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Shah Ismail I and Charles V: Diplomatic Encounters in the Early Sixteenth Century

Abstract

The Safavid Empire, founded in 1501 in the Azerbaijani city of Tabriz, soon found itself in conflict with the Ottoman Empire. This led its founder, Shah Ismail I, to seek alliances with Christian powers in the West, including Charles I of Spain, later Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The fact that both rulers perceived Ottoman expansionism as a common threat paved the way for the exchange of diplomatic missions and the drafting of letters. An examination of the available historical records shows that diplomatic figures such as Petrus Maronita de Monte Libano and Johann Balbi played vital roles in the conduct of Safavid-Spanish relations. Through these contacts, the Safavids aimed to establish alliances and organize coordinated attacks that would force the Ottomans to fight on two fronts simultaneously. However, these attempts at alliance failed to yield the expected concrete military results because of the vast geographical distances, the slowness of communication channels, and the shifting political balances in the region. This study focuses on the nature of the diplomatic contacts that Shah Ismail established with Spain, the activities of the envoys dispatched, and the obstacles that led to the failure of these alliance initiatives.

Keywords: *Safavid Empire, Shah Ismail I, Charles V, Safavid-Spanish Relations, Early Modern Diplomacy*

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Şah İsmayıl I və Çarlz V: XVI əsrin əvvəllərində diplomatik görüşlər

Xülasə

1501-ci ildə Azərbaycan şəhəri Təbrizdə əsas qoyulan Səfəvilər dövləti, qısa müddət ərzində Osmanlı İmperiyası ilə qarşıdurma vəziyyətinə gəldi. Bu geosiyasi vəziyyət dövlətin qurucusu Şah İsmayılı Qərbdəki xristian güclər ilə, o cümlədən sonradan V. Karl adı ilə Müqəddəs Roma imperatoru olan İspaniya kralı I Karl ilə ittifaq axtarışlarına sövq etdi. Hər iki hökmdarın Osmanlı ekspansiyasını ortaq təhdid olaraq görməsi, qarşılıqlı diplomatik heyətlərin göndərilməsinə və məktublaşmaların yazılmasına zəmin yaratdı. Mövcud tarixi mənbələrin təhlili göstərir ki, Petrus Maronita de Monte Libano və İohan Balbi kimi diplomatik fiqurlar Səfəvi-İspan əlaqələrinin idarə olunmasında həyati rol oynamışlar. Səfəvilər bu təmaslar vasitəsilə ittifaq quraraq Osmanlıları eyni anda iki cəbhədə döyüşməyə məcbur edəcək koordinasiya hücumları təşkil etməyi hədəfləyirdilər. Lakin coğrafi məsafələrin uzaqlığı, xəbərleşmə kanallarının ləngliyi və bölgədəki dəyişkən siyasi balanslar səbəbindən bu ittifaq cəhdləri gözlənilən konkret hərbi nəticələri vermədi. Bu tədqiqatın məqsədi Şah İsmayıl dövründə İspaniya ilə qurulan diplomatik təmasların mahiyyətini, göndərilən elçilərin fəaliyyətlərini və bu ittifaq təşəbbüslərinin uğursuzluğa düçar olmasına səbəb olan maneələri təhlil etməkdir.

Açar sözlər: *Səfəvilər dövləti, I Şah İsmayıl, V Karl, Səfəvi-İspan münasibətləri, Erkən yeni dövr diplomatiyası*

Introduction

The origins of relations between Iran and the Western world can be traced back to centuries before Christ. We can examine the relations between the Ancient Greeks and the Achaemenids, and between the Romans and the Sassanids, within this context. Although these relations were severed at certain periods in history, Iran has always served as a ‘bridge’ between the Western and Eastern worlds due to its geographical location. Relations between Iran and Spain also have a long history within this context (Mehrad, 2012, pp. 23-24). Indeed, the fact that the cult of Mithras, which spread throughout the Roman Empire shortly before the emergence of Christianity, originated in Iran and India before reaching the Western world, and the existence in Spain of a site associated with this cult, such as Augusta Emerita (modern-day Mérida), is of great significance in demonstrating the nature of Iran-Spain relations (Shafa, 2000, pp. 60). It is often suggested that a woman named Egeria travelled from the Iberian Peninsula to Iran as early as the fourth century. However, when we turn to more solid historical evidence, one of the earliest clearly documented journeys from Spain to Iran appears to date to the twelfth century. In this regard, the journey of the rabbi Benjamin of Tudela provides a clear example: between 1164 and 1173, he travelled from Spain to a number of Iranian cities, including Hamadan, Shiraz, and Shush (Mehrad, 2012, pp. 24). After the Mongols established their rule in Iran, the Ilkhanids, who stood in opposition to the Mamluks, began to send envoys and ambassadors to several European courts. In this context, a gradual exchange of diplomatic missions developed between Iran and Europe. It is also known that James II of Aragon (1291–1327), ruler of one of the Christian kingdoms on the Iberian Peninsula, dispatched an envoy to Iran during this period (Cutillas, 2015, pp. 256). In the 15th century, King Henry III of Castile sent a diplomatic mission, led by Ruy González de Clavijo, to Emir Timur, who also ruled over the Iranian region. The idea of attacking the Turks on two fronts had been a key factor in the dispatch of this mission. Clavijo also wrote a travelogue about this journey. Pero Tafur, who also undertook a journey to the East in the same century, also wrote a travelogue about his journey (Martín, 2017-2018, pp. 89).

Research

This study is based primarily on an analysis of the diplomatic correspondence between Shah Ismail I and Charles I of Spain, later Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. This correspondence is examined through a qualitative and contextual approach, with particular attention to the political, geographical, and communicative constraints of the early sixteenth century. This article examines the practical limitations that shaped both the content and the outcomes of this correspondence by situating the documents within their broader historical context. Secondary literature has also been consulted to support and contextualise the primary evidence.

Shah Ismail I's Search for Alliances in Europe

Following the establishment of the Safavid state in 1501, diplomatic contacts were gradually established with various countries. The first reports about Shah Ismail to reach Europe arrived in Venice in late December 1501, at a time when the Ottoman–Venetian war of 1499–1502 was still ongoing (Sanuto, 1880, p. 191; Amoretti, 1979, p. 3; Rota, 2002, pp. 580-581; Matthee, 2013, p. 9). The emergence and consolidation of the Safavid state in Tabriz, an Azerbaijani city, closely coincided with the Ottoman Empire's expansion towards the east. As this development brought the two powers into direct conflict, some European states began to consider the possibility of an alliance with the Safavids against the Ottomans. Shah Ismail, for his part, likewise sought to establish such an alliance, hoping to draw on the support of Christian Europe in his struggle against the Ottoman Empire. In this context, he sent a letter to the Doge of Venice, Leonardo Loredano, in 1505, expressing his respect and desire for friendship. The letter reached Venice the following year, in 1506 (Sanuto, 1881, pp. 302-304; Amoretti, 1979, pp. 91-92; Berchet, 1865, pp. 158; Rota, 2002, p. 581; Matthee, 2013, p. 9). In September 1508, an envoy of Shah Ismail met with the Venetian governor of Nauplia in southern Greece (Amoretti, 1979, p. 155; Rota, 2002, p. 581), in 1509, a Safavid envoy, accompanied by the Karamanid envoy, arrived in Venice to request the dispatch of craftsmen capable of casting cannons and for the Venetian fleet to engage the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II off the Greek coast. However, no outcome was achieved (Berchet, 1865, pp. 25-26; Amoretti, 1979, pp. 161-164; Rota,

2002, p. 581; Matthee, 2013, p. 9). In 1510, Shah Ismail, through an envoy dispatched to the court of Bijapur in South India, conveyed to the Portuguese governor of India, Afonso de Albuquerque, a proposal for a military alliance against the Mamluks. These contacts were maintained in 1513 and 1515. In the aftermath of the defeat at Chaldiran in 1514, Shah Ismail also sought to secure Portuguese support for his plans to seize Bahrain and Qatif (Matthee, 2011, p. 225). When the Portuguese sent their first envoys to Tabriz in 1514, the Safavids had just suffered a severe defeat at the hands of the Ottomans at Chaldiran. This setback, followed by the Ottoman conquest of Egypt, significantly reshaped the geopolitical balance in the region. No longer able to rely on the Mamluks, Shah Ismail turned instead to the Christian rulers of Europe, dispatching envoys to Rhodes and seeking to establish contact with the Papacy (Matthee, 2013, pp. 9-10). This Ottoman expansion effectively placed a barrier between Europe and the East, a development that further accelerated efforts to forge a strategic alliance between European states and the Safavid court. As Cutillas observes, Europeans came to view Shah Ismail as a pro-Christian figure in the struggle against Islam and as an ally of the Christian world, placing him on a level comparable to that of Charles V (Cutillas, 2015, pp. 258-259).

Contacts with Spain during the Reign of Shah Ismail I

Alongside Shah Ismail's efforts to find allies in Europe, King Charles I of Spain and King Louis II of Hungary likewise approached the Safavids in the hope of forming an alliance against the Ottomans (Lockhart, 1986, pp. 381-382). As early as 1507, efforts had already been made to reach an agreement between Spain and the Safavids (Truyol y Serra, 1980, p. LXV, fn. 122). Meanwhile, King Louis II of Hungary sent a monk named Petrus de Monte Libano as an envoy to Shah Ismail in an effort to secure an alliance. King Charles I of Spain, before his election as Holy Roman Emperor in 1519, likewise dispatched an envoy to the Safavid court with the same aim. As some of the relevant correspondence has not survived, Shah Ismail's response to these missions remains unknown (Lockhart, 1986, p. 382). There is also evidence that a Safavid envoy reached Vienna in 1522 (Truyol y Serra, 1980, p. 258, fn. 4).

Following all these developments, Shah Ismail sent a letter in Latin, in the month of Shawwal 929 AH (11 August–10 September 1523), to Charles, who also bore the title of Holy Roman Emperor, expressing his intention to form an alliance against the Ottomans and launch a joint attack. (Lanz, 1844, pp. 52-53; Falsafi, 1316, pp. 163-164; Lockhart, 1986, p. 382). The date assigned to this letter in Lanz's study, Shawwal 924 AH (October 1518), is incorrect (Falsafi, 1316, pp. 163-164; Lockhart, 1986, p. 382, fn. 1). According to information recorded in Emperor Charles's annals, a Safavid envoy arrived in Burgos in 1524 and this envoy most likely carried the letter in question (De Gómara, 1912, p. 70; Cutillas, 2015, p. 258, fn. 4; Tuyol y Serra, 1980, p. LXV). In this letter, which begins with the words "To Charles, son of Philip", Shah Ismail opens his address with praises to Allah and warns Charles not to trust the Ottomans under any circumstances. He expresses surprise that the Christian powers were engaged in conflicts among themselves instead of uniting against the Turks, arguing that such divisions had only strengthened the Ottomans. He therefore urges Charles to mobilise his forces and to launch a coordinated attack in April (during the spring season), striking the common enemy simultaneously from both east and west. Describing the Ottoman sultan as a "faithless" and "untrustworthy" adversary, Shah Ismail further warns that, given the vast distances involved and the Ottoman control of maritime routes, action must be taken without delay rather than prolonged through correspondence (Lanz, 1844, pp. 52-53; Falsafi, 1316, pp. 163-164). The envoy dispatched by Shah Ismail was Petrus de Monte Libano, who had previously been sent to the Safavid court by King Louis II of Hungary (Lanz, 1844, p. 168; Falsafi, 1316, p. 165). In 1523, Shah Ismail sent Petrus de Monte Libano to King Louis II of Hungary and Emperor Charles, with the aim of forming an alliance against the Ottomans (Slaby, 2005). Rome was also among the destinations to which the envoy was to be sent (Matthee, 2013, p. 10).

This letter reached the Emperor two years later, only after Shah Ismail's death. It is also noteworthy that confirmed news of Shah Ismail's death and the accession of his son Tahmasp appears not to have reached Emperor Charles by February 1529. For this reason, the two letters the Emperor sent to the Safavids following Shah Ismail's death were addressed to Shah Ismail rather than Shah Tahmasp. This suggests that communication between Spain and Iran at the time operated under

considerable constraints, which in turn made the coordination of their actions all the more difficult (Lanz, 1844, pp. 168-169; Falsafi, 1316, pp. 165-168; Lockhart, 1986, p. 382; Mehrad, 2012, p. 24, fn. 5). It is clear that envoys sent from the Safavid realm to European countries faced dangers such as deaths, epidemics, shipwrecks, harsh weather conditions, pressure from local authorities and pirate attacks along the way. The journeys took a very long time. The fact that the sea routes were under Ottoman control following the conquest of Egypt and Syria was the greatest problem. This situation also highlights the structural limitations of the early modern diplomatic era, where political decision-making processes could be based on outdated or incomplete information. Similar difficulties continued to affect Safavid envoys in later periods.

It appears that the first of these above-mentioned two letters was written in Toledo on 25 August 1525. In the letter, Emperor Charles states that Shah Ismail's letter, containing a proposal to act in concert against the Ottoman Empire, reached him late, and that the date set for the attack had long since passed by the time it arrived. Furthermore, he initially doubted its authenticity, as it bore neither an official seal nor a signature, but accepted it, trusting in Shah Ismail's sincerity. Mentioning that he had recently recovered from an illness and had entered into war with France, Emperor Charles declares that peace has now been established in Europe and that he is fully prepared to ally with Shah Ismail against their "common enemy," the Ottoman Turks, and to enter the war with all his might. At the end of the letter, he refers to rumours of Shah Ismail's death and, expressing the hope that they are unfounded, calls for swift communication through reliable envoys regarding military plans (Lanz, 1844, pp. 168-169; Falsafi, 1316, pp. 165-166). This letter makes it clear that the Emperor was favourably disposed towards the proposal. However, although he had heard certain rumours of Shah Ismail's death, he was not yet aware that Shah Ismail had in fact died and that Shah Tahmasp had ascended the throne. The outcome of Petrus de Monte Libano's second journey to the Safavid realm is unknown. By the time he set out for Iran, Shah Ismail had long since died, and his successor, Shah Tahmasp, had likely failed to reply to Emperor Charles because he regarded European rulers as 'infidels' and 'unclean' (Falsafi, 1316, p. 167).

When King Louis II of Hungary was killed in the decisive battle against the Ottomans at Mohács in 1526, the Habsburgs' efforts to secure allies in the East became even more pressing (Slaby, 2005). On 15 February 1529, Emperor Charles sent another letter to the Safavids. It is noteworthy that this second letter was addressed not to Shah Tahmasp, but to Shah Ismail (Lanz, 1844, pp. 292-293; Falsafi, 1316, pp. 167-168). As noted above, given the long distances and the difficult conditions imposed by the prevailing political situation, communication between the Safavids and the Spanish was slow, and it appears that news of Shah Ismail's death had not yet reached Emperor Charles by that time (Lockhart, 1986, p. 382; Mehrad, 2012, p. 24, fn. 5). In this letter, Emperor Charles, after praising Shah Ismail's military successes and his stance against oppression, proposes the formation of a united front against the Ottoman Empire through his envoy Johann Balbi. He notes that he had taken his long-standing rival, King Francis I of France, captive and released him only on the condition that he assist in the struggle against the Ottomans. Referring to the Ottoman attack on Hungary and the death of its king in battle, Charles declares that he would advance against the Ottomans via Italy, while his brother would do so via Hungary. He expects the Shah to move the Safavid army towards the Ottoman frontiers in order to divide Ottoman forces and draw their attention eastwards. Overall, the letter seeks to exert military pressure on the Ottomans from two fronts, framed in terms of the welfare of humanity (Lanz, 1844, pp. 292-293; Falsafi, 1316, pp. 167-168). It appears that on 18 February 1529, Emperor Charles sent a letter to Johann Balbi containing instructions regarding negotiations with Shah Ismail (Lanz, 1844, pp. 293-296). John Balbi set out for Iran via the Levant and, in a letter to the Emperor from Aleppo, reported his arrival there. He added that he intended to cross into Iran at an opportune moment and that the Safavid-Ottoman war offered a favourable opportunity for the Emperor to enter the conflict. However, Balbi made no mention of Shah Ismail's death or of Shah Tahmasp's accession. Nor did the other letters he sent along the way contain any significant information, and the outcome of his journey remains unknown (Falsafi, 1316, p. 169). However, it can be said that by the time Balbi reached the East, the political situation had changed, as the Safavids were forced to make peace with the Ottomans due to the Uzbek threat, Balbi's efforts

came to nothing. Similarly, Pietro da Negro and Simon de Lillis, whom Ferdinand had sent to Iran, were also unable to bring back any positive news to Europe (Slaby, 2005). In 1532, Shah Tahmasp I did send a letter to the Emperor (Cutillas, 2015, p. 258, fn. 4; Truyol y Serra, 1980, p. LXV). However, it appears that he did not attach much importance to the alliance proposals put forward by Spain and other Western powers (Gündüz, 2010, p. 415). Indeed, following the Christian victory at Lepanto in 1571, Pope Pius V wrote to Tahmasp urging him to launch an attack against the Ottomans, yet the Shah showed no inclination to do so (Lockhart, 1986, p. 384).

Conclusion

The correspondence exchanged between the Safavids and the Spanish following the establishment of the Safavid state suggests that both sides were willing to form an alliance against the Ottoman Empire and to launch a coordinated two-front attack against their common enemy. However, owing to the difficulties of timely communication, arising from both geographical distance and prevailing political conditions, these initiatives failed to produce any concrete results. The failure of these initiatives can largely be attributed to the technological and geographical constraints of the sixteenth century. Communication was so slow that by the time an envoy reached his destination, circumstances, such as the death of a ruler or the outbreak of a new conflict, had often changed fundamentally, rendering plans for simultaneous action impracticable. The fact that a letter could be addressed to Shah Ismail years after his death, without this being known to the sender, provides a striking illustration of this breakdown in communication. In this sense, Safavid–Spanish rapprochement remained largely a declaration of strategic intent rather than a realised alliance. Although contacts began as early as 1507 and continued thereafter, with envoys travelling in both directions, including figures such as Petrus de Monte Libano and Johann Balbi, these efforts ultimately failed to move beyond the level of diplomatic initiative. It may therefore be concluded that Spanish attempts, both during and after the reign of Shah Ismail, to form an alliance with the Safavids against the Ottomans and to coordinate a two-front offensive did not yield tangible results.

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