

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL IMPORTANCE OF DARBAND AND ITS ROLE IN THE RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND IRAN IN THE SAFAVID ERA**

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**Summary.** Darband, as one of the coastal towns along the Caspian Sea and as part of Caucasus region, played an important role in the political developments of this country. The city, after the complete conquest of Caucasus by Shah Ismail I was supervised by Shervan ruler, but after the outbreak of Shervan ruler and the creation of Bigla Beigi in Shervan, Darband got a better position in Safavid government. Darband, not only in the Safavid era, but also from the ancient time, because of its proximity to Northern Dagestan and the nomadic people, was known to be as gate entry to Caucasus, Aran, and Iran. Darband, in Safavid era, in addition to its strategic situation as a border town, was religiously a center for Shia Qizilbash to move there. This city was also on the way of silk trade of Caucasian and Guilan, and the traders exchanged their goods through this port with Russia and other places. First Safavid Kings, because of the importance of this city in the the Safavid official system, had realized its worth, but in the late Safavid period, Darband faced with a lot of invasions by Daghestan, the Kazakhs, and other tribes; thus, its people, and in the centre of it businessmen and merchants welcome the arrival of Peter the Great and gave the city to him. The occupation of this city by Peter the Great was one of the main reasons of his progress in Guilan.

**Key words:** Safavid; Russia; Ottoman; Darband; Shervan; Caucasus.

**Introduction**

In most of the historical periods of Iran, Caucasus has always had an important role in political, social, and economic conditions of Iran. This area, because of its geographic position, has always been one those areas of struggle of Iranian governments with the foreign government. Iranian governments had tried to consolidate their political position in Caucasus, however, Iran's relations with the peoples and tribes of the Caucasus, after the Safavids, entered a new stage. The spread of Shiism and its generalization among the ethnic groups in Caucasus, most of whom followed the religion of Christianity or were Sunni Muslims, created reactions which caused them not to be absorbed easily by the government, up to the end of the Safavid era, especially in mountainous regions such as Dagestan where the penetration of Safavid Qizilbash was less, and the population of the region remained zealous followers of the Sunni, however, the relations of Safavid government with some cities located in the plains and coastal parts of Dagestan varied.

Darband, geographically, was located along the Mazandaran Sea (Caspian). And, also, as this city was seen as a barrier to invading tribes for a long time, it has been important Iranian government. Safavid government followed two purposes with the migration of Qizilbash tribes their settlement in the city. First of all, it was going to confront revolution and possible invasion of this territory to the Safavid region and, then, help to expand the process of expanding Shi'ism by the help of the Qizilbash. These goals, in the first period of the Safavid dynasty, were followed closely, but in the late Safavid government, Darband was not addressed by the Safavid government. Shah Ismail, after the conquest of Shirvan, officially gave Darband as part of Shervan government which was supervised by its ruler; however, after the conversion of Shirvan to Biglar Beigi, Darband was managed separately.

The other importance of Darband was due to the accumulation of silk merchants. Caucasus was considered as the center of silk in Iran in Safavid era, so the silk of Shervan (Shirvan) and Caucasus, which had a good quality, was imported to this coastal city and traded. Russia, after getting to know the military and economic importance of the city, gave attention to Darband and in the campaign of Peter the Great, Darband was among one of the first cities to be captured by Tsar; of course, he took over Darband, with peace, by the cooperation and proposition of the merchants of the city, because people, to keep Darband in the late Safavid era, were not willing to accept Safavid government. The most important question that arises in connection with the issue is that, "How was Darband important for the Safavid government in the Safavid era? With respect to the above questions, the following hypotheses can be made. Darband, for being the gateway city of the important cities of Iran with northern Caucasus, and the gateway rebelled

tribes to Iran, and, also, becoming one of the important trade centers of silk, played an important role in the state system of this government. The researcher, using historical and geographical references of the Safavid era tries to explain the role of Darband in the Safavid era. The author, according to the reports concluded that Darband, in history, due to its geographical position has always been the key to conquer Caucasus and Guilan by the invaders from the North of Dagestan and Russia, and, on the other hand, it has been the center of land and sea trade between Iran and Russia.

### **Geographical Importance of Darband in the Safavid Era**

The city of Darband, as one of the cultural, civil, and economic centers of, Dagestan, from the ancient period to the discussed period, had an important role in the political and social changes of Caucasus and Iran. In the ancient time, protecting the city to prevent the entrance of nomadic tribes to Iran had a vital role to create stability of the Iranian regimes in the ancient era. In the Islamic era reference, because Darband was located in the north of the Caspian Gate or Gate of Albania, historians called it Bob Al-abvab (door of all the doors) (Zakaria Ghazvini, 1992: 329; Stakhri, 1989: 189). Russians called Darband, «derbent» and used this word in their historical and geographical text (Barthold, 1996: 23). Capturing and the achievement of an alien force to Darband meant mastery over Caucasus and Dagestan, because this city was the gate to enter these regions.

Darband, being located in the Mountain crossing of the Caspian Gate, the Strait of Caspian or Gate of Albania, had caused its preservation and protection to be important. According to the geographical texts, because of the consecutive attacks of nomadic tribes to the north west of Iran and Caucasus, and the destruction of urban centers, the Sassanid king, especially Khosrow and Qubad, first of all made stabilizers to defend the city and created tower and walls for it. (Zakaria Qazvini, *ibid*: 328).

After the first attack of Arabs subsided, the local rulers of Darband autonomously ruled the city and its region, but in the era of the Abbasid caliphs, Shervan kings got the city and made Darband rulers their clients, however, Darband princes, knowing the weak influence of Shervan kings, did not pay attention to them. This trend continued up to Ilkhanid and Timurid era. Timor, after conquering Darband, gave the city to the Shervan Kings. (Vaziraf, 2007: 11).

In the dominance era of the Turkmen over Iran, Darband was still dominated by Shervan kings. Therefore, social history of Darband, from the seven century (Lunar Year of Hejira (LYOH)) up to the Safavid era, has close links with the Shervan land and its rulers.

In the late nine century (Lunar year of Hejira), Sheikh Juneid and Heidar repeatedly attacked Shervan and Darband. These lands, because of being away from the attacks of Mongol and Timurid for centuries, did not lose their wealth; so, the Safavid sheikhs, if they captured these areas, they could collect the necessary financial resources for their political future; in spite of the death of Sheik Haidar (890 (Lunar year of Hejira)) by King Shervan, he blocked the political ambitions of the Safavids.

Shah Ismail Safavi fully conquered Darband and Shervan in 915 (Lunar year of Hejira); and Darband, then, was ruled as a state of Shervan and under the Safavid rulers. Following the death of Shah Tahmasp (984 (Lunar year of Hejira)), during the reign of Shah Mohammad Khodabandeh (985–996 (Lunar year of Hejira)), due to internal turmoil, the Ottomans used the opportunity created and occupied Darband and Shervan in 986 (Lunar year of Hejira) (1578 AD), against the peace agreement of Amasiyeh (952 (Lunar year of Hejira)). Ottoman Empire had the town and Shervan until 1015 (Lunar year of Hejira) until Shah Abbas the First re-attachment regions to Iran in the year of 1015 (Lunar year of Hejira). Darband and Shervan belonged to Iran until 1130 (Lunar year of Hejira) / 1723 AD when Russia occupied Darband and Baku on the agreements that they signed with the Ottoman Empire, and the Ottomans overran and occupied Shervan and western parts of Dagestan. (Pigoloskaya et al. 1967: 625).

Finally, Nader Shah, in 1147 (Lunar year of Hejira) / 1734 AD occupied Darband and Shervan, but this action by Nader had no benefit for Iran to maintain Darband because inappropriate behavior and lack of ability of Iran to manage these areas led to the complete dominance of Russians over Dagestan and Caucasus seek (Jones Henavi, 2008: 270).

Darband, religiously, was different from other territories of Dagestan and Caucasus before this age, because except Shervan, Aran, and Darband, other territories of Caucasus, especially Dagestan did not readily accept Islam. It was only from Ilkhanate and Timurid era that Islam could enter into other territories of Caucasus (Barthold, 1972, Vol. 93: 408). Perhaps, the mountainous conditions of Dagestan – except Darband- prevented the penetration of Islam to this land in the early centuries. Yet, by the entrance of Islam, the followers of other religions such as Judaism and Christianity started their activity on the territory of Dagestan. According to Ibn Bazzaz in *Safval-Safa*, followers of Zahedieh cult in Shervan, Aran, and Darband had widespread activities in this country. Multiplicity of Sheikh Zayed's fans in this region was in an extent that the ruler of Shirwan scared of their influence and number, and warned Sheikh that the number of his followers is more than those of king. (Ibn Bazzaz, 1376: 197).

However, it seems that, along with the fans of Zahedieh cult, the followers of other sects like Sohrevardieh, Qaderieh Kabroyeh, Naqshbandieh and Heidarieh had extensive activities in Shervan and Darband (Ali Reza Khazaeli, 2005: 296).

### **Political Changes of Darband in the Safavid Era**

Shah Ismail I, after the occupation of Shervan and oppression of its ruler, in line with Safavid establishment policies and procedures of expanding the Shia, forced part the Bayat tribe of Qizilbash to migrate so that, along with the expansion of Imami Shia, he can benefit from the interests of the Safavid government in these regions. In addition to Darband, according to vague reports that Hassan Beik Rumlu provides, Shah Ismail also forced other tribes to migrate to other lands of Dagestan (Hassan Beik Rumlu, 2003: 1038 and 1039). It seems that the purpose of Shah Ismail to transport tribes was to promote Shiism in Caucasus. Considering the fact that Shia was considered one of the pillars of the political power of Safavid, by expanding Shia, they could survive and maintain their power in the region. Since before the invasion of Safavid to Caucasus, most of the residents were Sunni, it seems that, to promote Shia among Sunni and Qizilbash, bloody battles have occurred in Caucasus.

Since the domination of people with Imami Shia religion in Safavid era in Caucasus, Dagestan, Darband, and Shervan was little, therefore, the conversion of the religion of people to new rituals was accompanied by violence and hardship. The Sunnis of Ghafghaz, because of insisting on the religion of their forefathers, were prosecuted and pressure Qizilbash. It created one of the reasons of the tie between Caucasus and the Ottoman court, from this era until the era of Naderi.

The Ottoman, during the Safavid period, with the pretext of supporting the Sunni Muslims, many times brought its troops to Caucasus, and was also welcomed by the people of this region. Safavid kings, to deal with this of trick of the Ottoman, used different ways to prevent the Ottomans from entering into Caucasus, for example, in the period of Shah Tahmasb I, after the treaty of Amasiyeh Peace, four hundred families of Qizilbash tribes were sent to Darband to resist against the enemies of the Safavid. (ibid: 41 and 42).

Safavid kings, to change the religion of people of Darband, in addition to changing demographics, used other methods, too. They, over time, understood that, by means of force and violence, they cannot change the religion of people of Shervan, Dagestan, and Caucasus; using different methods of taxation and economic instruments, they tried to pursue their own goals. In the era of Shah Ismail I and Shah Tahmasb I, in addition to the Shiite scholars, and religious students were exempt from tax, Shiite towns and villages in Caucasus were also subject to this law. Whereas the Sunnis of those areas should bear the tax burden of the Shiite cities and communities and fully pay the tax. The Safavid, using this method in a long period of time, could, in some areas, especially in Caucasus, especially in Darband and Shervan, spread Shiism (ibid: 45 and 46); while in the mountainous parts of Dagestan, the people of this area remained more or less Sunni. (Outer, 1984: 233 and 234).

Later on, this Sunni population of Dagestan resisted against Nader and imposed a heavy defeat on him and formally refused to obey him, because they extremely supported the Ottoman Empire, and because of their cooperation with the religious and military

policies of Ottoman Sultan, «Ghazi and residents [Sunni] of Caucasus», were sympathized and paid attention by the king. (Gougcheh, 1994: 42 and 43).

The political differences of Shervan and Darband kings with the central government cause rebel against them in this region of Caucasus. When Shah Ismail conquered Shervan fully in 915 (LYOH), by including Darband in that, gave the province to a ruler whose title was Shervan Shah. In 945 (LUOH) / 1538 AD, Shervan king rebelled against the king of Tahmasbt, following it Shervan Shah sent his brother, Alqas Mirza, to suppress him, and he managed to suppress him; since the end of the Safavid era, Shervan remained as a State in state system of the Safavid era (Jerborn, 2003, 115), and converts into one of the Bigla Beigis of the Safavid era. Following the uprising of the first Bigla Beigi Shervan-Alqas Mirza, brother of Qizilbash Shah in 952 (LYOH), Alqas Mirza was suppressed, and since then, shervan has been run by the Qizilbash. After the treaty of Amasiyeh Peace in 962 (LYOH) / 1557 AD between Shah Tahmasb and the legal Shah Sulaiman, Darband, which was considered as part of Shervan, was officially marked as the territory of Iran by Ottoman Empire. (Hassan Beik Rumlu, *ibid*: 1308-1309) Shah Tahmasb, to fix his position and power in Darband, sent about four hundred families of Ghoorchian to this town to protect this small city (Vazirov, *ibid*: 41 and 42). From this time to the end of the era of ShahTahmasb I, the social condition of Darband was calm and quiet, and regarding the fact that Darband was located in the coast, this peace was used for the economic prosperity. The economic importance of Darband in the era of Shah Tahmasb caused the first English merchant, Anthony Jenkinson, after moving from Haji Torkhan, first came to Darband for trade and then went Shervan to get to know about silk trade. (Parsadoust, 1998: 748).

After the death of Shah Tahmasb I, as in most territories of Caucasus, particularly Shervan, the spirit for anti-Safavi, because of the religious, economic, and social pressures, existed, and, also, the internal turmoil after the death of Shah Ismail II (Hassan Beik Rumlu, *ibid*: 1499–1505) caused the Sunni to start uprising against Shia and Safavid, and kill a lot of Shi'ite and Safavid fans; they did it according to the moral support of the Ottoman (Yunuso v, 2004, 78 ). According to the fact that the Ottoman government was considered, in terms of religion, their fellow, the Sunni population, being supported by the Ottoman, did so and asked the Ottoman government for help to deal with the Safavid. This action took place a lot of time, especially in the Naderi era, one of the reasons for the continuous battles of Nader in Caucasus was moral and material support of the Ottoman from the Sunni people of Caucasus.

The Ottoman invasion to Caucasus, Shervan, and Darband had miserable results for the Safavid government, because after the Ottoman occupation of Caucasus, because of the political crisis caused by the war of succession between the years 984 (LYOH) to 996 (LYOH), the Safavid kings were not capable of defending Darband and other territories of Caucasus, despite the fact that Heider Mirza, the son of Shah Mohammad Khodabandeh (984 (LYOH) – 996 (LYOH)), achieved some victories against Crimean Tatars, the differences of Qizilbash with him, Heider Mirza Qader was not able to expel the Ottomans from Caucasus and Dagestan. Till in the year 999 (LYOH) / 1590 AD, Shah Abbas I, with his first signing of the Istanbul Convention, he gave all the territories of Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire (Iskenderbek Monshi, 2003: 439).

The consequences of this Convention were the immigration of many Shiite people of Caucasus, especially Darband, to Iran, and joining of some people to the Ottoman Empire. Finally, Shah Abbas I, during the years 1012 to 1017 (LYOH) / 1603–1607 AD, could, by the help of Caucasus people, especially the residents of Baku and Darband, seize the Ottoman garrisons and end their presence in the South Caucasus. The appropriate manner and tolerance of Shah Abbas established the Safavid power in the liberated areas after many years (Iskenderbek Monshi, 2003: 645 and 646). To protect Darband, Shah Abbas I ordered to quickly repaire and restore town ramparts and walls of Darband that had a vital role in the security and defense of the city (Vazirov, *ibid*: 42). In addition, Shah Abbas I, to deal with future threats, like those of Shah Tahmasb, first of all changed the demographic formation of Darband and Shervan. By his command, some of the populations of Shervan were migrated to Khorasan, and, instead, some of the tribes of Bayat tribe were settled in Darband. (Iskenderbek, *ibid*: 736–739)

With all the necessary measures that Shah Abbas did to defend the cities of Darband, Baku, and other cities of Caucasus, but because of the natural conditions and strategic direction, these cities were paid attention by the Ottomans, Tatars and a new strong competitor, Russians, that gradually reached to Haji Tarkhan (Astarakhan) and northern Dagestan. (Vazirov, *ibid*: 45). Of course, the Russians, in the time of Shah Abbas I, were trying to, by helping Shah Safavid against the Ottomans, get closer to Iran and reduce the power of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, in conquering Darband castle gave military aid to Shah Abbas. According to Tecknader Fan Dryabl, Russian tsar sent several thousand armies and deserved gunmen and several guns to help Shah Abbas to surround Darband fortress; the demand of the Russians from Iran was just not to make peace with the Ottoman Empire to achieve victory. (Abdol Hossein Navaei, 1998: 192) Therefore, it seems that the primary purpose of the Russians is to weaken and defeat the Ottomans in Caucasus, and later find footprints in Iran, especially in the key realm of Darband, because after the failure of the Ottomans in this city, they got to know how they can get the city and later used these methods.

The Ottoman Government, in its relations with Iran over Caucasus region, always benefited from the stimulation of the Sunnites. Following the death of Shah Abbas I (1038 (LYOH) / 1628 AD), the Ottomans, used the tricks again. In the year 1048 (LYOH) / 1638 AD, they, with the stimulation of Dagestan ruler, intended to enter Dagestan, Darband, and Shervan; but the diplomacy of the Safavid state prevented carrying out this policy. Finally, following the Zahab treaty signing in 1049 (LYOH) / 1639 AD, the Ottoman again recognized Darband an inseparable part of the territory of Iran. Of course, the Ottomans, to affect the domination of Iran in Darband, Shervan, and other parts of Caucasus obtained important points in Mesopotamia and West of Iran. (Pigoulouskaya et al., *ibid*: 594; Rajersiouri, 1993: 227).

After the treaty of Zahab and The approval of Ottoman on the domination of Iran over Darband, this region was placed under the supervision of one of the Khans of Qizilbash called Soltan, who came to power by the Safavid Shah; however, he was still under Biglarbeigi Shervan. (Barthold, *Ibid*: 427).

One of the other reasons of the importance of Darband, particularly in the late Safavid era in relation with Russia, was the business of silk from this city to Russia. Shervan (Shirvan) and Caucasus, in general, after Lahijan, had an important place in the silk production in the Safavid. Russians, after discovering the earnings of silk trade that took place by European traders through Russia, tried to monopolize this important item. In the year 1047 (LYOH) / 1637 AD, Borougaman, the ambassador of Holstein, came to Iran to make a treaty for the trade of silk. During his stay in Moscow, he advised Tsar to occupy the Silk fertile shores of the Mazandaran Sea (Caspian) and start silk trading with the European governments, especially Holstein. According to the Russian writers of Iran history, Moscow Government, in those days, considered this plan as an adventure, however, Peter the Great, to change this sea into a Russian lake, occupied some parts of the shores of the Mazandaran Sea (Caspian). (Pigoulouskaya et al., *ibid*: 594). At the age of Shah Abbas II and King Solomon, the trade relations between Iran and Russia expanded, and Darband, as a whole, on the west coast of the Mazandaran Sea (Caspian), played an important role in silk trade, as this city was located on the beach and sending silk through the Ottoman or Aran was really difficult, so Russian merchants and traders of Darband won a lucrative benefit by silk trading, thus, along with the strategic position of Darband, changing it to a high center of silk trading was paid attention to by Russia and the Russians, in the period of Peter the Great, in their first conquest, could easily reach the city. (Vazirov, *ibid*: 45 and 46; Bartold, *ibid*: 46 and 47).

Undermining the political sovereignty of Safavid, some of the border states and cities of Iran were attacked by the Uzbeks and other nomadic ethnic groups or bandits. Coastal cities of Mazandaran Sea (Caspian), due to military and political weaknesses of Safavid government and its incompetent rulers were robbed Kazakhs, especially Stankarazin. Stankarazin, since 1078 (LYOH) / 1667 AD, in several occasions, attacked Farahabad, Rasht, Baku, and Astarābād. Due to the coastal location of Darband, this town was also favored by Kazakhs and was attack by them; instead, no serious steps were taken by the Safavid government to deal with the Kazakhs. Safavid

Shah did not make any correct and logical analysis of the causes and how to prevent them from plundering. Shah Safavi thought that the campaign of «infidel Kazaks» – Stenkarazin – was not done by Moscow government, and they, without the consent of Russian Tsar-Tsar Alexei, who had good relations with Iran at that time-took this action. Therefore, the King feared that the Kazakhs could find allies in the coasts of Mazandaran Sea (Caspian). (Pigolouskaya et al., *ibid*: 595) Later on, by the insistence of Shah Soleiman Safavid, Russian Tsar arrested Stenkarazin and executed him in Moscow. (*ibid*, Berian Shani Nov, 1978: 102) Revealing the political weakness of the Safavid government at this time, Darband and Shervan continued to be governed by this government, and were ruled by its rulers and agents. Shah Sultan Hussein, coming to power, (1135–1105 (LYOH) / 1722–1687 AD) political weakness of the Safavid state reached its peak. Religiously, religious and legal fightings, along with the impact that they had on the Safavid court, some cities and states of the Safavid were also changed in relation with it. Shah Sultan Hussein was so helpless and weak that he was ignored by scholars and even could control his authority. (Roger Savori, *ibid*: 238).

Political and religious conflicts in Caucasus region showed itself. Absence of an Authoritarian ruler supervision of Safavid caused the development religious differences between Dagestan and the Caucasus Shi'ite with the Sunni population. Shiites were settled in urban centers and coastal regions and Sunnis in the mountains. Rising differences among them caused that the mountainous Sunni residents of Dagestan raid Derbent and Shervan and fire their villages and cities. Because of these political conflicts and lack of supervision and influence of the Safavid government to finish the happening unrests, some of the rulers of Dagestan and Caucasus asked Peter the Great to be protectorate of Russia. Russians, who were waiting for such a suitable ground, regarding the downfall of Isfahan in 1135 (LYOH) / 1722 AD, crossed the northern Dagestan and occupied some cities of southern Dagestan. (Gadjiev, 2003: 55, 56) According to some historical texts and documents remaining, people, community groups, and merchants of Caucasus were so dissatisfied with the Safavid government that, with their own will, gave the keys of some cities such as Darband to Peter. According to Vazirov, many elders, scholars, and businessmen of Darband accepted the entrance of Peter with joy and gave the keys of all the cities to him. (Vazirov, *ibid*: 42). According to the available reports, during the years 1135–1136 (LYOH) / 1722–1723 AD, after occupying Darband and Baku, Peter refused further movement inside Iran's territory and occupying other parts of Caucasus and Baku. Till, after the contract in 1136 (LYOH) / 1723 AD in St. Petersburg with Shah Tahmasb II, Darband, Baku, Shervan (Shirvan), Guilan, Mazandaran, and Astarābād were given to Russia; in exchange, Russians, in the next year, in 1137 (LYOH) / 1724 AD, by signing a contract in Istanbul, formally gained the confirmation of the Ottoman in occupying these lands, and the Ottomans occupied the western parts of Caucasus and Dagestan. Joining of Darband and other territories to Iran until 1148 (LYOH) / 1734 AD, when Nader was able to seize Caucasus, was postponed. (Jan Outer, 1884: 128–130)

### Conclusion

In Safavid era, Darband, in addition to geographical and military importance, due to the Safavid rule and requirements that they give to it, took considerable interest in the region. Safavid government faced a lot of problems because of favoring the Shi'a religion and its extension to Caucasus, because most Caucasian people were Christians or Sunnis; its geographical and mountainous conditions caused slow progress of Shi'ism in this region; so, the natural geography of Darband caused the Safavid government to easily manipulate the city, and achieve its political goals by the migration of the Qizilbash tribes, and promote Shi'ism. Darband, in Safavid period, was considered as one of the key centers to protect Caucasus and confront the possible riots against the enemies of this government.

Another importance of Darband was changing this city to a center of Caucasus silk trade, especially Shervan (Shirvan); many great traders from Caucasus, Darband, and especially Russia worked in this city and Safavid government earned high income. Russians, according to the military and economic importance of Darband, in their plan to occupy the coasts of Mazandaran Sea (Caspian), had considered this city a lot; even in

the first movement, Peter the Great, to achieve the beaches and towns in Iran, occupied Darband. Obtaining Darband by the Russians was easily done, because people and businessmen of the city were dissatisfied with Safavid government agents and wanted to obey any government other than the Safavid.

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