The history of the Middle East in the early modern period was profoundly shaped by interstate conflicts, overlapping claims over border regions, religious tensions (Sunni-Shi’i), and warfare between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires. Except for few notable studies, the historians of the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran have not paid adequate attention to the impact of imperial rivalries on the borderland regions of Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and eastern Anatolia that lasted for several hundred years. The rise of the Shi’i Safavid state in the sixteenth century polarized the political and religious affinities of many communities who inhabited the frontiers of the two empires. The Ottoman state consolidated its hold over eastern Anatolia only in the sixteenth century after several major campaigns against Iran in 1514, 1535, and 1545. The Safavid threat persisted in the form of religious support to the Qizilbash and the Celali rebels as well as Ottoman princes who vied for succession to the throne. The Ottomans in turn lent support to the Sunni elites and tribal leaders who were alienated by Safavid extremist Shi’i policies against the Sunnis and the Christians in the Caucasus.

Borders in the early modern period remained porous and the identities of its inhabitants were flexible and hybrid. Regional leaders negotiated a more or less autonomous status with both states but had to take sides as the state of affairs became tense and led to warfare between the two states. This chapter will examine the impact of Ottoman and Safavid centralizing policies on their frontier regions and the tactics of local communities in maintaining their autonomy based on Safavid and Ottoman chronicles as well as Ottoman archival sources. Ottoman and Safavid dynastic politics sometimes had major implications for the border provinces.
since princes often served as governors in these regions. Their rebellion as governors of border provinces was often a response to local struggle for autonomy as well as a claim of succession to the throne. Both states exchanged gifts at times of peace negotiation but imprisoned and killed envoys when the situation became tense and war was imminent.

**A Safavid Prince in Istanbul**

The history of Ottoman-Safavid relations contains many examples of the shifting political loyalties of high-ranking officials turned renegade, rebellious princes, Kurdish local notables, and tribal leaders. Dynastic rivalry, tribal quest for autonomy, occupation, opportunism, and political maneuvering by central states were largely responsible for the constant shift in the political alliances and cross-border activities in the eastern frontier of the Ottoman Empire. The expansionist ambitions of both states posed a direct threat to semiautonomous frontier regions of eastern Anatolia, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, and Shirvan in the sixteenth century.

Highly organized and equipped with gunpowder technology, the Ottoman army defeated the local tribal infantry and incorporated these regions one after another during the sixteenth century. Faced with a formidable and expansionist enemy in the West, the Safavid state formed its own central and professionally trained army recruited from Christian converts who were equipped with firearms purchased from Venice, Russia, and England. But tribal infantry remained the largest part of the Safavid army while the Ottoman Empire relied on the janissaries as well as the cavalry. Under the increasing power of the two imperial war machines, the local communities had no choice but to side with either one of these two states depending on political expediency their own standing.

While official histories tend to downplay the real causes of political betrayal and defection by these individuals and groups, Ottoman archival sources offer insightful glimpses into the backgrounds of many former Safavid officials, princes, and notables who ended up in the Ottoman Empire as refugees and defectors throughout the early modern period.

Both states followed an active policy of appeasement granting official titles and positions to regional tribal leaders and power holders. The Safavids tended to grant more administrative autonomy to frontier areas, but at times they too broke up and dispersed the rebellious Qizilbash and Kurdish tribes. Moreover, the Safavids used religious propaganda in Eastern Anatolia to gain an edge in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire, sometimes alienating the Sunni groups who lived in these regions. When the Safavid threat became too unbearable, military confrontation became inevitable.

The subsequent Ottoman-Iranian wars of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries brought about economic devastation to the occupied territories and caused social dislocation for the inhabitants. Furthermore, they led to continued defection among the local notables and former officials. The religious policies of Shah Isma‘il alienated the former members of the Sunni ruling class and religious establishment particularly in western Iran and the Caucasus. The official Safavid histories did not record the coercive policies of Shah Isma‘il and the extent of resistance to his rule in Shirvan, Ganja, and Azerbaijan. The official Ottoman accounts, on the other hand,