In 1608, a rather unusual petition reached the Venetian Senate: Teodoro Dandolo, born under the Safavids in the Uzbek city of Bukhara, asked to be appointed interpreter of Persian, Turkish, Arabic, and ‘Indian’. About eight years prior, around 1600, Dandolo had migrated from Bukhara to Aleppo, where he had met Vicenzo Dandolo, the Venetian consul there (1598–1602). At the consul’s behest, he traveled to Venice and was baptized. Shortly after, the new convert relocated again, this time to Rome, where he spent the next four years in the household of Cardinal San Giorgio, Cinzio Aldobrandini (1551–1610). Now, upon returning to Venice, he sought employment as a Public Dragoman (official interpreter for Ottoman merchants and dignitaries in Venice), so that he could support himself. The members of the Venetian Board of Trade, to whom the case was referred for consultation, were divided. Two of them doubted Dandolo’s skills as a translator and writer in Italian. But given his precociousness (‘essendo lui de spirito vivo, et de ingegno pronto’), they recommended that he be placed under the tutelage of the acting Public Dragoman for training. A third member of the Board was far less enthusiastic about employing Dandolo in the delicate position of dragoman:

Having been born a Muslim, even though he has become a Christian, he could always have some greater inclination towards his nation, and since he is not Your [i.e. Venetian] subject, and has lived for many years

* This chapter elaborates on an earlier and slightly different version of the text, to be published in Rothman E. N., Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul (Ithaca: 2011).

1 Aldobrandini was the nephew of Pope Clement VIII, a Spanish sympathizer and an influential courtier in Rome. See Rota G., “Religious Conversion and Professional Rivalry in Venice: Two cases from the 17th Century” [unpublished] and passim for this and other details of Teodoro Dandolo’s biography. I thank Giorgio Rota for sharing with me this unpublished paper and much information about Dandolo.

2 Archivio di Stato di Venezia (henceforth: ASVe), Cinque Savii, Risposte, box 142, fols. 83v–84v (June 23, 1608 & Aug. 18, 1608).
in the house of the Illustrious Signor Cardinal San Giorgio, it could be feared that he might continue to serve, and have affection for him, and from what can be understood from the outside he is not very constant in his actions.³

Although the Board continuously struggled to find qualified dragomans, it could not agree on Dandolo’s merit. While some of its members challenged the applicant’s competence, others questioned his trustworthiness. Neither his conversion nor his linguistic promise sufficed to assuage fears over his Muslim birth in a faraway country, foreign juridical status, and Papal patron. Like many converts, Dandolo was embedded in extra-Venetian networks of patronage that were essential for his new social persona, but that also cast a perennial doubt about his loyalty. Four months after its initial report, the Board of Trade’s composition changed, and the new members decided to appoint Dandolo as interpreter, citing the frequent absence from the city of acting Public Dragoman Giacomo de Nores, and a successful occasion on which Dandolo assisted the Board to communicate with a group of Armenian merchants. Dandolo’s appointment, however, does not appear to have ever materialized. His name does not show up again in the archives until 1615, when the Board of Trade approved his request to become commercial broker ‘of Turks and Levantines’ and provided him with a booklet in which to keep record of all his transactions with ‘the Turkish, Greek, and Jewish nations, and other Levantine merchants’. The brevity of the Board’s response on that date, which repeated almost verbatim its 1608 reply, suggests that Dandolo had not been in its service in the intervening period.⁴

While Dandolo’s case may seem exceptionally complicated, it reflects broader uncertainty about the juridico-political entailments of Muslim-Christian conversion in early modern Venice. As I argue, the systemic distrust of Muslim converts to Christianity stemmed, in part

⁴ ASVe, Cinque Savii, Risposte, box 142, fols. 95r–v (Dec. 6, 1608) and box 144, fols. 31r–v (Feb. 14, 1614 m.v.); Ufficio della Bolla Ducale, Grazie del Maggior Consiglio, reg. 8, fol. 76 (Sept. 23, 1615); Cinque Savii, Seconda serie, box 4, file 47, unpaginated (Sept. 28, 1615).