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From Yerevan to New Julfa of Isfahan: Armenian Commercial Networks under the Safavid Empire

New Julfa is located on the southern bank of Zayanderud River, in Isfahan, where many Armenians were forced to immigrate from the Caucasus, especially from the town of Julfa (Jugha) on the banks of Aras River. It occurred by the order of Shah ‘Abbas (1587-1629) at the beginning of the seventeenth century when he draw his army to regain the region from the Ottomans.

In Safavid Iran, Armenian merchants, especially those from New Julfa of Isfahan had an important role of raw silk export trades to Europe. The high point of these Armenian cross-cultural ties came in the seventeenth century, when Shah Abbas I gave the Armenian merchants of New Julfa a monopoly over the Persian raw silk export trade. Shah Abbas’s granting of trade privileges enabled Armenians to dominate the trade throughout the seventeenth century, and by mid-century they controlled seventy per cent of the raw silk trade.

In the Armenian quarter of New Julfa, there were two districts called “old colony” and “new colony” during the Safavid era. The Old Colony was mainly inhabited by Armenians emigrated from Old Julfa during the campaign of Shah ‘Abbas in the early seventeenth century, while in the New Colony Armenians were forced to move from Tabriz and Erevan and to settle there in mid-seventeenth century. The latter was called Yerevanchi and Tabrizi.

As far as the Armenians of New Julfa engaged in silk trade, they passed through Azerbaijan Province to Armenia. They never

failed to visit northern Iran and Caucasus until the end of the seventeenth century.

Aside from Julfan merchants, Armenians of the Armenian Highland also were widely active in international trades. An Armenian merchant named Zakaria b. Aghamir from Agulis, a village in Nakhchevan, left his unique diary on his commercial journeys to Europe and Iran. He travelled not only to Erevan, Tabriz, Isfahan, but also to Erzurum, Tokat, Istanbul and Amsterdam throughout the latter half of the seventeenth century. In this paper I will trace his lifelong journeys based on his diary to shed light on the activities of Non-Julfan Armenian merchants in the Safavid era.