

# The Safavid Empire, 1501 to 1736



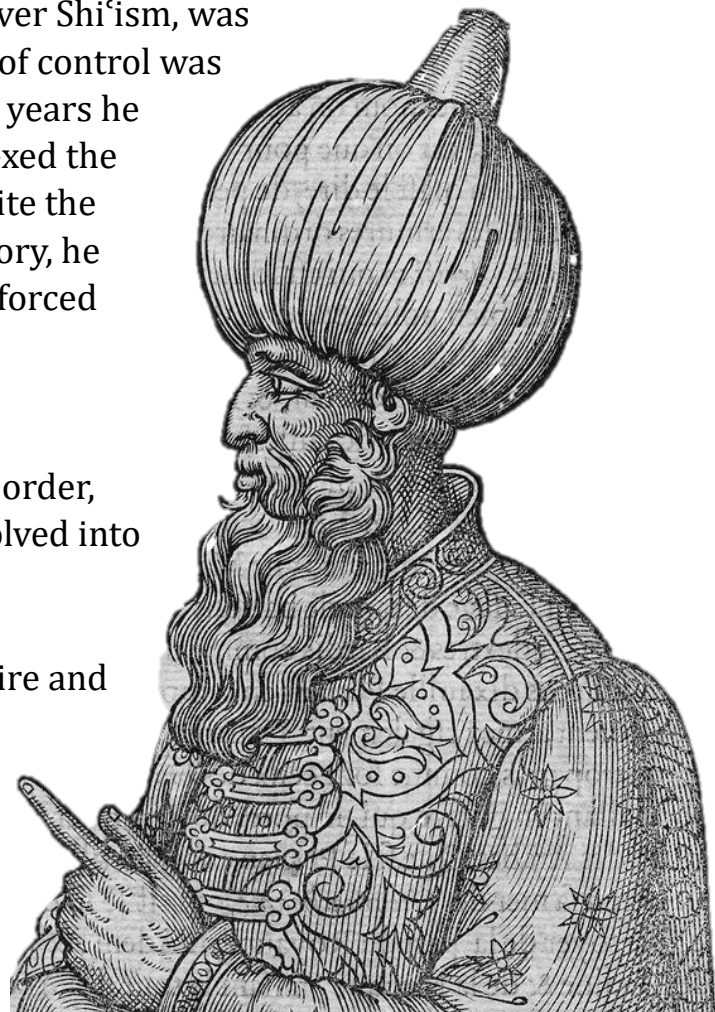
Figure 4.19 The Safavid Empire. This map shows the Safavid Empire (green) at its greatest extent, including disputed territories (dots) where the Safavids found themselves in conflict with the Ottoman Empire (orange) and the Uzbek rulers of the Khanate of Bukhara (purple). (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY NC-SA 4.0 license)

- **Islam**, major world religion promulgated by the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia in the 7th century ce. The Arabic term *islām*, literally “surrender,” illuminates the fundamental religious idea of Islam—that the believer (called a Muslim, from the active participle of *islām*) accepts surrender to the will of Allah (in Arabic, Allāh: God). Allah is viewed as the sole God—creator, sustainer, and restorer of the world. The will of Allah, to which human beings must submit, is made known through the sacred scriptures, the Qur’ān (often spelled Koran in English), which Allah revealed to his messenger, Muhammad. In Islam Muhammad is considered the last of a series of prophets (including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Solomon, and Jesus), and his message simultaneously consummates and completes the “revelations” attributed to earlier prophets.
- **Sufism**, mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God.



It consists of a variety of mystical paths that are designed to ascertain the nature of humanity and of God and to facilitate the experience of the presence of divine love and wisdom in the world.<sup>1</sup> Connected with **asceticism**, (from Greek *askeō*: “to exercise,” or “to train”), the practice of the denial of physical or psychological desires in order to attain a spiritual ideal or goal.

- **Twelver Shi‘ah**, the largest of the three Shi‘i groups that exist today. The Twelvers believe that, at the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 ce, the spiritual-political leadership (the *imamate*) of the Muslim community was ordained to pass down to ‘Alī, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, and then to ‘Alī’s son Ḥusayn and thence to other imams down to the 12th, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan, who is understood to have been born circa 870 but to have gone into occultation (Arabic *ghaybah*; Persian *ghaybat*)—a state of concealment by God—soon after his father’s death circa 874. The “Hidden Imam,” as he is sometimes called, is considered to be still alive and will return when God determines it to be appropriate and safe.<sup>2</sup>
- **Ismā‘īl I**, a Sufi mystic who adhered to Twelver Shi‘ism, was enthroned as shah (king), although his area of control was initially limited to Azerbaijan. In the next 10 years he subjugated the greater part of Iran and annexed the Iraqi provinces of Baghdad and Mosul. Despite the predominantly Sunni character of this territory, he proclaimed Shi‘ism the state religion and enforced its creed and prayers in the mosques of his dominion.
  - Ismā‘īl I was a member of the Safavid order, which was a Sufi brotherhood, but evolved into a militant movement.
- The relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Persia was characterized by centuries of intense rivalry, spanning the 16th to 19th centuries.



<sup>1</sup> Schimmel, A. "Sufism." Encyclopedia Britannica, April 13, 2026. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sufism>.

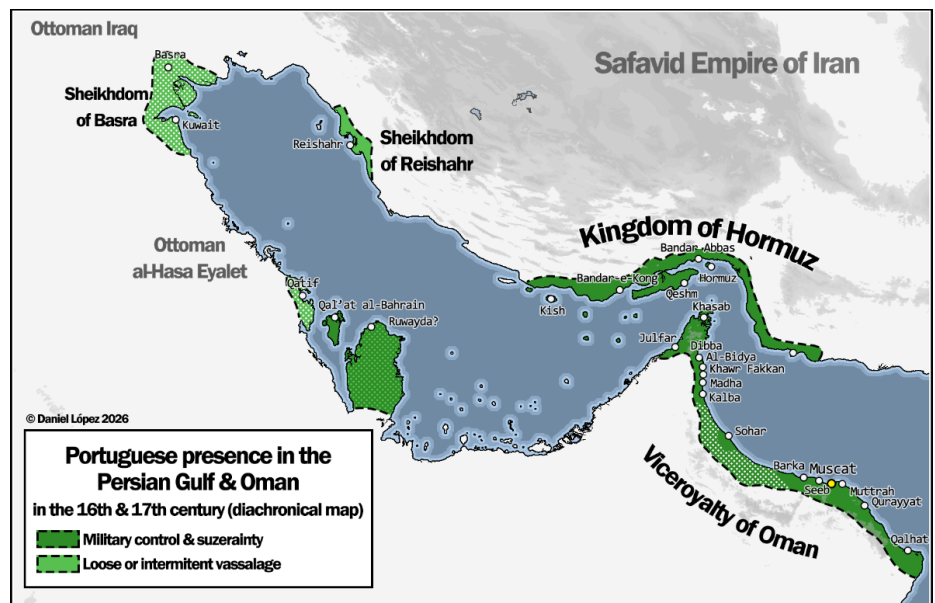
<sup>2</sup> Newman, A.J. "Twelver Shi‘ah." Encyclopedia Britannica, February 27, 2026. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Twelver-Shia>.

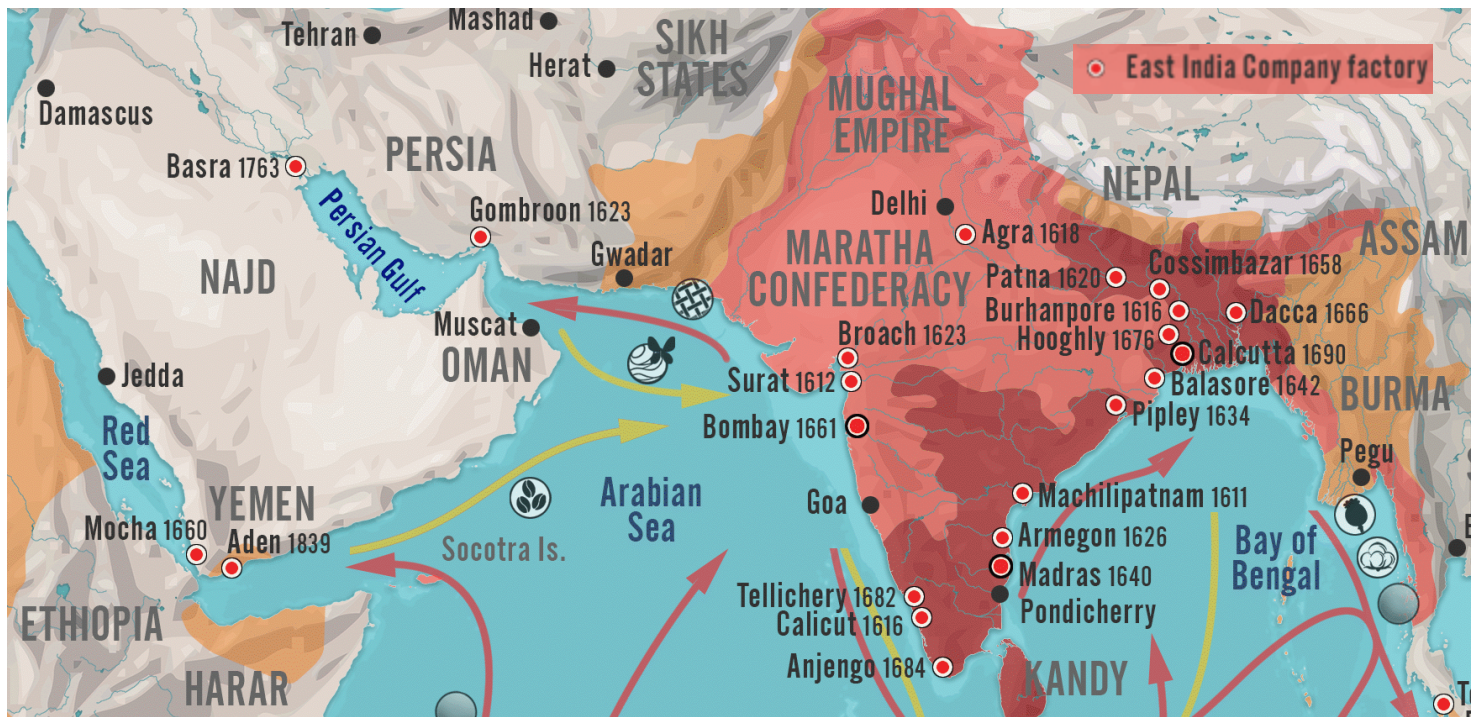


Driven by religious divide (Sunni Ottomans vs. Shia Safavids) and territorial disputes over Mesopotamia and the Caucasus, the two empires engaged in frequent wars, notably the Battle of Chaldiran (1514) and the 1639 Treaty of Zuhab, which established enduring, yet often contested, borders.

- In August 1514 Ismā‘īl was seriously defeated by his Sunni rival, the Ottoman sultan Selim I. Thereafter, the continuing struggle against the Sunnis—the Ottomans in the west and the Uzbeks in the northeast—cost the Safavids Kurdistan, Diyarbakır, and Baghdad, while Tabrīz was continuously under threat. Iran weakened appreciably during the reign of Ismā‘īl’s eldest son, Shah Ṭahmāsp I (1524–76), and persistent and unopposed Turkmen forays into the country increased under his incompetent successors.
- **Shah Abbas I** (r. 1588–1629), commonly known as **Abbas the Great**, is academically recognized as the most consequential ruler of the Safavid Dynasty. His reign transformed a fractured and vulnerable state into a centralized global power through radical military, administrative, and economic restructuring.
  - He expanded the ghilman (slave) system, recruiting thousands of Christian Georgians, Circassians, and Armenians as professional soldiers and administrators loyal only to the crown
  - With the help of English advisors like Sir Robert Shirley, Abbas established a standing army of 40,000 troops, including specialized musketeer (tufangchi) and artillery (topchi) units.

- In 1622, with the aid of the **English East India Company**, he expelled the Portuguese (occupiers since 1507) from the strategic island of **Hormuz**, securing control of Persian Gulf trade.





The expansion of the East India Trading Company. Map created by Simeon Netchev.

- The English East India Company (EIC) was established by Royal Charter on 31 December 1600 under Queen Elizabeth I (reign 1558–1603), granting it a monopoly on English trade east of the Cape of Good Hope. Initially conceived as a commercial enterprise, the Company focused on high-value Asian goods, such as spices, textiles, tea, and later opium, traded across India, Southeast Asia, and China. By the early 17th century, the EIC had established a growing network of coastal trading posts (“factories”), embedding itself within existing Indian Ocean trade systems while competing with Portuguese and Dutch rivals. Its success reflected broader early modern trends: maritime expansion, mercantilism, and the integration of distant markets into a global economy.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Netchev, S. (2025, December 20). Map of the East India Company trade, c.1800. World History Encyclopedia. <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/16446/map-of-the-east-india-company-trade-c1800/>  
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- In 1598, Shah Abbas I moved the capital to Isfahan, placing it centrally for better governance and trade.
- Under his patronage, Isfahan was redesigned as a "garden city" featuring the Naqsh-e Jahan Square, magnificent mosques like the Shah Mosque, and the grand Chahar Bagh boulevard.
- Silk became a crown monopoly and the empire's primary source of hard currency. Abbas forcibly relocated thousands of Armenian silk merchants from Old Julfa to a new suburb in Isfahan, leveraging their international trade networks.
- Abbas reversed the isolationism of his predecessors, welcoming European ambassadors and merchants to forge anti-Ottoman alliances and expand commercial ties with England, the Netherlands, and Spain.

Peter Frankopan writes about this extraordinary period (1500-1600s) in his book *The Silk Roads*:

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## THE SILK ROADS

The Ottoman and Persian empires did well from the sharp rise in transit taxes and import duties on goods coming from further east, and of course from domestic goods and products that were much in demand among the newly wealthy in Europe, from royal houses to merchant families, from court favourites to well-to-do farmers. But although the Near East did well from the cascade of gold, silver and other treasures that flowed across the Atlantic from the Americas, the chief beneficiaries were the places where most of the exports originated: India, China and Central Asia.

