



The Struggle for Independence Led by Mirwais Khan Hotak in Kandahar and the Defeat of Gurgin

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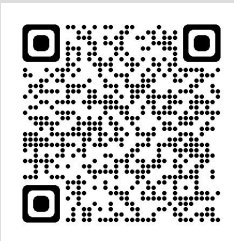
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Abstract: Mirwais Khan Hotak stands out as one of the most important Afghan leaders of the early eighteenth century. He led the movement that brought independence to Kandahar at a time when Safavid rule was widely viewed as oppressive, marked by corruption, heavy pressure, and religious intolerance. Rather than responding only with armed confrontation, Mirwais Khan approached resistance in a thoughtful and organized manner. He understood the importance of unity among tribal leaders, consultation with influential figures, and the support of religious scholars to give his movement legitimacy and broad public backing. This study uses a historical-analytical approach, relying on both primary historical accounts and modern scholarly works to explore his leadership and political thinking. Through careful examination of events, decisions, and their consequences, the research highlights how Mirwais Khan combined political strategy, social organization, and military action to build a stable foundation for independence.

The findings suggest that his success was not simply the result of rebellion, but of careful planning and an understanding of Afghan social structures. By strengthening internal unity and seeking moral and religious justification for his actions, he was able to establish a new political order in Kandahar. Mirwais Khan's leadership had a lasting influence, shaping early Afghan state formation and contributing to the development of national identity. His experience offers valuable insight into how resistance, legitimacy, and political organization interact in times of crisis.

Keywords: *Mirwais Khan Hotak, Afghan Resistance, Kandahar, Safavid Empire, Afghan Independence Movement, Gurgin Khan.*

Introduction:

Periods of crisis frequently result in widespread destruction, suffering, and uncertainty, yet they may also foster the emergence of strong leadership. When societies experience significant pressure, certain individuals are able to guide their communities through adversity and alter historical trajectories. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, continuing into the early eighteenth century, represented such turbulent periods in Afghanistan's history. Throughout these centuries, much of the country was dominated by external powers, leading to a significant decline in local autonomy. For nearly three centuries, various regions of Afghanistan remained under foreign influence or occupation. Notably, several decades prior to the French Revolution

(1789), Afghans succeeded in liberating parts of their homeland from foreign domination, providing an early example of organized resistance and political self-determination.

In the western regions, Safavid Persia exercised authority for many years. Over time, dissatisfaction grew among the population, particularly as governance became increasingly oppressive. In the early eighteenth century, the Safavid court appointed a governor named Gurgin to Kandahar. His harsh administration and rigid policies further deepened resentment among the people. It was within this atmosphere of tension and injustice that Mirwais Khan Hotak began to take on a more active role in public affairs.

Mirwais Khan's approach to resistance was not impulsive or reckless. He acted with patience and calculation, carefully studying both the strengths and weaknesses of Safavid authority. As a tribal leader, he maintained contact with the local administration and gained a firsthand understanding of its internal problems. At the same time, he traveled to the Safavid court in Isfahan, where he presented the concerns of Kandahar's people directly to the Shah. Through trade networks and personal connections, he gradually built awareness and support for reform and, eventually, independence.

Over time, Mirwais Khan secured allies and strengthened his position both locally and at the Safavid court. Although he was at one point sent to Persia under restrictive circumstances, he ultimately returned to Kandahar with increased recognition and influence. During his travels, he also sought religious approval for resistance, obtaining supportive opinions from respected scholars. His efforts culminated in a carefully organized movement that led to the independence of Kandahar in 1709. Notably, he did not immediately claim royal authority, but instead presented himself as a leader acting on behalf of his people. He remained in this role until he died in 1715, leaving behind a legacy that shaped early Afghan state formation.

Significance of the Study

Mirwais Khan Nika, widely recognized in historical sources as Mirwais Khan Hotak, ranks among the most influential political and military leaders in Afghanistan's modern history. There remains a significant need to investigate the lesser-explored aspects of his life, particularly his political, military, and social struggles, which have received limited attention in existing scholarship. The independence of the southwestern regions was achieved through his wisdom, prudence, sacrifice, and leadership. This study aims to clarify and illuminate his historical status and significance, thereby enabling future generations to better understand the contributions of authentic national leaders.

Research Objective:

The fundamental objective of this scholarly research article is, to the extent possible, to comprehensively examine the personality of Mirwais Nika (Mirwais Khan Hotak) and, under his leadership, the independence of Kandahar and its surrounding regions from the occupying Safavid state in its true and multidimensional sense.

Research Methodology:

This academic research article employs descriptive, analytical, and historical research methods. Efforts have been made to adhere to established academic research principles throughout the study.

Research Questions:

How can the personality of Mirwais Nika (Mirwais Khan Hotak) be examined comprehensively? During his lifetime, through which tactics and principles did he advance his political and military struggle? What political and historical transformations occurred in Afghanistan's destiny as a result of this struggle?

Literature Review

Several historians have examined the rise of Mirwais Khan Hotak and the decline of Safavid authority in Kandahar. Gholam Mohammad Ghubar highlights the political fragmentation of Afghanistan after the Timurid period and emphasizes the strategic importance of Kandahar in regional power struggles. Mohammad Sadiq Farhang also discusses the political and military circumstances that enabled the emergence of Mirwais Khan as a national leader. Abdulhai Habibi and Abdul Rauf Benawa provide detailed accounts of Mirwais Khan's biography and the formation of the Hotak movement.

Modern scholars such as Mohammad Hasan Kakar analyze the uprising within the broader framework of Afghan resistance to foreign domination. Despite these studies, many aspects of Mirwais Khan's political strategy, diplomatic actions, and use of tribal unity remain insufficiently examined. This study seeks to address these gaps by analyzing his leadership through historical and analytical perspectives.

Biography of Mirwais Khan Nika

The central figure of the Hotak movement was Mirwais Khan, widely known as Mirwais Nika. He was the son of Shah Alam Khan and the grandson of Karam Khan. Although many historians have written about his life and achievements, reliable and detailed information about his early life remains limited. Much of what is known comes from later historical accounts rather than firmly documented primary records.

Mirwais Nika was born into a respected and influential family. On his mother's side, his grandfather Sultan Malakhai Tokhi served as governor of Ghazni and Qalat, and his authority was formally acknowledged by the Mughal administration in India. His mother, Nazo Ana, is remembered in Afghan tradition as a woman of strong character who played an important role in shaping his moral outlook and intellectual development. Under the guidance of recognized scholars of his time, Mirwais received education in literacy and the religious and intellectual sciences then prevalent in the region (Hotak, p. 22).

Those who wrote about him often describe him as calm, thoughtful, and deliberate in his actions. He was known for his determination and for the strength of his character. His ability to speak persuasively proved especially valuable during his interactions with officials at the Safavid court in Isfahan, where he sought to build support against the harsh policies of Governor Gurgin. Before the idea of open independence took shape, Mirwais was involved in trade between India and Iran under his father's supervision. This experience, combined with his family's social standing and economic stability, helped shape his practical skills and broaden his perspective.

His social position grew further after his marriage into the Sadozai family, which strengthened his connections among influential Afghan groups. These personal, social, and economic factors contributed to his acceptance as a leader during a critical period in Afghan history. At a time of political tension and growing dissatisfaction with Safavid rule, Mirwais Khan raised the call for independence in the southwestern regions and ultimately succeeded in liberating Kandahar and laying the foundation for a new political order (Benawa, p. 9).

Historical Context of Kandahar

Kandahar occupied a strategically important position between Persia, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. For centuries, it served as a crossroads of trade routes linking Iran, India, and Central Asia. Because of this strategic location, it frequently became the object of rivalry between regional powers, particularly the Safavid and Mughal empires. Control of Kandahar allowed access to important commercial networks and military routes. Consequently, the political instability of the region during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries created

conditions that enabled local leaders such as Mirwais Khan Hotak to mobilize resistance against foreign domination.

The Uprising of Mirwais Nika

In 1505, the Timurid rule in Herat came to an end. With the سقوط of the Timurid state, the region historically known as Khorasan—encompassing much of present-day Afghanistan—lost its political unity and was gradually divided among competing powers. The northern provinces fell under the control of the Shaybanid rulers. In the east, the emerging Mughal Empire extended its authority over territories reaching as far as Kandahar. Meanwhile, the western regions, including Kandahar and Herat, came under Safavid Persian rule. As these foreign powers consolidated control, Afghanistan's political cohesion weakened, and its economic and social foundations suffered. Infrastructure such as irrigation systems, roads, and educational institutions declined under shifting and often exploitative administrations (Zadran, p. 93).

Within this broader context, the Safavid state appointed Gurgin as governor of Kandahar. Originally from Georgia, he had rebelled against Persian authority, was later captured, and accepted Islam. Shah Husayn granted him the title Shahnawaz and sent him to Kandahar with a large military force. His administration quickly gained a reputation for severity. Reports describe heavy taxation, strict control, and harsh treatment of local populations. As dissatisfaction grew, many inhabitants began looking for a leader who could represent their grievances and defend their interests. In this atmosphere, Mirwais Khan Hotak gradually emerged as a central figure.

Rather than immediately resorting to confrontation, Mirwais initially adopted a cautious and diplomatic approach. He cultivated outward cordial relations with Gurgin and gained his confidence. Through careful conduct and political awareness, he positioned himself as a trusted intermediary. On Gurgin's recommendation, he traveled to Isfahan, the Safavid capital, where he secured formal recognition of his standing among the Pashtun tribes.

As conditions in Kandahar worsened, Mirwais discreetly arranged for tribal representatives to present complaints directly to the Safavid court regarding Gurgin's administration (Habibi, p. 247). When Gurgin learned of these actions, he was angered but hesitant to act openly against Mirwais because of his strong tribal influence. Eventually, Mirwais and several other Afghan figures were sent to Isfahan under accusations of unrest.

By this time, the Safavid administration itself was weakened by internal rivalries and factional competition. Mirwais Khan recognized these vulnerabilities. Supported by his financial resources, political skill, and an understanding of court dynamics, he gradually built relationships with influential officials, particularly those opposed to Gurgin. Over time, he gained the Shah's trust and increased his influence within the court. His later visit to Isfahan marked another stage in this careful political maneuvering (Hamidullah, p. 141).

Journey to Hajj

After Mirwais Khan Hotak was declared innocent at the Safavid court, he requested permission from Shah Husayn to travel. He explained that he was unwell, exhausted by worldly affairs, and deeply wished to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. He assured the Shah that after completing Hajj, he would return. Because Shah Husayn was personally devoted to religious observance, he granted this request without hesitation.

Mirwais Khan set out for the Hijaz with a small group of companions. In Mecca and later in Medina, he met respected scholars and religious authorities. During these visits, he presented the situation of Kandahar and the oppression of its people. According to historical accounts, the scholars responded favorably and issued religious opinions supporting the right of his people to

defend their homeland and remove unjust rule (Zamani, p. 54). These religious endorsements strengthened the moral and spiritual legitimacy of his cause.

After completing Hajj, Mirwais returned to Isfahan. He brought gifts from Mecca and distributed them among influential figures at the Safavid court, further strengthening his reputation. Rather than rushing toward open confrontation, he chose to remain in Isfahan for some time, carefully reinforcing the Shah's trust in him. Meanwhile, internal divisions within the Safavid administration deepened, and opposition to Governor Gurgin grew. These conditions worked in Mirwais Khan's favor.

Eventually, he sought permission to return to Kandahar. By this stage, the court viewed him as an important intermediary. Suspicion toward Gurgin had increased, but the Shah feared that dismissing him outright might provoke rebellion. As a result, Mirwais was sent back to Kandahar as an adviser and representative, with official letters instructing Gurgin to consult him in all major matters (Rahmand, p. 194; Ataye, p. 18).

Mirwais returned not as a prisoner but with authority and recognition. He was warmly welcomed by Afghan tribes and communities. Soon after, he convened jirgas—tribal councils—in Zabul and later near Kandahar, where leading figures swore unity upon the Qur'an. A coordinated strategy was adopted: certain tribes would refuse taxes, while others prepared for mobilization (Benawa, p. 76).

When tensions escalated, Mirwais skillfully misled Gurgin into believing he remained loyal. Meanwhile, Afghan forces quietly prepared. At Deh Sheikh in Arghasan, during a banquet hosted by Mirwais, Gurgin and his close commanders were killed in 1709. Afghan fighters simultaneously secured key positions and eliminated remaining Safavid forces in Kandahar (Hotak, p. 169).

After liberating the city, Mirwais addressed the people, emphasizing that his actions were solely for the country's independence. Presenting the religious decree from the Hijaz, he was chosen as leader but never claimed kingship, adopting instead the title of national leader (Benawa, p. 43) instead.

Despite Safavid attempts to retake Kandahar through multiple military expeditions, Afghan forces successfully defended their independence (Pajhwak, p. 329). Mirwais also sought diplomatic recognition from the Mughal court to secure regional support (Farhang, p. 216). He led from 1709 until he died in 1715 at the age of forty-three, earning the enduring title "Neka" in recognition of his service (Ghubar, p. 327).

Discussion

The uprising led by Mirwais Khan Hotak illustrates how political legitimacy, tribal unity, and religious authority can combine to produce successful resistance movements. Unlike spontaneous revolts, Mirwais Khan's strategy involved careful preparation, diplomatic engagement with the Safavid court, and the securing of religious approval from scholars in the Hijaz.

His leadership demonstrates the importance of balancing diplomacy and military action. By initially maintaining relations with Safavid authorities, he gained time to organize tribal alliances and understand the internal weaknesses of Safavid administration. At the same time, his emphasis on collective decision-making through jirgas strengthened internal cohesion among Afghan tribes. This combination of political foresight and social organization played a decisive role in the success of the Kandahar uprising and contributed to the emergence of the Hotak State.

Limitations of the Study

This study relies primarily on historical narratives and previously published sources. The availability of primary archival documents concerning Mirwais Khan's early life and political activities remains limited. Future research may benefit from a comparative analysis of Persian, Mughal, and Afghan historical sources to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the political dynamics of the period.

Conclusion

The findings of this research indicate that after 1505, Afghanistan ceased to function as a unified and independent political entity. Instead, its territories were divided among three dominant regional powers. This prolonged period of foreign control weakened the country's political cohesion and disrupted its economic, social, and cultural institutions. Infrastructure deteriorated, and local autonomy was significantly reduced. Throughout these centuries, various leaders in different regions attempted to resist external domination. In the eastern areas, figures such as Pir Roshan, Khushal Khan Khattak, Aimal Khan, and Darya Khan struggled for independence, but their efforts did not result in lasting political sovereignty.

In contrast, the southwestern regions witnessed a more decisive outcome under the leadership of Mirwais Khan Hotak. After enduring sustained pressure and conflict, Afghan forces succeeded in liberating Kandahar and the surrounding areas, extending influence toward Balochistan. Through careful planning, consultation with tribal leaders, and broad public support, Mirwais Khan laid the foundations of a new political order that reflected local authority and collective participation. His leadership combined strategic foresight with social cohesion, enabling the establishment of what later became known as the Hotak state.

The study further shows that following independence, Mirwais Khan sought diplomatic engagement beyond Afghanistan's borders. By sending a representative to the Mughal court in India, he aimed to secure recognition and build stable relations with neighboring powers. After his death, the Hotak state expanded under his successors, who captured Isfahan, the Safavid capital, and for a period exercised authority there.

At the domestic level, the independence movement demonstrated the strong resistance of Afghan society to sustained foreign domination. Mirwais Khan's role in this struggle significantly enhanced his reputation among supporters of autonomy and self-rule. At the same time, opposing narratives emerged, particularly from writers aligned with Safavid perspectives. Nevertheless, the broader historical outcome confirmed that the independence movement reshaped regional power dynamics and contributed to the decline of Safavid authority. Under Mirwais Khan's leadership, Afghanistan re-emerged as an independent political entity during a pivotal moment in its history.

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Ethical Statement

This research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic and ethical standards. The study is based entirely on historical documents, published literature, and scholarly sources. No human participants, personal data, or confidential materials were involved in the research process. All sources used in this study have been properly cited and acknowledged.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research article. The study was conducted independently without any financial or institutional influence that could affect the interpretation of the findings.

Author Contribution

The author was solely responsible for all stages of the research process, including the conceptualization of the study, data collection, analysis of historical sources, writing of the manuscript, and final revision of the article.

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