

# About the Politicization of The Safaviyya Sufi Order

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## Introduction

Sufi fraternal communities emerged in the East in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Initially informal associations of mystics spontaneously emerging to promote “Ways of searching for the Truth”, some of these fraternities evolved into structured organizations-medieval orders. Sufi orders were significant in promulgating Islam in various regions of Asia Minor, Egypt, Central Asia, Africa, etc. They included the *Bektashiyya* and *Mevleviyya* in Turkey and the Safaviyya order in Azerbaijan. The North-African Tijaniyye (its followers established an independent state in the Senegal and Niger River Basins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and Sanusiyye (the Senussi dynasty ruled in eastern Sudan and Libya from 1837-1969) were the most influential orders in the modern and contemporary periods. The basic structure of the orders included relations between the teacher or guide (*murshid* in Arabic) and the student (*murid*)<sup>1</sup>.

The Safaviyya order in Ardabil in Azerbaijan, was of particular interest because, in 1501, according to Western scholars referring to historical sources, Shah Ismail I, who was a descendant of the order’s founder Safi-al-din, relying on the Turkic tribes, kyzilbash-murids, created a powerful state, initially including Azerbaijan, later all of Iran, present-day Armenia and Iraq Arabic<sup>2</sup>. Members of the order’s murshids, from the sheikh the forefather of the dynasty to the founding father of the state, include the following: Sheikh Safi-al-din (1252-1334), Sheikh Sadr-al-din (1334-1392), Sheikh Khoja Ali (1392-1427), Sheikh Ibrahim or Sheikh

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1 Trimmingham J.S. *The Sufi orders in Islam*. Oxford: 1971, pp. 17-36, 114-129.

2 Tapper R. “Black Sheep, White Sheep and Red-heads”. Iran, V. 4. Published by British Institute of Persian Studies, 1966, p. 63; Aubin Jean. “L’Avenement Des Safavides Reconsiderere (Etudes Safavides III)” // *Moyen Orient & Ocean Indien*, №V//, Paris, 1988; Browne Edward G. *Persian Literature under Tartar Dominion*. Cambridge University Press, 1920; اسگندر بیگ ترکمان. تاریخ عالم آرای، عباسی. تهران: امیرکبیر، 1381، ص. 27

Shah (1427-1447/8), Sheikh Junayd (1447-1456), Sheikh Haydar (1456-1488), Sheikh Shah Ismail I (1499/1500-1524). By the way, role of bloodline and kin in succession of spiritual authority in the Safaviyya order (which was not the case in all Safavi tariqas of the time) contributed to certain extent to transformation of Safaviyya sheikhs to shahs of Safavid royal dynasty. Interestingly, as W. Hinz noted, position in the line of succession was not important for ascension to the throne. For example, Sheikh Ibrahim was the third child in his family while Junaid was even sixth (and last-N.A.)<sup>3</sup>.

...How did the Safaviyya order achieve such high status and when did it first hold political power?

*The motives behind the formation of the fraternity were certainly religious in nature. Nevertheless, as H. Roemer writes, it also played a considerable role in economic and political life, even in the time of Shaikh Safi, who gave the family its<sup>4</sup>.* We may subscribe to the view that the order had political power from its foundation. We will return to this matter following discussion of the main hypotheses on the politicization of Safaviyya that prevail in contemporary historiography.

### **Traditional Hypotheses**

Traditional views hold that the order was politicized under the spiritual guidance of Sheikh Junayd Safavi<sup>5</sup> (Hinz, pp.12-13; Browne, pp.18-19 et al.). At the time open raids against Christian Georgia gave Safavids the title of kadee (Muslim judge)<sup>6</sup>. Later suggestions point to the guidance of Ibrahim (Sheikh Shah), son of Khwaja Ali, as supported by scholars Y. Kuchukdag and B. Dedeyev<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, many manuscripts link Safavi murids with Jahanshah Qara-qoyunlu. For example, a chapter on Rumlu in the manuscript «Tarix-i kızılbashan» (History of the Qızılbash)<sup>8</sup> reads: *their supreme emir was Jahanshah*; while the Safaviyya, is known

3 Hinz W. *Uzun Hasan ve Şeyx Cüneyd*. Tercümeçi Tefik Biyikhoğlu. Ankara, 1948, s. 10.

4 *Cambridge History of Iran*. Cambridge University Press. London. Vol. 6, 1986, p. 334.

5 Hinz W. *Uzun Hasan ve Şeyx Güneyd*. Tercümeçi Tefik Biyikhoğlu. Ankara, 1948, s. 12-13; Browne Edward G. *A history of Persian literature in modern times (1500-1924)*. Cambridge University Press, 1924, p.18-19.

6 Ochsenswald W., Fisher S. N. *The Middle East. A History*. 6th edition. New York, 2004 (previous editions: 1959,1969,1979), p. 215.

7 More precisely, the authorization of the order is divided into two stages: the period of passive politicization (from Shikh Khwaja Ali to Shaikh Juneyd) and the period of active politicization (from Shaikh Juneyd to shah Ismail I) (Küçükdağ Y., Dedeyev B. "Safevilerin nesbine farklı bir bakış". *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 2009, c.420).

8 *Tarix-i kızılbashan*. Tercüme eden Tufan Gündüz. İstanbul, 2015, c. 27-28.

to have, *had the support of the Qara-qoyunlu state<sup>9</sup> with its capital in Tabriz*. According to O. Efendiyevev, Jahanshah embarked on a military campaign against Georgia in 1440 and was joined by Sheikh Ibrahim (Sheikh Shah)<sup>10</sup>, ruler of Ardabil. These developments cause some scholars to believe that the order was politicized. According to professor Fisher, the fact that sheikhs of Ardabil converted to Shiism “approximately after 1392” already means beginning of politicization of the order<sup>11</sup>. Overall, with the fall of the Ilkhans dynasty at the turn of 14-15 centuries, a number of Turkmen tribal associations and numerous independent Sufi orders converted to Shiism. “Upon conversion to Shiism, hereditary spiritual leadership in the Ardabil order combined political and religious factors and became close to unorthodoxy... By 1450 they strived for political power in alliance with Akkoyunlu Turkmen”<sup>12</sup>.

On the other hand, according to researcher Iysa Ade Bello, the politicization of the order occurred during the spiritual guidance of Khwaja Ali. This is in line with Roger Savory’s view<sup>13</sup>: *Under the leadership of Khwaja Ali the order adopted Shi’izm and grew political ambitions. This move of conversion to Shi’ism on the part of the Safavids appears to be purely political*<sup>14</sup>. This writer states that conversion to Shi’ism was the result of the political context of the time, when the country, on the one hand, *was in chaos, divided into khanates and provinces ruled by rival princes* and on the other hand, *was locked between two powerful Sunni states-the Ottoman and Mongol empires. Hence, when political ambitions crept into the order, the Safavids rightly considered the adoption of Shi’ism as the most effective systematic political strategy*<sup>15</sup>. In other words, the author links conversion of Khoja Ali to Shiism with political goals. However, during leadership of Khoja Ali conversion of the order and its leader to Shiism was hardly visible: The latter conclusion is very important. at the time Shiism practices were more like isolated incidents rather than an overwhelming trend<sup>16</sup>.

9 Küçükdağ Y., Dedeyev B. “Safevilerin Nesebine Farklı Bir Bakış”, c.419-420.

10 *Azərbaycan tarixi*, c.III, Bakı, 1999, c.83.

11 Этот период совпадает с периодом духовного лидерства шейха Ходжи Али (1392-1427).

12 Ochsenswald W., Fisher S. N. *The Middle East. A History*. 6th edition. New York, 2004 (previous editions: 1959, 1969, 1979), p. 215-216.

13 Savory R.M. “The Struggle of Supremacy in Persia after the Death of Timur”, *Der Islam*, V. 40 (1964), p.56.

14 Iysa Ade Bello. “The Safavid Epizode: Transition from Spiritual to Temporal Leaders”. *Islamic studies*, V.23, N.1 (Spring, 1984), pp. 5.

15 Ibid.

16 Browne Edward G. *A History of Persian Literature In Modern Times (1500-1924)*. Cambridge University Press, 1924, p.19.

Although chronologically, we suggest that the order was politicized long before Khwaja Ali. For instance, according to A. A. Bakikhanov, Safi-ad-Din's ancestors had always been sheikhs or spiritual teachers. But since Sadr-ad-Din Musa, son of Safi-ad-Din, his further followers (Khoja Ali, Ibrahim, sheikh Juneid) combined spiritual power and political influence <sup>17</sup>.

### **The Concept of Political Power During The Spiritual Guidance of Safi-Ad-Din Ardabili**

#### **Main Resources of The Period of Sheikh Safi's Spiritual Guidance**

In discussing the emergence of the Safaviyya order and the period of Sheikh Safi's spiritual guidance, we must note the scant number of historical chronicles of the time. In fact, the main chronicle in this respect is "Safvat-al-safa" written by Ibn Bazzaz. All other sources refer to later periods: "Silsiletu-n-Nasabi-Sefewiyye", "Jihan-aray-i Shah Ismail-i Safewi", "Huld-i Berin", "Hulasatü't-Tevarih", "Tarix-i-alemarayye-Abbasi", "Tarihçe-yi Safewiyan", "Ravzatü's-Safewiyye" etc. However, this list can be complemented by two of Rashid-ad-din's letters from his collection "Munsha'at-i-Rashidi": the first (N<sup>o</sup>45, ff. 145<sup>b</sup>-149<sup>a</sup>) addressed to Sheikh Safi and the second (N<sup>o</sup>49, ff. 161<sup>a</sup>-169<sup>b</sup>) addressed to his son, Mir Ahmad... <sup>18</sup>.

However, we focus on another set of manuscripts, Mongol writings, of the time. These are decrees by Khulagu-«A Mongolian Document in the Musee de Teheran» decrypted by the American linguist F. Cleaves<sup>19</sup> after six years of intensive effort. Among them we would highlight *decree 720/1320 to the family of Shaykh Zahid* "Bıçığ of Busaid Bayatur Qan of 1320". One paragraph refers to the succession rights of two heirs of Sheikh Zahid Gilani, who was father-in-law and Murshid of Safi-al-din Ardabili. Apparently, the document conferred spiritual authority in *Sujjada* after Sheikh Zahid's death (he is referred to by his real name-Ibrahim (Taj-al-din Ibrahim Zahid) not to his son but to his "grandson Badr-al-din Mahmud" a rival of his brother Shams-al-din. Interestingly, while Badr-al-din was supported

17 Бакиханов А.А. Гюлистан-и-Ирам. Редакция, комментарии, примечания и указатели акад. З.М.Буниятова. Баку, 1991, с. 92.

18 Browne Edward G. "Persian Mss. of the late Sir Albert Houtum-Shindler", K.C.I.E. J.R.A.S., Oct. 1917, pp. 693-694; Browne Edward G. *Persian Literature under Tartar Dominion*. Cambridge University Press, 1920, pp. 80, 81-83; Рашидад-Дин. *Переписка*. Перевод, введение и комментарий А.И.Фалиной, Москва, 1971, сс. 303, 334-335.

19 Cleaves F.W. "The Mongolian documents in the Musee de Teheran". *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 16 (June), 1953.

by Khulagu, according to the document “Safvat-al-safa”<sup>20</sup>, Shams-al-din was favoured by Safi-al-din Ardabili<sup>21</sup>. V. Minorsky examined extensively the texts decrypted by Cleaves in his study «A Mongol decree of 720/1320 to the family of Shaykh Zahid»<sup>22</sup>. But the French scholar J. Aubin made even further progress on the interpretations of these decrypted texts in his article “La propriete fonciere en Azerbaydjan sous les Mongols” (1976) in which he proved that after Sheikh Zahid’s death his son Jamal-al-din was Murshid of the Gilani Sufi community and in 1310, during the rule of Oljaytu Khudabende, two sons of Jamal-al-din, who were also grandsons of Zahid Gilani, strove for economic power while the Ilkhans favoured Badr-al-din, the younger son. This decree was later confirmed by Ilkhan Abu Said in 1320.

Due to these documents, the English language historiography was dominated by the mistaken view that on issues of succession in the orders the Ilkhans preferred bloodline and kin over spiritual unity: *The Mongols, more respectful of the rights of bodily parentage, than of the mystical affinity, restored the rights of Jamal al-din’s son*<sup>23</sup>. This error was caused by a passage in the “Safvat al-safa” that was cited in all hagiographic studies: “Sheikh Zahid expressed his intention to give *Irshad* to Safi-al-din and install him on Sujdade but he humbly refused ... [But] the holder of the throne (Sheikh Zahid) put the cloak on him in accordance with God’s will and order (i.e., declared him Murshid-Sh.F.). Evil people objected saying: you have a faithful, clever and mature son Jamal-al-din Ali! Why don’t you give the high [holy-N.A.] throne to HIM?!”. Then «in order to calm people the sheikh» gave them (his son and son-in-law) a test. The legend has it that “*sheikh asked:*

-Where did my son go for a little privacy?

They answered:

- To a secret cell.

- And where did Safi go for a little privacy?

- The distance from his location to the khaneqah is half a farsakh (3-4 km).

20 *Şeyx Səfi Təzkiyəsi (Səfivət-üs-səfa-nın XVI əsr türk tərcüməsi)*. Bakı, 2006, s. 733-735.

21 Ахундова Н.Ф. *Развитие суфизма в Азербайджане: возвышение шейха Сефи ад-дина Ардебели в эпоху ильханата*. Баку, 2017, с. 174-176.

22 Minorsky V. “A Mongol Decree of 720/1320 to the Family of Shaykh Zahid”. Cambridge, 1954.

23 See: V. Minorsky/ *Ibid*, p.519-520.

- I am going to call them by their names and you will see who deserves this position». Three times he called his son by his name and he never responded. But when he called Safi by his name, he immediately responded saying: «Ləbbeyk, ey şeyx, ey mürsid» and then appeared in the flesh.

This is how Safi-al-din won the test”.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, the fact of “support of Gilani family by Ilkhans” was exacerbated by numerous attempts by Jamal-al-din to assassinate Safi-al-din following Zahid Gilani’s death, and described in the manuscripts<sup>25</sup>.

However, it would be naive to think that Mongol sultans were unaware of Sufi order traditions<sup>26</sup>. Obviously, as J. Aubin correctly assumed, the Ilkhans paid respect to descendants of the formidable Sheikh Zahid and Safi-al-din Ardabili, as “Jamal-al-din had followers in Gilan and was murshid of the murid community beyond Ardabil”. On the other hand, “under the protection of their holy reputation”<sup>27</sup>, the Gilanis were rich landlords, as confirmed in “Abu Said’s decree”.

However, in our view, the Ilkhans who supported the Gilan community took these measures, inter alia, for political reasons due to Sheikh Safi’s increasing influence.

### What Influence Did Sheikh Safi Have?

Sheikh Safi-al-din was not a landlord. After his death, his son Sadr-al-din stated: “His grace the Sheikh left all his property, as well as his livestock, sheep and goats (*mah və davar*) to the *zawiya* as *waqf*; by the end of his physical (*zahir*) life he had given all his money to charity and had debts... He incurred debts to the amount of 1,000 gold coins and did not leave anything to sell to pay it off... He always told his children: my sons, this *zawiya* is my home”<sup>28</sup> <sup>29</sup>.

24 اسگندر بیگ ترکمان. تاریخ عالم آرای عباسی. تهران: امیرکبیر، 1138، ص.13.

25 اسماعیلی ابن بزاز درویش. صفوه الصفاء. تهران، نشر: زریاب، 1377، ص. 789,788.

26 See: Lane G. “The Mongols in Iran”. Oxford handbook of Iranian History, 2011, pp. 248-249; Melville Ch., Nicola B. *The Mongol's Middle East: Continuity and Transformation in Ilhanid iran*. London, 2016; Ахундова Н.Ф. *Развитие суфизма в Азербайджане: возвышение шейха Сефи ад-дина Ардебилли в эпоху ильханата*. Баку, 2017, с. 88-110.

27 Aubin Jean. “Shaykh İbrahim Zahid Gilani (1218?-1301)”. *Turcica. Revue D’etudes Turques*. Tome XXI-XXIII, 1991, pp.52-53.

28 *Şeyx Səfi Təzkirəsi* (Səfvət-üs-səfa-nın XVI əsr türk tərcüməsi). Bakı, 2006, s. 729.

29 By the way, this quality was also characteristic of Shah Ismail I, who never valued material goods, preferring faith and spirituality. European contemporaries wrote: «Neither gold nor property, nor the treasure of the whole world matter to him. His coffers are usually empty: there is no money or gold there. He collected neither gold nor wealth, but he spent so much that many thought he

However, it is hard to deny that his community had clear influence and popularity and also had political influence. Though Sheikh Safi-al-din was not a landlord, *land ownership, an annual income generated from religious holdings, donations and other revenues gave the community economic influence, while he [Safi-al-din-N.A.] had a vast network of political contacts, including relations with such a (powerful) adversary as the Mongol Ilkhan*<sup>30</sup>.

Moreover, that network included followers who were ready to give their life for their murshid. This reminds of the dialogue between Sheikh Safi and the Mongol emir described in “Safvat-al-safa”:

The sheikh asked: *Why has emir Dimishk Khwaja visited us? Is it because he has no property, so that we can give him some? Or he has no army (ləşkər) so that we can give him troops; or is it because this dervish served another? Then we need to pray for him. This Sheikhzadeh [Shams-al-din Jamalán-N.A.] is the grandson of my Sheikh and I must protect the rights of this dynasty because everything I have, I have thanks to this dynasty.* Then sheikh told a parable and after that emir Dimishk Khwaja settled Shams-al-din<sup>31</sup> Jamalán’s matter at that meeting<sup>32</sup>.

Furthermore, “Safvat-al-safa” describes a quite symbolic event (*Hekayat*): one day “Mowlana Amin-al-din from Tabriz said:

“I heard from Khaji Giyas-al-din Mohammad [a great vizier, son of the great vizier Rashid-al-din-N.A.] that Padishah Abu Said used to say that the throne is no longer precious to me”. I asked: why? The padishah responded: when I went to see his eminence (hazrat) Safi, sheikh of the people and faith (Şeyx Səfi ül-millət v-al-din İsxaq), I entered the grand zawiya built of baked brick and said: *this is not a place for reclusion (zöhd)*. I saw a hundred thousand exalted people (*mövc*) there who barely noticed me. Then I asked: *Am I not Padishah Abu Said?* And they responded: *Yes, you are, but here your throne is worth less than nothing as here something else is required*<sup>33</sup>.

This episode illustrates that the Ilkhans could not but respect the reputation of Ardabil Sheikh Safi, especially as he was a highly educated Sufi. Being an eloquent orator, he attracted great numbers of people in Azerbaijan, Iran, Constantinople,

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had treasure hidden somewhere. If he likes something very much, he pays double or even triple the price for it» (Aubin Jean. “L’Avenement Des safavides Reconsiderere (Etudes Safavides III)” // *Moyen Orient & Ocean Indien*, N°V//, Paris, 1988, pp.61-62).

30 *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Cambridge University Press. London. Vol. 6, 1986, p. 334.

31 He was that Shams al-din who was mentioned in Mongol decree (1321).

32 *Şeyx Səfi Təzkiyəsi (Səfivət-üs-səfa-nın XVI əsr türk tərcüməsi)*. Bakı, 2006, s. 733-735.

33 *Ibid.*, s. 717-718.

Syria, Lebanon and India. As Biuk Jame'i noted, *He was considered a great mystic and thus attracted many followers*<sup>34</sup>. "Safvat-al-safa" reads that both Rashid-al-din and Oljaytu, Abu Said and Emir Choban regularly visited him and even often sought his advice<sup>35</sup>. I. Petrishevsky and Falina comment that *Ahmad and Niyas-al-din, sons of Rashid-al-din were murids of Sheikh Safi and visited his Sufi gatherings*<sup>36</sup>. Fazlullah Ibn Ruzbihan Khunji wrote:

در حظه اردبیل سایه ارشاد افکند و از شاخسار توحید میوه معرفت فشانید. امرای ولایت طالش دگاہ ولایت پناهش را پناه ساختند و کبرای (134-ر) مملکت روم به خدمتش سرافتخار برافراختند.

[Translation: in the land of Ardabil he built Irshad, gave out the fruits of the knowledge that he collected from the tree of monotheism (*tohid*). The emirs of the Talish vilayet made his reliable home into their asylum and great people of the Rumi region were honoured to serve him-N.A.]<sup>37</sup>.

Therefore, Sheikh Safi *was not just highly popular, but also very influential among various groups of people, including the nobility*<sup>38</sup>. *Sheikh Safi-al-din's vast influence was visible throughout the whole region, Mongol khans and their viziers visited him to pay their respects*<sup>39</sup>. In a way echoing the developments discussed, E. Browne states: *He [Sheikh Safi-N.A.] who wins a throne and founds a great dynasty destined to endure for more than two centuries is apt*<sup>40</sup>. He preached his doctrine based on ethics and religion and thus laid the foundations of religious (religious and Sufi-N.A.) power that lasted for 80 years after his death and in fact were the basis of the new political reign of Ismail Safavi<sup>41</sup>. The sheikh gathered vast numbers of supporters and inadvertently created a political force, a kind of "inner state". "...the number of visitors from Anatolia and Iraq, through Maraga and Tabriz alone, reached 13,000 over just three months. Many, if not most, arriving from Asia Minor" (See: J.R.A.S. ,

34 Biuk Jame'i. *Sheikh Safiaddin Ardebili's Mausoleum. The cultural Heritage of the Ardebil province*, 2012.

35 *Şeyx Səfi Təzkirəsi (Səfivət-üs-səfa-nun XVI əsr türk tərcüməsi)*. Bakı, 2006, s. 12.

36 Петрушевский И.П. "Городская знать в государстве Хулагуидов" // Советское востоковедение. Москва-Ленинград, №5, 1948, с.419.

37 تاریخ عالم ارای امینی: شرح حکمرانی سلاطین آق قویونلو و ظهور صفویان. نویسنده: فضل اللہ بن روزبہان خنجی اصفہانی، ص. 233.

38 Петрушевский И.П. "Городская знать в государстве Хулагуидов" // Советское востоковедение. Москва-Ленинград, №5, 1948, с.419.

39 Ade Bello Iyasa. "The Safavid episode: transition from spiritual to temporal leaders". *Islamic studies*, V.23, N.1 (Spring, 1984), p. 4.

40 Browne Edward G. *A history of Persian literature in modern times (1500-1924)*. Cambridge University Press, 1924, p.32.

41 Biuk Jame'i. *Sheikh Safiaddin Ardebili's Mausoleum. The cultural Heritage of the Ardebil province*, 2012.



July, 1921, pp. 403-404). In addition, W. Hinz notes, in referring to the Persian manuscript written by Ahmad Lutfullah (*Müneccimbaşı*) “Sahaif ül-ahbar”: *Safavi followers arrived even from such faraway lands as Balkh and Bukhara*<sup>42</sup>. It shows that even in its early stages the Order was a visible and integrated force in the region and, subsequently, was to become a source of great disturbance for Ottoman sultans<sup>43</sup>. Clearly, this all confirms the conclusion of most scholars: it is a proven historical fact that Safi-al-din was an influential spiritual, and significant political, figure of the time.

And so, returning to Mongol decrees, we can state another reason for the Ilkhans’ position to Gilani’s community: in our view, the sheikh’s great popularity cannot be underestimated by Ilkhans.

### **III. Political Power During The Spiritual Guidance Of Sadr-Al-Din Safavi**

We can see that the orders of the rank, scale and level of the Safaviyya could not but have a certain political significance even from the spiritual guidance of Sheikh Safi-al-din Ardabili. Also, the true army of unarmed followers- murids who were ready for battle at any moment with faith in, and at the call of, their Murshid could not but represent a certain military force. The outstanding and significant contribution of Sheikh Safi-al-din to the rise of the Safavid dynasty was also in the transformation of the Safaviyya from a local order to a wide-ranging religious movement whose influence went well beyond the Ardabil region, reaching Syria and Eastern Anatolia<sup>44</sup>.

Another question is whether this force was necessary at the time?!

In answering this question, a number of factors should be taken into consideration: the personal qualities of the spiritual leaders and the strength of their asceticism, the political context and the timing of developments.

#### **Characteristics of Safi-ad-din’s Spiritual Guidance**

Sheikh Safi-ad-din personally never used force, either for his own, or for the public, interest, however extreme the circumstances. As we know, the initial period

42 Hinz W. *Uzun Hasan ve Şeyx Güneyd*. Tercümeçi Tefik Biyikhoğlu. Ankara, 1948, s. 8.

43 Browne Edward G. *A history of Persian literature in modern times (1500-1924)*. Cambridge University Press, 1924, p.44.

44 Ade Bello Iysa. “The Safavid episode: transition from spiritual to temporal leaders”. *Islamic Studies*, V.23, N.1 (Spring, 1984), p. 4.

of Safaviyya rule was quite complex. As the historian Jean Aubin wrote, “elections of new leaders in all religious orders and confessions were immersed in latent conflict. The Zahidiya fraternal community followed the pattern... The Gilanis did not want to accept an heir [Safi-ad-din] who would move their capital city to Ardabil”<sup>45</sup>.

Ibn-Bazzaz mentions several attempts to assassinate Sheikh Safi-ad-din:

1. Following the death of Zahid Gilani, the sheikh would visit his tomb. Apparently, a situation was emerging and when the sheikh’s brother, Khoja Fahr ad-din Yusuf, arrived he advised the sheikh to be wary [of Jamal ad-din’s supporters-N.A] and not to visit the saint’s grave; the sheikh replied: *If I am doomed to die it will be so, but if not, I will survive-it’s all in the Almighty’s will*<sup>46</sup>.
2. Later on, Shahzade Jamal-ad-din Ali conspired to burn down the sheikh’s halvat [retreat]. Although *the fire failed and the halvat remained intact, the flame of fury and envy grew even stronger*

[چون این معنی ممکن نشد و آتش نمی افرخت و خلوت نمی سوخت، آتش غضب و حسد ایشان زیادتر ش] <sup>47</sup>.

3. After unsuccessful attempts to get rid of the sheikh, they tried to kill him *with an archer’s arrow. A few hypocrites (münafıqlar) set an ambush to do this.*
4. When that attempt failed too, they decided to use poison. *The sheikh’s table was laid with poisoned honey*

[پس قدری زهر در عسل کردند و با سفره طعام پیش شیخ آوردند] <sup>48</sup>.

5. “Savfat-as-safa” describes another attempt in which the sheikh was to be thrown out of a boat in the hope that he would drown... This attempt was also unsuccessful, but the sheikh never retaliated.

Eventually, Shahzade Jamal-ad-din had to admit failure in his efforts to get rid of Sheikh Safi-ad-din and “invited the sheikh to his halvat where they talked for about an hour. Finally, Sheikh Safi ad-din said, *if you want to kill me, order someone to bring poison and I will immediately take it for your sake, so you will achieve your object*

45 Aubin Jean. “Shaykh İbrahim Zahid Gilani (1218?-1301)”. Turcica. Revue D’etudes Turques. Tome XXI-XXIII, 1991, p.49.

46 اسماعیلی ابن بزاز درویش. صفوه صفا. تهران، نشر: زریاب، 1377، ص. 788.

47 Ibid, p. 789.

48 Ibid, p. 790.

*and nobody will know the cause*<sup>49</sup>. Clearly, even with his life in danger, Sheikh Safi refrained from the use of political intrigue or military force.

Regarding the relationship with Ilkhans, it is known that the Sufi sheikhs were highly respected by Khulagu (and by Turkic-Mongol khans in general). According to Ruzbihan Khunji, sultan Oljaytu Khudabende regarded Sheikh Safi-al-din as a “Treasure of his gatherings” [وجود سیخ اردبیل تمام زینت گردد]<sup>50</sup>. As to position of Abu Said, he could be more reserved. It is also known that Sheikh Safi regularly avoided meeting him<sup>51</sup> while Abu Said supported Jamal-al-din Gilani, whose community had immunity and was untouchable<sup>52</sup>. Nevertheless, the Ilkhans never altered their respectful and peaceful attitude toward the Safavi Sufi Order.

When the Chobanid dynasty took over in Azerbaijan, however, and especially when Malik Ashraf ascended to the throne, the situation changed drastically.

### **Characteristics of Sadr-al-din’s spiritual guidance**

Sheikh Sadr-al-din enjoyed his father’s favour and trust from an early age. Moreover, Safi-ad-din often sent his son Sadr-al-din to represent him at important events. For example, according to Ruzbihan Khunji, upon the completion of the Sultaniya (1305-13), the fair ruler Sultan Oljaitu (1305-1316) convened a reception of thanks attended by 400 nobles, ulama, mystics and saintly elders. However, as mentioned above, *the sultan wished to have the Ardabil sheikh there, as the diamond [زینت-decoration-N.A.] in the crown of the gathering. The sheikh knew that a refusal to eat at the feast might offend the ruler, but his piety did not allow him to accept food [naval-N.A.] offered by sultans.*<sup>53</sup> *Thus he excused himself on the grounds of age and sent his son Sadr-al-din in his place*

[...سلطان خواست که عقد آن جمع به وجود شیخ اردبیل تمام زینت گردد، به رسل متوالی حضور آن ولی (و) ولی

49 Ibid, p. 790-791.

50 تاریخ عام ارای امینی: شرح حکمرانی سلاطین آق قویونلو و ظهور صفویان. نویسنده: فضل الله بن روزبهان خنجی اصفهانی، ص. 234.

51 Here Minorsky cites the episode from «Silsilat-ul-nasabi-Safaviyye» (p.98) about the vizit of Abu Sa’id to Ardabil, according to which Sheikh Sefi al-din evaded the meeting with the latter; that spoke rather about his cold relations with Ilkhan according to which Sheikh Sefi al-din evaded the meeting with the latter; that spoke rather about his cold relations with Ilkhan (Minorsky V. “A Mongol decree of 720/1320 to the family of Shaykh Zahid”. Cambridge, 1954, c.520).

52 См.: Ахундова Н.Ф. Развитие суфизма в Азербайджане: возвышение шейха Сефи ад-дина Ардебилли в эпоху ильханата. Баку, 2017, с. 151-154, 157-158.

53 According to Gazali’s *Ihya’ulum al-din*, “currently, most of sultans’ assets are illegitimate” O.Efendiye, p.133).

را التماس فرمود. شیخ اندیشید که اگر در مجلس از تصرف طعام پادشاه امتناع فرماید، مبدا آن ملک عادل را که تالیف دل او از واجبات بود شکستگی خاطری روی نماید و تقوای آن قطب مکین اصلا فتوا به تصرف نواله سلاطین نمی داد؛ چه باطن همچو گنجش از برنج، به رنج می آمد و درون به ریاضت پالوده را، از پالوده ای آلوده نمی توانست ساخت. خلف صدق خود، خواجه صدرالدین را... جهت تسکین...<sup>54</sup>

Sadr-al-din was a young man who *had yet to breathe the scent of roses in the garden of asceticism* and did not refuse the food. Upon his return to Ardabil, Safi-ad-din appointed Sadr-al-din his spiritual successor.

We should note that Sadr-al-din's political activity intensified prior to the ascent of Malik Ashraf, who was naib of Azerbaijan from 1343 to 1353 and was declared sultan of Azerbaijan from 1353 to 1357. Sheikh Safi-al-din passed away on 12 Muharram, 735 AH (1334). Thus, at the age of 31, Sadr-al-din became the spiritual leader of the Safaviyya.

All narratives link the early years of Sadr-al-din's spiritual guidance to political changes in the country, namely the break-up of the Ilkhan empire and consequently, his intervention in political and social life. In the turbulent period aggravated by Malik Ashraf's politics, Sheikh Sadr-al-din armed his supporters and deployed them around *Dar-ul-Irshad* and in mountainous areas around Ardabil. But he sometimes used military force for other reasons too. He provided armed support to his followers against the emirs of towns and villages and, thus, intervened in political clashes, whether intentionally or not. This apparent interference by Sheikh Sadr-al-din in social and political developments provoked resistance (as involvement in political life was against the rules of the tariqa) from some *khalife* and leaders of *khaneqahs* and *zawiyas* in Safavid vilayets which, in turn, prompted trends towards schism and breakup in the order<sup>55</sup>. Thus, the early leadership of the young sheikh became extremely strained, adventurist and belligerent.

Regarding Malik Ashraf Chobani (1344-1356), Chobanid ruler of Azerbaijan virtually all historians describe him as a cunning and cruel tyrant. Not only did he devastate the country and impoverished its working population, he also regularly imprisoned his emirs, viziers and other nobles under false charges, confiscating

54 تاریخ عالم ارای امینی: شرح حکمرانی سلاطین آق قویونلو و ظهور صفویان. نویسنده: فضل الله بن روزبهان خنجی اصفهانی، ص. 233-234.

55 We don't stumble upon on these events in all of the versions of *Safvat-us-safa*. For instance, these events are absent in version which we used (1377). That's why we are referring on author's manuscript (300-311 vereqler) used by M.Abbasli in his article "Safevilerin Kökenine Dair" (See: Abbasli Mirza. "Safevilerin Kökenine Dair". Belleten, CXL, Ankara, 1976, s. 294-296).

their property and lands. Many nobles had to flee the country or hide. Khwaja Sadr-al-din Ardabili, son of Sheikh Safi-al-din Is'haq Ardabili, could not escape that fate either.

However, according to some medieval manuscripts, Malik Ashraf initially tended to favour Sadr-al-din:

... و اسمه [صدر الدين -N.A.] الشيخ موسى ابن الشيخ صفى الدين الاردبيل و يعرف بجليل العجم ....

[Translation: his [Sadr-al-din's-N.A.] name is son of Sheikh Musa Safi-ad-din Ardabili and he is known as an outstanding person (*Jalil*) of Ajam].

الاشرف الجوپانی يعظمه حتى انه (صدر الدين -N.A.) قبل قدميه مر ارا فاستقدمه الى تبريز فمغى اليه ثم حدثت بينها نفرة وجبت تبرم المالك الاشرف منه و بلغ صدر الدين ان امالك الاشرف اضمر له السوع وامر لبعض خاصته ان يصب اليه السم فاراد الخروج من تبريز فمنعه ثم اذن له ثم ندم فارسل في طلبه ارغوا [? -N.A.]<sup>56</sup>.

[Al-Ashraf Chobani praised him so highly that he even bowed to him (kissed his feet) and officially invited him to Tabriz. But then hatred sparked between them. Al-Malik al-Ashraf distanced himself. Sadr-al-din heard a rumour that al-Malik al-Ashraf harboured bad feelings towards him. He [Malik Ashraf-N.A.] ordered some of (his) court to poison him<sup>57</sup>. (Initially) when he [Sadr-al-din-N.A.] wanted to leave Tabriz, [Malik Ashraf-N.A.] did not allow him to, but then changed his mind. Later, al-Malik al-Ashraf (again) regretted letting him leave and sent Orguvan (probably, Orgunshah, one of Chobanid's personal emirs-N.A.) to bring him back.]

Therefore, Sheikh Sadr-al-din had to settle temporarily in Gilan. During his stay there, the sheikh negotiated not only with his political and spiritual allies in Azerbaijan but also with Janibek, khan of the Golden Horde and son of a famous Uzbek khan, who was a rival of the Chobanids.

Among those who emigrated from Azerbaijan, besides Sadr-al-din, the manuscripts also mention Sheikh Kijiji who settled in Sham (Syria) and Kazi Muhj-al-din Barda'i who settled in Saray, the capital city of the Golden Horde. According to Hafiz-i Abru and Abd-al-Razzak Samarkandi, Kazi Muhj-al-din Barda'i attended one of the Golden Horde's gatherings. At the meeting with the khan of the Golden Horde he *so eloquently described the grievous situation in enslaved Azerbaijan that he made*

الشبك: من فرق الغلاة في العراق: أصلهم. لغتهم. قراهم. عقائدهم. أو أيدهم. عاداتهم؛ اصراف، احمد حامد. بغداد، 1954، ص. 240

57 Repeated assassination attempts on Sadr ad-din are also reported in «Safvat-al-Safa».

*everybody cry, including Janibek*<sup>58</sup>. After that, Janibek, with the support of Kazi Muhj-al-din Barda'i, Sheikh Sadr-al-din Ardabili and many other Azerbaijani nobles, embarked on a quest to Azerbaijan and put an end to the reign of “the brutal tyrant” [Naturally, this quest also pursued long-term political aims].

Eventually, mainly thanks to this alliance, the sheikh returned to Ardabil and retained his spiritual leadership of the order. According to “al-Shabak min firaq al-Ghulat fi al-'Iraq”, after crushing Malik Ashraf, Jani Beg honoured Sadr-al-din and returned his lands to him<sup>59</sup>.

Militarization of the army, cooperation with some of the opposition representatives, as well as collaboration with the head of neighbouring rival state... Our house believes that all these developments are surely sufficient evidence of the order's involvement in the country's political processes.

### **Conclusion**

In view of the information discussed above, we cannot but agree that Sufi sheikhs exercised political influence and military force from the leadership of Safi-al-din. And they used political power from the leadership of Sadr-al-din. Therefore, it is appropriate in our view to distinguish between the “politicization” and “militarization” of the order and attribute its politicization not to the spiritual leadership of Sheikh Junayd or even to Sheikh Ibrahim, as traditional historiography and scholars believe. In fact, it was the spiritual leadership of Sheikh Junayd that marked the militarization of the order, while previous information quite clearly places the order's politicization during the leadership of Sadr-al-din.

58 Али-заде А.А. *Социально-экономическая и политическая история Азербайджана в 13-14 вв.* Баку, 2012, с. 360.

59 الشبك: من فرق الغلاة في العراق: أصلهم. لغتهم. قراهم. عقائدهم. أوأبدهم. عاداتهم؛ اصراف، احمد حامد. بغداد، 1954، ص. 240

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