RAIDING, REACTION AND RIVALRY: THE SHĀHSEVAN TRIBES IN THE CONSTITUTIONAL PERIOD

By Richard Tapper

Introduction

The Shāhsevan tribes of Azarbajjan were involved in various important events during the Constitutional period. In spring 1908, border incidents in Shāhsevan territory, between tribesmen and Russian frontier guards, provided the Russians with a pretext for military intervention in Azarbajjan on a scale which hastened the fall of the Constitutionalist government in Tehran. During the winter of 1908–9, there were some Shāhsevan among the reactionary forces which besieged Tabriz. In late 1909 most of the Shāhsevan chiefs joined a Union of tribes of eastern Azarbajjan, which proclaimed opposition to the Constitution and the intention of marching on Tehran and restoring the deposed Muhammad ‘Ali Shāh. They plun- ed Ardabil, receiving wide coverage in the European press, but were soon subdued by Nationalist forces during that winter and spring 1910. Subsequently the Shāhsevan were regarded as dangerous potential support for Muhammad ‘Ali, while the main activity of their warriors was resistance to the occupying Russian forces.

The actions of the Shāhsevan have commonly been dismissed as those of inveterate brigands and implacable anti-Constitutionalists. They have had a bad press, both in contemporary newspapers and among historians. European newspapers, particularly (after the 1907 agreement) the British, were strongly influenced by the Russians to see the Shāhsevan as bandits with ‘predatory instincts’, a ‘frontier problem’ comparable to that of the British on their North-West Frontier in India. For example, the Times correspondent in St. Petersburg, persuaded by the Russians’ interpretation of events in Ardabil and their plan for a ‘final solution’, commented (7 November 1909) ‘The interests of the [Russian] Empire demand a cessation of the anarchy on its borders. A punitive expedition against the Shahsevans would have been undertaken long ago had they indulged their marauding propensities on our Indian border.’ For recent historians, Shāhsevan involvement in the siege of Tabriz and their sacking of Ardabil have been enough to label them as anti-Constitutionalist, while Cottam, though noting Shāhsevan resistance to the Russians as motivated by xenophobia and religious hatred, states that ‘the Azarbajjani Shahsevan tribe... had consistently opposed the Constitutionalists and had been a major source of support for Muhammad Ali Shah.’

The aim of this paper is to re-examine the role of the Shāhsevan, and to explain the reasons for, and perhaps to correct, the hostile stereotypes to be found in historical accounts. A close examination of the historical and sociological background of the Shāhsevan tribes and their role in these events compels a somewhat different and more complex interpretation of their political behaviour. The tribes were never all united; many were willing to support the Constitution, and some did throughout; while the extent of raiding and banditry was in any case often grossly exaggerated, particularly by Russian sources.

1 This paper was presented at a Conference on ‘The Constitutional Revolution in Iran: a reappraisal’, held at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University, in March 1980.
2 Cottam (1964: 56-7). It is perhaps worth noting that in the 1860s Keith Abbott, British Consul in Tabriz, wrote numerous reports on the Shāhsevan expressing quite a different attitude, sympathetic with the tribes, mindful of their value to Persia in economic and political terms, and attacking their treatment by both Persian authorities and the Russians (Tapper, 1983).
Rather than being seen as motivated simply by blind reaction and lust for booty, Shāhsevan involvement in the Constitutional period must be evaluated in the light of three main factors: raiding—the reasons for the brigandization of eastern Azarbayjan in the early twentieth century; reaction—the varying assessments by the tribesmen, in terms of a monarchist and Islamic political ideology, of the appeal of various figures and forces which sought to gain their allegiance; and rivalry—the complex patterns of internal rivalries within and among the tribes.

The Shāhsevan tribes: historical and sociological background

The Shāhsevan are said to have been created by Shāh ‘Abbās I as a special composite tribe with personal loyalty to him and the Šafāvid dynasty. Actually, evidence for the existence of a tribal group bearing this name is lacking until some time after ‘Abbās’s reign, and it is unlikely that a tribal confederation under the name of Shāhsevan was formed before the eighteenth century, when Nādir Shāh Afshār is said to have united some of the tribes of north-east Azarbayjan under a particular chief, Badr Khān of the Sārīkhānbeglū tribe.

Later in the eighteenth century, rivalries in Badr Khān’s family split the Shāhsevan into two confederations, one associated with the city of Ardabil and the other with the district of Mishkin (see map). The former appears to have been dominant, the leaders controlling the city until 1808, while many of their tribesmen settled in villages nearby. The nomadic Shāhsevan, at this time estimated at around 10,000 families, wintered in the Mughān steppe as far as the banks of the Kur. Although, as the Shāhsevan of Mughān, the two confederations of Mishkin and Ardabil retained some grounds for unity in relations with tribal groups of neighbouring districts, in fact the chess-board patterns of rivalries which prevailed throughout Transcaucasia during the second half of the eighteenth century found the two confederations on opposite sides.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, Shāhsevan territory was swept by campaigns between the new Qājār rulers of Persia and the Russians, who were expanding south of the Caucasus. The Ardabil Shāhsevan appear to have been Qājār supporters (though their Khān was deposed from the governorship of Ardabil in 1808), while the Mishkin leaders took the side of the invaders. The campaigns ceased with the Treaty of Turkmānchāy (1828), when the present frontier was established in the north, cutting the Shāhsevan from the better part of their winter quarters in Mughān, though the nomads were allowed to continue using a restricted area of these pastures.

In the early nineteenth century, each confederation (el) was ruled by a descendant of Badr Khān as paramount chief (elbeglū), appointed (at least from the 1830s) by government, which held him responsible for the maintenance of order and the collection of taxes and military levies. Each comprised a number of tribes (tayfa) headed in turn by chiefs (beg) appointed by the elbeglū. Chiefs were assisted by elected elders (aqsaqal) of camp communities (oba). Members of the elbeglū dynasties and those half-dozen tribes which could claim common descent with them from Badr Khān’s ancestor Yūnsūr Pasha were classed as nobles (begzadā), the rest were commoners (rayāt, hampa). Chiefs of the 25-odd

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*The origins and early history of the Shāhsevan are traced in Tapper (1974). A paper on the Shāhsevan tribes up to the time of the Russian wars in the early nineteenth century is in preparation, while Tapper (1983) discusses events leading to the Russian take-over of Shāhsevan winter quarters during the nineteenth century. These, and the present paper, are based on the comprehensive account of Shāhsevan history given in Tapper (1972: 356–751), where fuller references are supplied for the summary presented here.
Sketch-map of northeast Azarbayjan, circa 1900.
commoner tribes joined the retinues of noble chiefs, on whom they probably depended at this time for access to pasture. By 1843 the Mishkín tribes were said to number 6-7,000 families and to be more prosperous and powerful, while the Ardabil tribes numbered 5,000 and were increasingly settled. But this formal hierarchy of groups and authority was breaking down, and a new structure was emerging, partly as a result of internal contradictions and partly in response to a series of drastic changes in the economic and political environment, beginning with the Russian advent in Mughán.

With Persia being steadily strangled by British and Russian imperial interests, most insidiously by their overt economic penetration of the country, the Sháhsevan as frontier tribes suffered not only from the restriction of their grazing lands but also from the increasing extortions of the Qájár administration. Not surprisingly they responded by raiding, confined at first to the Russian colonies along and beyond the Kur river. As these depredations spread further afield during the second half of the nineteenth century, they became a festering issue between the Russian and Persian authorities. The latter attempted to restrain the Sháhsevan through the elbejis, but the Ardabil branch of the dynasty was now already assimilated to the administration and to urban life, and had lost touch with the tribes, while the Mishkín elbejis either could not or would not control the most recalcitrant brigands, and were unacceptable to the Russians. The noble tribes meanwhile were weakened through rivalries within the chiefly lineages.

The break-up of the descent-based hierarchy and unity of the confederations had accelerated after 1850, when chiefs of individual tribes seized control of the pastures allocated to them in Russian Mughán. Where they had formerly depended on delegated authority, now they had important economic powers too. One noble tribe in each branch continued to dominate the rest: Qojabeglu in Mishkín and Polatlu in Ardabil. The larger and wealthier commoner tribes now declared their independence of the nobles and began to collect their own followings of weaker tribes. Weaker commoner (and noble) chiefs, if only to secure their control of their own tribes, sought the support of a dominant tribe. A new stratification, based not on descent but on wealth and manpower, now formed.

With the Persian authorities unable or unwilling to exercise more than intermittent control on their frontier, in 1884 the Russians took the planned but inevitable step of closing it to the Sháhsevan nomads. The result was economic, social and political upheaval in north-east Azarbajjan. More than two-thirds of the nomads were deprived of their traditional winter pastures and markets, and though efforts were made to find them new ones on the Persian side of the frontier, inter-tribal disputes grew violent and raiding proliferated. For forty years the Sháhsevan were in almost continual rebellion against all external authority.

By 1900 the chiefs of seven Sháhsevan tribes (Hájjikhojalu, Geyiklu, Qojabeglu and its rival offshoot Tśabeglu, Alárlu, Polatlu and Yortchi) had emerged as the most effective leaders. They divided the pastures and village lands of the region between them and sent their armed retinues to raid widely in neighbouring regions of Russia and Persia. A common feature of these tribes, the main basis of their chiefs' power, was that before the closure of Russian Mughán they all had either extensive village bases, or pasture in Persian Mughán, or both. Thus, Polatlu and Yortchi were almost wholly settled near Ardabil. Hájjikhojalu and Geyiklu, neighbours in both winter and summer quarters, had fine pastures in the western part of the region, comparatively
inaccessible both to the Russians and to the Persian authorities. Qojabeglu and 'Isâbeglu, occupying the centre of the region, were between them able to control both the access of other tribes to Mughân and the passing of trade caravans between the towns of Ahar, Ardabil and Belasuvar. Alârlu, mainly settled with prosperous farmlands near Garmi, dominated Ujârûd and the frontier between there and Ardabil. On one or two notable occasions most of these tribes were allied for a particular common purpose, but usually each was on terms of hostility if not blood-feud with its neighbours, and formed alliances among the others and with tribes in neighbouring regions: the Chalabiânlû and Hâjjî’âlîlû of Qarâdâgh, the Shatrânlu of Khalkhâl, the Dalikânlu of Sarab, the Galish of Tâlisî.

The chiefs of the former noble tribes Qojabeglu (and 'Isâbeglu) and Polatlu maintained a degree of moral authority and continued to wield symbols of nobility and to rule their followers through a hierarchy of subordinate chiefs and elders. The four leading commoner tribes (Hâjjîkhojalu, Yortche, Alârlu, Geyiklu) attempted to establish the same kind of dynastic rule and hierarchical structure of their following as had characterized the former noble tribes. Each dominant tribe had its chiefly lineage and its commoners, and so did each subordinate tribe. The hierarchy of each 'tribal cluster' now developed as follows:

The beţzâda included the chief of the dominant tribe and his suite, comprising his agnates and their households, who between them owned or controlled access to much of the available pasture and farmland, and a few personal servants (scribes, tutors), who might be of the chiefly lineage or refugees of rank from elsewhere; and also the chiefs of subordinate tribes in the cluster and their (much smaller) suites. The beţzâda provided military levies for the government when called on.4

Each chief had a retinue of servants (nôkâr), including the mounted riflemen provided by elders of commoner communities of the tribe, who would be detailed for domestic military duties (defence of the chief's property and camp, raids, coercion of dissident followers); it also included the chief's menial servants and herdsmen, mostly outlaws, or refugee peasants or nomads without property or effective kin support of their own.

The commoners (rayât, hampâ) were the mass of non-chiefly pastoral nomads, who usually had nominal rights to their pastures (particularly after 1884) and were economically independent, but were required to provide a number of mounted riflemen to serve in the chief's retinue.

This structure was not effectively centralized. The main threat to the cluster

4 In 1886 the Shâhevan of Mishkîn and Ardabil were expected to contribute a troop of 400 cavalry, while the Qojabeglu tribe was rated separately at 50 horsemen (FO 251/57, Herbert to Nicolson, Army Report, 7.6.1886). In 1903 the levy amounted to 440 men, broken down among the tribes as follows (Polatlu and Qojabeglu apparently escaped the levy by resisting the governor of Ardabil's recruiting expedition):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ardabil tribes:</th>
<th>Mishkîn tribes:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Khâmîslu (Polatlu)</td>
<td>'Isâbeglu (Qojabeglu)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yortche</td>
<td>Hâjjîkhojalu</td>
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<td>Dûrsûnkhâjalu</td>
<td>Âlîshmîkîlû</td>
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<td>Takileh</td>
<td>Geyiklu</td>
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<td>Alârlu of Langân</td>
<td>Husâynhâjîlû</td>
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<td>Damirchîlû</td>
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|              |                 | Ardabil tribes: | Mishkîn tribes: |
|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|              | Ardabil tribes: | Mishkîn tribes: |
| Khâmîslu     | 80              | 'Isâbeglu       | 50              |
| Yortche      | 50              | Hâjjîkhojalu    | 50              |
| Dûrsûnkhâjalu| 25              | Âlîshmîkîlû     | 40              |
| Takileh      | 25              | Geyiklu         | 30              |
| Alârlu       | 50              | Husâynhâjîlû    | 15              |

Each year those who had served the previous year were replaced, and then had to serve again the following year, so in fact some 880 horsemen of the Shâhevan were regularly involved (Tigranov, 1909: 121, 144).
chief's domination came from the more powerful of his close agnates, especially half-brothers or close cousins who owned and lived in lands at some distance from his own. They too maintained suites of armed henchmen and retinues of servants and herdsmen; the henchmen were locally recruited and owed their immediate loyalty to the leader who could best ensure the protection of their vulnerable pastoral resources. The cluster chief could not hope to crush these rivals, nor to deprive them of their property, and in fact relied on them to keep outlying subordinate chiefs and elders in order—these were discouraged if not actually prevented from accumulating wealth, and chiefs of smaller and weaker tribes were little more than primus inter pares among their elders. So long as the cluster chief supplied his agnates with sufficient spoils and armed reinforcements when necessary, he could rely on their support; otherwise rivalries threatened to split the chiefly dynasty, as they had the former noble tribes. Dynastic disputes did develop in each of the dominant tribes, the opposition in each case forming around close agnates of the cluster chief. The names of the chiefs involved in the events narrated below are often more significant than the names of their tribes.5

The Shâhsevan up to the Constitutional Revolution

During the years of Muḥammad ʿAlī Mirzâ's rule as heir apparent (1896–1907), the province of Azarbâyjan was in continual disorder and distress. The administrative machinery broke down; agitation by xenophobic reformist elements in the mercantile and religious classes increased following their victory over the Tobacco Concession, and now Russia, though having contributed to that victory, became the sole target of opposition. Muḥammad ʿAli identified himself with everything Russian, and his subservience to Russian influence was a major factor in his eventual downfall as Shâh. Meanwhile he relied, though with little effect, on brigands like Rahîm Khân Chalabiânlu of Qarādâgh to control his disordered province.

The Ardabil region was in turmoil. There were repeated grain shortages, due not only to bad harvests and the insecurity of cultivation but also to hoarding and speculation by the landowners. These included the religious leaders who, while pursuing their own active and often violent Niʿmat-Ḥaydari rivalries, incited the city populace against foreigners and against the Governors, several of whom were forced to take refuge. Meanwhile the Shâhsevan tribes raided throughout the region and in the city itself. On a number of occasions Muḥammad ʿAli sent Rahîm Khân to help quell disturbances in the city or to subdue the tribes. In 1901 two major expeditions against the Shâhsevan had some short-lived success: in March the Governor of Ardabil, Șamad Khân Shujâʾal-Dauleh,6 helped by Rahîm Khân, arrested the following chiefs: Ḥaẓrat Quîlî of Hâjjikhojalu, Muhammad Quîlî Khân of Alârlu, Sardâr Beg of Qojabeglu, and Qara Beg Dilaqarda; but these came to some arrangement with their captors, and were apparently released. For whatever reason, in spite of this success, Șamad Khân was dismissed. His replacement as Governor, ʿImâm Quîlî Mirzâ, refused to leave Tabriz without an adequate force, and since many of the landowners suffering from Shâhsevan depredations were prominent Tabrizi citizens, he was duly supplied with several thousand troops. With the aid of the Governor of Qarâdâgh, he had by late summer subdued all the tribes.

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5 Detailed descriptions of the tribes at this time and the effects of the frontier closure on them can be found in Tapper (1972: 590–613).
6 On this individual and his role in the period, see Mujtahidi (1948: 95 f.) and Good (1977).
though he had to fight several battles with Sardār Beg Qojabeglu.\textsuperscript{7} None the less, Shāhsevan banditry continued unchecked in the following years, Qojabeglu and Ālārlū raiding on the frontier north of Ardabil, Polatlu in the region of the city itself.

Throughout these years, the Caucasian administration and the Russian representatives at Tabriz apparently encouraged the Shāhsevan, supplying them with arms, allowing them to take refuge over the frontier when pursued, and intervening on their behalf when they were captured. Meanwhile they built up their Cossack forces at frontier points like Āstārā and Khudā Āfarīn, offering their services to the Persian government, which was able to refuse them only by sending expeditions such as that of Imām Quli Mīrzā in 1901. In addition, the Russians took their own reprisals against those of the tribes (notably Qojabeglu and Ālārlū) which raided too flagrantly over the frontier. Their policy was clearly to foster disorder within Persian territory and to make their own military assistance and eventual occupation indispensable, though they did not achieve this for some years.

Russian military expeditions visited Shāhsevan districts for intelligence purposes.\textsuperscript{8} Russian merchants and goods dominated the trade of Azerbayjan, and, after Tabriz, Ardabil was the most important commercial centre of the province. Russian subjects were buying numerous villages in the province, though they had to use Persian proxies in order to overcome legal restrictions. New roads and railways across the province were planned, though a proposed railway south from Aštāndūz was rejected as it would run through bandit-infested country.

The tribes of north-east Azerbayjan played no significant role in the first two years of the Constitutional Revolution. However, when Böyük Khān Chalabīānū, at the instigation of his father Raḥīm Khān (who was in Tehran), attempted to end the Tabriz \textit{anjuman} in May 1907, his march on Tabriz was halted by the pillaging of his villages in Qarādāgh in his absence by the Ḥājjīkhojālu tribe; but the latter’s action was probably more due to their long-standing enmity with the Chalabīānū than to the support for the Constitution which they were later to show.\textsuperscript{9} Pokhitonov, Russian Consul-General at Tabriz, magnified every such instance of disorder in his appeals for the introduction of Russian troops to ‘keep the peace’. Raḥīm Khān’s rival, Karīm Khān, was sent by the Constitutionalists to be chief of Chalabīānū, promising to capture Böyük Khān, but though he quietened Qarādāgh, he failed in his avowed object.

The populace of Ardabil had eagerly welcomed the turn of events in late 1906. They pressed for the removal of the reactionary Governor Sa’ād al-Mulk, and on instructions from Tabriz, the leading Ni’mātī mujtahid, Mīrzā ‘Alī Akbar, set up a local \textit{anjuman}. The Haydarī, however, set up a rival \textit{anjuman}, and hostilities between the factions intensified, until the introduction of bands of Shāhsevan warriors, Qojabeglu by the Ni’mātī and Polatlu by the Haydarī, brought violence and death to the streets. Naqī Khān Rashīd al-Mulk,\textsuperscript{10} a presumed supporter of the Constitution but later to become known as a Russo-phile, had been sent from Tabriz to be Governor; he suppressed the rival \textit{anjumans} and initiated a new one with equal numbers from each faction; but

\textsuperscript{7} On the events of 1901 see Tigranov (1909: 14–44); FO 248/745 (Wood no. 3 of 7.2.1901); FO Prints, Persia and Arabia, V to VII (1901: various monthly summaries).

\textsuperscript{8} e.g. Averyanov in 1899, Tigranov in 1903, Sh-f M-e-f in 1904.

\textsuperscript{9} See FO Prints, Affairs of Persia, XI (Spring-Rice to Grey no. 128, 15.6.1907); Browne (1910: 141–42); Farzād (1945: 91–92); Tāhirzādeh-Bihzād (1955: 472 f.); Hidāyat (1965: 170).

\textsuperscript{10} On this individual and his role in Persian history, see Mujtahidi (1948: 198–200).
he was unable or unwilling to arrest Böyük Khan or to pacify the Shâhsevan. In the summer of 1907, a Russian vice-consul was appointed for the first time. The Ardabilis began to agitate in the winter for Rashid al-Mulk’s dismissal, and in early 1908, when Shâhsevan warriors (probably Polatlu or Yortchi) raided Ardabil in force, the Governor was forced to flee. Then in April, a border incident in the north of the region brought the Shâhsevan into the very centre of events leading to the fall of the Constitutionalist government in Tehran.

The Belasuvar affair

Some years previously, Shâhsevan tribes migrating to and from the eastern part of Mughân had been given permission to use a track crossing Russian territory in the vicinity of Demân. Muḥammad Quli Khan of Alârlu constructed a small settlement beside the track; the Russian authorities, alleging that he based raiding expeditions on this settlement, which they thus interpreted as a fort, demanded that he dismantle it; as he paid no attention, a Cossack detachment was detailed to patrol the frontier between Demân and Belasuvar. On 11 April 1908 an officer of this detachment crossed onto Persian territory near Belasuvar in pursuit of a runaway horse. On encountering a party of Qojabeglu tribesmen he was shot dead and several of his escort were wounded. In immediate retaliation the Cossack garrison at Belasuvar crossed to the Persian side of the frontier, destroyed the customs post and killed some forty inhabitants. A week or so later, reinforcements arrived from Baku, and a force of several hundred men assembled and divided into two parties. The first, having entered Persia near Belasuvar and destroyed one or two Persian villages, set off in pursuit of the Qojabeglu, but after suffering heavily in an engagement with the tribesmen, the party had to withdraw. The second party, under General Snarskiy, destroyed Muḥammad Quli’s settlement near Demân, then crossed the frontier and razed other Persian villages to the ground before withdrawing. On 16 May Snarskiy, who was later to become notorious for his excesses during the occupation of Tabriz, gave the Persian authorities an ultimatum to the effect that if certain demands were not fulfilled, he would enter Persia again and see to their satisfaction himself. The demands included the handing over of the officer’s killers, the return of stolen property, guarantees against further raiding by the tribesmen, and the payment of 80,000 roubles, a sum which the Persians were most unlikely to be able to find.

Now the Qojabeglu had only too often in recent years raided Russian border posts for arms, and Russian villages for other loot, but on this occasion not only had the original Cossack party been trespassing but the officer had fired first and was in other ways to blame for his own fate (some years before, he had killed two sons of a Qojabeglu chief, and though subsequently offered a transfer so as to avoid vengeance, he had refused). Moreover, the retaliations were brutal and unjustifiable. The Russian envoy in Tehran, somewhat embarrassed by these excesses, admitted the officer’s trespass to his British colleague, but the Caucasian administration disguised what had really happened, refused to allow a Joint Commission of Enquiry, blew the incident up to major proportions and publicized Snarskiy’s expedition as a legitimate measure taken in exasperation against bandits, of whose continual atrocities against Russian frontier guards this had been merely the latest and worst example.

The Persian government took serious steps to satisfy some of the demands.

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11 On the political situation in Ardabil at the time, see Safari (1971: 160–202) and Amir-Khizi’s account in Ţahirzâdeh-Bihzâd (1955: 472 f.)
Though the tribes concerned managed to escape to the mountains, the Qojabegl and Alârlu chiefs were brought to Ardabil in custody at the end of May and most if not all the required indemnity was paid. Meanwhile the Nationalists at Tehran were incensed by the Cossacks' and Snarskiy's excesses and not deceived by the Russian version of the incident. With the 1907 Convention, the British envoy Marling, though he was well-informed on what had really happened and who was to blame, refrained from protests and simply advised the Persian government to accede to Russian demands. The Shâh intervened personally to ask for leniency, but many Persians suspected him of having incited the Shahsevan so as to give the Russians an excuse for introducing troops to crush the Constitutionalists. At the end of May the cabinet resigned over the affair. The Russians saw that they had gone too far in alienating Persian public opinion and early in June relented. Snarskiy's troops withdrew from the border and the unpaid indemnity was added to Persia's long-term debt, to be used to pressure the government in later years. Soon after, the Shâh bombarded the Assembly and restored his autocratic rule.12

Raḥîm Khân Chalabînlî had gone to Tehran in Muhammad 'Ali's entourage. In June 1907 the Shâh had been forced to imprison him in the uproar following his son's attempt on the Tabrîz anjuman, but in April 1908 he was freed by the Tehran Assembly and sent to Tabriz with the mission of bringing the Shâhsevan to order. In May he assured the Tabrîz anjuman of his allegiance to the Nationalist-Constitutionalist cause, and persuaded them to give him arms and money towards his mission, but he used these contributions to raise Royalist forces to attack the Nationalists at Tabriz, which he entered and began plundering in July.13

The Royalist forces besieging Tabriz until May 1909 were composed mainly of tribesmen from north Azarbajyan, but apart from some 500 horsemen from Yortchi and Polatlu the Shâhsevan refrained from joining Raḥîm Khân. Throughout the main period of the siege, the nomads were in Mughân, far from the scene, while there were indications in the spring that many of the Ardabil Shahsevan favoured the besieged Nationalists.14

The tribal union and the sack of Ardabil
Abandoning the siege of Tabriz early in May 1909, Raḥîm Khân withdrew to Qârâdâgh. That summer, north Azarbajyan was quite insecure, with Raḥîm Khân's followers raiding in Qarâdâgh and the Shahsevan tribes in Ardabil and vicinity and on the Tabriz-Tehran road. In June Constitutionalists regained control of Ardabil, driving out the tribesmen and forcing the leading reactionaries to take refuge in the Russian vice-consulate, whose guard was


13 In summer 1908 the Tabriz anjuman made further efforts to forestall Royalist opposition from the tribes. One Mulla Imâm Verdi of Mishkîn, a Constitutionalist, was summoned to the anjuman as the governor of Ardabil had complained of his activities. After the Shâh's coup in Tehran, Mulla Imâm Verdi was sent back to Mishkîn to recruit Nationalist support and to dissuade the Shahsevan from attacking Tabriz, but he was apprehended by the governor of Ardabil and hanged; he is remembered locally as a martyr (see Amir-Khiżî 1960: 40, 145; Sâ'îdî 1965: 88 f.).

14 On the siege of Tabriz see: FO Prints, Affairs of Persia, XV-XVIII; S.D.D., I and II; Browne (1910); Moore (1914); Wratislav (1924). There are several Persian accounts, e.g. Amir-Khiżî (1960).
reinforced by 100 Cossacks. After the Shâh’s abdication in July, Nationalists from Tabrîz arrived at Ardabil, formed a new anjuman and took over the city, while the Tehran government appointed Muhammed Quî Alârû as Deputy Governor. The anjuman proceeded to dispose of their opposition and Muhammed Quî Khan to loot the town; more Ardabilis (including the former Governor, Rashîd al-Mulk) joined the refugees in the Russian vice-consulate. The Russians planned a punitive expedition against the Shâhseevan for September, with the excuse that Snarskiy’s demands of the previous year had not yet been met.

At the end of August Russian detachments left Tabrîz for Ahar; ostensibly they were to demand the return of goods looted by Rahîm Khan’s tribesmen during the siege of Tabrîz, but having killed ‘Ali Khan, one of his Qarâdâghî rivals, they appear to have encouraged Rahîm Khan to raise the tribes of north and east Azarbâyjan in favour of the now deposed Muhammed ‘Ali Shâh. Telegrams were sent at the end of September to the Russian consulate at Tabrîz for transmission to the ex-Shâh and to the Nationalist leaders in Tehran, signed by Rahîm Khan and the chiefs of Qarâdâgh and of the Qojabeglu and some other Shâhseevan tribes, affirming their opposition to the Constitution and their intention of first looting Ardabil and then marching on Tehran to restore Muhammed ‘Ali.¹⁵ The telegrams arrived too late, for the Shâh had left Persia on October 1st. A week or so later the Russian Consul-General, Miller, sent his doctor to treat Rahîm Khan for a paralytic stroke, and (as he told his British colleague) to counsel moderation; but the doctor was believed to have instigated Rahîm Khan to further efforts to unite the tribes, for two days after his departure Rahîm Khan marched on Ardabil, where on 3 November he and most of the important Shâhseevan, Qarâdâghî and Khalkhâli chiefs signed a Treaty of Alliance, committed to struggle under his leadership for the restoration of Muhammed ‘Ali. Whether or not Rahîm Khan really had Russian support, he certainly gave out that he had, both to his allies and to his opponents.¹⁶

¹⁵ Few of the names of the fifteen signatories are identifiable. The texts of the telegrams are in Kasravi (1938, III: 119–20) and many other places; English translations in FO 248/974 (Smart to Barelay No. 35 of 14.11.1909).

¹⁶ The text of the Treaty, written in the margins of a Qur’an, was published by the then Governor of Tabriz in his memoirs (Hidayat, 1965: 218–19), and also in Amir-Khizi (1966: 429) and elsewhere, but no translation has yet appeared (to my knowledge) in English, so it is given here in full:

In the name of God the Compassionate and Merciful. On 19 Shawwâl 1327 [we] the slaves of the court, chiefs of the tribes of the five provinces, who have made an agreement and union for the restoration of security and monarchy in Iran and the repulse of the evil of the mischief-makers and the removal and suppression of those disobedient to the true religion and the propagation of the Ja’farî faith (to which a thousand congratulations and praise), and have first of all taken measures in this province of Ardabil for total reform in the future and performance of this work, and have sworn on the holy word of God among ourselves, and are laying down conditions whereby we shall strive in total struggle from the beginning to the end of the project with our lives and property, to the last drop of blood and last grain of substance; we have appointed the honorable Sâdâr Nuṣrat as our leader and hold it necessary for us to execute his commands. Whoever goes back from this Treaty and turns his hand to plundering, we shall expel him from the chiefly assembly; he has no tribal rights, no true religion, may this sacred word of God put an end to his house; we shall have to pillage his property all together and at once, and kill and execute him himself.

The signatories are listed as follows (with their probable tribal identity in parentheses): Sâdâr Nuṣrat (Rahîm Khan Chalabiânî); Amir ‘Ashâyir (Mustafâ Quî Khan Shatranî); Sâlîr As’ad (?) Sâlîr al-Sultân (Yortchi; perhaps Dalîkânî); Sâlîr Nuṣrat (?) Lutfullah Khan Sartip (Dûrmânkojalu); Iqtîdîr Nizâm (?; As’ad al-Saltaneh (?; Hazâr Khan (Amîr Tamân, Qojabeglu); Fâtih al-Mamâlîk (Habûbullah Khan Shûjî’ Lashkar Chalabiânî, son of Rahim Khan); Sâlîr ‘Ashâyir (Zarghâm Hájjî-allû’; possibly Karîm Rashîd al-Dauhî Chalabiânî); Sayîf al-Sultân (?) Sârîm al-Sultân (of Naim ?); Sâlîr Fûrûz (Isfandîrâ Khan Shatranî, elder brother of Amir ‘Ashâyir); Rashîd al-Mamâlîk (Shatranî, younger brother of Amir ‘Ashâyir); Sâlîr Divân (Hussîn ‘Ali Khan Polatlû, brother-in-law of Amir ‘Ashâyir); Mustâ’ân al-Mulk (?);
The Ardabilis had sent to Tabriz in August for someone to relieve them from the tyrannies of the new anjuman. The Governor of Tabriz (Mahdi Quli Hidâyat, Mukhbir al-Saltanâneh), eager at the same time to put an end to Rahîm Khân’s banditry, decided on a joint operation from Ardabil and Ahar. To Ardabil he eventually managed to send Sattâr Khân, the hero of the defence of Tabriz the previous spring, who had now become a drunkard and a nuisance. Accompanied by several hundred Nationalists, Sattâr Khân set out for Ardabil in early September; at Sarâb he was greeted by his old friend Muhammad Quli Alârlu and by Naşrullah Khân Yortchi, Husayn ‘Ali Polatlû and other Shâhsevan chiefs. According to Amir-Khizî, who accompanied Sattâr Khân on this trip, Muhammad Quli Alârlu tried to persuade the Nationalist hero to lead the Shâhsevan to Tehran and become Shâh. On their arrival at Ardabil, Sattâr’s party had some success in restoring order. Rashîd al-Mulk was persuaded to leave the Russian vice-consulate and returned to Tabriz. Soon almost all the Shâhsevan chiefs came to offer their submission to Sattâr Khân, who was forming a camp outside Ardabil and preparing an expedition against Rahîm Khân, but by the end of September he had alienated them by his abusive behaviour, his intrigue and his drunkenness. Led by Amir ‘Ashâyîr of Shatrânu, one by one the chiefs abandoned Sattâr and went to join Rahîm Khân. Last of all, even the latter’s bitter rivals, Zarghâm Hâjjî‘allîlu and the son of Hazrat Quli Hâjjikhojalu (who had been entrusted by the Tabriz anjuman with opposition to Rahîm Khân and the Qojabeglu), deserted Sattâr and joined the new Tribal Union. Sattâr also antagonized the Ardabilis by his requisitions and many of them went to join the Shâhsevan. Towards the end of October the tribesmen had surrounded Ardabil and were looting in the outskirts. After a token resistance, the defenders ran short of ammunition. On November 1st or 2nd Sattâr Khân escaped and fled to Sarâb and Tabriz.17 Two or three days

17 There is some controversy in the Persian sources over the actual date of Sattâr Khân’s departure, and whether he ‘fled’ or was ‘persuaded reluctantly’ to abandon the city. The question of the date is cleared up by the fact that Smart, British Consul in Tabriz, was able to report Sattâr Khân’s escape from Ardabil on Nov. 2nd (FO 484/974: Smart to Barclay, telegraphic No. 206 of 2.11.1909). It was presumably Smart from whom Browne received the report on Sattâr Khân which included the following remarks:

With regard to Sattâr Khan, I hope you will be moderate in your praises of him in your Constitutional History. I went to Tabriz a fervent admirer of Sattâr, and I came away with another lost illusion. Sattâr is an illiterate, ignorant Qaradâghi horse-dealer, who has no more idea of what a Constitution means than Rahîm Khan. . . . His conduct at Ardabil was despicable, and was mainly responsible for the rebellion of the Shah-sevens, whose chiefs had come into Ardabil to tender their submission. Sattâr, in a drunken fit, insulted them in the coarsest language. Furious at this treatment by a man whom they looked on as a plebeian, they left the town and joined Rahîm Khan. Sattâr then ignobly abandoned the unfortunate town to its fate and fled to Tabriz (Browne 1910: 441–2).

Badal Khân (?Zargar); Husayn Quli (?‘Ali) Khân (Galish of Tâlâsh); ‘Abâdulluh (‘Abdulluh?) Khân (Yortchi; or Ajirlu?); Abû ’l-Fath Beg (Pâshâkhânlu); Qudrat Khân (?); Mâshâ‘llah Khân (Rizâbeglu; perhaps Yortchi); Izâzullah Khân (perhaps son of Rahîm Khân Chalabîânu); Badr Khân (?Zargar); Muhammad Quli Khân (Alârlu); Muhammad Khân (?); Yâvîd Khân (Hâjjikhojalu); Inâhâ‘llah Khân (?); Naşrullah Khan (Naşrullah) (Yortchi; may be son of Rahîm Khân); Âqû Beg (Dalîkânlu; may be Isâbeglu); Fatullah Khân (may be Isâbeglu); Muhammad Naşir Khân (may be Shatrânu); Khâshim Khân (Qojabeglu; may be Yortchi). Conspicuously absent are Hazrat Quli Hâjjikhojalu and Amir Ārshad Hâjjî‘allîlu, Rahîm Khân’s two main rivals, among the Shâhsevan and in Qarâdâgh respectively. The names so far unidentified probably include the aliases or titles of the following: Sârdâr Beg, Bahârîm Khân and Na’ûrâz Khân of Qojabeglu; Qârâ Beg Dilaqarda; Râgî Quli Polatlû; Qâlî Khâmîshu; Farâj Geyiklu; ‘Imrân Hâjjikhojalu.

On the question of the Russian instigation of the Tribal Union, see: FO 248/1004 (Smart to Barclay, report no. 3 of 4.1.1910); FO Prints, Affairs of Persia, XXI (Barclay to Grey No. 8 of 27.1.1910); Amir-Khizî (1960: 428 f.); Kasravi (1938, III: 112–13, 118–19, 126 f.); Hidâyat (1965: 218); ‘Hafiz (1971: 230 f.); Browne (1910: 347).
later the defence collapsed and the tribesmen entered and sacked the town. The Constitutionalists took refuge in the Russian vice-consulate, which resisted Raḥīm Khān’s demands for their delivery.

The siege and sack of Ardabil caused great consternation not only in Tehran but in the European capitals, whose newspapers for some weeks carried leading articles speculating on the intentions of Raḥīm Khān and the Shāhsevan tribes and on whether the Russians had instigated the anti-constitutionalist Tribal Union—and if so, whether they would continue to support its projected move on Tehran. Meanwhile both Persian and Russian troops had been despatched belatedly to the relief of Ardabil. By the end of October a motley force of 3,000 Azarbayjani Nationalists of poor fighting quality, under Sattār Khān’s associate, Bāqīr Khān, and Ṣamad Khān Shujā’ al-Daulah, had assembled at Sarāb, where they delayed; Tehran meanwhile despatched some 1,500 men, a special effort which quite exhausted the new government’s already minimal resources. Russian detachments began to arrive from Āstārā on 7 November and the tribesmen retired to a camp outside the town. If the Russians had instigated Raḥīm Khān’s Tribal Union, as seems likely, in order to provide a pretext for further armed intervention, this aim has now been achieved, and indeed messages had been sent to Raḥīm Khān strongly warning him against excesses in Ardabil. At Sarāb on the 9th he met the Governor-elect (Rashīd al-Mulk once more) to whom he declared his loyalty to Russia and his intention of marching on Tehran; by the 14th, however, the formidable Tribal Union of Qarādāghī and Shāhsevan tribes was already disintegrating. The immediate aim of plunder had been achieved, but the longer-term prospect of wintering in Tehran had become remote, so the Shāhsevan nomads at least were eager to return to their usual winter quarters in Mughān, whither they departed a few days later. It is probable also that the tribes were disillusioned about the Russian support which Raḥīm Khān had claimed to be enjoying, for now Ardabil was occupied by over 3,000 Russian troops under Col. Averyanov, warmly welcomed by the populace. Rashīd al-Mulk was once more installed as Governor.18

In mid-December a Tehran detachment of 600 men, comprising Bakhtiārī tribesmen, Nationalist volunteers, Persian Cossacks and artillery, under the Chief of Police Yeping Khān and the Bakhtiārī chief Sardār Bahādūr, arrived in the region and joined the Tabrīzī force at Sarāb. The Russians decided to leave disciplinary measures to this combined force, and withdrew up to half their Ardabil garrison. In a series of engagements in late December and early January, government forces defeated and pursued Raḥīm Khān’s two eldest sons over snow-bound country north-west of Sarāb; while the Tabrīzīs stayed around Sarāb, the Tehran detachment captured Ahar, occupied it as their base, and during January defended it against repeated attacks from Raḥīm Khān’s warriors, the latter suffering considerably from the fire of the two Maxim machine-guns, weapons which they had not experienced before. Meanwhile no help was forthcoming from the Shāhsevan: the Mishkīn tribes were in their winter quarters in Mughān, the Ardabil tribes were in their villages and some of them (such as the Yortchi) were negotiating with Rashīd al-Mulk at Ardabil. On 1 February the Tehran detachment sallied northwards from Ahar: Raḥīm Khān was routed, fled with his retinue across the Aras and was given refuge by

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18 On the fall and relief of Ardabil, see Ṣafarī (1971: 230–306); Amir-Khızī (1960: 410–39); Kasrāvī (1938, III: 111–32); Hīdāyat (1965: 196 f., 226); FO Prints, Affairs of Persia, XIX. and XX (various items); S.D.D., III (passim); The Times (articles almost daily from 3 to 18 Nov. 1909); telegrams and despatches from Smart and Shipley at Tabrīz in FO 248/974 and /1004; Browne (1910: 441 f.).
the Russians; most of his Qarādāghī rivals and confederates tendered their submission to the government. Accompanied by the Qarādāghī chiefs Amīr Arshād Ḥājjī-alīlū and his brother Zarghām, the government troops withdrew to Tabrīz and a victorious welcome.19

During February and March the Russians increased their pressure for further moves in the spring to subdue and disarm the Shāhsevan, and for the fulfilment of Snarskiy’s demands of two years before; they threatened to send a punitive expedition themselves. At Tabrīz there was considerable turmoil, fomented by Šattār Khān who bitterly resented having been sent to the Ardabil ‘death-trap’. British and Russian representatives insisted on his removal to Tehran, which was effected in mid-March.

Meanwhile the Yortchi and Polatlu tribes of Ardabil, together with the Shatrānlū of Khalkhāl, were restless and, according to the Russians, making the roads south and west of Ardabil quite unsafe. Rashīd al-Mulk appealed to the Shāhsevan to submit and restore the plunder they had taken in November, but the tribes were alarmed by rumours of planned reprisals and declared themselves unwilling to submit except to someone they could trust. The government forces at Tabrīz prepared for an expedition against them for the spring, planned to reach the Ardabil tribes before those of Mishkīn had arrived from Mughān and could come to their aid.

On 12 April the Tehran detachment under Yeprem Khān and Sardār Bahādur left Tabrīz for Ardabil. After passing through Sarāb they fought an action on the 19th against the forces of Naṣrullāh Khān Yortchi, Ḫūsain ‘Ālī Khān Polatlu and Amīr ‘Aṣḥāyar Shatrānlū, in which Rizā Quli Khān, one of the Polatlu chiefs, was killed. The tribesmen fled, Naṣrullāh Khān and Amīr ‘Aṣḥāyar to Khalkhāl, Ḫūsain ‘Ālī Khān to his home nearby. The next day Naṣrullāh Khān’s main rival, Luṭfullāh Khān Dūrsünkhojalu, came over to Rashīd al-Mulk, and together with other local forces they joined the Tehran detachment at Nīr; soon after, Ṭaqī Khān of the neighbouring Sarābī tribe of Dalīkānlu came over. On the 22nd, Naṣrullāh Khān’s home at Aqchay was destroyed. Rashīd al-Mulk offered terms to Ḫūsain ‘Ālī Khān Polatlu but was refused, so the army moved into Khalkhāl and delivered an ultimatum to Ḫūsain ‘Ālī and to Amīr ‘Aṣḥāyar and Naṣrullāh Khān, demanding that they surrender or lose both life and property. On the 23rd Amīr ‘Aṣḥāyar duly surrendered, followed by Naṣrullāh Khān and Ḫūsain ‘Ālī. The victorious army proceeded to Ardabil, where the captured chiefs of the Yortchi, Polatlu, Khāmislu, Dūrsünkhojalu (except Luṭfullāh Khān), Dalīkānlu and Shatrānlū tribes were imprisoned in the castle. The Ardabil revolt was over.20

The Mishkīn tribes were now just beginning to leave Mughān on their annual spring migration south to the mountains. None of the chiefs, of whom the 70-year-old Sardār Beg Qojabeglu was the most prominent and intractable, had paid any heed at first to Rashīd al-Mulk’s appeal for submission, so on 2 May the government army, with some local levies, left Ardabil on the Mishkīn road. As they marched west and then north towards Mughān, a number of Sardār Beg’s opponents (Ṭaqā Beg and ‘Alish Beg ‘Īšābeglu, Ḥāẓrat Qulī Ḥājjī-khojalu, Muḥammad Qulī and Ḥamīd Beg Alārlū) came to the government camp, submitted and offered their services. Not once did the tribes unite to

19 On the campaigns against the Qarādaghs, see: S.D.D., IV (4–27); FO 248/1004 (various); FO Prints, Affairs of Persia, XXI (various); Amīr-Khīzī (1960: 443–8); Kasravī (1938, III: 138–41); Ḥidāyat (1965: 199).

offer resistance. Finally an engagement was fought on the 8th, north of Langān, against the Qojabeglū, who suffered heavy losses from the machine-guns: many of Sardār Beg’s close kinsmen, including his son Hazār Khān, were killed, and some 200 tribesmen were captured. The following day saw the surrender of Sardār Beg’s cousin and rival, Bahrām Khān. Of the important chiefs now at liberty there remained only Sardār Beg and his son (later chief) Naurūz Khān, and Javat Khān Ḥājjikhojalu, nephew and rival of the chief Ḥazrat Quli. The government force proceeded on the 16th to Mishkīn, where by the 23rd all the remaining chiefs had submitted or been captured; Ḥazrat Quli and one or two others were set free; the others were sent in chains to Ardabil, but not before they had disgorged a vast amount of money, the taxes which the tribes had not paid for three years. At the end of the month the army returned to Ardabil and a triumphal welcome; with a total of 93 chiefs now emprisoned there, Yeprem and Sardār Bahādūr could congratulate themselves on complete success.

On 10 June the government army departed for Tehran, taking with them 59 of the most important chiefs but leaving the others in the Ardabil castle. They entered the capital to a further magnificent reception towards the end of June.

Much of the looted property of the Ardabīlīs had been recovered and was restored to its owners, but Yeprem and the Bakhtīārī were said to have brought great loads of cash and booty with them back to Tehran. The Shāhsevan chiefs declared that they had been tricked into submission, that pledges made to them had not been honoured, and that they intended to hold an enquiry into the conduct of the expedition. Actually, Yeprem was later criticized by both Persians and Russians for not having disarmed the tribes, though this might well have proved impossible, and the Persian government probably still hoped to rely on the Shāhsevan as some kind of frontier guard.21

The Shahsevan and the Cossacks

With the tribal chiefs in captivity, comparative tranquillity was maintained in north-east Azarbāyjan throughout summer 1910. Rashīd al-Mulk planned to disarm the Qojabeglū and their allies, and in September assembled outside Ardabil a ragged force of 1,000, composed of local levies and some tribal cavalry from Yortchī, Polaltu and Rizābeglu. On the 25th the Qojabeglū fell on his camp and broke it up; part of his force joined the assailants, some were captured, and a few, including Rashīd al-Mulk himself, abandoned the artillery and supplies and fled back to the city. The Russian vice-consul claimed that, but for the Cossack garrison, Ardabil would have been sacked once more and the captive chiefs released from the castle.22 The Shāhsevan took control of Mishkīn, Ardabil and Sarāb districts, while the Shatrānlu and Galish tribes overran Khalkhāl and Āstārā.

Meanwhile Ḥazrat Quli Ḥājjikhojalu, who had been set free in the spring, had taken over Āhar in the name of the Nationalist Government. In September Raḩīm Khān Chalabiānlu’s sons Ḥabībullāh Khān and Böyük Khān returned from Russia; the former submitted to Ḥazrat Quli, the latter began widespread looting and on 23 October attacked Āhar, though he was driven off by Ḥazrat Quli’s tribesmen. By the end of October Ḥazrat Quli had won over the Chalabīānlu, and as a result of this pact, the other Shāhsevan tribes caused no more

trouble before they went to Mughân in November, after which order was restored in the Ardabil vicinity. In December, Raḩîm Khân himself returned to Persia, staying awhile in Mughân, but as he found the Shâhsevan there unwilling or unable to join him in a further rising he let himself be taken to Tabrîz in January 1911, a virtual prisoner.

At Ardabil Rashîd al-Mulk, at his Russian mentors’ insistence, prepared a further expedition against Qojabeglu. He thought he could rely on the Ḥâjjikhojalu at Ahar and on the Yortchi and Polatlu at Ardabil, while he hoped to gain the support of the Shatrânu by releasing from the castle Abish Khan (Ḥābüllâḥ Khân Rashîd al-Mamâlik), brother of the chief Amîr ‘Ashâyîr (who was in Tehran). During the winter all was relatively quiet in Mughân, but the Qojabeglu revolted against the alliance now being formed by the Qaraḏâghî tribes, the Ḥâjjikhojalu of Mishkîn and the Polatlu of Ardabil. Disorder at Ardabil increased; Nationalist elements demonstrated against the Russian forces, while Abish Khân and others were intriguing for the return from Tehran of the captive chiefs, who were themselves seeking the dismissal of Rashîd al-Mulk from Ardabil. When Ḥusayn ‘Ali Khân Galish and Muḥammad Quli Khân Alârî reappeared in the neighbourhood and their bands caused trouble in the Astârâ district, further Russian troops were moved into Persia to take reprisals.

Late in April 1911 Rashîd al-Mulk set off on his new expedition to disarm the tribes. Though he began with some success against bands of ‘Īsâbeglu and others, by the end of the month he found himself in a critical situation in Mishkîn; the aid promised by Ḥâjjikhojalu and Shatrânu failed to appear, probably through resentment at his Russian backing. The Governor of Qaraḏâgh was sent to his rescue, but at the end of May, both forces were heavily defeated by the Qojabeglu in Mishkîn, the Governor of Qaraḏâgh being captured and Rashîd al-Mulk fleeing to Ahar.23 The Qojabeglu again threatened Ardabil, but could not take it because of the Russian garrison of some 1,000 men.

That summer the effects of harsh drought and a poor harvest were aggravated by Qaraḏâghî and Shâhsevan bands, which pillaged all over the Ardabil and Sarâb regions and right up to the gates of Tabrîz. The Russian garrison at Ardabil was increased to nearly 2,000 men and employed in conveying caravans over the brigand-infested roads between Tabrîz, Miyâneh, Ardabil and Astârâ. Early in July it was learnt that the ex-Shâh’s favourite, Mujallal al-Salṭaneh, had passed through Ardabil and was now residing with the Yortchi tribe and engaged in recruiting Shâhsevan support for Muḥammad ‘Alî’s return. The Russians began to encourage the tribesmen; at the end of July a public proclamation was issued in Ardabil, apparently at the bidding of Mujallal and the Russian Vice-Consul Belyaev, to the effect that Muḥammad ‘Alî was in or near Tehran with a large army and vast resources, and had proclaimed an amnesty and overthrown the Constitution. The Nationalists went into hiding, nobody suspecting that the story was a fabrication. In August Mujallal entered the city unopposed, but soon enough the truth emerged, and Mujallal’s support, which does not seem to have been widespread among the Shâhsevan, melted away in September when it was heard that the ex-Shâh’s army had been defeated near Tehran by Yeprem Khân.

Measures taken by the Nationalist government to restore order in north-

23 Rashîd al-Mulk made his way to Tabrîz, where the Nationalists arrested him and were about to hang him for conspiring with the Shâhsevan to restore Muḥammad ‘Alî, when he was rescued by a force of Cossacks sent by the Russian Consul-General, for whom he had performed many services.
east Azarbajjan were somewhat unfortunate. At the end of July the reactionary landowner Şamad Khân Shujâ’ al-Dauleh was sent from Marâgheh to punish the Şâhsevan. He gathered a force of several thousand tribesmen at Sarâb, but in August began to recruit the Şâhsevan into his army, with which he then threatened Tabrîz, proclaiming himself Governor-General of Azarbajjan in the name of the ex-Şâh. He demanded the release from Tehran of the Şâhsevan chiefs, and on 15 September invested Tabrîz, though he did not press his advantage in view of the set-backs to the ex-Şâh’s cause in the rest of the country. Meanwhile the Tehran government had appointed the old reactionary ‘Ayn al-Dauleh as Governor-General of Azarbajjan; his plan for dealing with the Şâhsevan was to release the captive chiefs in Tehran and demand that they pacify their tribesmen. Believing their assurances that they would do so and would capture Mujallal and ensure his own safe arrival at Tabrîz, he took them with him on the road to Azarbajjan.

Böyük Khân Chalabiânlû brought his warriors into Şamad Khân’s camp, but the Nationalists promptly executed the imprisoned Rahîm Khân, to prevent his encouraging his followers. Amir Arshad Hajjî’alîlî, who had at first also come to Şamad Khân, now returned to Qarâdâgh and declared allegiance to the Nationalists; Böyük Khân was sent after him in October, but suffered a heavy defeat and was captured, leaving Amir Arshad lord of Qarâdâgh. Among the Şâhsevan, Şamad Khân’s only success was with some of the Ardabil tribes. Abish Khân Shattrânlu managed to unite many of the Mishkîn tribes against the Royalists and their Russian sponsors, and having rejected Şamad Khân’s overtures went to Miyânêh to await the arrival of the now freed chiefs.

From October onwards the British pressed the Russians to withdraw some of their troops from Persia, but the latter stated that ‘measures of extreme vigour’ would soon have to be taken to meet the situation in the northern provinces; and indeed, at the end of September there arrived at Ardabil a large Russian detachment under General Fidarov, whose mission was to prepare a campaign for the following spring to punish and disarm the recalcitrant Şâhsevan tribes. The tribes concerned—principally the Qojabeglu and others of the Mishkîn division, for most of the Ardabil tribes were now subject to the Russians at Ardabil—were now in Mughân and were joined by their chiefs sometime during the winter.24

On 1 January 1912 Şamad Khân Shujâ’ al-Dauleh entered Tabrîz with Russian support as Governor, and the Nationalists now suffered worse atrocities of killing, torture, and pillage than they had just experienced from the Russian occupying forces. His henchmen, such as Rashid al-Mulk, agitated in support of the ex-Şâh, but Şamad Khân himself refrained from doing so, since his Russian sponsors had now acceded to British requests not to extend official recognition to him as Governor. The British agreed however that he was the only Persian who could control the province, and the Governor eventually appointed by the new Bakhtîârî regime was delayed in departure from Tehran.

As expected, the Şâhsevan chiefs, who had returned in the winter eager for revenge, commenced looting on a wide scale in spring 1912. In April the first encounter took place between Fidarov’s troops and Şâhsevan tribesmen, in Khalkhâl. Both sides suffered heavy losses. Fidarov delayed his movement against the tribes; he probably felt his force insufficient and was waiting both for provocation by the tribesmen so that he could call for reinforcements, and

for a Persian force to be sent and to be shown inadequate. Then early in June a party of Cossacks left Ardabil for summer quarters nearby, and the Qojabeglu duly attacked them, thinking them a punitive expedition; Fidarov then sent a real punitive force against them, and there was some fighting in Mishkin and further heavy losses on both sides. Strong reinforcements were brought to the region from Tabriz, Qarâbâgh and Astârâ; at Russian request, a Persian force of 1,000 men was sent, once more under their ever-willing servant Rashid al-Mulk, but having suffered the expected defeat, the remnants did not reach Ardabil until mid-July, where they took up a strictly honorary role under Fidarov. According to Mirza Firooz Khân (1912), the Shâhsevan who defeated Rashid al-Mulk sent Şamad Khân the following message: ‘Do not send any more Mussulman soldiers against us. We do not care to kill our Mussulman brethren, but send all the Russians you can. We will settle our account with those yellow dogs!’ Fidarov now had some 5,000 troops—Cossacks, infantry, and artillery—and began a campaign which lasted several months. The Persian authorities expressed their concern that he intended to annihilate the tribes, while the Russian newspapers played down the political nature of his expedition; the Shâhsevan were not patriots defending their country against the invader, but lawless brigands who had proved a scourge both to the Russians and to their own countrymen, and were to be prevented from further banditry and to be forced to restore all the stolen goods.

The Shâhsevan meanwhile were organizing themselves, having learnt the lesson of defeat from the Nationalist forces two years earlier. The two most powerful tribes, Ḥâjjikhojalu and Qojabeglu, made up their differences and collected their warriors; they detailed some of the client tribes to declare themselves neutral and take all the flocks and families aside to a place of safety, leaving the warriors free to deal with the Russians, to whom they swore never to submit. The tribes were no longer interested in the Royalist cause, which had become discredited; and even those who still favoured it were annoyed with Şamad Khân for not openly declaring for Muḥammad ‘Ali on occupying Tabriz. Indeed, the chiefs returned from Tehran seem to have had encouragement and finance from influential persons there, to keep Şamad Khân busy in Azarbayjan and prevent him from marching on the capital in the ex-Shâh’s name.

Throughout July and August the Shâhsevan and the Russians fought. The course of the campaign, and even its outcome, are hard to determine. The Russians declared their eventual complete success, but observers in Tabriz saw large numbers of casualties brought in, while the Shâhsevan themselves maintain that their warriors killed thousands of Russians and that few tribesmen submitted.

Fidarov deployed his forces in four main columns, operating against Ḥâjjikhojalu, Qojabeglu, Alârlu, and the Khalkhâlis. Javat Khân Ḥâjjikhojalu, with his Geviklu allies, led the Russians first into the torrid wastes of Mughân in mid-July, and then back in August to Qosha Dagh; there, joined by a strong Party of Qojabeglu, he held the forest of Qashqamisheh against Fidarov’s greatly superior force, which he is said eventually to have defeated and driven back to Mughân and across the frontier. Meanwhile over a thousand warriors from Qojabeglu and associated tribes broke through a cordon with which the Russians had tried to trap them in the north-east of the region, and headed south to Miyâneh, threatening the small Russian garrison in Qazvîn and then asking government permission to migrate to Kurdistan or Turkey, to find winter quarters far from the Russians; they were eventually headed back north by a Persian force sent by Şamad Khân. At Demân, the column sent against the
Alârlu suffered heavily and lost a number of guns to the tribesmen. In September, however, the Russians achieved at least partial success, for they captured Muhammad Quli Alârlu and executed him, and then captured Amir 'Ashâyîr Shatrânlu, though he kept his life. They then cut off the nomads' retreat to Mughân. All those tribes which had submitted or been defeated, including those detailed by Hâjjikhojalu and Qojabeglu to look after their property, were collected at the Sâmiân bridge over the Qarâsû near Ardabil, and the Russians proceeded, with official permission, to divide all the property into two and to confiscate one half of it—whether animals, arms, tents, or clothing. This event is remembered by the Shâhsevan as 'the year of division' (bölgi-yiîî) and as the end of their struggle against the Tsarist Russians. The warriors of Qojabeglu, Geyiklu, and Hâjjikhojalu are said to have remained unsubdued, but they retained none of their property but their horses, their rifles, and their women, which they would have died sooner than give up. In October Fidarov's army withdrew with its booty.25

From the end of 1912 until 1917 the Shâhsevan continued to raid throughout the region, but caused no major trouble to the Russian forces which, apart from a brief evacuation in the winter of 1914–15, remained garrisoned at Ardabil. The tribesmen retained control of the region until 1923, when they were finally defeated and disarmed by the troops of the War Minister Rızâ Khan.

**Raiding, reaction, and rivalry**

In the nine hundred or so years of their presence in South West Asia, Turkic tribes have been notorious for their predatory activity, a cultural feature which may be seen as a fundamental principle of social organization. Noting that the Turkic 'tribe' is a political and not an ethnic or descent group, Oberling has observed that:

Traditionally, the chief's job was to make war (i.e. to get booty), and protect his tribesmen from other tribes whose leaders were similarly inclined. As a rule, there was a direct correlation between the military prowess of a chief and the size of his following.26

However strong the sense of moral duty which successful dynasties such as the Safavids and Qâjârs managed to instil in their subordinate tribes, the allegiance of the chiefs could not be secured without supplementary material rewards—spoils; the chiefs too relied on a supply of spoils with which to ensure the support of their own tribal followings. In many ways, the tribal policy of the early Qâjârs resembled that of the early Safavids: though they imitated the Safavids in fostering the charismatic, almost sacred, public image of the Shâh himself,27 they rewarded their most loyal followers with lucrative governorships, land

25 On the 1912 campaign, see: FO 248/1055 and 1059; FO Prints, Affairs of Persia, XXX–XXXII; Mirza Firooz Khan (1912); Rostopchin (1933: 114 f.); Bâybûrdî (1962: 105); Sâ'îdi (1965: 84–6; and 1968: passim); Şafârî (1971: 327–31). I have used accounts of Fidarov's campaign recorded from Shâhsevan participants and from a Persian army officer who knew Fidarov's artillery commander. The only contemporary source dating bolgi-yiîî at 1912 is Gazetteer (1914: 554). Rostopchin says that Fidarov's 1912 campaign was inconclusive, but that in a further one of 1916 'the operation was successfully conducted, and the Sháhsevan were cut off from their winter pastures. However a tremendous bribe accepted by General Fidârî caused him to order the Sháhsevans to pass on, so that the results of this expedition were favourable to the Shahsevan' (1939: 114 f.). I know of no other record of such a campaign in 1916, though indeed some of my informants suggested that bolgi-yiîî was about then. Şâ'îdi implies that it occurred before the Constitutional Revolution, which is definitely wrong, as is much of his chronology, though the historical solecisms of his account of Fidarov’s campaign in the novel Tup are quite outweighed by its literary value.

26 Oberling (1964: 61).

27 Lambton (1961: 128 f.).
grants, and tax concessions; they controlled the tribes through approved
chiefs, to whom they gave authority, legitimacy, and responsibility; they were
at first successful in their military campaigns, another source of spoils. The simi-
larity soon ends, however, for while the Şafavids, thanks largely to Şah
'Abbās I, enjoyed a heyday of a century and a half and were then allowed nearly
another century of peaceful decline before suddenly succumbing to aggression
by Afghans, Ottomans, and Russians, the Qājār dynasty was less than two
decades old when it confronted irresistible aggression, though even then it was
not allowed to fall, for the Imperial powers which could so easily have destroyed
the dynasty co-operated in preserving it for another century. None the less, as
Oberling observed,

As Persia suffered defeat after defeat in the nineteenth century, the flow
of spoils dwindled rapidly, with the result that the tribesmen lost their most
lucrative (and only legal) source of loot. As a consequence, banditry became
ever more prevalent [especially in the last three Qājār reigns]. . . . The
ambitious tribal leader now had to build his reputation solely on his exploits
as a highwayman.28

The prevalence of banditry grew more marked than elsewhere in the case of the
Şahsevan, where it was aggravated by the Mughān frontier closure and the
subsequent restriction of the pastoral economy, and by the attitudes of the
Russians and the Persian administration, both of whom, for different reasons,
stood to gain from Şahsevan raids.

If the brigandization of north-east Azarbayjan is explicable in terms of the
economic and political history of the region during the nineteenth century, does
lust for booty account for Şahsevan behaviour in the early years of the
twentieth century? We should at least consider a model—however speculative
and simplified—of the ideology to which the Şahsevan tribespeople were
reputed to subscribe.

In Şafavid times the name Şahsevan symbolized three linked values: loyalty to the Şafavids, fidelity to Shi'ism, and opposition to the Sunni Ottomans. After the fall of the Şafavids dynasty and the subsequent formation of the Şahsevan tribal confederation in north-east Azarbayjan by Nādīr Şah, none of these three values could have been relevant; none of them, up to the time of the establishment of the Qājār dynasty and the Russian annexation of Mughān, could have provided unambiguous ideological guidance for the tribes' political behaviour, and the Şahsevan would have been no more morally committed to the Qājārs at first than they had been to other eighteenth-century powers: Afghans, Afshārs, Zands, the Khāns of Qarābāgh and Qubba, or the Russian conquerors. As noted, however, the Qājār rulers promoted themselves as a matter of policy, imitating the Şafavids, with an almost sacred public image, and in due course those Şahsevan tribes which stayed in Persia after the Treaty of Turkmanchay came to owe the established monarchy some of the loyalty which their ancestors had given to the Şafavids. The other two values of the original Şahsevan complex were likewise transformed: fidelity to Shi'ism became generalized Muslim fervour and could at times direct former hatred of Sunni Ottomans against their new and aggressive neighbours, the infidel Russians. The latter, however, became known to the Şahsevan, particularly during Muḥammad 'Alī Mirzā's governorship of Azarbayjan at the turn of the century, as not only the allies but the protectors and paymasters of the Qājār dynasty, and the tribes' attitude to them became ambivalent. They saw the

monarchy as subject to overwhelming pressures by these infidels, and saw themselves as its frontier guard against Russian encroachments, and this view was indeed encouraged by the monarchy, while Russians represented the Shāhsevan as rebels against the Persian government. In the 1960s I recorded Shāhsevan legends of complaints made by the Russian Tsar to the Shāh Naṣir al-Dīn and Muẓaffar al-Dīn, on their visits to St. Petersburg, about banditry by such notorious Shāhsevan chiefs as Nūrullah Beg Qojabeglu, his son Bahrām Khān, and Muhammad Qulī Alārū; the Shāh, instead of punishing his ‘errant’ subjects, pardons or even honours and rewards them for keeping the Russians on his frontier sensible of his power. Most tribesmen were presumably unaware of the extent to which their banditry not only gave the Russians excuses for political pressure on the Persian government and later for the introduction of their troops, but was even encouraged by Muḥammad ‘Alī for the latter purpose.

In 1903 a Russian observer came to the following conclusions on Shāhsevan political potential:

An offensive operation could attract the Shāhsevan if they are promised at least material gain. Feelings of patriotism towards their common homeland are not found among them, nor is faith in the government and administration, whose policy of creating disputes among the tribes and destroying them, rather than fostering devotion to themselves, they understand very well, responding with open or concealed hatred. The possibility of arousing religious fanaticism among them is also very remote: they are hardly religious, they hate and despise the cowardly and self-interested clergy, who have begun to enlarge their estates at the expense not only of [Shāhsevan] lands but also of [Shāhsevan] peasants. Finally, the respect the Administration pays only to the clergy evokes among the Shāhsevan [chiefs] hatred and powerless fury towards them. One can say with certainty that the Shāhsevan will serve anybody they please, if he can gain their trust and guarantee them some sort of respect and material gain.29

This assessment was largely but not wholly validated during the following decades. Thus the divisive motive of material gain was indeed a dominant influence on Shāhsevan political behaviour in the period, and the tribes remained quite unmoved by respect for the administrative officials or the mullahs with whom they came into contact. They continued, none the less, to profess duty to the ultimate secular power and religious authority: to the Shāh and to Islam as represented by the chief mujtahids. On a few occasions the call of Shāh and Islam, uttered by respected leaders, brought a powerful if short-lived unity to the tribes. However, these related symbols were rarely enough to guide the Shāhsevan unambiguously in their attitudes to the complex external forces to which this period introduced them. If they were to observe their duty to the Qājār dynasty and to Islam, what attitude should they take towards the Russians: Christians and aggressive neighbours and yet known supporters of Muḥammad ‘Alī? To the Constitutionalists, who opposed and then deposed Muḥammad ‘Alī Shāh and yet swore allegiance to his successor? To Rahīm Khān, known supporter of Muhammad ‘Alī, yet with suspect motives and a chequered past as a local bandit leader on terms of deadly rivalry with important Shāhsevan tribes? To Sattār Khān, hero and leader of the Constitution, whose

29 Tigranov (1909: 146). Col. L. Tigranov of the Russian General Staff carried out an investigation of the region in 1903 and published an informative and perceptive account of the economic and social conditions of Ardabil province and of the nomad and settled Shāhsevan tribes.
personality and behaviour, when he came to Ardabil, accorded with none of the Shahsevan values? Where duty to Shâh and duty to Islam were in contradiction, then other values such as material gain would sway the tribes, and would sway different tribes in different directions. They would have no compunction about raiding or killing any persons known to have spoken or acted against Shâh or Islam, but alliance with such persons was conceivable if it furthered other aims.

The reformist movements that led to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–6 initially received considerable support from religious leaders (and hence from the masses who followed them) who, like the merchants and intellectuals, were opposed to the Shâh’s policy of ‘selling the country’ to infidels and foreigners. The fact that the Shahsevan tribes did not react decisively in the first year or two of the Revolution may reflect the contradiction they would have seen in the clerical leaders’ support for the Constitution and opposition to the Shâh. After the Revolution, however, some members of the religious classes awoke to the secular implications of the Constitution and Nationalism, and defected to the Royalist party. With the prominent part played in the Nationalist movement by non-Muslims, the Shahsevan by 1909 could see that their duty, to both Shâh and Islam, lay in opposition to the Constitution, and they were able to unite for this purpose even if it meant accepting the Russian support offered by Rahîm Khân Chalabiânlu.

The Royalist cause was soon discredited, however, losing the support of the clerics and also of the Russians, whose ulterior motives in Azerbaijan were revealed by their military occupation. The Shahsevan, accepting the legitimacy of Muhammad ‘Alî’s deposition and the succession of Sulṭân Ahmad Shâh, broke into open rebellion against the Russian troops, who, though they could still use Shahsevan banditry as an excuse for their presence, now feared that the Nationalists might recruit the tribes’ support, and determined to crush them and destroy their military effectiveness. This plan did not fully succeed at first, and the War and the Bolshevik Revolution prevented its completion. The Shahsevan tribes were left independent within their political environment.

In the years following the Russian withdrawal (1917) the Shahsevan devoted themselves politically to activity within the inter-tribal context, though they remained alert to threats and opportunities presented by external political forces. Of the Turks, the British, the Nationalists, the Democrats, and the Bolsheviks, none offered the combined values of Shâh and Islam, so none received unequivocal support from the Shahsevan. When Rizâ Khân seized power, however, and set about gaining control of the country, he made sure at first to court the religious leaders and to rebuff charges against him of secular intentions, and when he sent his army to pacify the Shahsevan it was not so much by superior force or by an appeal for national security that he persuaded most of them to submit without a fight, but rather by advertising his support for both Islam and the reigning Shâh, Sulṭân Ahmad Qâjâr. If the Shahsevan disapproved later when he abandoned these symbols by creating a new dynasty and a secular state, they could no longer resist, since they had been disarmed and subjected to the control of the new, secular National Army.

Thus, in most situations during the early twentieth century, it was not possible for the Shahsevan to act in a fashion at once consistent with both loyalty to Shâh and fidelity to Islam; but where it was possible so to act, then they did so. It is important to establish this consistency, not only because it corrects the bad press image the Shahsevan have had but also because they claimed at the time to be primarily motivated by these values (Shâh and
Islam), while Shāhsevan tribespeople in the 1960s found nothing shameful in the actions of their fathers and grandfathers a half-century earlier.

None the less, if the Shāhsevan did not betray their professed ideals, their political attitudes and behaviour did also conform throughout the period with two other imperatives, namely, material gain and the prosecution of internal rivalries. Possibly the main factor influencing Shāhsevan political attitudes at this period was relations between and within the tribes themselves. Over the previous century, as we have seen, the Shāhsevan confederations of Mishkin and Ardabil had broken down and new patterns of inter-tribal relations had formed, based largely on territorial and economic factors. With the restriction and redistribution of winter pastures, hostility if not feud became the characteristic relationship between neighbouring tribes. The restriction of the pastoral economy also forced the tribes to expand their non-pastoral activities, especially agriculture (or control of it) and raiding. The administration, ever short of resources, not only encouraged raiding but at the same time abandoned attempts to control the tribes through the paramount chiefs, in favour of a policy of khankhāntikh, in effect divide et impera; a policy which, as its obvious result was not order and security but the enrichment (through bribes, fines, and taxes) of its officials, served only to diminish further the tribespeople’s respect for the administration. The chiefs meanwhile acquired even greater power, measured by their wealth and their success in raiding, while rivalries developed within the major chiefly dynasties and split their tribal followings in consequence. The hostility of rivals within a tribe was sometimes more bitter than inter-tribal hostilities, and a tribe could not be counted on to unite against outsiders.

The cluster chiefs entered the khankhāntikh period with control of vast pastoral and agricultural wealth. They soon increased their armed suites and retinues, and acquired further resources which, in the absence of the elbejis, became essential to their leadership: in particular, control of information and communication from important centres of government. Each cluster chief had spies and representatives in Ardabil, Tabriz, and Tehran, and contacts through whom powerful government officials could be influenced. With the breakdown of government control in the region, the major tribes divided the villages between them. Settlements of Mishkin, and many near Ahar and Ardabil, were divided between the main nomad tribes: Ḥājjikhojalu, Geyiklu, Qojabeglu, and Isabeglu; settlements of Ungūt, Barzand, and Ujārād between Qojabeglu and Alārū; settlements of Ardabil and Khalkhāl between Alārū, Polatlu, Yortchi, and Shatrānlū. The major tribes then set about securing the available centres of commercial or strategic importance, market towns or large villages lying near or across the main highways, as defensible headquarters. The villages of Barzand and Langān commanded the Belasuvār–Ardabil trade route, and the eastern migration trail of the Mughān nomads; Zayveh straddled the western

30 See, for example, the telegrams and the Treaty of 1909, and the message of 1912 mentioned by Mirza Firooz Khan.

31 On the organization of raiding and inter-tribal relations in the first quarter of the century, see Tapper (1972: 658–71).

32 Such rivalries had presumably caused the distribution of Shāhsevan tribes among Bād Khān’s descendants, first into the Ardabil and Mishkin divisions and then between the various noble tribes. After 1884, of the former nobles among the dominant tribes, Isabeglu had already separated from Qojabeglu, while Khāmisu was in the process of breaking from Polatlu; later, Qojabeglu began to divide between Bahrām Khān and his cousin Sardār Beg; Isabeglu between Aqā Beg’s son Amir Aşān and his half-brother ‘Īsā Beg. Meanwhile, rivalries also began to divide the dominant commoner tribes: Ḥājjikhojalu between Ḥaẓrat Quli’s sons and his nephew Javāt Khān; Geyiklu between Faraj’s son Ḥātam Khān and his nephew ‘Ālīshān Khān; Alārū between the cousins Nafāj Quli Khān and Ghulām.
migration trail; Khiau and Lāri, important new market centres, commanded the Ahar–Ardabil road; Nir lay astride the vital Tabrīz–Sarāb–Ardabil highway. By the twentieth century many of these were already occupied: the Qojabeglū chiefs Bahrām Khān and Sardār Beg took over Zayvēh and Barzand respectively; later Zayvēh and Khiau became the focus of struggle between Qojabeglū and Geyiklu. Langān was controlled by Alārlū, Lāri by Ḯisābeglu, Nir by Yortchi. The two main prizes, Ardabil and Ahar (Sarāb remained dominated by Shaqāqī and neighbouring tribes) were beyond the control of a single tribal cluster, and alliances formed in competition for them. After Raḥīm Khān Chalabiānlū’s fall from power, Ḯājjī’alīlu and their Qarādāghī allies disputed Ahar with a coalition of Ḯājjīkhojalu, Geyiklu, and Chalabiānlū. Polatlū contracted alliances with Alārlū and Shatrānlū to take Ardabil, but was successfully opposed, at times by government or Russian troops (in occupation 1909–17) and later by a counter-alliance of Yortchi, Khāmislu and Qojabeglū. The latter pursued enmity with their neighbours Ḯājjīkhojalu, Geyiklu, Ḯisābeglu, and Alārlū, though these never allied against the common foe. It was rare for the tribes to combine for a single purpose. For a few weeks in 1909 most of them were united by Raḥīm Khān to oppose the Constitution and take Ardabil, but the Union was soon defeated piecemeal by Yeprem Khān. Having learnt their lesson, the tribes mounted a united and nearly successful resistance to the Russians in 1912. External forces sometimes caused a major shift of allegiances, as when Chalabiānlū, having lost control of Qarādāgh in 1910, allied themselves with their traditional enemies, Ḯājjīkhojalu, so as to oppose the new Qarādāghī power of Ḯājjī’alīlu. Rivalries within chiefly dynasties, and consequent shifts of power, meant that while in 1910 Qojabeglū relentlessly opposed the Constitution and the Nationalists, to whom Ḯājjīkhojalu, Alārlū, and Polatlū were prepared to give their support, ten years later the former tribe fought the others in the name of the Nationalist government.33

The main Shāhsevan chiefs were certainly politically informed, aware, through advisers in their suites and contacts in the cities, of the course and implications of the events that were shaking Persia. Their actions were motivated not merely by short-term gain, but at least in part by consideration of the long-term relevance of national issues to their local interests. Probably they never assembled more than a few thousand horsemen for a campaign; usually bands of a few hundred at most confronted the Russian Cossacks or other hostile forces. Contemporary Russian and British agents considered them a formidable fighting body, as great a potential military threat to government as any other tribal group in the country; they could muster 10–12,000 horsemen in their own defence—but not more than half that number for a campaign outside their home territory. It is this factor—the comparative vulnerability and accessibility of Shāhsevan pastures and property, both to Russian and to Persian government forces—rather than any comparative lack of leadership or political commitment, that explains why the Shāhsevan never made any concerted effort, in whatever cause, to emulate the achievements of the Bakhtīārī in Tehran.

33 In later years, before they were disarmed, the coalitions aligned into two blocs: the Alārlū–Polatlū–Shatrānlū coalition joined that of Ḯājjīkhojalu, Geyiklu and sometimes Ḯisābeglu, against the alliance of Qojabeglū–Yortchi–Khāmislu, which (until Amir Aršād’s death) had common cause with Ḯājjī’alīlu; but allies in each bloc did not send each other material support. Chiefly families within each bloc would contract marriages with each other, but affinal ties were no guarantee of permanence in an alliance.
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