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Guest Editor's Introduction

Commercial, Confessional, and Military Encounters in the Ottoman–Iranian Borderlands in the Early Modern Period

The papers (with the exception of two) in this special issue of *Iranian Studies* were presented in a series of conferences on Ottoman–Iranian encounters in Retz, Istanbul, and Vienna. Given the contested and militarized nature of this borderland as well as its relevance to contemporary events in the Middle East, the organizers and the editor of the journal felt that it was crucial to publish these papers together in a special issue and approach the history of this region from a different spatial dimension (periphery rather than center) and a more critical perspective than the current trends in nationalist historiographies. Moreover, as contributors, we felt that it was important to tackle narrative as well as archival sources in different languages, offer multiple readings of the same sources, and provide a critical perspective on official chronicles and narratives from both Ottoman and Safavid sides. Moreover, the study of confessional, political as well as military and diplomatic history of this borderland in the early modern period was crucial to a better understanding of developments in the later periods (nineteenth and twentieth centuries). As a few of the papers demonstrate, the confessional divide was only one aspect of the complex history of the region that developed later and in fact the diversity (ethno-linguistic, religious, social) and fluidity of this porous borderland on both sides were stable features of the early modern period and through most of the nineteenth century. The emergence of territorial sovereignty in the nineteenth century, the clash of old and new empires (Russia and Great Britain in particular) over the control of the borderland, the emergence of various movements for nationalism and self-determination, as well as the struggle for secular modernity and the two world wars all had profound impact on our borderland (eastern Anatolia,

greater Azerbaijan, the Caucasus, Kurdish regions, northern Iraq) but these topics are outside the scope of this volume.

This special issue of *Iranian Studies* thus represents an important turning point in both Ottoman and Iranian studies by bridging the two fields together in the study of Ottoman–Iranian borderlands. The questions raised in this issue tackle the history of empires from their peripheries or borderlands rather than their imperial centers, and from the ground up rather than from the top down. Rather than just focusing on the states and their central institutions, these papers underscore the impact of social, economic, and confessional developments in the borderland on developments in the center. Moreover, the papers in this volume also challenge the perceptions of contemporary official histories, which often represent the views of the state elites on developments in the borderlands.

The study of borderlands has assumed great importance in American studies. Oscar Martinez's study of the American Southwest entitled *Border People: Life and Society in the US–Mexico Borderland*, based on oral interviews with borderland people as well as fieldwork has shed great light on the unique and diverse character of the US–Mexico borderland.¹ Martinez has argued that borderland people differ from those who inhabit the heartland regions due to their transnational interactions, foreign influences, cross-border and cross-ethnic contacts. Borderland people anywhere share a great deal with each other and differ from those who inhabit the heartlands due to geographical, economic, and social factors as well as their political relationship with central governments. The porous boundaries of borderlands historically make the borderland people quite unique in their multi-layered identities as well as political outlooks.

It is important to refer to our region as a borderland between several empires (Ottoman, Safavid, Russian) rather than frontier, since the frontier developed clear demarcations in the form of fortresses, which was the case in the Ottoman–Hapsburg frontier in Hungary.² According to Mark Stein, who used Frederick Jackson Turner's concept of frontier, frontier is a zone that surrounds the boundary line and includes land on both sides that can be measured by forts, toll gates, border crossings that mark the limit of territory for each state. A frontier is also a transitional zone where states meet and interact. Frontier people also share a great deal with each other and maintain informal ties across the boundaries. The Ottoman state tried several times to create a frontier in the eastern border with the Safavids by occupying the major cities (Erzurum, Tabriz), destroying Safavid fortresses and building their own in occupied territories. As Sabri Ateş and Zarinebaf demonstrate, this region also gradually, by the seventeenth century, became a confessional borderland where the loyalties of the inhabitants solidified as the Ottomans and the Safavids established their control

¹Martinez, *Border People*; Martinez, *U.S. Mexico Borderlands*.

²Stein, *Guarding the Frontier*, 2–11, 15–27. The frontier offered economic opportunities for those who were willing to fight. Raids and captivity were typical features of the frontier. See also the important works of Frederick Jackson Turner on the American Frontier (e.g. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*).

over the territories after several wars and waves of persecution and deportation. The rise and expansion of the Russian empire into the Caucasus in the eighteenth century added yet another imperial actor on the borderland.

At the same time, when borderlands were located between empires that fought over their control, they became militarized zones and were often devastated by warfare, numerous occupations, overlapping claims and the clash of empires. As in the US–Mexico borderland and the acquisition of important territories (Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico) by the US from Mexico, the Ottoman Empire also expanded into Iranian-held territories in the borderland (eastern Anatolia, Azerbaijan, and the Caucasus). The Safavids held on to greater Azerbaijan and gave up control of eastern Anatolia and Iraq to the Ottomans and lost northern Caucasus to Russia in the nineteenth century.

This was an extremely rich and diverse borderland in its physical and human geography, ethnicity (Turkish, Greek, Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian), and religious composition (Muslims and Christian, heterodox Sufi orders) as well as economic configuration (transhumance, agriculture, and trade). The migration and settlement of Oghuz Turkoman tribes in several waves since the tenth century and through the Mongol invasions changed the ethnic landscape of this region (greater Azerbaijan and Anatolia) in a profound manner and helped the rise of the Ottoman Empire as well as Turkish confederations in Iran.

The region was also home to a large population of Kurdish tribes as well as Armenian and Greek (Anatolia) communities. While gradual Islamization through the Sufi convents took place in Anatolia for several centuries, the Ottoman Empire followed a policy of accommodation and toleration toward the non-Muslim communities as well as Sufi orders. Sufi orders, however, played a key role in *ghazā* (holy war), the settlement of Turkic tribes and their integration into settled life as well as the conversion of non-Muslim communities. The diversity (religious and ethnic) was an important feature of this borderland.

The Ottoman and Iranian states followed more or less similar policies in their borderlands, which ranged from a decentralized, loose control over tribes and principalities, the collection of tribute, the cooptation of local elites to a tight control over resources and the administration. States could also switch from one policy to another depending on their military strength and economic needs. The Safavids followed the former model based on a networked relationship with tribal leaders and elites through Sufi affiliations while the Ottoman state switched from a loose control to occupation and incorporation in the sixteenth century, largely in reaction to Safavid threat and expansion. Both states shared the same tribal origin and state formation from tribe to confederation and empire with a strong Sufi and ideological claim as *ghazi* states but the Ottomans were far more advanced in their state formation, military technology and strength than the Safavids.

The borderland became a militarized zone as early modern empires established different relationships with local elites that depended on the strategic importance of these regions as well as their economic potential. Central control was always tenuous and was achieved through a process of conquest, coercion, imposition of a

fiscal regime and the incorporation of local elites. At the same time rebellion, migration across the border, and negotiation with central governments were the responses of borderland people to imperial rule. Local inhabitants also developed an ideology of resistance in the form of religious and social upheavals (Safavid revolution, Celali rebellions) as well as nationalism in the modern period.

Fariba Zarinebaf's article traces the development of the Shaykh Safi Sufi order from the Ilkhanid to the Safavid periods, with its wide network in Azerbaijan as well as Anatolia. She argues that political developments in the Ottoman Empire after the centralizing policies of Sultan Mehmed II led to social upheavals in Anatolia, setting the stage for the radicalization of the Anatolian followers (the Qizilbash) and the military activities of the leaders of the order, Junayd and Haydar. In other words, political and social conditions in Anatolia and the restlessness of Turkoman tribes may have led to the radicalization of the Safavid order in Azerbaijan rather than the other way around (the role of the order in radicalizing tribes in Anatolia). Zarinebaf also focuses on the growing confessional divide in an otherwise diverse region as a result of the policies of Sultan Selim I and two centuries of military and ideological warfare between the two states. She examines the impact of these wars on the militarized landscape of Azerbaijan by comparing two long occupations in 1585–1603 and 1725–30 based on Ottoman surveys and tax registers.

Ferenc Csirkés focuses on the ideological content of the divan of Shah Isma'îl, placing it in the context of literary and confessional developments in the region. By comparing several editions of his divan, Csirkés argues that the messianic content of Shah Isma'îl's divan did not diminish after his defeat in Chaldiran in 1514 and that they formed a stable but small part of his poetry and while it might have been expunged from some editions, many copies retained it. His findings are very important since he underlines the continuing circulation and appeal of his messianic poems in Azeri Turkish among his followers, an issue that has largely been ignored by Iranian and Turkish scholars.

Sabri Ateş tackles the questions of the evolution of the borderland (*serhad*) into a border (*budud*) at the conclusion of Ottoman–Safavid wars and various peace negotiations that began in Amasya in 1555 and ended in World War I in 1914. He defines this borderland as one of the most contested and unstable regions over the control of which several wars were fought and many peace treaties were negotiated for 400 years. He argues that the Treaty of Zohab in 1639 did not demarcate the borders, and that the Ottomans and Safavids fell back on the Treaty of Amasya, signed in 1555, to redraw the boundaries several times in the course of 200 years. But they still failed to resolve the crucial confessional issues that divided the region and led to so many wars. He underlines the importance of the Treaty of Amasya, which was drawn after three major wars that sultan Süleyman led against Iran, recognized for the first time the legitimacy of the Safavid state by the Ottoman Empire, and established the “uneasy coexistence of the two states” in 1555. The treaty divided Georgia, Armenia, and Kurdistan between the two states and granted Iraq to the Ottoman Empire and Azerbaijan to Iran. Despite many wars, these boundaries remained more or less the same from the mid-sixteenth century until the twentieth century.

Undoubtedly, the local inhabitants of the borderlands had very little say in the drawing of these negotiations and a lot more depended on the military might of the negotiating parties. The primary interest of some local elites was to maintain their power and autonomy by switching their allegiance from one to another state. Thus, territorial sovereignty remained weak and boundaries stayed fluid. The negotiation for actual demarcation and transformation of the borderland into boundaries evolved over 400 years, reached maturity only in 1842 and ended in 1914 during World War I (seventy years), involving many imperial powers including Great Britain and Russia.

How did the people of borderland respond to occupation and imperial dominion over their regions by various powers? Vural Genç's paper is a micro study of the life and career of a local elite and Kurdish bureaucrat. Idris Bidlisi served the Aqqyunlu, Safavid and Ottoman administrations during a very tumultuous period, seeking patronage in three courts in Tabriz and Istanbul and shifting his loyalty between three dynasties in the sixteenth century. Genç argues that this was a typical feature of the borderland and the activities of local political elites in this contested borderland. He emphasizes shifting political conjecture and patronage ties rather than religious identities among some local elites as the most important factor in shaping the loyalties of local elites in a divided borderland. The Kurdish elites were willing to serve different courts and switch their loyalty readily from the shah to the sultan. As Zarinebaf shows, this was also true of some of the Qizilbash elites of Azerbaijan, who constantly switched sides. At the same time, he shows that their movement across empires and courts also led to the diffusion of Persianate culture in the Ottoman (and Mughal) capital.

The persecution of religious minorities was another outcome of a militarized borderland. Riza Yildirim focuses on the evolution of the Qizilbash movement in Anatolia, its deep ties to the Safavid state well into the seventeenth century and the policies of the Ottoman state in suppressing them as a fifth column of Iran. He argues that the Alevis and the Qizilbash in Anatolia were a single religious community that followed the Shaykh Safi order in Ardabil and the Safavid rulers until the seventeenth century. He is critical of the view of both Turkish and western scholars of the heterodox belief system of the Alevis as well as non-Sunni Sufi orders, and underlines the constitutive element of their Safavid–Qizilbash identity. He shows that the Ottoman crackdown on the Qizilbash movement in Anatolia by Sultan Selim I was an attempt to consolidate his rule on the borderland and claim himself as the champion of Sunni Islam, a development that started under Selim I and continued under Sultan Süleyman. He argues that after numerous Ottoman–Safavid wars and the suppression of the Qizilbash in Anatolia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Qizilbash maintained their ties with the Safavid state until the end of the seventeenth century based on new documents that he found in Anatolia. Like Zarinebaf, he emphasizes the Anatolian roots of the Safavid movement, the mass movement of Turkoman tribes to Iran and their role in the foundation of the Safavid state through the study of Ottoman chronicles and archival sources.

While religion and ideology played an important role in the Ottoman–Safavid wars, competition over the control of trade routes (silk trade) in our borderland was yet another aspect of the Ottoman–Safavid wars. Revenues from the silk trade made up an important source of income for both the Safavid and the Ottoman states. The Bursa silk industry as well as the Levant trade depended on the supply of raw silk from Azerbaijan and Mazandaran. However, continuous wars between the Ottoman Empire and Iran disrupted this trade and led to the decline of silk exports from Iran to the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans harassed Iranian traders and arrested and enslaved them during wars. Moreover, due to internal rebellions, the borderland became unsafe for European traders, who began looking for alternative routes to Iran.³ Meanwhile Shah Abbas the Great had also forcefully moved the Armenian Julfa merchants from Azerbaijan to Isfahan and settled them in their own neighborhood (New Julfa). His aim was to undermine the customs revenue from this trade for the Ottomans. The strategy worked and the Dutch and English East India companies began searching for alternative routes to trade with Iran, India and Asia (the Spice Islands).

However, few historians have critically studied the challenges faced by English traders in Iran. Daniel Razzari's paper addresses the arrival of the English East India Company to Iran and its competition with the Portuguese traders in the Persian Gulf and the Dutch East India Company in the early seventeenth century. Based on newly found English East India Company documents (letters, court minutes, company papers), as well as personal wills and travelogues, Razzari sheds important light on the early phase of English trade with Iran and the activities of English traders in Hormuz and their successes and failures in Isfahan. He argues that unlike the Portuguese, the English followed a non-aggressive policy and relied on diplomacy to gain a foothold in the Persian Gulf. They promised to help the Safavids defeat the Portuguese in Hormuz in 1622 in exchange for commercial privileges in Hormuz. He underlines the opposing opinions among the company directors and traders about the feasibility of English trade with Iran and its potential or lack thereof for large profits. Based on new documents he has unearthed in the British archives and English narrative sources, he shows that there was no consensus among English diplomats, company directors and traders (Shirley Brothers and Sir Thomas Roe) on their approach to trade with Iran. English traders constantly complained about harsh conditions for trade in Iran due to the bad climate, geography, and disease. They also disliked the shah's monopoly on the silk trade, the change in Safavid policies toward English traders, and rapacious local officials in Hormuz. He argues that the goals of the company remained modest in Iran and that these conditions made this route difficult to manage. Moreover, some of the same traders served in both the Levant and East India companies. Therefore, the Levant trade remained strong and Ottoman–Iranian trade through the borderland resumed after peace between the Safavids and the Ottomans was restored in 1555. The shah, moreover, did not show much interest in English woolens. Many Englishmen (60 percent) perished in Iran due to heat,

³Zarinebaf, *Mediterranean Encounters*, 118–22.

disease, and the consumption of wine. The English and Safavid states finally signed a diplomatic and commercial treaty in 1619. Razzari thus directs our attention to the opening of the southern maritime route through the Persian Gulf, the Safavid–English naval alliance against the Portuguese in the Gulf, and the fragile English–Safavid commerce in the early seventeenth century.

Finally, Rudi Matthee's article provides an overview of Ottoman–Safavid warfare in the context of war on multiple fronts. Based on European sources, he argues that Iran's geography, location as well as military ability or lack thereof made war on multiple fronts (Ottoman–Uzbek, and Mughal) unfeasible. The Safavids also vied for an alliance with the enemies of their Ottoman enemy, Venice and the Hapsburg Empire. However, he shows that Europe was also divided along confessional lines and that European rulers pursued their own commercial and political agenda with the Ottoman Empire. In the final analysis, all states avoided wars on multiple fronts and resorted to diplomacy when conditions changed on the ground. Like Sabri Ateş, Matthee sheds light on Ottoman–Safavid treaties in the seventeenth century to highlight the role of diplomacy at the conclusion of wars and negotiations over the jurisdiction of each state on their borderlands.

The Primary Sources, Archival Material Section provides a small sample of documents on the Ottoman administration of Azerbaijan from the Başbakanlık archives in Istanbul in English translation by Zarinebaf, which contains a rich collection of documents on the Ottoman–Iranian borderland.

The papers as a whole tackle religious, commercial, diplomatic as well as political and military encounters between the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran as well as European states through the study of their borderlands. They highlight the impact of these wars on the decline of economic and social life on the borderland, social upheavals and local quest for autonomy, the consolidation of otherwise fluid identities, the imposition of confessional divides as well as political and territorial claims by various empires. It is our hope that this revisionist approach to Ottoman–Safavid historiography will open up new venues for research and debate and will de-center both historiographies.

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