The Dutch and English East India Companies

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The East India Company and the foundation of Persian Naval Power in the Gulf under Nader Shah, 1734-47

Peter Good

Abstract
This chapter explores the involvement of the East India Company (EIC) in the creation of a fleet in the Gulf by Nader Shah of Persia between 1734 and 1747. It considers the rationale behind the EIC’s assistance to the Persians and what shape it took, considering the pre-eminent position and threat attached by contemporaries to European ships. The chapter draws on the EIC’s Persian Gulf Factory Records which shed new light on the ongoing negotiations between the EIC and Persian officials in country. The EIC were active in supporting the construction of a Persian fleet, turning a profit by supplying, not only ships, but also supplies and stores necessary for their maintenance. The provisions provided were a useful means through which the EIC gained favour with the Persian Court in a period of ongoing conflict and uncertainty.

Keywords: Persia, EIC, navy, Nader Shah

Beginning in 1734, Nader Shah, the formidable and brutal ruler of Persia sought to create a navy to match his recently reformed army. In order to do this, he worked to co-opt the English East India Company, which had access to the most powerful naval technology in the region. For decades now, scholars like Carlo Cipolla and others have explored the perceived superiority of European naval technology and the advantages that could be derived from it.¹ ² The

¹ Cipolla, Guns, Sails and Empire, 1985.
² Both Chaudhuri and Das Gupta discuss the superiority of European naval technology and the benefit derived from it in the Indian Ocean. Chaudhuri, Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean, p. 12; Das Gupta, India and the Indian Ocean World, p. 18.
focus, however, has always been on how Europeans used this naval power to dominate Asian trading and political bodies. The chaotic political climate in the Gulf region during Nader Shah’s reign provided an opportunity to expand his power, and in service of this he engaged the Company who provided ships for loan or sale for a variety of military and diplomatic missions. For its part, the Company was willing to be co-opted in this way, seeing opportunities for both financial and diplomatic gain. To this end, the Company used their forces in the region as a navy for hire, providing the Shah with ships to defeat his enemies in the first instance and then assisting him in acquiring his own, in order to protect their trade and turn a profit. This form of cooperation does not seem to appear in any other relationship between the Company and an Indian Ocean power, although it shares some similarities with VOC submission to the Tokugawa bakufu that ruled over Japan and the Dutch Company’s subsequent involvement in putting down the Shimabara Revolt.3

The strength of European naval power in the Indian Ocean has been widely recognised by scholars. Because of this, it is noteworthy that the Company, which was a significant naval power in this period, used its ships to bolster Persian power rather than to dictate terms to the Persian Empire. Chaudhuri suggests that the experience of the Child’s War at the turn of the eighteenth Century, in which the Company had entered into an ill-conceived conflict with the Mughal Empire, had impressed upon the Governors in London and India that they could not hope to militarily defeat the great Asian land empires in open war.4 The Company’s behaviour in Persia is consistent with this idea and indicates the lengths to which it would go to avoid conflict with a major power, even if that meant chipping away at the Company’s naval supremacy in the region.

After 1722 and the collapse of the Safavid Empire, Persia and the surrounding region became the nexus of a complex struggle involving the Ottoman Empire, Russia, pro-Safavid restorationists, and the Hotaki Afghan forces that had overcome and occupied the Empire’s territories. Eventually, the Safavid dynasty was restored, largely thanks to the efforts of a talented Afshar general, Tahmasp Qoli Khan, better known as Nader Shah. Nader Shah oversaw the empire throughout the largely ineffectual reign of Tahmasp II (1729-1732), who was succeeded by his infant son, Abbas III (1732-1736). Nader Shah eventually disposed of the fiction of Safavid rule in 1736, when he had himself proclaimed Shah in a large public gathering of notables on the Moghan Plain. He then successfully reorganised the army, leading it to

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4 Chaudhuri, Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean, p. 87.
numerous victories from Iraq to India. Not satisfied with his conquests by land, Nader Shah decided to build fleets on the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. In both endeavours he used Europeans, specifically Englishmen, to help his plans progress. On the Caspian coast, he hired Captain John Elton, a merchant and member of the Muscovy Company to design and oversee construction of a fleet. In the Gulf, Nader Shah sought instead to use the existing expertise of the East India Company, whose ships called regularly at ports on the Persian coast.

This chapter explores Nader Shah’s desire to extend his military reach to the Gulf and the East India Company’s willingness to serve as a navy for hire. It considers the various ways in which the Company was induced to perform services ranging from the provision of ships for embassies to the pacification of Arab and Afghan rebels on the Gulf coast. Nader Shah’s accession meant that the Company lost many of its previous freedoms. Previously the Company had been able to issue passes, tax passing trade and fire upon recalcitrant ships that did not submit to inspection. The status quo after the reassertion of Persian rule over the garmsirat, in which the Company had played a central role, was far more delicate, especially after the Company’s trade privileges and share of the customs due at Bandar Abbas were voided by the new Shah. In order to regain these, the Company was willing to acquiesce to some of the demands now being made upon them.5 The focus on the chapter is on the ever more intimate ties which the Company entered into in order to preserve its trading rights in Persia, and the ways in which Nader Shah attempted to use the Company’s naval forces against his enemies and rebellious subjects.

First stages

The Safavid Empire at its largest extent covered all of modern Iran along with parts of Eastern Turkey, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan. The Safavids also claimed suzerainty over the Southern littoral of the Persian Gulf, over what is now the UAE and Oman, as well as the island of Bahrain. After coming to power, Nader Shah resolved to recover

5 Three articles deal with the founding of the Persian fleet as a part of Nader Shah’s strategy. They are reliant largely on European Company sources, but the two later offerings by Axworthy and Floor borrow heavily from Lockhart, The Navy of Nadir Shah. See also; Floor, ‘The Iranian Navy in the Gulf during the 18th Century’; Axworthy, ‘Nader Shah and Persian Naval Expansion in the Persian Gulf’.
all of these former Safavid possessions. His campaigns in Iraq and India have gone down in history, earning him the title of the ‘Napoleon of Asia’. Like Napoleon, he was limited by his inability to rely on naval support for his campaigns. The *Hawala* Arabs, who controlled areas on both shores of the Gulf, and the Imamate of Oman, both represented significant blocks to any campaign in the Gulf. The Omanis had, in fact, become so powerful that EIC vessels would not pursue or harass Omani ships found without Company mandated passes, even though such offenses were usually punishable by heavy fines or the impounding of goods by Company forces.

As the only other naval powers in the Gulf region, European trading companies were seen as a key partner in Nader Shah’s campaigns against the independent Arab tribes and the Omanis. In order to secure their cooperation, Nader Shah decided to emulate Shah Abbas, who, desiring naval assistance to capture the island of Hormuz, had offered the Company significant trade privileges should they agree to support him. In order to do the same, Nader Shah first voided the Company’s privileges, promising their reinstatement should the Company cooperate with his regime. In this way, the Company’s involvement in Nader Shah’s campaign was not unusual. What is striking is the way in which the Company appears to have allowed itself to be forced into performing various services for the Shah.

**Borrowing and lending: Persian requests for Company ships**

The East India Company’s trade in Persia goes back to the first decade of the seventeenth century. Reduced to essentials, Persian trade was conducted by the Company as a primary source of bullion for Indian markets where European goods, especially cloth, were not popular. By 1730, the Company was represented by an agent in the port of Bandar Abbas and further representation in the Persian capital, Isfahan, and in the wool-producing region of Kerman. The Company had no more than a dozen Europeans working in Persia at any point, with the possible exception of European soldiers and sailors acting as garrison troops for brief periods.

During the early period of Tahmasp II’s reign, it was unclear who was in control of Persia, with both Tahmasp and Nader Shah issuing orders that were sometimes contradictory. Indeed on one occasion the Company applied to Tahmasp to rescind an order issued by Nader Shah. All this was to change, however, when Nader Shah took full control of the government of Persia in

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6 IOR/G/29/5 ff.106-v Consultation on Thursday 19th March 1730.
1732, having already strongly influenced policy during the reign of Tahmasp II and then his infant successor, Abbas III. The change was marked first by Nader’s declaration that all previous agreements with the Europeans were null and void. For the Company, this proclamation resulted in the loss of any claim to customs from Bandar Abbas and 3,000 toman owed them by Shah Sultan Hussein, who had been dethroned by the Afghans in 1722. This meant that the renewal of centralised Persian authority suddenly weakened the Company’s position with the loss of their privileged position in the Persian trade.

From 1732, when Nader Shah took full control of the Persian state during the minority of Abbas III, his calls for Company ships can be placed into three broad categories; borrowing, chartering, and buying. In the first case, the Shah demanded the use of a Company ship free of charge; the second involved payment for that service; and the third was based on the sale of ships and stores for Persian use. The relationship can further be broken down into actions taken against Persian enemies by the Company at the behest of Persian authorities, the transportation of Persian men and materiel and embassies, and lastly the direct trade in ships and military equipment. The use of the Company’s ships and crews was valuable to Nader Shah’s regime, especially at this time of instability, due to their greater size, speed and firepower relative to local vessels. This allowed Persian officials to deploy an imposing force able to broadcast the Shah’s power diplomatically or militarily. Company ships were used to deflect Arab raids on Persian territory and provide security against land-borne attacks. By providing such vessels, the EIC had the added benefit of being able to denigrate its European competitors, especially the Dutch who, more often than not, refused to carry out such missions. Gaining favour with various officials through cooperation also went some way to alleviate the burden of carrying out these missions. The significant benefit to the Company of ensuring the safety of shipping in Bandar Abbas, where they still claimed the right to exact 1,000 toman annually from customs, should also be made clear. This privilege was originally granted to the Company in 1622 and was one of the advantages Nader Shah withdrew when he came to power. It was this, along with other benefits granted historically to the Company that were used to manipulate it into assisting the Persian regime. After stripping away the Company’s trade privileges, Nader Shah demanded the use of EIC ships to blockade Arab ports resisting Persian suzerainty in 1734. The Company were told that their cooperation would result in the reinstatement of their

7 IOR/G/29/5 f. 185 Consultation on Thursday 7th December 1732.
former rights. The Company acquiesced to this demand, promising to blockade one port with the Britannia, the only ship they had in the Gulf at that time. The loss of their privileges had weakened the legal standing of the Company in Persia, which had lost the protections formerly guaranteed to its employees and property. Nader Shah was therefore clearly using this erosion of authority and security as a platform to make his demands.

The Shah’s demands and requests were not always greeted with immediate obedience from the Company, which attempted to gain concessions and the reinstatement of its privileges before deploying its ships. The Company’s servants were no doubt aware of their Persian interlocutors’ eagerness to use their ships and the bargaining power this could give them. The Persian reliance upon European shipping is revealed through a number of events which took place during this period, which included the use of Company ships to capture recalcitrant Persians subjects, blockade ports or suppress uprisings of Arabs along the Gulf Coast. While the Company predominantly did this under the promise of a renewal of their privileges, they were equally capable of bartering for other concessions, using their compliance with Persian demands as a show both of contrition and strength.

In one case the Company demanded the removal of a merchant who had attempted to channel all the Company’s trade through his person, before they would take any action against the Arab and Baluchi rebels. In this way it is possible to discern that the Company was aware of the bargaining power that they possessed which could be used for more than just regaining their former privileges. The Company was equally clear on the limitations on its support for Persian military adventures, refusing to assist Nader Shah in any campaign that infringed upon the Company’s good standing with the Muscatis, Mughals, and Ottomans, all of whom were important trade partners to the Company. On one occasion, the Shahbandar of Bandar Abbas visited the Company’s factory on 9 May 1734 and asked its agent for clarification on what services he could expect the Company to perform. The Agent, William Cockell, replied that the Company ‘could act nothing against Bussorah [Basra], the Muscat Arabs, The Mogulls Subjects all whom Wee were in a Strict Friendship and Alliance’. He added that requests to assist the Persians against their own subjects would be assented to whenever

8 IOR/G/29/5 f.225 Consultation on Sunday 3rd February 1734.
9 Ibid.
10 IOR/G/29/5 f.241 Consultation on Wednesday 29th May 1734; IOR/G/29/5 f.225 Consultation on Sunday 3rd February 1734.
11 Ibid.
12 IOR/G/29/5 f.235v Consultation on Thursday 9th May 1734; Lockhart, p. 7.
possible, as proven by the concurrent action being undertaken against Mohammed Khan Baluchi. Both the EIC and VOC were asked to lend ships to bring the rebellious Mohammed Khan Baluchi (a Baluchi Chief from Eastern Persia) to heel.\textsuperscript{13} The Company were clearly engaged in balancing the wishes and expectations of the Persians, while trying to maintain their broader geopolitical concerns.

Assistance to the Persians in their naval experiment was not to be given at any cost, but was a useful means of better securing the Company’s trade and political position. The ban on action against the Arabs did not stop the Company from choosing to provide the services of the \textit{Rose Galley} to carry supplies to Mohammed Taqi Khan, the Beglerbegi of Fars, during his campaigns on the Arab Shore, deeming that this did not contravene its orders not to engage in hostilities with the Arabs.\textsuperscript{14} The captain, Henry Venfield, was given strict instructions by the agent not to go out of his way to liaise with the Persians or Arabs and that on delivering his charge, consisting of some supplies and reinforcements led by an Arab Sheikh, he should stay no more than three or four days.\textsuperscript{15} Another passenger, an Armenian merchant named Khawaja ‘Sohawk’, was also to be taken with them, though Captain Venfield was instructed to leave him behind if he did not return to the ship within the time allotted in his instructions.\textsuperscript{16} Venfield was expressly forbidden from taking any hostile action against the Arabs under any circumstance.\textsuperscript{17}

Captain Venfield wrote later that Taqi Khan delayed him numerous times, spuriously claiming that he wished to return with the ship to Bandar Abbas, but never making a certain move to board her.\textsuperscript{18} Further requests were delayed by news of an Arab fleet cruising the Gulf and putting a stop to any shipping between Bandar Abbas and the Arab Shore, highlighting the tenuous position of Company shipping in the region at the time.\textsuperscript{19} The danger was highlighted when the \textit{Rose Galley} was captured by the Arab fleet and threatened with dire consequences should the ship be caught supplying the Persians again. Captain Venfield was also kept as a prisoner by the

\textsuperscript{13} IOR/G/29/5 ff.235v Consultation on Wednesday 8th May 1734.
\textsuperscript{14} Taqi Khan Shirazi, close supporter of Nader Shah until his failed rebellion in 1744. He served for a time as Governor of Shiraz. IOR/G/29/6 ff.37v-38 Consultation on Tuesday 13th June 1738.
\textsuperscript{15} IOR/G/29/6 ff.39v-40 Consultation on Wednesday 21st June 1738.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} IOR/G/29/6 f.44 Consultation on Wednesday 19th July 1738.
\textsuperscript{19} IOR/G/29/6 f.45v Consultation on Friday 21st July 1738.
Arabs for a time. The crew of the *Rose Galley* thereafter refused to carry anything for the Persians to the Arab Shore under any circumstance, causing a minor incident between the Company and the Persians, who requested the use of the *Rose Galley* to carry supplies again. This reveals the complex interplay of factors which governed the regional relations maintained by the Company and their fear of confrontation with an obviously threatening Arab naval force, a concern that overcame the political drive to maintain the Company's privileges in Persia. There were obviously limits to the risks that the Company would take and the clear demonstration of a threat, such as the incident with the *Rose Galley*, was enough to give them pause for reflection.

**Transportation of Embassies**

In addition to supplying vessels, the Company also engaged in the transportation of embassies for the Safavid and Afsharid state. As before, this was a well-established practice with VOC ships, for example, carrying embassies from Siam to France and Portugal. For the Persians, the presence of the Company as a willing carrier for their embassies opened up new possibilities for contacts with other powers throughout Asia and even Europe, as shown by a voyage to Siam and embassies carried to India. The prestige of being able to use European ships for these embassies, and the reach they afforded the Safavids, made the presence of the Company valuable to successive Persian Shahs.

Philip Stern has suggested that the presence of Europeans allowed for a much greater flow of diplomatic missions, spreading the reach of Persian diplomacy from Thailand to France and Britain. The Persian state continued to use the faster, safer transportation provided by the Company, which, as was the case in the dispatch of the Shirley brothers by Abbas the Great, was useful in broadening their diplomatic horizons. Persian diplomacy, unsurprisingly, had focused more on the Empire's close neighbours and main rivals in India and Turkey. It was common practice, for example, to send embassies on the deaths and coronations of Persian Shahs and Mughal Emperors. The importance of such mission was outlined when an emissary

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20 IOR/G/29/6 f.48v Consultation on Friday 28th July 1738.
21 IOR/G/29/6 f.49 Consultation on Monday 31st July 1738.
22 Ruangsilp, *The Dutch East India Company Merchants*, p. 130.
23 See O’Kane, *Ship of Sulaiman*.
was not sent to Persia on the death of Shah Tahmasp I, provoking the new Shah, Abbas I, to complain in a letter to the Mughal Emperor, Akbar.\footnote{Islam, \textit{Indo-Persian Relations}, p. 55.}

According to Subrahmanyam, prior to the Company’s arrival in the Gulf, Persian embassies had to travel to India via Kandahar, a region disputed by the two empires, or gain Portuguese approval to travel via the Gulf.\footnote{Subrahmanyam, \textit{An Infernal Triangle}, p. 105.} It seems clear, therefore, that the arrival of the Company in the Gulf greatly expanded Persian diplomacy from its immediate neighbours to the wider Indian Ocean world. In addition, the European presence allowed for faster, more secure communication with the Mughals, with whom contact had been halted due to the great distance and risk involved in the overland route. The presence of Europeans on the Gulf littoral also allowed for speedier communication with other European powers, should it be desired, permitting the dispatch of embassies to England, France, and elsewhere.

With his rise to power and prominence, Nader Shah sought to reaffirm these links with the Company, hoping to use them to facilitate his own diplomatic and military ambitions. In 1730, while the last of the Afghans were still holding on in various parts of Persia, including the Garmsirat, Nader Shah demanded that the Company provide shipping for an embassy to India. This embassy was led by the \textit{Ishik-Aghasi Bashi} or Chief Mace-Bearer, an honorific title in the Persian Court, Ali Mardan Khan. The request was transmitted by the Company’s Armenian broker, who was beaten on the Shah’s order and forced to pay 40 toman before being permitted to carry his message.\footnote{IOR/G/29/5 f.105v Consultation on Saturday 14th March 1730. I believe the beating may have been a warning to the Company about their status within the Empire.} The order came after the Company had already been forced to pay various exactions to Nader Shah, for which they were already petitioning the newly crowned Shah Tahmasp II for reimbursement.\footnote{IOR/G/29/5 ff.106-v Consultation on Thursday 19th March 1730.} Despite their ill treatment, the Company was still involved in the pacification of Arab forces resisting the Shah’s rule.\footnote{IOR/G/29/5 f.106v Consultation on Thursday 19th March 1730.}

It is noteworthy that the Company was willing, despite the aggressive and confrontational nature of its relationship with Nader Shah, to cooperate with him. The Company’s commercial interests in Persia were relatively modest, comprising mostly of purchasing Kerman wool and selling European broadcloth. It is true that the Company was compelled to sell British goods abroad, cloth being the major commodity for export, and that Persia provided in return a useful supply of silver and luxury goods, such as Shiraz wine
and rose water, for the Indian markets. This commerce did not, however, represent a large share of the Company's trade in the Indian Ocean. Instead, it seems to have been the Company's legal privileges that were so valuable to them. The share of customs from Bandar Abbas, the freedom from import duties and the Company's ability to charge ships for passes in Persian ports, while not vital to their operations in the Gulf, was highly significant to the Company's hierarchy. It seems that the existence and renewal of the Company's Farmans was important not so much for their content, but for the status that written agreements gave the Company and the profit that could be made from them, both financially and diplomatically.

The ambassador had to be stalled initially, being informed that 'the monsoon is as far sett in', with the adverse weather threatening 'Not only the Vessells but every Man on board'.30 It transpires that the two 'Vessells', the Severn and Edward, were both privately owned and had little space between decks and so were unsuitable to transport passengers. Moreover, the captain of the Severn had refused point blank to carry the Persians.31 His refusal shows that the Company did not always have the final say on the use of the ships they hired out, a problem that would re-emerge when other requests for shipping were made.

Nader Shah and his subordinates were also more than willing to play the European companies off against each other to meet their ends, alternating between the EIC and the VOC to force one of them into complying with Persian demands. The inability of the English Company to provide shipping in one case led Nader to request the same service of the Dutch, who at first refused, then offered a sloop to carry the ambassador with a few horses and attendants as far as Sind.32 The Dutch then withdrew their offer the next day, earning an angry response from the ambassador.33 The following week, after the intercession of various local officials, the VOC repeated the offer to lend the sloop to carry the ambassador, 30 attendants and 15 horses.34 The Persians, deeming the Dutch sloop much too small, turned again to the English Company, requesting the use of the recently returned Britannia.35 The Company thought it only proper to provide the ship in order to keep up

30 IOR/G/29/5 f.106 Consultation on Thursday 19th March 1730.
31 Ibid.
32 IOR/G/29/5 f.109 Consultation on Friday 17th April 1730.
33 IOR/G/29/5 f.109 Consultation on Saturday 18th April 1730.
34 IOR/G/29/5 f.109v Consultation on Monday 20th April 1730.
35 The disparity in size between the Company's frigate and the Dutch sloop may have been connected with the Persian ambassador's desire to look grand and guarantee that his entourage would be suitably impressive, both in size and in the means of its arrival.
with Dutch pretences to assist the Persian ambassador. They also believed this would help with the ongoing negotiations concerning their privileges that were being carried out at Isfahan. As a result, they agreed that the Britannia should be offered for Persian service. Mir Mehr Ali, the Persian governor of Bandar Abbas, welcomed this offer, especially as it was made ‘without recourse to frivolous excuses as was practiced by the Dutch’.36 After a short while, the ambassador decided to use only the Dutch sloop, leaving the Britannia at Bandar Abbas to guard against Baluchi or Arab incursions against the town.37 The action presented multiple advantages to the Company: discrediting the Dutch in the eyes of the Persians, showing the Company’s willingness to transport the embassy, and defending the city from the Baluchi and Arab threats. It served the EIC’s wider goal of regaining its trade privileges by making the Persian government believe that they were supplying their assistance willingly without threat or coercion.

During this exchange the ambassador said that it had always been customary for the Company to carry embassies on board their ships from Persia, hinting that any refusal might lead to punishment.38 EIC officials replied that they did not believe they were under any obligation to carry Persian embassies (though they had previously carried an embassy to Siam in 1685), but they would be prepared to lend a ship for this purpose ‘out of gratitude and Return were always ready to Shew our attachment to their majestys and out of Friendship and Respect [...]’.39 It is evident from the Company’s account that they were eager to provide the Persians with assistance both for their own advantage but also to discredite the Dutch. The Britannia was therefore set aside to carry the embassy, though the Persians were informed that they would need to provide a smaller ship to accompany her, the coast not being safe for a larger vessel to approach. In addition, transportation for the entourage, horses, and baggage of the embassy would need to be paid for by the Persians themselves; the small ship that the Company had intended on lending them in addition to the Britannia having been too badly damaged during its capture.40 Though the account does not report when the embassy left, the Britannia returned safely to Bandar Abbas on 14 December 1730, having last called at Bombay.41

36 IOR/G/29/5 f. 111v Consultation on Wednesday 29th April 1730.
37 Ibid. and IOR/G/29/5 f.112v Consultation on Saturday 2nd and Monday 4th May 1730.
38 IOR/G/29/5/ f.118v Consultation on Wednesday 22nd July 1730.
39 See O’Kane, The Ship of Sulaiman, 1972; IOR/G/29/5/ f.120 Consultation on Wednesday 22nd July 1730.
40 IOR/G/29/5 f.120 Consultation on Sunday 26th July 1730.
41 IOR/G/29/5 f.139v Consultation on Wednesday 14th December 1730.
In 1732, a second ambassador, Mahmud Ali Beg, was appointed to the Mughal Court, and again the Company was expected to provide transportation. This news was delivered in a letter from William Cockell, the Company’s Agent, which was accompanied by an order from Shah Tahmasp to carry the embassy. This was an order, rather than a request with the result that the Company complied immediately, promising to provide passage, but only for the ambassador. Although the Company did not consider such orders automatically binding, they attempted to fulfil them where they were able. Other Persian officials were more diplomatic, paying visits to the Agent in order to ingratiate themselves and make a public display of respect while asking for assistance.

These missions were a useful means by which the Company could gain favour from local and court officials, and they were able to use the support from the officials they had assisted to drive home their agenda at the Persian Court. It was through the endorsement of these officials that one can see the major advantage to the Company of acceding to Persian demands for transportation for their embassies. The endorsements and recognition that these acts received at Court were of considerable value to the Company in securing their trade privileges or as a means of escaping financial exactions for the Company’s masters or their servants. The EIC was careful to secure these endorsements first and dispatch them with letters of their own, as was the case with those secured from the two agents to India and Latif Khan, which were sent with a Company letter to Nader Shah.

In 1736, Nader Shah ordered that Mirza Mohsen, a new ambassador to the Mughal Emperor, be transported by either the EIC or the VOC to India. As well as this passenger, the sister and family of Sa’dat Khan, a Mughal Vizier, were also taken on board. Despite the Persians having their own ships by this point, as well as having not paid for previous transportation provided to their embassies, the Company agreed to carry the passengers in the hope of securing goodwill from the Shah and the reinstatement of their still defunct Farmans. These passengers were charged 1,800 rupees for the use of the Robert Galley. As it was not a Company-owned ship, the Agent was not able to simply instruct the captain to accept the passengers. No doubt the Company also hoped that this service done for the family of a Mughal courtier would not harm their activities in India. Previously, such arrangements had been written off as favours to the Persians and thus no

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42 IOR/G/29/5 ff.181-v Consultation on Saturday 28th October 1732.
43 IOR/G/29/5 f.315 Consultation on Saturday 3rd January 1736.
44 IOR/G/29/5 f.359v Consultation on Tuesday 30th November 1736.
45 IOR/G/29/5 f.361 Consultation on Thursday 9th December 1736.
payment was expected, whatever may have been promised. The Company instead used such opportunities to garner support. This provides further evidence that the EIC was used as a chartering service for private shipping and the advantage that this usage could secure for it.

The honourable Company as an honourable broker: purchase of shipping for the Persian navy

A major shift in policy came in May 1734 when Nader Shah dispatched Latif Khan, appointed as his admiral, to the Gulf with ‘orders to purchase shipping of the Europeans at Gombroon’.46 The Company and Dutch Agents discussed the matter and concluded that the ships that plied the Gulf belonged not to them, but their superiors in India and Batavia and were therefore not for sale. Along with this polite but firm refusal, the Company offered to organise the construction of shipping in Surat for the Persians, should they so wish. Lockhart mentions in his work that the ships of Surat were famed for their longevity, seaworthiness and resistance to the bad climate of the Gulf.47 The Persians were slow to warm to this idea; instead repeatedly pressing the Europeans to sell the ships that passed through Bandar Abbas.

The Company sought, along with the Dutch, to woo Latif Khan into putting a stop to entreaties for them to sell passing ships, as the request was beyond the powers of either of the Agents stationed in Persia.48 The danger was that Nader Shah, always mercurial at best, would decide that the Europeans were of no more use to him and that the creation of a strong navy of his own would allow him not only to expel the Europeans, but stop their trade altogether. This use of a provincial official by the Europeans to influence the centre was not unusual; in this case however, Latif Khan was being used specifically to create a strong advocate for their continued presence. As well as requesting that the Persians stop offering to buy their ships, the Company again mooted the idea of dispatching a Persian official, under Company guidance, to purchase ships for the Shah at Surat.49 A Persian request that the Company should buy the ships for them, if provided with the money, was deemed impossible without direct orders and permission

46 IOR/G/29/5 f.234v Consultation on Thursday 2nd May 1734; Lockhart, The Navy of Nadir Shah, p. 6. Lockhart provides this quotation, but fails to give a reference for it.
48 IOR/G/29/5 ff.240v and 241 Consultations on the 28th and 29th May 1734.
49 IOR/G/29/5 f.241 Consultation on Wednesday 29th May 1734.
from the Presidency at Bombay. As was typical, the Company attempted to navigate a fine line between Persian demands and their own limitations. They used Latif Khan to assuage the demands of Nader Shah, while pleading the need to follow the orders given to them by their superiors in India.

It was the Company who created the core of a Persian fleet in the Gulf by delivering up Sheikh Rashid, a local Arab chief, along with two ships they had captured during the siege of Kish. Lockhart, in his article on these events suggests that the Persians had purchased the two ships from Sheikh Rashid. In fact, the Company had captured and handed them over to the Persians, with the Sheikh deriving no advantage from the transaction. This ascribes a much more active role to the Company in the formation of the Persian fleet. The Persian desire to build a naval force presented a dilemma for the EIC. The Company’s officials were willing to facilitate the creation of a Persian fleet, which would essentially remove the European monopoly on naval strength in the region and thereby damage one of the few bargaining chips they had when it came to their rights and privileges in Persia. It would seem that this concern was not as important to the Company as removing their obligation to provide ships to the Persians when they needed them, suggesting that the Company’s attitude to the use of their ships as military tools had shifted. This change may well be due to the fact that most of the shipping travelling in and out of the Gulf was chartered by the Company, thus enjoying its protection, while not being subject to or beholden to fulfil any orders contrary to their contract. The Britannia was a Company ship and was therefore under the command of the Agent, leading to its regular use in serving Persian requests.

One of the dangers of having privately owned, Company-chartered ships operating in the region became apparent in 1734 when two ships, the Ruparell and the Patna, were sold by their captains to the Persians. This made it plain that while the Company might be unwilling to sell its own ships, private traders could fulfil Persian demands, thereby depriving the Company of any benefit. The captain of the Patna, Thomas Weddell, died shortly after selling his charge to Latif Khan at Bushehr, having sent his personal effects on from there with a dinghy that brought news of the sales to Bandar Abbas. The Company’s response was to censure Richard Cook, the captain and owner of

50 Ibid.
51 IOR/G/29/5 f.242 Consultation on Sunday 2nd June 1734.
53 Ibid., p. 7. and IOR/G/29/5 f.257v Consultation on Monday 2nd December 1734.
54 Ibid.
the Ruparell, for his actions which the Company described as ‘Scurrilous’. In order to take advantage of these circumstances, the Agent decided to convince Latif Khan that the ships had been sold to him ‘by our connivance’ in order to ‘make a merit of it’.\footnote{Ibid.} This event, reported to the Bombay Presidency by a letter sent on 3 December, was followed up by a positive ban on the sale of ships to the Persians by any party but the Company.\footnote{Lockhart, The Navy of Nadir Shah, p. 7.} The ban, as well as the Agent’s attempts to make it appear to the Persians that he had helped arrange the two previous sales, shows the flexibility in the way the Company’s servants managed the expectations of the Persian Court, not to mention a good eye for how best to protect their master’s interests.

In 1735 the nascent Persian fleet was sent against Basra, where the Company maintained a small residency. Here they met with defeat at the hands of the Turks, who, upon learning of the approach of the Persian fleet, seized the Royal George and Dean Frigate, two Company ships that had called to trade there. On confronting the Ottoman authorities about the seizure of the Company’s ships, Martin French, the EIC Resident, was imprisoned. The Persian ships were subsequently driven off by the superior firepower of these two ships, demonstrating the superiority of European naval gunnery when in trained hands.\footnote{Axworthy, ‘Nader Shah and Persian Naval Expansion in the Persian Gulf’, 2011, p. 35; Lockhart, The Navy of Nadir Shah, p. 8; Floor, ‘The Iranian Navy in the Gulf during the 18th Century’, 1987, pp. 39-40. Originally in IOR/G/29/5 f.278v Consultation on Monday 16th June 1735.} This act significantly jeopardised the standing of the Company in Persia, leading to a brief withdrawal from their factories in Kerman, Isfahan, and Bandar Abbas.\footnote{IOR/G/29/5 ff.299-v Consultation on Wednesday 3rd September 1735.} Perhaps more significantly, the seizure of the Company’s ships by the Ottomans demonstrated the desire of Asian powers for European naval technology, underpinning the superiority of the trading companies’ military strength. Equally, the success of the Ottomans outlined the necessity for adequate training as the possession of European ships was not adequate to ensure victory.

The use of Company ships by the Ottomans to repel the Persian navy at Basra is indicative of the ongoing threat faced by the mercantile companies when dealing with the land-based empires with whom they traded. No doubt it would have been in the power of the captains of the Royal George and Dean Frigate to resist Ottoman attempts to board their ships, but this would risk provoking a backlash both commercially and politically from the Gulf to the Mediterranean. It was for this reason that the Company decided not to offer the Persians military assistance against Basra, despite the affront of
having their ships commandeered and employees imprisoned.\footnote{IOR/G/29/5 f.294 Consultation on Monday 11th August 1735.} This event underlines the difference in firepower that European ships possessed when compared to what the Persians and their Arab sailors were used to or prepared for. No doubt this disparity was at least partly responsible for the continued pre-eminence of the Europeans in the Gulf along with the desirability of their assistance with military operations and transportation of important officials, supplies and troops. This also shows why Nader Shah desired to purchase or otherwise acquire European ships. A second attack on Basra by the Persians in 1743 led to the Ottomans again attempting to use a Company ship to defend the city, though they were again refused assistance by the Resident. For this refusal Martin French was again imprisoned by the Turks, who forced the ship to manoeuvre to defend the city. Not wishing to repeat the events of 1735, the crew created a leak in the hull of the ship, thereby escaping any need to render assistance to the Turks on pretext of repairing her.\footnote{IOR/G/6/ f.279 Consultation on Wednesday 17th January 1743.} The Company’s men were evidently capable of learning from their mistakes.

In May 1736, the agent was informed that the ship Northumberland, under the command of Robert Mylne, had been sold to the Persians, despite such a sale being banned by the Company.\footnote{IOR/G/29/5 ff.336-v Consultation on Friday 21st May 1736.} Lockhart and Axworthy erroneously suggest that this ship was seized by the Persians, who then paid off Captain Mylne.\footnote{Axworthy, ‘Nader Shah and Persian Naval Expansion in the Persian Gulf’, 2011, p. 35.} It is reported that Captain Mylne received 500 toman in silver, which he claimed to be a down payment on another ship he had promised to buy for the Persians, rather than as payment for the Northumberland. He also claimed he had a promise for 5,000 toman more should he deliver further ships to the Persians, which service he claimed he was forced to offer under threat of punishment by his ‘captors’. His story was dismissed by the agent who held him and Eustace Peacock, the Northumberland’s supercargo, responsible for the sale of the ship. It seems very unlikely that Mylne, against the orders of the Company and the Northumberland’s owners, sailed to Bushehr, the home port of the Persian fleet, in order to sell his cargo, unaware of the likelihood of the Persians’ wishing to purchase his charge. This does not seem credible, and was dismissed out of hand by the agent.\footnote{IOR/G/29/5 ff.340v-342 Consultation on Thursday 6th July 1736, consisting of letters between the Agency at Bandar Abbas and Eustace Peacock and Captain Robert Mylne.} The Persian purchase of a private ship shows that the Company’s plans to limit such sales to their own benefit were slipping. The high prices offered by the Persians, as well as the
desire of private European merchants to make a good profit, were clearly enough to render the Company’s deterrents only partly successful.

The sale of shipping by private individuals was of particular concern to the Company as it threatened its position in Persia by making their refusal to sell ships to the Shah seem obstructive at best or antagonistic at worst. A second issue for the Company was that private sales eroded their ability to organise and make a profit from selling their own ships built for the purpose in India. The first instance of a Company-brokered sale was that of the *Cowan* in 1736. The *Cowan* was, in fact, a privately owned frigate bought by the Company at Bombay and dispatched to the Gulf, arriving at Bandar Abbas on 19 November 1736.64 The arrival of the *Cowan* and its handover to the Persian fleet was accompanied by much fanfare and the firing of salutes from the Persian fleet, the fort at Bandar Abbas, and the Company factory and ships in the road.65 The Persians then requested that another ship should be delivered to them on similar terms. The sale of the *Cowan* illustrates how Persian officials could achieve their aims by compromising with the Company on the method used to do so. In exchange for a cash payment and the indulgence of the Shah’s good favour, the Persians were able to gain a much coveted European ship, while the Company were able to herald the deal as a profitable victory.

Seeing how well received the *Cowan* was, the Company agreed to deliver a second ship, having made somewhere in the region of 200% profit from the 8,000 toman sale, as reported by an envious Dutch source.66 The *Cowan* was later renamed the *Fath-i Shah* at a ceremony in which yet further salutes were fired, including by the Dutch.67 Despite several mentions in the secondary sources by Lockhart of a second ship being delivered with the *Cowan*, the EIC records contain no such detail. They show that the *Cowan* arrived in company with the *Robert Galley*, though this ship later departed carrying Mirza Mohsen, the Persian ambassador and the sister of the Mughal grandee Sadat Khan. The *Robert Galley* was eventually sold to the Persians in 1742 and not by the Company. Instead the ship was sold by the connivance of the already troublesome Eustace Peacock, who travelled up to Shiraz in order to offer the ship up to Taqi Khan. Peacock sold the *Robert Galley* for 1,000 toman, but was forced to give a gift of 150 toman to Taqi Khan on his visit to Shiraz.68

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64 IOR/G/29/5 f.357v Consultation on Friday 19th of November 1736.
65 IOR/G/29/5 f.361v Consultation Saturday 18th December 1736.
67 IOR/G/29/5 ff.38v-9 Consultation on Tuesday 3rd March 1737.
68 IOR/G/29/6 f.189v Consultation on Wednesday 27th January 1742 and f.190 Consultation on Sunday 31st January 1742.
Two more ships, the *Mary* and the *Pembroke*, were delivered to the Persians with naval stores in 1742 at a cost of 186,251 rupees or around 9,312 *toman* (£23,280).\(^69\) Originally, the Company at Surat had purchased three ships for the Persians, but the third had been damaged before departure and therefore had not arrived in Bandar Abbas. The Council at Bombay requested that these costs be covered by attempting to get the Persians to pay for the third ship, despite it having not been delivered.\(^70\) The agent and Council at Bandar Abbas found it impossible to follow this order; the Persians had bought several European ships already and so it was thought Taqi Khan was unlikely to be easily duped.\(^71\) Instead, the agent at Bandar Abbas made sure to get a receipt for the two ships delivered for the full amount already paid to him, thus putting an end to the issue as speedily as possible.\(^72\) The actions of the agent, though less than scrupulous, were somewhat better than the plan suggested by the Council at Bombay. The agent succeeded in gaining political capital from a potentially awkward and dangerous situation, balancing the advantage of a quick, risky profit with accruing the goodwill of Taqi Khan. Though Jean Sutton speaks briefly of the problems caused by private and Danish trade in arms, the sale of ships in this way seems to be unique to Company interactions with Persia.\(^73\)

The delivery of the *Mary* and *Pembroke* was accompanied by a fresh issue: how to crew the expanding Persian fleet adequately. Up to this point, the fleet had been manned by Arabs from various tribes in the Gulf, whose loyalty to Nader Shah in his campaigns against their fellow Arabs and Sunni co-religionists (1738 and 1742) could hardly be counted upon. Indeed, mutinies severely damaged the fighting ability of the Persian fleet on numerous occasions. This affected the Company as Taqi Khan, the *Beglerbegi* of Fars and chief administrator over the *Garmsirat*, had decided that the Indian and European crewmen already serving on the ships would be more competent, not to mention more loyal, than Arab crews. On getting wind of this, the Company dispatched their Armenian linguist with the ships in order to foil any attempt by Taqi Khan to detain the crews and, if necessary, to bribe the Persians to secure their return.\(^74\) The crews did end up staying on with the Persians for two months, but insisted on full pay and served under their own officers. These officers argued fiercely with

\(^{69}\) IOR/G/29/6 ff.a88v-9 Consultation on Sunday 24th January 1742.

\(^{70}\) IOR/G/29/6 f.183v Consultation on Wednesday 30th December 1741.

\(^{71}\) IOR/G/29/6 f.187 Consultation on Thursday 21st January 1741.

\(^{72}\) IOR/G/29/6 f.204v Consultation on Monday 19th April 1742.


\(^{74}\) IOR/G/29/6 f.201 Consultation on Tuesday 23rd March 1742.
Taqi Khan over whether the Persian or Company colours should be flown over the ships while the Company officers and crews remained aboard. 75 When Taqi Khan insisted on flying the Persian ensign, the crews refused to serve any longer than the two months they had been contracted for, despite an angry response from the Persian grandee. 76 This clearly reveals a tension between the expectations of the Persians and the Company. The lack of a treaty formally cementing the relationship and status of both sides allowed for significant difficulties to arise over questions of sovereignty and authority. This question over manning the ships delivered to the Persians shows weaknesses on both the Company’s and the Persian side. On the one hand, the Persians could compel the Company to provide the crews, threatening disfavour at Court and the anger of key local officials, while the Persians had no way of forcing the ships’ crews to comply with their orders. This would suggest that the Persians simply had no way to force the crews to comply with their orders, either through reward or duress, underlining the disparities between Company and Persian naval power.

An unexpected advantage lay in the capacity of the Persians to use deserters as military experts. This had originally been prohibited in the agreements made during the Hormuz campaign nearly a century previously, though this, like the Company’s privileges, seems to have broken down after the Afghan invasion and rise of Nader Shah. Most notable among these deserters was Captain Richard Cook, who had sold his ship, the Ruparell, to the Persians in 1734. Cook afterwards assisted the Persians at Bushehr in 1735, where he intervened with the Persians on the Company’s behalf after the defeat at Basra as well as taking part in later negotiations with Arab mutineers on behalf of the Persians. 77 Along with Cook, other European deserters appear to have made their way into Persian service, including those from the Harwich. 78 The records do not mention why these men chose to serve the Persians, though the promise of better pay, conditions, or appreciation for their naval expertise may have contributed. They would have been disappointed as the Arab mutinies were sparked, among other things, by a lack of pay and poor provisioning.

Despite these issues, the ships were officially handed over to the Persians on 28 May 1742, ignoring the fact the Mary was in need of daily pumping,

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75 IOR/G/29/6 f.204 Consultation on Tuesday 13th April 1742.
76 IOR/G/29/6 f.204v Consultation on Monday 19th April 1742.
77 IOR/G/29/5 f.282v Consultation on Monday 23rd June 1735 and Lockhart, p. 11.
78 IOR/G/29/6 f.14 Consultation on Friday 16th December 1737.
owing to leaks in her hull, while the *Pembroke* lacked full rigging.\textsuperscript{79} It has been suggested that taking ownership of the vessels gained Taqi Khan enough political capital with Nader Shah that he concerned himself relatively little with the state of the ships themselves, not to mention a further implied personal financial incentive tied up with the purchase.\textsuperscript{80} Despite these troubles, the agent was informed by Bombay that the Company would supply two further vessels for the Persians, as long as a bond of 20,000 rupees, or 1,000 *toman*, per ship was provided beforehand.\textsuperscript{81} The Persians had previously requested the use of crews composed of lascars from Bombay, though these requests had always been denied.\textsuperscript{82} The lack of concern shown by Taqi Khan over the state of his purchases suggests that the Company took some licence in the quality and cost of the ships they delivered, no doubt with an eye to a larger margin. This profiteering on the Company’s part was ignored by the equally avaricious Taqi Khan. In this case, the balance struck was highly beneficial to the Company, who turned a significant profit on the sale of ships to the Persians, while also earning the gratitude of Taqi Khan, whose status was augmented in the eyes of the Shah. In this way the Company maintained its friendship with an important official while also assisting in the advancement of that official’s career.

By 1743 there is significant evidence that the Persians were actively seeking out ships from other sources. These included other Company ships operating in Sind, which was now part of Nader Shah’s Empire in India, as well as Arab and Indian ships. These were purchased at Sind or extorted from the Arab Sheikhs of the Gulf.\textsuperscript{83} This diversification in supply shows that the Persian effort to build up their naval strength was not concentrated solely in the Gulf, nor limited to a single source. In fact, as Lockhart and Axworthy note, Nader Shah also worked to build up a fleet in the Caspian.\textsuperscript{84} There were also later reports of the Persians seizing eight ships from Sind and using them to carry men, horses, and 50,000 *toman* of treasure from there to Bandar Abbas.\textsuperscript{85} In 1743, during the campaign on the Arab shore against Muscat, it is recorded that a ‘large ship from Muscatt of about nine hundred tons and

\textsuperscript{79} IOR/G/29/6 f.215v Consultation on Friday 28th May 1742.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{81} IOR/G/29/6 f.233v Consultation on Sunday 14th November 1742.
\textsuperscript{82} IOR/G/29/5 f.367v Consultation on Monday 21st February 1737.
\textsuperscript{83} IOR/G/29/5 f.42 Consultation on Sunday 2nd May 1734 and IOR/G/29/6 f.274v Consultation on Wednesday 20th December 1743.
\textsuperscript{85} IOR/G/29/6 f.274v Consultation on Wednesday 20th December 1743.
mounts 50 guns arrived at Bandar Abbas after being handed over by the Muscati Arabs to the Persian forces. The ship was sent on to the Persian arsenal and dock at Bandar-e Laft where she was hauled ashore and her hull cleaned. This highlights a shift in the power relations of the Gulf region, the Persians now being able to flex their own naval muscle in such a way that they could capture and maintain ships from the Muscatis, who had previously exercised almost untrammelled control of the Gulf’s shipping, checked only by their fear of the Europeans.

Persian power in the Gulf took a serious downward turn in August 1740, when the Arab crews of the Persian fleet revolted en masse, killing the admiral, Mir Ali Khan, along with anyone who resisted them. They then took all the ships they could from the anchorage at Bandar-e Laft. The Company blamed this mutiny on a lack of pay and supplies, adding that the Persian fleet was lost should the Arabs refuse to sail, having no other sources of skilled mariners. In order to put down this revolt, the Persians were forced to request ships from the EIC and VOC. In this way, Persian authorities had to turn to Europeans to defeat a fleet whose primary function was to replace them as the paramount naval power in the Gulf. As the Company were unable to supply any assistance, the Dutch were requested to provide two ships that they had available at Bandar Abbas. The records note that the Dutch felt compelled to assist the Persians, believing that such a dire circumstance necessitated them giving their aid freely, as the backlash should they resist would be severe due to the panic that rippled through Persian officials. The Dutch did, however, need to bribe the ships’ crews to proceed past Kishm Island. The Company eventually lent some aid against the rebels by providing a tranky (small ship used for coastal voyages) crewed with some of their factory guards and a gunner, who, if the Company report is to be believed, put up a much greater resistance to the Arabs than did either the Dutch or the Persians, both being accused of taking flight at the sight of the enemy. This incident reveals a continued Persian reliance on their European ‘navies for hire’, especially in a period where the balance of power in the Gulf had not yet settled in Persia’s favour, meaning that a mutiny of this sort could set the Persians back to a point where they were again reliant on borrowed European military assets.

86 IOR/G/29/6 f.249 Consultation on Monday 23rd May 1743.
87 Ibid.
88 IOR/G/29/6 f.108v Consultation on Tuesday 26th August 1740.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 IOR/G/29/6 f.115v Consultation on Sunday 12th October 1740.
A final way in which the Company was involved in supporting Persian naval expansion in the Gulf was through the provision of naval stores and supplies, as well as, on one occasion, personnel to assist in the construction of ships at Bandar-e Laft.92 The first major instance of this was recorded in 1735, after the Persian defeat at Basra, when Latif Khan, the Persian admiral, asked the Company to provide him with a supply of tin, iron shot, and gunpowder, all of which he promised to pay for.93 Despite not having the quantity he requested, the Company gave him a considerable supply of 500 maunds of tin, 2,000 round shot and 10 barrels of powder. Why exactly the Company’s factory had such a quantity of shot and powder in the first place is unclear, and it seems unlikely this could have been solely for the factory’s use. The store of such a large quantity might have been used either to resupply ships passing the factory, or made available to local merchants or potential buyers. In fact, there is no mention of either of these activities taking place, the only trade in such naval stores being connected with demands from the Persian government, most of which came later than 1735. This seems, therefore, to be evidence either of a clandestine trade in military hardware with the Persians by the Company, which does not appear on their books, or that a private trade was being carried out by someone in such materiel, though if this were the case there would have been some recourse to the owners before it was given as a gift to Latif Khan. Such requests were made to the Company and Dutch sporadically throughout the period of the Persian naval experiment, sometimes with promise of payment, or treated simply as gifts. This evidence, along with the sale of ships to the Persians, solidifies the Company’s role as an arms trader in the Gulf.

The Company’s purchase of ships and gifts of stores to the Persian fleet provides an interesting case, showing a great level of military involvement in the Gulf region as well as revealing a further level to the political balance struck between the Company and the Persian government. On the one hand, it seems obvious that the Company would benefit from the profits they could turn on brokering the ship sales, while on the other, it would damage any claim to naval supremacy they had in the Gulf. Presumably this would permanently put a stop to any pretence the Company might have to collect money for passes from ships bound to or from India. There were other benefits to the Company in supplying ships; they would be seen to be assisting the Shah in his desire for a fleet, as well as building an effective force to combat piracy and threats by Arab shipping to the sea lanes. This

93 IOR/G/29/5 f.282v Consultation on Monday 23rd June 1735.
would alleviate the Company from the need to do so themselves, as they had in the past. The presence of a Persian fleet would also allow the Company to relinquish any responsibility for troublesome requests to transport embassies, troops, and supplies for Nader Shah; after all, this intimate involvement carried risks of gaining the Shah’s displeasure should his expectations fail to be met. This required the Company not only to placate him, but also to keep local officials, such as Taqi Khan and Latif Khan, firmly in the Company’s camp in order to advocate on their behalf at Court.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that Nader Shah used the English East India Company’s ships as a mechanism to engage in long-distance diplomacy, while taking advantage of European naval technology to achieve his strategic aims in the Gulf region. The desire for European ships and the negotiations that took place to acquire them are a neglected part of the relationship between the European Companies and states in Asia. The military balance between Europeans and Persians is demonstrative of the wider interaction of European naval technology and Asian powers while adding a new dimension to the way the Companies transacted business and diplomacy with non-European states. Unlike in India or Japan, where the Company took on the veneer of vassalage, their attitude towards Persia was based on the historic cooperation between the two powers to drive the Portuguese from Hormuz and the subsequent Farmans. The Persians’ ability to manipulate the Company with the promise of trade benefits, as well as the threat of expulsion or violence, is a strong indication of the Companies’ aversion to open conflict, as well as their respect for written agreements. It also challenges the idea of the Company as having the upper hand in their interactions with Asian rulers. As with the Tokugawa and the VOC, Nader Shah controlled the terms of the relationship with the EIC.

Despite this, relations between the Company and Persia were not entirely stable, requiring a delicate balancing act of differing expectations and interests with influences ranging from the ever-changeable mood of the Shah to the machinations of the VOC. The Persians did not simply dominate a quiescent Company, the employees of which played a constant game of cat and mouse with Persian officials in order to limit their exposure to Persian wrath while operating at a minimal cost to their Honourable Masters. They were able to do this by playing off Persian desire for European ships which allowed them to deal from a position of strength that belied their numbers.
The evidence also reveals a distinct shift from previous periods in the Anglo-Persian relationship, which shows that the Company were given a relatively free hand to act in the Gulf, issuing passes, firing upon non-compliant ships, and taxing passing trade. This carte blanche was lost on the accession to power of Nader Shah, whose vision for a renewed Persian hegemony over the entire Gulf region, including the Arab shore and Muscat, drew the Company into a closer relationship with the Persian throne. This new status quo was far more precarious, resting on the Company’s desire to regain their privileges, some of which they eventually did, set against the Shah’s own wishes and expectations.

In many ways, the Company’s presence in the Gulf was central to the naval experiment carried out by Nader Shah until the end of his reign in 1747. Without the Company’s willingness to act as a navy for hire, the Persians would have had no basis for their attempt to assert control over the Garmsirat. The defeat of the Afghans by Nader Shah precipitated the spread of smaller groups throughout the region. These smaller groups, in league with their Arab Sunni coreligionists represented a significant block to renewed Persian control over the Gulf littoral. The presence of the Company and their willingness to nullify the naval advantage of the Arabs was central to the rebels’ defeat. Nader Shah’s reliance on the Company for naval assistance was almost certainly a factor in his decision to create a fleet of his own. In this project he again found the Company to be a useful ally, despite initial difficulties in agreeing how ships might be purchased. In this way, the combination of Nader Shah’s desire for a navy and the Company’s scruples about selling their own ships led to a situation where the Company acted both as hired muscle and a supplier of military equipment. The Company were neither a silent nor an acquiescent partner, carefully balancing acting as a broker for the sale of ships, even feigning this role when private individuals made sales without their knowledge, with that of an independent power. The Persian fleet was therefore the coalescence of two mutually supporting policies. The Persians wished to assert themselves militarily in the Gulf, while the Company, happy to decrease their exposure to Arab piracy, turn a profit in the process, and gain back their extensive trade privileges, supported them in this attempt. Persian demand for the use of Company ships, either for embassies, fighting, or transporting supplies was a nuisance that the Company believed could be circumvented by providing the Shah with his own fleet, rather than a Company navy for hire.
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