



ARMY III. SAFAVID PERIOD

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iii. Safavid Period

1. *Under Shah Esmā'īl and Ṭahmāsp (1501-76)*. After leaving his refuge at Lāhījān, Shah Esmā'īl, the spiritual director of the Safavid order and founder of the Safavid state, recruiting followers en route (already 450 at Rašt (*Afżal al-tawārīk* 1,60b) and 1,500 at Ṭārom (*Ahşan al-tawārīk* p. 41) reached the pastures of Arzenjān in the summer of 906/1500. It is precisely here that 7,000 adherents, mainly Turkmen tribesmen from the provinces of Anatolia and Syria, gathered around their *morşed-e kāmēl* (king). Although Esmā'īl's predecessors had also formed troops of their followers, it is certain that the prototype for the military forces of the Safavid state was formed at that particular moment, for the partisans of the Safavid order had been dispersed after the defeat of Solţān 'Alī, Esmā'īl's brother, in 899/1494. This army had several typical tribal characteristics:

(1) The army was comprised of tribal units, the majority of which were Turkmen, the remainder Kurds and Čaġatāy. Gradually, as the conquest progressed, the heads of these units would be given a city or even a province as a kind of fief. One may thus view this army as a tribal confederation, similar to the Turkmen dynasties of the fifteenth century. The weapons of the cavalymen who formed the main battalions were traditionally sabers, lances, and bows and arrows (*şamşīr*, *neyza*, *tīr o kamān*).



(2) The army comprised, in theory, a center and two wings, the left and the right. For battle, an advance and a reserve force would occasionally be assigned. The shah and his non-tribal retinue would always occupy the center. Each of the tribes making up a confederation would have a set position in one of the two wings not only during military campaigns and on the battlefield but also on public occasions such as official assemblies, royal banquets, etc. The long tradition in the Turco-Mongol nomadic world lived on (Della Valle, pp. 350-51; Haneda, *Le système*, pp. 36-47).

(3) The shah had a royal bodyguard of *qūrčīs* (Mongolian “archer”) whose origin goes back to the Mongol period. The *qūrčīs* were, in theory, recruited from among the principal *gezelbāš* tribes and received their pay directly from the royal treasury. This corps was particularly important during the Safavid period, given the fact that it was the shahs’ only personal corps. At the head of each group of *qūrčīs*, originally all from the same tribe, was a *yūz-bāšī* (centurion). In command of the entire force was the *qūrčī-bāšī*. The effective strength of this corps was about 3,000 men under Esmā’īl and 5,000 under Ṭahmāsp (Haneda, *L’évolution*, pp. 41-50).

(4) There were several other offices traditionally found in the Turco-Mongol steppe such as *tūvāčī*, *amīr-e šekār*, etc.

As far as the actual size of the army under Esmā’īl, one finds several different figures ranging from 7,000 at the battle against the Šervānšāh in 1500 to 40,000 according to Mīrzā Ḥaydar’s description of the battle between Esmā’īl and Šeybānī Khan Uzbek in 916/1510 (*Tārīk-e Rašīdī*, English translation by N. Elias and E. D Ross, London, 1895, p. 234). Two years after the battle of Čālderān, the entire army of the shah probably amounted to no more than 18,000 men, of whom only 10,000 were really combat-ready, according to a report drafted 20 Jomādā II 922/21 July 1516 of a Safavid deserter to the Ottomans (Bacqué-Grammont, *Ottomans et Safavides*, pp. 204-08).

The three titles of honor for the military aristocracy were khan (the highest rank), sultan (the next highest), and beg (the third). The number of those who held the title “khan” was quite small at first but seems to have increased with time.

It is true that in the course of the conquest of Iran, diverse non-tribal elements (Iranian, for example) joined the Safavid army. But its fundamental structure did not change until the beginning of the reign of Shah ‘Abbās I (1587-1629).



There is a good example which proves this, a military review at Beštām in the summer of 936/1530 of virtually the entire army of Shah Ṭahmāsp (*Ḳolāṣat al-tawārīḳ*, pp. 198-204). On that occasion, the tribes marched before the shah, one after the other. Of a total of 105,800 men, certainly an exaggerated number (it includes non-combatants such as religious scholars and civilian officials as well), 84,900 belonged to tribes. It is certain that the troops coming from the tribes always made up the greater part by far of the Safavid army.

One should point out however a new aspect in the army of Ṭahmāsp emerging during this same review and that is the appearance of many types of artillery (*tūp*, *farangī*, *bādlīj*, and *zarbzān*) as well as three or four thousand arquebusiers (*tofanġčīān*). Considering the youthful age of the shah (16 years) and the confused political situation of this period, this modern corps armed with firearms is without doubt a legacy from Shah Esmā'īl who had begun to form a genuine corps of artillerymen and arquebusiers in 1516, after the debacle at Čālderān (Bacqué-Grammont, *Ottomans et Safavides*, p. 193). It is possible to consider this corps, which was equipped with firearms, as the embryo of the more important and systematic corps organized later by Shah 'Abbās I, the *tofanġčī* corps and the *tūpčī* corps.

2. *Shah 'Abbās and his military reforms.* No one has clearly indicated both aspects of the military measures adopted by Shah 'Abbās. On the one hand, from the perspective of domestic politics, they aimed at reducing the *qezelbāš* element which had played a predominant role in all aspects of Safavid politics; on the other, from the standpoint of foreign policy, they aimed at creating a corps equipped with modern weapons in order to confront the formidable Ottoman forces. The reinforcement of the *qūrčīs* (the royal bodyguard) and the creation of a corps of *ġolāms* pertain to the first, while the organization of the corps of *tūpčīs* and *tofanġčīs* was part of the second category.

a) Strengthening the corps of *qūrčīs*.

Minorsky's classic description of the Safavid army after Shah 'Abbās is based mainly on European sources and does not always reflect reality of the army of the period; most important, Minorsky has confused *qūrčī* with *qezelbāš*. In fact, while the term *qūrčī* designates the royal bodyguard, *qezelbāš* signifies the tribal elements in general who had backed royal power at the foundation of the state.

The number of *qūrčīs* (10,000-15,000) at least doubled under Shah 'Abbās. As a



consequence, the importance of the social standing and the office of the *qūrčī-bāšī* also increased. The shah rewarded the *qūrčīs*, who remained loyal to him in the period before and just after his accession to the throne. Moreover, he placed several of them in other important positions such as governors of the large provinces, *īšīkāqāsī-bāšī*, etc. That entailed the deterioration of the power of the *qezelbāš* amirs, who had a monopoly on the high offices of state. Although the *qūrčīs* had been recruited from the *qezelbāš* tribes and in that sense had constituted an indispensable element of the tribal confederation which characterized Safavid society in the period preceding the reign of Shah ‘Abbās, one should not confuse that regular corps with the *qezelbāš*, the tribal elements as a whole. By favoring one of the elements of the tribal society the shah intended to reduce the influence of the whole. By the end of Shah ‘Abbās’ reign, the *qūrčī-bāšī* was the most powerful amir of all the leaders of the state.

b) The creation of the *gōlām* corps.

Babaev (p. 23) attributes the date of the creation of the corps of *gōlāms* (made up of Armenians, Georgians, Circassians, etc.) to the period just after Shah ‘Abbās’ accession. However, the sources on which this is based only mention the reorganization of the army in general. As far as we know, no source precisely dates the actual creation of the corps of *gōlāms*, and it is quite certain that Shah ‘Abbās set the reform in motion immediately after the assassination of Moršed-qolī Khan, his *lala* (tutor) and the leading *qezelbāš* personality in 997/1588-89, for in the narrative of the events of 998/1589-90 in *Rawzat al-šafawīya*, there is mention of the nomination of a certain Yol-qolī Beg to the post of chief of the *gōlāms*, the *qollarāqāsī* (fol. 292b). The nomination may be considered a sign of the first attempt at reform by Shah ‘Abbās.

No one doubts the important role which Shah ‘Abbās played in the systematic establishment of the *gōlām* corps. Nonetheless, the term *qollarāqāsī* is already found in the narrative of the events of 991/1583-84 (*Rūz-nāma-ye Monajjem Yazdī* 46a) and refers to the participation of the *gōlāms* in battle as a royal guard (*gōlāmān-e kāšša-ye šarīfa*) under Sultan Moḥammad Ḳodābanda (1578-87) (e.g. Eskandar Beg, p. 338, *Rūz-nāma*, 46a). Since it is difficult to imagine that the *gōlām* system was evoked during the ten years of the confused reign of Moḥammad Ḳodābanda, one may surmise that it had already reached a certain level under Shah Ṭahmāsp; note especially Ṭahmāsp’s successive military campaigns towards the Caucasus beginning 947/1540-41.



The effective strength of the cavalry corps under 'Abbās was probably 10,000 or 15,000 men, as described in all the European sources. The weapons of both the *gōlāms* and the *qūrčīs* were the traditional ones. Numerous *gōlāms* were appointed to high positions of state and at the end of Shah 'Abbās' reign almost all the important offices (aside from the civil and fiscal offices traditionally given to Iranians) were occupied by former *gōlāms* or *qūrčīs*. Backing the shah both politically and militarily, the regular corps of *gōlāms* and *qūrčīs* were the two pillars of the state after the reforms of Shah 'Abbās.

c) The organization of the *tofangčī* and *tūpčī* corps. As mentioned above, these two corps had been established long ago. But it was Shah 'Abbās especially who made use of the modern weapons of these corps to reconquer lost territories. The *tofangčīs* were recruited from different regions and organized under the name of their region, e.g. "*tofangčīān-e Esfahān, tofangčīān-e Māzandarān,*" etc. At the head of each group a *mīn-bāšī* (chief of a thousand) was appointed. No *tofangčīāqāsī* is mentioned in the chronicles during Shah 'Abbās' reign. Neither the corps nor any of its members had any political importance to compare with the *gōlāms*.

As for the *tūpčīān*, there is very little information in the Persian chronicles, despite some references to them by Europeans (*Tadkerat al-molūk*, p. 33). Neither the structure of the corps, nor its actual strength under 'Abbās is known. Despite its effectiveness against the Ottomans, the importance of the corps within the army was not very considerable. Although Minorsky saw a purely Iranian element in these corps equipped with modern weapons (*Tadkerat al-molūk*, p. 32), yet one does find certain links between them and the *gōlām* element. It was a *gōlām*, Qaračqāy Beg who led this corps against the Uzbeks (Eskandar Beg, p. 620) and Ottomans (*ibid.*, p. 697) under Shah 'Abbās. In the period after Shah 'Abbās there were also *tofangčīāqāsīs* of *gōlām* origin. (*Dayl-e tārīk-e 'ālamārā-ye 'abbāsī*, p. 269).

Through the measures adopted by Shah 'Abbās, the tribal forces who had been led by the *qezelbāš* amirs, were placed under the command of the provincial governors, for the most part *gōlāms* or *qūrčīs*. They lost their importance, their identity, and even their particular names. They also ceased to be called *qezelbāš* (Haneda, *L'èvolution*, p. 56).

Thus the reform of Shah 'Abbās contributed in the short term to weakening *qezelbāš* influence and to strengthening central power. But in the long term, by crushing the base of tribal support which had allowed Shah Esmā'īl to accede



to the throne, the reform was to cause the collapse of the dynasty.

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