



ARMY IV. AFŠAR AND ZAND PERIODS

ARMY

iv. Afšār and Zand (ca. 1142-1205/1730-90)

The successor states to the Safavid empire were conceptually and administratively a direct continuation of the Safavid establishment. In terms of armament and organization, this applied also to the army. However, just as the ideology and motivations of the Afsharid and Zand rulers were in practice at odds with Safavid precedents, and the available resources varied considerably during this period, so too the composition of the army, its role in the state, and its effectiveness changed appreciably from late Safavid to early Qajar times (see *Army, Qajar* in Supplement).

Nāder Shah grew up a raider, made his early reputation as a mercenary, and came to power as commander-in-chief of a fugitive Safavid claimant in Afghan-occupied Iran; by force of arms he drove out the Afghans and intimidated the Ottoman Turks and Russians who had sought to partition Iran; and his political coup of 1148/1736, by which he engineered his election to the throne, was due mainly to his having built up an army of 80,000 comprising a majority of Afghans, steppe Turkmens, and Khorasan Kurds—Sunni Muslims from the eastern marches—outnumbering the Shi'ite Turkman *qezelbāš* and Iranian troops from western Iran who made up the Safavid partisans



(Lockhart, *Nadir Shah*, pp. 96, 113). As a ruler, it is therefore hardly surprising that Nāder Shah made the army virtually synonymous with the state. The national economy was seen as a pensioner of the victorious army, and was ruthlessly subordinated to the army's needs: Thus, after securing enormous booty from his Indian campaign in 1152/1739, Nāder declared a three-year tax exemption in Iran—and repealed it soon afterwards in order to equip his next campaign in Dāgestān (Lockhart, *op. cit.*, pp. 151, 238). During the ubiquitous rebellions of the last years of his reign—provoked largely by the excesses of his garrisons and the excessive taxation required to support them—the only solution he sought to apply was further armed repression. It was the remaining officers of the outnumbered *qezelbāš* units, anticipating their liquidation by Nāder's Afghan guards, who assassinated him in 1160/1747. More than any other Iranian ruler, Nāder Shah rose and fell by virtue of his army.

Like that of the Safavids, Nāder Shah's army was composed primarily of cavalry recruited from the pastoral nomadic tribes, lightly armored and armed with lances and broadswords. Supplementing these were *tofanġčīs*, infantry armed with matchlock muskets and recruited from the Persian peasantry; *ĵazāyerčīs*, harquebusiers—generally mounted for mobility—armed with a large musket (the *ĵazāyer* or jezail) fired from a rest; and *tūpčīs*, artillerymen, employing chiefly the *zanbūrak*, a falconet-sized swivel gun mounted on a special camel saddle and fired from the animal's back when couched. Following a precedent even older than the Safavids, Nāder purposely diversified the ethnic composition of his army, both to promote zealous competition and to lessen the risk of concerted disaffection—and, as mentioned, to offset the influence of Safavid supporters. By 1741, the army of 150,000 that he assembled for his Dāgestān campaign contained more Indians, Afghans, and Uzbeks than “Persians” (Bazin, *Lettres*, p. 288). The numbers of Nāder's forces varied according to his needs, and most estimates are almost certainly inflated (e.g., Hanway, *Historical Account* I, p. 242, estimated the army mustered near Hamadān in 1744 at 90,000, including camp followers, but only 30,000 actual soldiers). However, the following breakdown ([Table 8](#), and [Table 8 continued](#)) of the force assembled for the Iraq campaign of 1156/1743, obtained by Nāder's historian Moḥammad Kāẓem from a *laškarnevīs* (army clerk), gives some idea of the formidable size and bewildering ethnic mosaic of Nāder Shah's army at the zenith of his power, see Lockhart, *op. cit.*, pp. 113, 228 n. (notes in parenthesis represent this writer's estimates of ethno-religious composition and functions).



Nāder had a well-disciplined corps of *ḡāzāyerčīs* (Lockhart, op. cit., p. 267) and an excellent field artillery, with which he destroyed the Afghan *zanbūraks* at the battle of Mehmāndūst in 1142/1729 (ibid., pp. 36-37). The rugged terrain and absence of paved roads militated against the transportation and use of heavy siege artillery throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, nor did Nāder have as skilful a corps of engineers as his Ottoman adversaries; as a result, his sieges were on balance less successful than his battles (ibid., p. 268). There is no firm evidence that Nāder had European artillerymen in his train, though in 1734 the Russians sent an engineer officer, four gunners, and some heavy artillery to aid him in the siege of Ganja (ibid., p. 85).

It was chiefly Nāder's careful planning of campaigns and his concern to keep his troops well paid and fully equipped, and his officers alert and competent, that raised the Iranian army materially and morally from the low level to which it had sunk by the end of the Safavid period. After his unsuccessful siege of Baghdad in 1146/1733, he distributed 200,000 tomans to his troops to compensate them for their losses and enable them to purchase new equipment (ibid., pp. 72, 267). But these improvements were the temporary product of his personal genius, and left no permanent legacy to Iranian armies of later generations.

With the assassination of Nāder Shah in his camp in Khorasan, (1160/1747) his army disintegrated. The 4,000-strong Afghan contingent under Aḡmad Khan Sadōzay—in some accounts, taking the artillery (Ḥosaynī, *Tārīk*, fols. 12a-13b)—retired to Qandahār, where its young leader was elected first shah of Afghanistan (see above Afghanistan X, pp. 547ff.). The Baḡtīārī contingent under 'Alī Mardān Khan, and other Zagros tribal units such as the Zands and Faylī Lurs, disobeyed Nāder's immediate successor, 'Ādel Shah, and made their way westward (*Gombroon Diary* VI, 16 October and 7 November 1747; Perry, *Karīm Khan*, p. 6). These and the other components of Nāder's army were used by the various contenders for power during the next decade, until the situation stabilized with a relatively strong Zand-dominated state in western Iran and a rump Afsharid kingdom centered on Mašhad. The only standing army during this period was that of Karīm Khan Zand, who ruled as *wakīl* or "people's deputy" (1164-93/1751-79).

The bulk of Karīm Khan's manpower was recruited from among the Iranian pastoral nomads (Lor, Lak, and Kurd) of the Zagros foothills and Hamadān plains of his home range—the largely Shi'ite Baḡtīārī, Faylī Lor, Zand, Zangana, Vand, and Kalhor tribes. These were supplemented by *tofanḡčī* and



ĵazāyerčī units recruited, as ever, from the peasantry of the western and central provinces, but also from the Gulf littoral (Daštēstān) around Būšeher; these the *wakīl* appreciated and, at least during his crucial campaigns of 1166/1753, treated so preferentially as to antagonize his tribal cavalry (Nāmī, *Gītīgošā*, p. 35; Perry, op. cit., p. 51). From the 1760s his army was augmented by *qezelbāš* Turkmen (Afšārs of Urmia, Qajars of Astarābād), Turkicized Kurds of Azarbaijan (Donbalī, Šaqāqī), Arabs from the Daštēstān, and Iranians from Lār and Kermān—though on an occasional rather than a regular basis. These were predominantly Shi‘ites. The vestigial field artillery (Amīr Khan Tūpčī-bāšī, Nāder Shah’s artillery commander on the western front, had taken his guns to Mašhad in 1162/1749; Maṛ‘ašī, *Maĵma‘ al-tawārīk*, pp. 88-89) consisted chiefly of 700 *zanbūraks* under a Georgian officer (Perry, op. cit., p. 87).

Having gained power through diplomacy as much as by force of arms, Karīm Khan did not use his army to coerce refractory subjects or extort supplies and revenue to anything like the degree Nāder Shah had done. His standing army of Fārs during the period 1765-75 may be broken down approximately as follows (Table 9, see Fasā‘ī, I, p. 219; Partow Bayzā‘ī, “Tārīk,” 58-59; Perry, op. cit., pp. 279-80):

These numbers represent paper totals from the ledger of the *laškarnevīs*—perhaps about 1187/1774, during mobilization for the siege of Bašra—and must be reduced by at least half to give a realistic assessment of available fighting forces. For example, in 1765 Niebuhr was told confidentially by a Georgian officer that the force being led by Amīr Gūna Khan against rebels at Bandar Rīg, theoretically comprising 4,000 cavalry and 6,000 infantry, in reality counted no more than 1,100 and 500 respectively fit for service (*Reisebeschreibungen* II, pp. 102-03). Estimates reaching Russian officials at Rašt in the late 1760s put the Shiraz garrison at no more than 4,000, backed by a few tribal and peasant levies (Arunova and Ashrafyan, “Novye materialy,” p. 111 n. 8).

The élite corps of the *wakīl*’s guard, the 1,400 *ġolāms* (slaves), comprised 1,200 Lors armed with flintlock muskets (hence *ġelmān-e čakmāqī*; most other musketeers still carried antiquated matchlocks) plus 200 Kurds, Georgians, and others. This body was probably a vestige of the Safavid *qūllar* (slaves), mounted musketeers numbering ideally 12,000 in Shah ‘Abbās’ time and originally recruited—like the Ottoman janissaries—from Christian populations of the south Caucasus (Lockhart, “The Persian Army,” p. 93). The *‘erāqī* units are likewise probably a relic of the 12,000-strong Safavid *tofanġčī* corps.



Officers numbered 6,000 in all: Their nomenclature in essence continues the Turco-Mongol decimal terminology as inherited from the *qezelbāš* tribes, but with the numerical component in some cases realized in Persian, thus *mīn-bāšī* (commander of 1,000) and *yūz-bāšī* (of 100), but *pānšad-bāšī* (of 500) and *panjāh-bāšī* (of 50) (Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 103).

The only full-scale operation mounted by the Zand army at its height was the siege of Bašra in 1189-90/1775-76 (see Perry, op. cit., pp. 167-83). Commanded by the wakīl's brother, Šādeq Khan Zand, this force numbered about 30,000 men. The siege itself was essentially a blockade; the only specialized exploit of note was the establishment of a bridgehead by up to 2,000 Baḳtīārīs who swam across the Šaṭṭ al-ʿArab with the aid of inflated goatskins (Nāmī, op. cit., p. 187; Parsons, *Travels*, pp. 164-65).

During the civil wars and the struggles against the Qajars that followed Karīm Khan's death, the components of the Zand army split up among the contenders for power and in most cases eventually joined the forces of Āgā Moḥammad Khan Qājār.

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