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SAFAVID–KHIVA RELATIONS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR POLITICAL SUPREMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA (1620S–1630S)

This article offers an expanded and analytically grounded examination of the political, military, and diplomatic relations between the Safavid Empire and the Khiva Khanate during the 1620s–1630s, situating these interactions within the broader geopolitical struggle for supremacy in Central Asia. Following the disintegration of the Timurid Empire, the region evolved into a contested political arena in which the Shaybanid dynasty, the Ashtarkhanid dynasty, and local Khwarazmian elites competed for territorial control, tribal allegiance, and economic resources. The article argues that Safavid engagement in Central Asia was neither episodic nor reactive, but rather formed part of a long-term strategic effort to maintain a balance of power along the empire's northeastern frontier.

Particular attention is devoted to the internal political transformations within Khiva, especially the rivalry between Isfandiyar Khan and Abu'l-Ghazi Bahadur Khan. Their conflict reflected not only dynastic competition but also deeper tribal realignments among Uzbek groups and shifting patterns of legitimacy within the khanate. The Safavid court in Isfahan carefully monitored these developments, intervening selectively when such involvement could prevent the emergence of a strong and unified Uzbek bloc under Bukharan leadership.

The research further explores Abu'l-Ghazi's period of captivity at the Safavid court, interpreting it not merely as a personal episode but as a formative stage in his political development. His exposure to Safavid administrative culture, courtly protocol, and diplomatic practice influenced his later governance in Khiva. Upon his eventual return and rise to power, indirect Safavid support appears to have played a strategic role in counterbalancing Bukharan influence. In this respect, Safavid policy toward Khiva formed part of a broader effort to prevent the consolidation of hegemony by the Bukhara Khanate.

The article concludes that Safavid–Khiva relations were shaped by pragmatic diplomacy, dynastic rivalries, tribal politics, and regional balance-of-power calculations rather than by ideological confrontation alone. Safavid foreign policy in Central Asia was adaptive and strategic, aiming to preserve frontier security while exploiting internal divisions among Uzbek polities. By integrating political narrative with structural analysis of tribal dynamics and interstate competition, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of seventeenth-century Central Asian geopolitics and highlights the interconnectedness between domestic political fragmentation and transregional power politics.

Key words: Safavid Empire; Khiva Khanate; Khwarazm; Bukhara Khanate; Abu'l-Ghazi Bahadur Khan; Isfandiyar Khan; Shah Abbas I.

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СЕФЕВІДСЬКО-ХІВИНСЬКІ ВІДНОСИНИ ТА БОРОТЬБА ЗА ПОЛІТИЧНЕ ВЕРХОВЕНСТВО В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНІЙ АЗІЇ (1620–1630-ТІ РОКИ)

Ця стаття аналізує політичні та військові відносини між Сефевідська держава та Хівинське ханство у 1620–1630-х роках у ширшому контексті геополітичної боротьби за політичне верховенство в Центральній Азії. Після розпаду Держава Тимуридів регіон перетворився на арену суперництва між Держава Шейбанідів, Держава Аштарханідів та місцевими хорезмійськими династіями. Особлива увага приділяється суперництву між Ісфандіяр хан та Абул-Газі Бахадур хан, внутрішнім політичним трансформаціям у Хіві та стратегічному втручання сефевідського двору у регіональні конфлікти.

Окремий розділ присвячено так званому «Хорасанському повстанню» (1629–1630), де комплексно аналізуються його причини, етнічні виміри та військові наслідки. У статті доводиться, що вторгнення хівинських військ до Хорасану було тісно пов'язане з династичною нестабільністю в Сефевідській державі після смерті Шах Аббас I. Попри початкові успіхи нападників, військова відповідь за правління Шах Сефі I відновила центральну владу та нейтралізувала загрозу.

Дослідження також розглядає перебування Абул-Газі в сефевідському полоні, його політичне становлення та подальше сходження до влади за опосередкованої підтримки Ісфакана. Аналізується стратегічна логіка сефевідської політики у суперництві між Хівою та Бухарське ханство. Сефевідська держава послідовно прагнула запобігти консолідації бухарської гегемонії, підтримуючи хорезмійських правителів як противагу.

У підсумку стаття демонструє, що сефевідсько-хивинські відносини формувалися під впливом прагматичної дипломатії, династичних суперництв, племінної політики та міркувань регіонального балансу сил. Дослідження робить внесок у глибше розуміння зовнішньої політики Сефевідської держави в Центральній Азії та підкреслює взаємозалежність між внутрішніми племінними процесами та міждержавними відносинами.

Ключові слова: Сефевідська держава; Хивинське ханство; Хорезм; Бухарське ханство; Абул-Газі Бахадур хан; Ісфандіяр хан; Шах Аббас I.

Introduction. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, two powerful khanates existed in the territory of Central Asia. One of them was Bukhara, ruled first by the Shaybanids and, from the end of the sixteenth century onward, by the Ashtarkhanids (Janids); the other was the Khanate of Khwarazm (known from the mid-seventeenth century as Khiva). These regions had formed part of the Timurid Empire in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Following Timur's death, however, continuous internecine wars broke out among his successors. Taking advantage of this situation, the Uzbeks under the leadership of Muhammad Shaybani Khan rapidly seized Merv, Urgench, and even Astarabad—areas largely inhabited by Turkmen tribes (История Туркменской, 1957: 371). After the Battle of Merv in 1510, Shah Ismail I defeated the Shaybanids and annexed Khurasan. Subsequently, he incorporated Khwarazm into his dominions as well, dispatching his own darughahs (governors) to Urgench, Vezir, and other Turkmen cities. However, Qizilbash control over these territories proved short-lived. The Uzbek princes Ilbars and Baybars—descendants of a lineage hostile to the Shaybanids—captured the cities of Khwarazm and divided them between themselves (Абуль-Гази Бахадур хан, 1906:176–178). After the death of Ilbars Khan, a fierce struggle erupted among his heirs and relatives over control of Khwarazm.

Formation of Safavid–Khwarazm Relations in the 16th Century. During the 1530s–1550s, amid the numerous conflicts among Khwarazmian sultans over southern Turkmenistan, Din Muhammad Khan emerged as a prominent figure. In opposition to the Bukhara ruler Ubaydullah Khan, he allied with Shah Tahmasp I and, as his vassal, began to administer the entire province of Merv (Абуль-Гази Бахадур хан, 1906: 211). Din Muhammad Khan's successor, Nur Muhammad Khan, was unable to withstand the rivalry of the Bukhara ruler Abdullah Khan in 1593 and consequently lost Merv and southern Turkmenistan. Nevertheless, in 1598 he succeeded in restoring his authority with the assistance of Shah Abbas I (История Туркменской, 1957: 386). Soon thereafter, however, Shah Abbas put an end to the region's

relative autonomy and incorporated southern Turkmenistan and the province of Merv into the administrative structure of the Safavid state of Azerbaijan. As Din Muhammad Khan and his successor focused primarily on southern Turkestan, they were unable to intervene directly in the developments taking place within Khwarazm itself. From the mid-sixteenth century onward, Khwarazm and the territories extending from the Amu Darya River to the Caspian littoral were governed by the descendants of Ilbars and Baybars. Between the 1540s and 1565, the most influential representative of this lineage was Ali Sultan, who independently ruled the districts of Akhal, Urgench, Khazarasp, and Kath, while also launching several campaigns into Khurasan (Абуль-Гази Бахадур хан, 1906: 215). Haji Muhammad Khan (r. 1558–1602), who administered the province of Vezir until Ali Sultan's death, was likewise regarded as one of the prominent rulers of Khwarazm. Following Ali Sultan's death in 1565, Haji Muhammad Khan—whom Anthony Jenkinson referred to as the “king of the Turkmens”—also seized Urgench, thereby consolidating his authority in the region (История Туркменской, 1957: 393).

Thereafter, Haji Muhammad Khan's principal rival was Nur Muhammad Khan, the ruler of southern Turkmenistan. Although in 1592 Haji Muhammad succeeded in wresting the city of Nisa from Nur Muhammad, the conquest of Khwarazm by the Bukhara ruler 'Abdullah Khan II (r. 1588–1597) forced both rivals to seek refuge at the Safavid court. Haji Muhammad Khan's attempt in 1595 to recover Khwarazm ended in complete failure. Only after the deaths of 'Abdullah Khan and his son 'Abd al-Mu'min in 1598–1599 was he able to restore his authority in Khwarazm (Карпов, 1954: 216). In general, the rulers of Khwarazm pursued a pro-Safavid policy in their struggle against representatives of the Uzbek Shaybanid and Ashtarkhanid dynasties, seeking to preserve their rule with the assistance of the Safavid shahs. Haji Muhammad Khan's renewed reign in Khwarazm, however, did not last long. Following his death in 1602, his son Arab Muhammad Khan (r. 1602–1621) ascended the throne. During the reign of Arab Muhammad Khan, a fierce strug-

gle for power erupted within the Khanate of Khiva. From the early years of his rule, raiding incursions by Kalmyk tribes advancing from the direction of the Syr Darya also began to afflict Khwarazm (Каррыев, 1954: 216). Arab Muhammad Khan had seven sons: Isfandiyar, Khabash, Ilbars, Abu'l-Ghazi, Sharif Muhammad, Khwarazmshah, and Afghan (Abulqazi Bahadir Khan, 2002: 11). The principal contest for power unfolded between Abu'l-Ghazi and Isfandiyar, on the one hand, and Khabash and Ilbars, on the other. Abu'l-Ghazi and Isfandiyar were born to a wife descended from Chinggis Khan, whereas Khabash and Ilbars were sons of a woman from the Naiman tribe. According to information provided by Afghan Muhammad—one of Arab Muhammad Khan's sons who had fled to Russia—the khan displayed less favor toward Khabash and Ilbars than toward Abu'l-Ghazi and Isfandiyar, which fostered hostility in the former toward their father. He further suggested that another cause of tension between Arab Muhammad Khan and Khabash and Ilbars was their organization of raiding expeditions into Safavid territory and Bukhara without their father's consent (Абуль-Гази Бахадур хан, 1906: 216). Arab Muhammad Khan divided Urgench between his sons, granting one half to Abu'l-Ghazi and the other to Khabash, while he himself relocated to Khiva (Abulqazi Bahadir Khan, 2002: 11). Excluded from the central administration of the khanate and partially deprived of their appanages, Khabash and Ilbars opposed Arab Muhammad Khan's policy of maintaining peaceful relations with the Safavid state and the Khanate of Bukhara. It should also be noted that the struggle for power in the Khanate of Khiva was significantly influenced by relations between the Turkmen tribes of Khwarazm and the Uzbek population. During the reigns of Haji Muhammad and Arab Muhammad Khan, Turkmen notables held influential positions in Khwarazm, and it was with the support of both the Turkmens and the Safavid shahs that these rulers had restored and maintained their authority. The removal of Uzbek tribes from Khwarazm by the khans of Bukhara further strengthened Turkmen influence. However, during the reign of Arab Muhammad Khan, the return of the Qongrat, Manghit, and other Uzbek tribes to Khwarazm led Uzbek elites to seek the restoration of their former positions within the khanate, resulting in conflict between them and Arab Muhammad Khan (История Туркменской, 1957: 399). With the support of discontented Uzbek tribes, Khabash and Ilbars, after five years of struggle, defeated the forces of Arab Muhammad Khan, Abu'l-Ghazi, and Isfandiyar at the Battle of Dashli-Yarmish in 1621. Ilbars and Khabash captured their father, Arab Muhammad Khan, had him blinded, and

sent him under guard to Khiva. Surviving the defeat, Abu'l-Ghazi fled first to Kath and then to Bukhara. Isfandiyar Sultan, Sharif Muhammad Sultan, and Khwarazmshah Sultan sought refuge in the inner fortress at Khazarasp. Shortly thereafter, Khabash Sultan reconciled with his brothers and granted Isfandiyar permission to depart on pilgrimage to Mecca (Abulqazi Bahadir Khan, 2002: 14).

Internal Political Crisis in the Khanate of Khiva (Early 17th Century). In reality, Khabash intended to remove Isfandiyar from Central Asia and to eliminate his brothers by separating them from the tribal constituencies upon which they relied. Isfandiyar, however, fearing Khabash and Ilbars, departed from Khazarasp with official permission not for Mecca, but with the intention of seeking refuge at the Safavid court. At this time, Shah 'Abbas I—who was steadily consolidating the eastern frontiers of the Safavid Empire—closely monitored the conflicts among the Shaybanid princes in Central Asia. The Safavid court customarily granted asylum to princes from Khiva and Bukhara who sought refuge there and, when necessary, employed them in pursuit of its own military and political objectives. Thus, when Isfandiyar Sultan arrived at the Safavid court in 1621 under the pretext of undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca, Shah 'Abbas granted him protection and, in the following year, dispatched him to Khiva with a military contingent of three hundred men. As he advanced from Darun toward Balkhan, he was joined by seventy men from the Teke and Saryk Turkmen tribes and ten from the Yomut tribe (Abulqazi Bahadir Khan, 2002: 14). According to Iskandar Beg Munshi, Shah 'Abbas also instructed the Turkmens of the Seyn Khan (Astrabad) region to assist Isfandiyar in his struggle against his brothers (Каррыев, 1954: 217). By contrast, Abu'l-Ghazi reports that Shah 'Abbas merely offered Isfandiyar advice, recommending that he proceed to the Khurasan frontier and attempt to reclaim authority from his brothers there (Абуль-Гази Бахадур хан, 1906: 259–260). With a relatively small force composed of Teke, Saryk, and Yomut Turkmens from the Balkhan region, Isfandiyar launched a sudden attack against Khabash and defeated him, forcing Khabash to flee to Khiva to join his brother Ilbars. Thereafter, Turkmens loyal to Arab Muhammad Khan and Abu'l-Ghazi also rallied to Isfandiyar. However, the situation soon shifted unexpectedly. Nazar Khoja, a successor of Sayyid Ata—one of the prominent leaders of the Sufi Dervish community—intervened in the political process, siding with Ilbars Khan and mobilizing Uzbek tribes against Isfandiyar. As a result of intense propaganda, Isfandiyar lost much of his support, suffered defeat, and fled to Mangyshlak. According

to Abu'l-Ghazi, he soon succeeded in assembling a force of up to three thousand Turkmen troops (Абуль-Гази Бахадур хан, 1906: 259–260). Research indicates that, with the assistance of the Salor and Ersari Turkmens, Isfandiyar eliminated Khabash and Ilbars and restored his authority in the Khanate of Khiva (Каррыев, 1954: 220). Only thereafter did Abu'l-Ghazi Khan—who had fled to Bukhara—return to Khwarazm together with his younger brother Sharif Muhammad. From this point onward, a sharp struggle commenced between Abu'l-Ghazi, supported by the Uzbek nobility, and Isfandiyar Khan, backed by the Turkmen tribes. Upon Abu'l-Ghazi's arrival in Khiva, Isfandiyar plundered the Uzbek, Uyghur, and Naiman tribes with whom his rival had established contacts, and shortly thereafter devastated Uzbek-inhabited areas of the Khazarasp province. Considering Abu'l-Ghazi a serious threat to his rule, Isfandiyar kept him under surveillance in Khiva. Nevertheless, the Uzbek tribes retained considerable influence in the political life of the khanate. The Uzbek tribes gathered around Urgench demanded security guarantees from Isfandiyar Khan and insisted that Abu'l-Ghazi be sent to Urgench as a guarantor; otherwise, they threatened to migrate collectively to Bukhara. Isfandiyar's compliance with this demand demonstrates the substantial political weight of the Uzbek elites. After arriving in Urgench, Abu'l-Ghazi rapidly consolidated a large number of Uzbek tribes around himself. Although he mobilized his forces and launched a campaign against Khiva, he was unexpectedly attacked by Kalmyk forces en route, resulting in heavy losses among his supporters. Meanwhile, Turkmens residing in the Balkhan Mountains and Mangyshlak came to Isfandiyar's aid. Realizing that defeat was inevitable, Abu'l-Ghazi was compelled to reconcile with his brother and subsequently returned once more to Urgench (Каррыев, 1954: 220).

Abu'l-Ghazi's Captivity at the Safavid Court (1629–1639). Referring to *Khulāṣat al-Siyar*, I.K. Pavlova characterizes the 1629 attack on Merv by Isfandiyar Khan of Urgench (r. 1623–1642) as an act of ingratitude in response to the favors previously bestowed upon him by Shah 'Abbas I. She notes that Isfandiyar Khan and his entourage had been received at the Safavid court with high honors and had on several occasions been rescued from peril through the assistance of the victorious Safavid army (Павлова, 1993: 80).

Although Isfandiyar Khan's forces reached the environs of Merv and established their camp, the fortress garrison under the leadership of the governor, Ashur Khan Chakni, exerted considerable effort in organizing the defense and demonstrated their full

readiness to repel the formidable enemy. Despite the numerical inferiority of his troops, Ashur Khan sallied forth from the fortress and engaged the enemy's larger army in close combat, ultimately defeating them (Павлова, 1993: 80). The arrival of Qizilbash reinforcements compelled Isfandiyar Khan to flee; he was pursued, and the spoils seized by his forces were recovered.

Meanwhile, after occupying Nisa and Darun, Abu'l-Ghazi Khan advanced toward Abivard. However, the governor of that province, Jamshid Sultan—one of the *khassa ghulams*—had significantly strengthened the fortress defenses with the assistance of the *ghazis* of the Aberli branch of the Afshar tribe. News of these developments was conveyed to Manuchehr Khan, the governor of Mashhad. The principal amirs of neighboring provinces—including Bayram 'Ali Sultan Bayat, governor of Nishapur, and Ahmad Sultan Chakni, governor of Sabzevar—joined forces with Manuchehr Khan and advanced toward Abivard.

Upon learning of the approach of the Qizilbash army, Abu'l-Ghazi Khan plundered the region and retreated toward Nisa. Safavid forces pursued and defeated him, compelling him to abandon the booty he had seized and withdraw to Darun (Каррыев, 1954: 222). Thereafter, Manuchehr Khan was obliged to return to Mashhad, which had been left vulnerable. In the decisive engagement between the Safavid army and the Turkmen forces led by Rahmangulu Qaramash, the Qizilbash troops emerged victorious (Каррыев, 1954: 222; Павлова, 1993: 22).

As previously noted, during the Khivan invasion of Khurasan, Turkmen tribal contingents numbering some 6,000–7,000 men had defected from the Safavid state and joined the Khivan side. Isfandiyar Khan appointed Rahmangulu Qaramash as *amir al-umara* over these Turkmen forces. However, the *tüfengchi-bashi* Zaman Beg and the *beglerbegi* of Astrabad, Khosrow Beg, defeated them and killed Rahmangulu. Thereafter, the elders of the Turkmen tribes swore an oath of renewed loyalty to the Safavid state of Azerbaijan. Upon receiving news of Rahmangulu's defeat, Abu'l-Ghazi Khan—who was then in the vicinity of Nisa and Darun—was compelled to return to Khwarazm. The Qizilbash detachments under Aliyar Khan Garrayli pursued and defeated him, seizing a substantial quantity of booty that he had captured.

Zaman Beg subsequently reinforced defensive measures in the recovered fortresses and punished the governors of Nisa and Darun—Muhibb 'Ali Sultan Ustajlu and Ughurlu Sultan—who had displayed cowardice during the Khwarazmian attack. Thus, within a short period, the Safavid state succeeded in suppressing the Khurasan Rebellion.

It is noteworthy that Abu'l-Ghazi makes no mention of these events in his own chronicle. Following the Khurasan campaign, Isfandiyar Khan sought to restore his strained relations with the Safavid state by attributing primary responsibility for the events to Abu'l-Ghazi. He subsequently captured him and dispatched him as a hostage to the Safavid court (Каррыев, 1954: 222).

Without addressing the underlying reasons for his being sent to the Safavid court by his brother, Abu al-Ghazi states that in 1628 Isfandiyar Khan allegedly spread a rumor that Abu al-Ghazi intended to resettle the Bukharan Uzbeks in the Aral region, thereby undermining his authority among the Turkmen tribes. As a result, the Turkmen handed Abu al-Ghazi over to Isfandiyar Khan, who in turn dispatched him as a prisoner and hostage to the Safavid ruler (Каррыев, 1954: 222).

V.V. Bartold, addressing this issue, provides additional details. According to the author, Isfandiyar shifted the entire blame for the Khurasan uprising onto Abu al-Ghazi and surrendered him to the Safavid shah. At the same time, Isfandiyar Khan sent a special embassy accompanied by numerous gifts, declaring that—just as Khwarazmian princes had previously resided at the Safavid court—he was now sending Abu al-Ghazi Khan into the shah's service. Should the shah wish, he could accept him into service; otherwise, he might punish him for organizing predatory raids. Thus, Abu al-Ghazi was first brought to Abiverd and, in 1039 AH (January–February 1630), to the presence of the shah, who was then in Hamadan (Бартольд, 1963: 56; Каррыев, 1954: 222).

Muhammad Ma'sum ibn Khwaja-yi Isfahani interprets this episode as evidence that the Uzbek khans had effectively submitted to Safavid authority. According to his account, as soon as Isfandiyar Khan learned of his brother Abu al-Ghazi's defeat, he sent valuable gifts to the shah's court along with a letter expressing apology for his brother's rebellion. The letter stated: "Just as our forefathers have always remained under the protection and patronage of Your exalted court, so too does this sinner have no refuge other than Your threshold. My brother has acted unworthily with excessive obstinacy and impropriety. Therefore, I have imprisoned him and sent him to Your command, so that he may be justly punished, as he deserves for his actions" (Павлова, 1993: 81).

The official portrayal of these events, however, does not fully reflect their true nature. In reality, by arresting and sending his brother to the shah, Isfandiyar Khan effectively removed from Khwarazm a rival whom he regarded as more dangerous, thereby

consolidating his own authority. According to Bartold, the shah received Abu al-Ghazi with honor and ordered that he reside in the Tabarek fortress in Isfahan (Бартольд, 1963: 56). Since Shah Safi I was satisfied with the course of events, he pardoned Abu al-Ghazi and did not subject him to punishment. He was provided with a residence and granted an annual allowance of ten thousand tumans for his expenses (Бартольд, 1963: 134).

Conclusion. Naturally, the Safavid court clearly understood that not only Abu al-Ghazi but also Isfandiyar Khan bore equal responsibility for organizing the disturbances in Khurasan. Nevertheless, in order to avoid further escalation of relations with the Khiva Khanate, the dispatch of Abu al-Ghazi as a hostage was deemed a sufficient measure to bring the conflict to an end. Consequently, Abu al-Ghazi remained in Safavid territory as a hostage from 1629 to 1639. During this period, no conflicts between the Safavid state and the Khiva Khanate were recorded. The second phase of Isfandiyar Khan's rule passed in relative peace, with the exception of his struggles against Kalmyk tribes, which frequently raided Khwarazmian cities, trade routes, and Turkmen encampments.

At the end of the 1630s, Abu al-Ghazi succeeded in escaping from Safavid captivity. For some time, he lived among the Turkmen Ersari tribes, who had been driven from Mangyshlak into the Mehin region by the Kalmyks; shortly thereafter, he stayed among the Teke tribes settled in the Balkan region. In 1641, the leader of the Uzbek tribes residing in the Aral region secured Abu al-Ghazi Khan's release from the Kalmyk ruler Kho-Urlak by paying a substantial ransom, and in 1643 he was proclaimed khan in the Aral region (История Туркменской, 1957: 400–401). From that time onward, Abu al-Ghazi Khan openly began his struggle against Turkmen notables and against Isfandiyar Khan.

Thus, the research indicates that during the 1620s–1630s, relations with the Khiva Khanate occupied a significant place in the foreign policy of the Safavid state. Compared to relations with the Khanate of Bukhara, the ties between the Safavid court and Khwarazm were generally more peaceful in character. This was primarily due to the desire of the Khwarazmian rulers to benefit from Safavid assistance in their struggle against Bukharan aggression. On the other hand, since the Safavid state was equally interested in preventing the strengthening of the Khanate of Bukhara in Central Asia, it supported the rulers of Khwarazm and sought to use them as a counterweight against Bukhara, thereby preserving its own influence in the region.

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