



ŠAYĶ-‘ALI KHAN ZANGANA

ŠAYĶ-‘ALI KHAN ZANGANA, grand vizier for twenty years (1079-1100/1669-89) under Shah [Solaymān I Šafawi](#) (r. 1075-105/1666-94).

Šayĳ-‘Ali Khan was born in 1020/1611 or 1022/1613 in a prominent family of the Kurdish Zangana tribe (Kātunābādi, pp. 530-31). His father, ‘Ali Beg Zangana, was a “holder of the rein” (*jelawdār*) under Shah ‘Abbās I (r. 996-1038) who, in 1028/1618, moved up to the position of master of the king’s stables (*amirākor-bāši*), and, under Shah Šafi (r. 1038-52), became a *qurĉi* (a member of the royal guard). Rising from the position of stable boy, Šayĳ-‘Ali Khan, in Shah Šafi’s reign, briefly served as *amirākor-bāši*, succeeding his eldest brother, Šāhroĳ Solţān, when the latter became amir of the Zangana in 1048/1639 (Moĥammad-Ma‘šum Ešfahāni, pp. 264, 286; Eskandar Beg and Mowarrek, pp. 227-28; Matthee, 1994, p. 80).

Less than a year later, in 1049/1639, Šāhroĳ Solţān died, and Šayĳ-‘Ali Khan again succeeded his brother through his appointment as amir of the Zangana tribe. From 1063/1653 on, Šayĳ-‘Ali Khan served as the khan and landholder (*toyuldār*) of [Kalhor](#), [Sonĳor](#), and [Kermanshah](#), the homeland of the Zangana (Waĥid Qazvini, pp. 331, 569; Šāmlu, fol. 154; Chardin, X, p. 126; Fasā’i, I, p. 480; Luft, p. 110; Matthee, 1994, p. 80).

In this period Šayĳ-‘Ali Khan showed his administrative qualities by successfully mediating a conflict between the Lurs and their newly appointed leader, Manuĉehr Khan (Luft, p. 110). The Zangana, meanwhile, provided services for the Safavids by participating in the [Qandahar](#) campaign of



1057/1647 (Mollā Kamāl, pp. 109-10). Over the years he must have acquired a reputation as a competent military commander as well, for in 1076/1666 Shah ‘Abbās II called him with a contingent of the Zangana to [Isfahan](#) and sent him as a military commander (*sardār*) to Khorasan with the task of putting a halt to Uzbek raids into the northern regions (Šāmlu, fol. 153; Chardin, X, p. 126; Matthee, 1994, p. 80).

Şayk-‘Ali Khan’s political career was not interrupted by the death of ‘Abbās II later that year and the succession to the throne of Shah Şafi II, later recrowned as Shah Solaymān (q.v.). On the contrary, this turn of events offered him an opportunity to continue his rise through the ranks of the bureaucracy. Having demonstrated his abilities in military matters, he was called back to Isfahan in 1078/1668 and appointed *tofangči-āqāsi*, riflemen commander, replacing Budāq Solţān, who had resigned from the post (Chardin, X, p. 126). In June 1669, he finally succeeded Moḥammad Mirzā Mahdi as grand vizier (Nationaal Archief, VOC 1266, 20 July 1669, fol. 952v.)

Characteristics and assessment. According to [Jean Chardin](#), Şayk-‘Ali Khan had a nice physique and a handsome face that radiated calmness and composure. The Frenchman also called him wise, spirited, and known for his integrity, and relates how those who knew him spoke highly of his modesty and moderation. He was very devout and is said to have lived an upright life. He was married to only one wife and abstained from smoking and drinking (Chardin, III, pp. 30-32, IX, p. 331; Bedik, pp. 240-41, 270, 322). Incorruptible and concerned about the poor, he would go around the city anonymously at night to check on people’s conditions (Bāstāni Pārizi, p. 265). [Engelbert Kaempfer](#) (pp. 88-89) remarked on his religious devotion and lack of ostentatiousness as well, as seen in the small number of his entourage when he went out riding and the simplicity of his way of dressing, but also labeled him a typical Kurd, stubborn, brooding, and vengeful. The English, too, called him a man of “severe and morose humour,” and a “grimme and seveare man espetially to Christians whom he greatly hates” (IOR, G/36/106, 27 January 1672; Baladouni and Makepeace, p. 67). The second part of this assessment is clearly related to the rather uncompromising attitude he displayed in his dealings with the European maritime companies (Chardin, III, pp. 209 ff.; Matthee, 1999, pp. 186-88). The first part is an obvious reference to Şayk-‘Ali Khan’s well-known religious rectitude, symbolized by his short moustache, unlike the [Georgian](#) slave soldiers (*ḡolām*) who let theirs grow long, and his very long beard, again contrary to the Georgians, who sported a short beard



(Chardin, III, p. 125). In modern historiography, ŠayĶ-‘Ali Khan is mostly known for his forceful economic policies, prompting Bāstāni Pārizi (p. 73) to call him the “Safavid *Amir Kabir*” on account of his attempted economic reforms.

ŠayĶ-‘Ali Khan’s religious convictions were not without controversy. Rumor had it that ŠayĶ-‘Ali Khan, a Kurd, was a crypto-Sunni. This made him vulnerable at the Safavid court and must have contributed to his rather orthodox behavior. The role he played in the imposition of higher taxes on New *Julfa* and in forced conversion of a number of prominent New Julfan Armenians in the 1670s made him appear anti-Christian (Metzler, p. 693; Chardin, III, p. 119; Ghougassian, p. 158). Yet, as was not unusual among Persia’s Muslims, he had a missionary read the Gospel over the head of his sick son (Richard, I, p. 109 n. 272). He was also stern with anyone who behaved in ways he did not like. He thus had a ranking religious figure (*mollā*) punished with 200 strokes for engaging in obscurantist bureaucratic language (Chardin, III, p. 200). This gained him a reputation captured in the saying *Šāh mibaḳšad, ŠayĶ-‘Ali Kān namibaḳšad* (“the king forgives; ŠayĶ-‘Ali Khan does not forgive”).

Policies. Soon after accepting the highest administrative position, ŠayĶ-‘Ali Khan consolidated his power, edging out Maḳṣud Beg, the *nāẓer* (superintendent of the royal workshop) who left on a pilgrimage to Mecca (Nationaal Archief, VOC 1284, 28 July 1671, fol. 2371r). Faced with an empty treasury, the result of bad management, overspending, and a series of natural disasters, he lost no time trying to find new sources of royal revenue. For several years, he thus demanded the full supply of silk from *Gilan* for delivery to the Dutch. He also imposed a five-percent tax on all money taken from Isfahan for export and tried (but failed) to fix the price of sugar bought by the court (Nationaal Archief, VOC 1266, 20 July 1669, fol. 952v; VOC 1270, 24 April 1670, fol. 892v; VOC 1274, 22 April 1671, fol. 735v.; VOC 1288, 31 January 1672, fol. 876v). In later years he continued to be concerned about Iran’s monetary policy and currency reform (Matthee et al., pp. 83-85, 89, 90, 93, 120, 124-26).

Soon after taking over as grand vizier, he began to interfere in the regional administration of *Kerman* and sent mostly Kurdish officials to investigate bureaucratic practice and collect taxes (Mašizi, pp. 355-56, 359-60, 368). As early as 1081/1671, we hear of the imposition of new taxes on religious minorities as well. These disproportionately targeted the Armenians of *Julfa* (Ghougassian, pp. 41, 108-9). Most controversial was his attempt to increase state revenue by re-appropriating land in the form of many *toyuls* that had,



over time, been awarded to high officials.

Šayĳ-‘Ali Khan’s approach to industry and commerce was informed by a desire for Persian self-sufficiency. The Dutch, whom he confronted over silk, specie, and their temporary blockade of [Bandar ‘Abbās](#) in 1684, called him uninvolved and uninterested in trade (Nationaal Archief, VOC 1373, 29 May 1683, fol. 862v). In reality, he was not just interested in trade but encouraged it, only not trade that just benefited foreigners. In 1682, he approached the English [East India Company](#) to have goods shipped by them (IOR, E/3/42, no. 4870, 10 December 1682). Two years later, he involved himself with a Swedish delegation, instructing the Armenian merchant community to see how trade with Sweden via Russia could be stimulated (Hoppe, p. 160). He also regularly consulted with three wealthy merchants about matters of commerce (Nationaal Archief, VOC 1398, 13 October 1685, fols. 588-89v), and he engaged in trade himself, employing a son of Zachariah Sarhat of the wealthy Šahremāniān ([Sceriman](#)) family as his private merchant (Bournoutian, p. 9).

Šayĳ-‘Ali Khan was an active architectural and, more generally, perhaps a cultural, patron throughout his tenure as grand vizier. A [caravanserai](#) near [Sardašt](#), on the road between [Hamadan](#) and [Baghdad](#), bore the name “Šayĳ-‘Ali Khan” (Thevenot, II, p. 130). Another caravanserai, built in 1091/1681 near [Bisotun](#), was named after him as well, as was a bridge between Kermanshah and Hamadan near [Kangavar](#). In 1096-97/1685-86, he built a caravanserai named Čāla Siāh, at about 50 km northwest of Isfahan (Hedges, I, p. 213; Thevenot, II, pp. 130, 135; Honarfar, pp. 646-48). He built a madrasa in Hamadan, turning it into a charitable trust (*waqf*) property and appointing his oldest son as the supervisor (*motawalli*), provided that he would abstain from non-Islamic behavior (Sefatgol, 1999, p. 213; idem, 2002, pp. 330-31). Našrābādi, pp. 457, 497, finally, hints at wider cultural patronage by listing a few poets who worked in his service.

Fall from grace and rehabilitation. As reported by Jean Chardin (V, p. 419), Šayĳ-‘Ali Khan met fierce resistance from *toyul* (land assignment) owners, who saw their income drop by as much as one-fourth to one-half. His cost-cutting measures made him many enemies as well. His policy of urging the shah to be frugal in particular infuriated courtiers who depended on the ruler’s liberality. His rise from the margins, exemplified in the distich, *Rafta rafta qašow qalamdān šod / Šayĳ-‘Ali Kān wazir-e Irān šod* (“The currycomb gradually turned into a pen case; / Šayĳ-‘Ali Khan became the [chief] minister of Iran”; Bāstāni Pārizi, p. 146), as well as his presumed Sunni beliefs, made



him vulnerable to slander. A whispering campaign about his religious credentials got underway, contributing to his temporary fall from grace in late 1082/early 1672. The actual demotion is said to have followed a gathering during which the shah humiliated his aged grand vizier by demanding that he wrestle with a courtier. When Šayk-‘Ali Khan refused to follow an order to drink himself into a fighting mood first, he incurred the shah’s wrath. Shah Solaymān is said to have initially ordered his execution, but at the intercession of several officials he was pardoned and merely dismissed (Mašizi, pp. 387-88; Chardin, III, p. 29, IX, p. 331; Bedik, p. 322; Nationaal Archief, VOC 1288, 16 May 1672, fols. 924r, 927r, 928r; IOR, G/36/106, 29 April 1672). The fact that one of his sons sought refuge in the Ottoman empire at that time may be related to his discomfiture (Carré, p. 462).

Back in power. After living in disgrace for fourteen months, demoted but not replaced, Šayk-‘Ali Khan was reinstated on 26 June 1673, following another drunken royal scene. His rehabilitation was symbolized by a robe of honor and the accouterments of the prime ministry, among them a saddle and a gem-studded gold harness. In keeping with custom, he responded by having the streets covered with precious cloth for the shah (Chardin, III, pp. 29-32). Yet his position and, with that, his demeanor changed. The shah kept humiliating him, forcing him to drink and throwing wine at him, and at one point ordering his beard cut off in the most undignified manner, only to show remorse the next day. The only thing that kept Šayk-‘Ali Khan alive, it was said, was his proven administrative qualities and the general awareness, shared by the shah, that the country would fall into disarray without the grand vizier’s leadership (Chardin, III, pp. 121-26, IX, pp. 330-31).

Although having resumed his tasks as grand vizier, Šayk-‘Ali Khan now lived in fear and insecurity and acted with great caution rather than with his former self-confidence. Given the grand vizier’s position at the top of the administrative pyramid, this naturally came at the expense of the speed and efficiency of the execution of state affairs (Nationaal Archief, VOC 1285, 31 July and 13 September 1673; VOC 1279, 1 April 1675; VOC 1307, 12 December 1675). Henceforth his contacts with the shah were mostly mediated by the palace eunuchs. The only chance he had to influence the monarch was during an occasional joint horseback ride (Kaempfer, pp. 82-83).

Even though he never regained the prominence and visibility he had enjoyed before his fall from grace, in later years, as the shah more and more retreated into his harem, Šayk-‘Ali Khan’s standing and power seems to have increased



again, to the point where, by the early 1680s, the only significant rival he faced was Qurči-bāši Sāru Khan Sahandlu (Nationaal Archief, VOC 1364, 14 June 1682, fol. 365v; Matthee, 1994, p. 90). In 1085/1675, former grand vizier Moḥammad Beg traveled to Isfahan under widespread expectations that he would be reinstated. When he died before reaching the capital, it was widely believed that Šayk-‘Ali Khan had had him poisoned (Chardin, IX, pp. 345-46). By 1095/1684, Šayk-‘Ali Khan’s power was such that none of the courtiers dared any move against him. The sudden death of the *mostawfi-e kāṣṣa* (the official in charge of the financial affairs of the crown estates), Mirzā Raži, at this point was attributed to poisoning by the grand vizier (Nationaal Archief, VOC 1416, 20 October 1684, fols. 1609v-10r).

His staying power owed much to the fact that he continued to work assiduously on increased revenue for the shah’s coffers. Šayk-‘Ali Khan was no doubt instrumental in the consolidation of customs receipts at the Persian Gulf ports in 1084/1674 (Chardin, V, p. 404; Qā’emmaqami, p. 49). He also resumed his cost-cutting policies, sending tax officials to Kerman and securing continued control of silk deliveries to the Dutch (Mašizi, pp. 474, 485, 496; Nationaal Archief, 1349, 25 November 1679, fols. 1708r-11v; Matthee, 1999, pp. 186-88).

An underlying reason for Šayk-‘Ali Khan’s political longevity is that, in keeping with custom, many of his relatives and kinsmen held high-rank positions in the administration, to the point where much of the administration of the country was said to be in the hands of his extended family (Kaempfer, p. 89). The position of *amirākor-bāši* remained within the family, devolving on Faridun Khan, a first cousin, with Šayk-‘Ali Khan’s promotion (Bedik, p. 274). ‘Abbāsqli Khan, a son, served as *miršekār-bāši* from about 1180/1670 to 1092/1682 (Bedik, p. 274). Another son, Šāhqoli Khan, served as governor (*ḥākem*) of Kermanshah; yet another son was the ruler (*beglerbeg*) of Kuhgiluya (Kuh-e Giluya), and a fourth one ruled Qazvin. A brother held the joint position of military commander (*sepahsālār*) and governor of [Azarbaijan](#), and when he died, a nephew, Ḥājj ‘Ali Khan, assumed these positions, and with those, the task of protecting the borders with the Ottoman empire and [Georgia](#) (Kātunābādi, p. 547; Brosset, II/1, p. 553; Kaempfer, pp. 88-89).

One area in which Šayk-‘Ali Khan maintained a prominent role was in foreign policy. We have letters from him written to foreign rulers (Navā’i, p. 297). He also became involved in Georgian intrigues. He engaged in a divide-and-rule policy by having many Georgians appointed to high positions at the court



(Sanson, in Kroell, p. 49). A grudge he bore against Šahnavāz Khan, the king of Kartli, for being refused the latter’s daughter in marriage led him to take revenge by turning Shah Solaymān against the Georgian royal family, presenting them as unreliable for being disloyal to the Persian Crown (Brosset, II/1, pp. 79-83; 553-54; Lang, pp. 89-90). Most importantly, he was a strong advocate of continued peace with the Ottomans. In the early 1670s, when all courtiers agreed that Persia should take advantage of the Ottoman-Polish conflict by declaring war on Istanbul, it was Šayk-‘Ali Khan who advised the shah not to resume hostilities with the Ottomans (Bedik, pp. 271-72). One reason for his reluctance was his skepticism about European motives in their pledges to aid Iran against its most important enemy. In 1083/1673, he thus dismissed a Russian delegation and their request for the creation of an anti-Turkish alliance by scathingly informing them that the Christian powers tended to make peace with the Ottoman as they saw fit (Chardin, III, p. 203; Matthee, 1998, pp. 153-54). His detractors attributed his pacifism to his possession of substantial landed property in his ancestral Kurdistan, which would bear the brunt of any new Iran-Ottoman war. Equally self-serving was his obstruction of a project to connect the waters of the Kuhrang and the Zāyanda-rud, designed to irrigate the lands around Isfahan, since this would have come at the expense of the profitability of the many villages he owned in Kermanshah (“Sawad-e tumar”; Sanson, pp. 78-79; Sefatgol, 2002, p. 213).

Death and legacy. On 4 October 1689, Father Sanson reported that Šayk-‘Ali Khan was dying and that all of Persia was languishing with the grand vizier since no one could take over the management of the country during his illness (Sanson, in AME, vol. 353, pp. 115-18). Having served Shah Solaymān for two decades, Šayk-‘Ali Khan, passed away at four o’clock on 11 Moḥarram 1101/25 October 1689 (Kātunābādi, p. 547). Shah Solaymān was apparently so upset at the death of his grand vizier that he stayed in his palace for a full year and did not appoint a new vizier for almost two years (Brosset, II, p. 561). Following Šayk-‘Ali Khan’s death, members of the Zangana tribe continued to play a prominent role, not just in the affairs of their ancestral region but also in Persian politics in general. The positions of governor of Kermanshah and *amirāqor-baši* remained in the Zangana clan for the duration of Safavid period. His son Šāhqoli Khan served, first as *qurči-bāši*, and subsequently then as grand vizier between 1119/1707 and 1127/1715. Another relative, Rostam Khan Zangana, was sent as envoy to Istanbul in 1109/1697-98 (Naṣiri, p. 213)



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