

## *Twelver Shī'ism and the Problem of the Hidden Imām*

The disappearance of the twelfth Imām in 874 plunged the Twelvers (then Imāmīs) into a prolonged state of crisis. It took generations for the community to arrive at a consensus regarding the number of Imāms and the eschatological implications of occultation. This chapter examines the subsequent development of Twelver Shī'ism, which culminated in the adoption of a modified Mu'tazilī theological edifice, the development of a rationalist legal system, and the growth of the authority of scholars. Specifically, it documents three seminal transformations in Twelver Shī'ism: (i) the rise of Mu'tazilī theology and systematic legal reasoning in the aftermath of the Imām's occultation, (ii) the far-reaching impact of Safavid patronage of Twelver Shī'ism in Iran beginning in the sixteenth century, and (iii) the victory of rationalist (*uṣūlī*) over traditionist (*akhbārī*) legal discourse late in the eighteenth century. Although the chapter is organized chronologically, there are places where thematic concerns require a return to the preoccultation period.

### I. THE IMPLICATIONS OF OCCULTATION

Before 874, the forebears of the Twelver Shī'a had a visible and (mostly) accessible Imām who provided guidance on uncertain or ambiguous issues. As detailed in Chapters 1 and 2, the Twelvers viewed the Imāmate as a necessary consequence of the end of prophethood. The Imām's interpretations were considered authoritative, and they guaranteed that the Muslim community remained on the proper path. This section examines the devolution of authority in the postoccultation period from an Imām to a class of religious scholars who relied primarily on rational discourse.

## A. Theology

After the Imām's occultation, the Twelver Shī'a gradually embraced several key Mu'tazilī theological positions. They first affirmed the foundational Mu'tazilī idea that the fundamentals of religion were grounded in human reason. They then absorbed a number of central Mu'tazilī principles. Before turning to these developments, it may be helpful to restate the five core beliefs of the Mu'tazila as outlined in the introduction to Section 1 of the book:

- (i) The principle of divine oneness (*tawhīd*), which holds most of God's attributes to be metaphorical
- (ii) The principle of rational divine justice
- (iii) The principle of the promise and the threat (*al-wa'd wa-l-wa'id*), which affirms the eternal punishment of the sinner
- (iv) The principle of the "intermediate position," through which a grave sinner is considered morally corrupt (*fāsiq*) rather than a believer or a nonbeliever
- (v) The principle of "enjoining good and forbidding wrong," which requires an activist engagement with the material world

In time, Twelver scholars fully embraced the first two principles, unequivocally rejected the third and fourth, and conditionally adopted the fifth.

During the eighth and ninth centuries, the Twelver community's engagement with theology (*kalām*) was limited by the presence of a living and accessible Imām. This does not mean that Twelver scholars completely shunned theological discourse. In fact, a number of figures associated with Ja'far al-Ṣādiq participated in theological debates, including, most prominently, Zurāra b. A'yan (d. between 765 and 767) and Hishām b. al-Hakam (d. 795 or 796). A majority of Twelver scholars, however, refrained from theological speculation in favor of a traditionist approach grounded in the statements of the Imāms. Some even condemned theologically minded scholars in severe terms for preferring theological musings to the Imām's authoritative guidance. There was some basis for this criticism, as Twelver theologians occasionally took positions that appeared to contradict the Imāms, particularly on issues such as free will and the nature of God's attributes.

The general ambiguity of the Imāms' views provided Twelver theologians a degree of interpretive latitude. They also benefited from statements in which the Imāms encouraged their followers to utilize reason and rationality

to defend the community against Mu'tazilī attacks. For their part, the Mu'tazila accused the Twelvers of anthropomorphism and determinism and were particularly critical of the Twelver doctrines of *badā'* (a change in the divine decision based on historical circumstance) and *raj'a* (the return of the dead).<sup>1</sup> Twelver theologians of this period held a diversity of views, but they were united in their ultimate deference to the authority of the Imām. Hossein Modarressi notes that although the Imāms "pointed out that rational argument is good as a means in dialectics . . . no belief should be constructed upon it, because religion is the realm of revelation, not reason."<sup>2</sup> In other words, rationalism was valuable in polemical arguments, but it remained subservient to the authority of the Imām, especially in matters of belief.

In the course of the ninth century, the 'Abbāsids increasingly restricted the Imāms' movements and sequestered them from their followers. These pressures culminated in the forced transfer of the tenth and eleventh Imāms to the 'Abbāsīd capital of Samarra and the disappearance of the twelfth Imām in 874. At the time of the occultation, a majority of the Twelver Shī'a were traditionists, relying exclusively on reports that conveyed the words or actions of the Prophet and the Imāms. This perspective was particularly strong in the Iranian city of Qum, home to one of the two largest Twelver communities of the time. Theological discourse was restricted to a handful of Twelver scholars in Baghdad. By neutralizing the potential for conflict with the Imām, the occultation opened space for Twelver theologians to develop their ideas in conversation with the Mu'tazila.

By the late ninth and early tenth centuries, a few Twelver scholars had clearly embraced Mu'tazilī ideas. Abū Sahl Ismā'īl b. 'Alī (d. 924) and Ḥasan b. Mūsā (d. 922) from the prominent Banū Nawbakht family in Baghdad, for example, affirmed Mu'tazilī positions regarding God's attributes, divine justice, and free will.<sup>3</sup> They continued, however, to reject Mu'tazilī principles that directly contradicted the Twelver doctrine of the Imāmate, particularly the denial of infallibility and the belief in the unconditional punishment of the sinner.<sup>4</sup> Ibn Qiba (d. before 931), a Mu'tazilī theologian who converted to Twelver Shī'ism, signalled an even broader appropriation of rationalist theology. His conception of the Twelver Imāmate included

<sup>1</sup> The animosity between the Mu'tazila and Twelver theologians in the eighth century is well documented. See Modarressi, *Crisis*, 112–15 and Madelung, "Imamism," 13–15.

<sup>2</sup> Modarressi, *Crisis*, 115.

<sup>3</sup> Madelung, "Imamism," 15–16.

<sup>4</sup> This latter belief conflicted with the Twelver view that the Imāms would intercede on behalf of their followers on the Day of Judgment.

(i) an emphasis on knowledge and piety over lineage, (ii) a stress on the need for clear designation (*naṣṣ*), (iii) a reduction in excessive claims about the Imām's knowledge, and (iv) a reluctance to declare the broader Muslim community apostates over the succession to Muḥammad. Ibn Qiba's views were particularly influential among later Twelver scholars/theologians with Mu'tazilī inclinations.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the increasing number of Twelver scholars engaged in theological speculation, traditionism remained dominant within Twelver Shī'ism in the tenth century. The community's position at the time is best exemplified by Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Bābawayh al-Ṣadūq (known as Ibn Bābawayh) (d. 991 or 992), a leading Twelver authority who settled in Rayy.<sup>6</sup> Ibn Bābawayh was generally ambivalent toward theological discourse, but he was willing to engage theologians on those issues for which traditions appeared to provide some measure of guidance and insight. For example, he took Twelver traditions that seemed to support anthropomorphism and determinism and demonstrated the viability of alternative readings. In the process, he minimized differences between the Twelvers and the Mu'tazila regarding God's attributes and divine justice. With respect to free will, Ibn Bābawayh argued that the acts of human beings were created by God, but he described this creation as "preestimation" as opposed to "production." This meant that God did not compel an action but rather created the causal means for its performance. At the same time, Ibn Bābawayh remained committed to several Twelver notions criticized by the Mu'tazila, such as intercession, the change in the divine decision based on historical circumstance (*badā'*), and the return of the dead (*raj'a*).

The broad adoption of Mu'tazilī ideas by Twelver scholars first occurred in the generation after Ibn Bābawayh. The key figure in this transition was al-Shaykh al-Mufid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Nu'mān (d. 1022 or 1023), the head of the Twelver community in Baghdad. Al-Mufid dismissed traditionist injunctions against theology, citing the example of Imāms who had authorized their followers to use reason to defend the community's central doctrines (described earlier). In some instances, he offered creative reinterpretations of Twelver traditions that supported his theological positions, but in most cases, his opinions were grounded solely in his own independent reasoning.

<sup>5</sup> Modarressi, *Crisis*, 122–26.

<sup>6</sup> For Ibn Bābawayh's view as presented later in the chapter, see Madelung, "Imamism," 17–21.

The theological views ascribed to al-Mufid generally fit the Baghdadi (as opposed to Basran) school of Mu'tazilism.<sup>7</sup> The subtle differences between these two schools are beyond the scope of this book. In substantive terms, al-Mufid accepted a majority of Mu'tazilī arguments regarding God's unity and attributes (based on Twelver traditions) and divine justice (with most of its consequences). In the case of free will, he rejected Ibn Bābawayh's notion of "preestimation" in favor of the Mu'tazilī position. Al-Mufid remained opposed to the Mu'tazilī belief in the unconditional punishment of the sinner and the intermediate state of the sinner. His primary disagreement with the Mu'tazila, however, concerned the Imāmate, as he strongly affirmed 'Alī's exclusive right to succession and the special status of the Imāms (e.g., in terms of intercession and miracles).

Although he established the basic parameters of the relationship between Twelver Shi'ism and Mu'tazilism, al-Mufid was primarily interested in deflecting theological criticism. He believed that the fundamentals of religion were not based solely on reason but required revelation and transmitted knowledge. By contrast, his student and successor in Baghdad, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 1044), argued that reason alone could establish the validity of seminal Twelver beliefs.<sup>8</sup> In terms of doctrine, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā's views aligned with the Basran school of Mu'tazilism. This placed him in opposition to al-Mufid on a multitude of minor theological points (mostly beyond the scope of this book), but the two agreed on most vital issues. Wilferd Madelung notes that "in such fundamental matters as the imamate, the condemnation of the adversaries of the Imams as infidels, the rejection of the unconditional punishment of the sinner, and the belief in the intercession of the Imams al-Murtaḍā followed the doctrine of his first teacher al-Mufid."<sup>9</sup> In theological areas where al-Mufid reinterpreted traditions, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā offered rational explanations that implicitly (if not explicitly) affirmed central Mu'tazilī positions.<sup>10</sup> His primary innovation lay in his inversion of the relationship between reason and revelation. For al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, it was reason, not revelation, that established the basic fundamentals of religion.

<sup>7</sup> For al-Mufid's view as presented later, see Madelung, "Imamism," 21–24.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to al-Shaykh al-Mufid, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā studied with a number of prominent Mu'tazilī theologians.

<sup>9</sup> Madelung, "Imamism" 26–27.

<sup>10</sup> Madelung cites, for example, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā's efforts at interpreting *raji'a* as the return of the Imām as opposed to widespread return of the dead as well as his affirmation of the createdness of the Qur'ān. See Madelung, "Imamism," 26.

Al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā cleared the path for subsequent generations of Twelver scholars to embrace a wide range of Mu'tazilī doctrines. Madelung summarizes the classical post–eleventh-century Twelver theological position as follows:

Reason alone is the sole source of the fundamentals of faith according to their [i.e., thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Twelver scholars'] teaching. Questions which had been distinctive of early Imamite theology like the *badā'*, the *raj'a*, and the integrity of the Koran no longer were subject [*sic*] of discussion. Yet no concession is made to Mu'tazilism concerning the imamate, the intercession and the rejection of the permanent punishment of the believing sinner.<sup>11</sup>

Although this statement perhaps overstates the centrality of reason, it reflects the general tenor of Twelver theological discourse of the period. Whereas the Zaydīs adopted almost the entirety of Mu'tazilī theology, the Twelvers exercised considerable discretion particularly on matters concerning the Imāmate. By the eleventh century, they had developed the theological framework described in the first part of this book (see Chapters 1 and 2).

### *B. Law*

The previous section documented the gradual Twelver Shī'ī embrace of Mu'tazilī ideas. While permitting a degree of theological speculation, the Imāms were the final arbiters of doctrine and belief. Their overriding authority strengthened a traditionist perspective that was skeptical of the utility of human reason. Specifically, traditionist scholars argued that human reason could not produce certain religious knowledge and was therefore susceptible to mistaken judgments. In the presence of a living and accessible Imām, why was there a need for rationalist speculation in either theology or law? The Imām's occultation in 874 rendered such an argument irrelevant and allowed Mu'tazilī theology to pervade Twelver Shī'ism over the next two centuries. Twelver jurisprudence experienced a similar turn to rationalism, heralded by many of the same scholars mentioned earlier.<sup>12</sup>

Before 874, the Twelver Imāms provided their followers with definitive answers to all legal questions.<sup>13</sup> Traditionist scholars vested legal authority

<sup>11</sup> Madelung, "Imamism," 27.

<sup>12</sup> The subsequent discussion follows the periodization scheme proposed by Modarressi in his seminal study of the development of Twelver Shī'ī law. See Modarressi, *Introduction*, 23–58.

<sup>13</sup> For this period, see Modarressi, *Introduction*, 24–32.

in the words and actions of the Imāms. Such guidance was, in fact, the central and most important duty of an Imām. There also existed a rationalist tendency that was supported and often defended by the Imāms, especially with regard to theological discourse (described earlier) and jurisprudence.<sup>14</sup> With respect to the latter, Modarressi describes how Imāms sometimes offered only general rules and principles, leaving their disciples to formulate specific judgments. He also suggests that the Imāms publicly modeled jurisprudential methods for their followers to emulate. On the basis of this guidance, Twelver jurists developed a rationalist system that consisted of “logical analysis and reasoning within the framework of Qur’ānic texts and Tradition.”<sup>15</sup> This system used inference<sup>16</sup> as opposed to the analogical reasoning (*qiyās*)<sup>17</sup> characteristic of Sunnī jurisprudence.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Twelver Shī'ism in the preoccultation period included two competing groups of legal scholars: a majority that adhered to traditionism and a minority that relied on some rationalist techniques.

The controversy between traditionists and rationalists continued in the period stretching from the occultation (874) to the latter part of the tenth century.<sup>19</sup> The traditionists placed legal authority exclusively in reports from the Prophet and the Imāms, whereas the rationalists allowed for inferences that went beyond these reports. A second area of dispute concerned the utility of traditions preserved by a small number of (sometimes only one or two) chains of transmitters. As opposed to traditions with multiple independent chains of transmission, these singular accounts (referred to as *akhbār al-āḥād*) were significantly more prone to fabrication. Whereas traditionists accepted these as valid legal sources, rationalists rejected them as too uncertain and unreliable.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Those Twelver scholars who employed rational speculation in law were also partial to theological discourse.

<sup>15</sup> Modarressi, *Introduction*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> An inferential argument takes a Qur’ānic injunction and fleshes out its broader implications. For example, if the Qur’ān forbids uttering a word of annoyance to your parents (Q17:23–25), then you certainly cannot beat them, as this would be far worse.

<sup>17</sup> An analogical argument takes a Qur’ānic rule and analogizes it to a new situation through a causal factor. For example, the Qur’ān forbids grape wine (Q5:90–91). The reason (causal factor) for this injunction is intoxication. Because beer also intoxicates, it, too, is forbidden.

<sup>18</sup> In later centuries, Twelver jurists would refer to their approach as *ijtihād*. In the early eighth century, however, this word denoted the use of independent reasoning. For a discussion of the problematic and evolving legal terminology in the early period, see Modarressi, *Introduction*, 28–32.

<sup>19</sup> For this period, see Modarressi, *Introduction*, 32–39.

<sup>20</sup> Rationalists also rejected the use of *akhbār al-āḥād* as evidentiary sources in theological discourse.

Traditionist scholars enjoyed a clear advantage over rationalists in this period.<sup>21</sup> Based primarily in Qum, they focused on gathering and preserving reports from the Imāms. This project consisted in critical examination of chains of transmission to verify the reliability of a given report. Despite their vulnerability to fabrication, singular traditions were considered superior to human attempts at ascertaining God's will through reason. The most important traditionist scholars of the time included Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī (d. 941) and Ibn Bābawayh (mentioned earlier).<sup>22</sup>

The rationalist tendency in this period was represented primarily by Ibn Abī 'Aqīl (d. early tenth century) and Ibn al-Junayd (d. mid-tenth century). Ibn Abī 'Aqīl's use of rational inferences and general principles resembled the practice of the jurists who had surrounded the Imāms. He relied on traditions that were universally accepted but dismissed reports if they contradicted a principle deduced from the Qur'ān. He also rejected singular traditions as legal sources. A similar form of rational analysis informed the legal writings of Ibn al-Junayd. In contrast to Ibn Abī 'Aqīl, however, he accepted the validity of singular reports, using them (alongside the Qur'ān and widely transmitted traditions) to derive broad legal principles.<sup>23</sup>

Twelver legal thought experienced a marked change beginning in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries with the writings of al-Shaykh al-Mufid and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (both mentioned previously).<sup>24</sup> Based in Baghdad, these jurists successfully challenged traditionist dominance in Twelver Shī'ī jurisprudence. Recall that both al-Mufid and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā were skilled theologians who facilitated the adoption of some Mu'tazilī beliefs into Twelver Shī'ism. In the legal arena, their approach resembled that of Ibn Abī 'Aqīl, deriving legal inferences from Qur'ānic principles and widely transmitted traditions while rejecting the use of singular traditions. They also considered the established practice of the Twelver community to be a valid source of law.

The influence of al-Shaykh al-Mufid and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā cannot be overstated. They laid the foundation for the rationalist legal system that ultimately prevailed in Twelver Shī'ism. Traditionist ideas were

<sup>21</sup> Modarressi, *Introduction*, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Kulaynī was the author-compiler of *al-Kāfī*, the most important collection of Twelver Shī'ī traditions.

<sup>23</sup> Modarressi identifies a third tendency in this period that neither centered exclusively on traditionism nor utilized a formal rational system of law. He labels this position "The Intermediate School" and describes it as follows: "The school formulated its juridical opinions through the process of extracting specific precepts from the general principles implied in traditions, or through selection or reconciliation when traditions were contradictory." See Modarressi, *Introduction*, 39.

<sup>24</sup> For more on this period, see Modarressi, *Introduction*, 40–43.



marginalized and never recovered their previous strength. Their students consolidated the rationalist position and developed a distinctively Twelver jurisprudence. Muḥammad b. Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī (d. 1067), for example, formulated a new legal method that retained the rationalist features of al-Shaykh al-Mufid and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā while permitting the use of singular traditions. He was also responsible for the introduction of some Sunnī concepts into Twelver legal thought. In a number of works, he even demonstrated the validity of Twelver legal positions, relying exclusively on Sunnī sources or methods.

Although some jurists remained suspicious of singular traditions (e.g., Ibn Idrīs), al-Ṭūsī's integrative approach prevailed through the fourteenth century. The most important developments in this period involved the systemization of Twelver Shī'ī law. Al-Muḥaqqiq Ja'far b. Ḥasan al-Ḥillī (d. 1277) and his student, Ibn al-Muṭahhar Ḥasan b. Yūsuf al-'Allāma al-Ḥillī (d. 1325), argued that detailed knowledge of the law was a product of ambiguous indicators in the sources. The jurist (*mujtahid*) used rational methods (*ijtihād*) to navigate this doubt, producing rulings that invariably contained a degree of uncertainty. For this reason, they held that the ruling of every jurist on an issue, even if it contradicted those of other jurists on the same issue, was equally valid. The ordinary believer was instructed to follow or imitate a given jurist's ruling, a process called *taqlīd*. In contrast to early Twelver demands for legal certainty, this new system acknowledged that uncertainty was part and parcel of the law. Twelver Shī'ī jurisprudence achieved its classical (or *uṣūlī*) form with al-Shahīd al-Awwal (d. 1384), who replaced elements derived from Sunnī legal principles with exclusively Shī'ī ones. The result was a Twelver jurisprudence that was distinctively Shī'ī in content, form, and argumentative style.

### C. The Devolution of Authority

Twelver Shī'ism steadily embraced rationalism in both the theological and the legal spheres following the disappearance of the twelfth Imām. Before occultation, the Imām was the final arbiter on all issues, even if he did not always exercise this authority. Some Imāms tolerated a diversity of opinions among their adherents and encouraged debates on theological and legal matters, but this may have stemmed from political concerns. As rivals to the Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd dynasties, the Imāms were under constant surveillance if not outright persecution. In such an environment, the Imāms may have authorized their followers to practice rationalist discourse for practical reasons. Theology provided the community a means

to defend Shī'ī doctrinal beliefs, whereas rational jurisprudence offered it legal guidance at times when access to the Imāms was limited.

As long as the Imāms remained visible, advocates of traditionism held a clear advantage over proponents of rationalism. Their position was grounded in the idea that any knowledge derived purely from reason was inherently uncertain because the human mind was imperfect. The only source of certain knowledge was God, who communicated this information through the Qur'ān and his selected representatives (i.e., the Prophet and the Imāms). In the immediate aftermath of the occultation of the twelfth Imām, the traditionists successfully consolidated their advantage. It was broadly assumed that the twelfth Imām would soon return to usher in a new, just sociopolitical order (see Chapter 4). In the meantime, authority resided in traditions which preserved the community's memory of the Imāms' words and actions.

The dominance of traditionism began to wane in the latter half of the tenth century, largely through the efforts of al-Shaykh al-Mufīd and his students in Baghdad. A number of factors contributed to this change. First, the political landscape of the Muslim world had changed dramatically with the rise of Shī'ī dynasties. Iran and Iraq were ruled by the Būyids (934–1055), a Daylamite family of Shī'ī origins, who encouraged the celebration of distinctive Shī'ī festivals such as 'Īd al-Ghadīr (see Chapter 3) and patronized Shī'ī scholars.<sup>25</sup> Al-Mufīd and al-Sharīf Murtaḍā used Būyid political and financial support to spread their ideas, training students who, over the next few centuries, refined and systematized the use of rationalism in theology and law.<sup>26</sup>

A second factor in the victory of rationalism over traditionism may have involved basic pragmatism. The presence of an Imām dispels the need for a self-sustaining system for the production of religious knowledge. When an Imām is no longer present, however, the community requires a means for addressing novel issues. Is coffee permissible? Is abortion murder? How long should a Muslim fast if she lives north of the Arctic Circle where days extend for months? For the Ismā'īlī Shī'a, the answers to these questions come directly from a reigning Imām who wields absolute authority (see Chapters 6 and 9). For the Twelvers, traditions might have sufficed in the short term. Over time, however, there was an inevitable pull toward rationalist thinking that built on the textual sources but was malleable

<sup>25</sup> For the Būyids, see Kennedy, *The Prophet*, 212–49 and Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*.

<sup>26</sup> These rationalist scholars were based in Baghdad, which may have contributed to the growth of their influence as compared with traditionist scholars, whose strength lay in regions that lacked access to similar sources of patronage.

enough to address emerging problems. The drift of Twelver Shī'ism toward rationalism was likely a product of this impulse, as scholars filled the void of the absent Imām. Although the legal authority of the Imām devolved onto the scholars, his political authority remained inaccessible even after the establishment of a Twelver Shī'ī dynasty in Iran in the sixteenth century.

## II. SHĪ'ISM AND SAFAVID IRAN

### *A. The Founding of the Safavid Empire*

The rise of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722) in Iran marked an important transition in the history of Twelver Shī'ism. The Safavids were originally the leaders of a Sufi order based in Ardabil, a city in northwestern Iran near the current border with Azerbaijan. The order was founded by Ṣafī al-Dīn (d. 1334) in the fourteenth century and gradually built up a following of eastern Anatolian Turks (the Qizilbash). The teachings of the early Safavids likely inclined toward Sunnism while maintaining a reverence for the family of the Prophet (i.e., the 'Alids). The Safavids themselves claimed descent from the seventh Twelver Imām, Mūsā al-Kāẓim. The order gained strength and influence through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries due to the deterioration of political authority in the region. They also benefited from a series of long-lived leaders and a stable hereditary system for succession.

The transformation of the Safavids from a Sufi order to a Twelver Shī'ī dynasty occurred during the reign of Shah Ismā'īl I (d. 1524). Beginning in 1501, Ismā'īl I led a series of successful military campaigns with the backing of Qizilbash tribesmen. He was crowned Shah in his capital city of Tabriz in 1501, and, within a decade, his forces had completed the conquest of the entirety of modern-day Iran and Iraq. Safavid expansion continued until 1514, when Ismā'īl was decisively defeated by Ottoman forces at the Battle of Chaldiran. The dynasty survived for the next two hundred years despite a succession of wars with the Ottomans to the west and the Uzbeks to the east.

The power of the Safavid state rested on three pillars. The first was the military strength of the Qizilbash tribesmen, whose relationship to the Safavids was that of adherents in a Sufi order to their master. This charismatic bond was tenuous and unstable. It depended on a perception of divine favor bestowed on the head of the order and could be called into question after a political or military setback. Ismā'īl's defeat at the hands of the Ottomans in 1514 appears to have unsettled his Qizilbash supporters. Perhaps it was due to the potentially catastrophic consequences of further