



# NAVY I. NĀDER SHAH AND THE IRANIAN NAVY

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## NAVY

### i. Nāder Shah and the Iranian Navy

Nāder Shah's (r. 1736-47) earliest moves toward establishing a navy arose out of the consequences of his military campaigns in the interior of Persia. At the end of 1729 and the beginning of 1730, and again in 1734, Nāder Shah tried to induce the Dutch and English East India Companies (see [EAST INDIA COMPANY](#)) to use their ships based in Bandar 'Abbās to intercept fugitive enemies (e.g., Afghans, or the rebel Moḥammad Khan Baluch, governor of Kohgiluyā). Dissatisfied with this situation and already looking to project his power further, Nāder Shah appointed Moḥammad-Laṭif Khan as his admiral on the Persian Gulf coast with orders to buy ships from the Dutch and English and establish a naval base at Bushire (Gombroon Diary, 2/13 May 1734).

Under some duress, the Dutch and English gave help in 1734, but they were reluctant to sell their vessels. Moḥammad-Laṭif Khan managed to buy two good-sized English ships (brigantines) nonetheless, and another two from a local Arab shaikh, and in April 1735 he made an attack on Ottoman Basra. The Ottomans frustrated this attempt by commandeering two powerful English ships that happened to be in port. In May 1736, Moḥammad-Laṭif Khan copied this action, seized the British East Indiaman *Northumberland* in Bušehr, and



sailed with it and a number of smaller ships to Bahrain, which had been lost by the Safavids at the beginning of the previous decade, capturing it easily (Gombroon Diary, 17/28 June 1736; Floor 1987 pp 41-2).

The Persians did not keep control of Bahrain for long. Capturing Bahrain may have encouraged Nāder Shah to more ambitious enterprises in the Persian Gulf, but it had other effects too. It irritated the maritime Arabs and stimulated piracy and raiding against vessels from Persian ports. It also attracted the attention of Taqī Khan Šīrāzī, a courtier and financial adviser to Nāder Shah, who had been made governor of Fars. Taqī Khan arrived too late in Bushire to take part in the expedition to Bahrain, but took credit for its success nonetheless (Lockhart, 1938, p. 108; Floor, 1987, pp 41-42)

In March 1737, Moḥammad-Laṭīf Khan sailed with 5,000 troops to the Straits of Hormuz, in response to an appeal for help from the Sultan of Masqat. The Persians defeated the Sultan's rebel enemies, and after some difficulties renewed the campaign the following year, capturing Masqat. Some forts still held out for the rebels, and Moḥammad-Laṭīf Khan, Taqī Khan, and the Sultan fell out among themselves. Envious of Moḥammad-Laṭīf Khan's success, Taqī Khan had him poisoned, but he himself proved less successful as a naval commander, having little grasp of the necessities of naval provisioning and logistics. The Persians lost ground on land, falling back on Jolfār (Ra's-al-Ḳayma); and the Arab sailors in the Persian fleet mutinied, turning pirate (Floor, 1987, pp 43-45).

Over the next four years a desultory struggle with mutineers and pirates continued; some of the mutineers sided with the Persians again, only for new mutinies to break out later, prompted again by Taqī Khan's failure to pay or provision the ship's crews properly. In 1739, Taqī Khan attempted, under orders from Nāder Shah, to make a combined land-and-sea expedition to Sind, to meet Nāder Shah himself there as he returned with his army from the conquest of Delhi. The expedition was a complete failure; the troops ran short of food and water in the Makrān desert and were harassed and defeated by local Baluchis. The meeting never happened, and Taqī Khan had to pull back to Bandar 'Abbās (Gombroon Diary entries for October and November 1739; Floor, 1987, pp. 46-47). The episode seems to indicate Nāder Shah's intention to link up with his new sphere of influence in India, make use of the faster communications possible by sea, and control the important trade route to India. A further indication was his decision at this time to have Persian currency re-minted to make it interchangeable with the Indian rupee



(Gombroon Diary 5/16 February 1740; see also Subrahmanyam).

Already in 1734, in order to evade Nāder Shah's demands but also scenting a business opportunity, the British had suggested that Nāder Shah should buy ships from their yards in Surat, on the Gulf of Cambay. The first of these excellent teak-built vessels arrived in the Persian Gulf in 1741. Nāder Shah, planning to augment them by building his own ships from Persian timber, had timber carried to Bushire, with immense labor and suffering, all the way from the forests of Māzanderān (Bazin, p. 319).

By the spring of 1742 the Persians had a fleet of fifteen ships in the Persian Gulf, most of them powerful vessels built in Surat. By this time the swell of piracy and mutiny had receded again, and after new invitation from the Sultan, Taqī Khan made another intervention in Masqat. This time, the expedition was made on the basis that, should it be successful, the Sultan would recognize Persian sovereignty over his territories. The new fleet was able to transport more troops this time, and the rebels were overwhelmed. The last of them made terms in July 1743, the Persians took control of Masqat itself, and that appeared to be the final, decisive chapter in the story (Floor, 1987, p. 51; Lockhart, 1936, p. 13).

From this point on, Nāder Shah's experiment in the Persian Gulf suffered by his preoccupation with more pressing problems. He was ill and subject to uncontrollable rages. His avarice and brutality ravaged the country, and rebellions spread (including one in Shiraz led by Taqī Khan). By the time Nāder Shah was murdered by his own troops in Khorasan in June 1747, most of the new ships had been lost at sea or were rotting in port, and the Persian forces in Masqat had been pushed back again to Jolfār (Floor, 1987, pp. 51-53).

In addition to his Persian Gulf enterprises, Nāder Shah had been encouraging the development of a small fleet on the Caspian in the 1740s. This was achieved by John Elton, an Englishman who had first arrived in the Caspian to open up trade with Persia through Russia. Once in Persia, Elton began building ships for Nāder Shah, and he had finished two frigates and four smaller vessels by 1745, with more under construction. Nader Shah's unhappy experience in Daghestan in 1742 had shown him the need to secure sea transport for supplies across the Caspian Sea. Elton's activities angered the Russian government, without whose support Elton could never have set up in Persia at all. After Nāder Shah's death, Elton's difficulties intensified, and he was murdered in Gilan in 1751 (Lockhart, 1936, p. 17).



The story of Nāder Shah's Navy illustrates the expansionist, totalizing character of his regime more generally, and the ambition of his plans for his dynasty and for Iran. It was the maritime counterpart and complement to the military revolution that he began on land (Axworthy, 2007) and a necessary contribution toward his ultimate objective, which was hegemony over the central territories of the Islamic world, namely the territories of the former Safavid, Moghul, Ottoman, and Central Asian empires (Marvi, I, p. 234; Axworthy, 2006, p. 124). The fact that his plans failed, and that his immediate antecedents and successors did not share his vision, does not necessarily mean that his aims were necessarily impractical. His naval project was up against a number of major obstacles unfamiliar to him. The lack of a naval tradition and the lack of expertise in the highly technical sphere of naval warfare was a problem, perhaps surmountable; more intractable was the established, self-sufficient character of the maritime Arab culture of the Persian Gulf region, on both the northern and southern littorals, which resisted outside interference. This manifested itself as a contributory factor in the problems of mutiny and piracy, but also in the way that conquests proved ephemeral and were quickly erased by new rebellions or invasions. Finally, there was an air of amateurishness and lack of seriousness about the enterprise. This was partly because Taqi Khan was involved. He was more an accountant than a commander. But elsewhere, especially if there was a persistent problem, Nāder went to the scene of the action and intervened personally. He never visited the Persian Gulf.

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