



AFSHARIDS

AFSHARIDS, a dynasty (1148-1210/1736-96; [Table 16](#)) founded by [Nāder Shah Afšār](#) upon the abolition of the Safavid dynasty in 1148/1736. What follows is an outline history of the state founded by Nāder Shah until 1210, when it was annexed by the Qajars. Nominally a continuation of the Iranian empire as reestablished by Nāder, after his death the Afsharid state was in practice confined to Iranian Khorasan. Moreover, actual power was exercised for most of this sixty years not by the nominal ruler but by military leaders or other court factions, and for a brief time by Solaymān II, whose reign was an attempted Safavid restoration. The remaining parts of Nāder's empire were now the sphere of the [Zand dynasty](#) in western Iran, and the [Dorrānī dynasty](#) of Afghanistan. Afsharid is thus a convenient term for the history of Khorasan between the death of Nāder Shah and the accession of Āgā Moḥammad Khan Qājār, but has none of the wider political or cultural connotations of, say, Safavid or Timurid.

Nāder Shah (1148-1160/1736-1747). For most of the period of Nāder's rise to power and his subsequent reign, interest centers on his campaigns in western Iran, Afghanistan, India, and Central Asia rather than on the metropolitan province of Khorasan. Like Tīmūr, Nāder was a restless conqueror who neglected to lay firm administrative foundations for his far-flung ambitions. However, he did much to enhance the resources and prestige of Mašhad and its dependencies, which became obvious upon the spectacular disintegration of his empire. Nāder was born in 1100/1688 of the Qirqlū branch of the [Afšārs](#) in the Darra-gaz region seventy-five miles north of Mašhad. He gained



his early successes in the same area, raiding and pillaging with a varied band of local tribesmen. In 1135/1723 Malek Maḥmūd Sīstānī seized control of Mašhad and came into collision with Nāder's band. Meanwhile the Safavid claimant Ṭahmāsb, unable to oust the Afghan usurpers from Isfahan, turned instead to Khorasan and, having heard of Nāder's prowess, recruited him to his cause. Together they captured Mašhad in 1139/1726, and Nāder vigorously subdued the Kurds of Ḳabūšān and other local rebels. Just before his coronation on the Moḡān steppe, Nāder appointed his eldest son, Reżā-qolī Mīrzā, *wālī* of Khorasan; during Nāder's subsequent Indian campaign, he was the shah's viceroy in Iran, with his seat of government at Mašhad (Astarābādī, *Jahāngošā*, p. 273).

On his initial capture of Mašhad Nāder had ordered the shrine of the eighth Imam 'Alī al-Reżā, repaired and had a second minaret erected (see [Āstān-e Qods](#)). During a brief stay in 1153/1741, despite his generally anti-Shi'ite policy, he further embellished the shrine. He also had a second tomb built for himself in the city (the first was at his fortress of Kalāt) and initially intended to place here Tīmūr's tombstone, which he had brought from Samarqand. Other indications that he wished consciously to emulate the great Tamerlane are the name of his grandson, Šāhroḡ, and the similar strategy of his conquests. Mašhad was centrally located to be the capital of an Irano-Indo-Central Asian empire, and was freer of Safavid associations than Isfahan (Lockhart, *Nadir Shah*, p. 197). Nāder further populated the metropolis by concentrating here and elsewhere in Khorasan the hundreds of thousands of prisoners and exiles he took from his campaigns, mainly in western Iran; but since these went chiefly into his standing army, they became a strain on local resources rather than an asset (Perry, "Forced Migration," pp. 202-03, 209-10, 212).

During his last year, when Nāder toured Iran savagely punishing those in revolt (or allegedly so), at least 100 of the officials and notables of Mašhad were executed. While on his way to punish the Kurds of Ḳabūšān, he was assassinated by his Iranian officers on 11 Jomādā II 1160/20 June 1747 (Astarābādī, *Jahāngošā*, pp. 420-24).

'*Adel Shah (1160-61/1747-48) and Ebrāhīm Shah (1161-62/1748-49)*. Nāder's assassins offered allegiance to his nephew 'Alī-qolī Khan, who was already marching from Sīstān at the head of an army of rebels he had been sent to subjugate. At Mašhad the civil governor and superintendent of the shrine, Mīr Sayyed Moḡammad, secured the capital for 'Alī-qolī Khan. The latter reduced the Kalāt fortress and massacred all Nāder's issue, with the exception of



Šāhroḳ, his fourteen-year-old grandson by a daughter of the last Safavid monarch. ‘Alī-qolī Khan ascended the throne on 27 Jomādā II 1160/6 July 1747 under the regnal name ‘Ādel Shah (Golestāna, *Moǰmal*, pp. 1620; Maṛ‘ašī, *Majma‘*, pp. 96-97).

Though urged to march immediately on Isfahan, the new monarch preferred to carouse in Mašhad, appointing his younger brother Ebrāhīm as *sardār* of the old Safavid center. Despite his generosity and personal popularity, ‘Ādel Shah’s state began to collapse: Alleged conspiracy at court was followed by the disintegration of his army as the various tribal contingents brought to Khorasan by Nāder began to head homeward. Ebrāhīm was meanwhile consolidating his hold over western Iran. ‘Ādel Shah was finally persuaded to advance against him. The Mašhad army met Ebrāhīm’s forces between Solṭānīya and Zanǰān in Jomādā II, 1161/June, 1748; many of ‘Ādel Shah’s officers changed sides at the first onslaught, and Ebrāhīm gained a complete victory. After a reign of less than a year, ‘Ādel Shah was handed over to his brother and blinded. Ebrāhīm occupied Tabrīz and on 17 Ḍu’l-ḥejǰa/8 December was proclaimed shah.

Nine weeks previously, however, on 8 Šawwāl/1 October, Šāhroḳ Mīrzā had been elevated to the throne by a junta of Kurdish and Bayāt tribal leaders at Mašhad. The following spring, Ebrāhīm marched against this new rival, but his motley army disintegrated even before battle was joined. Ebrāhīm was captured and blinded, and joined his own victim ‘Ādel Shah to march in chains to Mašhad and execution (Golestāna, *Moǰmal*, pp. 28-32, 65; Maṛ‘ašī, *Majma‘*, pp. 98-103).

Šāhroḳ Shah (1161-1210/1748-96) and Shah Solaymān II (1163/1750). As a scion of the Safavid house, Šāhroḳ was more acceptable to the populace than a mere descendent of Nāder; as a youth of seventeen, he was also a convenient front behind which the amirs of Khorasan could appropriate Nāder’s treasure. Accordingly they resisted popular pressure to set out for the old imperial capital of Isfahan (Bazin, *Nāmahā*, p. 64), and invited Mīr Sayyed Moḥammad, who had survived the downfall of both ‘Ādel Shah and Ebrāhīm, to bring the baggage-train and prisoners from Qom to Mašhad. The Sayyed himself, like Šāhroḳ a grandson of Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn and an influential figure in both holy cities, was also a danger to their regime. Soon after his arrival, Šāhroḳ instigated two clumsy attempts on his life; these in turn ignited a mutiny among the amirs who had supported him and who perhaps feared that such rash actions would encompass their downfall. Led by Mīr ‘Alam Khan ‘Arab-e



Ḳozayma, they gathered an enthusiastic crowd and bore the protesting Sayyed in triumph from the shrine to the palace. Šāhroḳ fled into the harem (*andarūn*), where he killed the surviving younger brothers of ‘Adel and Ebrāhīm before he was deposed and imprisoned. Two weeks later, on 5 Šafar 1163/13 January 1750, the Sayyed was crowned Shah Solaymān II Šafawī (Bazin, *Nāmahā*, pp. 65-66; Maḟ‘ašī, *Maǰma’*, pp. 103-05; E‘temād-al-salṭana, *Maṭla‘ al-šams* II, pp. 341-50).

An influx of Safavid relatives and retainers swelled the ranks of parasitical courtiers, and the now customary proclamation of a three years’ tax amnesty depleted the treasury further. Herat had been annexed to Qandahār by Aḥmad Shah Dorrānī; Shah Solaymān now demanded its return, and enforced his claim by occupying the city after a short siege. While the new shah was away hunting, his viceroy Mīr ‘Alam Khan sought to insure himself against an Afsharid counter coup by blinding Šāhroḳ. The cracks in the façade had widened, and a rival faction of amirs, led by Yūsuf ‘Alī Khan Jalāyer, resolved to seize the dwindling wealth for themselves. They were encouraged by Šāhroḳ’s wife, who convinced them that her husband had not really been blinded. On the eve of Nowrūz 1163/1750, the conspirators rushed into the shah’s chamber and gouged out his eyes. Having rescued Šāhroḳ, they found that he was indeed blind; but, unable to go back, they installed him on the throne for a second term. ‘Alam Khan fled the city, and others of his supporters made terms with the new regime (Maḟ‘ašī, *Maǰma’*, pp. 88-90, 119-38; Golestāna, *Moǰmal*, pp. 47-70).

Afghan incursions and rival regents. Yūsuf ‘Alī Khan and his henchmen soon decided to cut their losses and abscond with the remaining jewels to Kalāt. However, they were intercepted and killed by ‘Alam Khan, who resumed control of Mašhad through an uneasy alliance with the local Kurdish tribes. By this time Aḥmad Shah Dorrānī had recovered Herat and determined to invade the chaotic province to his west. That winter he briefly besieged Mašhad and, when the defense proved too strong, continued on to Nīšāpūr; but a stout defense and severe weather forced his withdrawal to Herat. In the spring of 1167/1754 Aḥmad Shah again besieged Nīšāpūr in vain; however, he won over ‘Alam Khan’s dissident Kurdish troops and had ‘Alam Khan captured and put to death. In July he again laid siege to Mašhad, which was starved into surrender five months later. All were treated with diplomatic generosity, and when the Afghan monarch set out against Nīšāpūr next spring, he formally reinvested Šāhroḳ as ruler of Khorasan, leaving an Afghan viceroy and



garrison. But a succession of reverses, including a defeat by a Qajar force at Masīnān, prompted Aḥmad to withdraw via Herat in the autumn of 1169/1755. He left Amīr Khan Qarā'ī of the Barlās tribe as military governor of Mašhad (Ḥosaynī, *Tārīk*, fols. 22b-46a).

He was soon expelled by Fereydūn Khan, a Georgian, tutor (*lala*) to Šāhroḡ's sons; he in turn was assassinated and his followers expelled by Naṣrallāh Mīrzā, Šāhroḡ's eldest son. Šāhroḡ favored his younger son, Nāder Mīrzā, but had to acquiesce. In 1181/1768, however, the blind king persuaded Naṣrallāh to leave on a mission to Karīm Khan at Shiraz, ostensibly to solicit aid against the Afghan menace, but in reality to keep him out of the way while his brother was installed in his stead (Golestāna, pp. 95-97). On his return six months later, Nāder Mīrzā fled from Mašhad to Čenārān, and Naṣrallāh resumed his rule. Soon afterwards, Naṣrallāh laid siege to Nišāpūr, which under 'Abbās-qolī Khan Bayāt had refused to submit to Mašhad. Again Nāder Mīrzā took advantage of his absence to seize power, and again, when his brother broke off the siege and raced back, he was forced to flee the city. In 1188/1775 Naṣrallāh Mīrzā was once more ousted from power and resorted to Shiraz, probably in a vain attempt to gain support against his father and younger brother; he stayed some seven years, leaving Mašhad in the hands of Nāder Mīrzā. After his return and reconquest of Mašhad, he grew increasingly addicted to opium and died a near-recluse in 1200/1786.

The shortsighted ambition and rivalry of the brothers throughout this period drove the city and province further into ruin. Both of them exhausted their father's treasury and confiscated precious ornaments and fittings from the shrine to melt down into coin in order to pay their troops; the *motawallī* was unable to stop them, and the fickle citizenry and provincial amirs merely supported one against the other. Naṣrallāh's courage and energy twice saved the city from external enemies: once when he restored Mašhad's water supply which had been diverted at Čenārān by Ja'far Khan Kord, and again during Aḥmad Shah's third and last invasion of 1183-84/1770. Deserted by his Kurdish allies, Naṣrallāh nevertheless led his personal bodyguard of 200 men on a daring raid inside the Afghan camp; Aḥmad withdrew on terms which included the marriage of Šāhroḡ's daughter to his son.

After his brother's death, Nāder Mīrzā ruled as viceroy for a decade and fled to Herat on the approach of Āḡā Moḥammad Khan Qājār in 1210/1796. Šāhroḡ capitulated before the new ruler of Iran; he was tortured to reveal the whereabouts of his remaining jewels and sent with his younger children to



Māzandarān, where he shortly died. Upon Āgā Moḥammad's death the following year, Nāder Mīrzā recaptured Mašhad, and was tolerated by Faṭḥ-ʿAlī Shah until he could mount a personal campaign in 1216/1802. As the Qajars stormed the city, Nāder murdered the *motawallī*, whom he suspected of collusion with the besiegers; he was captured and executed in Tehran, and Khorasan finally came under Qajar control.

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Table 16. Genealogy of the Afsharids