

Foreign Policy of the Safavid Empire During Shah Abbas I

Zienez Hatamzad

Department of History Education, BakiDolet university, Baki, Azerbaijan
E-mail: z.hatamzad@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper studies how the Safavid government in Shah Abbas I's maintained its relations with its hostile neighbors, the Ottoman Empire and East Georgia, and newcomer colonizers such as Portuguese and England. In its pursuit, this paper reviews a number of historical occurrences, resulting in signing off on political and commercial treaties. Vitality of Strait of Hormuz and Port of Abbas (Bandar- E- Abbas) and Portuguese- English competition to gain superiority over the region will be discussed as well. Finally, taxation policies and the issue of currency and their comparative studies with other contemporary policies and currencies of other states will be discussed shortly. [Zienez Hatamzad. **Foreign Policy of the Safavid Empire During Shah Abbas I.** *Life Sci J* 2013;10(8s):405-407] (ISSN: 1097-8135). <http://www.lifesciencesite.com>. 67

Keywords: Shah Abbas, Ottoman, Hormuz, Portuguese, Silk, Port of Abbas, Silk, Isfahan

Introduction

While preparing for battle with Ottoman Empire, Shah Abbas I began to consider having political relationship with the European countries that did not have good relationship with Ottoman Empire. In 1602, Ambassadors of Germany, Kakash and Teknavor, alongside with Guva, special envoy of Philip II, King of Spain, traveled to Iran. In the meantime, Shah Abbas sent Anthony Shirley and Hossein Ali Beyg to Europe with the instruction of paying visits to the authorities of Russia, Germany and Spain.

Eventually in 1603, Shah Abbas waged a war against Ottomans. It was their first war in the century with Ottomans, the result of which was Ottoman's utter defeat and liberation of Tabriz. The four year long period of 1603-1607 was an era of triumph for the Safavid Empire; parts of Kurdistan, Lorestan, East of Armenia and Georgia were recaptured during the period by Safavid Army among whom Allahverdi Khan's legion was highly distinguished for their valorous actions and skills. Safavid's victories were due to Ottoman's internal chaos as well. Internal skirmishes for acquiring authority, civil wars against domestic insurgents, feudal rebels and proletariat separatist of Anatolia and consecutive loss of battles against European countries were some of the internal chaos they should face in their country.

According to the peace treaty of 1613, all of the occupied lands were confiscated by the Safavid Empire. Shah Abbas however, committed himself to sent 59000 kilograms raw silk annually to the Ottoman King so that their confiscated silk could be compensated in years to come. In 1616, Safavid-Ottoman battles began again, resulting in their second defeat in the century. In 1618, another peace treaty was signed in Sarab. In this treaty, the peace treaty of

1613 was verified and acknowledged but the annual amount of silk given to Ottomans was reduced to 2950 kilograms. In 1623, another battle took place. Shah Abbas won the war by supporting Bekir's rebels against Ottomans, besieging Baghdad and conquering the city. Mussel, Basra, and Shia holy cities like Najaf and Karbala were some of other cities that were confiscated by The Safavid State.

After Shah Abbas' victories over Ottomans, he was fixated on the idea of recapturing Ghandahar from Jahangir Moghal. Although his primary military efforts were doomed to failure, his diplomatic efforts were not. Utilizing the full potentiality of the treaty of Serav, he strengthened peaceful relations with Uzbeks of Mesopotamia. Invading most of the eastern regions of Ghandehar, he prepared to strike for Ghandahar.

In addition to Shah Abbas' involvements in battles with Ottomans and Moghals, he fought Portuguese as well when they conquered the Strait of Hormuz and its vicinal islands in the Persian Gulf. This strait and its surrounding islands are used as the repository for transiting goods, making its role vital for India, China, Arab states and European countries.

In 1507, Portuguese seized the control of seaway of India to China and Strait of Hormuz as well, avoiding paying royal taxes to the Safavid government. In 1515, they lost the islands and the strait for good to the Safavid state. During this eight year period, Portuguese Admiral Alfonso recaptured Hormuz, killed supporters of Qizilbash and their leaders, strengthening the structure of this strait by building garrisons and inquisition establishments and subjugated the local governor, Turan as their loyal servant. During the 16th century, an important Portuguese commercial factory was established in Hormuz and developed very fast. The Strait of Hormuz was important to the Safavid Empire for their silk exportation to Europe, since they had to face

cheaper custom expenses, when exported from the Strait of Hormuz in comparison with the costs of exporting silk from Anatolia in the Ottoman's Empire. That is why the price of silk in Halab, Syria was 50 percent higher than its price in the Safavid Empire. Of course, the Silk Road was much safer than seaways in the Persian Gulf for exportation in general, facilitating merchants with much more security, alongside with the higher amount of expenses.

In 1618, Shah Abbas negotiations on the issue of silk exportation through the Strait of Hormuz with the king of Spain and Philip III, King of Portuguese, did not result into signing off on a multilateral treaty although they had been received warmly by the Safavid Shah (Falsafi 123) It was a time that alongside with Portuguese, other colonizers started competing with English companies.

Eventually, in 1600, the East India Company was founded by England. One of its major objectives was to circumscribe the Portuguese influence in India and in the region in general and it was in this historical period when Shah Abbas' objectives meet with English colonizers, resulting in Shah's imposition of royal decree for the East India Company in 1614.

In 1620, the East India Company fleet and Portuguese fleet went to battle with each other in the Persian Gulf near the Jask Island. In 1623, the East India Company accompanied its fleet with the Safavid army so that the Strait of Hormuz could be confiscated from Portuguese. In this mission, Imam Gholi Khan, governor of Fars province and Allahverdi Khan's son, one of the commanders of the army's elite legions appointed as the commodore of the English Fleet to Hormuz. After confiscating the strait and its surrounding islands, Shah named the biggest island of the region "The Port of Abbas".

In the Port of Abbas, English traders were allowed their tax free commercial factories, enjoying a fixed portion from Custom revenues as well. However, English were expecting more prerogatives such as exclusive right of exporting silk and the right of citizenship in the Safavid States, since the latter was given to them in the Ottoman Empire, Italy and France. Not being satisfied with the given prerogatives, they found Dutch companies as a commercial competitor in the Port of Abbas as soon as they started establishing their settlements in the region.

Through bilateral relations with Russia, France, the Netherlands, Spain, and Germany, Shah Abbas desired to have close ties with Vatican and the Roman Catholic Church. Although Shah Abbas owned much of the precious lands in the Empire by subordinating most of the landowners, neither he nor any Safavid King could materialize a feudalistic system in the Empire. Shah Abbas' intention to

develop central provinces, in spite of the exploitation of colonizing countries of the time, could be read as a sign of his desire not to rule the Empire according to feudalistic system like the Ottoman Empire.

In 1607, after the invasion of Shirvan by Ottomans, Shah Abbas started taxing heavily in the confiscated states from Ottomans for 50000 Tomans. Of course, he could not levy more than 30000 Tomans.

At the same time, after signing off on a commercial bilateral treaty with the Ottoman Empire in 1612, Shah exempted people of Isfahan from paying taxes for three years on the dairy products. During 1670s and 1680s in general, the amount of taxes had a decreasing transference in their values, helping the economy of the Safavid State to have an unbelievable boom.

Generally, the Safavid Empire levied more taxes on confiscated states, resulting in bankruptcies of these states. The resulted chaos and civil war in these states gave Shah's feudal courtiers an opportunity to impose harsher taxations on the citizens as a punishment for creating chaos in the Empire.

Shah Abbas' supports for industrialization of some parts of the Empire and his struggles over traditional pillage and insecurity of some of the states created the opportunity for him to provide safer trading routes for merchants establishing for example, caravansaries on the landlords paved with stone slabs.

Shah Abbas supported agriculture in some central provinces as well. The ruling policies, migration of feudalists, studies on irrigative watering of crops and the destruction of Jolfa near Aras initiated relocating near Isfahan indicated that Shah's prioritized economical pursuit was to create his Empire one of the biggest cross roads in silk exportation. He ordered building roads for transports in Isfahan and Bandar Abbas so that there could be a proper transporting system for goods to be delivered to the Persian Gulf.

King Abbas built the new city of Jolfa near Isfahan for Armenians. Being a separated city from Isfahan territory, people were exempted to pay any taxes to the central government. However, only three thousand families from eleven thousand Armenian families migrated to Jolfa.

In religious ceremonies, Shah Abbas respected old traditions, giving them political coloring. He supported Shia religion, persecuted Sunnis, granting at the same time some privileges to Armenians.

For controlling indigenous population in confiscated states, he made craftsmen and farmers of Azarbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, migrate so that the influence of the Safavid government could be sustained in such states and the number of rebellious

uprising could be diminished. In 1605, 70000 citizens of Azarbaijan migrated from Nakhjivan, most of them died on the road. This bloody migration is remembered nowadays by "The Great Migration" by the locals.

In the bloody invasion of the East Georgia, Shah Abbas exiled 100000 of Kakhtian to Iravan. More banishment decrees were declared after suppressions of rebellious uprisings in the East Georgia, whose leader was George Sakazden. In 1618, 50000 Georgian citizens migrated to Iravan.

In Shah Abbas'era, building construction developed and Isfahan, the capital city of Safavids, was reconstructed and redesigned, turning this city into a city with thirty eight square kilometers surface area, bearing the population of 600000 people in the mid 17th century. The Shah Square was built near the presidential palace, leading to the Shah Mosque, Aali Qapu and Chehel Sutoun. This square is connected by a well-constructed bridge over Zayanderud to Jolfa. Palaces were built in Farahabad province.

Discussion

A new type of currency was introduced in the monetary system of the Safavid government. Named after Shah Abbas as "Abbasi", its value was one ounce silver which equaled 200 Dinars of the time. It is worth mentioning that in the 14th century, in Ghragh Khan's era, one Dinar equaled 3 ounces of silver, while in the 17th century one Dinar equaled 600 Dinars. Therefore, it could be concluded from this piece of historical evidence that during 300 years, Dinar lost its value 600 times.

Of course, providing a new monetary system was not possible in every part of the Empire. In the 17th century, alongside with Abbasi, other currencies, like Ottoman and European currencies, with variant values, were prevalent in the Safavid state.

Shah Abbas era was the most flourishing era in the Safavid Empire. In the 17th century, we could observe a much more realistic portrait of Shah Abbas personality from the historians' writings. He was portrayed as a distinguished, brave, diligent and valiant personage. Not being dogmatic, he was indeed interested in technology and the European culture.

References

1. Afandief, A. The Safavid Government of Azerbaijan. Baku: East and West Publishing, 2007.
2. Bayandor, A. Persian Gulf. Tehran: Dr. Mahmood Afshar's Public Foundation Inc., 1968.
3. Bushehri, N.A. The History of Political Relations of Iran and the World. Tehran: Rooznameye Omid Publishing, 1946.
4. Dadash, Ova. The Last Era of Safavid Dynasty. Baku: Noorlan Publishing, 2003.
5. Egbal, A.A. Copious History of Iran. Tehran: Amir Kabir Publishing, 1968.
6. Falsafi, Nasroallah. The Foreign Policy of Iran in Safavid Period. Tehran: University of Tehran, 1937.
7. Velayati, Ali Akbar. Iran and Savafid Shah Ismail. Tehran: Tehran International Desk of Foreign Affairs, 1998.

3/18/2013