

# CONFERENCE PAPER

## Migration of Diseases in Iranian and Ottoman Border Cities during the Qajar Era

S95



### Abstract

The expansion of trade and cultural relations and the existence of pilgrimage sites were among the reasons for the contacts between Iran and the Ottomans in the Qajar era. The geographical location of the Ottomans to reach Europe strengthened the relations between the two countries. This descriptive-historical study aims to analyze the causes of the migration of diseases along the borders of Iran and the Ottomans in the Qajar era. The findings show that the expansion of economic-trade relations, cultural exchanges, tourist and pilgrimage trips, and the transportation of corpses in the border cities of Iran and the Ottomans were the reasons for the migration of diseases in these regions. The lack of preparedness of governments to deal with the spread of diseases led to financial and human losses. Sanitary fences and the implementation of preventive rules by the two countries were among the methods of dealing with epidemics.

**Key words:** History of Medicine, Infectious Diseases, Ottoman, Qajar, Quarantine

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## **Introduction**

Iranian-Ottoman relations during the Qajar era were accompanied by numerous fluctuations. The long neighborhood of these two states also resulted in political relations, cultural contacts, trade exchanges, the influence of intellectual movements, and so on. This is evident in the familiarity of Ottoman statesmen and intellectuals with Persian, the residence of Iranians in Istanbul, and the presence of the Iranian merchant class in Ottoman cities (Raeisnia, 2006).

## **Method**

This library study employed a descriptive-historical approach and reviewed existing sources and documents, to examine the causes of disease migration across the Iranian and Ottoman borders during the Qajar era.

## **Results**

### **Background of Epidemics in the Qajar Era**

During the Qajar period, particularly during the reign of Nasser al-Din Shah (1848-1896 AD), some epidemics swept through different regions of Iran, resulting in significant financial and human losses for the population. According to the report of the British Consul in Tabriz, there were cholera outbreaks in the years 1835, 1846, 1856, 1866, and 1872 AD, with nine cases of cholera outbreaks reported in different cities of Iran. According to this report, more than a third of the Iranian population was infected with cholera, resulting in the death of half of those infected. The spread of the disease in border cities was more important because, in some cases, it also affected neighboring countries and required the assistance of governments (Zahid, and Mousavi, 2011).

### **Factors affecting the migration of diseases**

#### **1- Economic-commercial relations**

In addition to its commercial and financial aspects, economic relations between different nations also played a role in the emergence of epidemics and the spread of deadly diseases across borders. Many epidemics, such as plague, entered Iran from neighboring countries, and one of the causes of the entry of diseases was economic transactions and the movement of merchants (Raeisnia, 2006).

#### **2- Pilgrimages**

Pilgrims to religious cities also played a role in the transmission of epidemics from overseas into the country. Cholera broke out in Mecca in 1864 with the arrival of pilgrims to the Ottoman lands in that area and migrated to Iran via Baghdad. The death toll from this epidemic in Istanbul has been recorded at 35,000 within seventy days. The government ordered a ban on pilgrimages to the shrines due to the outbreak of plague in Iraq and the need to establish quarantines at border points (Abbasi, and Badiei, 1994).

#### **3- Transport of bodies**

Transportation of bodies to the holy places in Iraq, given the weather conditions, was one of the causes of the transmission of diseases. (Figure 1) Sometimes, these transportations caused conflicts and disputes with border officials, and they prevented the transport



of the dead. One of these cases occurred in 1869 AD, due to the severity of the cholera disease; border officials from the Ottoman government prevented the transport of bodies to Baghdad (Abbasi, and Badiei, 1994). In 1865, European governments strongly protested against the operations of the Iranian government during the outbreak of cholera. The Paris newspapers reported: “*The main factor in the spread of cholera and the stench of the air is the transport of bodies from Iran to holy shrines*” (Brugsch, 1988).



*Figure 1. Image of the transfer of bodies to pilgrimage sites in Iraq during the Qajar era*

### **Preventive actions of governments**

#### **1- Generation of the Health Council**

Due to the high prevalence of cholera in the country, the Iranian government formed the Health Council in 1867, headed by Dr. Tholozan (1820-1897 AD) and several court physicians. The rules of the council were written by Dr. Tholozan, and these rules aimed to preserve the health of the Iranian people and protect the entire country from the epidemic. In the report attached to the council, the main cause of the spread of cholera was identified as the passage of travelers, caravans, and pilgrims (Raeisnia, 2006).

#### **2- Health and medical cooperation**

Following the spread of the disease, a letter was written stating the cooperation of the health authorities of Iran, the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and India to control the Persian Gulf. The subsequent action taken by the Iranian government involved establishing a center to prevent the entry of infected people via the Baghdad road to Tehran.

#### **3- Quarantine**

The need to establish a Sanitary Fence (quarantine) in border areas required the cooperation and assistance of both the Iranian and Ottoman governments. In 1860 AD, Fuat Pasha (1814-1869 AD), the observer of the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expressed concerns regarding the insufficient facilities for travelers in a letter to the Iranian ambassador in Istanbul. He requested the presence of doctors from both Iran and Ottoman governments to provide adequate facilities and hospitals at the borders, and to establish quarantine at their discretion (Abbasi, and Badiei, 1994). However, some courtiers of the Iranian Shah objected to this proposal. The Ottoman government wrote



a reasonable response to these complaints: “*The quarantine has been imposed to protect public health, and since it is mandatory for citizens of other states, Iranians should also comply*” (Flore, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

The development of economic and cultural relations, pilgrimages and tourism, as well as the transfer of corpses to religious places under Ottoman rule, were reasons for the migration of infectious diseases in border areas. The lack of preparedness of governments to deal with the spread of diseases, along with political disputes and conflicts, led to numerous financial and human losses. The establishment of a sanitary fence (quarantine), health cooperation, and the adoption of preventive laws by both Iranians and the Ottomans were among the methods of dealing with epidemics.

### **Authors' Contribution**

Mohammad Hashemimehr contributed significantly to the conceptualization and design of the article. He conducted an extensive literature review and drafted the initial manuscript. He also revised the manuscript for intellectual content. Mahboobeh Farkhondehzadeh played a role in data collection, organization, and analysis of the reviewed literature. Masoumeh Dehghan contributed to the synthesis and interpretation of the data and provided valuable feedback to enhance the quality of the work. All authors read and approved the final version of the work.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

None.

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