

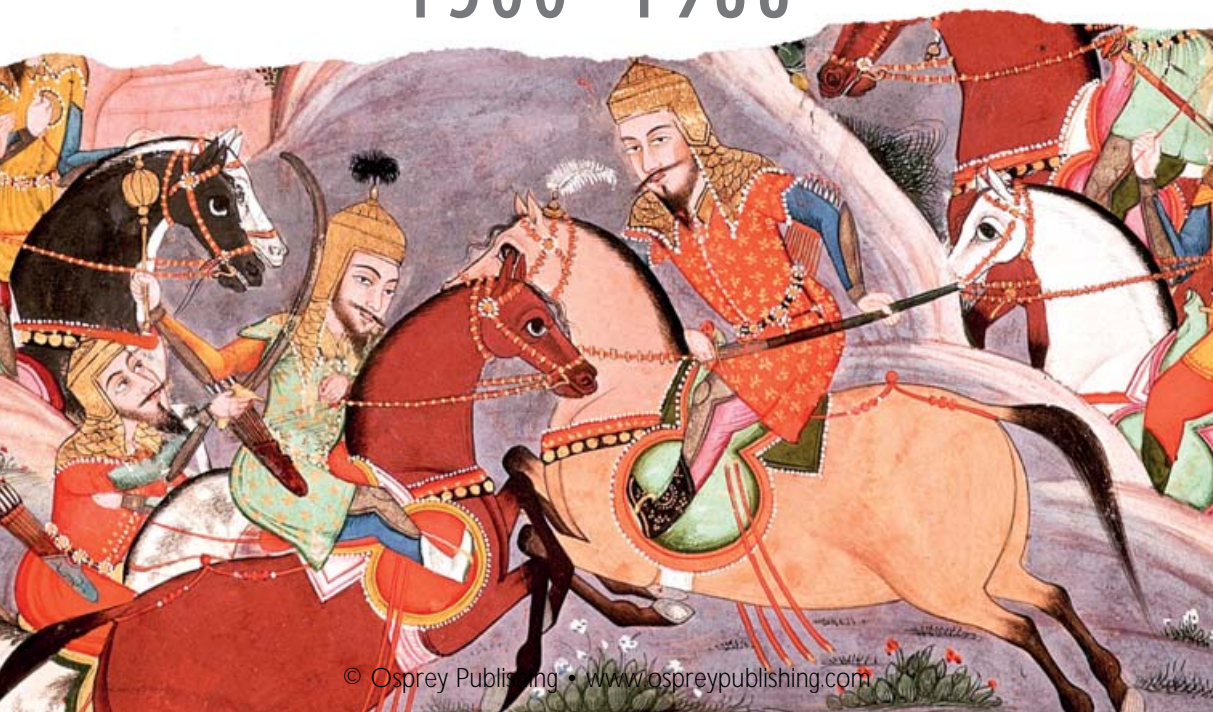


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IRAN AT WAR

1500–1988



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INTRODUCTION

In essence, *Iran at War* follows on from *Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia at War*. Once again, the key question arising is Iran or Persia? As noted in the introductory notes of *Shadows in the Desert*, both are correct. The Greeks referred to the first Iranian Achaemenid Empire as “*Perseeya*” or Persia, a term which then entered the Western and European lexicon. The Iranians refer to themselves as *Eire-An* or *Ir-An* (land of the Aryans); this was in essence a union of Medes, Persians, and the now mostly extinct northern Iranians. The end of the Sassanian Empire in the mid-7th century as a result of the Arabian conquests marks the end of the history of pre-Islamic Iran or Persia. Though it was conquered and its Zoroastrian faith replaced by Islam, Iran’s cultural identity endured. It was the Safavids who finally restored a united Iranian realm with frontiers approximating to those seen during the Sassanian era. It is important to note that Iran, ever since its formation thousands of years ago, has been a multilingual, multiethnic, and multifaith nation. In Iran’s true diverse tradition, the Safavids were an Iranian dynasty but were also Turkic speakers, and much Turkic vocabulary entered the Iranian military lexicon. This is a phenomenon known as the Persianate or Turco-Iranian civilization in which both Iranian and Turkic peoples shared (and continue to share) a mighty and ancient civilizational legacy. Even when Shah Ismail of the Safavids wrote his letter to the Ottoman Sultan Selim Yavuz in Azarbaijani Turkic at the eve of the battle of Chaldiran in 1514, Selim wrote back in Persian!

Readers will note that in Iran’s battles throughout the centuries, Kurds, Lurs, northerners, Persians, Azaris, etc often fought side by side in victory or in defeat – their common bond being Iran’s ancient history and Persianate culture stretching across the centuries. *Iran at War* offers readers a synopsis of the military history of Iran from the time of the Safavids to the end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988. Readers will be exposed to Iran’s military history during the Safavid, Nader Shah, Zand, Qajar, and Pahlavi eras followed by the onset of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and the Iran–Iraq War. There are numerous chapters that also overlap with complex social and political developments in Iran’s history, with notable examples such as the introduction of Shiism in Iran at the time of Shah Ismail, the Mossadegh events of 1953, and the Iranian revolution of 1978–79. Readers with interest in the non-military aspects of these periods are often referred to pertinent works in the references and endnotes.

On a final note, an ancient Iranian axiom describes Iran like the ever-eternal and resilient phoenix or *Simurgh*, rising repeatedly in its history to preserve and defend its integrity, independence, and culture across the centuries. One of the major factors in that resilience has been the tenacity and endurance of Iran’s soldiery throughout its history. In victory or in defeat, the Iranian soldier has indeed withstood the test of time.



PART I

THE SAFAVIDS

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CHAPTER 1

THE RISE OF THE SAFAVIDS

Preparing the way for the Safavids

The arrival of the Safavids by the early 16th century signaled the rise of the first truly united Iranian empire centuries after the fall of Sassanian Persia to the Arabs in the mid-7th century. The Safavid rise was the consequence of developments during the rule of the Arab Caliphates, the rise of local Iranian dynasties in the Iranian plateau and Central Asia, and the rebellions of Abu-Muslim Khorasani and Babak Khorramdin followed by the Turco-Mongol invasions.

As noted by Ettinghausen, Iran after the Arabo-Islamic conquests “had lost its independence, though not its cultural identity.”¹ Iran certainly saw its share of conquerors: the Greeks, the Arabs, the Turks, and the Mongols. Instead of being assimilated and destroyed, the Iranian sense of identity repeatedly rose again, like the *Simurgh* (lit. phoenix) of Iranian mythology.² In almost every case, the conquerors were in time conquered by the culture and language of those whom they had vanquished.³

Persianate (or Persianized) civilizations are defined as those civilizations variously influenced by the culture and language of post-Islamic Iran and pre-Islamic Persia.⁴ Persianate civilizations are not singularly defined as, or confined to, just Persians or wider Iranic peoples such as Kurds, Lurs, etc. In fact many such civilizations were Turkic in origin, notably the Seljuk Turks,⁵ Amir Timur (Tamerlane), and his Mughal successors in India;⁶ Iranian and Turkic peoples in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Western Asia, who all share powerful historical bonds in culture, the arts and architecture, music, values, and traditions.⁷

The Persian language and literary tradition spread westwards into Anatolia in the wake of the Mongol invasions of Iran (1219–60).⁸ This had a profound impact on the Ottoman Turks of Anatolia. The Turkic Uzbeks of Central Asia, mortal enemies of the Safavids, were (and remain) under heavy Persianate influence. From the eastern fringes of Central Asia to the shores of the Aegean, the powerful legacy of a Turco-Iranian synthesis resonates to this day. The Safavid shahs spoke Azari-Turkish in their court and much Turkic vocabulary entered Iranian military terminology.⁹ Turkey today is host to the largest population of West-Iranian speaking Kurds in the Middle East. The Persianate civilization is indeed a phenomenon that transcends race, language, modern political boundaries, and even religion.

Western authors have variously attributed the endurance of Iranian historical and cultural traditions to the “sense of ancient glory, of pride in identity”¹⁰ and “the flexibility and resilience of the Persian character.”¹¹ Part of that flexibility may be the historical Iranian willingness to embrace many of the ways of the conquerors then integrate these into an Iranian cultural milieu.¹²

During the Islamic conquests of Iran (AD 637–651), the Umayyad Caliphate (AD 661–750) had instituted a number of discriminatory anti-Iranian measures. The Persian language and culture was targeted for elimination with Arab sources even reporting of harsh measures taken against

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Persian speakers.¹³ Despite the efforts of the Caliphate, the culture and language of ancient Persia endured, well into the 13th century. The Caliphate also discriminated against its Iranian converts to Islam. Clawson has noted that despite adopting the Sassanian administrative model of the Iranians to manage their empire, the Arabs implemented a system of “ethnic stratification that discriminated against Iranians.”¹⁴ A letter to Ziyad Ibn Abih from Ummayyad Caliph Muawiyah (AD 602–680), instructs that Iranians were to be given lower pensions and jobs; discriminated against in prayers when Arabs were present; and forbidden to marry Arab women (Arab men were allowed to marry Iranian women).¹⁵ Muawiyah was very explicit in stating “never treat them [Iranians] as equals of the Arabs.”¹⁶ Other discriminatory measures against non-Arabs included declarations that only persons of “pure Arab blood” were worthy to rule in the Caliphate.¹⁷ The succeeding Abbasid Caliphate (AD 750–1258) failed to stem the rising discontent in the Iranian realms. By the early 9th century, much of the Iranian population was growing increasingly resentful and wary of the Caliphate.

In AD 816, Babak Khorramdin (AD 795–838) began a revolt in Iranian Azarbaijan.¹⁸ His objective was to unify the Iranians into a massive revolt against the Caliphate, and his movement made considerable headway. By AD 837, Babak and his followers were in control of much of northwest Iran. The size of his army has been variously described as between 100,000 and 200,000 fighters, which is probably an exaggeration, but it does show that he had much support for his cause.¹⁹ Babak’s resistance was ended in 838 when he was defeated by an Iranian general acting on behalf of the Caliphate.²⁰ The Babak castle in the Kaleybar mountains in the eastern area of Azarbaijan province was evacuated, but Babak was captured and tortured to death by Caliph Al-Mu’tasim (r. AD 833–842). Many of the survivors fled west towards Byzantium, where some took refuge from the caliph’s armies by serving the Byzantine army.²¹ While the Caliphate had succeeded in militarily defeating an essentially Iranian independence movement, the memories of Babak remained. The survivors of his movement in Iran gradually became absorbed into various Islamic sects.²² Despite the movement’s defeat, the sense of Iranian identity had not been destroyed. It would be in Azarbaijan that the bid to restore Iranian independence would resurface in the person of Shah Ismail and the Safavids.

The poet Ferdowsi (c. AD 935–1020) composed the Iranian epic, the *Shahname* (lit. Book of Kings), around 1000, under the administration of the Ghaznavid dynasty in Central Asia, which was Turkic in origin and Persianate in culture. The *Shahname* promoted the Iranian sense of nationalism by resurrecting pre-Islamic Persia’s tales of heroes, myths, and ancient glories. This was to have a major impact upon the political development of contemporary and subsequent Persianate civilizations.²³

Between 1219 and 1221, the Mongol conqueror Ghenghiz Khan (r. 1206–27) laid waste the mighty Khwarazmian Empire (built on Persian culture) in Central Asia, the city of Herat and much of Khorasan in northeast Iran, and Azarbaijan in Iran’s northwest.²⁴ Large cities were systematically destroyed. In Nishabur, Khorasan, Khwarezm’s great city of learning, blood literally poured in the streets. Every man, woman, and child was beheaded and the severed heads neatly piled up into macabre pyramids, around which the Mongols placed the carcasses of cats and dogs.²⁵ Surviving captives would often be herded outside conquered cities; some would be selected as slaves, the rest executed. Roughly four decades later, Ghenghiz’s grandson, Hulagu Khan (r. 1217–65), invaded all

of Iran and modern-day Iraq in 1256–60. The Mongol invasion brought killings, plunder, and rape into Iran, spilling west into Mesopotamia. Hulagu's sack of Baghdad in 1258 led to the death of Caliph al-Musra and the abolition of the Abbasid Caliphate.²⁶ It is estimated that millions of Iranians died during the Mongol invasions, and many more died from starvation following the invasions.²⁷ Hulagu established his kingdom and that of his descendants, known as the Il-Khanids, in Iran for the next 80 years.²⁸

Although the Mongol invasion was terribly destructive, there were some positive consequences.²⁹ First, Hulagu's territories coincided with those of the former pre-Islamic Persian Empire. After hundreds of years, Iran was more than just a geographical term; it was once again a political entity with no ties to the Caliphate. This laid the basis for the coming of an Iranian state with an indigenous Iranian dynasty. Il-Khanid rulers were tolerant towards religion, meaning that various religious interpretations could thrive, especially Shiism, which would become the official religion of the Safavids.³⁰ Also, despite Iran's destitute state after the Mongol conquests, Iranian culture thrived during the Il-Khanid era.³¹ Despite centuries of foreign rule, a powerful cultural renaissance was taking place, one that would finally find expression in the Safavids.

The military campaigns of yet another conqueror from Central Asia, Amir Timur or Tamerlane (r. 1370–1405), proved as devastating for Iran as those of the Mongols. By the time of Timur's arrival in 1381, Mongol authority had been replaced by a series of petty local dynasties with their own armies. The result was a disunited Iran unable to offer united opposition against Timur's invasions. The brutality of Timur in Iran was legendary, evidenced by, for example, the erection of a gruesome pyramid from the skulls of 70,000 inhabitants of Isfahan who dared to resist him.³²

Iran's cities at the time of Timur's arrival had witnessed the rise of a number of urban militias, many of them based on the Sufi mystical orders. Among the militias was the mixed Sufi–secular order of the *Sarbedaran* (lit. heads next to the gallows) of Khorasan who were highly effective warriors. These rose in the aftermath of the disintegration of Mongol rule from 1344 until their submission to Timur in the early 1380s. By the time of Timur's arrival, the Mongol-era Jalayerids were still in place in parts of western Iran and Iraq but their strength was waning. In the Anatolian mountains, Kurds and Turcomens often offered stiff resistance against Timur's forces.

Despite his impressive military achievements, Timur failed to nominate an heir. Eventually his successors (known as the post-Timurids) established themselves in eastern Iran, Afghanistan, and much of Central Asia. Among the most impressive of the post-Timurids was Hussein Bayqara of Herat city and province and Khorasan province who became a major patron of Persian arts, language, and literature.³³

The long-term political consequence of Timur's campaigns in Iran was a power vacuum leading to a civil war between various power centers, particularly the Aq Qoyunlu (1378–1507) and Qara Qoyunlu (1375–1468), Persianate Turcomen confederations of Azarbaijan and Anatolia that had originally arisen in the wake of the collapse of Mongol power.³⁴ The Aq Qoyunlu strongly and specifically identified themselves with Iran and its culture, citing themselves as Iranian kings.³⁵

By 1400, Timur had defeated the Qara Qoyunlu, forcing their leader Qara Yusef to flee to Egypt. After Timur's death, Qara Yusef returned to re-establish the Qara Qoyunlu in Azarbaijan. The Qara Qoyunlu became a significant power, capturing Baghdad four years later, and eventually

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controlling much of eastern Anatolia, western Iran, northwest Iran, and parts of northern and southwest Iran to the Persian Gulf coast.

Timur had granted the Aq Qoyunlu lands in Diyarbakr in eastern Anatolia in 1402. They were unable to expand their dominations, due to the ascendancy of the Qara Qoyunlu, until Uzun Hassan (1423–78) defeated the Qara Qoyunlu leader, Shah Jahan, in 1467.³⁶ The Qara Qoyunlu were completely extinguished a year later. The Aq Qoyunlu would prove to be dangerous opponents of the post-Timurids. By 1475–76, Aq Qoyunlu forces also contained native Iranian troops (Kurds, Lurs, and Persians) as well as Arabs.³⁷

After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, European powers were faced with the terrifying prospect of powerful Ottoman armies thrusting into the European continent. Desperate to find ways to curtail the Ottoman threat, the Europeans turned again to the east, hoping to find a new Timur. They found Uzun Hassan (r. 1453–78), one of the most influential leaders of the Aq Qoyunlu. He made an alliance with Emperor David of Trebizond in 1458, but the Ottoman Turks destroyed this kingdom shortly afterwards in 1461.³⁸ Venetian missions in 1463 and 1471 convinced Uzun Hassan to take military action against the Ottoman Turks.³⁹ The battles of Arzanjan (1471) and Tercan (1473) followed. At Otluk Beli in the upper Euphrates, Uzun Hassan was decisively defeated by Sultan Mehmed II in August 1473, the Ottoman victory due in large part to their powerful artillery.⁴⁰ This explains why a third Venetian mission led by Giosafat Barbaro failed to convince Uzun Hassan to launch another war against the Ottomans, although the Ottomans did not have the capability to overthrow Uzun Hassan.

Azərbayjan: home of the Safavids

Azərbayjan was to become a major bastion against Ottoman Turkish expansion into Iran and the Caucasus. The province and its inhabitants displayed a fierce determination to defend Iran during the Safavid era.⁴¹ In the historical sense, Azərbaycan is confined to the province of that name within the territorial boundaries of northwest Iran, below the Araxes River. The territories in the modern Caucasus within the modern Republic of Azərbaycan above the Araxes River were not known as Azərbaycan until May 27, 1918.⁴² Classical sources define the region north of the Araxes River as “Albania” and south of the Araxes as “Media Atropatene” (Iranian Azərbaycan).⁴³

The languages in Iranian Azərbaycan were Persian and other Iranian languages, such as Ghilani and Kurdish, until the arrival of Seljuk Turkic invaders in the 11th century AD.⁴⁴ The indigenous Iranian culture and Persian language were not destroyed after the Seljuk arrivals, despite the change in language over the ensuing centuries.⁴⁵ While the Seljuk invaders were certainly Turkic, they were absorbed by the culture and technology of their Iranian subjects.⁴⁶ Kazemzadeh notes that by the early 1200s AD, the Turkic elements in Arran and Azərbaycan were “disappearing rapidly owing to the influence of ... Persian civilization.”⁴⁷ The linguistic Turkification of Albania/Arran and Azərbaycan forcefully began during the Mongol and post-Mongol eras. However, Iranian languages did not disappear, as shown by literature, such as the 14th-century *Nozhat ol Majales* which demonstrates the prevalence of Persian in Azərbaycan and the Caucasus. Literary sources clearly indicate that cities such as Tabriz remained Iranian-speaking for at least four centuries after the Seljuk Turk arrivals. Iranian languages continued to be reported by visitors to the province as late as the 17th century.⁴⁸

The direct ancestor of Shah Ismail I and the Safavids, Sheikh Safi-e-Din Ardabili (c. 1252–1334), was Persian and Kurdish.⁴⁹ The 13th-century spiritual leader Sheikh Zahed Gilani (1216–1301) recognized Safi as his successor and gave him the hand of his daughter in marriage.⁵⁰ The name “*Safavid*” is derived from the sheikh’s name Safi. Sufism and mystical orders have a very long tradition in Iran, with Kurdish orders such as Ahl-e-Haqq or the Yarsean going back into ancient pre-Islamic times.⁵¹ Safi claimed that he was a descendant of Prophet Mohammad through the seventh Imam of the Shiites, Musa al Kazem (d. AD 799).⁵² This claim was passed on to Safi’s descendants, including the founder of the Safavid dynasty, Shah Ismail.

The Sufi and mystical orders gained much popularity in the aftermath of the Mongol invasions, providing spiritual comfort to the people.⁵³ It was under these circumstances that Sheikh Safi gained many followers not just in his native city of Ardabil but also in northern Iran and eastern Anatolia. Less known is the role of Sheikh Safi in organizing resistance in Azarbaijan against the Mongol invaders for over three decades (1300–34).⁵⁴ At some point between Safi and Ismail, the Safavid line became Shiite. According to Mashkoo, Sheikh Safi and his son Sadreddin were Shafii Sunnis but the Safavids were Shiite from the time of Khajeh Ali.⁵⁵ The issue of when the Safavid line became Shiite, however, is strongly debated by Roemer, who argues that no conclusive or direct evidence exists in that regard.⁵⁶

It was during the time of Sheikh Junaid (d. 1460) that the Safavid order changed from a purely mystical movement into one with military and political ambitions.⁵⁷ Sheikh Junaid was not only a mystical leader but a warrior whose 5,000 Sufi fighters were deeply motivated by the spiritual beliefs of the Safavid order of Ardabil.⁵⁸ They soon acquired a powerful reputation as brave and formidable fighters.⁵⁹ There seems to have been a quarrel between Junaid and Jaafar, one of the late Sheikh Ibrahim’s brothers. While the succession of leadership was from father to son, Junaid’s theological ideas were challenged by Jaafar.⁶⁰ The outcome was that Junaid left Ardabil and eventually reached eastern Anatolia. One of his campaigns there was an attempt to capture Trebizond, but he abandoned this upon hearing of the approach of the Ottoman Sultan.⁶¹ In Diyarbakr he forged an alliance with Uzun Hassan of the Aq Qoyunlu. Uzun Hassan married Junaid’s sister, Khadija Begum, further strengthening the alliance. Junaid and Uzun Hassan were now firm allies against the Qara Qoyunlu.⁶² Uzun Hassan certainly appreciated the presence of Junaid’s formidable warriors, who were present at the defeat of the Qara Qoyunlu in 1467.⁶³

Junaid was killed in battle against the Shirvans in the Caucasus in 1460.⁶⁴ It is not clear whether Junaid was intent on just using Shirvan’s territory for passage northwards towards Circassia or whether he also wanted to conquer Shirvan for use as a base for future conquests of Iran. What is certain is that Jaafar and Jahan Shah incited Khalil Sultan Shirvanshah of Shirvan against Junaid.⁶⁵

Despite this major blow, the Safavid lineage endured, with the mantle of leadership passed onto Junaid’s son Heidar. He lost no time in cementing the Safavid alliance with the Aq Qoyunlu by marrying Uzun Hassan’s daughter, Alamshah Begum.⁶⁶ Relations with the house of Aq Qoyunlu cooled considerably after the death of Uzun Hassan as Uzun Hassan’s half-Greek son, Yagoub, viewed the presence of a well-equipped and well-trained Safavid force within Aq Qoyunlu domains as a serious threat.⁶⁷

Shortly before his death in 1488, Heidar, inspired by a dream he had had of Imam Ali, ordered his followers to don the 12-gore hat, with each gore representing one of the Imams of Shiite Islam.⁶⁸

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Heidar's followers were henceforth known as the *Qizilbash* (Turkic: red-headed ones). Heidar was a remarkable warrior, known for crafting his own armor and swords as well as instituting military drills and martial arts training for his Sufi followers.⁶⁹ The Qizilbash were now dedicated religious warriors who spread Shiite Islam by the sword.⁷⁰

Like his father Junaid before him, Heidar led his men into the Caucasus, going as far north as Daghestan and Circassia and even battling the Christian Iranic-speaking Alans (modern Ossetians). The Shirvanshah, Farrokhyashar, allowed passage for Heidar's first two expeditions in 1483 (or 1486) and 1487. The entente soured during Heidar's third campaign in 1488 when he also sacked Shamakhi, the capital of Shirvan. Farrokhyashar sent alarming appeals for assistance to the Aq Qoyunlu leader, Yagoub, who dispatched 4,000 men. It was this force which proved decisive in helping Farrokhyashar defeat Heidar, who was killed at the battle of Tabarasan on July 9, 1488, not far from where Junaid had fallen almost three decades previously.⁷¹ Nevertheless the basis of a powerful Shiite movement based on the Safavid order was already in place. The Safavids had already won converts for their cause in Azarbaijan, the Caucasus, Iran, Iraq, and eastern Anatolia.⁷²

CHAPTER 2

SHAH ISMAIL AND THE BATTLE OF CHALDIRAN

Ismaïl escapes

Heidar was survived by three sons: Ali, Ibrahim, and Ismail (1487–1523). Yagoub imprisoned them all and their mother (his sister) in the fortress of Istakhr in Fars.¹ Ali, the designated successor, was to be later released by another Aq Qoyunlu leader, Rustam, after Yagoub's death. By this time a civil war was raging among the Aq Qoyunlu and Rustam was hoping to capitalize on Ali's ability to mobilize the Safavid order for his benefit. He then re-arrested Ali and his brothers in 1494, alarmed at the rising power of the Safavid house.² Ali and his brothers escaped that same year towards Ardabil. Ali was intercepted on his way there and killed in battle with 700 of his warriors.³ Ali had designated Ismail as his successor and head of the Safavid order.⁴ Ismail reached Ardabil but as the Aq Qoyunlu were still in pursuit, his supporters passed him to the safety of Lahijan in Gilan in northern Iran.⁵

A contemporary European portrait of Shah Ismail clearly portrays him with red hair and Indo-European characteristics, showing his part-Kurdish ancestry.⁶ Ismail also had Turkmen, Greek, and Georgian⁷ ancestry. Considerable effort was put into concealing Ismail's Kurdish origins to present him as a descendant of the family of the Prophet Mohammad.⁸ Ismail, like modern Azarbaijanis, was bilingual in both Persian and Azarbaijani-Turkish.⁹ He composed many poems in Azarbaijani-Turkish, and his writings in this vernacular did much to contribute to the rise of the Azarbaijani-Turkish language.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Ismail was clear in pointing out his connections to ancient Iran in his poems.¹¹ In general Ismail seems to have been highly intelligent, generous, a dedicated religious Shiite, and ethically just, caring much for the welfare of his people.¹² Ismail often gave up a significant portion of his share of captured plunder for equitable distribution among his troops and this generosity earned him the fierce loyalty of his troops.¹³ Ismail was a strong, formidable, and courageous warrior, highly gifted as an archer. He was also certainly capable of being harsh, showing very little mercy to his opponents and Iran's Sunnis.

In 1499, Ismail, aged 12 or 13, set out with his late father's followers from Gilan towards Ardabil, the spiritual home of the Safavid order.¹⁴ During his trek to Ardabil, Ismail was joined by 1,500 followers of the Safavid order from Syria and Asia Minor.¹⁵ Ardabil's Aq Qoyunlu governor was opposed to Ismail's arrival and forced him to retire to the Talysh area between Gilan and Azarbaijan. The Shirvanshah Farrokhyashar and the Aq Qoyunlu governor both tried to kill or capture Ismail at Talysh during the winter of 1499–1500. Ismail set out again for Ardabil in 1500, but then called out for his followers all over Asia Minor and Syria to join him

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in Arzanjan. While en route, Ismail was joined by 1,000 Anatolian Turkish or Turcomen Sufis.¹⁶ When Ismail reached Arzanjan in the summer of 1500, he found 7,000 followers from the Turcomen tribes of Afshar, Qajar, Ustajlu, Romlu, Shamlu, Tekellu Varsaq, and Zu ol Qadar already waiting for him. It was most likely at Arzanjan that Ismail began preparing to seize political power in Iran.

As the backbone of Shah Ismail's cavalry, the Turkmen Qizilbash were central to Ismail's early armies.¹⁷ They were organized in units or bands in accordance to their tribe. By the battle of Chaldiran in 1514, they are reported as wearing the best steel armor and mail from Shiraz and powerful shields, with their horses also armored (known as *Badgostvan*). Their weapons included the mace, *Shamshir* curved sword, dagger, lance, and archery equipment.¹⁸ Their helmets were especially robust, designed to provide as much protection possible in close-quarter combat. The Qizilbash also wore the ceremonial 12-gore hats symbolizing the 12 Shiite imams. Their strong loyalty to Ismail and their belief in his invincibility made the Qizilbash especially loyal and steadfast warriors. Ismail was soon joined by Persian, Azarbaijani, Kurdish, and Talysh warriors, especially in the wake of his victories over the Aq Qoyunlu in Iran.¹⁹

Firearms are thought to have first been introduced to Iran by the Venetians during the Aq Qoyunlu period, specifically at the time of Uzun Hassan (r. 1453–78), as part of an overall strategy of cultivating European relations with the Aq Qoyunlu.²⁰ Shah Ismail's father Heidar had deployed cannon in his siege of Golestan in 1488.²¹ Shah Ismail used artillery in a number of his early campaigns and, on at least one occasion in 1504, muskets. Despite this, the Iranians failed to utilize firearms at the battle of Chaldiran in 1514.

After the great gathering in the summer of 1,500 followers in Arzanjan, Ismail had two choices. He could either take his untested troops into Azerbaijan to confront the Aq Qoyunlu there, or strike into Shirvan in the Caucasus. Shirvan was Ismail's most immediate enemy as both his father Heidar and grandfather Junaid had lost their lives in combat against the Shirvanshahs.

Ismail crossed the Kura River and marched all the way to the port city of Darband on the Caspian.²² Darband's civilian population evacuated upon his arrival. The local citadel, however, chose to resist. Ismail responded by engaging in a highly effective siege, lasting 20 days. The defenders of Darband defended each of their towers with archery and lances. The Safavids made three unsuccessful attempts to dig mines, then dug a massive hollow below one of the towers, filled it with wood and set it alight. This proved too much for the Darband garrison commander who offered his surrender. Ismail's capture of Darband was of major military benefit for his army. The city offered him much military equipment, especially supplies of the *Jawshan* (shirt-like mail integrated with armored plates) which were immediately distributed to the troops.²³ These were undoubtedly useful to Ismail and his troops when they finally met Farrokhyashar in battle at Golestan in December 1500.²⁴ The outcome of the battle was a resounding success for Ismail: his army of 7,000 destroyed Farrokhyashar's main army of 27,000, and Farrokhyashar himself was killed.²⁵ After the battle, Ismail moved south towards the port city of Baku on the Caspian Sea.²⁶ The city was quickly surrounded and soon submitted to Ismail. He exhumed the bodies of late shirvanshahs and had these burned in retaliation for the deaths of his father and grandfather. Ismail's successes against the shirvanshahs enhanced his prestige and standing among his troops and followers.

Defeat of the Aq Qoyunlu and the capture of Tabriz

Just as Ismail arrived in Arzanjan in 1500, the Aq Qoyunlu reached a compromise to patch up their differences in Iran. Alvand Mirza was to govern Azarbaijan, Arran (modern Republic of Azarbaijan), the Mughan steppe and Diyarbakr in Eastern Anatolia. Murad Mirza was now in charge of the provinces of Fars and Kerman and of the cities and districts of the northwest near Azarbaijan (Zanjan, Hamadan, and Qazvin), the center (Isfahan) Kashan (facing southeast), Rayy (near modern Tehran), and Qom.

Ismail was planning to head back into Iran across the Araxes River for a campaign into Fars province's city of Shiraz, but was distracted by Alvand Mirza's arrival in the Caucasus to confront him. Alvand Mirza brought 30,000 cavalry along with his ally Osman Sultan Torkaman, and 10,000 cavalry from Ganja.²⁷ These combined to do battle against two of Shah Ismail's top commanders, Ghoraberi-Qajar and Halvachi-Oghlu, who commanded a modest total of just 5,000 cavalry. Ghoraberi-Qajar was killed, but Alvand Mirza lost 5,000 of his cavalry. Alvand Mirza, unsatisfied with the outcome, continued to deploy his forces for a showdown against Ismail. This prompted Ismail to move towards Nakhchevan to prepare for Alvand Mirza's arrival.

Shah Ismail arrived at Sharur (near Nakhchevan) with 7,000 troops, nominating Halvachi-Oghlu as his first officer in the theater. In July or August 1501, Alvand Mirza and Halvachi-Oghlu clashed in a bloody battle which lasted from dawn until dusk.²⁸ Although estimates vary, the *Alam Araye Safavi* reports that up to 18,000 of Alvand Mirza's troops were killed.²⁹ The battle was decided when Shah Ismail hacked his way with his Shamshir curved sword into Alvand Mirza's ranks to slice off the leg of the enemy standard-bearer.³⁰ Alvand Mirza and the remainder of his troops fled the field. Ismail's men then raided Alvand Mirza's abandoned camp and each man was rewarded with gold and silver.³¹

After his resounding victory over Alvand Mirza, Ismail entered Tabriz and crowned himself as shah. Despite speaking a Turkic language (as well as Persian), Ismail adopted the Iranian title of *Shah* rather than the Mongol-Turkic *Khan*.³² Like the ancient Sassanian kings, Shah Ismail was recognized as the shah of the entire Iranian realm.³³ Iranian historiography is clear that the Safavids and Shah Ismail regarded themselves as the heirs of the ancient Persian Empire.³⁴ As noted by Savory, Ismail had invoked an ancient Iranian tradition of kingship or *Farr* (lit. kingly glory/divine glory) rooted in pre-Islamic times.³⁵ While it is true that Ismail claimed descent from Prophet Mohammad's lineage,³⁶ he also claimed to be the descendant of Yazdegerd III (r. AD 632–651) the last ruler of Sassanian Persia.³⁷ Shah Ismail also commissioned a copy of the Iranian epic *Shahname* for his son and successor Tahmasp I (r. 1524–76).³⁸

Shah Ismail was also the head of the Safavid sufi-religious order in Ardabil. He was not just the shah of Iran but also the *Pir* (lit. old one/wise one), *Morshed* (lit. spiritual leader), or even *Morshed e Bozong* (lit. grand spiritual leader) to his followers who were known as the *Morid* (lit. follower of the leader), *Ghazi* (lit. warrior) or *Sufi*. The *Moridan* (plural of *Morid*) were expected to be absolutely loyal to their Morshed, Shah Ismail. Introducing a new Shiite priestly class into Iran was not easy task as the country was predominately Sunni and had few Shiite clergy. Ismail "imported" Shiite clergy from other countries: one group of Shiite Ulema arrived from modern-day Iraq after Ismail's conquest of Baghdad in 1508 and another group came from Syria.³⁹ By the latter days of the Safavid dynasty under Shah Sultan Hussein (1694–1722), Shiite scholars arrived from as far away as Lebanon.⁴⁰

Shiism, in combination with a resurgent sense of Iranian nationhood, became a major factor in the motivation of the troops against Ottoman incursions, partly explaining why the Ottomans, the military superpower of the day, failed to conquer Iran. The Europeans, who had a great fear of the mighty Ottoman armies, were quickly drawn to the Safavids. Portuguese admiral Albuquerque even went so far as to claim that Shah Ismail was “a thunderbolt launched by the Almighty for the destruction of Islam.”⁴¹ While Albuquerque’s statement was certainly misplaced as Ismail greatly revered the Prophet Mohammad and claimed descent from his family, there is no question that Ismail had no love for the Sunni branch of Islam and his determination to eliminate the Sunni creed is well known. He was quick to execute Sunnis who resisted conversion to Shiism, two notable cases occurring in Herat and Baghdad where Sunni theologians, scholars, and even poets were put to the sword.⁴² The 16th-century traveler, Ludovico di Varthema, noted Shah Ismail’s killings of Sunnis.⁴³ Ismail was in turn welcomed in cities that had large Shiite populations, notably Kashan and Qom.⁴⁴ He also found much support for Shiism in his home province of Azarbaijan, as well as eastern Anatolia.

Although the Qizilbash were Shah Ismail’s chief source of military strength, he slowly moved towards building a government apparatus that was more independent of them. Towards the end of his rule, especially after the disastrous battle of Chaldiran in 1514, Ismail promoted more and more Iranian aristocrats into high-level administrative positions.⁴⁵ This certainly did not displace the major power centers of the Qizilbash. It would be up to Ismail’s successor, Tahmasp I (r. 1524–76), to initiate the recruitment of Caucasians into the army. While the Shiite clergy were certainly influential, Safavid Iran as founded by Shah Ismail cannot be linearly defined as a theocracy.⁴⁶

Shah Ismail secures the Iranian plateau

Shortly after Ismail assumed the Iranian throne, word came to him that a resurgent Alvand Mirza, leading 50,000 fresh troops, was preparing for battle. Two-thirds of Alvand Mirza’s army was composed of Ottoman troops furnished by Istanbul. This indicated that the Ottomans were already aware of Ismail’s military potential, and were probably worried about his Shiite missionary zeal.

The Aq Qoyunlu, this time led by Morad Mirza, arrived with a force of 30,000, two-thirds of them Ottomans.⁴⁷ The battle that took place was notable in that Ismail placed cannon in front of his army. According to the *Alam Araye Safavi*, as soon as Alvand Mirza commenced his cavalry attack “the cannon [from Ismail’s army] fired 25 Goolooleh [lit. bullets/cannon balls] killing 7,000 Turkmens and Ottomans.”⁴⁸ Two of the Ottoman commanders, Osman Pasha and Zal Pasha, were killed during the battle. The total number of Ottoman-Turkmen casualties stood at around 18,000 dead.⁴⁹ This battle was especially significant as it proved the effectiveness of cannon against cavalry, especially highly trained Ottoman troops. Despite this success, Ismail didn’t permanently incorporate cannon as a regular arm in his forces.

The Aq Qoyunlu, led by Morad Mirza, and their Ottoman allies now raised a new gigantic force of 120,000 troops. Shah Ismail mustered just 12,000 Qizilbash warriors.⁵⁰ Battle was joined in the vicinity of Hamadan on June 20, 1503. The Ottoman-Turkmen forces were stationed in seven rows. The battle was hard-fought, but Ismail’s daring once again decided the outcome when

he led a charge of 2,000 of his best cavalry to slice through the enemy lines. He penetrated as far as the fourth row to slay one of the top Ottoman commanders with his Shamshir sword before returning to his own lines. The shock of this attack caused considerable panic within the Ottoman-Turkmen ranks, leading many to flee the battlefield. The enemy camp was looted and many of the fleeing soldiers were pursued and killed by the Qizilbash. Ismail had prevailed once again and this time up to 40,000 Ottoman and Turkmen warriors had been slain. Ismail's forces engaged in pursuit of the defeated Aq Qoyunlu and their Ottoman allies, following them as far south as Isfahan, where the populace welcomed Ismail. By this time Morad Mirza and 5,000 of his troops had sought sanctuary in the castle of Tabrak. Ismail's troops bored a large hole in the castle's walls then rushed in to slay 3,000 in hand-to-hand combat.

After the capture of Isfahan, many of those Turkmen who had resisted Ismail now came to him in submission. Despite these successes, Ismail still had to face a number of obstinate warriors of the Aq Qoyunlu. These no longer enjoyed Ottoman support, probably because Istanbul was aware of the rising fortunes of Shah Ismail and was reluctant to squander more military resources shoring up the declining political and military fortunes of the Aq Qoyunlu.

The Aq Qoyunlu were not finished as a fighting force in 1503, as Murad was able to raise another 70,000 troops for his cause, forcing Ismail again to mobilize an army of 30,000. They met in a great battle in Fars province. Ismail and his warriors launched cavalry attacks straight into the Aq Qoyunlu lines killing large numbers of the enemy in hand-to-hand fighting using Shamshir swords, lances, and maces. What proved especially decisive was the shattering of the chains fastening the enemy's cannon to its emplacements. Ismail's cavalry hacked the chains using powerful battleaxes, dislodging them from their carriages. Once again Murad fled the field, this time towards Shiraz. In a final showdown in September 1503 Ismail arrived at Shiraz to defeat Murad for the last time. This signaled the end of the ascendancy of the Aq Qoyunlu in Iran.⁵¹

Ismail's victory at Shiraz finally secured central, western, and southern Iran. Contingents from the entirety of Fars province, Kurdistan and Kermanshah, Yazd and Kerman arrived to offer their allegiance to Shah Ismail. This did not mean that all challenges to Ismail's authority in Iran were over. Kia Hussein Chelavi, the governor of Rustamdar, defied Ismail and rejected his authority. Ismail responded by mobilizing 12,000 troops, which included the Qizilbash, archers, and musketeers. Kia Hussein had engaged in major repairs of fortresses under his jurisdiction, especially those of Gol Khandan, Firuzkuh, and Asta. These measures failed to prevent the arrival of Ismail's army. As soon as the Qizilbash arrived at Rustamdar, a large number of local and Mazandarani warriors simply joined them. Ilyas Beg, one of Shah Ismail's top commanders, pursued Kia Hussein, who had taken refuge in the Iraj castle at Varamin. The Iraj castle was overcome and Kia Hussein was killed but resistance continued. Shah Ismail, who was in Qom at the time, deployed his forces in March 1504 towards the fortress of Gol Khandan. This was decisively overcome, largely through the use of siege equipment, oil-lit projectiles, and artillery firing stone projectiles.⁵² The fortress of Firuzkuh was more powerful than Gol Khandan and had been lavishly provisioned to enable it to withstand long sieges. Ismail brought forward his powerful siege engines, battering rams, stone-firing artillery, and glass projectiles filled with flammable oil-based liquids. On the first day of his siege of Firuzkuh, Ismail engaged in psychological warfare. He ordered his drummers and trumpeters to play in unison to demoralize the defenders before bombarding the fortress with

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artillery for 15 days. This forced the surrender of the garrison and its commander, Ali Kia, by late April 1504. The last fortress was Asta. After a thorough reconnaissance the Qizilbash concluded that besieging Asta with their existing equipment would result in a costly and prolonged operation. The decision was made to cut off the fortress' water supply from the Hableh River. Shah Ismail's troops and engineers managed to divert the river from the fortress, albeit with great effort and difficulty. This soon resulted in a severe water shortage in Asta, forcing its 12,000-man garrison to surrender.⁵³

Ismail looks west

Before facing eastern and northeast Iran, Ismail turned his gaze to a traditional base of the Aq Qoyunlu, the province of Diyarbakr in modern-day eastern Turkey. Diyarbakr was an extremely important province as it commanded the defense of Iran's northwest and the Mesopotamian north.⁵⁴ The area had been often contested between the Sassanian Empire and the Romano-Byzantines.⁵⁵ The region was home to a number of important cities such as Diyarbakr (ancient Amida), Hassankeyf (Hassan Keifa), Mardin, Urfa, Jazira, Uzun, and Sasoun, which boasted very well-built fortresses.⁵⁶

The first city Ismail conquered in eastern Anatolia was Hassankeyf, a formidable city protected by powerful walls approximately 12½–15 miles (20–24km) in diameter. The walls included 360 major towers and small fortresses.⁵⁷ The city was held by Ismail's brother-in-law, Sultan Khalil of the Aq Qoyunlu clan. The campaign against the city began with Ismail's dispatch of 10,000 troops under a Qizilbash commander named Ustajlu Mohammad Beg. Sultan Khalil responded by stocking up with a vast amount of supplies to withstand a prolonged siege.

Ustajlu had succeeded in gathering many of the local pro-Qizilbash militias under Ismail's banner. These then tried to fight their way into Hassankeyf's formidable defenses using muskets and traditional arms (especially archery equipment and lances) but no success was achieved. The strength of the city's defenses prompted Ustajlu to use artillery. A four-barreled mortar or artillery piece built during the reign of Sultan Yagoub was brought over from Mardin.⁵⁸ Another five-barreled artillery piece, built by an Armenian engineer for Ustajlu, was also brought forward. Most interesting are reports that Ustajlu's forces protected their artillery with a specially built "shield" or timber wall. The "wall" was elevated to allow the artillery to fire and then lowered to protect the artillery pieces.⁵⁹ This "fire and shield" system destroyed large numbers of Hassankeyf's powerful defenses and towers. The city finally surrendered after two months. The Safavids wrought terrible vengeance by building ten pyramids of their foes' decapitated heads.⁶⁰

After his successful conquests of eastern Anatolia, the Caucasus and Iran, Ismail thrust towards Mesopotamia and southwest Iran. He began his campaign with the conquest of Mardin in 1507, extinguishing the last bastion of the Aq Qoyunlu in the Middle East.⁶¹ Mosul and Baghdad fell the following year.⁶²

A far more serious campaign had to be undertaken in Khuzistan in southwest Iran, home to an extremist Shiite movement, the Mushasha.⁶³ Ismail had to bring the Mushasha to battle and defeat them. The leader Seyyed Fayyaz was killed but his brother and successor Fallah accepted Safavid suzerainty.

Battles in Central Asia: the Uzbeks

The Uzbeks were still nomads of the steppe when they rose to power in Transoxiana in Central Asia by 1495. Sheibani Khan, the Uzbek leader, was keen to annex the lands of Hussein Bayqara who had died in 1506. Thanks to infighting between the sons of Bayqara, the Uzbeks were able to move into much of Khorasan and occupy the cities of Mashad, Tous, and Herat.⁶⁴ This now placed the western part of Khorasan province under threat. It did not take long for the Uzbeks to challenge the newly established Shah Ismail.

In 1507, Sheibani Khan wrote a highly threatening and insulting letter to Ismail demanding that he come to battle.⁶⁵ Ismail was too preoccupied at the time with his campaigns in eastern Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Khuzistan to respond, leaving Sheibani free to roam Iran's northeastern Iranian realms at his leisure. Nevertheless, Ismail had every intention of coming to Khorasan once he had concluded his campaigns to the west. He had also given asylum to Badi ol Zaman, the late Hussein Bayqara's son and heir.⁶⁶

Finally in 1510 Ismail was ready to march northeast. By November of that year he assembled an army of 17,000 troops, from Luristan, Azarbaijan, Arran, Kurdistan, Fars, Kerman, Iraq-Ajam (Hamadan, Qazvin, Zanjan, Isfahan, Qom, Kashan, and Rayy), and Mesopotamia as well as local contingents from Khorasan and the Herat area.⁶⁷ The formidable Qizilbash cavalry would again play a pivotal role in the upcoming battle. The Safavid army was outnumbered as Sheibani was able to field 28,000 troops, almost all cavalry.

Ismail's army rapidly liberated Tous and Mashad. As Ismail moved towards Herat, Sheibani fled towards the city of Merv in Central Asia. Sheibani's tactic was an intelligent one. Ismail had not expected to engage in sieges, and hence had not brought much in the way of siege equipment. A means had to be found to bring Sheibani out into the open. Ismail and his Qizilbash commanders adopted Sheibani's literary tactics, and wrote him an insulting letter. They stated that they needed to leave immediately to fight rebels in Azarbaijan and Diyarbakr, and that they would return once the fighting was over. To add to the deception, Ismail ordered his "retreating" army to burn all of their old tents at their encampment. A small force of 300 crack Qizilbash cavalry, led by Amir Beg Muslu, was stationed near the burnt camp.⁶⁸

Safavid spies were highly active and brought up-to-date reports on the Uzbek army and Sheibani's intentions. Sheibani and the Uzbeks, thinking that Ismail was indeed retreating, decided to launch a surprise attack on their opponent's "retreating" army. They reached the burnt-out abandoned camp and found Amir Beg Muslu and his 300 cavalry waiting for them. Muslu engaged in a series of lightning hit-and-run attacks and then feigned retreat. Sheibani and his army took the bait and pursued. But Ismail had prepared a deadly trap.

Ismail had formed his army into a horseshoe shape, and asked Muslu to arrive at their location in the dark of night with the Uzbeks in pursuit. Muslu achieved his task brilliantly: in the darkness of night Muslu led the unsuspecting Uzbeks straight into the ambush.⁶⁹ Ismail's troops were equipped with oil-draped torches which were simultaneously lit, just as the war drums and trumpets chorused their message of doom. Ismail unleashed his cavalry from all around the horseshoe into Sheibani and the Uzbeks. Swinging his Shamshir sword, Shah Ismail slew large numbers of Uzbeks during the battle. He soon caught up with Sheibani and killed him as he fled. The total number of Uzbek dead stood at around 10,000.⁷⁰ After the battle, Ismail had Sheibani's skull fashioned

into a jeweled drinking vessel. There are also accounts that Ismail dismembered Sheibani's hands and legs, sending these to various local governors to affirm that the Uzbek menace had ended.

When Ismail defeated Sheibani and conquered Merv, he also liberated Khadije Khanum, the sister of the post-Timurid prince Zaher e Din Mohjammad Babur (1483–1531). She had been captured by Sheibani and forced to marry him.⁷¹ This inevitably led to an alliance between Babur and Ismail, leading to their military cooperation against the Uzbeks in Transoxiana. Ismail agreed to provide military support for Babur for his claims on Transoxiana on condition that he accepted Shiite Islam.⁷² Babur apparently accepted Shiism and even allowed Ismail to exercise his authority over him and his followers.⁷³ Safavid armies supported Babur's forces in a number of successful battles in 1511–12.⁷⁴ Despite this, Babur and his Safavid allies were unable to keep up the momentum of their success; they were finally defeated by an Uzbek army at the fort of Ghujduvan on November 12, 1512.⁷⁵ Babur abandoned his claims in Central Asia after eight years, departing to India where he founded the Sunni-Muslim and Persianate Mughal dynasty.⁷⁶

The Uzbeks followed up their success at Ghujduvan by launching a new attack into the Iranian realms in 1512. They sent a powerful force into Khorasan that defeated the local Safavid forces, leading to the occupation of Herat.⁷⁷ Ismail, who was in Isfahan, rapidly assembled a new Safavid force which retook Herat.⁷⁸ The main Uzbek army remained intact as they had mostly withdrawn upon Ismail's arrival.⁷⁹ This set the pattern of Uzbek–Safavid interaction throughout the latter's dynasty: the Uzbeks would launch raids into Iran's northeast whenever they sensed weakness in the Safavid military, then withdraw as soon as a powerful Safavid army arrived to counterattack.

The Portuguese occupy islands in the Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf has been Iran's major sea outlet since the days of the Achaemenid Empire. By the late Sassanian era the Persian Gulf had become especially vital for Iran's commercial shipping to India, the Pacific, and China.⁸⁰ By the early 16th century, the Persian Gulf had become a major center of commercial activity with major outlets at Oman, Muscat, Bahrain, Siraf, Kish and Hormuz. The area was pivotal in the transfer of weaponry, especially archery equipment and swords from Egypt and India.

Europe was to acquire a keen interest in the Persian Gulf. The rise of the powerful Ottoman Empire had cut off all overland trading routes to Iran and India. As Renaissance Europe felt it vital to secure raw materials and new trading markets outside the European continent, another route had to be found to the east. The Ottoman threat was one of the factors that propelled Christopher Columbus' voyage into the Atlantic Ocean. Numerous maritime voyages were made by the European seafarers in search of sea lanes leading to the east. It was the Portuguese who first made a military move into the Persian Gulf, appreciating its potential for trade (especially Persian silk) and its commercial links to the Indian Ocean.

Iran had no navy in the Persian Gulf. This meant that she was at the mercy of any maritime power willing to use force to seize her possessions.⁸¹ This was realized in the person of Alfonso de Albuquerque (1453–1515) who arrived with a powerful Portuguese fleet off the shores of the island of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf in 1507.⁸² Albuquerque had undertaken an epic journey around the Cape of Good Hope to reach the Persian Gulf waters. Before proceeding to Hormuz, he occupied

a number of locales in the Persian Gulf, including Muscat and the ports of Sohar.⁸³ Albuquerque's arrival coincided with the Uzbek rampaging of Iran's northeast.

The nominal Iranian ruler of Hormuz was 12-year-old Saif e Din, with all matters of policy under the supervision of his vizier, Khajeh Attar. Attar had received plenty of advance warning of Albuquerque's arrival and prepared accordingly. He assembled 400 vessels (most likely large boats or dhows), manned by 2,500 marine fighting men. Defense of the shores and the main town was entrusted to a force of 30,000 men (including 4,000 Safavid troops).⁸⁴ When the Portuguese fleet arrived, Albuquerque first engaged in threats and briskly demanded that Hormuz surrender to him. Attar refused. The local nobles were neither as brave nor as defiant as the vizier. The nobles calculated that Ismail was too militarily involved in his battles elsewhere and decided to yield to Albuquerque.⁸⁵ Saif e Din became a vassal of the King of Portugal to whom he had to pay an annual tribute.⁸⁶

In response to this takeover, Shah Ismail sent an official to Hormuz to symbolically collect the annual tribute for the Iranian crown. Perplexed at the situation, Saif e Din and his vizier consulted Albuquerque. Albuquerque again responded with threats. He symbolized his resolve by his dispatch of guns, cannon balls, and grenades to the Iranians.⁸⁷ He soon regretted this and tried to make amends by sending some precious gifts to the shah. In any event, Albuquerque was not able to retain Hormuz and was forced to leave the island by 1508 when his men grew weary of their stay on the island.

Deteriorating relations with the Ottomans

By 1512, relations between the Ottomans and their Iranian neighbours had been steadily deteriorating for a while. Confrontation was inevitable for three reasons. First, the Ottoman Empire was set on territorial expansion westwards into Europe and eastwards into the Middle East. Eastward expansion would set Istanbul on a collision course with Safavid Iran. Expansion into Europe with an intact Iran on its eastern flank meant that Istanbul always had to contemplate the possibility of a two-front war, and the Europeans were eager to forge alliances with the rulers of Iran against the rising military might of the Ottoman Empire.

The second factor leading the Safavids and the Ottomans towards war was religion. As ardent defenders of the Sunni faith, the Ottomans considered themselves as the seat of the Muslim Caliphate. Iran was now officially a Shiite state, a branch of Islam considered heretical by the orthodox Sunnis of Istanbul. This factor alone was sufficient to rally the Ottoman populace for a holy war against Iran. Ottoman Sultan Selim Yavuz (Turkic: the Grim) (r. 1512–20) was an ardent Sunni. He was resolved to crush Ismail and the Shiites of Anatolia and Iran. The third factor was a derivative of the second – namely the role of pro-Isma'ili Shiite Qizilbash sympathizers within the Ottoman Empire. These would soon engage in a major rebellion that would shake the Ottoman Empire to its very foundations:

When Ismail had seized the throne of Iran in 1501, he was congratulated by Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512). The latter counselled Ismail to put an end to his destruction of Sunni mosques and graves.⁸⁸ Ismail paid little heed to this and continued his quest to expand the Shiite faith at Sunni expense into Ottoman territory. Bayezid II had also been on good terms with Hassan

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Khalifa, the pro-Safavid Qizilbash leader in eastern Anatolia.⁸⁹ Despite this, relations between the Ottomans and the local Qizilbash were destined to sour.

It was around June 1511 that a major anti-Ottoman rebellion led by the Tekkelu Turcomen led by Shah Qoli broke out in eastern Anatolia.⁹⁰ What especially incensed the Sunni leadership of Istanbul was that numbers of the Tekkelu had already joined the Qizilbash of Ardabil in neighbouring Iran. It was clear that the Turcomen were looking eastwards to newly Shiite Iran and its charismatic leader. Many of the Qizilbash had continued to migrate from Anatolia into Iran to join Shah Ismail. This created a mass of fervent religious warriors whom Ismail decided to send back as warriors into the Ottoman regions of Anatolia. A particularly provocative action was Ismail's dispatch of a major expedition led by Ali Khalifa in 1512. This force launched a very damaging offensive deep inside Anatolia, crushing several Ottoman armies.

Selim seized the Ottoman throne in 1513, having fought his father Sultan Bayezid and his brothers for four years in a bitter civil war. From the outset Selim was determined to wreak his vengeance on the Shiite Qizilbash Turkmens of eastern Anatolia and their Safavid patrons in Iran. In a letter to Ismail, Selim accused him of perjury, wrongdoing, and blasphemy.⁹¹ Ismail in turn accused Selim of killing innocent people, violation of sexual mores, and aggression against fellow Muslims.⁹²

It is possible that Selim was hoping to provoke Shah Ismail into a face-to-face battle, for by June 1514 Selim had assembled a massive army to attack Iran. He was, however, deeply concerned that the local pro-Iranian Anatolian Qizilbash could harass his army as it marched towards Iran. Selim devised a plan to eliminate them. He sent his officials into the province of Rum in north-central Anatolia to register the names of 40,000 local Qizilbash. Selim then ordered many thousands of them executed or arrested.⁹³ It is important to note that not all the Qizilbash in Anatolia were Turkmens; there were significant numbers of local Kurds in the movement as well.⁹⁴

Selim also closed the Iranian–Ottoman border to sever the flow of goods between the two states. He wanted to deliver a crippling economic blow to Iran by preventing it from shipping its silk to the west.⁹⁵ Conversely, all potential sources of supplies or weapons from the west into Iran were also cut off. This was especially critical as Europe was now unable to send any firearms to Iran through Anatolia.

The battle of Chaldiran

Iran's upcoming contest with the Ottoman Empire was not unlike the wars fought between Partho-Sassanian Persia and the Romano-Byzantine Empire. The only difference was that the resurgent Iranian empire under the Safavids would be facing the Ottoman Turks all along its western, northwest, and Caucasian frontier.⁹⁶

As Sultan Selim marched to war, he was increasingly worried that the Iranian shah would not consent to a set-piece battle. This would then force the Ottoman army to march further east.⁹⁷ Such a scenario could prolong the campaign, leading to the unwelcome prospect of having to campaign in eastern Anatolia and northwest Iran during the bitter winter months. Selim's worries appeared to be well-founded. As the Ottoman army marched towards the east, the Safavid governor of Diyarbakr simply evacuated the city. The inhabitants of Diyarbakr then declared their allegiance to Selim who annexed the city on his way towards Azarbajjan.⁹⁸

Mohammad Ustajlu Khan, one of Ismail's most trusted commanders, arrived in Tabriz with alarming news. Ustajlu reported that Selim was now at Erzerum and rapidly moving towards Iran with a huge army. Selim had assembled a massive army variously estimated at between 100,000 and 140,000 men.⁹⁹ These included 12,000 Janissaries with firearms,¹⁰⁰ archers and *Sepahi* (royal cavalry guards).¹⁰¹ Supporting this giant force were 500 cannon.¹⁰² Selim certainly had auxiliary cavalry, but the actual numbers vary according to the sources. Iranian sources variously report the total number of Ottoman cavalry as ranging between 90,000 and 200,000, which is difficult to ascertain.¹⁰³ Undoubtedly the most impressive element in the Ottoman army was the Janissaries. Christian boys recruited from the Balkans, they were subjected to very intense military training, constant battle drills, and education and formed into a war-winning arm of the Ottoman military.¹⁰⁴ Selim's subsequent victory had also much to do with logistical planning, especially as he had marched his huge Ottoman army all across Anatolia into Azarbaijan for the decisive contest against Ismail.¹⁰⁵

Ismail lost no time sending messages for troops to mobilize throughout Iran's cities, tribal regions, and provinces. Some reached Tabriz on time for the battle, but many did not; the forces of Deev Sultan of Balkh reached Azarbaijan after the battle had ended.¹⁰⁶ This meant that the total number of available troops for the upcoming battle was alarmingly low. Primary Iranian sources such as the *Alam Araye Safavi* report 18,000 troops in the Safavid army with the *Habib ol Seyr* citing a total of 12,000 men.¹⁰⁷ In general, it is estimated that the total number of Iranian troops would have numbered around 30,000–40,000 troops, around the backbone of Qizilbash cavalry.¹⁰⁸

The very large numbers of Ottoman troops, and especially cannon, were a major concern for Ismail.¹⁰⁹ In an emergency military session the Qizilbash chiefs and Shah Ismail unanimously agreed that their only option was to face Selim directly in a set-piece battle.¹¹⁰ The main problem with this decision was that no solution had been found to neutralize the Ottoman cannon and musketeers. Perhaps Ismail and the Qizilbash chiefs were confident that their cavalry would charge through the Ottoman ranks before Selim's firepower could assert itself on the battlefield.

Ismail and his commanders found a way to turn the size of the Ottoman army against itself. They applied scorched-earth tactics all along the Ottoman advance. This was a highly effective strategy as it left the very large Ottoman army without access to local food or water. Adequate shelter also became a problem as the retreating Safavids destroyed all houses and urban centers along Selim's advance. The scorched-earth tactics put immense pressure on Selim's troops. This situation along with concerns over fighting fellow Muslims led to a near-mutiny among the Ottoman ranks.¹¹¹ But the news that Shah Ismail was waiting for the Ottomans at Chaldiran quickly put to rest all dissension.

One of Ismail's major errors before Chaldiran was giving up his mountain base at Khoi.¹¹² That location would have allowed him a much more effective defense as Selim would have been forced to fight in very difficult geography. Instead Ismail chose to march down to the flat plains of Chaldiran between Khoi and Urumiah (approximately 100 miles (160km) northwest of Tabriz), an ideal location for Ottoman artillery and firearms.¹¹³

An even greater mistake was Ismail's failure to heed the advice of his two top commanders in the field, Mohammad Beg Ustajlu and Noor Ali Khalifa, who had had experience fighting Ottomans. They urged Ismail to attack immediately before the Turks had time to complete the set up of their cannon and troops.¹¹⁴ Ustajlu also counseled against frontal attacks due to the strength of Ottoman

firepower. But Ismail was swayed by the arguments of another highly influential Qizilbash leader, Durmish Khan Shamlu. The latter counseled that Ismail simply wait until the Ottomans had completed all of their preparations because he thought that a pre-emptive attack before the Ottomans were prepared was “unmanly” and cowardly. Whatever Durmish Khan’s motives were, he certainly succeeded in swaying Shah Ismail who then reputedly said “I am not a caravanserai thief... Whatever is decreed by God will occur.”¹¹⁵ So the Ottomans were given ample time to complete the lining up and chaining together of their cannon carriages.¹¹⁶ The chains would bar Iranian cavalry from dashing through the spaces between the cannon. Mortars were also placed atop each of the cannon carriages.¹¹⁷ The Ottomans then positioned their 12,000 musket-armed Janissaries behind their cannon.¹¹⁸ By heeding the advice of Durmish Khan, Ismail had squandered his one chance of minimizing the impact of Ottoman firearms against his forces.¹¹⁹ Ismail’s unfathomable blunder was also perhaps derived from his charismatic overconfidence; he believed himself to be divinely invincible.

Having positioned his forces, Selim selected a hill from which he could observe and direct his forces during the battle. His headquarters were protected by his best men and cannon. Ismail took his position among his troops in the center of the Iranian army, which had no firearm units or cannon. The battle began in the early morning of August 23.¹²⁰ The Ottoman cannon immediately opened fire with their large barrels, causing much panic among both Iranian and Ottoman horses.¹²¹

From the outset the fighting was fierce and bitter. Had Ismail attacked when the Ottomans were still organizing, he might well have broken the Ottoman lines. The *Alam Araye Abbasi* provides a glimpse into the chaos and savagery of the fighting, reporting that when Selim dispatched one of his champions to challenge Ismail in heat of battle, Ismail rode towards the Ottoman, raised his Shamshir sword and cut off his head.¹²² Ismail fought beside his troops, but this time the enemy host was too large and well equipped to be overcome by sheer gallantry.

Ismail led the Safavid right flank to attack the Ottoman left flank, killing its commander Hassan Pasha.¹²³ Despite this terrible blow, the Ottomans did not collapse. Another Ottoman commander, Sinan Pasha, rallied the shaken Ottoman troops, enabling them to stand their ground. Sinan then led a deadly attack with his Balkan or Rumelian troops killing one of Ismail’s top commanders, Ustajlu, whose attacking contingents were scattered. Shah Ismail responded by bravely leading charge after charge towards the Ottoman center only to be repelled each time with heavy casualties.¹²⁴ The devastating impact of Ottoman firepower has been noted by Iranian sources.¹²⁵

Despite terrible losses, Ismail and his companion Qizilbash cavalry succeeded in reaching the Ottoman front lines a number of times. Using their Shamshir swords, Ismail and the Qizilbash even succeeded in shattering some of the chains linking the Ottoman cannon.¹²⁶ But each time they were forced back with heavy losses. Despite this, the Qizilbash attacked once more, forcing many Ottoman troops to fall back to the sanctuary of their cannon and the Janissaries. These actions were certainly brave and impressive, but the Ottoman center remained intact. Sinan then sprang a deadly blow by launching a powerful counterattack from the Ottoman right flank.¹²⁷ This attack crashed into Ismail’s flank. The impulse of Sinan’s attack was so strong that Ottoman troops reached Ismail’s camp, capturing plunder and one of his wives.¹²⁸ The Iranians now had no choice but to concede defeat. By this stage many of Ismail’s top commanders had been killed and Ottoman firearms had taken a terrible toll on Safavid troops. It was clear that no amount of bravery, élan, or dogged determination could overcome the Ottoman juggernaut. Selim though had not escaped

unscathed: he had lost a good number of his Albanian, Serbian, and Greek cavalry to the formidable Qizilbash.¹²⁹ Still it was Selim who emerged as the undisputed victor at Chaldiran.

Ismail decided to withdraw and yield the field to Selim.¹³⁰ He went with a small number of his Qizilbash followers atop a hill and began to sound his *Karney* Sufi flute to signal the retreat. The extent of the catastrophe became evident when only 300 survivors gathered around him.¹³¹ The next day, Selim executed all captured Iranian troop commanders.¹³²

Ottoman numerical superiority was definitely a major factor in Ismail's defeat, but Ottoman superiority in artillery and firearms, which enabled them to decimate the Iranian cavalry, was crucial. Ismail had used firearms and artillery in a number of his earlier battles, but at Chaldiran he used neither.¹³³ He may have chosen not to use them because the Qizilbash viewed firearms with contempt, seeing these as less "manly" than traditional weapons.¹³⁴ As noted by Savory, "The inescapable conclusion ... is that the Safavids did not use firearms at Chaldiran because they did not choose to use them."¹³⁵ A further issue cited by Iranian sources was that no new supplies of European firearms had arrived to Iran prior to Chaldiran.¹³⁶ The Portuguese admiral Albuquerque had sought the pope's help to dispatch cannon to Ismail before the battle,¹³⁷ but these efforts proved unsuccessful.

Selim captured Tabriz a little over two weeks later on September 5, 1514.¹³⁸ The logical course of action would have been to pursue and destroy Shah Ismail, but Selim's generals had other worries. Despite having won the battle at Chaldiran, Selim withdrew from Tabriz just eight days later.¹³⁹ Neither he nor his senior commanders wished to spend the bitter winter months in Iran. Ottoman supply lines were overstretched, making them vulnerable to attacks by the local Iranian cavalry in Azarbaijan.¹⁴⁰ The scorched-earth tactics employed in the area ensured that the Ottomans would have no local supplies to sustain them in Azarbaijan.¹⁴¹ Iranian cavalry could also conduct very costly raids against Ottoman occupation forces; while inside Tabriz the local population was fighting against the Ottoman occupation.¹⁴² These factors combined to dissuade Selim from trying to conquer Iran. As they left Tabriz, the Ottomans did capture Kars to the northwest of Azarbaijan, as well as Nakhchevan, and Yerevan in the Caucasus.¹⁴³

Shortly after Selim departed from Tabriz, Ismail re-entered the city against no opposition. Although Tabriz was once again in Safavid hands, Iran had lost much after Selim's invasion. Much of eastern Anatolia was now detached from Iran. Arzanjan, Diyarbakr, and much of Kurdistan were soon occupied by Istanbul, never to be recovered by the Iranians.¹⁴⁴ These regions were host to a number of Kurdish emirates whose political machinations were similar to the former Aq and Qara Qoyunlu confederations.¹⁴⁵ The Ottomans did little to change the administration of those emirates and even helped strengthen the position of local rulers or "emirs" now under their rule.

The two Kurdish emirates inside Iran, the Ard-Alan and Gowran, were very different from those under Ottoman rule. This was mainly because their rulers were urban and not tribal in origin.¹⁴⁶ For five centuries the Kurdistan region, like Armenia, was caught between the warring Safavid and Ottoman empires, often witnessing devastation and population displacements. Direct rule over the region over an extended period of time was virtually impossible for either empire. As a result both the Safavid and Ottoman empires often exercised their respective authorities through local chiefs. The latter often held the trump card of threatening to switch sides. The power base of these chiefs often derived from their alliances with either the Ottoman or Iranian empires, resulting in the rise of distinct pro-Iranian and pro-Ottoman clans.

Alliances with the West

Albuquerque, still trying to make a good impression on Ismail, sent Miguel Ferreira in 1513 with presents and an amenable message to the shah. Despite these pleasantries, Albuquerque proved his imperialism once more by returning to Hormuz in 1515 with 26 ships and 2,200 soldiers.¹⁴⁷ Iran, reeling from its defeat at Chaldiran a year before, was in no position to fight another major war. Hormuz became a major naval and commercial outpost for the Portuguese Empire. Ismail, who had no navy, had no choice but to comply with what was essentially a *fait accompli*.

Ismail sent his envoy to Albuquerque to propose an agreement: Iran would look the other way at Hormuz if the Portuguese agreed to three specific conditions.¹⁴⁸ The Portuguese were to provide firstly naval transportation for the Safavids for their operations in Bahrain and Qatif in the Persian Gulf and secondly military assistance to the Safavids in their operations at Makran (the coastal strip along Iranian and Pakistani Baluchistan); and most importantly the Portuguese were to forge an alliance with the Iranians against the Ottomans. The third provision was significant as the Iranians expected military support and equipment. The Portuguese acceded to this request by the dispatch to the Iranian army of a number of cannon, muskets, and artillery experts. Despite this agreement, the Safavids did not permanently abandon Hormuz. They had simply entered into an alliance of convenience with a lesser enemy against the Ottomans until circumstances changed.

Shah Ismail made serious efforts to reach out to the Europeans in an endeavor to forge an alliance against the Ottoman Turks. His efforts were reciprocated by King Charles V of Spain, and King Ludwig II of Hungary, who also wanted an Iranian–European alliance against the Ottoman Turks.¹⁴⁹ Both Charles and Ludwig sent their envoys to the Iranian shah.¹⁵⁰

In 1523, Shah Ismail sent an interesting letter, written in Latin, to Charles V. In it he expressed amazement that the European Christian powers chose to fight each other instead of combining against their common deadly foe, the Ottoman Turks.¹⁵¹ Ismail urged the Christian powers to set aside their differences and unite against the Ottomans.¹⁵² His letter had clearly demonstrated that he was ready to unite with the Europeans against Istanbul.¹⁵³ The letter arrived in Europe just as Ismail died in 1524.

Fortunately for the Ottoman sultans, the vast distances between Iran and Europe (and the primitive state of communications at the time) militated against any coordinated Euro-Iranian military action against them. Nevertheless, the seeds of a European–Iranian alliance had been made. Iran would be heir to European military assistance, a process that would reach its zenith at the time of Shah Abbas I.

The final years of Shah Ismail

After his massive defeat at Chaldiran, Ismail never challenged the Ottomans in open battle again. This did not mean that he completely desisted from militarily opposing Selim. Ismail did send a large Qizilbash force to support the Mamluks against Selim who was moving to conquer Egypt in 1517.¹⁵⁴ Another force of Qizilbash led by the Shamlu and Tekkelu Qizilbash clans was sent by Ismail to fight against Selim's march towards Baghdad, although this particular invasion was abruptly halted after Selim's death in 1520.¹⁵⁵

The Safavid army was also active in defending its critical northeastern frontiers facing Central Asia. In 1512 the Uzbeks, led by Obeidollah Khan, had launched a new invasion and occupied parts of the province of Herat.¹⁵⁶ The Shamlu Qizilbash warriors again distinguished themselves when Ismail assigned them to defeat and expel the Uzbeks. These campaigns demonstrated that the Safavid army, though battered at Chaldiran, was still intact and highly effective as a fighting force, fully capable of defending the frontiers of the realm.

Chaldiran had certainly resulted in the loss of much territory, but there was another blow to the person of Ismail, one from which he could never recover. Ismail had lost his aura of invincibility, an event which must have shaken his self-confidence. Ismail's sense of dash, boldness, and thirst for battle appear to have subsided after Chaldiran. He was never able to muster the strength to personally lead the Safavid armies into the battlefield.¹⁵⁷ This was a task he entrusted to his commanders. By the last ten years of his life Ismail had increasingly lapsed into a passive state, with a fondness for hunting and pleasurable pursuits.¹⁵⁸ He succumbed to fever and passed away in Tabriz in May 1524.

CHAPTER 3

THE EVOLUTION OF SAFAVID ARMIES (1524–1722)

From Tahmasp I to Mohammad Khodabandeh

The disastrous outcome at Chaldiran in 1514 forced the Safavid leadership to implement reforms for the Iranian army. These were underway during the reign of Ismail's successor, Tahmasp I (r. 1524–76). The Safavid military leadership and Tahmasp realized that the major reasons for the Ottoman army's successes were superb organization, elite units (especially the *Yenicheri* or Janissaries), and firearms.

A glimpse into the state of Iranian armies during the latter years of Tahmasp's reign is provided by a European visitor to Iran, Vincenzo D'Alessandri.¹ Arriving in 1571, D'Alessandri noted that Iran had been divided into five regions.² This rationalized the country's defense against attacks by the Ottomans (from the west and northwest), the Uzbeks (northeast), and other potential enemies. These zones were administered by 50 sultans, with each commanding a total of 500–3,000 standing troops. The sultans were capable of raising additional troops from their districts in times of war. Once the sultans had assembled the maximum number of available troops, they would march to a predesignated assembly area to link up with the Shah and the royal guards.

D'Alessandri reports the minimum strength of Iran's cavalry at 60,000 troops, which could be increased in times of war.³ Iranian cavalry were described as resolute, brave, and highly disciplined in battle. Their primary weapons are described by D'Alessandri as swords (undoubtedly the curved *Shamshir*), spears, and the musket. Of special interest is D'Alessandri's observation that "Persians are tall and strong ... commonly use swords, lances and guns on the battlefield... Persian Musketeers use their muskets so adeptly ... they will draw the sword at times of necessity ... muskets are slung to the back as to not interfere with the usage of bows and swords ... their horses are very well trained and they have no need to import horses."⁴ D'Alessandri's report shows that the Iranians had become highly proficient in the use of firearms before the arrival of the Shirley brothers to Iran during the reign of Shah Abbas I (r. 1587–1629). A major source of firearms instructors for the armies of Tahmasp was the Portuguese.⁵

The rising Iranian proficiency in firearms in concert with their proficiency in close-quarter combat with traditional weapons meant that Iranian troops were capable of facing up to Ottoman troops. This may partly explain why despite their superior numbers, devastating firepower, and high-quality troops the Ottoman Empire proved unable to conquer Iran and overthrow the Safavids.

The pace of the reforms appears to have waned, especially during the latter years of Tahmasp's rule. This was apparently due to the diversion of funds from military affairs towards the coffers of the Safavid royal house. This dealt a heavy blow to the Iranian army. Close to 15,000 unpaid

professional troops left Iran to serve in the militaries of India, Central Asia, and the Ottoman Empire.⁶ By the time of Tahmasp's death, the state could only afford to field 30,000 cavalry.⁷ None would be more disappointed than Iran's potential European allies. On October 7, 1571, they had finally gained an important victory when the combined navies of a number of Christian states (especially Venice and Spain) defeated the Ottomans in the battle of Lepanto. Pope Pius V had then sent a message to Shah Tahmasp I encouraging him to attack the Ottomans and regain his lost territories.⁸ Nothing came of this as, according to D'Alessandri, the Shah had become more interested in wealth and women than in fighting the Ottomans.⁹

The state of the army and its reforms reached a new low with the accession of the weak-willed Mohammad Khodabandeh (1578–87). Once again, the Europeans hoped in vain to form a military alliance with the Safavids against the Ottomans. Pope Gregory XIII dispatched Giovanni Battista Vecchietti to obtain information on the state of the Iranian military at the time. Vecchietti reported that Khodabandeh had limited military resources with practically no cannon in service.¹⁰ This is not surprising as this state of affairs was contiguous with the latter days of Tahmasp I's reign. Vecchietti also noted that Khodabandeh was a mere puppet of the Turkmen tribal leaders.¹¹ This was an astute observation as the Qizilbash wielded much power during the reigns of both Tahmasp and Khodabandeh.

Iran, however, was not suffering from any shortage of weapons at this time. According to Mirkhand, workshops across Iran's cities had continued to produce a large number of weapons and deliver these to Safavid arsenals.¹² This would be of great benefit to the revival of the Iranian army after the overthrow of Mohammad Khodabandeh in 1587. When Shah Abbas began to implement his reforms in the 1590s and 1600s, he found that he was able to quickly reconstitute the Iranian army with a large inventory of weapons already stocked in Iran's arsenals.

The Safavid military: organization and units

The Safavid army was to change considerably from its beginnings in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Many of the units and designations below have their origins in reforms implemented during the reign of Shah Abbas I (1587–1629), with a number of these originating as early as the time of Shah Tahmasp (1524–76).

When Tahmasp I attained the throne in 1524, he pursued his late father's project of forming an elite armed royal guard (Turkic plural *Qoorchilar*, singular *Qoorchi*; original Mongolian term for "archer"). These were drawn from the country's Turkmen warriors, often the Qizilbash. The Qoorchi stood at around 4,500 to 5,000 men by the 1570s.¹³ By the end of Shah Abbas I's reign in 1629, these had almost tripled to 12,000 men.¹⁴ Their armaments were a mix of traditional weapons (i.e. curved Shamshir swords, axes, etc.) and muskets. As dedicated royal guards, the Qoorchi were distinct from the main body of Iran's Qizilbash, but would often wear the 12-gore Qizilbash hat in battle. These troops were paid and armed directly by the Safavid royal house, being subject to the direct orders of the king. Qoorchi units at the time of Shah Abbas I were led by Allahverdi Khan (1560–1613), the governor of Fars province. The Qoorchis, whose commander was the *Qoorchi-Bashi*, contained both cavalry and infantry units.¹⁵ By the time of Shah Abbas II in 1642–66, Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1605–89), records a total of 22,000 Qoorchis in military

service.¹⁶ The office of the Qoorchi-Bashi was considered one of the most important posts of the Safavid state.¹⁷

The Qizilbash had been instrumental in bringing Shah Ismail to power. Though formidable warriors, the Qizilbash were highly conservative in their military doctrine. They favoured traditional cavalry and arms while shunning more modern developments in firearms. The Qizilbash were organized around tribal units and provincial contingents led by their respective khans. Every group of a hundred men was led by a *Yuz-Bashi* (Turkic: commander/leader of one hundred).

The khans were represented among the top command echelons of the Safavid army. They had a powerful voice in government and in matters of royal succession. The Qizilbash clans wielded considerable influence in Iran. Their leaders were in key positions of military, economic, and political leadership. Shah Ismail, however, had remained as the undisputed commander-in-chief of the army. In reality, the Qizilbash were the political-military elite that could potentially challenge the Safavid throne. They had very strong tribal loyalties, a factor which could undermine the stability of the state. As lifetime warriors, the Qizilbash looked down on the Iranians who were seen as fit “only” for administrative and bureaucratic duties.

Ismail had soon realized the long-term dangers of the Qizilbash power base within the realm. Although they certainly were excellent warriors, the force was also a double-edged sword, as they could menace the stability and integrity of the realm. As early as 1507, Ismail had appointed an Iranian to the office of the *Vakil* (i.e. viceroy), which was the highest political post in Safavid Iran.¹⁸ The defeat at Chaldiran had certainly shattered Ismail’s semi-divine status as the infallible and undefeatable Morshed of his Qizilbash Moridan. While Ismail certainly continued to be respected, the Qizilbash had begun increasingly to act like the feudal-type barons seen in late Parthian times.¹⁹ After Chaldiran, Shah Ismail elevated a number of local Iranian nobles to positions of government but this measure did little to eliminate the primarily Qizilbash influence in the military and government. Ismail’s successor Tahmasp I concluded that the only way to reduce Qizilbash influence was to recruit a large new class of *Gholam* (Turkic: slaves/servants) into the military and civilian administration. It would take many more decades before the Turkmens could be significantly displaced from the main levers of power in the government and military, but Tahmasp succeeded in initiating this process.

Caucasian Christians (Georgians, Armenians) and Circassians were brought from the Caucasus to be recruited as the army’s *Ghollar*. Like the Christian boys raised as Ottoman Janissaries, the Caucasians were raised and trained as Gholam warriors from an early age. They were proficient in the use of muskets and traditional weapons, notably Shamshir swords, maces, axes, spears, and archery equipment.²⁰ Gholams could also be placed into various professions to learn various skills and crafts as the state saw fit. Gholam units could be infantry or cavalry, totaling 15,000 men at the time of Shah Abbas I.²¹

It was during the reign of Shah Abbas that Gholam contingents greatly expanded in scope and importance. These, however, never came to threaten or disproportionately influence the political processes of the state. By the reign of Shah Abbas II (1642–66), the total number of Gholam troops stood at 18,000 men.²² Their numbers remained consistent at 15,000–18,000 men during the reign of Shah Safi II/Suleiman (r. 1666/1668–94).²³ The office of the *Ghollar-Aghassi* (Turkic: General of the Gholams) was second only to that of the Qoorchi-Bashi.²⁴

At the beginning of Shah Abbas' reign in 1587, the Qizilbash were able to mobilize up to a maximum of 60,000 troops (almost all cavalry).²⁵ This was to change as Shah Abbas implemented his reforms, which included promotion of the Gholams. A comparison of the numbers of Qizilbash chiefs in 1578 and 1629 provides a statistical measure of their decline. In a listing of Safavid military commanders in 1576 (last year of Tahmasp I's rule), there are 114 amirs (military commanders) cited of whom almost all are Qizilbash. In contrast, of 90 amirs listed in 1629, only 25 were Qizilbash.²⁶ The number of Qizilbash warriors was halved by Shah Abbas I to 30,000 troops during his reign.

Another interesting change took place in the armaments of the Qizilbash. These had traditionally been weapons such as swords, mace, lances, and archery equipment. Numbers of Qizilbash also took to wearing light metal helmets in battle.²⁷ By the time Shah Abbas' reforms had been implemented, numbers of regular Qizilbash troops carried muskets. Top Qizilbash commanders refused to adopt firearms, a testament to their conservative preference for more traditional fighting methods.²⁸ The reduction of Qizilbash influence removed a chief obstacle against the development of firearm units for the Iranian army.

Regular troops and cavalry numbered at 12,000 and 20,000 respectively under Shah Abbas, and were under the direct command of the shah.²⁹ The troops were paid and armed directly by the state. The cavalry element was intended to replace the Qizilbash. One of the European translators for the Shirley brothers in Iran wrote later that Shah Abbas I was able to raise a maximum of 100,000 cavalry.³⁰ This was possible by mobilizing all available units across the country, especially in the tribal and provincial districts. The cavalry in general (regular, provincial, and tribal) were a powerful arm of the Iranian army. European accounts describe regular units deploying a variety of weapons (Shamshir curved swords, spears, archery equipment, firearms etc) with deadly speed and a high level of effectiveness.³¹ These are described as being capable of quickly dispersing and coalescing at points of their own choosing during battle.³²

The *Tofangchilar* (Turkic plural: gunmen/musketeers, singular *Tofangchi*) were the Safavids' formal firearms units. The state of the Tofangchis at the time of Shah Abbas I has been vividly described by the Italian traveler Pietro Della Valle (1586–1652).³³ He noted that the Tofangchis were mainly recruited from the tough and robust Iranian-speaking peasants, in accordance with the advice of the Shirley brothers.³⁴ This is interesting as the 18th-century Iranian military leader, Nader Shah, was to recruit his musketeers in the same way. The Tofangchis were infantry who used horses for long-distance marches and campaigns.³⁵ They were able to fire from horseback if necessary. Their units were paid a regular salary throughout the year and expected to report to duty at times of war. Valle was especially impressed by the Tofangchis' ability to set up or leave camp at great speed. They are also described as being able to do so without being detected by the enemy. The Tofangchis were led by commanders known as *Yuz-Bashi*, not unlike the Qizilbash contingents.

Despite their lower social status in comparison to the Qizilbash, the Tofangchis were, according to Valle, among Shah Abbas' favourite units. The best of the Tofangchis came from Iran's northern Mazandaran province.³⁶ It is not clear how many Tofangchis were in service at the time of Shah Abbas I; estimates vary from 20,000 to 60,000.³⁷ By the time of Shah Abbas II, these are reported as standing at 40,000–50,000 men.³⁸ The Tofangchis were noted for maintaining their weapons and

uniforms in a high state of cleanliness and preparedness.³⁹ Tavernier reported the Tofangchis as having a high level of accuracy and agility during the reign of Shah Abbas II. One of their exercises involved a line of ten men aiming their muskets towards a line of ten spears thrust into the ground. Each spear had an apple placed at its top. Every apple would be accurately hit by the Tofangchis from a distance of 100 paces.⁴⁰

The *Jazayerchi* were first introduced during the reign of Shah Abbas II, numbering at 600 troops.⁴¹ These were a new elite troop selected from the most capable and resilient warriors of the realm. They were armed with the larger and heavier hand-held firearm known as the *Jazayer*.⁴² This was a much heavier form of musket, which due to its size and weight was fired by placing it on a tripod. For hand-to-hand combat, the Jazayerchis were also armed with Shamshir swords and daggers.⁴³ The Jazayerchis were to be later increased to 2,000 men.⁴⁴

The *Toopchis* were the artillerymen, manning the cannon units. In overall command of these contingents was the office of the *Toopchi-Bashi* (lit. cannon master/leader).⁴⁵ It is difficult to arrive at a consistent estimate of the size of the Safavid artillery corps, which at the time of Shah Abbas I stood at its strongest level. In general, it probably fielded a maximum of 500 cannon and up to 12,000 Toopchis.⁴⁶ Cannon were often used in sieges to destroy enemy towers and walls.⁴⁷ The Toopchis generally laid sandbags around their artillery nests during siege operations to protect themselves against enemy firearms.⁴⁸ The capture of cities and fortresses often entailed the practice of cutting off the besieged locale from all sources of supplies. Western observers note the relative lack of knowledge of the Iranians in their use of cannon in siege warfare.⁴⁹ Despite this liability, the Iranians were certainly adept in engineering operations and the digging of tunnels under enemy walls.⁵⁰ Excepting perhaps the reforms during the reign of Shah Abbas I, the Iranians never synthesized cannon as an integral part of their weaponry on the battlefield.⁵¹

This office of the Toopchi-Bashi was of considerable importance during Shah Abbas I's era but had steadily declined by the middle of the 17th century. Tavernier reports on the artillery's low level of efficiency and preparedness; he also notes that numbers of cannon were buried in the grounds of Isfahan.⁵² The office of the Toopchi-Bashi was actually temporarily abolished in 1655 (during the reign of Shah Abbas II) due to a combination of financial difficulties, the relatively peaceful state of relations with Iran's neighbours and the low amount of available operational cannon.⁵³ The generally negative reports of the Iranian artillery continue into the reign of Shah Safi II/Suleiman.⁵⁴ By this time the office of the Toopchi-Bashi had been reinstated with a nominal force of 4,000 Toopchis.⁵⁵ In practice that force existed mostly on paper, thanks to the consistent overall neglect afforded the artillery arm after the death of Shah Abbas I. Safi II/Suleiman did contemplate a reform of the artillery arm, but the idea was abandoned.⁵⁶

Amiri and Monshi provide a summary of the appropriation of cannon into the Safavid army.⁵⁷ The first of these came from battlefield captures of Ottoman and later of Portuguese cannon. The flight of the Ottoman prince Bayezid into Iran (who brought numbers of cannon with him) may also be viewed in this context. The next source of cannon came from the factories established with the assistance of the Shirley brothers during the reign of Shah Abbas I. There were also a number of mobile workshops capable of producing cannon at military camps during campaigns.

Provincial and tribal units were composed of both infantry and cavalry units but were clearly delineated from the regular and standing forces during Shah Abbas' reforms. The costs of

maintaining local and tribal units were often incurred by the commanding khans. By the time of Safi II/Suleiman, Iran was (nominally) able to call on an impressive array of provincial contingents supported by local tribal forces from the following locales in the event of an emergency: Kandahar (12,000), Khorasan (20,000), Gilan and Mazandaran (15,000), Darband and Shirvan in the Caucasus (12,000), Azarbaijan (20,000), Yerevan in Armenia (12,000), Luristan (12,000), Susa in the southwest (15,000), south of Iran and Kerman (12,000).⁵⁸ Noteworthy were the Qajar tribes who often distinguished themselves as excellent warriors against the Ottomans throughout the Safavid dynasty.⁵⁹ These numbers certainly looked impressive on paper, but the reality was that by late Safavid times, the army's state of preparedness and ability to mobilize troops had fallen to dangerously low levels. This was to be disastrously demonstrated when the Afghans succeeded in overthrowing the Safavid dynasty in 1722.

An important Safavid unit contingent was the *Shahsevan* or "Friends of the Shah." These were an all-volunteer national force, mainly composed of Azaris, Kurds, Turkmens, and other tribal-provincial elements. Iranian historians trace their origins to the latter days of Shah Abbas I, numbering up to 120,000 men at that time.⁶⁰ Of these 45,000 were permanent troops serving within the elite contingents (Qoorchi and Gholam) and firearm units (Tofangchis and Toopchis). They were also instrumental in reducing the influence of the Qizilbash.⁶¹ The Shahsevan often served as a bulwark of national defense against foreign invasion through Azarbaijan. This was demonstrated two centuries later during the Russian invasions of Iran's khanates in the Caucasus.

The *Yesanchi* were auxiliary units responsible for guarding important buildings and installations. These often cleared the streets for the passage of the shah and his entourage. They were also involved in elaborate ceremonies for visiting ambassadors. One such example occurred when the new ambassadors arriving to Isfahan from the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Mughal India were greeted with a highly disciplined honor guard of up to 60,000 armed troops lined up on both sides of the road from the shah's palace in Isfahan to the village of Dolatabad.⁶² The Yesanchi were also involved in ceremonies and celebrations following battlefield victories.⁶³

The *Alamdar* personnel were entrusted with the carrying of flags in battle. The *Alamdar-Bashi* (lit. chief/head banner/flag bearer) had the privilege of bearing the largest and/or most important banners. Iranian flags and banners generally included a number of motifs including those with Qoranic inscriptions, the double-headed Zulfaqar sword of Imam Ali, the names of past fallen warriors, and the Lion and Sun emblem.⁶⁴ The Lion and Sun motif would become the major flag of Iran. It can be seen portrayed by Ja'far ibn Mohammad Abū Ma'shar al-Balkhī as early as AD 850, just two centuries after the fall of the Sassanians. The motifs can also be traced back to ancient Iran.⁶⁵ Safavid armies used a variety of drums, percussion instruments, and trumpets to build up martial spirit and demoralize the enemy.⁶⁶

The tradition of weapons manufacturing on the Iranian plateau has spanned thousands of years. Iran's military technology has had a symbiotic relationship with developments in Central Asia, China, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, Mesopotamia and Anatolia. The Iranians were especially adept at crafting traditional weapons such as swords, blade weapons, spears, archery equipment, maces, battleaxes, and armor.

Weapons and armor

The *Jabadar-Bashi* ensured that arsenals throughout the country were well-stocked with weapons (traditional weapons, firearms, and gunpowder). The Jabadar-Bashi was also responsible for the supervision of armament production in Iran's factories.⁶⁷ At times of war the army would procure its war supplies from the arsenals of those towns and cities closest to the war zone. The army also had a mobile production workshop and repair center to ensure that armaments were always available during campaigns. If defeat was imminent or if a city was about to be captured, the army was obligated to destroy any weapons production equipment that could fall into enemy hands.

The Iranian tradition of forging metals and steel can be traced back to approximately 3000 BC.⁶⁸ Persian blades were famous in the West, but mislabeled as "Damascene steel," because they were purchased in the markets of Damascus, where weapons from across the modern-day Middle East were sold.⁶⁹ The European error has been noted by Jean Chardin, a French Huguenot jeweler who spent a decade in Iran from 1665.⁷⁰ The best-quality steel was in fact from India,⁷¹ but Persian steel was also in high demand and was purchased by foreign buyers from Iran at the time of the Safavids.⁷² Persian steel was primarily produced in major cities such as Shiraz, Tabriz, Isfahan, Kerman, Qazvin, Mashad, and Rasht.⁷³

The single-edged Iranian curved Shamshir sword was designed for fighting on foot or on horseback. The origin of the Shamshir is debated, but it is certain that this weapon became popular in Iran after the Seljuk, Mongol, and Timurid invasions.⁷⁴ By the Safavid era, the curved Shamshir had completely replaced straight swords in Iran. European observers have described the high level of Iranian craftsmanship in the building of swords and blade weapons.⁷⁵ The Safavid-era Shamshir gained considerable fame due to its deadly sharpness and its virtually unbreakable blade.⁷⁶ As a deadly close-quarter combat weapon the Shamshir was described as "being able to slice the Ottoman Turks in two."⁷⁷

The main Safavid centers for Shamshir sword production were Tabriz, Qom, Isfahan, and Qazvin.⁷⁸ Ottoman and Indian sword builders were also to imitate the styles of Assadolah Isfahani and his son Kolbali from the city of Isfahan.⁷⁹ In addition, there were many different types of *Khanjar* or daggers being built.⁸⁰ Two important centers for producing these daggers were in Kurdistan and Isfahan. There were also cases of Iranian sword-builders imitating Ottoman swords, these being highly valued among the Iranians.

The construction of archery equipment reached a very high level of craftsmanship in Iran during the Safavid era.⁸¹ Archery has a very ancient tradition in Iran, beginning with the earliest Indo-European arrivals to the area.⁸² Safavid bows were of the Turco-Persian composite type, built of wood variously combined with sinew, bone, wood, bark, horn, or intestine.⁸³ There is little doubt of the high quality of Iranian archery equipment. Chardin noted in his travelogues that "Persian bows are the best built in the East."⁸⁴

Arrows could be generally classified as long or short. Long arrows were around 30in (75cm) with shorter arrows acting as darts. The latter could rarely penetrate the opponent's armor, but they were an excellent harassment weapon due to their effectiveness against unprotected horses, unarmored levies, and infantry. Arrows were carried in pouches known as *Tir-Kesh* or *Tir-Dan*. There were at least 12 types of arrowheads including the *Chahar-Par* (four-lobed), and the *Beilak* or *Azar*, which caused severe injuries. There were also a whole class of arrows specifically designed for training purposes and competitive events.

Battleaxes, maces, and spears have a very ancient tradition in Iran. Bronze axe-heads dating at least as far back as the middle to late 3rd millennium BC have been found in Luristan.⁸⁵ The ancient Old-Iranian *Avesta* text mentions a weapon known as the “*Chakosh*” which was a double-headed axe thrown at the enemy.⁸⁶ The term has undergone many semantic changes such that the term “*Chakosh*” means hammer in modern Persian today. Safavid-era battleaxes were built to a high standard, with the handle of these often having spear-like tips.⁸⁷ Tips of spears were built of steel with the shaft being up to 10ft (3m) in length.⁸⁸ The mace was also a favourite Safavid weapon, used especially in hand-to-hand combat. Qizilbash warriors used a variant of the mace known as the “*Shesh Par*” (six-sided).⁸⁹

Iran has an ancient tradition of manufacturing armor. Demand for Persian armor over the centuries was prevalent in the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, Russia, and Central Asia.⁹⁰ The *Zereh* (Iranian mail) consists of a mesh of steel or rings of iron that could be welded, bent, or riveted.⁹¹ The best-quality mail appears to have come from Isfahan and modern Iraq.⁹² The *Jawshan*, a shirt-like construction of *Zereh* integrated with armored plates, appeared almost simultaneously in Iran, the Caucasus, northern India, and Anatolia.⁹³ *Jawshan* not only provided excellent protection against arrows, but was also light to wear. There were other types of armor, notably the *Basu-band* used for protecting the forearm and hand in battle.⁹⁴ John Cartwright, an English traveler who visited Isfahan in 1603, noted that Iranian mail provided excellent protection against arrows and battleaxes.⁹⁵

The *Basu-band* was often built for the right hand as the warrior often held the shield with his left hand during battle.⁹⁶ The Safavid *Separ* or shield⁹⁷ draws from a 4,000-year tradition of shield construction in Iran.⁹⁸ Safavid shields were variously built of steel, hide (rhinoceros or elephant), or even tough woods.⁹⁹ Safavid shields were circular. Interestingly, small cushions were included inside the *Separ* to lessen the impact of blows delivered by enemy maces and swords.¹⁰⁰ There was also a four-plated *Chahar-Ayneh* (Persian: four mirrors) that was used for protection of the torso. This was constructed of four rectangular plates: one to protect the chest (*Seeneh-band*), one for the back (*Posht-band*), one *Baghal-band* for the left side of the torso and another *Baghal-band* for the right side.¹⁰¹ The *Chahar-Ayneh* was built mainly in cities such as Yazd, Herat, Tabriz, Shiraz, and Isfahan.¹⁰² The *Chahar-Ayneh* was exported outside of Iran, one prime customer being the Russians.¹⁰³

Safavid *Kolah-Khud* helmets were built of a cone-like dome constructed of hard steel. The neck was protected by mail woven onto the sides and back of the helmet.¹⁰⁴ Prior to wearing the helmet, the warrior would place a seven-layered cloth of silk or felt on his head for additional protection.¹⁰⁵ Helmets and armor protection were also made for the heads of horses.¹⁰⁶

Reviving the martial arts

The Safavid era witnessed a vigorous revival of the ancient Iranian tradition of martial arts.¹⁰⁷ Chardin reported that “the youth, much like the times of ancient Persia, are introduced to martial exercises.”¹⁰⁸ The objective of the Safavids was to inculcate hand-to-hand combat skills, physical strength, and endurance. There was a keen emphasis on cultivating a warrior spirit and high morale, not unlike that seen in the Ottoman Janissaries or *Yenicheri*.

The Pahlavi (Middle Persian) term *Pahlevan* hails back to Partho-Sassanian times. It is a description of a warrior with conviction, courage, generosity, fairness, and mercy in battle, a

powerful sense of camaraderie, strict obedience, high standards of culture and moral conduct, who feels an obligation to protect the weak and helpless, who treats non-combatants with generosity.¹⁰⁹ There were a number of training exercises and treatises on warfare for the Pahlevan warriors of the Sassanian era.¹¹⁰ A unique development from the middle of the Safavid period was the revival of the *Varzesh-e Bastani* (lit. sports of the ancient/Ancient Persia).¹¹¹ The Pahlevans also acted as sheriffs or bailiffs in their local area, often patrolling the streets at night to ensure public safety. They became a vital element in Safavid law and order.¹¹²

Wrestling and hand-to-hand combat training were heavily emphasized. The Safavids placed great stress on face-to-face combat, and specific sword exercises were given for left–right and up–down movements as well as backward slashing actions. The aim of this was to increase strength, stamina, and fencing skills. Stick-fighting, which is still practiced by the Lurs and Bakhtiari of western Iran to this day, was undertaken with sticks wrapped in wire that weighed up to 20lb (9kg).¹¹³ Other exercises included stretching in order to increase limb flexibility. These training regimens were to yield dramatic results on the battlefield. One case of this occurred in Yerevan in 1604 where after holding out for months, the Ottoman garrison was forced to surrender after just a few hours of hand-to-hand combat.¹¹⁴ While the Ottomans were among the world's best troops in the use of firearms, the Iranian troops they faced were according to Vecchietti “expert in fighting with sword, lance and bow, and ... were greatly superior to the Turks in this.”¹¹⁵

The exercise venue for wrestling and strength training was the *Zoor-Khaneh* (lit. the house of power). Wrestling in the Safavid era also involved punching, a form of wrestling still seen in Gilan, northern Iran.¹¹⁶ Training was meant to prepare warriors for facing superior numbers of opponents on the battlefield. The exercise tools of the *Varzesh-e Bastani* were all derived from weapons.¹¹⁷ Khorasani has identified six traditional Iranian exercise regimens that survive to this day in Iran's *Zoor-Khaneh* schools.¹¹⁸ These are: *Sang*: based on the *Separ*, equipped with handles and used for “bench press”-type exercises; *Kabade*: a bow of iron or steel with a string of iron-chain, 60in (150cm) in length and around 45lb (20kg); *Takhteh Shena*: a wooden plank 4in (10cm) wide and 3ft (1m) long, used for five types of push-ups, often performed as a group; *Meel*: a wooden mace-like device weighing 25–110lb (11–50kg) and up to 4½ft (1.3m) tall; *Pa Zadan*, a variety of tools used to increase speed and reaction in a series of exercises including stepping exercises and avoidance training; *Charkh*: an ancient exercise of spinning, faster and faster. When the warrior was overwhelmed by superior numbers during battle, he would hold a blade with one or both outstretched hands and “spin and slash” his way out of the impasse.

The Safavids had a variety of other exercises for strength training. One of these involved the throwing spears that were larger and heavier than ordinary combat spears. Constant exercise and training enabled the best warriors to reputedly throw these as far as 600–700ft (180–215m).¹¹⁹ Safavid troops became very versatile at throwing spears in combat situations.

Training in archery was an ancient Iranian tradition that the Safavids vigorously revived.¹²⁰ To ensure that the archer's hands remained steady throughout the process of drawing the bow and releasing arrows, bows of increasing strength and weight would be given to the trainee.¹²¹

Fighting from horseback had been an essential skill since the Indo-European arrivals into Iran thousands of years before. The Safavids, like all their predecessors in Iran, were keen on developing effective cavalry skills, and polo (usually with 20 players on each side) was a favourite pastime of

the Safavids, including Shah Abbas I who participated on a regular basis.¹²² One interesting exercise required the rider to shoot an arrow backwards (the Parthian shot) at a cup placed on top of a 120ft (36m) pillar. Accuracy at full gallop was the primary objective. Post-Safavid cavalry became especially adept of delivering the Parthian shot with firearms. There was much emphasis on fluid rider–horse cooperation. Safavid riders were so proficient that they could gallop at full speed, on a loose rein and standing on their stirrups, while in complete control of their mount. Safavid riders could also ride sideways on the saddle to shoot their arrows with deadly accuracy. The best Iranian horses at the time were from the provinces of Luristan, Azarbaijan, and Fars. Arabian horses were also especially prized.

The introduction and development of firearms in Iran

The first systematic effort to train a regular standing force of musketeers began during Tahmasp's reign under Portuguese instructors.¹²³ Tahmasp and his commanders appreciated the Ottoman proficiency in the use of firearms.¹²⁴ In general, the early Safavids relied on foreign deliveries and battlefield captures to maintain a modest force of cannon. During Tahmasp's reign, for example, a defecting Ottoman prince brought high-quality horses (especially Arabians) and 30 cannon to Iran.¹²⁵ The Portuguese also provided the Iranians with 200 cannon for use against the Ottomans.¹²⁶

The Ottoman menace during the reign of Mohammad Khodabandeh (1578–87) prompted him to request European assistance. This soon resulted in the arrival of an envoy from Russia's Tsar Ivan IV, with 100 cannon and 500 firearms, to Qazvin.¹²⁷ Khodabandeh also made requests to the Grand Duke of Tuscany for Italian artillery instructors. The Pope even offered to supply cannon to the Safavids in 1783.¹²⁸

Shah Abbas I had a keen interest in cannon from the early days of his reign. In a meeting in 1595 with the Russian ambassador in Kashan, Shah Abbas had asked him several questions about Russian cannon.¹²⁹ In the same year, Iranian envoys left for Russia to purchase weapons.¹³⁰ Three years later, Shah Abbas gained access to European methods of firearms manufacturing. The English brothers Sir Anthony Shirley (*c.* 1565–1635) and Robert Shirley (*c.* 1581–1628) arrived in Iran in November 1598.¹³¹ The Shirley mission had been sent by the Earl of Essex to unite Iran with the Europeans against the Ottoman Turks, and facilitate commercial relations between England and Iran.

The Shirleys soon began to introduce European methods of warfare into Iran.¹³² One of their chief successes was in helping the Safavids organize their forces into distinct infantry, cavalry, and artillery arms.¹³³ The Shirleys worked closely with Allahverdi Khan, a major proponent of military reforms.¹³⁴ They were also of major assistance in introducing contemporary European methods of mass production for hand-held firearms and artillery in Isfahan.¹³⁵ It is estimated that through their efforts, the Shirleys helped the Iranians produce 500 pieces of artillery and 20,000 muskets.¹³⁶ The new cannon, in conjunction with those already captured from the Ottomans, gave rise to a highly formidable artillery force.

Despite their achievements, the role of the Shirleys in improving the organization of the Iranian military and firearms production is now believed to have been exaggerated.¹³⁷ Chardin provides an astute observation clearly showing that the Iranians were not simply copying European muskets in their factories. He reports for example that “the barrel of the Persian weapon is heavier [than

European counterparts] which makes its range and penetration greater.”¹³⁸ Another European observer at the time of the Shirleys has stated “I have never seen any gun barrel as well-built as I have seen in Persia.”¹³⁹ These observations clearly indicate that Iranian engineers had already implemented their own innovations to the musket, probably in accordance with the needs of Safavid military commanders on the Ottoman front. Cannonballs were mainly built in Mazandran. To the Shirleys’ credit, the Isfahan firms they designed continued their production into the early Qajar era.¹⁴⁰ Interestingly, the English system for weights, the pound, was used to designate cannonball specifications. For example if a cannonball weighed 80lb (36kg), it would be designated as “*Hashtad Pondi*” (80-pounder) in Persian.¹⁴¹ The maximum rate of fire for Safavid cannon was approximately one round per minute. Shah Abbas I continued to search for and receive arms from Europe for the Iranian army. As late as the 1610s, he received muskets from Venice and through the East India Company.¹⁴² Iranian cannon were primarily used in sieges against fortresses and cities. They were not thoroughly integrated into Iranian armies on the open battlefield until the reign of Nader Shah (r. 1736–47).

The origins of the *Zanbourak*, essentially a small cannon mounted on a special saddle placed on the back of a camel, are obscure. Some suggest that it was first developed by the Afghans of Kandahar, with others suggesting a Mughal origin.¹⁴³ Khorasani explains how the first prototype for this weapon was developed by the Shirley brothers near Lake Van in 1603.¹⁴⁴ This was an especially agile and mobile artillery unit, ideally suited for the vast, rugged, and varied terrain of Iran. The operator of the Zanbourak was known as the *Zanbourakchi*. The Zanbourak was not utilized much by the Safavids. It was certainly used as a major weapon by the Afghans when they invaded Iran in 1722.¹⁴⁵ Nader Shah made full use of this weapon against the Afghans, the Mughals, and the Ottomans. Usage of the weapon became less frequent during the Qajar period and was eventually phased out.

Iran had a number of workshops based in its major urban centers for weapons production. With the arrival of the Shirley brothers, firearms production was also introduced. Factories for the production of both traditional weapons and firearms were soon available in a number of Iran’s cities. The quality and workmanship of the products of Iranian weapons factories and workshops were highly praised by European observers during the Safavid era.¹⁴⁶

After his conquest of Herat, Shah Ismail I encouraged a large number of that city’s most talented artisans, artists, ironsmiths, and weapons manufacturers to come to Tabriz in Azarbaijan, where special quarters were constructed for them. This combination of the industrial traditions of Tabriz and Herat resulted in a dramatic improvement in the Iranian weapons production technology. A variety of new types of siege engines were soon invented.¹⁴⁷ These included new designs for stone-throwing artillery engines and launchers for large missiles (arrows/spears). A new type of flammable projectile also appeared, which was essentially hardened glass filled with flammable oils. A fuse on the projectile would be lit before it was shot into enemy ranks. Another interesting weapon was a metallic saucer filled with gunpowder that would explode upon impact. Tabriz-based Heratis are also credited with the design of a new type of metal Tabriz helmet. This was allegedly lightweight yet very robust, especially against arrows and even musket fire, although no samples are known to have been discovered.

Isfahan became a leading center for weapons production during the Safavid era, especially from the time of Shah Abbas I.¹⁴⁸ Traditional weapons were produced, with one entire section of the Aali

Qapu Square dedicated to weapons production.¹⁴⁹ Other sections of Isfahan (e.g. the Bazaar) produced firearms.¹⁵⁰ There were also factories that produced both traditional weapons and firearms. During the reign of Shah Abbas I, one factory housed 200 workers producing cannon, archery equipment, and Shamshir curved swords.¹⁵¹ Isfahan had also been settled by weapons builders from Mashad, famed for their production of exemplary archery equipment.¹⁵²

A number of other cities such as Shiraz served as leading weapons manufacturing centers. Kermanshah became a leading center, until its destruction by Karim Khan Zand. Major factories were also located in the Caucasus, such as Yerevan, which had a very large weapons production center for the Safavid army against the Ottomans. By the late Safavid era, Qom is also reported as a major center for the manufacture of blades and swords.¹⁵³

Fortifications

There were relatively few fortifications in Safavid Iran compared to Europe. Duri Effendi, an Ottoman ambassador visiting in 1720, noted that Iran had only three major fortresses, Kandahar (facing the Mughals of India), Yerevan (in the Caucasus facing the Ottomans to their east) and Darband (also in the Caucasus).¹⁵⁴ Apart from these, most Iranian cities were not defended by massive fortifications and so were generally unable to withstand armies equipped with artillery. Iranian operations against the Ottomans on the western frontier were often based on mobility, although siege operations would occur (e.g. Sultan Murad IV's successful 1638 siege of Baghdad).

A number of forts built along Iran's frontiers during the reign of Shah Safi II/Suleiman were described as poorly equipped to withstand sieges.¹⁵⁵ This did not mean that the Iranians lacked the knowledge and capability of building effective fortified structures. Chardin's description of Isfahan's Tabrak fortress, for example, reveals that the Iranians were efficient in military fortifications, at least at the time of Shah Abbas II.¹⁵⁶ Tabrak is described as having four major towers, a large ditch, an obstacle up to 30ft (9m) wide, 370 houses (for the troops), a major arsenal, and 40 high-quality cannon seized from the Ottomans and the Portuguese.

Matthee has provided a detailed analysis on the relatively weak state of many Iranian cities with respect to siege warfare by the late 1600s.¹⁵⁷ His survey provides a dismal picture of the defensive walls of major Iranian cities at the time. The walls of Shamakhi (in the Caucasus) and Kashan are described as "badly maintained," and those of Qazvin and Qom as "ruined," with Shiraz, Lar, and Rasht having no walls for defense.¹⁵⁸ Only Darband, Isfahan, and Mashad are identified as having well-maintained walls for defense.¹⁵⁹ The state of Tabriz's walls in the critical province of Azarbaijan is ambiguously described as "Yes/No." With the exception of Yerevan and Darband, virtually all other cities in the Caucasus, northwest Iran and the west (with the likely exception of Kermanshah) were vulnerable to invasion. In the east and northeast, Kandahar and Mashad were the only cities boasting powerful walls capable of withstanding sieges.

Army organization

When war was imminent, the shah would send his messengers to call up all available troops from Iran's cities, provinces, and tribal areas. These would muster in the capital where they were organized

by the royal commanders. When mobilization was complete and the army deployed to the critical sector, the commanders and the shah would discuss strategy.¹⁶⁰ However, swift enemy invasions of Iranian territory did not allow the full mobilization of the army in this way. In such critical scenarios, the shah marched as quickly as possible towards threatened sectors with those forces available. Messengers would also be sent throughout the realm for additional troops to join the shah's main army while it was on the march.¹⁶¹ When all forces finally arrived to join the shah, these would be variously assigned to the standing army's left and right flanks, center, and advance guards.

Scorched-earth tactics were often used against Ottoman armies, notably by Tahmasp and Shah Abbas I. The populations of villages, towns, or even entire cities would be relocated away from the Ottoman path of advance. All buildings and food supplies would be destroyed, and wells poisoned. This ensured that large invading Ottoman armies would be prevented from securing supplies from recently conquered territories. This often wreaked havoc with Ottoman logistics. Invading armies would also be subjected to harassment raids by the Iranian cavalry.¹⁶² If the Ottomans chose to invade with smaller armies instead, they would then risk being outnumbered by hostile Iranian forces.

Spies and informants were an important element of the Safavid military. They were often sent deep inside enemy territory to gain information. Shah Abbas I also introduced the practice of sending spies with emissaries into potentially hostile countries. The spies would quickly relay critical messages through the Iranian postal service, which would rapidly convey these to the high command and even the shah himself.¹⁶³ Spying was also applied in battlefield situations. Their main function was to report on the state of both Iranian and enemy front lines and rear echelons.¹⁶⁴ Safavid spies also maintained up-to-date reports on Iran's roads, critical sectors, cities, and garrisons. By the time of Shah Abbas I, the spy network had extended into Iran's cities, villages, and rural areas. The reputation of Shah Abbas I's spies for efficiency gave rise to a number of exaggerated rumors, even that family members in private households suspected each other of being spies for the government!¹⁶⁵

A gradual decline

The Iranians did not place much emphasis on improving their military after Shah Abbas I. Despite this, Safavid armies continued to demonstrate their prowess during the reign of Shah Abbas II (1642–66) by scoring a dramatic victory against the Mughals at Kandahar in 1648–53. The army had (up to this time at least) been kept in constant state of battle-readiness with high numbers of trained troops. This began to change due to perceptions that Iran's territorial integrity was secure against foreign invasions. With the exception of the introduction of the Jazayer troops, Shah Abbas II showed little interest in the Iranian army. Royal troops were to become increasingly demoralized as a result of the increasing corruption from the military administrator's office. Demoralization soon seeped into the lower ranks as the delivery of supplies began to lose consistency. The rot of inefficiency inevitably spread across Iran resulting in a sharp decline in the military effectiveness of provincial contingents.

The artillery arm had begun its deterioration during the reign of Shah Abbas I's successor, Safi I (1629–42). The decline of the artillery was so serious that Safi I had requested assistance from England's King Charles I (1625–49) in rebuilding the Iranian army's *Toopchi* (artillery) units.¹⁶⁶ The artillery arm continued to decline during the reign of Shah Abbas II.¹⁶⁷ By 1666, Chardin

who was present during a military review at the time of Shah Abbas II was blatantly told by an Iranian official that “we have a good army for reviews, but a bad one for war.”¹⁶⁸ This seems partly contradictory given Chardin’s positive descriptions regarding Iranian training and quality of arms production. It would seem that the military decline was rooted in the inefficiency of upper leadership as well as fiscal mismanagement. These had a profound impact on the Iranian military as a whole. Another observation by contemporary Europeans was the lack of bombs and grenades in the Iranian arsenal.¹⁶⁹

The situation further deteriorated during the reign of Shah Safi II/Suleiman. Widespread corruption during his reign led to a dangerous slackening in efficiency. The system of payments to troops became alarmingly deficient.¹⁷⁰ Casualness, dereliction of duty, and the lack of discipline were also evident. Very dangerous was the sense of entitlement that had spread among troops who expected payment but felt little obligation to perform their military duties. The strength of existing military units also fell, with many units now existing only on paper. Perhaps most alarming was the lack of trained troops stationed along Iran’s critical frontiers by the late 1670s.¹⁷¹ The rot which would destroy the military power of the Safavid Empire was now fully in place. The disastrous results of this decline in efficiency would manifest themselves by the early 18th century.

A dangerous vacuum: Iran’s lack of a navy

Despite Iran’s strides in military developments during Shah Abbas I’s reign, especially in firearms production, the Iranians did little to address a serious military problem: they had no navy of their own in the Persian Gulf.¹⁷² The Portuguese had been able to sail into the Persian Gulf in the early 16th century and seize islands for the simple reason that there was no Iranian navy to stop them. Shah Abbas I’s successes in ejecting the Portuguese out of islands such as Qeshm and Hormuz owed much to the support of British warships.

Warships in the Persian Gulf belonged to India, the Europeans, and the Arabs (especially Muscat). Iranian ports in the Persian Gulf were often unable to accommodate contemporary war vessels. The Iranians did not build powerful warships in the Persian Gulf, in contrast to the Caspian Sea where the ships were especially sturdy, built of a combination of wood and iron.¹⁷³ This meant that Iran remained dangerously vulnerable to the inroads of countries possessing powerful navies, notably the technologically advancing Europeans. For the time being (the Safavid era), relations were certainly constructive between Iran and the West. But with the passage of time, European powers would be inclined to expand their economic and political influence into the Persian Gulf, with little regard for Iran’s interests. The long-term dangers of lacking a navy in the Persian Gulf were simply not appreciated by the Safavids. By the early 1700s Iran was already facing a powerful fleet from Muscat but had no naval assets to confront it.

CHAPTER 4

PRESERVING THE EMPIRE (1524–87)

The ascension of Tahmasp I

After Ismail's death in 1524, the powerful Qizilbash, led by Vali Beg Afshar Yuz-Bashi, the leader of the Palace Guard, secured the royal palace and its environs. A royal council composed mainly of the Qizilbash was then formed, resulting in the ascension of 11-year-old Tahmasp I, the son of the late Ismail, to the Iranian throne. After Chaldiran, Ismail had made attempts to curb the Qizilbash Turkmen influence. This process was reversed by Tahmasp's *Atabeg* (Turkic: title of nobility or governor of the state but here meaning tutor), Div Sultan of the Romlu tribe, upon Ismail's death. Div Sultan took over the office *Amir ol Omara* (lit. amir of the amirs). He was to be immediately challenged by another powerful Turkmen tribe of Ustajlu prominent in both Azarbaijan (in the northwest) and Khorasan (in the northeast). Div Sultan managed to retain his post by making compromises with Kopek Sultan (of the Ustajlu) and Chuha Sultan (of the Tekkelu). This resulted in a triumvirate system of rule composed of Div Sultan, Kopek Sultan, and Chuha Sultan. Div Sultan was not content with this state of affairs and sought to eject Kopek Sultan and Chuha Sultan. This led to major battles in the northeast, which soon spread to other parts of Iran.

The fighting resulted in the death of Kopek Sultan and the battering of the Ustajlu tribe. Chuha Sultan then used his guile to incite Tahmasp against his Atabeg, Div Sultan. In the summer of 1527, Tahmasp symbolically shot an arrow towards Div Sultan in the presence of the court, signaling the end of the Atabeg. This was followed by the decline of the Romlu with the Tekkelu gaining ascendancy, but only for three years. The Tekkelu were then challenged in 1531 by Herat's governor, Hussein Khan, leader of the Shamlu tribe. Chuha Sultan was slain with Hossein Khan now assuming his former opponent's position. This success proved ephemeral, as just three years later Hossein Khan was removed from his post and executed. The Turkmen tribal clans behaved like a Praetorian Guard, a situation that was to endure for decades.¹

The tumultuous state of Turkmen tribal politics proved highly detrimental to the Safavid military in three ways. First, the infighting prevented the Iranians from fully focusing on the rebuilding of their armies. The conflicts also undermined Safavid military efficiency against dangerous invaders such as the Uzbeks and Ottomans. The third problem was that as one clan gained the upper hand, it immediately earned the enmity of the defeated clan(s). The prospect of renewed internecine fighting posed a continual threat for Iran. It was in this context that Tahmasp, like Ismail, looked to counterbalance the power of the Qizilbash, by introducing Gholam units.

Tahmasp's battles with the Uzbeks in Khorasan and the northeast (1524–35)

The Safavids were not just representative of a post-Islamic Iranian cultural revival. They had also inherited the strategic challenges that had troubled their pre-Islamic predecessors, who had faced the Romano-Byzantines to their west and the Turco-Huns to their northeast.² By the 1520s the three major empires in Western Asia and the Indian subcontinent were the Ottomans of Anatolia, the Safavids of Iran, and the Mughals of India. The Safavids' greatest military concerns were the Ottomans, followed by the Uzbeks and (to a lesser extent) the Mughals.³ Like the Sassanian Empire, the Safavids had to contemplate facing enemies on two fronts. Soon after Tahmasp assumed the throne, he was faced with fresh Uzbek attacks from Central Asia along the northeast frontiers. The Safavids never solved the problem of nomadic incursions into Khorasan as the Oxus River was fordable at numerous points, enabling the Uzbeks to launch five invasions between 1524 and 1535.⁴

The first Uzbek attack was somewhat like a large-scale raid, but their ultimate aim was to wrest Khorasan and Herat from the Iranians. The Uzbek attacks were most likely encouraged by the internecine warfare among Iran's Turkmen oligarchy.⁵ This is exemplified by a letter written by the Uzbek leader, Obeidollah Khan (the late Sheibani's nephew), to the commander of the Herat garrison being besieged during the winter of 1525–26. Obeidollah noted to Herat's commander that he could expect no help from Tahmasp as the Qizilbash were locked in conflict.⁶ He was correct, as Div Sultan of the Romlu could not spare troops to assist Herat due to his military preoccupation with his rivals. Fortunately, Herat held out and Obeidollah Khan withdrew.

Tahmasp succeeded in organizing a military response against the second Uzbek attack in 1528. The Uzbeks had occupied Mashad and Astrabad and were once again besieging Herat.⁷ A very bitter battle occurred at Jaam on September 24, 1528, in which Tahmasp personally took part. The Iranians deployed cannon, using methods learnt from the Ottomans.⁸ The Uzbeks mainly relied on their excellent archery skills during the battle. The Iranians then attempted to annihilate the Uzbeks by closing in with "Egyptian swords and large shields."⁹ Tahmasp himself charged with 3,000 of his cavalry and struck the Uzbek rear.¹⁰ The Uzbeks were defeated, but the Safavids failed to finish them off and they managed to escape.¹¹ Tahmasp was unable to continue the fight against the Uzbeks as he was forced to turn west to defeat an Ottoman-linked rebellion at Baghdad led by Zulfaqar Khan Mausillu Torkaman. Baghdad fell to Tahmasp in June 1529 and Mausillu was killed.

Tahmasp's Baghdad adventure gave Obeidollah time to regroup and organize his next attack into Iran. In 1529, the Uzbeks launched their third large-scale attack into Khorasan and the northeast, causing much destruction and hardship.¹² Mashad fell once more with the Uzbeks crushing a Safavid relief force of 3,000 Qizilbash cavalry.¹³

Interestingly, even as Safavid armies had been militarily engaged in northeast Iran, they had also engaged in a number of maneuvers and military reviews in the region. These maneuvers were meant to keep the army in a state of high alert and battle readiness but also to dissuade potential rebels in the area from taking advantage of the Uzbek raids to launch insurrections of their own.¹⁴ These tactics failed to stem the Uzbeks who also succeeded in capturing Herat.¹⁵ The fall of Herat was partly due to the continuing internecine Qizilbash rivalries. Chuha Sultan of the Tekkelu had refused to send military assistance to his rival, Hussein Khan, the commander of Herat. Iranian disunity clearly benefited the Uzbeks, who penetrated as far present-day Damghan.

News of this defeat came as a great shock to the Safavid court, but it was not until the summer of 1530 that Tahmasp marched at the head of a new army against the Uzbeks.¹⁶ As soon as Tahmasp's army arrived, Obeidollah's hand-picked governors took to their heels; Obeidollah himself retreated from Herat. He attempted to recruit more troops in Merv and when this failed he departed for Bukhara. With no Uzbeks to fight, Tahmasp withdrew by November. His army was too large to maintain in the field for an indefinite period without grave supply problems, and, more importantly, Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent was now threatening Iran's northern, Caucasian, and western frontiers.

The fourth Uzbek invasion occurred in 1531 and continued for two years.¹⁷ Tahmasp was in Tabriz when the Uzbeks struck, and witnessed the occupation of Khorasan province. This time the Uzbeks reached as far as Rayy in 1533.¹⁸ Herat, which was besieged, was the only locale that held out against the Uzbeks. Then all of sudden, in late October 1533, Obeidollah decided to return to Central Asia.

Tahmasp eventually arrived in Khorasan with his army by December 1533 and spent the winter in Herat to prepare for a massive punitive expedition against the Uzbeks. He finally deployed with his main force towards Balkh by late June 1534 to confront Obeidollah and the Uzbeks. Further military action was then abandoned due to a massive Ottoman invasion of western Iran.

Obeidollah launched the fifth and last of his invasions in 1535. This was largely facilitated by a local revolt against the Qizilbash, who constantly plundered the civilian population. A number of these rebels even made common cause with Obeidollah. Treason by some local citizens delivered Herat into the hands of Obeidollah and his allies. Despite this, Obeidollah was unable to hold on for long. As military discipline plummeted among the Uzbeks, news came that Tahmasp had halted an Ottoman invasion and was marching on Khorasan. Interestingly one of the reasons for Obeidollah's withdrawal was because of his troops' reluctance to fight the Qizilbash.¹⁹ There are reports of Qizilbash warriors crushing the Uzbeks in battle and chasing them back into Central Asia.²⁰

Tahmasp's battles with Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent

Even as the Uzbek frontier was temporarily pacified, the Ottoman military machine threatened Iran's western and northwest marches. Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–66), one of the most significant sultans of the Ottoman Empire, was an extremely capable and resourceful military leader. He posed a dangerous military threat to the Europeans, especially as previous Ottoman conquests had already absorbed much of the Balkans, and Serbia in particular.²¹ Suleiman had every intention of expanding further into Europe. Belgrade was conquered in August 1521, then in 1526 came Suleiman's great victory against King Louis II of Hungary at the battle of Mohacs. The Hapsburgs retook Hungary, but Suleiman reconquered the country in 1529. Suleiman concluded a ceasefire agreement with the Austrians in January 1533. By 1541, Suleiman's ascendancy over the Europeans was finally secured and Ferdinand and Charles V were forced to conclude unfavourable treaties with Suleiman. While Vienna remained outside the Ottoman orbit despite two sieges, Suleiman's military and political ascendancy in Europe had been firmly established.

The Iranians and the Europeans were both gravely concerned with the powerful Ottoman military machine. One thousand years previously, European Goth chieftains faced with Byzantine armies had sent embassies to King Khosrow I Anushirvan (r. 531–579); and the Europeans now realized how useful the Iranians could be as allies against the Ottomans. The first official contact between Iran and England took place when an envoy of Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603), Anthony Jenkinson (1529–1610/11), was granted an audience with Shah Tahmasp and the Safavid court in c. 1561–62, though this visit failed to achieve any results.²²

With the cessation of hostilities on his European frontiers, Suleiman turned his gaze eastwards. Suleiman was well aware of the potential danger posed by Iran, especially if it managed to reform and expand its military. Despite their overwhelming victory at Chaldiran, the Ottomans had failed to absorb Iran into their empire. This meant that any Ottoman expansion into Europe had to account for the possibility of Iranian military intervention in the east. Suleiman was intent on achieving complete strategic mastery against the Iranians. Memories of the Qizilbash rebellion in Anatolia, which had shaken the Ottoman Empire to its roots, had certainly not been forgotten either. With Safavid Iran crushed, Istanbul would then be able to focus all of its military might against the Europeans. The elimination of Iran would also allow the Ottomans to conquer the entire Caucasus right up to the Caspian Sea littoral. It was most likely with these objectives in mind that Suleiman launched his three invasions of Iran in 1532, 1548, and 1554, all of which would eventually fail in the face of the Iranians' accomplished scorched-earth tactics and Qizilbash raids, coupled with the bitter winter weather of the Caucasus and northern-northwestern Iran.²³ Suleiman had a keen interest in absorbing Azarbaijan into the Ottoman realm. The loss of this important province would fatally weaken Iran and cut it off from the Caucasus. An opportunity seemed to present itself when Ulama Sultan of the Tekkelu clan, the shah's governor in Azarbaijan, defected to Istanbul (c. 1531–32).²⁴ Ulama Sultan soon discussed Iran's troubles with his Ottoman hosts. He noted the Uzbek invasions and the turbulent tribal forces undermining Iran's stability. Duly impressed, Suleiman soon bestowed the rank of pasha on Ulama Sultan. The sultan then sent him to conquer Bitlis and support the Ottoman invasion of Iran.

Ottoman incursions into Iran began as early as 1532²⁵ with Ibrahim Pasha, the Ottoman grand vizier, capturing Tabriz on July 15, 1534.²⁶ Iranian sources report a very large Ottoman force in this operation, this reputedly numbering up to 500,000 troops.²⁷ By September Suleiman had arrived in Tabriz and from there pushed into Hamadan. Much of Kurdistan was also overrun. The ultimate objective was Baghdad, which fell without resistance to a vast army of 200,000 troops by December 1534.²⁸ Tahmasp, who was en-route towards Balkh to force a major showdown with the Uzbeks, hurriedly marched his army west towards the Ottoman armies, covering over 1,500 miles (2,400km). As Suleiman entered the Mesopotamian marches, Tahmasp proceeded to deploy his army. The Iranian commanders knew they were not yet ready to tackle the Ottomans in a set-piece battle. Instead they chose to rely on their excellent cavalry to launch lightning raids, harassment, and skirmishes against the lumbering Ottoman supply trains, rear guard formations, and other targets of opportunity.²⁹ Ottoman supply and communication lines had been stretched to the limit and scorched-earth tactics denied the large forces much-needed supplies.³⁰ The bitterly cold climate of Azarbaijan also took its toll.

Suleiman then departed for Istanbul. As soon he and his army departed, nearly all of their conquests were repossessed by the Iranians. A vivid example of this is Badran bin Fallah, a Mushasha ruler of Khuzistan, who was forced to acknowledge Suleiman the Magnificent but who sent his son to Tahmasp to confirm his loyalty as soon as Suleiman had departed.³¹ Baghdad remained in Ottoman hands, as did the Shiite holy shrines of Karbala and Najaf in southern Iraq. The port city of Basra also surrendered to the Ottomans in 1838, giving them access to the Persian Gulf through the Arvand Rud/Shaat al Arab waterway.³²

Nevertheless, the Ottomans had failed to destroy Safavid Iran, which still posed a dangerous military threat to their east. By the conclusion of Suleiman's first war with Iran in August 1535, the Ottomans had lost a staggering 50,000 troops, at least a quarter of their original force.³³ The Safavids then constructed a number of fortifications along their borders with the Ottomans.³⁴

Eight years later, Suleiman was given another opportunity to strike against the Safavids. Tahmasp's half-brother, Alghas Mirza, arrived in Istanbul to seek asylum.³⁵ Alghas, who had distinguished himself during the battles against the Uzbeks, had rebelled against Tahmasp once before and been pardoned.³⁶ Suleiman welcomed Alghas and furnished his "guest" with at least 40,000 cavalry, to be used in an invasion of Iran.³⁷ The Ottoman force thrust into Marand in Azarbaijan followed by the capture of Tabriz in c. 1548.³⁸ Alghas then captured Hamadan, following this by attacking Qom and Kashan. He made a determined push towards Isfahan, but it ended in complete disaster due to ferocious resistance from the Safavid army and the local populace.³⁹ Alghas was then captured by Tahmasp, or else escaped westwards into Ottoman territory.⁴⁰ Suleiman's attempt to invade Iran using an allied Safavid claimant had ended in failure.

An interesting account of one of the battles fought near the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia in 1548 is provided by a priest named Juda Thaddaeus Krusinski. Krusinski reports Suleiman arriving with 200,000 troops against Tahmasp's 100,000 troops.⁴¹ Krusinski then adds that Tahmasp "received 10,000 additional soldiers with twenty cannons from the Portuguese."⁴² Tahmasp is then described as having participated in a major attack which "with the help of the brave Portuguese defeated the Ottoman Turks completely."⁴³ The total number of Ottoman losses in the 1548–49 campaign stood at 20,000 troops.⁴⁴

In 1553, Iran launched attacks into the Ottoman Kurdish east. Ismail Mirza (Tahmasp's second son) attacked eastern Anatolia, capturing Akhlar and Arjish. An Ottoman army led by Erzerum's governor, Iskandar Pasha, was then decisively crushed right in front of the city of Erzerum.⁴⁵ Three thousand Ottoman troops were killed, and Erzerum was then captured.⁴⁶ The Iranian army conducted a number of similar operations, to the consternation of Istanbul.

Suleiman took to the field in May 1554 when he deployed his army from Aleppo for Amida advancing as far as Karabagh in the southern Caucasus, just north of the Araxes above Azarbaijan.⁴⁷ This three-month campaign achieved little except the collection of plunder. To their disappointment, the Turks had found the Iranian army unwilling to engage them in a set-piece battle. Instead, the Iranians subjected their Ottoman opponents to constant cavalry raids that harassed and weakened their large army.

Suleiman's territorial gains had come at a heavy price: the Turks had suffered heavy losses and their empire's treasury in Istanbul had been strained.⁴⁸ Realizing the futility of continuing, the Ottomans finally decided to end the fighting. This eventually led to the Treaty of Amasiya on May

29, 1555, the first peace treaty between the Ottoman Empire and the Safavids of Iran. While Istanbul could find consolation in the conquest of Baghdad and the Mesopotamian lands, Azarbaijan and other Iranian territories remained in Safavid hands. The Amasiya treaty affirmed the fact that the Ottomans were unable to conquer Iran.

Iran was also desperate for a peace treaty. The country had been badly battered as a result of virtually continuous wars since the days of Ismail. Decades of warfare had resulted in much depopulation and devastation in those provinces bordering the Uzbeks in the northeast and the Ottomans to the west and northwest. Tahmasp and the Safavids had succeeded in keeping the Iranian state intact and were more than capable of resisting Uzbek and Ottoman incursions but they were unable to inflict decisive defeats upon them. It was the appreciation of Ottoman military strength that prompted Tahmasp to move the Safavid capital from Tabriz, relatively close to the Ottoman border, to Qazvin, further inland in Iran.⁴⁹

Like the Safavids, the Ottomans were far from immune from internal dissensions. In 1559, a 10,000-man Ottoman army led by Prince Bayezid, one of Sultan Suleiman's sons, arrived in Iran seeking asylum.⁵⁰ Bayezid, his four sons, and their troops were given sanctuary in Qazvin by Tahmasp. Bayezid tried to persuade Tahmasp to provide him with an army to march towards Istanbul.⁵¹ Despite this apparently golden opportunity, Tahmasp remained circumspect, anxious not to disturb the fragile peace. Tahmasp also suspected that Bayezid was plotting against him in Qazvin.⁵² Suleiman's threats soon helped Tahmasp make up his mind. He warned Tahmasp that lasting peace was contingent upon the repatriation of Bayezid and his sons.⁵³ After two years of negotiations, Tahmasp was given gold coins and territorial concessions by Suleiman, resulting in the repatriation of Bayezid and his four sons in 1561.⁵⁴ Suleiman then had his son and grandsons put to death. In appreciation for Tahmasp's compliance, Suleiman reaffirmed the terms of the Treaty of Amasiya in 1562.⁵⁵

Tahmasp's battles in the Caucasus

Georgia held a top strategic priority for the Safavids. Tahmasp had launched at least three campaigns there in 1540–54 with Georgian resistance proving fierce. Despite the capture of the Georgian capital Tbilisi by the Qizilbash cavalry, Tahmasp was not always able to maintain control of the region. The Qizilbash in particular suffered high casualties in Georgia, which may explain their subsequent brutality. After the conquest of Tbilisi and Kakheti in Georgia, the Qizilbash rounded up an incredible 200,000 women, girls, and young boys who were then sold into slavery.⁵⁶ They also engaged in the systematic destruction of a number of local churches in Georgia.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Tahmasp was finally able to appoint the Bagratid David (brother of King Simon I) as the governor of Georgia. David then came to the Safavid court and converted to Shiite Islam.

The Caucasian Khanate of Shirvan became a part of Iran by 1538, followed shortly later by Baku and Shekki in 1551. Nevertheless the solidification of Iranian influence beyond these khanates thrust the Iranian army into a series of bloody battles. Fighting often involved muskets and close-quarter combat with spears, swords, and other close-quarter weapons.⁵⁸ Iranian forces also deployed cannon to batter defiant castles and cities into submission. Fighting was especially intense in the predominantly Sunni Lezgian region. As in Georgia, the Qizilbash cavalry rounded up 100,000 prisoners from the Lezgians who were then brought to Shirvan to be sold as slaves.⁵⁹ These rapacious

measures proved brazenly inept as they turned local opinion vehemently against the Safavids. The Ottomans became the main beneficiaries of Qizilbash brutality and consistently sought to extend their influence among the Sunni folk of the Caucasus.

These military preoccupations in the Caucasus and distractions to the east, especially Tahmasp's sponsoring Mughal emperor Homayoun's efforts to regain his throne, seriously compromised Safavid efforts at implementing widespread military reforms. Still, enough of these measures were put in place to provide the basis of a new and powerful Safavid military machine under Shah Abbas I.

Tahmasp's legacy and the ephemeral reign of Ismail II

During Tahmasp's final years, a serious rebellion erupted in Gilan. Relations between the Safavids and eastern Gilanis had progressively worsened and the governor appointed to Mazandaran by Tahmasp in 1569 lasted only until 1576.⁶⁰ In the mid-1570s, Gilan was overrun by a large force of 20,000 tough Gil and Daylami warriors led by Ahmad Khan Lahejani.⁶¹ Tahmasp assembled an army of 18,000, which thrust into Gilan to engage in heavy fighting, killing at least 1,000 rebels. Fighting subsided somewhat when the rest of the rebels scattered into the northern Iranian forests along the Caspian Sea.⁶²

In 1576, Tahmasp's death resulted in a dynastic struggle for succession in which Turkmen tribes played a significant role.⁶³ Tahmasp's son Ismail II (r. 1576–77) was an excellent warrior who had fought with distinction during Tahmasp's wars against the Ottoman armies of Suleiman. By the age of 19 Ismail II's martial ardour had landed him in command of 8,000 troops.⁶⁴ By 1547 he had become the governor of the important khanate of Shirvan.⁶⁵ Ismail had led Safavid and local Shirvani warriors into a great victory against vastly superior numbers of Ottoman troops with superior firepower in eastern Anatolia. Duly impressed by his son's achievements, Tahmasp appointed him as the guardian of Khorasan and made him the heir to the Iranian throne. Ismail II, however, then rebelled against his father, who stripped him of his privileges and removed him as heir to the throne.⁶⁶ Tahmasp then imprisoned his son in the remote fortress of Qahqaha.⁶⁷

After Tahmasp's death, the two contenders for the throne were Ismail and another of Tahmasp's sons, Prince Haidar.⁶⁸ Haidar's support was mainly based on the Ustajlu Turkmen tribe and the Georgian leaders of the Safavid court. Princess Pari Khan Khanum led the pro-Ismail coalition composed of her (Circassian) uncle Shamkhal Sultan and the majority of Turkmen tribes, except the Ustajlu. The issue was decided when 30,000 Qizilbash warriors assembled outside the Qahqaha prison in support of Ismail II.⁶⁹ Ismail II then assumed the throne in Qazvin on August 22, 1576. Haidar was arrested and decapitated thereafter by Ismail II's supporters. Ismail then distributed funds from his late father's treasury to reward those troops who had supported him.⁷⁰ It is fairly certain that Ismail II's brief 18-month tenure as shah was a bloody episode in Safavid history. Ismail systematically executed nearly all of his brothers, the only one to escape unscathed was the near-blind Mohammad Khodabandeh, and he most certainly would have been executed had it not been for Ismail's early death.

Lawlessness and banditry had risen alarmingly by the latter years of Tahmasp's rule. Thousands of citizens had been killed by marauding Turkmen warriors in search of plunder. To his credit, Ismail II put a stop to such practices by reestablishing law and order across the country with very stern and

severe measures. Perhaps Ismail II's strangest policy was his attempt to re-introduce the Sunni branch of the Muslim faith into Iran.⁷¹ Perhaps he was trying to placate the Ottoman Turks after Suleiman demanded in the Treaty of Amasya that the Iranians stop execrating the Sunni caliphs, Abu Bakr, Omar, and Osman. Domestic factors may also explain Ismail's anti-Shiite policies, aimed at undermining the power of the Shiite clergy in the country; or perhaps they can be explained by Ismail's estranged relationship with his father Tahmasp, his anti-Shiism acting as a rejection of his hated father's legacy. Ismail died in November 1577, under somewhat mysterious circumstances.⁷²

Mohammad Khodabandeh: incompetent leadership and heavy losses

Having survived his brother's murder spree, Mohammad Khodabandeh (r. 1578–87) was selected as shah by the Safavid court's council of Qizilbash leaders after Ismail II's death. He arrived to assume the throne in Qazvin on February 11, 1578. Despite their overwhelming power in Iranian politics, the Qizilbash chiefs continued to be unstable, with disastrous consequences for the Iranian state. Their disputes were noticed by the Uzbeks in Central Asia who invaded Khorasan once again just after Khodabandeh had become shah. The Uzbeks overran much of Khorasan, wreaking much destruction but were finally defeated by Mashad's governor, Morteza Qoli Sultan.⁷³

From the outset Khodabandeh's rule was perceived as incompetent, a fact that had invited the Uzbek attack and would quickly entice Ottoman invasions to the north and west. Khodabandeh attempted to diffuse potential opposition against him by paying those troops whose pay was in arrears (some had not been paid for 14 years!).⁷⁴ He also attempted to win the favour of his subjects by providing lavish grants from the imperial treasury.⁷⁵ This measure led to a rapid depletion of state funds and did little to "buy off" potential opposition, would cause problems when the military needed funds to help fend off the Ottoman invasions. Khodabandeh also displayed the despotic practices of his brother, Ismail II, putting Pari Khan Khanum, her uncle Shamkhan Khan and Shah Ismail II's child (Shah Shuja) to death. This action certainly contributed to Iran's dangerous state of political instability. The situation became so desperate that Khodabandeh's queen, Mahd e Olia, was murdered by Qizilbash chiefs in July 1579.⁷⁶ Two years later, a rebellion in Khorasan led to that province seceding from the Safavids.⁷⁷

Istanbul was acutely aware of events in Iran. The Kurds of Iran (mainly in western Azarbaijan) and the Caucasian Khanate of Shirvan had erupted in rebellion while Georgia had become split between a pro-Ottoman and pro-Iranian faction. Sultan Murad III (r. 1574–95) saw this as a golden opportunity to attack, in violation of the Amasiya Treaty. The recent Ottoman defeat at the naval battle of Lepanto in 1571 was perhaps another incentive for Istanbul to seek compensation, at Iran's expense.⁷⁸

In 1578, Murad III sent a huge army of between 100,000 and 300,000 troops (including 6,000 musketeers) supported by 600 cannon.⁷⁹ Many of these were Istanbul's Crimean Tatar allies who streamed down the Caucasus to support their Ottoman allies against Iran. The Ottomans crushed all Safavid opposition in their wake and captured the Caucasian khanates of Shirvan and Karabakh; much of Georgia was also invaded. This was a catastrophic economic blow to Iran. All Iranian commerce through the Caucasus to the Volga and Eastern Europe was now severed.

The situation deteriorated still further when Azarbaijan was also invaded, an action aided by a number of Kurdish chiefs in the western marches of the province.⁸⁰ This crisis prompted