Eric V. Snow Review Essay Mr. Fisher HST 395 March 6, 1991

Early modern/late medieval history in the Middle East was dominated by the Ottoman empire and its relations with neighboring states, both Muslim and Christian. One of its main adversaries was Safavid Persia (1501-1736), which though Muslim was held as inheritly suspect for its aggressive Shiism by the Sunni sultans of the Sublime Porte. But, as Adel Allouche[1] points out, this religious difference wasn't the primary cause of conflict between the Ottomans and Safavids, but it was more a geopolitical power struggle over who would control Anatolia.

To set up the context of the Ottoman-Safavid conflict, a review of the developments leading up to Safavid rule is necessary. The Safavids, much like their Ottoman counterparts, were Turkish[2] ghazi sufis who came to rule an empire. Safi Al-Din Ishaq (died 1334) was the founder of a Sunnite sufi order whose followers were known as the kizilbash. This order was transformed into a political-military (ghazi) machine by his descendant Junayd (died 1460) in order to fulfill his political ambitions, which was also why he converted it over to shiism as well to gain support from the nearby shii-inclined Turkoman tribes. The sufi order was founded and headquartered in Ardabil in northern Persia near the Caspian Sea, but soon had many followers in Anatolia, Syria, and Mesopotamia as well. Junayd's political ambitions are illustrated by his marriage to the daughter of Uzan Hasan, the ruler of Persia and leader of the Aq Qoyunlu tribe. Though killed in a raid on Shirvan near the Caspian Sea, his changes remained, and the order ceased only to be concerned about spiritual commitments. His son, Haydar, continued his father's gazi activities against Christians in the Caucasus area, and who also married an Aq Qoyunlu princess before also being killed in a raid on Shirvan as his father was. He set up the stage for Ismail, his son, who was to rule Persia.

Now Ismail, who took over leadership of his father's sufi order while only a baby, came to rule Persia after defeating Shirvan's king, Shirvanishah, and defeating one of the rival Aq Qoyunlu princes, Alvand, at the battle of Sharur, which allowed him to become Shah at the tender young age of 14. Soon, by 1510, he and his kizilbash followers had taken Baghdad and the rest of Persia including Khurasan. Ismail then set his eyes

[1] Adel Allouche, The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict (906-962/1500-1555) (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1983).

[2] The Shayk Safi appears to have been an Iranized Kurd, but since the order was largely populated by Turks and its hereditary leadership intermarried with Turks, one can say the Safavids were Turks. See Allouche, p. 35.

on eastern Anatolia, where many of his kizilbash followers lived. He instigated and/or supported two major rebellions of his followers (as well as others disaffected with Ottoman rule) in Anatolia, and tried to participate in an earlier one. The first, led by Qarah Biyak Oglu, included both kizilbash and discontentedsipahi (cavalrymen with a fief who are in the Ottoman army) and took Konya and Kutahya, killing the Beylerbey (commander-in-chief) of Anatolia in the process. The Ottoman Grand Vizer Ali Pasha put down this revolt in 1511 at the cost of his own life with fresh troops from Rumelia, killing Oglu in battle. Then, next year in 1512, Ismail sent in Nur Ali Khalifah to lead another revolt of kizilbash and other Turkoman and Kurdish groups. He even got the support of Ahmad, Bayezid II's son, who donned the red kizilibash hat in order to gain help in his dynastic struggle again Selim, and Ahmad's supporters joined the kizilbash in ripping up parts of Anatolia and attacking Tokat. Sinan Pasha, who was Ahmad's vizer, was defeated by Ali Kalifah and killed before he returned with his kizilbash back to Persia. Ismail also had many spies in Anatolia who kept him informed of developments as Ahmad and Selim battled for their father's throne, which is illustrated by a letter sent from him to Musa Turghud Oglu of the Turghud tribe.[3] Also, there is evidence that Ismail even in 1500 before becoming Shah had gathered his followers to Erzinjan near the Ottoman border to invade and participate in Karaman Oglu's rebellion in Anatolia,[4] but when only several thousand showed up, Shirvan was chosen for a target instead, a somewhat inadvertent course of action that was fated to put Ismail on the Peacock throne. Thus, the Safavid dynasty had worked hard over the years to stir up trouble in Anatolia and intervene in the Ottomans' dynastic struggle between Bayezid II's sons.

Now Selim I, Bayezid's youngest son and the provincial governor of Trabzon near Persia on the Black Sea's southern shore, was incensed at these rebellions, raids, espionage activities, and interventions in internal Ottoman politics. He ordered raids against Persia even while only a provincial governor in retaliation for the Safavid army's crossing of Ottoman territory in order to reach Dulgadir. After he had defeated and killed his brother Ahmad (who had courted kizilbash support in

[3]Allouche, p. 98.
[4]Allouche, p. 71-79, 82.

his struggle against Selim), he was determined to teach the Safavid Shah a lesson about not interfering in internal Ottoman affairs. Almost as soon as Selim had a comfortable hold of the Sublime Porte, he took action against the kizilbash by killing 40,000 of them as his army moved towards Persia in Anatolia.[5] He also began a commercial blockade against Persia. Later in 1514 his army inflicted a crushing defeat on Ismail's army at Chaldiran. Selim was even able to temporarily occupy Tabriz, the Safavid capital, and took control of Kurdistan and Mesopotamia. As a result, Safavid meddling in Ottoman Anatolia was ended for decades.

Tahmasp I (1524-1576), the son and successor of Ismail, knew better than to mess with the Ottoman army, and even resisted the temptation to attack Anatolia when the Ottomans were tied down in Europe until 1552-53. Sulayman the Magnificent (1520-66), Selim's successor, organized three major expeditions against Persia. The first in 1534 was designed to take advantage of internal power struggles and rebellions in Persia, while the second of 1546-48 was encouraged by Alqas Mirza, who revolted against his brother Tahmasp and fled to the Ottomans. The third expedition, of 1553, was caused by Tahmasp taking Erzerum. This expedition was marred by Sulayman ordering the execution of his son Mustafa during the campaign due to a conspiracy of the Grand Vizer, Rustam, and Sulayman's wife Roxolana. None of these times did the Persians dare to have a pitched battle with the Ottomans since their Janassaries' discipline, plentiful artillery, and numerical superiority showed who would win, and Tahmasp had to save his strength for holding off the Uzbeks, who continually attacked Khurasan on the northeastern frontier. Though the Ottomans could move around in Persia almost at will, they couldn't keep much of this territory because of the distances involved (from Contantinople) and Janissary complaints about the hardness of campaigns there and their refusal to winter there. Finally, with the Treaty of Amasya (1555), the Ottomans and Safavids signed a formal peace, which allowed the Ottomans to concentrate against Europe (which was their central tendency anyway), and the Safavids against the Uzbeks, who, as usual, kept trying to take Khurasan.

Now the author's main thesis, which I mostly agree with, is that while the Safavid-Ottoman conflict had a religious form to it--Shii versus Sunni--and some religious

[5] Allouche, p. 112. Notice this date and situation somewhat contradicts William Oschenwald and Sydney Fisher, The Middle East A History (fourth edition), (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), p. 184.

content, it, nonetheless, was primarily a geopolitical power struggle over who would rule Anatolia. It has to be remembered that the Ottoman sultan, as well as army officiers and officialdom were mostly sufi Muslims of the Bektashi Dervish order. They didn't care very much about theology, but only if one had submitted to God emotionally. Most of Ottoman officialdom had a Christian background (due to the devshirme system) and so weren't as likely to care as much about Muslim doctrinal disputes, especially with being inculated with the relatively non-theological sufi Islam of the Ottomans. They were tolerant, and didn't insist on adherents giving up most of their culture prior to becoming a member of their order. Thus, to people of such a mentality, the sunni-shii conflict isn't a very important issue necessarily. Against this background, the actual origin of Selim's hatred of the kizilbash and their Safavid leader becomes clearer. As governor of Trabzon, he saw the kizilbash as a subversive element that threatened the peace and order of the Ottoman state, especially since it was joined to and more loyal to the leader of a powerful neighboring state. His attitude could be compared to that of the typical 1950's American conservative mentality that saw the Communist Party as a dangerous subversive element intimately linked to a powerful enemy state, and secondarily as a bunch of atheists. Selim hated the kizilbash for instigating/joining/planning to join three Anatolian uprisings (1500-1, 1510-11, 1512). He was angered by his father's stance of moderation, or, if you prefer, appeasement policy towards this internal, subversive element and their foreign leader. ("The enemy within" has this way of inciting especially great fear and hatred in the human breast). Also, he saw the kizilbash conspire with his brother Ahmad against him and revolt against the Ottoman state's formal authority.[6] He would have found out his brother Shahinshah, governor of Karaman, was conspiring with Ismail and was loyal to the kizilbash.[7] Selim clearly saw Ismail and his kizilbash as meddling in the internal dynastic struggle of the Ottomans, and once more, against him! When Selim had 40,000 kizilbash slain in 1514 (Allouche's date), he saw them as a dangerous, political subversive element that had to be eliminated so the Ottoman state would be secure, in the same spirit that caused American leadership to put Japanese-Americans in detention camps in 1941-42. But for full security, Selim had to go to the source and clobber the kizilbash leader and his army, and so Chaldiran (1514) was

[6] Allouche, p. 97.

[7] Allouche, p. 91.

the end result. Selim's acquiring of fatwas against the Safavid heretics was a typical case of manufacturing a causus belli than an earnest attempt to launch a religious crusade. His embassy of 1513 to Ismail spent its time on his bogus hereditary claim to Diyar Bakr and getting Ismail to hand over Selim's nephew for strangling, which shows territorial and dynastic issues were upmost in Selim's mind, not a doctrine dispute.[8] Notice that Selim totally wiped out the Sunni Mamluk state, while causing the shii of Persia only territorial losses. Hence, the Ottomans saw the kizilbash order as a threat of their rule first, and their religion second.

However, the Persian side of the Ottoman-Safavid conflict would have given the religious and political aspects of their struggle with the Sublime Porte equal billing.[9] On the one hand, Ismail tried to get an alliance with the Sunni Mamluks.[10] Also, Ismail had taken Armenia and Azarbayjan in 1500-01, central and southern Persia in 1503, most of Mesopotamia in 1504, Baghdad and southwest Persia in 1508, and Khurasan in 1510. Hence, in 1511-12, Ismail logically continued this expansionistic policy with his Anatolian operations, especially since he had many followers already there. But on the other hand, since Ismail so ruthlessly persecuted the Sunni under his rule (he once burned a Sunni alive before Bayized II's ambassador), I think the religious aspect of the Safavid-Ottoman conflict would have had a considerably higher priority in Ismail's mind than it did in Selim's. Selim wouldn't have cared much about the Shii in his realm if they hadn't repeatedly revolted against Ottoman control in favor of a powerful foreign leader. But Ismail, who gave the unassuming, peaceful Sunni in his empire the alternatives of conversion or death, betrays a certain strong mentality about believing in correct doctrine. So for Ismail and the Persians the religious aspects of their conflict with the Ottomans would have been equal with the political aspects, unlike the case for Selim and the Ottomans.

Thus, the geopolitical power struggle over Anatolia was uppermost overall in the Ottoman-Safavid conflict, and not the religious aspects of a Sunni-Shii struggle. To be sure, the religious aspect shouldn't be ignored completely, as Allouche would say, but it wasn't the most important aspect here. I would add, though, the shii enthusiasm and extremism of Ismail and his followers, as shown by his "convert or die" persecutions of Sunnis in his empire would have made the religious aspects of this struggle equal billing to the political ones in the mind of the man who occupied the Peacock throne.

[8] This is in contrast to Bayezid's embassy of 1504-05, which strongly condemned Ismail's persecution of the Sunni. See Allouche, p. 86-87. [9] Here I disagree with Allouche.

[10] Allouche, p. 149