

# Central Asian aspects of pre-modern Iranian history (14th to 19th century)

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There is but little doubt about the existence of the idea of a peculiar historically based physiognomy of contemporary Iranian culture and society in comparison with other regions and peoples of the Islamic Near and Middle East. The consciousness of such traditional and typically Iranian elements certainly nourished and still nourishes the emergence of various aspects of national identity in the sense of modern nationalist ideological thought among the Iranian intelligentsia of our century.

According to nationalist imaginations and concepts, these peculiarities in Iranian cultural history are most commonly traced back to Sasanian, Achaemenian and sometimes even more ancient origins, thus presenting a tableau of the modern Iranian nation as having existed continuously since early antiquity. There is even a respectable number of international Iranologists who might agree with such an almost legendary image of Iran and of Iranian culture. We all remember quite well the former Pahlavi regime's endeavours to present such an interpretation of Iranian history in connection with the celebrations of the 2500th anniversary of monarchy in Iran.

However, closer examination of the social and sociocultural medieval and early modern history of the Iranian region offers, in some respects, a quite different explanation of these peculiarities compared with those of, e.g., Mamluk Egypt and Syria, and the territories having been gradually conquered by the Ottoman Empire. This seems to be related to the very special structure of Iranian society throughout the last six or seven centuries.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Mongol Domination and After**

The Mongol—or more precisely—the Chingizid invasion into Iran in the 13th century resulted in a disastrous blow against the physical existence of the majority of the Iranian population. In addition, the Mongol conquests caused a wave of immigration of non-Iranian, originally Central Asian horse-riding tribal elements, most of them being ethnically of Turkic origin. As far as their collective lifestyle is concerned, they differed clearly from the traditional tribes of the Iranian plateau between Kurdistan and the Hindukush ranges, especially

by their typically Central Asian traditions of horse-riding and pastoral nomadism, which is to be characterized mainly by long-distance mobility, a militant inclination to warfare and political power, and a peculiar system of tribal organization having been spread out all over the nomadic populace of the Central Asian steppe regions without regard to their ethnic or linguistic affiliations.

After the breakdown of Mongol rule in Iran during the 14th century the number of these mainly, but not exclusively, Turkic tribal and nomadic elements in Iran remained very high and even increased during the 15th century due to the Ottoman pressure against the Turkoman tribes of Anatolia (the Qara-Qoyunlu and the Aq-Qoyunlu tribal federations), thus having been forced to return to Iran at that time. As they had no further possibilities of remigration to Central Asia because they were stopped by the tribal military forces of Timur and his successors, and later on by those of the Uzbek khanates, they soon became a stable and constituent element of Iranian population and society. Concerning the early 19th century, the percentage of the tribal elements in comparison with the whole population of Iran was esteemed by some to be up to 50%. And as these tribal entities in Iran refrained from giving up their transhumant and militant lifestyle together with their typically Central Asian tribal organizational structures, they soon turned out not only to be monopolizing anything to do with military affairs, but almost exclusively to be the potential possessors of any type of political power in Iran. Thus, political power in Iran became based on traditionally tribal, instable coalitions and confederations as had been typical for Central Asian tribal politics. Therefore, the usually highly prized, centralized power and rulership (as represented by the Safavids in the 17th century) was in fact by no means typical for the sociopolitical history of premodern, post-Mongol Iran. If we compare Iran to other regions in the Near and Middle East in the same time, the usufructuary social layers and classes in Iranian society were only at a first and very superficial glance represented by urban, bureaucratic and courtly elements. As seen in the long run, the main potential beneficiaries of the state's collecting taxes and tributes from the mainly agrarian producers, and, consequently, the real ruling social class in Iranian society, were the above-mentioned tribes, a fact corroborated by historical evidence up to the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>2</sup>

According to the facts given above, since the period of Mongol domination, the Plateau of Iran has been hopelessly overcrowded by these tribes up until the end of the 19th century. To them, there might have existed various strategies in order to overcome this situation. One might have been the policy of elimination of the sedentary agrarian and urban population. This policy was exercised during the first decades of Chingizid rule, and again during the time of Timur. As the reforms of Ghâzân Khân (about 1300) and under Timur's successors corroborate, this strategy eventually proved to be disastrous, not only for the suppressed population but for the ruling classes too. Another possibility for collective reaction towards this situation might have been the permanent internal rivalry and fight for pasture-grounds in Iran among the various tribes themselves.

Repeated civil wars and destabilizing tribal fights give enough evidence for this concept having been practised in Iranian history during the last six or seven centuries.

But there was still another strategy: by maintaining their monopoly of military affairs, the tribes became successful in establishing political power and rulership. As this type of rulership—in accordance with their Central Asian traditions—was mainly based on tribal confederations, political power in Iran turned out to be usually neither centralized nor stable. Therefore, the *intermezzo* of the later Safavids offers a rather untypical example of a centralized state in Iran.

According to demographic considerations (high density of the tribal population and likewise the limitation of pasture-grounds in Iran), it seems to be reasonable to assume that their traditionally tribal and cattle-breeding, nomadic lifestyle gradually lost its importance under the aspect of economy and productivity. But, on the other side, the maintenance of this lifestyle was a basic precondition for maintaining their military capacities. These military capacities of the tribes enabled their leaders to participate in the permanent struggle for political power. Therefore, tribal and nomadic life must have been perpetuated not primarily to cover any economic and productive needs but, above all, in order to ensure military training. Step by step, tribal life and customs acquired a striking aspect of a more or less simulated economy. Consequently, the originally Central Asian tribes became the main potential beneficiaries of the state's means and tools of expropriation of the agrarian producers, and they remained in this usufructuary position in Iranian society up to the middle of the 19th century. It might be maintained that military affairs among the Mamluks and the Ottomans also formed a prerogative of ethnic elements of Turkic origin, but the crucial point is that they were not at all based on a tribal structure. In comparison with these areas, the sociopolitical structure of premodern Iran therefore belongs much more to a Central Asian pattern than to the Mediterranean model of the Arab and Ottoman civilizations.

### **Terminology and Semantics**

This basic socioeconomic feature of the social structure of the late medieval and premodern Iranian society greatly influenced what might be called the political culture in Iran during this period. Some had a direct influence on emerging political identity and self-consciousness of Iran and the Iranians.

In this connection, the most striking example is the usage of the term 'Iran' in order to denominate a political concept of territory. As Gherardo Gnoli (Rome) has pointed out, already the early Sasanians had created a political conception of 'Iran' merely following ideological lines, its contents being in tight relation to Sasanian political rule. So we must not wonder about the fact that after the breakdown of the Sasanian Empire, in other words from early Islam throughout the whole period of the Abbasid Caliphate, the term 'Iran' had lost all its political connotations. In the proper sense of the denomination of a

political entity, the word 'Iran' had virtually disappeared during this period. Even the Great-Seljuqs refrained from denominating their territory by using the word 'Iran', irrespective of the fact that their territory resembled more or less the geographical extensions of the ancient Sasanian Empire. Actually it was up to the Mongol Il-Khâns of the 13th century to realize the official reanimation of the political notion of 'Iran' in order to find an adequate denomination of their 'ulus', their partial Chingizid khanate. They might have done this facing the fact that there was no possibility to give the name of any immediate son of Chingiz Khan to their territory as had been practised in the cases of the Golden Horde (the 'Ulus Juchi') and of Transoxania (the 'Ulus Chaghatai'), since the founder of the Il-Khanate, Hülägü, was not a son but only a grandson of Chingiz Khan. His brother Kubilai was in a similar situation when he decided to proclaim officially his ulus simply as 'China' and himself as the founder of the Chinese Yüan-dynasty.<sup>3</sup>

Without any exceptions, all political concepts of 'Iran' dating from later periods up to contemporary times, were then derived directly from this Mongolian notion. The Mongols' conception of Iran consisted, for instance, in the idea of Iran's capital being the city of Tabriz. Before the Il-Khanid rule, Tabriz never before in Iranian history had been in a similar position. This city, being located at the northwestern fringes of the country, was not at all suitable geographically as the capital of a state covering the greater parts of the highlands of Iran. But regardless of this fact, the idea of Tabriz being the undisputed and quasi natural capital of Iran survived at least up to the end of the 16th century. Whenever Turkoman (Qara-Qoyunlu and Aq-Qoyunlu) rulers succeeded in the conquest of Tabriz in the 15th century they used to proclaim themselves as 'pâdshâh-e Îrân' or 'kesrâ-ye Îrân' without any regard to the real extent of the territory being actually under their rule. Shâh Esmâ'sil, the founder of the dynasty of Safavid rulers, happened to do quite the same in the year 1501. When then under his successor Tahmâsp, in the 16th century the capital was transferred from Tabriz to Qazvin, this was obviously conceived to be only a temporary measure, having been caused by the Ottomans' heavy military threat towards the province of Azerbaijan. Only at the beginning of the 17th century, when under 'Abbâs I. Isfahan was finally established as the Safavids' capital, did the extremely impractical idea of Tabriz being the capital of Iran come definitively to an end. But Tabriz remained to be a privileged city in comparison with all other Iranian cities and towns, having been—for instance—the residence of the Iranian heir-apparent until the early 20th century. Up to modern times the city of Tabriz continued to bear the official title 'dâro s-saltaneh', i.e., 'the location of rulership'.<sup>4</sup>

Another aspect of the Mongols' conception of Iran as a political territory concerns the northeastern frontier. Before the Mongol conquest there usually existed no clear borderlines conceived between the territories of Khorâsân, Transoxania and Khorâzm. Owing to the Mongols' territorial partition, these borders became clearly defined, in accordance with the fact that from that time onward Iran was—and still is—conceived as the territory of the former Mongo-

lian II-Khanate, whereas the Transoxanian rulers (Timur and the Timurids, and after them the Uzbek khanates until the end of the 19th century) were the successors of the Mongol Ulus Chaghatay, with the exception of Khorazm (Khiva) which had belonged to the Golden Horde in Mongol times.<sup>5</sup>

In this connection it is of high interest to us that as late as in the 19th century the Qajar rulers of Iran created a legitimizing but apocryphal myth of their own genealogical descent from somebody belonging to the personal entourage of the Chingizid Hülägü Khân, the founder of the Mongol state of Iran.

The development of the Iranian state chancery traditions and regulations throughout these six centuries accords perfectly with my thesis. When the Mongols reestablished a new administrative system under Ghâzân Khan about the year 1300, they adopted a wide range of chancery practices and uses originating in Chinese and Uighur bureaucratic traditions, and combined them with 'Abbâsid—so-called 'Islamic'-administrative practices. In later periods these Mongol inventions continuously were developed further until the 19th century, permanently and substantially disconnected from the chancery traditions of the Mamluks' and, above all, the Ottoman states.<sup>6</sup>

An even more striking example of the Mongols' impact on political culture in Iran is the development of taxation in Iran together with the specifically Iranian changes concerning the institutions of landholding. One must not forget that Islam had fallen definitively out of power as a normative juridic element in administration throughout the first 50 years of Mongol rule in Iran. After the rehabilitation of Islam in about the year 1300, the Islamic juridical regulations remained unaccepted in the question of taxation and grants of revenues (formerly called *iqṭā'āt*). The major and most important taxes remained then to be of non-Islamic origin, having been prescribed by the Chingizid legal codex, the *yasa*, throughout the following centuries. To a certain extent, this development was clearly stopped by the Uzbek rulers in Transoxania after 1500. In Iran, however, this development was even enforced at the same time under the Safavids. The implementation of Twelver-Shiism as the official religion in Iran did by no means result in a kind of Re-Islamization of the taxation system as had happened in Transoxania in the same period. In Iran, the Safavids as well as their successors never tried to make superficial legitimization by or harmonization with Islamic juridic principles of their tax-system. This is also to be observed in accordance with the administrative concepts of landholding, at least to a certain extent. The institute of the so-called 'soyūrghâl' etymologically and substantially of Mongol origin, was a clear and outspoken offence to the Islamic concept of '*iqṭā'*', as the soyurghal was officially accepted to be hereditary and, moreover, to grant administrative and political rights as well to its owner. So we may witness in administrative history of post-Mongol Iran something like a partial premodern 'proto-secularization', widely incomparable to any other Islamic political entity within the period under discussion. This development was by no means due to any 'typically Iranian' hostile attitude towards Islam, as some Iranian nationalists might argue, but originated exclusively in the Mongols' non-Islamic administration policies.<sup>7</sup>

## New Currency System Established

Present-day's Iranian currency shows an astonishing continuity, irrespective of a high degree of political discontinuity during the last seven centuries. Again due to Ghâzân Khân's reforms of the year 1300, at that time a new currency system was established, being no longer based on the traditional Islamic monetary system but rather in accordance with Chinese models. Thus, a silver coin named 'dinâr' was created as the basic currency unit, ten thousand dinars forming a unit of account named 'ûmân', derived from the Mongolian word *tümân* (meaning 10,000). In the course of waves of permanent depreciation, the standard silver coin had the nominal value of 1000 dinars at the beginning of our century and was called 'qerân', still based on Ghazan Khan's monetary reforms dating back to the early 14th century. The present-day's Iranian currency unit 'rîâl' is the direct successor of this 'qerân', the amount of 10 Rials still being called popularly 'tûmân'!

## Conclusions

By means of these examples and illustrations I have tried to trace some historically important roots from which the political conception of Iran's collective personality and special physiognomy gradually emerged. It becomes clear that, in an anthropological view of history, Central Asian tribal elements, once having been implanted by the Mongol conquerors and rulers and having been largely represented by Turkic tribes from the 14th to the 19th century, were in many respects responsible for what turned out to be the political conception of 'Iran', as it is at present accepted.

In opposition to the sociohistorical development of early modern Mediterranean and Atlantic Europe, Hamid R. Kousha defined his concept of an 'Ottoman-Iranian Historical Block'. But as long as we consider primarily the internal societal and historical dynamics of this 'Block', we must rather accept a clearly separate structural position of Iran together with Afghanistan, Transoxania and, maybe, even Muslim India, belonging much more to a Central Asian entity than to a Mediterranean-Ottoman one.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes and References

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  9. Hamid R. Kusha: 'Irano-Ottoman zone of social and economic vitality: a critical assessment of an historical block' (lecture given at the occasion of the 20th Annual MESA-Meeting, Boston, 20-23 November, 1986).