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**ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ – RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**RUSSIA, ZANDS AND THE ISSUE OF CAUCASUS**

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**ABSTRACT**

The history of Iran's affairs with European governments during the Zand Dynasty has been kept brief and undisclosed for many years. Domestic issues faced by Karim Khan Zand and the inefficiency of his successors in handling internal affairs resulted in the neglect of Russia's influence over the Caucasus and southern shores of the Caspian Sea. Unlike the Safavid period, no attempts were made by the Zands towards the restoration of Iran's sovereignty over the Caucasus, and unlike the Afsharid period, the Iranian government made no strong declarations of hegemony over these regions. This research aims to clarify Iranian-Russian affairs between the years of 1747 and 1785 through a descriptive-analytical approach and elucidate how permanent occupation in internal affairs and lack of comprehensive policies towards the consolidation of authority, resulted in the loss of sovereignty over Caucasus and autonomy in the region, which in turn enabled foreign rule over the area.

**Keywords:** Iran, Russia, Relations, Zand Era, Caucasus.

**RUSYA, ZENDLER VE KAFKASYA SORUNU**

**ÖZ**

İran'ın Zend Hanedanlığı döneminde Avrupa hükümetleriyle olan ilişkileri uzun yıllar boyunca yüzeysel tutulmuş ve açıklanmamıştır. Kerim Han Zend'in karşı karşıya kaldığı iç sorunlar ve haleflerinin iç işlerini yürütmedeki yetersizliği, Rusya'nın Kafkasya ve Hazar Denizi'nin güney kıyıları üzerindeki etkisinin göz ardı edilmesine neden oldu. Safevi döneminden farklı olarak, Zendler tarafından İran'ın Kafkasya üzerindeki egemenliğinin yeniden tesis edilmesi için herhangi bir girişimde bulunulmadı ve İran hükümeti Afşar döneminden farklı olarak bu bölgeler üzerinde güçlü bir hegemonya iddiasında bulunmadı. Bu araştırma, 1747-1785 yılları arasındaki İran-Rusya ilişkilerini tanımlayıcı-analitik bir yaklaşımla aydınlatmayı ve içişlerinde kalıcı işgalin ve otoritenin sağlanmasına yönelik kapsamlı politikaların eksikliğinin nasıl Kafkasya üzerinde egemenlik kaybına yol açtığını ortaya koymaktadır. Söz konusu bölgedeki özerklik, bu bölge üzerinde yabancı egemenliği mümkün kılıyordu.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İran, Rusya, İlişkiler, Zend Dönemi, Kafkasya.

**INTRODUCTION**

With the establishment of the Safavid government, Iran's affairs with major European countries entered a new phase. Although Iranian-Russian relations date back to the mid-10th century, diplomatic affairs between the two countries predate the expansion of the Ottoman Empire and western policies to unite with Iran against the Ottomans. As the tsarist empire began its development, a confrontation between the two countries became inevitable. At the apex of this confrontation, Caucasus, notwithstanding its geopolitical position, became a political arena for two

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governments seeking to consolidate dominance over the mosaic and multifaceted Caucasian Christian society. The rise of the Romanov dynasty brought about new policies for eastward expansion; in other words, Russia opened its doors to European industry and culture, through which it entered a new era of modernity. However, in the face of this fascination with the West, laid a contemptuous view of the East in Russian circles, creating an imperialistic aspect in Tsarism policies. Gradual adjacency, trade disputes, regional competitors were among the reasons for Russia's confrontations with its neighbors, especially Iran. Afterward, as the rise of Russia's most influential Tsar, Peter I was concurrent with the reign of Sultan Hossein, the most incapable Safavid king, diplomatic affairs between the two countries turned hostile and invasive. Peter aimed for rapid growth, foreign trade expansion, open water access, and the dream of conquering India; neither of which were attainable without conflict with Iran. Meanwhile, the Caucasus, Iran's arena and well-guarded territory, needed to remain subject to Iranian hegemony. However, considering that the populace of this area, including Georgian Christians, had been forced into obedience by the government of Iran after suffering numerous attacks and deaths by the hands of Safavid and Afsharid armies with intentions of looting churches and taking women, their condemnation and dissent, as well as religious commonalities could form powerful bonds between orthodox Russians and Armenian/Georgian Christians and be used as an advantage in the dispersion of Caucasus.

The strategic situation, prosperity, economic opportunities, and desire for independence in the Caucasus led the Iranian and Russian governments towards a new viewpoint of the Caucasus, hoping for the establishment of a powerful base, expansion of territory, and stabilization of their borders, as well as easy access to other parts of West and Central Asia. Despite the frequent short paragraphs in contemporary literature on Iranian-Russian affairs during the Zand Era or the history of Caucasus (some of which are referred to in the bibliography), there have been no scholarly articles on the matter, except "Zand Khans and the Issue of Southern Caucasus" by Ahangaran (1389), which covers the events in the Caucasus during the Zand Dynasty. There have been independent essays on the history of Iran-Russia relations in the Zand Era, due to the lack of sufficient data in historical sources and the shadow cast upon the affairs of Iran and Russia in this period by previous and succeeding ages.

### 1. Nader Shah's Heritage

With the assassination of Nader Shah in June 1747, Iran witnessed severe conflicts over succession between commanders and claimants such as Karim Khan Zand, Azad Khan Afghan, and Mohammad Hassan Khan Qajar. Consequential riots and chaos forced the Iranian army to leave certain areas seized in Nader Shah's era, creating an opportunity for disintegration in Iran and thereby a chance of power for local rulers. Additionally, as Nader Shah's successors did not hold sufficient influence and command to handle affairs in remote areas, the allegiance of borderline regions to the Iranian government was unstable and rather feigned. The view of such circumstances, Russia was presented with an exceptional opportunity to pursue its expansionist goals of advancing towards the Caucasus and influencing local governments.

With the region empty of Iranian forces, the governor of Nakhchivan tried to establish an independent khanate called the Nakhchivan Khanate. At the same time, other local khans took advantage of the government's state of weakness and declared independence, starting clashes with neighboring tribes and regions to expand their borders. Hussain Ali Khan, the ruler of Quba and Salyan, took rule over his neighboring regions; the people of Darband pledged allegiance to Mohammad Hassan Beyg Ghorchi; Mirza Mohammad Khan occupied Baku; the locals of Shamakhi brought Haji Mohammad Zarnawaie to power; sons of Askerbeg Nami, started a rebellion in Shirvan; Haji Celebi dominated Sheki, Ersh, and Quba; and Panah Beg Javanshir conquered Karabakh to Ardabil.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, while the power struggle between Khans and local emirs intensified in the Caucasus, Iran's domestic affairs were severely disrupted by the Afshar's inefficiency and the skirmish between Nader Shah's successors. Concurrently, in Azerbaijan, the three contenders for power, i.e. Azad Khan Afghan, Fath Ali Khan Afshar, and Karim Khan Zand, had entered a stage of the war. According to a historian: "There was such chaos, turmoil, disorder, and sedition, that no possibility of comfort and peace existed. Especially the poor people of Caucasus, who, having lived in fear and danger of invasion their entire lives, could not rest assured for a single night".<sup>2</sup>

Finally, in 1761, Azerbaijan was successfully conquered by Karim Khan Zand, and hence, with the entrance of his sovereignty to the Caucasus, the rulers of Ganja, Shirvan, and Armenia were forced to succumb to the central government. Even though he failed to fully take over the Caucasus and consolidate Iran's authority over the region

<sup>1</sup> Bakikhanov, *Golestan-i Eram*, pp. 159-160

<sup>2</sup> Bahman Mirza, *ShekarName-i Shahanshay*, p. 83

due to domestic struggles, the Zand Khan attempted to prevent local Khans from an uprising by taking members of each house, as hostages, to his base of command in Shiraz, following the traditional policy of former kings.<sup>3</sup> Vakil al-Roaya's policies regarding the rebellious behavior of local rulers in the Caucasus lacked Nader Shah's strength. Furthermore, due to the lack of an adequate and powerful military force, as well as constant confrontations with local rulers in the South, Karim Khan was unable to address affairs in Caucasus and remote areas such as Khorasan and Turkestan. He also had no power over the installment or dismissal of local emirs, through which their confederacy and gradual empowerment could have been prevented. As a result, the process of autonomy and disintegration demand, which had initially flickered during Nader Shah's rule, intensified, triggering a phenomenon called the "Khan Neshins" of the Caucasus. Consequently, during nearly 50 years from the fall of the Safavid government to the rise of the Qajar dynasty, and following the ignorance of the Safavid government as well as the defeat of Nader Shah and their neglect towards the Caucasus, opportunistic local leaders of areas such as Darband, Sheki, Shirvan, Quba, Lankaran, Qarabagh, Shamakhi, Ganjeh, etc. sought to form self-ruling governments, and severed ties with Iran. To these fledgling rulers, the only comprehensible political practice was to assert and maintain authority and sovereignty within their local boundaries. As a result, a widespread competition was formed over foreign forces, to gain autonomy through attracting the support of countries such as Russia or threatening the Iranian government<sup>4</sup>. However, it is to be noted that these local khanates were so incompetent and internally divisive, that they were incapable of forming an alliance and taking the necessary steps towards the independence or development of the whole Caucasus region.

## 2. Russians and Karim Khan Zand (Vakil-al-Roaya)

A noteworthy point in the affairs of Iran and Russia during the Zand Era is that despite the limited interactions between the two countries, the expansionist policies of Tsarism regarding the Caucasus, which originated from the rule of Peter I, were continued as Russia unceasingly invaded Iran's borders. In 1768, a letter was written to Karim Khan Zand by the people of Nakhchivan, asking the Iranian government to address the unjust rule of Hossein Ali Khan, Nakhchivan's Emir of time. At the same time, it was reported that Russian troops had been spotted in parts of Georgia. To avoid reactions from the Zand government, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs ordered its consul in Rasht to dispatch a friendly letter to government officials, assuring Iran that Russia holds no ill will towards Iranian territory and its actions are solely a series of temporary operations to prevent Ottoman penetration.<sup>5</sup>

However, this was from what the Russians reported. The truth lay within other reports by Russian agents, informing the Russian court about Iran's trade and political situations, and encouraging an increase in the number of troops and fleets to secure Russia's commercial interests in northern Iran. These reports resulted in command by the Russian Tsar in 1771, ordering all necessary expenses towards Russia's expansionist purposes to be carried out<sup>6</sup>. In October 1772, the Russians, being perfectly aware of Iran's internal affairs, reported on political and military movements in Georgia, claiming that the Khan of Yerevan, intends to dispatch an ambassador to Shiraz to persuade the Zand government of the invasion of Georgia, "*who bears benevolent and friendly will towards Russia*". The report claimed that Karim Khan had refused the invasion as "Iran was incapable of large-scale military operations, and an attack on Georgia would result in domestic Chaos"<sup>7</sup>

In 1776, while the Zand military was besieging Basra and confronting the Ottomans, the Russians seized the opportunity to enter Darband with an army to attack the Ottomans. Karim Khan Zand wrote to governors Fath Ali Khan in Quba, and Hedayatullah Khan in Rasht, asking them to "*defend their borders and beware of Russia's intentions and make war on them*"<sup>8</sup>. It is not clear whether an actual battle took place, but apparently, the news of Zand's order instigated enough fear of damaging resources, that the forty-thousand-man army of Russia was forced to retreat beyond the borders and outside the nominal territory of Iran. It is particularly noteworthy that the Russians were expanding their trade horizons along the Caspian Sea and therefore tried to establish bases for economic advancement and acceleration of access to Iranian regions. It was for this reason that the French consul in Basra expressed concern over the escalation of Russian activities, stating that: "Today, Russia alone handles Iran's foreign trade. Russia will be able to profit immensely and easily this way"<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, it should not be overlooked

<sup>3</sup> Perry, *Karim Khan Zand*, pp. 299-300

<sup>4</sup> Atkin, *A part of Iran-Russia Relations*, p. 217

<sup>5</sup> Perry, *Karim Khan Zand*, p. 302

<sup>6</sup> Musalmanian Ghobadiani, *Asnady Az Ravabet Iran Va Russia Az Safaviye Ta Qajariye*, pp. 418-419

<sup>7</sup> Musalmanian Ghobadiani, *Ibid*, p. 423

<sup>8</sup> Rostam Al-Hakma, *Rostam al-Tavarikh*, p. 367

<sup>9</sup> Hedayati, *Tarih-I Zandiye*, p. 248

that despite the weakening of Iran's political and military authority in the Caucasus, the cultural and civilizational ties between Iran and Caucasus remained unscathed. The Zand Khan maintained this bond by issuing orders of respect towards non-Muslim minorities. Through a formal issue, Karim Khan emancipated the engagement of Caucasian Christians in religious duties, and rituals such as ringing bells, clamoring, and burials according to Christianity, and called upon Shaykh al-Islams, judges, and government officials not to interfere in any way with such practices<sup>10</sup>. In yet another decree, Zand ordered that: "As stated by the privileged sultans of Safavid....no obstacles shall be cast upon such practices"<sup>11</sup>.

Perhaps the occasional visits of ambassadors from St. Petersburg to Shiraz to divert the minds of Iranian agents and claim that Russia was hoping to develop relations with Iran, was because of this. One such visit occurred in 1766 when a Russian delegation led by Scipe arrived in Shiraz.<sup>12</sup> However, despite the gifts and the ambassador's attempts to persuade the Zand court of alliance with Russia against the Ottomans, complications caused by other claimants, especially Azad Khan Afghan and Mohammad Hassan Khan Qajar, left no opportunity for negotiation between the two parties.

In December 1770 another ambassador visited the court of Vakil al-Ruaya and on behalf of the Russian Tsar, bestowed upon Karim Khan the news of Russia's victory over the Ottomans in naval war. The ambassador expected Khan's delight with the news, as there had been tension and dispute between the Zands and Ottomans over Basra to the point of military confrontation; however, he was shocked to find Zand's frowned response, claiming that the defeat of another nation would not gladden him. Afterward, the ambassador presented Karim Khan with the tsar's proposal of an alliance against the Ottoman, to which Khan did not provide a definite response<sup>13</sup>. Later, with the death of Karim Khan, the possibility of any union between the two countries was temporarily adjourned.

Fundamentally, Russia's desire to win over Iran found root in Tsarist expansionistic policies towards the Ottoman Empire. Since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Russians had aimed to infiltrate the orthodox communities of Caucasus, i.e. Georgians and Armenians, and use them as a shield against Iran and the Ottomans. Moreover, they would continue their advancement towards the northern Caucasus. Hence, Iran's borders were open to Russia's infiltration on three separate fronts: Georgia, Dagestan, and the Iranian-Ottoman border.

Having weakened the Ottomans through the imposition of the Karlowitz Treaty, successfully dismantled parts of the Ottoman empire, and attracted Muslim Caucasian Khans through policies of deception and intimidation, The Russian Tsarist regime decided to use Georgia as a base for battle with Iran and the Ottomans<sup>14</sup>. A policy that led to the Georgievsk Treaty between Georgia and Russia in 1783, and ignited the fires of Iran-Russia wars in the 19th-century. On the other hand, the Russians had also built a series of military fortifications in the North of the Caucasus in 1766, in line with their imperialist policies; and after seizing the Crimean Peninsula in 1774, a Russian army was sent to Dagestan to eliminate any movements in support of the Ottomans. Thus, the treaty between Russia and the Ottomans, namely the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji, established Russian power over the northern shores of the Black Sea, the Kuban River Basin, and up to the Northern Caucasus mountains. This remarkable expansion of the imperial sovereignty towards the south led Russia to the confrontation with the Ottoman and Iranian territories beyond the Caucasus<sup>15</sup>.

Bearing in mind the immense profits gained by Russian businessmen through trade with Iran and their efforts to expand their horizons towards the borders of India, commercial purposes played an important part in Russian expansionism policies regarding Iran. By 1792, the Russians had successfully exported approximately 511,360 rubles worth of goods to Iran, which was equivalent to ten percent of Russia's total exports to Asian markets<sup>16</sup>. Russian merchants set up a trading post on the Southern Astarabad Bay and aimed to take advantage of the government's entanglement in internal affairs and the absence of rivals, to take over the entire business and monetary economy along the Caspian Sea coast. Actions which later brought about the shelling of Russian fleets along the coast of Astarabad in addition to the establishment of a military fortress with several artillery vehicles in Ashraf, in 1782. Nevertheless, they were confronted with Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar's powerful reaction<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Kostikyan, *Documents of Matenadaran Decrees*, p. 346

<sup>11</sup> Bouroue of documents, *Asnadi Az Ravabet Iran Ba Mantage-I Qafqaz*, p. 133

<sup>12</sup> Ghaffari Kashani, *Golshan Murad*, p. 286

<sup>13</sup> Varahram, *Tarih-i Siyasi ve Ictimai-yi Iran der Asr-i Zend*, p. 199

<sup>14</sup> Gogche, *Caucasia and the policy of Ottoman Empire*, p. 93

<sup>15</sup> Gvosdev, *Imperial Policies and Perspectives towards Georgia*, p. 46

<sup>16</sup> Abdullayev, *A part of Iran-Russia Relations*, pp. 39-40

<sup>17</sup> Saravi, *Tarih-i Mohammadi*, pp.116-117

### 3. The Relations of Karim Khan Zand's Heirs With Russia

Russia's diplomatic relations with Iran were not severed with the death of Karim Khan. In 1782, an Armenian businessman named Yaqub met Ali Murad Zand at the embassy on behalf of Queen Catherine II, the Russian Tsar, proposing a deal that would allow Russians safe passage towards Kars and Erzurum the Ottoman Empire, in exchange for the suppression of the uprising of Lezgian tribes by Iran. But Ali Murad Khan declined the offer on account of Iran's peace with the Ottomans, commissioned Beglerbeg of Shirvan to stifle the tribes of Dagestan, and sent Mohammad Khan Mokri to Iran's embassy to Russia.<sup>18</sup> Yet, it seems that the Russians were not satisfied with this response, as they dispatched General Paul Potemkin, the commander of Russian forces in the Caucasus, to Shiraz, in 1784. His mission was to coax Ali Murad Khan Zand into the establishment of a Russian trade office in Darband, with monopolized trade rights in Iran's northern provinces and the Caucasus.<sup>19</sup> Struggling with the throes of fighting numerous claims to his throne, Ali Murad Khan granted Russia's request conditional to their assistance in the Qajar's revolt. The proposition was welcomed by the Russians as it allowed interference in Iran's internal affairs. Immediately afterward, an ambassador named Colonel Tamarov was sent to Iran to sign a contract.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the French ambassador's attempts of incitement of the Zand king towards severing ties with Russia hindered the achievement of Russia's purposes, and with the death of Ali Murad Khan in 1785, the case of affairs between the Zand Dynasty and Tsarist Russia was closed.

### CONCLUSION

At the turn of the 17th century, the princes of Moscow decided to abandon the subjugation of the Mongol dynasty and instead focus on trying their cold and barren territory with warm fertile lands in the south. Tsars of Russia, Ivan III and IV, set foot on the path towards expansionism through gathering Serf and Kazakh soldiers and forming alliances with European governments, through which they conquered trade capitals and strategic areas such as Kazan, Astrakhan, and Dagestan. These conquests, which coincided with the consolidation of the tsarist dictatorship, brought about the establishment of multilateral relations with Iran. affairs that were as political and developmental as they were economical and profit-seeking.

Russia's gradual transformation into a regional superpower had an imperialistic and colonial ambiance due to the violent and deceitful policies procured by Tsarism and upset the political equations in the West Asian region. Before the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the political balance in the Middle East mostly relied on the two major powers, Iran and the Ottomans. But with the emergence of a third gravitational force, i.e. Russia, the situation shifted towards a wide-ranging conflict; such that power equations were determined by social forces including ethnic groups and Khans, and even elements such as subcultures and cults.

There is no doubt that the Zand Dynasty envisioned territorial integrity and the expansion of Iran's sovereignty over neighboring regions, including the Caucasus. This claim can be verified with numerous orders issued by Karim Khan Zand regarding the wellbeing of Iran's Caucasian subjects. Yet, complications such as constant engagement in clashes with domestic claimants and rivals, lack of an opportunity for the establishment of an efficient administrative system, obliviousness and illiteracy of the concept of international politics, military and technical incompetence, etc., prevented the unstable Zand government from forming stable and authoritative relations with Russia. At the same time, the fact that Shiraz did not surrender in the face of Russia's deceit and the occupation of the Caucasus by Russians was not accomplished in the Zand Era, speaks of the relative insight of Zand rulers. The Zand Dynasty cannot be held solely responsible for the events that led to the dispersion of the Caucasus during the Qajar era.

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<sup>19</sup> Varahram, *Tarih-i Siyasi ve Ictimai-yi Iran der Asr-ı Zend*, p. 200

<sup>20</sup> Eshghi, *Siyasat-I Nizami Russia Dar Iran*, p. 27



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