



SAFAVID DYNASTY

SAFAVID DYNASTY. Originating from a mystical order at the turn of the 14th century, the Safavids ruled Persia from 1501 to 1722.

Introduction. The period of the Safavids, the dynasty that took control of Persia in the early 16th century, is often considered the beginning of modern Persian history, just as the state they created is said to mark the genesis of the Persian nation-state. It would be anachronistic to call Safavid Persia a modern nation-state, and it is important to realize that, in many ways, Safavid society continued Mongol and Timurid patterns and practices—ranging from its coinage to its administrative institutions. The Safavids, in fact, consciously built their legitimacy on past tradition. Just as Timurid historians had attempted to forge a connection with the Mongols, so Safavid historians made an effort to associate [Shah ‘Abbās I](#) with Timur-e Lang (r. 1370-1405) and to present him as a divinely inspired figure. Yet it is also true that the Safavids made many original contributions and their legacy survives in various ways. They unified much of Persia under a single political control, transforming an essentially tribal nomadic order into a sedentary society deriving most of its revenue from agriculture and trade. Most importantly, the Safavids introduced a concept of patrimonial kingship, combining territorial authority with religious legitimacy that, with modifications, would endure until the 20th century. The political system that emerged under them had overlapping political and religious boundaries and a core language, Persian, which served as the literary tongue, and even began to replace Arabic as the vehicle for theological discourse. A number of administrative institutions created during



the Safavid period or adapted from earlier times continued to exist well into the Qajar era. The Safavid period, finally, witnessed the beginning of frequent and sustained diplomatic and commercial interactions between Persia and Europe.

In discussing Persia between 1501 and 1722, several peculiarities of the area and the time should be borne in mind. The first concerns the country's physical environment and its effects. Much of Persia consists of arid, unproductive land. Large parts receive insufficient rainfall to support agriculture but are well suited to pastoral nomadism. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, nomads, organized in tribes, comprised as much as one-third to one half of the country's population. A second and related issue was that military power in Persia was usually tribal in origin, with political power following suit. Until the 20th century, all of Persia's ruling dynasties had their origins in tribal ambitions. The nomadic make-up of the state was reflected in an ambulant royal court and the fact that until modern times Persia did not have a fixed capital. Safavid Persia had a succession of capitals: for the capital was where the shah and his entourage happened to be. Thirdly, military and political power in Persia was generally in the hands of ethnic Turks, while ethnic Persians, called Tajiks, were dominant in the areas of administration and culture. As Persians of Kurdish ancestry and of a non-tribal background, the Safavids did not fit this pattern, though the state they set up with the assistance of Turkmen tribal forces of eastern Anatolia closely resembled this division in its makeup. At the same time, it is important to stress that the Turk versus Tajik barrier could be breached. Over time, many Turks served as bureaucrats while a number of Tajiks held military posts. Nor should the tension and rivalry created by mutual suspicion and divergent interests between the two groups be exaggerated. Fourthly, statecraft in pre-modern Persia was an admixture of Islamic traditions of governance, ancient Persian notions of kingship, and Central Asian, Turco-Mongolian principles of legitimacy and power. In the first, the ruler ruled the religious community as God's trustee; the second was built around the notion of an absolutist monarch governing over his people as a shepherd over his flock; while in the third, power, or at least charisma, resided in the clan which included women—mothers and daughters—as much as sons and uncles, rather than in the person of the ruler. In this, as in other areas, Safavid Persia has much in common with its neighbors to the east and west, Mughal India and the Ottoman Empire. The absence of primogeniture—the right of the eldest son to succeed—in the latter tradition turned every succession into a long struggle



for power and thus created much instability (though in Safavid Persia, the older Persian principle of the son succeeding the father usually prevailed).

Background. The Safavids began in about 1300 as a mystical order centered in the northwestern town of [Ardabil](#), the hometown and burial place of the order's founder, Shaikh Şafi-al-Din (1252-1334). Weathering the political storms attending the demise of Mongol rule in Iran and the rise and fall of Timur Lang, the Safavid order continued under the leadership of Şafi-al-Din's son Şadr-al-Din (d. 1391-92) and K̄vāja 'Ali (d. 1427), [Jonayd](#) (d. 1460), and Ḥaydar (q.v.; 1460-88), growing into an elaborate, ambitious movement inhabiting the interstices of the territory ruled by the [Āq Qoyunlu](#) and the Qara Qoyunlu. Their main supporters were Turkmen tribal groups known as the Qezelbāš (Qizilbāš), "redheads," in reference to the red headgear they were said to have adopted at the time of Ḥaydar. Its twelve gores symbolized their allegiance to the Safavid ruler and the twelve Shi'ite Imams. Despite their collective name, these seminomadic warriors of Turkish ethnic origin did not claim a common descent. They retained their individual clan affiliation, and the different clans continued to be one another's bitter rivals. The most important Qezelbāš clans supporting the Safavid cause were the Šāmlu, the Ostājlu, the Tekellu, Rumlu, and [Du'l-Qadr](#), all of them migrants from Syria and Anatolia. Each clan migrated to a different part of Persia, with their leaders appointed as governor of the area once the Safavids conquered it. Thus the Ostājlu were located in Azarbaijan and in part in ['Erāq-e 'Ajam](#) and Kermān; the Qarāmānlu hailed from Šīrvān; the Šāmlu resided in Khorasan; the Tekellu held Isfahan, Hamadan, and parts of ['Erāq-e 'Ajam](#); Fārs was in the hands of the Du'l-Qadr, the [Afšār](#) dominated in Kuhgiluya and Khuzestan (K̄uzestān), and Baghdad rested under the Mawşellu, a smaller tribe and offshoot of the Āq Qoyunlu.

The relationship of the Qezelbāš to the shah was a mystical one of the Sufi master, *moršed*, and his disciple (*morid*). They formed the military elite of the fledgling state and provided the praetorian guard, the *qurčī* cavalry, for the shah himself. Fiercely loyal to their leader and convinced of their own invincibility, they often threw themselves into battle without armor. They also engaged in rituals such as cannibalism (Aubin, "L'avènement," p. 45) and wild drinking sessions (Matthee, *The Pursuit*, chaps. 1 and 2). Jonayd gathered a following among these mostly Turkmen tribesmen, trained them for military operations, and used them in raids against the peoples of the Caucasus, Armenians, Georgians and Circassians. Such raids brought the Safavids into



conflict with the Šīrvānšāhs, in the course of which both Jonayd and his son, Ḥaydar, were killed. Jonayd, as yet lacking the requisite worldly power and facing the enmity of the Āq Qoyunlu dynasty, forged an alliance with this most powerful dynasty of the time, and Ḥaydar consolidated the ties further by marrying a daughter of their powerful ruler, Uzun Ḥasan (r. 1457-78).

Much about the early Safavid order remains unclear. One point of uncertainty is the precise nature of their religious beliefs. Originally, they seem to have harbored Sunni convictions, but under K̄vāja ‘Ali they are said to have gravitated toward Shi‘ism under the influence of their main supporters—Turkmen tribes who adhered to a popular brand of Shi‘ism. Originating as it did in a frontier region rife with primordial beliefs mixing cabbalistic and millenarian elements, their belief system had long borne little relation to orthodox Twelver Shi‘ism. Under Shaikh Jonayd, the order became more militant, turning towards an extremist form of Shi‘ism (*ḡoluw*, see [GOLĀT](#)) replete with shamanistic and animistic elements that included a belief in reincarnation and the transmigration of souls, as well as the notion of a leader invested with divine attributes, the *mahdi* (see [ISLAM IN IRAN vii. MAHDI IN TWELVER SHI‘ISM](#)). Upon Jonayd’s death, his followers allegedly began to call him “God,” and his son, Ḥaydar, “Son of God.” At the time of [Shah Esmā‘il I](#), a genealogy was fabricated according to which Ṣafi-al-Din descended from the seventh Imam, Musā al-Kāẓem (d. ca. 800). This did little to compel him to adhere to the official doctrine and practice of the newly established faith. He wrote poetry filled with pre-Islamic Persian terms and references, referring to himself as Feridun, Khosrow, Jamshid and Alexander, as well as applying religious names, such as “son of ‘Ali” and one of the Twelve Imams.

Esmā‘il I (r. 1501-24). It was under Ḥaydar’s son, Esmā‘il, that the Safavids evolved from a messianic movement to a political dynasty led by a shah rather than a shaikh. This was achieved with the assistance of the Qezelbāš, who venerated their leader as an incarnation of God and were blindly obedient to him, even offering themselves for martyrdom in his cause. They received land in return for their loyalty, and were appointed to governorships of newly conquered provinces. Safavid princes also received a Qezelbāš tutor. Having lived under the protection of the ruler of [Gilān](#) for five years, in 1499 Esmā‘il emerged from the Caspian region, defeated the Šīrvānšāhs, and set out to wrest control of western Persia from the Āq Qoyunlu. In 1501, the Safavid army broke the power of the Āq Qoyunlu by defeating their ruler, Alvand (r. 1497 in Diārbakr [q.v.], and then in Azarbaijan until 1502, d. 1504), in the



Battle of Šarur, in the Aras valley. The borderlands of Azarbaijan, Širvān and eastern Anatolia suffered extensively in the process. Much land was laid waste, commercial traffic interrupted, and frequent outbreaks of epidemics brought much misery upon the population. The Qezelbāš also sowed terror among the largely Sunni inhabitants, forcing people to condemn the first three caliphs in public and desecrating the graves of Āq Qoyunlu rulers. With Azarbaijan seized, Esmā'il, barely 15 years of age, inaugurated Safavid political rule in 1501 by proclaiming himself shah in Tabriz, having coins struck in his name and declaring the city his capital. He also decreed Shi'ism to be the official faith of the realm, thus endowing his new state with a strong ideological basis while giving Persia overlapping political and religious boundaries that would last to this day.

The next few years saw continued Safavid expansion across Persia. Internal divisions and the plague prevented the Āq Qoyunlu from resisting Esmā'il's conquest of Fārs in 1503. Its governorship went to a leader of the Du'l-Qadr who would rule the area for the next 100 years. The new shah also made a thrust toward the Persian Gulf littoral, forcing the commercial emporium of [Hormuz](#) into tributary status. He set out to occupy Māzandarān where a large number of Āq Qoyunlu troops had found sanctuary, quelled a revolt in Yazd, and seized rebellious Isfahan. Next he turned his attention to the western border areas, undertaking expeditions against Kurdistan and Diārbakr, where an Ostājlu amir was installed as an independent ruler. All the while Sunnis were persecuted, driven out, or killed. In 1508, Safavid forces achieved their final victory over the Āq Qoyunlu by capturing Iraq, including Baghdad and the Shi'ite shrine cities of Najaf and Karbalā'. 'Arabestān (Khuzestan), ruled by the local Shi'ite Moša'sa' dynasty, was subdued next, and with the seizure of Širvān the following year, all of Persia except for Khorasan was in Safavid hands.

It was to Khorasan that Esmā'il's attention was directed next. The Uzbeks, led by Moḥammad Khan Šaybāni (r. 1500-12), had overrun the area in 1507-08, moving as far west as Dāmḡān, from where they organized raids against Kermān and Yazd. In 1510, Esmā'il defeated Moḥammad Šaybāni Khan and took Marv and Herat, thus extending his realm from the ancient Mongol capital to that of the successors of the Timurids. A Šāmlu was appointed governor of Herat; a Qarāmānlu, was made ruler of the area between Balk and Morḡāb, and a leader of the Ṭāleš tribe received Marv (Merv). Esmā'il did not intend to expand his territory beyond Khorasan into Transoxania, but was



drawn into an attack on Samarqand by the ambitions of [Zāhir-al-Din Bābor](#) (r. 1526-30), a descendant of Timur and the progenitor of the Indian Mughal dynasty. At this point the Safavid realm attained the greatest expanse in its entire history, but this extended frontier was not to last. Following their victory in the Battle of Ġojdovān (q.v.), near Bukhara (see [BUKHARA iv.](#)), in 1512, the Uzbeks regained Transoxania and briefly occupied Herat and Mashad.

The main rivals of the Safavids were to be the Ottomans. The self-declared defenders of Sunni Islam could not but feel threatened by the establishment of a militant Shi'ite state on their border, and by Safavid propaganda among the Turkmens of central and eastern Anatolia, many of whom had long supported the Safavid cause. In fact, a migration of Turkish tribal elements from Anatolia and Syria to Persia, dating from the 14th century, greatly contributed to the initial strength of the Safavid cause and their viability as a political dynasty. Safavid provocations also played a role. Esmā'il, for instance, refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of Sultan Selim (Salim) I (r. 1512-20) as Bāyezid (Bāyazid) II's (r. 1481-1512) successor, and supported a rival contender. In the same period, pro-Safavid rebellions broke out in Anatolia, led by Qezelbāš who may have been attracted by the tribally organized order of neighboring Persia, and the Safavid army marched into Anatolia, intent on subverting Ottoman authority. Selim's response was swift. He brutally repressed all support for Esmā'il, proscribing Shi'ism and massacring large numbers of its adherents. His march against Persia culminated in 1514 in the famous battle of Čālderān (see also [OTTOMAN-PERSIAN RELATIONS UNDER SULTAN SELIM I](#)), where an Ottoman army equipped with field artillery and hand guns routed Esmā'il's troops fighting with bows and arrows. The Ottoman use of field artillery strung together in a corral, and infantry equipped with hand guns, was decisive in the defeat at Čālderān, though the fact that the Qezelbāš amirs had engaged in a drunken orgy the night before clearly did not help the Safavid cause.

Following Čālderān, the Ottomans briefly occupied Tabriz. They also instituted a commercial blockade of Persian imports, predominantly silk and, as importantly, of products exported to Persia, most notably arms, metal wares, and other war-related items. Since it affected the Ottoman economy as much as Persia's, resulting in a dramatic fall in customs dues in Bursa, the boycott was lifted by Selim's successor, Sultan Süleymān (Solaymān) I (r. 1520-66). An important consequence of the Ottoman occupation of Tabriz was the forced



migration of hundreds of skilled metal workers to Istanbul. While enriching Ottoman metalworking, this dealt a blow to Persia's artistic output and spelled the end of the pre-eminence of Tabriz as a cultural center. One of the battle's other lasting effects was the Safavid loss of much of eastern Anatolia and Syria's incorporation into the Ottoman realm, resulting in the establishment of a border that, though fluctuating over time, would continue to mark off Persian territory from Ottoman-controlled land. The most dramatic outcome of the defeat at Čālderān was, however, the doubt it cast on the invincibility and thus the divine aura of the Safavid ruler. This created divisions within the ranks of the Qezelbāš, and led to the dynasty's search for different ideological moorings under Shah Esmā'il's successors.

It is famously said that his defeat at Čālderān broke Esmā'il's spirit and that he never led his troops into battle again. It is true that the shah did little to prevent the loss of [Balk](#) (1516-17) and Kandahar (Qandahār [1522]), and that henceforth he took to hunting, wine-drinking, and spending time in the company of young boys, preferring these activities over the management of state affairs. Yet the Safavid army eventually recovered after the shattering defeat, and in the ensuing years advanced into northern Mesopotamia, threatening Aleppo and keeping the Ottomans on high alert and, significantly, prompting them to dispose of the Mamluks in their quest for security and control over Syria. Esmā'il also continued to search for allies against the Ottomans, offering his daughter's hand in marriage to the ruler of Širvān, and, most importantly, set out to rebuild his weakened army by introducing a corps of musketeers. [Firearms](#), which had been known in Persia since the days of the Āq Qoyunlu, now became a mainstay of the Safavid army. Though the Safavids reportedly never matched Ottoman expertise in casting and using cannon, they used it very adroitly in siege warfare. Persia's difficult terrain, a lack of navigable rivers, and the general absence of wheeled carriage traffic made transporting heavy guns difficult. Cannons were therefore usually cast on the spot, often with the help of European mercenaries. The Safavids never adopted field artillery, as this was totally unsuited to the traditional nomadic manner of fighting which was based on swift maneuvering, sudden charges, and rapid withdrawal.

Within a decade of the founding of the new regime, important changes with far-reaching consequences occurred in its makeup. Initially dominated by his Qarāmānlu and Šāmlu associates, Shah Esmā'il managed in 1508 to rid himself of these so-called "Sufis of Lāhijān," and appointed a new group of Ostājlu and



Rumlu advisers, led by Shaikh Najm Zargar. He delegated much of the daily affairs of state to a Persian *wakil*, or deputy. The *wakil* also frequently intervened in the appointment of the *şadr*, who was an important official since he administered the pious foundations, and also began to conduct foreign relations. Initially synonymous with the *amir al-omarā'*, the *wakil*, who was usually a Persian, also had an important military role. Esmā'il also handed the financial administration to the Tajiks by appointing the amir Najm Zargar Rašti as *wakil* in 1509. Often seen as a sign of the growing ethnic rivalry between Turks and Tajiks and the first attempt on the part of a Safavid shah to curtail the power of the Turkmen Qezelbāš, this growing reliance on Persian personnel was, in effect, a pragmatic move taken in the context of state building and fiscal management, a functional division rather than a conscious ethnic policy, with the Persian *wakil* handling matters for which the Turkmen rulers had neither the competence nor the appetite. Local Safavid amirs followed this example and appointed Persian deputies as well. The Turkmen Qezelbāš resisted, killing two successive *wakils* in the process, but could not halt the trend.

Ṭahmāsp I (r. 1524-76). Shah Esmā'il died in 1524, to be succeeded by his ten-year old son Ṭahmāsp, at a time when Persia had begun to recover from the misery and devastation that had accompanied the early Safavid conquests. Its main city, Tabriz, may have had as many as 80,000 inhabitants; Hormuz perhaps numbered 50,000. Most other cities were much smaller, with Isfahan, Kashan and Shiraz having a population of between 15,000 and 20,000 people.

Given Ṭahmāsp's age, it is only natural that real power was initially held by a body of regents, which consisted of *Div Solṭān Rumlu*, *amir al-omarā'* and tutor (*lala*) of the new ruler, and Köpek Solṭān of the Ostājlu tribe. Nor, given the divisiveness among the Qezelbāš and the fact that the new shah was no longer seen as the mahdi, is it surprising that his early reign unleashed a tribal struggle for power that degenerated into a ten-year civil war, pitting a Rumlu-Tekkelu coalition against the Ostājlu. Only in the 1530s did the Shah emerge victorious from the internal struggle, determined to consolidate his power by curtailing the unruly Qezelbāš. Hence the first appointments of Tajik officials to key positions traditionally reserved for Turks, including military ones. The origins of the corps of *ḡolāms*, "slave soldiers" serving as royal retainers, also date back to this period, though at this stage most *ḡolāms* still consisted of non-Qezelbāš tribal elements and urban dwellers. The royal practice of contracting marriages with Georgian and Circassian women originates from this period as



well, though for the time being the ones who gained the throne continued to be the sons of Turkmen mothers. Several Qezelbāš tribes suffered in the process; others gained in power. The Afšār, for instance, seized control over Khuzestan and Kermān. Another change that reflected the diminishing influence of the Qezelbāš and an increasing central control was a greater emphasis on the administration of the crown lands (*kāšša*). A unified currency system was also adopted for the entire realm, ending a monetary division between the eastern and western halves of the country. Later in Ṭahmāsp's reign, Safavid coins began to bear Persian instead of Arabic inscriptions.

Shah Ṭahmāsp made great efforts to further implant Shi'ism and bring religious unity to Persia. The state employed religious propagandists (*tabarrā'iyān*), whose task was to vilify Sunnis. Here too, the effect was a loss of power for the Qezelbāš. Attempts were made to standardize religious practice around a scriptural, urban-based version of the faith as opposed to the folk beliefs of the Qezelbāš. To disseminate the Shi'ite creed, to shore up his legitimacy as a Shi'ite ruler, and to build a religious cadre without ties to any of the domestic (tribal and ethnic) factions, the shah invited scholars from Arab lands, most notably [Jabal 'Āmel](#) in Lebanon (see also [SHI'ITES IN LEBANON](#)), to migrate to Persia, in return for land, cash, and high positions. To what extent they actually migrated to Persia and helped shape the faith is a matter of some controversy, but it is clear that a number of these Arab ulema heeded the call and became the nucleus of a scholarly class in the service of the state. The influential scholar, Shaikh 'Ali Karaki 'Āmeli (d. 1534), the leading Shi'ite jurist of his time and first incumbent of the pre-eminent religious position of *šadr*, is the best known of these. In the course of the Safavid period Persia became majority Shi'ite, but this was a long process. In the mid-16th century, several important cities such as Qazvin, Shiraz and Hamadan were still known as Sunni centers, and as late as 1720 an Ottoman observer noted that one-third of the country's population retained Sunni affiliation.

Having gained the upper hand in the power struggle, Shah Ṭahmāsp managed to extend his authority and influence over a number of areas that under his father had been buffer regions or vassal states. The Caspian provinces fell under Safavid control in 1536-37 (although the region was only definitively pacified by Shah 'Abbās I). In the northeast, he took on the Uzbeks, who had repeatedly invaded Khorasan, taking advantage of Persia's military weakness. They besieged Herat, but in 1528 were defeated at the Battle of Jām, which



they lost against superior Safavid gunpowder. Before long the area was brought back under Safavid control. Ṭahmāsp also regained Kandahar, which in 1522 had fallen to the Mughals. In 1530, he sent an expedition to Širvān, ruled by the autonomous dynasty of the Širvānšāh, with the aim of avenging the killing of his grandfather, Ḥaydar, and converting its Sunni population. Having subdued the province, he placed it under the command of his brother, [Alqāṣ Mirzā](#). When Alqāṣ Mirzā rebelled in 1546, Ṭahmāsp sent a further campaign to dislodge him, until, in 1547 Alqāṣ Mirzā fled to Istanbul to make common cause with the Ottomans.

The Ottomans, meanwhile, remained the most formidable enemy, provoked by the militantly anti-Sunni Safavids, who even employed an official called the *kalifat al-ḵolafā'* who was charged with anti-Ottoman propaganda. Ottoman troops posed a continual threat to the rich province of Azarbaijan. Persia, in the early years, may have been spared a possible Ottoman invasion because the Sultan was kept occupied on the western front. Between 1534 and 1554, Sulṭan Süleymān I, responding to Safavid harassment, conducted three campaigns against Persia, causing much devastation in Azarbaijan. This prompted Shah Ṭahmāsp in 1548 to move his capital from Tabriz, which had been briefly occupied in 1534 by the Ottomans, to Qazvin, a city located further in the interior. Between 1534 and 1536, Iraq fell to the Ottomans. Gilān, still autonomous, managed to resist a Safavid takeover by making common cause with the Ottomans, though it did not fall to the latter. In 1548, the Safavids managed to penetrate deeply into Anatolia, where the Qezelbāš created much local resentment by their cruel conduct. The Ottomans, however, were able to push them back. The third Ottoman campaign, mounted in 1554-55, ended with the [Peace of Amasya](#), which recognized Ottoman suzerainty over Iraq and eastern Anatolia while leaving Persia in control of Azarbaijan and the southeastern Caucasus.

Ṭahmāsp's dealings with the Sunni Mughals were far less acrimonious, in part because sectarian differences were less pronounced than in Persia's relationship with the Ottomans. As was true throughout the Safavid era, episodes of enmity alternated with periods of overt friendship, often built on shared anti Uzbek concerns. The struggle for power between the two states always concentrated on Kandahar, which in the course of two centuries switched hands twelve times. In 1545 Shah Ṭahmāsp seized Kandahar in a joint expedition with Crown Prince Homāyun (see [HOMĀYUN PĀDEŠĀH](#)), who had sought refuge in Persia two years before, when he was engaged in an



internecine struggle at home. Homāyun next seized the city for himself. In 1558 Ṭahmāsp retook the city from Akbar, Homāyun's successor. Persia's links to the Subcontinent also included a series of Shi'ite states in the Deccan in southern India, the Qoṭb-šāhis of Golconda (see [HYDERABAD](#) [Haiderabad]), the 'Adel-šāhis of [Bijāpur](#), and the Neẓām-šāhis of Aḥmadnagar. Considering Safavid Iran an important ally in their tenuous relationship with the encroaching Mughals, the rulers of those states frequently sent envoys to Persia and even included the Safavid shah in their *khotba* (formal intercessory prayers from the pulpit).

Georgia, where Shah Ṭahmāsp engaged in a number of campaigns in the 1540s and 1550s, was never properly subjugated. Yet the region became especially important as the source of Christian slave soldiers (*ḡolāms*), captured during raiding expeditions into the region. Initiated by Esmā'il, this practice was continued under Ṭahmāsp, the first Safavid ruler to build up these Caucasian recruits as a countervailing force against the overbearing Qezelbāš. The males were trained as administrators, while the women were employed in the royal harem, where they would exercise an increasing influence.

The reign of Shah Ṭahmāsp, a ruler of refined taste, saw a flourishing of the arts. This expressed itself less in architecture, which would only gain prominence in the 17th century, than in the visual arts, most notably painting. Much of early Safavid cultural production continued the legacy of previous dynasties. Herat, the cultural pivot of the late Timurids, and Tabriz, the initial Safavid capital, remained the main centers of manuscript production. Shah Esmā'il established a royal workshop and library for the production of illuminated manuscripts, the greatest Safavid contribution to the arts. A synthesis of the two styles, from Herat and Tabriz, would lead to the Safavid imperial style. The real beginnings of court-led cultural production, however, are to be found in Ṭahmāsp's reign, and the quality of the illuminated manuscripts produced under his patronage would never be surpassed. Mashad evolved into an important artistic center with the appointment of [Ebrāhim Mirzā](#), Ṭahmāsp's nephew, as governor in 1554-55. The school of painting that emerged under his patronage culminated in a magnificent edition of Jāmi's *Haft Owrang* (see [JĀMI iii.](#)) and dominated Persian painting throughout the second half of the 16th century.

Shah Ṭahmāsp's long rule witnessed an important transformation in Safavid ideology, continuing a shift in the shah's status that had begun with the defeat at Čālderān. With Shah Ṭahmāsp, divine pretensions gave way to a growing



focus on the shah's function as the representative of the Hidden Imam. Whereas Shah Esmā'il had been the representative of a primordial semi-pagan world in which orgiastic ritual involving drinking and sexual practices awkwardly mixed with an appeal to Islamic legitimization, Shah Ṭahmāsp inaugurated a phase of growing attention to outward religious behavior. A devout and, according to foreign reports, melancholy and avaricious ruler who rarely appeared in public, Shah Ṭahmāsp underwent a pietistic conversion in 1533-34 during a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mashad. A divine inspiration that promised him victory against his enemies if he followed *šari'a* injunctions prompted him to cleanse the town of all blameworthy activities that cause good governance to founder. He gave up wine and issued bans on drinking establishments and other forms of amusement. In 1544, he underwent a definitive transformation. He became fastidious in matters of hygiene and food, and averse to the arts that he had formerly patronized so avidly. He gave up on painting, firing all the painters of the royal ateliers, and dismissed Qāzi Jahān, grand vizier and patron of the arts. Wine was proscribed and public entertainment such as singing and dancing was restricted. Aside from the purely personal and ideological motives involved, this campaign was also directed against the Qezelbāš, whose orgiastic excess in drink and sexual represented the old order. No longer nurtured at the royal court, many artists left Persia in an exodus that would continue for the remainder of the Safavid period. The majority found refuge in India, where they would exercise a crucial influence on the arts at the courts of the Mughals and the rulers of the Deccan. Shiraz, in southern Persia, was one art center that survived, turning out commercial art without royal patronage.

By the time Shah Ṭahmāsp died in 1576, the Safavids had proven their staying power in the face of the powerful Qezelbāš, the persistent Ottoman threat, and a weakening ideology. Persia had benefited from two decades of relative peace. Commerce, which the shah had facilitated by standardizing weights and measures, received a boost. Still, Persia's meager gold and silver deposits, and its dependence on foreign lands for precious metal, made its economy vulnerable. Thus the outbreak of the Ottoman-Venetian war of 1570-73, and the eruption of rebellions in Anatolia in the same period, made the flow of money between the Ottoman Empire and Persia dry up. The result was Ṭahmāsp's inability to pay his troops during the last fourteen years of his reign as well as the total absence of known Safavid coinage for its last three years, the period 1573-76.



Shah Esmā'īl II (r. 1576-78) and Shah Moḥammad Ḳodā-banda (r. 1578-87, d. 1595 or 1596). Shah Ṭahmāsp was succeeded by his son, Esmā'īl II, who had established his reputation by defeating the Ottomans in 1549. Early on, Esmā'īl's energy and ambition had raised Ṭahmāsp's suspicions. Fearing that his son might conspire against him, Ṭahmāsp had him incarcerated in 1557. Esmā'īl owed his release from the prison fortress of Qahqaha to the succession struggle that ensued after his father's death and, more particularly, to [Pari Kān Kānom](#), the shah's second daughter, who played an important role in tilting the balance in favor of Esmā'īl and against Ḥaydar Mirzā, his half-brother and main rival. Esmā'īl also enjoyed overwhelming support from the Qezelbāš, who were ready to revolt for lack of pay, while Ḥaydar was favored by the Tajiks. The struggle was won by the Qezelbāš, ending with Ḥaydar's murder and Esmā'īl's elevation to the throne.

Esmā'īl II has been compared to Ivan the Terrible (the Russian Tsar Ivan IV, r. 1533-84) for his cruelty and for his frequent irrational fits of temper which scholars have attributed to his long years of solitary confinement. Insofar as the terror unleashed following his accession targeted the Ostājlu, who had opposed his claim to the throne, it is easily explained. But during the short fifteen months of his reign he also ordered the killing of a great many princes from various Safavid branches, possibly in emulation of contemporary Ottoman practice. Only one of his brothers, Moḥammad Ḳodā-banda, and his three infant sons survived the massacres. Esmā'īl himself died shortly after ordering the killing of his elder brother, Moḥammad, the governor of Shiraz. It remains unclear whether he died from natural causes or was poisoned by the Qezelbāš, many of whose leaders he had executed.

Another controversial aspect of Esmā'īl's reign is his adherence to the Sunni branch of Islam. Many prominent Shi'ite clerics were excluded from his inner circle, and a noted Sunni scholar, Mirzā Maḳdum Šarifi, who played a role in the shah's conversion to Sunnism, was promoted to the eminent post of *šadr*. Conversely, Esmā'īl's religious policy made the Qezelbāš waver in their loyalty to him, fearing that a tilt toward Sunnism would mean greater power for Tajik families.

Following Esmā'īl's death, the Qezelbāš elders selected Moḥammad Ḳodā-banda, a man of refined tastes but weak character, and suffering from poor eyesight, as his successor. Power during his reign was initially concentrated in the hands of his wife, Maḥd-e 'Olyā, who favored the people from her home region, Māzandarān, and in general the Tajiks. Assisted by the grand vizier,



Mirzā Salmān, she set out to centralize power. A legacy of the Central Asian element in Safavid statecraft, such female influence and power was not unprecedented. Tājlu Kānom, one of Shah Esmā'il's wives and the mother of Shah Ṭahmāsp, had been as powerful as the shah himself in the latter part of his reign, and the same is true for Pari Kān Kānom. Resentful of her and her policies, the Qezelbāš conspired against Maḥd-e 'Olyā, and received the shah's approval for her assassination, which took place in 1579. With the Qezelbāš once again holding the reins, the remainder of Kōdā-banda's reign was to be plagued by factionalism and infighting. The pre-adolescent Prince Ḥamza was proclaimed crown prince. He was allied with Mirzā Salmān, who had survived the fall of Maḥd-e 'Olyā by siding with the Qezelbāš, but who overstepped his boundaries with his military pretensions. Both were killed.

Persia's neighbors, meanwhile, again took advantage of the turmoil in the Safavid realm. The Uzbeks staged incursions into Khorasan in 1578, and in the same year a new round of Safavid-Ottoman warfare erupted that would continue until 1590, causing severe economic disruption in Persia's northwestern regions, already devastated by severe drought and famine. Georgia was the initial target of Sultan Morād III's (r. 1574-95) attempts to establish control over parts of Transcaucasia with a Sunni majority. Šīrvān, where heavy taxation had led to an anti-Safavid uprising, soon followed. Assisted by Crimean Tatars, the Ottomans in 1579 advanced as far as [Baku](#) and [Darband](#) on the Caspian Sea, blocking maritime traffic by establishing naval supremacy. In frequent clashes with the Safavids, Šamaḡa, the capital of Šīrvān and the center of Persia's northern silk trade, was destroyed. In 1585, the Ottomans once again briefly seized Tabriz, massacring segments of its population. The Persians, applying their usual scorched-earth policy, further contributed to the area's destruction.

Kōdā-banda's weak rule spawned several Qezelbāš revolts, the most important of which occurred in Khorasan. One of the insurgents, the Šāmlu amir 'Aliqoli Khan, used 'Abbās Mirzā, Kōdā-banda's young son who had been sent to the east as governor, as a protégé, declaring him shah in 1581. When 'Aliqoli Khan's revolt was quelled, 'Abbās Mirzā was adopted by Moršedqoli Khan, a member of the Ostājlu. Together they marched on Qazvin, forcing the shah to abdicate. 'Abbās Mirzā was next enthroned as Shah 'Abbās, although Moršedqoli Khan continued to wield supreme authority for some time to come.

'Abbās I (r. 1587-1629). 'Abbās I is universally regarded as the greatest Safavid



ruler, the embodiment of the age-old Persian ideal of the just monarch. His reputation is not simply retrospective: eyewitness observers already attested to his justice and generosity, as well as to a relative lack of corruption during his reign. His reign also marks a crucial phase in the evolution of Safavid Persia from a steppe formation to a (quasi-) bureaucratic state. This is noticeable, among other things, in the evolution of Safavid historiography from a tribal to a dynastic enterprise. Whereas earlier chronicles usually offered general accounts of universal history built on legitimacy reflecting Turko-Mongol claims, those written from the late 16th century revolve more narrowly around the dynasty of the Safavids as Persian rulers. The Persian focus is also reflected in the fact that theological works also began to be composed in the Persian language and in that Persian verses replaced Arabic on the coins.

Shah 'Abbās was first and foremost an outstanding strategist, keen to regain the territories that had been lost to enemy forces or to internal sedition. Particularly in his struggle against the Ottomans, his strategic acumen made up for military weakness in terms of numbers and weaponry. This enabled him to recapture Tabriz, taken by the Ottomans in 1585, and Sistān, which the Uzbeks had invaded, as well as Kandahar, lost to the Mughals in 1595. Aware that he would not be able to fight on two fronts simultaneously, and intent on having his hands free in the east, Shah 'Abbās initially concluded a peace with the Ottomans that cost him Azarbaijan, Qarābāg, Šīrvān, Dāgestān, and Baghdad, aside from partial losses in Kurdistan and Lorestān. Turning his attention to the Uzbeks, the new ruler recaptured Mashad and Herat. He next sent his general, [Farhād Khan Qarāmānlu](#), to occupy former vassal states such as Gilān and Māzandarān on the Caspian Sea. 'Abbās then turned to the western front and, having secured the support of the rulers of Georgia through alliances, resumed war with the Ottomans, who were vulnerable because they had been engaged in war with the Austrian Habsburgs since 1593, and were wracked by internal rebellion. In 1601-03, 'Abbās took advantage of instability in Hormuz to extend his control to the Persian Gulf littoral by defeating the local ruler of Lār and by occupying [Bahrain](#). At the same time he remained engaged in the north, reconquering Azarbaijan and chasing the Ottomans out of Naḵjavān, Erevan, Lorestān and part of Kurdistan. In 1607 he took Šīrvān as well as parts of Georgia. In later years, 'Abbās recaptured Kandahar, consolidated his access to the Persian Gulf coast by driving the Portuguese out of Hormuz, regained parts of Kurdistan, and seized important portions of Mesopotamia, including Baghdad. His military success against the Ottomans



was mostly fortuitous. Persia could only take on the Ottoman army so long as the latter were also engaged elsewhere. Thus, having concluded the Treaty of Sitva Torok with the Austrians in 1606, the Ottomans fought back, and in 1610 embarked on a campaign that once again briefly put them in control of Tabriz. The treaty that ended this latest war, signed in 1612, stipulated a return to the Peace of Amasya, but in effect made Persia cede substantial parts of Iraq and Georgia, in addition to the undertaking to pay the Turks 200 bales of raw silk annually.

Regaining Persia and securing its borders was intimately linked to Shah 'Abbās' main objective, that of maximizing personal control and centralizing power. 'Abbās ended the practice of appointing the crown prince as governor of Khorasan, and other sons to various provincial governorates under the tutelage of Qezelbāš guardians. Instead, in order to forestall rebellion and premature claims to the throne, he killed one of his sons and blinded two more. Following Ottoman precedent, he also locked up his grandchildren in the harem, thereby starting a trend that would produce rulers wholly unprepared for the task of governance. Taking revenge against those Qezelbāš amirs he held responsible for the murder of Ḥamza Mirzā, he had his own tutor, Moršedqoli Khan, murdered as a potential rival and the latter's tribe, the Ostājlu, broken up. He similarly dealt with the powerful Farhād Khan Qarāmānlu, who by the time he was executed in 1598 controlled most of Persia's northern half, from the Caucasus to Khorasan. After 1603, he systematically engaged in depopulating regions and resettling tribes to far-off regions with the aim of strengthening frontiers and breaking up existing loyalties. Thousands of Afšārs were thus relocated, while a great many Qajars as well as Kurds were moved to Khorasan and Māzandarān. The latter region also became home to many Armenians and Georgians, who were moved there to help develop its economic potential. In the 1590s, the shah transferred his capital from Qazvin to Isfahan (see CAPITAL CITIES ii.). This shifted the capital even farther away from the exposed western frontier, and completed the shift from a Turkish to a Persian cultural focus. Yet the shah remained true to nomadic tradition, constantly traveling during his incessant campaigns, hunting, or wintering in his favorite Māzandarān.

Most importantly, Shah 'Abbās embarked on a number of internal reforms designed to break the power of the Qezelbāš. He did so in part by creating substitute military and administrative elites. He raised the profile of the *golām* institution (see [BARDA](#) and [BARDADĀRI iv.](#)), swelling their ranks with



thousands of Armenians, Georgians and Circassians taken captive during the brutal wars in the Caucasus in 1603-04 and 1616. Intensifying the practice of appointing *ḡolāms* to high positions, he gave them a more prominent place in the ranks of the military where they served to counterbalance the Qezelbāš as members of a standing army answerable to the shah himself. The existing army unit of *qollar*, consisting of *ḡolāms*, was reorganized and expanded, and the position of *qollar-āqāsi*, the head of this corps, turned into one of the most elevated bureaucratic posts. Its main incumbent under Shah ‘Abbās, [Allāhverdi Khan](#), was among the most influential officials of the time. It has been estimated that by the end of Shah ‘Abbās’ reign some one-fifth of high-ranking officials were *ḡolāms*.

The *ḡolāms* were also given greater administrative power. The first *qollar-āqāsi*, Allāhverdi Khan, was the first of the *ḡolāms* to be appointed provincial governor. He governed the important region of Fārs, from where he assisted the shah in his expansion toward the Persian Gulf littoral. The shah also intensified another policy initiated by his predecessors by removing a great deal of state land, given out in various kinds of fiefs (*toyuls*, *soyurgāls*), from tribal overlordship and turning them into crown domain (*kāṣṣa*). Such crown land came to be administered directly by a vizier appointed by the shah, so that revenue would flow into the royal treasury rather than pad the pockets of a tribal chief. *Ḡolāms* were appointed as governors of these newly formed crown provinces. Centrally located major provinces such as Qazvin, Kāšān, Isfahan, Yazd, and part of Kermān were thus converted to crown land, as were the silk-producing regions of Gilān and Māzandarān, following Farhād Khan’s demise. Only border provinces such as Georgia, Kurdistan and Khuzestan, where the Safavids were forced to negotiate for power with local forces, remained semi-autonomous, controlled by *wālis*.

Shah ‘Abbās devised the internal policies that enabled the Safavid state to last for over two centuries—co-opting adversaries and balancing competing forces through accommodation and inclusion—to a new level of pragmatic effectiveness. When directly challenged in his authority, he could be ruthless, but generally ‘Abbās was careful to maintain a balance between powerful groups (and individuals). Thus Qezelbāš prestige and tribal affiliation diminished from their previous standing but did not disappear. The head of the tribal guard, the *qurčī-bāši* (q.v.), continued to be an important official whose standing actually increased over time. The *ḡolāms*, in turn, managed to attain the highest bureaucratic positions, including governorships,



marginalizing the local notables who previously had been in control, but in terms of employment and income, they remained wholly dependent on the shah. Not being raised together and more loosely organized, they never came to resemble the Ottoman Janissaries in *esprit de corps* and power, and the fact that they continued to share military power with the Qezelbāš prevented them from dominating the army. By preserving ties to their ancestral homeland, they also facilitated Safavid control over these territories.

Centralization took other forms as well. Rebellious officials were rarely executed but often allowed back into the fold after punishment, and it was customary not to punish the family members of officials who had been deposed. Other measures included the creation of new bureaucratic offices, the elevation in rank of existing ones and the elimination of old ones. Examples are the creation of the post of *majles-nevis*, the shah's personal scribe, and the removal of the post of *wakil* from the ranks of the Qezelbāš. Succession was typically hereditary for all administrative positions, although the shah could always break the line. Ties were forged and cemented through institutions such as reciprocal gift-giving, the *šāhsevan* (Turk., lit. "shah-loving") phenomenon, referring to a tribal appeal to loyalty to the shah, as well as through intermarriage between the royal house and elite families, especially with the Mar'āši family of Māzandarān, the shah's motherland. Intermarriage between the dynasty and members of the religious establishment increased the effective subordination of the clergy to the state.

With Ẕalifa Solṭān, an official of Mar'āši descent who was married to the shah's daughter, Shah 'Abbās' reign saw the first appointment of an official of clerical background as grand vizier. Yet, rather than simply reflecting the ascendance of the ulema, this was part of a religious policy marked by pragmatism and designed to enhance the legitimacy of the dynasty. Encouraged by the clergy, the shah suppressed religious radicals ranging from representatives of extremist Shi'ite beliefs to Sufi groups who questioned his authority. His massacres of the Noḡṭawi Sufis, adherents of a set of beliefs that included reincarnation, the transmigration of souls and belief in monism (*waḥdat al-wojud*) are particularly notorious. Other aspects of his religious policy mixed issues of ideology and revenue. The shah used religious endowments (*waqf*), as an instrument of public policy, projecting himself as a pious ruler and gaining tax advantages by turning the entire newly created center of Isfahan into *waqf* property. He conducted a pilgrimage on foot to the shrine of Imam 'Ali al-Rezā in Mashad in order to reaffirm his commitment to



the faith, but also to propagate the city as an alternative to the shrines of Hejaz and Iraq (the latter, except for a brief period between 1623 and 1638, were under Ottoman jurisdiction). Like most Safavid rulers, he tolerated the existence and economic activities of important groups other than (Shi'ite) Muslims in society, most notably large Armenian and Hindu Indian merchant communities in Persia's urban centers.

Shah 'Abbās was a great builder. He often spent winters in Māzandarān, where he had the resort towns of [Ašraf](#) and [Faraḥābād](#) constructed as part of a larger project designed to develop the region. But surely his most celebrated measure is the embellishment of his new capital, [Isfahan](#). The focus of his urban design was a new commercial and administrative area, centering on a magnificent central square known as the *Meydān-e naqš-e jahān* (see [ISFAHAN MONUMENTS](#)), surrounded by a royal palace, beautiful mosques and numerous shops. Isfahan at this time became a large, cosmopolitan and attractive city (although the figure of 600,000 inhabitants, given by [Chardin](#) [1643-1713], is almost certainly an exaggeration), mixing people of many nationalities who congregated in the city's bazaars and socialized in its coffeehouses, enjoying two newly introduced stimulants, coffee and tobacco. On holidays and following royal campaigns, the square and the main bazaar would be lit with thousands of lamps, symbolizing the ruler's illumination of the world, and spectacle sports such as polo, wolf baiting and bullfighting would be staged. The city also became a center of art and philosophy. After Shah Ṭahmāsp I, Shah 'Abbās was the first Safavid ruler to patronize the arts in a sustained manner. The most important painter to flourish under him was Reżā 'Abbāsi, an artist of subtle and refined imagery. At the same time, the "[Isfahan school of philosophy](#)", represented by Mollā Ṣadrā and other thinkers, became known for its metaphysical speculation. Outstanding religious figures in the early 17th century include [Bahā'-al-Din 'Āmeli](#) (1547-1622), known as Shaikh Bahā'i, who had come to Persia from Lebanon as a child and who, under Shah 'Abbās, was appointed *šayḵ al-Eslām* of Isfahan. A religious scholar with Sufi leanings and a prolific writer, Bahā'-al-Din wrote the anthology *Kaškul*, a number of religious treatises, and poetry. His erudition won him the title of *mojadded* of the 11th/17th century.

Shah 'Abbas is especially known for his encouragement of commerce, another source of royal revenue. He reestablished road security in Persia, which had lapsed in the tumultuous period preceding his reign, and had a great many caravanserais constructed throughout his realm (although the number of 999



traditionally given is much exaggerated). His rebuilding of Isfahan, which included the construction of a new administrative and trading center surrounding the royal square, combined issues of political legitimacy and commercial energy and income. In 1619 the shah decreed the export of silk a crown monopoly, thus enhancing the income the royal treasury derived from Persia's most profitable export product. To take advantage of the commercial and artisanal skills of his Armenian subjects, he resettled a large number of them from the town of Jolfā (Julfa) on the Aras River, in the border area with the Ottoman Empire, to a suburb of his new capital, which was named New Jolfā. There they were given trading privileges, especially in the export trade in silk, Persia's most lucrative commodity. However, because this resettlement took place while a brutal war was being waged against the Ottomans, it would be more accurate to see it as part of a much more chaotic and ad-hoc chain of events. Still, New Jolfā, prospered under the protection of the queen mother. The Armenians acquired a privileged position in Persian trade, forming a mercantile gentry in the service of the crown and becoming the country's most active long-distance merchants. The family partnership that underlay their commercial dealings provided them with a unique network of credit facilities, logistical support, and low overhead costs. Some of the Jolfā merchant houses became fabulously rich in the 17th century, exporting silk to the Ottoman cities of Aleppo and Izmir, and returning with large amounts of cloth and cash.

Shah 'Abbās was the first Safavid ruler to attempt to establish control over the Persian Gulf coast, an area with strong connections to the Indian Ocean that had rarely been an integral part of Persia and that had long been ruled by independent, mostly Arab dynasties. The shah's policy vis-à-vis the Persian Gulf, too, was motivated by a series of political and commercial objectives combining territorial conquest, a desire to circumvent Portuguese-held Hormuz, and to open up an alternative outlet to the commercial routes via Ottoman territory. After the defeat of the local dynasty of Lār and the conquest of Bahrain, Shah 'Abbās' attention was temporarily diverted to the north, but after making peace with the Ottomans in 1611, he set out to take on Portuguese-held Hormuz. Once he had seized Hormuz, he razed the town to the ground and founded a new port called, after himself, **Bandar 'Abbās**, at the site of the existing village of Gomru on the mainland.

Mixing commercial with strategic concerns, Shah 'Abbās opened Persia to the wider world in unprecedented ways. His diplomatic overtures to the West were mostly aimed at finding allies in his anti-Ottoman struggle and continued



contacts between Persian and Christian rulers that went back to the efforts of European rulers to solicit the [Il-khanids](#) in their Crusading wars and Western attempts to encircle the Ottomans following the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Shah Esmā'il had sent envoys to Venice. Shah Ṭahmāsp, too, had been in contact with European rulers. Shah 'Abbās intensified these contacts. He dispatched numerous embassies to Europe and Russia, many of which combined diplomatic with commercial mandates, and he even tried to establish reciprocal trade relations with the Netherlands and England (see [DUTCH-PERSIAN RELATIONS](#); [GREAT BRITAIN ii](#); [EAST INDIA COMPANY \(THE BRITISH\)](#); [EAST INDIA COMPANY \(THE DUTCH\)](#)).

Shah 'Abbās similarly welcomed various trading nations from the West, most notably the British and Dutch East India Companies who made their appearance in Persia during his reign, intent on capturing a share of the country's silk trade. He granted the English half of Bandar 'Abbās's toll receipts in return for their assistance in ousting the Portuguese from Hormuz Island in 1622, while he offered the Dutch the right to engage in toll-free trade in exchange for a contractual obligation to take an annual volume of 600 bales of silk. These merchants would long provide Persia with large amounts of spices and textiles, while exporting silk and other commodities such as goat's wool from Kermān. Shah 'Abbās' main concern in all this, the inflow of a maximum amount of gold and silver specie into the country, appears natural given Persia's perennial currency shortages and the costly nature of the reforms that he undertook.

Among the Europeans who came to Persia in great numbers during the reign of Shah 'Abbās I were representatives of Christian monastic orders. Shah 'Abbās welcomed the Augustinians and Carmelites (see [CARMELITES IN PERSIA](#)), among others, and allowed them to establish convents in his realm. Long ascribed to the shah's natural affection for Christians, this policy was in fact largely informed by political considerations: the missionaries all hailed from countries— notably Spain and Portugal—with which the shah hoped to ally himself in his struggle against the Ottomans, and they also served as liaisons with the Papacy and major Christian countries such as Spain and France. While favorably inclined to European missionaries and the Armenians of Jolfā (see [ARMENIA AND IRAN vi.](#)), the Shah engaged in several campaigns designed to convert the Christians of his realm, providing them with an incentive by introducing a custom whereby an apostate would automatically inherit the property of his deceased kin.



Shah ‘Abbās waged war until the end of his reign, reconquering Kandahar from the Mughals in 1622 and Baghdad from the Ottomans a year later. These campaigns, coming as they did on the heels of the protracted wars against the Ottomans, seriously depleted the royal treasury and exposed the financial difficulties of the state. During the expedition against Kandahar, Safavid soldiers defected in large numbers for lack of pay, and during the Baghdad campaign soldiers were paid not in current coin but in *barāts* (Ar. pl. *barawāt*), promissory notes that upon cashing would have lost much of their value, or in commodities such as cloth that often proved unvendible. Some of these problems were systemic, a function of Persia’s inherent lack of precious metal, and some may have been the first negative manifestations of a series of policy measures that provided short-term revenue but had harmful long-term effects. The shah’s conversion of state land (*mamālek*) to crown land (*kāṣṣa*), a policy that was designed to produce income for the crown but that came at the expense of long-term productivity of the land, is the best example of this.

Shah Ṣafi I (r. 1629-42) and Shah ‘Abbās II (r. 1642-66). When Shah ‘Abbās I died of natural causes in early 1629, there were no sons to succeed him. He was therefore succeeded by his grandson Ṣafi, the son of Ṣafi Mirzā, who had been murdered by Shah ‘Abbās on suspicion of sedition. Shah Ṣafi, the first of the Safavid rulers to have spent his youth in the confines of the harem, came to the throne in an atmosphere of discord and rebellion, with provincial forces taking advantage of the death of the ruler to try and regain autonomy. The most dramatic manifestation of this was an uprising in Gilān, staged by a self-styled messiah (*mahdi*), who exploited religious expectations as well as fiscal grievances. Although he managed to quell the revolt, the shah remained weak and dependent on court forces until 1631-33, when he asserted himself by eliminating many of those who held power, among them the powerful governor (khan) of Fārs and the de-facto ruler over most of southern Persia, [Emāmqoli Khan](#), son and successor of Allāhverdi Khan, and most of his family. These massacres and blindings mark the end of a system whereby the extended Safavid family held corporate power, and inaugurated a phase in Safavid history in which the shah became the sole ruler surrounded by his palace entourage consisting of women, eunuchs, and *gōlāms*.

Under Ṣafi I, the trend toward greater power and influence for the *gōlāms* continued, as did the drive to convert state domain to crown land. The highest military post, that of *sepahsālār* was held by two prominent *gōlāms*, Rostam Khan and his brother, ‘Aliqoli Khan, almost uninterruptedly for nearly twenty-



five years between 1631 and 1655. Fārs was turned into *kāṣṣa* land—and broken up into smaller units—following the elimination of Emāmqoli Khan. The revenue this generated for the royal coffers was, however, not necessarily applied to the army. The shah himself was of the old warrior type, but a pacifist camp, headed by the women and eunuchs of the harem. The antagonism between the Qezelbāš and court circles that Ṣafi inherited resulted in diminished military expenditure and thus contributed to a weakening of Persia's fighting spirit. Under Ṣafi, the Mughals recovered Kandahar and the Ottomans managed to recapture Baghdad and most of Mesopotamia, a situation that was incorporated into the peace accord of Qaṣr-e Širin, concluded in 1639. Qaṣr-e Širin by and large reaffirmed the boundaries that had been stipulated by the Treaty of Amasya and that would mark the borders between Persia and the Ottoman Empire and the modern border with Iraq and Turkey. By terminating the wars with the Ottomans, Qaṣr-e Širin also put an end to the most imminent threat to Persia's survival, thus further contributing to the decline of the Safavid army.

Shah Ṣafi died in 1642, aged thirty-one, and exhausted from excessive drinking. The reign of his son and successor, Shah 'Abbās II, has been called the Indian summer of the Safavid era, in reference to his success in recapturing Kandahar, and the favorable conditions foreign observers detected in his realm. Mounting the throne at age ten, Shah 'Abbās II escaped an overly long childhood dependence on the forces that dominated the harem. Three years later he asserted his independence. He sanctioned a Qezelbāš conspiracy against his grand vizier, Mirzā Moḥammad Sāru Taqī, who, in league with the shah's own mother, had wielded great power since he had been appointed by Shah Ṣafi in 1633. After the vizier's assassination, however, the ruler resolved to have the conspirators, led by the *qorč-bāši* Jāni Khan, removed as well. 'Abbās II subsequently grew into a forceful ruler with a reputation for justice. His reign was mostly a period of stability and peace. Aside from the conflict with the Mughals in 1648-50, during which the shah seized Kandahar from Shah Jahān, no major external wars were fought, and while some visitors saw signs of a deteriorating economy, most still compared the security on the country's roads and its prosperity favorably with conditions in the Ottoman Empire. Persians felt themselves protected by their vast open plains and deserts in which an invading army would be exposed to ambush attacks and find itself out of victuals following the scorched-earth tactics practiced by the Safavid army.



Shah ‘Abbās II’s reign witnessed a continuation of many longstanding trends. One was a shift from tolerance for expressions of popular religiosity to a growing emphasis on a strict interpretation of the faith. A manifestation of this was the launch in 1645 of an officially sanctioned morality campaign directed against brothels and wine taverns. Popular Sufism, with its connotations of antinomian behavior, was another target. Anti-Sufi sentiments, which went back to the reign of Shah Ṭahmāsp I and the condemnation by Shaikh ‘Ali Karaki ‘Āmeli, culminated in this period in an outpouring of writings against the manifestations of popular Sufism. Yet this did not prevent many clerics from adhering to high-minded and philosophical mysticism, or Shah ‘Abbās II from paying his respects to various representatives of Sufi orders.

The most conspicuous religious controversy of the time was that between the *aḳbāris* and *oṣulis* (see [AḲBĀRIYA](#)), a debate that went back to questions over the nature of authority and qualifications of interpretations that arose in the absence of a living Imam. The *oṣulis* accepted the authority of a (living) interpreter (*mojtahed*, see [EJTEHĀD](#)), and reserved a place for rational interpretation. The *aḳbāris*, on the other hand, accused the *oṣulis* of preaching innovation and argued that the Imam was the only source of knowledge, and that in the absence of the Imam, only the Qur’ān and its interpretive tools, Sunna and Hadith, were sources of authority. The articulation of the *aḳbāri* position in Safavid times is associated with [Mollā Moḥammad-Amin Astarābādi](#) (d. 1623-24). The conflict may have had a class base, with many *aḳbāris* residing in provincial towns and peripheral areas, while *oṣulis* tended to be closer to the center of power. The collapse of the Safavids saw the rising influence of the *aḳbāris*, possibly as a result of the association of the *oṣulis* with the central state.

Divergences involving the relationship between religion and state came to the fore in this period. The Safavids never resolved the tension between a religious hierarchy that was in theory only beholden to the Hidden Imam, and a state built around ancient Persian notions of divine kingship. In the period of Shah ‘Abbās II we hear of high-ranking ulema who went well beyond advocating a more active part in governing the realm for the religious leaders, and openly called for direct clerical governance by declaring the rule of the shah illegitimate; though too much should not be made of this, for it was certainly not a general tendency, and overall, clergy-state relations were marked by pragmatism and a functional division of labor. The ulema, convinced of the need for a monarch as the patrimonial head of the body-



politic, overwhelmingly acquiesced in the status quo, whereby the secular state wielded ultimate power, served the state in a variety of bureaucratic offices, and paid no more than lip service to the normative notions of Twelver Shi'ism, including the illegitimacy of the secular state. Coexistence of the religious and the secular, and implicit accommodation to the power of the latter is also visible in the judicial system. Religious law and customary law existed side by side. Invariably, though, customary law (*'orf*), prevailed over the šari'a (shari'a), especially in criminal cases, and most people are said to have favored government courts over religious courts. Worldly power, in sum, always trumped religious authority, and even as the shah's status as *moršed* diminished, he did not lose the ability to maintain himself at the apex of the pyramid and above the vortex of the never-ending power struggle.

The drive toward centralized control continued in this period. Crown domain, for instance, reached its greatest extent under Shah 'Abbās II. The person mainly responsible for this was Mirzā Sāru Taqī, who in his twelve years as grand vizier made great efforts to enhance royal revenue. Included in these efforts were money-saving measures that targeted the army, a policy that made him many enemies, especially among the Qezelbāš. The failure of his assassins to capitalize on his murder must be seen as symbol of the definitive failure of the Qezelbāš to dominate the political scene.

Sāru Taqī's murder did not spell the end of the prominence of the grand vizier. His successor, Moḥammad Beg, was as formidable an official in his continued focus on the enhancement of royal income. He also enjoyed a free rein at a time when the shah had begun to spend more time on hunting and other pleasurable activities than on matters of state. He too fell victim to jealousies of rivals who managed to persuade the shah to demote him. Unlike Sāru Taqī, he was not killed but brought back into the fold following demotion and a period of forced exile.

Both Sāru Taqī and Moḥammad Beg had been appointed in part because they were able administrators, and both successfully tapped new sources of revenue to fill the royal coffers that were badly depleted by the long wars against the Ottomans and the Mughals. However, neither could stem the corrosive effect of mismanagement that was inherent in the administration of crown lands, whose supervisors lacked the incentive of the supervisors of quasi-private fiefs to invest in the longterm prosperity and revenue of the land. A related development, the combined outcome of deteriorating economic conditions and the growing influence of the religious authorities, was



increasing pressure on non-Muslims. Under Shah 'Abbās II, the Armenians of Isfahan were forced to live across the river in New Jolfā, while Shi'ite religious leaders launched a campaign aimed at converting Persia's Jewish population that amounted to little more than an extortion scheme.

Shah Solaymān (r. 1666-94) and Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn (r. 1694-1722). The accession of Shah Ṣafi II, 'Abbās II's successor, in 1666, exposed further signs of the country's weakening state. The period following his enthronement was followed by epidemics and famine, causing the court astrologers to declare that the shah had been crowned at an inauspicious moment. In 1668, Ṣafi II had himself re-crowned as Shah Solaymān, as he considered his first coronation as inauspicious.

In the changed position of the sovereign, the period of Shah Solaymān and Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn shows how the Safavid polity, once driven by millenarian energy, had lost its ideological direction. Their predecessors had been roving warriors, forever vigilant in patrolling their realm to pacify unruly tribes and withstand external enemies. In keeping with nomadic, Central Asian tradition, the early shahs had also been highly visible and approachable and, in the case of Shah 'Abbās I, even informal in their governing style. The Safavids never completely lost the mobility that came with moving between winter and summer pastures, and even later shahs continued to prefer the open space of the steppe to the confinement of the city, frequently camping in tents outside the city, in the extramural garden (*bāḡ*, see also [GARDEN](#)). But Solaymān and Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn reigned as sedentary monarchs who, aside from occasional hunting parties, preferred to live ensconced in or near the capital, invisible to all but the most intimate of courtiers. Disconnected and hardly interested in administrative affairs, they relied on their grand viziers for the daily running of the state. Though some of these were able administrators, they lacked the aura of the shah, who remained the ultimate source of power, and could never substitute for him, and thus were incapable of reversing the mismanagement and corruption that the shah's lack of participation tended to promote.

In terms of military matters, Solaymān's reign was uneventful, mostly because the shah was scrupulous in observing the Treaty of Qaṣr-e Širin. This policy was, however, informed less by sheer cowardice and apathy, as is often claimed, than by the rational calculation on the part of the shah and his officials that, in the face of weakened fighting power, it would be most judicious to maintain peaceful relations with the powerful Ottomans.



Continuing budget constraints indeed caused the army to grow ever weaker, to the point where during military parades the same regiments passed a number of times before the shah. Military weakness at this point vitiated central control for it forced the state to reverse the policy of bringing land under the authority of the crown by realigning it as state land administered by tribal forces. An example is the province of Māzandarān, which in the 1670s was given to representatives of the Qajar tribe so as to forestall attacks by Turkmen tribesmen.

Myriad signs of economic retrenchment, most strikingly reflected in a fall in agricultural output, growing numbers of bankruptcies among indigenous merchants, and a deteriorating currency, became palpable during Solaymān's rule. A stagnating influx of precious metals from the Ottoman Empire, though very much related to European conditions, reflected Persia's faltering economy as well, and led to the closing of numerous mints in the second half of the 17th century. Foreign merchants, unable to find Persian goods that could be profitably exported to either Europe or India, had for years been siphoning vast quantities of silver and gold from the country to India. Indigenous merchants engaged in the same practice, defying frequent governmental bans on the export of specie. It is not true, as is often claimed, that the government failed to respond to these conditions, and it is therefore not strictly correct to speak of unchecked decline. Safavid authorities, though not necessarily the shah, were well aware of the lamentable state of affairs in their realm, but efforts to remedy the situation were often halfhearted and counteracted by structural economic weakness, endemic corruption, and weak leadership. Bans on the export of specie put inflationary pressure on the monetary system, encouraging moneychangers and merchants to hide the good coins for export and pass on the bad ones. In 1684, the state introduced a currency reform, issuing new coins of better alloy. Its effects were minimal, however, for little new money was brought into circulation, and the few newly minted coins were quickly hoarded or spirited out of the country.

The architect of this monetary reform, and of other revenue-enhancing measures, was Shaikh 'Ali Khan, grand vizier during most of Solaymān's reign, whose tenure marked the culmination of a series of forceful chief ministers acting as the stand-in for a weak and aloof ruler. Shaikh 'Ali Khan, however, was only marginally successful in his efforts because he lacked the shah's consistent support, crucial in a system as personalized as that of Safavid Persia, in which shah tended to serve as a buffer between oppressive officials



and his subjects. The fate of the Armenian community, whose outward prosperity could not conceal mounting problems, is a case in point. Conflicts with the Catholic missionaries in Persia and internal squabbles between the See of Echmiadzin and the Diocese of New Jolfā weakened the community. Moreover, while the Jolfan Armenians continued to thrive in trade, securing privileges in the transit trade through Russia in 1667 and 1673, pressure mounted from clerical circles, leading to increased taxation and the reinstatement of the poll tax. By the late 17th century many of them, including rich merchants, began to migrate from Persia to Europe, India, and Russia in a process that would eventually lead to the decimation of the country's active Armenian population.

Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn, Solaymān's son, was not necessarily the most appropriate successor to the throne when his father died in 1694. A famous story has it that Solaymān, when asked who should succeed him, answered that if people wanted a forceful and capable ruler, they should choose his younger son, 'Abbās Mirzā, but if they wished to have peace and quiet, they should go for the older Solṭān-Ḥosayn. Instrumental in the choice of the latter were the palace eunuchs who preferred a malleable ruler to an independent one, and the new shah's maternal grandaunt, Maryam Begom, who would wield a great deal of power throughout her grand-nephew's reign. The increased power of both groups, eunuchs and women, was a function of a royal household that had more than doubled in size since the late 1500s to become a fixed place centered on the harem. Beginning with Shah Solaymān, it was the eunuchs of the royal harem who wielded effective power, taking over the shah's task of balancing competing interests among state courtiers. The importance of women in the political life of the 16th century has been mentioned before, but the phenomenon was even more pronounced in the later Safavid period, although following the shift from corporate to individual legitimacy, it was now the queen-mother rather than royal sisters and daughters who wielded power and influence. As the shah was either a minor upon accession or one who retreated into seclusion after taking office, Safavid royal women, who are said to have numbered 500 under Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn, and especially the queen-mother, played a crucial role in state affairs, serving on the secret royal council by the late 17th century. The pious and impressionable Solṭān Ḥosayn, who had seen little more of the world than the harem walls when he came to power, quickly fell under the spell of the religious forces as well, and more particularly of [Moḥammad-Bāqer Majlesi](#) (the Younger), the son of the rather mystically inclined [Moḥammad-Taḳī Majlesi](#) (the Elder), and a prolific scholar



whose Shi'ite encyclopaedia *Behār al-anwār* numbers over 100 volumes in the printed version. Majlesi the Younger was appointed *šayk al-Eslām* of Isfahan in 1689, a position he held until his death in 1699. At the behest of Majlesi the Younger, the shah's enthronement was accompanied by an official ban on alcohol consumption and other activities deemed contrary to the tenets of Islam. Sufis bore the brunt of the renewed persecution instigated by Majlesi the Younger, but non-Muslims suffered as well. Hindu Indians were forced out of Isfahan, and the rules of ritual purity against *demmis* (q.v.) were more strictly enforced, with ordinances issued against them venturing out during rainfall for fear of polluting the Muslim population.

As Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn took power, the country's weakness became apparent in numerous insurrections and invasions around the country, and in the problems the state faced in quelling them. Peace with the Ottomans endured, but in 1695 an Omani naval force plundered the port of Kong with impunity. In 1696 it took six months to mobilize 12,000 soldiers. In 1699 Baluchis raided the Kermān area, exposing the vulnerability of the border areas. Solṭān-Ḥosayn's lack of firmness in responding to these challenges highlighted the importance of a ruler who could make effective use of this symbolic power and, following the Persian tradition of statecraft, could instill among his subjects a mixture of loyalty and fear by balancing reward with punishment, and by keeping the personal interests of his courtiers and administrators from coalescing into a force preying on the productive population. Under a weak shah, rivalry and factionalism, endemic to the system, would paralyze decision-making. This had happened in the early reign of Ṭahmāsp I, and again under Moḥammad Ḳodā-banda. Given Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn's increasing seclusion, oppression by local officials and discord within the ranks of the palace went virtually unchecked, with all out intrigue and a crippling effect on governance as the outcome.

As of 1710, even the outward stability began to unravel, with instances of abuse of power becoming endemic. The army, always a scourge on the local population, began to plunder villages located on its marching routes. Road security lapsed, with local governors reportedly aiding and abetting highway brigands, and caravans suffering attack close to the gates of Isfahan. The court, meanwhile, was crippled by factionalism and excessive venality, and no longer offered recourse for the people who increasingly suffered from fiscal oppression. The state's drastic financial crisis was exacerbated by the record number of people who annually performed the pilgrimage to Mecca in this



period, draining huge sums of gold from the country. At the same time when the treasury lacked the funds to equip an army capable of meeting the mounting challenges of domestic unrest and invasions from outside, the shah built pleasure gardens, most notably [Faraḥābād](#) near Isfahan, the cost of which was extorted from peasants, merchants and court officials. While the shah resided in Faraḥābād for long periods of time, court eunuchs dominated politics, thwarting the adoption of any effective solution to the country's pressing problems through manipulation and intrigue.

Emblematic of this development was the career of [Fath-ʿAli Khan Dāgestāni](#), the official who served as grand vizier from 1715 to 1720, when he fell victim to a plot that involved accusations of treason and collusion with Persia's Sunni neighbors, and left him blinded and deposed. Fath-ʿAli Khan's extortionate policies were legendary and served as fodder for his detractors. But other officials, including high-ranking clerics, were no less venal, and as a result little changed after his demise. His nephew, the capable [Loṭf-ʿAli Khan](#), who had been appointed army commander with the task of confronting Persia's enemies in the south, was also dismissed. There are signs that the palace eunuchs, fearful of the prestige and influence that victory would bring him, deliberately blocked his military efforts by withholding money and supplies, thus actively undermining the country's ability to defend itself.

Another development with equally debilitating effects was the religious policy of Shah [Solṭān-Ḥosayn](#)'s administration. The tenure of Fath-ʿAli Khan Dāgestāni as grand vizier shows that even in late Safavid times, when a literalist interpretation of Shi'ism was ostensibly official policy, an official with questionable credentials hailing from a peripheral part of the realm could still operate at the very center of power. Yet this did not prevent the court from conducting a religious and fiscal policy that alienated many groups. Among these was the country's large Sunni population, many of whom lived near the exposed borders, which put a great premium on their loyalty. Armenians and Hindu Indians, both groups with a disproportionately large role in the economy, fell on hard times as well. They lost their tax advantages, and especially the Jolfan community suffered, both from the poor economic conditions and from the pressures exerted on them as non-Muslims by the increasingly assertive clerical forces. Local and regional functionaries, no longer held in check by the punitive sanctions of a credible shah, increased fiscal pressure and engaged in gross extortion.

Between 1715 and 1720, many parts of the country either erupted in rebellion



or were threatened by outside forces. In the Caucasus, the Lezgi tribes of Dāgestān intensified the incursions into Safavid territory that they had been conducting since 1708. In 1721 they seized and pillaged Šamāki, the area's capital and commercial center. Across the country, the 'Omāni Arabs in 1717 took Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. Simultaneously, revolts broke out in Kurdistan and Lorestān. More seriously, the *Abdāli* Afghans revolted in Khorasan, taking Herat and Mashad. The reaction from Isfahan typifies the disarray in court circles by that time. Under pressure from Maryam Begom, the shah organized a military campaign, but problems with the recruitment and payment of soldiers doomed the effort. Even the shah's decision to have the gold from Shi'ite shrines and his ancestors' graves remelted and struck into coins failed to yield the requisite funds.

The decisive blow was to come from the east. In 1701 unrest broke out in Kandahar, and was ruthlessly suppressed by the local governor, *Gorgin Khan*, and his Georgian troops; and the rebellion by the local *Ġilzi* population ended with the capture of their leader, Mir Ways, who was sent to Isfahan. There, he managed to turn the shah against Gorgin Khan. Released and having returned to Kandahar, Mir Ways murdered Gorgin Khan. He then declared autonomy, defying punitive campaigns. He died in 1715, to be succeeded, after a brief interregnum, by his son, Maḥmud Ġilzay (d. 1725). Maḥmud managed to dupe the shah into appointing him officially as governor of Kandahar, but in 1720 he staged his first raid into the Kermān area.

The end came two years later. While Baluchi tribesmen seized and plundered Bandar 'Abbās, Maḥmud again invaded the southeast in 1721, this time capturing Kermān. A lack of unity, borne out of resentment and jealousy played an unmistakable role in the denouement, both on the part of the hard pressed Zoroastrians of Kermān, who are said to have welcomed the Afghans, and on the part of the Qezelbāš who, embittered with the Georgians and the number of high positions held by them, seem to have encouraged the Afghans. Still, the Georgians fought, but they lacked the numbers to resist the Afghans. The Afghans won a confrontation with a hastily assembled Safavid army in March 1722 at Golnābād, near Isfahan. They took the suburbs and, unable to breach the city walls, resorted next to a blockade. After a six-month siege during which Ṭahmāsp Mirzā, Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn's third son, was spirited out of the city. Starvation brought the city to its knees. Solṭān-Ḥosayn submitted to Maḥmud, conferring on him the title of shah. Upon news of the fall, Ṭahmāsp (II) proclaimed himself shah in Qazvin.



As the Safavid regime crumbled, both the Ottomans and the Russians took advantage of Persia's weakened state to cast covetous eyes on its northern territories. Russia had just won the Great Nordic War (1700-21) against Sweden, and the threat to Russian merchants provided a pretext for Moscow to invade Persia. It is said that they were encouraged in this by Georgians who actively desired a Russian invasion. Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725) took Darband and, responding to an appeal by Gilān for protection against the Ġilzi Afghans, marched on the Caspian provinces, which he took as well. In 1723 Tsar Peter concluded a treaty of alliance with Ṭahmāsp, according to which the Russians received the Caspian provinces as well as Darband and Baku, and pledged to assist Ṭahmāsp in the pacification of the rest of Persia. War then loomed between Russia and the Ottomans, who had meanwhile invaded and captured Georgia and Kermānšāh, their hands free because of the Treaty of Passarowitz (1718), which had ended their war against Austria-Hungary and Venice. The Russo-Ottoman accord that the two concluded in 1724 divided much of northwestern Persia between them. This did not prevent the Ottomans from taking [Ganja](#) and Tabriz a year later. The death of Tsar Peter in the same year prevented the Russians from responding adequately. Fearing instability in Persia, however, in 1727 the Ottomans concluded a peace treaty with [Ašraf Ġilzay](#) (d. 1729), Maḥmud's successor in Persia.

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