

Relations Between the Bukhara Emirate and The Qajar Dynasty in The Late 18th – Early 19th Century

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Abstract: The article examines the diplomatic, political, and military relations between the Bukhara Emirate and Qajar Iran during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a period marked by significant regional transformation in Central Asia and the Iranian plateau. Following the decline of the Afsharid and Zand dynasties, the emergence of the Qajar state under Agha Muhammad Khan and later Fath Ali Shah created new geopolitical realities that directly influenced Bukhara's foreign policy. The study explores the competition between the two Muslim monarchies over strategic territories such as Marv, Balkh, and Herat, which served as vital buffer zones between Central Asia and Persia. These frontier regions became arenas of recurrent military campaigns, local uprisings, and shifting alliances involving Afghan tribes and Turkmen clans.

The article highlights how religious legitimacy and claims to leadership of the Islamic world were also used as instruments of statecraft. Both Bukhara emirs and Qajar shahs sought to portray themselves as defenders of Sunni and Shia orthodoxy respectively, thereby extending political conflicts into the ideological sphere. The mutual suspicion between the Sunni Uzbeks of Bukhara and the Shia Persians under the Qajars deepened political fragmentation and hampered efforts toward stable cooperation. Nevertheless, the study also notes periods of pragmatic diplomacy, including exchanges of envoys, trade agreements, and negotiations over prisoners and caravan safety, which indicate the existence of limited but persistent dialogue between the courts of Bukhara and Tehran.

Through analysis of archival Persian and Central Asian chronicles, as well as European travel accounts, the research reconstructs the shifting balance of power in the borderlands of Khurasan. It reveals how the struggle for control of Herat and Marv not only shaped Bukhara–Iran relations but also drew in external actors such as the Afghans and, later, the Russians and British, whose expanding imperial ambitions further complicated the regional equilibrium. By situating these dynamics within the broader context of 18th–19th century Eurasian geopolitics, the article demonstrates that Bukhara's relations with Qajar Iran were part of a larger process of political realignment, ideological contestation, and territorial reconfiguration that defined the precolonial history of Central Asia.

Keywords: Bukhara Emirate, Kajars, Agha Muhammad, Fathalishah, Iran, Afghans, Bukhara, Marv, Balkh, Herat, Mashhad.

Introduction: Agha Mohammad, a member of the Qajar dynasty of Iran, had declared Tehran his capital as early as 1785. Tehran was located in northern Iran, close to the Astrabad region, where the Qajar tribe lived. He relied on his tribe in his struggle for power.[1]

On March 20, 1796, after the coronation ceremony, Agha Muhammad Qajar began his march to Mashhad[2].

In 1796, he marched into Khorasan and captured

Mashhad on May 14, 1796.[1 9] The main goal of capturing Mashhad was to seize the wealth left by Nadir Shah and subjugate Khorasan.[3]

After defeating the remaining representatives of the Zend dynasty and establishing his rule, Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar began planning to restore the borders of Iran. He intended to return the borders of Iran to the era of Nader Shah and the Safavid kings, and for this purpose he marched into Georgia and captured

Mashhad. At that time, the three ancient cities of the Khorasan province - Balkh, Herat and Merv - were under the control of the rulers of Afghanistan and Bukhara [4]. Having seized power within the country, he immediately took the necessary measures to regain the lost territories of Iran. Thus, he wrote letters to the ruler of Afghanistan and his brother, the ruler of Herat, Mahmud Mirza, reminding them that the two cities - Balkh and Herat - were historical lands of the Iranians. [5]

In his foreign policy, Agha Muhammad did not forget the Iranians' dominance over Marv, because this city was now in the hands of Shahmurad, the emir of Bukhara, so he tried to return it.

Most of Shah Rukh's sixteen sons fled to Herat, to Mahmud Mirza. He sent Afshar princes Nadir Mirza, Abbas Mirza, Kahramon Mirza, Reza Quli Mirza and others to Kabul to meet Zaman Shah, the ruler of Afghanistan. Zaman Shah sent Nadir Mirza to Peshawar, who raised an army of 100,000 men and announced that he would march into Iran to punish Agha Muhammad Qajar for capturing Khurasan and expelling Shahrukh and his family.[6]

Shahrukh's two sons, Imam Quli Mirza and Haidar Mirza, with a small number of supporters and servants, set out from Herat via Merv to Bukhara with a letter from Nadir Mirza (Shahrukh's eldest son), in which the prince reminded them of the family ties of the Afshars with the Bukhara rulers and of Nadir and the Afshars' support for Sunni Islam in Iran. He asked for military assistance to drive Agha Muhammad Qajar out of Khorasan, in return for which he promised to mint coins in the name of the Bukhara emir and deliver sermons in his name, as well as to obey him[7] and to "count us among your servants" [8]. - he said.

The Emir of Bukhara did not provide any assistance to the descendants of Nadir Shah and even tried to get rid of them as soon as possible, and they were soon killed by the grandson of Elbar Khan, who had once been sentenced to death by Nadir Shah. However, Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar had other reasons for starting a war with the Bukhara Emir Shah Murad. The attack of the Bukhara Emir on Merv (1794), the transfer of its population to the Emirate of Bukhara, the forced conversion of Shiites to Sunni Islam, and the appointment of rulers from Bukhara to Merv were viewed by Agha Muhammad Khan as an encroachment on "legitimate Iranian lands". The fact that Merv had been ruled by Qajar khans since the Safavid era was also cited as a reason[9].

In a letter written to Amir Shahmurad Biy, Agha Muhammad Khan accused Bayram Ali Khan of killing Qajar, the ruler of Marv [10].

In addition, in 1795, the Bukharans invaded not only the oasis of Marv, but also the cities of Khurasan, destroying two of them and forcing the inhabitants of the other two to convert to Sunnism[11].

From Mashhad, Agha Muhammad Khan decided to march towards Bukhara. It was impossible to march across the waterless deserts with a large army. Agha Muhammad Khan appealed to Zaman Shah Durrani with a proposal to launch joint operations against the Uzbeks and allow Iranian troops to enter Balkh from this city to strike at the Khan of Bukhara. He sent Muhammad Hussein Khan Karagozli as an ambassador to Zaman Shah Durrani. The Afghans presented their troops to the ambassador, as if they were ready to go to Iran. Nevertheless, Zaman Shah preferred peace relations with Iran, given the presence of a large Iranian army in Mashhad. The Afghan ambassador, Kadu Khan Barakzai, brought news of Zaman Shah's agreement to assist the Qajars in the fight against the Emir of Bukhara[12].

However, soon Agha Muhammad Khan received news of the beginning of Russian military operations in the Caucasus and the official declaration of war by Russia against Iran. The Russian detachment led by BA Zubov captured Derbent, Baku, Shamakhi, Ganja, Talysh, and reached Mughan. The expedition was successful. It was of great importance for strengthening Russian influence in Transcaucasia. The military campaign was stopped by order of the new Russian emperor Paul II, who was more interested in joint actions with Great Britain against France in Europe than in aggravating Anglo-Russian relations due to Eastern affairs [13].

Agha Muhammad Khan immediately returned from Mashhad to Tehran, leaving Vali Khan Qajar in Khorasan, and since it was winter, he sent his troops home to rest and ordered a large army to be assembled in the spring.[14]

Bukhara-Iranian diplomatic and military-political relations became much more active at the beginning of the 19th century[15].

In June 1797, Agha Muhammad Khan was assassinated by his own servants in Shusha as a result of a conspiracy.[16] This, in turn, led to a change in the political situation in Iran and neighboring regions.[17]

Agha Muhammad Khan's nephew, Fath Ali Khan, gained the upper hand over his rivals. New Year's Day, March 21, 1798, coincided with the Eid al-Fitr holiday. On that day, Fath Ali Khan wore the crown (kalakh-i-koyani) and ascended the throne under the name Fath Ali Shah.[18]

Iran's neighboring Asian states quickly recognized the Qajars as the rulers of Iran. In Afghanistan and Central

Asia, they closely followed the rise of the Qajars in Iran and sometimes supported Iranian rivals. Some khans who were persecuted in the eastern and northeastern regions of Iran by the Qajars found refuge in the Emirate of Bukhara and Afghanistan. Iran's relations with neighboring Afghanistan played an important role in its foreign policy.[19]

When Fath Ali Shah ascended the throne, Zaman Shah, Muradbi and other eastern Iranian armies were forced to reckon with the Qajars. Because the chances of other claimants were cut short. As a result, the brothers of Timur Shah Durrani appealed to Fath Ali Shah and asked him to support Zaman Shah from the Afghan throne in overthrowing him. Fath Ali Shah welcomed the claimants to the Afghan throne, Mahmud Mirza, his son Kamran Mirza, his brother Feruz al-Din Mirza and his nephew Qasim Mirza, with great pleasure and sincerity, and helped the Afghan princes gather troops in Iran. However, the Iranian Shah could not provide more help to Mahmud Mirza. Because by this time Zaman Shah had already formed an alliance with the Emir of Bukhara, Shah Murad. While Zamanshah was exhausted from the war with the Indians, Emir Shah Murad set out for Merv with an army of 20,000 men [21].

Fath Ali Shah, considering it inexpedient to escalate the conflict, "repented and asked for peace[22]. However, Fath Ali Shah, not only on the advice of the British, but also out of fear of Zaman Shah's growing power[23], continued to support and patronize the rebellious Afghan princes in order to form an Afghan opposition in Herat that could oppose Zaman Shah in the future[24].

The Turkmen, together with Uzbek and Khiva detachments, invaded the lands of Khorasan, Astrabad, and Mazandaran, capturing not only livestock and other property, but also the population, which they later resold to the Khiva and Bukhara khanates. There were tens of thousands of Iranian prisoners in Central Asia[25].

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, Russia and England played an important role in the history of relations between Iran and Central Asia. Great Britain sought to use Iran to realize its aggressive ambitions in the East. Russia's interests in the East at that time were tied to the struggle for the development of trade markets on the eastern outskirts of the Russian Empire. Despite the British's close attention to India and its security, they, if they were right, wanted to strengthen their influence in Central Asia. To achieve their goals, they tried to use Iran's influence over the Central Asian khanates and prevent any state from passing all its forces and resources through its territory to India.

Iranian prisoners held various positions and positions in Bukhara's government systems. Some of them have held positions for a long time due to their loyal service.

Among them were Haji Amir Babakhan, Ali Sultan, Husaynkhan, Mirza Nazar, Abdulsamad, Normuhamedboy, and others. Haji Babakhan served as the chief devanbey in the cities of Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva, and Khujand for more than 40 years.[26]

It should be noted that the issue of Herat was important in the relations between Iran and Central Asian khanates.

After taking the throne, the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Shah, wanted to take Herat under his control.

The British wanted to capture Herat themselves and make it a springboard for entry into Central Asia, and from there they intended to send their spies to Bukhara and Khiva[27].

The siege of Herat in 1837-1838 was unsuccessful for Muhammad Shah and damaged his reputation. Then, to find a way out of the difficult situation, the Shah sent his representative Husayn Khan to London for negotiations. A treaty was signed and diplomatic relations were restored between them.[28]

Iran's relations with the Emirate of Bukhara were not always the same, as with the change of political situation and the change of rulers, their relations with Iran also changed. Thus, while there were close ties with the ruler of Bukhara, as well as with Kokand and Khiva, during the reign of Muhammad Shah, relations between Iran and the ruler of Bukhara were interrupted and then resumed.

During this period, Iran's relations with the Emirate of Bukhara were characterized by political changes in the structure of dynastic rule in both Iran and Bukhara. These relations were accompanied by the Ottomans' involvement in assisting the Turkestan khanates, which complicated the formation of favorable and friendly relations between Iran and them, but it should be noted that diplomatic relations played a very important role during this period.

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