

Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society

<http://journals.cambridge.org/JRA>

Additional services for *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Nader Shah and Persian Naval Expansion in the Persian Gulf, 1700–1747

MICHAEL AXWORTHY

Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society / Volume 21 / Issue 01 / January 2011, pp 31 - 39

DOI: 10.1017/S1356186310000362, Published online: 20 January 2011

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1356186310000362

How to cite this article:

MICHAEL AXWORTHY (2011). Nader Shah and Persian Naval Expansion in the Persian Gulf, 1700–1747. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 21, pp 31-39 doi:10.1017/S1356186310000362

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

Nader Shah and Persian Naval Expansion in the Persian Gulf, 1700–1747

MICHAEL AXWORTHY

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to relate a remarkable episode involving Nader Shah's navy and to connect it directly to the wider aims and projects of his regime (notably his ambitions in India), and the central events of his reign. In this way his Persian Gulf policy may emerge not as the oddity it might at first appear, but rather as a consistent element in a coherent larger whole.

The story of Nader Shah's naval programme in the Persian Gulf, and of the expansion of Persian power to dominate the Gulf region during his reign, is likely to be unknown even to many who specialise in this region. This is partly due to the relative obscurity of this period and of the history of Nader Shah himself.¹ But the story has been explored, by Lawrence Lockhart, in an article published in 1936,² and in his biography of Nader Shah of 1938.³ And Willem Floor brought the state of knowledge up to date, adding a wealth of new material from the records of the Dutch East India Company, in an article published in 1987.⁴

The purpose of this piece is not to repeat in detail what appears in those earlier accounts, though it is necessary to give an outline of the main events. The purpose is rather to relate the remarkable episode of Nader's navy more directly to the wider aims and projects of his regime (notably his ambitions in India), and the central events of his reign. In this way his Persian Gulf policy may emerge not as the oddity it might at first appear, but rather as a consistent element in a coherent larger whole.

It is necessary first of all to give a brief account of how Nader Shah came to power in Persia. In the first two decades of the eighteenth century there was a gradual erosion of

¹Of the contemporary chronicles of Nader's life, the most important is that of his official historian, Mirza Mohammad Mahdi Astarabadi - his *Tarikh-e Jahangusha-ye Naderi* (JN); translated into French by Sir William Jones as the *Histoire de Nader Chah*, (London, 1770); original Persian text (ed.) Abdollah Anvar, (*Anjoman Asar va Mafakher-e Farhangi*) (Tehran, 1377/1998).

²'The Navy of Nadir Shah' in *Proceedings of the Iran Society* Vol. 1 Part 1, pp 3–18, (London, 1936).

³Laurence Lockhart, *Nadir Shah* (London, 1938).

⁴Willem Floor, 'The Iranian Navy in the Gulf during the Eighteenth Century' in *Iranian Studies*, 20, 1987. Like Willem Floor's other publications translating and summarising evidence from the records of the Dutch East India Company, this article conveys a wealth of new primary source material. I am grateful to Willem for commenting on this article before submission (which produced a number of amendments): he and I have discussed the Military Revolution thesis at length without (so far) reaching full agreement.

the authority and prestige of the Safavid monarchy, particularly in the outlying provinces of the empire. The most serious event in this process was the revolt of the Ghilzai Afghans of Kandahar in 1709, followed by that of the Abdalis of Herat later; but there were serious revolts in Kurdistan, the Caucasus and Khorasan also.

Part of this pattern was the expansion of raiding against Safavid territory on the Persian Gulf coast from Muscat. Bandar-e Kong was sacked in 1714, and ibn Saif II of Muscat sent a major force against Bahrain in 1715. This was beaten off, but the Muscat fleet returned in 1717 and captured the island. They went on to take Larak and Qeshm, and besieged the fort at Hormuz. The troubles of the Persians were exacerbated by their lack of ships. The Safavid state had no naval vessels of its own. They tried to get ships from the Dutch, Portuguese and English trading companies present at the Persian ports (a recurring theme later on), but the Dutch and English refused. The Persians briefly retook Bahrain in July 1718, using small vessels lent by local Arab tribesmen to ferry across a 6,000-strong expeditionary force, but another fleet from Muscat landed in Bahrain in November and massacred the Persians. The Persian commander had some success later, with the help of Portuguese ships, in removing the Muscat fleet from the waters around Bahrain, and the two sides entered into negotiations concerning the island in 1721. But implementing the agreement they reached was messy and no definitive settlement was ultimately achieved.⁵

After 1719 the difficulties of the Safavid monarchy deepened and the court in Isfahan had no time to spare for their territories in the Persian Gulf. Growing bolder after their revolt, the Afghans of Kandahar raided Kerman in 1719, and then in 1722 struck at the heart of the Safavid realm, defeated the royal army and after a long and destructive siege occupied the capital, Isfahan itself.⁶

This catastrophe led to a free-for-all in the provinces. In Nader's birthplace, Khorasan,⁷ rival warlords (him among them) manoeuvred and fought to take control. But Nader's cause was greatly strengthened in 1726, when Tahmasp, the son of the last Safavid Shah, arrived in Khorasan and joined forces with him. Together, under Nader's leadership, they were able to take Mashhad and in 1729 successfully defeated an Afghan army from Isfahan under the Afghan Shah, Ashraf. After two further battles Nader ejected the Afghans, and restored Tahmasp to his throne in Isfahan. Within a few years Nader had restored the borders of Persia almost to the extent to which they had reached before the Afghan revolt, defeating a variety of enemies, including the Ottoman Turks, along the way. But he did not do it for Tahmasp, who was deposed in 1732. After a period as regent for Tahmasp's son, Nader deposed him too and made himself Shah in his own right in 1736.

The argument in my book, *The Sword of Persia*, is that Nader achieved this startling reversal of fortune by a ruthless and innovatory policy, which unconsciously paralleled many of the

⁵Floor 1987, pp. 34–37.

⁶The best detailed overall account in English of the Afghan revolt and the fall of the Safavid monarchy is still Laurence Lockhart's *The Fall of the Safavi Dynasty and the Afghan Occupation of Persia* (Cambridge, 1958) – though important additional source material has become available since that time.

⁷Nader came from the Turkic Afshar tribe of northern Khorasan.

measures of military reformers in Europe in the gunpowder age.⁸ Marshall G Hodgson⁹ famously named the Safavid as one of the three Gunpowder Empires of the Islamic world in the sixteenth century, but in an important article¹⁰ Rudi Matthee has pointed out the weakness of the Safavid claim to that title, even by the end of the seventeenth century. Despite the use of muskets and cannon by some of the centrally-held troops of the Safavid State, the majority of provincial troops were still armed with lance, sword and bow, as they had been since the time of the pre-Islamic Sassanid monarchy. Most towns were unwallled and few or none had the new kind of powerful fortifications designed to resist artillery that were the norm in Europe, and common in the Ottoman and Moghul territories.

Nader changed all that, gradually building up an army that at its height was fully equipped with up-to-date gunpowder weapons. With the ultimate aim of wresting the caliphate and supremacy in Islam from the Ottomans, he expanded the army hugely and insisted on constant, daily training to ensure maximum effectiveness of the new weapons. His regime had a new, totalising character, extracting the last drop of revenue from taxation, and demanding minute accounting from officials. In other words, in a short time most of the elements of at least the first stage of what in Europe has been described as the Military Revolution¹¹ were present. Maximising the effectiveness of the regime's armed force at sea was an indispensable part of that process.

This is the context in which we have to view Nader's Persian Gulf policy. Nader was a monarch in a different mould. He did not loll back in his capital, sending his officers off to do battle in far-flung provinces. He was constantly on the move, accompanying his troops on all their major campaigns, rarely staying in one place for more than two months at a time, unless forced to do so by the necessity of a lengthy siege. He paid minute attention to logistics and the preparations for his campaigns, usually engaging in preparations for the next project even while the current one was still under way. His construction of a Navy in the Persian Gulf was no whim, but one aspect of this relentless drive to push his authority and power to the maximum.

As we have already seen, amid the turmoil that led up to the siege and Afghan conquest of Isfahan, the Safavid regime suffered a loss of authority in the Persian Gulf too. But Muscat was weakened by its own dynastic problems in the early 1720s, and could not maintain its new conquests. Bahrain and the other islands were retaken by local Arab tribesmen (the Huwalas), who by now were effectively independent.

After Nader's final defeats of the Afghans near Shiraz at the end of 1729 and the beginning of 1730, the Afghan survivors scattered, and some made for the Persian Gulf coast rather than attempt the hard journey back to Kandahar by land. Nader sent messages to the Dutch and English in Bandar Abbas to intercept them, but there is little indication that they did

⁸The argument is developed at greater length in my article 'The Army of Nader Shah' in *Iranian Studies*, December 2000, pp. 635–646. It is not an absolute argument, but one of degree: not one of whether the Safavids had or used gunpowder weapons or not (obviously, they did) but of the extent, by comparison with their neighbours and others, to which previous patterns of warfare and military practice were changed by the introduction of firearms.

⁹Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* [especially Vol. 3, 'The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times'] (Chicago, 1974).

¹⁰'Unwallled Cities and Restless Nomads: Firearms and Artillery in Safavid Iran' in Charles Melville (ed.) *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society* (London, 1996), pp. 389–416.

¹¹Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution* (Cambridge, 1988).

much to comply, and other sources show a number of Afghans made it to Muscat, while some died in shipwrecks.¹² This was Nader's first indication of his relative powerlessness on and beyond the shore of the Persian Gulf – something he rarely tolerated for long.

In July 1733 Nader suffered the only major battlefield defeat of his career,¹³ outside Baghdad, at the hands of the Ottoman general Topal Osman Pasha. The indirect consequences of this defeat were to intensify his interest in the Persian Gulf region. One of his officers, Mohammad Khan Baluch, the governor of Kuhgilu province, had been tasked to keep watch over the city of Baghdad while Nader fought the main battle. When Nader was beaten, Mohammad Khan and his force (mainly infantry) were left high and dry. Most of his troops were massacred by the Ottomans, but Mohammad Khan managed to escape with a few companions on horseback. Perhaps embittered by this experience and certainly seeing an opportunity, Mohammad Khan did not attempt to rejoin the survivors of the main Persian army as they withdrew toward Kermanshah. Instead he diverted away to the south-west, toward the Garmsir, the territories along the northern coast of the Persian Gulf.

Much of this area had never been properly brought under central authority since the period of Afghan rule in Isfahan, and the Arab tribes in the part south and west of Lar were in open revolt under Sheikh Ahmad Madani.¹⁴ Mohammad Khan joined forces with these rebels, calculating that it would not be long, after the shattering defeat at Baghdad, before Nader's upstart regime collapsed entirely.

But this proved to be a miscalculation. Nader returned to Ottoman Iraq in October with a new army and defeated the Ottomans in a further battle, in which Topal Osman Pasha died. Having rectified the defeat of July, Nader moved swiftly to deal with the rebels in the south of Persia in the early months of 1734. He scattered their forces near Shiraz, and like the Afghans before him Mohammad Khan fled south, taking refuge on the island of Qeys.

Once again Nader's enemies had escaped him (albeit temporarily) by sea. Nader had a controlling, dominant personality. He disliked loose ends, and the sort of weakness that led to them. He resolved to capture Mohammad Khan, but also to take steps to ensure the full exercise of his authority in the region in future (and there are indications that he was already thinking about naval power as one aspect of his ambitions toward India). He appointed Latif Khan as his admiral in the Persian Gulf, and sent him to Bushire to set the place up for the operations of a coastal fleet. Latif Khan was ordered to buy up ships from the Dutch and English in Bandar Abbas,¹⁵ and he refurbished the old fort in Bushire as a base.

The English and Dutch lent ships to help with the capture of Mohammad Khan Baluch,¹⁶ but refused permanent sale of them. The Europeans were in a difficult position. Their

¹²Gombroon diary (the records of the British East India Company (EIC) at Bandar Abbas, drawing on letters from their traders in Isfahan, Kerman and elsewhere – held in the India Office Collection of the British Library, classmark G/29/ vols 3–6 and 16) for 24 December 1729/4th January 1730; Sheikh Mohammad Ali Hazin, (ed.) and (trans.) F. C. Belfour as *The Life of Shaikh Mohammed Ali Hazin* (London, 1830), pp. 200–202.

¹³Not to detract from the significance of his defeat by guerrilla tactics in Daghestan in 1742.

¹⁴Willem Floor, 'The Revolt of Shaikh Ahmad Madani in Laristan and the Garmsirat (1730–1733)', in *Studia Iranica* 12, 1983.

¹⁵Gombroon diary, 2nd /13th May 1734 (not the entry for 7th/18th May as Lockhart has it – *Nadir Shah* p. 78); Floor 1987, p. 39.

¹⁶Mohammad Khan was captured by mid-June 1734. He was sent to Isfahan, where he was blinded as punishment. He died shortly afterwards (JN Vol. 1, p. 193; Floor 1983, pp. 90–91; Gombroon diary 8th/19th May 1734).

presence in Persia depended on the goodwill of the Persian authorities, but their interest was trade, not war or maritime police work. Lending ships to the Persians meant temporary loss of the use of valuable assets that needed to be kept sailing and trading to justify the expense of their construction and running costs. If they were damaged in Persian service that meant more expense; and there was a fairly high risk that they could be lost altogether. Handing ships over to Persian control also risked losing the goodwill of other powers in the Persian Gulf (notably the Ottomans and the Arabs of Muscat) if the ships were used against them.

The arguments went to and fro; the Persians repeatedly demanded ships and the Europeans prevaricated. To get out of this bind, and in the hope of a tidy profit,¹⁷ the English offered means to help the Persians get their own ships built. They suggested they should commission ships to be built for the Persians in Surat, where the East India Company's own ships were constructed, in the Gulf of Cambay on the west coast of India.¹⁸ This was the assistance that was to lead to the construction of Nader Shah's small but powerful navy.¹⁹

Nader renewed his war against the Ottomans in 1735, and as part of this campaign Latif Khan led an assortment of vessels against Basra at the end of May. They were beaten-off when the Ottomans commandeered two English vessels, stuffed them with Turkish troops, and (despite the reluctance of the English crews) bore down on the Persians with superior firepower.²⁰ But the main theatre of Nader's campaign of 1735 was in the Caucasus, and the attempt on Basra is perhaps best seen as an extensive experiment.

Latif Khan learned from the experiment, because in May 1736, following the Ottoman example,²¹ he seized the English East Indiaman *Northumberland*, paid off its captain generously, and sailed it to Bahrain with a fleet of other vessels, and 4,000 troops. Sheikh Jabbara, the Huwala leader who had taken Bahrain at the end of 1722, was in Mecca on the Hajj when Latif Khan arrived off the coast of Bahrain. His deputy fled and after a few skirmishes Bahrain was back in Persian hands.

Nader's financial adviser and favourite Taqi Khan Shirazi (who as governor of Shiraz had authority over Bushire and Latif Khan) entered the story at this point. He had intended to sail with Latif Khan and the Persian fleet, but arrived too late. He was anxious to get the credit for the success of the expedition. Taqi Khan tended generally to behave as though Fars and the Persian Gulf coast were his personal possessions, and as though all that happened there did so only by his permission. He sent the keys of the island's fort to Nader, and was rewarded with a coat of honour and the attachment of Bahrain to his governorship of Fars.²² But the episode caused resentment among the Huwala Arabs, resulting in raiding and piracy against ships from Persian ports.

¹⁷The Dutch, who had effectively refused to help the Persians acquire ships for themselves, later ruefully alleged that the English made a 200% profit on the deal (Floor 1987, pp. 38–39 and p. 41).

¹⁸Gombroon diary, 7th/18th May 1734.

¹⁹An Englishman, John Elton, was also involved in the establishment of a small fleet for Nader on the Caspian Sea. But that story is outside the scope of this study.

²⁰Gombroon diary, 18th/29th June 1735; Floor 1987, pp. 39–40. According to the Dutch, Nader removed Latif Khan from his post after this failure, but reinstated him within a year.

²¹But only temporarily – Sheikh Jabbara and the Huwalas returned in 1737 and the Persian forces were too busy elsewhere to uphold their control of the island. The fort at Manama fell in the summer of 1738. Willem Floor, *The Persian Gulf: The Rise of the Gulf Arabs – The Politics of Trade on the Persian Littoral 1747–1792* (Washington DC, 2007), pp. 241–242.

²²Floor 1987, pp. 41–42.

These events encouraged Nader to consider wider naval enterprises. Having run the country since 1732 as regent, in March 1736 he finally took the throne of Persia as Nader Shah. This achieved, his next plan was to regain the last piece of Persian territory still to be recovered – Kandahar – and then to march into India. Given the great distances involved and the difficulty of travel overland, it was natural for him to connect his growing power in the Persian Gulf with his plans for India. There was a potential obstacle in between: Muscat. But the rulers of Muscat were struggling against internal rebellions, which proved useful for Nader's purposes.

Later in 1736 the Sultan of Muscat sent Nader a request for help against his rebellious subjects, and in March 1737 Latif Khan sailed from Bushire with two ships bought from the English, two more large vessels and a number of smaller ones. They took 5,000 troops and 1,500 horses on board at Bandar Abbas and arrived at Khor Fakkan on the Gulf of Oman on 16th April, where Latif Khan disembarked some of his troops before sailing back through the Straits of Hormuz to Julfar (Ras al-Khaimah), where the rest of his small army landed. Joining up with the Sultan of Oman's forces, the Persians defeated the rebels at Falju's-Samini, but then fell out with the Sultan because they were behaving more like masters than helpers. Latif Khan withdrew to Julfar, but later in the year the Sultan renewed his requests to Nader for help.

Nader ordered Taqi Khan to renew the offensive, and in January 1738 he and Latif Khan sailed again from Bandar Abbas, this time with 6,000 men, having commandeered a number of Dutch and English ships. Taqi Khan was unhappy, and blamed Latif Khan for having encouraged Nader to order the expedition over his head. The Persians were successful, defeated the rebels again and enabled the Sultan to reoccupy Muscat; but a number of forts still held out. While they were being besieged, Taqi Khan quarrelled with the Sultan, and with Latif Khan again. Taqi Khan's solution was to have Latif Khan poisoned.

After Latif Khan's death the campaign went rapidly downhill. Taqi Khan was more talented at extortion and court intrigue than naval logistics and military strategy. Some Persian garrisons were overwhelmed, and the Arab seamen in the Persian fleet mutinied for want of provisions, going over to piracy. The Persians fell back on Julfar, but managed to regain some of their ships when the mutineers fell out among themselves. The Persians fought a sea battle with the remaining mutineers in January 1739, in the course of which the battling vessels were separated by a thunderstorm and the leader of the mutineers was blown up after a fire broke out on his ship; but before the Persians could renew their efforts in Muscat, Nader ordered Taqi Khan to sail for Sind, to meet him there after his successful conquest of Delhi.

Wanting to test the feasibility of sea communications with his new territories in India, but perhaps thinking also of Alexander's campaigns by land and sea in the Makran and the Indus plain, in the spring or summer of 1739 Nader ordered Taqi Khan Shirazi to bring 25,000 troops from Fars to join him in Sind. Some of them were to go by land, and a fleet carrying more troops was to sail eastwards along the coast in support. The Dutch contributed one large ship, and a variety of others were requisitioned along the Persian Gulf coast. One wonders what Nader's further plans for these forces were, once they had met him in Sind. Perhaps he would have established a naval base at the mouth of the Indus. Or he might even have sailed some of them south, to take control of the shipbuilding yards at Surat.

But the meeting in Sind never happened. Taqi Khan was no Alexander, though he encountered some of the same difficulties. His men ran short of supplies and water, and were defeated by Baluchi tribesmen near Kesh in the Makran desert. The expedition was an utter failure and by 16th April 1740 Taqi Khan was back at Bandar Abbas, with many dead.²³ When he found out what had happened, Nader sent a peremptory message ordering Taqi Khan to meet him in Kandahar. Taqi Khan was briefly relieved of his governorship of Fars, but stayed at court and used his personal friendship with Nader to regain his office within a few months.

After the Makran debacle the sailors of the Persian fleet mutinied again, prompted once more by Taqi Khan's failure to pay or provision them properly. Some Arab tribesmen along the Persian coast revolted in sympathy. The mutineers again turned to piracy, and there were clashes in the Persian Gulf between them and ships the Persian authorities borrowed from the Dutch. But in 1741 some of the mutineers came to terms with Nader, and he decided to put more money and effort into his Persian Gulf adventures. Control of Muscat and the Straits of Hormuz was important if he were to communicate with his Indian territories by sea, and would enable him to milk revenue from all trade going in and out of the Persian Gulf – including trade with Ottoman-controlled ports.

The first of the ships built for Nader in Surat arrived in 1741; he may have ordered as many as ten more. The Surat-built ships were excellent. Built of tropical teak, they were stronger and more resistant to damage from the hull-destroying teredo worm than any other available in the world at that time; but they were expensive. So Nader set about establishing his own shipbuilding yards at Bushire. One difficulty with this project was a lack of skilled shipbuilders. Nader ordered a Fleming, la Porterie, to Bushire to supervise, despite the man's pleas that he knew nothing of shipbuilding, and, as time went on, that his health was deteriorating (La Porterie eventually died in 1742). Another difficulty was that the Persian Gulf coast was completely devoid of timber; so Nader had it brought from the thick forests of Mazanderan, 600 miles to the north. Because the roads were poor or nonexistent, the timber had to be carried on the shoulders of porters for much of the way. This was not done for pay but by corvée – by the forced labour of the peasants along the route. Many died of exhaustion.

There were further naval clashes with pirates and mutineers in 1741, but by the early months of 1742 the Persian fleet consisted of fifteen ships, most of them Surat-built; the keel of a large ship had been laid down in Nader's own shipyard in Bushire; and further disturbances in Oman again favoured a Persian intervention.²⁴

Taqi Khan finally secured a conclusive triumph in Muscat in 1743. The Sultan of Oman's subjects rebelled again, and the Sultan asked Taqi Khan for help, as before. The Persian fleet, largely made up of the fine new ships which Nader had bought from Surat, sailed to Julfar in June 1742 with 8,000 cavalry on board and large quantities of supplies. The Sultan made an

²³Floor 1987, pp. 46–47; also Floor's article in *Iran and Iranian Studies: Essays in Honor of Inaj Afshar*, (ed.) Kambiz Eslami (Princeton, 1998); Gombroon diary entries for October and November 1739; Lockhart 1936, p. 11.

²⁴For the preceding paragraphs see: Lockhart 1938, pp. 182–184 and 212–216; and Floor 1987, pp. 43–49. For the suffering caused by Nader's orders for timber to be brought from Mazanderan, see: Père Louis Bazin 'Memoires sur les dernieres annees du regne de Thamas Kouli-Kan et sa mort tragique, contenus dans un lettre du Frere Bazin' in *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses Ecrites des Missions Etrangeres*; Vol. IV, (Paris, 1780) [the letter was written in 1751] – p. 319.

agreement with the Persians on the basis that they would restore him to power, in return for his recognition of Persian sovereignty over Oman. The campaign went forward successfully, and Taqi Khan himself crossed over to the southern shore of the Persian Gulf later in the year. Muscat itself had still been held by the Sultan's people, but the Persians moved in there and, by a trick, took control of the forts that dominated the place. The last rebels came to terms in July 1743 and Oman passed under Persian control – but not for long.

In the autumn of 1742, plagued by liver disease and prone to uncontrollable rages, Nader had become convinced that his eldest son, Reza Qoli, had tried to have him assassinated. Nader punished Reza Qoli by having him blinded, to prevent him ever taking the throne. But the incident seems to have brought about a crisis or breakdown, after which point Nader went into a decline. In the spring of 1743 Nader commanded an army of 375,000 men or more, which was probably the most powerful single military force in the world at that time. But, despite the opportunities offered by the relative weakness of the Ottoman regime and its rule in its eastern provinces, his campaign of 1743 in Ottoman Iraq showed little of his usual energy and fizzled out after an unsuccessful siege of Mosul. From this point until his death in 1747 at the hands of his own bodyguard, Nader's reign became a history of bitter rebellions and atrocious reprisals. One of the worst rebellions was that of Taqi Khan in Shiraz in 1743/1744, which the Dutch believed had been prompted by Nader's demand that Taqi Khan reimburse him for the costs of the last Muscat expedition.²⁵

Nader achieved one last great victory over the Ottomans near Yerevan in August 1745, but then his plans and his drive evaporated, and with them went his naval schemes. Nader's failing grip of affairs and other manifold difficulties meant that the fleet and the troops in Oman were neglected even before that. By the summer of 1743 the construction of the big ship that had been begun in the shipyards at Bushire ground to a halt, and was never resumed. After Taqi Khan returned to Bandar Abbas in November 1743, tribute payments from the former rebels that were to have kept the Persian troops in Oman paid, dried up. The rebels were able to seize some of the Persian officers, and then managed to persuade the leaderless garrison of Muscat to surrender. Their leader, Ahmad ibn Said, at length secured almost the whole of the territory of Oman, and got himself elected Sultan towards the end of 1744, founding the al-Bu Said dynasty. An almost forgotten Persian garrison managed to hang on in Julfar until after Nader's death in 1747. By that time most of the neglected ships of his fleet had been wrecked or were rotting away in harbour.²⁶

Nader Shah's naval programme began with the need to control the coastal borders of Persia and prevent the escape of rebels and fugitives, but it matured to complement his grander aims of dominance in the wider region. In September 1732 he had claimed he would throw reins around the necks of the rulers of Ottoman Turkey, Moghul India, Kandahar and Turkestan. By the end, he had achieved the last three and had given the Ottomans serious cause for concern too. If he had succeeded completely, the Persian Gulf would have become the central trade-route between his possessions in India and Iraq (India had in any case for centuries been Persia's most important overseas trading partner). In preparation, in 1739 he ordered Persian currency to be re-minted to be interchangeable with the Indian

²⁵Floor 1987, p. 51.

²⁶Lockhart 1936, pp. 12–14; Floor 1987, pp. 51–53.

rupee.²⁷ With Bahrain, Basra and Muscat in his possession, the Persian Gulf would have been effectively a Persian lake, and his navy patrolling it would have been unchallengeable. The unification of this huge area under one central authority, if governed wisely²⁸ could have produced a great surge of trade and economic prosperity, analogous to that achieved in the early years of the Abbasid caliphate in the eighth and ninth centuries AD. It is easy to dismiss this dream as impractical, but as we have seen, Nader came close to establishing the basis for it.

Nader's Persian Gulf policy had some particular weaknesses. Previous commentators have pointed to the reliance of the navy on non-Persian sailors, who proved liable to mutiny – but any sailor would mutiny or desert if left without pay or provisions for extended periods. The cause of the mutinies was ultimately poor leadership and poor planning – Taqi Khan Shirazi was no naval commander, as the Sind expedition conclusively showed. Latif Khan by contrast seems to have been a competent and strong-willed admiral.

If Nader had given Latif Khan full authority, and had backed him up against Taqi Khan's encroachment, Nader's naval enterprises might have fared better. But the overall impression is that Nader's regime was somewhat out of its depth in its efforts in the Persian Gulf. Some commentators²⁹ have stressed the separate identity of the Persian Gulf region as a whole, and the degree to which it continued to function as a regional system, along the northern littoral as well as the southern, despite whatever else might be going on inland. Although I have argued for an understanding of the naval programme as an integral part of Nader's wider aims, it is plain that it was less central to his thinking than the other campaigns he supervised personally. It is significant for a monarch who insisted on intervening personally in so many angles of state affairs that Nader never visited the navy he spent so much treasure on. The mutinies under Taqi Khan's command have no parallel in the record of the forces under Nader's direct command, where failures of supply and pay were rare. All these considerations are subordinate to the stark fact that Nader's naval programme failed ultimately because his wider programme faltered and failed with his own death. If Nader or others of his dynasty had sustained the success, energy and drive that had characterised his rule up to the winter of 1742/1743, it is likely that the naval programme would also have developed further. Whether his regime could ever have succeeded in a permanent transformation of the power balance in the Persian Gulf region is less certain.

MICHAEL AXWORTHY

Exeter University

²⁷ Gombroon Diary, 5th/16th February 1740; Willem Floor, 'Dutch Trade in Afsharid Persia', *Studia Iranica* 34 (2005) – reprinted in Floor, *The Rise and Fall of Nader Shah: Dutch East India Company Reports 1730–1747*, (London, 2009). For Nader Shah's plans for India and a compelling counterfactual thought experiment on what could have happened if he had established an Irano-Indian Empire, see: S. Subrahmanyam 'Un Grand Derangement: Dreaming an Indo-Persian Empire in South Asia, 1740–1800' *Journal of Early Modern History*, Vol. IV, (Leiden, 2000).

²⁸ In his later years Nader showed some awareness of the need to protect merchants and their trading, but his rapacity in the quest for cash to pay his huge armies devastated the economy of his territories. His grand schemes of empire could not have been sustained without a drastic re-alignment of policy in favour of economic development. Some contemporaries believed that his son Reza Qoli, had he not been blinded, would have governed more wisely.

²⁹ Notably Floor, in the various works cited, but also Thomas M. Ricks in a presentation to the annual Gulf conference at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, July 2006.