

OTTOMAN-SAFAVID DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE HISTORY OF AZERBAIJAN

OSMANLI-SAFEVİ DİPLOMATİK İLİŞKİLERİ VE AZERBAIJAN TARİHİNDEKİ ROLÜ

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Özet

Bu makalede XVI-XVII. yüzyıllarda Osmanlı-Safevi ilişkileri, Azerbaycan tarihindeki siyasi, ekonomik ve kültürel sonuçlarıyla birlikte ele alınmaktadır. Çalışmanın amacı, 1501-1639 yılları arasındaki başlıca askerî ve diplomatik gelişmeleri izlemek ve bu sürecin Azerbaycan'ın jeopolitik konumu, sınır bölgeleri, şehir hayatı, ticaret yolları ve kültürel ilişkileri üzerindeki etkisini değerlendirmektir. Araştırmada karşılaştırmalı-tarihsel ve problem-kronolojik yöntemlerden yararlanılmış, Azerbaycan, Türk ve Batı tarih yazımındaki çalışmalar karşılaştırmalı biçimde incelenmiştir. Osmanlı-Safevi ilişkileri yalnızca savaşlar ve mezhep farklılıkları üzerinden değil; elçilik heyetleri, hükümdarlar arası yazışmalar, barış antlaşmaları, sınır sorunları, ticari çıkarlar ve diplomatik hediye alışverişi üzerinden de değerlendirilmiştir. Çaldıran Savaşı'ndan sonra şekillenen siyasi ortam ile Amasya (1555), İstanbul (1590), Nasuh Paşa (1612), Serav (1618) ve Kasr-ı Şirin (1639) antlaşmalarının Azerbaycan açısından taşıdığı anlam üzerinde özellikle durulmuştur. İnceleme, tarihî Azerbaycan topraklarının iki imparatorluk arasındaki mücadelede yalnızca bir savaş alanı olmadığını, aynı zamanda diplomasi ve bölgesel ticaret bakımından da önemli bir konuma sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. Uzun süren savaşlar bazı bölgelerde yönetim değişikliklerine, nüfus hareketlerine, ekonomik kayıplara ve güvenlik sorunlarına yol açmıştır. Buna karşılık barış dönemleri, ticaret yollarının

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yeniden işlemesine, sınır bölgelerinde görece istikrarın sağlanmasına ve şehirlerin ekonomik hayatının toparlanmasına imkân vermiştir. Özellikle 1639’dan sonra başlayan uzun barış dönemi, sınır sorunlarının daha çok diplomatik yollarla çözülmesini ve elçilik temaslarının düzenli hâle gelmesini sağlamıştır. Bu dönemde merkezî yönetimlerin yanı sıra sınır yöneticileri, yerel aşiretler ve tüccarlar da iki devlet arasındaki ilişkilerin sürdürülmesinde etkili olmuştur. Böylece diplomasi yalnızca saraylar arasında yürütülen bir süreç olmaktan çıkmış, sınır bölgelerindeki günlük hayatı ve ekonomik düzeni de doğrudan etkilemiştir. Tabriz, Erdebil, Nahçıvan, Gence ve Şamahı gibi şehirlerin ekonomik hayatı, Anadolu ve daha geniş bölgesel pazarlara uzanan yolların güvenliğiyle doğrudan bağlantılıydı. İpek ticareti, kervan yolları, diplomatik hediyeler, sanat eserleri ve zanaatkârların hareketliliği de siyasi ilişkilerin önemli bir parçasıydı. Sonuç olarak Osmanlı-Safevi diplomasisi, Azerbaycan’ın jeopolitik konumunun, idari tecrübesinin, ekonomik ilişkilerinin, kültürel temaslarının ve tarihsel hafızasının şekillenmesinde uzun süreli bir rol oynamıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Osmanlı İmparatorluğu; Safevi Devleti; diplomasi; Azerbaycan tarihi; Amasya Barışı; Kasr-ı Şirin Antlaşması.

Abstract

This article examines Ottoman-Safavid relations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through their political, economic, and cultural consequences for Azerbaijan. It focuses on the main military and diplomatic developments between 1501 and 1639 and considers how they affected Azerbaijan’s geopolitical position, frontier regions, urban life, trade routes, and cultural contacts. The article uses a comparative-historical and problem-chronological approach and draws on Azerbaijani, Turkish, and Western historiography. Ottoman-Safavid relations are discussed not only in terms of warfare and sectarian rivalry, but also through embassy missions, royal correspondence, peace treaties, frontier disputes, commercial interests, and the exchange of diplomatic gifts. Particular attention is given to the political situation after the Battle of Chaldiran and to the importance of the treaties of Amasya (1555), Istanbul (1590), Nasuh Pasha (1612), Sarab (1618), and Zuhab/Qasr-e Shirin (1639) for Azerbaijan. The analysis shows that the territories of historical Azerbaijan were not simply battlefields between two empires; they were also important spaces of diplomacy and regional trade. Long periods of war brought changes of authority, population movement, economic losses, and insecurity in several regions. Periods of peace, however, allowed trade routes to recover, created more stable conditions along the frontier, and supported the revival of urban economic life. The long peace that followed the Treaty of Zuhab in 1639 made it possible to manage many frontier problems through diplomacy

rather than open warfare and helped regularise embassy contacts. The economic life of cities such as Tabriz, Ardabil, Nakhchivan, Ganja, and Shamakhi was closely tied to the security of routes leading toward Anatolia and wider regional markets. Silk trade, caravan routes, diplomatic gifts, works of art, and the movement of craftsmen were also closely connected with political relations. The article argues that Ottoman-Safavid diplomacy had a lasting influence on Azerbaijan's geopolitical position, administrative experience, economic networks, cultural contacts, and historical memory.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire; Safavid State; diplomacy; history of Azerbaijan; Peace of Amasya; Treaty of Zuhab.

Introduction

The emergence of the Safavid state at the beginning of the sixteenth century created a new balance of power in the political system of the Near and Middle East. In 1501, Shah Ismail I proclaimed his rule in Tabriz, and the state formed under his leadership soon developed into an imperial power extending its influence across Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq, and the South Caucasus. This expansion intersected with the interests of the Ottoman state, which was simultaneously advancing toward Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and the Caucasus. Consequently, relations between the two states were shaped by the interaction of several factors: military rivalry, competing claims to political legitimacy, sectarian mobilisation, border security, and control over international trade routes (Savory, 1980, p. 1-2; Newman, 2009, p. 8-10).

The subject is especially important for the history of Azerbaijan because Tabriz, Shirvan, Karabakh, Nakhchivan, Chukhur-Saad, and other historical regions directly experienced the consequences of wars, embassy missions, and peace settlements. Azerbaijani cities were at times targets of military campaigns, while at other times they functioned as centres of negotiation, taxation, trade, and frontier administration. The studies of Ogtay Efendiyev and Namig Musali emphasise the role of the Azerbaijani political environment, the Qizilbash tribal confederations, and Tabriz in the formation of the Safavid state (Efendiyev, 2007, p. 44-45, 92; Musali, 2011, p. 87-88). Tofiq Najafli, in turn, compares interpretations of Ottoman-Safavid relations in Turkish historiography and demonstrates that these relations cannot be adequately explained solely within the framework of religious confrontation (Najafli, 2014, p. 15-34, 67-75).

Unlike approaches that treat Ottoman-Safavid relations primarily as a sequence of military conflicts, this article considers their consequences for Azerbaijan through the combined perspective of diplomacy, frontier administration, trade, and cultural exchange. Particular

attention is given to the position of Azerbaijani regions as both contested territories and active spaces of political and economic interaction.

Research Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this study is to identify the principal stages of Ottoman-Safavid diplomatic relations and to assess their political, socio-economic, and cultural consequences for the history of Azerbaijan. Using comparative-historical and problem-chronological approaches, the period of confrontation from 1501 to 1639 is compared with the phase of relative stabilisation after 1639. The source-critical analysis draws on Azerbaijani, Turkish, and Western historiography. In this article, diplomacy is understood as a form of political communication that includes treaties, embassy missions, royal correspondence, the settlement of frontier disputes, commercial interests, and the symbolic exchange of gifts.

Particular attention is given to the role of Azerbaijani regions not only as territories of military confrontation, but also as spaces of diplomatic negotiation, trade, and cultural interaction. This approach makes it possible to assess Ottoman-Safavid relations from the perspective of their direct political and socio-economic consequences for Azerbaijan.

From Confrontation to Diplomatic Recognition: 1501-1555

During the first stage, tensions were intensified by Safavid propaganda among supporters in Anatolia, the political activity of the Qizilbash movement, the mobility of frontier tribes, and the universal claims to legitimacy advanced by both dynasties. The Ottoman government considered the growth of Safavid influence along its eastern frontier a matter of internal security, whereas the Safavids used their religious and political links with Anatolian Turkmen communities as a strategic resource. These tensions culminated in the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. Although the battle demonstrated the Ottoman army's superiority in firearms and artillery, it neither destroyed the Safavid state nor ended the long-term rivalry between the two powers (Savory, 1980, p. 42-46; Newman, 2009, p. 20-25).

After Chaldiran, Safavid strategy gave greater importance to avoiding open-field battles, applying scorched-earth tactics, disrupting the logistics of Ottoman campaigns, and using negotiations to gain time. During the reign of Shah Tahmasp I, flexible defence and diplomatic delay were employed in response to successive Ottoman expeditions. The Peace of Amasya of 1555 was the central outcome of this stage. As the first formal peace agreement concluded between the Ottoman and Safavid states, it opened the way for the parties to recognise one another in practice as legitimate political actors. The peace lasted for approximately two decades and created a legal framework for frontier relations (Savory, 1980, p. 63-64).

The importance of the Peace of Amasya for Azerbaijani history was not limited to territorial arrangements. The suspension of warfare facilitated the partial restoration of trade routes toward Shirvan and Tabriz, contributed to greater stability in everyday life, and strengthened the capacity of central authorities to administer the provinces. At the same time, because the agreement did not establish a precisely demarcated frontier, disputes over tribal territories, fortresses, and mountain passes continued. Peace therefore did not eliminate conflict; rather, it transferred a significant part of the rivalry into diplomatic and administrative channels.

The Changing Rhythm of War and Negotiation: 1555-1639

The war that resumed in 1578 was connected with the Ottoman attempt to expand its position toward the Caucasus and the Caspian region. The Treaty of Istanbul, also known as the Treaty of Ferhad Pasha, concluded in 1590, produced severe political consequences for the Safavids. Several areas of Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus temporarily came under Ottoman control. However, the military and administrative reforms introduced by Shah Abbas I altered the balance of power. Safavid counteroffensives beginning in 1603 restored most of the lost territories. The Treaty of Nasuh Pasha of 1612 generally provided for a return to the frontiers established at Amasya, while economic obligations, particularly the delivery of silk, became an important element of diplomatic bargaining (Newman, 2009, p. 52-62; Savory, 1980, p. 85-88).

The Treaty of Sarab of 1618 confirmed earlier arrangements with certain modifications, yet competition over Baghdad and frontier fortresses continued. The war of 1623-1639 imposed substantial financial and human costs on both states. The Treaty of Zuhab, also known as the Treaty of Qasr-e Shirin, concluded in 1639, confirmed Baghdad under Ottoman control and contributed to a more stable division of influence in the Caucasian direction. Although the treaty did not create a precisely mapped border in the modern sense, it became the principal reference point for subsequent relations between the two empires (Savory, 1980, p. 88-89, 202; Newman, 2009, p. 74-77).

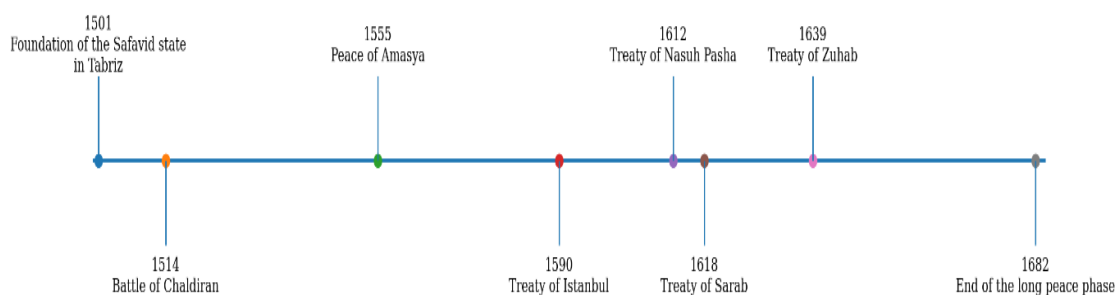
A major characteristic of diplomacy in this period was the conversion of military outcomes into legal and symbolic forms through negotiation. The ceremonial reception of ambassadors, the titles and forms of address used in royal correspondence, and the quality and quantity of exchanged gifts all reflected disputes over rank and political status. Arcak Casale (2023, p. 31-66, 177-216) demonstrates that gift exchange was not merely an act of courtesy; it functioned as a diplomatic language communicating imperial hierarchy, political intention, and claims of cultural superiority.

Table 1. Major treaties in Ottoman-Safavid relations and their significance for the history of Azerbaijan

Treaty	Diplomatic outcome	Significance for Azerbaijani history
Amasya, 1555	First formal peace; practical political recognition of the parties and a legal framework for frontier relations.	A pause in warfare, partial restoration of trade routes, and more stable provincial administration.
Istanbul (Ferhad Pasha), 1590	Formalisation of temporary Ottoman superiority in the Caucasus and Azerbaijan	Changes of authority in several cities and regions, accompanied by increased taxation and population movement.
Nasuh Pasha, 1612	General return to the Amasya frontiers; expansion of economic diplomacy through the silk obligation.	Greater strategic importance of the Tabriz-Shamakhi-Anatolia commercial route.
Sarab, 1618	Confirmation of earlier agreements with modifications and a temporary stabilisation.	Reorganisation of administrative control over frontier fortresses and passes.
Zuhab (Qasr-e Shirin), 1639	Settlement of the Baghdad question and establishment of the foundations of long-term peace.	A more stable environment for security and regional trade in Azerbaijan's western and south-western directions.

Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of Savory (1980, p. 63-64, 85-89, 202), Newman (2009, p. 52-62, 74-77), Najafli (2014, p. 67-75), and Güngörürler (2024, p. 1-15, 36-89).

Figure 1. Principal stages of Ottoman-Safavid diplomatic relations, 1501-1682



Source: Prepared by the author.

Diplomacy, Border Administration, and Cultural Exchange after 1639

Following the Peace of Zuhab, the possibility of renewed war did not disappear completely, but relations were increasingly managed through the exchange of embassies, the localisation of border incidents, and established rules of protocol. Güngörürler's study of the period from 1639 to 1682 shows that the long peace was not a passive condition; it was the result of continuous diplomatic labour. Frontier governors, local tribal leaders, merchants, and religious pilgrimage routes became important intermediaries affecting the policies of the central governments (Güngörürler, 2024, p. 1-35, 90-140).

This stabilisation was particularly significant for the regions of Azerbaijan. The economic life of cities such as Tabriz, Ardabil, Nakhchivan, Ganja, and Shamakhi depended on the security of routes connecting them with markets in Anatolia, the Black Sea region, and the Mediterranean. More predictable rules at frontier crossings benefited caravan trade, handicraft production, and tax revenues. At the same time, diplomatic gifts, works of art, carpets, manuscripts, and the movement of craftsmen intensified cultural interaction. Arcak Casale (2023, p. 31-66, 177-216) shows that artistic and material exchange did not cease even during periods of warfare; instead, it remained an important instrument of political communication.

The Role of Ottoman-Safavid Diplomacy in the History of Azerbaijan

First, Ottoman-Safavid relations were among the principal factors determining Azerbaijan's geopolitical position. Because historical Azerbaijan lay at the intersection of east-west and north-south routes, it served simultaneously as a strategic resource, a diplomatic corridor, and a space of economic exchange. The political fate of Tabriz, Shirvan, Karabakh, and Nakhchivan was directly connected with campaigns and treaties; therefore, the region's political history cannot be explained separately from inter-imperial relations.

Second, rivalry accelerated the strengthening of centralised government and military-administrative systems. Frontier beylerbeyliks, fortresses, and the control of roads acquired greater importance, affecting the conduct of local elites, the settlement of tribes, tax collection, and urban-rural relations. Although warfare was destructive, periods of diplomatic stability created opportunities for reconstruction and the renewal of economic activity.

Third, these relations clearly reveal the interaction of religion and politics. Sectarian difference functioned as an instrument of legitimacy and mobilisation, but silk obligations, the question of Baghdad, frontier fortresses, and trade routes exposed the political and economic foundations of the rivalry. Reducing the conflict solely to a Sunni-Shia confrontation therefore oversimplifies the historical picture (Najafli, 2014, p. 67-75; Newman, 2009, p. 8-10, 52-62).

Fourth, diplomatic experience influenced the formation of historical memory. Chaldiran, Amasya, and Zuhab became central reference points in discussions of statehood, territory, political choice, and the balance of power.

Conclusion

Ottoman-Safavid relations constituted one of the most persistent rivalries in the history of the Near East during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, their development cannot be explained solely through warfare and sectarian confrontation. From Amasya to Zuhab, military competition was accompanied by negotiations, embassy missions, economic obligations, and ceremonial protocol. Diplomacy therefore became an important mechanism for managing rivalry and transforming military outcomes into political and legal arrangements.

For Azerbaijan, these relations had consequences that went beyond changes of political control. Wars affected population movement, urban economies, trade routes, and local administration, while periods of peace created conditions for greater stability and the recovery of regional exchange. The Azerbaijani territories thus functioned not only as contested frontier zones, but also as important spaces of diplomacy, commerce, and cultural contact. In this sense, Ottoman-Safavid diplomacy played a lasting role in shaping Azerbaijan's geopolitical position, administrative experience, economic networks, and historical memory.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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