

PERSIANS AND SHI'ITES IN THAILAND: FROM THE AYUTTHAYA PERIOD TO THE PRESENT



Persians or Indo-Persians on a mural inside Wat Ko Kaeo Suttharam, Phetchaburi, Thailand (1734). Photo credit: Author

Christoph Marcinkowski



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Persians and Shi'ites in Thailand: From the Ayutthaya Period to the Present

Christoph Marcinkowski¹

INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist kingdom of Siam—present-day Thailand—can look back to several hundreds of years of contacts with the Middle East. Iran features most prominently in this regard. Iran's cultural and trade relations with Southeast Asia date back far into the pre-Islamic period. Although contacts during the Sasanid and the early Islamic periods have been documented (see Colless 1969, 1969–79; Tibbetts 1955, 1957, 1981), official diplomatic relations between the two regions, exemplified by the exchange of non-permanent missions rather than by permanent extraterritorial embassies, become traceable only during the Safavid period (1501–1722).

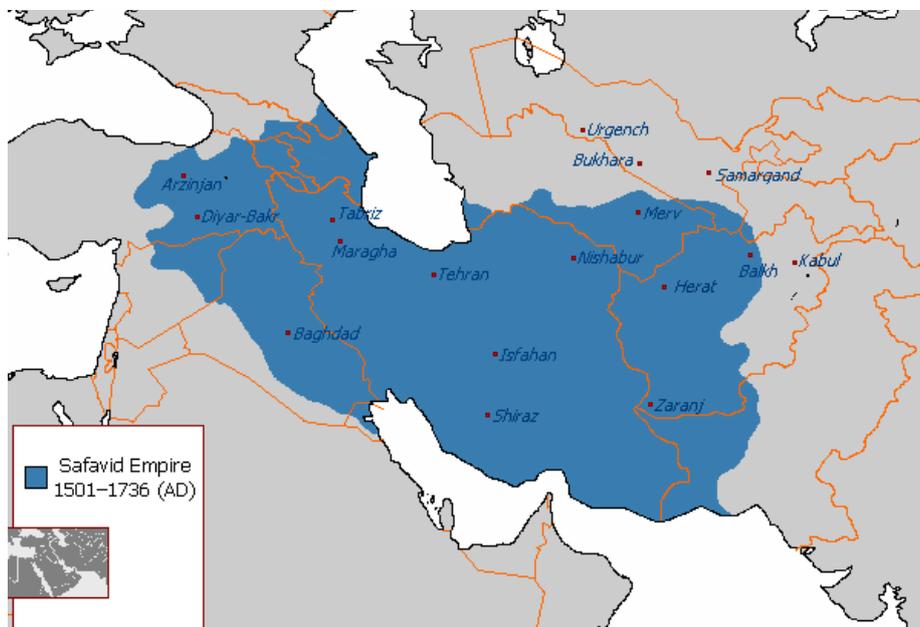


Fig. 1: Safavid Iran. Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Safavid_Empire_1501_1722_AD.png

¹ This article expands on a public lecture which was presented by the author on 20 March 2012 at the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, ISEAS. I would like to thank Dr. Geoff Wade and the NSC team for their kindness and hospitality.

Contacts between Persians (whether via the Indian subcontinent or from Iran proper) and the Thai people became possible only after the latter's gradual settlement and domination of the central plains of present-day Thailand. This process of migration culminated in the foundation of Ayutthaya in 1351 by King U Thong (r. 1351–69, under the throne name Ramathibodi) as the capital of a Thai kingdom which became known as Siam.



Fig. 2: Siam during the Ayutthaya period.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map-of-southeast-asia_1400_CE.png

Ayutthaya is situated about 80 km to the north of modern Bangkok. It is strategically located on the navigable Chao Phraya river system which leads to the Gulf of Thailand and was destined to become one of the region's most important trade emporia, situated equidistant from East Asia, China and India. In the long term, however, sea-born trade was of less significance to Iran than was the traditional Silk Route. Lack of investment in ship building and the navy, provided the Europeans with the opportunity to monopolize this trading route.

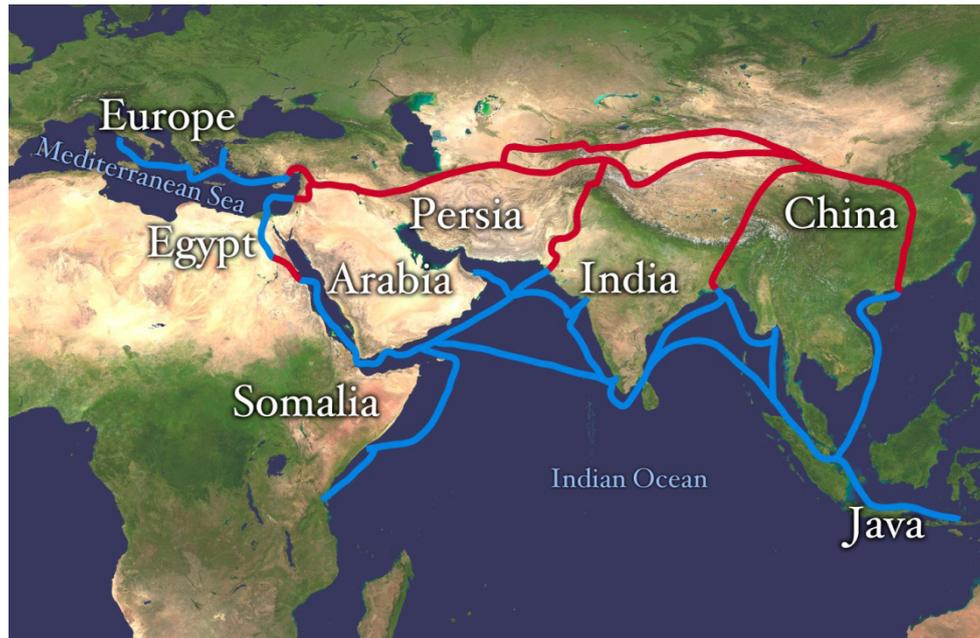


Fig. 3: Major international trade routes in the 17th century.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Silk_route.jpg

In the first half of the 15th century, the Muslim Chinese writer Ma Huan, who accompanied the famous Ming admiral Cheng Ho on some of his explorations in the Indian Ocean region, also visited Siam (*Hsien-lo*) and reported on the presence in Ayutthaya (*Yu-ti-ya*) of 'five or six hundred families of foreigners', yet without explicitly mentioning Persians among them (Ma Huan 1997:106). In 1442, Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi, in his *Matla' al-Sa'dayn*,² refers explicitly to close trade connections between the Persian Gulf emporium of Hormuz and Shahr-e Nav, a synonym for Ayutthaya. Arab sources of the 15th century, such as Ebn Majid, refer to the same *Shahr-e Nav*, calling it *Shahr Nawa*.³ I have elaborated elsewhere⁴ on the circumstance of Ayutthaya being referred to by the Persian name *Shahr-e Nav*—and its many variant spellings—among foreigners and non-Thais. Here, it can only be mentioned briefly that *Shahr-e Nav*, 'City of Boats and Canals', appears to be the correct form.⁵

THE COMING OF THE PERSIANS TO SIAM

In order to understand the background of the presence of Persians in Siam, it is important to consider the wider setting. The insubordinate status of the principality of Malacca (a vassal of Ayutthaya on the Malay Peninsula) during the 15th century, and especially its final extinction by the Portuguese in 1511, had forced its Siamese sovereigns to look for additional gateways for trade with the western Indian Ocean region. During the 1460s,

2 English translation in Browne, 1984:397–398.

3 See Tibbetts 1981, 'index of place names' and 'Arabic index'.

4 See Marcinkowski 2002e:25–29.

5 See Marcinkowski 2004a; Al-Attas 1970:3 ff.; Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail 1998:110 ff.; English tr. in Brown 1952:45 ff.; Yule and Burnell 1996:795–96, entry 'Sarnau, Sornau'.

Siam took control of Tenasserim, followed in 1480 by Mergui, thus gaining direct access to the Gulf of Bengal and Mughal India (Sunait 1999). Further west, the 16th century saw major political changes in northern India with the gradual establishment of the Mughals. Towards the beginning of the 17th century, the Mughals had gained full control over Bengal and Orissa, by which they obtained access to the Bay of Bengal.



Fig. 4: The Qotb-Shahi kingdom.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Golconda_Sultanate.jpg

A formidable power in the southern Indian region was the Deccan kingdom of the Qotb-Shahi dynasty (1512–1687) in Golconda,⁶ a successor-state of the Bahmanid kingdom (1347–1525). The Qotb-Shahi rulers were Twelver Shi'ites with political links to the Safavid shahs of Iran, whose names were even mentioned alongside the names of the Twelve Imams in the sermon during Friday prayers. Their highly Persianate kingdom was not only a major trading power but also was to become a haven for Shi'ites, in most cases Persians from Persia but also from northern India, who were at times subjected to persecution under the Sunni Mughals. In his study of the migration of Persians from Persia to India and Southeast Asia, Subrahmanyam (1992) has provided abundant evidence for their massive economic, political and literary presence in the Qotb-Shahi kingdom.

By the second half of the 16th century, intensive trade links existed between Golconda's main port Masulipatam (or Matchlibandar) and Siamese Tenasserim (Alam 1959). The Qotb-Shahi kingdom thus also served as an important gateway to Southeast Asia, and the Thai empire of Ayutthaya in particular, since merchant-ships bound for the east used its harbors as stopover ports. In spite of the existence of Bengali, Gujarati, and Hadrami trade networks in the Indian Ocean region, the role of the Persians should be seen as beyond that of pure merchants. This last aspect, i.e. the various additional educational and cultural activities of the Persians, however, still needs further investigation and clarification since similar activities are due also to the Hadramis with regard to their role in spreading Sufism in Southeast Asia. In the light of the dominating role of Persianate Muslim states on the Indian Subcontinent, however, it is not surprising that the Siamese trading emporium of Ayutthaya should have been known to the mainly Muslim merchants under a Persian name. Politically and militarily, the Qotb-Shahi kingdom was on the decline from the second half of the 17th century onwards, due particularly to Mughal pressure from the north. To the knowledge of the present writer, Indo-Persian historiographical literature (especially from the Deccan) has not yet been

6 See the relevant studies by Sherwani (1974) and Minorsky (1955).

investigated with regard to Siamese-Deccan relations from the 15th century onwards.⁷

As argued by Subrahmanyam (1992), the first Persians in the Ayutthaya kingdom might have settled in Tenasserim and Mergui. There is evidence, at least, for Persians in Siam's Burmese neighbouring state Pegu and in Malacca for the early 16th century.⁸ The presence of Persians in the Siamese capital Ayutthaya, however, seems to have remained limited in number up to the beginning of the 17th century. Several factors appear to have contributed to an emigration of Persians (mainly from southern India, but perhaps also directly from Iran) to Siam, in particular during the 17th century. These include political instability in the Deccan, the extension of international Safavid trade under Shah Abbas II (r. 1642–66) and the expansion of Siamese trade with East Asia, and in particular Japan (Nagashima 1997, Nagazumi 1999). The latter resulted in Ayutthaya becoming an important entrepôt of its own for trade with that region, and thus attracted foreign immigration. Up to the end of the 17th century, Shi'ite Persians, whether immigrants from India (in particular the Shi'ite kingdoms of the Deccan) or from Iran proper, might have even have constituted the majority of the Muslims resident at Ayutthaya. The French traveler and diplomat Guy Tachard⁹ reported *ta'zia* processions during the 1680s in that city, sponsored by the Siamese (Buddhist!) monarch.¹⁰

One obstacle to research on the Iranian community in Ayutthaya using the surviving fragments of Thai 'Royal Chronicles' is the circumstance that non-Siamese individuals, whether subjects or foreign residents and visitors, are for the most part hidden under Thai official titles and are referred to throughout as *khaek* if they are of Middle Eastern or Indian ethnic origin. In the latter case, non-Muslims are included.¹¹ Interestingly, in the 'Royal Chronicles', when referring to events from the 16th century until today, the Thai language refers to Westerners by the expression *farang*.¹² In that form, *farang* is derived from Persian, where it has the same connotation. Apparently, there exist other fragments of Thai chronicles which survived the sack of the Ayutthaya in 1767 at the hands of Burmese invaders but to which the present author has had no access. Thai historians of the 19th and early 20th centuries have based their works on them.¹³ They refer to a certain 'Shaikh Ahmad Qomi' or 'Kuni', an immigrant who is said to have arrived toward the beginning of the 17th century as a merchant 'from the West', perhaps via India. He is said to have risen to favor with King Song Tham (r. 1610/11–1628), who appointed him to the highest administrative positions and who put him in charge of Siam's entire trade with the Middle East and Muslim India (Wyatt 1999c:108). Under the Thai title *chualarajmontri*, the Muslim office of *Shaikh al-Islam*¹⁴ was introduced to Siam by Shaikh Ahmad, who was appointed to this position by the king as its first holder.¹⁵ The necessity for this action

7 For an overview of Persian literary activities in that kingdom, see the excellent, but often neglected study by Devare (1960). A reprint of this work with a foreword by the present writer is forthcoming.

8 Based on assertions by the early 16th-century travelers Ludovico de Varthema and Tome Pires; see Ferrier 1986:423.

9 See Part 2 of Tachard 1999:214–215.

10 For the text, see Marcinkowski 2002c and 2002d.

11 See Cushman 2000, Index of proper names, s.v. *khaek*.

12 See *ibid.*, s.v. *farang*.

13 See Chao Phraya Thiphakorawong Maha Kosa Thibodi 1939.

14 See Marcinkowski 2003a, 2003b.

15 For details see Marcinkowski 2002d.

might be seen in the increase of Ayutthaya's Muslim (Shi'ite?) population (Marcinkowski 2003b; Yusuf 1998). Remarkably, his Shi'ite descendants who became known as the Bun-nag family, continued to be appointed to this position up to 1945. Since that year, Sunnites had held that office. From about 1750 onwards, the majority of his descendants, however, converted to Buddhism in order to be allowed to be present at court permanently, and many of them hold influential positions in Thai public life even today.

PERSIANS AND SHI'ITES IN THE AYUTTHAYA KINGDOM

The fortunes of Ayutthaya's Iranian community rose under King Narai (r. 1656–88) who opened the kingdom further to foreign trade and who was also interested in cultural contacts. For this period, we have the late 17th-century Persian travel account *Safine-ye Solaymani* of a Safavid embassy to Siam, written by Ebn Mohammad Ebrahim (Marcinkowski 2002a). To my present knowledge, this text appears to be the only extant Persian source for the extensive Safavid contacts with the region in question. In it we read that '[s]ince Siam is close to the ports of India and is situated on the sea route to China and Japan, merchants have always been attracted to settle there'.¹⁶

Ayutthaya's becoming an emporium of international trade in Asia, the presence of numerous foreign merchants there, and political and strategic considerations might have driven the Siamese rulers—apparently on the advice of the resident Iranian community—to seek diplomatic contacts with other countries with an interest in Indian Ocean trade, perhaps also as a counterbalance to Mughal India. In 1664, for instance, the court of Golconda received a splendid Siamese embassy (Alam 1959:178). In 1669, another Siamese embassy, sent by King Narai (r. 1656–88), arrived at the court of the Safavid Shah Solayman (r. 1666–94).¹⁷ Another Siamese trade mission was in Iran in 1680/81 (Hutchinson 1990:11 n. 2, 127–128). A letter, dated 20 January 1683, by the Apostolic Vicar and titular bishop François 'of Caesaropolis', a French missionary based in Isfahan, to his sovereign Louis XIV, also refers to a Siamese embassy which was present during that year at the Safavid court (Du Mans 1890:339). Engelbert Kaempfer, too, who visited Iran prior to his sojourns in Siam and subsequently Japan, reports in July 1684 of (another?) Siamese embassy present at the shah's court at the Bagh-e Sa'dabad, referring to a 'native-born Persian' as the leader of the Siamese delegation (Kaempfer 1940:199). This individual was most probably the Hajji Salim Mazandarani referred to by Ebn Mohammad Ebrahim.¹⁸ The Iranian embassy of 1685/86 to Ayutthaya (of which Ebn Mohammad Ebrahim was a member) was thus rather a return visit, responding to the Siamese mission to Isfahan of 1684 and thus not to the earlier Siamese visit of 1669.

Ayutthaya's development as a major trading power in the second half of the 15th century resulted in an influx of foreign merchants, many of whom were to stay permanently. This necessitated the introduction of maritime laws and of clearly marked responsibilities for officials dealing with foreigners (Breazeale 1999:1–54). A similar situation prevailed with other states on the Indian Ocean rim such as Malacca on the Malay Penin-

16 Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972:94.

17 *Records of the Relations between Siam and Foreign Countries in the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 2, pp. 92–98.

18 Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972:20, 104, 105; see also Aubin 1973:121–122.

sula and Masulipatam, where officials with the Persian title *shahbandar* were to be found (Subrahmanyam 1992:345). The maritime relations of Ayutthaya were the responsibility of a minister known in Thai as *Phra Khlung*, rendered by Breazeale as 'Ministry of External Relations and Maritime Trading Affairs'. The title *Phra Khlung* became known to European traders of the time under various corrupted forms, such as 'Berklam' or 'Barcalon'¹⁹ This ministry was organized in four main departments: the 'Department of General Administration, Appeals and Records', the 'Department of Western Maritime Affairs', the 'Department of Eastern Maritime Affairs and Crown Junks', and the 'Department of Royal Warehouses.' The 'Department of Western Maritime Affairs' was concerned with the Indian Ocean trade and was called in Thai *Krom Tha Khwa* (literally: the 'Harbor Department of the Right'). At court, the official in charge of it sat to the right of the king, higher than his colleague of the 'Eastern Department' who sat to the left of the monarch and who was regarded as lower in rank. The holder of the 'Western Department' was usually a Muslim.

The Iranian Shaikh Ahmad, whom we shall consider below, was in charge of the *Krom Tha Khwa*. Apparently, the *Krom Tha Khwa* department also had various territorial responsibilities, in particular with regard to the Siamese Indian Ocean ports on the west coast of the peninsula. The power of the 'Western Department', which was larger and more complex than its 'Eastern' counterpart, declined towards the later 18th century. Leonard Andaya (1999:127) has referred to the office of *Phra Klang* as 'king's merchant' and noticed apparent similarities between the *Malek al-Tujjar* ('king of merchants') in Iran and comparable offices in the Southeast Asian trading world, such as that of *shahbandar*.

In 1610, presumably towards the beginning of the rule of the Siamese king Song Tham, a contemporary of Shah Abbas I the Great (r. 1588–1629), the *Phra Khlung* ministry is said to have been reformed with the help of two Iranian immigrants.²⁰ Apparently, the division of the ministry into a 'Right' and 'Left' department happened under their influence. Leonard Andaya (1999:125) refers to these two men (in fact Shaikh Ahmad and his brother) as originating 'from southern India', unfortunately without presenting evidence for this assertion. According to Andaya, Ahmad was to stay in Ayutthaya and to become head of the *Krom Tha Khwa*, the 'Right Department' in charge of trade with the Indonesian world and the western Indian Ocean area. His brother is said to have returned to India. Ahmad and his followers were granted a village site for their houses, a mosque and a cemetery which is still known today as Ban Khaek Kuti Chao Sen.²¹

Professor Wyatt's (1999a, 1999c:108) genealogical studies into the origins of Thai nobility provide more detailed information on the mysterious Shaikh Ahmad. According to Wyatt, Shaikh Ahmad together with his younger brother, Mohammad Sa'id, arrived at Ayutthaya in 1602 'from the Persian Gulf' (without giving evidence), where they took Thai wives. Ahmad was soon appointed 'Head of the Department of the Right.' Early under Song Tham, he was promoted to the position of *Phra Khlung*. By the end of the reign of that monarch he rose to the position of prime minister or *Samuhanaiyok*, with the rank of *Chaophraya*. About 1630, his eldest son (known under the Thai name Chün) succeeded

19 Kaempfer 1998:39; de Chaumont and de Choisy, *Aspects of the Embassy to Siam 1685*, tr. Smithies (1997:111).

20 Chao Phraya Thiphakorawong Maha Kosa Thibodi 1939:3.

21 Chao Phraya Thiphakorawong Maha Kosa Thibodi 1939:3.

him in that position, holding the official title *Chaophraya Aphairacha*, until 1670. He, in turn, was succeeded by his eldest son Sombun, the later *Chaophraya Chamnanphakdi*. Elsewhere, Wyatt (1999a:96) also supplies a genealogical table (*stemma*) of Shaikh Ahmad's descendents.

The 16th- and 17th-century trade-network of Iranian merchants virtually controlled the eastern Indian Ocean maritime trade and operated from southern India (Subrahmanyam 1992, Aubin 1973). Subrahmanyam's study contains rich material on the biographies of eminent Iranian merchants of southern India, the most successful of them being Mir Mohammad Sayyed Ardestani (1591–1663), who grew up in Isfahan and went to the Golconda kingdom during the 1620s. Contemporary Western observers, as well as Ebn Mohammad Ebrahim, state that up to the middle of the 17th century the presence of Persians in Siam, in particular at Ayutthaya, seems to have been limited in number.²² Significantly, Ebn Mohammad Ebrahim never refers to Shaikh Ahmad by name or as the alleged 'founder of the Iranian community' in Siam.

During the 1680s, the fortunes of Siam's Iranian community were checked by the rise to royal favor of another foreigner, the Greek Konstantinos Gerakis, or Constantine Phaulkon. This occurred about the time of Ebn Mohammad Ebrahim's visit to Siam. As a result of the sack of Ayutthaya by the Burmese in 1767, surviving Thai historical writing on this period is rare (Charnvit Kasetsiri 1976, Wyatt 1976). From the ancestry of the Bunnag family, on which David Wyatt has worked, we learn that Shaikh Ahámad, who is said



Fig. 5: The tomb of Shaykh Ahmad in Ayutthaya today. Photo credit: Author

to have arrived at Ayutthaya in 1602, features as the ancestor of the Bunnag family in 19th and 20th century Thai works on the genealogy of Siam's nobility. At times, he is referred to as 'Shaikh Ahmad-e Qomi', i.e. 'of Qom.' His *actual* place of origin, however, must be considered as far from being established since we also come across the expression 'from Arab lands' (Andaya 1999:125). Thus, an origin 'from Qom', such as stated on a recently erected commemoration tablet at his tomb in Ayutthaya, cannot be verified. The same must be said concerning the *nesba* 'Qomi.' King Narai himself is said to have been under Iranian cultural influence in terms of his daily food and dress and his preferred architectural styles (Subrahmanyam 1992:349). Apparently, the services and the cooperative attitude of the Iranian community towards their host-country were appreciated by Ayutthaya's rulers. According to Professor Anthony Reid, Persian Shi'ites were among Narai's closest advisers, especially as commercial counterweights to the more dangerous European companies.²³

22 Caron and Schouten, 1986:134; Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972:94.

23 See Reid 1993:190, and Dhiravat 2001:176–183.



Fig. 7: Palace gate in Lopburi, the second residence city of King Narai, featuring Persianate architectural features. Photo credit: Author



Fig. 8: Another palace gate in Lopburi. Photo credit: Author



Fig. 9: Another building inside the Lopburi palace complex. Photo credit: Author

Shaikh Ahmad and the history of the presence of Persians in Siam have been the subject of several conferences in Thailand. The first, held in 1994 at the Historical Study Centre Ayutthaya, resulted in the publication of a volume of proceedings in Thai, with selected English abstracts.²⁴ A similar meeting took place on 1 March 2003 at the Asia-Pacific Institute of Bangkok's Srinakharinwirot University under the title *Conference on the Thai-Iranian Relations: Past-Present-Future*.²⁵ Another meeting—possibly the best so far of those dealing with Thai-Iranian relations in past and present times—was the *International Conference on the Effects of Persian Sufism on Southeast Asia*, which took place in Bangkok on 7–8 February 2004 and was organized by Assumption University, a Catholic institution. This conference, too, resulted in the publication of a volume (see Yusuf 2004). I attended the last two mentioned meetings. The Cultural Center of the Iranian Embassy at Bangkok was actively involved in the organization of all three meetings.

A TINY MINORITY: SHI'ITES IN THAILAND TODAY:

It appears that the embassy described by the *Ship of Solayman*, was the last diplomatic contact between Iran and Siam until diplomatic ties between Tehran and Bangkok were resumed in the 20th century. Diplomatic relations between Siam (Thailand) and Persia (Iran) collapsed as a result of the destruction of the Ayutthaya empire (by the Burmese) in 1767 and of the Safavid empire (by the Afghans) in 1722. They were, however, resumed,

²⁴ Cultural Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran 1995.

²⁵ Apparently, a proceedings volume of this conference was published by the Cultural Centre of the Iranian Embassy; I have been unable to verify this.

this time on a permanent basis under Iran's bygone Pahlavi monarchy. Both the Thai and Iranian monarchs visited each other during the 1960s. Now there are permanent embassies in both countries; the one in Bangkok, established in 1956, is the first between Iran and any Southeast Asian country.



Fig. 10: The Dusit Sawan Hal in Lopburi, Thailand, today. Photo credit: Author



Fig. 11: Persians or Indo-Persians on a mural inside Wat Ko Kaeo Suttharam, Phetchaburi, Thailand (1734). Photo credit: Author

The *World Factbook*²⁶ for June 2006 put Thailand's population figure at 64,631,595 and the percentage of Muslims in the kingdom at a rather low 4.6%, with 94.6% Buddhists. Here is not the place to dispute these figures, although perhaps the actual Muslim percentage might be around 10%. More importantly, the Muslim community of present-day Thailand, although not ethnically homogeneous, is culturally dominated by southern Thailand's Malays, who adhere firmly to the Sunnite Shafi'ite legal school.²⁷ Their cultural and religious perspective is directed towards neighboring Malaysia and the Arab world, rather than toward Iran or India, as it was the case during the Ayutthaya period. The main and decisive historical factor behind the dominance of Sunnite Islam among the Muslims of contemporary Thailand seems to be—aside from the end of the 'Persian intermezzo' during the Ayutthaya period—the incorporation in 1902 of the four southern princely states of Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, and Satun into the administrative framework of the

26 Central Intelligence Agency, 'The World Factbook: Thailand', available online at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/th.html> (accessed on 27 June 2006).

27 See RISEAP 1996 and Farouk 1988. For general accounts of the history of Islam in Thailand, see Gilquin 2005, and Farouk 1988. Important sources in Thai language are Khatchatphai Burutsaphat 1976 (*Thai mutsalim*, 'Thai Muslims'), and Kukrit Pramoj 1970 (*Khvam pen ma khong mutsalim nai prathet thai*, 'History of the Muslims in Thailand'). For introductions to the issue of Islam in Southern Thailand, in other parts of the kingdom, and on other social issues, see Kersten 2004, Kraus 1984, Scupin 1981 and 1988, and Arong Suthasasna 1984. For an interesting introduction to traditional religious education among Southern Thai (Sunnite) Muslims, see Madmarin 2002, Che Man 1991, and Marcinkowski 2004b.



Fig. 12: Cabinet, Ayutthaya period, around 1650–1750, with Persians (or Indo-Persians) and Europeans, wood, painted, gilded. Note: Height: 164.5 cm; width: 118 cm, National Museum Bangkok. Photo credit: Author

kingdom, resulting in Islam becoming the country's largest minority religion (Yusuf 1998:284). The dominance of Sunnite Islam also resulted in the appointment, in 1945, of a Sunnite 'head of the Muslim community' (known as *chularajmontri* in Thai and *Shaykh al-Islām* in Arabic) instead of the previous Shi'ite ones. Those Shi'ite heads, as we saw earlier, had been members of the Bunnag family and as such descendants of 'Shaykh Aḥmad of Qum', the Persian immigrant scholar and merchant favored by the Ayutthaya kings.²⁸ Despite the end of 'Shi'ite dominance', Shi'ite Muslims, mostly ethnic Pathans, but also

28 On the 1997 reorganization of the office of *chularajmontri*, see also Teerapol Arunakasukorn et. al., *The Royal Act on Islamic Organization Administration* (Bangkok, 1999), Division 1, Articles 6–10, 9–12 (in Thai; unfortunately, I had no access to this work, quoted in Chaiwat Satha-Anand 2004:161, n. 44).



Fig. 13: Postal stamp (2006) issued by the Royal Thai Mail, celebrating 50 years of diplomatic relations. Source: Royal Thai Mail

new Thai and ethnic Malay converts, continue to live in the kingdom. Shi'ites are now merely an insignificant minority in metropolitan Bangkok which, perhaps, may come as a surprise to most given the great history of Shi'ism in Thailand in the Ayutthaya period. Although it is impossible to give any numbers, my informants put the number of Shi'ites in Thailand at 'about one percent of the country's Muslim population', which would mean tens of thousands of people, depending on which population figures one is basing an assessment. According to the US Department of State, Thailand's

[...] Religious Affairs Department (RAD) reports that there are 3,479 registered mosques in 64 provinces, with the largest number in Pattani Province. The majority of these mosques are associated with the Sunni branch of Islam. The remainders, estimated by the RAD to be from 1 to 2 percent of the total, are associated with the Shi'a branch of Islam.²⁹

At any rate, Shi'ite life in contemporary Thailand seems to be dominated entirely by the Iranian embassy in Bangkok and its Cultural Centre, in spite of the presence of the rather quietist 'As-Sayyid Al-Khoei (Al-Sayyid al-Khū'i) Centre' in the same city. I have tried to find out more about this institution but I have been told that it is no longer active. Aya-tollah Sayyid Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Khū'i (1899–1992) was perhaps one of the most respected Najaf-based Shi'ite quietist scholars of the 20th century. He was fervently dedicated to establishing welfare, social, cultural, and educational institutions under his name for Muslims worldwide (e.g. in London, New York, Lebanon, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Thailand).

The Iranian embassy in Bangkok tries to promote a 'favorable environment' for Iran by convening conferences and publishing classical Persian literature in Thai translation, such as the poetry of Ḥāfīz, Sa'dī, Rūmī, and others. 'Shaykh Ahmad' and the history of the presence of Iranians in Siam, for instance, have been the subject of several conferences in Thailand—mostly in conjunction with several local universities. The Cultural Center of the Iranian embassy houses in its compound a 'Shaykh Ahmad Qumi Library'

29 United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 'International Religious Freedom Report 2005: Thailand', available online at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51531.htm> (accessed on 5 July 2006).

that mainly hosts religious books and publications on Iran and its history and culture. As mentioned earlier, the Cultural Centre was always actively involved in the organization of conferences; the Iranian embassy also organized a *Conference on Shaykh Ahmad Ghomi*, which took place in Bangkok from 23 to 24 November 2005. It was mainly thought of as an official commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Iran and the Kingdom of Thailand in 1955. As stated earlier, it appears that the Iranian mission described by the 17th-century travel account *Ship of Sulaymān* was the last diplomatic contact between Iran and Siam until diplomatic ties between Tehran and Bangkok were resumed in the 20th century. It is worth noting that Thailand was apparently the first Southeast Asian country with which Iran established permanent diplomatic relations during the Pahlavi period.³⁰

Most of the members of the Thai staff working at the Iranian embassy appear to be converts, some of them ethnically Malay, some of them ethnically Thai. Since the early 1980's, Thailand features a steadily increasing number of converts to Shi'ism, mostly from Sunni Islam, and many of them rather fervent supporters of the current regime in Tehran. Moreover, most of them are former seminarians of the Twelver Shi'ite study centers in Iran, such as Qom. Most of them appear to be rather unconditional adherents of Iran and its current political system.³¹



Fig. 14: During the visit of Shaykh Ghulam Ali Abazar (right) to Iran.
Source: <http://bahrololom.com/eng/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/82.jpg>

Shaykh Ghulam Ali Abazar (which appears to be his name as a Shi'ite convert; his original name is unknown to the author), for instance, is running a study center and a training seminary for talented Thai students in Bangkok, which has also a mosque, 'Al-Huda' ('Guidance'), whose name is planned to be changed to 'Al-Mahdi' in the near future. He is said to be the representative of about twenty Thai Muslim organizations. One of his latest

30 For a brief account of Thai-Iranian relations, see Marcinkowski 2002b.

31 Because of this, they often find themselves in isolation vis-à-vis their Sunnite compatriots and have almost nothing in common with the southerners and their struggle for more autonomy.

trips to Iran was even sponsored by the 'Vali-e Asr World Center', a particularly hard-line Mahdist organization in the Islamic republic. As per the agreement concluded between Abazar and this organization, the 42nd branch of it would be established in Thailand.³²

The delegates visited the offices of the grand ayatollahs and had meetings with them. It is worth mentioning that during their trip to the Middle East the Thai delegates also visited Iraq's holy cities of Karbala' and Najaf. During that part of their journey they met the leading Shi'ite religious authorities in Najaf including, Ayatollahs Sistani, Bashir-Najafi, Ishaq Fayaz and Muhammad Ali Sabzavari.



Fig. 15: A visit by a delegation led by Thai Shi'ite leader Hujjat al-Islam Shaykh Ghulam Ali Abazar (right) in Iran.

Source: <http://bahrololom.com/eng/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/42.jpg>

In terms of security concerns on the part of the Thai government, it might be stated that so far Shi'ites have not been singled out as distinct from their Sunnite brethren, as the Muslims in the kingdom are generally seen as part of the 'southern problem', i.e., ethnic Malay separatism. This might change in case of an escalation of the Iranian nuclear issue—which involves the United States, Thailand's closest ally. In that scenario, we might see a repetition of the events of the 1980s, which saw Shi'ites worldwide portrayed as potential security risks and 'walking time bombs'. This, by the way, might not only be the case with regard to Thailand. On the other hand, for the future, I cannot foresee any changes with regard to the reliance of Thailand's Shi'ites on Iran, as the funding for Shi'ite cultural and religious activities seems to depend almost entirely on that country.

Unfortunately, in February 2012, Thailand unexpectedly became the stage of the current conflict between the regime in Tehran and Israel over the nuclear issue. On 14 February, a series of explosions in Bangkok injured five people. Thai authorities said that the bombings were a botched attempt by Iranian nationals to assassinate Israeli diplomats. Several Iranians were arrested and charged for the attacks.

³² 'Thai Shiites' Prominent Personality Visits I.R. Iran', available online at <http://bahrololom.com/eng/thai-shiites-prominent-personality-visits-i-r-iran/#more-72> (accessed on 23 January 2014).



Fig. 16: Thai bomb squad officials inspect the site of an explosion in Bangkok on 14 February 2012. Source AFP/FILE, via The Express Tribune (accessed on 23 January 2014) <http://tribune.com.pk/story/336808/israel-says-bangkok-bombers-linked-to-new-delhi-georgia-attackers/>



Fig. 17: Thai police escort Iranian suspect Mohammad Khazaei at the Immigration Bureau in Bangkok on 16 February 2012. Source: Reuters, via Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (accessed on 23 January 2014) http://www.rferl.org/content/thai_police_seek_two_more_suspects_in_iranian_bombing_case/24487129.html

In closing, it remains to be mentioned that, in recent years, Thailand has also become a popular destination for Iranian medical tourists (Pratruangkrai 2007). However, due to numerous incidents of drug smuggling, Iranians coming to Thailand fall under heavy suspicion from police. According to the Narcotics Suppression Bureau (NSB), most drug smugglers arrested at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi international airport are from Iran and Iranian nationals travelling to Bangkok appear at the top of drug police watch lists as potential trafficking risks (DuPee and Wahee 2011).

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