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## AN ANALYSIS OF NADİR SHAH'S RELIGIOUS POLICY

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The hypothesis of this study is that Nādīr Shah (1688-1747) was neither consistent in his personal belief in matters of religion nor that religion was the driving motive of his policy.

Briefly, Nādīr began his career in the service of the Safavids as a Shi'a. At his coronation in 1736 he adopted the Sunni faith and endeavoured to enforce it on his subjects. Then, in 1746 he abandoned his Sunni claims. His "conversions" took place and developed along with his political policy. Nādīr's religious policy was a means for an end and it is meaningful only in the context of his political policy.

Prior to his coronation in 1736, Nādīr supported the Shi'a sect.<sup>1</sup> The evidence of family names suggests that his family was a Shi'a and that he himself belonged to that sect when he was young. His father was called Rida Qulī, his first son also Rida Qulī, and his third son by Gauhar Shād, Imām Qulī.<sup>2</sup> Muhammed Kazim of Marv<sup>3</sup> mentions that Nādīr's second son by Gauhar Shad was called Murtada Qulī but that the name was changed to Nasrullah after Nadir gained the battle of Karnal in 1739. Names such as "Rida Qulī", "Imam Qulī" and "Murtada Qulī" are typical Shia names.

By the time Nādīr had gained the confidence of Tahmasp II, the Şafavid ruler, entered his services, became the "Qulī Bashi" (Master of Ordnances) and received the title of "Tahmasp Qulī" (Slave of Tahmasp) he is seen paying his respects to the Shi'a shrine at Mashad. On behalf of Tahmasp II, after seizing Mashad from Malīk Mahmud (1728) Nadir gave orders that the shrine of Imam Rida be repaired, the dome re-gilt and a second minaret be erected. His concern for a Shi'a shrine may be taken as proof that, at least nominally, he associated himself with the Shi'a sect. Such manifestations were,

<sup>1</sup> Sir Percy Sykes, "A History of Persia", London 1921, Vol 2, pg 273 states that Nadir was a Sunni but there is no evidence to support his view.

<sup>2</sup> Mirza Muhammad Mahdī of Astarabad, "Tarikh-i Nadiri" Bombay 1849, pg 246.

<sup>3</sup> I have not seen this work myself and I owe this reference to L. Lockhart: Muhammad Kazim of Marv, "Kitab-i Nadiri", MS in the Institut Vostokovedeniya, Leningrad, pg 430.

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no doubt, a political move in the way of enlisting to his side the influential power of the mujtahids and mullas residing in Mashad and throughout the Safavid Empire. The support of the religious classes would certainly have been to Nadir's credit for several reasons. Nādir wished to secure his position as Tahmasp II's commander. One of his rivals, Fath 'Ali Khan, had already been put to death but other rivals could emerge. The only force which so far had backed Nadir was his army of tribal origin. The nucleus around him consisted of his Afshar relatives, some three four hundred families of Jalayir Torkomans with their chief Tahmasp Qulī Nādir some Kurds of Daragaz, Abiward, Kalat and Khabushan. Nadir could count only on the Afshars and the Jalayirs. The ministers of Tahmasp II viewed Nadir's capacity and achievements with disquiet and sought a suitable occasion to undermine him. They obtained this occasion when Tahmasp II went to Khaushan and Nādir was left in Mashad. They stirred the Kurds of Khabushan who abandoned Nadir's side and Tahmasp II, gaining courage from this split, called upon the governors of Mazandaran, Astarabad, and Gilirai to oust Nādir.<sup>1</sup> Though Nādir was able to check these developments through his military abilities, if he had been forced to retreat to Mashad and defend his position in Mashad, the religious classes may have extended support to their generous benefactor.

While Nadir was still in the service of Tahmasp II, he conducted a campaign against the Ottomans. He was, however, forced to leave his campaign incomplete in order to deal with the Abdalis in Mashad. Tahmasp II took over the campaign. Fearing the return of Nādir the Ottomans signed a preliminary treaty with Tahmasp II in 1732.<sup>2</sup> Under the circumstances the treaty was not unfavourable to the Persians. The Ottomans regarded the provisions of the treaty as being definitely derogatory for their own country. Nadir however, was enraged by the terms of the treaty and declared war on the Ottomans. Furthermore, he sent letters of severe terms to the Safavid dignitaries deprecating the terms of the treaty, and he made a declaration to the "headmen, peoples and nobles of the Kingdom."<sup>3</sup> In a letter<sup>4</sup> he addressed, presumably at this time, to Muhammed 'Ali Khan, the Baglarbagi of Fars, Nādir spoke of his own victories as "the happy auspices of the house of Haidar ('Ali) and the twelve Imams." In reference to his denunciation of the treaty he added, "This day is big with ruin to their (Shi'as') enemies and with joy to the sect of Shi'a. The discomfiture of the evil minded is the glory... of the followers of 'Ali."<sup>5</sup>

Nādir stigmatised the treaty and championed the Shi'a cause because he aimed at discrediting Tahmasp II. If Tahmasp II's followers refused to go to war against the Ottomans, they could be accused of siding with the Sunni enemy; if, on the other hand, they joined Nadir in declaring war they would be lowering the prestige of their sovereign because renewing the war would have meant that Tahmasp II had not achieved

1 Lockhart, L., "Nadir Shah - A Critical Study Based Mainly on Contemporary Sources" London 1938, pg) 27.

2 Minorsky, V., EI, first edition, the article on "Nadir Shah".

3 The full text of the declaration is given in the "Tarikh-i Nadiri", Mirza Mahdi, pg 108-110.

4 Sir John Malcolm gives a translation of the text in "Asiatick Researches", Calcutta 1810, vol 10, pg 533-539.

5 L. Lockhart, pg 60.

the victory which Nadir was about to do. Tahmasp II was deposed, his infant son, 'Abbas III, was proclaimed king, and the war against the Ottomans was renewed.

In 1736 Nādir issued an invitation to all civil and military officials, and religious dignitaries to assemble on the Mughan plain. The purpose of the assembly was to confer the crown of Persia on the most deserving person. By that, of course, Nadir had himself in mind but nevertheless he made some pretence that he had withdrawn from public affairs. The assembled guest very well knew the answer expected of them. Mirza 'Abdu'l Hasan, the chief Shi'a Mulla, in the privacy of his tent had ventured to pronounce that everyone was for the Safavid house; the chief Mulla's words were overheard by the spies and the following day he was duly strangled<sup>1</sup>

Nādir, then, accepted his nomination as Shah and declared that he would wear the crown upon certain conditions. One of his conditions was that the heretical practices of the Shi'a faith should be abandoned in favour of the Sunni faith. He is supposed to have said, "I must insist that, as I sacrifice so much for Persia, the inhabitants of that nation shall, in consideration for one who has no object but their tranquility, abandon that belief which was introduced by Shah Ismail, the founder of the Sfaavid dynasty, and once more acknowledge the legitimate authority of the four first caliphs. Since the schism Shi'a has prevailed, this country has been in continual distraction: let us become Sunnis, and that will cease. But as every national religion should have a head, let the holy Imam Ja'far, who is of the family of the prophet, and whom we all venerate, be the head of ours."<sup>2</sup> The above proposal was approved and sealed by the assembly.

An immediate result of the edict was a series of bans. Nādir ordered the mention of the names of the first three caliphs with respect, forbade the mention of the phrase "Ali, the friend of God" at the time of call to prayers. He also forbade the mention of the sentence "May the King, from whom all our fortune flows, live for ever." after the fatiha and the takbir.<sup>3</sup>

A project which would have reduced the power of the religious classes considerably if it had been formulated and executed in the early years of Nadir's rule concerns the appropriation of religious endowments. In 1746, in the last year of his reign Nadir issued a decree ordering the appropriation of religious endowments.<sup>4</sup> He died, however a year after this decree, before full effect was given to the project. It is conceivable that Nadir designed the idea of appropriating religious endowments in the earlier years of his rule but that he held back from doing so in order not to alienate completely the Shi'a 'ulema. When Nadir's religious policy failed to yield the results he had hoped from it, he perhaps wished to express his resentment by means of depriving religious institutions of their financial independence.

<sup>1</sup> L. Lockhart, pg 99 in reference to the "Kitab-i Nadiri" of Muhammad Kazim of Marv. J. Fraser, "History of Nadir Shah" London 1742, and J. Hanway, "An Historical Account..." London 1753, give a different account. Apparently the chief Mulla was murdered after he advised Nadir not to interfere with matters of religion.

<sup>2</sup> Sir John Malcolm, "The History of Persia", London 1815, vol 2, pg 63.

<sup>3</sup> Fraser, J., "History of Nadir Shah" London 1742, pg 123.

<sup>4</sup> Lambton, A.K.S., "Landlord and Peasant in Persia", London 1969, pg. 131, 132.

After issuing the edict which declared that Persia was to adopt Sunnism, Nadir sent an embassy to the Ottoman Sultan. Among his requests were the following points. One that the Persians having given up their former beliefs and chosen the religion of the Sunnis, were to be recognised as a fifth Sunni **madhab**, to be known as the Ja'fari. Two, that since each imam of the four existing Sunni **madhabs** had a column (rukn) in the Ka'ba assigned to them, a fifth column was to be provided for the Imam Ja'far. Three, that a Persian Amiru'l-Hajj (Leader of the Pilgrimage) with a position equivalent to that of the Amirs of the Syrian and Egyptian pilgrims, should be appointed and be allowed to conduct the Persian pilgrims to Mecca.<sup>1</sup>

Nadir's purpose in introducing a fifth Sunni **madhab** which was to be called the Ja'fari **madhab** and which was to be the national religion of the Persians, was to emphasise the break away from Safavid rule. The Shi'a doctrine was closely associated with the Safavid dynasty. Lockhart considers this point only "an additional reason" and he puts forward that "Nadir's immediate objects in effecting this change was to facilitate a temporary settlement with Turkey."<sup>2</sup> This seems implausible since at the last encounter of the Ottomans and the Persians in 1735, before Nadir's coronation, the Ottomans led by Köprülüzade were defeated near Erivan, and Ganja and Tiflis were capitulated by the Persians. Nadir definitely had the upper hand. A further point which contradicts Lockhart's view is that at the first opportunity in 1738 the Ottomans expressed their inability to recognise the Ja'fari **madhab** and in 1741 when an attempt was made on Nadir's life and rebellion threatened the country, the Ottomans sent a definite refusal of recognition in 1743 which made Nadir declare war on the Ottomans. So, Nadir's religious innovation was by no means an act of appeasement to the Ottomans.

It is a matter of conjecture as to why Nadir was so keen to have the Ja'fari **madhab** recognised by the Ottomans. He may have thought that the Ottomans would have welcomed the idea and the recognition of the Ja'fari **madhab** by the caliph would have given a respectability to his 18th century innovation - even if not in the eyes of the Shi'a religious classes, at least in the eyes of the Sunnis.

If one is to believe Nadir's stated reasons, he wished to tighten the cords of friendship between the Ottomans and the Persians; he considered that the fifth **madhab** contained the elements for the pacification of the Muslim state.<sup>3</sup> But under no circumstances, did the Ottomans wish to acknowledge Nadir's religious points. Presumably they suspected Nadir's intentions. Lockhart considers that Nadir may have had an ulterior motive of a far-reaching kind; "might not his real aim in seeking to unite the Muslim world have been to make himself ultimately the head of it? His ambition knew no bounds, and, he is known to have cherished the design of marching to Constantinople, he may have considered that it would not be difficult to go a step farther and wrest the Caliphate from the Sultan."<sup>4</sup> The Sunni 'ulema found the precepts of the fifth **madhab** incompatible with the Orthodox doctrine, and the matter was closed at the Ottoman side.

<sup>1</sup> L. Lockhart, pg 101.

<sup>2</sup> L. Lockhart, pg 100.

<sup>3</sup> Mirza Mahdi, pg 231.

<sup>4</sup> L. Lockhart, pg 100.

When Nādir advanced his Sunni policy he relied on himself and his army. Being a self made man, he had supreme faith in himself and he gained his strength from his well disciplined army. Even before his coronation Nadir had begun increasing the non-Persian and non-Shi'a elements in his, army. His army contained a large proportion of Afghans and Turkomans,<sup>1</sup> some of whom were Sunnis. But the Shi'a element in his army was by no means in the minority. Nadir checked Shi'a manifestations and dealt with suspects of disloyalty with the strictest of measures. For example, after the conquest of Delhi in 1739, at the wedding of Nadir's son Nasrullah and an Indian princess, the daughter of Yazdan Bakhsh, some fifteen or twenty Qizilbash troops danced and sang in Turkish, and recited parts of the *marthiya* (threnody) of Husain. Nadir had them executed outside one of the city gates,<sup>2</sup> and forbade the Muharram ceremonies.

Occasionally, however, he was forced to take a middle course of tolerance and persuasion because at no time Nadir felt secure of Shia, pro-Safavid, and pseudo-Safavid threats. During his Mesopotamian campaign news reached Nadir of certain risings led by Safavid pretenders in Persia. In 1743, following the unsuccessful siege of Mosul and before leaving for Persia to suppress the risings, Nadir set out to visit the Sunni and Shi'a sanctuaries of Mesopotamia<sup>3</sup> in Kazimain he visited the shrines of the Imāms Musa al-Kazimi, the seventh Shi'a Imam, Muhammad Taqi, the ninth Shi'a Imam, and in Mu'azzam he visited the tomb of Abu Hanifa. In Karbala he performed the circumambulation (*tawaf*) of the shrine.<sup>4</sup> His wife, Radiyya Begum, the sister of Tahmasp II, gave 20,000 *nadiris* for the repairing of the sacred building. Then, Nadir proceeded to Najaf where he gave orders for the shrine of 'Alī to be gilded. In the same year he summoned a great assembly of ecclesiastics at Najaf. The 'ulema of Persia, Afghanistan, Balkh, Bukhara, and the Holy Cities of Mesopotamia joined the assembly to discuss and settle the religious question. The prearranged discussions confirmed the renunciation of the "heresy of Shah Ismail", the legitimacy of the first three caliphs, the true descent of Ja'faru's-Sadiq from the Prophet, and the Persians' right to recognition as belonging to the Ja'fari *madhab*. When the manifesto was drawn up, Nadir's wife, Gauhar Shad, gave the sum of 100,000 *nadiris* for the repairing of the walls and tile work of the shrine and presented a jewelled censer and another of gold to be used in the Najaf shrine.<sup>5</sup>

In 1746, a year before Nadir's assassination, events took an unexpected turn. Even though Nadir had won a victory over 'Abdullah Pasha and Yeğen Mustafa Pasha in Mosul, Nadir renounced his religious claims vis-à-vis the Ottomans, as regards the Ja'fari *madhab* and the fifth pillar in Ka'ba. However, he still rejected the Shi'a faith and repeated that he had accepted the crown of Persia on the condition that the Persians abjured the Shi'a faith. A possible explanation - failing to find a substantial one - to account for his abandonment of his Ja'fari claims may be that Nādir became weary of endeavouring to gain Ottoman recognition for a religious policy which was originally intended to distinguish Nadir's rule from that of the preceding dynasty.

<sup>1</sup> See L. Lockhart, pg 228 foot-note for a list of the troops and their numbers in Nadir's army in 1743.

<sup>2</sup> L. Cockhart, pg 151.

<sup>3</sup> Mirza Mahdi, pg 241.

<sup>4</sup> L. Lockhart, pg 232.

<sup>5</sup> Mirza Mahdi, pg 246.

In conclusion, therefore, as regards the reasons of Nadir's incorporation of a Sunni-Ja'fari claim into his policy, one must look for internal rather than external reasons. The Sunni-Ja'fari claim was not an act of appeasement towards the Ottomans but rather a means of giving his rule a unity based on Sunni doctrine with a Nadiri originality about it which would replace the twelve Shia doctrine that had given unity to the Safavid dynasty. In his attempt to consolidate his rule which was to be based on the Sunni-Ja'fari doctrine, Nadir was inconsistent: he first obtained a forced approval of the Persian ecclesiastics, and military and civil officials (1736). Then, he tried to obtain the recognition of the Ottoman caliph (1736), failing that (1741) he secured again the forced approval of the Mesopotamian and Transcaucasian 'ulema (1743), but then he suddenly abandoned the policy in favour of the Ottoman caliph (1746). Nadir was inconsistent because neither his personal religious conviction in the Ja'fari cause was deep rooted, nor was his religious policy supported by any indigenous or consequential sector of the society. The Persian 'ulema never extended their genuine support to Nadir and Nadir's tactics towards them were harsh and punitive, and occasionally inviting by means of generous offerings. It seems that when Nadir introduced the Ja'fari **madhab**, he relied on the non-Persian, tribal, Sunni section of his army. His irrational terrorism, however, caused the Persian contingent of his army to rebel: Nadir was assassinated in 1747, and no more was heard of the short lived Ja'fari **madhab**.

#### ÖZET

Afgarlı Nadir Şah tahta geçtiğinde İran'ın resmi dinini Şilikten Sünnilğe çevirmek istemiştir. Bu makalede Nadir Şah'ın bu politikasının nedenleri, tatbik tarzı ve neticesi ele alınmıştır.