



FLAGS I. OF PERSIA

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“National flags” symbolizing political entities began to evolve from religious or military applications of dynastic “emblems” (also called “badges” or “devices”) with the Crusaders and more systematically with the rise of European states and their overseas expansion in the 16th century (Siegel, pp. 17-136, Pl. 17). In Persia, “imperial” banners were employed as early as Achaemenid times while the use of family “devices” on standards of feudal magnates of the Parthian and Sasanian periods is reflected in those attributed to the house of Rostam (a dragon), the house of Gōdarz (a golden lion), and to the Kayanid kings (a golden sun; see [DERAFŠ](#)). By the 6th century a “national flag” had emerged, called *Derafš-e Kāvīān* (q.v.), which consisted of a heavily bejeweled purple background, a star (*aḵtar*) as the emblem, and red, golden, and purple streamers (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, I, pp. 64-65; cf. *ibid*, III, p. 63, v. 11). Because of the emblem, it was also frequently called the *Aḵtar-e Kāvīān* (*ibid*, I, p. 65, v. 244; III, p. 42, v. 621, p. 173, v. 2654; IV, p. 97, v. 1375; p. 98, vv. 1385-90; V, p. 102, v. 294), emphasizing its symbolic meaning, since the term *aḵtar* signified both “star” and “fortune.” Its national significance was such that a Turanian hero could say: “It is that *aḵtar* wherein lies the strength of the Iranians (*ān aḵtar ast, ke nīrū-ye Īrān bad-ū andar ast*), and “If we seize that purple *derafš*,” we have won the day (*ibid*, IV, p. 98, v. 1390). Indeed the capture and destruction of this banner signaled the collapse of the Persian empire (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, pp. 502-4). When, therefore, Ya‘qūb Layṭ claimed “the



inheritance of the kings of Persia” and sought “to revive their glory,” a poem written on his behalf to send to the ‘Abbasid caliph said: “With me is the Derafš-e Kāvīān, through which I hope to rule the nations” (Abū Eshāq Ebrāhīm b. Mamšād, cited by Stern, p. 541). He may have intended to recreate a banner similar to the ancient one (cf. Titley, pl. 15), but this never materialized. Nevertheless, star-studded banners remained popular in Persia (Figure 1, Figure 2 a-b) until the ascendancy of the lion and sun symbol on the flag.

The Omayyad banners were white (Ṭabarī, II, p. 1921; although Bal’amī, ed. Rowšan, II, p. 1024, says they were green). The Aš’arī tribe (some of whose members settled in Qom) was reported to possess a small banner inherited from the Prophet Moḥammad, consisting of two streamers, one black and ornamented with a red crescent of the moon, the other white (Abu’l-Boḥtarī, cited by Qomī, p. 282; Figure 3). Abū Moslem (q.v.) raised two large banners, one black, the other white and inscribed with Qur’ān 22:39 (Ṭabarī, II, p. 1954; Bal’amī, ed. Rowšan, II, pp. 1010-11; Figure 4). The imperial standard of the ‘Abbasid Caliphs (Figure 5) was black in color with the legend in white “Moḥammad is the Apostle of God” (Margoliouth and Amedroz, *Eclipse* I, p. 199). Opposition to ‘Abbasid rule was expressed by the discarding of black banners: the Fatimid caliphs of Egypt adopted the green (Sarre, p. 361f.); the ‘Alids and leaders of rebellions in Persia raised white banners (Gardīzī, pp. 172, 274, 278 f., 281; Qazvīnī, pp. 84, 240, 412, 421f., 426, 458, 462, 470-71, 475, 477, 559). When appointing ‘Alī al-Rezā (q.v.) as heir apparent, al-Ma’mūn adopted green, the ‘Alid color, for his banners and dress (Ya’qūbī, *Ta’rīkò* II, pp. 545, 551; Bal’amī, ed. Rowšan, II, pp. 1241, 1250, cf. p. 962); whereupon he was accused of following ancient Persian traditions (‘Abd-al-Jalīl Qazvīnī, pp. 384 f.), and soon reverted to the official ‘Abbasid black (Bal’amī, ed. Rowšan, II, pp. 1250; Ya’qūbī, *Ta’rīkò* II, pp. 550 f.). Rulers of the ‘Abbasid client states received, as a sign of legitimacy, black banners which they carried along with their own dynastic standards (Ackerman, pp. 2773f.; Spuler, *Iran*, pp. 348f.). Exceptionally, ‘Azod-al-Dawla (q.v.) received on his investiture by the ‘Abbasid caliph two special banners, a white one normally assigned to army chiefs (*omarā’ al-joyūš*), and a golden one indicating the rank of the heir to the throne (Helāl, p. 94). Before his death he allegedly inscribed his black banners with an Islamic invocation, as well as his intention to conquer Fatimid Egypt (Baḡdādī, p. 209).

In time, Iranian and Turkish symbolism combined with Islamic inscriptions to



form banners of various colors, designs, and sizes. Two early representations are worth noting. (Those engraved on a “post-Sasanian” plate from Anikowa, originally produced in the 8th century but reworked a century or two later, Marschak, p. 322 with Pls. 209-11, are not relevant here). One is a dragon-shaped streamer floating from the mast of a boat (Figure 6) depicted on a 9th century lusterware from Nīšāpūr. Another is an inscribed banneret carried by a warrior painted on a 10th century bowl (*Survey of Persian Art*, Pl. 577). When Ḥasan b. Moḥammad b. Bozorg-Omid established the Nezārī sect, “he raised four banners of red, gold, white, and green on the corners of the pulpit” and published his claim to the imamate (*Tārīḵ-e gozīda*, ed. Navā’ī, p. 523). According to an illustrated manuscript of Rašīd-al-Dīn’s history, Ghaznavid banners were usually red and often used checkered squares as emblems (Rice and Gray, Pls. 38, 44, 57, 60), but literary evidence suggests they bore figures of the *homāy* (q.v.) in gold or of a lion (Mīnovī, pp. 91-95 and Nafīsī, 1949, pp. 45, 48-58; Yūsufī, pp. 422 f.; Figure 7 Figure 8). According to Qazvīnī, who wrote ca. 560/1164, the Shi’ite kings had banners of white, green, and all other colors save black, while the Saljuq monarchs employed green, yellow, and red (p. 559).

The ascendancy of the Saljuqs, and especially of the Mongols, increased the diversity in shape, color, and size of banners. Some were what the Turks called *parčam*—a large tassel (*tūg/ṭūq*) made of the mane or tail of a yak (Persian *gāž-gāv*) or of a horse’s tail and fixed upon a lance (Pūr-e Dāwūd, pp. 288 ff.; Ackerman, p. 2777). Others were small angular silken pieces with one or more pennons and ornamented with floral or geometric designs Figure 9c; the latter probably representing Tīmūr’s banner; see Clavijo, p. 208), or with such emblematic figures as dragons (Figure 11a), and *homāys* or *sīmorḡ* (Figures 12a-b) or the name and title of a king (Figure 13, Figure 14, Figure 15; for literary evidence see Ackerman, p. 2774; Nafīsī, 1949, p. 44) and with the background stiffened by square pieces of heavy fabric, and cut in one or more pennon-like streamers (Figure 1, Figure 7, Figure 12b). Their emblems included stars (Figure 2a), the moon (Nafīsī, 1949, pp. 46, 51), the sun (ibid, p. 57; see also the illustration in Lentz and Lowry, catalogue no. 46), dragons (Figures 10, 14; Nafīsī, 1949, pp. 29, 46; Mīnovī, p. 95), lion (Figures 8, 13; Nafīsī, 1949, pp. 47-57; Mīnovī, p. 94-97), and *homāy* or *sīmorḡ* (Figure 11b, (Figure 18) is from a miniature painting illustrating a copy, dated 826/1423, of the *Šāhnāma* of Šams-al-Dīn Kāšānī—an epic composition on the Mongol conquest (Bibliothèque Nationale, suppl. no. 1443). It shows several (Mongol?) horsemen approaching a walled city (Nīšāpūr), and one of them carries a tall banner



which is crowned by a spear-head within a crescent moon (the *māhčā-ye lewā*) and its square background bears a lion passant with a rising sun on its back and two floating pennons (Blochet, 1928, III, p. 180). A similar early depiction (Figure 19) is on a large, double-paged miniature dated ca. 865/1460 (Martin, Pls. 60 f.). Clavijo (pp. 207 f.) describes a palace which Tīmūr had seized from the former Chaghatay khans of Samarqand, and states that the lion and sun symbol ornamented the gateway of the main building and the arches around the courtyard. He was told (ibid, p. 208) that this emblem “was the armorial bearing of the former lords of Samarqand.” Tīmūr’s own emblem was “three circlets set thus to shape a triangle” (ibid.), as seen on the banner in Figure 9c and, frequently, on Ottoman royal garments (Tezcan and Delibas, Pls. 1 and passim). The sun and lion motif survived in Samarqand where it still decorates the main portal of the Šērdār *madrassa* built in 1028/1627 (Nafīsī, 1949, p. 62; Papadopoulo, p. 433, Fig. 457 with incorrect dating).

By the time the Safavids created a unified state and promoted Shi‘ism as the national creed, the lion and sun had become a familiar sign everywhere—on copper coins, on banners, and on artworks. Thomas Herbert, who visited Persia during the last year of Shah ‘Abbās’ rule (1036/1627), was told that Shah Esmā‘īl’s grandfather, Shaikh Jonayd, had instituted the “new ensign” of the Persian banner, namely, a star, a lion couchant, and the sun orient in its face (Herbert, p. 239). This claim probably reflected a rationalization of the antiquity of the symbol as there is no evidence that the lion and sun was the emblem of Persia under Shah Esmā‘īl. His ‘*alams* captured by the Ottomans at Čālderān show no such emblem (*EIr.* I, p. 790). Qāsem Gonābādī refers to Shah Esmā‘īl’s “banners of green” (crowned) with the figure of the moon (Nayyer Nūrī, 1968, p. 72). The king is shown with his army battling the Turks in a fresco of the Čehel Sotūn (q.v.) of Isfahan made in 1028-31/1647-50 (Papadopoulo, Fig. 566), but his banner there is plain (Figure 20a) or red and purple and star-studded without the lion and sun symbol (Figure 20b; a similar ensign, Figure 2b, is found in a *Šāh-nāma* miniature made for Esmā‘īl II: Robinson, Pl. VIIIb). A miniature painting by a later Safavid artist illustrating an anonymous history of Shah Esmā‘īl shows him and his troops daringly crossing the River Kor (Titley, p. 114; Pl. 19). After his defeat at Čālderān, Shah Esmā‘īl is said to have used only black banners (as a sign of mourning) on which *al-qeṣāṣ* “revenge” was written in white (Falsafī, 1963, p. 81). Finally, other early Safavid banners (Figure 20c) and especially those depicted in the *Šāh-nāma* made for Shah Ṭahmāsb (Welch, Pls. on pp. 137, 165) lack the lion and sun symbol. However, Adam Olearius, who visited Persia in



1040/1636, remarked (I, p. 611): “Nowadays the Turks use the crescent moon (as their emblem), and the Persians the sun which is mostly placed above the lion.” In 1007/1601 Egedius Sadeler, a Flemish illustrator of books on emblems, painted a portrait of Ḥosayn-‘Alī Beg Bayāt, whom Shah ‘Abbās the Great had sent to European courts. The portrait shows the envoy under a Europeanized and curiously crowned lion with a sun rising from its back (Falsafī, 1955-67, IV, opp. p. 160).

It is thus clear that, although various *‘alams* and banners were employed by the Safavids (see also below), the lion and sun symbol had become by the time of Shah ‘Abbās the recognized emblem of Persia (cf. its appearance on a Safavid steel horse-frontal, *Survey of Persian Art* XIII, Pl. 1407). The association may originally have been based on a learned interpretation of the *Šāh-nāma*’s references to the “the Sun of Iran” and “the Moon of the Turanians/Turks.” As noted earlier, the Sasanians had called their king “the Sun of the East” and the Roman (i.e., Byzantine) emperor “the Moon of the West.” The evidence of the *Šāh-nāma* was certainly well known to the Safavid kings. Since the crescent moon had been adopted as the dynastic and ultimately national emblem of the Ottoman sultans (Sarkisian; Ettinghausen, pp. 383 f.), who were the new sovereigns of “Rūm,” the Safavids of Persia, needing to have a dynastic and national emblem of their own, chose the lion and sun motif.

The often quoted account of Jean Chardin (V, pp. 485-87) gives the following details on Safavid ensigns (cited and translated by Ackerman, pp. 2780 f.; Nafīsī, 1949, pp. 65 f.). The banners were triangular pieces of rich fabric of various colors, bearing as emblem either religious invocations (cf also the fine example in Papadopoulo, Pl. 53) or the double-pointed sword of ‘Alī (see [DU’L-FAQĀR](#)), or a lion with a rising sun above it. The great standard was a swallow-tail pennon (PLATE III) carried by a high official called *‘alamdār-bāšī*. There were also many other *‘alams* for various ceremonial occasions, especially the Moḥarram rituals. Chardin specifically points out that the obverse of copper coins (*folūs*) imitated the emblem of the Persian flag in showing the sun and the lion symbol.

Chardin is thus the first to refer to the “Du’l-faqār” banner even though Sultan Selim (Salīm) I and other Ottoman rulers had already employed similar ensigns (Ettinghausen, pp. 383f.; Pls. XVI/17, XVII, XVIII/19), and the Great Mughals of India had, by 1737, adopted it—along with stars and crescents—on their banners (Siegel, Pl. 49, no. 8). John Fryer, who visited Persia in 1677, describes (p. 356) the flag of Persia as being “a bloody sword with a double



point in a white field.” In May 1737 the British agent at Gombroon (Bandar-e ‘Abbās[ī], q.v.) reported that Nāder Shah’s admiral had hoisted “his Flag, being a white ground with a red Persian Sword in the middle” (cited by Lockhart, p. 182). The term “Persian Sword” for *Ḍu’l-faqār* shows how this emblem had become incorporated into the Persian ideology of rulership. However, the primary position was given to the sun and lion flag. Maurice Herbette has collected contemporary records—including several paintings—of the arrival in 1714 of Moḥammad-Rezā Beg (reportedly sent by Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn) at the court of Louis XIV. The flag of Persia is several times mentioned (Herbette, pp. 65, 156, 158) and thrice represented (on pp. 115, 138f., 155; (PLATES II and III). These depictions document a pennon bearing as its device a large lion passant and a round female face surrounded by rays above it.

In seeking a possible Safavid interpretation of the sun and lion symbol several points need to be considered. Firstly, as is well known, the Shi’ites reserved the title Lion of God (Ar. *Asad-Allāh*, Pers. *Šīr-e Ḳodā*) for ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb (q.v.; see, e.g., Qazvīnī, pp. 165, 472). Secondly, the sun as the manifestation of God-given Glory (*farr*, q.v.) had been reinterpreted as “light” in Islamic Persia, and the Prophet and Imam ‘Alī had been credited with the possession of a divine light of lights (*nūr al-anwār*) of leadership, which was represented as a blazing halo (Milstein, pp. 536-40; cf. Qazvīnī, p. 165, where ‘Alī is called the “light of the eyes of the divine law,” *nūr-e dīda-ye šarī‘at*). The attribution of such qualities to ‘Alī and the tracing of the Shi’ite fourth Imam’s lineage to the royal Sasanian house (literature in Boyce, pp. 33-35), so infuriated Persian Sunnis that they accused the Shi’ites of having deserted Islamic traditions in favor of ancient Persian concepts: “Just as the Zoroastrians (*gabrakān*) consider sovereignty (*molk*) to be based on descent and divine glory (*farr-e yazdān*), so do the heretics (*rawāfeẓ*, deserters) base the caliphate on descent and replace divine glory with the idea of *naṣṣ* (explicit designation, divine nomination)” (Qazvīnī, pp. 406-7). Thirdly, the Safavids justified their claim to rulership on their alleged lineage from Imam ‘Alī (Kasrawī, 1944; Falsafī, 1955-67, I, pp. 3-4). Their veneration of ‘Alī is well documented. Shah Esmā‘īl referred to himself as *ḡolām-e Ḥaydar* “Haydar’s slave” (Falsafī, 1955-67, I, p. 4; *ḥaydar* “lion” being an epithet Shi’ites often used for ‘Alī), and Shah ‘Abbās the Great called himself *kalb-e āstān-e ‘Alī*, “the dog at ‘Alī’s threshold” (ibid., II, pp. 17 ff.). These considerations suggest that the Safavids had reinterpreted the lion as symbolizing Imam ‘Alī and the sun as typifying the “glory of religion,” a substitute for the ancient *farr-e dīn*.



A number of “Safavid” banners reproduced by Siegel (Pls. 49, nos. 7, 9; 60, no. 9; see also Jamālzāda, Figs. 1 2 3 4-5) are highly suspect. One has a gold background and bears three crescent moons, two of them set above the third; but exactly the same ensign is given (in red and blue) by Siegel (Pl. 47, nos. 6, 8) as Turkish and dated to between 1737 and 1769. Another has three lions rampant, two positioned above the third (wrongly directed and supplied with swords in Jamālzāda, Fig. 1). They have every appearance of being European in origin. The third combines a single-bladed sword with rows of sun-rosettes, crescent moons, and even Christian crosses. It is almost identical to a “Du’l-faqār” banner of the Great Mughals of India (Siegel, Pl. 49, no. 8) again dated 1737-69, and may well be of Indian origin.

Nāder Shah maintained two lofty imperial standards: “One of them was in stripes of red, blue and white, and the other of red, blue, white and yellow, without any other ornaments” (Hanway, I, p. 248). He appears to have avoided green as a specifically Safavid (and Shi‘ite) color. However, his signet device—a lion passant and a rayed sun encircling the words *Allāh al-malek*—shows that the symbol remained a recognized emblem of Persia (Nayyer Nūrī, 1964, fig. 4). The sun and lion is further documented on the tombstone of a soldier from the Zand period (Nafīsī, 1949, pp. 73 f.). Under the early Qajars the symbol appeared, quite ununiformly, on coins, medals, and banners (details in *Ḍokā’*). In imitation of the French Légion d’Honneur, Faḥ-‘Alī Shah created in 1807-10 the Order of the Persian Lion and Sun (*Nešān-e šīr o koršīd-e īrānī*, so specified by Ouseley, I, p. 184, II, p. 496) for conferring on French and English diplomats and officers (Wright; see also [DECORATIONS](#)). Persia was now given an official flag with the lion and sun as its device. A century later one could write: “Persia is known to-day as the Land of the Lion and Sun” (Jackson, p. 56). Already in 1811, Ouseley observed in Būšeḥr that a newly appointed Persian admiral had received a drum and “a flag displaying the Lion and Sun of Persia” (I, pp. 183 f.). Gaspard Drouville, who served in the Persian army in 1812-13, reports (II, pp. 133 f.): “The banners and standards of the Persians bear the armorial emblem of the country, namely, a lion couchant beside a rising sun, with the legend Solṭān ebn Solṭān Faḥ-‘Alī Shah Qājār□They are, like our [French] ensigns ornamented with silken white streamers and golden fringes. Banners are red, and crowned with a silver hand signifying the hand of ‘Alī, and the smaller standards are violet-blue and apexed with a sharp spear-head.” Moritz von Kotzebue, who visited Persia in 1817, gives an illustration (Pl. IV/10) showing a Persian gunner mounted on a camel and carrying a rectangular flag bearing the sun and lion symbol within



a white circle. Louis Dubeux says (p. 462) that Moḥammad Shah had two flags, “one with the sword of ‘Alī, which is double-pointed” and the other “with a lion couchant and the sun rising from its back.” That the second flag was the principal one was evident from several battle scene illustrations from the second Russo-Persian war of 1826-28 painted by the Russian artist Mashkov (Reproduced in Nafisī, 1955, Pls. between pp. 130 f., 134 f., 138 f.).

An interesting illustration of the Persian flag is given by Drouville FARHANGESTĀN), the established words for “flag” (Pers. *derafš*, Ar. *‘alam*, Turk. *beyraq*) were, curiously, replaced by the Turkish *parçam* (“tassel, hair”), with scholarly protests (e.g., Pūr-e Dāwūd, pp. 287-303) to no avail.

The exact measurements and form of the flag were re-established in 1957 (Dokā’, no. 38, p. 23), and remained unchanged until the Revolution of 1979. Then the device was replaced by the word *Allāh* “God,” written in red in a stylized form including the symbol for doubling the consonant (*šadda*), and the legend *Allāh akbar* “God is great” was added in white twenty-two times along the bottom of the green stripe and the top of the red stripes (PLATE VIII).

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