

# FACTORS LEADING TO THE FALL OF THE SASANIAN ARMY

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**A**mong the various reasons often cited for the downfall of the Sasanian empire is the military weakness of the *Spah* (*Sepah* in Persian), the Sasanian military machine Kaveh Farrokh enumerates these weaknesses in his voluminous publication, *The Armies of Ancient Persia: The Sassanians*, Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Military, England, 2017, (pp. 297-314). He agrees with Porshariate's theses (noted already) that the inherent and ongoing conflict between the Parthian and Sasanian elites weakened the *Spah* on the eve of the Arab invasion and surprisingly "many of the (Parthian), Dehkans chose not to battle the Arabs as they entered Iran and even joined the banner of Islam." (p. 298), for which however he does not furnish evidence. When Prince Hormuzd, the brother of King Shapur II defected with his *Spah* units to the Roman's after failing in his bid to oust Shapur II and becoming king, it enabled the Romans to learn to develop their own Persian type cavalry which was far superior to theirs in the battlefield. The *Spah* tended at first to flee if their leader was killed in the battle or chose to flee, which only helped the enemy. Lack of a charismatic warrior king led to the defeat of the *Spah* by Arabs. "Khosraw II made very little military impression during the campaign with respect to planning, strategy or personal combat" (p. 299) and Kaveh Farrokh provides many instances to confirm it. Lack of high quality professional *Spah* officials and armored cavalry seem to have been a problem from the Parthian times onward, despite King Ardeshir's efforts to solve it, but the problem laid in the structure of the Iranian society which had a limited number of upper noble clans.

The *Spah* was organized to defend the four corners of Iran as a defense against invaders but it does not seem to have been designed to be offensive enough to conquer a vast territory. "Frye has noted that when the Arabo-Islamic forces broke through, there were no fresh garrisons in Iran's interior to repel the invaders. When Khosraw II and later Heraclius launched war on all the fronts, the weakness of the *Spah* system was exposed.

Naxarars, the Armenian knights, abandoning the Sasanians in 618 C.E. and switching their allegiance to the Khazar Turks and ultimately to the Romans was a great blow to the Sasanians. Moreover, the morale of the *Spah* was seriously affected by the Khosrow Heraclius wars and

the consequent loss of skilled warriors which would take time to replace them and yet the new recruits would not have the benefit of having seasoned warriors train them in the art of wars. Finally, “Khosrow II committed a major blunder by removing the Lakhmid King Numan III in 602 CE.” and by alienating many Arabs, notably the Bani Sheiban, who ultimately fought against the Sasanian armies and emerged victorious in the battle of DhuQarin in 610A.D., but the Sasanians were then too busy fighting the Byzantines to address the reasons for their defeat and, much less, to do anything to prevent such a failure in future. Khosrow II himself contributed in many ways to weaken both the *Spah* and Iran and make it very vulnerable to Arab invasion. While all these contributing factors may not have equal valance, in the end they jointly contributed to the downfall of the Sasanians. Yet, I wonder if the Arabs had been successful in conquering Iran had the Sasanian capital been far away in the mountainous regions with severe winters, as argued by Patricia Crone, already noted, and not in such a proximity of Arabia.

Another factor that helped Arabs to ultimately succeed in conquering Iran was their continuous surprise raids on the nearby themselves against the relentless raiders from Arabia. This was a very unusual, tortuous method of ultimately demoralizing a stable population by a small band of raiders and looters which did not allow their victims to even realize what their real intentions were - to ultimately conquer, loot and enslave them. Moreover, as Kaaveh Farrokh observes: “It was this very same small-scale raids that provided the initial basis of Arab military experience. The Arabs soon refined their tactics by factoring in routes and locales most convenient” for their surprise raids. (p. 316). Thus, it was these unrelenting surprise raids that paved the way by weakening the Iranian borders for the ultimate conquest of Iran.