

IRANIAN-ARMENIANS ON THE SILK ROAD¹

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Introduction

In the media of the West, Iran is often portrayed as the Islamic bogeyman. Theocratic and anti-American, few in the West would view Iran as tolerant towards religious minorities.

But this stereotype contradicts reality. Despite President Ahmadinejad's rhetoric about wiping Israel off the map, the Islamic Republic of Iran is home to the largest Jewish minority in the Islamic world who, along with the three other constitutionally recognised religious minorities (Armenian Christians, Assyrian Christians and Zoroastrians), are guaranteed political representation and protection.

For Iran, this is nothing new; tolerance towards religious minorities is evident even as far back as the Achaemenid Era (559-330 BCE) of classical Persia. To

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understand modern Iran, however, it is best to look to the Safavid Dynasty (1502-1722 CE), the era in which Iran emerged as a unique Shi'a entity. During this dynasty's reign, there were many examples of such tolerance.

Of all of these examples, the most prominent and arguably the most famous is the favour bestowed by Shah Abbas I on the Armenian Christians. In the early 17th Century, Shah Abbas deported en masse the Armenians of the Caucasian trading town of Julfa to the capital Isfahan, creating an entire new suburb – New Julfa – for their benefit. Under Abbas' reign, this non-Muslim minority became the backbone of the Iranian economy with the explicit blessing of the ruling elite.

In this paper, I will examine Abbas' favour towards the Armenian Christians and argue that their status was a result of the Safavid's practical needs. From the very origins of Persian tolerance lie such pragmatism; since Cyrus the Great's 6th Century BCE cylinder, often upheld as the first declaration of human rights in history, tolerance has existed in Iran as a means of securing "political tranquillity" rather than "philosophical purity" (Daniel 2001, p.39). Therefore Shah Abbas' motives in granting privilege to the Armenian Christians had more to do with the Safavid's economic and political survival that they did with Islamic law. The survival of the Armenian merchant town of Julfa during two decades of conflict coupled with Abbas' general distrust of Muslim merchants within his territory were the determining factors which would lead to the flourishing and economic dominance of Armenian communities throughout Asia in the 17th and 18th Centuries. Furthermore, this discussion will conclude with an analysis of what this period in history can tell us about modern Iran and its religious minorities.

The Safavids and the Julfa Armenians

The Armenians are an ethnic group many have heard of but few know much about. Linguistically, they can be counted as an Indo-European people who have traditionally populated the mountainous regions of Eastern Anatolia and the South Caucasus. For millennia their homeland has faced countless invasions by Assyrians, Persians, Romans, Arabs, Turks and Russians but their language and culture has in part been preserved by their geographic inaccessibility (Bournoutian 1993, p.6). Furthermore, since their conversion to Christianity in the early 4th Century they have developed their own separate identity based on their unique language, alphabet and brand of religion which has allowed them to maintain a distinct awareness of their Armenian-ness even when thousands of miles from their ancestral homeland (Aghanian 2007, p.1). In other words, their language, alphabet and sect of Christianity are the foundations for the Armenian Diaspora, one of the oldest and archetypal of all diasporas.

Armenian interaction with and presence in Iran begins some 2500 years ago in the Achaemenid Era. For many centuries, they shared the same religious beliefs as their Persian neighbours and much of their language's vocabulary has consequently been influenced by Persian (Dalby 1998, p.36). Even following their conversion to Christianity, significant Armenian communities have existed in Iran especially during the Sassanian (4th Century CE) and Mongol (11th-13th Centuries CE) Eras (Berberian 2001, pp.34-35). However, the origins of the modern Armenian-Iranian community are far more recent, being traced to the deportations of the Julfa Armenians to Isfahan in the early 17th Century (Berberian 2001, p.35).

Julfa, which is located in Nakhichevan in the modern day Republic of Azerbaijan, originally developed as a mercantile centre following the bridging of the

River Aras at that point in the 14th Century. This crossing created a new gateway for traders from Iran to cross Anatolia to the Mediterranean. Julfa grew as a stopping place where travelling merchants could access provisions, markets, storage and transport, as well as be tolled formally for use of the bridge (Herzig 1996, pp.309-310).

Rapid growth was experienced in Julfa around the mid to late 16th Century. This growth is reflected by the numerous *khachkars* (ornate Armenian crosses) which date from that period; Herzig (1996, p.308), for example, noted that of the original 2000 *khachkars* at Julfa, “very few recorded examples are dated earlier than the 1550s and the vast majority...are from the period 1570-1604”. In addition to this, as the majority of these *khachkars* were *in memorandum* of merchants, we can safely assume that Julfa had become a mercantile centre by this time (Herzig 1996, p.308).

While the merchants of New Julfa in Isfahan would gain a monopoly on silk through royal decree, it appears their immediate ancestors were already heavily involved in the trade. The wealthy merchants of Julfa had exploited their town’s strategic location in using trade networks to buy silk in nearby Karabagh, Shirvan and Tabriz (where silk from Gilan was traded), and selling it to merchants in Aleppo (Herzig 1996, p.310). By the 16th Century, Iran had well surpassed China as Europe’s main supplier of silk (Khanbaghi 2006, p.114). The overland routes to the Mediterranean, where the Armenians were most active, also rose in importance after Portuguese domination Asia’s sea routes severely restricted Iran’s access to maritime trade (Herzig 1996, p.317).

Overland trade to the Levant was complicated by the Shi’a-Sunni rivalry between Safavid Iran and the Ottoman Empire. In the early 16th Century, the Ottomans had made it illegal for their subjects to trade with Shi’a Iranians, leaving all

Iranian business in the hands of Jews and Armenians (Khanbaghi 2006, p.116). It was in this environment where the Armenians of Julfa emerged as the middlemen in the Middle East.

Apart from persecution, trade has been one of the major factors which has drawn Armenians away from their ancestral home and into the Diaspora, and continues to be a significant force sustaining the Armenian Diaspora to this day (Aghanian 2007, p.1). The success of Armenian traders in the Middle East was in part due to a preference by European Levantine companies for trade with other Christians, a circumstance which allowed the Armenians to become a bridge between Christian West and the Muslim East (Herzig 1996, pp.317-18). Once the Armenians had traded their silk in the Levant, they were then able to return with European bullion which contributed to the wealth of Julfa.

During the years of its greatest prosperity, Julfa was surrounded by the violent conflicts which erupted as a result of the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry. These wars, in particular the conflict of 1578-1588, destroyed many other important mercantile centres in the region such as Tbilisi, Ganja and Yerevan as well as much smaller towns and the surrounding countryside (Herzig 1996, p.309). The Ottoman-Safavid contest for control of the South Caucasus-Caspian region ended with an Ottoman victory and the Shi'a Safavid ruler, Shah Abbas I, was forced to temporarily concede much of the territory to his Sunni Ottoman counterpart in 1590 (Herzig 1996, p.313).

How Julfa managed to survive and prosper in an environment which had resulted in what Herzig (1996, p.309) described as “the widespread depopulation of the countryside, a crisis in agriculture and severe disruption of commerce” is a matter for debate. Herzig (1996, p.313) gives several possible reasons ranging from Julfa's possession of fortifications which were significant enough to deter marauders, to the

using of their wealth to bribe their way out of being sacked. Indeed, there is one such example of a wealthy Armenian from Julfa buying protection from Abbas with a plate of gold coins, an action which saved his town from destruction but possibly inspired Abbas to eventually deport the Armenians (Khanbaghi 2006, p.114).

Overall the survival and prosperity of Julfa during such times of destruction appears to stem from two causes: the neutrality of the Armenians in the war and international nature of their trade. Their neutrality in a Sunni-Shi'a war was crucial as it allowed the Julfans to bypass each side's blockades on the other (Herzig 1996, p.313). Julfa was able to prosper even further, as much of their competition in neighbouring cities was disrupted or destroyed by the war (Herzig 1996, p.313). Furthermore, the Julfan's prosperity was safeguarded by their luck; their clients in Europe were situated outside of the war zone and their supply (especially Gilan) was spared from destruction (Herzig 1996, p.318). But Julfa's success would also be its downfall, leading to the beginnings of the modern Iranian-Armenian community.

New Julfa: the Favourites of Shah Abbas I

The motives for Shah Abbas I's deportation of the Julfan Armenians to Isfahan once Nakhichevan was reconquered by the Safavids are numerous. The bribing of Abbas by wealthy Julfans during the ten-year conflict no doubt demonstrated to the Shah the extent of their prosperity and, according to Arakel of Tabriz, a principle contemporary source on the deportations, the threat of Ottoman destruction of the town motivated Abbas to move it out of harms way (Arakel of Tabriz, 287-288). Furthermore, Shah Abbas clearly did not want the Ottomans to be able to regain the town and its wealth (Gregorian 1998, p.37). The Safavids, who were fond of practicing a scorched earth policy as a means of creating a buffer between themselves and the Ottomans,

slaughtered most of the region's population once they recaptured it in 1603, exterminating the entire population of the Ottoman seat of Nakhichevan and raising the town to the ground (Herzig 1996, p.314). The Armenians' lives were spared, however, though they faced another fate: deportation.

There had been deportations of Armenians by Safavid rulers in the 16th Century but the details are scarce, so it is difficult to conclude whether deportation was a common fate for Armenians (Khanbaghi 2006, p.112). The situation of Julfa may have been different, however, since the town clearly had had the attention of the Safavid court for several decades before the deportations took place (Herzig 1996, p.308). Abbas had had relations with the Julfans before he ceded the territory in 1590 and even after this date he was sending Julfan Armenians as his envoys to Europe (Herzig 1996, p.315). Herzig (1996, p.315) argued that there seemed "to be a pattern emerging in the 1590s of Abbas deliberately employing and honouring Julfan merchants" as he saw them as intermediaries in his relations with Europe as well as in his desire to regain the territory he had lost.

Abbas' deportation of the Armenians and restructuring of the economy developed out of necessity for his survival in office. As Baghdiantz McCabe (2005, p.31) argued, Shah Abbas was faced with a situation where "most of the wealthy Iranian merchants were feudal lords whose power was a threat" and Abbas, who himself came to power after a period of civil war, decided that in order to consolidate his power, Iran would need a "new powerbase". While he recognised that in regaining the South Caucasus he would control all the silk growing areas in the region, he could not rely on the Muslim Iranian silk traders to boost his economy as many were of Turkic origin, and had enough legitimacy in their respective regions to blackmail him and render him an impotent leader (Khanbaghi 2006, pp.115, 117). Abbas therefore

chose the Armenians, a neutral group, moving them far from their homeland so that they would have no geographic advantage against him and instead would have to rely on his favour to protect themselves against the Muslim majority.

By 1603, when Julfa was reconquered by Abbas, the Armenians appear to have been well disposed to the Safavids, welcoming them into their city (Herzig 1996, p.315). They also had extensive networks in Iran and were present as far away as Samarkand, which Khanbaghi (2006, p.11) suggests is evidence that they “were already playing a conspicuous role in the trade of Iran” and therefore had enough experience to serve the economy. Abbas ordered the deportation of Julfa’s entire population as well as that of Armenians from surrounding districts. Only the wealthy Armenians – Shah Abbas I’s “valuable economic assets” – were destined for a favoured life in New Julfa, the remainder were deported to other parts of Iran with many perishing en route or shortly after arrival (Khanbaghi 2006, p.113).

To make way for the arrival of the Christian merchants, Abbas ordered the removal of Muslim peasants from the villages of Saghabad, Falashan and Marbanan near Isfahan (Khanbaghi 2006, p.113). Isfahan had only become the Safavid capital during Abbas’ reign and was chosen as it was safer from Ottoman attack than the previous capitals of Tabriz and Qazvin; the fact it was near the “soft underbelly” of the Ottoman Empire, Baghdad, was also advantageous to the Safavids (Bournoutian 1994, p.28).

The land allotted to the deportees was given the name New Julfa in honour of their old home and in 1619 the residents of this suburb were given a complete monopoly on the silk trade (Baghdiantz McCabe 2005, p.27). The Armenians of New Julfa were granted control of the buying and selling of Iranian silk by the Shah on the condition that they agreed to his high prices. Khanbaghi (2006, p.115) described

Abbas' strategy as being fairly straightforward: "Abbas relied on the Julfan's commercial contacts in the Ottoman and European markets... [and] taxed both their export of silk and import of silver. Thus the Armenians, as the main supplier of the country's silver, had become the backbone of Iranian foreign trade".

In return for their service to the Shah, the Armenians of New Julfa were given religious privileges unprecedented in an Islamic country. Berberian (2001, p.36) described how the New Julfans had:

"complete religious freedom including the right to hold public processions and ring church bells, rights no other Christian community in Iran held...they had their own courts, judges, the right to buy and sell property and no restrictions on clothing, again unlike other non-Muslim communities in Iran."

The Armenians lived in seclusion and their relationship with the government was in the hands of the Christian hierarchy and a handful of wealthy lay people (Sanasarian 2000, p.38). This led to a golden era which was especially pronounced in the 1630s when the first Armenians school was opened and as the New Julfans brought back many innovations from their travels, the first book printed in Iran was an Armenian book of Psalms in 1638 (Berberian 2001, p.37).

As with the modern era, the condition for religious minorities in an Islamic society, or any society for that matter, is never without complications or periods of persecution. As has been demonstrated above, in showing favour to the Armenians of New Julfa, Abbas was motivated more out of martial and economic strategy than religious conviction. For this reason he was still prone to occasional lapses which threatened the Armenians, a pattern that was repeated by many of his successors. In

these sudden changes of royal mood, the Armenians would have to rely on each other for survival.

There were several instances of forced conversion during the reign of Shah Abbas I. In 1609, Abbas forced many lower class Armenians to adopt Islam after a dispute over a loan though most were able to return to their faith (Arakel of Tabriz, 148-156). Again in 1613 there were pressures on the Armenians to convert and a crisis in around 1620 was so bad that several Armenian merchants refused to return to Iran and share their profits with Abbas until the persecution ceased (Khanbaghi 2006, p.128).

Khanbaghi (2006, p.127) argued that the Armenians, as with other religious minorities in Iran like the Jews and Zoroastrians, “could not count on exterior support and had to rely on their own negotiating skills”. In some instances, as with the crisis of 1620, they were able to use their financial importance as a bargaining chip (Khanbaghi 2006, p.128). They already had a fairly close political relationship with the Shah whose favour had allowed them to advance economically, a position which was further strengthened by the presence of Armenian converts to Islam along with Armenian Christian artisans in the Safavid court, both of whom acted as lobbyists (Khanbaghi 2006, p.120). However, following the death of Shah Abbas I, the situation of the Armenians drifted over time to disfavour and the rise in anti-Armenian policies would see an increasing growth of the Diaspora in the East, particularly in India. By the time of the Afghan Invasion in 1722, which heralded the sack of Isfahan and brought an end to the Safavid Dynasty, the era of the New Julfa Armenians was well and truly over (Berberian 2001, p.37).

The Wandering Armenian: Expansion into Asia

Before the Armenians were deported to New Julfa, they already had well established trading networks with other Armenian communities in Russia, the Ottoman Empire and Europe. This was a reason in part for their deportation to Iran, as it demonstrated their value to the global economy. Once established in Persia, the Armenians of New Julfa were able to exploit pre-existing contacts to create a network from Amsterdam in the west to Narva in the north all the way to the Philippines and Indonesia in the east (Baghdiantz McCabe 2005, p.28). Once in Asia, a formidable Armenian trading community took root in India.

India in the 17th Century was something of a “land of opportunity” for Iranian merchants and during this period many of the most prominent traders in Persia were relocating to the sub-continent (Baghdiantz McCabe 2005, p.36). India’s growth as a commercial centre for Iranians in part stemmed from the “quality and affordability of Indian textiles and raw silk” (Chaudhury 2005, p.52), a fact that was not lost on the Armenians. Kurkjian (1959, p.469) even asserted that Shah Abbas I himself “encouraged the establishment of Armenian colonies in the important cities of India – Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and also in Ceylon”. It was in Bengal where the Armenians had their most successful settlements during this period.

The Armenian presence in India can be traced as far back as the final years of the 15th Century (Kurkjian 1959, p.469) and during the 16th Century the original Armenians from Julfa were already opening their franchises in India using the silver they had traded for silk in Aleppo (Herzig 1996, p.318). By the time of the deportations to New Julfa, there was already fertile ground for Armenian trade in India.

Chaudhury (2005, p.53) argued that the success of the New Julfa Armenian traders in India was based on the frugality of their lifestyle and the strength of their ambition –“if there was any possibility of profit in trade, they would go even to remote places and deal” – a factor which separated them from other traders in Bengal. They maintained their identity along the trade routes through the diffusion of Armenian books by travelling merchants and the building of Armenian churches in their colonies on money from New Julfa (Baghdiantz McCabe 2005, p.39). Furthermore, in their own profits they were able to send money back to New Julfa and even as far as Historic Armenia, where their capital played an important role in keeping the Armenian Church free from Catholic attempts at annexation (Baghdiantz McCabe 2005, p.39).

The growth in Armenian settlement in India in the mid 17th Century coincides with a rise in anti-Christian rulings back in Iran. For instance, in 1647 Shah Abbas II (Abbas I's successor) forced all Armenians of Isfahan to reside in New Julfa, which Baghdiantz McCabe (2005, p.45) argued signalled an end to “the favoured status of the New Julfans and the creation of an Armenian ghetto”. Arakel of Tabriz (445-447) recorded this event as being part of the Shah's plan for restricting alcohol in the city by keeping the “people who drink wine” (Armenians, Jews, etc) segregated from the main Muslim populace. Iran's loss was India's gain and fairly soon a strong Armenian merchant community grew in Bengal where the majority of Armenians were born or had their origins in New Julfa (Sinha 1995, p.99).

Armenian successes in India came to an end in the 18th Century due to increased European dominance of trade in the region. One commentator described how the “high handed” tactics of the British, which included robbery, led to the demise of the Armenians in India (Sinha 1995, p.103). The same commentator

ascribed their downfall to their lack of resourcefulness stating that “the Wandering Armenian has not the adaptability and mental receptiveness of the Wandering Jew” (Sinha 1995, p.105). However, Armenian success and survival in most of the world counters this notion. Chaudhury (2005, p.66), for instance, has noted how “the Armenians often acted as a group rather than individual entrepreneurs”, a result of “the pride they took in their identity”. Furthermore, Chaudhury (2005, p.68) argued, “the Armenians succeeded because they were able to create networks of trust, shared information and mutual support based upon the fact that they were a distinct ethnic and religious minority”. Today a small Armenian community remains in Calcutta and a suburb still retains their name – Armanitola, the “habitat” of the Armenians (Chaudhury 2005, p.67).

Conclusion: the Legacy of New Julfa on Modern Iranian-Armenians

Today some 200,000 Armenians live in Iran, making them the largest recognised religious minority in the Islamic Republic (Sanasarian 2000, p.39). The community had experienced a decline in the 18th and 19th Centuries, particularly after the Russian annexation of the South Caucasus in 1828 which saw many Armenians from all over Iran emigrated to modern day Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (Berberian 2001, p.17). During the first years of the 20th Century the Armenian community grew rapidly as many Russian Armenians fled discriminatory measures introduced by the Tsars in 1903 (Berberian 2001, p.79). Many Armenians played a part in the defence of the Iranian Constitution of 1906 but throughout the Pahlavi Era (1925-1979) they kept a low profile in Iranian politics and were mainly concerned with “the preservation of their community” (Berberian 2001, p.187).

The 1906 Constitution guaranteed the Armenians one political representative in the Iranian parliament (known as the Majles). Later, during the Pahlavi Era, this was increased to two representatives on account of their numbers – one representative of Armenians in the north around (centred on Teheran) and one for Armenians in the south (Isfahan) (Sanasarian 2000, p.40). Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, rather than ignore this, the new government headed by the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini chose to reaffirm the place of the recognised religious minorities in Iran and the protection continued.

While Shah Abbas I's favouritism of the Armenians could never occur in the modern Islamic Republic (indeed, it was more or less unprecedented in Islamic history), the policies of the Safavids offers insight into the actions of the modern government. As I have argued in this paper, the Armenians were a crucial to Abbas' plans to control the political and economic situation in Iran. The Armenians, as Christians without a territorial claim where they resettled, were a neutral group with whom Abbas was able to develop a mutually dependent relationship.

Today all four of the recognised religious minorities (Armenians, Assyrians, Jews and Zoroastrians) play a utilitarian role in modern Iranian society just as their predecessors have done in the past. Since 1979, they have been useful as a propaganda tool for the Iranian government in demonstrating their level of tolerance to their Western critics as well as emphasising their legitimacy in the Islamic world through their claimed adherence to Qu'ranic rulings on religious minorities. It is evidence that the study of Iran's culture and history are in the 21st Century as the nation's importance to world affairs grows.

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