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# *Introduction*

## *State, Sect, Subject*

"Religion is a sixteenth-century word for nationalism," a renowned historian once argued.[1] Indeed, religion played a pivotal role in shaping not only individuals but also entire states during the early modern era, bearing a resemblance to the way nationalism operates in contemporary times. From the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, an era marked by significant turmoil, a tapestry of religiopolitical movements emerged, redefining sociocultural notions of belonging and loyalty across global communities. At the same time, religious commitments and allegiances, at both the imperial and individual levels, exhibited remarkable adaptability when faced with the continuously shifting socioeconomic and political dynamics of their time. This book explores the latter phenomenon: the agility of early modern states and their subjects.

The expansive territories under the control of the Ottoman and Safavid empires offer a rich setting for examining the complex interactions between religion, politics, and economics. Throughout the long sixteenth century, a period defined in this book as spanning from the 1460s to the 1640s, a sequence of interconnected sociopolitical and religious transformations exerted a profound and enduring impact on the fabric of both states and societies. The schism between the Sunni and Shiʿi denominations of Islam, as we recognize them today, fully manifested during the reigns of the Ottoman dynasty and its eastern rival, the Safavids. These two mighty empires, through the formulation of rigorous religious ideologies and the initiation of what might appear to be sectarian conflicts, both against each other and within their own realms, sought to establish themselves as the "guardians" of Sunni and Shiʿi Islam, respectively.[2] This religious rivalry played out across the

[1] The historian was Lewis Namier (d. 1960). Cited in Anthony Marx, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism* (New York: OUP, 2005), 25.

[2] The main periods of war between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires were 1514, 1532–1555, 1578–1590, and 1623–1639, and the main peace agreements signed



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region now encompassing Turkey, Iran, Syria, Iraq, and the Hijaz, leaving an indelible mark on the religious, political, and economic landscape for centuries to come.

It was during this period that sectarian terminology entered imperial rhetoric, and notable incongruities emerged between, on the one hand, officially mandated binary classifications and rigid confessional hierarchies and, on the other, the adaptive policies and behaviors implemented by the same governmental actors. Gradually – yet firmly – a discernible dichotomy materialized between rhetorical posturing and the substantive enactment of policies. It is imperative to note that the state was not the only actor operating according to realpolitik during this period. Subjects themselves often pursued a confluence of religious and socioeconomic interests in their engagements with both the Ottoman and Safavid states. Their objectives included the pursuit of safety, security, and a sense of belonging – religious, social, political, and financial – as well as opportunities for advancement. Consequently, a complex web of religiopolitical policies and practices, often conflicting, emerged and coexisted at various levels – individual, communal, and state. To put it differently, while seemingly unwavering sectarian discourses held sway within the corridors of power in the imperial capitals, the sociopolitical and economic landscapes of the interimperial and interconfessional contact zones in Anatolia, Kurdistan, Iraq, and western Iran exhibited a remarkable degree of adaptability and flexibility in terms of loyalties. These regions became crucibles where diverse influences converged, interacted, and mutually shaped one another.

In this book, I undertake a comprehensive exploration of sectarian divergence in the early modern Middle East, situating the distinct trajectories of Sunni and Shiʿi entities within defined temporal and geographical frameworks. My analysis particularly dissects the paradoxical character of the early modern Ottoman state, wherein ostensibly clearcut ideological discourses existed alongside layered and pragmatic maneuverings. I delve into the complexities of this dichotomy, focusing on influential figures who epitomized this phenomenon, while paying close attention to the interplay of political, economic, and religious forces. This inquiry provides the portrayal of a historically

between the two political actors were the Amasya Treaty (1555), the Istanbul (Constantinople) Treaty (1590), and the Kasr-ı Şirin (Zuhab) Treaty (1639).

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rich and varied landscape, revealing the deeper intricacies that surpass simple sectarian divides, and includes an intricate examination of the elements that influenced the strategies of both state actors and independent entities. Subsequent chapters construct a historical account to elucidate the Sunni Ottoman Empire's nuanced relations with its non-Sunni Muslim subjects and counterparts. This construct is paramount in accentuating incremental yet profound religious, socialpolitical, and fiscal shifts spanning an extensive chronology and geography. The objective is to elevate our historical comprehension beyond its traditional confines – eschewing a myopic focus on political or sectarian divisions, singular rulers, specific years, or notable battles.

In this investigation, I center my focus on a group that has been frequently mentioned yet often overlooked: the Qizilbash. The Qizilbash hold a remarkable historical standing, being both the founders of the Safavid Empire and the most substantial and well-documented religious community within the Ottoman Empire during the early modern era.

## Who Were the Qizilbash? Why Did They Matter?

While historians often point to 1501 as the official establishment of the Safavid Empire, it is crucial to recognize that this year marked the culmination of a nearly two-century-long process of politicization, militarization, and Shiitization of a mystical (Sufi) order.[3] The Safavid family, initially Turkish speaking, rose to prominence as the leaders of the Safaviyya Sufi order in northwestern Iran during the early fourteenth century. Over the subsequent two centuries, the Safavids steadily ascended to regional prominence through a series of intricate socioeconomic and religiopolitical maneuvers. Their journey

[3] Several scholars have been recently and rightfully critical of historians' use of the term "order" due to the "Christian baggage" that it carries. For a useful discussion on this topic, see Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 10–12; P. M. Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Mu'in al-Din Chishti of Ajmer* (Delhi: OUP, 1989), 1–15. While acknowledging the limitations of the term "order" and the problematic frameworks it may impose, in the following pages I use it to denote relatively identifiable networks with various shared elements including "mystical philosophy, notions of saintly persons invested with miraculous powers, and intellectual lineages built around initiatory rites and distinctive liturgical practices." Bashir, *Sufi Bodies,* 10.

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to power was far from straightforward, marked by complex interactions and strategic decisions. Ultimately, it was in the fiercely contested territories of western Iran and eastern Anatolia that they managed to consolidate their authority, leading to the establishment of the Safavid state at the turn of the sixteenth century.

A key moment in this extended historical narrative came with the actions of the prominent Safavid leader Haydar (d. 1485). Haydar introduced a distinctive emblem in the form of a twelve-gored crimson headpiece known as the *qizil taj*, which translates to "red crown" in Turkish. This symbol represented the unwavering loyalty of Haydar's followers to the Twelve Shiʿi Imams and their allegiance to the Safavid family as their spiritual and political guides. Over the years, the term *Qizilbash* – meaning "red head" in Turkish – emerged as the primary identifier for this group, used by both supporters and adversaries of the Safavids.[4] The Qizilbash were instrumental in the establishment and consolidation of the Safavid state in Iran. Serving as both the backbone of the Safavid army and the holders of critical positions within the state's administration and bureaucracy, they played an indispensable role in shaping the foundation and structure of Safavid rule, effectively acting as its architects. By the 1520s, the power and influence of the Qizilbash within Safavid Iran had grown to such an extent that the Safavid state and its military forces began to be referred to as the "Qizilbash" by the Safavids themselves, as well as by the Ottomans and various European states and actors.[5] The Safavid Qizilbash dignitaries (*umara*), most of whom also served as leaders of local communities – often referred to as tribes (*uymaq*, *qavim*, or *taifah* in singular) originating from eastern Anatolia, western Iran, the southern Caucasus, and northern Syria – played a central and enduring role within the Safavid state for almost two centuries.[6] They served the

[4] The Persian version of the term Qizilbash, *sürh ser/sorkh sar*, was also used, albeit less often, by both the members of the community and others. Feridun Bey et al. (eds.), *Mecmua-yi Münşeat-i Feridun Bey or Münşe'at-i Selatin*, 2 vols. (Istanbul: Darüttıbattil'âmire, 1265–1274 [1848–1857]), I, 305; Mustafa Naima, *Tarih-i Naima, Ravzat el-Hüseyn fi Hulâsat Ahbâr el-Hâfikayn*, ed. Zuhuri Danışman, 2 vols. (İstanbul: Bahar Matbaası, 1967), I, 356–59.

[5] Ataollah Hasani, "Qizilbash: Istilah-i Manfur-i Asr-i Shah Isma'il," *Majalli-yi Tarikh-i Iran* 19/1 (1395/2016): 69–114, 80–83.

[6] The term "tribe" remains ambiguous and contentious within scholarly discourse. For discussions on this topic, see David Sneath, *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia* (New

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Safavid shahs as advisors, military commanders, and provincial governors and held crucial positions at the royal court.[7] Countless Safavid Qizilbash members also occupied various lower-ranked administrative and military roles within the state. Additionally, a considerable number of Qizilbash leaders maintained close familial ties with the dynasty through marital unions.

In contrast to the Safavid Qizilbash, Ottoman Qizilbash communities exhibited a notably diverse composition, encompassing individuals from both tribal and non-tribal backgrounds, hailing from both rural and urban origins. Within this heterogeneous collective, a portion of Ottoman Qizilbash traced their lineage to intricately linked Sufi traditions in medieval Anatolia, each with its unique background and sphere of influence. As Ayfer Karakaya-Stump has shown in the context of the upper Euphrates basin in eastern Anatolia, a number of local Sufi groups gradually coalesced under the overarching leadership of the Safavid dynasty.[8] During the sixteenth and seventeenth

York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Richard Tapper, "Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan: An Update," *Études rurales* 184 (2009): 33–46; Ira M. Lapidus, "Tribes and State Formation in Islamic History," in *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, ed. Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (Berkeley: UCP, 1990), 25–47; and Ayşe Baltacıoğlu-Brammer, "From *Aşiret* to Tribe, *Oymak* to Clan: The Politics of Labeling in Sixteenth-Century Texts and Their Translations," paper presented at the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association (OTSA) 2024 Conference, Evanston, IL, October 25–27, 2024. In this book, the term "tribe" refers to a form of socio-political organization, typically marked by alliances formed around shared interests and/or kinship ties, whether actual or perceived. On the *uymaq/qavim/taifah*, see James Reid, *Tribalism in Society in Islamic Iran* (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1983); Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 2002); Rula J. Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004); Rasul Jaʿfariyan, *Safaviyyah: Dar Arsah-yi Din va Siyasat* (Tehran: Nashr-i Miras-i Maktoob, 1999); and Rıza Yıldırım, "The Safavid-Qizilbash Ecumene and the Formation of the Qizilbash–Alevi Community in the Ottoman Empire c. 1500–c. 1700," *Iranian Studies* 52 (2019): 449–83.

[7] Klaus Röhrborn, *Provinzen und Zentralgewalt Persiens im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 1966), 18–60.

[8] Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, *The Kizilbash/Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics and Community* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2020). Karakaya-Stump particularly posits the influence of the Wafa'i Sufi tradition in shaping the Qizilbash milieu. While her scholarship presents a nuanced perspective on the genesis of Qizilbash communities in Anatolia, her conclusions regarding the association between the Wafa'i Sufi order and Anatolian Qizilbash communities do not furnish a

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centuries, these groups consolidated under a form of organization revolving around saintly lineage, known as *ocak* ("hearth" or "family" in Turkish). Many Ottoman Qizilbash individuals maintained robust affiliations with particular *ocak*s.[9] The legitimacy of these *ocak*s was frequently based on the perceived or verifiable status of their leaders as *seyyid,* meaning they were identified as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632). These leaders were typically referred to as *baba*, *dede*, or *pir*.

However, not every Ottoman Qizilbash in this period was a part of an *ocak* system. Alongside the consolidation of several medieval Anatolian Sufi orders under the Safavid umbrella, within the framework of *ocak*s, the Qizilbash population in the Ottoman Empire experienced a significant surge during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries due to various contributing factors. One reason for this increase was individual and collective conversion, with people identifying themselves first as followers of the Safaviyya Sufi order and subsequently as sympathizers of the Safavid dynasty.[10] As detailed in Chapter 1, before adopting the label "Qizilbash," the leaders of the Safaviyya order were steadfast in their efforts to disseminate their evolving religiopolitical ideology across vast regions, including Ottoman territories. These

comprehensive depiction of the overarching landscape. For two well-rounded critiques of Karakaya-Stump's assertion regarding the significance of the Wafa'i order in the formation of Qizilbash belief and identity in Anatolia, see Jonathan Brack, "Was Ede Bali a Wafāʾī Shaykh? Sufis, Sayyids and Genealogical Creativity in the Early Ottoman World," in *Islamic Literature and Intellectual Life in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Anatolia*, ed. A. C. S. Peacock and Sara Nur Yıldız (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2016), 333–60, and Yıldırım, "The Safavid-Qizilbash Ecumene." The possibility of the Wafa'i-Qizilbash connection has been previously discussed by A. Yaşar Ocak as well in "The Wafā'ī tarīqa (Wafā'īyya) during and after the Period of the Seljuks of Turkey: A New Approach to the History of Popular Mysticism in Turkey," *Mésogeios* 25–26 (2005): 209–48.

[9] It is crucial to note that the concept of the *ocak* predates the rise of the Qizilbash. Historical records show that as far back as the fourteenth century, state authorities intentionally divided groups of nomads across Anatolia and the Balkans into units of twenty-four men, and each unit was called an *ocak*. Each *ocak* served not just as a military or administrative division but also as a fundamental social structure within these societies. Rudi P. Lindner, *Nomads and Ottomans in Medieval Anatolia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 56.

[10] For individual conversions dating as late as the last quarter of the sixteenth century, see Murat Alandağlı, "XVI. Yüzyılın Son Çeyreğinde Rûm Eyaletinde 'Şah'a Meyledenler'," *Tarih Okulu Dergisi* 52 (June 2021): 1601–19.

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efforts continued for decades after the politicization of the Safaviyya order, underscoring the enduring significance of their mission.[11] The closeness between the Qizilbash/Safavid state in Iran and adjacent Ottoman territories remained robust for nearly two centuries, fostering a trans-imperial bond encapsulated by Rıza Yıldırım as the "Safavid-Qizilbash ecumene."[12]

It is both difficult and futile to attempt to isolate a single theory explaining why individuals and communities "became Qizilbash." As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2, a complex array of prevailing factors, motivations, and impulses weighed differently in a given individual's or group's decision to adopt or renounce adherences, either religious, political, or both, in this environment. These motivations often included preexisting religious sensibilities, universally popular millenarian predilections, attraction to charismatic leaders, and the desire for salvation. In many cases, however, sociopolitical pressures and fiscal enticements were as important, if not more, in determining the choices that were made. In practical terms, the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions of the long sixteenth century continuously undermined the wellbeing of the inhabitants of Anatolia and its environs. In this challenging context, the Safavid/Qizilbash movement, underpinned by a strong religious ideology, emerged as a viable alternative.[13] Therefore, it should not be surprising that the Ottoman regions in which the largest number of people responded to Safavid efforts and "became Qizilbash" were those experiencing

[11] Vural Genç, *Osmanlılar ve Safeviler Arasında Bidlis, 1502–1723* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2024), 62–63.

[12] Yıldırım, "The Safavid–Qizilbash Ecumene."

[13] The term "movement" carries a connotation of collective action or shared objectives, but it does not necessarily suggest a monolithic or uniform entity. Instead, it represents a dynamic and interconnected web of informal interactions among diverse groups, individuals, and organizations. Within this network, participants may share certain common goals, values, or interests, but they often maintain their distinct identities, perspectives, and strategies. In essence, when I use the term "movement" in the context of Safavid and/or Ottoman Qizilbash communities, I acknowledge the complex and multifaceted nature of social and political change, where different actors with their unique roles and viewpoints collectively contribute to the advancement of shared ideals and objectives. Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (eds.), *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (Oxford: OUP, 2003); Paul Almeida, *Social Movements: The Structure of Collective Mobilization* (Berkeley: UCP, 2019).

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socioeconomic problems or political disturbances due to Ottoman state policies of sedentarization, centralization, and heavy taxation.

The demographic growth of the Ottoman Qizilbash was also closely tied to the empire's territorial expansion into key regions of eastern Anatolia, Kurdistan, Syria, and Iraq – areas that already featured a significant Qizilbash presence and exerted considerable influence. The rapidly increasing number of Qizilbash within Ottoman lands did not escape the notice of foreign observers visiting the empire. Lorenzo Bernardo, Venice's representative to the Ottoman court in the late sixteenth century, for instance, reported,

> [A]ll of Asia [Minor] follows the Persian religion based on the doctrine of ʿAli, disciple of Muhammad, all of [the Muslims'] common prophet. The Turks call these people Qizilbash because they usually wear a red band on their heads in order to be distinct from the others ... What frightens [the Ottoman state] most [is] that they [know] well that if they were to experience some major defeat by the Persians, this might give rise to serious unrest in Asia [Minor], which belongs almost completely to the Persian religion.[14]

By the midpoint of the century, a substantial number of Ottoman subjects, potentially hundreds of thousands, identified themselves and were formally acknowledged by the state as Qizilbash. Within the purview of the Ottoman state, application of the term "Qizilbash" functioned to designate a diverse array of individuals and groups, including those who identified with Shiʿi beliefs in a broader sense, sympathizers of the Safavid state and its cause, and the subjects of the Safavid state, irrespective of their religious or sectarian affiliations. This ambiguity, explored in greater depth in Chapter 4, meant that the Ottoman state employed the term "Qizilbash" in various contexts, often with contradictory nuances.

The Ottoman state was also acutely aware that Safavid activities within its borders extended far beyond isolated incidents involving seemingly inconsequential individuals. I consider Safavid activities in Ottoman lands to be semi-organized and sophisticated: The Safavids were assiduous in seeking not only to replace Sunnism, or non-sectarian attitudes toward religion, with Shiʿism, but also, more importantly, to transform the latter from a sectarian devotion into a

[14] Eric Dursteler (ed.), *In the Sultan's Realm: Two Venetian Ambassadorial Reports on the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2018), 82.

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source of political and ideological loyalty under their banner. In addition to various conventional methods, such as training and dispatching disciples to spread the teachings of the Safaviyya order, the Safavids also devoted a great deal of attention to performative and ritualistic acts from the earliest days of their movement. These performative acts, explored in Chapter 3, were an integral part of Safavid leaders' religiopolitical praxis, and each leader widened their territorial reach with complex policies and practices. Therefore, during a series of letter exchanges between Safavid Shah Tahmasb (d. 1576) and Ottoman Sultan Suleyman (d. 1566), the former did not hesitate to threaten the latter with unleashing his supporters within and outside of the Safavid realm to delegitimize Ottoman rule with constant cursing.[15] The ritual of cursing (*laʿnat* in Persian and *lanet* in Turkish) here functioned as a powerful tool for shaping religiopolitical culture. This practice, with its vivid invocation of eternal damnation, was directed not only at the opponents of Imam ʿAli and the Imamate but also at adversaries of the Safavid state, particularly the Ottomans. Over time, it evolved into a central element of the anti-Ottoman rhetoric of the period, reflecting the deep intertwining of religious and political ideologies.[16]

It was in this environment that the Qizilbash subjects of the Ottoman Empire rapidly emerged as an existential threat to the state, not only due to their numbers in core regions of the empire, but also due to their sympathies for, and at times overt loyalty to, the Safavid court. This allegiance extended beyond mere dynastic affiliation or a loose adherence to Shiʿism. The term "loose" here denotes the inherent malleability of the Qizilbash framework. Despite their foundational alignment with Shiʿi principles evident in the profound veneration accorded to ʿAli, the inaugural Shiʿi Imam, and his eleven successors, Qizilbash communities in both Ottoman and Safavid contexts notably deviated from prescribed Islamic practices, such as the observance of the five obligatory daily prayers, fasting obligations during Ramadan,

[15] Rosemary Stanfield-Johnson, "The Tabarra'iyan and the Early Safavids," *Iranian Studies* 37 (2004): 51.

[16] Christiane Gruber, "Curse Signs: The Artful Rhetoric of Hell in Safavid Iran," in *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions*, ed. Christian Lange (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 297–335, 301.

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and adherence to prohibitions on alcohol consumption.[17] Within the early modern Ottoman political landscape, Qizilbash belonging often translated into continuous engagement with the Safavid court, albeit in varying forms and intensities. This included maintaining communication through envoys dispatched to Ottoman territories; providing financial contributions to the Safavid court or the Safaviyya order's central shrine in Ardabil; serving the Safavid shahs as soldiers in their army; fomenting rebellions in the most volatile regions of the Ottoman state; and, in numerous instances, migrating to the Safavid realm, either individually or *en masse*.[18]

Beginning in the early sixteenth century, numerous Ottoman court chronicles, religious opinions (*fetva* in singular), and imperial edicts labeled the Qizilbash, both Ottoman and Safavid, as worse than Jews and Christians. The famous chief mufti (*şeyhülislam*) of Istanbul in the mid sixteenth century, Ebussuʿud Efendi (d. 1574), for instance, called the fight against the Qizilbash *gaza-i ekber* (greatest holy war) and *şehadet-i azime* (great martyrdom).[19] In a similar fashion, the famous Ottoman bureaucrat-cum-scholar Mustafa Âli (d. 1600) wrote that "all the subjects [of the Safavids] are the followers of a different religious sect and they would fight together with all their children and adults. [They are] heretical believers to the point that they would kill all the Sunnis."[20] Moreover, many Ottoman state and religious authorities at times regarded the Qizilbash as even more problematic

[17] Karakaya-Stump has labeled this type of religiosity "dissentient." According to her, these religious communities "are united in their rejection of the legalistic orientation and textual literalism of normative Islam in favor of an esoteric and ethical understanding of religion." Karakaya-Stump, *The Kizilbash/Alevis,* 4–6. In addition to the Qizilbash, other dissentient communities have been the Yazidis of Iraq, the Nusayris of Syria, the Druze of Lebanon, and the Ahl-i Haqq of Iran.

[18] Ayşe Baltacıoğlu-Brammer, "Neither Victim nor Accomplice: The Kızılbaş as Borderland Actors in the Early Modern Ottoman Realm," in *Historicizing Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1450–c. 1750*, ed. Tijana Krstić and Derin Terzioğlu (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 423–50.

[19] Süleymaniye Manuscript Library (MS Özel 626), 2a. Also see Ertuğrul Düzdağ, *Şeyhulislam Ebussud Efendi Fetvaları Işığında 16. Asır Türk Hayatı* (İstanbul: Enderun, 1972), 109.

[20] Zahit Atçıl, "The Ottoman Conception of Sovereignty and Succession: Mustafa Ali's *Essence of History* (*Kunh al-Akhbar*)," in *The Empires of the Near East and India: Source Studies of the Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal Literate Communities*, ed. Hani Khafipour (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 228–39, 236.

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