



AŠRAF ĠILZAY

Ašraf ĠILZAY, the Afghan chief who ruled as Shah over part of Iran from 1137/1725 to 1142/1729. The eldest son of ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz and a nephew of Mīr Ways (q.v.), belonged to the leading line of the Hōtak (q.v.) tribe which together with Tōkī (q.v.) tribe, dominated the Paštūn confederacy of the Ġilzī. Born in southern Afghanistan early in the 12th/18th century, he took part in the invasion of Safavid territory by these tribes in 1133/1721-1135/1722. When his cousin Maḥmūd (q.v.), with whom he was on bad terms on account of a family feud, deposed the legitimate Safavid monarch Sultan Ḥosayn and proclaimed himself Shah at Isfahan in 1135/1722, Ašraf went back to the Qandahār region and stayed there for some time. Later he returned to Isfahan at the insistence of the Afghan occupying force who thought he would be a better leader than the unstable Maḥmūd. As soon as he arrived he began to hatch plots for his cousin’s overthrow. With the connivance of part of the Afghan army, he achieved this purpose and took over the throne on 12 Ša‘bān 1137/26 April 1725.

Ašraf’s reign of little more than four years was almost wholly occupied with fighting against various external and internal adversaries. He was at war successively with Ottoman Turkey and Russia, the two powers which had taken advantage of Iran’s decadence to annex de facto a large number of frontier districts. Posing as the legitimate inheritor of the Iranian throne, Ašraf demanded restitution of all the annexed territories. The Ottomans took offence at this arrogance, as they saw it, and proceeded to sever relations and open hostilities in Azarbaijan in the spring of 1138/1726. Since one of their declared



war aims was to restore the Safavids as a client dynasty, Aşraf's first response was to put Sultan Ğosayn, who was living in captivity at Isfahan, to death in the autumn of 1139/1726. Then, after strengthening the city's fortifications, he marched out to meet Turkish troops and defeated them at Ğorramābād, south of Hamadān, on 25 Rabī'a I 1139/20 November 1726. The Afghan victory over a greatly superior military opponent was largely due to infiltration of the Ottoman ranks by agents provocateurs who emphasized the common Sunni faith of the Turks and the Afghans, deplored the fratricidal war between them, and advocated alliance against their common enemies, the heretical Iranians; this adroit tactic sapped the morale of the Turkish troops and procured the defection of the Kurdish cavalry. Preferring not to push onward, Aşraf opened negotiations which led to the signature of a peace treaty in Şafar, 1140/October, 1727. This confirmed Ottoman sovereignty over all the western and northwestern parts of Iran and, in return for Aşraf's abandonment of his territorial claims, gave him official recognition as Shah of Persia with rights of minting coins and sending annual pilgrimage caravans to Mecca. Immediately after this success, Aşraf turned his attention to the Russians, who were advancing in Ğilān. Here he fared less well; the Afghan force was defeated near Langarūd in 1140/1727. Even so, the subsequent signature of a treaty at Rašt in Raġab, 1141/February, 1729, in itself signified recognition of Aşraf's legitimacy by the second great regional power.

These two wars against external enemies enabled Aşraf to muster support from his Iranian subjects, particularly from Sunni Kurds and Zoroastrians but also from Shi'ite Şāhsevan tribesmen. Nevertheless the great majority still rejected the Afghan regime as usurping. The resultant wave of internal revolts caused countrywide insecurity and exhausted the strength of the Isfahan-based central government. The first revolts were in support of throne-claimants who boasted of real or fictitious Safavid lineage. The most important were at Kermān in 1139/1726-1140/1728 in support of Sayyed Aġmad, a descendant of a daughter of Shah Solaymān, in the Baġtīārī country, and in Baluchistan where several pretenders tried their luck. The elimination of these manipulators of the popular resentment left the field clear for Sultan Ğosayn's only surviving son **Ṭahmāsp**, who was then a refugee in Māzandarān. As time passed, Ṭahmāsp emerged as the only serious rival to Aşraf, and all the more so when he won the allegiance of several chiefs of the two strongest Turkish groups in northeastern Iran, the Qāġār and the **Afşār** tribes. One of these chiefs, Nāder-qolī Bēġ Afşār, the future **Nāder Shah**, became Ṭahmāsp's principal military backer. Thus reinforced and ably led, the Safavid prince's



army won its first significant victory with the capture of Mašhad on 16 Rabī'a I 1131/11 November 1726 from an effectively independent local potentate, Malek Maḥmūd Sīstānī. Northeastern Iran was then gradually brought under control and made the base for an attempt to reconquer the throne.

Ašraf at first belittled this adversary, but later took the threat seriously and launched an offensive against Ṭahmāsp. His troops, however, were worn out by their incessant campaigning. They were driven back by Nāder in a battle at Mehmāndūst near Dāmḡān on 6 Rabī'a I 1142/29 September 1729. Taking advantage of this success, Nāder embarked forthwith on a vigorous counteroffensive. After failing to block the way at the pass of K̄vār east of Varāmīn, Ašraf had to abandon Tehran, where Ṭahmāsp now took up residence, and retreat in haste to Isfahan with Nāder at his heels. For fear of a popular pro-Safavid uprising, the Afghan troops sacked Isfahan, set fire to the bazaar, and killed a large number of its inhabitants, including 3,000 of the 'olamā' and other notables. Then, apparently after receiving some Ottoman reinforcement, Ašraf marched out to Mūrčak^vort, 35 miles northwest of the city. The Afghans suffered heavy losses in the subsequent hard-fought and largely hand-to-hand battle. Ašraf had to abandon his capital on 21 Rabī'a II 1142/13 November 1729, and Nāder made his entry three days later at the head of the victorious force. The city had in the meantime again been plundered by the mob and presented a sorry picture when Ṭahmāsp arrived a month later to mount the throne of his ancestors.

Ašraf continued to pose a real threat, because he commanded an army still about 20,000 strong, and had with him a large amount of treasure. Nāder therefore set out as soon as possible in pursuit. He defeated the Afghan army at Zarqān near Shiraz and destroyed a detachment of rearguard troops at Pol-e Fasā, 16 km southeast of Shiraz, but not before they had enabled Ašraf to escape to Lār. In the last phase of retreat, the remnants of the Afghan army disintegrated. Some of those who managed to reach the shore of the Persian Gulf got onboard ships at Bandar 'Abbās but were kidnapped by the Arabs and later seen in the slave markets of Bahrain and Masqaṭ (Muscat). Ašraf himself unsuccessfully attempted to flee by sea to Bašra, where he hoped to obtain Ottoman support for his ambition to regain the throne. His only remaining chance was then to march back through the interior in the hope of reaching Qandahār. While crossing the eastern desert he was intercepted by a band of Baluchis near the Sīstān border and killed late in the same winter, 1142/1730. These Baluchis may have been in the pay of Ašraf's cousin Ḥosayn, who had



not forgiven him for the circumstances of Maḥmūd's death and had virtually proclaimed his own independence of Qandahār.

Ašraf's defeat marked the end of Afghan rule in Iran. The Shi'ite-Sunni antagonism was not the root cause of its failure. Sunni elements (Turkmen and Kurds) formed the spearhead of Nāder's army in 1142/1729. A much more important factor was the disaccord within the Afghan tribes. This eventually cut off the regime in Isfahan from its natural bases in Afghanistan and almost totally deprived it of reinforcements. It is significant that it was to the Ottoman Turks that Ašraf, when up against the wall, looked for help, not to his Afghan fellow tribesmen. As long as the Iranian opposition was divided, the Ğilzay regime was secure; when a resolute leader, gifted moreover with great tactical ability, took charge, the days of Ğilzay power were numbered.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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This basic work contains a critically annotated list of sources (pp. 497f.) and a large supplementary bibliography, to which must be added a contribution by 'Abd-al-Ra'ūf Bīnawā, *Hōtakīhā*, Kabul, 1335 Š./1956 (pp. 114-37 on Ašraf).

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