

**How to cite this article:**

Hassanzadeh, A., Sepehri Rad, O., & Mobin, A. (2026). A Comparative Study of Iran's Political Conditions during the Reigns of Shah Abbas I of the Safavid Dynasty and Nader Shah Afshar. *Journal of Historical Research, Law and Policy*, 4(2), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jhrlp.225>



Article history:
Original Research

Dates:
Submission Date: 18 November 2025
Revision Date: 03 February 2026
Acceptance Date: 10 February 2026
First Publication Date: 17 February 2026
Final Publication Date: 01 March 2026

A Comparative Study of Iran's Political Conditions during the Reigns of Shah Abbas I of the Safavid Dynasty and Nader Shah Afshar

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ABSTRACT

The present study conducts a comparative analysis of Iran's political conditions during the reigns of Shah Abbas I of the Safavid dynasty and Nader Shah Afshar. This research aims to identify structural similarities and differences in Iran's political order and to examine their consequences, employing a comparative-analytical method and drawing on library-based sources. The findings indicate that despite apparent similarities in military approaches, there were fundamental differences in the modes of governance adopted by these two rulers. By relying on political legitimacy and pursuing a balanced approach to military, administrative, and economic reforms, Shah Abbas succeeded in creating a period of stability and prosperity. In contrast, despite his remarkable military victories, Nader Shah, due to an excessive concentration on military affairs and neglect of other dimensions of governance, failed to establish durable governmental structures. The results also suggest that in the realm of foreign policy, both rulers faced similar challenges in their confrontations with the Ottoman Empire. Shah Abbas, by adopting a phased policy—initially focusing on stabilizing the eastern frontiers and subsequently reclaiming western territories—achieved greater success, whereas Nader Shah, despite his military triumphs, was largely unsuccessful in resolving sectarian disputes with the Ottomans and in establishing a lasting peace. With regard to internal rebellions, a significant difference can be observed in the crisis-management strategies of the two rulers. Shah Abbas employed more flexible policies and in some cases even granted amnesty to rebels, while Nader Shah predominantly resorted to harsh repression, which in turn intensified public discontent.

Keywords: Shah Abbas I of the Safavid dynasty; Nader Shah Afshar; comparative study; governance; military reforms

Introduction

The history of Iran during the Safavid and Afsharid periods witnessed profound political transformations. Among these, the two reigns of Shah Abbas I of the Safavid dynasty (1587–1629) and Nader Shah Afshar (1736–1747) occupy a particularly significant position in Iran's political history. A comparative examination of these two historical periods can lead to a deeper understanding of Iran's political structures in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Shah Abbas I came to power at a time when the Safavid state was facing serious internal and external challenges. On the one hand, the excessive empowerment of the Qizilbash amirs and their internal rivalries, and



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on the other hand, external threats from the Ottoman Empire in the west and the Uzbeks in the east, endangered the very existence of the Safavid state. Under such circumstances, Shah Abbas, through prudent policies and structural reforms, succeeded in restoring political stability to the country. One of his most important measures was the reform of the military structure. By establishing a standing army composed of Circassian, Georgian, and Armenian ghulams who were directly loyal to the Shah, he was able to reduce the military and political power of the Qizilbash amirs. This measure, which was accompanied by the conversion of state lands into crown lands, significantly strengthened the foundations of central authority (1-3).

Approximately one century later, Nader Shah Afshar emerged under markedly different circumstances. The fall of Isfahan to the Afghans in 1722 and the collapse of the Safavid dynasty had plunged Iran into a deep crisis. Russia and the Ottoman Empire took advantage of this situation and occupied parts of northern and western Iran. A fundamental difference lay in the fact that Shah Abbas enjoyed political legitimacy as the recognized heir of the Safavid dynasty, whereas Nader initially presented himself as the regent of Tahmasp II and later ascended the throne through the convocation of the Moghan Plain Assembly. In the realm of foreign policy, both rulers faced similar challenges. Shah Abbas, by adopting a policy of temporary peace with the Ottomans and focusing on neutralizing the Uzbek threat, gradually restored Iran's power. Nader Shah, likewise, through successive victories, restored Iran's territorial integrity and even embarked on extraterritorial conquests, including the campaign to India (4-6).

A comparative study of these two periods raises important questions for scholars. What were the political conditions of Iran during the reigns of Shah Abbas I and Nader Shah Afshar, and what similarities and differences can be identified between them? Moreover, what factors contributed to the success or failure of the policies pursued by these two rulers? This study adopts an analytical-comparative approach to examine Iran's political conditions during the reigns of Shah Abbas I and Nader Shah Afshar. The main objective of this research is to identify, analyze, and comparatively evaluate the political situation of Iran in these two periods. The principal hypothesis is that the political conditions of Iran during the reign of Shah Abbas I were characterized by greater stability and strength than those of the Nader Shah period. A comparative analysis of these two eras can contribute to a better understanding of power dynamics in pre-modern Iran. This research demonstrates how various factors—including political, military, economic, and cultural structures, alongside the personal characteristics of leaders—play a decisive role in shaping the destiny of a country. This article seeks to enrich the existing literature on Iran's political history and to provide a foundation for further research in this field.

Research Background

Foreign Studies

Savory emphasizes that Shah Abbas, by creating a centralized administrative system and reducing the power of the Qizilbash tribes, succeeded in establishing political stability in Iran (1). He also strengthened Iran's economy through economic policies such as the expansion of the silk trade (2). In the field of foreign policy, Shah Abbas sought to exploit European colonial rivalries to Iran's advantage by establishing diplomatic relations with countries such as England and the Netherlands (3). His wars with the Ottomans and the Uzbeks have also attracted scholarly attention. For example, Roemer argues that Shah Abbas's military victories not only expanded Iran's borders but also enhanced his legitimacy among the population (7).

Lockhart, on the other hand, stresses that Nader Shah, by creating a disciplined and powerful army, was able to impose his authority throughout Iran (4). He also attempted to finance his military campaigns through the implementation of stringent taxation policies (5).

In terms of foreign policy, Nader Shah's extensive campaigns in India and Central Asia brought considerable wealth into Iran. However, some scholars argue that although these campaigns were successful in the short term, they ultimately weakened Iran's economy in the long run (6).

Nader Shah's religious policies have also been the subject of scholarly analysis. For instance, he sought to enhance his power by reducing the influence of the Shi'i clergy (8). Matthee likewise maintains that both rulers, by establishing centralized administrative systems and strengthening the military, were able to create political stability in Iran (9).

Domestic Studies

Safakish, in *Safavids in the Passage of History*, adopts an analytical approach to examine Iran during the Safavid era within the context of global developments. Drawing on authoritative historical sources, he presents a relatively comprehensive picture of Iran's position in the international system of that period (10). Shabani, in *History of Political and Social Developments of Iran in the Afsharid and Zand Periods*, provides a comprehensive examination of Iran's political and social events following the fall of the Safavids. With a particular focus on the Afsharid period, he offers a relatively detailed portrayal of Nader Shah's rule. Utilizing primary and reliable sources, he presents an in-depth and multidimensional analysis of Nader Shah's domestic and foreign policies, including the background of his rise to power, military and administrative reforms, internal and external campaigns, and ultimately the factors contributing to the collapse of the Afsharid state (11).

Falsafi, in *The Foreign Policy of Iran in the Safavid Period*, examines Iran's external relations during the Safavid era. By focusing on Safavid foreign policy, this work provides a suitable framework for understanding Iran's political conditions during the reign of Shah Abbas I. The limitation of this book, however, lies in its exclusive focus on the Safavid period and its lack of coverage of the Nader Shah era. Drawing on original historical sources, the author presents a comprehensive account of Iran's foreign relations during this period (12).

The Cambridge History of Iran (seven volumes), compiled by a group of prominent historians, offers a comprehensive and scholarly perspective on Iranian history and provides an appropriate foundation for comparative studies of different historical periods, including the Safavid and Afsharid eras. Its distinction from the present study lies in its broad temporal and thematic scope, which extends beyond the two periods under consideration (13).

Rezaei and colleagues, in the article *The Role of the Qizilbash in Determining the Succession of Safavid Kings from the Foundation of the Safavid Dynasty to the End of Shah Abbas I's Reign*, examine the role of the Qizilbash in the succession process of Safavid monarchs. Using a descriptive-analytical method, the researchers analyze the influence of the Qizilbash as one of the most important power centers in the Safavid state on succession disputes and related crises. The study shows that inefficient succession mechanisms and the presence of multiple claimants facilitated the intervention of various forces, including the Qizilbash, in the succession process (14).

Faridi and colleagues, in the article *An Analysis of Symmetrical Rebellions in the Naderid Era Influenced by Perceptions of Relative Deprivation*, analyze social uprisings during Nader Shah's reign based on the theory of relative deprivation. Using a descriptive-analytical method and library-based data, the researchers examine the factors contributing to these rebellions and their consequences. The findings indicate that factors such as the lack

of political legitimacy and Nader Shah's style of governance played a crucial role in generating feelings of relative deprivation and, consequently, in the outbreak of rebellions (15).

Karimifard, in the article *A Realistic Analysis of Shah Abbas I's Foreign Policy toward Great Powers*, investigates the factors influencing the orientation of Shah Abbas I's foreign policy. Conducted using descriptive and analytical methods, the study identifies pragmatism, realism, the formation of temporary alliances, and distrust of great powers as key elements of Shah Abbas's political identity. The findings show that his foreign policy orientation was shaped by his pragmatic and realistic disposition, power considerations, political calculations, and Shi'i ideology (16).

Thavaqeb and colleagues, in the article *Shah Abbas I's Peace-Seeking Policy toward the Ottoman State*, examine Shah Abbas I's conciliatory approach in relations with the Ottomans. Using a descriptive-analytical method and relying on political correspondence and treaties, the study demonstrates that the core strategy of Shah Abbas's foreign policy toward the Ottomans was based on peace and peaceful coexistence. The researchers argue that this policy, influenced by religious teachings and objective realities, played a significant role in the survival of the Safavid state (17).

An Overview of Iran's Domestic Situation in the Reign of Shah Abbas I of the Safavid Dynasty and His Political Measures

The reign of Shah Abbas I of the Safavid dynasty (1587–1629) is regarded as a distinctive period in Iranian history, characterized by profound political, economic, and social transformations. This era—often referred to as the “golden age” of Safavid rule—was marked by territorial expansion, economic development, and the flourishing of art and architecture. The present study examines Iran's domestic conditions and the political measures undertaken by Shah Abbas I.

Early Challenges of the Reign and Structural Reforms

At the beginning of Shah Abbas I's reign, the country confronted numerous difficulties, including widespread devastation, general poverty, population displacement, and insecurity along commercial routes. In addition, the Ottoman occupation of silk-producing مناطق and the repeated incursions of the Uzbeks posed serious challenges to the national economy (18). In order to establish order and stability, Shah Abbas initiated deep structural reforms within the political and administrative system. One of the most important internal challenges was the tribal Turkoman order, which—by occupying the highest positions of authority—persistently weakened the central government. Shah Abbas dealt decisively with the Turkoman amirs and, in order to curb their unchecked power, turned to strengthening Iranian elements as well as Georgian and Circassian نیروهای (1, 2).

Mode of Governance and Power Management

Pietro Della Valle, in describing Shah Abbas's style of rule, writes: “Shah Abbas is the sole absolute ruler of Iran. In matters of sovereignty he consults no one. Of course, if a difficult issue arises he asks the opinion of competent persons, yet what is implemented is his own judgment and command” (19).

Responding to Internal Rebellions

During Shah Abbas's reign, several rebellions occurred, the most important of which included the uprising of Ya'qub Khan Dhu'l-Qadr—an insurrection that affected Fars, Yazd, and Kerman and constituted a serious challenge

to the government—and the rebellion of Khan Ahmad Gilani. Khan Ahmad, the last member of the Karkiya line and one of the rulers of Gilan, fell into royal disfavor after establishing contacts with the Ottomans and Russia, and ultimately died in Baghdad in 1598 (20). Another major disturbance was the rebellion of Bengi Malek of Mazandaran. This uprising occurred in 1596, and to suppress it Shah Abbas dispatched fifty thousand troops from the Qajar tribe to Mazandaran under the command of the Qurchi-bashi (21).

Economic and Commercial Reforms

In the course of national economic reconstruction, Shah Abbas implemented important measures. Among these, an organized road-guarding system and a carefully planned network of caravanserais were established (22). According to Tavernier, once the road guards received a report of theft, they were immediately dispatched to the site of the incident and ensured the punishment of the offenders (23). Chardin likewise attests that, owing to political order and tranquility in this period, urban economic production increased, and certain cities became major centers for the manufacture of specific products (24).

Foreign Policy

In foreign policy, Shah Abbas faced multiple challenges. The Portuguese presence in the Persian Gulf was among the major ones. Shah Abbas—who sought to build a centralized and powerful state—could not ignore the military presence of foreigners in Iran's territorial waters (25). Relations with Spain constituted another challenge. In 1608, Shah Abbas dispatched an embassy to the Spanish court with the aim of encouraging the Spanish monarch to confront the Ottomans and to expand commercial relations (26). Overall, Shah Abbas's reformist measures on the domestic front and his strategies in confronting external challenges laid the groundwork for deep transformations in Iran's political and economic structures. The gradual elimination of tribal dominance, strengthening of central authority, expansion of trade and urbanization, and the establishment of a disciplined non-tribal standing army are among the major achievements of this period, making it one of the most brilliant eras in Iran's history.

Iran's Domestic Situation during the Reign of Nader Shah Afshar and His Measures

Nader Shah Afshar, as one of the most influential figures in Iran's post-Islamic history, emerged at a critical juncture when the country was under pressure from neighboring empires and succeeded, through forceful authority, in restoring Iran's territorial domain (27). His birth in 1689 among the Afshar tribe (of the Qarah-Khlu clan) is regarded as the beginning of far-reaching transformations in Iranian history.

Origins and the Path to Power

Nader grew up in a turbulent and insecure environment that prepared him for confronting future challenges. His ancestors, who constantly lived in a defensive condition, transmitted this trait to him in a pronounced manner. Nader's exceptional military and combat abilities in adolescence paved the way for his joining the group of Baba Ali Beg Kuseh Ahmadlu (28). His rise progressed rapidly, and he attained important posts such as tufangchi-aghasi and ishik-aghasi. His familial ties with the household of Baba Ali Beg—formed through two successive marriages—further consolidated his position within the local power structure (29).

Military Actions and Territorial Expansion

Nader's first military successes in the battles of Nahavand and Malayer, alongside the acquisition of considerable booty, had a deep impact on Iranian *تیروها* morale. The conquest of Hamadan paved the way for the unopposed capture of cities along the route to Tabriz. The public jubilation in Maragheh after liberation from seven years of captivity reflected the profound psychological effect of these victories (30). In the sphere of military management, Nader strengthened the country's military infrastructure through strategic measures, including transferring captured military equipment to Khorasan and using Ottoman prisoners to transport artillery (29).

The Conquest of Kandahar and the Expansion of Eastern Influence

The capture of Kandahar—long at the center of Nader Shah's attention—was accomplished through a complex and innovative strategy. The dispatch of substantial forces to contain Afghan groups and *بلوچ* tribes, along with sending Reza-Qoli Mirza to seize Balkh, indicates Nader's comprehensive security strategy in the Afghanistan region (30). The prolonged siege of Kandahar ultimately ended through a calculated measure on 23 February 1740. Nader's final strategy—based on guaranteeing the besieged population's safety—led to the surrender of Husayn, the governor of Kandahar (30).

The Campaign to India

The conquest of India, one of Nader Shah's most significant military achievements, was driven by multiple motives, including access to the immense wealth of the Mughal rulers and exploitation of that country's disordered conditions (31). The decisive Battle of Karnal, which ended in Iran's resounding victory, demonstrated Nader Shah's strategic and tactical superiority over the massive army of Muhammad Shah Mughal. The victory was considered so significant that Nader changed his son Morteza-Qoli's name to Nasrollah (30).

Final Campaigns and the Consolidation of Power

In the last phase of Nader Shah's conquests, the campaign to Dagestan and the final conflict with the Ottomans took place. In the battle against Yegen Muhammad Pasha—who commanded 140,000 troops—the decisive role of the Abdali Afghans in the Ottomans' severe defeat became evident (30). The sudden death of the Turkish commander and the dispersal of his forces created an exceptional opportunity for the Iranian troops, resulting in a decisive victory and the consolidation of Iran's regional position (29). Overall, despite its relatively short duration, the reign of Nader Shah Afshar represents a pivotal period in Iran's history. His military genius, political acumen, and ability to manage diverse ethnic groups enabled the restoration of Iranian authority and the recovery of lost territories. Nader's intelligent strategies in military and political arenas, combined with his capacity to exploit emerging opportunities, contributed to the formation of a remarkable period in Iran's historical trajectory.

Foreign Relations in the Reign of Shah Abbas I of the Safavid Dynasty

Foreign relations during the reign of Shah Abbas I of the Safavid dynasty (1587–1629) occupy a special place in Iran's history. In this period, Iran's foreign policy took shape through a multidimensional and strategic approach whose central aim was to safeguard national interests and consolidate Iran's position in the international arena. Relations with the Ottoman Empire—as Iran's most important western neighbor—were particularly complex. At the

outset of his reign, because Shah Abbas was engaged on the eastern front against the Uzbeks, he was compelled to accept a peace treaty with the Ottomans in 1590. Under this treaty, key regions such as Tabriz, parts of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and sections of Lorestan were ceded to the Ottomans (32). However, after stabilizing conditions in the east, Shah Abbas was able by 1606 to recover all lost territories in line with earlier Safavid–Ottoman arrangements (33).

In relations with Europe, Shah Abbas pursued an active policy. Relations with England entered a new phase with the arrival of Sir Anthony Sherley in Iran in 1599. Sherley came with two principal objectives—forming an alliance against the Ottomans and expanding commercial relations—and he was welcomed by Shah Abbas (34). The presence of the Sherley brothers at the Safavid court contributed significantly to strengthening military and political ties with Europe. Relations with the Dutch likewise were formed largely around commercial interests. In 1624, an agreement was concluded between the two countries under which Dutch subjects were exempted from customs duties (32). Nevertheless, Shah Abbas's efforts to secure Dutch support against Portugal and Spain were not particularly successful.

Regarding France, although some attempts were made to draw the two countries closer, these ties did not expand substantially due to the death of Henry IV and France's internal developments. Still, in the period of Louis XIII, France showed greater interest in developing relations with Iran (33). Relations with the Holy Roman Empire also emerged within the framework of a balance-of-power strategy against the Ottomans. The exchange of diplomatic missions and meetings between Iranian envoys and Emperor Rudolf II reflected the significance of these ties (33). Even so, the conclusion of a peace treaty between the Empire and the Ottomans caused Shah Abbas's dissatisfaction (12).

In the east, relations with the Mughal Empire of India were of particular importance. The issue of Kandahar was consistently a point of contention between the two states. After Kandahar was taken by Akbar, Shah Abbas—occupied with confronting the Uzbeks in Khorasan—reacted in a limited way and pursued the matter primarily through diplomatic channels (35). Relations with Tsarist Russia likewise formed an important component of Shah Abbas's foreign policy. Efforts to build an alliance against the Ottomans and to expand commercial relations were among the main aims of these ties (35). However, due to internal conflicts in Russia and Iran's simultaneous engagement on multiple fronts, these relations did not expand significantly by the end of Shah Abbas's reign (32).

Overall, Shah Abbas I's foreign policy can be viewed as an example of active and multifaceted diplomacy designed to secure national interests and strengthen Iran's international standing. Key features of this policy included seeking a balance of power against the Ottoman Empire through alignment with European powers, expanding commercial relations, and reinforcing the country's military capacity (16, 17).

Examining Foreign Relations in the Reign of Nader Shah Afshar

Iran's foreign relations during the reign of Nader Shah Afshar (1736–1747) underwent significant changes in relation to neighboring states and regional powers. This period was characterized by distinctive military and diplomatic approaches that profoundly shaped Iran's political relations. In the sphere of relations with India, Nader initially sent a letter to the governor of India requesting measures to prevent the asylum of rebellious Afghan groups (30). The inadequate response of the Indian court to Nader's diplomatic demands led to his military campaign. After the Battle of Karnal and the siege of the Indian camp, negotiations between representatives of the two sides

culminated in a direct meeting between Nader and Muhammad Shah, resulting in India's payment of war indemnities (27).

In relations with the Uzbeks, Nader Shah—understanding the geopolitical complexities of Transoxiana—adopted a calculated strategy. Following the conquest of Kandahar and the bloodless acquisition of Andkhoy, he pursued a combined military–diplomatic policy that enabled him to incorporate twenty thousand of the best Uzbek and Turkmen soldiers into his army (36).

Iran–Ottoman relations in this period were marked by repeated tensions. After driving out the Afghans, Nader moved to recover occupied territories and liberated Hamadan (37). He later concluded an agreement with Ahmad Pasha, the governor of Baghdad, under which the occupied regions were returned to Iran (32). In relations with Russia, Nader—through a treaty—compelled Russian forces to withdraw from parts of Mazandaran, Astarabad, and Gilan, and the Sulak River was designated as the boundary between the two states (38).

Relations with England developed mainly around commercial and maritime considerations. Compared with its Dutch counterpart, the English East India Company had a weaker position in Iran (39). Nevertheless, an important contract was concluded with Captain John Elton that granted multiple commercial privileges to the English side. Relations with the Dutch were likewise predominantly commercial. The Dutch East India Company, benefiting from its long experience in Iran, showed greater cooperation and extended its trade toward northern and northeastern provinces. Yet in the late Naderid period, the decline of the population's financial capacity due to wars and heavy taxation forced many merchants to abandon commercial activity (40).

Relations with France remained limited. According to Jean Otter, the French representative, Nader Shah lacked an orientation toward commercial expansion and instead focused on advancing interests through war (39). Overall, foreign relations in the Afsharid era can be understood as a period of combining diplomacy with military power. Nader Shah's foreign policy was largely built on recovering lost territories, stabilizing borders, and expanding regional influence. While this approach produced notable short-term successes, the military and fiscal pressures it generated had long-term negative consequences for Iran's economy and trade (5, 6).

Shared Features of Iran's Domestic Situation under Shah Abbas I and Nader Shah Afshar

Turbulent and Crisis-Ridden Conditions at the Outset of Rule

Both rulers came to power under conditions in which the country was confronting multiple internal and external crises. At the time Shah Abbas rose to power, several contenders in different parts of the country claimed kingship, and, in Sherley's words, "the realm was thrown into turmoil and five or six men became kings" (34). Similarly, during Nader's emergence, Iran was in political disorder and was pressured from multiple directions by Afghan, Russian, and Ottoman forces (27).

Confronting Multiple External Threats

Both rulers faced multidirectional external threats. Shah Abbas confronted the Ottomans in the west, the Uzbeks in the east, and the Portuguese in the south. Nader Shah likewise faced comparable threats from the Ottomans, Afghans, and Russians, requiring complex military and political strategies.

Military Reform and the Reorganization of the Army

Both rulers recognized the importance of military reform and the reorganization of the armed forces. Shah Abbas sought to reduce the role of tribal and Qizilbash units and to build a more disciplined army (41). Nader, too, strengthened Iran's military capacity by forming an army of selected soldiers drawn from different ethnic groups and by providing adequate wages (42).

Overall, a comparative study of Iran's political conditions during the reigns of Shah Abbas I and Nader Shah Afshar reveals recurring and shared patterns in Iran's political history. Analyzing these patterns through three main axes highlights the historical continuity of governance challenges in Iran. The crisis conditions at the beginning of both reigns reflect structural weaknesses in Iran's political system regarding the transfer of power. The multiplicity of claimants in Shah Abbas's era—described in historical accounts as the emergence of “five or six kings” (34)—bears a meaningful resemblance to the turbulent situation of the Naderid period. In both cases, the fragmentation of coherent political structures facilitated external interventions and intensified internal crises.

What makes this resemblance more significant is the simultaneity of internal crises with external threats. Historical studies indicate that both rulers faced similar challenges in foreign affairs: the Ottoman presence in the west, eastern threats (Uzbeks in the Safavid period and Afghans in the Afsharid era), and southern maritime challenges (the Portuguese in the Safavid period) represent a recurring pattern of external pressures (32, 35). Recognizing these shared threats pushed both rulers toward military reform. Shah Abbas, by curbing tribal and Qizilbash forces, and Nader Shah, by forming an army composed of multiple ethnic groups, pursued comparable strategies to modernize the military structure. These reforms can be interpreted as responses to a shared recognition of the need to alter the traditional organization of armed forces (41, 42).

A comparative analysis of these three axes suggests that governance challenges in Iran, despite a gap of about a century, followed similar patterns. This similarity in challenges and responses points to deep socio-political structures that superficial transformations were unable to change. In other words, the recurrence of comparable patterns in two different historical moments indicates the persistence of certain fundamental features in Iran's political structure. An important aspect here is the reciprocal relationship between these three shared features: internal crises created openings for external threats, and these threats in turn underscored the necessity of military reforms. This dysfunctional cycle formed a recurrent pattern that both rulers were compelled to confront (3, 4).

Ultimately, it can be concluded that the similarities in the political conditions of the two periods were not merely coincidental but were rooted in deeper social and political structures in Iran. This understanding can contribute to a clearer interpretation of Iran's historical developments and to identifying recurring patterns in the country's political history. It also shows that success in governance requires an accurate grasp of the link between internal challenges, external threats, and reform imperatives. The experience of both rulers suggests that an integrated approach to these three domains was a key determinant of the effectiveness of reformist action.

Points of Divergence between Iran's Domestic Situation under Shah Abbas I of the Safavid Dynasty and Nader Shah Afshar

Origins and Political Legitimacy

A fundamental difference between these two rulers lies in their origins and political legitimacy. Shah Abbas ascended the throne as the legitimate heir of the Safavid dynasty and possessed both traditional and religious

legitimacy. By contrast, Nader rose to power through military competence and personal charisma and was compelled to manufacture legitimacy primarily through continued military victories (1, 5, 6).

Approach to Foreign Policy

Shah Abbas adopted a more balanced approach to foreign policy and drew on active diplomacy to manage relations with external powers. The dispatch of envoys to Spain and efforts to establish ties with England exemplify this approach (32, 34). In contrast, Nader Shah relied more heavily on coercive power, and his foreign policy was largely oriented toward campaigns and military conquest (27, 36).

Management of Economic Resources

Shah Abbas placed particular emphasis on economic and commercial development; by securing trade routes and managing relations with foreign powers, he sought to stimulate economic prosperity (9, 33). Nader Shah, however, concentrated more on financing the state through war booty and stringent taxation, a pattern that became especially evident in his Indian campaign (5, 40).

Domestic Political Stability

Shah Abbas succeeded in creating relatively durable political stability by transferring the capital to Isfahan and building a coherent administrative structure. In the Naderid period, by contrast, despite major military successes, domestic stability remained fragile and ethnic and tribal tensions persisted (11, 43). This comparative perspective shows that, despite some initial similarities in the circumstances of accession and the challenges faced, the two rulers adopted different strategies of governance. Shah Abbas pursued a more comprehensive and long-term strategy aimed at durable stability, whereas Nader Shah concentrated more on military success and short-term outcomes. This divergence in approach directly affected the sustainability of their achievements (3, 6).

Overall, a comparative reading of Iran's political conditions under Shah Abbas I and Nader Shah—through the lens of fundamental differences in governance and political management—offers a revealing perspective in Iranian history. These two historical figures, despite major achievements in multiple arenas, diverged in core governing orientations that shaped Iran's trajectory. In terms of origins and legitimacy, Shah Abbas benefited from hereditary and religious foundations: as the fifth ruler of the Safavid dynasty, he was recognized as the legitimate heir to the throne and could draw on the support of Shi'i religious institutions and scholars. This dual legitimacy—dynastic and religious—enabled him to implement broad reforms in the structures of government (1, 2). Nader Shah, in contrast, lacked a comparable institutional foundation and derived legitimacy largely from military prowess and personal authority. This difference in the basis of legitimacy exerted a deep influence on governing style and political stability in the two reigns (5, 6).

In foreign policy, the divergence is even more pronounced. Shah Abbas, by adopting a positive balancing strategy and active diplomacy, developed extensive relations with European powers. By dispatching envoys to European courts and receiving foreign representatives, he facilitated the expansion of commercial and political ties, enabling Iran to benefit from diplomatic opportunities (16, 32). Nader Shah, by contrast, relied more on military power and structured foreign policy mainly around campaigns and conquests (27, 36). A similar contrast emerges in economic resource management. Shah Abbas, recognizing the importance of economic development, invested in commercial and productive infrastructure. The organization of trade routes, the support of commerce, and policies

that strengthened Iran's position in long-distance exchange reflect this comprehensive outlook (9, 33). Nader Shah, in contrast, depended more heavily on revenues obtained through war booty and heavy taxation; his famous campaign to India and the seizure of Mughal wealth is a clear manifestation of this model (5, 40).

Domestic political stability constitutes another major axis of divergence. Shah Abbas, by relocating the capital to Isfahan and establishing an effective administrative order, created relatively sustainable stability. By weakening the Qizilbash power base and strengthening the ghulam forces, he constructed a new balance of power that supported the central state (14, 43). In Nader Shah's reign, however, despite extraordinary military authority, domestic stability remained fragile and ethnic and tribal tensions persisted. Consequently, while Shah Abbas's reforms and institutional arrangements exerted more durable effects on Iran's historical development, Nader Shah's military achievements—despite their scale—rapidly eroded after his death (4, 40).

A Comparative Analysis of Iran's Foreign Relations under Shah Abbas I of the Safavid Dynasty and Nader Shah Afshar

Iran's Foreign Relations with India

A comparative analysis of Iran's relations with India during the reigns of Shah Abbas I and Nader Shah Afshar demonstrates substantial differences in their political and military approaches. This comparison can be assessed from several angles:

A) Similarities

1. **The strategic importance of Kandahar.** Both rulers recognized Kandahar's strategic value as a connective corridor between Iran and India. Shah Abbas, at a certain stage of his reign, refrained from pursuing the Kandahar issue with full intensity due to his engagement against the Uzbeks in Khorasan. In Nader Shah's period, Kandahar likewise functioned as a strategic gateway into India (32, 35).
2. **Use of diplomacy.** Both rulers employed diplomacy before resorting to military action. Shah Abbas attempted to preserve friendly relations through envoys and diplomatic correspondence. Nader Shah, too, sent an ambassador to the Indian court prior to his campaign (27, 30).

B) Differences

1. **Political approach.** Shah Abbas followed a policy of restraint and forbearance. Even after Kandahar was taken by India, he avoided a harsh reaction and relied largely on diplomatic correspondence. Nader Shah, in contrast, pursued an aggressive approach and treated India's insufficient response to his diplomatic demands as a pretext for invasion (5, 35).
2. **Political and military objectives.** Shah Abbas's objectives largely centered on maintaining amicable relations and securing mutual interests. Even when Kandahar was lost, he preferred that it remain under Indian control rather than fall to the Uzbeks. Nader Shah pursued more expansionist objectives, seeking not only control over strategic territories but also war booty and the weakening of India (5, 6).
3. **Handling disputes.** Shah Abbas addressed disagreements through peaceful means—envoys, gifts, and negotiation—whereas Nader Shah responded to non-cooperation with large-scale military action that culminated in the violent seizure and plundering of Delhi (27, 30).
4. **Consequences of relations.** Under Shah Abbas, diplomatic relations were preserved despite disputes over Kandahar, and ambassadorial exchanges continued. Under Nader Shah, the invasion produced the capture of Delhi, the seizure of treasures, and the imposition of heavy terms on India (5, 27).

5. **Attitudes toward religious issues.** In his relations with India, Shah Abbas generally engaged less with sectarian questions and focused more on political and economic interests. Nader Shah, by contrast, attempted to emphasize Muslim unity and reduce Shi'i–Sunni tensions, using this theme as a political instrument (6, 11).

In sum, comparing Shah Abbas I and Nader Shah's approaches to India reveals two distinct foreign-policy patterns. Shah Abbas pursued a cautious realist strategy grounded in regional constraints and prioritization of threats. Although this approach contributed to the temporary loss of Kandahar, it avoided a large-scale conflict with India and enabled concentration on the Uzbek threat. Nader Shah, in contrast, adopted a militarized and expansionist approach, using India's non-cooperation as a pretext for invasion. While the campaign yielded considerable short-term material gains, it damaged long-standing bilateral relations and left a bitter imprint in historical memory. In this sense, Nader Shah's Indian campaign—despite military success—exhibits a lack of long-term strategic design in foreign relations (5, 6, 32).

Iran's Foreign Relations with the Uzbeks

A) Similarities

1. **Defensive character of early military policies.** Both kings initially adopted defensive postures in response to Uzbek incursions. Repeated attacks on Khorasan and eastern Iran constituted a central driver of conflict in both periods and compelled military responses.
2. **Strategic importance of Khorasan.** In both eras, Khorasan held special geopolitical importance. Securing and defending the region was a strategic priority for both rulers, and repeated efforts to recover occupied areas and restore security formed a shared feature of their policies (2, 7).
3. **The necessity of military confrontation.** Both rulers concluded that confronting the Uzbek threat required military action aimed at securing the eastern frontier and preventing recurrent incursions.

B) Differences

1. **Differences in military strategy.** Shah Abbas generally pursued a defensive–security strategy and, after recovering occupied territories, strengthened frontier defense through the deployment of *نیروهای* protective forces along Khorasan's borders. Nader Shah, by contrast, adopted a more offensive approach, campaigning into Transoxiana and seeking deeper control over Uzbek-inhabited regions while incorporating their forces into his army (1, 36).
2. **Managing relations after victory.** Shah Abbas concentrated on fortifying borders and maintaining defensive deployments to prevent renewed attacks. Nader Shah pursued an absorption-and-integration strategy, incorporating large numbers of Uzbek forces into his military and reinforcing relations through political and kinship ties (27, 36).
3. **Scope of military operations.** Shah Abbas largely confined operations to recovering Khorasan and securing the frontier, whereas Nader Shah extended campaigns deeper into Uzbek territories, widening the operational theater (5, 40).
4. **Diplomatic approach.** Nader Shah's diplomacy was more complex and multi-layered, combining coercion with recognition and co-optation of local rulers, whereas Shah Abbas's approach relied more heavily on military deterrence (1, 6).

Overall, differences in Shah Abbas's and Nader Shah's responses to the Uzbeks can be interpreted through their respective temporal contexts and governing imperatives. Shah Abbas faced numerous internal challenges early in his reign and needed to concentrate on consolidating central authority and managing western threats, which encouraged a more cautious approach in the east. Nader Shah operated from a stronger position, enabling more aggressive strategies. Shifts in the regional balance of power and the relative weakening of Uzbek power in Nader's era facilitated deeper advances. Moreover, Shah Abbas's strategic goal centered on frontier security and territorial integrity, whereas Nader Shah pursued more expansionist aims and sought to extend Iranian influence into Transoxiana. Finally, differences in military structure mattered: Nader Shah's more cohesive and powerful army enabled broader operations. Thus, while both rulers confronted the shared Uzbek threat, their distinct domestic and external contexts produced different strategies—Shah Abbas's defensive—security approach and Nader Shah's offensive—integrative approach—each of which proved functional within its own historical circumstances (1, 5, 6).

Iran's Foreign Relations with the Ottoman Empire

A) Similarities

1. **A military orientation focused on recovering occupied territories.** Both rulers made the recovery of territories occupied by the Ottomans a primary priority. After consolidating internal power, Shah Abbas moved to reclaim western regions and succeeded in liberating areas such as Tabriz, Shirvan, and Yerevan (20, 43). Likewise, after expelling the Afghans, Nader Shah campaigned westward and recovered regions such as Hamadan, Kermanshah, and Tabriz (27, 37).
2. **A negotiation strategy and tactical flexibility.** Both rulers used a mix of diplomacy and military force. Shah Abbas, early in his reign, accepted an Ottoman peace proposal in order to concentrate on the eastern problems. Nader Shah similarly showed readiness—when necessary—to negotiate and conclude peace arrangements with the Ottomans, particularly when confronted with urgent domestic or regional contingencies (17, 32).
3. **Attention to border stabilization.** Both rulers sought to define and stabilize clear borders with the Ottoman Empire, a feature that can be seen in the repeated resort to treaties and formal agreements in both periods (32, 37).

B) Differences

1. **Religious approach.** The most important difference concerns religion. Shah Abbas used sectarian difference as a political instrument to strengthen identity and mobilize resistance against the Ottoman rival, whereas Nader Shah attempted to reduce sectarian friction—most notably by discouraging practices that inflamed Sunni sensitivities—in order to lower religious tensions and facilitate accommodation (2, 6).
2. **Alliance policy with external powers.** Shah Abbas pursued rapprochement with European powers as a means to pressure the Ottomans, whereas Nader Shah, in contrast to this approach, sought more direct accommodation with the Ottomans and relied less on building European alliances against them (6, 16, 34).
3. **Intensity and continuity of conflict.** Military conflict under Nader Shah was generally more intense and concentrated. His engagements with the Ottomans—often described as tactically complex—illustrate a more hard-driving operational tempo. Shah Abbas, by contrast, tended to adopt a more cautious posture and relied more heavily on attritional strategies and phased escalation (1, 5).

4. **Ultimate objectives.** Shah Abbas aimed at creating a stable balance of power with the Ottoman Empire. Nader Shah, however, aimed more explicitly at addressing underlying sources of dispute by lowering religious tension and attempting to create a friendlier relationship (6, 32).
5. **Military methods.** Nader Shah's tactics were generally more complex and innovative, including more systematic use of artillery, new siege methods, and the construction of temporary fortifications. Shah Abbas relied comparatively more on established methods and traditional strategies, including scorched-earth practices in some contexts (1, 5, 27).

Overall, this comparative analysis shows that despite surface-level similarities in their military orientation, the two rulers differed in their grand strategic logic. Shah Abbas, with a more conservative and long-term approach, sought to establish balance through international alignments and the reinforcement of a distinct politico-religious identity. Nader Shah adopted a more aggressive yet reformist approach aimed at addressing disputes more fundamentally by reducing sectarian tension. These differences can be related to divergent historical contexts: Shah Abbas ruled in an era that required rebuilding and consolidation, whereas Nader Shah rose in a more acute crisis and was compelled toward faster and more decisive choices. The outcomes of these approaches are also notable: Shah Abbas's policies yielded a period of relative stability and balance, while Nader Shah's actions—though successful in the short term—did not culminate in a durable peace (3, 5, 32).

Iran's Foreign Relations with Russia

Iran–Russia relations during the reigns of Shah Abbas I and Nader Shah Afshar represent two distinct phases in Iran's diplomatic history. Although the two periods share some similarities, they also display significant differences in objectives, approaches, and outcomes.

A) Similarities

1. **Strategic importance of the relationship.** In both periods, relations with Russia had strategic salience. Both Shah Abbas and Nader Shah recognized Russia's geopolitical significance and its potential impact on Iran's interests, and they calibrated foreign policy with this strategic reality in mind (32).
2. **Exchange of ambassadors and diplomatic missions.** Both kings employed active diplomacy toward Russia. The dispatch and reception of ambassadors and formal delegations are repeatedly observed in both periods, indicating the importance of official diplomatic channels in bilateral relations (32).
3. **The Caucasus as a focal point.** The Caucasus served as a central arena of competition and tension in both periods due to its strategic location and its role in regional security calculations (32, 41).

B) Differences

1. **Nature and goals of the relationship.** Under Shah Abbas, relations with Russia were shaped largely by the aim of balancing against the Ottoman Empire—seeking Russian support to counter the Ottoman threat. Under Nader Shah, the relationship assumed a more defensive character, oriented toward recovering occupied territories and stabilizing borders (4, 32).
2. **Balance of power and relative positioning.** In Shah Abbas's period, Iran occupied a stronger position and could pursue policy with greater confidence—seen, for example, in willingness to contemplate concessions as inducements for cooperation. Under Nader Shah, Iran initially operated from relative weakness and had to prioritize restoring power and retrieving lost territory (3, 4).

3. **Results and achievements.** The outcomes differed sharply. In Shah Abbas's era, despite sustained diplomatic efforts, relations produced few tangible results. In Nader Shah's era, negotiations yielded concrete outcomes such as border agreements and the evacuation of occupied regions (32, 38).
4. **Russia's internal conditions.** Russia's domestic situation differed across the two periods. In Shah Abbas's time, internal instability and political turmoil in Russia negatively affected bilateral relations. In Nader Shah's period, comparatively greater Russian stability facilitated more serious negotiations (32).

Overall, comparing Iran–Russia relations across these two eras shows that despite superficial similarities in diplomatic method, the nature and outcomes of relations diverged substantially. These differences can be interpreted at three levels. At the **structural level**, changes in the regional balance of power and the relative positioning of Iran and Russia directly affected the type of relationship. At the **agency level**, differences in leadership style mattered: Shah Abbas relied more heavily on diplomacy and negotiation, while Nader Shah used a combined model of military coercion and diplomacy. At the **environmental level**, differing domestic and external conditions—such as Russia's internal stability, the presence of other powers, and regional threats—shaped the relationship. In both periods, however, ties with Russia were embedded within a broader strategic logic: under Shah Abbas, they were framed by balance-of-power policy against the Ottomans; under Nader Shah, they formed part of a strategy of rebuilding power and restoring Iran's borders. Thus, differences in historical context, strategic objectives, and relative power position produced two different patterns of Iran–Russia relations and underline the importance of historical–geopolitical context in analyzing foreign policy (4, 32, 38).

Iran's Foreign Relations with England

A) Similarities

1. **A pragmatic orientation in foreign relations.** Both kings adopted a pragmatic approach toward England. Shah Abbas, by receiving and supporting the Sherley brothers, and Nader Shah, by cooperating with the English East India Company, sought to advance Iran's national interests. In both periods, this pragmatism contributed to the development of commercial and—where relevant—military ties (34, 39).
2. **Use of English expertise.** In both eras, Iranian rulers drew on English know-how for military modernization. Under Shah Abbas, Anthony Sherley contributed to training in new methods of warfare and the use of firearms. Under Nader Shah, Captain John Elton played an important role in shipbuilding and naval development (34, 39).
3. **Balancing against regional threats.** In both periods, relations with England functioned as an instrument within broader balancing strategies against regional powers and maritime challenges—against the Ottomans under Shah Abbas and against regional/maritime threats under Nader Shah (32, 39).

B) Differences

1. **Nature and level of relations.** Under Shah Abbas, relations were more personal and diplomatic, shaped heavily through intermediaries such as the Sherley brothers. Under Nader Shah, relations became more institutional and commercial, structured primarily through the East India Company and corporate actors (34, 39).
2. **Complexity of commercial relations.** Trade relations under Nader Shah were more complex and multidimensional due to competition among European companies, customs issues, and intertwined

financial–military demands. Under Shah Abbas, trade ties were comparatively simpler and centered more on customs exemptions and guarantees of commercial freedom (9, 32).

3. **Strategic objectives.** Strategic aims differed: Shah Abbas prioritized forming a military alignment against the Ottoman Empire and expanding diplomatic ties with Europe, whereas Nader Shah placed greater emphasis on naval development and meeting military–logistical needs (34, 39).

In general, comparing Iran's relations with England in these two periods indicates a gradual evolution from a more person-centered pattern toward more institutionalized ties. Under Shah Abbas, personal and diplomatic channels were central, and actors such as the Sherley brothers played an outsized role in initiating and sustaining contacts, largely oriented toward alignment against the Ottomans and the broadening of diplomatic relations with Europe. Under Nader Shah, relations became more complex and multi-layered: the presence of competing commercial companies, intensified economic rivalries, and naval and military needs shifted the relationship beyond purely political concerns and made its economic and military dimensions more salient. Yet certain basic patterns persisted across both eras: in both periods, Iranian rulers treated relations with England as a tool for strengthening military capability and for balancing against regional threats, and in both periods they drew on English expertise in pursuit of military modernization (32, 34, 39).

Iran's Foreign Relations with the Netherlands

A) Similarities

1. **Political–military motivations.** Both rulers sought to draw on Dutch cooperation to counter opponents. Shah Abbas looked to leverage Dutch maritime capacity against the Ottomans and the Portuguese, while Nader Shah sought Dutch assistance to address challenges in the Persian Gulf (32, 35).
2. **Expansion of commercial relations.** Both governments prioritized expanding trade with the Dutch. Under Shah Abbas, a major commercial agreement was concluded in 1624, and under Nader Shah, commercial privileges were likewise granted to the Dutch East India Company (9, 32).
3. **Granting privileges.** In both periods, special concessions were extended to Dutch merchants to encourage cooperation, including customs exemptions and guarantees facilitating trade across Iran (9, 32).

B) Differences

1. **Level of diplomatic engagement.** Shah Abbas established more direct diplomatic relations with the Dutch state, including the dispatch of envoys. Under Nader Shah, relations were largely confined to dealings with representatives of the Dutch East India Company, without comparable state-to-state ambassadorial exchange (32, 39).
2. **Interactive style.** Shah Abbas relied more heavily on negotiation and diplomatic methods to secure Dutch cooperation. Nader Shah, by contrast, at times used coercive pressure to compel compliance—for example, through threats targeting Dutch shipping and assets (39, 40).
3. **Success in obtaining cooperation.** Shah Abbas's attempts to secure Dutch military support against the Ottomans and the Portuguese were largely unsuccessful. Nader Shah, in certain instances, was able to obtain more practical cooperation from Dutch actors, including short-term maritime assistance linked to internal security needs (32, 40).

4. **Commercial position and institutional presence.** In Shah Abbas's era, Dutch involvement in Iran's trade was comparatively new and more limited. By the Naderid period, the Dutch had established a stronger commercial footprint and operated through more developed networks and offices in multiple centers (9, 40).
5. **Economic posture toward European competitors.** Shah Abbas generally pursued a more balanced policy toward European powers, attempting to generate competition among them to serve Iran's interests. Nader Shah's approach was more uneven, and in some circumstances Dutch capacity was treated as preferable to English commercial–maritime capabilities (32, 39).

Overall, the divergence in these rulers' approaches can be traced to several factors. First, historical timing mattered: in Shah Abbas's era Dutch regional presence was still emerging, whereas by Nader Shah's time the Dutch had longer experience and deeper situational knowledge. Second, strategic priorities differed: Shah Abbas emphasized coalition-building against the Ottomans alongside trade expansion, while Nader Shah focused more on strengthening maritime power and controlling the Persian Gulf. Third, governing style diverged: Shah Abbas tended toward more diplomatically flexible maneuvering, whereas Nader Shah often adopted a more direct—and at times coercive—mode of engagement. Even so, in both periods the Netherlands remained a significant node in Iran's foreign policy calculations, and both rulers sought to capitalize on Dutch commercial and maritime capacity, albeit through different methods and with different results (9, 32, 40).

Iran's Foreign Relations with France

A) Similarities

1. **Limited diplomatic relations.** In both periods, Iran's diplomatic relations with France remained markedly limited. Multiple internal and external factors constrained the development of broader, more sustained ties (32).
2. **Unsuccessful diplomatic initiatives.** In both eras, French attempts to establish relations produced few concrete outcomes. Under Shah Abbas, French diplomatic initiatives did not translate into a stable partnership; under Nader Shah, missions such as that of Jean Otter likewise failed to yield a clear diplomatic breakthrough (33, 39).

B) Differences

1. **Different objectives and motivations.** Under Shah Abbas, French interest emphasized religious influence and missionary activity, alongside wider geopolitical and commercial aims. Under Nader Shah, the principal emphasis shifted toward commercial footholds, including attempts to develop trading capacity around key ports and commodities (33, 39).
2. **Domestic political conditions.** Shah Abbas's period displayed comparatively greater political and economic stability, which was more conducive to diplomatic engagement and to accommodating a range of European presences. In Nader Shah's period, persistent warfare, political volatility, and internal disruptions undermined the prospects for stable diplomatic and commercial relations (3, 39).
3. **Different obstacles and constraints.** In Shah Abbas's era, one structural constraint was France's broader geopolitical posture and its strategic interests in relation to the Ottoman world, which reduced incentives for a deep rapprochement with Iran. In the Naderid period, obstacles were more strongly internal and administrative, including governance weaknesses and the lack of reliable commercial infrastructure (32, 39).

4. **Rulers' governing priorities.** Shah Abbas adopted a comparatively more diplomatic and calibrated approach, seeking to broaden relations through negotiation and limited concessions. Nader Shah prioritized military expansion and state financing through campaigns, giving lower priority to the long-term cultivation of diplomatic and commercial partnerships (1, 5, 39).

Overall, comparing Iran–France relations in these two periods shows that, despite potential opportunities for cooperation, multiple factors prevented the emergence of durable ties. Under Shah Abbas, limitations were shaped more by geopolitical calculations and regional rivalries, whereas under Nader Shah, internal instability and the state's strategic priorities played a larger role in keeping relations restricted. The comparison also underscores that success in foreign relations depends not only on diplomacy, but also on domestic stability, economic infrastructure, and rulers' strategic prioritization. Despite French initiatives in both eras, the absence of favorable internal and external conditions prevented the formation of sustained and effective relations between the two countries (3, 32, 39).

A Comparative Analysis of Internal Rebellions in Iran during the Reigns of Shah Abbas I of the Safavid Dynasty and Nader Shah Afshar

A comparative examination of internal rebellions in two major periods of Iranian history—the era of Shah Abbas I of the Safavid dynasty and the period of Nader Shah Afshar—reveals significant similarities and differences in the political, social, and economic structures of these two eras. This section analyzes the shared features and points of divergence of internal rebellions in these periods.

Shared Features

1. Political legitimacy and its challenges

In both periods, the issue of political legitimacy was one of the main factors behind the emergence of rebellions. During the reign of Shah Abbas, despite the relative consolidation of Safavid authority, some members of the royal family claimed the throne. Similarly, in the period of Nader Shah, various claimants, aware of the incomplete legitimacy of the Afsharid dynasty, attempted to exploit the remaining popularity of the Safavids among the population.

2. Regional character of rebellions

In both periods, rebellions were predominantly regional in nature. During Shah Abbas's reign, uprisings such as that of Ya'qub Khan Dhu'l-Qadr in Fars, Yazd, and Kerman, as well as the revolt of Khan Ahmad Gilani in Gilan, occurred. In the era of Nader Shah, most revolts were likewise local and lacked effective coordination with other regions.

3. The role of economic factors

Tax pressure and economic difficulties played an important role in fueling rebellions in both periods. During Nader Shah's reign, heavy taxation imposed to finance continuous military campaigns led to widespread dissatisfaction. In Shah Abbas's time as well, the severity and misconduct of tax officials were among the principal causes of unrest.

Points of Divergence

1. Methods of managing rebellions

A notable difference can be observed in the methods used to manage rebellions. Shah Abbas adopted more flexible policies and, in some cases, even pardoned rebels and granted them robes of honor. By contrast, Nader Shah generally relied on harsh measures and severe repression, which in turn intensified social discontent.

2. Social base of rebellions

During Shah Abbas's reign, most rebellions were led by local governors and members of the elite, such as the revolt of Khan Ahmad Gilani. In contrast, during Nader Shah's period, a broader range of social groups participated in uprisings, and the general population, under economic pressure, increasingly joined rebellious movements.

3. Connections with foreign powers

In Shah Abbas's era, rebels often established contacts with the Ottoman Empire and occasionally with Russia, as in the case of Khan Ahmad Gilani's relations with these powers. In Nader Shah's period, such external connections were more limited, and rebellions were largely internal in character.

4. Consequences of rebellions

The consequences of rebellions differed markedly between the two periods. Under Shah Abbas, the suppression of rebellions contributed to the consolidation of central authority and greater political stability. Under Nader Shah, however, recurrent rebellions gradually weakened the state and ultimately contributed to the collapse of the Afsharid dynasty.

Overall, this comparison shows that despite superficial similarities in the causes of rebellions, there were fundamental differences in their management and outcomes. Shah Abbas succeeded in preserving political stability through a combination of coercive and conciliatory policies, whereas Nader Shah's predominantly repressive approach produced counterproductive results. Another critical factor was the difference in the legitimacy of the two regimes: the Safavids enjoyed historical and religious legitimacy, while the Afsharids lacked such foundations. This disparity had a significant impact on how rebellions were addressed and on their eventual consequences. Economic conditions also played a crucial role. During Nader Shah's reign, heavy taxation to finance warfare intensified public dissatisfaction, whereas economic management under Shah Abbas was comparatively more balanced. This comparative analysis demonstrates that successful management of internal rebellions depends not only on military power, but also on political legitimacy, economic governance, and styles of rule. The experiences of these two historical periods offer valuable lessons on the importance of balancing authority with flexibility in governance.

Conclusion

The present study has undertaken a comparative examination of Iran's political conditions during two critical historical periods: the reign of Shah Abbas I of the Safavid dynasty and that of Nader Shah Afshar. The findings indicate that despite certain superficial similarities in their modes of rule, there were fundamental differences in their approaches, achievements, and the consequences of their governance.

The analysis shows that both rulers came to power at times when the country was facing severe internal and external crises. However, Shah Abbas benefited from political legitimacy derived from the Safavid lineage, whereas Nader Shah lacked such a foundation and initially presented himself merely as the regent of Tahmasp II Safavid. This divergence in political legitimacy had a profound impact on governing practices and the degree of political stability achieved in each period.

In the sphere of military reform, both rulers implemented significant measures. Shah Abbas established a standing army and relied on non-Qizilbash forces, such as Circassians, Georgians, and Armenians, thereby curbing the military and political power of the Qizilbash amirs and strengthening central authority. By contrast, despite his military genius and remarkable battlefield victories, Nader Shah failed to create a sustainable military structure, as his attention remained focused primarily on continuous campaigns.

From the perspective of political stability, Shah Abbas's reign was marked by the creation of a coherent administrative system, the transfer of the capital to Isfahan, and extensive urban development. This stability fostered economic and commercial growth. In contrast, Nader Shah's rule, characterized by constant warfare and heavy fiscal burdens on the population, failed to establish lasting political stability. The absence of a fixed capital and limited attention to bureaucratic institutions were among the indicators of this instability.

In foreign policy, both rulers confronted similar challenges in dealing with the Ottoman Empire. Shah Abbas adopted a phased strategy, initially prioritizing the stabilization of the eastern frontiers and subsequently reclaiming western territories, which yielded greater success. Nader Shah, despite military victories, achieved limited success in resolving religious disputes with the Ottomans and in establishing a durable peace.

With regard to internal rebellions, a clear difference can be observed in crisis-management approaches. Shah Abbas employed more flexible policies and in some instances even pardoned rebels, whereas Nader Shah predominantly resorted to harsh repression, which exacerbated dissatisfaction.

A comparison of their achievements indicates that Shah Abbas was more successful in establishing durable political and military structures. His comprehensive approach to national development—including military, administrative, economic, and infrastructural reforms—led to a period of stability and prosperity. In contrast, Nader Shah's excessive focus on military affairs and neglect of other dimensions of governance, despite his brilliant military achievements, failed to produce lasting institutional foundations.

The findings underscore the importance of balance between military power and other pillars of governance. Shah Abbas's successful experience in maintaining such a balance provides an instructive model for understanding the requirements of effective rule. Conversely, Nader Shah's experience demonstrates that military strength alone, without attention to political legitimacy, administrative efficiency, and economic development, cannot guarantee long-term stability.

This study further shows that successful governance is not confined to military capability alone, but requires a balanced approach to all aspects of statecraft. The historical experiences of these two periods offer valuable insights into the importance of equilibrium among military power, political legitimacy, administrative capacity, and economic development. A comparative analysis of these two eras deepens our understanding of the dynamics of power in premodern Iran and illustrates how political, military, economic, and cultural structures, together with the personal characteristics of rulers, shape the destiny of a state.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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