Not many people are aware that Iran used to be majority Sunni, producing scholars such as Abu Hanifa, Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, until the Safavids forcefully converted it to Twelver Shi’ism in the 1500s.

The Conversion of Iran to Twelver Shi’ism: A Preliminary Historical Overview

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Part 1:
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Part 2:
The Persian Origin of the Six Masters of Sunni Hadith
The Conversion of Iran to Twelver Shi’ism: A Preliminary Historical Overview

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One of the most significant transformations that occurred in Islamic history, the legacy of which is apparent even in our own day, was undoubtedly the conversion of Iran from Sunnism to Shi’ism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although there have been other instances throughout Islamic history of rulers seeking to bring about religious uniformity for political reasons—the Almohads in Iberia and North Africa being prime examples; the example of Malikism in al-Andalus is another—the case of the Safavids in Iran is perhaps the only example where such a conversion of territory was largely successful, in terms of both the scale of the project and its permanence. The end result was that an entire region of the Islamic world was placed under the exclusive dominion of a single sect, Twelver Shi’ism, at the expense of other forms of Islam (Sunnism and Zaydi Shi’ism).

A little-known fact to most laypeople is that, for much of its Islamic history, between the Arab conquest in the seventh century and the establishment of the Safavids as rulers of the country in the sixteenth, Iran was a stronghold and intellectual center of Sunni Islam. Most of the significant thinkers and figures of Sunnism, including theologians (Sharif al-Jurjani, Fazlallah b. Ruzbihan Khunji-Isfahani), mystics (Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, Abd al-Qadir al-Gilani), founders of schools of law (Abu Hanifa, Dawud al-Zahiri), historians (Tabari, Bayhaqi), political theorists (Nizam al-Mulk, Jalal al-Din Davvani), poets (Abd al-Rahman Jami, Farid ud-Din Attar), and hadith collectors (all the Sunni authors of the *Sihah al-Sitta*) were Iranian. To be sure, there were significant Shi’i communities in Iran as well, concentrated mainly in Kashan, Qom, and Gilan but these included Isma’ili and Zaydi groupings as well as Twelvers. The Isma’ilis were largely destroyed and the Twelvers would only experience ascendancy on the Iranian plateau following the Mongol invasions and the
establishment of the Il-Khanate (1256–1335) and the Qaraqoyunlu dynasty (1375–1468). However, these latter two dynasties were characterized by their toleration of Shi‘ism rather than any large-scale attempt to impose the faith on their populations, as the Safavids would do. In this piece, I want to shed some light on the process of the Safavid conversion of Iran to Twelver Shi‘ism in order to encourage further inquiry into the topic.

As a scholar of medieval and early modern Iberia—and especially as one interested in the large-scale conversions of 1391 and 1501 in Spain—I find this particular topic to be one of utmost importance. The destruction of the Sunni community of Iran bears strong resemblances to the process of the Christianization of conquered regions of al-Andalus. It is also quite an interesting fact in itself that the conversion of the Muslims of Spain and the conversion of Iranian Sunnis were both enacted in the year 1501. Both processes were also extremely politically motivated and had far more to do with the process of state-building, the relationship between clergy and state power, and the homogenization of the polity in the early modern world than any inherent propensity of either Catholicism or Twelver Shi‘ism for violence. There was also an important messianic component in both cases, which should certainly not be ignored. As the 500th anniversary of the important battle of Chaldiran (1514) approaches, it is now more important than ever to consider the significance of the Safavid conversion of Iran, a historical event which has evaded the historical consciousness of the vast majority of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The conversion of Iran was a critical component (some may even argue a catalyst) in the confessionalization of the Near East that took place in the early modern period. By “confessionalization,” I mean the increased association between religious identity, sectarianism and the polity. While for much of Islamic history, various sects had coexisted (however uneasily) throughout the Islamic lands, often residing in close proximity to one another, the process of confessionalization involved the exclusive identification of a political entity (and thus, a geographic region) with a particular sect (or confession/creed). This meant that the populations which resided in each entity acquired a stronger sectarian identity and, thus, the lines between sects (often blurred in the medieval period) became increasingly defined. State power began to play a more direct role in determining the lines between “orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy,” enacting harsh sanctions against those deemed to belong to the latter category. “Confessionalization” also implies that a polity’s domestic and foreign policy also became increasingly tied to its own sectarian affiliation. By the mid-sixteenth
century three major political formations had emerged: A staunchly Shi’i Safavid Iran, an increasingly Sunni Central Asia (under the Uzbeks), and a staunchly Sunni Ottoman Empire. Sunnism was harshly repressed in Safavid domains, just as Shi’ism was severely persecuted in Central Asia and the Ottoman lands. It was this confessionalization of the Middle East that played a central role in weakening whatever cultural or religious unity remained in the central Islamic lands. To some degree, this association between sect and state still has profound consequences in the modern-day Middle East.

The Rise of the Safavids (1501–1514)

In the early sixteenth century, the establishment of the Safavid polity had a major effect upon the political fortunes of Twelver Shi’ism, previously existing as a tolerated but oppressed religious community, and greatly transformed the relationship between Sunnis and Shi’is in the Islamic world. It was essentially the militant espousal of Twelver Shi’ism by the Safavids and the sporadic, yet devastating, wars with the Ottoman Empire which played a key role in the confessionalization of the Near East into two distinctive sectarian camps. It was during the reign of Shāh Ismā’īl (r. 1501–1524) that Iran was conquered by the Safavids, Shi’ism established as the official religion, and the ritual cursing of sacred Sunni personages, namely the Companions of the Prophet, institutionalized. Over the course of the sixteenth century, the most confrontational attitudes within the Sunni and Shi’i traditions—exemplified by takfīr (anathematization) and sabb (ritual cursing)—were appropriated, developed and deployed by
the Ottomans and Safavids respectively. The practice of *sabb*, in particular, played a central role in the development of early modern Iranian Shi‘i religious identity and greatly informed the attitude of the Ottomans towards the Safavid state. In order to better grasp the process and implications of this transformation, it is important to revisit the circumstances surrounding the rise and establishment of the Safavids in Iran.

Since at least the mid-fifteenth century, the Safavid order, which was established by Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn of Ardabil (d. 1334) as an ostensibly Sunni *ṭarīqah* (Sufi order), had become increasingly important as a political force in the territories of the Aqquyunlu in Iraq, Anatolia, and Azerbaijan.[i] It was during the period when Shaykh Junayd ibn Ibrahīm (d. 1460) assumed leadership of the Safavid order that it became explicitly Shi‘i and closely
affiliated with the more ghulātī (extremist/heterodox) strands of Shi‘ism. It was also during this period when the Safavids were fully transformed from a mystical order into a militant organization which actively engaged in politics and conquest, but whose leaders nevertheless maintained their spiritual importance and sacral authority as leaders of the ṭarīqah. Junayd, who now claimed the title “sultan” as well as “shaykh”, thereby underscoring this major transformation of the order, acquired a strong following among the pastoral tribes of eastern Anatolia, Syria and Iraq and entered into an alliance with Uzūn Ḥasan (d. 1478), the ruler of the Aqquyunlū confederation. The militarization and politicization of the Safavid order continued under the leadership of Junayd’s son, Ḥaydar (d. 1488), who eventually established his base at Ardabil in Azerbaijan with the assistance of Uzūn Ḥasan, and continued to attract followers to his cause.

During Ḥaydar’s leadership of the Safavid order, the Turcoman tribes adopted the distinctive twelve-pointed red head-gear (known as the tāj-i haydarī), signifying allegiance to the Twelve Shi‘i Imāms, for which they became known in Turkish as the Kizilbash (“red-heads”). It is important to note that the Shi‘ism promoted by Junayd and Ḥaydar did not resemble the more “orthodox” Twelver Shī‘īsm of urban centers such as Qom, Ḥilla or Jabal ʿĀmil, but was rather an eclectic mix of various doctrines which were subsumed under the general framework of Shi‘i devotion to the Twelve Imāms. In fact, sabb/shatm is a practice which was, historically, associated quite closely with the ghulāt, which is why it is important to underscore this aspect of the early Safavid movement in order to understand the developments which occurred following the movement’s conquest of Iran in 1501. It appears that many of Ḥaydar’s followers adopted extremist Shi‘i beliefs and deified their leader, believing him to be a manifestation of God. According to Fazlallāh ibn Rūzbihān Khunjī (d. 1517), “it [was] reported that [the Kizilbash] considered [Ḥaydar] as their god and, neglecting the duties of namāz and public prayers, looked upon the Shaykh as their qibla and the being to whom prostration was due.” During Ḥaydar’s reign as head of the Safavid order in the late fifteenth century, it was transformed into a fully independent political and military force, a fact which generated much anxiety among Uzūn Hasan’s son, Sultan Ya‘qūb who sought to curb the power of Ḥaydar and his followers. Before long, the Kizilbash, whose numbers were significantly augmented by even more Turcoman tribesmen from Iraq and Anatolia, were in open conflict with both the Shirvanids and the Aqquyunlu, and Ḥaydar himself was killed fighting against their combined forces in 1488. Although this defeat temporarily
halted the rise of Kizilbash, it did not permanently end the threat emanating from the Turcoman tribes and the Safavid order.

Between 1501 and 1510, Ḥaydar’s son, Ismāʿīl utilized this spiritual authority to mobilize his Kizilbash followers to conquer all the regions between eastern Anatolia and Khurasān. He successfully overthrew the remnants of the Aqqūnlū dynasty and set out to conquer a large swathe of territory, seizing the Shirvanid capital of Baku (1500), Tabriz (1501), Isfahan (1503), as well as the old ‘Abbāsid capital of Baghdad (1508), and established his sovereignty over Persia, Azerbaijan, Eastern Anatolia, and Iraq, effectively unifying the old territories of Iran for the first time in centuries.[xii] In 1510, he defeated and killed the Uzbek ruler Shaybānī Khān (d. 1510) and extended his rule into Khurāsān and brought both Mashhad and Herat under his control.[xiii] Following his conquests, he established Twelver Shiʿism as the state religion throughout his domains, and violently imposed this creed upon his (largely Sunni) subjects in Iran, Iraq, and Azerbaijan by introducing the Shiʿi call to prayer and instituting the practice of sabb whereby the first three Caliphs, the Prophet’s wife ‘Āʾisha, and a number of the Prophet’s Companions were ritually cursed and vilified.[xiv] This practice was particularly emphasized in regions where the majority of the population was Sunni, and most of the population was forced to engage in it or face persecution. There are examples of several prominent clerics being executed for their refusal to publicly participate in this practice. Sufis, in particular, were the target of violence as a later Safavid Shiʿi source indicates: “Ismaʿil crushed all the silsilahs (Sufi orders); the graves of their
ancestors were destroyed, not to mention what befell their successors...he eradicated most of the sīlsilahs of sayyids and shaykhs.”[xv] Moreover, Ismā‘īl’s conquests were accompanied by mass violence against Sunni communities, the devastation of their property, and the destruction of shrines, including those of the important figures of Abu Ḥanīfa (d. 767) and ‘Abd al-Qādir Gilānī (d. 1166) in Baghdad.[xvi]

Various massacres also took place: 10,000 were executed near Hamadan in 1503; 4000 members of the Kaziruni Sufi order were murdered in Fars, while all the tombs of rival Sufi orders were desecrated; ten thousand refuges and dissenters who took up refuge in Asta were put to the sword; the entire cities of Yazd, Tabas and Abarquh was slaughtered, tens of thousands of people in these three cities alone according to Safavid chronicles; in Khurasan, the tomb of Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492) was destroyed and the entire population of Qarshi—about 15,000 people—massacred.[xvii] The violent institutionalization of Shi‘ism and the brutal eradication of Sunni Islam in the lands under Safavid rule was meant to announce the arrival of a new dispensation, one which was predicated on the defeat of bāṭil (“falsehood”; identified with Sunni Islam) and the elevation of ḥaqq (“truth”, which could only be Shi‘ism). The Sunni community of Iran, which had existed for centuries in the country, was permanently destroyed between the early sixteenth and late seventeenth centuries through a sustained process of mass violence, forced conversion, exile, the destruction of religious institutions (Sufi orders, mosques, and networks of scholars), and a concentrated program of religious propaganda aimed at transforming the country into a bastion of Twelver Shi‘ism. By the late seventeenth century, the only Sunni communities that remained were those residing along Iran’s frontiers and they were treated with varying degrees of toleration.
Confrontation with the Ottomans

While Ismāʿīl, now king of Iran, was expanding his empire eastwards, his deputies (known as *khulafā‘*) sought to agitate the Turcoman tribes of central and western Anatolia into rebellion against the Ottomans in order to expand Safavid domains westward. Rather than actively confront the Kizilbash militarily, Bayezid II took a more diplomatic approach and wrote Ismāʿīl a letter in which he scolded the latter for the excesses of his followers, his betrayal of the Sufi path by seeking worldly power, and for his role in dividing the Muslim community.\[xviii\] Perhaps encouraged by the relative inaction of the Ottomans, a massive Kizilbash uprising, under the direction of Shāh-kulu (“slave of the Shāh [Ismāʿīl]”), erupted across western and central Anatolia in 1511.\[xix\] Largely as a result of Bayezid’s perceived inability to suppress the Kizilbash uprisings, Selīm I acceded to the Ottoman throne in 1512 and proceeded to crush the revolt, massacring nearly 40,000 Shiʿis accused of being Kizilbash or Safavid agents, and imprisoning or deporting thousands of others.\[xx\]
This massive repression of the Kizilbash in Anatolia was a serious blow to the prestige of the Safavids and prompted Shāh Ismāʿīl to launch an invasion of eastern Anatolia in 1514.[xxi]

As a result, Selīm I marched eastwards to confront Ismāʿīl and engaged the Safavids in August 1514 at the Battle of Chaldiran, which ended in a decisive victory for the Ottomans, who then proceeded to establish their authority over eastern Anatolia and to occupy the Safavid capital at Tabriz, which was abandoned shortly thereafter.[xxii] Shāh Ismāʿīl’s defeat at Chaldiran necessitated a retreat from the more extravagant claims which were previously espoused—including pretensions to divinity—and an emphasis upon more normative modes of legitimacy. It was in this context that the Twelver Shiʿi mujtahids, among whom ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Karakī (d. 1534) was considered the most prominent, began to play an increasingly important role in defining the legitimacy of the state and disseminating a correct understanding of orthodox Shiʿism among the populace.[xxiii] Al-Karakī, who had joined the court of Shāh Ismāʿīl around 1508, was present at the Safavid capture of Herat in 1511.[xxiv]

The Institutionalization of Sabb

It would be oversimplistic to characterize the institutionalization of ritual cursing in Safavid Iran merely as an outgrowth of the messianic and heterodox tendencies of the Kizilbash, although this was certainly a factor in its institutionalization. The ritual cursing of the first two caliphs, viewed as usurpers and oppressors by Twelver Shiʿis, has an important history which long precedes the Safavids. However, due to the relative paucity of sources, it is
unclear whether the implementation of this practice—at Tabriz in 1501, and then across Iran—was a product of this ancient tradition or merely a political tool which was utilized in order to undermine the established Sunnism of the Iranian populace and facilitate the adoption of Twelver Shi’ism as the state religion. In any case, the institutionalization of sabb was an unprecedented development in Shi’i history and was a major violation of the normative practice of taqīyya. Neither the Fatimids nor the Buyids, both Shi’i states in the Middle Ages, had ever instituted such a practice.

In several ways, the early Safavid period represents a major break with classical Shi’ism with regard to the issue of tabarru’. Based upon my reading of the literature and the primary sources consulted, the institutionalization of the practice of public vilification of the Companions of the Prophet—who were considered to be sacred personages by the Sunnis—was a bold move and a clear abandonment of taqīyya or precautionary dissimulation. Although the traditional view among Shi’is was that it was wisest to await the arrival of the Mahdī or Qā’im, who would exact retribution upon the enemies of the faith and reveal the truth of all things to them, the establishment of the Safavids in Iran was a major development which prompted an increasingly activist approach, especially among figures such as al-Karakī
who viewed the Safavids as the means by which the faithful would be empowered and enabled to manifest their faith openly. Following al-Karakī’s lead, many prominent Shi’i scholars during the Safavid period—including Nūr Allāh al-Shushtārī (d. 1610) and Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisī (d. 1699)—would compose major works demonstrating the invalidity of Sunnism, the merits of cursing the Companions of the Prophet, and the necessity of openly confronting the vast majority of “misguided Muslims” about these facts.[xlviii] Indeed, al-Shushtārī is a particularly interesting case since he was active in an explicitly non-Shi’i state—Mughal India—but nonetheless proclaimed that he “threw away the scarf of ṭaqīyya and, taking with me an army of arguments, I plunged myself into jihād against the ‘ulamā’ of this country.”[xliv] Shushtārī’s statement about casting aside ṭaqīyya was a direct reference for his insistence upon the public cursing of the Prophet’s Companions and the exposure of their historical injustices against the Family of the Prophet. The career of Shushtarī, like that of al-Karakī, reinforced the association between public anti-Sunni activities and the abandonment of ṭaqīyya. Both were conscious actions and militated against the prevailing wisdom which had hitherto dominated medieval Shi’ism.

Needless to say, the forced conversion of Iran to Shi’ism and the institutionalization of ritual cursing was not received well by the Sunni world. The existence of this practice became the explicit casus belli of the Safavid-Ottoman wars throughout much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Various fatwas were issued by the Ottoman religious establishment emphasizing the complete infidelity of Safavid Iran and the necessity of all faithful Muslims to wage war against it in order to defend the honor of the first three caliphs and the Companions of the Prophet.[li] The Sunni juristical discourse of takfīr was placed in the service of the Ottoman state, which deployed it against the Safavids (and other Shi’ite groups) as it deemed fit. This gave the wars between the Ottomans and Safavids a strongly religious and sectarian character and was instrumental in the confessionalization of the Near East during the early modern period.
Further reading

Primary Sources


Secondary Literature


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Momen, Moojan. An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi‘ism. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985


shiismo como religión de Estado en Irán,” p. 440; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, p. 44


[iv] The adoption of the title of “sultan” suggests worldly pretensions and a claim to political authority.


Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran*, p. 25

Scherberger, “The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi’i Empires,” p. 54; Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire*, p. 78; Hermann and Ibarra, “La instauración del shiismo como religión de Estado en Irán,” p. 447; Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3: 23; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p. 109. Abū Ḥanifa (d. 767) was particularly singled out by the Safavids for vilification because he was the founder of the school of Islamic law followed by the Ottomans. His tomb in Baghdad was desecrated in destroyed first in 1508 by Shāh Ismā’īl and again in 1623 by Shāh ‘Abbās I (Jean Calmard, “Tabarru’,” *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*).

Scherberger, “The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi’i Empires,” p. 53; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, p. 86


Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p. 106


Andrew Newman, “The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran,” p. 79

Previous Shi’ite states, including the Buyids and the Isma’ili Fatimids, had not institutionalized ritual cursing in the lands they ruled and even harshly punished perpetrators of the practice, which was viewed as a disruption of public order.
This was the period immediately following the consolidation of Safavid control over most of Iran and the defeat of the Uzbeks in Khurasan. As such, this period—immediately before Chaldiran—reflected the peak of Safavid power and messianic fervor.

Andrew Newman, “The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran,” p. 80

This is a reference to the Safavid’s claim of descent from the seventh Imam, Mūsa al-Kādhim

al-Karakī, Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt, p. 14


Newman, “The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran,” p. 68

al-Karakī, Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt, pp. 15–16

al-Karakī, Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt, p. 17

al-Karakī, Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt, pp. 17–18

al-Karakī, Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt, p. 18
For a particularly interesting discussion of the importance of cursing which closely mirrors that laid out by al-Karakī in *Nafaḥat al-Lāhūt*, see Nūr Allāh al-Shushtarī, *Maṣā‘īb al-Nawāṣib* (Qom: Dalile-Ma, 2005), ed, Qays al-Attar, 1: 193–210


“If knowledge were located in the Pleiades (a constellation of stars), the Persians would surely attain it”–Prophet Muhammad

It is a little known fact that all six of the authors/compilers of the major books of Sunni ḥadīth—works that are together known as the Siḥāḥ al-Sitta—were of Persian/Iranian origin. Interestingly, these eminent figures are only six of hundreds of other Iranian scholars who were central to the shaping of the Sunni religious and intellectual tradition. In a scheme of Islamic history which is dominated by Arabo-centrism and in a contemporary world in which the association between Iran and Shi’ism is so central that one cannot think of one without the other, this fact of the Persian origin of some of the most important figures of authority in Sunni Islam becomes increasingly relevant in challenging the dominant narratives and assumptions which continue to pervade the historical understanding (and contemporary vision) of Islam and Iran.
1) Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl ibn Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mughīrah ibn Bardizbah al-Ju'fī al-Bukhārī (810–870), originally from Bukhara (located in modern-day Uzbekistan)
2) Abū al-Ḥusayn ‘Asākir ad-Dīn Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj ibn Muslim ibn Ward ibn Kawshādh al-Qushayrī an-Naysābūrī (815–875), originally from Nishapur (located in modern-day Iran)
3)  Aḥmad ibn Shu`ayb ibn Alī ibn Sīnān Abū `Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Nasāʿī (829–915), originally from Nasā (located in modern-day Turkmenistan)

4)  Abū Dawūd Sulaymān ibn al-Ashʿath al-Azādī al-Siğsīstānī (817–889), originally from Siğsistan (located in modern-day Iran)
5) Abū ‘Īsa Muḥammad ibn Ţaṣa al-Sulamī al-Ḍarīr al-Būghī al-Tirmidhī (824–892), originally from Termez (located in modern-day Uzbekistan)

6) Abū ʻAbdillāh Muḥammad ibn Yazīd Ibn Mājah al-Rabʿī al-Qazwīnī (824–889, originally from Qazvin (located in modern-day Iran)
المزاكورة من
مغامرة摘要
الله
المهاجرين
والأنصار
وبعدها
القسم
الثاني

الرسالة
الثانية
عن
المهاجرين
والأنصار
وبعدها
القسم
الثاني