An Examination of Shah Abbas Safavi's Violence based on Dollard and Miller's Frustration-Aggression Theory

Abbas Eghbalmehran[1*]; Saham Naami[2]

[*1]Department of History, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran
[2]Department of Industrial Psychology, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Ahvaz Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran
*Corresponding Author Email: abass.em1987@gmail.com

*Abstract— This study employs John Dollard and colleagues' Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis as a theoretical lens to analyze the pervasive political violence of Shah Abbas I (r. 1588-1629) of the Safavid Empire. It argues that the Shah's violent behaviors—including the suppression of the Qizilbash, the murder of relatives, brutal punishments at court, and aggression towards foreigners—were not merely acts of a tyrannical personality but can be understood as **aggressive responses to profound structural and personal frustrations**. These frustrations stemmed from internal threats to central authority, external military pressures from the Ottomans and Uzbeks, and personal insecurities rooted in a turbulent youth. Using a historical-analytical method, this interdisciplinary research synthesizes Persian chronicles and European travelogues to trace a **causal link between specific failures/frustrations and subsequent aggressive policies**. The findings suggest that Shah Abbas's reign presents a compelling historical case study of the frustration-aggression dynamic operating at the level of statecraft, where psychological defense mechanisms became institutionalized as tools of governance. This analysis provides a deeper, multi-causal understanding of Safavid political behavior, moving beyond purely political or military explanations to incorporate psychosocial drivers.*

Keywords— Shah Abbas I, Safavid Empire, Political Violence, Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis, Psycho-history, Qizilbash, Statecraft.

I. INTRODUCTION

Shah Abbas I stands as a pivotal yet paradoxical figure in Iranian history, renowned for consolidating the Safavid Empire, revitalizing the economy, and patronizing magnificent art and architecture, yet also infamous for his exceptional cruelty and systemic violence. Traditional historiography has often explained his violent actions as necessary measures for state-building or as manifestations of personal despotism. This study proposes an alternative, interdisciplinary explanation by applying the **Frustration-Aggression Theory**, developed by Dollard, Miller, et al. in 1939, to his reign.

The core premise of this theory is that aggression is always a consequence of frustration—the blocking of goal-directed behavior. This research posits that Shah Abbas's rule was characterized by acute and recurring frustrations: the **frustration of effective sovereignty** due to over-mighty Qizilbash tribes, the **frustration of security** from Ottoman and Uzbek incursions, the **frustration of stable succession** rooted in familial betrayal, and the **frustration of economic and religious integration**. We hypothesize that his documented aggressive actions—purges, executions, symbolic terror, and military campaigns—constitute patterned responses to these blocked political and personal goals.

This study seeks to answer: 1) How can specific violent acts of Shah Abbas be mapped onto identifiable political, military, or personal frustrations? 2) To what extent does the frustration-aggression framework provide a plausible, integrative explanation for his reign's violence compared to purely strategic or tyrannical models? By bridging social psychology and history, this analysis aims to illuminate the **psycho-logic of power** in early modern Iran, offering a model for understanding state violence as a complex interplay of structure, strategy, and psychological impulse.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1   Historical Scholarship on Shah Abbas and Safavid Violence:

Scholarship on Shah Abbas I is extensive. The classic narrative, from Iskandar Beg Munshi's contemporary chronicle *'Alam-ārā-ye Abbāsi* to modern biographers like David Blow and Roger Savory, details his reforms and cruelties, often attributing violence to *Realpolitik* or a harsh but effective state-building ethos. Studies on Safavid violence, such as those by Rudi Matthee and Kathryn Babayan, often focus on its ritual, religious, or theatrical dimensions within the context of Shi'i legitimacy and kingly ideology. A significant gap exists in **systematically examining the psychological drivers** behind this violence, beyond attributing it to "tyranny" or "necessity."

2.2   The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis: Core and Evolution:

The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis, formulated by Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, and Sears in 1939, posits that "the occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration," and conversely, "the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression." This seminal work has been extensively critiqued and refined. Later research moderated its absoluteness, recognizing that frustration creates a *readiness* for aggression, which is then mediated by situational cues, learning history, and cognitive appraisal (Berkowitz, 1989). Furthermore, aggression can be **displaced** onto a substitute target or **channeled** into non-violent but assertive activities. This study adapts this refined model, viewing Shah Abbas's aggression as a **primary, though not exclusive, response** to acute frustrations, shaped by the cultural and political tools available to an absolute monarch.

2.3   Psycho-History and Its Application:

The application of psychology to historical figures (psychohistory) is a contested but valuable field, pioneered by Erik Erikson. Its principal challenge is avoiding reductionism and anachronism. This study heeds these cautions by: 1) Grounding analysis in documented behaviors and historically-attested stressors; 2) Using the theory as an interpretive framework for patterns of action, not a clinical diagnosis; 3) Acknowledging the simultaneous role of rational strategy. We argue that frustration-aggression theory is particularly suitable here as it deals with observable stimuli (frustrations) and responses (aggression), avoiding undue speculation about unconscious depths.

III.   METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes a **qualitative historical-analytical method** within an interdisciplinary framework. The primary data consists of textual sources: Persian chronicles (e.g., Iskandar Beg Munshi), Safavid administrative documents, and European travelogues (e.g., by della Valle, Chardin, Tavernier). These sources are subjected to **source criticism** to account for bias (courtly panegyric, foreign astonishment).

The analytical procedure involves:

1. **Identification of Frustration Events:** Cataloging documented events that constitute a blockage of Shah Abbas's political or personal goals (e.g., a Qizilbash rebellion, a military defeat, a succession challenge).

2. **Identification of Aggressive Responses:** Cataloging his subsequent violent actions, noting their timing, target, and form.

3. **Pattern-Mapping and Analysis:** Seeking temporal and logical connections between (1) and (2). We analyze whether aggression follows frustration, if it is proportional or displaced, and how it is justified. We also consciously **consider alternative explanations** (strategic calculation, cultural norm) for each violent act to test the strength of the frustration-aggression link.

4. **Synthesis:** Evaluating the overall utility of the theory in explaining the patterns of violence across his reign.

IV.   ANALYSIS: THE ARCHITECTURE OF FRUSTRATION AND AGGRESSION

This section moves thematically through the major categories of frustration Shah Abbas faced, analyzing how each manifested in aggressive policy and personal behavior.

4.1   The Frustration of Sovereignty: The Qizilbash Problem:

Upon his accession, Shah Abbas's central goal—effective, uncontested rule—was **frustrated** by the decentralized military-political power of the Qizilbash Turkoman tribes, who had often made and unmade earlier Safavid shahs.

- **Aggressive Response:** His solution was a systematic, violent neutering of their power. This was not a single act but a prolonged campaign of aggression: the assassination of powerful generals like Murshid Qoli Khan Ustajlu (who had initially enthroned him), the confiscation of tribal lands (*toyuls*), and their replacement with a directly loyal slave-soldier (*ghulam*) army. The violent purges of Qizilbash leaders were direct aggression against the perceived source of his political frustration.

4.2   The Frustration of Security: External Threats:

The early reign was marked by the **frustration** of territorial losses and humiliation at the hands of the Ottoman Empire and Uzbek Khanates.

- **Aggressive Response:** This fueled external military aggression. Campaigns to reconquer lost territory (e.g., the systematic wars against the Ottomans) displayed organized, state-level aggression. The brutal treatment of Ottoman prisoners and diplomats, as recounted by European observers, can be seen as **displaced aggression**—an inability to immediately defeat the main enemy fully, leading to excessive violence against available surrogates. The reconquest of the Persian Gulf from the Portuguese, while strategic, was also an aggressive assertion of control against a blocking force.

4.3   The Frustration of Kinship and Succession: A Treacherous Family:

Shah Abbas's personal life was defined by the **frustration** of familial trust and security. He witnessed and experienced princely fratricide, was separated from his mother, and lived under constant threat from rival relatives—a profound blockage of any need for familial safety.

- **Aggressive Response:** This trauma fueled pre-emptive aggression within the family. The murder of his eldest son, Safi Mirza, and the blinding of two others were extreme acts of aggression aimed at eliminating the perceived source of future frustration (a coup). This represents a tragic internalization of familial strife, where potential future blockage was met with immediate, devastating aggression.

4.4   The Frustration of Control: Provincial Elites and the Public:

The goal of complete fiscal and administrative control was **frustrated** by semi-autonomous provincial rulers and occasional public disobedience.

- **Aggressive Response:** He met this with spectacular, theatrical violence designed to instill terror. The brutal punishments described in the sources—flaying alive, roasting, public impalement—served as aggressive, over-the-top demonstrations of power meant to crush any future frustration of his will. The confiscation of elite wealth was both a fiscal strategy and an aggressive act of humiliation against a rival center of power.

4.5   Channeled Aggression: The Constructive Outlet:

The theory allows for the channeling of aggressive impulse into non-violent activity. Shah Abbas's immense **frustration with Iran's weakness** appears to have been **channeled** into a furious agenda of construction: rebuilding Isfahan as a grand capital, fostering trade, and patronizing arts. This was assertive, goal-directed activity that transformed aggressive energy into a legacy of cultural flourishing, demonstrating the complexity of the frustration-response dynamic.

V.   DISCUSSION: WEAVING THE THREADS OF CAUSATION

The analysis reveals a recurrent pattern where periods of acute frustration are followed by notable escalations in aggressive violence. The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis provides a compelling **unifying framework** that makes psychological sense of disparate violent acts—from the intimate (killing a son) to the geopolitical (waging war). It helps explain the **excess** of his violence; a purely strategic explanation might justify a purge, but not necessarily its brutal methodology.

However, the theory alone is insufficient. It must be integrated with an understanding of:

- **Strategic Calculation:** Much aggression was also rational policy (e.g., creating the *ghulam* system).
- **Cultural Repertoire:** The forms of violence (flaying, impalement) were part of a shared language of sovereign power in the region.
- **Instrumental Terror:** Violence served to communicate power, not just to vent frustration.

Therefore, we propose a **synthetic model**: Frustration (from structural threats and personal trauma) created a pervasive readiness for aggression in Shah Abbas. This aggressive drive was then expressed through the available **political and cultural tools** of a Safavid monarch, becoming institutionalized as a key method of governance. His violence was both a psychological reaction and a calculated political instrument—the two are inseparable.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis offers a powerful, though partial, key to understanding the violence of Shah Abbas I. By mapping his documented aggressive actions against the backdrop of political, military, and personal frustrations, a coherent psycho-logic emerges. His reign illustrates how the frustrations inherent in state-building—security threats, elite intransigence, dynastic instability—can catalyze aggressive responses that become embedded in the machinery of state.

This interdisciplinary approach moves the historical discussion beyond the dichotomy of "great statesman" versus "bloody tyrant." It reveals Shah Abbas as a ruler whose brilliant reconstructions and horrific cruelties may have sprung from the same well of intense, frustrated ambition. The value of this framework extends beyond Safavid studies, suggesting that the frustration-aggression dynamic is a valuable lens for analyzing the exercise of power in any pre-modern, personality-driven state. Future research could apply this model to other monarchs (e.g., Ivan the Terrible, Louis XI) or explore the role of collective frustration in precipitating state-level aggression in different historical contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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