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Examining the Role of the Qizilbash in the Formation of the Central Government and the Consolidation of Safavid Power

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ABSTRACT

The Qizilbash, as the principal military and political force of the Safavids, played a prominent role in the formation of the central government and the consolidation of the dynasty's power. Through their profound religious attachment to the Safavid order and their belief in the Perfect Guide (murshid-i kāmīl), they developed an exceptional degree of cohesion and loyalty and became the backbone of the Safavid military establishment. Through military victories and the suppression of internal rebellions, the Qizilbash secured the frontiers and created the conditions necessary for the expansion of Safavid territory. Moreover, their support for the doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism contributed significantly to strengthening the religious identity and political legitimacy of the state. Nevertheless, the concentration of power in the hands of the Qizilbash and internal rivalries among their tribes gradually became a serious challenge to Safavid rule. Excessive Qizilbash interference in governmental affairs and the crises arising from tribal rivalries weakened the internal cohesion of this group and disrupted the political stability of the state. The Safavid shahs, particularly Shah Abbas I, adopted policies such as curbing Qizilbash influence and establishing an independent army, thereby reducing Qizilbash power and strengthening the concentration of authority in their own hands. These transformations shifted the Qizilbash from a central force to a more marginal group, and ultimately the adverse consequences of this shift for Safavid military and political power became evident. The Qizilbash experience provides a model of both the successes and challenges associated with the management of power in tribal-based political systems, the effects of which have remained significant in the political and religious history of Iran. This dual role demonstrates the importance of internal cohesion and the equitable distribution of power in the establishment and preservation of centralized governments.

Keywords: Safavid dynasty, Qizilbash, central government, Twelver Shi'ism, military structure, political cohesion.

Introduction

The Safavid period (1501–1723) constitutes one of the most significant eras in Iranian history, during which fundamental transformations occurred in the country's governmental, religious, and social structures. The dynasty, which originated in the Sufi Safavid order of Ardabil, established a centralized government in Iran for the first time after centuries of political fragmentation. Its most important measure was the official establishment of Shi'ism, which transformed the country's religious identity from Sunni Islam to Shi'ism and provided Iranians with new foundations



of collective identity. Relying on the support of the Qizilbash, the Safavids consolidated their political authority and strengthened the country's economic foundations through the expansion of the silk trade. Iran's foreign relations were likewise shaped largely around hostility toward the Ottoman Empire, producing a form of regional balance of power (1). Safavid religious policies were often accompanied by coercive measures, which generated extensive changes in the short term and, over the longer term, contributed to the formation of a distinct national identity among Iranians. In the final years of the dynasty, internal weaknesses, administrative corruption, and foreign invasions, particularly the Afghan invasion, precipitated its decline, and Nader Shah Afshar ultimately brought Safavid rule to an end in the early eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the cultural, religious, and political effects of the Safavids persisted for centuries (2).

The Safavid period witnessed fundamental political transformations. By establishing a centralized government, the dynasty brought order to the unstable conditions inherited from the preceding centuries. The official establishment of Twelver Shi'ism was not merely a political instrument for consolidating power; it also reconstructed Iranian national identity and helped resist intervention by foreign powers (3). Social transformations during this period likewise included the redefinition of social relations, the strengthening of the clergy's role, and the emergence of new social hierarchies. The authority of both religious scholars and monarchs increased, whereas the lower social strata occupied a weaker position, making social inequality one of the notable characteristics of the period (4). Safavid economic policies, including the expansion of the silk trade, also affected social transformations and the status of different classes, gradually shaping a society oriented toward a distinctive religious-national identity (2). The Safavid era therefore represents a turning point in Iranian history, establishing new cultural and social values whose effects have endured to the present day.

The Qizilbash constituted one of the most important and influential groups in the formation and establishment of the Safavid state. Historically, the term Qizilbash referred to groups of Shi'i Turkmen tribes that played a fundamental role in establishing the Safavid state (5). These tribes initially migrated to Iran from Azerbaijan and the Caucasus and acquired a prominent position within the army (6). The word "Qizilbash" is composed of *qizil*, meaning "red," and *bash*, meaning "head," and refers to the red headgear worn by followers of the Safavid order, known as the "Haydari crown"; although in Azerbaijani Turkish, *qizil* may also mean "gold" (7). The Qizilbash were initially followers of Shaykh Junayd and later Shaykh Haydar, and their beliefs combined elements of Shi'ism, Sufism, Isma'ilism, and pre-Islamic customs. During the Safavid era, this group included tribes such as the Afshar, Qajar, Tekelu, and Shamlu, which had migrated to Iran from Anatolia and Syria. At the outset, when Safavid rule had a predominantly military character, Qizilbash forces played a particularly important role (8).

The role of the Qizilbash remained highly significant until the end of the reign of Shah Abbas I. They contributed to the defense of Iran's frontiers against the Ottomans and Uzbeks and, socially, particularly in Azerbaijan, Fars, and Khorasan, promoted their own culture and customs (9). Shah Abbas I sought to diminish their influence by strengthening the army through new forces and training non-Qizilbash officers; nevertheless, the Qizilbash continued to exert considerable influence in both social and military spheres (10).

Numerous studies have demonstrated the role of the Qizilbash in various dimensions: Sawagheb, Azadbakh, and Morvati regarded their military and tribal strength as the foundation of Shah Ismail's power (8); Rezaei, Jadidi, and Jamali emphasized their role in succession crises (11); Seyyed Bankdar described the Qizilbash crown as an instrument of loyalty and Shi'i identity formation (12); Pourghayoumi, Mahmoudi, and Raees Al-Sadat considered their support for Shah Ismail and Shah Tahmasp to be a foundation of Safavid power (13); Hosseinneshad and

Edrisi highlighted tribal rivalries that at times weakened and at other times balanced political power (14); and Sarafrazi demonstrated that the Tekelu tribe both contributed to the consolidation of Safavid power and, through cooperation with the Ottomans, inflicted damage upon it (15).

Overall, the Safavid period, through extensive political, social, religious, and cultural transformations, played a fundamental role in shaping the national and religious identity of Iranians. As the military and political arm of the Safavid state, the Qizilbash played a pivotal role in consolidating Safavid authority, confronting external threats, and shaping Iran's social and cultural structures. Examining this role can contribute to a better understanding of the political and social processes of the period and provide a framework for analyzing the role of military-social groups in major historical transformations. Accordingly, the present study aims to examine the role of the Qizilbash in the formation of the central government and the consolidation of Safavid power.

Origins and Historical Ties of the Qizilbash to the Safavid Order

The Qizilbash, one of the most prominent military-political forces in Iranian history, traced their origins to Turkmen tribes from regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Influenced by the mystical teachings of Shaykh Safi al-Din Ardabili and his successors, particularly Shaykh Junayd and Shaykh Haydar, these tribes gradually drew closer to the Safavids and became one of the principal pillars of Safavid power. Their name derives from the combination of *qizil* ("red") and *bash* ("head"), and their red headgear symbolized loyalty to the Safavid house. The alliance between the Qizilbash and the Safavids rested upon three elements: tribal cohesion, spiritual commitment, and military capability, reaching its height under Shah Ismail I. They played a key role in major battles such as Chaldiran and in internal conflicts and, by supporting Safavid religious legitimacy, helped consolidate the foundations of the state (16). The Qizilbash also played a major role in promoting Shi'ism as the official religion of Iran, which distinguished Iran religiously from its Sunni neighbors, particularly the Ottoman Empire (17). Nevertheless, intra-group rivalries among Qizilbash tribes occasionally generated political crises, while excessive Safavid dependence on them, particularly during the reign of Shah Tahmasp I, created imbalances within the structure of power.

The Safavid order initially constituted a Sufi movement rooted in the teachings of Shaykh Safi al-Din Ardabili and emphasized mystical and spiritual dimensions. Through the acquisition of Qizilbash support, however, the order evolved from a purely spiritual movement into a military and political power (18). The Qizilbash were not merely loyal soldiers but also spiritual followers who firmly believed in the Safavid leaders as the "Perfect Guide" (*murshid-i kāmīl*). By emphasizing religious and military symbols, Shaykh Haydar strengthened the cohesion of the group, while Shah Ismail I exploited this loyalty to transform them into a powerful force (19). The Qizilbash also exercised influence in political and social affairs and participated in major decision-making processes (17). The fusion of religion, Sufism, and militarism gave them a multidimensional identity, and through the dissemination of Shi'i teachings they contributed to the creation of a new religious identity for Iran that has endured to the present day. Nevertheless, intra-group rivalries and excessive Safavid dependence on the Qizilbash threatened governmental stability during certain periods (20).

Following Shah Ismail's official proclamation of Twelver Shi'ism in Tabriz, the Qizilbash assumed responsibility for promoting the faith, and Safavid religious teachings spread among different strata of society. Through participation in numerous wars and the creation of alliances among Turkmen tribes, they helped establish the conditions necessary for the formation of a strong centralized government (21). Through participation in the teaching of religious doctrines, performance of religious rituals, and support for Safavid cultural institutions, the Qizilbash

influenced the national and religious identity of Iranians. Moreover, by suppressing oppositional movements and ensuring unity at the royal court, they played an unparalleled role in preserving the political stability of the Safavid state, to such an extent that this model of governance subsequently inspired other dynasties in Iranian history.

The Political and Military Structure of the Qizilbash during the Safavid Period and the Impact of Internal Rivalries on the Consolidation and Destabilization of Safavid Power

The political structure of the Qizilbash during the Safavid period combined tribal organization with the convergence of military and religious power and was founded upon absolute loyalty to the Safavid order and their military function. Important governmental offices were distributed among the various Qizilbash tribes, with each tribe assuming responsibilities in accordance with its military strength and political influence. The Qizilbash, who were predominantly Turkmen tribes, became one of the principal pillars of the government through their spiritual and historical ties to the Safavid order. Acceptance of the shah as the "Perfect Guide" reinforced their tribal unity and their political and military effectiveness. Offices such as commander-in-chief, *beglerbegi*, and provincial governorships were assigned to tribal leaders, who also participated in major governmental decisions. This structure contributed to the consolidation of Safavid rule, although rivalry among the tribes also threatened the balance of power (22).

Qizilbash leaders, because of their extensive influence at court, sometimes prioritized tribal interests over those of the state. Such rivalries occasionally generated political dynamism but at other times resulted in tension and direct conflict among the tribes. Safavid rulers, particularly Shah Tahmasp, adopted policies intended to preserve the balance of power and prevent the concentration of influence in the hands of any single tribe. Although these measures prevented major crises, over the long term they reduced Qizilbash cohesion and diminished their role in government (23). Nevertheless, the Qizilbash continued to perform essential functions in defending the frontiers, administering domestic affairs, and promoting Safavid religious teachings.

The Qizilbash army constituted the backbone of the Safavid military establishment and was a major factor in the consolidation of dynastic power. Composed of forces drawn from the Qizilbash tribes, this army possessed not only a military function but also considerable political significance. Loyalty to the shah and belief in his spiritual leadership reinforced tribal unity. The Qizilbash played an important role in the early conquests of Shah Ismail I, including the capture of Tabriz and campaigns against domestic opponents. They also contributed to the expansion of Safavid territory and the strengthening of central government through their confrontations with the Ottomans and Uzbeks (24).

This army also played a vital role in suppressing internal revolts and maintaining security across different regions. Their tribal cohesion enabled them to function as the first line of defense against domestic threats. The suppression of local rebellions and containment of insubordinate governors strengthened the shah's authority and consolidated order throughout the country. Moreover, their religious commitment to the shah transformed the Qizilbash army into a symbol of the political and religious unity of the tribes (25).

The Role of the Qizilbash in the Formation of the Safavid Central Government: Support for Shah Ismail I, the Conquest of Tabriz and Official Proclamation of Shi'ism, and Participation in the Establishment of Governmental Structures

As a key and indispensable force supporting Shah Ismail I, the Qizilbash played a central role in establishing and consolidating one of the most important governments in Iranian history. Composed of Turkmen tribes, this

group became Shah Ismail's principal and inseparable supporters because of its profound connection with the Safavid order and its spiritual teachings. Through their commitment to the Perfect Guide and the Shi'i-oriented doctrines of the Safavid house, the Qizilbash played an unprecedented role in social and military mobilization and succeeded in assembling extensive forces in support of the Safavids' political and religious objectives. These tribes, traditionally characterized by strong tribal cohesion and considerable military capability, became a fundamental factor in Shah Ismail's success not only through their participation in wars and military campaigns but also through their role in organizing the political structure of the state. Shah Ismail's military victories, including his successes against domestic adversaries and local coalitions, were largely attributable to the unconditional support of the Qizilbash, who, through their high degree of unity and cohesion, constituted the powerful executive arm of the Safavids (17). This loyal force, combining faith in its religious leader with extensive combat capability and military experience, enabled Shah Ismail rapidly to defeat his domestic opponents and establish the foundations of centralized government. Through their sacrifices on the battlefield and deep commitment to Safavid religious values, the Qizilbash played a vital role in preserving and expanding the political territory of the dynasty. Shah Ismail was able to employ Qizilbash military forces to administer and control newly conquered territories and extend his influence across Iran. In this context, the military strength of the Qizilbash was used not only against external enemies but also to maintain an internal balance of power and control competing tribal forces. Through their tribal structures and internal cohesion, the Qizilbash consolidated Shah Ismail's political authority and prevented the fragmentation of power across Iran's extensive territories. Furthermore, the group functioned as an intermediary between the shah and the population and played a fundamental role in promoting Shi'i religious teachings, culture, and doctrine, thereby strengthening the religious foundations of the Safavid state (26).

The Qizilbash role in the conquest of Tabriz and the official proclamation of Twelver Shi'ism represents one of the most significant turning points in Safavid history, with consequences evident not only in the consolidation of political power but also in the formation of Iran's religious identity. Relying on the substantial military capabilities and martial ethos of the Qizilbash, Shah Ismail conquered Tabriz in 1501 and designated the city as the first capital of the new Safavid state. In addition to symbolically demonstrating Shah Ismail's power to domestic and foreign rivals, this military victory created the conditions for the official proclamation of Twelver Shi'ism in Iran. This historic measure, made possible by the decisive support and sustained efforts of the Qizilbash, opened a new path for the construction of Iran's religious and political identity and enabled the Safavids to expand their influence throughout Iranian territory (27). The Qizilbash, who had been loyal and united supporters from the earliest days of Shah Ismail's uprising, played a fundamental role in the conquest of Tabriz and the consolidation of Safavid authority. They served not only as combat forces on the battlefield but also as the executive arm of the shah's religious policies. Following the conquest of Tabriz, the Qizilbash promoted and consolidated Shi'ism in different regions and, by suppressing resistance, created the conditions for the religious consolidation of Safavid rule. Through implementation of the shah's religious policies, particularly reforms designed to strengthen Shi'ism and eliminate opposing manifestations, they acquired a distinctive role in shaping religious institutions. Moreover, the conquest of Tabriz and establishment of the Safavid capital created a strategic opportunity to enhance the legitimacy of Safavid rule vis-à-vis other regional powers, including the Ottoman Empire and the Uzbeks, an objective realized through the active and influential participation of the Qizilbash in all these dimensions (19). This military victory, resulting from the combination of Shah Ismail's strategic acumen and the high operational effectiveness of the Qizilbash, had profound consequences for the Safavid state. By exploiting the victory at Tabriz, the Qizilbash helped consolidate Shah

Ismail's position as both the political and religious leader of the region and thereby contributed to defining a distinctive identity for the Safavid state. Furthermore, the conquest of Tabriz marked the beginning of broader regional interactions and the strengthening of Safavid political relations with other states. The event transformed the Safavid state from a local force into an international power, while the Qizilbash became recognized as a symbol of Iran's military and religious power. Through their sustained efforts, they played a significant role in consolidating and expanding Safavid influence across the region and emerged as a connecting force between politics, religion, and society during this historical period (28).

In addition to their prominent role on the battlefield, the Qizilbash also played a key role in political and governmental affairs as Shah Ismail's principal advisers and executive arm. Drawing upon their tribal structures and historical experience, they rapidly became one of the most influential institutions of power following the establishment of the Safavid central government. Their active participation in major decisions, important policy formulation, and implementation of the shah's programs enabled the newly established Safavid polity to become one of the region's powerful states within a relatively short period. By advising the shah on military and political matters, the Qizilbash proposed strategies for establishing stability and strengthening central authority. Through organizing military forces, supervising different provinces, and managing domestic challenges, they not only contributed to the establishment and reinforcement of the governmental system but also promoted greater cohesion and integration within the country's social and political structures (29). The role of the Qizilbash was not confined to domestic affairs; they also played an indispensable part in managing Safavid foreign relations and diplomatic challenges. Drawing upon their extensive networks and the support of the Safavid order, the Qizilbash influenced relations with neighboring powers, particularly the Ottoman Empire and the Uzbeks. Through negotiation and diplomatic interaction, they contributed to strengthening the Safavids' international position and formulated effective strategies for confronting external threats. Recognized for their military and political capabilities, they helped establish a balance in foreign relations and regulate regional affairs, thereby positioning the Safavids as one of the principal actors in regional politics. Their efforts in this field not only strengthened the central government but also consolidated Iran's position as an influential power in the Islamic world (30). Through their multiple functions, the Qizilbash constituted one of the principal factors in the success and expansion of the Safavid state. In addition to their military and political roles, they actively participated in establishing and supervising governmental structures. Owing to their internal cohesion and strong tribal ethos, they played an important role in managing domestic relations, balancing competing groups of power, and preventing unrest. Furthermore, Qizilbash advice concerning policymaking, formulation of governmental strategies, and implementation of major state programs enabled the Safavids to become a dominant power not only domestically but also internationally. The multidimensional and comprehensive role of the Qizilbash in Safavid history demonstrates their unparalleled importance in the establishment, consolidation, and expansion of centralized government and highlights their historical significance as one of the essential pillars of Safavid success. Their influence on governmental structures and diplomatic interactions provides a framework for examining the role of military-political groups in the transformations of Iranian history.

The Consolidation and Expansion of Safavid Power through Reliance on Qizilbash Military Forces in Confronting Domestic and Foreign Opponents

As one of the principal pillars of Safavid military and political power, the Qizilbash played a fundamental role in consolidating the dynasty's rule. Deeply connected to the Safavid order and loyal to Shah Ismail I, this tribal force became the government's principal instrument for confronting domestic opponents. Following the establishment of the Safavid state, numerous revolts by local rulers posed a serious threat to the country's political cohesion. Possessing substantial military capability and tribal solidarity, the Qizilbash suppressed these revolts and created the conditions necessary for the establishment of central authority. These measures not only produced relative domestic stability but also contributed to the formation of the centralized Safavid state (17).

In addition to suppressing opponents, the Qizilbash contributed to establishing administrative and military order in conquered territories and strengthened the state's military structure through the transmission of their combat experience. Their presence on various battlefronts consolidated Shah Ismail's authority as the central ruler. Their contribution to the development of Safavid military culture also increased cohesion among governmental forces (16).

Alongside these functions, the Qizilbash created the conditions necessary for administrative reforms and the expansion of the government's economic and social policies. By providing internal security, they enabled the Safavid state to administer Iran's extensive territories more effectively. Thus, the Qizilbash became one of the principal factors in consolidating the structure of the central state.

In the external sphere, the Qizilbash also played a decisive role in confronting the Ottoman Empire and the Uzbeks. Against the Ottomans, they resisted in battles such as Chaldiran and, although the outcome was a defeat, helped prevent the complete collapse of Safavid power (18). In the east, they preserved the security of Iran's eastern frontiers by containing Uzbek attacks and prevented the weakening of the central state (18). Their performance enhanced the Safavids' position within regional power relations.

The Qizilbash also played an important role within the royal court and in the educational system for princes. As military and political tutors, they were responsible for training princes in warfare, state administration, and policymaking (19). In addition, they exercised a supervisory role in succession processes and, by maintaining a balance among court factions, sought to prevent crises of power (17).

Overall, by simultaneously performing military, political, and courtly roles, the Qizilbash became one of the principal pillars of the Safavid state. Despite certain negative consequences in later periods, their role in the initial consolidation of the government, preservation of internal cohesion, and confrontation with external threats occupies a decisive place in Safavid political history.

The Evolution of the Qizilbash Role across Different Safavid Periods: From the Height of Their Power under Shah Tahmasp to Their Decline in the Late Safavid Era

During the reign of Shah Tahmasp I, the position of the Qizilbash, who had previously constituted the principal foundation of Safavid military and political power, underwent significant structural transformations. Because Shah Tahmasp ascended the throne as a child, he initially required Qizilbash support to consolidate central authority, and the Qizilbash continued to play the leading role in defense and military administration. Nevertheless, intense rivalry among different Qizilbash tribes for influence at court and control of governmental offices weakened their cohesion and generated internal tensions that disrupted the political equilibrium of the state (1).

To contain this situation, Shah Tahmasp adopted a policy aimed at balancing power among different groups and employed non-Qizilbash elements, including Tajiks and Georgian and Armenian *ghulams*, in order to prevent the concentration of power in Qizilbash hands. This policy gradually reduced their political influence and increased the shah's control over governmental structures. Despite these changes, the Qizilbash retained an important position in military affairs and frontier defense (2).

As a result, the political role of the Qizilbash diminished compared with the reign of Shah Ismail, and their internal cohesion became increasingly fragmented. Although they remained active militarily, they gradually moved away from the center of political decision-making. These developments prepared the ground for more profound transformations in the Safavid structure of power during subsequent reigns and, particularly under Shah Abbas I, resulted in a substantial decline in Qizilbash influence.

During the reign of Shah Abbas I, the policy of reducing Qizilbash power was pursued more systematically. Seeking to centralize authority, Shah Abbas created a standing army composed of Georgian, Circassian, and Armenian *ghulams*, thereby reducing the state's military dependence on the Qizilbash (4). He also relocated Qizilbash tribes to frontier regions distant from the political center, thereby weakening their tribal cohesion and preventing the concentration of their political power.

Furthermore, the gradual removal of powerful tribal leaders and their replacement by non-tribal personnel in important offices substantially transformed the structure of power (3). These policies strengthened royal authority and produced a more centralized system, although at the same time they weakened one of the most important social and political foundations of Safavid rule.

In the late Safavid period, Qizilbash decline accelerated. Diminishing tribal cohesion, the growing influence of *ghulams* within the structure of power, and domestic and external crises further weakened their position. Internal rivalries, court corruption, and military pressure from the Ottomans and Uzbeks intensified this process (5). Consequently, the Qizilbash, who had once played a decisive role in the establishment and consolidation of Safavid rule, gradually became a marginal force, and their role within the political and military structure of the state was reduced to a minimum (6).

The Role of the Qizilbash in Succession Crises and Court Disputes: The Impact of Tribal Rivalries on Determining the Heir to the Throne, Internal Conflicts among Qizilbash Amirs, and Their Effect on Weakening the Central Authority of the Safavid State

As the principal military and political force of the Safavid state, the Qizilbash played a decisive role in succession crises; however, their tribal structure and internal rivalries became a source of instability. The absence of an institutionalized system for transferring power encouraged each tribe to intervene in the selection of the future shah in order to increase its own influence, thereby intensifying court disputes and political crises. Clear examples can be observed in the successions of Shah Ismail II and Shah Mohammad Khodabanda, which severely weakened political cohesion (8).

These rivalries were not confined to succession but affected the entire political and military structure. Qizilbash amirs used their military power and court influence to intervene in the appointment or removal of princes, and their actions sometimes culminated in violence and assassination. This situation not only weakened central authority but also reduced the government's capacity to confront external threats, producing widespread instability (9).

In response, Shah Abbas I implemented policies designed to centralize power by reducing Qizilbash influence and creating an army composed of Georgian, Armenian, and Circassian *ghulams*. Although this measure

strengthened political centralization, it weakened Qizilbash cohesion and transformed the traditional Safavid military structure. Consequently, the Qizilbash shifted from a central force to a more marginal group.

Internally, rivalry among Qizilbash amirs for offices and political influence generated intense tribal conflict. These disputes sometimes resulted in conspiracies and at other times in armed confrontation, thereby weakening royal authority. Governmental resources that could otherwise have been used against external threats were instead consumed in resolving internal disputes (16) and (10).

Consequently, the Qizilbash evolved from a united force into competing factions that gradually lost their military and political effectiveness. Combined with diminishing cohesion, this situation made the state more vulnerable to external threats from the Ottomans and Uzbeks and contributed to the erosion of central power.

In subsequent periods, Safavid rulers increasingly relied upon non-Qizilbash elements such as Tajiks and *ghulams* to control these crises. Under Shah Tahmasp and Shah Abbas, this policy redefined the structure of power while simultaneously reducing the historical role of the Qizilbash substantially (17) and (17).

Gradually, the Qizilbash, who had initially served as an instrument of governmental consolidation, became a factor contributing to the weakening of central authority. Their internal rivalries not only undermined military cohesion but also increased rebellions and diminished the government's capacity to manage crises (18) and (19).

Overall, the predominance of tribal interests over governmental interests eroded the Safavid structure of power and transformed the Qizilbash from a united force into a source of political instability, a process that constituted one of the major factors in the gradual weakening and decline of the Safavid state.

Comparison of Qizilbash Influence with Other Influential Groups in the Safavid State: A Comparative Analysis of the Political, Military, and Religious Power of the Qizilbash vis-à-vis Other Court Forces, Including the Clergy, Viziers, and Military Commanders, and Their Influence on Key Safavid Decisions

The influence of the Qizilbash within the Safavid state, particularly during its formative period, was far greater than that of other influential groups such as the clergy, viziers, and military commanders. They constituted the principal foundation of Safavid military and political power and, through their tribal structure and intense loyalty to the shah, played an important role in the consolidation and expansion of the state. From the reign of Shah Ismail I onward, the Qizilbash played a decisive role in military victories and in suppressing domestic and foreign opponents, to such an extent that major governmental decisions could scarcely be made without consideration of their interests (30).

By contrast, the clergy were primarily active in legitimizing the government religiously and strengthening the ideology of Twelver Shi'ism. Although they enjoyed a high social position, their direct power within the executive and military structures was limited. Viziers, despite their responsibilities in administrative affairs, generally operated under the influence of the Qizilbash and the decisions of the shah and possessed limited autonomy. Accordingly, compared with other groups, the Qizilbash occupied a more dominant position within the structure of power (30).

In addition to their military function, the Qizilbash exercised considerable influence in court politics and affected matters such as the designation of royal successors. At times, their influence was so extensive that the shah was compelled to consider their interests in sensitive decisions. Qizilbash military commanders likewise played an essential role in directing wars and defending the frontiers. Meanwhile, despite their important cultural and religious functions, the clergy never managed to compete with the Qizilbash in the spheres of political and military power (29).

Over time, particularly during the reign of Shah Abbas I, the balance of power changed. Seeking to reduce the threat posed by Qizilbash power, Shah Abbas adopted policies to weaken them and strengthen new forces. One of his most important measures was the employment of Georgian, Circassian, and Armenian *ghulams* in the army and court. Because of their high degree of loyalty, these forces replaced part of the Qizilbash influence and contributed to the concentration of power in the shah's hands (28).

During this period, the role of the clergy also increased, and they became an important instrument for strengthening the shah's political legitimacy. By supporting Shi'i scholars, Shah Abbas elevated their position within the structure of power and used their religious influence to consolidate the state. At the same time, viziers assumed a more substantial role in administering bureaucratic affairs and gradually replaced some of the executive functions previously exercised by the Qizilbash (29).

These developments reduced the Qizilbash from their initially dominant position to a more restricted status. Although these policies strengthened Shah Abbas's central authority, over the long term they fundamentally altered the power structure and contributed to the weakening of Qizilbash cohesion.

Consequently, the redistribution of power during the Safavid period, particularly under Shah Abbas, transformed the political and military structure and reduced the Qizilbash from a central force to one of several more limited power groups. During this process, the clergy, viziers, and new military forces acquired a larger share of power, producing a new balance within the structure of government whose effects continued into subsequent periods (27).

Thus, although Shah Abbas's centralizing policies strengthened royal authority, they fundamentally altered power relations between the Qizilbash and other political groups and determined the subsequent trajectory of the Safavid state structure (26).

Evaluation of the Role of the Qizilbash in the Safavid Political and Military Structure: Analysis of Their Positive Effects on Strengthening the Government's Religious and Political Identity, the Negative Effects of Concentrated Power and Internal Divisions, and Their Long-Term Impact on Iranian Political History

From the perspective of its positive consequences, the role of the Qizilbash within the political and military structure of the Safavid state constituted one of the fundamental factors in the formation and consolidation of that government. Through their deep connection with the Safavid order and adherence to the doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism, they created a cohesive and loyal force that played an important role in legitimizing the state. Recognition of the Safavid shah as the "Perfect Guide" promoted convergence among different Qizilbash tribes and strengthened their ideological cohesion. This religious solidarity not only reinforced the shah's political authority but also created the conditions for the consolidation of Shi'i identity within the Safavid governmental structure and played an essential role in the formation of a powerful centralized state (25).

From a military perspective, the Qizilbash constituted the principal force behind the Safavids' early conquests and played a decisive role in territorial expansion and the consolidation of the state's frontiers. They stood at the forefront in campaigns such as the conquest of Tabriz, confrontation with the Uzbeks, and conflicts with the Ottomans, functioning as the backbone of the Safavid army. They also played an effective role in suppressing internal revolts and restoring order in different provinces, thereby strengthening the authority of the central government (13).

In addition to their military function, the Qizilbash were influential in implementing governmental policies and promoting Shi'ism. As the executive arm of the state, they participated in disseminating Shi'i teachings and implementing religious and administrative reforms, thereby contributing to the formation of a shared political and

religious identity in Iran (24). This multidimensional role made the Qizilbash one of the most important factors in Safavid political and religious cohesion.

Despite these positive functions, the concentration of power in Qizilbash hands also generated negative consequences. Intense rivalry among the various tribes for influence at court produced internal disputes, political conspiracies, and military confrontations. This situation weakened Qizilbash internal cohesion and reduced their effectiveness in performing political and military roles (23).

The extensive influence of the Qizilbash within the power structure also constituted a major challenge to royal authority. Their intervention in political appointments and succession processes constrained the shah's decision-making autonomy and weakened the administrative stability of the state (22). This development ultimately prompted Safavid rulers, particularly Shah Abbas I, to adopt reform policies designed to reduce Qizilbash influence.

Policies such as the creation of an army composed of Georgian, Circassian, and Armenian *ghulams* and the replacement of tribal forces with non-tribal personnel gradually reduced the Qizilbash role within the power structure. Although these measures centralized power and strengthened royal authority, they weakened Qizilbash cohesion and shifted them from a central position within the political system to a more marginal status (27).

In conclusion, during the formation and consolidation of the Safavid state, the Qizilbash played a decisive role in linking religion and politics, expanding the state's territory, and creating internal cohesion. In the longer term, however, the concentration of power in their hands and their internal rivalries became factors contributing to the weakening of the Safavid political structure. This historical experience constitutes a clear example of the dual function of tribal forces within centralized states.

Conclusion

The role of the Qizilbash in the formation of the central government and the consolidation of Safavid power was undoubtedly one of the key factors in the emergence and success of this dynasty in Iranian history. Through their close and profound connection with the Safavid order and their belief in the spiritual and political position of the Safavid shah as the "Perfect Guide," this military and tribal group played an unparalleled role in laying the foundations of Safavid rule. The Qizilbash, composed of several Turkmen tribes, created an efficient and powerful force based upon internal cohesion and tribal organization, upon which the early Safavid successes against domestic and foreign enemies depended. By securing major victories, including the conquest of Tabriz and campaigns against the Uzbeks, they protected the country's frontiers and, through the suppression of domestic rebellions, further strengthened the foundations of Safavid royal authority. Their presence at these critical historical moments transformed Iran from a fragmented and decentralized territory into a powerful state characterized by central cohesion. The Qizilbash not only played a decisive role on the battlefield but also exercised extensive influence within the political structure of government. Their spiritual and ideological connection with the Safavid order made them among the most important supporters of the dissemination and consolidation of Twelver Shi'i doctrines in Iran. Their support for Safavid religious teachings both strengthened the legitimacy of the government and introduced a new religious and political identity for the country. This spiritual and religious support created a strong bond between society and the state that enhanced confidence and national unity in the face of domestic and foreign threats. Iran, which had previously been influenced by diverse religious schools and confessions, was able, through spiritual unity and Qizilbash support for official Shi'ism, to consolidate its religious and political identity as a powerful centralized state. This dual role of the Qizilbash, both military and spiritual, established them as one of

the principal pillars of Safavid power. One of the most important characteristics of the Qizilbash was their internal cohesion, which enhanced their power and effectiveness in advancing governmental objectives. Qizilbash tribal solidarity, founded upon loyalty to the Safavid shah and the principles of the Safavid order, enabled them to remain a united and powerful force against foreign enemies such as the Ottomans and Uzbeks. Qizilbash support for Twelver Shi'ism and their role in disseminating the faith not only contributed to legitimizing the state but also played an important role in strengthening national unity and Iranian identity.

Nevertheless, the excessive concentration of power in Qizilbash hands and internal rivalries among the group's various tribes gradually became one of the most significant challenges confronting the Safavid government. The group, which had initially acted as a united and cohesive force, gradually became divided because of tribal interests and internal competition, weakening its original cohesion. Different Qizilbash tribes each sought to expand their influence and preserve their own interests within the structure of power, and these rivalries sometimes resulted in severe conflict and, in certain cases, armed confrontation among them. This situation not only diminished the Qizilbash capacity to function effectively as the military and political backbone of the government but also exhausted resources that could otherwise have been devoted to major governmental and developmental priorities. Such divisions and lack of coordination among the Qizilbash confronted the Safavid system with serious challenges and weakened political stability. Moreover, the extensive influence of the Qizilbash in governmental affairs and their intervention in the selection and appointment of princes and officials substantially diminished royal authority. Some Qizilbash leaders used their power and influence to advance tribal or even personal interests, frequently producing political instability and reducing governmental effectiveness. In certain cases, Qizilbash rivalry and intervention in determining the royal succession created serious crises within the Safavid political structure and delayed or weakened major court decision-making processes. These problems compelled Safavid rulers to adopt policies aimed at curbing Qizilbash influence and restoring authority to the central government, including policies of de-Qizilbashization and the reduction of their role in governmental affairs. Although these measures contributed to the concentration of power in the shah's hands, they simultaneously weakened the cohesion and effectiveness of the Qizilbash, once among the principal foundations of Safavid power, and transformed them into a more marginal force. These developments, resulting from the concentration of power and internal Qizilbash rivalries, had long-term consequences for the Safavid state. The weakening of the Qizilbash and reduction of their role within the political structure not only diminished the government's military strength but also weakened Safavid rulers' confidence in the group. As Qizilbash influence and cohesion declined, the Safavids were compelled to rely increasingly on new forces such as Georgian, Circassian, and Armenian *ghulams* to compensate for the vacuum created by Qizilbash weakness. Although this approach temporarily strengthened royal power, it eliminated the Qizilbash position as a key force within the governmental structure. The result was greater governmental reliance on groups that lacked the same deep traditional and historical ties to the Safavid order, which in turn made the state more vulnerable to domestic and foreign threats. The concentration of power in Qizilbash hands, which had initially contributed to the success and consolidation of Safavid rule, gradually became one of the dynasty's principal weaknesses.

Overall, the experience of the Qizilbash under the Safavids constitutes an example of the influential yet challenging role of tribal forces in Iranian political history. They are remembered not only as one of the principal pillars of power in the consolidation and expansion of the Safavid state, but also for the weaknesses and failures associated with their management of power and internal rivalries, which provide an important historical lesson

concerning the significance of internal cohesion and the equitable distribution of power. Despite the negative consequences of their internal competition for power, the Qizilbash impact on Iran's religious and political identity remains one of the important turning points in Safavid history and in Iran's broader political development. Their experience demonstrates the importance of effective management of military and political forces for maintaining the stability and authority of centralized governments.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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Transparency of Data

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