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Research Article

## Iranian Merchants as a Religious Community in Late Ottoman Istanbul

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### ABSTRACT

Long-term peace between the Ottoman Empire and Iran provided an opportunity for Iranians to carry out various activities, especially trade, in the Ottoman Empire. Istanbul, the link between Asia and Europe, had become a point of interest to Iranian merchants as early as the 18th century, but it was particularly during the second half of the 19th century that one could speak of a well-organized Iranian community at the heart of the social and commercial life of the city. This community, formed mainly by merchants, was also a religious community belonging to the Shia sect, which enabled them to act together and form an organized community in Ottoman Istanbul, the population of which consisted mainly of Sunni Muslims. The combination of religious, cultural, social, and other practices of the Iranian merchants had brought an institutionalization along with it, and thus memories were created that would leave a legacy in the cultural history of Istanbul. Through an investigation of state archives in Turkey, this study aims to explore the story of Iranian merchants during the 19th century Ottoman period in Istanbul, focusing on their commercial, social and religious lives. The findings of the study shed light on the institutionalization of Iranian merchants as a close-knit community based on their commitment to sect-based practices.

**Keywords:** Iranian merchants, Ottoman, Istanbul, Shiite, religious community



## 1. Introduction

Despite rivalries between the Ottoman Empire and Iran as two Muslim countries, it is well-known that they succeeded in keeping a long-lasting state of peace for centuries. This enabled Iranian citizens to travel around, trade, and establish and manage foundations within the Ottoman Empire. Since the 1500s, Iranians had migrated to the Ottoman Empire primarily for social and political reasons (Sasani, 2006, p. 73–74). Iranians living in the Ottoman Empire played important roles in the economic, social, cultural, and political spheres of the Empire. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Iranian merchants became increasingly interested in different cities of Anatolia for trading purposes. During the period from the 1800s until the 1920s, these merchants were at the heart of a well-organized Iranian society and took active roles in the social, political, and economic spheres both of Istanbul and of other Anatolian cities.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the trade route between Istanbul and Tabriz was revitalized. With the advent of steamship technology, Europe's interest in trade in the Black Sea and Iran had surged. Added to this, the political developments, economic difficulties, and newly emerging social needs in Iran during the 19<sup>th</sup> century played a role in the revitalization of the trade route between Istanbul and Tabriz. At the time when Iran was experiencing economic difficulties, the increasing pressures of states wishing to expand their spheres of influence - such as Britain and Russia - almost put Iran into the position of being a colonial state. The success of Iranian merchants carrying out commercial activities outside of Iran encouraged other Iranian merchants to do the same. Thus, during this period, the number of Iranian merchants increased adequately to allow them to create colonies in European cities such as London, Marseille, and Manchester, as was already the case in Istanbul, Baghdad, Baku, Bombay, and Calcutta (Pavlovic and others, 1951, p. 25).

Istanbul had already become an important center for Iranian merchants. Products brought from Iran or produced in Istanbul were marketed to Europe from there. According to Rudolf Gödel, an Austrian merchant trading on the Istanbul-Trabzon-Erzurum-Tabriz route at that time, European companies did not develop direct commercial relations with Iran. Rather, they conducted trade with Iran through companies located in Istanbul. These companies in Istanbul served as intermediaries by connecting them with Tabriz, the center from which Iranian goods were collected for trade with Europe (Issawi, 1971, p. 100).

The presence of Iranian merchants in Istanbul played an important role in the commercial life of the city during the final period of the Ottoman Empire, and this presence certainly left its mark on the social, political, and religious spheres of the time. The fact that these Iranians belonged to the Shia sect was decisive in their formation as a close-knit community in Ottoman Istanbul, where the majority of the population was Sunni Muslim. Their activities and attempts to meet the religious, cultural, social, and other needs of this community gave way to an institutionalization that would meet the aforementioned needs of Iranians for a long time. Such attempts also created memories that left a legacy in the cultural history of Istanbul. Since the 1850s, the period in which larger numbers of Iranian merchants started to populate Istanbul, they began to build their mosques, cemeteries, and hospitals, also establishing schools for their children. They also made significant contributions to the cultural life of Istanbul with their printing and publication activities, including newspapers and magazines. Their traces in the urban space of Istanbul are still visible today in certain architectural structures such as the Iranian Mosque and the Iranian Cemetery. These also indicate that, particularly during the period from the 1850s to the 1920s, the activities of Iranian merchants in Istanbul were focused around the formation of a social and religious life for the Shiite community.

Iranians, who were extremely active in the commercial life of Istanbul at that period, also carried out important activities in the political field. A new space had emerged in Istanbul for opponents of the shah's rule in Iran. The Constitutional Monarchy in Iran (1906) and the Constitutional Monarchy in the Ottoman Empire (1908) were in the same period. During the period leading up to the Constitutional Monarchy, the Iranians in Istanbul conducted some activities in relation to the Iranian constitution, and they worked to strengthen their relations with the Committee of Union and Progress, the leading constitutionalist movement in the Ottoman Empire. They even published newspapers with the intent that their policies could reach every region where Iranians lived. Indeed, the scholarly literature underlines that the Ottoman Empire was a role model for some members of Iran's political and religious elite during the Tanzimat period and the reign of Abdulhamid II (Çetinsaya, 2000, p. 13).

The busy lives of Iranian merchants in commercial, religious, social, and political spheres are evidenced by the accumulation of numerous documents in the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey's Directorate of State Archives, and this has attracted the attention of researchers in recent years. These studies are, however, limited in that they shed light exclusively on the commercial and political activities of the Iranian merchants. Bringing in the dimension of religion, this present study focuses on the Iranian merchants as members of a Shiite community in Istanbul. It explores their activities in the intersections of religion, economy, and politics through document analysis of the primary sources retrieved from the the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey's Directorate of State Archives. In this study, these primary sources were supported with reference to the existing scholarly literature on Iranians living in different historical periods of the Ottoman Empire. These sources were used to explore the commercial and religious activities, and the social relations of Iranian merchants in Istanbul. Based on the findings, the study sheds light on the institutionalization of Iranian merchants as a close-knit community drawn together by their commitment to Shiite practices.

The study is divided into four sections. The first section outlines the historical background of the Iranians in Ottoman Istanbul and Anatolia. The following sections explore the commercial and religious activities and the social relations of Iranian merchants in Istanbul respectively.

## **2. Iranians in Ottoman Istanbul and Anatolia**

The presence of Iranians in Istanbul and Anatolia goes back to the 1500s. According to Han Melik Sasani, who served as the Iranian Ambassador in the last years of the Ottoman Empire, when the Ottoman commanders organized expeditions to Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and the Caucasus, they brought many Iranians to Istanbul either by their own will or by force. In 1514, Selim I forced the people of Tabriz to migrate and brought them to the Ottoman Empire. In the political environment of the period, many prominent people left Iran either due to internal conflicts or for personal reasons (Sasani, 2006, p. 73).

Wars between Iran and the Ottoman Empire between 1578-1639 negatively affected the trade relations between the two countries. Tabriz, which until then had had a central position in the silk trade with the Ottomans, lost its importance, and Isfahan and the Persian Gulf came to the forefront as the new centers of trade. After the 1750s, Iranian merchants of Azerbaijani origin increased their trade with the Ottomans and turned Tabriz into an important trade center once again (Kurtuluş, 2010, p. 175). Starting from this period, the migration of Iranian merchants to Ottoman cities began to accelerate.

The Trabzon-Tabriz transit road was opened in 1830, and with the development of steamship technology, the importance of port cities such as Istanbul, Trabzon and Samsun surged. The creation of a trade route between these cities and Tabriz as well as increasing European interest in trade in the Black Sea and in Iran were among the most influential factors in the migratory movements of Iranian merchants to certain Ottoman cities, especially Istanbul (Dıġıroġlu, 2014, p. 71).

In addition to this, factors such as the economic policies of Iran and the profitability of trade for Iranians led Iranian merchants to conduct trade abroad. Studies conducted on the period show that Iranian merchants greatly preferred Tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire, India, North Africa, and West Africa as places in which to conduct trade abroad (Atabaki, 2010).

Archive documents show that Iranian merchants began to populate Istanbul in large numbers after the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was noted in a census conducted in 1851 that the total number of Iranian merchants living in Istanbul and dealing with trade was 243. Most of these merchants resided in central trade places of Istanbul such as Beyazıt, Beşiktař, Üsküdar, and the surrounding areas. These were Iranian citizens who were engaged in trade activities. It is also understood that one hundred of these 243 merchants were involved in the tobacco trade (BOA, İ.HR, .74/3603). This number increases considerably when Iranians who were engaged in work other than trade in Istanbul are also taken into account.

Nevertheless, it is not possible to present an exact number of Iranians who lived in Ottoman Istanbul and Anatolia at that time. The rate of immigration fluctuated from one year to another. Besides, while many Iranians became Ottoman citizens, others were not registered. Based on the data obtained from the consulate's notebooks, Han Melik Sasani, the Iranian ambassador in the 1920s, gives information about Iranians living in Ottoman cities other than Istanbul. For example, the number of Iranians living in Anatolia between 1873 and 1890 who received residence permits was approximately 10,800. In 1919, the number of Iranians in Anatolia was 1843 (Sasani, 2006, p. 77–81).<sup>1</sup> As of 1908, a total of 20,000 Iranians lived in Istanbul (Afary, 1996, p. 231). These Iranians mainly lived in Beyoġlu, Boġaziçi, Üsküdar, Kadıköy, and on the Princes Islands. Yet, the most intense commercial activities took place in Valide Han (BOA, DH.KMS, 25/34).

According to Sasani, among those who came to the Ottoman Empire from Iran, there were also descendants of Iran's ancient dynasties. Some of them assumed senior positions in the Ottoman Empire (Sasani, 2006, p. 74).<sup>2</sup> Many Iranian names and nicknames are listed among the people who were tradesmen in the market, even among ordinary people. The majority of these Iranians became Ottoman citizens. According to the data obtained from the consulate notebook, the number of people who remained Iranian citizens was approximately 16,000. 80% of them were of Azerbaijani origin and came from Tabriz, Khoy, Salmas, Shabestar, and Mamkan. Azerbaijanis were followed by the people of Isfahan, Tehran, Kazvin, Khorasan, and Kashan (Sasani, 2006, p. 74). According to Sakamoto, the high density of Azerbaijanis among Iranian merchants has to do with their place of residence being closer to Istanbul, the similarity between the Azerbaijani language and Ottoman Turkish, and the competence of Azerbaijanis in trade (Sakamoto, 1993, p. 68).

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1 Questioning the reasons for the rapid decrease in the number of Iranians, Sasani stated that they either acquired foreign citizenship due to the persecution of the Ottomans, or were conscripted to the Ottoman army, or some of them were killed by Iranian consular officials. (For detailed information, see Sasani, 2006, p. 77–81)

2 For example, Haydarzade İbrahim Efendi is from the Safavid dynasty, his ancestry goes back to Sheikh Haydar, the grandfather of Shah Ismail. He had important duties in the Ottoman state. He served as a Shaykh al-Islam. He was a mild-tempered, kind person with various virtues. He is known with his help and support to Iranians. Mustafa Zihni Pasha Babanzade, who was the governor of Hejaz for a period, was originally from Suleymaniye Iranians. He has a love for Iran in his heart. (Sasani, 2006, p.74).

### 3. Commercial Activities

The abovementioned institutionalization of Iranians in the Ottoman Empire is evidence of Iranian merchants' success in trade. It also shows their wealth as well as the responsibilities they undertook to help other Iranians, which made them the forerunners of the wider Iranian community in the Ottoman Empire. These merchants brought about the allocation of a cemetery to Iranians in 1853 (BOA, İ.HR, 104/5103), the establishment of a hospital for Iranians in 1883, and the opening of a school for Iranians in 1884 (Sasani, 2006, p. 81–83). Similarly, the period of mourning organized by the Iranians in Istanbul during the month of Muharram was also conducted under the leadership of these merchants. Indeed, the commercial centers where the merchants were largely located (Valide Han and the inns around it) and the neighborhoods where they resided (Üsküdar) were the places where Muharram mourning was organized for many years (Kurşun, 2007, p. 204–205).

According to Sasani, Iranians tried many jobs and professions and they did not turn away from any field. The Persian carpet trade was mainly in the hands of Iranians with a large number of well-known merchants among them. The carpet trade was followed by bookselling and manufacturing. Some jobs in the market, such as cigarette sales, were considered as occupations exclusive to Iranians. Most of the tea and coffee vendors, as well as the car and phaeton drivers were also Iranian. Each artisan group had its own leader, and these people were called “butlers” in Istanbul (Sasani, 2006, p. 74–75).<sup>3</sup> Other than the professions already mentioned here, Iranians in Istanbul were also active in professions such as calligraphy, bookbinding, papermaking, street trading/grocery, *sakalık* (dealing with irrigation in rural areas), and glassmaking (Dıġıroġlu, 2014, p. 79).

Among the Iranian merchants, Mohammed Tahir Tabrizi stands out as an important figure in the printing trade. Tabrizi migrated to Istanbul from Tabriz when he was in his 20s and got a license to open a printing house in 1862 (BOA, DH.MDK, 220/88). He first worked as a typographer in Istanbul for many years, and then had a printing house in Valide Han and a bookshop in Hakkaklar Bazaar (BOA, DH.MDK, 154/90). He had close ties with other Iranians residing in Istanbul and had an important position among the Iranian merchants. He provided financial support and accommodation for those who came to Istanbul from Iran for either short or long durations. He even guided the pilgrims who used the Istanbul route to go on a pilgrimage during their stay in Istanbul (Yıldız, 2017, p. 179). Among the many activities of Tabrizi, the publishing of the “Ahter” newspaper, published in Persian between 1876 and 1896, stands out as deserving significant attention. “Ahter” advocated Sultan Abdulhamid II's understanding of the Islamic Union and became an important medium that housed social and political reflections of Ottoman-Iranian relations.

The carpet and tobacco trades were also among the important commercial activities of Iranian merchants. According to Tsutoma, Istanbul played a vital part in Iran's trade with Europe during the Qajar dynasty. For example, Manchester cotton products to be exported to Iran were first brought to Greek or Armenian merchants in Istanbul as wholesale products. Later, these were exported to Iran by Armenian or Azerbaijani merchants who regularly visited Istanbul. Iran did not have to export its commercial products directly to Europe. Until the 1860s Gilan silk was

3 There were many reputable and wealthy people among Iranian merchants. One of them is Hacı Mirza Fethali Isfahani. He has leather, soap, dyeing, carpet washing and halva factories. He has employed hundreds of Iranians over the years. He built each of these factories with his own work and managed all of them himself. (See Sasani, 2006, p.74–75).

typically sent to the markets of Milan and Marseille via Istanbul. The time when the silk trade started to lose its importance in the 1870s was the very time which saw the rise of the carpet trade. Until the First World War, Istanbul was one of the main centers from which Persian carpets were exported to Europe and the United States (Sakamoto, 1993, p.58).

According to the 1851 census, almost half of the Iranian merchants (100 out of 243) were involved in the tobacco trade (BOA, İ.HR, 74/3603). There were wealthy and reputable people among the tobacco merchants (Sasani, 2006, p. 79–80).<sup>4</sup> According to Tsutomu, Iran's hookah tobacco was of higher quality than that of other Muslim countries. This tobacco was exported regularly to Turkey, Syria, Egypt, and the Hijaz Region. Istanbul was a place where tobacco was consumed heavily. At the same time, Istanbul was a center where tobacco was distributed to other regions. Indeed, it is well known that there were many Iranian tobacco merchants in Istanbul during the tobacco protest movements in 1891 and 1892 (Sakamoto, 1993, p.58; Issawi, 1971, p.247–249).

Iranian merchants, especially the Azerbaijani Turks of Tabriz, actively continued to trade in Istanbul until World War I. However, Istanbul's prospects of becoming a worldwide carpet market were damaged at the beginning of World War I. The reasons for this included the lockout which was applied to the Bosphorus at the beginning of the war and the increase in customs duties, which before the war had stood at 7% in the carpet trade. In the years of the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, Istanbul lost its importance in the international carpet trade. London became the new center of the international carpet trade, and Iranian and Armenian merchants moved from Istanbul to London (Sakamoto, 1993, p.70).

#### **4. Social Relations and Religious Activities**

Iranian merchants' economic activities cannot be understood in isolation from their religious activities, which helped them form a close-knit community. As mentioned in the documents in the archive, the Iranians in Istanbul belonged to the Shia sect and as was visible from the wide range of religious practices, religion constituted an important part of their social life. Although both the Iranians and the locals of Istanbul were Muslim, differences in sect led Iranians to seek alternative religious and social spaces in Istanbul. Indeed, pious Iranian citizens requested the Ottoman administration to provide them with a place of worship specifically for their sects. As per their request, a mosque was allocated to them. They acquired a cemetery to bury their deceased. They turned their trade locations and routes with their mosques and cemeteries into the main routes where Muharram mourning was performed. In a sense, they shaped their commercial and social lives within the framework of sect-based religious practices.

The mourning of Muharram, one of the most important rituals of the Shia sect, was significantly influential as a means of showing the religious activities of the Iranians in Istanbul to the public and as a way of forming social relations among Iranians. A look at the Iranian merchants' far-reaching economic and social activities clearly shows that they were extremely dynamic, well-organized, in solidarity, and successful. Their sect-related religious practices and rituals were influential in the establishment of this solidarity and in drawing the boundaries of a close-knit community. For exam-

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4 According to Sasani, "An Iranian named Ali Parağanlı had a reputable tobacco shop in Beşiktaş. This person, in his 50s, had been trading tobacco in Istanbul for more than 30 years. He was never married and used to sleep in the shop at night. Everyone knew that the palace women left their jewels entrusted to him, as he was close to the sultan's palace and he was shopping with the palace dwellers. It was spoken among people that he had a lot of money and that he had precious jewels in his shop. One morning towards the end of November 1920, in the month of Muharram, the news that Tütüncü Ali had died at night was heard..." (For detailed information also see. Sasani, 2006, p.79–80).

ple, Sasani noted that Iranians who married Ottoman women at that time mostly complained about their situation, and after some time most of these marriages ended in divorce. Accordingly, the sect difference between the couples caused most of the Shiite Iranian men who married a Sunni Ottoman woman to be unhappy. This was in fact one of the main reasons why Iranian men did not marry Ottoman Sunni women. These problems led to the enactment of a law by the Istanbul government in 1874 banning Ottoman women from marrying Iranian men (Yurt, 2019). Sasani, who for a while thought that this ban was a disadvantage for Iran and therefore strived for its repeal, later thought that it was in fact favorable for Iran. He points out his reflection on the sect difference in marriage by stating that “*Fortunately, the number of people married to Ottoman women is extremely low and religious feelings play an important role in this*” (Sasani, 2006, p.75–76). As is evident in this example of a ban on marriage, sometimes Iranians as a Shiite community suffered social exclusion in the dominantly Sunni Ottoman society. For this reason, Iranians confined their daily lives and social relationships within their own cultural ghettos. According to François Georgeon, Iranians used to gather in coffeehouses around Valide Han in their free time. Ali Ekber’s Teahouse, located in the Kumkapı district, was another important social place where Iranians got together. This teahouse was marked by a portrait of Shah Muzafferuddin hung on its wall. The Iranian flag (with lion and sun) was also hung on its door every Friday (Georgeon, 1999, p.54–55).

Erika Glassen’s research shows that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Iranians in Istanbul were not yet such a respected community that they could organize Muharram mourning publicly (Glassen, 1993, p.113). Hammer’s writings in 1822 support this view. According to Hammer, the number of Iranians in Istanbul was so small that they were drowned in the vast ocean of people. Most of them were merchants or dervishes. As Shiites, i.e. heretics, they were nowhere allowed to raise their heads. And as heretics, they were more hated than the Jews by the fanatic orthodox Sunnis (Glassen, 1993, p. 113). This hatred and social exclusion were observed by the French traveler Gerard de Nerval, who conveyed memories about the social life of Iranians in Istanbul in his book *Le Voyage en Orient*. During a visit to Istanbul during the 1840s, Nerval wore Iranian clothes and stayed at the Yıldız inn where the Iranians were staying because Christians were not allowed to stay in the area where the inns were located. He introduced himself to others as an Iranian merchant. His memoirs show that the Iranians were interested in him, and he spent time with them by visiting coffeehouses. He noted that from time to time the local people thought that he was Iranian, and he felt that he was excluded because of the sect (Nerval, 2017, p.313–327).

Drawing on such writings, some researchers have explored the ways in which the Shiite-Iranians were able to organize publicly visible Muharram mourning practices in the heart of Istanbul, the capital of the Sunni Caliphate, while being excluded as a minority group. According to Sasani, Iranian ambassador Hacı Mirza Huseyin Khan’s (1858-1870) close relationship with the pioneers of the Ottoman Tanzimat reformers (e.g. Mithat Pasha, Ali Pasha and Fuat Pasha) probably had a lot to do with the Iranians getting permission to organize public ceremonies for Muharram mourning. These relationships had also influenced Hacı Mirza Huseyin Khan deeply and he tried to copy some of the administrative reforms they had carried out in the Ottoman Empire when he was later Prime Minister in Iran (Sasani, 2006, p.185). Similarly, according to Gordlevski, the Ottoman grand vizier Ali Pasha, a former Bektashi, had protected the Shiite mourning of Muharram in Istanbul (Gordlevski, 1993, p. 169). However, Erika Glassen claimed that it was not only sign of religious tolerance on the part of the Ottoman authorities to allow the Shiite Muharram observances, but it was also an indication of the strength and self-confidence of the Iranian community (Glassen, 1993, p.113).

### 5. Muharram Observances as a Social Institution

Valide Han, full of the bustle of commercial life, and the Iranian cemetery in Üsküdar (Seyit Ahmet Deresi), were important centers for the Iranians in Istanbul. Most of the merchants carried out their commercial activities in Valide Han and its surrounding inns. Similarly, they resided in areas close to their workplaces, some in Valide Han and its surroundings, and some in Üsküdar and some other regions. The flamboyant Muharram mourning that Iranians conduct every year in the month of Muharram was held in those regions. It is not yet known when exactly the mourning of Muharram first began to be held in Istanbul. However, Sasani states that Iranians in Istanbul did not organize the Muharram observations publicly before the time of Hacı Mirza Huseyin Khan, and that the mourning in Istanbul started thanks to his power and influence (Sasani, 2006, p.85). Mirza Huseyin Khan started his duty in Istanbul in 1858 as the Iranian ambassador and continued this duty until 1870 (Sasani, 2006, p.185). It can be inferred from these findings that the Muharram mourning in Istanbul started in the 1860s (Glassen, 1993, p.114).

There are many documents in the state archives regarding the performance of the mourning of Muharram. These documents indicate that the mourning would start every year in the month of Muharram in Valide Han and would finish in Üsküdar. A document dated 23 September 1887 presents information about the Muharram mourning as well as some social reflections on mourning and some measures to be taken. According to a letter written by Süreyya Pasha, Head Clerk of Mabeyn, to the Grand Vizier, Iranians living in Istanbul gathered in the inns every year and they would practice mourning from the first night of the month of Muharram to the tenth night. They would make a noise in the streets as they moved in groups from one inn to another. On the tenth night of the month of Muharram, around 150-200 Iranians would be wearing white shirts, hitting their heads with swords and daggers, and shedding blood. Another group would go to Valide Han singing elegies in a choir and beating their hearts and they would go back the same way. Students, residents, and some foreigners would gather on the roads to watch the mourning. Some Ottoman women even went to the inns during the day to watch the observations.

In his letter, the Head Clerk of Mabeyn mentions the possibility of a poignant social problem. If one of the locals or foreigners gathered in the streets or inns during the mourning smiled, the Iranians could interpret it as making fun of them. Süreyya Pasha further notes that there is nothing to say that Iranians should perform their mourning in their inns per their sects and beliefs. However, making a noise on the streets at night, being drenched in blood due to sword and dagger wounds on the tenth night of Muharram, gathering in Valide Han singing elegies in a choir, and going out from there to other shops would not have had a good effect on the public. The letter continues with the suggestion that Ottoman women should be prohibited from entering the inns for the purpose of watching the mourning, even during the day (BOA, İ.DH, 82523). As understood from the warnings here, there was a concern that public order could be undermined as the mourning practices had the potential to be transformed from a religious practice to a spectacular ceremony, which could have negative effects on society. Despite these concerns, there were no restrictions on Iranians organizing mourning rituals as per their beliefs (Kurşun, 2007, p.205).

Looking at the Muharram observations in later years, it is understood that the state dignitaries' warnings on confining the mourning to within the Valide Han were largely ignored. A similar warning was made both in 1887 and then again the following year (BOA, İ.DH, 86049). In fact, the Iranian Ambassador Muhsin Han was kindly warned and asked that the mourning should not go beyond the Valide Han in order to avoid any possible problems (BOA, İ.DH, 86124). However, despite such warnings, the observations, which included noisy practices and large crowds of par-



ticipants, continued to spread over a broad area every year. A regular Muharram mourning would begin in Beyazıt and its surroundings and end at the end of the day in the Seyit Ahmet Deresi in Üsküdar. Considering the large number of participants and the extent of the mourning, one can say that Iranian citizens in Istanbul were not the only ones who participated in these observances. The Muharram mourning, which was overseen through certain warnings and measures, was a common activity of all Ja'faris, and became a part of the Ottoman public opinion.

While the Shiite Iranians held their period of mourning in the month of Muharram, during the same period Sunnis had the custom of distributing water to the people in the Sünbül Sinan Lodge in Kocamustafapaşa (Köse, 2012, p. 73–74).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, law enforcement had to be maintained for both sides of Istanbul (BOA, ZB, 380/133 – 383/134).<sup>6</sup> Since there were not enough policemen and gendarmes to maintain order in Seyit Ahmet Deresi in Üsküdar, reinforcements were sent to Üsküdar from the European side. These mourning rituals continued for many years and there are many documents regarding the security measures taken, but there is no information that any unrest occurred during the observations. It is understood that the mourning was carried out peacefully every year (Kurşun, 2007, p.209). As a matter of fact, in 1906, the Iranian government awarded Ahmet Remzi, the Chief of Police in Üsküdar, and the commissioners Kadri, Hüsnü and Şevki Effendis with medals named 'Şir ü Hurşid'<sup>7</sup> and permission was obtained from the Ottoman sultan for them to wear them (BOA, ZB, 473/76; 283/134; 338/78). Thus, the Muharram observations were large-scale events for which the administrators made intense efforts to take precautions against any conflict.

Besides, these observations were also the subject of diplomatic relations between countries. The performance of the mourning ritual spread over a broad area in both the European and Anatolian sides of Istanbul. At the same time it attracted the interest of local people and foreigners living in Istanbul. One can argue that the tradition of hitting their bodies with wedges and swords and shedding blood during the period of mourning was effective in the perception of mourning as a spectacular ceremony and non-Shiites would pour out onto the streets to watch these rituals. The Iranian ambassador Sasani was extremely disturbed and complained about the spectacle that the mourning created. He described his meeting with the secretary at the American embassy before the mourning ritual as follows: *"On the ninth day of the month of Muharram, they were constantly making phone calls from foreign embassies and saying, 'please book a place for us at the show tonight'. After some research, I learned that the ambassadors before me had allocated a special place in Valide Han so that foreign embassies could see the wedding better. Meanwhile, the maid went in and said that the secretary in the American embassy had come and had a very important issue to talk about with you. After the small talk, we had a conversation like this:*

5 On the tenth day of the month of Muharram, Sunnis have the custom of distributing water in the Sünbül Sinan Dervish Lodge, but it is said that Iranian Shiites also visited here and performed mourning here. It is believed that the mausoleum known as the "Tomb of Double Sultans" in Dergah belongs to daughters of Prophet Hussein, named Fatima and Sakine. Rumours has it that Fatima and Sakine were captured in one of the crusades, and brought to Istanbul by sea. Respectfully to that, Iranians were visiting the Sünbül Sinan Dervish Lodge in the month of Muharram and doing mourning. (Köse, 2012, p. 73–74).

6 On the day of mourning on 7 February 1907, police were tasked in Sünbül Sinan Lodge and Üsküdar to prevent possible tensions and to ensure security. (BOA, ZB. 380/133; ZB. 383/134).

7 Şir ü Hurşid is a description that originates from Mesopotamia and Iran. It has become a symbol for celestial events that emanate from astrological beings. It has become the national emblem of Iran in the historical process and is associated with Shiism. The medals given by the Iranian state were named as "Şir ü Hurşid" and these medals featured the traditional lion and sun depiction. (For more information see; Turan, 2017)

- *Where will the Iranians break their heads tonight?*
- *I don't know.*
- *Are they doing this without saying anything to the Iranian embassy?*
- *Yes, because this is something sectarian, it has nothing to do with the embassy.*
- *How is it that the members of a nation shed their blood in a foreign country without the knowledge of their embassy?*
- *Yes, it is like this in Iran and there are many examples (Sasani, 2006, p. 87).*

Before the appointment of Hacı Mirza Huseyin Khan as Iranian ambassador in Istanbul between 1858 and 1870, it had not been common to practice self-flagellation in the period of Muharram mourning. Iranians had not attended public condolence ceremonies in that period. However, the influence and power of Mirza Huseyin Khan enabled them to organize elegizing councils in Istanbul, just like in Iran (Sasani, 2006, p. 85).

The tradition of blood-shedding by hitting with swords and wedges, which turned the mourning into a spectacular ceremony and attracted the interest of non-Shia people, occasionally caused disputes and important debates among the Iranians. Devout merchants and other religious Iranians who cared about religious rituals, embassy workers representing the state of Iran, and Iranian reformists who were in favor of modernization could be listed among the parties to these disputes and controversies.

As we understand from the notes of the Iranian ambassador Sasani, sometimes people came from distant regions to watch this demonstration of the Iranians and to slander and mock the customs of the eastern nations. This situation was seen as something embarrassing for the Iranian reformists living in Istanbul. At the beginning of World War I, under the pretext of confiscating weapons, Iranian wedges were also taken. Iranian reformists were very pleased with this situation. During the war, it was only reading of elegies that took place, and no self-flagellation occurred. Criticizing the attitude of some Iranians in Istanbul at that time, Sasani claims that by bringing people together under the name of a religious ceremony, they used the religious feelings of people for their worldly purposes, and even the Iranian consulate staff sabotaged the self-flagellation in the rituals in order to put him in a difficult situation (Sasani, 2006, p.86).

The way in which the mourning of Muharram , which left important historical memories of that era of Istanbul, was performed and the effect it had on the beholder, was recorded in the works of some authors who lived in that period and who watched the mourning in person.<sup>8</sup> To better understand the performance of the mourning ritual and its effects, it will be useful to present the notes of one of the authors here.

Sadri Sema describes the tenth day of Muharram in Istanbul as follows: “For ten days in Muharram, Iranians used to perform day and night mourning rituals in their inns in Istanbul and their lodges in Seyyidahmet Deresi in Karacaahmet in Üsküdar. On the tenth day, they gather in this lodge from all over Istanbul, some of them pass in groups, some of them scattered, they go to Seyyidahmet Deresi, towards the evening they return to their inns in Istanbul with a regiment

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8 In Sadri Sema's book "Memories From Old Istanbul", the Muharram mourning of Iranians in Istanbul is described in detail. (Sadri Sema, *Eski İstanbul'dan Hatıralar*, Istanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 1994. In the article Cemalettin Bildik wrote in the Akşam newspaper on 4 February 1948 with the title "İstanbul Hanları", further information about the execution of the Muharram mournings was presented. (Cemalettin Bildik, *İstanbul Hanları*, Referred from the Akşam Newspaper dated 4 February 1948 by M. Nermi Haskan, *Yüzyıllar Boyunca Üsküdar I*, Istanbul, Üsküdar Belediyesi Yayınları, 2001, p. 222). "Asitane, Evvel Zaman İçinde İstanbul I" by A. Ragıp Akyavaş also describes mournings in detail. (A. Ragıp Akyavaş, *Asitane, Evvel Zaman İçinde İstanbul I*, Ankara, Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2004).

equipped with flags. A sad ritual, even a bloody farewell, a sorrow...

Now, on the tenth day of this Muharram, Üsküdar would be the meeting place for the people of not only Üsküdar but all of Istanbul. From the Bosphorus, the Princes' Islands, Kadıköy and all over Istanbul, women, men, and children would pour into the streets of Üsküdar. The rooms, windows, and balconies of all shops were rented. Wooden sofas and couches were built on empty plots, and places were sold for five or ten piastres. An indescribable situation. All those streets, especially Üsküdar Bazaar, would be a flowing groove. It would be difficult to walk on the crowded roads. In the morning people would go to the Seyyidahmet Deresi, and in the evening, they would go along the bazaar, to the pier square.

All Iranians come to Üsküdar on the first ferry. With tea samovars, hookahs, carpets, flags, and chains in their hands and on their shoulders, they rush to the Seyyidahmet Deresi. Prayers and elegies are recited there until the evening. *Ahonds* made speeches, performed rituals, and tears were shed.

When the evening approached, they would gather, line up in order, and arrange groups. They would swing around in the form of a mourning procession, a convoy of sorrow, a mass of remorse. This anguish portraying this sorrow, this place of mourning, the sadness of the Karbala, would be really painful, poisonous, and sad. A meaningful apocalypse... Police and gendarmerie used to line both sides of the roads to prevent any chaos. In the front, the Iranian hodjas, *ahonds*, with white, green turbans, black and green robes, henna beards, black eyes, would pass in formations of orderly rings. Behind them, lush elegy readers with beautiful voices would recite sad odes. Every line of these elegies was followed by a ferocious, bitter groan, a big hum, and deep cries. Screams of regret mixed with tears, deep woes.

In my childhood, the most famous reader of this ritual, this mass of sorrow, was the beautiful, strong and touching voice of a man named Arap Ahmet. I remember it like it was yesterday. There were also other *hafizes*, elegy readers. While they read, the whole group would swell, enthral, groan, cry, and burst into sobs.

Arap Ahmet, with his hands on his ears, in the middle, would recite facing the group, shouting:

**Ya şah-ı Kerbela, nereva bunca gam sana?  
Derd-i demadem-ü elem-i dembedem sana?**

This couplet was followed by the cries of the whole group, the *sayhas*;

- Ali! Husayn!

How? With heartbreaking howls and moans...

Another elegy reader cried in a sad voice in another group:

**Berk-i sehab-ı hadiseden tığler çeküp,  
Yer yer havale-i şüheda kıldın ey felek!**

**Bir rahm kılmanın ciğeri kan olanlara.  
Gurbetde rûzkârı perişan olanlara!<sup>9</sup>**

9 The couplets mentioned here belong to Fuzuli's verse in his famous work "Hadikatu's-Suada" in which he describes the Karbala incident. It respectively means; "O fate, you had drawn swords from the lightning of the residing cloud"; "And then, you swung one by one at the martyrs and slaughtered them"; "You had never had mercy on those whose liver is full of blood,"; "And nor on those whose lives and dooms miserable in the foreign land."

Such painful words would be mixed with painful sighs and with tears of fire, and this group of mourning would stir up more emotions. Hearts and eyes were painted with mourning and sorrow.

Further back, on rows of horses, pigeons, tied in white shrouds with their wings painted with blood, passed. This was a symbol of the tragedy... This was followed by flags painted and soaked in various colors, inscriptions, and pictures. From far behind, on both sides of the convoy, in two or three rows, the *fedais* beat their open chests with fists, punching them as if they wanted to tear themselves to pieces... There were several idlers gathered in four corners or in circles in the middle, poor people drenched in blood, with bare chests and backs. They had tassel-shaped chains with stems in their hands, bare backs, and bare chests, “Sharrk! Sharrk!” They would beat and tear our hearts. The clatter of these bloody chains is still in my ears. What was the anger and the bloody torture that these people showed to injure, crush, beat, and even die for the sake of their ancestors? Why? Where did it come from?

Odes, fists swung in harmony with the elegies, chains that work from right to left, from left to right, soaked in blood, chests covered in red blood and wounds, and the venomous sight of the backs; this is not something that can be erased from the mind. This mourning and this convoy of sorrow would go down the street with chains, wounds, the wounded, punches, screams, convulsions, hiccups, and tears. It would disappear towards the pier. I would look behind them. I would hear the cries that rose from the distance, tearing the clouds:

- Ya Ali!
- Ya Husayn!
- The cruelty!

I think I have heard these sad and mournful cries today as well. The convoy passes, the people disperse. The streets get quiet. I would return to my house, but it’s like coming back from a funeral. My heart is poisoned by the spectacle of this harsh tragedy, my eyes are wet, my soul is crushed...” (Sema, 1994, p.100–102).

As so vividly described above by Sadri Sema, Istanbul was one of the cities where the Muharram rituals were organized in the most magnificent way. In the shadow of political events such as World War I, the occupation of Istanbul by the Allied Powers, the collapse of the Ottoman state and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the political atmosphere of Istanbul also changed and Muharram observations came to a halt after the 1920s. Indeed, at that time, Istanbul began to lose its importance in international trade as Iranian traders, like many other foreign traders, left Istanbul. However, the city regained its importance as a place of Shiite practices once again with the migration of Azeri-Shiite Turkish citizens from the eastern provinces of Turkey to Istanbul after the 1960s. They settled in the Halkalı region of Istanbul, and a new Shiite community was formed here. Since the 1990s, glorious Muharram mourning practices have become publicly visible in Halkalı. Since then, many people from different parts of society, even political party leaders, have attended these ritual gatherings. As a matter of fact, the mourning of Muharram, which was organized in Istanbul-Halkalı in 2012, was accepted by UNESCO as the mourning ritual that best reflects the spirit of Ashura (Yeler, 2019, p.214).

## 6. Conclusion

The stories of Iranian merchants retrieved from the documents in the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey’s Directorate of State Archives provide important insight into the commercial life of 19<sup>th</sup> century Istanbul and the religious practices of a Shia community in a dominantly Sun-

ni society. Through an archival investigation of memoirs, letters and other documents, this study analyzed the commercial activities, religious practices and social relations of Iranian merchants in Istanbul in the last period of the Ottoman Empire.

The findings of the study indicate that Iranian merchants were active in trade (from carpet trade to bookselling through manufacturing to tea and coffee) starting from the 1850s to the 1920s, until the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic, and their presence in Istanbul went further than mere involvement in commercial activities. Their social relations were primarily shaped by their Shiite religious practices, and the leading Iranian merchants were institutionalized as a close-knit community without integrating into Ottoman society by forming sectarian-based institutions. For example, they carried out their commercial activities in the inns around the Beyazıt region, which was the center of trade in Istanbul. Valide Han, one of the most important trade centers of Istanbul, in time began to be known as the Iranian's inn.

Iranian merchants were also religious people belonging to the Shiite sect. Sectarian cleavages between Shiism and Sunnism were influential in drawing the boundaries of social relations between Iranians and the dominantly Sunni Muslim Ottoman society. Iranians, who did not worship in mosques frequented by Sunnis built their own mosques in Valide Han and Seyyit Ahmet Deresi, and they also acquired a cemetery to bury their deceased. Besides religious places, they built their own hospital to provide health services to Iranians and opened schools for their children's education. These institutions specifically catered for meeting the basic needs of Iranian merchants in Istanbul, and pinpoint the fact that Iranians confined their daily lives and social relationships within their own cultural ghettos, leading to the institutionalization of Iranian merchants as a closed Shiite group isolated from the surrounding majority Sunni society.

Notwithstanding the Iranian community's tendency towards keeping to themselves, Iranian merchants strived to develop close political relations with the Ottoman rulers. People who came to Istanbul from Iran and opposed the Iranian administration would stay in Valide Han. Some of them published newspapers, conveying their political ideas to other countries where Iranians lived. In fact, some sources indicate that the constitutional monarchy in Iran in 1906 was inspired by the Ottoman constitutionalists.

Another sphere where Iranian merchants moved beyond the boundaries of their community was the Muharram mourning, the most important religious practice of the Shia sect in the public sphere. In the period from the 1860s to the 1920s, Iranians performed ostentatious mourning rituals in Muharram in Istanbul. The mourning rituals, started in the inns in the Beyazıt region on the 10th day of Muharram every year, continued throughout the day and were completed in the evening in the Üsküdar Seyyit Ahmet Deresi district. The practices of bloodshed by beating their heads with swords and of the recitation of elegies aloud attracted the attention of the local people and even of the diplomatic representatives of European countries. Thus, the mourning of Muharram turned into a public spectacle for both the Sunni community and Western audiences.

All in all, these findings shed light both on the boundaries in which the Iranian merchants isolated themselves and on the ways in which they opened themselves up to the Ottoman society in Istanbul. Their commitment to Shiite practices, the potentially diasporic nature of this community, as well as the ways in which they retained ties with their home country could point to further research questions.

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