



## KARIM KHAN ZAND

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**KARIM KHAN ZAND** [Moḥammad-Karim] (b. ca. 1705; d. Shiraz 13 Šafar 1193/1 March 1779; [FIGURE 1](#)), “The Wakil,” ruler of Persia (except Khorasan) from Shiraz during 1164-93/1751-79. The Zand were a pastoral tribe of the Lak branch of the northern Lors, ranging between the inner Zagros and the Hamadān plains, centered on the villages of Pari and Kamāzān in the vicinity of Malāyer. In 1732 [Nāder Shah](#) deported thousands of Baḡ-tiāri and a number of Zand families to Khorasan. After Nāder’s assassination in 1747, they made their way home, the Baḡ-tiāri under ‘Ali-Mardān Khan (see [BAḤTIĀRI CHIEFS](#)) of the Čahār Lang, and the Zand under Moḥammad-Karim Beg (also called Tušmāl Karim, and later Karim Khan). When Nāder’s successors of the [Afsharids](#) failed to reassert their authority over western Persia, these two chieftains, in alliance with [Abu’l-Fatḥ Khan Baḡtiāri](#), a chieftain of the Haft Lang branch of the Baḡ-tiāri, who nominally governed Isfahan for the Afsharids, occupied the former Safavid capital in 1750 in the name of a Safavid princeling, Abu Torāb Mirzā, whom they styled Esmā’il II (actually the third monarch of that name; Nāmi, pp. 15-17; Golestāna, pp. 171-72). While the Zand leader, as commander-in-chief, was pacifying the northern Lor areas and Kurdistan, ‘Ali-Mardān Khan staged a coup: he killed Abu’l-Fatḥ Khan, invaded Fārs, and plundered Shiraz. On his way back he was ambushed in the narrow mountain pass known as Kotal-e Pir Zan (Kotal-e Doḡ-tar in Fasā’i) by local musketeers and driven into the mountains (Moḥammad Kalāntar, pp. 41-44; Nāmi, pp. 17-18; Golestāna, pp. 172-74; Fasā’i, I, pp. 590-91).

Karim Khan, who had meanwhile returned to Isfahan in January 1751 with an



augmented army, sought out and defeated his rival in Baḳtiāri country. Karim Khan recovered Shah Esmā'il III and assumed the Baḳ-tiāri khan's title of *wakil al-dawla* or regent. Defeated again the following year, 'Ali-Mardān Khan fled to Baghdad, where he joined the Pasha and other political exiles from Persia, including [Mirzā Mahdi Khan Astarābādi](#) (Nāder Shah's ambassador to Istanbul and official chronicler), in acclaiming a new Safavid pretender, styled Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn II, and marched on Kermānšāh. He was again defeated and fled, but was later killed by a band of Zands (1754) led by Šayḳ-'Ali Khan, whom he had captured. Karim Khan was now in control of western central Persia (ʿErāq-e ʿAjam) and was attracting more adherents, not only from the local tribes, but also from contingents still returning from Nāder Shah's army of Khorasan, such as 6,000 families of Šaqāqi Kurds (Golestāna, pp. 175-83, 197-201, 292-303).

*The struggle for power, 1751-63.* Three other contenders for supremacy remained: Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan of the Qovānlu clan of the Qajars of Astarābād, [Āzād Khan Afḡān Ġelzāy](#) (who had been in command of an Afsharid contingent of 15,000 Afghans in Azarbaijan), and Fath-'Ali Khan Afšār of Urmia. The Qajar chief had challenged the Zands in 1752, while they were besieging the fortress of Kermānšāh. They pursued him to Astarābād but were driven back; Moḥammad-Ḥasan even captured Shah Esmā'il III, and he struck coins in his name. The Zands also lost the first battle with Āzād Khan, who had arrived in 1753, too late to join forces with 'Ali-Mardān. Āzād Khan, in alliance with Fath-'Ali Khan Afšār, took Isfahan, and Karim Khan retreated into the Kuhgiluya hills. The Zand khans Moḥammad and Šayḳ-'Ali had meanwhile taken the Kermānšāh fortress and were interrupting Āzād Khan's communications with Urmia. Karim Khan defeated Fath-'Ali Khan at Kamārej and pursued him back to Shiraz, which Āzād Khan had to evacuate; on 13 Safar 1168/29 November 1754, Karim Khan first entered his future capital of Shiraz (Moḥammad Kalāntar, pp. 49-52; Nāmi, pp. 45-46).

The next few years saw several confrontations between Āzād Khan's forces and the Qajars, culminating in a defeat for Āzād Khan near Urmia in April 1757. Fath-'Ali Khan joined the Qajars, who again occupied the long-suffering city of Isfahan. After an unsuccessful siege of Shiraz, Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan was pushed back to Astarābād, and on 15 Jomādā II 1172/14 February 1759, he was defeated by an army under the command of Šayḳ-'Ali Khan Zand and slain by a renegade Kurd. Karim Khan spent two winters in Tehran, where he completed a massacre of the Afghans remaining in Māzandarān (already



begun by the Qajar governor of Sāri), appointed new governors (some from the rival Davallu) over the former Qajar territories, and built a fortified residence which was the nucleus of the future Golestān palace (q.v.; Nāmi, p. 96; *Dokā*, pp. 18, 42).

In the summer of 1760 Āzād returned from refuge in Baghdad in an attempt to regain control of Azarbaijan, but his former allies, Faṭḥ-‘Ali and Šahbāz Khan Donboli of Tabriz, turned on him and defeated him at Marāga. Karim Khan then advanced into Azarbaijan, successively defeating the Afšār and Donboli forces and taking Tabriz and Urmia in February 1763. Āzād Khan, who had taken refuge with his old ally, the Georgian monarch Erekle (Heraclius), surrendered to Karim Khan and lived thereafter in honorable retirement at Shiraz. Faṭḥ-‘Ali Khan Afšār, who had also surrendered, was executed the following year at Isfahan, as Karim Khan returned to Shiraz with a Qajar wife (Kādiya Bigom, sister of Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan), considerable booty, and hostages for his newly appointed governors of the captured provinces. On the way he had to dispatch some of his forces to quash an insubordinate rampage by his cousin Zaki Khan, which stirred up the half-subdued Feyli Lors and several Arab tribes of Khuzestan in temporary rebellion. On 2 Šafar 1179/21 July 1765, the Wakil re-entered Shiraz and remained there until his death almost fourteen years later (Ġaffāri, p. 145; Moḥammad Kalāntar, p. 63).

*The Wakil at Shiraz, 1765-79.* Karim Khan defied everyone’s expectations—Iranians, French, and Russians (see, e.g., Donboli, II, p. 31; Carmelites, p. 664; Arunova and Ashrafyan, p. 111)—by declining to assume the title of *šāh*. Not only was he content with that of *wakil* throughout his reign, but he reinterpreted this as *wakil al-ra‘ayā* “deputy of the subjects” or *wakil al-k-alā‘eq* “people’s deputy.” The former term was the designation of a local official, documented from the Safavid through the Zand and Qajar periods (though often an ex-officio function of the *kalāntar* “mayor,” or *ḥākem*, “city governor”), who was appointed by the shah to investigate crimes and complaints of administrative abuse (Perry, 1978, pp. 209-12). “Esmā‘il III,” who was kept in comfortable confinement at the fortress at Ābāda, predeceased the Wakil in 1773, and the fiction of a Safavid revival was quietly dropped.

Karim Khan still had to mount periodic campaigns to enforce the subservience of Lār, Yazd, Kermān, and Qajar-dominated Astarābād (Gorgān) and Māzandarān. He ultimately delegated Kermān to an Isma‘ili *sayyed*, Abu’l-Ḥasan ‘Alīšāh Maḥallāti, grandfather of the future Aga Khan (see [ĀQĀ KHAN i. MAḤALLĀTI](#)); the *sayyed*’s piety and charisma assured the loyalty and



obedience of his subjects, and his private income from the *k-oms* (the tithes from Ismaʿili faithful, some as far away as India) precluded any likelihood of extortion or peculation. The Qajars never fully submitted, and though Karim Khan kept [Āgā Moḥammad Khan](#) and several other Qajar notables at his court (including, briefly, Bābā Khan, the future Fath-ʿAli Shah), he never retaliated against them for the insubordination of their relatives in office (see, e.g., Eʿtemād al-Salṭana, p. 314).

Karim Khan did not attempt to recover Khorasan, which became a tributary of the Afghan monarch, [Aḥmad Shah Dorrāni](#). Likewise, he realized that his power, and that of his vassals in the northwest, could not realistically challenge the hegemony that the Georgian king Erekle (Heraclius) had established over Armenia and Azarbaijan north of the Aras River. He had limited success in controlling the Banu Kaʿb Arabs, the most powerful tribe in Khuzestan, with an expedition against them in 1757. In 1765 an amphibious assault by the Wakil, the Ottoman ʿOmar Pasha of Baghdad, and the British East India Company failed through poor coordination; the Persians were able to exact tribute by dint of breaching the Banu Kaʿb’s irrigation dam, but the tribe continued to dominate the Šaṭṭ-al-ʿArab region until the death of their leader, Shaikh Salmān, in 1768 (Perry, 1971).

To serve the commerce of his realm, with its center of gravity in Fārs, The Wakil authorized the [East India Company](#) to establish a trading post at Bušehr in 1765 (Wilson, pp. 178-79), and (like previous rulers, and with limited success) sought to co-opt their naval capacity to assist in subjugating the Arab shaikhs who dominated other Persian Gulf ports (notably Bandar Rig).

In 1768, the year of Shaikh Salmān’s demise, Mir Mohannā Zaʿābi, the pirate ruler of Bandar Rig and Kārg Island, who had defied and harried the Zands and both the English and the Dutch East India Companies, was ousted by a mutiny, fled to the coast near Basra, and was captured by the Ottoman governor and executed. His career had begun with a campaign against the Dutch, who in 1753 leased a commercial base on Kārg Island from Mir Mohannā’s father but neglected—their landlord claimed—to pay rent. Mir Mohannā captured their fort by trickery on New Year’s Day 1766 and set them adrift, thereby obtaining an impregnable stronghold and a rich haul of merchandise (Floor; Wilson, pp. 179-81). The British, trading from Basra and hoping to gain Kārg themselves, cooperated in desultory and ineffective fashion with Karim Khan’s forces, but again it was only internal accident that tamed the autonomy of yet another miniature shaikhdom of the Persian Gulf



(Nāmi, pp. 161-68). Having secured the coastal approaches, Karim Khan in 1769 demanded tribute from the Imam of Oman and the return of Nāder Shah's ship, the *Rahmāni*, which the Imam had bought from the Banu Ma'in Arabs of Hormoz without Karim Khan's consent. These demands were contemptuously rejected, and an intermittent state of war was maintained between Persia and Oman for most of the Zand period (Lorimer, pp. 411-12).

In 1775 the Wakil sent his brother (Moḥammad) Ṣādeq Khan to besiege Basra in Ottoman Iraq, which after a yearlong siege was taken and occupied until Karim Khan's death in 1779. Among the *casus belli* were 'Omar Pasha of Baghdad's confiscation of the effects of Persian pilgrims to Najaf and Karbalā who had died during the plague of 1773, and his interference in the politics of the Kurdish principality of Ardalān (a joint Zand-Kurd force also mounted a diversionary campaign in Kurdistan). However, the epidemic had already significantly reduced commerce at the port, and when Moḥammad-'Ali Khan Zand replaced Ṣādeq Khan as governor of occupied Basra, his rapacity led to his defeat in an ambush by the Arab tribe of the Montafeq in June 1778, followed by anarchy in the port. In December Ṣādeq Khan was sent back to restore order. He was there for barely three months before he received news of Karim Khan's death (Lorimer, p. 1264).

Karim Khan died in his seventies after a six-months illness, probably of tuberculosis, on 13 Ṣafar 1193/1 March 1779. He was buried three days later, with scant ceremony, in a garden (the Bāg-e Naẓar) adjacent to the palace, while his kinsmen pursued a murderous struggle for supremacy (Ġaffāri, pp. 376-82; 'Abd-al-Karim, pp. 5 ff.; Fasā'i, I, pp. 614 ff.; Francklin, pp. 294-310; Jones Bridges, pp. cx ff.). His remains were subsequently moved to Tehran by [Āgā Moḥammad Khan Qājār](#), and later reportedly sent to Najaf by [Fath-'Ali Shah](#), which is contradicted by the report that Reza Shah had the bones exhumed and buried in Qom (Dokā', pp. 111-21). Karim Khan's resting place is no longer known for certain.

*Achievements and character.* Karim Khan's relatively successful efforts to revive the economy of Fārs and western Persia focused on encouraging refugees (especially Armenians and Jews) to return to their homes and lands; community leaders, such as the Kalāntar of New Julfa, bearing letters from the Prelate, were sent to Baghdad expressly for this purpose (Yovhaneanc, p. 312). In 1763 one such caravan from Baghdad was said to have numbered about 10,000 returning refugees (Carmelites, I, pp. 662-63, 672). Grain subsidies in years of poor harvest and price controls in the capital were also a factor. In



autumn of 1775, for instance, a severe famine in Isfahan and Fārs obliged the Wakil to throw open the state granaries for the relief of the poor. Grain had to be brought from as far afield as Tehran, Qazvin, and even Azarbaijan, so that on arrival at Shiraz the cost had soared to fourteen times the nominal rate at which it was sold to the needy. Despite the urgings of his ministers to cover expenses, the Wakil insisted on distributing this grain at the fixed nominal rate, and the famine was eventually beaten (Āṣaf, pp. 421-22).

While encouraging the East India Company to operate from Bušehr, Karim Khan and his financial advisers were well aware of the chronic problem then besetting Persia's international commerce, namely, the drain of silver from the country. This was caused by the unfavorable balance of trade with India, Afghanistan, and other countries on the Persian Gulf, since Persia suffered from a shortage of exportable goods sufficient to cover imports, so that the balance was made up from cash. Hence it was specifically stipulated in the first trade agreement concluded at Shiraz, in July 1763, that the Company was to take a fair proportion of goods in kind "and not export from Persia the whole Amount of their sales in ready Money, as this will impoverish the Kingdoms [sic] and in the end prejudice Trade in general" (Jones Brydges, p. cix; East India Company, XVI, p. 781; Perry, 1979, pp. 259 ff.). This policy was regarded as unduly restrictive by the Company's Directors in London, who were naturally more concerned with maximizing their immediate profits.

Not only European but also Indian merchants were welcomed in Shiraz, which the Wakil largely rebuilt. His *arg* "citadel" (q.v.), mosque, and several gardens are still standing, while the city wall, several baths, and caravanserais and half of the Wakil's covered bazaar have been demolished, either by order of Āġā Moḥammad Khan, when he captured the city in 1792, or during the 20th century urban reconstruction. Karim Khan repaired the neglected tombs of Šāh Šojā', Ḥāfez, and Sa'di. Zand and other Lak and Lor officers and their families were given housing in Shiraz; the capital soon boasted a population greater than that of Isfahan (perhaps 40-50,000) and attracted poets and artisans from that city (Donboli, I, pp. 241-42, 269, 271; Ġaffāri, pp. 387-461; Afsar, pp. 181 ff.).

'Abd-al-Razzāq Beg Donboli, the Wakil's hostage-guest from Tabriz, who went on to join the Qajar court and write a pompous history of his new patrons, memorializes the Zand court of Shiraz as a happy haze of wine, women, and verse. The Wakil's wives were chosen out of political or economic considerations, such as Kadija Bigom, the sister of Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan



Qājār, and another, unnamed, whose brother owned a clothier's store (Āṣaf, p. 345; Hedāyat, IX, p. 127); but his favorite concubine, and mistress in later years, was a witty courtesan called Šāk-e Nabāt "Sugar-Candy" (a name also used by Hāfeẓ and popularly believed to be that of the poet's beloved). When she died, the disconsolate Wakil had her portrait painted and a verse epithet composed by the court poet (and later historian), Mirzā Šādeq Nāmi (Āṣaf, p. 341; Waring, facing p. 61, a copy of the portrait; Donboli, quoted by Bahār, III, pp. 326-28).

The Wakil kept executive authority as his prerogative; his viziers were rubber stamps rather than colleagues in government. He entrusted military command almost exclusively to his closest kinsmen among the Zand, though other Lak and Lor officers were trusted with important tasks (Heydar Khan Zangana was twice sent as an ambassador to Baghdad, while 'Abd-Allāh Khan Kalhor went as ambassador to Istanbul in 1775; Perry, 1979, pp. 191, 254-55). He was able to build a measure of trust and some lasting alliances with the bureaucrats, magnates, and religious leaders of the major cities of western Persia (sometimes without the traditional expediency of taking hostages: cf. Kermān, above, delegated to the Isma'ili *sayyed*, Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alīšāh Maḥallāti). He endorsed the majority Imami Shi'a and approved the traditional stipends for major dignitaries, such as the superintendent (*motawalli*) of the shrine of Shah 'Abd-al-'Azīm at Ray, south of Tehran; though he seems not to have courted the support of the ulema (*'olamā'*) and is said to have refused pensions to religious students, *sayyeds*, and dervishes, regarding them as parasites. He declared that his regulation of prices enabled them, like everyone else, to get by on what they had. On the other hand, the same source mentions that when a courtier advised against a dervish's petition to have a hostel (*takiya*) built for him and his visitors, charging that the man was fond of wine and hashish, Karim Khan retorted that, if he had such extra expenses, he would need a stipend as well, and duly assigned him one (Āṣaf, p. 309).

The dramatic enactment of the martyrdom of Imam Ḥosayn (q.v.) at Karbalā, known as *ta'zia* or *šabih-k'vāni*, most likely evolved during the Wakil's reign. It is not reported during the later Safavid period, when other aspects of the Moḥarram rituals became popular; but a visitor to Shiraz in 1786, during Ja'far Khan Zand's reign, watched performances of the well-known episodes of Qāsem's wedding and the European ambassador's protest to Yazid (Francklin, pp. 248-50). It is at any rate certain that Shi'ism as a component of Iranian identity, which came under threat during Nāder Shah's attempts to make



peace with the Ottoman Turks, reasserted itself fully under the Zands.

His reputation for clemency and forbearance is marred by a few executions of Zand officers and of Faṭḥ-‘Ali Khan Afšār in the early 1760s, and his blinding of Šayḳ-‘Ali Khan Zand during a quarrel. Though stories abound of his personal courage, sexual prowess, and enjoyment of wine and perhaps opium, it is his strict fairness, sense of humor, and notable humanity that are most frequently recorded in popular anecdotes. Karim Khan made it a personal rule not to appropriate windfalls: just as in his years of struggle he distributed booty among his troops and new allies, so in the period of consolidation he refused to confiscate the residue of those deceased without immediate heir, and when, during the rebuilding of Shiraz, a pot of gold coins was unearthed, he shared it out among the workers on the site. As Wakil, he retained his simple tastes in clothes and furniture, wearing the tall Zand turban of yellow cashmere and squatting on a cheap, flatweave rug (*zilu*) instead of a throne. He had gifts of jewelry broken down and sold to top up the treasury (see Āṣaf, pp. 310, 420, 421). He is still generally regarded among rulers of Persia as, if not the greatest by conventional criteria, undoubtedly the best. Sir John Malcolm thus characterized his reign: “The happy reign of this excellent prince as contrasted with those who preceded and followed him, affords to the Historian of Persia that description of mixed pleasure and repose which a traveller enjoys who arrives at a beautiful and fertile valley, in the midst of an arduous journey over barren and rugged wastes” (quoted by Jones Brydges, pp. cii, see also pp. cx ff.; Francklin, pp. 294-310).

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