Borderlands and Empire: Iran's Relations with the Ottoman and Russian Worlds

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Introduction

This book examines Iran’s shifting relationships with the Ottoman and Russian worlds across the long arc of the sixteenth to twentieth centuries. It treats borders not as fixed lines on a map but as zones of encounter where rival imperial projects overlapped, collided, and were negotiated in everyday life. At stake were sovereignty and security, to be sure, but also livelihoods, faith, kinship, and mobility. By following both high diplomacy and low practice, the chapters that follow trace how contested frontiers became modern boundaries—and how those boundaries continued to be lived, bent, and reimagined by those who dwelt along them.

The approach taken here is deliberately border-centered. Rather than beginning in imperial capitals and moving outward, we start in the marches—among caravanserais and customs posts, winter pastures and summer uplands, shrine cities and port towns. In these places, governors and generals shared the stage with tribal khans, village headmen, shrine custodians, merchants, translators, and smugglers. These local power brokers did not merely implement metropolitan orders; they interpreted, mediated, and often redirected them, turning imperial rivalry into local opportunity or constraint. Their actions help explain why treaties written in elegant chancery prose could yield messy, uneven geographies on the ground.

Diplomacy is thus treated not only as the exchange of notes and the signing of instruments but also as a repertoire of practices. Capitulations, consular protections, mixed tribunals, boundary commissions, and survey expeditions were technologies of rule with local afterlives. They established regimes of extraterritoriality and legal pluralism that ordinary people learned to navigate—seeking protection under one flag, litigating across jurisdictions, or exploiting inter-imperial ambiguities to keep trade moving and herds grazing. Such practices reveal how sovereignty was divisible in practice, even when indivisible in theory.

Equally central is the lived experience of border communities. Families straddled frontiers through marriage and migration; pilgrims circulated between shrine cities that connected Iran to Ottoman Iraq; artisans and traders linked Caspian ports to Caucasian markets under changing Russian rules. For pastoralists, borders could be seasonal obstacles or instruments of leverage; for captives and converts, they were matters of life, identity, and return. By foregrounding these microhistories, the book recovers how people made sense of imperial transformations in the cadence of daily life—at once constrained by new lines and resourceful in working around them.

Chronologically, the narrative moves from early modern accommodations after Amasya (1555) and the landmark settlement of Zuhab (1639), through the upheavals of the eighteenth century and the reconfiguration of authority under Nadir Shah and the Qajars. It then follows the nineteenth-century hardening of borders through Gulistan (1813), Turkmenchay (1828), and the Erzurum settlements (1823, 1847), as

well as the Akhal agreement (1881) and expanding Russian legal regimes along the Caspian. The twentieth century brings constitutionalism, the First World War’s borderless violence, the reordering of relations after 1917, and the consolidation and renegotiation of frontiers in the age of the nation-state. Across these episodes, the emphasis remains on how global power politics were translated into local arrangements.

Methodologically, the study blends diplomatic history with social and cultural history, historical geography, and borderlands studies. It draws on Persian, Ottoman, and Russian archival materials; consular records and boundary commission reports; travelogues and local chronicles; petitions, court cases, and cadastral maps. Attention to language—of law, faith, and commerce—allows us to see how terms like “protection,” “subject,” and “jurisdiction” acquired different meanings in different settings. Throughout, maps are treated as arguments as much as instruments: they not only depicted space but also made claims about authority and belonging.

Finally, the book argues that modern boundaries emerged from cumulative, negotiated practices rather than singular, decisive moments. Even as lines were surveyed and posts erected, the frontier remained an ongoing project—maintained through patrols and paperwork, tax registers and passports, alliances and amnesties. To understand Iran’s relations with the Ottoman and Russian worlds, then, is to grasp how empires were co-produced with the people who lived at their edges. The chapters that follow chart this co-production, showing how borderlands shaped empires just as empires sought to shape their borderlands.

CHAPTER ONE: Frontiers of Faith and Power: The Safavid–Ottoman Borderland

The early sixteenth century witnessed the dramatic emergence of the Safavid Empire in Iran, a transformation that profoundly reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and introduced a new, enduring dynamic to Iran’s relationship with its western neighbor, the Ottoman Empire. This was no mere shift in dynastic power; it was a revolution, both political and religious, that set the stage for centuries of conflict, coexistence, and complex borderland interactions. The rise of Shah Isma‘il I and his declaration of Twelver Shi‘ism as the state religion of Iran created an ideological schism with the Sunni Ottoman Empire, whose sultans increasingly saw themselves as the protectors of orthodox Islam. This fundamental difference in religious orientation would infuse every aspect of Safavid-Ottoman relations, turning what might have been conventional imperial rivalries into a struggle imbued with theological significance.

Before the Safavids, the lands comprising modern-day Iran were a patchwork of Turkoman tribal confederations and local potentates, often beholden to a succession of transient powers. The Ottomans, by contrast, had steadily consolidated their Anatolian heartland and expanded into the Balkans and beyond, building a formidable bureaucratic and military machine. The stage was set for a clash of titans, one representing a new, fervent Shi‘i identity, the other an established, powerful Sunni order. The borderland between these two burgeoning empires became more than just a geographical divide; it became a theological fault line, where loyalties were tested, and allegiances were often a matter of life and death. This frontier was not a static line but a fluid zone, pulsating with the movement of armies, merchants, pilgrims, and ideas, all navigating the treacherous terrain of imperial ambition and religious conviction.

Shah Isma‘il, a charismatic leader claiming descent from the seventh Shi‘i Imam, Musa al-Kazim, rallied a diverse following, primarily Turkoman tribesmen known as the Qizilbash (Red Heads) due to their distinctive crimson headgear. Their unwavering devotion to Isma‘il, whom they viewed as a divine manifestation, was a powerful force that propelled the Safavid expansion. The Qizilbash combined martial prowess with profound religious zeal, forming the backbone of the nascent Safavid state. Their rapid conquests, culminating in the capture of Tabriz in 1501 and Isma‘il's proclamation as Shah, sent shockwaves through the region. Suddenly, a new and aggressive power had emerged on the eastern flank of the Ottoman Empire, one that directly challenged Ottoman claims to Islamic leadership and offered an alternative religious legitimacy.

The Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II initially reacted with caution, recognizing the potential threat but perhaps underestimating the revolutionary nature of the Safavid movement. However, his successor, Sultan Selim I, who ascended to the throne in 1512, adopted a far more aggressive stance. Selim, known as "the Grim," was a devout Sunni and viewed the Safavids as a dangerous heresy that threatened the unity of the Islamic world and posed an existential threat to Ottoman authority. His determination to confront the Safavids head-on would lead to one of the most decisive battles in early modern Middle Eastern history, forever etching the contours of the Safavid-Ottoman borderland in blood and fire. The clash was not merely for territorial control; it was a struggle for the very soul of the Islamic world, a contest between two competing visions of religious and political legitimacy.

The confrontation came to a head in 1514 at the Battle of Chaldiran. Selim I, commanding a technologically superior Ottoman army equipped with artillery and muskets, faced Shah Isma‘il’s Qizilbash cavalry, renowned for their courage but lacking modern firearms. The battle was a devastating defeat for the Safavids, who suffered heavy casualties. Shah Isma‘il himself was wounded and narrowly escaped capture. Chaldiran shattered the myth of Isma‘il’s invincibility and demonstrated the decisive advantage of gunpowder technology in warfare. The Ottomans captured the

Safavid capital of Tabriz, though they were unable to hold it for long, withdrawing due to logistical challenges and Qizilbash harassment. Nevertheless, the psychological impact of Chaldiran was immense, forcing the Safavids to acknowledge the military superiority of their western rival.

Chaldiran did not, however, resolve the underlying tensions or definitively fix the border. Instead, it inaugurated a long period of intermittent warfare and uneasy truces, shaping the character of the borderlands for centuries to come. The initial Safavid expansion had pushed their influence deep into Anatolia, particularly among Turkoman tribes who shared their Shi'i sympathies and Qizilbash affiliations. These communities became a persistent source of concern for the Ottomans, who viewed them as a potential fifth column within their own territories. The border, therefore, was not merely a line on a map but a porous membrane through which religious ideas, political allegiances, and even populations could flow, complicating any neat division of imperial authority.

The geography of the borderland itself contributed to its contested nature. Stretching from the Caucasus in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south, it encompassed rugged mountains, fertile plains, and strategic river valleys. Control over key cities like Baghdad, Van, Kars, and Tabriz shifted hands multiple times, each capture and recapture leaving a legacy of destruction and displacement. These cities, often thriving centers of trade and culture, became symbols of imperial prestige and vital strategic outposts. Their fluctuating ownership reflected the ebb and flow of military power and the ongoing struggle for regional dominance. The borderlands were, in essence, a chessboard upon which the two great empires played out their ambitions, with local populations often serving as pawns.

Beyond military campaigns, the Safavid-Ottoman rivalry manifested in other, more subtle ways. Both empires engaged in propaganda, portraying the other as heretical and tyrannical. Ottoman sultans sponsored Sunni religious scholars to write polemics against Safavid Shi'ism, while Safavid ulema likewise condemned Ottoman Sunnism. This ideological warfare was crucial for mobilizing support among their own populations and legitimizing their claims to universal Islamic authority. For the common people in the borderlands, these religious narratives often translated into concrete experiences of persecution or forced conversion, depending on which empire held sway at a given moment. The spiritual frontier was often as sharply drawn as the physical one, if not more so.

The economic dimensions of the borderland were also significant. Trade routes connecting East and West, particularly the lucrative silk trade, traversed these contested territories. Both empires sought to control these routes, taxing caravans and benefiting from the flow of goods. The Safavids, for instance, relied heavily on the silk trade for revenue, and the Ottomans' control over access to European markets often became a point of contention. This economic competition sometimes spurred

conflict but also created opportunities for pragmatic cooperation, as both sides recognized the mutual benefits of maintaining at least some degree of cross-border commerce. Smuggling, of course, thrived in the interstices of official trade, further blurring the lines of imperial control and creating intricate networks of local exchange that defied imperial dictates.

Another crucial aspect of the borderland was the presence of powerful tribal confederations, particularly the Kurds, who straddled the imperial divide. These tribes, often possessing significant autonomy, frequently played both empires against each other, shifting allegiances to secure their own interests and maintain their traditional way of life. Their intimate knowledge of the rugged terrain and their formidable fighting skills made them indispensable allies or formidable adversaries for both Safavid and Ottoman forces. The empires often sought to incorporate these tribes into their administrative structures through promises of land, titles, or military service, but outright control proved elusive. The Kurds, therefore, functioned as a mediating force, complicating the imposition of a clear imperial boundary and contributing to the borderland’s inherent instability.

The constant state of flux along the border also had a profound impact on local governance and administration. Imperial control in these zones was often lighter and more adaptable than in the heartlands. Local governors and military commanders exercised considerable discretion, frequently engaging in localized diplomacy, truce arrangements, and even independent military actions to secure their territories or extract resources. This decentralized authority meant that the "border" was often a patchwork of varying degrees of imperial influence, with strong local power brokers holding significant sway. These local actors became essential intermediaries, translating imperial decrees into local realities and often shaping those realities to suit their own ambitions and the needs of their communities.

The early Safavid-Ottoman borderland, therefore, was a complex tapestry woven from threads of religious fervor, military might, economic interests, and local agency. It was a zone of constant negotiation, where the grand designs of empires met the stubborn realities of geography and the resourceful pragmatism of border communities. While Chaldiran marked a decisive moment, it did not create a fixed boundary but rather initiated a long process of definition, contestation, and adaptation. The lines on the maps were always more fluid than the imperial chanceries might have wished, reflecting the enduring power of local forces and the inherent difficulties of imposing a rigid order on such a dynamic and strategically vital region. The subsequent chapters will delve into how these early accommodations and conflicts laid the groundwork for the more systematic attempts at demarcation and the evolving nature of cross-border interactions that would define Iran’s relations with its powerful western neighbor.