OTTOMAN-PERSIAN RELATIONS II. AFSHARID AND ZAND PERIODS

OTTOMAN-PERSIAN RELATIONS

ii. AFSHARID AND ZAND PERIODS

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Ottoman conflicts with European powers overshadowed relations with the Safavids. Following the 1718 Passarowitz Treaty between Austria and the Ottoman empire, Sultan Aḥmad III dispatched a mission to Isfahan to conclude an agreement with Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn making Persian goods destined for Austria duty-free. This Ottoman delegation arrived in Persia in early 1720 just at the beginning of the Afghan invasion that would end two centuries of Safavid rule by Moḥarram 1135/ October 1722.

In the summer of 1722, Peter the Great viewed the impending collapse of Safavid power as his chance to expand, so he led his armies down the Caspian coast. Because the Ottomans wanted to check this Russian advance and were coming under pressure to aid Sunnis in the Caucasus who claimed harsh treatment from their Shiʿite rulers, the sultan too declared war on the Safavids early in 1723 (Lockhart, 1958, p. 225). To provide a pretext for invading Persian territory, the Ottoman *Šayḵ-al-eslām*, the highest religious authority,

issued *fatwas* (religious rulings) denouncing the Safavids' abuse of their Sunni subjects as well as their continued adherence to heretical Shiʿite beliefs (Aktepe, p. 18). Over the next two years, the Ottomans secured control of Georgia, Armenia, Azarbaijan and Shirvan (Šervān), leaving the Caspian coast and Daghestan (Dāḡestān) to the Russians. Following considerable diplomatic activity, a Russian-Ottoman treaty was drawn up in which both sides were allowed to keep areas of Persia they had occupied. Paradoxically, they both supported the struggle of the Safavid claimant, Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn's son Ṭahmāsp (who became widely recognized as Shah Ṭahmāsp II), against the Afghans to regain the Persian throne: a *realpolitik* reversal for the Ottomans, at least, of their previous religious condemnations (Lockhart, 1958, pp. 199-200).

The Afghan conqueror of Persia, Maḥmud, had made a bad impression on an Ottoman emissary dispatched by the governor of Baghdad to him soon after the fall of Isfahan, so the Ottomans chose not to make him their ally. Instead, they concentrated on securing control of the parts of Persia they had occupied while implementing the terms of their agreement with the Russians. In Šaʿbān 1137/April 1725, Maḥmud died or was put to death by members of his court after he had gone mad, so his cousin Ašraf became shah. Ašraf proved more successful than Maḥmud and began to establish his authority fairly quickly, despite his previous support for Ṭahmāsp II against Maḥmud (Lockhart, 1958, p. 282-84).

Ašraf sent an emissary to the Ottoman sultan in January 1726 who requested that Ottoman forces withdraw from all of Persia. In an accompanying letter, a group of nineteen Afghan clerics proposed that the sultan recognize Ašraf as fully autonomous because he had conquered land in Persia that was technically "ownerless" since Shiʿites, as heretics, did not enjoy property rights. They also argued that Ašraf's independent status was legitimate according to the principle that sovereigns may rule independently when their domains are remote from one another (*Cevāpnāme*, fol. 26b.) When some Ottoman ulema apparently responded favorably to this letter due to Ašraf's growing reputation in Istanbul as a champion of Sunnism, the Šayḵ-al-eslām issued another fatwāstating that the Afghan leader could be declared a rebel for even *claiming* independent authority over Persia. This document asserted that Muslim rulers could only function as independent sovereigns in areas separated by significant geographical barriers such as the Indian Ocean. One measure of official concern over the Afghans' initial letter was that more than

one hundred and sixty prominent Ottoman religious authorities signed the fatwā responding to it (*Cevapname*, fol. 16a).

Within a few months, the Ottomans mounted a military campaign led by the Ottoman governor of Baghdad, Aḥmad Pasha, against Ašraf under the pretext that he was a rebel against the sultan's legitimate authority. Facing this challenge, Ašraf had Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn the Safavid, whom he was holding prisoner, put to death as a potential threat to his own legitimacy. The Afghan ruler then inflicted a severe defeat on Ottoman forces at Ḵòorramābād near Hamadān in the fall of 1726. At this encounter, many Ottoman soldiers refused to enter battle after an Afghan delegation persuaded them not to fight fellow Sunnis (Lockhart, 1958, p. 290). By the following fall though, the Ottomans and Afghans did conclude a peace treaty that avoided addressing specific questions of sovereignty but acknowledged the Ottoman sultan's overall authority over the Muslim world. In this agreement, the Ottomans were able to retain their territorial gains of the 1720s while restoring the same general parameters in their diplomatic relationship as had been observed in the Safavid era. Although it was short-lived, several provisions of this treaty, such as its attempt to secure proper treatment for Persian pilgrims in Ottoman lands and its call for the regular exchange of ambassadors between Persia and the Ottoman Empire, foreshadowed Persian-Ottoman diplomacy over the next two decades.

As Ašraf's reign marked the highpoint of the Afghans' tenuous hold over Persia, a new leader, Ṭahmāsp-qoli Khan (later known as Nāder Shah), was rising to power as one of Shah Ṭahmāsp II's most successful military commanders. Nāder's defeat of Ašraf at the pivotal battle of Mehmāndust in Ṣafar 1142/September 1729 marked the end of Afghan rule in Persia. Two years later, while Nāder was busy driving the remnants of Afghan forces back to their homeland, Ṭahmāsp II launched a campaign against the Ottomans that ended in his defeat: providing Nāder the pretext to depose him and place Ṭahmāsp's infant son on the throne as Shah ʿAbbās III (Lockhart, 1938, p. 72).

After a series of inconclusive campaigns and negotiations between Nāder and the Ottomans over the next few years, the sultan sent an ambassador to reestablish, at long last, a peace based on the 1049/1639 Ottoman-Safavid borders. He arrived in the Persian army camp in the spring of 1736 to witness Nāder's coronation ceremony at a large conclave of delegations on the Moḡān steppe (*Dašt-e moḡān*). There, Nāder declared that his elevation to the throne signaled the Persian people's acceptance of the concept that Twelver Shiʿism

henceforth should be considered a fifth school (*maḏhab*) of Sunnism and known as the Jaʿfari *maḏhab* in honor of the sixth Imam, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādeq, renowned among Shiʿites for his deep learning and jurisprudential skills (Tucker, 1994, p. 167).

Immediately following his coronation, Nāder sent an embassy to Istanbul to explain his ideas. This delegation arrived in Istanbul at a time when the Ottomans were willing to listen to its proposals, given their ongoing hostilities at that time with Austria and a looming conflict with Russia. The Persians presented a peace plan with five basic conditions: (1) Ottoman acceptance of Twelver Shiʿism as a fifth legitimate school (*maḏhab*) of Sunni Islam, (2) the construction of a communal prayer center in the Kaʿba for this *maḏhab*, (3) the appointment of a Persian *ḥajj* caravan leader (overseer of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca), (4) the exchange of prisoners of war and prohibition of their sale or purchase, and (5) the regular exchange of ambassadors. Nāder's letter to the sultan asserted that before the Safavids, "we [the Persians] had been favored, as the people of the *sonna*, to follow in the path of The Prophet." (Nāder Shah, quoted in Qojā Meḥmet Rāḡeb Pasha, *Tahkik ve Tevfik*, p. 52). Nāder's ambassadors proclaimed that he had decided to follow the school of Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādeq, whose legal writings agreed with Sunni scholars' pronouncements on fundamental religious issues (*oṣūl*) and differed from them only on secondary questions (*foruʿāt*) just as the writings of legal scholars from the four conventional Sunni *maḏhabs* differed among each other (Qojā Meḥmet Rāḡeb Pasha, *Tahkik ve Tevfik*, p. 52).

The actual discussion of this proposal largely consisted of the two delegations talking past each other, and no agreement could be reached. As upholders of orthodox Sunni Islam, the Ottomans defended received tradition and bristled at the mere suggestion of religious innovation. Nāder, on the other hand, wanted the most important ruler in the Sunni Muslim world, the Ottoman sultan, to grant external legitimacy to his attempt to overcome what he perceived as the burden imposed on Persia by its Safavid Shiʿite legacy. One Ottoman negotiator categorically stated that if the Persians really wanted a just and enduring peace, Nāder must not insist on recognition of his Jaʿfari *maḏhab* because it would disrupt tranquil relations between the Ottoman sultan and his subjects (Qojā Meḥmet Rāḡeb Pasha, *Tahkik ve Tevfik*, pp. 56-57). The Ottoman negotiators' unwillingness to discuss such a major reorganization shows how the processes of change beginning to sweep across the Middle East during this time only reinforced official Ottoman concerns

about preserving the existing political and religious status quo.

On the other hand, the negotiations of 1736 also witnessed the beginning of a shift in how the Ottoman government officially classified Persian prisoners, and by extension, Persians. When the Persian embassy complained that it was not lawful to detain Muslim prisoners against their will, the Ottomans responded that any infidel could legally be imprisoned. Since Shiʿite Persians had cursed three of the four "rightly-guided" caliphs, they were classified as "infidels." The Persian delegation, though, presented a compelling case for the difficulty of verifying that any individual had actually done this, so the Ottomans ultimately agreed to release their Persian prisoners. The Ottoman government, in fact, ordered that henceforth, the buying and selling of Persian prisoners should be prohibited (Qojā Meḥmet Rāġeb Pasha, *Tahkik ve Tevfik*, p. 121).

A related issue concerned the treatment of Persian ḥajj pilgrims. During the negotiations, Nāder's ambassador requested that a Persian caravan leader be appointed to lead an annual Persian caravan. The Ottomans agreed to allow Nāder to select his own ḥajj caravan leader: a concession that offered an unprecedented level of political authority for the shah's representative as the head of an official foreign delegation traveling through Ottoman territory.

The Ottoman responses to Nāder's proposals revealed some willingness to put the relationship with Persia on a new footing. Efforts made by the Ottomans to free Persian captives and Ottoman consent to the argument that the prisoners could not collectively be declared infidels showed that they would now treat Persian captives as they would fellow Sunnis. Their offer to appoint a Persian overseer for the ḥajj pilgrimage (*amir al-ḥajj*) would have accorded Nāder important political status as the organizer and sponsor of a yearly *ḥajj* caravan. The 1148/1736 talks thus began the transition from an Ottoman-Persian relationship which, although peaceful for many years, could never transcend certain basic religious disputes, to a more stable tie in which the common Muslim identity of Ottomans and Persians was formally recognized as more important than their sectarian differences.

However, Nāder rejected these counteroffers out of hand, because the Ottomans would not accept his Jaʿfari maḏhab proposal. After he had successfully carried out invasions of India and Turkistan over the next few years as well as suppressing rebels in Daghestan, Nāder again embarked on a campaign against the Ottomans, entering Iraq in 1743 and placing Mosul and

Basra under siege. This time, the Ottoman Šayḵ-al-eslām issued the last traditional fatwā justifying war with Persia (Başbakanlık Arşivi, Istanbul, *Mühimme Defteri*,no. 148, p. 226). It stated that Nāder had portrayed the Jaʿfari maḏhab concept as a return to Sunnism, but because this was not true, Persians could still be treated as heretics and war lawfully waged on them. After he had lifted the siege of Mosul and withdrawn most of his troops there, he convened a council of Ottoman and Persian clerics in the shrine city of Najaf to conduct detailed negotiations on the Jaʿfari maḏhab issue. As before, these talks stalled.

After three more years of inconclusive warfare, Nāder agreed to drop the Jaʿfari maḏhab idea and concluded an agreement with the Ottomans in 1746 at Kordān. It reestablished the 1639 borders and prohibited cursing the "rightly-guided" caliphs and companions of the prophet, asserting that this practice was a corruption introduced by the Safavids. The treaty admonished both sides to protect merchants and traders from excessive taxation (text in *Muahedat Mecmuası* II, pp. 317-30).

In addition to these familiar clauses, it contained novel provisions that called for the protection of Persian pilgrims, the regular exchange of ambassadors, and the liberation of prisoners of war, whose purchase or sale was prohibited. Persian visitors in Ottoman lands were specifically recognized as enjoying equal status with all other Muslims there and their rights to visit Shiʿite tombs in Iraq openly acknowledged. Thus, the 1746 treaty incorporated many concessions that the Ottomans had offered in 1736, placing more emphasis on the status of Persians as fellow Muslims: a shift in focus that would help shape Ottoman-Persian relations for the next 150 years.

Although Nāder was assassinated soon after this treaty was drawn up, its basic terms remained in effect even during later episodes of renewed conflict. The next significant round of Ottoman-Persian conflict began when Karim Khan Zand, who had taken over part of Persia after the collapse of Nāder's empire upon his death, occupied Basra in 1775. The Ottomans had gone to great lengths to avoid deploying troops to defend Iraq, but were forced to mobilize there by 1778 to recapture Basra from the Persians (Ahmet Cevdet Paşa, *Tarih-i Cevdet Paşa*, Istanbul, 1891, II, p. 305).

As before, the Ottoman Šayḵ-al-eslām issued a fatwālegitimizing Ottoman actions, but it described Karim Khan simply as a rebel *(yāḡi)* against the sultan who was acting against Islamic unity and argued that he could be killed on

that basis alone. It never made the slightest accusation of heresy, although Karim Khan had based much of his domestic legitimization on his attempt to defend and revive Safavid-style Shiʿism in Persia. The fatwārevealed how basic Ottoman policy towards Persia had evolved. A process of diplomatic change that began in the era of Nāder resulted over the next several decades in the development of a new *de jure* framework for Ottoman-Persian relations. Its premise was that despite intermittent clashes, a relationship based on the formal acceptance by the two sides of their common Muslim identity was preferable to a policy of implicit conflict and confrontation based on consciousness of their religious differences. This emerging new paradigm of Ottoman-Persian relations would continue to develop through the early thirteenth/nineteenth century.

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