

## Chapter 2

# ***Zar-o Zur: Gold and Force: Safavid Iran as a Tributary Empire***

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### Introduction

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw a plethora of scholarly writings on the concept of empire and its historical manifestations. Propelled by the terrible events of 9/11 and the overseas wars the United States launched in their wake, this renewed attention to an old state structure introduced and sought to generalize the proposition that, despite its habitual denial-cum amnesia with regard to its status, America constitutes a latter-day global empire. Within half a decade, forced to keep pace with evolving events, the emerging discussion changed course to fasten onto the notion that, barely begun, the end of the American empire was already in sight, that America's imperial decline had set in as soon as its imperial status culminated.

Safavid Iran, with a lifespan of 221 years, might sound like a remote and unlikely homologue. Yet, with the caveat that time in the modern world is compressed, that developments playing out over a decade today might have taken a century or more in the past, the simile is, on second thought, perhaps not an unreasonable one: The Safavids, too, "declined" (and collapsed) soon after attaining their peak.

That, at least, is one of the arguments I advanced in an article published in 2010 in which I posed the question of whether the Safavids

presided over an empire at all.<sup>1</sup> The very question might seem strange, yet the reason for posing it was simple: In the traditional literature, following Marshall Hodgson's well-known classification, Safavid Iran was typically included in the "gunpowder empire" club, together with the contiguous Ottoman and Mughal states.<sup>2</sup> It continues to be examined as part of the same triad, even though it is now recognized that firearms in early modern times and especially in non-Western settings "were not necessarily drivers but rather indicators of change."<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the "gunpowder empire" moniker has now fallen out of favor (more about that later).<sup>4</sup> Yet, gunpowder state or not, in the broader and ever widening, theoretically grounded, and inherently comparative discourse that followed in the wake of 9/11, (Safavid) Iran has hardly played a role. From declaring America an empire, historical scholarship quickly and, perhaps inevitably, moved to the avatar of empires, ancient Rome. The link was easily made, for America's very founding fathers envisioned the state they forged as "Rome revived"—albeit as an incarnation of Republican, not Imperial Rome. The decline scenario, immortalized by Edward Gibbon, was similarly too obvious to be ignored once the "imperial presidency" reached new heights under George W. Bush, religion made ever deeper inroads into the American body politic, and the excesses of the country's corrupt corporate elite hit the headlines in the wake of the 2008 credit crisis.

Even earlier, scholars had embarked on the study of a wider comparative, historically grounded nexus, incorporating early mod-

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1 Rudi Matthee, "Were the Safavids an Empire?" *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53 (2010), pp. 233–265.

2 Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 3, *The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago, 1974), p. 18.

3 Emrys Chew, *Arming the Periphery: The Arms Trade in the Indian Ocean during the Age of Global Empire* (Basingstoke, 2012), p. 18.

4 See Stephen F. Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals* (Cambridge, 2010); and, for a latter-day employment of the term, Douglas E. Streusand, *Islamic Gunpowder Empires: Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (Boulder, CO, 2011).

ern political entities that behaved like empires and that declined like empires—complex state structures encompassing large, ecologically variegated territories inhabited by a large number of people of diverse linguistic and ethnic identity—even if these didn't necessarily identify themselves as empires. They thus examined the Ottomans and the Spanish and Habsburg empires and, leaping across Iran, extended their ambit to the Indian Mughals, various South-east Asian states, and the Chinese Ming dynasty.<sup>5</sup> If Iran is mentioned at all in this discourse, it is usually as the land that spawned the first serious empire in history, that of the Achaemenids, who pioneered or refined many of the patterns and practices that became quintessentially attached to the form, with an occasional reference to the last of the Iranian regimes, that of the Sasanians (r.

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5 Aside from the literature given in my 2010 article, Iran is also virtually absent from the two collections edited by P. F. Bang and C. A. Bayly, the special issue on empires in the *Medieval History Journal* 6:2 (2003); and *Tributary Empires in Global History* (Basingstoke, 2011). No Iranian empire receives any particular mention in the synthetic study edited by Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010). In Victor Lieberman's magisterial *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2003 and 2009), Iran mostly serves a source of migrant labor seeking employment in India. The comparative element in Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, 2008), is mostly limited to the Roman and Russian empires. Sanjay Subrahmaniyam, in a recent essay comparing the Mughals, the Ottomans and the Habsburgs, goes so far as to speak of “three early modern empires that covered an impressive swathe of more or less contiguous territory” only interrupted by a “small gap from east to west equivalent to the width of the Safavid Empire.” See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “The Fate of Empires: Rethinking Mughals, Ottomans and Habsburgs,” in Huri Islamoğlu and Peter Perdue, eds., *Shared Histories of Modernity: China, India and the Ottomans Empire* (London, New York, New Delhi, 2009), p. 75. Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven and London, 2013), pp. 417–420, treats Iran as an early modern anomaly and enigma for not conforming to the global pattern of mid-seventeenth-century war, rebellion and human misery.

250–644), before the lands between Mesopotamia and the Hindu Kush were absorbed into the Arab-Islamic dispensation.<sup>6</sup>

## The Safavids: Gunpowder State, Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire or Tributary State?

This essay examines Safavid Iran, one of the stepchildren in the wider discourse about manifestations of early modern empires. Its angle is different from the one I took in my earlier essay. In its attempt to put the Safavids on the “imperial map,” “Were the Safavids an Empire?” focused on the ideological and political underpinnings of the state and, to a lesser degree, on the extent to which their military capacity and resources allowed the Safavids to make good on their claim to oversee a political dispensation we call empire. Indeed, answering the question in the title, I tentatively embraced the Safavid dynasty as an empire, with the qualification that its centralizing capacity and thrust were relatively limited and that its status derived more from its dynastically and religiously underpinned ideological mobilizing power than from its actual military might.

For this reason alone the term “gunpowder empire” is indeed less than appropriate for the Safavid state. Gábor Ágoston, among others, has contested the gunpowder empire epithet as an all-encompassing term for the Ottomans with the argument that it places too much emphasis on one single factor to explain various exceedingly complex processes.<sup>7</sup> Stephen Dale concurs with regard to the Safavids. The term is, as Dale notes in his comparative study of the Ottomans, the Safavids and the Mughals, “particularly questionable for the Safavids, who never really warmed to the use of heavy artillery.”<sup>8</sup> The Safavids demonstrably lagged behind

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6 One scholar, struck by this absence of Iran from the discourse, in this case the discourse about non-Western “modernities,” has aptly called the “‘Turkey-India-China grouping’ the ‘Three Tenors’ of non-Western Modernities.” See Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, “Modernity: The Sphinx and the Historian,” *American Historical Review* 116 (June 2011), p. 649.

7 See Gábor Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 191–192.

8 Dale, *The Muslim Empires*, p. 6.

the Ottomans in this regard, and there are reports that, at least in the sixteenth century, the Iranians disliked and were even afraid of artillery, perhaps because they were as yet relatively unfamiliar with this technology.<sup>9</sup> Like many contemporary states, the Safavid state sought to hold on to its initial monopoly on firearms by restricting their spread among the population. Yet, as everywhere else, this was a doomed effort.<sup>10</sup> It is also true that firearms helped the dynasty's most forceful monarch, the centralizing Shah `Abbas I (r. 1587–1629), reorganize his army. But the task was enormous and the effort remained half-hearted; the new technology, involving the introduction and use of firearms, would be a minor factor in the formation of new elites and thus was hardly decisive for the ultimate fate of the state. The Safavids used cannon to great effect in siege warfare yet firepower handled by a newly formed infantry consisting of *gholams*, Georgian and Armenian “slave” soldiers imported from the Caucasus, never replaced mounted archers as the mainstay of their army. The Afghan insurgents who brought down the Safavid state, moreover, proved as adept at using gunpowder—even in novel ways in the form of the camel-mounted *zamburak* cannon—as the Safavid armies whom they defeated.

Having “shelved” the gunpowder rubric, the present essay, following Stephen Dale and Stephen Blake in their respective approach to the Mughals, proposes that the most appropriate overarching term for the seventeenth-century Iranian state—as forged by Shah `Abbas I—is that of the patrimonial-bureaucratic variety as originally proposed by Weber, in that its apparatus was organized and functioned as an extension of

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9 Giovanni Tommaso Minadoi, *The History of the Warres between the Turkes and the Persians*, trans. Abraham Hartwell (London, 1595; repr. Tehran, 1976), pp. 73–74; and the report offered to the Venetian Senate on May 1, 1580, in Guglielmo Berchet, ed., *La repubblica di Venezia et la Persia* (Turin, 1865; repr. Tehran, 1976), p. 189.

10 For this, see Rudi Matthee, “Unwalled Cities and Restless Nomads: Gunpowder and Artillery in Safavid Iran,” in Charles Melville, ed., *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society* (London: 1996), pp. 389–416; and Idem, *Persia in Crisis: Safavid Decline and the Fall of Isfahan* (London, 2012), pp. 111–112, 217–218.

the royal household, that its administrative offices knew little functional division, and that private and public spheres overlapped in distinctly premodern ways. Coercive power, in sum, continued to be the ruler's personal property.<sup>11</sup> This does not say anything about the *effectiveness* of the ruler's power—which was absolute in the sense that his power over his subjects' life and death was unbounded yet factually limited beyond his immediate orbit.<sup>12</sup> It does, however, point to the fact that, if the term “empire” is to have any meaning at all, it would have to be by linking it to the dynasty that oversaw it. Imperial power, in other words, was above all dynastic power.

In addition to the charge that it is teleological in nature, a common criticism of Weber's theory is that it presupposes static, even immutable structures, and that it envisions a state that not only claims to hold a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence but that actually has the means to enforce this right. Weber was explicit about the fragility of patrimonial rule, yet he formulated state and society as a unitary system and, in his nineteenth-century (German) tendency to overrate the ability of the state to control, manage, and arbitrate, he paid insufficient attention to societal challenges to its power. Michael Mann's reformulation of Weber's ideas, taking this into account, rejects a simple antithesis between the all-powerful state, and society, the populace, the objects of its coercion. Mann sees a dialectic relationship between the two, a relationship in which a “range of infrastructural techniques are pioneered by despotic states, then appropriated by civil societies (or vice versa); then further opportunities for centralized coordination present themselves, and the process begins anew.”<sup>13</sup>

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11 For the features of the patrimonial state, see Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 2 vols., ed. Guenter Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, 1978), vol. 1, pp. 1006–1010. For Blake's use of the term, see Stephen P. Blake, “The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 39 (1979), pp. 77–94.

12 Philip S. Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Revolution* (Chicago, 2003), p. 29.

13 See Michael Mann, “The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results,” *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 25 (1984), p. 4.

He also views society less as a structure than as a series of “multiple overlapping and intersecting sociopolitical networks of power.”<sup>14</sup> This paper follows these propositions, including Mann’s distinction between “despotic” (immediate) and “infrastructural” (logistical) power.

We might gain more insight into the actual working of Safavid Iran as a patrimonial state by highlighting the tributary dimension of its relationships. Like all premodern empires, the Safavid state was based on the “conquest of wide agrarian domains and the taxation of peasant surplus production.”<sup>15</sup> Tribute, the extraction of wealth as a token of respect and submission or allegiance or, in the words of Shmul Eisenstadt, the “collection of free-floating resources,” was crucial for the working, success and ultimately the survival of the prevailing power structure; it suffused not just economic relations but operated at the heart of the dynamic interaction between the central state and the society that was formally subjected to it.<sup>16</sup> The tributary mode as originally presented by Samir Amin and Eric Wolf aims to dissolve the traditional Marxian distinction between the Asiatic mode of production and the feudal mode of production by subsuming all precapitalist systems under one model. In keeping with the Marxist paradigm, tribute in their writings is primarily economic in nature, yet to the extent that economic conditions are intertwined with political and social relations, the notion will here be used not just as a mechanism of economic import but as essential tool for the production and reproduction of political and social power in Safavid Iran.

## Forms of Tribute

The payment of tribute as a manifestation of deference to power has a long history, going back to the first world empire, that of the Achae-

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14 Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. 1, *The History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 80.

15 Bang and Bayly, eds., *Tributary Empires*, p. 6.

16 Samir Amin, *Unequal Development* (Hassocks, 1976); Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 79–82; and S. M. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires* (New York, 1963), pp. 23–28.

menids (c. 550–330 BCE).<sup>17</sup> Throughout Eurasia, states in the next two millennia operated on the principle of extracting tribute.<sup>18</sup> Safavid Iran is no exception to this. Indigenous, Persian-language sources make various ideological and religious objectives appear as the main drivers behind the rise and the maintenance of the Safavid state, yet underneath these one detects two principal motivating forces. One is *zur*, force, the lust for power and glory, and the manly urge to conquer and subdue.<sup>19</sup> The other one is *zar*, gold, monetary inducement, which stirred at the heart of a web of personal relationships based on patronage radiating from the shah—the ultimate source of power and patronage. Even if *zur* was often the first and always the last mechanism the state employed, *zar* appropriately appears first in the expression “*zar-o zur*.” Political domination was ultimately predicated on military control, but daily practice was a matter of surplus extraction in myriad forms and varieties, ranging from regular taxation to rent and confiscation, from state monopolies on commodities to forced partnerships, from diplomatic gift-giving to obligatory donations offered by provincial rulers to the shah. The terms of these arrangements were the outcome of bargaining processes pitting central power in its quest for domination against local or peripheral resistance and subterfuge. Tributary relations were primarily extractive, applied to state centralization. But, following ancient patterns among nomadic states, they also knew a reciprocal, redistributive element.<sup>20</sup> This would take the form of a distribution of the spoils of war among the warriors; as

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17 See Amélie Kuhrt, “The Achaemenid Persian Empire (c. 550–c. 330 BCE): Continuities, Adaptations, Transformations,” in Susan E. Alcock et al., eds., *Empires, Perspectives from Archeology and History* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 93–124.

18 See John Haldon, *The State and the Tributary Mode of Production* (London, 1993), who follows a neo-Marxist approach (and who leaves out Iran altogether from his discussion of early modern states).

19 See Walther Hinz, *Irans Aufstieg zum Nationalstaat im fünfzehnten Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1936).

20 For the Mongol manifestation of this, see H. F. Schurmann, “Mongolian Tributary Practices of the Thirteenth Century,” *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* 19 (1956), pp. 320–322.

well as of largesse expressed by way of banquets.<sup>21</sup> Extraction only had a chance of being considered legitimate if it was balanced by the spread of resources and power among the members of the ruling clans. Only thus could (temporary and instrumental) loyalty and cooperation be acquired and made to work.<sup>22</sup>

Even though Safavid rulers did not incorporate the notion that their state was an overarching, sovereign state into their rhetoric vis-à-vis subject peoples as much as their Ottoman peers, examples of tribute giving and taking abound in Safavid Iran.<sup>23</sup> Tribute could be a token of deference to power, an “insurance” mechanism involving protection, or a symbol of mutual dependence. At the onset of Safavid rule we have an excellent example of the first in the term, *moqarrariya*, which we may actually translate as tribute.<sup>24</sup> Before the rise of the Safavids as a political power, the rulers of Hormuz paid *moqarrariya* to the governor of mainland Lar.<sup>25</sup> After 1501, the ruler of Hormuz, Salghur, paid this impost to Shah Isma`il, both in deference to the new ruler on the mainland and in order to maintain control over the shipping lanes of the Persian Gulf. Before Shah `Abbas I extended his dominion to the Persian Gulf in the early 1600s, the Safavids were mainly interested in receiving a share of

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21 See Jürgen Paul, “The State and the Military: A Nomadic Perspective,” *Orientalwissenschaftliche Hefte* 12, *Militär und Staatlichkeit* (2003), pp. 35–36.

22 Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730* (Cambridge, 2004), Introduction.

23 For the use of the term by the Ottomans, who, at least rhetorically, considered rulers as far apart as those of Poland and Yemen tributary to themselves, see Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, “What Is Inside and What Is Outside? Tributary States in Ottoman Politics,” in Gábor Kármán and Lovro Kunevic, eds., *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Leiden and Boston, 2012), pp. 421–432.

24 Vladimir Minorsky translates “muqarrari” as “regular subvention,” whereas Willem Floor has “regular emolument.” See V. Minorsky, tr. and ed., *Tadhkirat al-Mulūk. A Manual of Safavid Administration* (Cambridge, 1943; repr. 1980), p. 183; and Willem Floor, *A Fiscal History of Iran in the Safavid and Qajar Periods* (New York, 1998), p. 34.

25 For this, see Jean Aubin, “La politique iranienne d’Ormuz (1515–1540),” *Studia* (1994), pp. 27–28.

this tribute. Indeed, the contacts between the Safavids and the Europeans who came to their country after the Portuguese similarly revolved around tribute. In return for the assistance the English gave to the Iranians in ousting the Portuguese from Hormuz in 1622 the former received the right to collect the moiety of the toll income from the Persian Gulf port city of Bandar `Abbas in perpetuity. And the agreement that the Safavids made with the Dutch in 1623 stipulated the annual exchange of a fixed amount of 600 bales of silk for cash.<sup>26</sup>

Here, as in other relationships, the actual balance of power determined the direction as well as the amount. Thus, the Iranians rarely paid the English even a fraction of the toll income they owed them, in part because the local authorities in Bandar `Abbas found excuses not to pay but ultimately because the English East India Company depended on the Safavids more than the Safavids depended on the English. On the other hand, when the Portuguese regained their naval strength in the second half of the seventeenth century, they managed to reverse the roles in their relationship with the Safavids, forcing the Iranians to cede to them the moiety of tolls in the port of Kong—and enforced compliance with a threat of violence.

The ability of religious “minorities” to operate in a Muslim-dominated environment similarly involved the payment of tribute. As was true of other Muslim states, the *jez`ya*, the poll tax extracted from non-Muslims, and more particularly the so-called People of the Book, Jews and Christians, was really nothing but a form of tribute, a token of deference to the hierarchy of the Islamic ruling order. But forced payments exceeding the *jez`ya* representing insurance against mistreatment were not unheard of either. In 1700, for instance, the Banyan, Hindu-Indian residents of Bandar `Abbas paid the local khan an annual sum of 100 tumans to have their temples protected.<sup>27</sup>

The notion of tribute, finally, was inherent in the highly ritualized custom of gift-giving, which more often than was in effect a form of

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26 For this, see Rudolph P. Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran: Silk for Silver, 1600–1730* (Cambridge, 1999).

27 Frantz Caspar Schillinger, *Persianische und Ost-Indianische Reis* (Nuremberg, 1707), p. 277.

taxation. Gifts and donations came in multiple forms and were offered on many occasions. One common form was the exchange of presents on the diplomatic level. Diplomatic missions representing non-Muslim powers embodied the tributary idea since they were typically not reciprocated. Foreign embassies were expected to bring rich gifts with them and to present these during their first official audience, when they were carried around the royal square in Isfahan in a procession. Foreign envoys also routinely offered sums of money, usually in the form of gold ducats, to the shah and his grandees.<sup>28</sup> There was nothing spontaneous about such offerings. Examples of *pishkash* offered or taken after conquest suggest a levy rather than a “spontaneous” gift: after Shah Esma`il’s conquest of Gilan the region’s inhabitants hastened to offer *pishkash* to the shah, and *pishkash* and *savari* were taken from the people of Baku after the town was occupied by Shah Esma`il in 1501–02.<sup>29</sup> Other good examples of arranged offerings are the tributary annual “gift” of 300 to 400 bales of silk that Shah `Abbas I agreed to send to the Ottoman Sultan Ahmad I as part of the Ottoman-Safavid Peace of Sarab of 1612, the annual presents through which Isfahan prevented the tribes of Daghestan from conducting raids into Safavid territory, and the monetary allowances the Safavids sent to Georgian rulers to keep them from switching their loyalty to the Ottomans.<sup>30</sup>

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28 Jean Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin, en Perse, et autres lieux de l’Orient*, ed. L. Langlès, 10 vols. and map (Paris, 1810–11), vol. 3, p. 493; François Valentijn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*. 5 vols. Vol. 5, *Keurlyke beschryving van Choromandel, Pegu, Arrakan, Bengale, Mocha, van ‘t Nederlandsch comptoir in Persien en zaken overblyvzen; een net beschryving van Malacca . . . Sumatra . . . Malabar . . . Japan . . . Kaap der goede hoope . . . Mauritius* (Dordrecht-Amsterdam, 1726), p. 276.

29 Amir Mahmud b. Kvandamir, *Iran dar ruzgar-e Shah Esma`il va Shah Tahmasb-e Safavi*, ed. Gholamreza Tabataba’i (Tehran, 1370/1991), pp. 109, 113.

30 Pietro Della Valle, *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle. Il pellegrino descritti da lui medesimo in lettere familiari all-erudito suo amico Mario Schipano divisi in tre parti cioè: la Turchia, la Persia e l’India*, 2 vols., ed. G. Gancia (Brighton, 1843), vol. 1, p. 651; Nicolaas Witsen, *Noord en oost Tartarye* (Amsterdam, 1705), p. 565; Jean Pitton de Tournefort, *Relation d’un voyage du Levant, fait par ordre du Roy*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1717), vol. 3, p. 173.

Officials of all ranks, both those stationed in the provinces and those attached to the royal court, were expected to offer a *pishkash* to the shah upon being appointed, and each time they were reappointed. No one who wished to remain in esteem (and office), moreover, was free from the obligation to offer a *nowruzi* to the shah on the occasion of the New Year, and an *'eydi* on (religious) holidays. Whenever a new high-ranking public official took up his post, a welcoming present, *salami*, was expected from his subordinates. The agents of the Dutch and English East Asia Companies were required annually to send their *nowruzi*, a sum of money in gold, in addition to cloth and spices, to the shah, but also to the various central and provincial officials with whom they had dealings. They paid *salami*, a “greeting” or “welcoming” gift, whenever a new grand vizier was appointed in Isfahan, or when a new governor or harbor master, *shahbandar*, arrived in Bandar `Abbas. In late Safavid times, the English and the Dutch annually paid 50 *tumans* each to the *shahbandar* and the khan of Bandar `Abbas.<sup>31</sup> Messengers who announced the pending visit of the shah to a province counted on a gift, and when the shah actually traveled through a region, the local authorities were expected to offer him *pishkash*. When the shah honored an official with a personal visit, the latter was also supposed to give a present, usually in cash.<sup>32</sup> Auspicious events such as the shah’s birthday, his recovery from an illness or the removal of a rebellious official were cause for gift-giving and accompanied by *tasaddoq*, the distribution of gifts to the poor.<sup>33</sup>

Reciprocity was built into the institution of gift-giving. According to the Italian traveler Pietro della Valle, it was customary for the recipient of a gift to offer one of greater value to the donor. Yet the same author elsewhere claims that inferiors tried to give little or nothing back, that people of similar ranks exchanged gifts on par, and that only superiors were expected to be more generous with their gifts than their underlings.<sup>34</sup>

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31 British Library, London, India Office Records, E/3/60/7515, 24 March 1701.

32 Chardin, *Voyages*, vol. 9, p. 359; Francis Richard, *Raphaël du Mans, missionnaire en Perse au XVIIe s.*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1995), vol. 1, p. 23.

33 Giovanni Gemelli-Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 6 vols. (Naples, 1699), vol. 2, pp. 123–124; NA, VOC 1152, fols. 248–249.

34 Valle, *Viaggi*, vol. 1, pp. 442, 651.

Subordinates presented gifts to their superiors to express their fealty or to propitiate them, acknowledging past favors and anticipating future ones. The gift-giving of superiors, by contrast, symbolized the munificence and magnanimity of the donor but was also designed to secure his subordinates' continued loyalty. The shah thus lavishly bestowed robes of honor, *khel`at*, on many occasions, to the envoy representing a foreign ruler, to a newly appointed official or after receiving the Nowruz *pishkash*.<sup>35</sup> The significance of the *khel`at* was highly symbolic, since by granting it the shah declared the recipient his subject and incorporated him into his realm. By accepting it the recipient acknowledged subordination, and refusing it was tantamount to rebelliousness.

Gift-giving was a form of regular (*moqarrari*) or occasional (*hokmi*) "taxation" and as such highly regulated and institutionalized.<sup>36</sup> Yet the amount and value were flexible, as is suggested in the Persian chronicles, where the term *pishkash* is often accompanied by the terms *layeq*, appropriate, *shayesta*, suitable, or *sazavar*, worthy. "Gifts" indeed were often open to negotiation, and instances are known of recipients complaining about their value or even rejecting presents offered to them as being unworthy. A combination of the presumed importance of the country, the weight of the issue to be negotiated, and the value of gifts previously received, determined the richness and value of the presents proffered at diplomatic exchanges. When the Iranian ambassador Mohammad Reza Beg in 1709 presented gifts to Louis XIV that were deemed below standard, some speculated that their meager value was in response to the even less worthy presents that a previous French envoy had brought for the shah.<sup>37</sup>

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35 V. S. Puturidze, ed., *Persidskie istoricheskie dokumenty v knigokhranilishchakh Gruzii*, kniga 1, vyp. 2 (Tbilisi, 1962), p. 28, *hokm*, decree, from 1082/1671. According to Chardin, *Voyages*, vol. 7, p. 375, the shah each year offered more than 8,000 *khel`ats* at a total cost of nearly 70,000 tumans—a huge sum indeed given an estimated 600,000 tumans in total state revenue.

36 A. K. S. Lambton, "Pishkash: Present or Tribute?" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57 (1994), pp. 145–158 (147–148).

37 Maurice Herbet, *Une ambassade persane sous Louis XIV* (Paris, 1907), pp. 182–183.

## Strong State v. Weak State

Guided by a “presentist” perspective and perforce relying on sources originating from the center—in many cases the only ones that have survived—one would be tempted to regard Safavid Iran at its height as marked by a strong, coherent and articulate center in opposition to a weak, inexpressive periphery inhabited by people with a dim self-awareness and a poorly developed sense of identity. The state and the “capital,” consisting of the shah and his entourage—wherever they happened to be—appear to have controlled the “country,” if not in equal measure all the way to its formal borders, at least along a sliding scale, maintaining a grip that became less tight yet never fully dissolved with distance.

In reality, however, the Safavid state was both strong and weak. It was strong in the mobilizing power of its ideology—originally by way of charismatic leadership representing a messianic creed and forging a bond between faith and territory. The Safavids suffered military defeat and thus lost some of their charismatic aura soon after their establishment of a state, and Weberian “routinization” set in after the death of the founder of the state, Shah Esma`il, in 1524. Yet the original mystique that surrounded the shah persisted until the last days of the dynasty, and even resonated long after its demise to the point where the immediate successors of the Safavids all invoked their name to legitimize themselves.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, irrespective of political capacity and economic vitality, Iran commanded respect among its neighbors because of its cultural cachet as the fount of Persianate culture articulated in the Persian language and suffused with Persian cultural symbols and motives.

Over time, the state also became more centrally organized, in a process that culminated during the reign of Shah `Abbas II (1642–66). Yet not even under the most celebrated of all Safavid rulers, Shah `Abbas I, was the state ever able to overcome the political, social, and economic fragmentation of society. Its leaders naturally pursued maximal administrative and fiscal control. Shah `Abbas I’s policies, most notably his

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38 For this, see John Perry, “The Last Safavids,” *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 9 (1971), pp. 59–71.

efforts to replace tribal power with a new military and bureaucratic elite and his choice of Isfahan as the realm's administrative and economic center, represented a major step on the road from a tribal nomadic to an urban sedentary order. Despite all efforts, however, the Turcoman Qezelbash warrior, the mainstay of the Safavid army, never became fully subordinated to the Tajik (ethnically Persian) urban scribe, the pillar of bureaucratic management and order. The ancient "Turco-Mongol" tribal tradition, decentralized, exploitative, redistributive, and built on corporate legitimacy, continued to challenge its urban-based, agrarian Tajik or "Iranian" counterpart, with its tendency toward accumulating revenue and concentrating power in the hands of a single supreme ruler.<sup>39</sup> This means that the connection between tribal power and military power, which the Safavids inherited from previous regimes, was never fully severed.<sup>40</sup> Unlike the Ottomans and Mughals who, with far greater resources at their disposal, in time broke the military monopoly of the refractory tribes that had brought them to power, Iranian dynasties never achieved the same autonomy despite periodic attempts at introducing sources of non-tribal military power.<sup>41</sup>

All this means that, even at the height of their power, Iran's rulers were unable to exercise their (theoretically unrestricted) monopoly of violence. Ruling over an heterogeneous territory to which access was often difficult, they were forced to accommodate difference and deviance, and often had no choice but to leave policing to local forces. Severely

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39 For the contrast between these two notions and the Central Asian antecedents of the former (in the case of the Ottoman state), see Isenbike Togan, "Ottoman History by Inner Asian Norms," in Halil Bektay and Suraiya Faroqhi, eds., *New Approaches to State and Peasant in Ottoman History* (London, 1992), pp. 109–184.

40 For this, see Michael Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind* (London and New York, 2008), p. 161.

41 For this argument, see Bert G. Fagner, "Historische Wurzeln neuzeitlicher iranischer Identität. Zur Geschichte des politischen Begriffs 'Iran' im späten Mittelalter und in der Neuzeit," in Maria Macuch et al., eds., *Studia Semitica Necnou Iranica Rudolpho Macuch Septuagenario ab amicis et discipulis dedicata* (Wiesbaden, 1989), pp. 79–100.

limited infrastructural capabilities and fragile institutions gave the state weak effective control over all but the capital, the main provincial cities, and the arteries that connected them.

Well into the twentieth century concentrated power in Iran faced other formidable obstacles. A harsh natural environment, causing communication to be slow and difficult, was the first and most consequential of these. Iran's heartland, a saucer-shaped plateau, is made up of vast stretches of semi-desert and piedmont terrain flanked by formidable mountain ranges. Urban centers, irrigated agriculture, and the traffic of people and goods have always clustered on its rims. Regular caravan trade linked the main towns, but the vast stretches of the country in between remained unaffected by such communication. This resulted in scattered villages, economic isolation, and affinities and loyalties that were intensely local and regional, giving Iranian villages and towns a large measure of self-sufficiency and political autonomy, with officials chosen by the local population regulating most of their own affairs.<sup>42</sup>

Economic realities arising from geopolitical conditions were a major cause of weak "infrastructural" state control. As a productive and consumer market, Safavid Iran was of modest size. Overwhelmingly arid, the country was poorly endowed with arable land and low in population density. According to the most plausible estimate, its population in the early to mid-seventeenth century did not exceed eight million.<sup>43</sup> About a third of those, moreover, were pastoralists, people who, living at the near-subsistence level, made only a modest contribution to the country's economy.

Agriculture, heavily dependent on irrigation in most parts of the country, required intensive initial investment as well as high maintenance expenditure. Some of the empire's richest agricultural regions defied central control. Fertile plains around major cities such as Tabriz, Qazvin, Isfahan, and Kerman ordinarily produced enough to feed the urban areas and their surroundings. But some of the most productive areas, among

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42 A. K. S. Lambton, "Islamic Society in Persia," in Eadem, *Theory and Practice in Medieval Persian Government* (London, 1980), pp. 3–32.

43 Willem Floor, *The Economy of Safavid Persia* (Wiesbaden, 2000), p. 2.

them Shirvan, Azerbaijan and the Caspian provinces, were situated on the periphery of the country and thus dangerously exposed to unrest and outside attack. The entire northwest faced Ottoman and, ultimately, Russian aggression. The inaccessible interior of heavily forested, rain-soaked Gilan and Mazandaran had repelled land-based invaders since the seventh-century Arab conquest, but the Caspian littoral, the center of Iran's sericulture, was open to seaborne Cossack raids.

Iran's low production of goods for which foreign demand existed combined with its scarce precious metal deposits gave it a perennial trade deficit, especially with the Indian subcontinent, from which it received many consumer goods and to which it exported substantial sums of bullion in return. Safavid authorities naturally did all they could to regulate precious metal exports through bans and taxation, but a policing system riddled with corruption doomed most of these efforts. The problems Shah `Abbas I faced in enforcing his silk export monopoly epitomizes the limitations of the state's ability to harness economic resources.<sup>44</sup>

## Forms of Alliance Building

These circumstances made it impossible for the Safavids to rely on military power alone or even mostly. To be sure, for all of the sixteenth and part of the seventeenth century, the shah was first and foremost a warrior-in-chief, the head of a band of fighters. Violence, or the threat of violence, was what made his opponents retreat or submit, and it was always the means of last resort for the state. Yet it never could be the only or even the principal form of control. The Safavids used what today we call "soft" power much more widely and, arguably, more effectively to keep their underlings and provinces in check. This came in different forms, ranging from the appointment of shadow officials to alliance building by way of marriage and various tributary arrangements. The ultimate purpose of all of this was, in Burbank and Cooper's terminology, "loyalty, not likeness."<sup>45</sup> As such, the premodern state did

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44 For this, see Matthee, *The Politics of Trade*, pp. 99–105.

45 Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, p. 12.

not inspire any loyalty.<sup>46</sup> Yet managing a state was predicated on at least some form of (temporary) loyalty. To achieve this was to engage in perpetual negotiation and bargaining.<sup>47</sup>

Tributary relations were most conspicuously visible in relations between the center and the frontier provinces, the so-called *velayats*. *Velayats* were located in border regions beyond the mountain ranges that framed the central plateau. These mostly mountainous areas, located on the edge of Safavid jurisdiction and mostly inhabited by fiercely independent tribally organized people, might, in the relationship with the Safavids, be best described as protectorates, a “convenient state between annexation and mere alliance.”<sup>48</sup> The five *velayats* in late Safavid times were `Arabistan (modern Khuzistan), Luristan, Georgia, Kurdistan, and Bakhtiyari territory, in that order of rank and status.<sup>49</sup> *Valis* were all but independent governors. Hailing from leading local families, they usually ruled in hereditary fashion even if it was the shah who officially appointed them. In a concession to regional autonomy, the latter almost always chose a candidate from the region. Appointing someone from outside the resident tribe might create more problems than it solved, as is shown by the example of Kurdistan, where in the 1680s a non-Kurdish governor dispatched by Shah Soleyman was run out of town by the local population.<sup>50</sup> Good behavior by chieftains was enforced by means of keeping a family member, typically a son, in Isfahan as a hostage.

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46 Patricia Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies: Anatomy of the Pre-Modern World* (Oxford, 2nd ed., 2003), p. 38ff.

47 As was true for the Ottoman Empire and the Mughal state; see Barkey, *Empire of Difference*, passim; and Hasan, *State and Locality*, passim, respectively.

48 W. G. Runciman, “Empire as a Topic in Comparative Sociology,” in Bang and Bayly, *Tributary Empires*, p. 99, quoting Lord Halsbury. For the distribution and organization of *velayats*, see Willem Floor, *Safavid Government Institutions* (Costa Mesa, 2001), pp. 81–90.

49 Mohammad Rafi` al-Din Ansari, *Dastur al-Moluk: A Safavid State Manual*, trans. and ed. Willem Floor and Mohammad H. Faghfoory (Costa Mesa, 2007), pp. 11–15.

50 Ayatollah Sheykh Mohammad Mardukh Kordestani, *Tarikh-e Mardukh* (Tehran, 3rd ed., 1359/1980), p. 111.

*Valis* formally expressed allegiance to Isfahan and had coins struck in the shah's name. Unlike regular governors, however, *valis* oversaw their regions' administrative apparatus, controlled their own budgets, maintained their own militia, and managed their own vassal relations, in all of which the shah rarely intervened.<sup>51</sup>

One way in which *velayats* showed their subordinate status was by sending annual donations to the capital and the royal court, typically on the occasion of *Nowruz*. *Valis* were obligated to send the royal court *enfaz*, specific amounts of goods, the first fruits of the region, or the specialty of the area.<sup>52</sup> The rulers of Kartli and Kakheti in Georgia sent hawks, wine and slaves to the Safavid court.<sup>53</sup> The Bakhtiyari tribe sent mares and mules, in addition to falcons and saltpeter, rice and lemons, while the ruler of `Arabistan was held to send stallions and mares of Arab blood to Isfahan as a New Year's gift, a *nowruzi*.<sup>54</sup> The tributary strategy the Safavids employed vis-à-vis *velayats* varied with circumstances. Ordinarily, the exactions were light. Georgia in the early days of Safavid rule, having just been subjugated by Shah Tahmasb, is said to have paid 2,000 ducats in annual tribute to the shah.<sup>55</sup> The region also sent (female) slaves. Shirvan, located in the southern Caucasus as well, in early Safavid times offered silver, silk, camels, mules, horses and young slaves as tribute to the court of Shah Esma`il.<sup>56</sup> Luristan in late Safavid times annually supplied only twenty Arabian horses in addition to 200

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51 T. S. Kuteliia, *Gruziia i sefevidskii Iran (po dannym numizmatiki)* (Tbilisi, 1979), p. 30.

52 Minorsky, ed. and trans., *Tadkirat al-Mulūk*, p. 156; Ansari, *Dastur al-Moluk*, vol. 2, p. 74; Chardin, *Voyages*, vol. 5, pp. 380, 394; John A. Fryer, *A New Account of East India and Persia, Being 9 Years' Travels, 1672–1681*, ed. W. Crooke, 3 vols. (London, 1909–15), vol. 3, p. 23.

53 Ansari, *Dastur al-Moluk*, vol. 2, p. 73; Pitton de Tournefort, *Relation d'un voyage du Levant*, vol. 3, p. 167.

54 Ansari, *Dastur al-Moluk*, vol. 2, pp. 71, 74.

55 Michele Membré, *Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia (1539–1542)*, trans. and introd. A. H. Morton (London, 1993), p. 17.

56 Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont, *Les Ottomans, les Safavides et leurs voisins* (Istanbul, 1987), pp. 322–323.

mules and a quantity of valuables. In time of war, however, the Lurs were held to provide up to 12,000 cavalymen and the same number of foot soldiers.<sup>57</sup>

Naturally, the most autonomous tribes lived on the margins of Safavid jurisdiction, on the edge of the *velayats*, in the Ottoman, Mughal, and Uzbek borderlands, on the frontiers of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and the barren deserts of Sistan and Makran, all of which were exposed to tribal incursions. The fertile Georgian lowlands invited attack by Lezghi mountaineers; Uzbeks and Turkmen often raided deep into the interior of Khorasan, and Baluchi and Afghan tribesmen constantly threatened the vast eastern regions as far as Kerman and Yazd. At times these depredations inflicted heavy damage on local and regional economies. In an effort to neutralize them and even make them safeguard the frontier zones, the Safavids made various arrangements with the tribal peoples living on their frontiers. All of these involved monetary payments. Most often, money changed hands in the form of straightforward tribute. Before the Caspian provinces were subjugated by Shah `Abbas I, for instance, their ruler paid an annual sum of 7,000 tumans in tribute to the Safavids.<sup>58</sup> A tribe formally subordinated to Isfahan would continue to pay an annual sum as a token of submission, and Isfahan often held an important relative of the chief, typically a son, hostage as a guarantee for good behavior.

But in cases where the central government lacked military deterrence or needed their services to gather intelligence or facilitate the passing of troops, the Safavids were forced to accommodate the forces on their fringe and might *pay* tribal chiefs for peace and cooperation.<sup>59</sup>

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57 Mirza Mohammad Hoseyn Mostowfi, "Amar-e mali va nezami-ye Iran dar 1128," *Farhang-e Iran Zamin* 20 (1353/1975), p. 406.

58 Yukako Goto, *Die südkaspischen Provinzen des Iran* (Berlin, 2011), p. 131.

59 For a good overview of these arrangements, see Rhoads Murphey, "The Ottoman-Safavid Border Conflict, 1603–1638." *Orientwissenschaftliche Hefte* 12 (2003), pp. 151–170; and Idem, "The Resumption of Ottoman-Safavid Border Conflict, 1603–1638: Effects of Border Destabilization on the Evolution of State-Tribe Relations," in Stefan Leder and Bernard Streck, eds., *Shifts and Drifts on Nomad-Sedentary Relations* (Wiesbaden, 2005), pp. 307–332. Also see Rudi Mathee, "Between Arabs, Turks and Iranians: The Town of Basra, 1600–1700," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 69 (2006), pp. 53–78.

Following a great deal of unrest in `Arabistan, culminating in a conflict between Sayyid Mubarak and his son Amir Badr al-Din, who had been appointed governor of Dezful, Shah `Abbas in 1594–95 sent an army headed by his grand vizier, Hatem Beg Ordubadi, and the governor of Fars, Farhad Khan, to the province. Sayyid Mubarak was thus forced formally to submit to Safavid authority, but the Iranians, fearing Ottoman interference if they treated him too harshly, allowed him to hold on to his previous conquests, including the Jazira region.<sup>60</sup>

Mubarak Khan of Huwayza never dispatched any of the proceeds of the income generated by `Arabistan to Isfahan. He merely sent a small number of horses to the capital each year as a formal gift (*pishkash*), and in return received lavish presents and precious robes of honor from the shah.<sup>61</sup> He did keep the peace in return. Such collaboration was never assured, though. The Kurds and Arabs in the borderlands between Iran and the Ottoman Empire, especially, could always defect to the other side, and often did. As long as Shah Esma`il was alive, the Kurdish leader Teymur Khan was content to be his protégé. Upon the shah's death, fearing instability in Iran, the khan threw in his lot with the Ottomans—in exchange for an annual stipend of 100,000 *akçes*.<sup>62</sup> An envoy from the Arab Musha`sha` expressed it best in his admonishing remarks to Shah Esma`il I: “Each year we send taxes and tolls to the shah's court. Do not make claims on our territory, for if you apply force, we will flee and

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60 Eskandar Beg Torkaman, *Tarikh-e `Alam-ara-ye `Abbasi*, 2 vols. paginated as one, ed. Iraj Afshar (Tehran, 2nd ed., 1350/1971), pp. 675–677; Mahmud b. Hedayat Allah Afushta`i Natanzi, *Nuqavat al-asar fi zekr al-akhyar*, ed. Ehsan Eshraqi (Tehran, 2nd ed., 1373/1994), p. 546ff.; Mirza Mohammad Taher Vahid Qazvini, *Tarikh-e jahan-ara-ye `Abbasi*, ed. Sayyed Sa`id Mohammad Sadeq (Tehran, 1383/2004), p. 130.

61 Mohammad `Ali Ranjbar, *Tarikh-e Mosha`shashi`yan. Mahiyat-e fekri, ejtema`i va farayand-e tahavollat-e tarikhi* (Tehran, 1382/2003), p. 58. According to this source, the number of horses was fifteen; according to a different source, it was nine. See *Ibid.*, p. 323.

62 See Mirza Shokr Allah Sanandaji, *Tohfa-ye Naseri dar tarikh va jografi-ye Kordestan*, ed. Heshmat Allah Tabibi (Tehran, 1366/1987), pp. 99–100. This equaled some 30,000 tumans.

retreat. You will not stay in these borderlands forever. When you put the region under someone else's control, we will return once you are gone to overthrow your appointee. If, on the other hand, you treat us with kindness and justice, we will remain your tributaries.”<sup>63</sup>

In these circumstances, loyalty was thus often literally bought in an ad-hoc manner, either with cash or by way of lucrative concessions.<sup>64</sup> When Emam Qoli Khan, the governor of Fars, marched against Basra in 1628, he got the Arab tribes en route to render him a variety of services by handing out “cash grants, robes of honor, and other gifts in profusion.”<sup>65</sup> The Afghan warlord Mir Weys in the early eighteenth century served as *qafila-salar*, supervisor of the caravan trade between Iran and India.<sup>66</sup> The Safavids also made more institutionalized arrangements with various tribal peoples.<sup>67</sup> Shah `Abbas II coopted the Lezghis through a mutually beneficial tributary arrangement: They sent gifts to Isfahan as a token of fealty, and in turn received 1,700 tumans per annum from the shah to ensure stability and the protection of the border against other marauders. This arrangement included the resettling of large numbers of tribesmen from the mountains of Darband and Qobba.<sup>68</sup> The same ruler

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63 Anon., *Tarikh-e`Alam-ara-ye Safavi*, ed. Yad Allah Shokri (Tehran, 1363/1984). Written in the 1670s as a popular history of the Safavids, this is not a primary source for the events.

64 N. Sanson, *Estat présent du royaume de Perse* (Paris, 1694), p. 176.

65 Eskandar Beg Monshi, *History of Shah `Abbas the Great*, trans. and ed. Roger Savory, 3 vols., paginated as one (Boulder, CO, 1978), p. 1299.

66 Mollah Mohammad Mo`men Kermani, *Sahifat al-ershad (Tarikh-e Afshar-e Kerman—payan-e kar-e Safaviya)*, ed. Mohammad Ebrahim Bastani-Parizi (Tehran, 1384/2005), p. 361.

67 Chardin, *Voyages*, vol. 9, pp. 205–206.

68 “Mémoire de la province de Sirvan,” in Père Fleuriau d’Armenonville, ed., *Letters édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères* (Toulouse, new ed., 1810), vol. 4, p. 28; Judasz Thadeusz Krusinski, *The History of the Revolutions of Persia*, 2 vols. (London, 1733), vol. 1, p. 243; Ahmad Dourry Efendy, *Relation de Dourry Efendy, ambassadeur de la Porte Othomane auprès du roi de Perse*, trans. M. de Fiennes, ed. L. Langlès (Paris, 1810), p. 33; Mostowfi, “Amar-e mali va nezami-ye Iran dar 1128,” p. 405; and Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia’s Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800* (Bloomington,

paid the Kharazmian ruler Abu'l Ghazi Khan an annual allowance of 1,500 tumans during a decade of gilded captivity in Isfahan, and kept disbursing this sum even after Abu'l Ghazi Khan had escaped and regained power in Central Asia, simply to keep him from turning against Iran.<sup>69</sup> After the shah had conducted several campaigns against the Uzbeks, he struck a deal whereby they received an annual stipend in exchange for a promise to desist from raiding—a promise they promptly broke following the shah's death in 1666.<sup>70</sup>

## Disengagement and Retreat

The health and longevity of the tributary order in traditional empires—which was based on revenue extraction rather than commercial development—presupposes a balance between the level of state exactions and the ability of the tributary subjects to deliver. It also presupposes alertness on the part of the state by way of a realistic assessment of evolving power relationships, a modicum of sensitivity to local, cultural and religious customs and habits of formally subordinate peoples and, ultimately, flexibility and pragmatism.

The Safavids may be said to have preempted continuation along these lines by choosing premature disengagement. The crucial date here is 1639, the year when, following a confrontation over Iraq that ended with the Ottoman seizure of Baghdad, they concluded the Peace of (Pol-e) Zohab, ending almost a century and a half of warfare with their archenemies. As such this bid for peace was a rational decision, based on sound military considerations—the clear-eyed realization that the Ottomans would always be stronger militarily and a calculation that the advantage of making peace with their long-standing enemies at the

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2002), pp. 68–69. The payment of an annuity to subordinates was common practice for the Russians as well; see *ibid.*, pp. 55, 63.

69 Chardin, *Voyages*, vol. 10, pp. 58, 64.

70 Krusinski, *The History of the Revolutions of Persia*, vol. 1, p. 243; Evliya Efendi, *Narrative of Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Joseph von Hammer, 2 vols. (London, 1834; repr. 1968), vol. 1, p. 33; Chardin, *Voyages*, vol. 10, pp. 58, 64ff.

cost of far-reaching territorial concessions outweighed the expense of continued aggression. Yet it was emblematic of a wider disposition at the Safavid elite at this point—a choice to forego war as a natural state of being for comfort and tranquility—a move that was in part induced by monetary concerns, in part by pacific sentiments harbored by the women and eunuchs who increasingly came to dominate the court.<sup>71</sup>

The result was that, from 1639 onward the Iranians enjoyed relative peace, even outward prosperity, a happy state that at least one Safavid chronicler ascribes to the Accord of Zohab and that caused many a foreign observer to exult in the apparent stability of Iran in mid-century.<sup>72</sup> The political elite henceforth counted on strategic territorial depth as a defense mechanism. Urban Iranians felt safe behind the mountains and deserts that surrounded the central plateau on three sides, viewing the same sparsely populated desert expanses that made life difficult for their own soldiers as a shield protecting the heartland against enemy attack.<sup>73</sup>

This attitude was related to several other developments. One was that the last few Safavid rulers ceased to be roving warriors leading their troops into war and patrolling their realm. Instead, Shah Soleyman (r. 1666–94) and Shah Soltan Hoseyn (r. 1694–1722) became sedentary, insular rulers, ensconced in their palaces, only accessible to the most intimate of courtiers and the increasingly powerful members of the high clergy. In sum, they lost touch with conditions in their realm and gave up their “punishing” power, inviting provincial officials to fleece the population with impunity, and allowing hardline clerics a free hand

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71 For this, see Matthee, *Persia in Crisis*, chaps. 7 and 8.

72 Mohammad Vala Qazvini Esfahani, *Khold-e barin (Iran dar ruzgar-e Safaviyan)* (Tehran, 1372/1993), pp. 531, 585. Nicolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor or Mugul India 1653–1708*, trans. William Irvine, 4 vols. (London 1907), vol. 1, p. 40. Manucci called Iran in the 1640s “very well governed, having no rebellions or treasons, neither robbers nor highwaymen on the roads . . .”

73 Gabriel de Chinon, *Relations nouvelles du Levant, ou traités de la religion, du gouvernement et des coutumes des Perses, des Arméniens, et des Gaures* (Lyon, 1671), p. 69; Jean-Baptiste de la Maze, Isfahan, to Baron, Aleppo, Nov. 7, 1667, in *Archives des Affaires des Missions Etrangères*, Paris, vol. 350, fols. 259–262; and Sanson, *Estat*, p. 162.

in increasing pressure on Iran's non-Shi'i inhabitants. Another was a woeful financial and organizational neglect of the military, which lost its capacity and readiness to fight.

The consequences for the tributary order were catastrophic, especially in the tribal frontier lands, bordering on the Sunni Ottoman, Uzbek, and Mughal states. These were mostly populated by Sunnis, estimated to number one-third of the population, who refused to bow to Safavid pressure to convert and whose loyalty could not be taken for granted.<sup>74</sup>

A few examples should suffice to illustrate this point. The first comes from the northern frontier, Daghestan, where, as noted, the Safavid maintained a precarious tributary relationship with the troublesome Lezghis—whom they paid to patrol the borderlands. In the 1710s, the latter took advantage of the growing weakness of the central state by staging a revolt. In 1719 Georgian troops were enlisted to confront the Lezghi threat to the region. Their commander was Khosrow Khan's half-brother Vakhtang VI, the *vali* of Georgia's central district of Kartli, who, after a long period of resisting, in 1716 had finally agreed to convert to Islam. Appointed commander-in-chief, *sepahsalar*, he was sent back to Georgia with the task of taking on the Lezghis, who appear to have been moved to a new uprising against the Safavids following the blinding of Fath 'Ali Khan Daghestani, the grand vizier of Lezghi origin who owed his falling part to a slander campaign about his Sunni proclivities.<sup>75</sup> Moving to Daghestan and assisted by the *beglerbeg*, governor, of Shirvan and the king of Kakhet'i, Georgia's eastern half, he managed to inflict heavy losses on the Daghestani rebels. Yet at the height of the campaign, in the winter of 1721, the shah recalled him. The order was issued at the instigation of a eunuch faction at the court whose members apparently had persuaded the shah that a victory for Vakhtang over the Lezghis would

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74 The Ottoman ambassador Dürri Ahmad Efendi in 1720 estimated that no less than one-third of Iran's population consisted of Sunnis. See Dourry Efendy, *Relation*, p. 54.

75 For this, see Rudi Matthee, "Blinded by Power: The Rise and Fall of Fath 'Alī Khān Dāghestānī, Grand Vizier under Shāh Soltān Ḥoseyn Šafavī (1127/1715–1133/1720)," *Studia Iranica* 33 (2004), pp. 179–219.

harm the country since it would enable the vali to form an alliance with the Russians with the aim of conquering Iran.<sup>76</sup>

In 1721, as Kurds staged raids into Iran from the Erzurum area and roamed close to Isfahan, the chaos in the north peaked with the Lezghi occupation of Shamakhi.<sup>77</sup> Suggesting how inflamed ethno-religious sentiments had become at this point, between 4,000 and 5,000 of the town's Shi'ite inhabitants were put to the sword.<sup>78</sup> Especially suggestive are the words of Dürri Ahmad Efendi, the Ottoman envoy who traveled to Iran in early 1721, to the effect that the Lezghi aggression could have been avoided. He relates how in a private conversation, grand vizier Mohammad Qoli Khan had implied that the Lezghis—as well as the Afghans—might have been bought off. Their raiding activities, Mohammad Qoli Khan claimed, were really meant to force the shah to acknowledge their vassal status with a robe of honor and the payment of their agreed-upon annuity. Only the ruler's obstinate refusal to do so had stood in the way of a solution.<sup>79</sup>

The second example is the case of the Kurds living in the western borderlands with the Ottoman Empire. The Baba Soleyman rebellion that wreaked havoc in the Mosul area and as far as Shahrezur was in

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76 Tardy, "Georgische Teilnahme an den persisch-Afghanischen Kriegen 111–1725 im Spiegel eines Missionsberichtes," *Bedi Kartlisa/Revue de Kartvélogie* 40 (1982), pp. 325–326. It seems that Hoseyn Qoli Khan resented the Iranians on account of his forcible conversion. We also know that he secretly expressed pro-Russian feelings to Volynskii. See D. M. Lang, "Georgia and the Fall of the Safavi Dynasty," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 14 (1952), pp. 534, 536; idem, *The Last Years of the Georgian Monarchy 1658–1832* (New York, 1957), pp. 109–110; Laurence Lockhart, *The Fall of the Safavi Dynasty and the Afghan Occupation of Persia* (Cambridge, 1958), p. 118.

77 Dourry Efendy, *Relation*, p. 69.

78 P. P. Bushev, *Posol'stvo Artemiia Volynskogo v Iran v 1715–1718 gg.* (Moscow, 1976), pp. 215–216, 219–220; Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris, Perse 5, Padery, Shamakhi, to Paris, 5 Jan. 1720, fols. 258–260; V. P. Lystsov, *Persidskii pokhod Petra I 1722–1723* (Moscow, 1951), p. 103; Père Bachoud, "Lettre de Chamakié," in Fleuriau, ed., *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, vol. 4, pp. 98–99.

79 Dourry Efendy, *Relation*, pp. 41–42.

part incited by anti-Sunni sentiments and policies coming out of Isfahan. Jean Otter who, traveling between Baghdad and Isfahan in 1738, visited Hamadan, insisted that the town had been pillaged and destroyed by the Sunni Dergezin tribe as revenge for the (religious) persecution its members had suffered under the late Safavids, prompting them to seek refuge with the Ottoman sultan.<sup>80</sup>

The third, even more telling example, comes from the east, the vast arid region between the city of Kerman and Qandahar inhabited by mostly unpacified Baluchi and Afghan tribesmen. These, too, became restive in the last years of the seventeenth century, driven to despair by prolonged drought and famine and frustrated that the central government no longer honored long-standing arrangements involving monetary compensation for peaceful behavior. In the 1690s, Isfahan appointed Gorgin Khan, an erstwhile Georgian prince, governor of Kerman and a huge area stretching east all the way to Kabul, tasking him to take on the Baluchis, whose raids now ravaged the country as far as Yazd.<sup>81</sup> Gorgin Khan soon thereafter faced off against Mir Samandar, a Baluchi chieftain whose incursions threatened Qandahar. Appointed *beglerbeg* of Qandahar in 1704 and aided by the Afshar, who had reemerged as a formidable force in Kerman, Gorgin Khan routed the numerically stronger Baluchis in several confrontations, forcing Mir Samandar to submit to him.<sup>82</sup>

Gorgin Khan would meet his match in Mir Weys b. Shah `Alam, a chief of the Hotaki clan of the Afghan Ghelza`i tribe who held the post of *kalantar*, mayor, of Qandahar. Mir Weys, who had long served the Safavids by patrolling the caravan traffic between Iran and India, at first cooperated with the Georgians, but soon became alienated from Isfahan.

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80 Jean Otter, *Voyage en Perse* (Paris, 1748), vol. 1, pp. 180–181.

81 Mohammad Ebrahim b. Zeyn al-`Abedin Naseri, *Dastur-e shahriyaran*, ed. Mohammad Nader Naseri Moqaddam (Tehran, 1373/1994), p. 277; M.-F. Brosset, trans. and ed., *Histoire de la Géorgie depuis l'antiquité jusqu'au XIXe siècle*, 2 vols. (St Petersburg, 1856–57), vol. 2, part 2, p. 16; Krusinski, *History of the Revolutions*, vol. 1, pp. 150–151; Tardy, “Georgische Teilnahme,” p. 321.

82 Kermani, *Sahifat al-ershad*, pp. 14, 298–301, 337, 346–347; Brosset, *Histoire de la Géorgie*, vol. 2, part 2, pp. 16–20; Lockhart, *The Fall of the Safavi Dynasty*, pp. 46–47, 84–85.

He must have been greatly disturbed when in 1706 his lucrative post was taken away from him, to be offered to a rival, `Alam Shah Afghan.<sup>83</sup> Gorgin Khan's oppressive rule in Qandahar meanwhile quickly strained relations with the Afghans. The Georgians sequestered goods, commandeered Afghan girls and women, and raised taxes. Gorgin Khan even demanded Mir Weys's own daughter and partied on the anniversary of the murder of the Caliph `Umar (by a Persian slave).<sup>84</sup> His (nominally Shi`ite) Georgian soldiers also misbehaved toward the local population, violating a guarantee of religious freedom that the Sunni Afghans had obtained as a condition for submitting to the Safavids.<sup>85</sup> They reportedly desecrated Sunni mosques by bringing pigs and drinking wine inside, and are said to have abused underage girls and nine- to ten-year-old boys to the point of killing them, after which they dumped their bodies at their parents' homes. The resentful Afghans sent complaints to Isfahan but these were intercepted by Gorgin Khan's men at court and thus never reached the shah. Eventually, the outrages prompted Mir Ways to rebel against his Georgian masters. But before he could engage in a full-scale rebellion, Gorgin Khan, suspicious of Mir Weys's ambitions, had him arrested and escorted to Isfahan, urging Shah Soltan Hoseyn to get rid of him, or at least never to allow him to return to Qandahar.<sup>86</sup>

The scene of the final example is the siege of Isfahan in 1722, which preceded the fall of the Safavids in October of that same year. It suggests that the Afghans who brought down the city and with that, the state, might have been willing to remain in their region of origin, Qandahar province, a thousand miles from Isfahan, if the Safavid shah had agreed to make meaningful concessions to them. Shortly after he had laid siege to the

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83 Kermani, *Sahifat al-ershad*, pp. 351–354, 363–369.

84 Ibid., 368–369. The date given in this text, Rabi` al-thani 1121/17 June 1709 must be incorrect, both because it does not correspond to the anniversary of `Omar's assassination and because Gorgin Khan was killed in April 1709.

85 Krusinski, *History of the Revolutions*, vol. 1, p. 162.

86 Ibid., p. 154; Mohammad Mirza Tehrani, *Mer'at-e varedat. Tarikh-e soqut-e Safaviyan*, ed. Mansur Sefatgol (Tehran, 1373/2004), pp. 108–109; Brosset, ed., *Histoire de la Géorgie*, vol. 2, part 2, p. 26; Lockhart, *Fall of the Safavi Dynasty*, p. 85.

Iranian capital, Mahmud the leader of the Ghelza'i Afghans, reached out to Shah Soltan Hoseyn, proposing to withdraw with his troops in return for being granted control over Khorasan and Kerman. Eventually the shah agreed to the proposal, but by that time the Afghans felt confident enough about their coming victory to reject the offer.<sup>87</sup>

## Conclusion

Upon close inspection, the Safavid state appears less as a Leviathan than as a forum for never-ending negotiation. Safavid shahs wielded tremendous power, to be sure, including the power over their subjects' life and death. Their rise and initial expansion involved violent conquest, and their ultimate weapon remained ruthless retribution. Yet their infrastructural reach was rather circumscribed. Governing a land of scarce resources populated by mostly tribal folks led by seditious chieftains, even the strongest ruler needed to forge and maintain alliances. What really held an "empire" such as Safavid Iran together beyond the appropriate and timely use of overwhelming force was the ability of its governing elite to negotiate arrangements of mutual benefit with various constituencies—ensuring collaboration through cooptation by way of intra-elite marriage and tributary agreements. Tribute was intrinsic to intra-elite interaction, beginning with the relationship between the shah and his courtiers; it was embedded in foreign diplomacy and official trade relations with the outside world; and it was especially crucial to the balance of power between central authority and the provinces and in particular the tribal periphery of the empire.

Such relations had always been at the heart of the Safavid polity—as they had been at the heart of all polities holding sway over the Iranian plateau since time immemorial. Iran, in the words of Dick Davis, has always been a society "that has an extremely porous rather than simply oppositional relationship with surrounding cultures, incorporating

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87 Petros di Sarkis Gilanentz, *The Chronicle of Petros di Sarkis Gilanentz concerning the Afghan Invasion of Persia in 1722*, trans. and ed. Caro Owen Minasian (Lisbon, 1959), pp. 13–18.

as much as it excludes; and that is vitalized by the edge, even by the demonic and nonhuman edge, never mind by the non-Iranian edge, as much as by the imperial center.”<sup>88</sup> This lack of unitary identity or, rather, this unity in diversity—which persists today—made a healthy relationship with the fringe imperative and potentially a productive one.

At bottom, power relations in Safavid Iran were fueled by *zar-o zur*, gold and force, monetary inducement coupled with coercion including (the threat of) violence. This is not to deny or underplay a regular fiscal system or the market-driven nature of economic exchange, and various other “rational,” intentional and forward-looking aspects of Safavid state policy. The economic capacity of Safavid Iran included a flourishing private market, albeit not a national market, as well as periodic state efforts to solicit and stimulate trade; witness Shah `Abbas’s resettlement of a large contingent of Armenians to his newly founded capital, and his subsequent granting of a silk-export monopoly to these, as exceptional and even unique manifestations of such dynamism. Nor is it to overlook the sophistication of the Safavid bureaucracy, about which we know less than we would like for a lack of surviving documentation but which is exemplified in the various administrative manuals that have come to us from the early eighteenth century, drafted to instruct the new masters of the realm, the Afghans, in the intricacies of Iranian statecraft.

A complex phenomenon, the dramatic and sudden demise of the Safavids is attributable to many factors. Surely one is the weakening of tributary arrangements, either by way of neglect, impotence, or a growing intolerance of diversity. In Safavid Iran, finally, the tributary periphery did not become self-sustaining, as it did in parts of the Ottoman Empire and Mughal India in the face of a weakening central state; it dissolved into chaos, dragging the core with it into the maelstrom.

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88 Dick Davis, “Iran and Aniran: The Shaping of a Legend,” in Abbas Amanat and Farzin Vejdani, eds., *Iran Facing Others: Identity Boundaries in a Historical Perspective* (New York, 2012), pp. 44–45.