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## 6 **The Ottoman Factor in Safavid-Venetian Relations**

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### **6.1 The Safavids and Ottomans in Venetian Realpolitik**

The nature and intensity of Safavid diplomatic engagement with Venice should be considered in the light of Ottoman-Venetian and Safavid-Venetian relations, as they were closely interrelated during this period. In the sixteenth century, this relationship was mainly centred on the issue of the Ottoman threat.

Giorgio Rota argues that both the Venetian attitude towards the Ottomans as well as Venetian interest in the Safavid state were shaped by the necessity of trading and of defending trade (Rota 2009a, 7). Venetians were interested in trade relations and it was their commercial concerns that resulted in a warming of their relations with the Ottomans. In many respects, Venice pursued Realpolitik by safeguarding its commercial relations with the Ottomans for the purpose of its own survival (Preto 1975, 28). Palmira Brummett (1999, 227-8) points out that the Ottoman-Venetian relationship was not characterised by an attitude of extreme hostility. Across borders, Ottomans and Venetians were more often engaged in trade than at war. The fortunes of each state were connected to the fortunes of the other.

In the sixteenth century, in particular, Venetians and Safavids viewed each other as potential allies against the threat of the expanding Ottoman Empire. Therefore, contacts were only made when one side or the other was contemplating military action. On the other hand, the maintenance of peaceful relations with the Ottomans was a critical element in both Safavid and Venetian grand strategies. Peaceful relations with the Ottomans also contributed to a more propitious commercial climate in the Eastern Mediterranean. Mutual trade interests often took precedence over the prospect of a military alliance in Safavid-Venetian relations, particularly for the first half of the seventeenth century. Gabriele Caliari's painting of the reception of the Safavid envoy Fathi Bey by Doge Marino Grimani on 5 March 1603 could serve as a telling example of this (Rota 2009b, 229-33). The artist chose to focus on the gift of precious silk rather than on any religious or military emblem (Niayesh 2016, 209).

Generally, Venice looked upon the Safavids through the prism of its relations with the Ottomans. This was also true for the Safavids, the nature of whose contacts with the Venetians was influenced by their attitude to the Porte. In its relations with the Safavids, the Venetian government pursued a cautious policy and tried not to antagonise the Ottomans. Venetian officials were so careful that they tried to ensure that the Ottomans did not get wind of even their most insignificant dealings with the Safavids ("Non pervenisse alle orecchie de Turchi").<sup>1</sup> As long as Venice did not lose any of her vital possessions to the Ottomans, no ambassadors were sent to the Safavid court. Whenever the Ottoman threat seemed graver, the Serenissima sought support from the Safavids against the Porte. For the most part, Venice maintained neutrality or amicable relations with the Ottomans, except when her possession of certain territories and bases was at stake (Brummett 1999, 230).

Venetians exercised the same caution in their contacts with the Safavids in order not to damage their relations with Mamluks, one of Venice's principal trading partners before their fall in 1517. However, Mamluk-Venetian relations were temporarily strained in the wake of an incident that took place in the summer of 1510, involving the interception of Shah Ismā'il's letters by the Mamluk authorities.<sup>2</sup> These letters, carried by Cypriot Nicolò Surier and his companion, were addressed to the Doge, to the Venetian consuls in Syria as well as to the rectors of Cyprus (Sanudo 1879-1903, 12: col. 236-7).

<sup>1</sup> ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, fz. 26, unpaginated; ASVe, Risposta dei Cinque Savij, 7 Marzo, 1626, unpaginated.

<sup>2</sup> See Lucchetta 1968; Setton 1984, 25-33; Rota 2021, 589.

Outraged by the links between the Safavid Shah and the Venetian government (Sanudo 1879-1903, 11: col. 825), the Mamluk Sultan ordered the arrest of Pietro Zen, the consul of the Republic in Damascus. In 1512, to 'sweeten' the soured relations and conciliate the Sultan, the Venetian government sent its envoy Domenico Trevisan with rich gifts and assurances that correspondence between the Signoria and the Safavid shah was in no way directed against the Mamluk sultan (Setton 1984, 29-30).

In 1580, when the Safavids sent the embassy led by Haji Mohamad in an attempt to get at least 'moral' support against the Ottomans, it resulted in failure due to Venetians' unwillingness to break peace with the Ottomans (Rota 2012, 150).

The delayed audience of Safavid envoy Asad Bey at the Venetian Collegio could serve as a further example of Venice's policy of caution and desire not to provoke the Ottomans. Despite being informed of Asad Bey's arrival in Venice on 29 May 1600,<sup>3</sup> the Venetian Collegio did not grant him an audience until 8 June.<sup>4</sup> The reason being that the Ottoman envoy Davud çavuş was in Venice at the same time.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Asad Bey's audience with Doge Marino Grimani was deliberately delayed until the çavuş had left the city. Furthermore, Venetians advised Asad Bey "not to talk to anybody, especially to the Ottoman envoy".<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in 1601, a Safavid envoy called Huseyn Ali Bey Bayat, who was accompanying Anthony Sherley, who was charged with discussing a military alliance against the Ottomans, was not given permission to enter Venice. This could be interpreted as the Venetian government's wish to avoid involvement in any action that could endanger its peaceful relations with the Sublime Porte. Venice had evidently decided that the mission could negatively affect its relations with the Ottomans. It is interesting to note that in 1609, the Venetian government refused to negotiate with Robert Sherley, another Safavid envoy, this time on a mission to the Pope (Paz 1914, 644). Venice's reluctance to deal with Robert Sherley might well explain the importance of the precautionary principle in the Serenissima's foreign policy.

Contacts between various European states and the Safavids aroused the Porte's suspicions regardless of the intentions of the

<sup>3</sup> ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, registro 14, 18 maggio 1600, c. 111v.

<sup>4</sup> ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, fz. 11, 8 giugno 1600, unpaginated.

<sup>5</sup> ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, registro 14, 18 maggio 1600, cc. 111rv. For Davud's visit to Venice see also Pedani 1994, 36, 55.

<sup>6</sup> "Ella gli [Asad Bey] commise, che non dovesse parlarne con alcuno, et meno di tutti con il [Davud] chiaus, et che dovesse trattaner l'audientia al Persiano sino che esso Chiaus fosse espedito" (ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, registro 14, 29 maggio 1600, c. 112v).

parties involved, especially when the Ottoman Empire was in a state of war with one of them (Güngörürler 2016, 94). For example, in his dispatch dated 28 November 1609, the Venetian bailo in Istanbul Simon Contarini informed the Senate about his conversation with the Ottoman *Kapudan-ı Derya* Halil Pasha, who had questioned him regarding the Safavid envoy's visit to Rome. His reply to Halil Pasha illustrates Venice's cautious policy towards the Porte:

I told him [Halil Pasha] about the Persian Ambassadors [Robert Sherley's embassy] and he asked me where they were. I said that they were in Rome, and they had also wanted to go to Venice, but the Ambassador of the [Venetian] Republic [in Rome], aware of the wish to never to cast any shadow of hostility in the direction of the Grand Sultan [Ottoman sultan], with great prudence dissuaded them from that journey [...] Pasha [Halil Pasha] was very happy to hear this and took my hand laughingly.<sup>7</sup>

When the Serenissima was on peaceful terms with the Ottomans, Venetian officials tried to give an unofficial character to the visits of the Safavid envoys and in most cases, associated the presence of Safavid subjects in Venice and their contacts with the Safavids with trade issues.<sup>8</sup>

The impact that the Ottomans had upon Venetian-Safavid relations clearly emerges in the case of Safavid diplomat Zeynal Bey's visit to Venice. In the late spring of 1604, Safavid envoy Zeynal Bey Shamlu's sojourn in Venice on his way to the Habsburg court in Prague aroused suspicions among the Ottomans. The Ottoman *Hazinadar* (Treasurer) demanded an explanation from the bailo in Istanbul regarding the visit of Zeynal Bey. The Venetian government ensured the Porte that the Safavid ambassador was in Venice "not only privately, but also secretly" and they had not engaged in any negotiations with him.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> ASVe, Senato, Dispacci Costantinopoli, fz. 68, 28 novembre 1609, cc. 376r-377v: "et gli havevo detto degli Ambasciatori del Persiano, mi addimandò ove fossino, dissi che erano a Roma, et che havrebbo anco voluto andar a Venetia, ma che là Ambasciadore della Republica con sapevole del desiderio che ella tiene di non apportar mai nissun ombra di disgusto al Gran Signore gli haveva con molta prudenza dissuasi da quel viaggio... Si fè il Bassà molto allegro.. et presomi per mano ridendo".

<sup>8</sup> ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, registro 14, 31 maggio 1600, c. 113r; ASVe, Senato, Dispacci Costantinopoli, fz. 98, 18 gennaio 1624 (*more veneto*), c. 439rv.

<sup>9</sup> ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, fz. 10, 17 luglio 1604, unpaginated: "Con questo che è stato qui, non solo privatamente ma, si può dir, occultamente, noi non habbiamo havuto niuna sorte di tratattione, né lo [Zeynal Bey] habbiamo veduto et parti verso la fine di giugno medesimamente passato verso Praga. Ma, perche ci perviene hora à notitià che' il Casnadar intese l'esser qui di esso Persiano, et disse di haver anco inteso che da noi gli sià stato dato un passaporto".

## 6.2 The Safavids' Policy of Caution

By refusing to grant an audience to Vincenzo degli Alessandri, who had been dispatched to the Safavid court in 1571 in order to urge the Safavids to join the anti-Ottoman alliance, Shah Tahmāsp showed his unwillingness to put peace with the Porte at stake. As a part of its policy aimed at involving the Safavids in the anti-Ottoman league, the Venetian government also used Safavid subjects as envoys to the shah. For example, after the outbreak of the Ottoman-Venetian war over Cyprus in 1570, one of the two envoys sent to the Safavid Court by the Venetian Senate was Khoja Ali Tabrizi, a Safavid subject who traded in Venice. The letter of bailo in Istanbul makes it clear that the Venetians made attempts to employ the Shah's subjects, particularly the merchants. He urged the consul in Syria to seek to curry favour with the Safavid merchants there, "so that they might convince the Shah to join the war against the Ottomans", as he had already done through Venetian merchants and other Safavid merchants in Istanbul.<sup>10</sup> Despite the Venetian efforts, Shah Tahmāsp saw no alternative to continuing peaceful relations with the Ottomans.

From the signing of the peace of Zohab (1639) until the end of Safavid rule in the early eighteenth century, Safavid rulers sought to avoid involvement in an alliance against the Ottomans, maintaining an extremely cautious policy designed not to antagonise their western neighbour (Matthee 1994, 750). Peaceful terms with the Ottomans allowed the Safavids to recapture the strategic city of Qandahar from the Mughals in 1649.

In the early years of the Cretan (Candian) war (1645-69), the Venetian government sent several missions to the Safavid court in order to urge the Shah to join the anti-Ottoman alliance. According to Tavernier (1678, 74), the main aim of this attempt was "to excite the King of Persia to engage him in a war against the Turk, thereby to keep off the storm that threatened Christendom". None of these missions produced any results due to Shah Abbās II's reluctance to jeopardise his peace accord with the Ottomans. Shah Abbās II's response invariably included an affirmation of friendship but no commitment to military support (Rota 2012, 151).

From time to time, both the Safavids and Ottomans would appeal for peace on the grounds of Muslim solidarity, arguing that a continuation of hostilities served the benefit of the Europeans. According

<sup>10</sup> ASVe, Senato, Dispacci, Costantinopoli, Rubriche D1, 18 luglio 1570, c. 260v: "Ha esortato il console in Soria far qualche officio con mercanti Persiani, che potessero mover il Soffi alla guerra contra Turchi, come ha egli fatto far in Costantinopoli da nostri mercanti con altri mercanti Persiani".

to Iskandar bay Munshī, in a letter brought by Kheyreddin çavuş in H. 1017 (1608/1609), the Ottoman grand vizier Murad Pasha noted:

Such situation would only weaken the Muslim forces engaged in the struggle with the Frankish [European] princes, who were in a constant state of war against the Muslim world, and would produce malicious joy among Christians. (Munshī 1978, 2: 986)

In his reply to the Ottoman sultan, Shah Abbās wrote:

If the Ottoman sultan will relinquish his claim to this territory [Safavid provinces occupied by the Ottomans], I am ready at any time to discuss peace for the benefit of all Muslims. What could be better than that Muslim rulers should live together in peace and harmony, and thus frustrate the designs of the enemies of the faith? (Munshī 1978, 2: 987)

In his other letter to the Shah, reported by the Venetian bailo in March 1611, Murad Pasha wonders why so much Muslim blood was spilled if they (Ottomans and Safavids) all belong to the same religion.<sup>11</sup>

In his dispatch dated 12 May 1608, the Venetian bailo Ottaviano Bon related that a Safavid envoy in Istanbul had informed a Polish diplomat about the progress of the Shah's army against the Ottomans.<sup>12</sup> According to the Venetian document dated 19 July 1634, during his audience at the Venetian Collegio, the Safavid envoy Ali Bali informed the Doge that the shah had sent his ambassador to the king of Poland to urge him not to make peace with the Ottomans and for his part "promised to continue a war".<sup>13</sup> However, it is interesting to note that in 1622, when the Safavids and Ottomans were on peaceful terms, in a letter to the Ottoman Sultan, Shah Abbās emphasised that he prayed with the clerics in the mosque for the success of the Sultan's campaign against Poland (Küpelı 2009, 73).

<sup>11</sup> ASVe, Senato, Dispacci Costantinopoli, fz. 71, 19 marzo 1611, cc. 55r-55v: "che fra di loro tutti d'una seta si spanda tanto sangue di Mussulmani".

<sup>12</sup> ASVe, Senato, Dispacci Costantinopoli, fz. 66, 12 maggio 1608, c. 127r: "Et, esso Ambasciadore ha riferito al Nontio di Polonia che lo ha visitato senza sospetto come per lettere con ha' havuto, fin hora Van deve esser preso, et che il Re con potentissimo esercito deve esser verso Babilonia".

<sup>13</sup> ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, fz. 26, 19 luglio, 1634, unpaginated: "Che il Re di Persia a quello di Polonia haveva inviato Amb[asciadio]re per ecitarlo a non far la Pace con Turchi promettendo dal suo canto di tener fermo con gran forze la continuazione della guerra".

### 6.3 The Ottoman-Safavid Conflict and Europe

In spite of the role of Shia-Sunni rhetoric in Safavid-Ottoman confrontation, it is inappropriate to place relations between these two powers in the context of sectarian rivalry. As borne out by the facts, the political dimension was preeminent over the religious dimension in relations between these empires (Allouche 1983, 149). The Safavid-Ottoman struggle was mainly distinguished by extreme competition over territories, control of trade routes, prestige, and political hegemony in the Middle East rather than by differences regarding religious authority in the Islamic world.

European powers maintained a keener interest in Safavids on account of their traditional desire to involve the Safavids in an anti-Ottoman alliance. The Safavid Empire was strong enough to challenge the Ottomans military sphere. The frequent wars between these two powers and their mutual weakening were in the interest of the Western European countries, including Venice (Makhmudov 1991, 113). The Venetian Council of Ten's decision regarding Haji Mohammad's audience on 13 June of 1580 is a good example.<sup>14</sup> The resolution of the Council of Ten suggests that the Venetian government was interested in the continuation of the war between the Ottomans and Safavids.

It appears from the letters of the Venetian bailo in Istanbul, dated 7 May 1579 and 1 October 1579 (see "Appendix 3"), that Haji Mohammad was not the first or only Safavid subject given an audience in Venice following the outbreak of the Ottoman-Safavid war<sup>15</sup> in 1578. According to the letters of the bailo, a certain Huseyn (*Ussein*), a merchant by profession, claimed to have visited Venice on several occasions and to have been introduced to the Venetian Collegio through the offices of public dragoman Michele Membré.<sup>16</sup> Huseyn's case suggests that the activities of some Safavid merchants in Venice were not limited to trade, so when the need arose, especially during the Safavid-Ottoman wars, they were debriefed by the Venetian authorities regarding the situation in the Qizilbash domain. On the other hand, Huseyn's initiative could be explained as an attempt by this Safavid subject to act as an intermediary between the Shah and the Doge.

The advantages for Europeans resulting from conflict between the Safavids and the Ottomans had an important place in European

<sup>14</sup> ASVe, Consiglio di Dieci, Deliberazioni, Segrete, registro 12, c. 40r: "sperando nel Signor Dio, che continuando la guerra darà occasione non solamente a noi, ma anco a tutta la christianità, di mostrar con effetti qual sia il suo desiderio".

<sup>15</sup> For the Safavid-Ottoman war of 1578-1590, see Guseyn 2005 and Matthee 2014.

<sup>16</sup> ASVe, Capi del Consiglio di Dieci, Lettere ambasciatori, b. 5, c. 81rv (7 maggio 1579), c. 95r (1 ottobre 1579).

strategic thinking, which cherished the idea of two Islamic powers destroying each other (Matthee 2019, 515). Europeans believed that the Safavid-Ottoman confrontation would bring “an opportune time to expel the Turks with little effort from Europe”, since the Sultan’s entire army would be busy against the Safavids in Asia.<sup>17</sup>

A favourite theme for Venetian speculation in the mid-sixteenth century was the possible role of the Safavid shah as “an agent for the destruction of the Ottoman sultan” (Libby 1978, 117). The Ottoman-Safavid wars eased pressure on Europe and meant a temporary respite for European powers, providing them with opportunities to capitalise on the military and economic weaknesses of the Ottomans. This could be best exemplified with the words of Venetian bailo in Istanbul Alvise Contarini: “The Turks might do harm to Your Excellencies [Venetian government] if they will be free”.<sup>18</sup> However, from an economic perspective, the Safavid-Ottoman wars did not serve Venetian commercial interests, given their negative impact on Levantine trade, one of the *Serenissima’s* main sources of revenue.

The Safavids themselves were aware of the strategy employed by Europeans in order to bring the Qizilbash into the war with the Ottomans. This was best described by the words of Zeynal Bey Shamlu, one of the Safavid envoys to the court of the Habsburg emperor Rudolf II:

All their [the Emperor’s and the Christian Princes’] professions of friendship were false, and that all they wanted was for the Turks and Persians to destroy each other and the Muslim religion included. (Chick 1939, 169)

The Venetians’ stance on Safavid-Ottoman military engagements could also be traced through their reactions to the Ottoman *fethnames*<sup>19</sup> (victory missives) sent to the Doges to celebrate their victories and conquests against the Qizilbash. For example, in a reply to the Ottoman *fethname* brought by Hüseyin çavuş in March of 1550, the Senate sent a congratulatory letter to Sultan Suleyman I (r. 1520-1566) on his victories against the Safavids.<sup>20</sup>

In 1555, the Senate dispatched Alvise Renier as its ambassador to Istanbul to congratulate Sultan Suleyman on his victories against the

<sup>17</sup> ASV, Arm. I-XVIII, 5505, f. 223v.

<sup>18</sup> ASVe, Senato, Dispacci Costantinopoli, fz. 120, 9 aprile 1639, c. 102v: “se turchi saranno liberi; et che possano far male all’Eccellentissima Vostra, lo faranno certo”.

<sup>19</sup> For Ottoman *fethnames* to Venice, see Pedani Fabris 1998.

<sup>20</sup> ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni, Segrete, registro 67, cc. 29v-30r.



Safavids.<sup>21</sup> Following the capture of the former Safavid capital Tauris in 1585, the Senate sent a fulsome congratulatory letter to Sultan Murad III (r. 1574-1595) stating that they had received this news of “victorious success” with “great joy”.<sup>22</sup>

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**21** ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni, Segrete, registro 69, cc. 138v, 139r, 149v, 152r, 161r: “le grandi vittorie di sua Maestà et lo acquisto di molte città et provintie”.

**22** ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, fz. 6, 11 gennaio 1585 (*more veneto*), unpaginated: “Con sommo nostro consenso havemo inteso per lettere del Bailo nostro residente à quella Eccelsa Porta; la nova dell’Aquisto fatto da Vostra Imperial Maestà della principalissima et Real città di Tauris: Del qual vittorioso successo, havendone noi sentito quella grande, et intima allegrezza che ricerca la sincera amicitia, et bevolentia che tenemo con Lei”.

