



# OTTOMAN-PERSIAN RELATIONS I. UNDER SULTAN SELIM I AND SHAH ESMĀ'IL I

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## OTTOMAN-PERSIAN RELATIONS

### i. UNDER SULTAN SELIM I AND SHAH ESMĀ'IL I

The dynamics of Ottoman-Safavid relations during the almost contemporaneous reigns of Sultan Selim I and Shah Esmā'il I (r. 1501-24) are closely connected with the general socio-political and socio-religious conditions prevailing in Anatolia, Persia, and the border regions between the two empires since the second half of the 15th century. The Turkmen groups scattered around Anatolia had deep differences from the central administrative system, religiously, socially, and politically, which went back to the Saljuq period; and the weakening of the Aq Qoyunlu state in the late 15th century fostered political chaos. Shah Esmā'il, with his new religious doctrine, established influence over the Turkmens and filled the power gap. (See also discussion in [ĀLDERĀN](#).)

Shah Esmā'il, still only the head (*moršed*) of the Şafawiya order of militant Shi'ite dervishes (see Mazzaoui, 1971 and 1972), defeated the last [Āq Qoyunlu](#) ruler and seized his capital Tabriz, then the largest city in Persia. He crowned himself in Tabriz in 1501 and soon was able to take control of the



remainder of Persia and to establish there Twelver Shi'ism as the official creed. The latter action inaugurated a new period of tension in the Middle East which was to disturb its political geography for centuries, since Persia was surrounded by predominantly Sunnite neighbors, foremost among them Selim's Ottoman empire. Nevertheless, the initial period of Ottoman-Safavid relations could be considered as friendly (see Tekindağ, 1967, pp. 34-39; 1968, pp. 54-59; Bacqué-Grammont, 1991, pp. 205-207).

Several Türkmen tribes in Azarbaijan and Iraq, and more especially in Anatolia, which had been conquered just recently by the Ottomans, were affected by the religious-sectarian movement that was now led by the young and energetic Shah Esmā'il (b. 1487). Before Selim's accession to the throne, his father, Sultan Bayezid (Bāyazid) II (r. 1481-1512), already old and ill and confined to Istanbul, noticed the danger posed by the Safavids and their emissaries to the heterodox Anatolian tribes, but he was helpless against Shah Esmā'il, who enjoyed a series of victories won by his raiders in Anatolia. The rebellion of Šāhqoli Bābā Tekelü (Tekelu) in southern Anatolia in 1511 was only with difficulty suppressed by the Ottomans. The swift expansionist policy of Shah Esmā'il and Shi'ite propaganda in Anatolia were creating a great deal of anxiety in Istanbul's military circles. Parts of the army believed that only Prince Selim, the youngest son of Bayezid II, could save the state from this crisis (Tekindağ, 1968, p. 52; Uluçay, 1954, 1956), although Bayezid intended to leave the throne to his eldest son Aḥmad. Prince Selim, who advocated a more resolute attitude towards the Safavids, took the throne in 1512 and began his reign by killing his brothers and nephews, who could have threatened his rule. This was followed, in 1513, by ruthless measures taken against the Shi'ite Turkmens in Anatolia, before preparations began for a war against Shah Esmā'il (Bacqué-Grammont, 1991, pp. 207-8; Baştav, pp. 21-27).

On 20 April 1514, Sultan Selim I left Istanbul at the head of a large army after having obtained a fatwa from several well-known Sunnite clerics of that time, such as Mofti Nur-al-Din Ḥamza, known as "Saru Görez," and Ebn Kamāl, supporting the legitimacy of the military campaign against Shah Esmā'il (Tansel, 1969, pp. 34-36; Tekindağ, 1968, pp. 53-55; Allouche, pp. 170-73.). Soon after having arrived in Sivas via Eskişehir, Konya, and Kayseri, Selim, challenged Esmā'il to the battlefield with three letters, written in Persian in an extremely offensive style (for texts, see Feridun Beg, I, pp. 379-81, 382-86). As a safety measure, Selim had left behind 40,000 of his 140,000 soldiers, apparently to protect the region between Kayseri and Sivas. The Ottoman



army suffered from shortage of supply and the severe climatic conditions in the unfriendly terrain. Selim, however, decided to march on, using severe measures to keep discipline among the soldiers who had been dissatisfied by the prolonged campaign.

Ultimately, the Ottoman and Safavid armies came face to face on the field of Čālderān (see also Walsh; [PLATE 1](#)) on 3 August 1514. The ensuing battle ended with the complete victory of the Ottoman army, because of its superiority in number, its innovative military tactics, and especially the extensive use of firearms. Shah Esmā'īl, who had fought courageously, lost many of his close followers and commanders, though he managed to escape wounded from the battlefield. Selim then marched unopposed towards the Safavid capital, Tabriz, which he entered on 6 September. The Safavid camp, along with precious possessions belonging to the shah, was seized and many artisans from Tabriz were deported to Istanbul (for a document from that time, which has preserved a list with their names, see Uzunçarşılı, 1986, pp. 23-76).

The approaching winter, however, became a serious threat to the Ottoman army, whose logistic problems began to worsen. It left Tabriz for Karabakh (Qarābāg) in the southern Caucasus on 15 September 1514. Selim was willing to winter in Karabakh and then to resume his campaign against Shah Esmā'īl, but a mutiny started in the army when it reached the Aras River, which made Selim's position in Azarbaijan untenable, and he departed with his army for Amasya in Anatolia. Once Selim and the Ottoman army had left for Anatolia, Esmā'īl returned to Azarbaijan, entering Tabriz, his capital, in September 1514, where he passed the winter (Możtar, ed., p. 508; Montazer-e Şāheh, ed., p. 534; Ḥasan Rumlu, I p. 196).

Meanwhile, Selim was reinforcing his military success against Shah Esmā'īl with skillful use of diplomatic, economical, and psychological warfare. In order to weaken and encircle the Safavid state, he initiated contacts with the Sunnite ruler 'Obaydallāh Khan of the Uzbeks, whose territories bordered on the northeast of the Safavid domain (for details, see Feridun Beg, I, p. 374-79, 415-16). He also prohibited the transport of goods to Persia and confiscated them from traders who ignored the embargo (Feridun Beg, I, p. 498; K̄vāja Sa'd-al-Din Efendi, IV, pp. 213-16; Bacqué-Grammont, 1975). As an insult and also a psychological ploy, he forced the favorite wife of Shah Esmā'īl, who had been captured at Čālderān, to marry one of his men (see K̄vāja Sa'd-al-Din Efendi, IV, pp. 213-15; Uzunçarşılı, 1959, pp. 611-19; Savory, 2003, pp. 217-32;



Pārsādust, pp. 479-81).

Selim spent the winter of 1514/15 in punishing those soldiers and statesmen who had opposed the Persian war, and in bringing the Kurdish feudal lords of the frontier area, who had so far pursued a wait-and-see attitude, over to his side (see TSMA, E. 8333; Ḥaydar Čalabi, p. 149; Edris Bedlisi, pp. 237-40). Meanwhile, Shah Esmā'il sent an embassy, led by Sayyed 'Abd-al-Wahhāb, to Amasya offering peace, but Selim rejected this proposal and had the envoys sent to Istanbul as prisoners.

Although the power of Shah Esmā'il could not be destroyed entirely in the Battle of Čālderān, he was never again to constitute a serious danger to the Ottomans. The defeat had deep effects on the future policy and even on the psychology of Shah Esmā'il. Hitherto, he had spent his life in struggles and wars and had achieved spectacular successes and victories. After 1514, however, he kept away from all political contention and wars and never again led his army into a battle.

In the few years following Čālderān, Selim turned his attention to those principalities from which the Safavids might possibly get aid. In the spring of 1515, he captured first the fortress of Kemāk, present-day Kemah in eastern Anatolia (see Imber), which was still held by Esmā'il's troops. He then sent an army under the command of Senān Pasha to the principality of the Du'l-Qáadr, who had followed ambiguous politics during the Persian war. After the Battle at the Turna Mountain (12 June 1515), their territory was incorporated into the Ottoman empire. This annexation was followed by the conquest of the cities of Āmed (present-day Diyarbakır) and Mardin (Mārdin), and the surrounding region by Biyıklu Mehmed Pasha.

Selim, however, was unable to continue his Persian war because of renewed mutinies in the army. Instead, he returned to Istanbul and spent the year 1515 in punishing those officials whom he suspected of disobedience. After this, Selim launched a military campaign against the Mamluks, as the annexation of the Du'l-Qáadr principality had created tensions between the two powers, which were now immediate neighbors. The Ottoman army entered Cairo after two decisive victories at Marj al-Dābeq (24 August 1516) and Raydāniya (22 January 1517); thus Syria, Egypt, and Hejaz were annexed to the Ottoman empire.

After the elimination of the Mamluk empire, Selim turned again his attention



to his archenemy Shah Esmā'il. In the winter of 1517-18, when the Ottoman army was stationed in Damascus, he commanded a bridge to be built over the river Euphrates. However, by the time it was completed, the sultan encountered again the severe resistance of his army. He was therefore forced to postpone the planned march against Persia and to return to Istanbul. During the last two years of his reign, Selim was still planning campaigns against Shah Esmā'il, but the instable situation among his troops prevented him from turning his plans into action.

Sultan Selim died on 21 September 1520 near Çorlu. The interest of his son Süleymān (Solaymān) I (r. 1520-66), who succeeded him to the throne, focussed on the West, although he, too, led several campaigns into Persia. Under his rule, trade with Persia was resumed, although on a limited scale. An official letter and an embassy sent by the shah to congratulate Süleymān on his accession to the throne and his conquest of Rhodes in September 1523 caused a temporal thaw in the relations between the two states (Faridun Beg, I, pp. 525-27). Shah Esmā'il died the following year and was succeeded by his son Ṭahmāsb I (q.v., r. 1524-76). These events were the beginning of a new era in the relations between the Ottomans and the Safavids.

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