War and Peace in Qajar Persia

Persia Felix could never have been a phrase coined to describe modern Iran. Her lot since the period of the Qajars has been to stand in the crossfire of great power politics.

In this collection, a new debate takes place on the approach of the Qajar system (1796–1925) within the context of the wars that engulfed it and the quality of the peace that ensued. Consistent with the pattern of history, much of the material available until now on the Qajar era, particularly as regards its responses to crisis, its military preparedness and the social organization of its borderlands, was written by the victors of the wars. This volume, in contrast, throws new light on the decision-making processes, the restraints on action and the political, economic and social exigencies at play through analysis that looks at the Persian question from the inside looking out. The results are often surprising, as what they reveal is a Persia more astute politically than previous analysis has allowed, strategically more adept at spurning the multiple interventions and intrigues on all sides in the heat of the Great Game, and shrewd at negotiating in the face of the severe economic pressures being brought to bear by the Great Powers.

Although history reconceived does not paint a purely rosy picture of the Qajars, it does offer a reassessment based on Persia’s geopolitical position, the frequently unpalatable options it had to choose from, and the strategic need to protect its resources. Today, events in Iran and Western Asia appear to echo many of the power plays of the nineteenth-century’s Great Game. States of the region are again seeking advantage over their neighbours; the issue of oil nationalism is at the top of the agenda as it was in the early twentieth century, and great power dominance, indeed intervention, has become a central theme. The essays in this volume make it clear that an understanding of how policies were formulated during the Qajar era can provide a historical dimension to current analysis of the region, as similar circumstances today may be engendering like responses.

This volume makes an important contribution to the effort of rewriting the historical record. It is a revisionism that is overdue not only in respect to an era that in itself has been understudied and misunderstood, but that carries significant linkages to present-day conditions.

Roxane Farmanfarmaian is completing her PhD at the Centre of International Studies at the University of Cambridge, where she served as editor of the Cambridge Review of International Affairs for three years. During the revolution in Iran she founded The Iranian, an independent weekly newsmagazine. She reported on Iranian affairs from Moscow and has been a contributing writer to The New York Times, the Christian Science Monitor and The Times of London. She has guest lectured at the Centre of Middle Eastern Studies at UC Berkeley, at Madingly Hall at Cambridge University and has consulted on Iran and Iraq for the British Military.

Contributors: Peter W. Avery; Stephanie Cronin; Manoutchehr M. Eskandari-Qajar; Mansoureh Ettehadieh; Roxane Farmanfarmaian; Ali Gheissari; Vanessa Martin; Lawrence G. Potter; Richard Schofield and Graham Williamson.
Contemporary events in the Islamic world dominate the headlines and emphasize the crises of the Middle East and North Africa, yet the Islamic world is far larger and more varied than we realize. Current affairs there, too, mask the underlying trends and values that have, over time, created a fascinating and complex world. This new series is intended to reveal that other Islamic reality by looking at its history and society over the ages, as well as at the contemporary scene. It will also reach far further afield, bringing in Central Asia and the Far East as part of a cultural space sharing common values and beliefs but manifesting a vast diversity of experience and social order.

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War and Peace in Qajar Persia
Implications past and present
_Edited by Roxane Farmanfarmaian_
War and Peace in Qajar Persia

Implications past and present

Edited by Roxane Farmanfarmaian
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Peter Avery’s interest in Persian began in India during World War II and was focused mainly on the desire to read Hafiz in the original. He spent several years in Iran after the Second World War, having taken a degree in Persian and Arabic from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in 1949. From 1949–1951 he was education liaison officer in the oil fields, and from 1955–1958 he was Personal Assistant to the Senior Manager of John Mowlem, a road building contractor in Southern Iran.

In 1958 he was appointed Lecturer in Persian at Cambridge University and became a Fellow of King’s College. He translated and published 30 poems by Hafiz in 1952 (reissued in 2003), Modern Iran in 1963, and a translation of The Mantiqu’i-Tair (The Speech of the Birds) by ‘Altar in 1992. Since his retirement from his lectureship in 1990, he has published The Collected Lyrics of Hafiz of Shiraz (2007) and The Spirit of Iran (2007), has written numerous articles and has contributed to the Encyclopedia Iranica.

Stephanie Cronin is Iran Heritage Foundation Fellow at the University of Northampton. She is the author of The Army and the Creation of the Pahlavi State in Iran, 1910–1926, (I. B. Tauris, 1997) and Tribal Politics in Iran: Rural Conflict and the New State, 1921–1941 and the editor of The Making of Modern Iran; State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921–1941 (Routledge Curzon, 2003) and Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran: New Perspectives on the Iranian Left (RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

Manoutchehr M. Eskandari-Qajar is Founder and Director of the Middle East Studies Program at Santa Barbara City College. He is also Founder and President of the International Qajar Studies Association (IQSA) and a regular contributor to its journal, Qajar Studies, now in its seventh year. His research interests are focused on the Qajar period. He is co-editor, with Ferydoun Barjasteh and Sahar Khosrovani, of Qajar Era Health, Hygiene and Beauty, Rotterdam, Holland 2003 (ISBN: 90-5613-071-4), and Guest Editor of and contributor to the September 2007 issue of Iranian Studies dedicated to the proceedings of the sixth annual IQSA conference of June 2006 on the theme of “Entertainment in the Qajar Era.”
Mansoureh Ettehadieh graduated from Edinburgh University with an MA in history in 1956 and obtained her PhD in 1979 from the same University. She taught history in the department of history in Tehran University from 1963 to 2000. She founded the publishing firm Nashr-e Tarikh-e Iran in 1983, which specializes in the history of the Qajar period. She is currently engaged in working on public opinion from 1870 to 1920. She has written and co-edited a number of works on this period, some of which are: Khaterat va Asnad Hosein Qoli Khan Nezam al-Saltaneh (Three volumes of the Correspondence and diaries of Hossein Qoli Khan Nezam al-Saltaneh), 3 volumes, 1984, co-edited with S. Sadvandian; Majles va Entekahbat az Mashruteh ta Payan-e Qajar-iyeh (Parliament and Elections from the Constitutional Revolution to the end of the Qajar Period), 1996; Majmueh Asnad va Mokatebat-e Nosrat al-Dowleh Firuz (The Correspondence and documents of Nosrat al-Dowleh Firuz), 1999, co-edited with S. Pira; Inja Tehran Ast, Majmueh-ye Maqalati dar bareh-ye Tehran, 1269HQ/1344 (A Collections of Essays on the Social and Economic Conditions of Tehran, 1850–1925 Reza Qoli Khan Nezam al-Saltaneh), 1998; Zendegani Siyasi va Asnad-e Mohajerat (The life and the correspondence of Reza Qoli Khan Nezam al-Saltaneh), 3 volumes, 2000; and Peydayesh va Tahavol-e Ahzab-e Siyasi Mashrutiyyat (The Origin and Development of Political Parties during the Constitutional Revolution), reprinted 2002. Ettehadieh has also written two novels: Zendegi Bayad Kard, Zendegi Khali Nist.

Roxane Farmanfarmaian is completing her PhD at the Centre of International Studies at the University of Cambridge, where she served as editor of the Cambridge Review of International Affairs for three years. During the revolution in Iran she founded The Iranian, an independent weekly news-magazine. She reported on Iranian affairs from Moscow and has been a contributing writer to the New York Times, the Christian Science Monitor and The Times of London. She has guest lectured at the Centre of Middle Eastern Studies at UC Berkeley, at Madingley Hall at Cambridge University and has consulted on Iran and Iraq for the British Military.

Ali Gheissari is Professor of History at the University of San Diego with research interests in the intellectual and political history of modern Iran. He studied at the Faculty of Law and Political Science, Tehran University, and at St Antony’s College, Oxford, and has held visiting appointments at Tehran University, Oxford University, UCLA, and Brown University. His work include Merchants in Tabriz and Rasht during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911 (edited volume, Tehran: Nashr-e Tarikh-e Iran, 2007); Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty (coauthor, Oxford University Press, 2006); “Despots of the World Unite! Satire in the Iranian Constitutional Press: Introducing Majalleh-ye Estebdad, 1907–1908” (in Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, 25:2, 2005); and Iranian Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century (University of Texas Press, 1998 and 2007).
Vanessa Martin is Professor of Middle Eastern History at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her research interests cover nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran. She is the author of The Qajar Pact: Protest, Society and the State in Nineteenth Century Iran (I.B. Tauris 2005); Islam and Modernism: the Iranian Revolution of 1906 (I.B Tauris, 1989).

Lawrence G. Potter teaches at Columbia University and is Deputy Director of Gulf/2000, a major research and documentation project on the Persian Gulf states. He received an M.A. from S.O.A.S. and a Ph.D. in History from Columbia. He co-edited three books on the Persian Gulf, the latest being Iran, Iraq and the Legacies of War (2004), and is currently editing a book on the history of the Persian Gulf.

Richard Schofield is Lecturer in Boundary Studies and Convenor of the Master’s programme in Geopolitics, Territory and Security (formerly International Boundary Studies) at King’s College, London. He has written extensively on territorial aspects of Iran, Arabia and the Persian Gulf region and is currently writing a book (with James Denselow), New Iraq, Old Neighbours: Borders, Territoriality and Region Hurst & Co./Columbia University Press 2007.

Graham Williamson lives in Hornchurch, Essex, England. He has been interested in military history for many years and became fascinated with the history of the early Qajar rulers. He has had articles published in the Journals of the International Qajar Studies Association, Continental War Society and the Iran Society.
Acknowledgements

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Special thanks go to Professor George Joffe, co-editor of the “History and Society in the Islamic World” series, whose advice throughout the process of editing this volume has been critical. Additionally the editor wishes to thank the publisher, Routledge, and the anonymous readers it provided, for their insights, which have contributed materially to the quality of this volume.
Historical revisionism can be both dangerous and liberating. To rethink and recalibrate the meanings of the past, imputed by chroniclers of current events, is to deny the viewpoint of the witness. This is not a process to be taken lightly. And yet, without the benefit of temporal distance, cross-cultural comparison and political, social and economic context to better understand the motives and tactics of men and empires, history remains impoverished and the lessons to be drawn today remain oblique, if not plain wrong. It is only in the recognition and analysis of ongoing trends and human responses over time, what Braudel called “la longue durée”, that history comes into focus, and can provide insight for both policymakers and academics. Thus, history is constantly in the making, an ongoing process of interpretation that begins as events unfold but then continues from then on.

It is not uncommon, of course, for the spyglass of historical interest to be fickle, and ignore certain events and eras while favouring others – that is, to be drawn to popular periods and places, and only by chance or through eccentric focus, to discover other, more obscure subjects upon which to turn its enquiring gaze. However, wars and dynasties – the death, dominance and governance of men, particularly in regions of strife and crisis – remain history’s focus, especially the more recent they are, for history thrives on documents, and documents are the fodder of the modern world.

It may be deemed surprising then, that a state at the heart of a still moderately recent, intensely critical area of international relations, sufficiently fraught with the implications of territory and empire that it became known as the Great Game, should itself have remained largely ignored by the critical eye of historical enquiry. Within the rich analyses by the Ottomans, the Russians, the British and the French during the period stretching generously across the century marks at both ends of the 1800s, evaluation of Persia under the Qajars remains strangely wooden. Descriptions of the Qajars as condemning their country to decline and foreign dependence because of the Shahs’ incompetence, avarice and corruption remain as unvarying and unchallenged as the assumptions of their military failures and their inability to maintain Persia’s territorial integrity.

These views echo those of many, though not all, of the witnesses of events at the time, diplomats, travellers, military personnel and businessmen who
represented or were citizens of the Great Powers, and who understood the turmoil of politics, war and social upheaval from the perspective of the foreigner, and usually, the European. To many of these chroniclers, even those with sincere generosity of heart, the Persians were enigmatic and often incomprehensible, particularly in their often oblique interpretation of the European habits and practices being introduced into Persia during this early modern period. What is more, their own vesting in Persia was often very high, whether territorially (particularly the Russians to the north and, eventually, the British to the east), or financially (especially in the later years for the British, once the concessions began, most importantly that of oil). Although often accused of being dangerous because it was weak, Persia represented power to those who were strong. The efforts of her leaders to exercise their own control over the divisions of power were, not surprisingly, viewed with a jaundiced eye by those who wished them either more pliant or more decisive, less Oriental and more European, more controllable in a word, because of Persia’s matchless geopolitical position – a situation that is strongly echoed today. Being uncompliant to the end would earn the Qajars a reputation that has dogged them for three-quarters of a century, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, reduced the country to the status of rogue, ripe for regime change, with no supporters to include it in the community of nations that met at the Paris Peace Conference to rethink the Middle East.

With the departure of the Qajars, the era was purposely ignored by the Pahlavis, who, like many successor dynasties in history, kept the records of the past in shadow not only for the sake of their own reputation, but to distinguish their actions from those of their predecessors, and to control the idea that what they brought was both new and better. It is axiomatic that history is written by the victors, and in this case, the victors at home robed the era in enforced silence, and the victors abroad relied on established imageries of the past. The Qajar era remained, and to a great extent, still remains, on the one hand caught in the codification of its original presentation, and on the other hand, pristine.

Much of what has been written and widely disseminated inside and outside Iran, and which constituted the received wisdom concerning the Qajars, was penned close to the period, when Western norms concerning the centralization of the state, the value of big business, the social benefits of urbanization and the culture of progress were still concepts that were largely unassailed, primarily as no alternative had yet been suggested by practical experience. The exception was the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, though even this, despite being ideologically a challenge to Western foundations of economic or social structuring, did not fundamentally question the centralization of the state, the technological bases of progress, or, and most particularly, secularization as a building block of modernity.

For current scholars, this period offers a rich and still largely untrammelled field for investigation and interpretation; it also offers the opportunity to discover patterns in the past that may have relevance to current events. The
level of scholarly engagement in the Qajar era has risen exponentially over the past two decades since the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty, effected both by a reinterpretation of existing material and access to the vast troves of newly available documents, artefacts and images from the Court archives and from the various libraries not only in Iran, but in such places as Georgia and Russia. What is more, there is now a level of debate about a range of issues of importance during that period, including questions of law and constitutionalism, finance and development, military capability and social organization, that did not exist before and which is helping to reduce the previous politicization of Qajar studies and instead inspire a legitimate body of scholarly literature. The freighted subject of territorial integrity, for example, and how it related to historical conceptions of Persia proper, the expansion of empire and the definition of boundaries has become a hotly contested area of scholarly interest as new material and analysis has opened up debate on the constraints faced by the Qajar rulers at the time, and what they meant to the prosecution of war and diplomacy, as well as to the balance between domestic and foreign demands. The different views of how the Qajars addressed and managed the territory of Persia and the treaties that attempted to lock the borders into their current position, colour as well as inform how related issues are understood, and, as can be seen throughout this volume, many unresolved questions remain. What is clear is that a significant domestic dimension, hitherto discounted or misconstrued, exercised an important role in the outcomes of the Great Game. The debate reveals that our understanding of the complexities of the Great Game (and what it may illuminate concerning current geopolitical interactions between the West and the Gulf) has much to gain from a more thorough investigation of the Persian historical perspective.

The establishment of the International Qajar Studies Association (IQSA) in 2000, as well as the setting aside of funds from many sources for the study of various aspects of the Qajar era, has resulted in a plethora of new publications, conferences and analyses of a complex state with one side of its face turned to the traditional Orient and one to the modernizing world, while being in the crosshairs of a territorial struggle of momentous dimension between the world’s greatest powers. In fact, although other aspects of Qajar Persia, such as the role of the clergy, have been the subject of initial scholarly treatment prior to this time, the issue of war and the administration of the periods of peace that ensued has been singularly lacking. Previously understood and judged largely from the outside, both culturally and strategically, Qajar Persia, the pivot around which the Great Game turned, and which nonetheless defied colonial or other foreign takeover, is now being investigated on her own terms, or in relation to her near abroad, vantage points that offer a completely different reading of history.

What is more, political, economic and social theories are being utilized for the sake of locating aspects of Qajar history within a rigorous scholarly framework. It is within such a framework that Manoutchehr Eskandari-Qajar’s
chapter in this volume, “Between Scylla and Charybdis: policy-making under constraint in early Qajar Persia”, for example, grapples with that greatest scourge of the Qajar’s reputation referred to above, its apparent inability to maintain Persia’s territorial integrity, and hence, its “loss” to Russia and the Ottomans (and to the British, via Afghanistan) of vast tracks of Persian land. In analyzing this question during the critical period in which the Treaty of Turkomanchay was drawn up – a Treaty generally deemed in the literature to reveal serious ineptitude at the court of Fath-Ali Shah – Eskandari-Qajar unpicks the decision-making that took place in terms of trade-offs between gains and losses, locating his analysis within the theoretical constructs of prospect and rational decision-making theory. By shifting the viewpoint so that the options being faced by Tehran are the focus of investigation, Eskandari-Qajar draws several surprising conclusions that suggest an alternative paradigm by which to understand the progression of events and their outcomes. The process he outlines introduces a set of imperatives whose role has previously been ill understood, both in terms of historical conceptions of Persia’s territory propre and in terms of Fath-Ali Shah’s need to respond to developments on his borders that in fact reflected shifts in power relations taking place in Europe between Russia, Britain and France, and thus well beyond his scope of control.

The result of these revisionist investigations based on existing and new material are narratives that are not only more rounded, but also suggest significantly different motivations than previously considered (and assumed) in regards to decision-making, resource-management, border administration, local (social) influences or geopolitical identity. The Persia that emerges is one of relative political stability, notwithstanding the turmoil on all sides of her borders; one of independence from the colonial practices that characterized the interventions in the lands of her neighbours; and one that, despite significant pressures from the outside on her trade, currency and other resources, enjoyed a regime continuity that was unique in the geopolitical region she occupied. On the one hand, as Mansoureh Ettehadieh describes in her chapter, drawing on new empirical information on brigandry, security and crime, and as Gheissari points out in his study on merchant life in Tabriz during the revolutionary period, foreign occupation, internal constitutional upheavals and economic pressures significantly interrupted trade and reduced the level of social safety, particularly towards the end of the Qajar era. On the other hand, there was a consistent, if often thwarted, commitment to gradual reform economically, politically and militarily, which continued despite huge setbacks, and can be seen to have been a hallmark of this early modern period of Persian history. Although this is not to say that corruption, mismanagement of the state and hardship did not accompany the enormous changes being experienced in the course of the wars and periods of uneasy peace that followed so close upon one another as the century progressed, they can no longer be considered, as the chapters in this volume clearly indicate, the only elements that define the Qajar reign.
In addressing the matrix of war and peace, the contributions in this collection, though not able to cover the entire gamut of possible academic enquiry, nonetheless take up questions that are fundamental to understanding the Great Game and the relationship not just of the government, but of the Persian people, to the economic, political and regional pressures which the country encountered at that critical time. What emerges is a picture of a state which offers perhaps unexpectedly useful comparison with the contemporary world in at least two significant ways: in terms of its geopolitical position and its resource management.

During the reign of the Qajars, pressures were being exerted upon the country from three directions: the north from Russia; the east from British India and the new buffer state of Afghanistan; and the west from the Ottomans and the British in the Persian Gulf. For the Qajars, the focus of both their internal and foreign relations, therefore, was on resistance to external penetration. This had structural as well as ideological implications. First, it required a new approach to the organization of the state – that is, toward a centralization of control, not only over the management of governance, but significantly, over military capability, a move that gradually involved replacing the networked structure of tribal and feudal loyalties which had until then defined a distributed military system of power, to one formally led and paid for from the centre. This reconfiguration, with its reverberations through both the social and political spheres, was begun by the Qajars as a response to Persia’s geopolitical vulnerability to the interventions of the Great Game, and the need for managed military campaigns to fend off when necessary – and often, simultaneously – the modern, technological advances of the Great Powers. Perhaps the best examples are the two Herat Wars, in which Britain attacked Kharg Island (and in the Second Herat War, Bushehr and Mohammerah) from the west, in order to settle the ongoing conflict over Herat in the east. As Vanessa Martin illustrates, however, in her study of the effect of social networks on foreign policy during the First Herat War, the process of centralization was not an easy – or from the point of view of the local populations, an immediately obvious – one, and cooperation between the Shah and the tribes or cities, in their mutual need to protect Persia’s borders, often broke down.

Second, the need to protect against external penetration, and hence, to assure the continuance of the “nation” of Persia, shifted the emphasis on securing the state by means other than the use of direct force, that is, through negotiation, frequently through third parties. With varying degrees of success, this development introduced a new ideological basis upon which loyalty and engagement with the centre would become evident, namely on a popular conception of “national identity”. This would eventually find its expression in the Constitutional Revolution, which would take place even as Persia was finally formally divided into spheres of foreign influence in the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907.
Thus, two significant domestic trends began to take place inside Persia in response to the fact that there were contested borders on three sides of Persia’s territory during this period. By implication, this historical moment can be understood to have constituted a critical era of border definition, which led to military (and state) modernization and the genesis of a modern sense of Persian national identity.

THE GEOPOLITICAL FACTOR

From the very early years of the Qajar dynasty, the Russo-Persian War (1811–1813) began the process of a modern confrontation with European military technology and methods that inspired Fath-Ali Shah and his successors to follow in the footsteps of the Ottomans (and Egyptians) and attempt military reform for the sake of protecting the territorial boundaries of the state. Although Stephanie Cronin suggests in “Building a new army: military reform in Qajar Iran” that in the final analysis, the guerrilla warfare practised by the horse-mounted tribes was probably more efficacious against the formations of the Russian (and later Ottoman and British) armies, the court nonetheless attempted throughout the nineteenth century to Europeanize. To this end, it focused on developing a modern infantry while eclipsing its cavalry, which it did by bringing to Persia successive foreign military experts, none of whom fully succeeded in strengthening the Persian forces sufficiently to enable real protection of its borders through military exploit.

Nonetheless, as Graham Williamson argues in his investigation of the wars prosecuted by Fath-Ali Shah’s two sons, the Crown Prince Abbas Mirza in the northwest and Azerbaijan, and Mohammad Ali Mirza in the southwest and against Baghdad, the Persian mastery of new military practices and technology was sufficiently successful that both princes were able to win decisive battles against what were considerably larger and better equipped Ottoman armies. Williamson starkly illustrates, however, in “The Turko-Persian War of 1821–1823: winning the war but losing the peace” that military prowess on the field was in itself not sufficient when the state lacked the centralized mechanisms (financial or organizational) to feed and quarter a standing national army, and thus hold the territory that had been gained through battlefield success. Despite the military conquests in the Turko-Persian War that in fact accrued to Persia, therefore, Williamson contends that the peace was lost because of the complex play of loyalties, tribal as well as religious, which extended across a broad band of fickle territory that only roughly delineated Ottoman Azarbaijan and Ottoman Iraq from Persia. Here, suzerainty could be shifted from one side to the other as easily through financial incentive, tribal fealty and the blandishments of religious affiliation as through military conquest. What Williamson hints at in his analysis of the play along the Iran–Iraq border between religious extremists (which included a strong strain of resurgent Wahhabism), tribal banditry and independent holy
city states, is a situation strikingly reminiscent of the region’s tumult today, a zone of lawlessness in which local populations in the midst of war have little incentive to compromise with any of the far-off centres of authority.

The concept of a border as a demarcated line between nations (thus representative of differently affiliated peoples), and which was imposed by external powers, is taken up by King’s College geographer Richard Schofield. In his chapter, “Narrowing the frontier: mid-nineteenth-century efforts to delimit, map and demarcate the Perso-Ottoman border”, he describes the tortuous process, fraught with intrigue, improbity and foreign schemes, that was involved in drawing the boundary between what are present-day Iran and Iraq – an undertaking that was repeated by other border commissions organized by both the British and Russians in Persia’s southeast as well as northeast. In effect, the 1847 Treaty of Erzurum, drawn up between Persia and Turkey, delineated the Middle East’s first real negotiated border; in this, the Ottomans “expressly recognized that the anchorage of Mohammerah and the lands east of the Shatt al-Arab belonging to Persian tribes were Persian territory”. Although, like most of the other borders established by negotiation and the work of commissions, the process took years, being subject to dispute and renegotiation in all cases. However, the process which evolved was to mark a significant milestone in the establishment of suzerainty over territory in the Middle East, and the reversal of the role of war and peace in establishing it.

Strict borders, lines upon a page, as Schofield observes, were a European, not a Middle Eastern, concept. Previously, the boundaries of Persia, in the same way as the other states in the region, were in fact “borderlands”, dozens, if not hundreds, of miles wide, areas of fluctuating patronage and liege that did not themselves involve the same suspicion and conflict between adjacent powers that arose once strict lines were drawn in the sand. The imposition of marked boundaries by Britain and Russia upon the Persian and Ottoman rulers was therefore a European project for European purposes (even though they never succeeded in getting the lines as perfectly settled as they had wished), and had the unexpected result of causing border friction between Persia and her neighbours where previously there had been none. Because of its critical geopolitical position, Persia became the first country in the Muslim world whose borders were so defined; North Africa would have its borders delineated only later in the nineteenth century; the Gulf states and the rest of the Middle East would not have their borders ruled until post-World War I.

Even so, Schofield describes a process that was neither efficient nor definitive. After many years of negotiation, the western border of Iran remained fungible and open to dispute, a fact that continues to bedevil its relations with Iraq in, for example, the Shatt-al Arab and the marsh areas to its north, and which renders the mathematical accuracy of today’s Global Positioning System largely irrelevant.

More successful was Persia’s own extension of indisputable dominion over the coastline of the Persian Gulf, a process which was a direct result of the extension of centralized power outwards from Tehran. With the incentive of
gaining greater revenue by taking over control of the customs receipts of the prosperous port cities, the various Arab tribes that had occupied the eastern coast of the Gulf were gradually eased out, leaving the Omanis and British – the two main naval powers – as the principal entities with which the Qajar state had to negotiate. By the end of the nineteenth century, all but Bushehr, still a British enclave, and Mohammerah, the domain of Sheikh Khazal, came under Qajar control – including the rich port of Bandar Abbas. Here, as Vanessa Martin points out, the local populace remained an important factor in driving out both the Omani and British presence, since the pride of local leaders and merchants in the Shah’s ability to promote Persian national prestige (and hence, sense of “nation”) proved as important as any later nuance of negotiation or force of arms. Though Martin argues that Mohammad Shah’s ability to generate funds from the populations located in the north for the campaigns against the Russians remained severely hampered during this period, social groups in the south were more able to turn the conflict to their own financial advantage – and by association, Persian dominance along the littoral.

The critical change brought about by the extension of Qajar control over the Gulf coast at the expense of the power of both Oman and the British Empire came towards the second half of the nineteenth century, according to Lawrence Potter, when the dynasty at last acquired several ships, forming the beginnings of a navy. In “The consolidation of Iran’s frontier on the Persian Gulf in the nineteenth century”, Potter traces the gradual changeover of control from the Arab tribes, including the Sultanate of Muscat, which had dominated the depot towns and farmed their customs through lease, to that of the Persian state, at first administered from Shiraz, and then later controlled by Tehran. Although he argues that the acquisition of ships was itself insignificant, as they did not constitute a naval force per se, the action represented the concentration of Qajar power over the entire coast, encouraging a conception of the eastern littoral of the Gulf as Persian, even by the British, who were among the consolidation’s greatest detractors.

RESOURCE SCARCITY AND PROTECTION

A second theme that runs throughout the chapters in this collection, and is taken up as a main focus of research in Roxane Farmanfarmaian’s chapter, “The politics of concession”, is that of the Qajar’s continuous lack of financial resources, and the growing currency difficulties they faced. This was due to three main factors. First, the usurious terms imposed on the state following the Treaty of Golestan (and later, the Treaty of Turkomanchai) by the Russians, who established a “most favoured nation” system of duties on trade, which was eventually copied by the British. Second, the gradual shift in trade routes away from Persia as a product of the Great Game. Third, the silver basis of the currency, which gradually lost value on the international market as vast quantities of silver were released from the American West, while
at the same time a majority of countries shifted their currency basis from silver to gold, leaving Persia’s currency virtually isolated by the turn of the century.

Until the discovery of oil in 1911, the Qajars had access to three main resources by which to keep the economy afloat and the currency from declining: trade, in which the export of Persian goods, as well as the service of transit goods, earned valuable lucre, as well as serving to bring in gold coinage from abroad; customs duty farming at border posts and port cities; and, beginning with the reign of Nasser-edin Shah, the sale of concessions. Spoils of conquest, which had fuelled previous military campaigns, and added to the treasure trove of gold and silver bullion at the royal treasury, were no longer a factor once the stability of the Qajars was established, and instead, the outflow (and popular hoarding) of gold began to empty the state’s coffers. In today’s parlance, therefore, the Qajar economy can be seen to have been largely a service economy focused on import/export, and on facilitating trade across its many borders. The rerouting of trade was the result, not only of political considerations of the Great Game, but also of technological developments in naval and land transportation. This shifted the trade routes first from an east–west axis to a north–south axis, and then served to dry up trade quite substantially as the routes circumvented Persia through the Black Sea to the north, or from the Gulf through Baghdad along the railroad to Europe in the west. As a result, revenues dropped, even as Persia’s debts rose. Continuing in its tradition of turning to Western experts for help in modernizing and organizing its affairs, Persia invited a Belgian official to take over the management of its customs, and he was succeeded by Morgan Shuster and J. Millspaugh from the United States to more broadly sort out Persia’s finances.

As has amply been recorded, Nasser-edin Shah, when faced with this sorry (and seemingly hopeless) state of affairs, travelled to Europe to observe western methods of industrialization and economic practice, encountering concession hunters along the way to whom he began awarding concessions upon his return to Tehran. Often accused in the literature of having sold Persia’s resources for his own gain, an alternative argument points to Persia’s dire need to prop up its currency and contribute in new ways to its economic productivity, both of which could be achieved in joint ventures with foreign businesses. The concessionary practice can be seen to have evolved directly from Persia’s already established tradition of working with foreign advisors and business enterprises in various other sectors – and the structure of the concessionary agreements, despite being a new area of contract design, reflects a degree of economic sophistication within the Qajar court which only the distance of time and comparison with other concessions elsewhere, have made clear. This is not to say that serious errors were not made, as in the case of the Tobacco Concession, perhaps the most egregious example of the knavery, cut-throat competition and multiple payoffs which characterized the concession business at its worst. However, as Farmanfarmaian argues, the increasingly
tough deals, which revealed the Persian government learning from its mistakes and pushing the concessionary each time for higher returns and greater Persian control, were hammered out despite collusion between European government and business representatives, a situation that reached its pinnacle of abuse in the manipulation of the oil concession in the south by the British government. Although detailed records of the Persian debates and decisions concerning the concessions have yet to come to light, a close reading of British Foreign Office exchanges and Persian commentaries expose a perfidy on the part of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, in association with the British Legation in Bushehr, the Embassy in Tehran and the banking authorities of the British-controlled Imperial Bank, that could not have been any less shameful and destructive than any possible act of venality or incompetence on the part of the Qajars. The list of malfeasance has been amply recorded elsewhere, and extended to double-dealings in concessionary arrangements with the Bakhtiari,² the halting of royalty payments for two years in contravention of the concession’s terms, and the siphoning of thousands of barrels of unpaid-for crude oil to the British Admiralty at cost – actions against which, within the structure of the Great Game, Persia had few instruments with which to fight, and which cost her not only her financial security, but helped to confirm the Qajar’s dismal reputation.

CONTEMPORARY PARALLELS WITH THE QAJAR PERIOD

The lessons of history are not to be drawn from a search for repetition, but rather, from the way that defining characteristics of a place and people can affect responses to events in similar ways across widely spaced periods of time. For Persia under the Qajars, its geopolitical importance and its need to protect both its borders and its resources, reflected a continuum that defined Persian identity and Persian foreign policy, and which continues to do so even under the country’s rubric as the Islamic Republic of Iran. For Iran, these two critical elements constitute Braudel’s “la longue durée”, that is, the slow-moving factors that persist throughout history, and affect the crises and choices faced whenever an important juncture is reached.

In the early period of the Qajar dynasty under Fath-Ali Shah, and before him, under the Safavids, Persia was the dominant state in the region, a geopolitical hinge between all four sections: the divided Arab entities of the Persian Gulf, a still embryonic British India, a militarily subdued Czarist Russia and an Ottoman empire more focused on European conquest than Asian expansion. This was a period that has its parallel in the situation enjoyed by modern Iran in the latter decade of the twentieth century, a position of dominance gained primarily because of geopolitics, as the Soviet Union collapsed and withdrew not only physically from Afghanistan and the Central Asian states, but financially from supporting Iraq and Syria. The events of 2001,
however, brought this Iranian dominance to an abrupt halt as the United States appeared to Iran’s east in Afghanistan and north in the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and, in 2003, to Iran’s west in Iraq. Much like the situation faced by the Qajars as the Great Game came to focus military might around its periphery, so Iran faced a situation in the early twenty-first century, in which it was directly pressured on three sides and forced back from geopolitical dominance to a purely Gulf dimension.

Yet, like the Qajars, the leaders of Iran today are facing a period of Great Power rebalancing that includes several similar characteristics to that bygone era: the conflicts around it are, for example, beyond Iran’s direct control but play off its critical geopolitical importance, and the rebalancing of the Great Power relationship in its region relates directly to Iran’s particular approach to political and strategic independence in regard to its attempts to ward off outside penetration. The greatest force on Iran’s several borders, the United States, is, much like imperial Britain during the Qajar period, discovering itself unable fully to control events on either side of Iran’s territory, the massive American military strength being sapped of efficacy in the face of local realities; and instead, US power finds itself vulnerable in the face of the complex geopolitical linkages and ignominies that characterize regional relationships. US foreign policy towards Iran is based on an understanding of the state that is astonishingly similar to that of Britain’s during the Qajar period and which constructed the Qajars in terms that have their echo in American constructions of the Islamic Republic. These include the view that Iran’s threat emanates from a weak government, that it is incompetent in governance and shamefully corrupt, that it suffers a fundamental inability to form a cohesive link with its people, that its Oriental traditions are incompatible with modernity and that its obstreperous rhetoric continuously pits one power against another in delaying tactics that promote only Iran’s nefarious plans. Perhaps a further parallel can be drawn in the tendency to characterize the decision-making process of the current Iranian leadership again as fraught with irrationality, ulterior motives and lack of political vision, in other words, as overly personal in nature in contrast to the “impersonal, rational, objective” way by which Iran’s rivals in the region and beyond are thought to come to their decisions.

Not least among the difficulties faced by the US and its partners in the current crisis is the question of borders, particularly along the Shatt-al Arab (although the Kurdish regions to the north, and the eastern border of Baluchistan are not altogether immune). Despite the Algiers Agreement of 1975, the southwestern border remains an ambiguous area of shifting tribes, active gun-running, multiple power sources and independent militias, many of which are linked to the holy cities that line the divide between Iran and Iraq. As noted earlier, Williamson draws a similar picture as existing during the early nineteenth century, suggesting a pattern along a geopolitical divide of longue durée. The parallels with the later Treaty of Erzerum, and the contests it left in its wake, need not be further emphasized.
Iranian geopolitics is significant to another Great Power relationship along its borders, that of the US and Russia, which, like Britain and Russia during the Qajar period, appear deeply distrustful of each other’s motives in their approach to the Iranian plateau. For Russia today, as in the Qajar past, Iran is its “near abroad”, a country with which it shares a long border and with which it has extensive trade agreements. To understand the tensions between the United States and Russia today, an analysis of the uncertain relationship between Russia and Britain during the Qajar period may offer useful insights as, like the US today, Britain then was the non-resident power, its greatest engagement in the region based on economic and strategic interests rather than geopolitical imperative. Britain’s commitment to India can be seen to have its echoes in the US commitment to the oil-rich Gulf states, in both cases marking a course that contains within it both a fear of expanding Russian influence though Iran into the south, and a not-so-cloaked threat against Russian adventurism – expressed perhaps most strongly today against its support of the Iranian nuclear energy project. Iran, because of its geopolitical location, appears again at the centre of this maelstrom of power politics.

The issue of resources likewise finds thematic continuity. For the Qajars, the silver basis of the currency proved by the end of their reign to be a devastating hindrance which severely weakened the state. For modern Iran, although oil has been in many ways a boon, it has also been a curse, exposing the country to the vulnerabilities of price changes on the international market – a situation not dissimilar to the price fluctuations of silver a century earlier.

The studies in this collection are a contribution to a deeper understanding of an era important in its own right in the progress of history. Yet, their insights beckon toward a more cohesive approach to comprehending how the present is rooted in the past, and how responses can more usefully be analyzed in relation to circumstances, rather than specific events.

Notes

* Special appreciation for his input and insight on this introduction goes to Professor George E. Joffé of the Centre of International Studies, Cambridge University.


The Safavid dynasty conquered and then ruled over most of what today is the geographical entity, Iran, for 234 years. That the period of the achievement of Safavid sway over Iran is described as having been preceded by its conquest is significant. Dominion over the whole country was only achieved by the fifth Safavid Shah ‘Abbas I (1587–1629), who moved the capital Qazvin to Isfahan, making this city one of the wonders of the world. Nader Shah established Safavid puppets until his own coronation in 1736, but it was the Afghans’ 1722 invasion that in fact ended the great regime of the Safavid Shahs, which they had formed as a Shi’ite counterpoise to the Sunni Ottoman Empire.

Nader Shah’s Afsharid dynasty lasted from 1736 to his assassination, by a group of servants considered trustworthy, 11 years later. The dynasty was carried on through the reign of the blind Shahrokh who was eventually tortured to death by Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar in 1796 when the latter was seeking to get hold of Nader Shah’s treasury.

Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar was the founder of a dynasty that lasted 145 years. In some respects it emulated that of the Safavids, not least in successfully accomplishing dominion over the whole of the modern Iranian area. Afghanistan had become detached after the fall of Nader Shah, but, insofar as its city of Herat was concerned, was twice the target of the Qajar rulers. Pretensions to provinces in Central Asia had long since been dropped; Nader Shah attempted a reconquest there but failed. The expedition planned in 1833 by the brilliant innovative military reformer, the Qajar ‘Abbas Mirza, was aborted by this Prince’s untimely death. It was the premature demise of a man who, had he lived to succeed his father, Fath-Ali Shah, might have completely changed the future of Iran.

The purpose in drawing attention to, first of all, Qajar emulation of Safavid rule and, secondly, the length of time their respective dynasties survived, becomes manifest when the state of Iran which the Qajars found and, for that matter, which the Safavids had found on their ascent to power, is noted as having been a scene of anarchy. On the murder of Nader Shah, his huge Wehrmacht fell apart. His Afghan general, Azad, took over Azerbaijan. His Bakhtian Officer, Mardan Khan, held Isfahan, while Karim Khan Zand reigned
in Shiraz and contended for supremacy with Shahrokh, Nader’s grandson, whom he ultimately left a shadowy potentate in Mashad.

During this chaotic period, Mohammad Hussain Khan Qajar consolidated his position in the Caspian region round Astarabad. His son Agha Mohammad, after he had been castrated by Nader’s nephew, ‘Adil Shah, was eventually captured but treated honourably in Shiraz by Karim Khan the Zand. Western historians tell how, although he was well treated, the eunuch Aqa Mohammad nurtured the ambition to avenge the Qajars, a Turcoman people from the North, on his captors. It is said that he used to sit in Karim Khan’s court and cut into the carpet with a sharp fruit knife as a means of venting his anger and indignation. It was a purpose he accomplished as the Qajar dynasty’s founder when he had the remains of Karim Khan the Zand reburied under the doorstep of his residence in his new capital, Tehran, so that he might have the satisfaction of stepping on the Zand’s grave. Historians have tended to present him as a bitter and cruel tyrant, but this interpretation of his conduct has to be seen against the background of the anarchic conditions he found in the realm over which it was his purpose to establish a nationwide hegemony.

This he did, but suffered from what became the bane of all Qajar rulers: lack of usable revenue, the insufficiency of which became more pressing as Qajar Iran was brought closer to Powers representing a more modern world. As for the loot in jewels Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar had seized from the last Afsharid, and Nader in his turn from the Emperors of India, precious gems are not an easily convertible asset. What was wanting was a sufficiency of revenue from taxes. There is a moving account of how a revenue official entering Agha Mohammad’s tent one winter’s evening found him playing, as it were, marbles on the floor with those precious stones Nader had fetched from Delhi. There was little else that the Shah could do with these baubles.

In many of the discourses contained in this volume, and which were presented at the Conference, the spectacle is seen of history turned inside out. Too much of the history of Iran, as written by Western historians, is the depiction of the Iranian people and their vicissitudes from outside. As already suggested, the cruelty of Agha Mohammad Shah can be explained not only by his physical defect, but principally by the situation with which he was faced when he set out to gain supremacy.

He was succeeded by his nephew, the magnificent Fath-Ali, whose consciousness of the dream of Empire is displayed in his having images of himself carved in proximity to those in ancient ruins dating back to the Sassanid and Achaemenid eras, times when Iran established the prototype for all future great empires. The magnificence of Fath-Ali Shah and, incidentally, the meticulousness of his Court procedures and hierarchy of officials, are amply illustrated by James Morier, a member of King George III’s mission to the Persian Court in the years 1808–1809. Morier is blessedly impartial and was obviously impressed by Fath-Ali Shah’s splendour.

Unfortunately, that splendour was to become increasingly threatened by the impact of Russia in the north and the responding impact of Britain seeking
to ensure the safety of its possessions in India. Fath-Ali Shah’s sumptuous self-confidence was by 1813 overshadowed by increasing contacts with the West, and by the increasing cost for Persia which these contacts entailed. Furthermore, Fath-Ali Shah still had to continue the subjection of internal rebellion. In 1833, he sent his eldest son, the ‘Abbas Mirza, mentioned above, to suppress rebellion in the great Eastern province of Khorasan, a commission which absented ‘Abbas Mirza from his governorship of the Province so vulnerable to Russia, Azerbaijan. At first ‘Abbas Mirza was successful, but alas, death deprived Iran of a man who might have become its real saviour. His Father, on his way to claim revenue withheld by another of his sons, the Farman Farma, Hossein-Ali Mirza, Governor-General of Fars, himself died at Isfahan in October 1834. It is noteworthy that his successor, Mohammad Shah, who reigned from 1834 to 1848, had an unjustifiably vilified minister, Mirza Aghasi, who was sensitive enough to the Anglo-Russian threat to be the first Iranian statesman to seek counterweights in alliances with other countries, such as Spain and Belgium.

It was during Mohammad Shah’s reign that the first nineteenth-century attempt to regain Herat for Iran was not entirely unsuccessful, but only for a short while. It was an attempt really sponsored by the Russians, interested in gaining a staging post on the road to India. Hence any attack on it caused the British rulers of India considerable anxiety.

In 1848, Mohammad Shah with his dervish-habits died, to be succeeded by his son Nasser-edin Shah. He began a long reign lasting until his assassination in 1896. He is praised by the British historian of Persia, Sir Percy Sykes, as a man of enlightenment, which indeed he was. Poetry and music figured among his pleasures and after his first visit to Europe in 1873, he developed a taste for travel.

Nasser-edin Shah’s European journeys were no doubt prompted by the wish to seek the roots of that “Western secret”, by which late nineteenth-century Iranians sometimes tried to explain the West’s apparently ever-growing power and influence. Some older Iranians go so far as to regret that Western influence over Iran never included the outright conquest the British had made in India. Some have thought that the inclusion of Iran in the British Empire might have brought benefits similar to those which India enjoyed. But the Anglo-Russian aim was to keep Iran a compliant buffer state between Russia’s expanding empire in Central Asia and Britain’s Indian dominion. This Iranian status as a buffer state was eventually exposed when Russia and Britain divided the country into spheres of influence in 1907. Russia got the lion’s share while Britain showed its concern for the protection of India by consolidating its position in the south.

Regrettably Nasser-edin Shah’s reign became increasingly overshadowed by financial problems, attributable not least to this monarch’s attempts to make Iran like the advanced countries of Europe. Although he was a conspicuously pacific monarch, Nasser-edin Shah was persuaded to make a further bid for Herat. This uncharacteristic campaign was immediately answered by General Outram’s arrival from India to invade southern Persia. He took Khuzestan,
but the invasion was aborted even before it began by the conclusion of peace between Nasser-edin Shah and the British in the 1857 Treaty of Paris.

Nasser-edin Shah’s reign saw an increasing number of those concession hunters of whom Lord Curzon is so witheringly critical: he describes the individual concession hunter as “not uncommonly an adventurer, and sometimes a rogue”. In several of the following studies and discussions concerning Qajar Iran’s external and internal relations and exigencies, attention has been paid to these ultimate economic and development consequences of that Western contact begun in 1800. Nor will it be forgotten that it was in the reign of Nasser-edin Shah that the first British Oil Concession was signed and sealed.

A related topic is the demand for a Constitution, which was finally granted on 5 August 1906 by Nasser-edin’s successor, Mozzafar-edin, and which, with modifications over the years, remained Iran’s Constitution until the Revolution of 1979.

This revolution accomplished the downfall of the Pahlavi Dynasty and Mohammad Reza, the second and last Shah of this dynasty which had replaced that of the Qajars in 1925. It is interesting that the article on the Kadjars (sic) by Professor Lambton in the Encyclopaedia of Islam confirms my thesis regarding the Qajars’ rise. She says that in 1925, Persia “at the close of the Kadjar period was once more in a state of disorder and weakness”, and Reza Shah “like Aqa Mohammad was faced . . . with the problem of re-imposing the authority of the central government and reasserting Persian independence against foreign powers.”

Iranian history may in fact be seen as alternating between attempts by a single paramount power to suppress Iran’s fragmentation and once again realize the dream of Empire. The danger of the country falling apart among independent provincial governments is never far from the thinking Iranian’s mind. In this context it should be remembered that, with the help of British and Russian surveyors and cartographers, it was in the late nineteenth century that under the Qajars the present frontiers of Iran were defined.

It is here that I wish to end with a short and, some might consider, facetious anecdote. The then Pretender to the Qajar throne arrived in Tehran in the late 1950s as an employee of the Shell Oil Company, part of the Oil Consortium. He was called Commander Drummond (RN Retd). He had been a British Naval Officer. Since I was known, even notorious, as one interested in the Qajar dynasty, friends took steps to ensure that I was introduced to him. We met at a cocktail party. We went into a corner and after he had told me that my Persian was probably better than his, I, as tactfully as I could, asked him if his arrival in Iran had been accepted by the present ruler. He replied, “Oh you mean Pahlavi. I telephoned him and he raised no objection.” I liked the unadorned “Pahlavi”: once a Prince, always a Prince!

Keynote Address
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Corpus Christi College, Cambridge
Notes

1 Shahrokh’s survival can in fact be mainly attributed to protection offered him from another of Nader Shah’s former officers, Ahmad Shah, the founder of the Durrani dynasty in Afghanistan, who survived until 1773 when this protective shield was lost to the Afsharid.

2 I have been informed by a person who heard this paper delivered at the Fifth Annual International Qajar Studies Association Conference in Cambridge in July 2005 that in fact Agha Mohammad Khan had been castrated by one of my informant’s Zand ancestors. Apparently Agha Mohammad had had an affair with the sister of this gentleman’s daughter-in-law and consequently the Zand gentleman was left with no alternative but to effect a legal punishment on Agha Mohammad; it might well have been stoning to death but in the event it was limited to castration. It has to be admitted that there has been considerable confusion about when and by whom Agha Mohammad Qajar was castrated. My informant’s remarks were of sufficient interest to deserve recording.

3 A Journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor, in the Years 1808 and 1809 (London, 1812). See especially chapters X, XI, XII and XIII.

4 The Governor-General, i.e. Farman Farma of Shiraz, did not only withhold revenue, but also enraged his father by his hostility to the nomination by Fath-Ali Shah of Abbas Mirza’s son, Mohammad as heir apparent; Hossein-Ali considered that he should be named as the successor to the recently deceased Abbas Mirza.

Part I

War
Between Scylla and Charybdis

Policy-making under conditions of constraint in early Qajar Persia

Manoutchehr M. Eskandari-Qajar

It is hard to imagine a more appropriate metaphor for the dilemma of the early Qajars in their struggle with Russia and England, than the story of Odysseus’ encounter with the twin monsters Scylla and Charybdis. Russia and England were both preying on Persia for their own ends: Russia to expand her empire south to complete her “manifest destiny,” England to defend hers against advances by others toward India. To be sure, Persia was not a helpless victim in this struggle, and, much like Odysseus, its rulers used a variety of means at their disposal to play one side against the other in the hopes of achieving their own ends. In doing so, however, Persia, like Odysseus, was not free to act as she pleased: her resources were limited, her options few, and there were many pressures on her, from without and within. In the end, for the Qajars, as for Odysseus, the result was survival, but at a cost.

In dealing with the early Qajars and their rivals, writers have generally applied a double standard, ascribing to the actions of Russia and Great Britain a larger impersonal logic of power (called variously “Great Power rivalry,” “power politics,” and later “the Great Game”), but to the actions of the Qajars only a narrow outlook and a flawed calculus of self-interest. This difference in ability and disposition, it is often held, assured victory for their antagonists and humiliation and defeat for the Qajars. In other words, and to use the language of politics and economics here, there is a common assumption that the international players in this rivalry were “rational utility-maximizers,” but that their Qajar counterparts were bereft of such capacities and acted only on instinct, without rhyme or reason, and on very narrowly defined short-term personal interest. As a result, they failed in their encounters with their antagonists, Russia and England, and in the process failed to safeguard the interests of Persia. There is also the further assumption that policy options were plentiful and that negative outcomes for the Persian side were the result of wrong choices and narrow vision rather than lack of alternatives. Of course, the situation is not helped by the fact that when considering the actions of the early Qajars in their encounters with their foreign rivals, the weight of historical facts, such as their ultimate defeats in the two encounters with the Russians in 1813 and 1828, the ostensibly inconclusive outcomes of the two Herat campaigns of 1838 and 1856, and
the defeat of Persian forces in the Anglo-Persian war of 1856–1857, heavily favour their antagonists.

**THE NEED FOR A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Military defeat or failure to achieve military objectives decisively, are never easily explained, and historiography implicitly favours victors, as victors not only inherit the spoils but also inevitably become owners of the narrative. One of the flaws of such narratives, however, is the assumption that rationality in decision-making is ineluctably linked to positive outcomes, which, in the context of wars, are defined narrowly, both in the popular psyche and in their academic mirroring, as either territorial conquest or absence of territorial losses. This is a critical flaw, as rationality is in reference to process and not outcome, though implied in the process is, of course, goal orientation, and in goal orientation, gain and not loss. Put differently, rational decision-making aims for gain, yet the achievement of gain is not a measure of the presence of rationality, neither is the outcome of “loss” proof of the absence of rationality. Both gain and loss could have occurred as a result of a variety of factors having little to do with the process of decision-making itself, luck being just one of these.

It is appropriate at this juncture to ask why theoretical considerations from the fields of economics and political science should be relevant as analytical tools in a study of historical phenomena such as the outcomes of the engagements between Persia and her rivals in the nineteenth century. A full exposition of the reasons for the validity of this choice would require a much longer discourse than the present framework allows. Suffice it to say, this however: political science and economics theory can offer insights into the dynamics driving international actors that mere historiography cannot capture. These disciplines allow us to gain greater insight into the rationales for action rather than simply describing the fact of action. In order to bring some degree of clarity into discussions about nineteenth-century Persia, a proper theoretical foundation is a necessary starting point, and political science, in particular, is the eminently relevant field of inquiry in this context. In addition, the absence of theory in favour of subjective descriptions in the guise of historiography has done a great disservice to a fuller and better understanding of this crucial period of modern Persian history. It is precisely the lack of such necessary clarifications, and the presence of generalizations about the purported behaviour of early Qajar leaders, that has inevitably allowed them to be portrayed as deficient in the most basic requirements of national level decision-making.

The next question might well be: Why should proving the presence of rationality in the decision-making process of the early Qajars be of such importance? As was pointed out at the outset, the assertion of deficiency on the part of early Qajar decision-makers, and by extension of Qajar rulers in general,
allowed for what sociologists call “labelling” (stereotyping) to occur, which became the premise for subsequent portrayals of the Qajars. This, in turn, became the foundation and building block upon which the edifice of Qajar “ineptitude” was diligently built, and in this respect, this phenomenon is no different from any of the countless examples of such similar labelling leading to colonialist or neo-colonialist attitudes, from declaring Turkey the “sick man of Europe,” to speaking of England’s “white man’s burden” or of France’s “mission civilizatrice.” The difference in the historiography of the Qajars, if any, is that in their case this portrayal was continued by Iranians themselves, academic and lay persons alike, and for a variety of reasons ranging from sectarian to political opposition.

**RATIONALITY IN DECISION-MAKING**

When speaking of rationality in decision-making, two different but related questions must be addressed. First is the question of the presence or absence of rationality in the decision-maker. In this context the question of rationality refers to empirically observable facts of behaviour, and thus rationality is defined as goal-oriented, purposive behaviour, implying a certain cost–benefit calculus, in which the actor strives to maximize gains and minimize losses. A further caveat is added in the context of national level decision-makers as opposed to individuals who make private decisions, in that the decision must be shown to have been based on national interests rather than self-interest. This position is referred to as the rationality assumption, i.e. a position that assumes goal-oriented, purposive action resulting in the use of appropriate means to attain desired ends. This assumption about actors, though related, must be considered separately from the theoretical construct referred to as rational decision-making theory, to which we will turn presently.

Among the many theoretical approaches in their respective fields, political science and economics provide us with two in particular, rational decision-making and prospect theory, that address the question of rationality of decision-makers well. Each of these approaches affords a deeper understanding of the motives and motivations behind foreign policy decisions of national level actors, though they arrive at their answers from different, and, some argue, even mutually exclusive angles. A brief explanation of the basic tenets of each theoretical approach and of the essential differences in each approach is therefore in order.

Prospect theory is a psychological theory of decision-making under conditions of risk. While prospect theory has its roots in psychology and economics, it has gained prominence in political science in the last two decades as a tool of foreign policy analysis. Prospect theory is relevant when looking at the decisions of early Qajars when their decisions are considered in the context of impending invasion or territorial challenges posed by Russia in particular. As Rose McDermott, one of the prominent proponents of this
approach in political science states “[t]he notion of risk involves some prospect of loss; the concern revolves around what might be lost, and how much of it. Prospect theory makes several predictions about the choices people tend to make under conditions of risk.”\textsuperscript{12} The theory holds that there are two phases affecting decision-making, the phase called framing, where perception or presentation of the situation in which decisions must be made affects the disposition towards some alternatives over others; and second, the evaluation phase, where the decision-maker assesses gains and losses relative to a reference point rather than in absolute terms. This reference point in turn may shift depending on the perspective of the decision-maker. In dealing with this important question of perception on gains and losses by the decision-makers, prospect theory concludes that,

decision makers seem to fear losses more than they covet gains, which translates into a willingness to take greater risks to protect what they have and fewer risks to acquire what they want. The status quo – for example, a state’s current territorial possessions – often becomes a reference point, which helps to predict “risk averse” or “risk-seeking” behavior. But the status quo is not always the reference point, and knowing a decision-maker’s actual reference point is important.\textsuperscript{13}

Based on this view, prospect theorists expect that national level decision-makers would be willing to “take fewer risks to acquire territory than to prevent the loss of territory.”\textsuperscript{14} This last point is an extremely interesting finding in view of the actions of the early Qajars with regard to the threat of Russia on their northern border and later with regard to Herat on their eastern border, as in both cases, from the point of view of the Qajars, territorial loss was being prevented by their actions rather than territorial gains sought.

Rational decision-making, the second theory under consideration, is most emphasized by the realist and neo-realist schools of thought in political science. Both realism and its modern-day successor neo-realism are predicated on the assumption that all actors on the world stage (countries and their decision-makers) pursue their national interests (power and security) in an anarchic international system characterized by the absence of an overarching power to regulate their activities.\textsuperscript{15} These schools of thought also assume that the actors are rational or “purposive” and that they pursue “various objectives understood to be consistent with their separate interests.”\textsuperscript{16} This view regards the basis for the actions of all actors to be the same: the seeking of power or the pursuit of national security. The implication of this view is, therefore, that one set of actors cannot be divorced from the assumption of rationality while others are included in it. The assumption applies to all equally and is a matter of empirical verification. Hans Morgenthau, one of the early proponents of this school of thought in the United States put it this way:
We assume that statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power, and the evidence of history bears out that assumption. . . . The concept of interest defined as power imposes intellectual discipline upon the observer, infuses rational order into the subject matter of politics, and thus makes the theoretical understanding of politics possible. On the side of the actor, it provides for rational discipline in action and creates that astounding continuity in foreign policy which makes American, British, or Russian foreign policy appear as an intelligible, rational continuum, by and large consistent within itself, regardless of the different motives, preferences, and intellectual and moral qualities of successive statesman. A realist theory of international politics, then, will guard against two popular fallacies: the concern with motives and the concern with ideological preferences.17

In its strictest formulation the requirements of rational decision-making theory are: that the decision-maker knows all the policy alternatives available; knows all the consequences of each policy alternative; calculates the ratio of costs to benefits of each policy alternative, and selects the most efficient policy alternative.18 Efficiency is defined here as maximum gains, minimum losses, minimum expenditure (cost), and in this the term is related to the concept of utility maximization referred to earlier. When the notion of national interest is added to this equation, defined roughly as the sum of all goods that would benefit the nation in the long run, then rational decision-making theory becomes a normative theory of decision-making of national leaders.19

A further dimension to this formulation is given by Paul Viotti and Mark Kauppi:

Within the global system, opportunities present themselves that, if handled properly, can help to achieve specific objectives. Similarly threats emanating from the global system have to be dealt with if they interfere with the achievements of basic objectives. But to exploit these opportunities and to handle these threats, states are required to mobilize the various capabilities they have at their disposal in order to exert power constructively to achieve those objectives and protect those interests. A key responsibility of leaders is to make sure that objectives are in line with available capabilities.20

The usefulness of the rationality assumption, whether through the lens of rational decision-making or that of prospect theory, lies in the insights it helps generate regarding international relations, the conditions under which decision-makers decide and act, their impetus for action, and the impulses that generate such action.21 Based on the rationality assumption, Qajar decision-makers must be looked at as utility maximizers (or loss averters, as the case may be) in much the same way as their Russian or British counterparts were, whether or not the expression of this maximization (or loss aversion)
mirrored that of their rivals. On the separate question of the process of decision-making itself, it can also be established empirically that the process of decision-making of the early Qajars was not arbitrary, that it followed rules and corresponded to the requirements of rational decision-making as outlined above, albeit overlooked by most observers, and that the outcomes intended and planned for by these decision-makers were often positive, rather than negative.

Both these conclusions are welcome in that they help short-circuit the polemically appealing but academically dubious opprobrium suggesting irrational or self-serving action that has often been attached to early Qajar decision-makers whenever deeper explanations were lacking or when the actions did not produce the desired outcomes from the point of view of the observers and commentators. Of course, we also cannot forget that commentators themselves are subject to the burden of perspective and perception when it comes to analyzing the situations they comment on, and may have their own agendas in framing situations in particular ways and not others. As the noted British historian E. H. Carr pointed out: facts need to be interpreted, and interpretation, after all, is everything.22

**REVISITING THE HISTORICAL RECORD USING A RATIONAL DECISION-MAKING THEORY FRAMEWORK**

The main criticism of the early Qajars concerned their inability to maintain the territorial integrity of Persia.23 The underlying basis to this criticism was that their decision-making process was flawed, leading to their inability to defend their territory. Furthermore, this flaw is portrayed as one of character rather than one of decision-making per se. Usually the “loss of territory” criticism goes hand in hand with the notion that the Qajars were weak and/or self-serving and that their decision-making process did not take into consideration the interests of the nation, or, alternately, when it can be shown that it did, that they were incapable of using all the means at their disposal to achieve better aims. In each case, the failure is held to be of character as well as of decision-making.

This criticism intriguingly glosses over several important facts in addition to the question of gain and loss as related to rationality.24 The first is the failure to consider, or realize, that there was no accepted notion concerning the extent of Persian territory in the early years of Qajar rule. Persia’s borders had changed tremendously from the waning years of the Safavids to the rise of the Qajars, yet the notion of what was “Persia’s territory” proper had not kept pace with these changes. Not knowing what the boundaries were, therefore, makes a discussion of loss and gain difficult, if not meaningless. Second, the criticism glosses over the fact that the Qajars had already conquered the territories in question under Agha Mohammad Khan’s rule and that it was their attempt to maintain these territories that resulted in
their renewed loss. To address these facts, then, one needs to ask: What was the extent of the territory of Persia at the time of Agha Mohammad Khan for us to be able to distinguish clearly between Persia proper and foreign dominions? What were the lines of demarcation and where were they? The following historical portion of this paper will elaborate these points.

For the purposes of this discussion, the focus will be on the decisions that led the early Qajars either to war or to the defence of their territory until the time of the Treaty of Golestan (1813). Clearly, the necessity of defending the territory of Persia did not disappear with the conclusion of the Treaty of Golestan and the subsequent Treaty of Turkomanchay of 1828, which imposed an even heavier toll on Persia; but Turkomanchay, in my view, was the continuation of the logics set in motion that led to the Treaty of Golestan. In looking at these events more closely, Golestan was a prelude to Turkomanchay, as Russia already had made the decision that her border with Persia would be the Aras river, while England had made her decision that she would not be held to any obligations with respect to Persia other than the minimum she could get away with.

Defence of her territorial integrity was a perennial theme for Persia and continues to be for Iran today. It has been Ariadne’s thread running through Persian and Iranian history. No country in history, of course, has been spared that concern, and very few today are fortunate enough not to have to be on their guard for such an eventuality. Iran, especially due to its strategic position at the crossroads of civilizations and at the cusp of the East-West divide, has not been and will not be in that happy circumstance in the foreseeable future.

**AGHA MOHAMMAD KHAN AND THE DECISION TO RECLAIM PERSIA’S SAFAVID BORDERS**

The assessment of the achievements of the Qajars in their encounters with their rivals has particularly been framed around the question of territorial integrity. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, in her pioneering work, *Frontier Fictions*, sheds new light on the reason for the framing of the issue in terms of territorial loss and gain. Interestingly, and contrary to expectation, these parameters did not originate with the critics of the Qajars but rather with the Qajars themselves, starting with Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar. Upon the death of Karim Khan Zand, Agha Mohammad Khan escaped from his long years of confinement at the Zand court, and set out to consolidate his power over his rivals and to unite Persia under his rule. Agha Mohammad Khan’s ambition was singular: to finish what his father Mohammad Hassan Khan Qajar had begun. Consolidation of power, control over the Iranian plateau and defeat of all domestic rivals was a feat no ruler had achieved since the time of the Safavids. Having attained this goal, Agha Mohammad Khan’s attention turned to the restoration of Persian sovereignty over all
the lands once controlled by the Safavids: the Caucasus, Khorasan, and parts of Afghanistan, Herat in particular. It needs to be emphasized, however, that this goal was secondary, and only pursued after domestic consolidation was completed.

There is a common assumption that Persia had clearly demarcated borders prior to the advent of the Qajars. A more appropriate statement would be that there are records of the maximal extent of Persia under the Safavids, as that is the recurrent “base-line” in the literature, and there were minimal boundaries of territory under Persian control after the Afghan invasions at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In between the maximal extent and the minimal size of Persia lies that grey area over which so much ink has flowed, particularly in relation to the period of the Qajars. Clearly when Agha Mohammad Khan came to power, Persia did not control the southern Caucasus, Khorasan or Herat. Had these areas been under Persian sovereignty, Agha Mohammad Khan would not have needed to field armies to conquer these areas, or rather, bring them under Persian control again. Having said this, we must acknowledge the ambiguity of these delineations. For instance, in the chaos of the transition from Afshar to Qajar rule after the death of Nader Shah, more than a dozen Khanates arose in the southern Caucasus, between Georgia, the Caspian Sea, and the Aras river. These Khanates simultaneously behaved as if they were autonomous entities and as if they were still under Persian suzerainty. For example, in Georgia, silver coins were minted in the years 1764 to 1797, – and even as late as 1798 (1213 AH), the first year of Fath-Ali Shah’s reign – with the invocation “ya kareem,” though no Persian ruler had ruled directly over Georgia since the Safavids and most certainly not the Zands. On the other hand, Georgia had its own line of kings, the Bagratids, who were considered vassals by the Persian rulers with the title “vaalit” (deputy or viceroy), but saw themselves as independent kings with sovereign decision-making power as evidenced by the events King Erekle II precipitated. Thus, as Gavin Hambly points out, “the effectiveness of these somewhat haphazard assertions of suzerainty depended on the ability of a particular Shah to make his will felt, and [upon] the determination of the local khans to evade obligations they regarded as onerous.”

The same was true of Herat and Khorasan, over which the Durranis had claims as did remnants of the Afshars – Shahrokh Afshar, the grandson of Nader – and various other local chieftains. So, what constituted Persia proper? Over what extent of a territory did a ruler have to consolidate power in order to be considered ruler of all of Iran? Was it Afsharid Persia? Was it Zand Persia? Was it Safavid Persia? The question answered itself for Agha Mohammad Khan the moment Russia under Catherine II advanced into the Caucasus and King Erekle II declared allegiance to her by means of the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783. Whether he had planned to or not, Agha Mohammad Khan was now at war with both Erekle II and Russia over who controlled Georgia. After the sack of Tiflis by his forces in 1795, his answer was in effect
“Persia’s boundaries are those of the Safavid Empire now reborn as the Qajar Empire.” It is noteworthy that he only accepted the crown after the conquest of Tiflis and the Khanates of the southern Caucasus, and when he did he accepted it as Shahanshah, Emperor, much as the Safavids had done before him. Thus, the question of the territorial integrity of Persia comprising the Khanates of the southern Caucasus, and the provinces of Khorasan and Herat was a matter reinforced by Agha Mohammad Khan, though it was far from clear cut at the time of his accession. From the death of Nader Shah to the sack of Tiflis by Agha Mohammad Khan, dominion over the lands north of the Aras to the Kura remained an open question. Historically, they had been part of Persia for centuries, but the facts on the ground had changed quite a bit immediately prior to the advent of the Qajars. Agha Mohammad Khan thus forced the territories back into the equation, and when Fath-Ali Khan (Baba Khan) became Shah in 1798, he considered those territories an integral part of the empire he was now going to rule.

Given the positive outcome of Agha Mohammad Khan’s struggles, no serious question has ever been raised on either the logic of his actions, or on the decision-making process leading to this outcome. Agha Mohammad Khan seemed to have had an intuitive understanding of the requirements for action in the arena of politics of his time. He also had an accurate measure of the strength of his armies as compared to those of his opponents. Observers agree that he did nothing without calculation and purpose and that he made his calculations well in advance, with a shrewd cost-benefit calculus worthy of the best tacticians, as, for instance, the account of his encounters with Count Zubov, Catherine’s general for the Caucasus campaign, attests. Thus, because Agha Mohammad Khan’s actions accorded with what was apparently accepted tradition that understood the territory of Persia as including the southern Caucasus, Khorasan, and Herat, Fath-Ali Shah inherited not only the territories acquired and consolidated by his uncle, but equally importantly, the tradition of including them under the “Guarded Domains” of Persia, which was the justification for those acquisitions in the first place. Based on this tradition and on the political reality of having incorporated these territories back into Persia proper, a “hunger for empire” not only “emerged” in Qajar era narratives, as Kashani-Sabet relates, but was fanned and nurtured by these narratives to become the accepted baseline for all assessments of effective policy-making for the rest of the dynasty’s rule, and into the Pahlavi era as well.

This parameter for, or limitation on, policy initiatives by the heirs of Agha Mohammad Khan constitutes an example of the constraints on decision-making. Constraints, in this context, refer to factors outside of the control of decision-makers with which they must contend, but over which they have little, if any, say. Constraints limit the options decision-makers have at their disposal, and thus, in a sense, mirror the concept of scarcity in economics and politics. The presence of constraints does not, however, change the nature of decision-making itself, though it may change its scope, that is, constraints
do not affect the process of rational decision-making unless they are of such extraordinary amplitude that they would distort the decision-making process altogether. In that case the term duress might be a more appropriate term, with all the implications and nuances that it implies. These instances are of course rare and must be treated as exceptions. Certainly in the cases under consideration here, constraints never reached this level, though at times, the pressures Fath-Ali Shah and Abbas Mirza were under between the demands by France, Great Britain, and Russia, could be considered duress by more sympathetic commentators on the period.

Unlike Fath-Ali Shah’s dilemma, for Agha Mohammad Khan very few constraints remained once he had conquered his domestic foes. Agha Mohammad Khan was also the beneficiary of international events he had no hand in affecting. First, his would-be foe, Catherine II, died in 1796 and was replaced by her son Paul I, who showed no interest in pursuing her policies of conquest in the southern Caucasus. He, instead, summoned Count Zubov to return to St Petersburg, and in so doing effectively removed the threat of any encounter with the Russian armies, freeing Agha Mohammad Khan’s hand to consolidate his power in the southern Caucasus.

Second, Napoleon’s ascendancy in Europe as First Consul and General of the revolutionary armies of France, drew away the attention, albeit temporarily, of the Great Powers from the Persian and Central Asian theatre and focused it on Europe. This was still true at the time of Fath-Ali Shah’s accession to the throne, although the British government in India was already taking notice for its own reasons, given that Agha Mohammad Khan had died while contemplating an eastern campaign the moment he was satisfied that the gains from his northern campaign were consolidated.

Third, the military absence of Russia and Great Britain meant that Persia’s armies were the strongest military force in the region with no credible challenger. The only possible constraint on Agha Mohammad Khan’s planned military campaigns would have been the collapse of his internal coalitions, either in the larger Qajar clan or with the other tribes, but given his track record, even these eventualities were very remote. Agha Mohammad Khan was in an enviable position at the time of his second campaign in the Caucasus. He was practically the unimpeded master of the entire terrain and, were it not for his assassination on that fateful night at Shusha, who knows what circumstances his heirs would have inherited.

FATH-ALI SHAH: CONSTRAINTS ON DECISION-MAKING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PERSIA’S BORDERS

Fath-Ali Shah only had the benefit of a few years of respite regarding the question of the borders of Persia with Russia. In 1801, Tsar Paul I was assassinated and replaced by his son Alexander I. Tsar Alexander’s views concerning the southern Caucasus differed dramatically from those of his father.
and before long Persia was engaged with Russia again in a struggle for supremacy over the Khanates and Georgia. In addition, now Britain and France turned their attention to Persia as well.

Assessments on the decision-making process of Fath-Ali Shah and on his awareness of the larger context within which Persia had to operate at this time, differ, as do the assessments of the kinds of constraints the Qajars had to work under. Certainly one set of constraints were the power politics of the Napoleonic Wars as they spilled out into the Middle East. Another set were those emanating from the policy of the British Empire in India, which, for the early years of Qajar rule, represented slightly different pressures than that of England proper, and which the Qajars tried to adjust to, understand, and use to their advantage whenever possible.

After Napoleon’s unsuccessful campaign in the Levant in 1799, Lord Wellesley, then Governor General of India, felt it was time for British India to cover her western flank by staving off any possible further advances. Her forward defensive line would be Persia, or, failing that, Afghanistan. Thus Major General John Malcolm was dispatched from Bombay with a retinue fit for a potentate, to impress upon the Persian ruler how necessary an alliance with Britain would be. The result of this expedition was the Anglo-Persian Treaty of 1801. The treaty had separate political and economic components to it. The economic one, which a few decades prior would have been uppermost on Britain’s mind, was to become negligible in view of unfolding events. The political component, which was played down by Malcolm at first, turned out to be the decisive aspect of the treaty and the most vexing aspect for both parties in the years to come.

Sir Denis Wright relates the essence of this treaty thus:

Malcolm was instructed to encourage Persian attacks on Afghanistan, to counteract any possible moves by “those villainous but active democrats, the French” and to stimulate English and Indian trade. . . . Under the Political Treaty the Shah undertook to attack Afghan territory should that country invade India and to prevent the French from settling or residing in Persia: in return the British were to supply “as many cannon and warlike stores as possible, with necessary apparatus, attendants and inspectors” should either the Afghans or the French attack Persia and, in the latter event, also to send troops to join Persian forces in securing “the expulsion and extermination” of the French.37

The Russians for their part were not interested in treaties of mutual assistance with the Persians. They were about to conquer what they needed from the Persian-controlled areas of the southern Caucasus. As for the rest, they would negotiate with Persia from a position of strength once their conquest was complete. Here is what Gavin Hambly states regarding the position of Fath-Ali Shah and his assessment of the Russian threat:
In retrospect, Russian expansion into the southern Caucasus region appears inevitable, but in Fath Ali Shah’s view of the world, the Khanates belonged wholly to Iran. . . . Until 1804 it is probable that neither the Shah nor his entourage fully apprehended the extent of the Russian threat. It would simply be perceived in terms of the type of trans-border skirmishing in which the Iranians engaged with their neighbours, while it would be taken as axiomatic that local rulers in such circumstances would attempt to play off one potential overlord against another. It is unlikely that anyone in Tehran imagined that the Russian government in Saint Petersburg might be planning outright annexation, or that the pro-consular ambitions of local Russian commanders in the field would tend to promote just such an outcome. It was the manner of dealings with the Russians as much as anything else that made contemporary British observers assume that Fath Ali Shah lived in a world of fantasy. Ignorant of the world beyond his frontiers he certainly was, but to blame him for failure to anticipate the subsequent course of Russian expansionism is to read back into the early years of the reign subsequent developments which few, around 1800, could have predicted.38

Hambly’s assessment of Fath-Ali Shah notwithstanding, the assertion that he was not aware of the gathering storm and the extent of that storm is not borne out by what is known of his policy decisions in this regard. In fact, the genesis of the ill feelings and mutual suspicion between the Qajars and the British is found in Fath-Ali Shah’s disappointment over what he perceived to be England’s reneging on her offer of assistance against Russia’s incursions into Persia’s territories in the southern Caucasus. Of course, England had no such view of her promises to Persia. “The British aversion to commitments in peacetime,” says Edward Ingram, “may have been strengthened by their resentment of the demands made on them by the Qajar regime in Persia in the twenty-five years following the Napoleonic Wars. . . . Like many similar arrangements between the British and foreigners, its legacy was bitterness and disappointment. Expecting to be offered help, the British resented being asked for it. They expected to fight Napoleon to the last Austrian and to defend India to the last Persian.”39

Of course, Fath-Ali Shah’s view was different. He felt he had made a treaty of equals and he also felt that the treaty included assurances by the British to help defend his territory against Russian incursion in return for his guarantee to do the same for the British in India or wherever they would request his assistance. It is true that he did not know the extent of the disparagement of his person and of his abilities as a ruler by the British, but he was able to form a fairly accurate view of their willingness to keep promises made, whether in the spirit or the letter of the treaties, and realizing that the British therefore did not treat him as an equal, Fath-Ali Shah turned to the French when the occasion arose.
The decision, however, was not sudden. Nor was it solely the result of the
disappointment Fath-Ali Shah must have felt in having thrown in his lot
with the British and then being snubbed and seeing their promises to him
broken. There is an interesting remark recorded by Iradj Amini concerning
a question Fath-Ali Shah posed to Malcolm at their first meeting in 1801.
The Shah asked him point blank, “Are the French a powerful people?”
Malcolm replied “Certainly. They would not otherwise deserve to be men-
tioned as enemies of the English.” Upon hearing this reply, Amini relates,
the Shah turned to his ministers and said: “There you have it. We were led
to believe that the French were a weak and contemptible nation. The Elchee
(ambassador), by telling us the truth, has done them justice, and elevated
his country at the same time.”40 What Amini uncovers here is far more than
a conversation between an inquisitive monarch and a foreign ambassador.
What this reveals is that Fath-Ali Shah was already weighing different options
with regard to the help he knew he needed in facing this enemy who had,
since the time of his uncle, become more formidable and more intransigent.
Amini further adds this illuminating note:

By praising the French, [Malcolm] confirmed Fath Ali Shah’s personal
opinion of them, an opinion he had no doubt formed as a result of the
news he regularly received from Rousseau, the commissioner of French
commercial relations in Baghdad, about French exploits in Europe. For
the time being, however, the Persians were only too pleased to nego-
tiate with the British, especially with their government in India, which,
owing to its proximity, was in a better position than any other power
to keep in check the territorial ambitions of Russia. So the Shah
ordered his Prime Minister, Hajji Ibrahim Itimad-al-Dauleh, to start imme-
diately upon commercial as well as political negotiations with Malcolm.41

Thus the picture that emerges is one of Persian initiative rather than pas-
sivity in the face of the constraints imposed on Persia by geopolitics beyond
her control.

Of course, Persia’s attempt to break free of the dilemma of a menacing
Russia and a reluctant and demanding England does not end there. In reac-
tion to General Tsitsianov’s seizing of the Khanate of Ganjeh (Ganja) on
January 3, 1804, marking the beginning of Russian hostilities against Persia,
and in response to British foot dragging on the question of assistance against
Russia, Fath-Ali Shah weighed his “best alternative options” and turned to
the French, who now eagerly seized the opportunity by offering a treaty of
friendship and mutual support. The British not having fulfilled their end of
the bargain, Fath-Ali Shah felt free now not to be bound by his. The result
of this new policy was the Treaty of Finkenstein between France and Persia
in 1807. What Fath-Ali Shah could not get in writing from the British in
the Treaty of 1801, he achieved from the French in 1807, or so he thought.
Naturally, there were also costs attached to this new alliance. One was of
course the loss of whatever goodwill Britain may have had towards Persia, as Fath-Ali Shah had in fact broken the letter of the treaty with England, while England had reneged on its spirit in not assisting Persia against Russia. The other cost was that Fath-Ali Shah did not get what he needed from the bargain with the French either. The French turned out to be no more willing to look out for the interests of Persia above and beyond their own than the British were. The text of the treaty promised France’s intervention in maintaining Persia’s territorial integrity, guaranteeing her in article 4, “the integrity of [the] existing territory of Persia.” What Fath-Ali Shah could not anticipate was what France had meant by “existing.” What he could also not anticipate was France’s intervening peace with Russia and the resulting Treaty of Tilsit between Napoleon and Alexander just two months later. This rendered the articles of Finkenstein inoperative as far as France was concerned regarding her obligations to Persia against Russia. In her betrayal of Persia’s trust, France turned out to be as adept at interpreting words and carving out meanings as England had been. Talleyrand, writing to General Gardane after Tilsit says:

Nothing regarding Persia has been stipulated at Tilsit, and you will easily understand the reason for it. Our treaty with Persia was not yet ratified by that country; it was not even known there, and we had no indication how Fath Ali Shah would react to it. In a situation like this the most reserved course of action was the most appropriate one, and it was natural not to complicate other interests we had to settle with Russia through stipulations about Persia.42

Of course, in France’s view what remained operative of the Finkenstein Treaty was Persia’s obligation to declare hostility against England. Thus the new instructions to General Gardane were to “promote peace between Russia and Persia and urge Persia to act exclusively against British interests.”43 Meanwhile, Persia was still at war with Russia and, for all her efforts at gaining ground on the one aim she pursued single-mindedly throughout all these years of negotiation with England and France, namely, the integrity of her territory north of the Aras, Persia still seemed no better off than when she started. I say “seemed” because the alternating alliances Persia managed to forge gained Russia’s attention, though Russia did little about them other than agreeing to a cessation of hostilities pending mediated negotiations on the status of her own gains in the southern Caucasus and on Persia’s losses.

Yet even these temporary measures did not last. In 1808 Russia became insistent that Persia’s losses be ratified without further delay. As Fath-Ali Shah slowly became aware of Napoleon’s inability, if not unwillingness, to do anything for him, he once again weighed his alternatives and found he had to turn to Britain. This time he knew that the costs of return would be even greater than the cost of the previous instance when he put trust in Britain’s willingness to help regain Persia’s territories in 1801. He would now have to
negotiate from a position of weakness, as England not only held most of the cards but also held a grudge against Fath-Ali Shah for what it deemed to be his desertion of his obligations under the 1801 treaty.

Given these setbacks, one might wonder if Fath-Ali Shah and his advisors were in fact fully aware of the dangers lurking in the waters they were now navigating. Amini argues that they were, but could do very little about them other than hope for a favourable turn of events. Commenting on Abbas Mirza’s understanding of Napoleon’s neglect of Persia in favour of his own interests in Europe, he states:

This comment by Prince Abbas Mirza shows that the Persian authorities were perfectly aware of the political realities of Europe and of the priorities of French diplomacy. But the fact remained that, torn apart by Russia’s ambitions to the north and Britain’s to the south, they had no choice but to attempt the impossible to oppose both countries with the power of France. Perhaps the partisans of this theory, who included persons as influential as the Crown Prince himself and the prime Minister, Mirza Shafi, hoped that Napoleon’s hatred of Britain and his desire to invade India by way of Persia would prevail over his friendship with Russia, and that he would sooner or later act in their country’s favour. Had not Gardane done everything to convince them of the sincerity of France’s friendship?

In the meantime, Persia did not remain idle in her attempts to regain her lost territories and was fighting her battles on two fronts, one military and one diplomatic. In the winter of 1808, Abbas Mirza confronted the Russians and, though he engaged General Nebolsin’s troops at Nakhtchevan in November against the advice of his father and lost, in December he managed to snatch a victory against the more formidable General Gudovitch at Erivan, showing that the reforms of the armed forces he had initiated could stand him in good stead. On the diplomatic front, in the spring of 1809, Persia signed her second treaty with England, represented by Harford Jones. This second Anglo-Persian treaty remedied from the point of view of the Persians the one defect of the first that drove them into the arms of the French in the first place. The price of this new treaty, on England’s insistence, was an abrogation of all concessions made to France, but in return it gave to Persia the guarantee that Britain would come to the aid of Persia if she was invaded by a “European” power, as well as providing Persia with military aid and financial assistance. The inclusion of the term “European” was a concession demanded by Persia, but the term had a very different meaning for each party. From Persia’s point of view, the treaty strengthened her hand against Russia. From Britain’s, it covered her western flank from any further incursion by France as the “European” power in question, and the question of territory was again in reference to present and not past boundaries.
Thinking herself safer now, Persia pursued her struggle against Russia in the hope of regaining lost ground while England, in the person of Lord Minto, the new Governor General of India, was already thinking of ways to extricate herself from the obligation to support Persia’s struggle against Russia. Again, in another turn of events, European political considerations interfered with Persia’s interests. In 1809, Gudovitch, sensing his position to be more precarious than he had led the Persians to believe, offered a negotiated settlement. This time it was Britain that insisted that the war must continue and that Persia should fight on. England did so out of concern over Russia’s strength in the European theatre should Russia be rid of the problem of fighting Persia. Persia reluctantly agreed, but Mirza Shafi made these remarks to Harford Jones showing the degree of calculation the Persians were engaged in at every turn of the road: “Very well, but supposing that things turn out badly in Europe and you leave us ‘in a tight spot.’ Today we can make peace if we want to. But what will happen tomorrow if we trust you and if your government is at variance with you?”

In fact this is exactly what happened in the coming years. Jones was replaced by Sir Gore Ouseley, and Gudovitch with General Tormazov. While Ouseley was following the new policy of his country, Tormazov was laying down the new and tougher line of his. In Europe, in the meantime, Russia and Britain had allied in the Third Coalition against Napoleon. Amini states that this new change in British policy was to “have disastrous effects on Persia,” as Persia now found herself abandoned again without the military support she needed to see her struggle with Russia through. It is here that Abbas Mirza made the most fateful decision of his campaigns. Assessing his chances at a possible military victory in one decisive battle, he took a chance and engaged the enemy at Aslanduz, despite being outnumbered and outgunned by the Russians. The result was defeat and with this defeat, Persia was no longer in a position to engage the Russians alone. Having lost France’s support and England’s, Persia had to sue for peace. The resulting Treaty of Golestan, negotiated with the assistance of Sir Gore Ouseley, was a terrible blow to Persia. In it Persia ceded control over all the Khanates north of the Aras except for Nakhtchevan and Erivan, and given the outcome of this treaty, questions were raised by Persia on the role of Ouseley in seeing to Russian and thus British interests rather than to those of Persia, which by treaty he was supposed to help protect.

RETHINKING QAJAR DECISION-MAKING USING PROSPECT THEORY AND RATIONAL DECISION-MAKING THEORY

Though the outcome was negative for the Persian side, little in her decision-making process, based on the evidence, could legitimately fault Persia for having taken fewer precautions than necessary, or neglected information she
could have had access to. Having pursued her interests on several fronts with a singular view of regaining lost territories in the Caucasus, Persia could not have acted differently given the resources available to her. Had she in fact had a stronger military with more modern equipment or the support of an ally who would commit troops side-by-side with her, there is little doubt that Abbas Mirza could have recovered some, if not all, of the lost ground. Despite the limited means at his disposal, the record of his military victories against Russia is not negligible, and if it is suggested that more could have been done, the onus surely would have to be on those who suggest it, to show how, given these parameters, limitations and constraints pushing on Persia, Persia could have done better than she did.

Rational theory shows that Persia’s reaction was called forth by Russia’s actions in the Caucasus. Rational decision-making theory also shows that Persia’s decision-makers had little choice as to how to react. Rational decision-making theory helps us understand the larger context of the actions of Russia and Persia and those of the other players, the Ottoman Empire, France, and Great Britain. Prospect theory, on the other hand, helps explain the peculiarities and differences between Agha Mohammad Khan’s and Fath-Ali Shah’s reactions to Persia’s foes.

Prospect theory’s finding that players tend to want to “protect what they have and [take] fewer risks to acquire what they want” applies very precisely as an explanation of differences in the decisions of Fath-Ali Shah and Agha Mohammad Khan. There is no question that people in general and decision-makers in particular, tend to be risk-takers when they start out and are seeking to achieve their goals, but once they have reached those goals or approximated them, they tend to become risk averse in order to maintain their achieved status. Given the exigencies and pressures on Agha Mohammad Khan as a dynasty builder and consolidator, he was willing to take great risks and incur heavy personal costs to regain Persia’s territorial heritage. The loss of his beloved brother by his own hand, the constant campaigning, and the hardship of life on the battlefield – all these were offset by the goal of unifying rule over Persia, consolidating power for the sake of passing it on to his chosen heir, Baba Khan (Fath-Ali Shah), and establishing a viable dynasty that could withstand the inevitable challenges and uncertainties that any new rulers might face.

The circumstances surrounding Fath-Ali Shah’s rule, on the other hand, were very different from those of his uncle, and thus his aims and goals were quite different also. For Fath-Ali Shah, maintenance of power, not consolidation, was important. Given the memory of the turmoil under which the dynasty was established, the violent deaths of his great-grandfather and namesake Fath-Ali Khan, and that of his grandfather, father and uncle, and the many years of internal strife, and foreign wars it took before he was able to reach the throne of Persia, his paramount goal throughout his rule was stability and thus risk aversion. For Fath-Ali Shah this translated into a desire to end military engagements as soon as possible with foreign foes such as
the Ottoman Empire and Russia and instead to forge alliances with England
and France in order to fend off further wars. Prospect theory’s further point
that decision-makers will “take fewer risks to acquire territory than to pre-
vent the loss of territory,” also helps explain some of Abbas Mirza’s actions
that resulted in the defeat at Aslanduz, and the actions of both Fath-Ali Shah
and Abbas Mirza that resulted in the defeat in 1828 and the subsequent
Turkomanchay treaty. Abbas Mirza’s risk-taking strategy, running counter
to his father’s risk aversion, was dictated by the circumstances he found him-
self in and by the prospect of reconsolidation through one decisive victory
that could have restored a balance that had been disturbed by Russia. Fate,
of course, would have it otherwise.

Just as Odysseus’ troubles were not over when he survived the sea pas-
sage between the twin monsters Scylla and Charybdis, neither were those of
the Qajars after Golestan and Turkomanchay. The stranglehold by Persia’s
twin foes continued well into the twentieth century, with ill results for the
Qajars and for the Pahlavis who followed them. What rational decision-
making theory and prospect theory allow us to conclude, however, is that the
early Qajars were not hapless victims of circumstance. They were initiators
of policies and acted rationally, though on a calculus difficult to discern with-
out the insights these theories make possible.

Notes

1 Book XII of the Odyssey relates the encounter of Odysseus with the monsters
succinctly as follows: “Next came Charybdis, who swallows the sea in a
whirlpool, then spits it up again. Avoiding this we skirted the cliff where Scylla
exacts her toll. Each of her six slavering maws grabbed a sailor and wolfed him
down.” In Greek mythology Scylla was the daughter of Phorcys and the Titan
Ceto, and Charybdis the daughter of Poseidon and Gaia. Both were beautiful
women, turned by Circe and Zeus, respectively, into these monsters. As monsters,
Charybdis was more dangerous, but Scylla was more terrifying.

2 By early Qajars are meant the first two rulers of the Qajar dynasty, Agha
Mohammad Khan and Fath-Ali Shah Qajar, but this description of course also
includes Abbas Mirza, Fath-Ali Shah’s son, heir, and chief military commander,
and, in certain aspects of the article, applies as well to Mohammad Shah and Nasser-
edin Shah until the conquest of Herat in 1856.

3 What economists refer to as “utility maximization,” political scientists call the
“pursuit of national interests.” While in economics the assumption, both normatively
and empirically, is that the actor in the marketplace acts with individual goals in
mind, in international politics the assumption is that the actor acts with the inter-
est of the state, or national interest, in mind. In this context, actor refers to national
level decision-maker such as monarch, prince, general, prime minister, or presid-
ent, and this distinction between the requirements of rational private action and
the dictates of rational public action is best and most memorably explained in
Niccolò Machiavelli’s treatise, The Prince.

4 In politics as in economics, scarcity, not plenty, is the fundamental premise, and
though this is more easily understood with regard to wealth over which economic
competition occurs, this is no less true of power, over which political competi-
tion unfolds. As in economics so also in politics, means for the acquisition of the
goods over which there is competition are not unlimited, and thus one speaks of constraints bearing on the actors in this competition. Were the means and the goods in both arenas unlimited, politics, the science of statecraft, and economics, the science of house-holding, to follow Aristotle’s definitions, would not only be superfluous, but also meaningless activities, and competition over plentifully available goods, irrational if not insane.


6 Popular belief associates rationality in decision-making with success, thus in the context of the competition between England, Russia, and Qajar Persia from the waning years of the eighteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century, there is never a question about Agha Mohammad Khan’s foreign policy decisions since they resulted in territorial gains. On the other hand, lack of territorial gains, or worse, loss of territory, provokes scrutiny and needs justification on the assumption that failure to achieve gains is due to the personal shortcomings of decision-makers, or defects internal to the decision-making process. To take into account, for example, unalterable factors from the outside, internal pressures, or simply luck or lack thereof, the popular mind has little patience. It is therefore essential before entering into debates about historical outcomes to consider how theoretical discussions might help clarify what otherwise must remain only a bewildering array of data.

7 Far too little attention has been paid to the question of luck or good fortune, and yet in international politics chance is often a decisive factor in the outcome of events. Machiavelli in *The Prince*, is one of the few political thinkers who seriously considers the role of chance. He speaks of *Fortuna* as the counterpart to or mirror image of *Necessità* or Fate. For Machiavelli, fate represents the parameters or constraints within which the decision-maker must operate. Fortuna represents the opportunities that arise. A conjunction of right timing and good fortune may decide the issue of the event. See also Carl von Clausewitz’ classic treatize, *On War*, with an introduction by Anatol Rapoport (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), on the role of chance in questions of strategy, and Joseph Nye, Jr and David McCullough on chance in politics and history respectively. Nye calls his conceptual framework incorporating chance “counter-factuals,” a term he popularized as a method of reaching greater certainty in international political analysis; see, *Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History*, 4th edn (New York: Longman Publishers, 2003). McCullough speaks of the role of chance in General Washington’s campaigns against the British during the American Revolution in his recent work, *1776* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

8 There is a substantial debate on the question of how national interest is defined and whether or not national level decision-makers do (or do not) present personal interests as national interests, either by clever formulation or by forced equation such as Louis XIV’s statement “l’état c’est moi.” However, Machiavelli’s position remains the standard answer to these criticisms, both during his time and in that of his realist heirs today.


10 See Robert Jervis “The Implications of Prospect Theory for Human Nature and Values,” in Rose McDermott, ed., *Political Psychology* 25/2 (April 2004): 163–76. The intricacies of the debate between rational choice theorists and prospect theorists are beyond the scope of this paper, but the predominant view is that prospect theory is a departure from rational choice as it focuses on emotion (loss aversion and framing) as a determinant of action, whereas pure rational choice
theories abstract from emotion to focus on a strict utility maximization principle. (For a thorough discussion see McDermott’s introductory remarks in the above special issue on prospect theory, pp. 147–61.) There is also a question as to whether these new formulations are refinements of rational decision-making or substantial enough critiques of it to constitute departures from the theory altogether. Russett et al., op. cit., p. 166, answer that,

[n]one of these challenges to the rational actor model imply that decision makers are irrational, only that actual decision making departs from the ideal model in various and significant ways. Nor do they suggest that rational choice approaches to the study of world politics are doomed to failure because of these imperfections.

It is Russett et al., op. cit., p. 163, who choose the term “refinement” to describe prospect theory as an alternate theory of rationality. There have also been attempts to bring the findings of rational decision-making and prospect theory closer together as prominent exponents of each camp have looked for common ground. (See for instance, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Rose McDermott, “Crossing No Man’s Land: Cooperation From the Trenches,” in McDermott, op. cit. (2004), pp. 163–76).

Finally, there are questions regarding the theoretical strength of each of these theories. (For a survey of the state of the discipline regarding rationality in decision-making see Eldar Shafir and Robyn A. LeBoeuf, “Rationality,” Annual Revue of Psychology 53 (2002): 491–5.) Two challenges to prospect theory are particularly noteworthy: a) the apparent failure of the theory to more fully explain the origin and causes of framing, and b) the inability of the theory to distinguish satisfactorily between consistency and causality (see McDermott, op. cit., pp. 154 and 160). Rational decision-making, on the other hand, has been criticized on the notion that its requirements are too strict and its conditions impossible to fulfill in real-world settings. Decision-making theorists such as Herbert Simon therefore speak of “limited rationality” or “bounded rationality” in decision-making and of the notion of “satisficing” (that is “first acceptable option” decision-making) as a more appropriately descriptive theory of the actual decision-making process than pure utility maximization. See Herbert Simon, Models of Man (New York: Wiley Publishers, 1957) and Models of Bounded Rationality (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982). The idea of bounded rationality is applied to wartime decision-making by Scott Sigmund Garter in Strategic Assessment in War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), as cited in Russett, et al., op. cit., p. 163. Some have even abandoned the analytical framework of rational decision-making altogether in favour of different approaches that they argue capture the real world of decision-making processes better without requiring the detachment of strict rational decision-making theory, see Thomas R. Dye, Understanding Public Policy, 11th edn (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005), chapter 2, “Models of Politics.” Graham Allison, in his landmark formulation of the essence of decision-making in 1971 (cited in Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi, International Relations and World Politics: Security, Economy, Identity, 2nd edn (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), p. 127), presents one of the most famous critiques of rational choice theory:

where a given bureaucratic actor or diplomat stands on a given issue is often determined by where he or she sits; that is, one’s view of alternative courses of action is highly colored by the perspective of the organization to which one belongs or role one plays. Perceptions of what is the optimal or best course of action often vary from one bureaucratic actor to another, reflecting
organizational biases that raise serious doubts concerning the rationality of the process as a whole. What assurance is there that optimal choices for the state as a whole will be made? Or is optimality, when achieved, purely accidental?

11 Economics and political science have developed important theories regarding the behaviour of actors in competitive situations under conditions of scarcity and constraint. Balance-of-power, game theory, public choice, rational choice theory, and prospect theory are among the most currently prominent and promising in terms of their explanatory and predictive power regarding the behaviour of state actors in the arena of foreign policy, the specific subject of this paper. The exponents of the schools of thought associated with these theories are too numerous to list exhaustively here, suffice it to mention James Buchanan, William Harrison Riker, Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, and David Kahneman, as among their most prominent early representatives. Additionally, political science has also developed elaborate theories on the causes and origins of wars that bear indirectly on the question of rationality of actors. Prominent among these theories are balance-of-power theory mentioned above, whose chief exponent today is Kenneth Waltz. Coupled with theories of origins of wars is the concept of levels of analysis, pioneered by a variety of political scientists, including David Easton, Kenneth Waltz, J. David Singer, and John Spanier for the classic statements of this view. See Kenneth N. Waltz, Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); Kenneth N. Waltz, The Theory of International Politics (New York: Random House, 1979); John Spanier, Games Nations Play: Analyzing International Politics (New York: Praeger, 1972); Richard Rosecrance, Action and Reaction in World Politics: International Systems in Perspective (Boston: Little Brown, 1963). Levels of analysis theories allow the search for the causes of war in the international system to be focused at the three different levels: the international level and the impersonal forces and logics operating there, the level of the nation-state itself, and lastly the level of the decision-makers. The first level is termed systemic level of analysis and systems theories are theories addressing that level of analysis. Its early exponents were Ludwig von Bertalanffy, General Systems Theory (New York: Braziller, 1968); David Easton, The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953); David Easton “An Approach to the Analysis of Political Systems,” World Politics IX (1957): 393–400; J. David Singer, “The Level of Analysis Problem in International Relations,” World Politics XIV (1961): 77–92, among others. Of course the earliest thinker associated with this approach is Thucydides in his Peloponnesian Wars, and closer to our own time, Thomas Hobbes in his Leviathan, pointing to the anarchic nature of the international system as eliciting a kind of stimulus-response pattern independent of the wills of the actors involved. The pioneer of this behaviourist approach in psychology was B. F. Skinner, whose famous stimulus-response model tried to prove at the individual level what systemic theorists were saying at the level of the international system and the behaviour of nation-states. The level of analysis approaches alternately also focus on nation-state systems (sub-systemic national level analysis). The most famous early exponents of the view that particular types of regimes (forms of government or political systems as they are called today) embody warlike or peaceful tendencies are Plato in his Republic and Aristotle in his Politics. Closer to our own time, Immanuel Kant in his Essay on Perpetual Peace (1795) is considered the originator of the idea that democratic systems tend towards peace, their opposites to war. Most recently the theory of “democratic peace” is examined and espoused by Jack Levy, “The Causes of War: A Review of Theories and Evidence,” in Philip E. Tetlock et al., eds, Behavior, Society, and Nuclear War, vol. 1 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) as quoted in Viotti and Kauppi,
The last level of analysis is the one focused on groups within nation-states or leaders and decision-makers within states. This approach is called sub-systemic leadership or decision-making analysis. Typically, these approaches bridge psychology and political science. Pioneers in this field of analysis, not surprisingly, include Sigmund Freud, (Moses and Monotheism) and Erik Erikson (Young Man Luther), and their modern-day heirs such as Marvin Zonis, Majestic Failure: The Fall of the Shah (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). The approach now known as prospect theory, though originally from the field of economics and at first called “value theory” in the works of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky in the 1970s, fits into this last level of analysis and has increasingly become an important tool of analysis of foreign policy decisions in political science. For an example of Kahneman and Tversky’s early work see their “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” Econometrica 47 (1979): 263–91. For more current examples of articles on prospect theory see two special issues of the journal Political Psychology, of June 1992, edited by Barbara Farnham and of April 2004, edited by Rose McDermott, op. cit. Though David Kahneman is an economist, and many of the pioneers of rational decision-making theory were political scientists, both theories have their roots in psychology as well. (See Shafir and LeBoeuf, op. cit.)

13 Russett et al., op. cit., pp. 163–6.
14 Ibid.
15 There are two dominant schools of thought in political science, each defining national interest differently. For the realists, national interest is defined in terms of power and defence of territory. For their counterparts, the idealists, it is defined as morality and the rule of law. Their contemporary versions, neo-realists (structuralists) and neo-liberals have each incorporated some of the points of their opponents, and their focus now is more on the prevalence of conflict or of cooperation in international relations. The two most prominent exponents of the realist and neo-realist schools of thought in the American context are Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. The essence of the realist approach is the emphasis on the quest for power. The essence of the neo-realist is that of the quest for security. Thus neo-realism may accommodate positions that classical realism would reject such as the acceptance of structural constraints in the form of international legal regimes that would provide for security to an extent and make the quest for power less important than the impulse to abide by those regimes as a means of increasing security short of the necessity for war. See Hans Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace, 6th edn, revised by Kenneth W. Thompson (New York: Knopf, 1985) and Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Origins of War in Neo-Realist Theory,” Journal of Interdisciplinary History 18/4 (Spring 1988): 39–52; and also Kenneth N. Waltz, 1959 and 1979, op. cit. For an early proponent of the alternative point of view to realism, see John Herz, Political Realism and Political Idealism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951). Herz laid the groundwork for the neo-liberal synthesis today, with its emphasis on cooperation in a world where conflict is not absent, in contradistinction to the structuralists who see the world in terms of a predominance of conflict where cooperation is nevertheless possible under certain circumstances, such as in a globally democratic world. The neo-conservative positions currently prominent within the George W. Bush administration and espoused forcefully by Francis Fukuyama, Charles Krauthammer, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and others, derive both from the fundamental principles of realism and of liberalism, with emphasis on democracy as the answer to conflict and on power/force as the means to achieve that democratic world.

16 Viotti and Kauppi, op. cit., p. 74.
17 Excerpt from Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, op. cit., as quoted in Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis, eds, International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues, 7th edn (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005), p. 8. Morgenthau’s enunciation of the main principles of realism has been reprinted under the title “Six Principles of Political Realism,” in various edited volumes and has become a classic. His formulation in this context is in strong opposition to the work that led to theories such as prospect theory, which focus on the motives behind the actions of decision-makers. In Morgenthau’s formulation “[t]o search for the clue to foreign policy exclusively in the motives of statesmen is both futile and deceptive” (ibid.). Yet, by qualifying his statement in the manner he did, Morgenthau acknowledged that the psychology of leaders may indeed yield clues to their decision-making process and allow for predictions, if these motives could be quantified and empirically verified. Prospect theory, it seems, has risen to this very challenge.

18 Dye, op. cit., p. 15.

19 Rational decision-making, in its strict formulation, must be viewed as a normative theory. As such, it is an ideal description of what decision-making could be under optimal conditions. In political science, classical realists consider it an explanatory and predictive theory. It is because of this insistence that their critics have rejected rational decision-making theory in favour of alternate explanations such as prospect theory, bounded rationality, and “satisficing,” or even incrementalism. (See note 10 above.)

20 Viotti and Kauppi, op. cit., p. 74. For a similar formulation see also Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis, 2nd edn, (New York: Longman Publishers, 1999), chapter 1, as cited in Russett et al., op. cit., p. 161. Allison’s Essence of Decision was first published in 1971 (Boston: Little Brown).

21 See Viotti and Kauppi, op. cit., p. 80 and Russett et al., op. cit., p. 166.

22 E. H. Carr, What is History? (New York: Penguin, 1961), is a collection of lectures given in Cambridge in 1961. The first lecture, at Trinity College, was entitled “The Historian and his Facts,” and opened with the question that was later to become the title of the book: “What is History?” In that lecture, E. H. Carr famously quotes Geoffrey Barraclough as saying: “The history we read, though based on fact, is, strictly speaking, not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgments.”

23 See note 3 above.

24 See notes 7 and 8 above, among others.


26 March 1, 1779 marks the day Karim Khan Zand died and Agha Mohammad Khan escaped from Shiraz after he had been Karim Khan’s captive for almost 20 years. The consolidation of Agha Mohammad Khan’s rule over the Iranian plateau, from the Caspian Sea to Shiraz and Kerman and from the Euphrates valley to the borders of Khorasan, was completed by 1794 with his capture and execution of Lotf Ali Khan Zand. See Gavin Hambly, “Agha Muhammad Khan and the Establishment of the Qajar Dynasty,” in Peter Avery et al., eds, The Cambridge History of Iran: From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic, vol. VII (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 114.

27 “Hence, when Agha Muhammad Khan began, in 1192–3/1779, the process whereby he eventually brought all Iran under his control, he was not so much aspiring to new goals as fulfilling those of his father,” Hambly, op. cit., p. 113, Mohammad Hassan Khan Qovanq Qajar already carried the title Shah and was poised to defeat his rival Karim Khan at the gates of Shiraz in 1758, thus to unite Persia under his control, but events turned. He was forced to retreat and was
betrayed by his father-in-law, Mohammad Hossein Khan Davalu, and killed by an assassin in 1759 before he could enter the safety of the ancestral fort of the Qovanlus at Astarabad. His severed head was sent as a trophy to Karim Khan Zand in Shiraz. It is for this reason that Agha Mohammad Khan never forgave Karim Khan and had Karim Khan’s bones exhumed and reburied under the steps of his palace in Tehran so he could walk over them each day. His father had been murdered on the orders of Karim Khan. Interestingly, upon his coronation as Shah, Reza Shah, as one of his first public acts, had the bones exhumed again and had them reburied with great pomp in Shiraz. This was a purported symbolic righting of a wrong. In reality it was his attempt to indicate symbolically that the Qajar period was only an interregnum and usurpation between the great Zand, Karim Khan, and the great Pahlavi. For a copy of the famous photograph taken on this occasion, see among others, Bagher Agheli, *Teymourtache* (Tehran: Javidan Publishers, 1377 solar), p. 233. The bones and skull of Karim Khan are in the hands of Mohandess Taherzadeh. Reza Shah is to his right and Abdul Hossein Khan Teymourtache, minister of court, to the left of Taherzadeh. This ritual was orchestrated by Teymourtache to mirror the program of the new Society for National Heritage (*Anjoman-e Asar-e Melli*). For an excellent article recounting the origins and implications of the creation of this entity by the architects of the “new Iran”, see Talinn Grigor, “Recultivating ‘Good Taste’: The Early Pahlavi Modernists and Their Society for National Heritage,” *Iranian Studies* 37/1 (March 2004): 17–45. For the rituals of exhumation and reburial and the meaning of these rituals for the new founders see, ibid., p. 19, in particular.


29 The least generous but probably the most accurate representation of the actual view by England of Persia under the early Qajars is given by Edward Ingram in *Britain’s Persia Connection, 1798–1828: Prelude to the Great Game* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 15:

Qajar Persia was not a state as Europeans understood the term, for it was not territorial: it existed, as did the Maratha Confederacy in India, in British and French dispatches. Both states were European conceptions rather than Asiatic realities. And the British and the French both saw the Qajars as mercenaries living beyond the bounds of the civilized world, who could be called upon to attack its enemies or to defend its frontiers. As leaders of large and reputedly effective bodies of irregular cavalry, the Qajars might be of use against an enemy operating at a distance from his own base. They would be of less use against a neighbour strong enough to prevent them from ranging far and wide in undefined territory. To meet that challenge, the Qajars’ own territory would have to be assigned, first on a map, later on the ground.

30 One of the standard reference works for Islamic coins, Steve Album, *A Checklist of Islamic Coins*, 2nd edn, (Santa Rosa, CA: Steve Album Publisher, 1998), p. 139, mentions that 11 of these Khanates issued their own coins from the 1750s until 1828, when they were absorbed by the Russian Empire. He adds that “all coinage is anonymous or in the name of a living or deceased Iranian shah.” The Khanates in question are Ganja, Shirvan, Sheki (Shakki), Darband, Kuba (Qubba), Gharabagh (Panahabad), Erivan (Erivan), Nakhchivan (Nakhjavan), Talesh, Baku, and Georgia itself. With the exception of the Georgian copper coins that bear the name of the Georgian rulers of Teymouz II (1744–1762), Erekle II (1762–1798) and Giorgi XII (1798–1800), but whose silver coins bear the invocation “*ya kareem,*” the other Khanates bear religious formulae or the names of Agha Mohammad Khan or Fath-Ali Shah, as these Persian rulers had coins struck
in their own names in the mints of these Khanates as a sign of their suzerainty. In particular are the coins of Fath-Ali Shah from the Erivan mint and the coins of Agha Mohammad Khan from the Ganja mint, Ganja being one of the ancestral areas of the Qajars, where Qajars are found by name to this day. (For a list of these Khanates, see also G. Hambly, op. cit., p. 146.)

31 The author has in his possession one of these silver coins dated 1211/1796 minted in Tiflis, Georgia, with the invocation “ya kareem” addressing Karim Khan Zand. As is customary with Islamic coins, the inscriptions often include clever word plays. In this case, “kareem” is a reference to God (Allah), one of whose names or titles in the Koran is “kareem” (Great or Generous); it is also a reference to the invocation “ya kareem ol kaatebeen,” (“oh generous/benevolent writers”) denoting the two angels in the Koran who record the good and bad deeds of men for God’s Judgment Day; it is also a reference to the “recorder” (i.e. calligrapher) of the coin on which the inscription occurs, and lastly, a reference to Karim Khan Zand, who was the nominal ruler over these dominions as successor to the Safavids. It is noteworthy to remember that Karim Khan had been dead since 1779.

32 Only the Georgian rulers bore the title “vaali,” a higher ranked title than “khaan” (khan), given that they were kings in their own right. The other local rulers all bore the title “khan,” and in this there is a possible explanation as to why the Georgians considered themselves legitimately more autonomous.

33 Hambly, op. cit., p. 146.

34 As Hambly states (op. cit., p. 129), Agha Mohammad Khan had refused to be crowned until then on the grounds that he did not yet control all of Persia. He accepted the crown after the conquest of the Khanates of the Caucasus; at that time he indicated that the job of unification was not complete and he was making preparations for the subjugation of Khurasan, Bokhara and Herat. Only then would he be satisfied that he was indeed Shahshah of all Persia. This was not, as has been at times claimed, a question of weak legitimacy. He came from a long line of khans and his father already held the title Shah. He was not like Nader, who boasted that his legitimacy came from his sword. Agha Mohammad Khan considered himself the rightful heir to the long line of kings and emperors of Persia going back to Cyrus and Darius. Not in the way the Pahlavis tried to tie themselves to that line, but because of the historical facts of hundreds of years of chieftainship by the Qajars before his time and the immediate history of the years before his accession to the throne. The question of legitimacy was never raised in his time or in the time of the Qajars. It became a question later under the Pahlavis. It is true that Qajar historians created official histories linking Qajar bloodlines to the Safavids, yet it was not based on those accounts that the Qajars and Agha Mohammad Khan in particular, were considered legitimate rulers of Persia. Legitimacy, beyond the question of legacy, was acquired through unification of territory and accession to power, since it was not possible for Agha Mohammad Khan to acquire it by heredity, given the untimely death of his father. It is noteworthy that the acquisition of legitimacy by the Qajars was thus no different from that of the Safavids.

35 Hambly, op. cit., p. 136. Hambly’s assessment on the process of decision-making of Agha Mohammad Khan would deserve full quotation, as would that of Malcolm and Fraser, contemporary observers of Persian politics. These assessments leave no room for doubt on the complete applicability of the rationality assumption and the rational decision-making model to the actions of Agha Mohammad Khan, even to his reputed acts of cruelty, which upon examination, though perhaps larger in scale than those of his immediate predecessors, were intended to fend off further challenges and spare him and his armies the need for battle. He would offer safe haven if surrender was made and even rewarded those who submitted. Only if his offer was rejected would he resort to punishment of the
vanquished as a lesson for future challengers, and he stayed consistent in the application of this tactic. His foes knew they had a chance to surrender with minimal negative consequences, but if they did not and were defeated, they would have to face terrible consequences. (See for instance Agha Mohammad Khan’s letter to Erekle II mentioned in Hassan Fassa’i’s *Farsnameh-ye Nasseri*, translated from the Persian by Heribert Busse as *History of Persia Under Qajar Rule* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p. 66 and in Hambly’s account, op. cit., pp. 127–8.) Agha Mohammad Khan acted against his own immediate duty of avenging the murder of his father by making peace with his sworn enemies, the Davalu at Varamin in 1779, the singular event that guaranteed his accession without internal challenge from the Qovanlu’s most dangerous enemies within the Qajar tribe.

36 Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, op. cit., p. 19. Kashani-Sabet relates the fictitious account of Etemad Saltaneh, known as *Khalseh* or *Khaabnameh*, in which he praises the “country-conquering” attributes of Iranian kings, and makes “country-conquering” the yardstick and measure of good kingship.


39 Ingram, op. cit., p. 2.


41 Ibid., p. 42.

42 Ibid., p. 110.

43 Ibid., p. 111.

44 Ibid., p. 157.


46 Ibid., p. 184.

47 Wright, op. cit., p. 15. In this connection, Laurence Kelly relates the first meeting between Griboyedov and Abbas Mirza in 1819, where Abbas Mirza asked Griboyedov to explain the purported advantages Persia was deriving from the Treaty of Golestan. Kelly characterizes Abbas Mirza’s question as “a question difficult to answer” for Griboyedov. (*Diplomacy and Murder in Tehran: Alexander Griboyedov and Imperial Russia’s Mission to the Shah of Persia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), p. 64.)

48 See Graham Williamson in this volume, who underlines this point in reference to the Turko-Persian war of 1823, maintaining that Fath-Ali Shah was opposed to both Abbas Mirza and Mohammad Ali Mirza continuing their campaigns against the Ottomans even though they were both in positions of advantage, and pressured them to reach agreements that would ensure the cessation of hostilities. Critics, such as Edward Ingram, consider this a weakness of character. “Always more interested in the permanence of a settlement than the terms of it, Fath Ali even promised to accept whatever terms Napoleon should agree to on his behalf” (Ingram, op. cit., p. 106). What Ingram does not explain, but finds force in prospect theory, is that this was a calculated policy on the part of Fath-Ali Shah rather than a weakness. This is exactly what the theory would predict as rational behavior in actors who wish to maintain their gains!
2 Building a new army
Military reform in Qajar Iran

*Stephanie Cronin*

In the early years of the twenty-first century the United States and Britain find themselves, as a consequence of their resort to war, the resulting collapse of indigenous state structures, and their own post-war policies, once again directly involved in military reform and state-building in the Middle East. In Iraq and Afghanistan, US and British missions have undertaken the reconstruction of military and police forces, defining their projects in terms of building up local military forces to the point at which these forces would be politically reliable and capable of guaranteeing domestic peace and security. In this, they place themselves within a tradition of Western-sponsored military reform in the Middle East which has a long and problematic pedigree. The nineteenth century saw a plethora of European military missions arrive in the Middle East and North Africa from all the major powers, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia, as well as from minor and supposedly neutral countries such as Sweden. The twentieth century saw a renewed eruption of military missions, notably to Iraq and Transjordan, under the aegis of the mandatory system, while after the Second World War the United States became the principal supplier of military advisers, especially to Iran. The narrative below looks at the history of one Middle Eastern country’s experience with Western military missions, an experience which extended over a protracted period, and which was to have a profound impact on the configuration of Iranian nationalism.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, when the Middle East and North Africa first began to attract the sustained attention of European imperialism and colonialism, Arab, Ottoman Turkish and Iranian polities began what was to be a protracted experiment with army modernization. These decades saw a mania in the Middle East for the import of European methods of military organization and techniques of warfare. Everywhere, in the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, Egypt and Iran, *nezam-e jadid* (new order) regiments sprang up, sometimes on the ruins of older military formations, sometimes alongside them, unleashing a process of military-led modernization which was to characterize state-building projects throughout the region until well into the twentieth century. The ruling dynasties in these regions embarked on army reform in a desperate effort to strengthen their defensive
capacity and resist growing European hegemony and direct or indirect control, by imitating European methods of military organization and warfare. Almost every indigenous ruler who succeeded in evading or warding off direct European control, from the sultans of pre-Protecorate Morocco in the west to the shahs of the Qajar dynasty in Iran in the east, invited European officers, sometimes as individuals, sometimes as formal missions, to assist with building a modern army. With the help of these officers, Middle Eastern rulers thus sought to appropriate the secrets of European power.

Early attempts by Middle Eastern rulers to modernize their military forces were partly driven by shock at successive defeats by European powers, especially by the relentless Russian conquests of Ottoman and Iranian territory and the consequent extension of infidel control over Muslim populations. Napoleon’s occupation of Egypt in 1798, although temporary, provided both a reminder of local military weakness and an impressive display of the power of a modern army. There were, however, other equally important motives for military reform. In the early nineteenth century, Middle Eastern rulers still harboured ambitions of reconquering territories lost to European expansion and hoped to develop modern armies with offensive capacities, such capacities also proving useful in enhancing their regional standing vis-à-vis other local states. Perhaps most importantly, by creating a modern army loyal exclusively to themselves, the Ottoman and Moroccan sultans, the beys of Tunis, the shahs of Iran and Muhammad Ali of Egypt also hoped to equip their dynasties with a coercive weapon capable of quelling domestic opposition and buttressing their own personal power as expressed in the form of a modern autocratic state.

The protracted struggles of these rulers to build up military forces capable of defending their realms from external attack largely failed. Yet the Ottoman example, and the more temporary achievements of Mohammad Ali in Egypt in the 1820s and 1830s, were of immense importance in spreading ideas of military reform throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The adoption of European methods by rulers as strong and assertive as Mohammad Ali or with the prestige of the Ottoman sultan-caliph, made these innovations palatable and even desirable to wider Muslim opinion. The routes by which modern concepts of military organization and innovations in military technology were transmitted throughout the Middle East and North Africa were complex. Nineteenth-century Europe itself offered no single model of military development, and Middle Eastern countries in general appear to have been influenced much more by each local effort at reform than directly by the unmediated European example.

Iran in particular seems to have been fascinated by the Ottoman experience. In its military reforms, Iran shared many of the Ottoman Empire’s goals. Iran, like the Ottoman Empire, conceptualized its military needs in terms of a large multi-functional army, based on mass conscription. Although the later triumphs of European imperialism, in which Iran has been cast as passive victim, have tended to obscure this motive, the Qajar shahs wanted a large
modern army, not only for defensive but also for offensive warfare. They wished not only to defend themselves against the inexorable pressure from Russia but also to regain lost territory in the Caucasus and to the west in Afghanistan, which had been under the rule of their Safavid predecessors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in this way appropriating some of the religious charisma of the Safavids and legitimizing their own rule. The first and second Qajar shahs, Agha Mohammad Shah and Fath-Ali Shah, struggled for decades to reassert their hegemony against Russian challenges in the eastern Caucasus, especially over Georgia, and creating reformed regiments was a key element in their strategy. Later shahs continued to harbour hopes of using military power to advance their dynastic claims. Mohammad Shah in 1837, and Nasser-edin Shah in 1856, launched wars to take possession of Herat in western Afghanistan, both attacks frustrated by British diplomatic, military and naval power, and in 1860 Nasser-edin Shah made an ill-fated attempt to assert his sovereignty over the oasis-town of Merv in Central Asia. It was only towards the end of the century that he finally abandoned these increasingly unrealistic objectives and Iranian opinion began to reconcile itself, in practice if not always in theory, to the country’s existing borders.

For the shahs of Iran in the nineteenth century, the recovery of lost territories through military means was of great significance in terms of ideological legitimization and the consolidation of the dynasty. But military reform was intimately linked to state-building in another, novel sense. The establishment of reformed regiments would enable the shahs to embark on a project in which the existing balance between the state, as expressed in the person of the shah, and the rest of the political system as expressed in layers of princes, courtiers, notables, tribal khans and ulama, would be fundamentally altered. It was the centrality of this function to programmes of military reform and, in the Iranian case, its eventual overriding importance, which determined the choice of model to be adopted. There was no evidence that nezam troops were superior in warfare to the forces which they were intended to replace. Their great advantage was that they were entirely dependent on and, formally at least, loyal to the shah, possessing no other allegiance than to the state.

For all the reforming rulers of the nineteenth-century Middle East, to reform meant to Europeanize. The reforming elite’s preference for regular disciplined forces on the European model never seems to have been questioned. Yet, in purely defensive terms, other modes of military organization appear to have been much more successful. It may be argued that in the nineteenth century the goal of defence against European armies was unrealistic. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Iran’s traditional forces were able to stalemate Russia in the eastern Caucasus for many years but, by the beginning of the twentieth century, Russian armies could march through northern Iran unopposed by the nezam regiments. During the nineteenth century, the most powerful opposition to European expansion was offered, not by the nezam
forces of the established dynasties, but by the well-organized, disciplined and militant sufi brotherhoods led by charismatic figures whose legitimacy was derived from religious origins. Sheikh Shamyl of the Naqshbandi sufi order in the Caucasus, Abd al-Qadir of the Qadiriyyah in Algeria and Sheikh Mohammad Ahmad (the Mahdi) of the Samaniyyah in the Sudan put up fierce resistance for years and sometimes decades. Such movements, however, with their subaltern and radical dimensions, were as much a menace to the established local rulers as they were to the European empires.7

In their efforts to build disciplined regular forces, all the reforming rulers of the early nineteenth century Middle East faced the same problem: a lack of a professional officer corps.8 Since the region then possessed no modern educational institutions, let alone military colleges, nor had there yet been any significant effort by local elites to acquire training abroad, Middle Eastern rulers turned directly to European officers, whom they employed for varying lengths of time, under a variety of conditions. The use of such officers, however, whether renegades and adventurers engaged as individuals, or formal missions possessing the sanction of their own governments, was fraught with difficulties. For the ruler and the high officials appointed to oversee reform, European officers were useful both for their professional expertise and, perhaps more importantly, for the prestige and imperial backing which their involvement seemed to lend to programmes of modernization. Any advantage so derived was, however, invariably offset by the resentments which their presence generated among both the elite and the population at large, resentments which arose from the humiliation of seeming to mimic the ways of an enemy deemed culturally and religiously inferior, from anxiety at the loss of sovereignty implied by the presence of foreigners in command of the army, and from the specific hostility of those whose personal positions were directly undermined or threatened. In addition, the ascendancy of foreign officers from any individual country often aggravated opposition from one or all of that country’s European rivals as much as it provided diplomatic cover and imperial support.

The account which follows looks at Iran’s experience of building a regular army under the leadership of European military missions during the rule of the Qajar dynasty (1797–1925). The Qajar shahs and their ministers and, by the end of the nineteenth century, wider layers of reforming opinion, were obsessed with the need to establish regular disciplined military forces and the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were peppered with attempts to set up a standing army on the European model with the help of foreign officers. In all, Qajar Iran saw three formal French military missions, three British, two Austrian, one “unofficial” Italian mission, one Russian, this with the Cossack Brigade, and one Swedish with the Government Gendarmerie, as well as a miscellany of foreign adventurers and mercenaries employed on an individual basis. Yet the cumulative result of this obsession was to leave Iran in the first decades of the twentieth century burdened by an immense expenditure on the army but militarily greatly weakened, its forces surviving within
a maelstrom of political controversy, in conflict with each other and reflecting and exacerbating the struggles taking place within the Iranian political system. It was, paradoxically, only with the advent to power in 1921 of Reza Khan, later the first Pahlavi shah, Reza Shah (1925–1941), and his dismissal of all the foreign officers commanding the remaining fragmented military forces, that Iran was finally able to build a national army on the European model.

The narrative below is divided into two parts. The first part examines the efforts made by successive Qajar shahs and their reforming ministers to establish regular nezam-e jadid forces and the role played in these efforts by European military missions. It argues that these efforts were not only futile but, in a period when European influence was at its zenith and Middle Eastern countries experiencing unprecedented political, diplomatic and financial aggression, were actually dangerous to Iranian independence and solvency.

This part of the account highlights both the self-serving motives of the European powers, always focused on the advancement of their own strategic and diplomatic interests, and Iran’s fitful attitude to the missions and their task, an attitude where admiration for Europe was tempered, and sometimes overwhelmed, by mistrust and suspicion, and where reform was essentially configured by the whims of a despotic shah. It charts the process by which the shahs, always eager for new missions, finally lost control of the foreign officers, a process symbolized by the establishment of the Russian military mission with the Cossack Brigade, a unit which functioned practically as a foreign force. It concludes by showing how, partly as a result of the Russian mission’s role in defending Tsarist imperial interests, bolstering a weak and reactionary shah and starkly illustrating his dependence on foreign support, the presence and role of foreign military missions became a key signifier for reforming opinion of the actual and potential loss of Iranian sovereignty.

The second part of the account discusses the new context for the politics of military reform under European leadership provided by the constitutional and post-constitutional years. It discusses how the project of army reform, and the wider state-building agenda in which it was embedded, was taken up in the early twentieth century by a new generation of constitutionalist and nationalist reformers. For these circles, the shah was no longer, if he ever had been, capable of acting as an agent of reform, but was now rather a major impediment to Iran’s regeneration. This section describes the struggle by the constitutional authorities and later Iranian governments to rid Iran of the Russian mission and resist the imposition of a British mission, and their parallel struggle to establish a military force, under European officers from a neutral country, which would be loyal to themselves and would enable them to resist the demands of the imperial powers and a puppet shah. It places this struggle within a rapidly changing diplomatic nexus, in which first Britain and Russia together, and after 1917 Britain alone, made unprecedentedly aggressive bids to take control of Iran’s armed forces as part of a broader effort to establish an unchallengeable hegemony.
PART ONE: THE QAJAR SHAHS AND MILITARY REFORM

The military forces of the early Qajar Shahs

At the end of the eighteenth century, the military forces of the Qajar rulers resembled those of preceding dynasties, bore strong traces of the Turco-Mongol military tradition which dominated the Middle East and owed practically nothing to European military science.10 In peacetime there was no standing army other than the shah’s household establishment.11 James Morier described Fath-Ali Shah in 1809 as having a bodyguard of 12,000 janbaz, mainly drawn from Mazandaran and the Qajar tribes, and 3,000 gholams, or slave horsemen.12 Similar establishments on a smaller scale were maintained by the provincial prince-governors. On the outbreak of war the shah would assemble his forces by issuing a farman (edict) calling on the tribal khans and provincial governors to collect recruits. Such an army would be assembled in the spring and would generally be disbanded on the approach of winter, men joining the colours for one campaign only and then returning to their homes and families. It was largely made up of irregular cavalry, drawn from the nomadic tribes, who constituted the prestigious and effective fighting element, and whose loyalty was guaranteed by the expedient of keeping the chief or his son at court as a hostage. Footsoldiers were taken indiscriminately from the peasantry, the inhabitants of the towns never taking up arms unless in imminent danger. Enlisted men usually reached the place of assembly, designated by royal farman, within a relatively short space of time, while those who failed to answer the call quickly were severely punished. In 1796, for example, 40 men who had refused to join the army had their eyes put out.

The early Qajar shahs appointed senior military commanders for specific campaigns. Those so appointed were either tribal khans, who officered their own irregular cavalry, or princes of the Qajar tribe, court favourites or provincial governors. These commanders then engaged their own relatives, clients and dependants as subordinate officers. The commander-in-chief of an army was known as the sardar, the khans or chiefs of tribal contingents as sultans, while chiefs of tribes or governors of provinces might act, when appointed by the shah, as generals of divisions. Other officers were commanders of 1,000, 500, 100, 50 and 10 men, called min-bashi, pansad-bashi, yuz-bashi, panjah-bashi and dah-bashi respectively, the nomenclature and organization being of Turco-Mongol origin although now with the occasional use of Persian words. There were no fixed pay-scales or hierarchical command structure, each man negotiating his terms of service individually. The troops carried firearms and also bows, lances, swords and daggers. The only artillery possessed by the early Qajar army was a corps of zamburaks, small cannons mounted on a swivel on the pack-saddle of a camel.13 Pay was very low and the troops fought out of the fear of the harsh consequences of disobedience,
and, as far as the tribal forces were concerned, loyalty to their chiefs and especially the hope of plunder. An ideological dimension was often given to major military campaigns by the declaration of a *jihad*.

As campaigns were undertaken only during the summer, the troops mostly marched at night, with torches and music. Early Qajar armies were capable, on occasion, of covering large distances quickly. In 1795 Agha Mohammad Khan marched with his cavalry from Tehran to Tbilisi (Tiflis) in 15 days. But the passage of an army was a catastrophe for the local populations. When on the march, the troops lived almost entirely at the expense of the inhabitants of the districts through which they travelled. The army intendants gave receipts for the supplies which the troops took, and the value of the supplies was supposed to be deducted from the revenues due from the local population, but the reduction was rarely made, and the districts suffered almost as if they had been occupied by an enemy force. The sudden demands of a large number of troops for food, forage and transport threatened a rural population surviving on subsistence agriculture with a scarcity which might reach famine levels.

In its struggle with the Russia in the late eighteenth–early nineteenth centuries, Iran was able to campaign with a considerable degree of effectiveness. The early Qajar shahs were able to assemble large armies. During the first Russo-Iranian war (1804–1813) the Iranian forces were several times larger than their Russian enemy in the eastern Caucasus, and European observers commented on the skills of marksmanship and horsemanship displayed by the cavalry. Their approach to fighting was, to European eyes, undisciplined and disorganized, resembling a tribal raid, and success was often dissipated due to the troops abandoning the battle in order to loot. But, by using the tactics of tribal raiding, the Iranians avoided the formal battles which would have favoured disciplined forces, relying primarily on guerrilla raids, picking off small, isolated detachments, harrying enemy communications and so on. With these methods the Iranian forces were able to deny victory to Russia for nine years, despite the latter’s immense superiority in size and resources.

**Early Qajar military reform: French and British missions**

The first attempts to introduce European concepts of military organization to Iran took place at the beginning of the seventeenth century when Shah Abbas, taking advice from the British adventurers, the Sherley brothers, raised a large force of infantry on the European model armed with muskets. Yet, under Shah Abbas, battles continued to be little other than large-scale cavalry engagements. In the eighteenth century Nader Shah, having concluded that the Europeans’ victories over the Ottomans were due to the discipline and order with which they fought, studied foreign methods, began to organize an artillery and entrusted the direction and command of newly raised infantry to European, mostly French, officers. Nonetheless he too continued to depend
principally on his cavalry, the new infantry regiments playing little part in fighting his wars. Nader Shah’s army collapsed after his death and by the late eighteenth century none of the several Iranian experiments with European methods had achieved any enduring effect.

The first Qajar ruler, Agha Mohammad Khan, with the military forces he was able to muster, successfully established Qajar power throughout Iran and temporarily drove the forces of the advancing Russian empire back beyond Tibilisi, reasserting Iranian supremacy over the kingdom of Georgia. On his accession in 1797 Fath-Ali Shah was also able to command sufficient military strength to defeat his internal rivals and secure his position as shah. However in 1803 Russia invaded and annexed Georgia, considered by Iran as a vassal state, and continued to push southwards. Russia’s inexorable pressure forced Fath-Ali Shah (1797–1834) and especially his son, the crown prince and governor of Azerbaijan, Abbas Mirza, to embark on a major military reorganization in the hope of increasing Iran’s defensive capacity. Abbas Mirza’s initiative was the first in a long series of attempts by Qajar rulers to set up a standing army on the European model with the help of missions of foreign officers.

Fath-Ali Shah and Abbas Mirza made the first systematic attempt in Iran at military reform along modern European lines, the political context being provided by the first Russo-Iranian war (1804–1813). Both the shah and his son were convinced that the introduction of regiments of European-style troops would enable them to break the deadlock in the war with Russia and win victory, regaining lost territory in the Caucasus and thus helping to legitimize their dynasty. In the early nineteenth century the province of Azerbaijan and its capital, Tabriz, constituted the front line against Russian expansion, and was the focus of Iran’s military efforts. Its military condition was also important for another reason. Tabriz was, by tradition, the seat of the crown prince, and it was essential that the heir apparent possess sufficient armed strength to impose acceptance of his claim to the throne against the inevitable challenges on the death of the shah.

Abbas Mirza, like his contemporaries in the Middle East and North Africa, had come to the conclusion that the survival of both his dynasty and his country depended on matching European military strength by imitating European military organization. Abbas Mirza seems to have been fascinated by European military science and James Morier quoted him as saying that he believed it was in vain to fight the Russians without soldiers like theirs, and that their artillery could only be opposed by artillery. Deeply impressed by the steps already taken on this path by the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim III, Abbas Mirza began the construction in Azerbaijan of his own version of the disciplined infantry and artillery regiments known in the Ottoman Empire as the *nezam-e jadid*. Like Sultan Selim and his successors, Abbas Mirza also intended that a Europeanized army would reduce and finally eliminate his dependence on tribal and provincial chiefs and notables for the raising of military forces.
Abbas Mirza faced two major problems of personnel and manpower. He lacked officers with any knowledge of European methods and he had no regularized method of enlisting recruits. The solutions he found to these problems, the employment of foreign officers and the introduction of a rudimentary form of conscription, were similar to those adopted in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt and determined the character of the Iranian reform effort for the rest of the century.21

At first Abbas Mirza, like the Ottomans before him, employed renegade Christian officers to raise and drill troops, drawing on the large number of Russian deserters in Tabriz.22 Even before Abbas Mirza’s arrival in Tabriz, a number of Russian deserters who had taken refuge there had brought with them ideas of European tactics. The then governor had made them officers and with his encouragement they had formed and drilled a few battalions. Abbas Mirza also initially made use of a renegade Russian to teach drilling but these initial efforts encountered great hostility from both the troops and the general population, who disliked any imitation of European, and particularly Russian, methods. He was, for example, obliged to arrange for the troops and their Russian instructor to use a private courtyard so they would not be exposed to public ridicule. In order to overcome opposition to European methods, the prince himself adopted military uniform and took instruction in drilling from a Russian, ordering his nobles to follow his example and learn to handle a musket. Abbas Mirza succeeded in teaching a few of his men to march and drill but it was only the arrival of the first French military mission that provided him with the professional officers and NCOs necessary for the further development of his plans.23

Fath-Ali Shah, impressed, as he wrote to Napoleon, by French victories in the East, had begun to seek Western assistance in his war against Russia.24 In 1807 the first French mission to Iran under General Gardane arrived in Tehran. Gardane and his staff came under the terms of the Treaty of Finkenstein by which Iran had entered into an alliance with Napoleonic France against Britain and Russia.25 An offshoot of the struggle then taking place in Europe, Gardane’s mission was to organize the shah’s forces along European lines as part of a comprehensive diplomatic and military agreement between Iran and France. By the terms of the treaty France guaranteed Iran’s territorial integrity, provided for the Iranian recovery of Georgia and promised to supply Iran with arms, officers and artificers, while Iran committed itself to severing relations with and declaring war on Britain, and promising free passage to a French expedition to India. On their arrival at Tehran General Gardane and several other officers were made khans and received Iranian military decorations. Two officers, Captains Fabvier and Reboul, were sent to Isfahan to build a cannon foundry, and another two, Captains Verdier and Lamy, with three NCOs and an interpreter, went to Abbas Mirza in Tabriz as military instructors. Other officers began travelling through the country with the object of gathering intelligence and surveying the districts and routes for a French march on India.
The French officers were in Tabriz for about 14 months. Captain Verdier began raising and training three regiments of infantry, between four and six thousand men. These troops, known as sarbaz, were armed with muskets made in Tabriz on the French model, and clothed in uniforms also notionally on the French model but with a typical Persian black sheepskin hat. Captain Lamy directed the construction of barracks, an arsenal, a powder mill, cannon foundry and fortifications, and also formed a kind of polytechnic school in the camp for training officer-engineers, Abbas Mirza himself being one of the students. Work was begun on organizing the artillery, which was commanded by Tahmuras Khan, a Christian nobleman of the family of the last Prince of Georgia. Abbas Mirza also still had in his camp many Russian deserters, now formed into a unit of their own, and they were also put under the orders of Captain Verdier. Alongside these modern units, it was estimated that the Prince also possessed 22,000 cavalry and 12,000 unreformed footsoldiers.

The French mission, however, soon fell victim to the changing European context. Little more than two months after the conclusion of the Treaty of Finkenstein, European alignments were reversed when Napoleon and the tsar signed the Treaty of Tilsit and French influence in Iran began to collapse. Fath-Ali Shah agreed to receive a British mission and summarily expelled the French, Gardane’s mission having already been severely undermined by a degree of opposition from Iranian officials in Tabriz and Tehran and by the hostility of the British at the shah’s court. Although the British had originally rebuffed Fath-Ali Shah’s overtures, Gardane’s arrival in Iran had galvanized them into sending missions of their own, and their efforts to displace the French were successful. The Preliminary Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, concluded in 1809, provided for a British subsidy to pay for British military stores, equipment and officers and men, in exchange for the shah’s breaking with the French. Between 1810 and 1813, members of a British military mission, officers, NCOs and men, arrived in Iran from both India and Britain. By 1813 the mission numbered over 50. In addition to the British officers and men, the mission also included a number of Indian sepoys, who were to assist with the training of the Iranian troops. In Tabriz the British mission continued the work begun by the French of raising and drilling troops, beginning with an artillery unit. British muskets and sabres replaced equipment supplied earlier by the French, and an attempt was made to modify uniforms to resemble a nominally British style. In reality, however, the only European element of the uniform was the jacket introduced by the French. Other than this, the uniform remained essentially similar to local Iranian costume, including wide trousers or pantaloons and the sheepskin hat. Officers apparently continued to regard their uniform as simply another version of formal dress. The British did oblige the sarbaz to shave, the right to wear beards being confined to officers, although the ordinary soldiers preserved their customary way of wearing their hair: a shaved head with a top-knot and side-curls.
In addition to the convulsions of European diplomacy, Abbas Mirza faced other problems. Iran’s revenues were insufficient for its expensive wars, and the revenues of Azerbaijan in particular were quite unequal to the demands of Abbas Mirza’s agenda. In 1810 the British began paying a subsidy to Abbas Mirza, which went primarily to defray the cost of the new regiments, but training, equipping and paying these sarbaz was so expensive that overall, even with the British subsidy, his financial problems worsened. The reforms also encountered opposition on their own account. The population in general, and occasionally the sarbaz themselves, disliked the European appearance of the new regiments, while some of the ulama declared that the presence of infidels was harmful and the adoption of their methods betrayed the example of the Prophet. These doubts were quickly exploited by Abbas Mirza’s political enemies, but his supporters also mobilized religious support where they could, obtaining opinions that the reforms were in fact a return to early Islamic practice.

By 1812 Abbas Mirza possessed a European-trained army of about 13,000 infantry, cavalry and artillery, and he and the shah believed that victory in the war with Russia was within reach. Although the fledgling regiments had achieved some minor victories in 1810, Abbas Mirza’s hope of exploiting Russian weakness during Napoleon’s invasion of 1812 was disappointed and the war finally ended after the Iranian nezam regiments suffered a series of military disasters. Four British officers and twelve NCOs actually accompanied the Iranian troops into battle and, although the Iranians snatched one victory when they routed a Russian force at Sultanabad near the river Aras in February 1812, the campaign ended in complete defeat at the Battle of Aslanduz in October during which one British officer, Charles Christie, was killed.

Abbas Mirza now also faced the loss of the British mission. The alliance formed between Britain and Russia in 1812–1813 caused the British government’s commitment to Iran to weaken and the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 led to a further British loss of interest in Iran. By the end of 1815 the British mission had been withdrawn, although a small group of officers and NCOs had been allowed to stay, on condition that they took no part in operations against countries (meaning Russia) with whom Britain was at peace. The remaining British officers gradually left the Iranian service after 1819, only Captain Isaac Hart continuing as commander of Abbas Mirza’s bodyguard.

Both the Gardane mission and the British mission had come to Iran as a result of European conflicts and rivalries and in order to further their own political, diplomatic and military objectives. As their needs and requirements and the European context changed, so their interest in Iran waxed and waned, their military missions being merely tools of political expedience and easily dispensed with. Naturally both Britain and France did everything possible to undermine the work of the other’s mission. Abbas Mirza and the shah had done their best to manoeuvre within, and to exploit, the shifting
European alignments. Although Iran was powerless over the wider context which determined the level and duration of European interest, nonetheless the initiative for both the French and the British missions had clearly come from the shah and Abbas Mirza, for whom foreign assistance with military reform was one of the major benefits of Iran’s international alliances. The missions were not forced on a reluctant or conservative Iran by a forward-looking Europe. On the contrary, it was the shah who insisted on the military missions in the face of a European consensus that, in Iran’s existing circumstances, such reforms were unlikely to be beneficial, even the officers of the military missions themselves expressing skepticism regarding the extent to which Iran was really benefiting from these experiments with European models and the employment of European officers.

To European observers, Iran’s military strength had always resided in its irregular cavalry, furnished by the tribal khans, which had proved itself so effective in lightning raids and defensive skirmishing, while the new *nezam* troops inspired little confidence. The remarks of a Russian staff officer, Captain N. N. Muraviev, are typical. In 1817 he declared:

> This unfortunate infantry, of which they speak in Europe with respect, was invented to our own benefit. After losing their Asian agility and quickness, the sarbaz have not however acquired European characteristics and are a base and dirty force, badly dressed and created as victims for our grenadiers. They cannot even handle the English muskets which they have been given.  

Echoes of Muraviev’s conclusions were to be heard throughout the century. Henry Rawlinson, for example, a member of the 1833 British military mission and later British minister at Tehran, was candid about British motives, writing in 1875 that Britain had assisted Abbas Mirza to build “a so-called regular army” solely in order to prise Iran away from the French alliance. He frankly admitted that the *nezam* forces of Iran had been “from the epoch of their first creation contemptible”, and that all they ever had in common with the regular armies of Europe was drill and exercise, while their expense was rapidly impoverishing the country. Rawlinson acutely concluded that although Iran’s defensive military capacity had been progressively weakened by the introduction of European-style regiments, the shah’s power had been significantly augmented.

During the 1820s, after the departure of the British, no new official military missions arrived in Iran, but Abbas Mirza continued to engage European officers on an individual basis. The end of the Napoleonic wars had left many ex-officers in Europe without employment or career prospects, and many travelled far afield in search of positions. A number of such officers, of various nationalities, French, Italian and Spanish, eventually arrived in Iran and found employment both with Abbas Mirza and with Mohammad Ali Mirza, the Prince-Governor of Kermanshah. Although these foreign officers
were responsible for drilling troops, they apparently spent much of their
time in quarrelling amongst themselves and duelling with each other, and
European observers were scathing about their military capabilities and their
low social class.

Many soldiers of fortune were to continue to find employment in Iran
throughout the nineteenth century, their numbers diminishing only towards
the end of the century with the stabilization of the Russian mission with the
Cossack Brigade. Most had little impact on Iran’s military development, but
a few played significant roles. Among these were Isidore Borowsky, a Polish
officer who became a general in Iranian service, took part in several cam-
paigns and finally met his death during the Iranian assault on Herat in
1837–1838; a French officer named Semino who had been an NCO under
Napoleon and had fought under Ypsilantis in Greece before coming to Iran
where he served for 27 years, reaching the rank of lieutenant-general, and
taking part in the campaigns of Abbas Mirza in 1830–1833 and in the siege
of Herat in 1837–1838; and, towards the latter part of the century, an
Italian Major Maletta, formerly of the Egyptian Gendarmerie, who became
an infantry instructor in Iran.

As well as searching for foreign officers, Abbas Mirza also tried to intro-
duce changes into methods by which the nezam regiments were recruited, both
to provide himself with a more predictable supply of manpower and to make
himself independent of the local elite, devising the bunichah system, a primit-
ive form of conscription whereby liability for military service was tied to
revenue assessments in the countryside. Some sort of conscription system may
have been suggested to him by his French officers, as it seems to have been
suggested to Muhammad Ali of Egypt, but Abbas Mirza’s system, indirect
and collective, and with an implicit reliance on landowners, bears stronger
traces of Russian influence and the model of Peter the Great, and may have
owed something to the Russian deserters still present in Abbas Mirza’s
regiments.31 However it may also have resulted simply from an effort by Abbas
Mirza to regularize the existing system from which it differed greatly in
theory but little in practice.

Nonetheless, when war with Russia again flared up in 1826, it once more
ended in a disastrous defeat, with the Russians actually entering Tabriz in
November 1827 and concluding with the Treaty of Turkomanchay in 1828.
Undeterred by yet another military failure, Abbas Mirza continued to main-
tain the nezam forces of Azarbayjan which, by 1831, consisted of about 12,000
infantry, 1,200 horse artillery and one regiment of lancers, recruited under the
bunichah system. They were divided into ten regiments of Iranian troops and
two of Russians. The Russian regiments were composed of deserters, mainly
from the Russian army in Georgia. They were commanded by a former
NCO from Nizhni-Novgorod, now promoted to sartip (general), Samson
Yakovlevich Makintsev, known as Samson Khan. The deserter units, known
as the bahaduran, were, in contrast to other troops, well and regularly paid
and were apparently good soldiers, fighting well for their new masters, and
the authorities placed particular trust in them when facing internal rebellion or religious tumult. These *nezam* forces were sufficient to enable Abbas Mirza to suppress several revolts in the early 1830s in central Iran and among Kurdish and Turkoman khans in the northeast.

Meanwhile Abbas Mirza continued his search for foreign officers, making renewed appeals to Britain. The British reaction was again determined entirely by its own strategic needs. The government in London, and especially in Calcutta, now harboured growing concern over a possible Russian threat to India and its own loss of influence at Tehran and accordingly in 1833 sent a second British military mission, recruited in India. This mission consisted of eight officers, fourteen sergeants and an assistant apothecary under the command of Colonel Passmore of the East India Company Bengal Native Infantry, and counted among its number several officers who were later to play important roles in Anglo-Iranian diplomacy, Justin Sheil, later British minister in Tehran 1844–1851, Francis Farrant, chargé d’affaires in 1848, and Henry Rawlinson, British minister 1859–1860.

However, before the mission could begin its work, the domestic Iranian political context was suddenly changed by the deaths of both Abbas Mirza and the monarch, Fath-Ali Shah. The mission thus found itself faced with the immediate task of ensuring the smooth succession of a new shah, Mohammad Shah (1834–1848), and averting any potential crisis by suppressing rival claimants. British officers then began raising and drilling troops.

Despite their role in installing the new shah, the British officers immediately began to encounter difficulties. The political context was becoming less and less favourable, Russian influence at Tehran was growing and the new shah was determined to renew his claim to Herat against inevitable British opposition. The British officers received little support from either the new shah or the Iranian government. They were also deeply resented by the Iranian *nezam* officers and constant friction arose from the struggle, sometimes subterranean, sometimes overt, over the extent and scope of British functions and responsibilities. The Iranian authorities insisted on regarding the British officers purely as instructors and refused them the control they desired over pay, rations and promotions, while the *nezam* officers hated their interference and frequently disregarded their recommendations altogether. The British found their work obstructed at every level as a result of the combination of political opposition to British strategy, wounded national pride and professional jealousy which their presence engendered. The British mission suffered further from intrigues both by the military officers of other nationalities in the shah’s service and by the diplomatic representatives of rival Powers. This second British experiment finally broke down completely after the political and diplomatic rupture occasioned by Mohammad Shah’s attack on Herat in 1837. In 1838 Britain, breaking off relations with Iran, ordered all its officers in the shah’s service to quit the country.

Despite his experience with the British mission, Mohammad Shah continued to seek foreign assistance with his desultory efforts at military reform. Since
relations with Britain were strained and Russia was too distrusted to be allowed
the education and command of the army, the shah turned to France. The
French agreed to supply weapons and army instructors to replace the British
and in September 1839 a mission led by Edouard Comte de Sercey left Paris,
reaching Tabriz in January 1840. However, the treasury was empty and the
shah demoralized by the Herat failure. After its arrival the French mission
was treated mostly with indifference by the Iranian government. It was opposed
by both Britain and Russia while the shah made no effort of any sort on the
officers’ behalf. The officers were all subalterns or NCOs, some of them old
enough to have served with Napoleon, and they were all greatly mocked by
their fellow Europeans for giving themselves senior ranks and fancy uniforms.
The mission remained in Iran less than four years, the officers apparently
spending most of their time trying unsuccessfully to extract their pay from
the authorities. By the time of Mohammad Shah’s death, the blue tunic of
the French had again replaced the English red-coat, but little else had changed.

Military reform under Nasser-edin Shah

A new phase in efforts to reform the army opened with the accession of Nasser-
edin Shah (1848–1896). His able prime minister, Mirza Taqi Khan Amir
Kabir, impressed by the progress of the Ottoman reform movement of the
tanzimat, immediately launched a comprehensive programme of reform,
including a series of measures aimed at modernizing the army. He established
the Dar al-Funun, an elite military and technical college, and developed the
bunichah system of conscription devised by Abbas Mirza and originally
intended only for Azerbaijan, into a relatively complex measure, theoretically applicable across the country and to the entire population. He reorganized
the existing nezam units and ordered the formation of 16 new regiments, including one of local Christians, to which were added some officers and men of
the old regiments of Russian deserters. To assist him in these efforts, especially in providing tuition at the Dar al-Funun, Amir Kabir again turned to
Europe and political considerations again determined the choice of the
nation. Placing little trust in either the British, the French or the Russians,
Amir Kabir cast his view wider and, impressed by the Austrian victories over
Sardinia in 1848–1849, approached that country for help. An Austrian mission
was recruited but before it reached Tehran the political context had turned
against it with Amir Kabir’s fall from power. The new prime minister, Aqa
Khan Nuri, was unsympathetic to the reforms of his predecessor, especially
the college, and to the engagement of Europeans. Despite their weakened
position, the Austrians began work at the beginning of 1852, exercising recruits
in the parade ground and instructing officers at the Dar al-Funun.

In addition to its difficulties with the Iranian government, the Austrian
mission was further compromised by the arrival in Tehran of a group of Italian
officers, refugees from various Italian states, who had taken an active part
in the revolutionary movements of 1848–1849, and who were now appointed instructors of the infantry. Relations between the Austrian and Italian officers in Iran were from the beginning extremely bad as the Italian revolutions of 1848 had been suppressed by the Austrian army. The Austrian officers, frustrated and demoralized, began to leave. By 1853 the Italians had acquired sole charge of the infantry, leaving the Austrians the artillery and cavalry. The Austrian mission, hampered at every turn, made almost no progress, while the impact of the Italians, who themselves had very little military experience, only short periods of service in revolutionary corps of volunteers, was equally small.39

In 1856 Nasser-edin Shah launched another disastrous attack on Herat. After the collapse of the Herat expedition under British military and diplomatic pressure, the shah again began to toy with the idea of western-style reforms and again sought military advisers from Europe. Neither the Italians nor the Austrians had been a success, relations with Britain had been soured by the Herat war and Russia was still considered more a source of danger than assistance, so the shah again turned to France. He sought advice from Napoleon III, who encouraged him in both his military reforms and his regional ambitions, Iran being useful to France as an obstacle to Ottoman influence and British ambitions, and a third French mission arrived in October 1858.40 The mission was led by Commandant Brongniart, all its members were professional soldiers and all had served in the French colonial army in Algiers, Napoleon III having specifically recommended the combination of regular and irregular forces raised by the French in Algeria as a model for Iran. The mission was to raise and train troops and to teach at the Dar al-Funun. It survived until 1867 but finally quit the country without any real achievements except at the arsenal, where some progress was made under the French superintendent. Control of the infantry had remained with the Italians, with whom the French officers had clashed repeatedly, and in any case the Treasury was empty after the Herat war. The shah then again turned to Britain for assistance. Britain, however, in the grip of the policy of “masterly inactivity”, declined the shah’s request.41 In 1870 the request was renewed but again declined.

After the departure of the third French mission, three Italians remained the principal European military advisers to the shah. All three rose to the rank of general, and one, Enrico Andreini, who had been a lieutenant of the Tuscan volunteers in 1848, became Instructor-in-Chief and remained in service until his death in 1894.42 During these years a miscellany of foreign adventurers and mercenaries was also to be found occupying military appointments at various ranks in Iran.

In the 1870s the reforming prime minister and minister of war, Mirza Hossein Khan, Moshir-e-Dolch launched another major effort at military re-organization, again, as in Amir Kabir’s time, in deliberate imitation of the Ottoman tanzimat and again with the help of foreign military missions. As part of a comprehensive programme of modernization Moshir-e-Dolch drew up extensive plans for the reorganization of the army, including measures
to regulate the army budget, enforce conscription and improve military education. Like his predecessors, Mushir-e-Dolch turned to Europe for military assistance and, in 1878 the shah, while travelling in Europe, asked both the emperor of Austria and the tsar of Russia for the loan of instructors. In January 1879 the second Austrian mission duly arrived in Tehran. Very soon after the arrival of the Austrians the first Russian mission came to Iran under Colonel Domantovich and began the organization of the Iranian Cossack Brigade to help with the establishment of a regular cavalry in the form of the Iranian Cossack Brigade.

Although the Austrian officers had been unpleasantly surprised, on their arrival in Tehran, to find the charge of the cavalry had been given to Russians, nonetheless the mission began its work. It recruited about 5,000 men in western Iran, formed them into seven regiments and one battery of field artillery, and armed them with Austrian Werndl rifles. This force became known as the Austrian corps. But before long the Austrian mission began to attract hostility from the pro-Russian faction at court, which was eager to promote the Russian military mission, funds began to be irregularly supplied or not paid at all and the corps began to disintegrate. As well as being extremely expensive, the Austrian corps attracted much jealousy from officers in older military units, and there was also friction among the Austrian officers themselves. Although 1,200 men with a battery of six Euchatius guns did see service in Azerbaijan, where they were sent together with other troops to quell the Kurdish revolts of 1880–1881, the Austrian officers were not retained after the end of their contracts and all, with the exception of the band master, left Iran at the end of 1881. The Austrian corps fell to pieces, its men being drafted into other regiments while many of its officers figured for years on the Army List without actually being in service.

The Qajar Shahs and the European missions: a balance-sheet

By the end of the century Iran’s “reformed” military forces, with the partial exception of the Cossack Brigade, still adhered essentially to the conceptions introduced in 1812 by Abbas Mirza and the first French and British missions. Throughout the century, under the combined impetus of internal reform efforts and the succession of European missions, infantry and artillery regiments had been raised which theoretically conformed to European models in terms of appearance, internal organization, methods of recruitment and training and structures of command. In reality, however, despite repeated efforts, under a wide variety of European instruction, this had not succeeded in providing Iran with a Europeanized army, but the entire project had rather experienced a slow, inexorable collapse. Abbas Mirza’s plan to raise regiments capable of recovering lost territories and defending the country against attack had become a simple desire to have troops suitably modern in appearance with which to provide the shah with the trappings and accoutrements
of power and statehood. Nasser-edin Shah’s army, although occasionally used against refractory tribes, was essentially a mirage.

The role of the *nezam* troops as essentially for show, to furnish a “modern” backdrop for the shah’s power, was most clearly illustrated by the Tehran garrison. Here the troops’ only training, under the supervision of Iranian officers themselves trained by the Austrian mission, was in simple parade ground manoeuvres to enable them to take part in a march before the shah. Review officers would provide specially selected infantry regiments with good rifles and new uniforms. After their performance, the men marched straight back to barracks and returned the rifles and uniforms to store. For most of the time, the good Austrian Werndl rifles were stored in the magazines, where they were “stacked up like firewood”, and the troops were armed, if armed at all, with ancient percussion guns.\(^46\) It was the same with the uniform. Great attention had been paid over the previous decades to assembling an appropriate uniform for officers and men of the *nezam* regiments. Different colours had been allotted to different branches of the Qajar army, often depending on the tradition of the particular foreign officers then employed. By 1900 the infantry wore red, the artillery blue and the cavalry green. The official uniform consisted of, in the appropriate colour: a *kolah* (cap), tunic, pantaloons, boots or shoes and sometimes a greatcoat. However, in practice most of the money supplied for uniforms was pocketed by senior officers and officials, and clothing was very irregularly supplied and usually made of poor quality material. Typically, within a month of his arrival in garrison, the recruit’s uniform was in rags. However, whenever the shah was due to review the army, the troops were issued with a new set of uniforms for the occasion.

On paper, the numbers of *nezam* troops had risen inexorably throughout the century, each reform wave leading to the raising of more regiments. While the French mission was at Tabriz in 1808, Abbas Mirza possessed between 4,000 and 6,000 *nezam* troops. By the late 1830s the infantry alone had risen to 50 regiments containing 54,850 officers and men. By 1900 the *nezam* infantry officially numbered 78,500 men, divided into 80 regiments. The regulation strength of a regiment, in theory, ranged from 800 to 1,000 men, with 38 officers. In reality, however, most of these troops were either absent from their regiments or entirely fictitious, the muster rolls having been falsified so that the pay of the imaginary soldiers might be retained by senior officers. Although “given time and a fairly liberal expenditure of money”, commanding officers seemed able, by rough and ready methods, to raise regiments to something approaching full strength, money was in ever shorter supply, Iran was falling into indebtedness, and in any case troops so raised were completely lacking in training and discipline.\(^47\)

This relentless rise in paper regiments constituted an enormous drain on Iran’s resources. Whatever the situation on the ground, the authorities invariably met in full the cost of pay for the complement of officers and men stipulated on the muster rolls, for their uniforms, weapons, and so on. This
merely served to introduce a new method of redistributing resources among the elite. In fact, the possibility of acquiring an appointment in one of the nezam regiments, with their fixed and unfailingly honoured budgets, had opened up a novel and extremely profitable avenue of investment. Commands were bought and sold at high prices, frequently purely as an investment by civilians. Indeed so lucrative was command of a nezam regiment that tribal chiefs often tried to acquire such a position rather than retaining their irregular cavalry. Having bought his regiment, the colonel was then able to recoup his investment and make a profit in a number of ways, by retaining the wages of soldiers who were on the official strength but not actually maintained, by selling commissions to his subordinate officers and exemptions from service and discharges to the private soldier and by profiteering out of rations and pay.48

Prior to Abbas Mirza’s reforms, men were enlisted for specific military campaigns and paid only so long as present with the colours. The introduction of a standing army based on Abbas Mirza’s bunichah system represented an enormous increase in state expenditure and this rudimentary form of conscription became a cross which the Iranian Treasury was forced to bear. Yet, although its financial impact was considerable, in practice, the new method of recruitment differed little from the old. The bunichah system clearly defined liability for military service on the basis of a calculation of the number of ploughs required to keep village land under cultivation, one man per plough deemed liable. The authorities, however, totally lacking in modern administrative and bureaucratic resources, especially a census, fixed the responsibility for enforcing the system onto the village, not the individual. Thus the selection of recruits was actually made by the village elders and local landowners as the need arose and as they saw fit, much as it had been done prior to the reform.49 The bunichah system was never enforced systematically and soldiers continued to be taken from traditional recruiting grounds, especially Azerbaijan. Even in Azerbaijan the application of the system became increasingly haphazard as the century progressed, the original tax assessment according to which liability was assessed remaining unrevised and becoming increasingly anomalous. The bunichah system never succeeded in overcoming tribal and clan-based recruiting, some nezam regiments being composed entirely of recruits from the same tribe, or a preponderance of the Turkish element. It failed to provide the authorities with a predictable supply of trained manpower and did nothing to inculcate a spirit of patriotism and loyalty to the state, an objective which it did not, in any case, espouse.50 Offering recruits nothing in the way of education or possibilities of advancement, or even regular pay, service in the army remained intensely unpopular with the peasantry.

The introduction by Abbas Mirza of a system of fixed rates of pay had also led to a catastrophic deterioration in the conditions endured by the nezam troops. Prior to this reform, terms of service had been negotiated individually and on an ad hoc basis, and therefore roughly reflected the cost of
living and the market value of labour. In 1810, Abbas Mirza laid down fixed rates of pay for officers and men, these rates remaining more or less unchanged throughout the century. But in 1810 a private soldier’s pay, in silver coin (toman), was sufficient for buying food to keep a family for a month. During the course of the century the toman consistently depreciated until its purchasing power had decreased by about 80 per cent.51 By 1900 both officers and men were actually receiving only one-fifth of the pay which Abbas Mirza’s original scheme intended they should have, and but even this pittance often remained unpaid for months or even years. With much of their pay withheld, and with their daily food alone costing more than their ration allowances, soldiers were allowed, encouraged and even obliged to find other work as labourers, small shopkeepers and also often as money-lenders, in this way providing for themselves and, owing to a system of percentages, also for their officers.

The deterioration in the conditions under which the nezam troops lived led not only to garrisons becoming shells, empty while the troops earned their bread in the bazaars, but also to more serious breaches of discipline. Although during the nineteenth century Iran had acquired various formal codes of military discipline, in practice commanders punished their men entirely at their own discretion and soldiers guilty of individual transgressions might expect brutal treatment. However, collective disobedience, even mutiny, might occasionally be met with negotiation and concessions from the authorities, who lacked the means to suppress bodies of armed men. Soldiers, finding their arrears of pay intolerable and unable to make ends meet, often resorted to mass protests, taking bast in mosques and elsewhere, sacking food shops, refusing to attend parades and intimidating senior officers. The outcome of each protest varied according to circumstance but, although ringleaders were often victimized, the troops were often successful in obtaining at least a portion of what they were due.52

By the end of the century neither Iranian reformers nor the European military missions had succeeded in creating a professional officer corps for the nezam regiments.53 Although Amir Kabir had founded the Dar al-Funun with the intention of educating a professional officer corps, its graduates were largely prevented from finding employment in the army owing to the persistent opposition of those who had bought their appointments. The authorities observed no formal regulations for the appointment and promotion of officers. These were made rather on the basis of favouritism and purchase. Nor had Abbas Mirza’s creation of a European-style graded hierarchy produced an effective command structure. Before Abbas Mirza’s reforms, officers had been known simply by appellations which indicated the number of men under their command, as chiefs of 10, 50, 100, 1,000 and 10,000 men, and modern ranks with their hierarchical significance were unknown. For his nezam regiments, Abbas Mirza abolished the old nomenclature and introduced new ranks with titles which were the exact equivalents of European usage, naib (lieutenant), sultan (captain), yavar (major), sarhang
(colonel), sartip (general). During the course of the century however, this system degenerated. Regulations governing hierarchy disintegrated and the designations of rank ceased to imply any fixed military responsibility or even any connection with the army. The number of officers proliferated, and the army budget paid salaries and pensions to many people who had acquired military rank by patronage or purchase simply in order to benefit financially. The confusion was aggravated by a new habit among the civilian elite, fostered by Nasser-edin Shah, for wearing military uniform and sporting elaborate military decorations.

In operational terms, the irregular cavalry was still the most effective fighting element in Iran’s military forces and it had remained untouched by the European military missions and government efforts at reform. It continued to be organized exclusively on a tribal basis, with men serving under their own chiefs and supplying their own horses and weapons. In return for keeping available for service a specified complement of men, the khans received payment in the form of a tax deduction, a dispensation of great financial value and which also symbolically diminished their acknowledgement of the central government’s authority. The khans’ military role significantly enhanced not only their own financial resources but also their personal authority within the tribal structures. In general terms, the state’s continued reliance on such forces buttressed the power of the khans and negated efforts by the reforming officials to reduce their autonomy and make them more dependent upon and responsive to the central government, frustrating and even reversing a wider agenda of centralization.

The irregular cavalry was divided into 69 regiments or squadrons of varying strength, which were known by their places of recruitment or by that of their tribe. The internal organization of the regiments was based upon the old Turco-Mongol system of divisions of tens, fifties and hundreds. On mobilization, the cavalry possessed an estimated potential strength of 37,591.54

Although of some effectiveness in campaigns against their tribal enemies and as a threat to subdue urban populations, the use of the irregular cavalry was fraught with difficulties. They were usually mobilized only for specific operations and rarely agreed to serve outside their own districts. They were motivated entirely by the prospect of plunder and when on campaign were often themselves the cause of serious disorder.

**Nasser-edin Shah and the Russian military mission**

By the late nineteenth century little had been achieved in creating a Europeanized army, either in appearance or reality. The reformed regiments’ main significance was in providing a conduit through which state money might be channelled into the pockets of elite families and in indulging the shah’s fondness for what amounted to military fancy dress. Nonetheless, in the 1870s, one step had been taken which was to have permanent and momentous
consequences for the country, when the shah asked the Russian Tsar for officers to help with the organization of a regular cavalry.

The Russian military mission with the Iranian Cossack Brigade was a new departure in Iran’s experiments with foreign officers. It was to be the longest lasting of all the foreign military missions to Qajar Iran, remaining until removed by the British just prior to the coup of 1921, a total of 41 years. It was also to prove itself to be of a different type to previous missions. It was openly an instrument of Russian foreign policy and was completely beyond Iranian control. By giving Iran the Cossack Brigade, Russia only partially succeeded in tying the shah to itself but was completely successful in establishing a visible and apparently permanent affront to Iranian sovereignty.

Russia attached great importance to its mission in Iran, having been systematically excluded from providing military assistance by British opposition and Iranian suspicion since the beginning of the century. From the beginning of its life the Russian mission was able to rely on the energetic support of the Russian authorities, including the viceroy of the Caucasus, the general staff at Tiflis, the Russian foreign ministry and the tsar himself.

The Russian officers encountered many of the problems familiar from the experience of previous missions, including opposition from resentful officials and courtiers, hostility from the diplomatic representatives of other Powers, social and professional tensions within the new corps, and the Iranian government’s perpetual failure to provide sufficient funds. Nonetheless the Brigade was able to sustain itself and grow, mainly as a result of unrelenting Russian pressure on the Iranian government. Russia supplied most of the arms and munitions for the Brigade, free, often in the form of a present from the tsar to the shah. When recruiting, the Russian officers relied on volunteers and were able to offer financial incentives – the pay of a private Cossack soldier was more than double that of the nezam troops – and the benefits of Russian diplomatic immunity. Russia provided cash for the Brigade if the Iranian government found itself without funds, and in fact directly assumed the full cost of the force after the outbreak of war in 1914. Russia also consistently attempted to use favourable political circumstances to press for an increase in the strength of the Brigade, both its Iranian element and the Russian officers, and for an extension of their influence, especially within the “Russian Zone” established under the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907.55

Perhaps the most novel aspect of the Russian military mission, in comparison with previous foreign missions, was its relationship to the Iranian government. The Russian commandant abandoned any pretence of subordination to Iranian authorities, whether the shah or the government and operated more or less independently according to his interpretation of Russian interests. For the Russian officers of the Brigade, furthermore, the advance of Russian interests was indissolubly linked to the defence of Qajar absolutism. By the late nineteenth century the monarchy had become dependent on the Brigade. In 1896, after the assassination of Nasser-edin Shah, it was
the Russian Cossack officers and their men who ensured the accession of the new shah, Mozzaftar-edin (1896–1907).

The novel position of the Brigade and its commandant was reflected in a new degree of hostility from Iranian opinion and from the very beginning of its life the Russian military mission and the Brigade itself aroused great resentment both within official circles and among a broader nationalist and constitutionalist milieu, which felt the Russian mission had been imposed on Iran as a result of pressure on a weak and despotic ruler. After the Constitutional Revolution, the Brigade was drawn ever deeper into domestic political conflicts, not an arm of the state but rather a partisan of the shah in his struggle with the constitutionalists.

PART TWO: THE CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION AND MILITARY REFORM

Constitutional government and the Cossack Brigade

In 1905–1906 the Constitutional Revolution transformed the political and ideological contexts within which debates about military reform and foreign assistance took place. For constitutionalist opinion and the new National Assembly (Majles), the key issue was no longer how to strengthen the monarchy but, on the contrary, how to limit the absolutism of the shah. How were the new authorities to enforce their own power, defend themselves against their internal and external enemies, assert state power over all the national territory, and halt the disintegration that threatened Iran’s existence as an independent state? The solution they found to this question was to reactivate the efforts towards state-building and specifically the construction of a modern army, which had dominated nineteenth century efforts at reform. But now these efforts had to take place against the backdrop of opposition from the shah and the military forces on which he depended, the Russian officers with the Cossack Brigade.

The constitutional movement developed two strategies. Firstly, the new authorities tried to establish their own effective control over the existing military forces, most significantly, the Russian-officered Cossack Brigade. In this they failed. Their second strategy succeeded when in 1910 they established the first modern, national military force, the Government Gendarmerie.

In 1905–1906 the Cossack Brigade was weak and demoralized. Popular hostility was intense and many of the Iranian officers and men sympathetic to the revolution. The Russian mission was in disarray, and the military authorities in Russia preoccupied with defeat at the hands of Japan and the suppression of the 1905 revolution. Indeed, despite its royalist and pro-Russian traditions, in 1905–1906 the commandant had been unable to provide the shah with a coercive instrument to use against the revolutionaries and its paralysis and the absence of other effective army units meant that the
revolution was able to achieve its objectives largely peacefully. After the revolution, the Russians lost control completely and the Iranian officers formed a military council to take control of the Brigade.

Nonetheless the constitutional regime was unable to grasp this opportunity to rid itself of the hated Russian military mission. The Russian authorities regained the initiative and, at what was a critical moment for the Brigade, both internally and vis-à-vis the wider political situation, a new commandant arrived. In September 1906, one month after Mozzafar-edin Shah signed the proclamation convening a Constituent National Assembly, Colonel Liakhov took over the Brigade. He was determined to re-assert Russian control and succeeded in abolishing the military council and in weeding out Iranian officers opposed to Russian influence. In this he encountered considerable difficulty as, besides resistance within the Brigade itself, the leading ulama, government ministers and the Majles all continued to make efforts to curb his power.

The constitutional regime soon paid the price for allowing Russian officers to remain in control of the Brigade. In June 1908 Liakhov and the Cossacks under his command made a decisive intervention into the domestic political conflict, bombarded and suppressed the Majles, and overthrew the constitutional government on the orders of the new shah, Muhammad Ali (1907–1909), and his royalist and Russian supporters. Liakhov himself became military governor of Tehran, but his ascendancy was brief. After the capture of the capital by constitutionalist armies in 1909, the Russian officers and the Brigade were again eclipsed, to re-emerge again only after the Russian government in 1911 forced a second closure of the Majles. In the context of the general defeat suffered by Iranian constitutionalism in 1911, the Brigade was once more consolidated into an instrument of royalism and foreign control.

The Swedish military mission and the Government Gendarmerie

By the beginning of the twentieth century all the broad schemes of military modernization under missions of foreign officers had all ended in failure, while the establishment of the Cossack Brigade under the Russian military mission had created a new problem of loss of authority without solving the old problem of a lack of effective military strength. By the constitutional period, the issue of sovereignty had become paramount and the state-building agenda had passed from the shah and his high ministers to a new generation representing new social forces. Iranian constitutionalists argued strongly in favour of the creation of a force which could defend Iran’s borders and independence, maintain internal security, collect taxes and uphold the authority of the constitutional authorities. In government pronouncements, Majles debates, programmes of political parties and the press, the need for a strong national army was constantly reiterated.
Much of the hatred for the Cossack Brigade stemmed from its role as an arm of the powerful imperial presence on Iran’s northern border. Yet, although horrified at the effect of the presence of Russian Cossack officers at the heart of the Iranian state, the constitutionalists could not slough off the old fascination with foreign military missions. Now, however, it was argued that officers should come from neutral countries which had no imperial ambitions in the region and that they should be firmly under the control, not of a shah compromised by his dependence on foreign support, but of the institutions of constitutional government, the Majles and the ministries of war and the interior. In 1910 the government embarked on yet another experiment with foreign officers. As part of a general programme of reform, the Majles voted for the establishment of the Government Gendarmerie and, the following May, approved a Swedish military mission to lead the force, Sweden being an acceptable source of foreign officers as it had a tradition of neutrality and was considered a minor power. A mission of three Swedish officers, led by Colonel H. O. Hjalmarson, began its work at the end of 1911. By 1914 seven regiments, all volunteers, had been established in Tehran and throughout southern, south-eastern and south-western Iran.

Just as the Cossack Brigade survived as a result of persistent Russian backing, so the Government Gendarmerie in its early years benefited enormously from British financial and diplomatic support. Although still reluctant to become directly involved in officering an Iranian military force, Britain hoped that, by offering its patronage to the Swedish officers, it might use the Gendarmerie to protect its growing interests in southern Iran and to counter balance the Russian Cossack Brigade in the capital. However, the danger for Iran inherent in the existence of military forces sponsored by essentially rival powers became apparent when the Gendarmerie was prevented from establishing itself throughout the country as Russia opposed its presence in its zone of influence, wishing to make that area the exclusive preserve of the Cossack Brigade.

Nonetheless, by 1914 the Gendarmerie represented the first real success in Iranian efforts to build a regular military force and had come to embody the state-building trend which had begun with Abbas Mirza and was now represented by the constitutional movement. The Swedish mission had been engaged by the Majles and it offered no challenge to Iranian sovereignty on the contrary it drew its legitimacy from its identification with the constitutional authorities. The Gendarmerie possessed a novel ideological coherence and dynamism and, unlike previous Iranian military formations, including the Cossack Brigade, was able to employ the motifs of nationalism to attract recruits and ensure their loyalty. It was, in particular, able to assemble a professional officer cadre. By the second decade of the twentieth century, the Swedish mission was able to draw on a new type of officer, with ideological commitment and occasionally with professional military training obtained abroad.
New British missions and a bid for supremacy

The years of the First World War saw a further transformation in the domestic and the international contexts within which the foreign missions in Iran operated. The constitutional revolution had failed to provide Iran with the means to escape from the coils of an exhausted Qajar political order and the War brought increased imperialist intervention, both political and military, with Iran’s continued independent existence threatened by national disintegration, partition or the imposition of direct European control.

The Gendarmerie had derived significant impetus in its early years from the political and financial support of Britain but, with the outbreak of war and the concomitant political polarization, the force rejected its imperial patron and identified itself unequivocally with Iranian nationalism. The Swedish command was effectively eclipsed, freeing the Iranian officer corps to assume a leading role in the military and political conflicts of the war and post-war years. Iranian gendarmes turned their guns on their British patrons, arresting the entire British colony in Shiraz and driving Allied nationals out of much of southern and western Iran. Between 1915 and 1917 Gendarme officers offered military leadership to nationalist forces battling against foreign intervention and control, and a docile and collaborating shah.

In the first years of the war the Cossack Brigade became more than ever a Russian tool while Britain, shaken by its treatment at the hands of Gendarme officers whom it had armed and financed, itself began planning to raise and officer a force directly, over which its control would be certain. Iran’s strategic significance and the helplessness of its government proved an irresistible temptation to Russia and Britain. Allies in war, at first Britain and Russia acted together. In 1915 the two powers settled their differences over western Asia with the Constantinople Agreement which, although primarily concerned with Russian demands for control over the Straits into the Black Sea, also gave Britain the “neutral zone” in Iran, and recognized a free hand for both powers in their respective zones. In 1916, with Russian armies in occupation of northern Iran and within striking distance of Tehran, they used their control of elements within the Iranian government to draw up the Sipahsalar Agreement which provided for the expansion of the Cossack Brigade to a Division and the establishment of a British-officered force, the South Persia Rifles (SPR). Through the expanded Cossack Division and the SPR, Russia and Britain each intended to consolidate its power in its respective zone of influence, Russia in the north and Britain in the south.

The Agreement provoked profound opposition in Iran, where it was widely perceived as accelerating the partition of the country, and the government, while too weak and dependent on Allied support to repudiate it outright, refused any formal acceptance. Although the Agreement thus possessed no legal standing, the Russians proceeded immediately to expand Cossack numbers while Britain raised the South Persia Rifles, a force whose
legitimacy was always contested and which was to be a thorn in the side of Iranian nationalists throughout its existence.

In 1917 the October Revolution held out hope to the Iranian government that it could simultaneously rid itself of both the old Russian and the new British military missions. Popular hatred of the Cossacks had reached a crescendo since the outbreak of the war and the new Soviet government’s official recall of the Russian officers was greeted with widespread enthusiasm. The government was, however, too weak to take advantage of the moment and insist that the Russian officers themselves accept the new situation and hand over control to Iranian officers. On the contrary, the British seized the chance to adopt the Cossacks and refashion them into a device for advancing not Russian but British interests. In early 1918 Britain assumed political and financial sponsorship of the Division, and welcomed the seizure of command by a White Russian officer, Colonel Starroselsky. Starroselsky’s coup against the existing Cossack command, which was in fact preparing to hand over the Division to Iranian control, enraged the Iranian government, highlighting the independence of the Division and the practical irrelevance to it of any legal authority.

Britain had initially hoped to use the Division in support of its own strategic political and military plans in Iran and the Caucasus, but the fierce White Russian nationalism of Starroselsky and his efforts to carve out an independent political role for himself, and the burgeoning anti-British nationalism of the Iranian Cossacks, soon clashed with the new plans formulated by Lord Curzon for the establishment of unimpeded British control over Iran through the Anglo-Iranian Agreement of 1919. Britain began to see the Russian officers as an obstacle and even a menace to its policy, especially to its intention to create a unified army under British officers, and in October 1920 the Cossack camp at Qazvin was placed under British guns and the Russian officers summarily removed from their commands by General Sir Edmund Ironside, ending four decades of the Russian military mission in Iran. Ironside placed a few British officers in temporary command and, in 1921, used the Division in an intervention in domestic politics more dramatic even than the coup of 1908.

The South Persia Rifles

Meanwhile the last episode in Qajar Iran’s long experiment with foreign military missions took place with the establishment in 1916 of the British-officered South Persia Rifles. The SPR was intended to replace the Gendarmerie, which the British now regarded as incorrigibly hostile, and to restore and maintain order in southern Iran for the remainder of the war, but also to be available as a political instrument to secure British interests in post-war Iran.

The SPR was established by Colonel Sir Percy Sykes under the Sepahsalar Agreement of 1916 as a quid pro quo for Russia’s expansion of the Cossack
Brigade to a Division. The odium which the SPR attracted was a mirror-image for the British of the resentment engendered by the Russian military mission, and the linking of the two forces in the Sepahsalar Agreement gave the Iranian government the opportunity to oppose and demand the removal of both contingents of foreign officers.

The Iranian government was still wedded to the idea of a single national army under Iranian control. They wanted Allied help to finance it, and were prepared to accept that it be officered by neutrals, as long as such officers recognized Iranian sovereignty, but they were resolutely opposed to another force along the lines of the Cossack Brigade. For Iranian opinion, the establishment of yet another such corps rendered the eventual creation of a national army even more remote and was one more confirmation of the de facto partition of the country into a Russian-dominated north and a British south. The government, although without the strength to reject outright the British mission to the SPR, yet temporized and procrastinated, refusing and resisting acceptance of the Sepahsalar Agreement.

Iranian reluctance to endorse Sykes’s mission turned the SPR into the hub of a wider conflict between Iran and Britain in the years after the First World War. The force took on a symbolic importance for both countries. For Iran the SPR was a visible reminder of a loss of sovereignty and the creeping dismemberment of the country, while the British saw the success of Sykes and his officers as vital to imperial prestige and as a way of cutting through the chaos resulting from war, new and growing nationalist opposition and dangerous experiments with neutral officers.

In the early stages of the SPR’s life, most of its commissioned ranks and many of its men were former Gendarmes and Sykes and his British officers were unable to eradicate their deeply-ingrained nationalist and anti-British sentiments. However, it seems that the main difficulty facing the British in their task of constructing the SPR resulted from the vacillating attitude of the central government and its underlying hostility. Ultimately Sykes found it impossible to create a coherent corps and to ensure the loyalty of officers and men in the face of the passive, and sometimes active, opposition of the government, and the bitter enmity of nationalist opinion. After the Iranian government in March 1918 publicly declared its non-recognition of the SPR and denounced it as a foreign force, Sykes’s work began rapidly to unravel. Within a few months the SPR was fighting for its survival against enemies from both within its own ranks and without. Two serious mutinies shook the Fars regiment, while the force found itself overwhelmed by a tribal insurgency led by the anti-British Qashqai tribal confederation.

The SPR survived its political, military and organizational difficulties solely as a result of immense British pressure on both the central government and the provincial authorities in the south. During these years the numerical strength of the force varied considerably. Between 1916 and 1921 the Iranian element averaged around 6,000. By 1920 the two brigades, in Fars and Kerman, broke down into 47 British officers, 256 British and Indian NCOs,
190 Iranian officers and 5,400 in the Iranian ranks. The cost of the force was borne entirely by the British and Indian governments. Envisaged as a crucial component of the national army proposed by the Anglo-Iranian Military Commission, created under the terms of the Anglo-Iranian Agreement of 1919, the SPR never shook off its reputation as a tool of foreign influence. British determination to impose acceptance of the SPR on Iran poisoned relations with a succession of Iranian cabinets down to and even beyond the coup of 1921 and although officers and men of the force were accepted into Reza Khan’s new army, they remained the object of suspicion and none achieved high rank.

**The Anglo-Iranian Military Commission**

Despite the chequered history of the SPR, in 1919 Britain put forward a much more grandiose scheme for the modernization of the army under British officers. After the war, the foreign secretary, Lord Curzon, prevailed in his view, against the opposition of the Government of India, that Britain should consolidate its new predominance in Iran, resulting from the withdrawal of Russia after the Bolshevik revolution, through a long-term agreement with pro-British elements in the country. The mechanism adopted for this consolidation was the Anglo-Iranian Agreement of 1919. Under the terms of this Agreement, an Anglo-Iranian Military Commission was set up to devise plans for a complete overhaul and reorganization of Iran’s military forces. The mixed commission of British and Iranian officers assembled in January 1920 and at the beginning of April presented a report recommending the merging of Iran’s existing forces and the construction of a uniform national force under British officers. In practical terms, the commission envisaged rebuilding the Iranian army around a core constituted by the SPR.

The scheme devised by the Commission bore a strong similarity to earlier plans for military modernization within a framework of comprehensive administrative reform, but the role it prescribed for British officers was now, in the new political and ideological climate, an intolerable affront to national dignity. In the rapidly changing circumstances of post-war Iran, both the Agreement itself and the proposals of the Military Commission caused outrage among nationalist opinion and specifically among the Iranian officers and men of both the Gendarmerie and the Cossack Division.

During the constitutional period the Iranian government had continued to advance schemes for creating a national army while the Sepahsalar Agreement had provided nationalist opinion with the opportunity to link the fate of the Russian mission with the Cossack Division to that of the British officers of the SPR and to demand the substitution of both with officers of a third and neutral power. The Allies and, after 1917, the British alone, had repeatedly discouraged the idea. With the Anglo-Iranian Military Commission, it seemed that Iran was at last to obtain a uniform national army, but
without the sovereignty which had been at the heart of the state-building agenda.

By 1919 it was impossible for any Iranian government to accept the Anglo-Iranian Agreement, which in any case required a now politically impossible Majles ratification. The British refusal to relinquish the Agreement produced a protracted political crisis in Tehran and eventually led to their abandonment of any strategy of working through the existing authorities and their resort to the desperate expedient of the sponsorship of a coup.\textsuperscript{75} The coup was carried out by the Cossacks in Qazvin, led by Reza Khan in partnership with the civilian politician, Seyyed Zia-edin Tabatabai, and was facilitated by the British officers then in nominal command of the Cossack camp, including those of the Anglo-Iranian Military Commission who were intended to comprize the leadership of the proposed new army.

In 1921 the Cossack Division, still under foreign control, was the instrument of a decisive political intervention which would later overthrow the Qajar dynasty, which it had been established to protect, and establish another, the Pahlavi, which would shape modern Iran and endure till 1979. The British had intended the coup to install in power their protégé, Seyyed Zia, who was committed to introducing British financial and military advisers. For the British involved in its planning, the coup was envisaged as an alternative route to the achievement of the main objectives of the 1919 Agreement. In reality, however, the coup marked a turning point in British power in Iran. Its capacity to intervene directly in the Iranian political system collapsed, and the confidence and assertiveness of the new regime was symbolized by its determination to refuse foreign officers any role in the building of a national army.

In the months after the coup, a struggle for power rapidly developed between Seyyed Zia and Reza Khan. This burgeoning political and personal conflict came to a head over Seyyed Zia’s determination to give operational command to the British officers who were still unofficially on active service with the Cossacks. This Reza Khan declared to be equivalent to selling to foreigners “the soul of the nation”, which was the army.\textsuperscript{76} Forcing Seyyed Zia into exile, Reza Khan peremptorily dismissed the British officers serving with the Cossacks. The British officers with the SPR soon followed them, as did the remaining Swedes. With all the foreign officers and the remnants of the foreign missions gone, Reza Khan was finally able to embark on the task of building a unified national army, on the European model, but free from foreign control.

CONCLUSION

In assessing the consequences of the long Qajar dalliance with foreign military missions, two broad issues arise: first, the role played by the foreign officers themselves and, second, the general impact of the missions on Iran’s construction of a modern army.
Explanations for the failure of military reform in nineteenth-century Iran have usually focused on the overall weakness of Qajar reform efforts, on the only fitful interest of the shahs and the unpredictable rise and fall of their reforming ministers, on internal opposition, on poor governance and mal-administration. Yet it seems clear that the foreign military missions, far from being disinterested and professional, were themselves haphazard and chaotic, often lacked the consistent backing of their governments, were riven by internal conflicts, both among the officers and very frequently between the officers and their own diplomatic representatives, and entirely contingent upon the European diplomatic context. The missions aggravated and galvanized European rivalries and aroused intense professional resentment and political hostility among Iranians.

Until the arrival of the Russian mission in 1879, none of the foreign missions had remained long in Iran, either disintegrating through Iranian ambivalence or collapsing as a result of international complications. Not only were they too short-lived to make any real progress but the countries from which the missions were sought constantly changed, as Iran tried to navigate through the complexities of Great Power diplomacy and avoid unwelcome political entanglements. With each new mission, weapons, methods of training and tactics, and uniforms changed accordingly, creating confusion and even havoc, with troops engaging on operations while armed with a variety of weapons requiring different types of parts and ammunition. Occasionally missions from different European countries were in Iran at the same time, leading to political and professional tensions. The Austrians and Italians imported their conflict from Europe, and relations between the second Austrian and the Russian missions were tense as a result of rivalries in the Balkans. A much more serious danger from the presence of rival foreign missions arose in the twentieth century. Iranian fears of the partition of their country between the British and the Russian Empires, sharpened by the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, were given further substance as the Russian-officered Cossack Brigade and the Swedish Gendarmerie were confined to different “zones” of the country, adding a military reality to diplomatic spheres of influence.

Much historical writing about Qajar efforts at state-building has been dominated by a “catastrophist” perspective which has encouraged a view of all nineteenth-century reform as futile and hopeless, leading only to a deepening crisis. Certainly the serial efforts to use foreign military missions to produce an Iranian army which exactly resembled the armies from which the European officers were themselves drawn, whether British, French, Austrian or any other nationality, failed, as did the comprehensive schemes for reform within which these efforts were embedded. It may even be argued further that the establishment of the nezam regiments actually contributed to Iran’s deteriorating military and financial situation. Before Abbas Mirza’s reforms, Iran relied for defence and internal security largely on tribal irregulars who made few active demands on the treasury, khans being recompensed by an
accounting device – deductions in the revenues they owed. By contrast, the maintenance of vast numbers of regular troops, most of whom had little or no real existence but the cost of whom was always met in full, the pay of foreign officers themselves and the purchase of weapons from abroad, amounted to a crippling expense. It was indeed an expense which increased throughout the century as ever more regiments were raised, each with large numbers of salaried but otherwise inactive Iranian officers. Ever more foreign missions arrived, even though Iran’s financial position deteriorated as it became integrated into the global economy. Rather than the nezam regiments dragging Iran towards a wider modernization, the regiments themselves became assimilated to the decaying Qajar order, the conditions of officers and men, far from being maintained at the level prescribed by Abbas Mirza at the time of the Napoleonic wars, worsening as the century progressed. By the end of the nineteenth century Iran’s military forces were much weaker vis-à-vis European armies than they had been in the time of Abbas Mirza.

Yet there is another dimension to the history of Qajar military reform. Two foreign missions, although very different in character and context, were successful in producing military forces which were to have a defining impact on Iran’s history in the twentieth century, the Government Gendarmerie and the Cossack Division. Both forces carved out an existence in isolation from any wider attempt at modernization. Both were financed without any radical restructuring of domestic taxation, the bulk of their cost borne by one or other foreign power, both were armed by the largesse of Britain and Russia, both sidestepped any use of the unwieldy and inefficient bunichah system of recruitment, remaining small and enlisting mostly volunteers and both relied on diplomatic support to face down their domestic critics and enemies.

The Gendarmerie constituted the most successful in the Qajar period’s attempts to build a modern army with the help of foreign officers. In the 1920s the Gendarmerie provided Reza Khan with a human resource, the military expertise and experience of the Gendarme officer corps, vital to the construction of the new army. The Cossack officers for their part provided him with a bedrock of political loyalty on which he secured not just the new army but also his dynasty. Crucially, however, although the officer corps of both forces were incubated by foreign missions, it was only after the marginalization or removal of these missions that the Gendarmes and Cossacks were freed to assume a national political role.

There was in fact a fundamental conflict at the heart of the relationship between Iran and the foreign military missions. All the various Iranian individuals and groups who embraced the concept of military-led modernization, first the shahs and their reforming ministers, then constitutionalist and nationalist political circles, hoped to build an army on the European model in order to defend Iran against Europe. This was not an objective that was shared by any of the foreign military missions, with the partial exception of the Swedish mission established under constitutionalist auspices. The major imperial powers, especially Britain, Russia and France, engaged in the game
of army reform in order to augment their own influence over Iran and its government, and in order to deny the field to their European enemies. Their degree of commitment was determined by the imperial context and their missions were intended to further their own political, diplomatic and military objectives, they were, in fact, merely another card in the Great Game. Far from enabling Iran to assert its sovereignty with greater strength, the missions were a device to increase European hegemony and Iran’s dependence. This was symbolized by the way in which the troops were armed. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Iran’s military forces possessed weapons which were of good quality and produced locally. During the course of the century Iran began what was to become a chronic reliance on the purchase of weaponry in Europe, a reliance which endured throughout the Qajar and Pahlavi eras, which became an enormous drain on national resources and which made the army’s very existence contingent upon foreign industries and governments.

The conflict between European and Iranian objectives found expression in the perpetual struggle for control which afflicted every foreign mission. The foreign officers constantly complained that they were treated as instructors only, lacking wider powers and at the mercy of the Iranian authorities, while the latter, in thrall to the notion of scientific methods of organization and warfare but fearful of the consequences of deeper imperial involvement, alternately invited and resisted the European presence. The Russian military mission finally cut the Gordian knot, gave up any pretence of deferring to Iranian control or even supervision and operated entirely independently.

Iran’s experience with the Cossack Brigade, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, revealed starkly the dangers of foreign missions. By this time, Iran had not only failed to strengthen itself against European encroachment but, after decades of modernization schemes, had become relatively much weaker, in economic as well as military terms, and ever more vulnerable. Since the early nineteenth century various European powers had involved themselves sporadically and unsuccessfully in Iran’s attempts to build a modern army. None of the missions had survived the vagaries of European rivalries and Iranian ambiguity. The Russian military mission of 1879 was a turning point. After its arrival, Iran found itself with a regular cavalry force, but one which was permanently lost to Iranian control and which was, in 1908, to overthrow the institutions of constitutional government at the behest of a foreign power. During the years of the Russian mission’s presence, and indeed partly because of the character of that presence, Iranian attitudes towards foreign military missions were transformed. From actively seeking the help of such missions, Iran began a long struggle to resist their imposition and to have removed those who remained.

Iran’s struggle to rid itself of the Russian military mission was to endure until 1920, and was only to be achieved then by British power in pursuit of British goals. However, in the two decades before the 1921 coup, not only did Iran face the unrelenting determination of Russia to retain its mission,
but also faced a newly aggressive approach from Britain. For much of the nineteenth century, Britain’s interest in Iran’s attempts at army reform had been desultory, periods of activity sparked off by a desire to deny the French or the Russians any advantage, and never lasting longer than the specific episodes of imperial rivalry themselves. During the constitutional period, however, burgeoning British interests in the Persian Gulf and southern Iran, especially its interests in oil, concentrated attention on security and defence. Britain now repeatedly offered, and finally threatened that, if Tehran could not maintain order in the south, Britain would itself raise and officer a force. With the example of the Cossack Brigade before its eyes, Britain, at its imperial zenith, embarked on a deeper and more complex involvement in Iran’s military modernization. This involvement, however, coincided with the birth of modern nationalism in Iran and made the British determination to guide and control Iran’s military forces a point of intense conflict. Britain first sponsored the Gendarmerie, which it hoped would act as a counterweight to the Cossack Brigade. After this catastrophic experiment, Britain lost patience with neutral officers. During the First World War, British and Russian determination to impose their own officers increased, as did Iranian reluctance. In 1916 Britain and Russia imposed the Sipahsalar Agreement on a helpless government, providing for a substantial increase in the number of Russians serving with the Iranian Cossacks, and for the establishment of a British military mission. The South Persia Rifles was established in a deliberate British effort to wrest control of southern Iran from the nationalists and the Gendarmes, and was seen by Iranian opinion not as an instrument for the realization of national aspirations, but of their frustration. After the 1917 revolution removed the Russian imperial presence, Britain, in a bid to establish its sole hegemony over Iran, first adopted the Cossack Division, then sponsored a broader scheme to build a national army led by British officers as part of the Anglo-Iranian Agreement of 1919. The British insistence on imposing its officers and Iranian resistance culminated in a protracted political crisis over the Anglo-Iranian Agreement. The presence of a British military mission charged with reorganizing, training and officering the Iranian army was a pivotal element in the Agreement and caused deep resentment, contributing materially to its eventual rejection.

For much of the nineteenth century, the shah and the reforming elite had seen foreign assistance with army reform as essential, indeed they had no other perspective than simply to copy European models in dress and drill in the hope that European military strength would follow by some still mysterious process. As the century drew to a close attitudes began to change. The foreign missions had always aroused a degree of resentment, religious disquiet mingling with political distrust among both elite and popular classes. Now, however, the growth of modern nationalism and a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of European tutelage, coupled with the actual experience of the Russian military mission with the Cossack Brigade, made it impossible for an emerging Iranian public opinion to tolerate Russian and British
officers in command of the army. In this new climate, the Iranian political class lost its appetite for foreign military missions, which were now clearly understood to be a harbinger of more general political tutelage. But by now, Britain and Russia were as determined to impose their officers on Iran as Iranian nationalists were to refuse them.

In the nineteenth century the Qajar shahs and their ministers had been free to invite foreign officers as they wished. However, in addition to the unacknowledged contradiction between the motives of Iran and the agenda of the foreign missions, there was another conflict at the heart of the reforming project. The Iranian state was never an abstraction, but an embodiment of particular social forces. Military modernization was couched in terms of improving the state’s ability to defend the country against foreign aggression but an equally important objective of army reform was to strengthen the monarchy in order to enable it to impose its will on other social groups within the country which were, either actually or potentially, contending for power. Until the late nineteenth century, the state was in practice identified with the shah and the dynasty and the foreign missions were in Iran in the service of the shah, a position highlighted by their role in safeguarding the dynasty by enforcing acceptance of the succession of Mohammad Shah in 1834 and Mozzafar-edin Shah in 1896. But support for the shah inevitably involved suppressing his enemies. In the nineteenth century this might mean, for example, action against rebel princes who disputed the succession. The foreign officers, further, inevitably became entangled in domestic power struggles taking place between factions at court, each faction possessing its own position to defend, its own orientation towards one or other imperial power, and with a pro- or anti-reform inclination. In the twentieth century, foreign military missions became drawn into a new and much wider battle between the monarchy and Iranian nationalism. By the constitutional period, the shah had come to be held responsible not for the strengthening of the state but rather with its weakening, and identified with the loss of sovereignty and the spread of foreign influence, a phenomenon perfectly illustrated by his reliance on the Cossack Brigade. State-building opinion now defined progress in terms of limiting royal despotism and, accordingly, resented foreign attempts, through military missions as well as in other ways, to shore up the shah’s power and frustrate their own ambitions.

The reaction against the Qajar experience with foreign military missions led to a resolute refusal by the soldier Reza Khan to countenance such experiments. It was, ironically, only after the removal of the missions that Iran was able to succeed in building a modern army. For the 20 years between 1921 and 1941 no foreign military missions came to Iran. In fact, of all the rulers of Iran since the early nineteenth century down to the Islamic revolution, Reza Shah was unique in resisting the temptation to allow foreigners control of the army.

After Reza Shah’s abdication in 1941 the struggle between the monarchy, buttressed by foreign military missions, and the nationalist opposition,
determined on their removal, resumed in earnest. Within a greatly weakened political context, the new power in Iran, the United States, was once again able to insist on missions of its officers serving in the country. As in the late Qajar period, so now, it was the shah, Mohammad Reza (1941–1979) who accepted this imposition against nationalist opinion, and suffered accordingly. Once again, as in the years before 1921, the foreign military missions, although intended to further imperial objectives, in fact provoked intense Iranian resentment, constituting a factor of major significance in bringing about another dramatic political rupture, the revolution of 1979.

Notes

1 Where countries fell under direct European control, the process of military modernization and state-building took place within a totally different configuration.

Shah decades are dealt with by Reza Ra’iss Tousi, “The Persian Army, 1880–1907”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 24/2 (April 1988): 206–29. The individual military forces of the constitutional and late Qajar periods have fared rather better, see below, footnotes 44, 57–9, 68. The only foreign mission to have received serious attention is the Swedish mission of the constitutional period, see Markus Ineichen, *Die Schwedischen Offiziere in Persien 1911–1916* (Bern and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002). This article is the first to examine the foreign military missions to Iran as a general phenomenon.


4 The Safavids claimed descent from the seventh Imam and had ruled an empire which at its height stretched from Baghdad to Herat.

5 Reza Shah, like his contemporary Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, conceptualized the state-building project in terms of consolidating these borders, not on an irredentist challenge.


7 The use of such strategies continues in the contemporary Middle East, most notably by Hizbullah in Lebanon. The similarity of this approach to methods of guerrilla warfare adopted in other areas of the world is obvious.


13 For the *zamburaks* see Manoutchehr M. Eskandari-Qajar, “Mohammad Shah Qajar’s Nezam-e Jadid and Colonel Colombari’s Zambourakchis”, *Qajar Studies* 5 (2005): 52–79.

15 For a discussion of the respective military strengths and weaknesses of Iran and Russia see Atkin, *Russia and Iran*, pp. 99–122.
20 Ibid.
21 In the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, the reform effort could only begin in earnest after the destruction of reactionary military castes, the Janissaries and the Mamluks respectively. In Iran no such action was necessary as no such forces existed, an illustration not of its relatively advanced condition, but rather of its primitive civil and military structures.
22 The presence of such a significant number of Russian deserters in Tabriz may be explained by the extremely harsh conditions prevailing in the Russian armies in the Caucasus. See Atkin, *Russia and Iran*, pp. 106–7.
27 Accounts of this mission and of the 1833 British mission may be found in Dennis Wright, *The English Amongst the Persians, during the Qajar Period, 1782–1921* (London, Heinemann, 1977).
29 Kibovskii and Yegorov, “The Persian Regular Army”.
31 For a general discussion of conscription in the Middle East see Jan Lucassen and Erik J. Zürcher, “Introduction: Conscription and the Historical Context”, in Zürcher, ed., *Arming the State*, pp. 1–19.
32 Some observations about the difficulties encountered by the British officers of this mission may be found in Lt-Col Stuart, *Journal of a Residence in Northern Persia and the Adjacent Provinces of Turkey* (London, Richard Bentley, 1854).
33 Throughout the nineteenth century the shah possessed a number of European officers of a wide variety of nationalities in his service. See, for example, Mansoureh Etlehadieh and S. Mir Mohammad Sadigh, eds, with an introduction by Jean Calmard, *Zhinral Saminu dar Khidmat-i Iran-i Qajar va Jang-i Hirat, 1236–1266* (Tehran, 1375); Bo Utas, “Borowsky, Isidore”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*; Jaqueline Calmard-Compas, “Ferrier, Joseph Phillipe”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.
35 An account of the French mission may be found in Eugene Flandin, *Voyage en Perse* (Paris, 1851).


For the circumstances of Amir Kabir’s fall, see Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, pp. 133–68.


For the shah’s relationship with Napoleon III see Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, pp. 352–3.

This policy held sway between 1830 and 1870 and concentrated on consolidation in India and a static defence of the Empire.

See Piemontese, “An Italian Source”.


Slaby, “Austria Diplomatic and Commercial Relations with Persia”.


For a discussion of attitudes towards office-holding prevailing in the Qajar period, see A. Reza Sheikholeslami, *The Structure of Central Authority in Qajar Iran, 1871–1896* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997).

See Picot, Report on the Organization of the Persian Army, p. 97, for a description of the results.


The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 divided Iran into spheres of interest: Russian in the north, British in the south-east, with a neutral zone in the south-west.


For the Swedish officers see Ineichen, *Die Schwedischen Offiziere*. Two of the Swedish officers with the force have left memoirs: P. Nyström, *Fem Ar i Persien som Gendarmoofficer* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1925); Hjalmar Pravitz, *Frau Persien i Stiltje och Storm* (Stockholm, 1918).


In the early twentieth century oil joined Britain’s older commercial and strategic interests in the area.

See Hassan Arfa, *Under Five Shahs* (London: John Murray, 1964), pp. 51–2. Even now, the Ottoman link was still important as many Gendarmerie officers went on their own initiative to the Ottoman Military Academy for training.


The Agreement was named after the prime minister, Mohammad Vali Khan Sipahsalar, by whom it was drawn up.

Marling to FO, 21 December 1917, FO371/2988/242011; Consul, Tabriz, to Marling, 20 February 1918, FO371/3264/33414.


See, for example, the scheme outlined by the Prime Minister, Ala al-Saltaneh, in July 1917. Memorandum from Ala-us-Saltaneh [sic] to Marling, 30 July, 1917, FO371/2981/200656.

Norman to Curzon, 6 June, 1921, FO371/6406/E9970/2/34.

See Tancoigne, A Narrative of a Journey into Persia, pp. 245–9.

3 The Turko-Persian War
1821–1823
Winning the war but losing the peace

Graham Williamson

According to the Treaty of Zohab (May 1639), following the end of a period of conflict between the Ottoman and Persian Empires, the frontier between them was not a line but a broad zone running through Armenia, Azerbaijan, the Western Zagros Mountains and as far south as Basra and the Persian Gulf. Isolated from distant capitals and inhabited by hostile Arab and Kurdish tribes jockeying for patronage from the rival empires, these border areas were extremely unsettled. Both empires fought over the revenues of the local tribes and repeatedly raided each other across the border. It was upon this volatile and unsatisfactory backdrop that a cooling of relations between the two empires at the end of the Napoleonic Wars provoked a bloody and damaging conflict that ultimately settled nothing.

BORDER TENSIONS

Traditionally the Ottomans sought approval from Persian Governors for new appointments in their border provinces, but this courtesy began to disappear at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which increased tension and suspicion. The then Persian heir-apparent, Abbas Mirza, who was governor of the strategic northern province of Azerbaijan, had secured the support of the Pasha of Van in his fight against the Russians. The Pasha’s sudden removal had hardened positions. The usurping of the ageing Suleyman Pasha of Baghdad (1809) and the later appointment of the more aggressive Davoud Pasha (1813) had the same effect in the south.¹ There was also an increase in tribal or “political” refugees on both sides of the border, in particular Turkish dissidents who hoped to use Persia as a base for intrigue and insurrection. In fact was the Ottoman kidnapping and beheading of a high ranking Turkish official who had taken refuge in Persia that served as the catalyst for an Iranian offensive.

In the south, Kurdish sympathy for Persia, in part due to Mohammad Ali Mirza’s enlightened policy towards his region’s minorities, and the complex power struggles within the local ruling elite often led to conflict and more than once Persia invaded in order to restore deposed Beys (governors).
Mohammad Ali Mirza was the Shah’s eldest son but was unable to inherit the throne because his mother was a Georgian and not of Qajar blood. Nevertheless he was highly regarded by his father and had been appointed as governor of the southern provinces of Kermanshah, Luristan and Khuzestan in 1805.

The Beys in the predominantly Kurdish region of Shahizor (based around the town of Suleymaniyah) in Ottoman Iraq, were usually drawn from members of the Baban Dynasty. Unfortunately, their internecine quarrelling and intrigue led to those temporarily out of favour seeking Persian or Ottoman support for their “cause”. On a number of occasions Mohammad Ali Mirza sent troops across the border to restore Kurdish exiles to power, whilst the authorities in Baghdad would likewise attempt to impose their own “favourite”. Since the warring families might switch patrons at short notice the region was in constant state of tension.

Furthermore, the presence of Shi’ite holy ground within the Baghdad Pashilik (province) was a constant cause of conflict. The security of Persian pilgrims en route to the holy town of Karbala, or even Mecca, and corpses taken for burial around the Holy Tombs of Hussein or Ali, were frequently violated by Turkish officials or Wahabbi zealots (Islamic fundamentalist dissidents). The taking of Iraq, in particular Baghdad, would, some intemperate Persian voices argued, remove this source of irritation. Indeed the two powers were bedevilled by the growing Sunni–Shi’ite rivalry which had thwarted any serious cooperation in the Napoleonic period. All attempts at coordinated action against their mutual Russian enemy were frustrated by suspicion and betrayal.

Once war had broken out between the two empires, it nevertheless became clear that, militarily at least, the Persians had the advantage and might, to the delight of Russia but to the horror of the British, force a redrawing of this porous border in favour of an emerging Iran. After the loss of much of the Caucasus to Russia in the Napoleonic period, some Persians would see this as just compensation. So why did this situation seem so favourable to Persia and why did nothing ultimately come of it?

In this article I will look at why Persia failed to take full advantage of the Ottoman’s vulnerability, how they might have done so and the wider implications to one of history’s geographical/political “fault” lines.

**Stirring the pot**

In fact the loss of territory to the Russians over this period encouraged both parties to covet their rival’s territory as compensation. Furthermore, recent research has revealed that the Russian military commander in the Caucasus, General Aleksey Yermolov, was encouraging Abbas Mirza to act against Turkish provocation, whilst the Tsar’s representative in Persia, Aleksandr Griboyedov, even provided much needed funds for Abbas Mirza’s campaign.
The resultant war revealed both the Ottoman’s weakness and strength vis-
à-vis Persia.

Internal dissent was greater than in Persia and resulted in more bloody
conflicts in the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, much of their standing army
was engaged in suppressing revolts and whatever the Janissaries’ (the core
of the standing army) faults, they were less than those of the Ottoman’s pro-
vincial and secondary forces. It was to these latter forces that the defence of
the frontier fell and they were little match for an aggressive commander, such
as Mohammad Ali Mirza, or the “regular Sarbaz”, i.e. European-trained units
Abbas Mirza been developing. The Ottoman command and control was also
more decentralized (often the result of political jealousy) and on the battlefield
this proved disastrous.

On the other hand, Ottoman provincial commanders, usually the governors,
were quite resilient in raising or recalling men to their banner even after a
heavy defeat. Ironically it was the same strength the Russians had previously
ascribed to the Persians. They also had a numerical advantage, which though
usually of little consequence on the battlefield, did provide a constant supply
of fresh recruits. At this time the respective Ottoman and Persian popula-
tions were thought to be 23 million compared to 6 million respectively.
Ultimately we shall never know that if the bulk of the Ottoman’s standing
army or Sultan Mahmud II’s fledgling nezam (similar to Abbas Mirza’s “reg-
ular Sarbaz”) had been available whether they would have nullified the Persian
tactical superiority.

For two years the conflict ebbed and flowed, but despite Persian victories and
strategic opportunities, the war was concluded by the Treaty of Erzerum on
23 July 1823. This maintained the territorial status quo and was a poor reward
for the heavy expenditure of Persian lives and money; it was to prove the
high watermark of any ambitions they may have harboured on this frontier.

Ottoman vulnerability

The timing of the war for the Ottomans was not propitious and the conflict
brought out the tensions and instability that were rife throughout the
Empire at this time. The Empire was also in the middle of a centralizing pro-
cess which naturally encountered resistance. Further, loyalties had not yet
been cemented to the regime as local loyalties had been allowed to develop
in the previous century.

Fighting internal rebellion

The year 1820 marked the beginning of a series of revolts within the
Ottoman Empire. In Montenegro the Turks were driven from the valley of
Zeta and Ali Pasha, the powerful but rebellious Governor of Janina, was in
revolt and holding out against the Empire. In the following year, whilst Tudor
Vladimirescu began a revolt in Wallachia and Bosnian Moslems rebelled against an “infidel” Sultan, an abortive raid by Greek exiles over the River Pruth in Besser (Moldovia) sparked off a full-scale revolt in Morea in 1822.4

At the other end of the Empire, Abdullah Pasha, the governor of the near impregnable fortress and port of Acre, was in conflict with the governors of Damascus and Aleppo, whose action was sanctioned by a falsely obtained Farman (decree) from Constantinople. The standing army was, therefore, tied down dealing with internal dissent and was able to offer little help to the eastern border provinces. Fighting therefore fell to locally recruited forces. Furthermore the internecine warfare, however desultory, indulged by some of the provincial governors, also removed a potential source of “soldiers for hire”.

The strategic command and control of these secondary armies put them at a distinct disadvantage compared to the Persian army. The loyalty of the Turkish troops was to their local pasha and there were many occasions where these pashas refused to assist one another. The process of political centralization, begun by Sultan Mahmud II, which included the elimination of semi-autonomous “valley lords”, was still far from complete. In contrast, there were really only two Persian armies, north (based around the Azerbaijan forces) and south (based across the south-western provinces to the south of Azerbaijan) and there was little disobedience, at least on a strategic level. The Turks became aware of their weakness and later in the war attempted to combine forces under a strong Seraskier (commander-in-chief), but this still offered no guarantee of a coordinated approach and often broke down under pressure.5 Crucially the superior discipline, technical proficiency of the artillery and the strong contingent of regular, i.e. European-trained, forces in the Persian and, in particular, the Azerbaijan army, proved decisive. What the British in India gleaned from this was that the Persians had slowly come to realize that a small number of disciplined troops, able to maximize the use of contemporary firepower, was more than a match for any number of ill-disciplined hordes.

The Turks, however, were too arrogant about their own, historically more important, military capabilities to seriously develop similar forces. Indeed, until the destruction of the Janissaries in 1826, such forces were more often butchered by internal rather than external rivals. Without the much vaunted Janissaries, engaged in putting down the various revolts, the provincial armies proved to be no match for the Persian front line.

The northern front

On paper, the opposing armies seemed reasonably matched. On the “northern” front (largely the frontier directly astride the Persian province of Azerbaijan) the Ottoman Governor of Erzerum, Khosrow Pasha, was assigned as Seraskier.6 The army at his command would be largely composed of his
provincial forces. Such forces, apart from the Pasha’s bodyguard and town Janissaries, were foot-militia, light tribal cavalry (“djellis” or guides) and mounted Kurdish infantry (who were more pro-Ottoman in the north), all called up only in times of conflict. Garrisons apart, they could field on paper around 30,000 troops.

The other eastern provinces of Van, Moosh (Mus) and Kars may have been able to raise up to 25,000 each (the former two with a greater proportion of cavalry due to their strong Kurdish contingents). In theory up to half might be detached to the Seraskier’s command. In practice, however, there was little cooperation between the armies, and indeed provinces drifted in and out of “war” regardless of their neighbours’ situation. This lack of unified command was to later cost the Turks dear as Persian forces could effectively deal with each province or detached army corp piecemeal.7

Opposition

Opposing Khosrow Pasha’s army were the Azerbaijan forces of the Persian heir-apparent, Abbas Mirza, and the semi-autonomous Sardar (leader) of the Khanate (province) of Erevan, Hossein Khan. The latter, although not totally trusted by Abbas Mirza, was a wily and respected campaigner and the two worked closely together for the duration of the campaign. Although there had been some “withering away” since the end of the Napoleonic wars, the regular forces had benefited from years of training, even if on a part-time basis. Shortly before the outbreak of the war the British travellers Kerr-Porter, and later James Fraser, recorded the actual regimental returns (as apart from paper strengths).

Table 3.1 Regular regiments8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Tribe/District)</th>
<th>Recruits</th>
<th>Name (Tribe/Regiment)</th>
<th>Recruits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&amp;2 Tabriz (D)</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>Lancer Regiment (Afgans)</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Maragha (D)</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>Artillery (inc. horse, 6 troops × 6 guns)</td>
<td>640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Karabagh (D)</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>Zamburak (Camel guns)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Marand (D)</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>Semi-total</td>
<td>1,240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (Light infantry)</td>
<td>Shaghogges (T)</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (Merged with 8)</td>
<td>Afsars (T)</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Khoi (D)</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>Irregulars:-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Naksheewan</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Toffanghis (infantry)</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Bagaderan” Russian deserters</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>Cavalry</td>
<td>12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semi-total</td>
<td>9,400</td>
<td>Semi-total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL = 32,640 men
At the onset of war, attempts would be made to raise the numbers in the regular regiments to the nominal 1,000 (although some were clearly larger) and a further 8,000 militia were called up. The field army, after posting garrisons, would be around 35,000 strong.

The Sardar of Erevan could also field a small corps:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular Regiment (Erevan)</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toffanghis</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurdish Cavalry (led by Hussein Aga)</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>5,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A further militia of 3,500 infantry and 1,500 cavalry could be raised in an emergency. The Sardar’s forces were nominally under the leadership of Abbas Mirza’s command but did act at times independently.

**The southern front**

In the south in the Pashalik of Baghdad, the Mameluk governor, Davoud Pasha, was appointed Seraskier. Despite having a more centralized command and being more personally ambitious and active than the previous governor (Sa’id Pasha 1813–1817), Davoud suffered from the growing dissent of the Pashaliks’ minorities. The activities of the Wahabbis (a religious sect) threatened the lucrative Shi’ite pilgrimage through the Nejd region in the Arabian Peninsula, disrupted the economy through constant plundering as far as the Euphrates and spread revolt amongst the Arab population. The main tribe in the Iraq’ province was the Zobeir, whose activities were abetted by large numbers of Bedouin Montafiq, Shammar, Dhafir and numerous smaller tribes. They had a history of refusing to pay taxes and were in a semi-state of war with the Pasha’s tax collectors. Indeed, the Pasha was forever sending small expeditions into his southern districts to punish recalcitrant tribes.10

In the northern sanjaks (districts) of the province things were little better as the Kurdish tribes were in perpetual conflict with the local authorities. Worse still, many Kurds looked to the Persian governor across the border in the provinces of Luristan and Kermanshah for protection. Indeed, apart from Persian intervention to restore Kurdish chiefs ousted by more pro-Ottoman Beys, dissident Kurds could be found in Persian forces as hired help. The Governor of Sulaymaniye, Mahommad Pasha, had even ridden with Mohammad Ali Mirza on his celebrated “mass raid” behind Russian lines in 1809.11 Consequently, many were thought unlikely to report for service and there was even concern that they might desert to the other side.
The field army

On paper, the Pasha could field a small standing corps composed of his own bodyguard some 3,000 strong (2,000 foot and 1,000 horse), plus 5,000 infantry. Most of the Janissaries had been called away by the central government in Constantinople. The Pasha could call upon the governors of his sanjaks to provide him with local militia. This would range from 10,000 foot soldiers from Sulaymaniyeah to between 1,500 and 2,000 from Koui, Harir, Dhibah and Armadiyye. The major towns of Mosul, Kirkuk, Arbil, Hilla and Mendeli furnished a fixed, but small, number of fusiliers as their contribution to this levy. A further 10,000 to 15,000 nomadic tribal cavalry (Arab and Kurd) would come from the feudal levy. The state would provide bread and forage to all raised in this way. His weakest area was artillery, with only a handful of cannon, most of which were slow and heavy. In all, slightly more than 35,000 troops and officers would be available, including garrisons, for the campaign.12 In an attempt to boost his numbers, the Pasha looked beyond his province. The central government was initially only able to send a small number of regular infantry and cavalry from the cities of Diarbekir and Aleppo. Consequently he hired over 10,000 men (djellis and older reservists) from Anatolia.

Military prowess

Facing these forces was the feudal army of Mohammed Ali Mirza. The Shah’s eldest son, not being of “pure” Qajar blood and thus, by law, unable to reign, was made Prince-Governor of all the western provinces south of Azerbaijan. In the complex world of court politics he was often used as a counter-weight to Abbas Mirza’s growing authority. Mohammed Ali Mirza himself was recognized as an aggressive military leader with a string of victories over the Ottomans, in particular in 1806 and 1812, as well as internal enemies. The Ottomans feared his reaction to any provocation. In the Russian war his forces numbered around 30,000 but this could be raised to nearer 40,000 if directly threatened. His forces were rarely involved in that war except for his deep raid behind Russian lines a decade previously. It was however remarkable that he was allegedly able to muster some 25,000, mainly cavalry. The prospect of plunder, so important to a tribal warrior, was undoubtedly a significant attraction. Despite the Shah’s interest in the way the Europeans organized armies, and the heir-apparent’s significant development of regular forces or even his own belated attempt at raising such units, Mohammad Ali Mirza’s army still primarily followed traditional lines. Two-thirds were cavalry raised from local tribes such as the Bakhtiari or Lars. Kurds also fielded some heavy, mailed squadrons. The balance was composed of feudal infantry drawn heavily from the Kurdish population, in particular the Ahl-e Haqq sect. Up to 12,000 men could be
raised by the local Kurdish chief, Suleiman Khan, and were regarded as the best of the infantry. All however fought in an irregular manner. The small, regular force, meanwhile, had grown slowly. The European officers were given responsibility for their own regiments, for example Claude August Court drilled the “Hamedan” Regiment. These seemed to have been based in towns and once again the Kurds provided excellent material for these new regiments.

**Battle of Toprah Kaleh**

Once war broke out it did not take long for the Persians to gain the upper hand on both the northern (east of Erzurum) and southern (Shahizor) fronts. Although they were ultimately hampered by poor planning and lack of resources, they were more than a match for their enemy on the battlefield. Perhaps the best example that highlights the respective armies’ strengths and weaknesses is the key battle of Toprah Kaleh in May 1822.

After the outbreak of war in late 1821, Abbas Mirza carried out a successful winter campaign, leading to the dispersal of the Ottoman forces, the capturing of several important towns and forts and the appointment of sympathetic governors. Unable to force a peace he withdrew the bulk of his army back to Tabriz and partial demobilization, whilst leaving behind garrisons in the most strategic towns and forts. This saved him precious financial outlays and allowed the irregulars to return to village or nomadic life. The Turks, however, were not idle, and they set about organizing a counter-offensive. The original *Seraskier* was replaced by Mohammad Amin Rauf Pasha and the provincial armies were nominally put under his command. Since the main centrally-controlled forces were committed elsewhere, the government hired men in and around the capital of Constantinople. Fraser notes they were of a dubious quality and included the “sweepings of the gaols”. The combination however gave the new *Seraskier* a field force of over 40,000 men.

The Turkish plan was to roll up the Persian garrisons in a dash to the frontier and then push into Azerbaijan before Abbas Mirza could mobilize his forces, thus forcing a peace on their terms. However, the problem with this plan was the fort of Toprah Kaleh that sat astride the Erzeroum–Tabriz road, which constituted the invasion route. It could not be simply bypassed and was held by troops left behind by Hussein Khan, the *Sardar* of the Erevan khanate, and subordinated to Abbas Mirza. Although initially invested by one of the three Turkish field corps, the fort would ultimately frustrate the Turkish plans. In addition, there was Hussein Khan’s constant raiding from his conveniently placed khanate on the Turkish left flank and main supply line, which eventually forced the Ottoman’s advanced guards to fall back onto Toprah Kaleh in an attempt to remove this sore before crossing the border, an undertaking that cost precious time. It was this delay that allowed Abbas Mirza to collect his demobilized and dispersed forces and rush them to the border by May 1822. News that the fort of Toprah Kaleh might
not hold out much longer forced him to attempt relief at short notice. By this time, however, he had only managed to muster perhaps 20,000 men, who were well outnumbered by the Ottoman army of between 40,000 and 60,000. The Turks moved east from their besieging encampments towards the oncoming Persian army. Both armies split their forces into the traditional three divisions.

The Ottomans had either the Pasha of Van (Mahmood) or Moosh (Selim Khan) on the right wing, Chuppan Oglu of Yozgat to the left and Rauf Pasha in the centre. They were opposed by the Persian army organized around a central division commanded by Abbas Mirza himself, with either his chief of staff, General Amir Khan, or Hossein Khan Sardar to his left, and Hassan Khan (the Sardar’s brother, known as the ruthless cavalry leader the “Yellow Lion”) to his right. Apart from his paucity in numbers the regular units were also under strength, some say as little as 4,000 men in total. Abbas Mirza’s guard of two battalions, including the legendary Russian “Bagadaran” (the brave), were held in reserve. The Ottoman plan was to engage at close quarters to make their numbers count. Abbas Mirza aimed to hold the line until reinforcements arrived.

The battle focused largely on a small hillock held by the Turkish left division. The Persians hoped to secure it as a vantage point for defence and moved towards it, but came under repeated cavalry charges under the personal command of the Turkish commander in chief. He was unable, however, to break the Persian line or squares and lost heavily against the Persian artillery. The artillery, so often the “Queen” of the battlefield, was modern and professionally handled. Unlike the Turks, the Persians had unlimbered their guns to the front of their line and, in keeping with their superior training, held their fire until the enemy came within 1,000 yards. Consequently, they were able to help disperse the cavalry attacks and later do great damage amongst the infantry. A captain, Hadjee Beg, of a battery of four 12-pounders on the crucial Persian right flank, was later commended for his effective fire.

As the Turkish infantry closed they began to lose cohesion due to their poor training and the effectiveness of Persian fire. On the right flank the Guard under Surteer (Colonel) Haje Qassem Khan led by the Russian and possibly the Persian Valihad (Crown Prince) battalions, moved forward through the infantry and then the battery line to engage the Turks in long-range musketry. Other Persian Sarbaz and irregulars also moved forward, contrary to Abbas Mirza’s orders to stand fast. They were perhaps emboldened by the late arrival of various Persian detachments which added a further 7,000 men to the line. Some of these units had marched a phenomenal 30 miles a day. However, this still left the Persians heavily outnumbered and any forward movement could jeopardize the front lines’ cohesion, leaving some units isolated and vulnerable. Abbas Mirza still hoped that up to 10,000 more men might yet arrive before any decisive blow could be struck so the lines’ cohesion could be maintained.

The Russian Bagaderan, however, had a fierce reputation to live up to and they would only leave the battlefield feet first. They were commanded by
a Russian deserter, Dragoon Sergeant Samson Makintzev. Taking the name Samson Khan and a Colonelcy in the Persian army, he helped form a company of Russian deserters in 1804. By 1820 it was composed of two battalions. One was of company strength and was held in reserve for married men, whilst the other fluctuated between four and nine companies of single men. Despite the casualties it had already suffered earlier on in the campaign it would still have been a sizeable unit. As the firing intensified they had been drawn closer to the advancing Turkish “line” which had by now degenerated into an unwieldy mass with little coordination between neighbouring units, let alone among the corps. Yet, the Bagaderan did not become too overextended and the eventual forward push of the Persian regular infantry, led by the Russians, took the high ground on the Turkish left. At that point the Turks fell back in disorder to be ruthlessly harried by the Persian irregular cavalry.

With superiority of numbers and control of the most favourable ground the Turks should have swept the Persians from the field. However, the division of forces along provincial lines once again allowed petty rivalries and jealousies to hold sway. Their right flank, for example, barely moved that day, presumably content to husband the troops for defence of their province in the event of defeat. Their tactics were poor; the artillery fired from long distance, compounded by their small calibre, and consequently could not exploit the infantryman’s natural huddling together or formation into a square when faced with cavalry. Time and again the Turkish provincial forces were defeated by superior training or tactics. By pure mischance, the Persians were not, however, at this moment able to exploit their success. As the victorious army began its march towards the Ottoman provincial capital of Erzerum, it fell foul of cholera and had to withdraw back to the frontier. The loss of perhaps 4,000 regulars was a blow to Abbas Mirza’s forces and would take time to replace.

WHY WAS THE TURKS’ MILITARY VULNERABILITY NOT EXPLOITED?

Given their military superiority, one might have expected the Persians sooner or later to extract favourable demands from the Ottomans or even seize and hold territory. That this was not done can be set down to a number of factors, the most substantial being financial, supplies, and war aims.

Financial

As Napoleon stated, an “army marches on its stomach” and, however popular a ruler, however fertile a land, the necessary sustenance will have to be paid for. Further still, equipment has to be bought or made and the troops paid. Despite the best efforts of Abbas Mirza he never had enough money to purchase all he required and indeed pay his troops, whose wages were
often in arrears. A traditional Persian army, more like the army of south Persia, could to some extent, barter away pay for the prospect of loot, but this could only hold them together for a specific campaign and limited them to one opportunity to exploit any military advantage. A regular army required regular funds and the lack of it forced Abbas Mirza to demobilize on a number of occasions. This, coupled with the need to release his part-time irregulars to harvest crops, made it difficult for Abbas Mirza, and indeed for the armies in the south, to maintain any permanent occupying forces beyond the odd garrison.

On the eve of war, Fraser states in his travelogue that, despite stripping the main arsenal in Tabriz (known as the “Ark”), the army of Azerbaijan had only 200 pieces of shot or shell per gun for the artillery and 30 rounds of ball-cartridges each for the regular infantry. Abbas Mirza had attempted to build a military–industrial complex but it was totally inadequate for the job. Finance or, in Abbas Mirza’s case, the lack of it, was the result of the Russian reparations the ensued from the Treaty of Golestan (24 October 1813), the loss of the British subsidy and the need to pay tribute to his father the Shah. To finance a major war would have required external, that is, central, funding. However, Fath-Ali Shah was notoriously frugal with his finances and was little interested in wasting it on military pursuits. His own regular forces had begun to wither through lack of sustenance. Despite repeated requests for help, the Shah would not budge and offered only a token sum of 2,000 Tumans (about £1,100 in sterling), which compares unfavourably to late Napoleonic British subsidies of 200,000 Tumans per year.

Supplies

The Persian commissariat was rudimentary. Traditionally, eastern armies “lived off the land”. Although this might mean the purchasing of local produce, it more often meant pillaging and many an historical army has come unstuck relying upon these methods of sustenance. The only way to sustain an army in this way is with full cooperation from local villagers and farmers and this was not forthcoming. There are numerous examples of Persian foraging parties being ambushed by local tribes in Iraq. In 1822, the British Chargé d’Affairs, Henry Willock, said that the war was also unpopular in Persia and the interruption of commerce and the Turkish confiscation of merchants’ property was a severe blow. The longer the war dragged on, the less popular it was, and the greater the drain upon the treasury.

DIFFERING WAR AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The progenitor of the outbreak of war was Abbas Mirza, the pretext being the kidnapping and later beheading of a Turkish noble in Persia and
the Pasha of Erzerum’s protection of recalcitrant Kurdish tribesmen. Henry Willock suggested that the underlying reason was a chance to profit from a supposed war breaking out between Turk and Russian. It is now known that Russia, through its agents in the Caucasus and representatives in Tabriz, encouraged Abbas Mirza with blandishments, hints of a new Turko-Russian conflict and even money.

What exactly did he hope to gain from the war? Abbas Mirza stated that his main reason for going to war was a point of honour but this was expressed after its conclusion. I suspect that there was no master plan or goal, just a wish to ensure that Persia was at the head of any queue when the spoils were handed out. That it would turn out the way it did can be attributed to several factors: the failure of Russia to become involved, a failure by Persia to consolidate gains obtained in the early part of the war and the general lack of enthusiasm from members of Abbas Mirza’s own and the Shah’s courts.

Initially, the Shah refused to fund any conflict and only offered support once war had broken out. Indeed the raising of an army under his son-in-law (husband to his second daughter) Allah Yar Khan, was a poisoned chalice as the feeding and clothing of such forces fell upon Abbas Mirza. One commentator says that the abstinence of the Shah in pursuing an aggressive posture on the Ottoman frontier is best explained by “his receipt of heavy money-bags from Baghdad, for avarice was his passion”. One should also note that whisperings for peace by, for example, the British, rang in the Shah’s ears as regularly as Russian ones for war did in his son’s.

Southern successes

The Shah’s eldest son and southern governor, Mohammad Ali Mirza, was certainly more interested than his father in interfering in Iraqi politics, as he had already done many times in the preceding decade and violently so on two occasions. The pretext for intervention was mainly however over the succession to the leadership of Shahrizor, the predominantly Kurdish province in Ottoman Iraq’, rather than annexation.

Once again, 1821 saw the usual congregation of exiled Baban princes (the predominant Kurdish family) in Persia plotting a return to usurp the latest Turkish favourite. Attempting to overthrow the Ottoman’s favourite local ruler was nothing new; this time, however, the last in a long line of Mameluk rulers, Davoud Pasha, reacted with greater vigour than his predecessors and resolved to obtain approval for war from Constantinople. Already under attack from Abbas Mirza, the Sultan was in no mood to pacify and declared war in October 1821, thus giving Davoud a green light to invade Persia. In reality it was the Persians who were able to launch a more successful counter-attack and push deep into southern Iraq’ to threaten Baghdad. The conflict was thus widened from the appointment of a favoured tribal vassal to a general frontier war. It was this unintended escalation of a regular conflict rather
than any design that opened up an opportunity for Persian arms to prize open the border.

In fact, the southern region offered an even greater opportunity for a redrawing of the border than in the north, and by doing so, not only to “reward” Persian arms, and compensate the dynasty for the loss of Caucasian provinces, but seriously shift the balance of power in the Persian Gulf decisively in Persia’s favour. Why the southern campaign, as with the north, came to naught, I shall now examine.

Baghdad, the military and political key

Much of the Governor of Baghdad’s time was spent in pacifying Arab tribes and Kurdish princes. The army was a shifting coalition of minority tribes welded onto a small Mameluk standing army. Those who held Baghdad, with its relatively large commercial sector, population and geographical dominance, held Ottoman Iraq’. The loss of Baghdad would have unravelled their control over the region and could have led to a quite different treaty. The relatively new, but aggressive, Governor of Baghdad, Davoud Pasha, was unable at this time to field an army that could defeat Mohammad Ali Mirza. Lack of numbers, inferior tactics, treachery within the ranks and a small but significant element of European-trained troops in the Persian forces, led to his inevitable defeat.

In October 1821, after overcoming the Ottoman army in Kurdistan, the Persian army was encamped within a day’s march of Baghdad. Although the city walls were formidable and stores well provisioned, the Pasha was outnumbered and had insufficient cannon to man all the capital’s bastions. Instead, however, of storming the city or enforcing a siege, Mohammad Ali Mirza simply stayed in-situ encamped for some weeks before retiring. 28

Although the Treaty of Zohab (1639) relinquished all Persian claims to Baghdad, this is not likely to have been a crucial obstacle. 29 What prevented its fall is usually ascribed to nature, as Napoleon and Hitler are often said to have been victims of “general winter”, Mohammad Ali Mirza’s forces (like the army in the north a year later) fell to the ravages of “general cholera”. Whilst pondering his next move outside Baghdad, his army, and crucially, the leader himself, fell ill. Upon his army’s withdrawal to Kermanshah he died in the foothills of the Zagros in December 1821. The southern army was not well-equipped to take a city, the necessary ingredients such as regular infantry and cannon being in short supply. It was the onset of disease, however, that settled any further thought of taking Baghdad by storm, let alone siege. Yet this opportunity had long since been squandered when the city lay at his mercy some weeks earlier.

The Shah had never wanted war with the Ottomans and on numerous occasions had asked his sons to desist from conflict. Diplomatic correspondence suggests that the Shah even ordered both sons to withdraw from the border, but matters had escalated too far before the messages were received. 30
The Shah asked his son Mohammad Ali Mirza to spare the city of Baghdad and Sheikh Muasa Najaf, the son of a celebrated Arab jurist (who had performed a similar function twice before) was sent to mediate between the two protagonists. This period of reflection and negotiation, coupled with the growing incidences of cholera, meant that the opportunity to strike ebbed away while Mohammad Ali Mirza struggled to feed his army and shake off illness. Soon he had no recourse but to withdraw and another opportunity was missed. Subsequent forays into Iraq by forces under Mohammad Ali Mirza’s son, Hossein-Ali Mirza (and new governor of the southern provinces), lacking his father’s inspirational skills, came to naught.

**Cross-border loyalties**

If Persia had taken Baghdad earlier, could they have held onto it and thus changed the history of the region? As we have seen, the Persians certainly could take ground; but they found it difficult to hold onto their gains because of their need to demobilize in order to save money and allow the irregulars to tend the flocks and harvest the crops. To hold onto new territory required local political support from the affected region. The mere appointment of new governors and Beys, thought to be more reliable, often did not turn out as hoped. Most proffers of loyalty from Ottoman exiles in the north were but expedients. Ironically in the south the Persian forces did not stay long enough to set up an alternative administration and the appointment of the ex-Kaihya (commander-in-chief) of the Ottoman army as Pasha seems to have come to nothing. The experience of internecine warfare amongst the border tribes highlights the mercenary and ephemeral nature of loyalty to the central governments amongst these tribes and peoples. Accommodations would be made but it was common for individuals, whether ruler or peasant, to change sides. This was because they were actively playing off one empire against another and sought autonomy from all.

The most significant group straddling the frontier were the Kurds. They played the two empires off against each other in the hopes of attaining local autonomy rather than experiencing absorption. Jealousy and rivalries between Kurdish tribes on both sides of the border and religious differences between the Sunni Kurds and Shi’a Persians prevented their possible annexation by Persia. The Machiavellian politics practised within the Kurdish Baban dynasty led protagonists to switch sides at bewildering speed and was surely seen for what it was, a naked struggle for personal advancement. Persian hopes of a permanent blessing for Qajar rule over the district of Shahrizor were thus misplaced. In the north, the Kurds were even more hostile to the predominantly Turkic Azerbaijanis, and were more likely to raid east into Persia than west, and were a constant threat to the protected Christian and Assyrian minorities around Lake Urmia. Thus overall there was little appetite amongst Kurds to be dominated by either empire.
There were over 1 million people living in Iraq at the time. Apart from the Kurds in the north-east the rest were largely Arabs, the majority being nomadic. In particular those living to the south of Baghdad were Muslims following the Shi’a rather than Sunni sect, and they composed almost two-thirds of the capital’s population. The holy cities of Najaf and Karbala also contained substantial numbers of Persians. The Ottoman rulers of Baghdad province were primarily from the Mameluke dynasty. The majority of officials were from this group or Turkic outsiders and shared the Sunni religion. The majority of Arabs, either Shi’a or Sunni, were kept out of power. The Ottomans viewed the Shi’i in particular with suspicion and as potential “fifth-columnists” for their co-religionists in neighbouring Persia. Litvak says that “the Ottomans regarded the Shi’a population as potential or actual agents and allies of Iran (Persia)”. They particularly despised the Shi’a clergy in the holy cities because “Ottomans regarded the Shi’i missionary activity as part of Iran’s effort to draw the tribes to its side”. City governors were usually of the Sunni faith and appointed by Baghdad, but often struggled to raise taxes from the general population. On the other hand the Shia “Shrine” or holy cities were particularly lucrative as they were recipients of religious endowments and special “taxes”; this made the Ottomans more prepared to tolerate the sect for pecuniary benefit.

Outside the towns the largest group were Arab nomadic tribes, some only fairly recent migrants from neighbouring Southern Arabia. Fleeing from the fundamentalist Wahabbis they ultimately turned against Sunni extremism by becoming Shi’a. The Ottomans were mainly interested in ensuring “tribute” be paid to the Pasha as rent and numerous expeditions were sent south to chase the tribes around the desert. Ottoman rule in the Iraqi region was thus precarious. Apart from the Kurdish problem they had to rule over a largely alien ethnic people (Arabs) and an alien religion (Shi’a). The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a loosening of central control from Istanbul, which was replicated down to the districts. The towns, in particular the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, had become semi-autonomous whereby Shi’a notables, religious Mujtahids and street gangs ruled in an uneasy alliance.

**Persian links**

The Persian element amongst the religious leaders in the holy cities was quite strong. Najaf, with a population of around 20,000, was probably one-third Persian (this would temporarily double in periods of pilgrimage), whilst in Karbala the majority of the 30,000 residents (or families) hailed from Persia. Many of these were refugees from the Afghan (and Sunni) invasion of 1722. The Shi’a Ulama (religious leadership) was dominated by Persian migrants who continued to enter the holy cities, particularly Karbala, as the most important centres of Shi’a study following the demise of Persian Isfahan around 1737. It was only natural for them to look for protection from their neighbour.
The Iranian Shi‘i establishment had already been manipulated by the Qajars in support of their dynasty. Mohammad Ali Mirza had cultivated the religious leadership (ulama) and supported in his provincial capital of Kermanshah the Arab theologian Sheikh Ahmad Ahasa, (the unintended founder of Sheikhism). Bonds had also formed between the ulama across the border of Persia and Iraq’, linking the holy cities. Following the sack of Karbala by the Wahabbis (1801) the Shah of Persia even sent 500 Baluchi families to live in the city to act as a “bodyguard” for Persian interests. This was not all one-way traffic as the Iraqi (Arab) ulama were much respected in Iran. Nakash says Sheikh Ja’far Kashif al-Ghita, put the local “share of the Iman” (a religious tax up to a tenth of a believer’s income) at the Shah’s disposal for the latter part of the Persian–Russian war (around 1810–1813). Seyed Mohammad Tabataba‘i had great influence in Iran and even led the successful ulama campaign to pressure the Shah into a jihad against Russia in 1826.

There was also an emerging popular Shi‘a political consciousness in the area. The Kaihya (commander in chief) of Davoud Pasha’s army, Mohammad Agha, had deserted the army following its defeat by Mohammad Ali Mirza in late September 1821, and was later appointed by Mohammad Ali Mirza as a rival pasha of the occupied territory. After disappearing from the scene following the Persian withdrawal, he turned up in Hilla in 1824, Shortly afterwards, despite being a Sunni Mameluk, he led a revolt from the town by largely appealing to Shi‘a sentiment, and even obtained support from the holy cities. (Later, the new Governor of Hilla, believing that Sheikh Ja’far Kashif al-Ghita had been responsible for fermenting Shi‘a discontent, expelled him from the town.) Davoud Pasha was able to defeat Mohammad Agha but only after the latter’s forces had suffered from desertion, as much from the Agha’s indecisiveness as anything else. Davoud laid siege to Karbala (which, like Najaf at the time, had taken the opportunity to cease paying taxes) but could not capture the city and could only negotiate a settlement (it was not until 1843 that one of his successors finally was able to take the city).

**Replace one ruler for another?**

It would be a mistake however to portray the whole of southern Iraq’ as seething with discontent and eager to embrace the Qajar dynasty as an alternative source of rule. The majority of the Arab tribes had not by the time of the war even been converted to the Shi‘a sect. Many converted later in the century and then, initially, only followed the rituals rather than subscribing to the theology. Feelings of “brotherhood” would be limited. One should also note differences within the sect; Mohammed Ali Mirza’s favoured theologian, for example, Sheikh Ahmad Ahasa, was excommunicated by the Iraqi Shi‘a establishment in the middle of the war!

It is not surprising then that the tribes which conducted a limited guerrilla war behind the Persian front lines in that summer of 1821, such as members of the Shammar tribe, were still regarded as loyal Sunnis. Indeed
one should not discount ethnic tension between Persian and Arab, particularly amongst the religious establishment. Litvak notes that “Arabs and Indians resented Iranian domination of the shrine cities” and ethnic differences were often reflected within the rituals of popular religion. He also reminds us, however, that “a correlation between ethnicity and political conduct (did not) appear during the nineteenth century”.35

The Iraqi ulama should not therefore be seen as plotting to usurp Ottoman power and replace it with Qajar rule. They were quite prepared to cooperate with the local Sunni ulama and Turkic authorities if it suited. The lucrative religious taxes and donations were jealously guarded and while accepting that the Shi’a ulama were concerned with keeping Ottoman hands off this income, they were equally unlikely to readily gift it instead to the Qajars. Although they often encouraged Persian pressure to be brought to bear upon Baghdad, it was not their only avenue of support. A substantial amount of income was derived from a generous annual endowment from the Shi’a state of Awadh (Oudah) (1722–1846) in northern India. Controlling this was extremely important and like all these financial donations took up the ulama’s temporal thoughts far more perhaps than politics. Nevertheless, faced with a de facto Qajar occupation, it begs the question whether the Shi’a would have rallied around their co-religionists as a matter of preference.

**Turkish response**

We should not however suppose that the Ottomans would have lightly acquiesced to the loss of the province. Not only did they benefit from Shi’a pilgrim money but there was lucrative commercial trade via the Persian Gulf, and the loss of control of that trade by surrendering Basra and its hinterland would have been viewed as extremely serious. The Ottomans would have particularly been keen to restore the border beyond the Shatt al Arab (a major factor in the Ottoman’s taking, if only temporarily, of Mohammara in 1837). The loss of Baghdad, a key post on the ancient Silk Road and a symbol of a once powerful empire, would have led to severe tensions among the remaining Arab minorities. The Ottomans had been steadily losing territory on their European borders for years, and a further new loss in the south would have been unacceptable.

On the one hand, they believed they had certain advantages over the Qajars that would facilitate a “comeback”. For example they counted on: a) greater resources, financial and human (a population of 23 to 26 million); b) historically greater military traditions, which included individual bravery and resourcefulness, as well as vast experience. In addition, the death of Mohammad Ali Mirza emboldened Turkish morale as it weakened Persian. On the other hand: a) the standing army was heavily stretched in 1822; the Greek revolt in the west did not end on the ground until 1827 and only then with the help of the Egyptians; b) the Ottomans were experiencing difficulty mobilizing sufficient troops. They may have had a paper strength in excess of 300,000, but perhaps only a third could be counted on to rally to the colours
as the desertion rate was notorious; c) the empire was less unified than Persia with more minorities and subjugated “nations”; d) the Ottomans were less well organized at the provincial level than the Persians. Governors were driven by jealousy and were often replaced due to disloyalty or incompetence. Persian governors on the other hand were usually related to the royal family and loyal to Fath-Ali Shah; e) a greater proportion of Persians were under arms; thus the state could raise 250,000 nationally (although perhaps only 100,000 in defence of the Ottoman border). This was the result of de-centralization, which was traditionally the Shah’s style of rule. The Ottomans, by contrast, would raise a centrally-managed army to deal with a specific area that was beyond the resources of the local governors and would take over operations upon arrival. The Persians would instead raise reinforcements for their governors and then largely leave them in charge. Additionally, not all of Persia’s forces were fielded. Apart from the western armies, there was a token force of 14,000 directly loyal to the Shah (but placed under Abbas Mirza’s command). He had available a further 30,000 to 70,000, of which perhaps 20,000 could be used. His other sons, Hossein-Ali Mirza (located in Fars) and Mohammad Vali Mirza (located in Khorassan), were not involved but could have raised forces if required. In the Russian wars, units had been sent from these provinces and in 1828 there was even a proposal to put them in charge of operations against the then victorious Russians; f) finally, the Ottomans were hampered by a limited campaign period, in that there was difficulty in supplying fodder for cavalry from May until September.

Had the Ottomans attempted a counter-offensive they would almost certainly have tried to restore a Mameluk Sunni class over the Arab Shi’a population. If Mohammad Ali Mirza (or his son) had exploited the religious split he may have been able to raise local forces or at least neutered any opposition into acquiescence. Persia would have found its greatest support to the south of Baghdad, particularly along the hinterland of the Euphrates around the holy cities and along the Shatt al Arab. The area was the “headquarters” of the Shi’a Arab principality of Chaub (Bau Ka’b). Like the Kurds, however, they preferred to be autonomous but accepted nominal Persian sovereignty, and it took the Ottomans various expeditions and raids to enforce the expected tribute. On the other hand on the west bank of the Shatt al Arab there were many competing tribes, such as the Shammar, Bedouin Montefiq, Zobeir and Dha fir, some of whom were more loyal to (or more used to!) the Ottomans.

On balance, the Persians could have mustered support for their claim to suzerainty by appealing to popular Shi’a sentiment. Whether they could have held onto the territory would depend on the Shah being prepared to release his jealously guarded public purse to support the upkeep of an occupying army. The ease by which the south could have been absorbed by neighbouring Persia, therefore, makes the prospect not so far-fetched, and such a question finds its echo in modern times. Saddam Hussein was greatly concerned with the reaction of the Shi’a south when conducting the Iran–Iraq’ war, and it was a factor in his treatment of the Marsh Arabs. Coalition forces in Iraq’ subsequent to the American overthrow of Saddam fear an increasing
Table 3.2 Persian regional armies (Napoleonic period)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governor</th>
<th>Province(s)</th>
<th>Field army</th>
<th>Emergency levy</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbas Mirza</td>
<td>AZERBAIJAN</td>
<td>20,000 C</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>Because of the Russian war large numbers of forces were raised and kept in reserve. These “regular” forces largely replaced the irregulars, often the cavalry*1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10,000 I</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hassan Khan</td>
<td>EREVAN</td>
<td>2,000 ©</td>
<td>1,500 C</td>
<td>Larger than the usual 20,000 “expected” by the Shah due to the Governor’s warlike nature</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(allied to Azerbaijan.)</td>
<td>2,000 (i)</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>3,500 I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohammad Ali Mirza</td>
<td>KERMANSANAH</td>
<td>22,000 C</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>Field Army used primarily against internal dissent but expeditionary force to Arabian peninsula in support of Sheikh of Muscat</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LURISTAN</td>
<td>8,000 I</td>
<td>30,000</td>
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<td></td>
<td>KHUZESTAN</td>
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<td>Hussein Ali Mirza</td>
<td>FARS</td>
<td>10,000 C</td>
<td>5,000</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LARISTAN</td>
<td>5,000 I</td>
<td>15,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>6,000 C</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>Provided some of the best irregulars but could raise large militia if invaded (e.g. by Russians in 1805)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>MAZANDARAN (incl. Gilan &amp; Asterabad)</td>
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<td>Shah Inc. ERAQ-IAJAM</td>
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**TOTAL** 150,000 92,000*2

*1 Fraser in 1822 puts the combined northern forces available as 10,400 Sarbaz, 12,000 irregular infantry, 14,000 irregular cavalry, plus a further 13,000 mixed militia i.e. a total of 50,000.

*2 In 1800 a figure of 80,000 semi-regular troops and 120,000 provincial (perhaps 140,000 cavalry and the remainder infantry) has been quoted. In 1810 Malcolm suggests there were 254,000 troops across the whole empire, including 80,000 nomadic cavalry. The increase is probably the result of the Russian wars.

**Index:** C = Cavalry (inc. Heavy), I = Infantry, G = Cavalry Guard, FG = Foot Guard
Iranian influence amongst “believers”, even as the areas around the shrine cities appear to be governed by an uneasy coalition of military, ulama and gangs, in an echo of the Ottoman period under discussion. If in the near future, southern Iraq were to end up creating an autonomous region or even state, Iranian support is to be expected.

CONCLUSION

The Treaty of Erzeroum, 28 July 1823, was signed because, in the north, Abbas Mirza had become weary of the struggle, the war was unpopular at home and his treasury was empty. In the south the Ottomans under Davoud Pasha seized the initiative after the demise of the Shah’s eldest son, although they were not yet strong enough to force the issue. The Shah wanted peace as always but his astute mobilization of an army in the southern area of Hamedan and the threat of escalation persuaded the Sultan to make terms.

The Treaty, however, was scant reward for Persian military success and sacrifice. The terms were largely economic (reduced custom rates for Persian goods (4 per cent), and the restoration of seized spoils), as well as symbolic, including greater protection for pilgrims and the “corpse” traffic for burial at the holy cities. There was no territorial revision although it was agreed to create a Boundary Commission to regulate the border (see Richard Schofield in this volume).

Despite Abbas Mirza’s concern with the health of his Sarbaz force and his interest in European health practices, his army, and of course his brother’s, fell foul of the Asian cholera pandemic of 1817–1823 at the zenith of their military success. After their respective high watermarks (October 1821 and May 1822), neither front would produce any further decisive action. Thus, history does not reveal whether the frontier could have been permanently redrawn.

Notes

8 James B. Fraser, Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan in the Years 1821 and 1822 (London: Longman, 1825), p. 227.

Partly due to Mohammad Ali Mirza’s contempt for his brother’s handling of the war against Russia (1804–1813) and partly due to his father’s penchant for playing one off against the other, Mohammad Ali Mirza was ordered to take a significant, predominantly cavalry, force (some say as high as 25,000 strong) to the Caucasian frontier. Crossing the frontier into the Pembak region he penetrated the Russian lines around Lori and raided as far as the plain of Kodi, just south of the Georgian capital of Tiflis. The Russians, however, were largely content to sit in their fortified posts, safe from the attack of cavalry, leaving the Persians to plunder the countryside. Mohammad Ali Mirza’s force then turned east, as planned, towards the important town of Gandja, hoping to catch the Russian forces facing Abbas Mirza’s army marching from the south in the rear. Finding his way, however, blocked by a large body of Russian reinforcements, he broke off the campaign and retreated, with much booty, to the friendly Khanate of Erevan. See C. J. Rich, *Residence in Koordistan* (London: James Duncan, 1836), pp. 139–40.


Avery et al., op. cit., p. 213.

Fraser, op cit., p. 313.

Watson, op. cit., p. 200

Lt Colonel Charles Stuart, *Journey of a Residence in Northern Persia and the Adjacent Province of Turkey* (London: Bentley, 1854), p. 188.

Diplomatic correspondence: G. Willock to Lord Strangford 12/08/1822, PRO FO 60/21.

See Fraser, op. cit., p. 314.


Fraser, op. cit., p. 315.

Ibid., p. 228.

Ibid., p. 313.

G. Willock to Lord Strangford, May 14/05/1822. PRO, Persia, vol. 22.

G. Willock to Canning, 6/12/1823, PRO 60/21.


Ibid., 245.

This Treaty was the first attempt at delineating the border and that would preclude Persia legitimately moving on Baghdad. This Treaty however had not yet been accepted as the “last word”. For example the district of Zohab (within the Ottoman side of the so-called border) was retained by Persia after taking it in the war until 1914!

G. Willock to Lord Strangford, 19/10/1821, PRO 60/21.


Ibid, p. 119.


Litvak, op. cit., p. 34.
Social networks and border conflicts

The First Herat War 1838–1841

Vanessa Martin

The story of the Great Game of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia is usually told from the point of view of high politics, of British and Russian diplomatic manoeuvres, and of the response of the Iranian Shah and his ministers to British and Tsarist policies. Great power rivalry, however, touched not only the government and elite of Iran, but also those further down the social scale, and indeed, through their networks, people at an ordinary level. This article seeks to study the impact of a phase in the Great Game, namely the First Herat War lasting from 1838–1841, on social networks in Iran and along its borders, and the ways in which they were able to exert influence on Iranian policy. It provides an example of the interaction of the population below the elite level with a great power, in this case Britain, and with its own government, during a border conflict. The article argues that social networks can influence the central government over a border conflict, as well as collaborate with it. They also are revealed to have some influence on the foreign power in the form of a deterrent, but equally, are vulnerable to manipulation by that power.

First, therefore, it is necessary to assess the part played by the First Herat war in the context of the Anglo-Russian rivalry in which it was set; second, the role of the social networks in the conflict, with particular attention being paid to the south of Iran will be discussed.

THE FIRST HERAT WAR IN CONTEXT

In 1834 Mohammad Shah acceded to the throne, with aspirations to restore Iranian ascendance in Afghanistan. Such a move was contrary to the interests of Britain, which feared that the extension of Iranian influence would lead to the increase of Russian influence as a result of the Treaty of Turkomanchay signed in 1828. The British feared an alliance between Iran and Afghanistan under Russian influence would threaten British India from the north-west frontier, given that the Russians intended to make Iran the agent of their policies in Central Asia. So from 1837 the principal aim of the British was to prevent such an event, and keep these states separate as buffers.
for India. The Great Game, however, was no simple conflict, and it should be observed that events did not always unfold as might have been anticipated. The Herat problem formed part of a whole skein of issues involving Britain and Russia stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to Afghanistan, and indeed, Europe itself, though this is outside the scope of this chapter. In essence, whilst engaged in relentless rivalry, Britain and Russia also needed each other to settle local differences so as to avoid their own direct military engagement, circumstances which could produce ironic and anomalous outcomes to local disputes. In addition, the pursuance of their interests in one part of the vast area of their struggle could lead to their neglecting seemingly obvious opportunities in another.

These characteristics of the Great Game were manifest at the time of the First Herat War. As will be observed, Russia’s ambitions to extend her influence in Afghanistan were hampered by her aspirations to control the turbulent and inhospitable terrain of the Caucasus. Events in the eastern Mediterranean, on the other hand, impeded British aspirations to confront the Russians more firmly in Afghanistan. These latter involved the ambitions of Mohammad Ali, Pasha of Egypt, to be Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, and his consequent conquest of Syria. The Ottoman Empire was, of course, the buffer against Russian penetration in the Mediterranean, and its collapse would destabilize the balance of power in Europe, which was of much greater significance to British interests than Iran. A British offensive towards Iran would make Russia much harder to deal with in the eastern Mediterranean. A further problem at the time of the First Herat War was that Mohammad Ali’s subordinate, Khorshid Pasha, marched into Najd with the ostensible purpose of suppressing resurgent Wahhabism, and the British were concerned that he might attempt to overturn their agreements with the Sheikhs of the Persian Gulf littoral, and try to seize Baghdad.

It was against this background that the British made every possible effort to persuade Mohammad Shah to abandon his plans in Afghanistan and give up Herat, which in their eyes represented a particular danger given its position as a gateway to the route to Kabul, and thence to India. They were also afraid that the Afghan amirs would form an alliance with Iran, supported by the Russians. The Shah, however, encouraged by the Russians, moved his forces into Khorasan in 1837, and prepared to besiege Herat.

The British representative, McNeill, met the Shah at his camp in March 1838. During discussions, the Shah argued that the Anglo-Persian Treaty of 1814 permitted Iran to intervene in Afghanistan. McNeill pointed out that, from the British perspective the main purpose of the Treaty was to protect India, and that it would be undermined by an Iranian occupation. McNeill failed to dissuade the Shah, and on 7 June 1838, he withdrew from the Shah’s camp, and cut relations between Britain and Iran, subsequently moving to Erzurum in Ottoman territory. The British then decided that they needed a bargaining counter to force the Shah to withdraw, and therefore on 16 June 1838, they invaded Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf. A full-scale assault by
Persian troops on Herat on 23 June 1838 did not succeed, and the Shah, by now under a variety of pressures, raised the siege of Herat and withdrew. The cumulative effect of the failure over Herat and the British occupation of Kharg Island on 19 June 1838 persuaded the Shah to agree to a variety of British demands on 9 September, promises, however, which he did not keep. McNeill remained in Erzurum until relations between Britain and Persia were finally restored by the treaty of 28 October 1841, ironically with the assistance of the Russians.

INTERNAL IMPLICATIONS IN BUSHEHR AND KHARG ISLAND

The principal internal effect was that from 1839 in particular, trade became dislocated by the estrangement between Iran and Britain, a downturn exacerbated by the drop in trade in the south in this period due to being rerouted so as to enter Iran through the north. The economy was also already affected by foreign imports and the Shah had had to issue an order in 1840 that no Russian cloth be brought in. Evidence of the disturbed state of the country is provided by the fact that there was disorder at Shiraz, Kashan, Isfahan and Kerman at the same time, and that these towns were deemed to have passed out of government control. In Yazd, the population, with the local mujtahid at its head, had expelled the governor. In Isfahan a form of class warfare began in which the poorer social groups robbed the wealthier ones, particularly its merchants and traders.

The British were well aware that one of their weapons against Mohammad Shah was the economic disruption that a conflict over Herat would cause. In July 1838 McNeill reported that: “The whole of the Persian authorities and the entire population of Tehran (as he put it) and its vicinity are anxious to dissuade me from leaving Iran and are disapproving of the Persian government”. This awareness lies behind McNeill’s letter to the renowned mujtahid, Mohammad Baqir Shafti. Ostensibly intending to express the goodwill of the British government towards the people of Iran, it sought to explain the British point of view and imply that the cause of the conflict was the Shah’s obduracy. McNeill stated that he had tried to explain to the Iranian government the consequences of failing to meet his request, but in vain. He would therefore have to withdraw from Iran, and the resulting strife and contention would be the responsibility of the Shah. McNeill was anxious to distinguish between the British attitude to the Shah and their attitude to the Iranian people, demonstrating his understanding of the possible influence of popular reaction not only on the British position but on the Shah’s policy. Naturally he hoped the mujtahid would pass on the message to the non-elite groups, whom the ulama so often represented. Alert to the manoeuvre, Shafti responded by saying that the difference which had arisen between the Shah and the British did not concern the Shi’a faith, and that he recommended
to the people that even if relations led to outright war, they should not take part in the quarrel. In his relatively neutral response, the mujtahid demonstrated his understanding of the controversy the Shah’s venture was arousing among the population at large.

The removal of the British minister from Iran immediately began to disturb the delicate structure of control and balance in the south. The attitude of the people of Bushehr, in particular, towards the British was complex, and to some extent contradictory. On the one hand they depended on the British for the protection and prosperity of their trade; on the other hand the people mistrusted the British presence and intentions. Even before the Shah’s attack on Herat, the people in Bushehr had begun to take advantage of the growing disagreement between Britain and Iran to reduce British influence there. There was an increasing number of anti-British incidents, including in 1836–1837 the suspending in the bazaar of an effigy of Griboyedov (the Russian emissary previously murdered by the populace in Tehran in 1829) from a sort of gibbet for the edification of the British Resident, and an insult to the Residency sarraf (banker) by Seyyed Salman, the nephew of the leading local mujtahid, Shaikh Hasan. When the Shah marched on Herat in the late summer of 1837, the deterioration in relations gave the people a new opportunity to express their animosity towards the British, particularly when a fight broke out between a British apothecary and a dervish that ended in a dispute over legal jurisdiction.

The local altercation exacerbated the differences over larger issues. When Britain drew up a list of conditions for peace, it included the relinquishment of the Shah’s right to punish the apothecary, as well as an equitable agreement over Herat, indicating how the popular pressure in Bushehr impacted on relations at the national level. The Iranian government itself responded to British complaints with a policy of stonewalling and evasion. Frustrated, the British invaded Kharg Island on 19 June 1838, as mentioned. They were immediately visited by the leading local notable, and periodic governor of Bushehr, Shaikh Nasir, an Arab tribal Shaikh, who saw an opportunity to attack the Iranians for the many grievances he considered that he had suffered from them. The British made arrangements with him to maintain a base in Kharg Island, his acquiescence thus assisting their pressure on the Shah, and demonstrating how they could manipulate the discontent of local powers to serve their own ends.

Meanwhile the final full-scale assault by Iranian troops on Herat on 23 June 1838 had not succeeded, and the Shah raised the siege of Herat and withdrew. The cumulative effect of the failure over Herat and the British occupation of Kharg Island persuaded the Shah to agree to a variety of British demands on 9 September, including the punishment for the attack on the Residency sarraf, the dismissal of the newly appointed Governor of Bushehr, Mirza Asadullah, the evacuation of the fort of Ghorian and the conclusion of a commercial treaty to place British personnel on the same footing as the Russians. However, he kept none of these promises. The curious juxtaposition
of comparatively minor demands with major ones demonstrates the significance of the popular attacks on British interests. British prestige required that restitution be made for even the most minor slights to Britain and British personnel. The maintenance of such prestige was the means by which Britain dominated the politics of the region, and indeed her empire, at relatively low cost, particularly in terms of achieving her objectives without major military ventures.

In November 1838 relations further deteriorated as a result of a dispute in Bushehr originating in a disagreement over taxation between the local merchants. It led to an attack on the Jews on the pretext that a farash (aide) of the governor had been found intoxicated from wine they supplied. A mob attacked the Jewish quarter, most particularly the house of the British Residency sarraf, who was engaged in the wine trade. In this fashion, the people of Bushehr at once resisted higher taxation, and vented their displeasure at the British occupation of Kharg Island and overall policy towards Iran.

Both the Iranian authorities and the population kept up the pressure. In early March 1839, in a further demonstration of hostility, Mirza Asadullah, who had recently replaced Shaikh Nasir as Governor of Bushehr, cut off supplies to British ships, in effect placing an embargo on the export of grain to Kharg Island. He also prohibited the British from using Iranian stonemasons to repair the fort on Kharg. McNeill feared the loss to British prestige in the Gulf if such hostile Iranian measures continued, and that there would consequently be attacks on British commerce. The British Resident, Hennell, now had the option of either withdrawing or occupying Bushehr itself, which he did not feel able to hold in view of popular hostility towards the British, which shows how such pressure acted as a deterrent.

Meanwhile there was disagreement between the government in London and the government of India over the Kharg Island policy. The latter saw Kharg not so much as a bargaining counter with Iran over Herat as an opportunity to implement a long-standing British Indian objective of securing an island base in the Persian Gulf. The government in London, on the other hand, was worried about provoking a Russian intervention in the north, and was anxious that occupation of Kharg Island should not extend to Bushehr itself. A further perceived obstacle to invasion was the financial cost that might be incurred through a military force facing stiff popular resistance. The idea of actually invading the mainland was therefore abandoned. The Russians, meanwhile confined themselves to protesting over the occupation, as other alternatives appeared too costly as long as Britain did not make a further move. They therefore endeavoured to enhance their prestige by negotiating a settlement to the Irano-British conflict.

Matters in Bushehr itself finally came to a head in late March 1839, when Admiral Maitland and a British fleet appeared at Bushehr to demonstrate support for the Resident. When the Admiral tried to land, ostensibly to meet
the Governor, the people of Bushehr threw sticks and stones, and Iranian soldiers under the command of a local khan, Baqir Khan Tangistani, fired on the British. The upshot was that the British Resident decided to withdraw the Residency to Kharg on 30 March 1839.\textsuperscript{21} In the British mission there was much disquiet at what had taken place. The British Representative, Sheil wrote to Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary, fulminating on the loss of British influence consequent on what he considered a trial of British forbearance over a long series of indignities. He pointed out that the British Admiral and Resident had retired, in the eyes of Iranians, before the “rabble” of Bushehr. The British were particularly disturbed as the event coincided with a setback in Kandahar.

The British withdrawal was greeted with mixed feelings by the local population. Realizing the implications for trade, the Bushehr merchants and the \textit{qazi} (principal judge) wrote to the British Resident expressing disquiet at his departure. Letters were also sent to the Governor of Bushehr asking him to promise not to impede British trade. The conciliatory view of the merchants of Bushehr was not shared by Mohammad Shah, who seized the opportunity, realizing the implications for British prestige. He summoned Baqir Khan Tangistani, the \textit{qazi} of Bushehr and his nephew, Shaikh Salman, to court, where they received robes of honour, decorations and substantial pensions and were received by the Shah with great condescension and respect. It was officially reported that an English admiral in command of a ship of 80 guns had, by a stratagem, taken Bushehr, but had been defeated with great loss by Baqir Khan and his force of Dashtestanis, and driven from the town. It was additionally reported that a large quantity of English heads had been sent to Shiraz.\textsuperscript{22}

The Shah made his version known throughout Iran and down the Persian Gulf,\textsuperscript{23} undermining British prestige, which, of course, resulted in additional financial burdens from reduced commerce from the Iranians. This event caused more damage to British prestige in the Persian Gulf than had their retreat from Kabul in 1841–1842. It is evident from the vehemence of Sheil’s dispatches that it really was a victory for the populace.\textsuperscript{24}

The British eventually evacuated Kharg Island in February 1842. A British presence in the form of a coaling station, representing the long-standing aspirations of the government of India, clung on until it was finally removed as a result of repeated remonstrations by the Persian government to London in 1944.

The people of Kharg Island had benefited from the war as they had paid little in the way of taxes for three years, their main dues normally being paid to Shaikh Nasir to support the island garrison through a pilotage tax.\textsuperscript{25} They had restructured their administration and grown used to managing their own affairs by council. They remained, however, loyal to the Shah. Why did the British go? The main reason was that if they seized part of the south, the Russians might do the same in the north; but also, in those days there was little financial advantage in staying if the locals were not friendly.
THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN FARSW Meanwhile the impact of the war, and the Shah’s loss of authority through his failure before Herat, produced disturbance and defiance on the part of the provincial authorities throughout Fars. Fereydun Mirza, the Shah’s brother, and governor of the province, regarded the people of Fars as secretly in league with the British – and indeed Baqir Khan Tangistani sent them friendly messages. However, there is not much evidence of a direct connection between the British and the local powers. The main problem was that the continuing economic difficulties exacerbated the political situation, particularly in Shiraz. In August 1839, for example, Mirza Ahmad Khan, the principal administrator of Fars and the governor’s leading official, was driven from the town by popular discontent. On 9 August 1839 a tumultuous crowd gathered in objection to his return. In desperation, the prince-governor, especially dressed in military uniform, gave an order that the town should be destroyed and the people massacred; however, he too was forced to quit the city by the angry populace, leaving the people victorious. Despite bringing pressure on the leading mujtahid Shaikh, Abu Turab, in September 1840, Mohammad Shah had little success in imposing his will on Shiraz, and less in raising any taxes. The people of Shiraz, like those of Kharg Island, used the period of the war and its aftermath to further their own interests.

IMPACT ON THE WAR BY POPULAR NETWORKS IN THE EASTERN AND WESTERN REGIONS

With regard to the war on the eastern front it is difficult to assess the level and nature of popular involvement. This is partly because of lack of source material; partly because of the localized nature of the struggle in Afghanistan rather than Iran – by contrast to Bushehr, which was radicalized by the actual British presence; and partly because the eastern border that was underpopulated. One observer remarked that if the Shah really wanted to extend his rule in Khorasan he had better start by re-peopling Torbat-e Shaikh Jam. The majority of local potentates appear to have resisted British pressure to join them: Amir Assadollah Alam fought in the Iranian army; Mohammad Reza Khan and ‘Ali Khan of Sistan and certain leaders of the Baluch tribes reportedly gave their allegiance; however, the chief of Kelat Naderi sought alliance with the British. As Mojtahed-Zadeh has observed, while the peoples of the eastern frontier were at war with the British, they collaborated, but once the threat was past, they reverted to their customary tribal and ethnic rivalries.

To the west and north-west there was trouble in Kermanshah, where the people turned against the governor, and also in the area between Erzurum and Khoi, where there were attacks by the Kurds, who constantly harassed the villages there. However, such problems were endemic and not noticeably worse than at any other period, unlike the situation in the south. The Shah
was fortunate in that the Ottomans were engaged in a struggle to control Mohammad Ali (the Pasha of Egypt), and to reassert their authority in the eastern Mediterranean, and therefore did not take advantage of the Shah’s difficulties to stir up the tribes on the border.

In the north-west, there were disturbances amongst the tribes on the frontier, which related partly to the Shah’s aspirations in Herat and Khorasan, and partly to the decades-long advance of Russia in the Caucasus. At the time of the Treaty of Turkomanchay in 1828, it had been Russian policy to break up Azerbaijan into independent Khanates but not actually to annex the province.34 From 1828 Russia sought influence rather than control on the Iranian side, being primarily concerned with the need to continue to subdue the tribes on its side of the border. From the point of view of events in our period the tribes most affected were Lezgis, a Sunni group originating in Daghestan, some of whom had historically either moved or been moved to the Iranian border. Before the advance of Russia this latter group had been under Persian rule, but local khans had asserted their authority as Safavid power declined. These in turn were now threatened by the Russians and also divided amongst themselves as to whether their interests lay with the Iranians or the Russians, or in a continued struggle for independence.35 According to Tapper, the Russians were welcomed in some parts of the eastern Caucasus, as they provided a release from the local khans.36 Other inhabitants of the region felt obliged to declare war against the Iranians on the Russians’ side as they were in no position to resist them. Some of them already resided inside the Iranian border, but at this period the concept of a border was nebulous as far as such tribes were concerned. In their mountain habitats they migrated as they pleased, and without much reference to the local authorities.37 Although the Russian campaigns put some pressure on Iran to settle the nomadic tribes, for example by persuading them to migrate to Iranian territory and to acknowledge the suzerainty of the Shah, Iran also benefited from their pastoral produce and their services as frontier guards.38 On the other hand, both Russians and Iranians played the tribes off against each other. All in all, for a variety of reasons, Iran did little to settle its frontier population before the 1850s.

The Russian struggle to control the Lezgis went on regardless of the war over Herat and, in strategic terms, seemingly independent of it. In the autumn of 1838 the Lezgis achieved some success against the Tsar’s forces, seizing the town of Kuba and plundering Shekki. They were reportedly much under the influence of their mullas in their revolt against the power of Russia,39 which was evidently seen in religious terms. The Lezgi tribes felt the Shah (as the Muslim power in the region) was failing them, and it is reported that they sent an emissary who was the bearer of:

a man’s cap and a woman’s headdress and is instructed to request that the Shah will either choose the former and act as a man by coming to their assistance, or receive the latter and acknowledge that he has no right to wear any other than a woman’s attire.40
The Shah’s neglect of the Lezgi interest, and failure to reprove the Russians, thereafter became entangled with general unrest in Azerbaijan over the war. The Shah, who still clung to the fortress of Ghorian in Afghanistan, much to the annoyance of the British, and continued to harbour yearnings towards Herat, ordered his brother in the early summer of 1839 to lead 20,000 men to Khorasan, with the intention of protecting the fortress. Members of the ‘ulama representing their respective regions arrived from Khoi and Salmas and warned the Tabriz authorities that the government must relinquish its current oppression of the peasantry, or they would all migrate to Russia or the Ottoman Empire. The state of the economy was indicated by the fact that the previous year’s corn remained unsold.

In addition, the ‘ulama of Tabriz in particular expressed support for the Lezgis, and criticized the government for not protecting them against the Russians. The British Consul, who watched the difficulties of the Iranians and Russians with some satisfaction, commented that:

Surely if the Russians intended to assist the Persians in their new campaign they would give them some money to get them off, as time must be an object and they are at a dead stand here for one hundred tomans.

Reports that the Lezgis were gaining advantages over the Russian troops, would also seem to suggest that the Russians might wish to facilitate the Shah’s departure, but they did not. In other words, all in all the evidence would suggest that the Russian campaign in the Caucasus was not particularly linked to their policy over Afghanistan.

If the Shah could not get money from the Russians, he was equally unsuccessful with his own subjects, who either evidently had no intention of supporting his ambitions to the east, or merely saw it as an opportunity for pecuniary advantage. The merchants of Tabriz refused point blank to provide funds to the government to pay the troops, and the troops themselves mutinied over pay. Such lack of support indicates that there were internal impediments to the Shah pursuing his campaign, in addition to those imposed by great power rivalry.

In central Iran there was a popular uprising in Isfahan in 1840, so serious that it brought the Shah in person to the city. At this time Isfahan was dominated to an extraordinary degree by lutis (the turbulent urban poor), which is perhaps a testimony to economic problems and unemployment. Certainly, there seem to have been struggles between different social groups with merchants being subjected to constant robbery by lutis. The disorder became so great that the Shah marched to Isfahan with a force of 30 guns and 14 corps of infantry, a most unusual event, which was to remain for some time in the popular memory. Hundreds were seized, several dozen beheaded and three hundred imprisoned. The Shah had evidently curbed the worst of the disorder, but he could not eradicate it without resolving the underlying economic problems. The seriousness of this revolt demonstrated that the
Shah could not afford to go on ignoring popular unrest, which constituted a pressure on him to settle with the British.

In conclusion, the Shah was responsive to great power politics, but the picture of the period of the war is not complete without some understanding of the role of social networks. On the one hand they could act as a deterrent to great power intervention. They could cooperate with the state officials and even the Shah himself in undermining the enemy. Not unexpectedly their influence was greater on the Iranian government than on external powers. On the other hand they represented an impediment to the Shah’s progress and a threat to his back with riots, refusal to pay taxes and mutiny. They detained him and at the same time, as in the Tabriz example, clamoured that his absence in the east provided opportunities for the Russians in the west. In 1839–1840 there is some evidence that the Shah intended to return to Khorasan; he possibly even had new designs on Herat, which he certainly never gave up. However, the turbulence of his kingdom in the wake of the war, notably more threatening in the cities than amongst the tribes, was a serious disincentive, and in the event he had to march south to curb rebellion.

The Shah finally gave up the fortress of Ghorian in March 1841 and the conflict between Britain and Iran over Herat was eventually settled on 28 October 1841. The British had less success with their minor demands as no reparation was offered to them for the insults to the British admiral; Mirza Asadullah lost his post as Governor of Bushehr, but for other reasons, which were not made clear; and there was no punishment for the attack on the Residency sarraf, the qazi and his nephew in particular continuing to be held in high honour. This outcome was not atypical, as the local people were regularly in a position to resist British pressure on their government because of the strength of their networks. In addition, when the Resident eventually returned to Bushehr he was obliged to endure relentless petty harassment from the populace for some time.

Relations between Britain and Iran had been so severely exacerbated over the Herat conflict that resolution was not an easy matter, largely because of the Shah’s resentment over the crushing of his aspirations. Peace required prolonged negotiations, and ultimately, was partly achieved through the Great Game itself. The differences between Britain and Russia had varied priorities, with the eastern Mediterranean coming highest for both powers, and when relations there were tense it was preferable to settle disagreements elsewhere. Therefore Britain used Russian influence to help solve the conflict over Herat, which had been started to keep Russia out of Afghanistan.

**PAST PRACTISES AND POLICY SUCCESS**

There is a broader question concerning the relations between an outside power and the society of the country with which it is in conflict, whether over a
border or any other issue. In the nineteenth century the British were at great pains to be well-informed on all aspects of Iran. Not only did their diplomats often have long experience in the country, but many of the travellers there were military personnel seeking information and understanding. For most of the nineteenth century, British policy in Iran was based on sound intelligence, rigorously interpreted. In the First Herat War, the local policy was set carefully within the broader framework, however inviting alternatives might have been. The principal example of this was the decision of the government in London to force the government of India to relinquish Kharg Island. The British used the understanding and information at their disposal in dealing with local society and in evaluating the implications in terms of popular response to a proposed policy, for example, in the decision on whether or not to occupy Bushehr in 1839. Thus knowledge, insight, and careful and dispassionate interpretation of intelligence are vital to achieving success in any given policy towards another country, and to avoiding the pitfalls of ignorance and naivety.

Notes

3 Ibid., p. 293.
4 M. E. Yapp, Strategies, p. 373.
6 Hennell to Sheil, 25 May 1840, FO 248/99. Part of the problem was that the Russians imported cloth dyed with indigo from Iran.
7 Encl. in No. 19, 12 May 1840, FO 60/73.
8 Encl. in Hennell to Sheil, 18 June 1840, FO 248/99. Following retribution by the authorities, he had taken refuge with Sayyid Muhammad Baqir, referred to as the chief mujtahid of Persia, from whose house, on the Shah’s orders, he was dragged and bastinadoed very severely. The beating of a mujtahid was not unknown, but it was unusual.
9 See report of 22 July in No. 40, 3 Aug. 1838, FO 60/58. At the time of the British withdrawal from Bushehr to Kharg Island, the merchants of Bushehr, and the Imam Jum’a, realizing the implications for trade, wrote to the British Resident asking him to return. IO R/15/1/81, No. 80, p. 33. Interestingly, McNeill also received separate appeals from both the mother and the wife of the Shah.
10 See No. 53, 5 Oct. 1838, FO 60/59.
12 Mackenzie to McNeill, 3 Dec. 1836, FO 248/85. Griboedov was a Russian special emissary who had been murdered by a mob in Tehran in 1829 for perceived arrogance towards Islam.

15 Encl. of 20 June 1838, in No. 44, 7 Sept. 1838, FO 60/59.

16 Hennell to McNeill, 21 Nov. 38, FO 248/85. A rescript from Faridun Mirza, Governor of Fars, specifically stated that the sale of wine was forbidden in a Muslim country. See, 14 Dec. 1838, FO 248/85, on receipt of rescript.


18 No. 18, 8 Dec. 1839, FO 60/65;; see also Farman-Farma-yi Fars to Mohammad Shah in I. Safa’i’s, *Yak sad sanad-i tarikhi* (Tehran: Anjuman-i Tarikh, n.d.), pp. 37–8. Although the letter is dated Sha’ban 1256/September-October 1840, it appears from the tone and content to have been written when he was Governor of Fars, i.e. in 1838–1839.


20 Ibid., p. 295.

21 No. 35, 26 May 1839, FO 60/66.

22 No. 42, 6 June 1839, FO 60/66.

23 It was recorded in Hasan Fasai’i’s *Farsnama-yi Nasiri* that Shaikh Hasan, the mujtahid of the ‘Usfur tribe, his nephew Shaikh Salman and Baqir Khan had risen in rebellion with the inhabitants of Bushehr and expelled the British regular soldiers and Resident from the town. See H. Busse’s translation, *History of Persia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 260.

24 Encl. 2 in No. 13, 7 April 1840, FO 60/73.

25 Robertson to Sheil, 21 June 1842, FO 248/108.

26 Encl. in No. 72, 17 Oct. 1839, FO 60/67.

27 Busse, *History of Persia*, p. 266.

28 Encl. of 8 June 1839 in 10 July 1839 FO 60/66.


30 No. 66, 28 Nov. 1838, FO 60/66.

31 No. 69, 28 Nov. 1838, FO 60/60.

32 Bonham to McNeill, 1 July 1839, in No. 51, 17 July 1839, FO 60/66.

33 Bonham to McNeill, 25 Nov. 1841, FO 60/82.


35 According to Cunynghame, the Lezgis were warlike and their main centre was Bodlith near Avari in the Eastern Caucasus. A. A. Cunynghame, *Travels in the Eastern Caucasus* (London: John Murray, 1872), p. 213. He adds that no woman was allowed to remain a widow for more than three months, so great was the shortage of the population in that area during the wars with the Russians (p. 214).

36 Tapper, *Frontier Nomads*, p. 149.

37 Ibid., p. 168.

38 Ibid., p. 190.

39 No. 52, 5 Oct. 1838 and No. 61, 5 Nov. 1838, FO 60/59.

40 No. 61, 5 Nov. 1838, FO 60/59.

41 No. 42, 6 June 1839, FO 60/66. The Shah was not clear as to his intentions in Khorasan, thereby arousing intense suspicions in the British.

42 Encl. in No. 51, 17 July 1839, FO 60/66. The exact connection is not clear, but their support may well have arisen from sympathy for the struggle of Muslims against control by a Christian power. Certainly Islam bound the Lezgis to other tribes fighting the Russians in the region, and perhaps to Shamil in Daghestan (who, however, is not named in the contemporary dispatches). Possibly also there were economic links through pastoralism, and even, on the frontier itself of landownership. It may be noted that the Lezgis had a reputation for legalism, and would travel long distances to settle legal cases. Cunynghame, *Eastern Caucasus*, p. 215.

43 No. 38, 2 June 1839, FO 60/66.
Vanessa Martin

No. 38, 2 June 1839, and No. 43, 6 June 1839, FO 60/66.

Encl. of 8 June 1839 in No. 46, 21 June 1839, FO 60/66.

No. 43, 6 June 1839, FO 60/66. See also No. 46, 21 June 1839, FO 60/66.

No. 42, 24 Aug. 1840, FO 60/74.

Encl. in No. 42, 24 Aug. 1840, FO 60/74; encl. in Hennell to Sheil, 25 May 1840, FO 248/99.


M. E. Yapp, Strategies, p. 373. For an example of their efforts at an earlier stage see correspondence of 8 June 1839 in 10 June 1839, FO 60/66.
Part II

Peace
5 The consolidation of Iran’s frontier on the Persian Gulf in the nineteenth century*

Lawrence G. Potter

Iran’s rightful predominance in the Persian Gulf looms large in the historical memory of Iranians, although control over the past two millennia was in fact episodic and not continuous. The Sasanian influence in the Gulf, which reached its height in the sixth century AD, for example, is often recalled, as is the glittering succession of ports – Siraf, Kish, and Hormuz – which dominated the Gulf from the ninth to the sixteenth centuries. The most recent period of Persian hegemony came under Nader Shah in the 1730s, a time when Iran briefly controlled Bahrain and Oman.¹

In the period after his death, however, a decades-long political struggle ensued in Iran during which there was no strong central government, and the southern ports were largely autonomous or controlled by Arabs from the other side of the Gulf. The German traveller, Carsten Niebuhr, who visited the region in the 1760s, remarked that “the Arabs possess all the seawall of the Persian empire, from the mouths of the Euphrates, nearly to those of the Indus.”² Their settlements were independent of Persia, yet they did not belong to Arabia either. The later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the rise of a number of Arab principalities along Iran’s southern coast, which extends some 1,100 miles from the Shatt al-Arab to the Gulf of Oman.

The early Qajar monarchs, Agha Mohammad (1779–97), Fath-Ali Shah (1797–1834) and Mohammad Shah (1834–1848), were not particularly interested in the Gulf or able to assert themselves there. They were preoccupied with threats from Russia in the north-west and later the reconquest of Herat in the north-east. Tehran was cut off by poor communications and the borders of Iran were still in flux and undefined.³ The Ottoman Empire did not even recognize the city of Mohammara (later Khorramshahr) and Abadan as part of Iran until the 1847 Treaty of Erzerum. Policy toward the Gulf was often left to the governor of the southern province of Fars. “For most of the early nineteenth century, the Iranian authorities had played a weak hand with much skill,” according to historian Malcolm Yapp. “They had maintained the appearance and style of a power that they could not, in fact, exercise, asserting their claims at every opportunity and protesting strongly at any supposed infraction of their rights.”⁴
By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the government of Nasser-edin Shah (1848–1896) had reasserted Tehran’s control over the entire Gulf coastline. The independent Arab sheikhdom of Bushehr was the first to fall in 1850, followed by the cancellation of the Omani lease of Bandar Abbas in 1868 and the eviction of the Qasimi sheikhs from Bander Langeh in 1887. Iran’s south-eastern boundaries were settled by the British in order to facilitate expansion of the telegraph line from India to Europe, which was given high priority after the Indian Mutiny in 1857. Chahbahar, the best harbor on the Persian Makran coast, lay on the Persian side of the boundary determination of 1871, and was taken by force of arms from Oman in 1872. Iranian agents even made a half-hearted bid to extend Persian control over the sheikhs of the Trucial Coast in the late 1880s. By the early 1890s, according to Curzon, “the Persian Government [was] exercising along its shores and over its islands a more extended and emphatic authority than at almost any previous epoch during the last 300 years.” The culmination of this process came with the reduction of Shaikh Khaz'al of Khuzistan by Reza Shah in 1924. Since that time, the central government in Tehran has exercised unquestioned control over its southern coastline, although sovereignty over Abu Musa island and the Tunbs has remained contested with the United Arab Emirates.

It is the intention of this paper to present a preliminary overview of this process of political consolidation. The historical background will be briefly sketched, highlighting the instability in Iran prior to the rise of the Qajars along with the large-scale migration of Arab tribesmen to the Iranian coastal area. The role of local powers in the Gulf – Iran, Oman, and the Qawasim – will be reviewed, as well as that of Britain. An examination of Qajar policy toward the Gulf follows, with a description of the process of retaking the Arab principalities and subjecting them to the control of Tehran. By the time of Reza Shah, Iran’s territorial definition as a state was well established with recognized boundaries on all sides.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During the post-Mongol period, the Persian Gulf was dominated by a series of European imperial powers and their trading companies, including the Portuguese (1505–1622), the Dutch (1630–1700) and, starting in the early 1800s, the British. The Safavids were the last regional dynasty to control the northern Gulf shore. But the Safavids did not have a navy and had to rely on the English for naval support, which enabled them to attack Hormuz and Qeshm. Safavid decline in the late seventeenth century and their downfall in 1722 at the hands of Afghan invaders opened up an opportunity for local powers on the Gulf shoreline to assert themselves. This process, while interrupted by Nadir Shah (r. 1736–1747), resumed until the assertion of Qajar power in the Gulf in the late nineteenth century.
Nader Shah, the tribal adventurer from Khurasan who repulsed the Afghans and reconquered much territory that had been lost by the later Safavids, took a personal interest in restoring Iranian control of the Gulf. Nader established a base at Bushehr (temporarily renamed Bandar-i Nadiriyya) which became the main port on the Gulf until the rise of Khorramshahr in the 1920s and 1930s. He built a navy, but was bedevilled by a range of problems, from acquiring vessels to selecting competent admirals. Nevertheless, in a number of campaigns in the 1740s he managed to conquer Bahrain and mounted three major expeditions to assist the Imam of Oman, Saif b. Sultan. In the opinion of Lockhart, though,

the ‘Oman campaigns had proved a costly failure. At least 20,000 men had perished either in battle or from the ravages of disease, but this heavy sacrifice brought no commensurate advantage... the ‘Oman operations imposed a prolonged and useless drain upon Nadir’s resources, and the efforts to provide men and material to carry them on caused much privation and suffering in Southern Persia.10

But if ultimately a failure, Nader Shah’s attempts to reassert Persian control over the Gulf did provide an inspiration to Qajar efforts in the nineteenth century.

The period after the death of Nader was marked by political struggle between the Zands and Qajars for control of Iran, which initially led to the rule of the former in Shiraz (1750–1794). The first and longest-lasting Zand ruler, Karim Khan (1750–1779), took an active interest in the Gulf and aimed to bring the coastline from Langeh to Jask under his control. He maintained a strong alliance with Sheikh Nasser-edin Shah of Bushehr, who could safeguard the trade coming up the Gulf. With his help Karim Khan ended Ottoman domination of Basra and invaded the northern Gulf littoral in 1757 and 1765.11

Karim Khan was less successful in the lower Gulf, and the Omani sultan rejected his demands for tribute. The nature of authority exercised by the Zands on the Gulf coast and islands was in fact tenuous. “Even the petty rulers of the mainland ports, who were vulnerable to his punitive campaigns, accorded him [the Zand ruler] at best a marginal compliance interrupted by outbreaks of defiance,” according to Perry.12

Rise of the Gulf Arabs

The eighteenth century saw the widespread movement of Arab tribes around the Gulf area.13 Best known is the migration from northern Arabia of the ‘Utub Arabs of the Anaza group, who, under the leadership of the Al Sabah family, established themselves in Kuwait in the 1750s. Those under the leadership of the Al-Khalifa migrated to Zubara (on the north-west coast of Qatar) in 1766 and ultimately came to rule over Bahrain in 1782. In Oman, the Al
Bu Sa’id family came to power in 1749 in the wake of the Iranian invasion. In Najd, in eastern Arabia, there was the rise of the Wahhabis and establishment of the Al Saud dynasty. Khuzistan, the south-west province of Iran, witnessed a large-scale introduction of Arab tribes from Najd, especially the Banu Ka’b (Chaub), who wielded considerable power in the latter eighteenth century.

While not well documented, the continuous exchange of peoples between the two shores likely increased in this period and gave many Arabs a foothold on the Iranian coast. Why did they come? Nadjmabadi’s research suggests that many did so because of more favourable environmental conditions. There was ample space and water for their animals and for date plantations. She describes a process whereby Arab settlement took place with the blessing of the Iranian government, which could not otherwise protect the coastal inhabitants. The relationship between the Iranian authorities and the shaikhs of the coast was contractual, with the shaikhs paying regular taxes (maliyat) to the state in return for the right to levy taxes on imported goods and collect taxes from the coastal residents. According to Ricks, there were about 30 port towns (bandar) divided into 5 sections from north to south. These ports were allied on the basis of tribal origin and marriage, and usually engaged in warfare only in conjunction with others. He notes that close ties between the bandaris made them a significant force should warfare break out. When it did, often a coalition of Arab and Persian forces engaged in the fighting. In the opinion of Landen, “in a real sense the Persian interest in Gulf affairs in the eighteenth century was an expression of the desire of Iranian-coast Arabs to realize their own leadership in the Gulf.”

Two major Arab groups centred in the lower Gulf were the Qawasim confederation and the Hawla (Huwala). The Qawasim rose to power along the so-called Trucial Coast, centred in the towns of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah, and later gained a foothold on the Iranian side. Karim Khan Zand supported Qawasim settlement on the Iranian coast. Following the death of Nader Shah, the Qawasim seized Bandar Langeh and held it until 1765, then retook the city after the death of Karim Khan in 1779. They held it, along with the islands of Abu Musa, Sirri, and the Tunbs, until 1887. The Qawasim also contested with the Ma’in Arabs and Oman for control over Qeshm, which was taken over by the Al Bu Said ruler in 1794–1795. Allied to the Wabbabis in central Arabia, the Qawasim were regarded by the British as pirates and the target of major British raids on Julfar (now Ras al-Khaimah) in 1809 and 1819. They were rivals of the sultan of Oman and challenged the Omanis for supremacy in the Gulf.

The Hawla or Huwala (sing. Holi) were groups of Sunni Arabs that migrated from Oman and the eastern coast of the Arabian peninsula to the Iranian side of the Gulf in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Many Hawla lived on the coast between Bushehr and Bandar Abbas. They later returned to the Arab side as individuals or groups, but many were unsure what tribe they belonged to and they freely intermarried. About 1900 they
were found living in Bahrain, Hasa, Qatar, Trucial Oman, and on Sirri island. Somewhat estranged from the local inhabitants, they became an important part of the local intelligentsia after the discovery of oil.

The role of Oman

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Oman was the predominant regional power in the Gulf and indeed the western Indian Ocean. Muscat had always been one of the most important ports in the region, and under the rule of Seyyed Sultan (1792–1806) and Sa’id b. Sultan (1807–1856) Muscat expanded its maritime empire, gaining footholds at Bahrain, Bandar Abbas, Hormuz, and Qeshm. Oman was on friendly terms with Britain, which offered support against encroachments by the Wahhabis, Qawasim and Persians. The Omani fleet (both merchant and vessels of war) was the largest in the Gulf after the British. It operated from ports at Muscat, Mutrah and Masirah island, as well as on the East African coast.

Oman had an important presence on the eastern shore of the Gulf, maintaining bases at Bandar Abbas, Jask, Langeh, Qeshm, Hormuz, and Larak. Seyyed Sultan’s forces took possession of Gwadar in Makran, at the time “an insignificant fishing village,” after his accession to power in 1792. (It had been given to him by the Khan of Kalat in 1784 for his support when, as a pretender to the Omani throne, he took refuge there.) The sultan’s forces also conquered Chahbahar in 1792, and he personally directed the capture of Bandar Abbas, Qeshm, and Hormuz in 1794. After this the lease under which Bandar Abbas had been governed by the Bani Ma’in Arabs after about 1770 (later contested by the Qawasim) was transferred by the Persian government to Oman. Bandar Abbas was an important revenue source for Muscat; in 1802 it was providing a third of the sultan’s income.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the power of Muscat declined greatly, following the death of Sa’id b. Sultan in 1856 and the splitting of the empire into two branches based in Oman and Zanzibar. The ruler in Muscat was now deprived of most of his income as well as his fleet, and increasingly fell under the influence, and depended on the subsidy, of Britain. The loss of income, which the sultan needed to pay Persia for the lease of Bandar Abbas, was a serious blow.

British policy

British policy toward the Gulf in the nineteenth century was influenced by their determination to prevent Persia from coming under undue Russian influence, which would present a threat to British India. From the 1870s they also opposed the Ottoman presence in eastern Arabia. Britain imposed a maritime peace on the Gulf in stages beginning in 1835, and sought to stamp out the piracy, slave trading and arms trafficking that had been prevalent
Figure 5.1 Omani enclaves
there. Their Political Resident, an official of the Indian Political Service, carried out his duties from Bushehr with the assistance of a small group of officers posted in key cities throughout the Gulf. His style of rule depended upon collaboration with a cadre of “native agents” made up of local elites which benefited both parties. According to Lord Curzon, writing around 1890, the pacification of the Persian Gulf in the past and the maintenance of the status quo are the exclusive work of this country; and the British Resident at Bushire is to this hour the umpire to whom all parties appeal, and who has by treaties been intrusted with the duty of preserving the peace of the waters.

The British always acknowledged Persian sovereignty over the northern shore of the Gulf, although “the British Resident at Bushehr [assumed] a certain responsibility for justice and security upon the Persian coast.” Over Persian objections they stationed forces and maintained a coal depot at Basidu on Qeshm island from 1823 to 1879. Basidu was regarded by the Government of India as being “virtually British territory” until Persian sovereignty was admitted in 1868. Britain twice occupied Persian soil at times of conflict over Herat, namely Kharg Island in 1838 and Bushehr, Mohammerah, and Kharg in 1856–1857. They were tempted to retain Kharg as a base but resisted due to fears of the Russian reaction. In 1888, the British minister in Tehran, Sir H. Wolff, gave an explicit assurance that if any other power should make an unprovoked attack on Persia, the British government would take steps necessary to prevent any infringement of Persia’s territorial integrity.

In general the British regarded the Persians as too eager to assert themselves in the Gulf, and sought to restrain them. They opposed Persian claims to Bahrain, which was lost to the Utub Arabs in 1783, and supported the ruling Al-Khalifa dynasty there. Britain regularly intervened on behalf of the Sultan of Oman in his affairs on the Persian shore: for example, in October 1856, one of the British requirements to settle the Anglo-Persian War was that Persia renew the Bandar Abbas lease on reasonable terms, and in 1866, the British again pressured the Persians for a lease renewal. However, the British also dissuaded the Omani sultan from “commit[ting] aggressions on any of the Persian ports” when Tehran appeared reluctant to renew the lease. In the opinion of Colonel Pelly, Persian Gulf Resident in 1868, “Were it not for us, the Arabs would plunder her coast and not allow a Persian boat to put to sea.

Qajar policy in the Gulf

As noted above, Persia assumed an important role in the Great Game being conducted by Britain and Russia in the nineteenth century, although Persian interests were rarely uppermost in the minds of the great powers. “It was only through negotiation and the complex and often devious game of diplomacy
that Qajar Iran could withstand the imperialist threat of Britain and Russia,” according to Amanat. “By playing off the two rivals and sacrificing control over Iran’s often precarious periphery, the Qajar state maintained control of Iran’s heartland and avoided, at least partially, the most menacing European interference in its internal affairs.”

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, Persian policy toward the Gulf, such as it was, was carried out by the governor of Fars Province, based in Shiraz. He administered the whole area from Bushehr to Jask. He also formulated policy toward neighbouring Gulf states. Ever since the Persians were driven out of Bahrain in 1783, regaining it had been the constant aim of Persian diplomacy. This led, in 1822, to the Treaty of Shiraz, in which the British Resident at Bushehr acknowledged Persian sovereignty over Bahrain. This treaty, however, was immediately repudiated by the British Indian government. Fath-Ali Shah, angry that his son in Shiraz had negotiated with the British behind his back, also disowned it. In 1861 the British recognized the shaikh of Bahrain as an independent ruler and after 1880 they took control over Bahraini foreign policy. Nevertheless, Persia never relinquished her claim but rather, periodically invoked the Shiraz treaty. It also asked the British to loan vessels so it could retake the island. In 1855, Persia even proposed a treaty with the US that would provide naval assistance so the shah could assert control in the Gulf.

A key to Persian weakness in the Gulf lay in the fact that, unlike Oman or Britain, the shah did not have a navy. The British viewed Persian capabilities with derision: according to Curzon, “Brave and victorious as the Persians have shown themselves at different epochs on land, no one has ever ventured so far as to belie the national character as to insinuate that they have betrayed the smallest proficiency at sea.” The issue did not become acute until, at the time of the negotiations over the Bandar Abbas lease renewal, Oman threatened to blockade the port unless Persia came to terms. Tehran was dependent upon the British navy to dissuade the Omanis from doing so, and began thinking of acquiring its own flotilla. Around 1865 Nasser-edin Shah proposed acquiring several armed steamers (to be commanded by British naval officers and manned by Arabs or Indians), but Britain refused on the grounds that it might cause trouble for Bahrain.

The Persians clearly wished to continue relying on the British to police the Gulf. In 1868, the Prince Governor General (beglerbegi) of Fars told Colonel Pelly, the Persian Gulf Resident, that:

As regards the proposed creation by Persia of a flotilla in the Persian Gulf, the Prince said he entirely concurred with me in thinking it would prove an unnecessary expense and a costly failure. He said Persia entrusted the peace of the Gulf entirely to the British Resident, and that he would be prepared to issue any orders I might draft in view to my securing full support and prompt communication from the local Governors along the Persian coast line.
The real impetus for a naval force came when the campaign to increase customs revenues was introduced. In 1883, the Persian government decided to acquire one vessel a year and thereby build up a flotilla which could police the coast and hopefully increase customs revenue. In 1885 the Tehran government finally acquired a ship, the *Persepolis*, which was built in Germany, to patrol Gulf waters.50 A small river steamer, the *Susa*, was built in Germany in sections which were sent to be assembled at Mohammerah. These ships did not prove very effective and the impetus for the navy seems to have dissipated. In 1903, the Persian government bought an armed Belgian steam yacht to carry out anti-smuggling patrols in the Gulf, and in 1905 ordered five more from Bombay.51 It is doubtful, however, whether this made much of a dent in illicit trade in the Gulf.

In response to the commercial expansion arising from the advantages extended to Russian and British subjects in treaties of 1828 and 1841, respectively, trade grew. The Persian government established a network of agents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, called *kargozars*, who were stationed in important cities such as Bushehr and could arbitrate between Iranians and the growing number of foreign subjects. This *kargozari* system was set up in the 1860s and was fully operative by the 1870s and 1880s.52 (It was particularly effective in Bushehr, in contrast to the more unsettled situation prevailing in Khorasan.53) The *kargozar* was supposed to deal with foreigners independently of the local authorities such as the governor. From Tehran’s point of view, the *kargozar*’s job was to maintain order, control foreigners in their area, and impede their acquisition of property.54 Before 1898, the *kargozars* handled disputes between foreign merchants and the customs, but after the reform in 1898 the customs were reformed and regularized.55

Beginning in 1882, there was a political reorganization of the Gulf ports, which were removed from the jurisdiction of the Governor-General of Fars and handed over to the Amin al-Sultan, the grand vizier and an intimate of the shah. The royal government was in dire need of revenue, and the customs duties from the southern ports were an attractive asset. In 1887 a Gulf Ports district, headquartered at Bushehr, was formed which contained Bushehr, Langeh, and Bandar Abbas and their dependencies.56

Before major changes were made in the Customs Administration after 1898, the customs were farmed out and there was no degree of uniformity in their collection. The central government only received a small portion of the taxes collected in the provinces. In the late nineteenth century, however, the shah’s government was increasingly in need of revenue, in particular to repay foreign loans. Because the customs duties of the Gulf ports were one of the most lucrative and reliable assets, the port cities were increasingly brought under the control of Tehran. (These revenues were pledged, for example, to guarantee payment of the loan made in 1892 to compensate for cancelling the Tobacco Concession.) To repay a small loan made in March 1898, the (British-owned) Imperial Bank of Persia sent agents to Bushehr and Kermanshah to carry out collection between April and August 1898. Starting in 1899, the
customs were put under the control of Belgian experts, who aimed to introduce a uniform and efficient system of tax collection and to raise the rates. Within two years all tax farms had been abolished and management placed in a new department, the Imperial Persian Customs. In March 1900 the customs of Bushehr, Langeh, and Bandar Abbas were placed under the control of the new department, which led to a remarkable rise in revenue for Tehran. The new higher tariffs were opposed by the merchants and led to a sharp decline in legitimate trade in the Gulf, notably at Bandar Langeh (and a concomitant rise in smuggling).

RETAKING THE GULF

The fall of Bushehr

Although in the early nineteenth century the Qajar government was not in a position to take control of the Arab principalities along its Gulf littoral, by mid-century the situation had changed. Bushehr, on the northern coast, was the most important Gulf port, with substantial income from customs and tax receipts. “Bushehr was a port city, but in contrast to many other Asian port cities of the colonial era,” Floor notes, “it was a port that was an integral part of a large independent state, Iran.” At the time of Fath-Ali Shah, half of Persian imports in the Gulf came through Bushehr.

Bushehr had been governed by the Al-Mazkur family since 1750. The Al-Mazkur were members of an Arab tribe, the Martarish, who are reported to have come from Oman. They ruled not only Bushehr, but also coastal localities ranging from Bandar Rig, Ganaveh, and Deylam to the north, as well as Asaluyeh to the south. They also controlled some inland towns and districts such as Ahram, Borazjan and Dalaki. The Al-Mazkur had a close alliance with the Zand dynasty in Shiraz from 1770 to 1789, and acted as their maritime arm, for example providing ships to besiege Basra. The Al-Mazkur held Bahrain between 1752 and 1783.

During the early nineteenth century, changing economic and political conditions in Iran jeopardized the autonomous position of the Al-Mazkur. Most critically, their relationship with their overlords deteriorated. The new Qajar dynasty did not seek to carry out any military adventures in the Gulf, and therefore, unlike the Zands, did not need the help of vassals in Bushehr. From about 1820 to 1850, Shiraz demanded ever greater payments of tribute, while the sources of revenue for the Al-Mazkur were shrinking.

One reason was the transformation of Bushehr, starting in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, from a port-of-call to a port-of-transit. As a port-of-call, Bushehr acted as a marketing and distribution centre for long-distance trade, and merchants would come to the city to trade in season. Later as a port-of-transit, goods were shipped directly from Bushehr to markets inland, and visiting merchants were replaced by resident merchants
located in large cities on the plateau, such as Shiraz or Yazd, as well as in Bombay.

In time, the Al-Muzkur lost control of several territorial districts and customs revenues declined under the pressure of competition from ports such as Bandar ‘Abbas and Mohammera (present day Khurramshahr). By 1850, the Al-Muzkur family was caught in a financial squeeze from which it was unable to escape.66

The last ruler, Nasser-edin Shah, was ultimately deposed because he could not pay his taxes. His unpopularity was such that when he was replaced there was no outpouring of protest by Bushehri.

The fall of Bushehr in 1850 illustrated the relative ease with which the Iranian government, acting through officials in Shiraz, could take over an important port. As noted by Grummon, in the northern Gulf littoral the main danger to the Arab shaikhdoms came from the interior, not the sea.67 Like any Gulf port, Bushehr could not stand alone against Shiraz without the support of neighbouring districts and tribes. Also, the British declined to protect the ruler, which established a pattern that persisted until the removal of Sheikh Khaz’al in 1924. As in other cases there was an absence of popular uprising, since the Al-Mazkur had been harsh in extracting revenue from their subjects. The advice of the British Political Resident was for Nasser-edin Shah to proceed to Shiraz and not try to resist.68

Their departure also removed a buffer protecting the Arab sheikhs on the southern shore of the Gulf from the Persians, and they regarded it as an alarming development.69 The retaking of Bushehr undoubtedly emboldened the Persian government to extend its control throughout the littoral, and the other Arab principalities were now on notice that their turn could be next.

The Bandar Abbas lease70

As outlined above, Oman gained control over Bandar Abbas and its dependencies in the late eighteenth century, although its presence was regulated by an agreement with and rent paid to the Persian government. The lands specified in the Omani lease evidently differed in the Persian and Arabic versions,71 but Oman administered the coastal strip from Sadij,72 some 60 miles east of Jask to Khamir, about 45 miles west of Bandar Abbas, and inland as far north as Shamil, some 30 miles from the coast, as well as the islands of Hormuz and Qeshm.

There were sporadic efforts on the part of Persian officials to regain control of Bandar Abbas. In 1823 an initial attempt was rebuffed by Sa’id b. Sultan, partly by bribery and increased tribute to the agent of Shiraz.73 In 1845–1846 an army sent by the Governor General of Fars to Bandar Abbas to extort payment, and by the Governor of Kerman to invest Minab, caused
the sultan to consider blockading the Persian coast. He was deterred from this by the British resident at Bushehr and the crisis passed with the death of Mohammad Shah of Persia. In 1854, however, while the sultan was in Zanzibar, the Persians expelled the Omani governor from Bandar Abbas and took over the city.

Under Nasser-edin Shah, Persia resumed efforts to retake Bandar Abbas. In 1856 Persia renewed Oman’s lease, but on much more stringent terms. According to Lorimer, this “marked a decided strengthening of the position of Persia with reference to Bandar ‘Abbas, for it demolished the basis of any claim to independent sovereignty which the Sayed of Oman may have been inclined to cherish.” The treaty raised the rental rate and specified that Bandar Abbas and its dependencies, including Qeshm and Hormuz, were to be considered subject to the Persian province of Fars. The Persian flag was to be flown at Bandar Abbas. These terms were further strengthened, with a higher rental and a shorter duration, when the agreement was renewed, under British pressure, in 1868. Two months later it was cancelled outright by Persia upon the overthrow of the ruler in Oman, as provided for by a clause in the treaty. Thus ended Oman’s control of the enclave around Bandar Abbas that it had maintained for the better part of a century.

Expansion to the south-east: Gwadar and Chahbahar

Until late in the nineteenth century the limits of Persian sovereignty in the south-east were vague. The last major stretch of littoral on the Gulf of Oman that the Persian government aimed to reclaim was in the province of Makran, stretching eastward from Jask. This area was far from the power centres in Tehran, Karachi or Bombay, and, aside from the enclaves controlled by the sultan of Oman, was mainly subject to the Khans of Kalat (in British India, south of Quetta) and Bampur (in Iranian Baluchistan, south of Dozdab (later renamed Zahidan)). Kalat was a close ally of Britain, which treated it as an independent state and regarded it as an important buffer to its Indian possessions. By the 1850s the Iranian government was already contemplating expansion eastwards: one clause in the 1856 lease of Bandar Abbas required its chief to provide provisions and guides for any troops sent by the Governor General of Fars or the Governor of Kerman to Cutch, Makran or Baluchistan.

The main impetus to delimit the boundaries came as a byproduct of the advance of the telegraph line which connected India to England. In order to extend the line beyond the Ottoman Empire and through Iranian territory, Britain needed the cooperation of both Persia and Oman, as well as assorted semi-independent Baluchi tribal chiefs. The problem was that in order to satisfy one power Britain would inevitably alienate the other. Under the terms of the Bandar Abbas lease, Oman could not grant permission for any activity on the part of foreigners in its zone, and this would include the British.
Figure 5.2 Arab principalities
In the event Britain did not make a serious attempt to come to terms with the Persians and did not seek their advice or keep them up-to-date on the negotiations. No financial inducements were offered to the Persian shah to comply.

The construction of a telegraph line was of great consequence to the Persian government, allowing it to be instantly connected to provincial centres. According to Amanat,

No technological innovation in modern times left the same impact on the political life of Iran (and other countries of the Middle East). Of all the economic and political reform plans and modernization measures undertaken in the Nasiri period, the telegraph proved the most successful.83

Nevertheless, the Persian government was not prepared to grant permission for a line to cross its territories easily.

The Persian Government, as the Government of India had foreseen, utilized the question of telegraph construction, which they declared themselves most anxious to promote, to lay claim to all the country between Bandar 'Abbas and the frontier of the British province of Sind.84

The need for permission to cross Persian territories led to long negotiations with the British, who ultimately ignored the sovereignty issue by conceding that telegraph construction would not prejudice Persian claims to the Makran coast. Ultimately, the idea of a landline beyond Gwadar was abandoned in favour of a submarine cable via Musandam, Bushehr, and Fao. In 1863 the landline from Karachi reached Gwadar, then a prosperous port under Omani control. The British believed that Persian claims did not extend farther east than this. At this time the governor (sartip) of Bampur, who represented Persian interests in Baluchistan, began to take an active interest in asserting Persian sovereignty over Gwadar, and carried out raids only a few miles from that city. In 1864 the Persian government asserted sovereignty over Gwadar and Chahbahar (based on the conquests of Nadir Shah) despite the fact that both had been ruled by Oman for many years. The Persians did not want to allow the continuation of the telegraph past Gwadar without their express permission, lest their claim to sovereignty over the Makran coast or even Bandar Abbas itself be called into question.85 The Omani government considered sending troops to defend Chahbahar, but was dissuaded by the British adviser.86

The Iranian boundaries in the east were largely settled by a series of boundary commissions staffed by British officers seconded from India. The Treaty of Paris (March 4, 1857), which ended the Anglo-Persian War, had provided for British arbitration should any differences arise over the border between Persia and Afghanistan. The British goal was made clear by their leading expert, Colonel F. J. Goldsmid, namely “the peace and protection of our
Indian frontier.” In response to a request by the Government of India in 1863 to ascertain the validity of the claims of Persia, Kalat, and Oman in Makran, Goldsmid remarked, in reference to Persia, “as to her right, I know of none but of the strong over the weak; of the prestige of a high-sounding monarchy over the obscurity of a small chiefdom.”

In 1870 the Tehran government agreed to participate in a commission, including representatives of Kalat and Britain, that would establish the frontier. The Persian government had prior experience with such mixed commissions, having participated in one that was to settle the boundary with the Ottoman Empire. Tehran was undoubtedly anxious to establish a border in the south-east, and was not in a position to oppose the British, having just lost the Anglo-Persian War (1856–1857) and having twice (in the 1830s and 1850s) been thwarted in reasserting control over Herat. The Persians did not want to unduly jeopardize their relationship with the British government over territory that they did not even control.

In 1871, the commission determined a border, placing the boundary at the village of Gwatar, about 50 miles west of Gwadar. Gwatar was thus recognized as Persian, although there was no sign of Persian authority there and the villagers expressed a “dread and dislike” of the Qajars. Gwadar, an Omani enclave, fell on the Kalat side of the line, ensuring that the telegraph line was protected to that point. Chahbahar, still held by Oman by right of conquest, was on the Persian side of the line, but the commission did not determine its sovereignty. In 1872, the sartip of Bampur attacked Chahbahar and expelled the Omanis. Henceforth, Gwadar was the only Omani enclave left on the Persian coast.

In September 1871 the Persian government unhappily accepted the new eastern boundary, with reservations.

Suspicion, in fact tinged the whole attitude of the Persian Government in the Kalat frontier question, it not being understood by them, perhaps, that what was desired by the British Indian authorities was to keep at a distance from India not Persian influence, but the Russian influence which might follow in its train.

Overall, the Persian government came out well in the struggle over the telegraph and benefited greatly from the line’s completion in 1865. More to the point, it used its leverage to gain British acknowledgement of its border in the south-east, confirming Persian ownership of all the territory along the Makran coast from Gwatar westwards. Persia did not obtain Gwadar, which it did not rule anyway, but was able to evict the Omanis from Chahbahar and assert sovereignty there. As Shahvar concludes:

In all, the Shah and his government dragged the British government into a hard bargain and tough negotiations, and thus Persian conduct in the negotiations over the Indo-European telegraph line could be remembered
as one example, in a usually un-even relationship, where the Qajars were able to honorably withstand the British pressure.\textsuperscript{92}

**Other localities**

Other localities along the coast were incorporated as opportunities presented themselves. Sometimes, strife between local Arab governors and Persian officials offered a pretext for intervention. In this manner, Kangan reverted to Persian control in 1880. After Shaikh Mazkur, the Arab ruler, failed to make good on promises of increased revenue and proclaimed the independence of the region, he was captured, sent to Shiraz and strangled.\textsuperscript{93}

Jask, some 140 miles south-east of Bandar Abbas, was a forgotten corner of the Gulf that had long escaped the notice of the Persian government. It was also a key station on the Indo-European telegraph line, which had been opened there in 1869. In 1879 British Indian troops who had been evacuated from Basidou were temporarily posted there. Jask was finally taken over by the Persian government in 1886 when it opened a customs house there. As Curzon comments,

> the Persian authority here, as elsewhere along this coast, is cordially detested by the local tribes, who have been accustomed to a life of independence, and who resent the appearance of the tax collector and the serbaz, as the death-warrant of their old freedom.\textsuperscript{94}

The last piece of territory to be retaken was Bandar Langeh and its district, stretching about 40 miles along the coast. This important port had been ruled by the Qawasim for most of the previous century.\textsuperscript{95} Already in 1881, the Persian government had appointed a “Passport Officer” there to deal with the many traders. In 1882, the Amin al-Sultan took over the customs, although he retained the local shaikh to collect the revenues.\textsuperscript{96} Conflict within the family of the ruling shaikh led to his murder in 1885 and a disturbed state of affairs ensued. Shaikh Qadhib, a relative who was responsible for the murder, appealed to the Qawasim at Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah to come to his aid, but they were warned off by the British. The Persian government, uneasy at the state of affairs and fearing intervention from across the Gulf, in 1887 sent troops who occupied the town and sent Qadhib as a prisoner to Tehran. While the residents of Langeh (who were about half Arab and half Persian) were reportedly unhappy about replacing an Arab ruler with a Persian, they acquiesced. An attempt in 1899 by another Qasimi to drive out the Persian governor failed.

A related issue was the Persian takeover of Sirri Island in 1887 in the wake of the affairs at Langeh.\textsuperscript{97} Sirri had been administered from Langeh by the Qasimi shaikh located there. After Langeh’s occupation, forces were dispatched to Sirri where they raised the Persian flag. This event had larger
As is often the case in Iranian history, when the central government is weak there is a pronounced trend toward local autonomy, and this was true along the Persian Gulf littoral under the early Qajars. During the long reign of Nasser-edin Shah, however, the government increasingly consolidated its control over the whole country and brought the Gulf ports directly under its authority. Between 1850 and 1887 Tehran progressively took control of the Arab principalities strung out along her southern coast from Bushehr to the border with India. It was left to Reza Shah to retake Khuzestan, the final, most powerful province, in 1924.

As mentioned at the outset, Persian control over the Gulf was never continuous but waxed and waned over the centuries. The long period between the fall of the Safavids in the early eighteenth century and the rise of the Pahlavis in the early twentieth century was one in which a weak government in Tehran was not able to fully control its Gulf littoral. However, starting in the middle of the nineteenth century there is an unmistakable trend to retaking the ports whose outcome was never in doubt. Persian sovereignty over its littoral was never challenged by the British, the main external power, while the presence of Arabs governing there, such as the Qawasim in Bandar Langeh or Omanis in Bandar Abbas, was regulated by agreements with and tribute paid to the Persian government. Only in Bahrain did Persia maintain a pretence of sovereignty it could not enforce.

A key problem for the Qajars was that they lacked a navy, and repeated requests to the British to loan them vessels were refused out of fear that Iran would make trouble in Bahrain. However, while this prevented the Persian government from projecting its power across the Gulf, it did not prevent Tehran from exerting pressure on the ports. The real vulnerability of the port cities, as noted by Grummon, was from land and not sea. A city was dependent upon its hinterland, in an area where food and water were in short supply. If a city lost control of this hinterland, as Bushehr did in the 1840s, it was easy for Persian forces to sweep down from Shiraz.

There were various ways in which Iran was able to retake the ports. Tehran often took advantage of inter-Arab strife and local disorder to impose itself, as happened at Langeh. A quarrel between the local ruling family and
Persian officials also offered occasions to intervene, such as at Bushehr and Kangan. In most cases the local population simply acquiesced in the change-over of rule, although at times, such as at Kangan, there was some resistance. According to Curzon: “[The Arabs] have been powerless, from their own intestine feuds, to resist the encroachments of the Persian authority, which has been pushed in these regions with uncompromising vigour, not exempt from much injustice and cruelty.”

By the end of the nineteenth century, it was largely for financial reasons that the port cities were retaken. The central government, in need of revenue and burdened by large foreign loans, focused on the southern customs as one of the most dependable and lucrative sources of income. In the 1880s the bureaucracy was rearranged so that control of the ports shifted from Shiraz to Tehran, and the customs were farmed personally by the Amin al-Sultan, one of the most powerful men in the country. “The changes which were made in the Customs administration after 1898 constitute the most important series of administrative reforms which took place during the reign of Muzaffar al-Din Shah,” according to Burrell.

Britain played a key role in these events. Above all, it sought to maintain peace by keeping the Persians and Arabs on their own side of the Gulf. Thus the British sought to prevent the Persians from retaking Bahrain, and did not allow Qasimi shaikhs in Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah to come to the rescue of their kinsman in Langeh when he was deposed. Likewise the British prevented the Omani sultan from sending an armada to Bushehr, Bandar Abbas or Chahbahar, when at various times he was displeased with Persian actions. It is notable that Britain never intervened to protect a local Arab shaikh, starting with the Al Mazkur in 1850 in Bushehr and continuing until Shaikh Khaz‘al in Khuzestan in 1924. British policy was to work with the central government, no matter how attractive it might have been to create small statelets as it did on the southern shore of the Gulf. Britain could have made Khuzestan another Kuwait, but it chose not to. British policymakers were periodically keen to retain the island of Kharg, which they occupied twice, as a base, but desisted so as not to provoke Russia.

Before the late nineteenth century nobody knew where the border lay in the south-east and few cared. The British project to build a telegraph, however, inaugurated a new era. It aroused Persian interest in the coast of Baluchistan, which they had hitherto ignored. Suddenly sovereignty over the tiny village of Jask, for example, became an international issue. Britain drew the borders with its own interests in mind, i.e. protecting British India and the telegraph line. However, it drew the border in light of political reality, and acquiesced in the Iranian takeover of Chahbahar. The coming of the telegraph was, needless to say, of considerable benefit to the Qajar government,
for the shah could now exercise much closer supervision over far-flung parts of his empire, including the southern ports. The Khan of Bampur, the last major Persian outpost in the south-east, henceforth had to pay much closer attention to the wishes of Tehran. According to Kashani-Sabet:

If the boundary negotiations accomplished anything for the Iranians, it was their success in providing them with an excuse for mining myth and history to preserve Iran’s precious domains, thus unleashing ardent cultural sentiments in the struggle to protect their Iranian identity and the territory that embodied it.100

The late nineteenth century was the end of the era of autonomous Arab principalities along the Iranian coast. The leases by which Arab shaikhs were authorized to rule, and paid Tehran to do so, were now a relic of the past. Persia was now much stronger than Oman or the small Arab principalities on the Gulf’s southern shore. As the Qajar government modernized and centralized, it was inevitable the Gulf coast, as other parts of the country, would be increasingly subject to the will of Tehran. After 1888, there is no record of political relations or correspondence between the Tehran government and the independent Arab principalities.101 The final chapter of the story of regional powers resuming control over their coastline came in 1958, when the Sultan of Oman sold the enclave of Gwadar to Pakistan for £3 million.

Notes

* I would like to thank Richard Schofield for originally suggesting this as a topic of research; Shahnaz Nadjmobadi, for comments on the text; and M. R. Izady for preparing the maps.


14 It was ironic that “the principal legacy of Nadir’s campaigns against Oman was the future rise of the family of Bu Sa’id as rulers of Oman and Zanzibar.” Rose Greaves, “Iranian Relations with the European Trading Companies, to 1798,” in Avery et al., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 7, pp. 352–3.
16 Shahnaz Razieh Nadjmabadi, personal communication, April 11, 2006.
20 “‘Qawasim’ was a term loosely applied to denote the tribes subject to the authority of the Qasimi shaikhs of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaima, but it applied more strictly to the shaikhly family itself. How many tribes acknowledged the authority of the Qasimi shaikhs, what their strength was, or how they were distributed, are difficult questions to answer.” (Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*, pp. 17–18).
21 Nadjmabadi, “Arab Presence on the Iranian Coast.”


The nature of this grant has been disputed ever since. Kalat maintained that the grant was only for the temporary support of the sultan while he was a refugee, whereas Oman contends that the cession was permanent and assured naval protection of the Makran coast. In any case, Gwadar thrived under Omani sovereignty and became the main port on the Makran coast. Oman maintained possession of Gwadar until it sold it to Pakistan in 1958. (More detail in Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 2, pp. 601–22). See also Riccardo Redaelli, “Administrative Subdivisions and Tribal Structures: The Perception of Territory between Tradition and Modernity,” in *Baluchistan: Terra Incognita: A New Methodological Approach Combining Archaeological, Historical, Anthropological and Architectural Studies*, BAR International Series 1141, Studies in the Archaeology and History of Baluchistan 1 (Oxford: Archaoepress, 2003), pp. 37–8.


Ibid., pp. 2105–9. The Union Jack was flown there.


Point 16 in Pelly letter, 10 August 1868, in *Iran and the Persian Gulf*, vol. 1, p. 512.


Ibid., p. 265.


Ibid., vol. 5, p. 2596. In 1900–1901 the net customs revenue of the Gulf was 320,000 tomans, whereas previously they had been farmed for 250,000 tomans, only a portion of which reached Tehran.


Floor, “The Rise and Fall of Bushehr.”

Ibid.

Their Omani origin is cited in Niebuhr, *Travels Through Arabia*, vol. 2, p. 145; another possibility mentioned by Wellstead that they came from Abu Dhabi can probably be disregarded due to the primitive state of that area at the time. See Grummon, “Rise and Fall of the Arab Shaykhdom of Bushehr,” pp. 67–8.
63 Ibid., p. 54.
64 Ibid., pp. 77–8.
65 This process is explained in ibid., pp. 220–41.
66 Ibid., pp. 21–2.
67 Ibid., p. 99.
68 Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 4, pp. 2049–52. This is despite the fact that the shaikh had supported the British during the invasion of Kharg in 1838 (Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*, p. 467).
77 Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 4, p. 2045.
78 For another copy of the lease and insight into the circumstances surrounding its revocation, see *Iran in the Persian Gulf*, vol. 1, pp. 507–12.
84 Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 4, p. 2158.
90 Shahvar, “Communications, Qajar Irredentism, and the Strategies of British India,” part 2, p. 592, fn. 83. The Persian government accepted the new border with the exception that Kouhak and part of the Mashkil Valley should belong to it, a position finally accepted by Britain in 1896.
96 This led many merchants to emigrate to or open agencies in the Trucial Coast, where business could be carried out more profitably – for example, imported goods at Dubai could be sold 10 percent cheaper. See Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 8, p. 1098.
97 Ibid., vol. 4, p. 2066.
100 Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, p. 36.
6 Narrowing the frontier
Mid-nineteenth century efforts to delimit and map the Perso-Ottoman boundary

Richard Schofield

SUMMARY

Drawn for the most part from a familiarity with the relevant British primary sources, this chapter chronicles the vexed process of narrowing the Perso-Ottoman frontier during the mid-nineteenth century. Having established that these borderlands had long functioned as a traditional frontier or border march, it then scrutinizes the roles played by Britain and Russia (as the interventionary powers) and by the Ottoman Empire and Persia as the local sovereigns in these efforts to narrow a disputed and impermanent zone into a mappable line from 1843 to 1876. It will be argued that Britain's rationale for stabilizing the frontier – casting in stone the territorial balance that they estimated to prevail along the borderlands in 1843 – was not only flawed in principle but impossible, in practice, to establish on the ground on any convincing basis. Britain would demonstrate in all of this that its understanding of a socially and historically complex borderlands was rather superficial. If this was one reason why the project remained unfinished in the mid-1870s, the main one was that Britain and Russia did not possess the authority to impose the settlement they sought. Nevertheless, one consequence of this imperial project was to progressively instil a more developed territorial consciousness or defensiveness in the local disputants, whereby territorial definition in itself would become a major component of identity and rivalry. Customary transboundary movements would increasingly be viewed by central authority in Constantinople and Tehran as unwanted violations of national territory. Essentially, it will be argued that the Ottoman Empire saw participating in efforts to settle the frontier question as a chance not only to familiarize itself with remote and inaccessible terrain but to actually materially improve its territorial definition at the expense of Persia. For its part, Persia was notably pragmatic throughout this episode, believing that it would secure a more favourable definition by supporting the efforts of the mediating powers than it would by confronting Constantinople directly.

The paper consists of three main chronological sections. First it details the trials and tribulations of the Turco-Persian Boundary Delimitation Commission between 1850 and 1852. Second, it reviews the faltering attempts made
by the mediating powers to produce detailed mapping in the 1860s of the borderland zone recognized during that survey. Third, it reviews the resumption of negotiations in the mid-1870s, when optimism briefly prevailed before outbreak of the Serbian war.

ESTABLISHING THE FRONTIER

In truth, the scenario whereby a linear international boundary evolves within a long-established frontier zone is rarer than one might assume from the literature, especially for areas of the former colonial world – testimony to the oft-mentioned assertion that colonial boundary-drawing was haphazard. Yet, by any reckoning, the Perso-Ottoman borderlands constituted a classic frontier zone. Classic in the sense that they existed as a fluctuating, conflict-prone zone to which competing imperial authority was never extended on a permanent basis; also classic in the sense that for the Ottomans they constituted remote and unfamiliar terrain and for the Persians, the divide separating the aliens to the west. Finally, this textbook traditional frontier provided ample opportunities for localized political autonomy and the relative freedom of socio-economic borderlands movement.

The eastern Mesopotamian plain and Zagros mountains to its east had long been recognized as a traditional frontier, dating back to the times when the Byzantines and ancient Persia hired the local Arab Ghassanid and Lakhmid groups to fight out their struggles here. In treaty terms, the frontier must rank as one of the longest established anywhere for the May 1639 “Treaty of peace and demarcation of frontiers”, signed in Zohab, remains the oldest explicit demarcation agreement between states. Yet the combined effect of this and similar follow-up truces in the form of further Perso-Ottoman treaties signed at Hamedan (1727), Kerden (1746) and Erzurum (1823) was essentially to shade a wide strip of territory in which the authority of Ottoman Sultan and Persian Shah was weak and disputed, albeit with slightly increased degrees of precision. At least, though, the Zohab Treaty had established the basic parameters of the frontier zone. For the previous one and half centuries had seen wild fluctuations in territorial control as the new Persian Safavid rulers collided with an Ottoman Empire bent on expanding eastwards into the Caucasus. Persian territorial losses in western Azerbaijan and its main Kurdish areas further south were codified in the 1555 Treaty of Amasya, crudely defining the borderlands to run southwards from Georgia and Armenia to the Shatt al-Arab delta down the spine of the Zagros mountains. A revival of Safavid fortunes under Shah Abbas I saw Persia make good these losses, reclaiming Azerbaijan and even occupying Baghdad for a short period. With the Ottomans recovering to retake Baghdad in 1638 and a relative territorial equilibrium recognized, the Zohab deal was signed by Abbas’s successor, Shah Safi and Sultan Murad IV. Though, post-Zohab, there would not be quite the extreme fluctuations in territorial fortunes previously
witnessed, the Perso-Ottoman borderlands would still shift eastwards and westwards in a manner roughly analogous to the historical tribulations of a Polish state trapped between Germany and Russia.

This is not to argue that at certain times and along certain stretches of the borderlands, boundaries did not exist as fixed limits of militarized state control, or that they were not respected as such. In fact Matthee argues that the “Ottoman–Safavid border area, moreover, was a political border as much as a frontier”.5 Fixed border transit posts, frequented by merchants and pilgrims crossing the Zagros mountains, operated with precision (most particularly the Kermanshah–Baghdad road route via Mandali), while Persian sources from the Safavid era depict the western borders as a militarized limit, separating the alien lands and peoples to the west.6 Yet, while a series of frontier fortresses may have marked lines of military control – sometimes fairly rigidly, for local borderlanders the frontier represented a “hostile, unstable and insecure zone that presented an administrative challenge to both empires”,7 from the malarial marshlands of the south to the remote mountains and valleys further north.8 The constant changes in the post-war balance of power recorded by the early Perso-Ottoman territorial treaties as both local powers tried to meet such a challenge exacerbated these classic characteristics of the frontier and created an unstable margin in the celebrated fashion of a border march, a zone in which both imperial fortunes and the loyalties of borderlanders fluctuated.

The Persian and Ottoman empires had learned from long experience, like the Romans and other imperial powers before them, that in these circumstances one did not just build alliances with borderlanders up to the limits of what was usually fleeting territorial control, but beyond them.9 This reinforced the zonal function of this frontier and was a state of affairs with which distant central authority may not have been unhappy. As McLachlan (1989) attests,

local considerations were often more important than imperial policies in settling the spheres of Iranian and Ottoman influence in the borderlands. Furthermore, the Ottomans hesitated to define the boundary too precisely because of the potential loss of large revenues collected from client tribes in the area.10

Moreover, allying with borderlanders could only be tentative and more often than not, only temporary, since tribal loyalties “might be bought but could never be taken for granted”.11 If pragmatism governed Ottoman frontier policy, then the overriding Persian interest in projecting the frontier westwards (or at least rendering it more secure and stable) may have been an appreciation of a rather more basic and constant consideration, as explained by Barthold (1984): “The Shi‘i rulers of Persia were . . . reluctant to leave a region that harbored the principal Shi‘i sanctuaries and where the Shi‘is constituted the major part of the population, in the hands of the Sunni sultans of Turkey.”12
Imperial incentives to narrow the frontier

Incentives and opportunities to narrow the frontier derived from an unprecedented decade of European diplomatic cooperation (much of it concerning Middle Eastern issues), the developing interests of Russia and Britain in the southern and northern ends of the borderlands and genuine fears that these were about to be impacted by another serious bout of Perso-Ottoman hostilities, especially following the Ottoman sacking of Mohammerah in 1837.\textsuperscript{13} With Russia desiring stability in its recently-acquired Caucasian provinces and Britain coveting a more stable Mesopotamia into which to project its economic interests, narrowing the Perso-Ottoman frontier became a prioritized European project in the early 1840s. Britain and Russia agreed momentarily to see eye to eye on the Eastern Question in December 1839, while unity was briefly restored to the Big Five in Europe (Russia, Britain, France, Prussia and Austria) following their success in cutting Mehmet Ali Pasha down to size with the settlement of the Egypt crisis at the turn of the 1840s. Having concluded a commercial convention with Constantinople in August 1838, Britain added its name (with Russia and the Ottoman Empire) to multilateral conventions aimed at pacifying the Levant and establishing a regime for the Turkish straits during 1840–1841. This would be followed immediately by the conclusion of an Anglo-Persian Treaty of Commerce in October 1841.\textsuperscript{14} So the conditions for intervention in the frontier question were as good as they were ever likely to be.

Brought in as mediatory powers onto a quadripartite boundary commission in May 1843, Britain and Russia hoped to guide their hosts towards a more definitive and binding settlement of their territorial dispute and to narrow the frontier zone into a mappable line. In fact, once they had hastily recognized a rudimentary territorial status quo in the borderlands from Mount Ararat in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south – which was to be the basis of their loose treaty definition of the land boundary four years later, most of their energies were spent determining the ownership of the port of Mohammerah (the contemporary Iranian city of Khorramshahr) on the Shatt al-Arab.\textsuperscript{15} The merits of the competing claims to Mohammerah had been neatly encapsulated by Sir Stratford Canning, Britain’s Ambassador in Constantinople in April 1844: “The whole results in a presumption that the original territorial right is in favour of Turkey, and the right of conquest and possession is in favour of Persia.”\textsuperscript{16} When Britain and Russia agreed that the port at this stage possessed greater linkages with Persia than the Ottomans, the die was cast for a new territorial accommodation.\textsuperscript{17} Most importantly, this observation meant that a river was defined in the Erzurum boundary treaty of May 1847 to comprize the southernmost constituent of the Perso-Ottoman boundary, whereas the Shatt al-Arab had found no mention in the previous Perso-Ottoman treaties already referred to. This was not considered especially problematic since already, by this stage, the “superiority” of the natural boundary (i.e. that following physical
Figure 6.1 The 1843 borderlands status quo
features such as mountains and rivers) was accepted in the West and would provide a guiding principle for colonial boundary-drawing for the next half-century.

Deliberately maintaining grey area within the May 1847 treaty and the general murkiness of the manner of its conclusion were the inevitable costs of gaining Ottoman and Persian signatures on the document. For here there was a river boundary delimitation supposedly introduced by a treaty that made no explicit mention of ownership of the river waters itself, while Ottoman assent to its vague and ambivalent contents had only been extended after the issue of secret explanatory notes from Britain both before and after its signature (of which Persia would be unaware until after the Erzurum Treaty’s signature).18 Even then, Britain realized that the territorial arrangement being contemplated – recognition of the Shatt as an Ottoman river – was far from ideal for a navigable river used by both sides. No less a figure than Lord Palmerston himself (then Foreign Secretary) voiced reservations:

I have to state to you with reference to the pretension which has been advanced by the Porte to an absolute right of sovereignty over the Chat-el-Arab, that when the opposite banks of a river belong as they do in the case of the lower portion of the Chat-el-Arab, to different Powers, it would be contrary to international usage to give to one of the two powers the exclusive sovereignty of that portion of the course of such River, and that therefore this proposal of the Turkish Government’s seems to be inadmissible.19

Hence the very crux of the Shatt al-Arab boundary dispute as it existed up until 1975 had been recognized before pen was put to paper to initially define the river boundary in the first instance. Here though, the mediating commissioners had to concern themselves with the art of the possible. Yet, while Ottoman ownership of the entire waters of the Shatt was clearly implied by the treaty and Britain and Russia felt confident that a delimitation had been extended along its east (Persian) bank as a consequence, the text itself was anything but definitive. Article Two dealt with territorial definition:

The State of Persia undertakes that all the level lands of the province of Zohab, i.e. the lands of the western part of it, shall be abandoned to the State of Turkey.

The State of Turkey also undertakes that the lands of the eastern part of the province of Zohab, i.e. all the mountainous lands of it, with the valley of Kerrind, shall be abandoned to the State of Persia.

And the State of Persia firmly undertakes to give up all manner of claim in regard to the town and province of Souleimanieh, and not at any time to meddle or interfere in any way with the right of sovereignty which the State of Turkey possesses in the said province.
And the State of Turkey also firmly undertakes that the town and seaport of Mohammerah, and the island of El Khizir, and the anchorage place, and also the lands of the eastern bank, i.e. the left side of the Shatt-el-Arab, which are in the possession of tribes acknowledgely attached (subjected) to Persia, shall be in the possession of the State of Persia, in full sovereignty. And besides this, Persian ships shall have the right to navigate the said river in full liberty, from the place where it flows into the sea, as far as the point of junction of the frontiers of the two parties.²⁰

Most of the land boundary further north was based upon the aforementioned crude identification of the status quo pertaining in 1843, which in itself supposedly corresponded loosely to earlier vague Perso-Ottoman treaties, except for the specific arrangements earmarked for Sulaymaniyeah and Zohab (see above). Article Three of the May 1847 treaty had stipulated the formation of a four-party commission, whose task was to refine the delimitation introduced by that document and to map and mark it on the basis of a survey they would undertake of the whole length of the borderlands. Clarifying the task to be performed by this commission at the outset, Palmerston established that, as far as the mediating commissioners were concerned, territorial restitution would be confined to Mohammerah, Zohab and Sulaymaniyeah, in accordance with the 1847 treaty and that otherwise, the status quo as approximated in 1843 along the borderlands should be established on the ground. Yet such an undertaking, performed between 1850 and 1852, would prove impossible, predictably in light of the Erzurum Treaty’s inexactitude and the limited mediatory powers of Britain and Russia. For both the local powers would adopt widely divergent and essentially irreconcilable interpretations of what had been introduced in 1847, as we shall witness.

THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF THE TURCO-PERSIAN BOUNDARY DELIMITATION COMMISSION, 1850–1852

By November 1848 representatives of both the local and mediating powers had been appointed to the delimitation commission. Colonel Fenwick Williams, who had been chief representative during the Erzurum negotiations, was appointed British Commissioner and Colonel Y. I. Tchirikof, the Russian Commissioner, with Mirza Jaafar Khan and Dervish Pasha their local Persian and Ottoman counterparts. In light of the commission’s subsequent failures, the last paragraph of Sir Stratford Canning’s instructions to Williams of December 1848 seemed particularly ironic: “I leave the subject here, with a confident hope that the same success which ultimately crowned your negotiations at Erzurum will, after an interval less protracted by unavoidable incidents, attend your present duties.”²¹

In the early months of 1849 the work of the delimitation commission was to be gravely compromised before it had even assembled. While ostensibly
on his way from Constantinople to join his fellow commissioners at Mosul, Dervish Pasha made a detour to Khotour and forcibly removed the occupying Persian authorities from the district. The Ottoman commissioner then established barracks for a regular troop garrison and erected a line of stone pillars only six or seven miles away from the Persian town of Khoi. These landmarks carried inscriptions recording the annexation of the district to the Ottomans from the date of their emplacement. This would only be the first of several unilateral actions taken by Dervish Pasha over the next couple of years or so, but would militate against any success the delimitation commission might have achieved and certainly abused a Perso-Ottoman commitment to respect the territorial status quo in the borderlands in the run-up to the signature of the Erzurum treaty.

While the commission met briefly during the summer of 1849, it did not get down to any real business until January 1850, when it met in Mohammerah to commence operations. The record of its eight sittings before the end of February is enlightening. For it soon became clear that Article Two of the Erzurum Treaty, with the explanatory note issued by the mediating commissioners (as well as the apparent ratification of these documents in March 1848), had failed to solve the discord over limits to state territory at the head of the Persian Gulf. Dervish Pasha, who had arrived with all guns literally blazing, in a gunship built specifically for the occasion of the commission’s inauguration, manipulated the less than crystal clear wording of the explanatory note to advance Ottoman claims deep into Persian Khuzestan (Arabistan). He recognized the walled port of Mohammerah and the island of Khizir (Abadan island) only as Persian sovereign enclaves within what was claimed to be long-established Persian territory. He also declared that this concession had only been made in the belief that Persia would abandon illegally-held territorial positions further north in the borderlands, including Khotour. While this was obviously a retrospective pretext for the annexation of Khotour, there is no evidence to suggest that such a commitment was ever made or even discussed. An exasperated Stratford Canning in Constantinople would make the following comment to Palmerston:

If the Turkish line were established there would be three lines of frontier, running almost parallel to each other, from the sea to the Haffar Channel – an absurdity which never could have been contemplated by those who sought to simplify the relations of Turkey with Persia and to diminish the chances of fresh collision between them.

Given Ottoman actions, Persia was left with little alternative than to play the same game, interpreting the treaty with its explanatory note in an equally unconvincing manner to have granted it sovereignty over all territory east of the Shatt al-Arab, for practically the whole course of its length from the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates at Kornah to the head of the Gulf. Moreover, the vague treaty definition of the river boundary, and its
Figure 6.2 The 1850 Williams line and rival Persian and Ottoman interpretations (to its west and east) of the 1847 Shatt al-Arab boundary delimitation

stipulation about the right of Persian vessels to navigate freely, was used to argue that the boundary delimitation ran along the middle of the river. So the chief effect of all this had been to create a zone of overlapping claims in the deltaic region at the head of the Persian Gulf. Williams soon responded on 4 February 1850 by proposing the line in the delta region that he reckoned had been introduced by Article Two of the Erzurum Treaty. His line ran southwards from Hawizeh to the junction of the Jideyeh canal with the Shatt al-Arab and from there along the east (Persian) bank of the river to the Persian Gulf. Its raison d'être was to keep the Ottomans away from territory east of Mohammerah and Khizr Island and Persia away from the waters and islands of the Shatt, thereby guaranteeing the future security and continued prosperity of Mohammerah and Basrah.25

While the Williams line would later become universally accepted as the river boundary delimitation introduced by the Erzurum Treaty, getting the Ottomans to respect it – even on a temporary basis – proved a tedious and elusive affair. By the end of March 1850, Persia had all but consented to the Williams line for the river delimitation but wanted its territory to be defined to extend four miles further upstream so as to leave resident Bani Ka’ab tribesmen in Persia. When this suggestion was frowned upon by the mediating commissioners because of the threat such a move might present to the well-being of Basrah (as well as to explicitly contravene the stipulations of Britain’s Explanatory Note of April 1847), Persia agreed on 25 May 1850 to accept the Williams line, provided that all Ka’ab tribesman to its west be transferred back to Persian territory. This was never acted upon since getting Ottoman movement on the issue was proving a far tougher nut to crack. All the intensive efforts of the British and Russian ambassadors in Constantinople to induce the Porte’s (short for Sublime Porte, a commonplace nineteenth-century European reference to the Ottoman government) acceptance came to nought and resulted in a proposal in the summer that the disputing parties only temporarily respect the mediating commissioners formula and move on to dealing with other, less troublesome stretches of the borderlands further north. For much of the next year, however, a protracted legal wrangle ensued as to what constituted the status quo in Mohammerah and what it represented in relation to the 1847 treaty itself. In the end the Ottomans would not consent to respect the Williams line on a temporary basis until the autumn of the following year, meaning that in the intervening period the commission was idle in an official sense. The frustration of the mediating commissioners at their impotence in moving the business forward was graphically expressed by an exasperated Palmerston, “the boundary between Turkey and Persia can never be finally settled except by an arbitrary decision on the part of Great Britain and Russia”.26 While history would ultimately prove him right – with Britain and Russia finally gaining the arbitrating powers to do just this on the eve of the Great War during 1913–1914, progress towards delimiting the borderlands would remain infuriating elusive in the mid-nineteenth century. But at least with the qualified Ottoman assent finally
elicited in the autumn of 1851, the local commissioners formally accepted in writing the status quo at Mohammerah as defined by Colonel Williams. Their agreement of November promised to set aside previous recriminations and to renounce any change or innovation in respect to the inhabitants of the deltaic borderlands.

In those 21 months of stalemate between February 1850 and November 1851, the four commissioners never worked together. The British, Russian and Persian commissioners spent the summer of 1850 in the remote valleys of Luristan, while Dervish Pasha ploughed a lone furrow at Badra in the alluvial plains further south. Though they may have suspected as much, the mediating commissioners did not know at this stage that their Ottoman counterpart had been instructed by Constantinople to firm up local indicators of Turkish control in the borderlands before they were formally visited by the commission. We will return to the dual function of Dervish Pasha in a later section of this chapter. The mediating commissioners would spend the summer and spring of 1851 alone with their respective entourages in Karind and Senna.27

Any hopes that the agreement to respect the Williams line on a temporary basis would usher in a more functional operational basis for the commission were soon dashed by the attitudes of the local powers (but, again, primarily the Ottomans) when the commission finally reconvened to interpret on the ground the 1847 treaty’s territorial prescription for Zohab province. For in their respective proposals for partition, each side would interpret the wording of the 1847 treaty quite differently, perhaps predictably, given the record at Mohammerah. For as was the case in that instance, there was no boundary line mentioned in the treaty text to lay down on the ground. While the 1847 treaty had recognized the eastern, mountainous half of Zohab as Persian, Dervish Pasha advanced a claim along a notional watershed in the eastern extremes of the province (thereby already playing the natural boundaries game) while, for his part, Mirza Jaffar Khan claimed a line running through the low plain in its westernmost reaches. It would take a good couple of months before the British, in February 1852, again came up with a delimitation proposal that in their minds reflected the intent of the vague treaty formula (see Map 2). Barely had this left Williams’s hands before Dervish Pasha announced that he would suspend participation in the commission until such time as the 1843 status quo, as recognized by the Porte, was restored in Mohammerah and Zohab. Believing the complaint to be unreasonable – as far as they understood it at all – the remaining three commissioners moved southwards to survey the stretch of borderlands between Mandali and Hawizeh, terrain that Dervish Pasha had already visited twice in unilateral efforts to beef up markers of an Ottoman presence. By the end of April 1852 Williams and Tchirikof announced that the mediating commissioners were in possession of sufficient topographical data to map the southern Perso-Ottoman borderlands from the Gulf northwards to Zohab.28
Relegating the ambitions of the commission,
May–September 1852

By this stage the mediating powers were already relegating their ambitions for the commission. After Palmerston’s observations, they realized that no progress could be made on delimitation until such time as they were granted arbitrating powers. Persia seemed prepared to consent to such an arrangement, providing its control of Khotour was restored and that delimitation would be based squarely on the express (albeit vague) terms of the Erzurum Treaty. Constantinople’s absolute refusal to entertain any such notion persuaded Britain and Russia to pragmatically restrict the labours of the commission to the construction of a map. Thereby a border zone would be allocated, ranging in width between 20 and 50 miles, within which a precise boundary would be delimited by future common consent. Resumption of further diplomatic efforts to agree upon delimitation would not be contemplated until completion of the said map.29 Apparently satisfied by this turn of events, Dervish Pasha rejoined the commission for the final stage of their survey, northwards from Zohab through Kurdistan to Mount Ararat in the north, a task that would take until mid-September. Yet his unilateral walkabouts would continue, with the mediating commissioners fairly certain that stop-offs in Serdesht, Banna, Larijan and Ushni were designed to seduce Persian subjects away from their well-established allegiance to the Shah. Nevertheless, on 14 September 1852, Colonel Williams reported to Whitehall the conclusion of the survey of the Perso-Ottoman frontier from the Gulf to Ararat. A few months later – early in 1853 – Williams informed the British government of his intention to draw up a report in conjunction with Tchirikof, embodying the opinions and suggestions for delimitation of the mediating commissioners on every stretch of the surveyed borderlands.

Now near farce would intervene to further bedevil the imperial project to narrow the Perso-Ottoman borderlands. Incredibly, all the characteristically meticulous (and, by all accounts, copious) notes and memoranda that Williams had collected for the borderland mapping, as well as his own final report, were lost to the muddy Thames at Gravesend, as his return voyage from Constantinople made British territorial waters but, alas, no further. He at least survived to tell the tale but the loss of the vast majority of data collected between 1850 and 1852 meant that whatever slim chance they had of clarifying the recent territorial history of the borderlands (and therefore the context for the 1847 treaty settlement) had now disappeared. It will be recalled that the mediating commissioners’ original instruction had been to confine territorial restitution to Mohammerah, Sulaymaniyeh and Zohab, in conformity with the 1847 treaty, but elsewhere to respect the status quo as originally estimated in 1843. With the loss of Williams’s records, establishing what this territorial status quo might have meant in more detailed terms on the ground was now a completely futile exercise.30 Luckily, the detailed
travelling diary maintained by Colonel Tchirikof survived, while Dervish Pasha would also later publish his recollections of the vexed exercise.

So despite the considerable exertions of the delimitation commission in the early 1850s, the Perso-Ottoman boundary had evolved very little. The mediating commissioner had proposed a clarification of the delimitation from Hawizeh to Mohammerah, though this had only been relented to on a temporary basis by the Ottoman Empire. Constantinople flatly rejected the mediators’ suggestion for partition of Zohab. Khotour province further north had merely been surveyed, and though Britain and Russia had consistently maintained that it should be restored to Persia, their failure to propose a delimitation here would later cause problems. On the termination of the doomed delimitation project in September 1852, Persia had appealed to the mediating commissioners to formally vindicate their rights to the locality, which was immediately done by Williams and Tchirikof, who recognized that control of its mountain passes was vital to its national security. Indeed, during the very next year, as Russia and the Ottomans were briefly at war, Britain suggested that Ottoman recognition of Persian sovereignty over Khotour would be a reasonable price to pay for its eastern neighbour’s neutrality. Any chances of this prevailing were complicated by the construction of a Persian fort in Zohab, west of the mediating commissioners’ recommendation for a delimitation there. It would not be until 1861 that Constantinople replied that evacuation from Khotour was impossible.

WAR, PEACE AND MAPMAKING, 1854–1870

By the mid-1850s, the decade of relatively cordial relations between the states represented on the commission was clearly at an end. Ironically, almost everyone but the Persians and Ottomans would trade blows. A brief Russo-Ottoman conflict in 1853 was followed by the Crimean War (1854–1856) and then the Herat episode (1856–1857). Persia even suggested that as a consequence France might now serve as mediator, but with a return to regional stability in the late 1850s, Britain and Russia put their minds to the question of mapping the borderlands. A first step was to remove the centre of operations for a scaled-down Turco-Persian Boundary Commission from Constantinople to St Petersburg, whose chief purpose was now to produce detailed maps of the borderlands surveyed by the delimitation commission earlier in the decade. Supervision of the British cartographic effort now devolved upon Lieutenant Glascott, Britain’s surveyor on the previously mentioned 1848–1852 effort.

As the mediating role was increasingly confined to mapping back in Europe, Persia and the Ottomans charged each other with territorial transgressions of the vague and elusive status quo supposedly pertaining back in the 1840s. Ottoman concerns revolved around Persia’s alleged construction of forts west of such an imaginary line, though privately Britain reckoned that constructions at Merivan, Lahijan and Avraman lay within established
Persian territory. Even the pettiest charges and countercharges now became quickly magnified since, as Kashani-Sabet attests "By then, Perso-Ottoman rivalry had only intensified." Meanwhile, back in St Petersburg, considerable differences had come to light between the maps of the borderlands being produced by the British and Russian delegations on the Turco-Persian Boundary Delimitation Commission. Produced independently of one another, the two versions were reviewed by the British and Russian Ambassadors in Constantinople, who noted literally thousands of contradictions and discrepancies and the painting of such a divergent picture that any question of jointly presenting them to the Ottoman government was a non-starter. As Lyons, the British Ambassador in Constantinople, would comment on 10 January 1867:

It appears... that the two maps differ so widely that they cannot be used indifferently for the purpose for which they were designed – in fact that a line of frontier might be drawn which would be admissible according to the one and inadmissible according to the other.

Not only that, but the orthography of place names within the mapped borderland zone was causing real problems and that was just Lieutenant Glascott trying to match up the British and Russian translations on the mapping. This all pointed to a wider shortcoming of the 1850–1852 exercise, of course. Many languages were spoken within the borderlands and the mediating commissioners would not have been that familiar with them. Nor can it have been that likely that those individuals on the home delegations during the delimitation survey would have been familiar with Armenian, Kurdish and Chaldean. Maybe this partially explained Ottoman diffidence to some of the rulings of the mediating commissioners – for they simply cannot have been that well acquainted with the human geography of the borderlands. Suffice it here to say that the separate British and Russian maps remained unsigned and the two powers agreed to produce instead a joint Identic Map for presentation to the Ottoman and Persian governments.

In August 1869 Glascott announced the completion of the Identic Map or Carte Identique. Produced at great expense, this extraordinary document measured some 60-feet long and was executed on a scale of one inch to a mile, covering the entire length of the borderlands between the 30th and 40th degrees of latitude from the Persian Gulf in the south and the high drainage divides of the Caucasus mountains in the north (see map three for a reproduced section of the Carte Identique). The frontier zone encapsulated on the map ranged variously between 20 and 50 miles. Having given the mapping the go-ahead this time around, the British and Russian Ambassadors presented it to the Ottomans in October 1869, with their counterparts in Tehran handing over the same document to the Persian government some four months later in February 1870. The representatives of the mediating powers then expressed the expectation that the Perso-Ottoman boundary would
be found somewhere within the limits depicted for the borderlands on the map. In their mediatory capacity, they also suggested a procedure whereby both the local powers might mark down their opinions of where the boundary lay within the allotted zone and that where divergences might arise, these should be referred back to the British and Russian governments.\textsuperscript{38} Constantinople had evidently been anticipating a document of some clarity and utility with Ottoman Foreign Minister Ali Pasha commenting that “only by its promulgation can it be hoped that an end to frequent misunderstandings will be effected”.\textsuperscript{39} Yet, while representing a “surprising feat of cartography”,\textsuperscript{40} the mapping was still replete with errors with upwards of 4,000 discrepancies having to be resolved before the mid-1870s. While Constantinople delivered no reaction following receipt of the Identic Map, Tehran continued to believe – as it had done from the mid-1840s – that it would secure the best deal on the borderlands by cooperating fully with the mediating powers. Hence, whatever was thought of the technical merits of the mapping, it hinted strongly that it would agree without reservations that the boundary line should be fixed by arbitration within the zone indicated on the joint Anglo-Russian map.\textsuperscript{41}

While Britain and Russia refined their borderland mapping, Constantinople and Tehran were increasingly engaged in the kind of territorial disputes that suggested that if Anglo-Russian efforts had succeeded in doing anything these last two decades or so, it was instilling a more developed awareness of national territoriality. The number of incidents occurring along the borderlands was increasing – especially in the Pusht-i Kuh vicinity – as new European diplomatic efforts were made to get the two sides talking further about narrowing the frontier on the occasion of the presentation of the joint mapping. In an attempt to stabilize the growing disquiet over their frontier, the Ottoman Empire and Persia had signed yet another status quo convention on 3 August 1869. This stipulated that the frontier question should remain in status quo until such time as it could finally be regulated and that neither party should erect buildings on disputed territory. Yet this convention, confirmed in 1870 and slightly modified four years later, proved no more effective than its predecessors. If anything, it introduced a new element of discord for, predictably, the status quo of August 1869 that it introduced was interpreted differently by each litigant. Disputes over Kazli-Ghiol lake, lying north-west of Khotour, were followed by the alleged demolition of an Ottoman guardhouse by Persian Kurdish groups in the autumn of 1872. The latter dispute at least was apparently settled in October 1872, when Persian, Ottoman and British representatives met on the Kurdish frontier.\textsuperscript{42}

A territorial sense was developing on the part of the local powers that had not been readily apparent before this time and this was manifesting itself in incidents along the frontier and, more significantly, in attitudes to local movements within and across the borderlands. In 1867, the customary movements of the Kurdish Mangur tribe from Persia back to areas of Ottoman control caused a furore when, in reality, they had gone unremarked for decades.\textsuperscript{43}
Figure 6.3 A reduced section of the 1869 Anglo-Russian Carte Identique
A similar sense of awareness underpinned Tehran’s efforts of 1873 to claim jurisdiction over Persians resident in the Ottoman Empire by virtue of Article Seven of the May 1847 Treaty of Erzurum. It also explained its complaints when up to 10,000 Kurdish tribesmen entered what was claimed as Persian territory in June of the same year. Though Persia claimed that this transboundary movement constituted a flagrant abuse of the August 1869 status quo convention, Britain’s Ambassador in Tehran suggested it had more to do with the keen, more rigid sense of territoriality that Britain and Russia had effectively fostered, “the summer and winter pastures of tribes on both sides of the Turco-Persian frontier had for some years now been a source of tension and bloodshed”. The point was that while disputes might have been acute in a localized sense, they had rarely troubled central authority seriously in previous decades. Britain continued to play a useful, if limited, mediatary role in the borderlands during this time. A minor success in temporarily settling a territorial dispute at Bagsai (Pusht-i Kuh) in July 1873, which involved each side agreeing to withdraw its sizeable troop contingents in the area, was fairly typical.

CLOSE, BUT NO CIGAR, 1874–1876

Anglo-Russian hopes in the mid-1870s that real progress would finally be made in delimiting a Perso-Ottoman territorial divide were dashed by the untimely outbreak of the Serbian War in July 1876. Negotiations would be further suspended during a subsequent (and more serious) Russo-Ottoman War in 1877. At least the 1878 Treaty of Berlin had the effect of definitively settling the territorial status of Khotour and its occupation since 1849 by the Ottoman Empire. With that treaty having secured its evacuation by Constantinople, a mixed Anglo-Russian commission delimited a precise boundary for the area two years later.

Encouraged by Britain and Russia but delayed by further border skirmishes in the Pusht-i Kuh district and seemingly constant claims of Ottoman encroachments into Persian territory, it would not be until December 1874 that Persian and Ottoman representatives met in Constantinople to get back to the business of narrowing the frontier, supposedly to sketch out a definitive delimitation on the much corrected Identic Map. Deadlock was soon reached, however, when Persia relied upon Article Three of the 1847 Erzurum Treaty to demand a restoration of the status quo of 1843 for all parts of the frontier not expressly mentioned in Article Two. For its part, the Ottoman Empire invoked Article Nine of the same instrument to claim the application of the first Erzurum Treaty (1823) and its forerunner, the 1639 Zohab Treaty to those sections of the borderlands not singled out in Article Two. Unable to narrow their differences, the local powers accepted renewed (January 1875) Anglo-Russian offers to mediate in the dispute, though Ottoman acceptance had been contingent on an unequivocal statement that in any
forthcoming negotiations, Britain’s 1848 Explanatory Note concerning Mohammerah would be regarded as no less formal than the provisions of the 1847 treaty itself. In delivering this assurance, Britain expressed the hope that Constantinople and Tehran would find more room for compromise in the forthcoming quadripartite negotiations than they had formerly been inclined to show.

So, in March 1875, General Sir Arnold Kemball, who had previously served in both Tehran and Baghdad and was well acquainted with the borderlands and their recent history, was appointed as the British Commissioner to succeed Sir Fenwick Williams in the conferences at Constantinople. Colonel Zelenoi was appointed Russian Commissioner, Mohsin Khan, Persian Commissioner, while the durable Dervish Pasha once again headed the Ottoman delegation. Business began in earnest during June when Kemball and Zelenoi started off the conferences by reconfirming Palmerston’s ruling of 1850 in favour of the Persian contention that Article Three of the Erzurum Treaty was applicable to the frontier and that Article Nine was irrelevant (and so, by extension, were recent Ottoman arguments thereby redundant). This was consistent, but (especially with Williams’s voluminous field notes lost to the Thames back in 1853) the mediating commissioners possessed no reliable evidence as to what constituted the territorial status quo in 1843. Nonetheless, once the governing rules were re-established, the local powers were invited to trace out the boundaries they claimed (i.e. for the most part their interpretation of the territorial status quo as it had existed in 1843) within the border zone represented on the Carte Identique. When ready, these tracings – along with explanatory memoranda – were to be laid before the reconvened commission. Perhaps not too surprisingly, given his previous eccentricities during the borderlands survey of 1850–1852, the response of Dervish Pasha proved problematic for the mediating commissioners. He explained that the line he intended to trace lay altogether to the east of the designated frontier zone indicated on the Identic Map and that it would be informed by the unilateral field missions he had undertaken back in the early 1850s. He added that his government had never once accepted that a final Perso-Ottoman boundary delimitation would lie within the mapped frontier zone. Constantinople soon would, however, for the mediating commissioners energetically spelled out that any claim line passing outside the mapped borderlands would not be entertained. The attitude of the Russian government had been decisive here, for it was now a much more powerful force in the Caucasus and Black Sea than it had been only 30 years earlier. So the Ottoman government backtracked and formally recognized the frontier zone as embodying the limits within which the boundary should be traced. Constantinople did caution nevertheless that should the present commission not arrive at a definitive settlement of the frontier question, then this admission ipso facto would lapse.

For its part, and also during August 1875, the Persian government “intimated that they would agree to the arbitration of Great Britain and Russia,
and accept any line within the zone laid down by the Mediating delegates”.50

It will be recalled that a half a decade earlier, a pragmatic Tehran had signalled a similar readiness. By now, Britain was confident a settlement might finally be broached and the Foreign Office produced a series of memoranda pinpointing the remaining issues of contention that would need to be resolved en route to settlement.51 Having convened during June and September 1875 to establish the procedural basis upon which delimitation might be accomplished, the commission met up in January 1876, supposedly to review the respective boundary claims of the Ottoman and Persian governments. It would prove to be its last sitting. Here Dervish Pasha duly presented a tracing (in gold) of the frontier claimed by Constantinople with an explanatory memorandum, “but, owing to a misapprehension on the part of the Persian Commissioner, the Persian Memorandum and tracing were not ready”.52 And they would not be for a further six months (when a boundary claim traced in silver was received) by which time the Serbian War was about to break out. This subsequently absorbed all the Ottoman government’s energies and, frustratingly, halted the proceedings of the commission, just when it appeared they were making real headway. Yet the mediating commissioners had to carry the blame themselves to a certain extent, taking an eternity to get the aforesaid Ottoman and Persian memoranda translated (see below). Kemball would himself state during February 1877 that there was no prospect of the commission resuming its activities for the indefinite future. A later letter from Kemball, dated 14 March 1848, effectively winding up the commission, also embodies British frustrations:

As desired by your Excellency, I have the honour to state, in the matter of the progress made in the settlement of the Turco-Persian boundary, that the labours of the Joint Commission had reached their final stage, when they were suspended by the outbreak of war with Servia. After many sittings, which remained without effect in reconciling the long-standing differences between the two countries, the Turkish and Persian Commissioners had consented respectively to embody their pleas in memoranda to be submitted to the appreciation of the Delegates of the mediating Powers, but the preparation of the certified translations of these memoranda (which by my Russian colleague was deemed to be indispensable) had been so much delayed as to prevent our considering seri- atim the matters involved, and recording our conclusions regarding them in an official form.53

Whether or not Kemball and Zelenoi ever got the memoranda translated to their ultimate satisfaction remains unclear but privately, at least, they did come up with a compromise line of their own that bisected the boundary line claims of the local powers within the mapped borderlands. They had reservations about their achievement that was never broached to the local powers. As Kemball later commented in June 1880:
As the result of private discussions of some delicacy and difficulty, of which from the nature of the case no record could be retained, though the voluminous papers on which they are based with translations, are, of course, extant, I venture to recommend that line with little reserve. It embodies the conscientious appreciation of complicated pretensions, based upon the alternate possession and dispossession of territory by conquest in the course of centuries, but it partook necessarily of the nature of a compromise to which neither Delegate would be committed in detail, and inasmuch as our conclusions were arrived at as it were out of Court, these conclusions could not probably be enforced as decisions without appeal. Admitting them, however, to be rightly liable to revision, they have at least the merit of embracing the subject as a whole, and of presenting at one view the compensations and mutual sacrifices which are proposed from end to end of the line.\textsuperscript{54}

Diplomatic realities meant that there would never be a realistic opportunity to present Kemball and Zelenoi’s compromise line. The reservations expressed by Kemball also suggested that the mediating powers no longer had the appetite. Getting the two local powers to trace their boundary claims was one thing (and a genuine achievement in the light of this protracted episode). Trying to reconcile them might have been an entirely different matter. It would have to wait until the eve of the Great War for a line to be drawn under this particular story, by which time, crucially, Britain and Russia had assumed arbitrating powers.\textsuperscript{55}

**LOOKING BACK – CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The British secretary on the commission that would finally demarcate a Perso-Ottoman land boundary in 1914 looked back on the whole vexed project of narrowing the frontier and commented that it had been “[a] phenomenon of procrastination unparalleled even in the chronicles of Oriental diplomacy”.\textsuperscript{56} Certainly, the mid-nineteenth-century imperial effort to narrow the Perso-Ottoman frontier had driven home several home truths. First, territorial settlements of this vintage were rarely governed by an objective application of international law. While Britain was probably correct in its assessment that the only way Persia and the Ottoman Empire were going to be able to agree upon territorial accommodation was to dilute its detail and clarity, this was no formula for defining territorial limits. Second, while Britain would become something of an old hand both in delimiting colonial territorial limits by the turn of the twentieth century and presiding over commissions for that purpose, here it was still very much a novice. The bases for drawing a boundary had been crude and unclear and were too often an arbitrary compromise between rival Persian and Ottoman claims. The borderlands survey of 1850–1852 had always been marked by a confusion of aims and methods.
Perhaps the most obvious lesson to be drawn was, however, that to lead effectively a territorial definition exercise, a specific mandate is required for the task. Britain and Russia were trying to lead a process without adequate powers. As mediators, they could only try and bring together the local disputants but ultimate control remained with Persia and the Ottomans.

It is not surprising that establishing a boundary in a frontier zone would prove so difficult. The basis for this project was to estimate the territorial balance in a transition zone marked by fluidity and impermanence. If Britain’s intervention here in the borderlands was characterized by an attempt to cement variable political structures and to freeze situations in time, it would do analogous things elsewhere in the region. Making protectorate-style arrangements in the decades that followed with the most powerful families of the coastal settlements of the western and southern Persian Gulf littoral would have a similar effect of fossilizing prevailing political power structures in stone when fluidity had previously been a defining feature. At least in the latter case the state of affairs that Britain decided to render permanent had been clearly recognizable. Never mind that adopting the territorial balance that just happened to prevail in 1843 was highly questionable in itself; there was no way that Britain and Russia could have characterized this accurately in the first instance. And despite the fact that the 1843 territorial status quo continued to be the guiding principle for narrowing the Perso-Ottoman frontier, no-one could convincingly re-establish where it lay, even in an approximate sense.

Adjusting to a more rigid frontier also troubled and confused the Persians and Ottomans. Whereas neither had been generally disturbed by the customary migrations of tribes across the historic borderland zone, each would increasingly characterize these as deliberate and unwarranted territorial transgressions across a line (or at least a frontier of considerably less width). A hardening territorial rivalry had developed by the late 1860s. Sure enough, before this time some transboundary movements of tribes had annoyed central authority but more for the inconvenience they caused than any developed sense of territoriality. For instance, in the years before Britain and Russia intervened in the frontier dispute, the Ottoman government complained about having to take responsibility for seasonal transboundary movements of Persian Kurds. As Britain’s Consul in Erzurum commented: “The pasha again repeated that some decided steps must be taken by Persia to retain the Koords when restored, for that Turkey could not undertake annually to employ troops to force the Persian tribes to quit the Turkish territory and return to Persia.”

Evolving Persian and Ottoman views and conduct throughout the nineteenth century require attention. For Constantinople this was a long-established though distant frontier zone. Bringing greater territorial stability to the borderlands through the quadripartite border treaty and the subsequent surveying commission also represented an opportunity for Ottoman central authority to actually extend control there, never mind just getting better acquainted with the region. Before the 1850–1852 Turco-Persian Boundary Delimitation Commission had even sat down to
consider matters, its representative had delayed proceedings for a good halfyear by officially annexing the borderland province of Khotour en route to its first session in Mohammerah. Following this rather blatant landgrab, he would then participate only at a distance within the commission, frequently leaving his three colleagues to embark upon his unilateral, fact-finding tours of the borderlands. It took some time for the mediating powers to realize that he was playing a double game. As M. A. Gamazof (1875) would later comment in the introduction to Colonel Tchirikof’s travelling diary of the demarcation survey:

As regards the Ottoman commissioner, he did not arrive at Bagdad till the middle of June. His delay was caused by the fact that the Porte had given him a preliminary mission independent of the common work of the mixed commission. The Turkish representative went from Constantinople straight to the frontier of Azerbaijan, not solely in order to make enquiries there, as the Porte said at the time, but, as was proved by the facts, simply with the object of taking possession of Kotur and the defile leading from Van to that strategically important place, which, the Porte asserted, had been taken from Turkey by Persia without any right. The Porte wished in this way to get possession of something to be made use of in future eventualities, and chose Kotur, in the first place because that locality, not being mentioned in the last Treaty of Erzeroum, could easily be made the subject of a false interpretation; and in the second place because, in the event of war, it would place in the hands of the Turkish forces concentrated at Van one of the most important points of exit for an invasion of the very heart of Persia.58

Largely as the local power on the back foot, Persia had been surprisingly pragmatic and accommodating from the start, generally believing that it would get a better territorial deal vis-à-vis Constantinople through the treaty negotiations, borderlands survey and its aftermath than it would otherwise. After all, this was a Persian state still smarting from its humiliating territorial losses in the Caucasus to Russia during the early nineteenth century. Pragmatism would increasingly be the watchword of its territorial policies as, by the end of the century, it began to differentiate more clearly between contemporary political boundaries and the imperial Persian territorial limits of the past, real or imagined, pre- or post-Islamic (see Eskandiari-Qajar in this volume). The defensive late nineteenth-century Qajar mindset was to police and defend this diminished Persian state territory, just as a future project would soon be to more effectively Persianize its now better defined margins.59 This would be witnessed, for example, in the increasingly direct manner by which the Persian central government wielded its authority over its coastline in the Persian Gulf, a process that began with the abolition of semi-autonomous Arab rule in Lengeh at the turn of the 1880s and ended with Reza Shah’s subjugation of the Sheikh of Mohammerah in the mid-1920s.60
By this stage, there were other clear indications that Qajar Persia had adopted a more pragmatic self-view. As modern geography flourished, published regional maps depicted cartographic reality rather than the traditional cosmographic visions of the past. Preferring now to negotiate rather than to fight to maintain its territorial extent, Persia played by the emerging rules of the game in as much as it now recognized the need to present arguments and evidence for the features or territory it was claiming with neighbouring states. This was all in marked contrast to even the comparatively recent past, when, for example in the mid-1840s, its Foreign Minister Aghassi had restated Persia’s universal claim to all the waters and islands of the Persian Gulf, seemingly on the basis that ownership should follow nomenclature.61 Pragmatism more than anything else had therefore governed Persia’s attitude towards narrowing its western frontier.

Notes

6 Ibid.
9 Matthee, op. cit., p. 165.
10 McLachlan, op. cit., p. 401.
11 Matthee, op. cit., p. 165.
12 Barthold, op. cit., p. 206.
18 The Ottoman Empire would only agree to the Erzeroum Treaty’s prescription for territorial definition in the Shatt region once they had been assured by the mediating commissioners in a joint Anglo-Russian note of 14 April 1847 that,
in ceding to Persia the city, port and anchorage of Mohammerah and the island of Khizr, the Sublime Porte was not ceding any other parts there may be in this region. The undersigned representatives further declare that Persia will not be entitled under any pretext whatsoever to put forward claims in regard to the regions situate on the right (west) bank of the Shatt al-‘Arab, or to the territory on the left (east) bank belonging to Turkey, even where Persian tribes or parts of such tribes are established on the said bank or in the said territory.

Before the Ottoman Empire agreed to ratify the May 1847 Erzurum Treaty (ratifications were ultimately exchanged between Constantinople and Tehran on 21 March 1848), it demanded and received a further “Explanatory Note” from the mediating powers on 9 March 1848, formalizing and reinforcing the above assurance. For more detail, see Richard Schofield, op. cit. (1994), pp. 72–92.

19 Lord Palmerston to Lord Bloomfield, 3 March 1847 in the National Archives file: FO 78/2716.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
26 Despatch dated 11 October 1851 from Lord Palmerston to G. H. Seymour in the National Archives file: FO 78/2716.
28 Ibid., pp. xiv–xv.
29 Ibid., p. xv.
30 Ibid.
31 “Memorandum on Forts Erected by Persia on the Turco-Persian Frontier”, 10 November 1865 in the National Archives file: FO 78/2726.
33 Despatch dated 10 January 1867 from Lyons in Constantinople to Lord Stanley, British Foreign Secretary in the National Archives file: FO 78/2727.
37 Memorandum dated 8 August 1869 in the National Archives file: FO 78/2728.
40 Ibid., p. xviii.
42 Despatch dated 19 June 1873 from Taylour Thomson, British Ambassador, Tehran to Lord Granville, British Foreign Secretary in the National Archives file: FO 78/2730.
Narrowing the frontier


See the companion chapter by Lawrence G. Potter elsewhere in this volume.

There has been an attempt to maintain consistency of transliterations throughout this volume. This chapter is no exception but includes transliterations for place-names used by the British government during the period under review. The main reason for so doing is that many of the smaller settlements or sub-regions mentioned in the text do not easily correspond to modern settlement patterns today. One cannot be sure about the modern names, existence or location of all these localities.
Qajar Iran has often been depicted as a despotic country with little in the form of a standing army or a bureaucracy. The weak central government often relied on a balancing act of rewards and punishments to maintain its control. Nowhere was the weakness of the central government manifested more clearly than in the general state of lawlessness that existed in the countryside and sometimes in the towns and cities as well. There are numerous accounts of criminals preying on civilians in memoirs and travelogues from the period. There are also lurid accounts of the extraordinary punishments that were meted out to criminals in these books, and yet we know very little beyond the general supposition that the country suffered from lawlessness and criminal activity on a scale little different than other countries of the region and period, despite the very low figures suggested by the intelligence reports discussed below, which, in the province of Fars, put the incidence of theft at less than six a year and robbery (or banditry) at ten a year.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer an overall view of crime and criminal activity in the late Qajar period. Therefore, it is limited to the question of theft and banditry and their punishment as revealed in intelligence reports, as well as official and non-official newspaper accounts.

DEFINING CRIME

In general crime is a reflection of the life pattern and environment of the criminal and is a sign of social distress. Different crimes reflect the various structures of the community and the nature of social relations. For the purpose of this study, I divide criminality into two broad categories, crime against persons and crime against property. Crimes against persons reveal specific forms of social tension. Crimes against property reveal certain types of economic circumstances and conflicts. This chapter specifically addresses the latter category, namely crimes against property.

According to our criterion, theft occurred in urban areas, banditry in the open country. Theft was committed by one, two or a group of several thieves,
usually not mounted and often unarmed. The literature addressing that period has distinguished banditry as committed by gangs of armed and mounted robbers and highwaymen or tribesmen, and implies that it was the most traditional form of property crime. Rural areas were subjected to acts of banditry and plunder rather than theft, or perhaps rural thefts were considered insignificant and were not reported, as they probably did not come as readily to the knowledge of the authorities.

The sources examined for this study cover about 60 years from 1850 to the early twentieth century. These consist of two intelligence reports prepared by British agents on Fars and Astarabad and five Persian newspapers, both official and non-official. The intelligence reports are “Mokhaberat Astarabad,” 1908–1924, and “Vaqaye’e Etefaqiyeh,” 1875–1903, which covered Fars. The official newspapers are the Ruznameh-ye Vaqaye’e Etefaqiyeh and the Ruznameh-ye Dowlat-e Eliyeh, 1852–1881, and the Ruznameh-ye Iran, 1882–1894. The non-official newspapers are Habl al Matin, published in Calcutta from 1900 to 1925 and Ra’d published from 1909 to 1914. Because of the dissimilarity of our sources, this study is divided into two parts. In the first part I shall examine the conditions of Fars and Astarabad, based on the intelligence reports. The second part will deal with the whole country, based on the information contained in the newspapers.

It should be taken into consideration that not all crimes were reported. Many times they were settled between the parties concerned and did not reach the authorities. Furthermore, it is possible that those which were more sensational made it into the news and the less so went unreported. It is also possible that the official newspapers did not publish the worst news, whereas after the Constitutional Revolution when newspapers became free, they perhaps purposely exaggerated the news of insecurity and robbery.

Criminal justice was arbitrary and usually very harsh and was considered to act as a deterrent, though it did not seem to have had this effect. Punishment often had a private character, and was extremely capricious. In certain instances punishment was administered collectively on the community of the culprit. In theory, when a criminal was arrested, he was either tried in a religious court, and the sentence was then submitted to the government to carry out, or the culprit was tried by common law. However, this rule was not always carried out in a systematic manner and criminals were often punished arbitrarily by the governors or tribal chiefs. The arrest of thieves and the administration of justice were easier in urban areas than in the open country, where the robbers were generally armed and mounted.

Before discussing the nature of crime, two factors must be mentioned: the size of the population and the physical aspect of the country. We have no accurate statistic of the population of Iran for this period, but is has been suggested that there was an overall increase of the population despite periods of famine and epidemics and it has been estimated as between 5 and 6 million. City populations grew from 10 per cent to 20 or 25 per cent, while the nomadic population fell from 50 per cent of the population in 1800, to
33 per cent by 1850 and 25 per cent by 1914. The agricultural sector appears to have remained stable at about 25 per cent of the population.\(^4\)

In discussing the nature of crime it is necessary to keep in mind the physical geography of the country, the primitive state of communication, the fractured nature of society, semi-autonomous character of the tribal areas, the weak position of the central government both militarily and financially, and the venality and corruption of government officials. In general, it could be said that the economic conditions of the country were undergoing fundamental transformations during this period.

**ECONOMIC CONTEXT AND ITS RELATION TO CRIME**

There is very little consensus between scholars on the overall economic condition of Iran in the nineteenth century beyond the general decline thesis. A number of scholars, such as Noshiravani, Gilbar, and Nashat, maintain that there was actually a rise in per capita income and conditions improved, whereas others, for example, Issawi, Bharier, and Keddie, maintain that there was relative stagnation and very low development. John Foran, a recent contributor to the latter point of view, argues that though there was some development, it was dependent on external forces and had a negative repercussion on the standard of living, the balance of payment, the state budget, employment in crafts, and so on.\(^5\)

The deterioration in the state of Iran's finances has been richly documented.\(^6\) The silver currency depreciated and inflation resulted. Iran, which had been self-sufficient as far as food production was concerned, began to import wheat. The production of cash crops caused a constant threat of famine and food shortage. The production of cotton for export benefited the landlords and merchants rather than the peasantry. In these circumstances, with very little employment in the rural areas, the peasantry migrated to urban centers, joining the urban poor, or migrated abroad in search of work. In the urban sector, Foran points out the decline of handicrafts due to foreign imports, which occasioned the decline of cities like Yazd and Kashan.\(^7\)

According to Foran, the tribes, which were mainly pastoralists, had less contact with the outside world and were less affected by these changes. Another factor in the decline of the urban centers was the depreciation in the value of the currency, which caused inflation and depression and a decline in the standard of living of the working class. The tribes were generally better-off and more secure than the peasantry, though this varied according to different areas and parts of the country.

Did these economic changes mentioned very briefly here, relate to the general state of insecurity in the country and how far did they affect the crime rate, especially banditry? Or did the recurring insecurity we meet with in our sources reflect a way of life based on the social structure of the country, rather than the economic changes occurring in the country at large?
THIEVERY, BANDITRY AND PUNISHMENT IN FARS, 1875–1903

The best information we have about theft, banditry and indeed all other kinds of crime, concerns Fars from 1875 to 1903, and if we could prove that these conditions compare to general conditions in the country, then we would have a better understanding of the state of insecurity in at least those parts of Iran which had similar social and economic structures to Fars.

Curzon, who travelled in Iran in 1889, has left an excellent account of the conditions of the provinces of the country. The social and economic conditions of Fars which he described were no doubt conducive to banditry for he particularly referred to the considerable trade and the scale of goods which passed along the southern routes of Iran, and the numerous tribes of this area, some of which lived by robbery only.

During the years covered by these reports, there were 168 cases of theft in Fars, on average 5.6 cases a year, of which 61 cases – or 36 per cent – resulted in arrest. Of course, the richer a community the more items to be stolen. In Fars, those who fell victim to theft were the well-to-do and their servants, shopkeepers, the officers of the English telegraph line, or the employees of the post or the bank, merchants, and high-ranking officials. Thefts were modest in comparison with armed robbery. They included household goods, merchandize from shops, money, wheat, and opium. Sometimes jewellery or guns or horses and donkeys were also stolen. The thieves generally did not move in great numbers, as did the highwaymen and tribal robbers. They were local people, servants, soldiers or tribesmen. Their punishment, too, does not seem as severe as in the case of robbery. It generally entailed imprisonment, fining, returning the goods and repenting, and flogging. Only in extreme cases did it involve the cutting off of hands or ears, or hanging.

Banditry in Fars was twice as widespread as theft during the same period. There were 318 cases, on average 10.6 cases a year. In this instance, in 40 cases – or 12.5 per cent – arrests were made. Banditry was carried on outside urban areas, in the vicinity of towns and in villages, along trade routes and mountain passes. For instance, there were 46 cases of banditry near Shiraz, whose walls were crumbling according to Curzon. There were also 21 cases of banditry outside Fasa, including many villages adjacent to that town. Other towns also suffered similar fates. But the largest incidence of banditry was committed on the highways such as on the roads to Kazeroun, Kerman, Yazd, Bushehr, Arsanjan, Jahrom, Isfahan, and Ardakan, for example. Other locations mentioned were mountain passes, such as Tang-e Bolaqi, Tang-e Zanjiran, and Kotal Melo. Many villages are also named as having been attacked and looted.

Such cases of banditry were undertaken by armed gangs of mounted highwaymen, sometimes numbering 20 strong. But much worse were attacks by tribal gangs. There were 47 instances of attack and looting by the Arab tribes of Fars and 45 cases of attack and robbery by the Qashqais. A certain Panjali
Abolverdi and his men attacked and looted 18 times, the mounted Baharlou attacked 12 times, in gangs of between 150 and 600 strong. What is particularly worth noting is the attacks and looting by soldiers, sometimes by the order of the government officials or the governor, as reprisal for misdeeds, as a warning, or simply for loot. Though the reports are not always precise, 249 people were reported killed. There were a few cases of branding and burning and a few reports of women and children being killed. Attacks were made against other tribes, local people, pilgrims, the post, and sometimes foreigners. Sometimes it was just for the sake of booty, at other times it was for revenge or due to feud, but the results were the same. There were 64 attacks against caravans, and 73 cases of attacks against villages.

The spoils were often quite considerable, as for instance 740 sheep, 80 donkeys, and a number of cattle which were plundered on one occasion. On another occasion, 12,000 sheep were stolen. Money, too, was stolen but usually the amount is not given. However, on one occasion 20,000 tomans were taken, on another occasion it was reported that 300,000 tomans’ worth of goods were taken. Once it was reported that the Baharlou and Arabs had robbed the people of Jam of 5,000 sheep, 70 camels, 500 donkeys with their bridles, and 500 ancient coins. One particular disaster which befell the peasants was to have their fields grazed by the horses of the attacking gang or tribe. Goods and merchandize were also plundered from caravans and the post and the letters were destroyed. Even people’s clothes were sometimes taken and the victims were left naked.

The pursuit of robbers and thieves was ordered by the governor or the provincial authorities and undertaken by soldiers or road guards or by the local people themselves. Some of the pursuers were members of other tribes who engaged in reprisals, such as the Baharlous. It must be kept in mind that a considerable gun running operation passed through Fars, and the majority of people, even simple peasants, were armed. Caravans had their own guards but it seems they were not always effective.

Usually the number of government troops which pursued the robbers is not cited, but often they do not seem to have been as considerable as the number of robbers. On one occasion the number of robbers was 100 strong, and they were pursued by 20 mounted government troops. On another occasion 600 men of the Baharlou tribe attacked the villages of Larestan; Qavam al-Molk sent 300 men in pursuit with a cannon. On yet another occasion 600 mounted men of the Baharlou tribe attacked seven villages in Darab, even abducting the wife of another Baharlou chief. They were pursued by 200 men, mounted and on foot, who were members of the Arab tribes, 200 men of the Baseri tribe and two groups of soldiers with one cannon.

The punishment for such crimes was administered by the order of the governor and it was often harsh. Imprisonment was very rare and there is no mention of a trial. It is probable that some of the verdicts, such as the cutting off of hands, were given by the Shar’ia courts. Other kinds of punishment consisted of the confiscation of property in cases of insur-
rection, of banishment, or of incarceration in plaster for highway robbery. The cutting off of hands, fingers, chins, and ears too was practised for theft. One particular punishment was to blow the felon from the mouth of a cannon.

The destruction of the houses of felons, or those who had aided them, for instance, to escape, was also practised. On one occasion the Sorkhi tribe was plundered by the order of the local guards for theft. This punishment was so severe as to cause 10,000 tomans’ damage to the peasants, and turned 1,000 of them into thieves. On another occasion, when a similar punishment was meted out to the Mamasani tribe, apparently without cause, the result was to turn them all into thieves, according to the report. The result of such severe punishments was not always negative, however, as it was reported for instance that as the result of blowing a highwayman from a cannon, the roads had become safer. But, another time it was reported that when the hands of four thieves were cut off, the situation did not improve.

CRIME IN ASTARABAD, 1908–1924

The other report, “Mokhaberat-e Astarabad,” mentioned above, concerns Astarabad, where the existence of the unruly Turkoman tribes was a constant source of insecurity, despite the fact that they had been greatly subdued by the Russian presence over the border. When Curzon passed through Astarabad, he saw the evidence of the terror they inspired in the poor peasants and pilgrims. The conditions in Fars were very different to those of Astarabad, economically, socially, and physically. Though both were inhabited by tribes, their main characteristics varied. Even the conduct of the government was quite different.

Agriculture was practised by sedentary peasants, but the majority of the Turkomans made their living sheep farming and horse rearing. Yet another way of life was to live by plunder and robbery. Indeed the Turkomans were always described in disparaging terms in the papers *Vaqay e Etefaqiyyeh* and *Dowlat-e Aliyyeh*. Of 17 Turkoman tribes named, the worst offenders were the Atabays, with 223 cases of banditry and theft, next were the Jafarbays with 173 cases, followed by the Daz with 75 cases.

The “Mokhaberat-e Astarabad” was compiled during the Civil War, which followed the Constitutional Revolution and occasioned the occupation of northern Iran by Russian troops. In fact, the years 1909 to 1911 were the worst years from the point of view of general insecurity in this province (as well as for the whole country), with on average 127 cases a year of banditry and 52 cases of theft, which no doubt were due to the upheavals occasioned by the Revolution and Civil War. The Russian presence continued till the Second World War and was a further destabilizing element in the region. In fact there are reports of Russian soldiers engaging in plunder too. Another factor causing insecurity was the insidious role the government and its
representatives played in this province. There are numerous reports of their engaging in raids and plunder against the Turkomans.\(^9\)

In general the insecurity in Astarabad seems to have been worse than in Fars. In particular, robbery was widespread. From 1908 to 1924 there were, on average, 27 cases of theft a year reported and 71 cases of robbery. Arrests were minimal with, on average, 3 cases a year reported. Those attacked by the Turkomans were pilgrims, the post service, travellers, merchants, and other tribes, but their particular target seems to have been sedentary villagers. Even the soldiers’ garrisons were attacked and looted.

In these raids great numbers of people were killed or taken into bondage, and children were stolen. Indeed this was a particularity of this province. Other booty consisted of goods and money but mostly of cattle, sheep, horses, donkeys, and camels. In the year 1908, for instance, the spoils consisted of 11,650 sheep, 332 cattle, 180 camels, 10 horses, and a number of mules and donkeys, and what was generally written as simply animals. In the same year, there were 43 robberies, in which 14 people were killed and 9 were taken into bondage. Sometimes these people were bartered or sold back. The reports sometimes mention that a *boluk* of sheep or cattle were taken, a *boluk* is a geographical entity and in this instance it means the animals of a *boluk* were taken.

Although the conditions of insecurity in Fars and Astarabad were very severe, there seems to have been a difference, and Fars by comparison was better-off than Astarabad, where the government was not only ineffective, but helped in many ways to engender further insecurity (though the conditions of unrest and war in the latter case make comparison difficult). Therefore Fars has been taken as a model. A comparison is made between that province and the information we have from other parts of the country, so that a better idea of the general conditions as regards crime can be obtained.

**CRIME COMPARISON BETWEEN FARS AND THE REST OF THE COUNTRY**

Reports in the newspapers, which span the period from 1850 to 1914, a time-frame of 60 years, are not consistent, and we have little information for such areas as Baluchestan, southern Iran, Bandar Abbas, Bushehr, and Arabestan (Khuzestan). However, from the information we do have, certain facts of importance emerge. The provinces which suffered the most from banditry were Khorasan, Azerbaijan, Fars, and Astarabad, in that order. These however were not necessarily the provinces suffering the worst from the growing economic depression in the country and were comparatively better-off than other areas. Fars and Astarabad have already been dealt with. Azerbaijan was rich agriculturally, with an important foreign trade, but with adjacent tribal areas. Khorasan, too, was agriculturally rich with great numbers of pilgrims passing to and fro, and it was situated within easy reach of the Turkomans.
From the point of view of theft, Azerbaijan, Isfahan, Khorasan, and Hamedan, in that order, had the worst conditions. Tehran had the largest number of thefts, but then the case of the capital was exceptional as the events of Tehran received the most attention and it was the centre of the greatest political upheavals. It was also where the richest people lived; it had a growing population and considerable numbers of immigrants, and no doubt many unemployed people. There were luxury goods in the shops and trade was growing.

Interestingly the average rate of theft and banditry for Fars and the country as a whole are not too dissimilar, and is an important contrast to that of Astarabad. The average rate of theft was 8 per year for the country and 5.6 for Fars, whereas for Astarabad it was 26. Banditry incidence was 11.6 for the country as a whole, 10.6 for Fars, and 67 for Astarabad. The number of arrests was also not too divergent, 48 per cent for Fars and 54 per cent for the whole country. The goods stolen or plundered during all the thefts and banditry raids also did not vary much between Fars and the rest of country, but varied as to be expected in Astarabad.

CONCLUSION

This chapter offers a preliminary attempt at analyzing the vast amount of information we have concerning the state of crime and criminality in Iran, from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. This was a period of growing economic depression, unsuccessful reforms, foreign dominance, and growing weakness of the central government, not to mention, political change, and a constitutional revolution. These developments naturally had an adverse affect on society and created immense social and economic tensions. However certain conditions were unchangeable from time immemorial such as the physical geography of Iran, the primitive state of the roads and communication (although of course, the trans-Persian railroad was built at this time), and the existence of semi-autonomous tribes that had always been unruly and a source of insecurity. With these conditions in mind, the question to answer is how far crime and criminality were due to the changes society was undergoing, and how far it was due to the existing and unchanging conditions of the country.

Certain conclusions can be drawn from this preliminary survey. Banditry was more widespread than theft and the goods plundered were more considerable. The state of insecurity was not so much linked to economic distress but rather to the structure of the society and social relations. On the other hand, we see that most of the robbery and looting was done by tribes, which was probably as much a way of life as due to economic circumstances. The worst affected areas were not necessarily those suffering most from economic regression.

The government authorities were unsuccessful in curbing the rate of crime. In many instances government forces were the cause of insecurity and
created or contributed to situations in which raids and plunder took place. The situation did not improve with time, but it is not possible to conclude with any precision that the situation grew worse with the growing economic depression of the country.

Notes

3 S. Sirjani, ed., Vaqaye’e Etefaqiyeh (Tehran, 1361).
Differences of opinion were likewise expressed by those living in Persia at the time. Comte Julien de Rochechouart, for example, French Consul from 1863–1866 (successor to the famous Comte de Gobineau), notes, in his Souvenirs d’un Voyage en Perse (Paris, 1867), a record of his travels by road throughout the country, that in all of his three years, he never encountered an incident of brigandage, or otherwise, “un seul instant d’ennui”.
6 See, e.g. Farmanfarmaian, “The politics of concession,” in this volume.
7 Ibid., pp. 20–22.
9 As this was a contested border area, and the Turkmans freely switched loyalties from one side to another according to circumstance, the government authorities were engaged as much in semi-warfare as in the use of force for establishing control over the area. See for example Cyrus Ghani, Iran and the Rise of Reza Shah, From Qajar collapse to Pahlavi power (London: I. B. Tauris), pp. 98–99.
8 Merchants without borders

Trade, travel, and a revolution in late Qajar Iran (The memoirs of Hajj Mohammad-Taqi Jourabchi, 1906–1911) ¹

Ali Gheissari

Merchants were important players in the Iranian constitutional movement and during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911; they participated on both sides in the autocratic/constitutional conflict – a number of them served as leading advocates of the revolutionary cause and were a major force in advancing the revolutionary struggle. Some merchants made financial contributions to the constitutionalist campaigns, such as supporting the constitutionalist papers, financing the purchase of weapons, or maintaining the “sit-in” (bast) at the British legation in the summer of 1906.² Together with the existing wealth of published material, more systematic research on the role of individual merchants, at least on par with the scope of research on courtiers, government officials, intellectuals, or the ulama, will significantly expand our understanding of the late Qajar period.³

The social history of the constitutional period and the role of the merchants in the revolution can further be told with the aid of private papers, memoirs, archival reports, and other documentary material, which are gradually appearing in print for a wider use by students of Iranian history. The occasional publication of such material has always been beneficial. For instance, with regard to the province of Azerbaijan in the constitutional period, a number of contemporary accounts such as the ones written by Mohammad-Baqer Vijviyeh and Esma’il Amir-Khizi, or Ahmad Kasravi’s The Eighteen-Year History of Azerbaijan, are well known and, at least in the case of Kasravi’s work, widely read.⁴ Additional material by direct participants in the revolution, such as Sheikh al-Eslam, Taqizadeh, Theqat al-Eslam, Yeprem Khan, and others, have also been made available through publication.⁵ Works by Dowlatabadi, Mehdi-Qoli Hedayat, and Nazem al-Eslam Kermani, published earlier, have significantly benefited research.⁶ Since the early 1980s there has been a further trend in such publications, such as Sharif Kashani’s chronicle of daily events, or the papers of Nezam al-Saltaneh Mafi, among others.⁷ Together these form the staple of valuable primary sources for anyone wishing to begin work on the late Qajar period. In addition to these, Iran’s National Archives (Sazman-e Asnad-e Melli) and the collection at
the Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies (Mo’asseseh-ye Motale’at-e Tarikh-e Mo’aser-e Iran) offer a wide range of unpublished primary source material for research.

MEMOIRS

This paper provides a general summary of the Memoirs of a merchant from Tabriz, Hajj Mohammad-Taqi Jourabchi, during the period of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran. The Memoirs was written primarily for private circulation among family members in the future. The time span of the Memoirs corresponds to the years 1906–1911, i.e. during the tense period of the revolutionary struggle against royal autocracy and imperialist intervention in Iran by Russia and Britain. In addition to family affairs, the Memoirs is also informative with regard to the social and political situation of northern Iran during the period of the Constitutional Revolution and the presence of Russian forces in Azerbaijan province in north-western Iran, and provides valuable information on trans-regional trade and travel. The text offers valuable observations on both the personal and social life of the author in Tabriz and Rasht, in the northern provinces of Azerbaijan and Gilan respectively; both were major centres of revolutionary activity during the period. It also contains information on the port of Anzali in northern Iran, as well as on Baku and other locations in the Russian Caucasus, on trans-Caspian travel at the time, and on Eshqabad, Qouchan, and Mashhad in north-eastern Iran; all of which the author visited and resided at during this period. The Memoirs further provides information on Ottoman Istanbul and Izmir, Port Said (Egypt), and the pilgrimage route to Mecca, and especially contains informative observations about several Shia centers of pilgrimage in Ottoman Mesopotamia, i.e. the Atabat, including Najaf, Karbala, and Kazemain, which he also visited during the time of the Iranian revolution.

It becomes apparent in the Memoirs that although the Constitutional Revolution was an important event, it was not the only source of preoccupation, and that the everyday life of the merchants was not entirely overwhelmed or overshadowed by it. Moreover, one gets a clear sense that the constitutionalist partisans, the ulama, or the intellectuals, were not the only leading players. Although many merchants themselves were also constitutionalists, and on occasion were drawn to the centre stage, their lives at the time did not solely revolve around political/national concerns, as business and personal matters continued to preoccupy these individuals.

In the Memoirs we have the case of a well-connected, dynamic, and busy merchant who offers a personal narrative of contemporary life in some major Iranian cities and beyond and provides a very different perspective on Iranian society and politics. Constitutionalism or not, business mattered more, and other considerations in life did not come to a halt because there was either a revolution, a Russian occupation, or a famine. This is not to suggest that
the merchants were inherently “without ideology.” Ideational factors were as important and consequential among merchants as they were among other social classes. However, many merchants held that their commitments to ideas and obligations could be pursued only after an effective pursuit of business. The other commitments and obligations included family, religious dues, and charity, subsidizing the constitutionalist press, or at times even paying for guns and bullets or financing hospital care for armed constitutional fighters.9

I first came across the second half of the original manuscript of the Memoirs in the early 1980s.10 This second half was subsequently published in Tehran in 1984.11 The first half of the manuscript was found more recently and thus the new edition represents the complete text.12

At the outset one may be puzzled by the very existence of the manuscript. The author, Hajj Mohammad-Taqi, was a mid-ranking merchant, a family man, a devout Shia Muslim, and normally very busy. In addition, he had to cope with a revolution or, in effect, with several revolutions: one in his native Tabriz and others in various places in the Caucasus that he visited or traded with; and if not a revolution, at least a riot, a siege, or foreign occupation. In other times he had to cope with bandits, famine, and epidemics. These were the parameters around which he had to organize first and foremost his business and commercial travels, and then the life of his family.

At first glance some questions may arise with regard to the author’s persona and the very act of writing a testimony – that a busy and devout merchant such as Hajj Mohammad-Taqi should make time to commit pen to paper and methodically write a memoir. These questions, simple as they may appear, are not easily resolved by reliance on conventional categorizations such as “class structure” or “ideal type.” Hajj Mohammad-Taqi was not a writer, but a bazaar-based Azeri merchant who produced a detailed narrative in Persian about private and social life. Why should he, in all devotion to faith and dedication to business, invest time and effort to author a memoir? This was an endeavour which ordinarily was someone else’s trade (such as those clerics or intellectuals who were busy writing tracts). Here and there in the text, the author offers some clues to such questions.

Apparently his initial decision to write was hastened by the revolutionary situation and the interruption of business activities, which inevitably afforded him extra time. Instead of spending this spare time dawdling and sitting idle around the house or fixating on endless worries (which, as he puts it, may “harm one’s person”),13 he decided to record certain social and political events he had witnessed, and also to record for posterity some information relating to his family. He wrote this “History” (Tarikh) in order to maintain his sanity and put the rapidly transforming conditions into perspective. He was about 42 or 43 years of age at the time of writing the Memoirs. Accordingly, “the reason for writing this history is the recent upheavals [in Tabriz]; I have been writing this book as a result of too much despair and anguish . . . As things calmed down, it was no longer possible to write,”14 as he was again busy doing business.15
Furthermore, “as of late, which is the Dhul-Hijja of 1329 AH [November or December 1911], from Rasht [the Russians] have brought in many troops, [they] have sent some to Qazvin, and have kept some here [in Tabriz] – it is for two weeks now that the bazaar has been closed and people are confused. . . . Out of desperation and in disarray I have been stuck in the house . . . and once more I thought that too much worry would harm me, so I kept myself busy again with the writing of this history.”

Although Hajj Mohammad-Taqi wrote under stress and anxiety, the text of the *Memoirs* has a certain flow and ease in style. At times it reflects the author’s ambivalence regarding political events or over business issues and decisions, but it also shows that he remained on solid ground with respect to matters of faith, commitment to trade, and the sense of duty towards himself and his family. All distractions and occasional doubts notwithstanding, in his mind he was sufficiently organized to devote at the outset a good deal of space to common statements of faith and creed and a number of popular faith-based observations on the actual and potential capacity of the human mind to grasp Divine knowledge; deducing from them a kind of moral theory of knowledge. Accordingly, although human mind is limited in attaining full knowledge of reality, moral imperatives as directed by faith keep man on the right path – a deduction through which the author also arrives at a teleological certitude and functional, rather than meditative, view on the meaning of being. He further discussed the family as a necessary institution, the significance of procreation, and the special status of parents and one’s duties towards them. Several pages are devoted to various aspects of such theological and moral points, written in the spirit of faith and practical devotion.

Hajj Mohammad-Taqi stated that in appreciation to Divine attributes there are centres and peripheries, and also there is a hierarchy which encompasses animate and inanimate worlds; hence, he observes great difference and diversity within each category of being – both in terms of quality and in form. Accordingly, we do not fully know the details and specifics of such differences, but certainly there must be a hierarchical ladder – for instance, among stones, which differentiates gems from ordinary rocks. The same hierarchy also applies to the world of humans – no matter how much man prays, or submits to the Will of God, he will not be equal to a prophet who was directly appointed by God.

The conclusion of his argument is that God’s purpose in creating man was for man to continuously strive to know God.

Hajj Mohammad-Taqi then embarks on summarizing the biblical narrative on the genealogy of the human race, and goes on to specifically highlight its moral significance. From Adam and Eve, Abel and Cain were born. After Cain slew Abel, chaos prevailed. In response to Adam’s mourning for Abel, God created Sheith (Shem) and Yafeth (Japheth), and designated a Houri for Sheith to marry, and a Jinn for Yafeth – who, respectively, represented good and bad attributes in the moral make-up of humanity. Subsequently, the human race proliferated and settled in different parts of the earth.
and different languages, tribes, and nations sprang from such beginnings. Cities were built, agriculture expanded, and those who expressed their talents in different industries became dearer than others in people’s eyes.

Hajj Mohammad-Taqi began to write the Memoirs in late Rabi’ I 1327 AH/April 1909. Therefore, the first half of the Memoirs was written after the outbreak of the Iranian civil war in Azerbaijan and shortly before a major conflict in Tabriz (known as “Sham-Ghazan”) in April 1910, and prior to the Russian deployment of force in Azerbaijan. The second half was written in late 1911 and early 1912, corresponding to the termination of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the large-scale entry of Russian forces into the northern Iranian provinces of Azerbaijan, Gilan, and Khorasan. This second half of the Memoirs begins with the narration of the events of July 1908 in Tabriz and the placing of white flags on the door tops of houses (indicating compliance with the authority of the constitutional insurgency in the city), and ends with the events of December 1911 and January 1912 in Rasht and Anzali, in the period marking the Russian occupation and the end of the Constitutional Revolution.

The Memoirs can be approached in terms of three distinct, yet interrelated analytical domains – family, business, and society, around which the narrative evolves.

Family

The author, Hajj Mohammad-Taqi, was a merchant from Tabriz. His father Hajj Hasan Jourabchi (b. 1255 AH/1839) was also a merchant, as was his father Hajj Rasoul, as, in turn, was his father Hajj Abu al-Qasem (d. ca. 1210 AH/1795) – and so was, very likely, the latter’s father Ali Beyg – although there is no mention of Ali Beyg in the Memoirs. Hajj Mohammad-Taqi takes certain personal and professional pride in his paternal lineage, and simply takes it for granted that he does what they did – tejarat (trade).

Hajj Mohammad-Taqi was born in Tabriz on 13 Safar 1285 AH/5 June 1868. He was the eldest of five sisters and five brothers; all siblings were from the same mother and father. References to his maternal line or female parentage in general are limited. His mother, Zahra (also referred to as Zahra Soltan and as Hajjiyeh Khanoum, born in 1263 AH/1846–1847, and married to his father in 1284 AH/1867), was the daughter of Mashhadi Hasan (d. 1277 AH/1860) who was a baker. His references to his siblings follow a similar abbreviated approach; although he is more informative and thorough about his brothers than he is about his sisters. Females are often referred to as daughters of their fathers, and he customarily avoids referring to them by their first names. They are only mentioned in passing, as shadows in the background, together with the children. At other times, they are mentioned in
moments of expressed pity and commiseration – for example, when he describes their suffering as a result of war, famine, other hardships, or sickness. For happier occasions he often uses common, but no more descriptive, idioms such as “khosh-qadam” (carrier of good fortune) in reference to female relatives.33

There is also little mention of the process through which family members married, except the fact that almost all sisters were married to merchants, and still less on specifics of life at home.34 On these issues there is a guarded silence. For him, talking about women of the family or issues of domestic life were not among topics one would normally write about – i.e. write about for an audience. Several years after the completion of the Memoirs the text was shown to a cleric who wrote a brief Preface (Taghriz, lit. praise) to the notebook, thus giving it his blessing and religious approval – perhaps a further indication both of the concern with meeting the standards of religious piety as well as the intention to share the Memoirs with an audience.35 Hajj Mohammad-Taqi first married in 1891. Some years after the death of his first wife, Belqeis (daughter of Mirza Esmail Jourabchian-Haqqi),36 in Dhul-Hijja 1325/January 1908 Hajj Mohammad-Taqi married Alaviyeh Tabatabai, the daughter of “Hajji Mirza Ali Aqa Mojtahed Tabrizi Tabatabai.”37 We are also informed that his brother-in-law, Mirza Mohammad-Taqi (the eldest son of Mirza Ali Mojtahed), was the leader of the constitutionalist society (Anjoman) of Tabriz.38

The author’s reference to his brothers is more extensive and is mainly business-oriented. Brothers are good if they are reliable and adept at business. At times their personal characteristics are alluded to – for example, Mashhadi Naqi was “well-built” and “cooperative in all affairs;”39 Karbalai (Mohammad-) Baqer was “difficult” and in his recurrent clashes with people had no hesitation in resorting to verbal abuse, but then he is praised for his tenacity in business, such as going repeatedly to the Governor’s house before finally managing to collect a small debt;40 or Mashhadi Shafi’, who had little interest in his studies at school but is praised for being a “cheerful fellow” and a go-getter.41 Hajj Reza is admired for his ambitions in looking beyond Tabriz or Rasht for business pursuits, and for his literary talents and overall style.42 Occasions like this reveal further clues to the author’s mentality – he values family, good education, refined manners, vision, and business success. However, the allusion to the last brother is not indicative of the existence of any tradition of literary pursuit in the family, or that the Jourabchi brothers were educated beyond the basic level provided at traditional elementary schools (maktabs). Hajj Mohammad-Taqi does not discuss education – the nature of which was the subject of constitutionalist debates – except on occasions when members of the family, either by choice or out of necessity, abandoned school at a young age, and moved to the bazaar. There is no mention of his own choice of literary reading beside the religious texts.43 There is also no indication of his support of the new modernizing educational curricula; nor is there any reference to whether he sent his own children to particular types of schools. Furthermore, in the few available
photos of him from this period he appeared mostly in traditional pose and profile. In other words, as a person who had travelled abroad, he was not visibly influenced by the Westernizing or “globalizing” changes that were impacting Iran at the time.44

Business

Business occupied a high status in Hajj Mohammad-Taqi’s list of priorities in life. Tejarat (trade) summed up his profession, skill, duty, and identity. He was a Twelver Shia Muslim, an Iranian from Tabriz, a nationalist (underscored by his pro-constitutionalist stance, including his association with the progressive Anjoman of Tabriz), and a responsible family man. Yet all these fell into place after he succeeded in anchoring himself in life as a merchant – tejarat was his vocation.

In spite of its relative isolation, Iran in the late Qajar period was connected to its neighbouring regions though a number of long-established commercial routes which were important in the economic and social, as well as the intellectual, history of the country. Through these routes Iran was connected to the Ottoman Empire, mainly via Tabriz to Istanbul (through Trabzon, opened in 1830s); to the Caucasus region and Russia, via Rasht and Anzali to Baku and beyond; and to India, via Bushehr to Bombay. In addition to these there were the pilgrimage routes to the Atabat and Mecca, which also had certain commercial significance. Furthermore, following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, it became cheaper to ship cargo from Europe and the Mediterranean region to northern Iran through the Suez Canal and Bushehr than it was to Tabriz via Trabzon, which impacted negatively on Tabriz-Istanbul trade.45

During the days of the revolution or the subsequent large-scale Russian occupation of northern Iran, Hajj Mohammad-Taqi’s prime concern was to find a window of opportunity to carry out business, whether domestically or trans-regionally. To this end, he relied on an elaborate network of merchants; their common objective being the circulation of goods and capital and, ultimately, profit. There is no indication of any source of patronage or support to which he could turn for protection during times of crisis. In contrast, there is an implied sense of pride in not being under the patronage of another person. Instead, there are references to occasions when he provided assistance to junior members of the family or facilitated their start in business. On one occasion the business failure of a relative in the bazaar was attributed to the fact that he had embraced Sufism.46 Often “as he showed up for work in his shop in the bazaar, so would the mystics, and in spite of [my] father’s repeated advice [to him to concentrate on business], they would end up at the coffee shop and continue with their talks.”47 It was highly regrettable for both Hajj Mohammad-Taqi and his father to see that much precious time in the bazaar was being wasted over endless flow of tea and Sufi chatter.
Despite business being important, the text of the *Memoirs* is not a business report. Hajj Mohammad-Taqi’s success or failure is measured by the safe arrival and dispatch of merchandize, by the safekeeping of cargo, and by the timely purchase and sale of goods. He comes across as stoic and reserved on most occasions except when he reports yet another disaster, but even then his expression of grief is often directed at others, rather than dwelling on his own misfortunes. He displays a remarkable capacity to absorb loss – or so he would like to be seen by his future readers. When he profits he is thankful to God, to good fortune, and to the good deeds of others. In either case he moves on, and his main objective throughout remains the circulation of goods and profit. At times he also lets his conviction to faith direct him to spend business gains. For example, on one occasion, during a pilgrimage trip, he conducts some profitable business on the side – he only begins to feel good about it after he distributes the profit to charity and among beggars and the needy. The fact that he records such details for posterity may also indicate his intention of further underscoring his piety and magnanimity and eliciting respect and admiration.

Furthermore, it is clear in the *Memoirs* that Hajj Mohammad-Taqi had various business connections and in his transactions he often relied on a significant network of merchants, both regionally and trans-regionally. The text is informative in this regard – on how goods were shipped and accounts cleared in times of crisis or during the period of foreign occupation.

It should also be noted that by and large the merchants engaged in light trade, that is, in consumer goods rather than capital intensive ventures – a trend which was common in the wider Middle East. Furthermore, the merchants were both curious and concerned about larger political issues, such as the Constitutional movement and other national and regional matters (both out of personal political allegiances as well as the potential short-term and long-term impact of such developments on local, regional, and international trade); but, on a daily basis their business performance mainly revolved around immediate preoccupations such as the circulation of goods, safe dispatch of cargo, and timely collection of credit.

In 1905, as a result of the political events in the Caucasus (such as the Russian Revolution of 1905, or the recurrent clashes between Armenians and Muslims in the Caucasus during 1905–1906), many Iranian merchants in the Russian Caucasus moved from Baku to Anzali and Rasht in Iran, as did many Armenian merchants. As a merchant from Tabriz, Hajj Mohammad-Taqi had already sensed some tension towards “outside” competitors in the bazaars of both Rasht and Anzali, and the arrival of a fresh group of newcomers only intensified the strain. At one point some local merchants accused Hajj Mohammad-Taqi of smuggling and selling ammunition to Armenian rebels (to both the Russian Armenians fighting the Russian government across the border, and local Armenian “rebels”), a rumour which he vehemently rejects and blames on his jealous competitors in Rasht; the Jourabchis were not in the ammunition business. In Rasht the Jourabchi brothers, besides
their main line of business (i.e. “jourab,” hosiery), also traded in yarn and rope, and in cigarettes, which they rolled, boxed, and marketed. In 1905 one of the brothers, Shafi’, ordered cigarette labels, bearing the Jourabchis’ own print – the new packaging was an instant success.52

The Jourabchis, however, did have some dealings with Armenians, sometimes good and profitable, and sometimes with mixed results. In 1327 AH/1909 an Armenian resident of Rasht, “Hartoun,”53 sold Hajj Mohammad-Taqi and his younger brother, Hajj Reza, barats (i.e. trade bills, or in this case foreign bills of exchange)54 in French francs for less than their face value, issued by “not a well known” bank in Paris.55 The Jourabchi brothers bought a total of 6,000 tumans worth of barats from Hartoun and sent them to Istanbul for collection on maturation date. Subsequently they were informed by their associates in Istanbul that the bank was defunct and the barats were bounced. Hajj Reza waited four anxious months, then (on 22 Dhul-Hijja 1327 AH/4 January 1910) went to Istanbul, hoping in vain to cash the barats. The brothers lost that investment, together with an additional 1,000 tumans that they spent to collect it.56 Hajj Mohammad-Taqi blames the misfortune on the evil eye and the jealousy of others. Perhaps his stated reaction may be viewed as a good indication of his overall personal character or, at least, his projected/implied worldview. He merely thanks God for his life and for the life of his family. In light of his criticism of failed business endeavours of relatives, he is also circuitously and obliquely downplaying his own business naïveté after all these years, which may otherwise be attributed to earthly/monetary preoccupation after all. In the meanwhile, Hajj Reza in Istanbul buys an office and begins to run a profitable business – in two years they recovered their losses.

The Russian and the royalist siege of Tabriz during the civil war (1908–1909) had a negative impact on the fortunes of local merchants, such as the Jourabchis. Even Russian and other European merchants in Tabriz were suffering economically from the royalist blockade of the city.57 It can further be argued that Iranian merchants never indicated that they were pleased with the presence of Russian forces in the north or British forces in the south, no matter if on some occasions these foreign forces were viewed as guarantors of security on the trade routes, given the ever present risks of brigandage (see Ettehadieh in this volume). The merchants knew well that although some roads might have been safer than during times of turmoil, foreign occupation ultimately meant the obligation to contribute to the regular purchases of the foreign troops, with a profit margin that often did not compensate for their feeling of public or private guilt.

Moreover, even though the merchants were clearly not fixated only on political developments and were preoccupied more urgently with business concerns and financial survival, political developments nonetheless directly impacted their business fortunes. In other words, as far as the merchants were concerned, economics and politics were not two mutually exclusive domains.58
During the crisis of 1909 Hajj Mohammad-Taqi and his wife left Tabriz for Rasht, via Baku and Anzali. The following passages from the *Memoirs* capture the trip and the overall situation:

[In the spring of 1909] the Russians were gaining more control [over Tabriz]. Some of the Mojahedin [partisans] who were from the Caucasus were being rounded up and arrested. They also detained Hajj Sheikh Ali Va’ez.59 [The Russians] were alleging that they were arresting the wrongdoers.60

[The Russians] were bringing in to the town many Cossack [soldiers] from the area of North Garden (Bagh-e Shomal) and the Aji Bridge. After seeing this, people were saying: “This is [another] trick,61 because [Mohammad-Ali] Shah with Russian help now wants to capture one by one those who were involved in this uproar. [However,] Baqer Khan and Sattar Khan [had already] issued uniforms to [their] partisans and were not disarmed.62

[As] I wanted to go to Rasht, I talked with one of my relatives Aqa Mirza Baqer, the brother of Aqa Mir-Mohammad, and asked him to come along and help [me] with the office in Rasht. Also I had sought guidance from the Holy Book (Estekharem) [whether or not] to take along the daughter of His Eminence Hajj Mirza Ali.63 In the eighth of Jumadi al-Awwal [1327 AH/28 May 1909] I rented a Faytoun64 and [we] headed on. In Julfa65 I was hosted by Hajj Sattar Khameneh.66 Next day I crossed to the Russian side [of the border] and stayed one night at Qahveh Khoy [?],67 and [then] with car it took [us another] two days to reach Badkoubeh.68 It was three hours till sunrise. We stayed those three hours at Vagzal.69 In the morning I went with the Faytoun to Hajji Aqa’s Caravanserai, [and] slept a little. Then I got up, had breakfast and went to the bazaar to meet Aqa Mohammad-Hossein Aliyof. From there I took the daughter of Hajj Mirza Ali Aqa70 to the home of Mashhadi Ghaffar. [We] stayed two nights in Badkoubeh [and] had a good time in the evenings – a few people from Tabriz were there, all in one house and merrymaking till five hours into the night.71

Then [we] took tickets for Taqiof’s Prakhoud72 and arrived at Anzali one day and one night later.73 My brother, Karbalai Shafi’, had come to Anzali to greet us. On the day of [my arrival] there were also a few more people from Tabriz with their wives. We did not stay in Anzali. Three hours later with Barkas74 [we] headed towards Rasht.75 [The date of] our arrival in Rasht was the evening of the eighteenth of Jumadi al Awwal [1327 AH/7 June 1909] – some friends came to visit [us], and I did not do any work for two or three days. The weather in Rasht in those days was very hot [and humid]. One could not rest in the evenings because there were too many fleas. In that year ice too was expensive; Rasht was safe in those days; and there were many Mojaheds [partisans] around.76
In an overall assessment it may therefore be noted that a trans-regional network existed among merchants in the frontier areas. While merchants on both sides of the frontier were unhappy about the emergency military situation in times of crisis (for example, in the Russian Caucasus in 1905 or in Azerbaijan following the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906), they relied on each other’s partnership and cooperation to ship cargo through checkpoints, customs, and hazardous roads on to the market – in other words, they were particularly interested in the circulation of goods, which in their view was perhaps a more sensible way to cope with mounting inflation and political uncertainties. In later years those who held onto their liquid assets in Russian imperial rubles lived to regret it bitterly when such notes lost their value following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Moreover, hoarding, apart from its moral and social stigma, was not always the safest or cheapest way to generate profit.

In the period that followed the First World War the Jourabchi brothers continued with trading and retail of hosiery, mainly in Tabriz, Rasht, and also in Tehran. Subsequently during the early Pahlavi period (i.e. before 1931) they established a wool spinning, weaving, and wool carding factory in Tabriz which, by 1940, employed some 300 workers.

**Society**

Although the *Memoirs* is centred mainly on family and business, occasionally it is also informative about the society. Hajj Mohammad-Taqi often comes across as trying to offer fair observations of other people’s lives and impartially acknowledging differences. In view of the circumstances, most of his social depictions were devoted to the upheavals and how they affected society. Tabriz, both in terms of its various districts and also in terms of its links with the countryside and other provinces, looms large in these accounts. He wrote about different neighbourhoods in the city, occasional skirmishes between the opposing constitutional and anti-constitutional camps during the Iranian revolution, and of the support networks people forged to bypass or endure the restrictions imposed on them by the royalist government or by the occupying Russian troops.

Also a great many of Hajj Mohammad-Taqi’s observations are related to pilgrimage. He felt very happy each time he went on a pilgrimage – be it to Mashhad, to the Atabat, or to Mecca. Like many other pilgrims, if he could, he would prolong his stay beyond the usual rituals associated with the pilgrimage, except in Mecca where such extensions were not possible – partly because of the set rituals of Hajj, and partly perhaps because of his Shia faith. On such occasions, he would attend sermons, and audit religious lectures and classes, and would leave with spiritual satisfaction; thus, complementing prescribed set rituals with additional religious education. His feeling of contentment would be complete if he could manage to do some business as
well – whether buying or selling. The proverbial “ham ziarat, ham tejarat” ([doing] both pilgrimage and trade) was therefore viewed as an ideal mix of best possible worlds.

Hajj Mohammad-Taqi’s wider social circle consisted mainly of other merchants regardless of their political associations. In fact on political issues many merchants were characteristically circumspect and often hesitated to explicitly identify themselves with any particular political trend, ideology, or person. Their more visible involvement in the constitutional movement (as a movement) was at times due to pressures put on them by political societies (Anjomans) – for instance in the form of requests to help with expenses, or to act on their decisions, such as closing or decorating the bazaar for political events. However, the merchants seemed more willing to contribute to religious occasions, in deference to their personal beliefs and as good publicity. Also, the majority of merchants were often reluctant to publicly display their wealth – be it on the exterior of their houses or in their own appearance, lest the government or the public, each in its own way, put undue demands on them.

Many Iranian merchants, like the Jourabchis, in addition to commonly expressed patriotic political ideals, also had certain economic expectations in supporting the constitutional movement. Such expectations included a more rational system of taxation, more orderly trade routes (something that failed to materialize during the revolution), and preventing various local and provincial strongmen from extorting money out of them.

CONCLUDING NOTES

It is important to understand the ideals and motivations of the merchants who were an important part of the constitutional movement, but whose values were not necessarily echoed by officials, intellectuals, or the ulama – of course, without suggesting a uniformity of ambitions or political orientations among the merchants. Often times national and international crises did impact, and at times severely, the fortunes of the merchants, leading to their prosperity, periodic losses, or ruin; in the case of merchants belonging to religious minorities, occasionally religious prejudice on the part of the mainstream population could also had negative consequences. Yet in one way or another, many of them survived revolutions and wars – trading, as it were, under fire.

These Memoirs include some political events, but also reveal much about both public and, in a sense, the private lives of merchants during the Constitutional period. Hajj Mohammad-Taqi’s account of his private life only includes passing accounts of the private sanctum of his household (the andaroun). Although accounts of his private life may be more indicative of his personal choices or idiosyncratic lifestyle, they nonetheless seem to provide some clues about life inside the homes of a representative mid-ranking Shia Iranian merchant – regional, ethnic, religious, and cultural variations notwithstanding. The remainder of the Memoirs offers valuable information
Figure 8.1
Seated, first from left: Hajj Mohammad-Taqi Jourabchi
Seated, first from right: probably Hajj Naqi Jourabchi
Figure 8.2

Seated, from the left:
1. Hajj Mohammad-Taqi Jourabchi; 2. Hajj Hasan Jourabchi (in the middle);
3. probably Hajj Naqi Jourabchi

Standing, from the left:
1. Hajj Shafi’ Jourabchi (holding a child, probably Abu al-Qasem, son of Hajj Naqi);
3. Rasoul Aqa (son of Hajj Mohammad-Taqi); 4. Gholam-Hossein (son of Hajj Naqi);
5. probably Hajj Mohammad-Baquer Jourabchi

Seated on the floor, from the left:
1. Saddiqeh (daughter of Hajj Reza); 2. Abbas (son of Hajj Naqi)
Figure 8.3
Seated: Hajj Mohammad-Taqi Jourabchi
Standing, first from right: probably Hajj Naqi Jourabchi
Standing, second from right: probably Hajj Mohammad-Baqer Jourabchi
about the broader financial anxieties of Iranian merchants at large and their commercial networks. Hajj Mohammad-Taqi focuses more on his personal concerns about trade, while also providing details of his travels, which at times were a combination of business and pilgrimage. The author narrates his passion for auditing lessons given by the more commendable among the ulama whenever he was on pilgrimage or engaged in trade in various pilgrimage centres. His very private pursuit of intellectual/spiritual matters is an important dimension of the Memoirs.

Some merchants chose to support the royal autocracy during the Revolution, either for personal economic reasons, or because of their particular sense of religious devotion which compelled them to follow the directives of
**Figure 8.5** Taken in Hajj Hasan Jourabchi’s house in Tabriz:
Seated, front row, from left:
Standing, from left:
1. Rasoul Jourabchi; 2. Mohammad Reshad
Standing, from right:
1. Probably Mashhadi Mohsen; 2. Sadeq Jourabchi
Seated, middle row, from left:
Ebrahim Dallal; 5. probably Gholam-Reza (Harandian?)
Names as written on the upper margin, from right to left:
Ja’far Aqa, Karbala’i Ebrahim, Aqa Ali-Akbar Aqa, Hajji Baqer Dallal,
Mohsen Aqa, Aqa Mohammad-Ali, Ahmad Aqa
Names as written on the right margin, from top:
Mashhadi Mohsen, Aqa Sadeq, Aqa Gholam-Reza, Mashhadi Ebrahim Dallal,
Karbala’i Rafi’, Hajj Esma’il, Karbala’i Ahmad Aqa, Abbas Aqa, Aqa Rafi’,
Aqa Abu al-Qasem, Aqa Kazem, Hajj Ali-Asghar Aqa
Names as written on the lower margin, from right to left:
Probably Aqa Gholam-Hossein, Aqa Ahmad Reshad, Aqa Gholam-Hossein
(crossed over), Aqa Mir Mohammad, Hajj Aqa Reza Aqa Jourabchi, Aqa
Mohammad Reshad, Rasoul Aqa
Figure 8.6
Taken at the Iranian Consulate, Istanbul (c. early 1920s, probably 1924)
Seated first from left: Hajj Reza Jourabchi (holding a cane)
Seated in the middle: Sheikh Asadollah Mamaqani
Standing first from left: Mohammad Kalamchi
Standing first from right: Abd al-Hossein Ahrabi
anti-constitutionalist clerics. On the other hand, given the political dynamics, the very constitutional movement which merchants like the Jourabchi brothers sponsored or went along with, at times adversely impacted their fortunes. For example, after the Russian ultimatums in 1911, a constitutionalist campaign was waged to boycott the purchase of Russian and British goods, along with the use of Russian-owned trams, and the Imperial Bank. The boycott had an adverse impact on transactions by those merchants (constitutionalist or otherwise) who imported Russian or British goods. Also, the business of some merchants on either side of the revolutionary struggle had periodically been affected or even ruined by their political opponents, through looting and plunder or confiscation and extortion.

In the social history of the late Qajar period, including the period of the Constitutional Revolution, the merchants clearly played a significant part. However, it cannot be overtly assumed that all that concerned them during the revolution revolved around the topic of politics; the Jourabchis clearly felt otherwise. In our assessment of the constitutional era, and in order to gain a better understanding of Iranian society and its complexities at the time, this personal/social space deserves to be further studied on its own.
Notes

1 An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 5th Annual International Qajar Studies Association conference (16 July 2005), at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. My thanks are due to the organizers of the conference and to Mohsen Ashtiany, Mansour Bonakdarian, Roxane Farmanfarmaian, and Willem Floor for reading the draft and providing me with helpful suggestions and comments and to Natalja Mortensen and Kathy Auger for professional assistance and Clare Zon for copy-editing the text.


8 For example, the disturbances resulting from the demand for a “House of Justice” (*Edalat-Khaneh*) in December 1905, that eventually gave rise to the constitutional struggle, had been provoked by the bastinado of a number of prominent sugar merchants. See Kasravi, *Tarikh-e Mashrouteh-ye Iran*, pp. 58–9. For a theoretical and comparative analysis of the forces involved in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, see, for example, Nader Sohrabi, “Historicizing Revolutions: Constitutional Revolutions in the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and Russia, 1905–1908,” *American Journal of Sociology* 106/6 (May 1995): 1383–1447.

10 The original manuscript consists of 160 densely written pages (5″ × 8″, ruled by the author in 4.5″ × 7″ for the written text). I am specially grateful to Fardin Simnad Jourabchi, daughter of Hajj Reza Simnad Jourabchi, a younger brother of Hajj Mohammad-Taqi Jourabchi (the author of the Memoirs), for the safe-keeping of the second half of the Memoirs over the years, and for having kindly made it available for research and publication. This second half of the Memoirs was among the papers of Hajj Reza Simnad Jourabchi (the maternal grandfather of the present author).


12 See Hajj Mohammad-Taqi Jourabchi, Harfi az Hezaran Ke-andar Ebarat Amad: Khaterat-e Hajj Mohammad-Taqi Jourabchi (Vagaye’e Tabriz va Rasht, 1324–1330 AH) [Memoirs of Hajj Mohammad-Taqi Jourabchi (A Narrative of Events in Tabriz and Rasht, 1906–1911)], complete text with additions and an Introduction by Ali Gheissari (Tehran: Nashr-e Tariikh-e Iran, 1386/2007), hereafter Memoirs. I would like to record an additional note of gratitude to Behrouz Chehroudi, a grandson of Hajj Mohammad-Taqi Jourabchi, for providing me with a copy of the first half of the Memoirs; a fortunate coincidence that eventually brought the text to its original entirety. This first half of the Memoirs was among the papers of Dr Ali Chehroudi, the son of Hajj Mohammad-Taqi Jourabchi. I am further grateful to Fardin Simnad and Behjat Reshad Partovi for providing me with several family photos and help in identifying them, and to Hossein Reshad, Adeleh Jourabchi Nematzadeh, the late Aliyeh Jourabchi, and Navideh Jourabchi Moqaddam for their further assistance in identifying the photos.

13 Hajj Mohammad-Taqi Jourabchi, Memoirs, p. 42.


15 This suggests that Hajj Mohammad-Taqi was returning to the Memoirs after abandoning its writing for some time – and further connotes not only the resumption of writing, but also serves as some form of an explanatory preface or afterword inserted into the middle of the text. This also indicates that later he was in some way possibly editing the Memoirs and adding further detail to some earlier entries as he revisited the text and returned to the work of writing it. Throughout the text Hajj Mohammad-Taqi shifts from personal memoirs relating to business and political events to family history – reflecting older Persian narrative traditions or tropes of moving between personal and family history. However, it can also be argued that often memoirs have been basically of two sorts, namely, pseudo-memoirs in which the writer has tried to prove a specific point or points, such as explaining an intellectual shift (for example, why the author has suddenly decided to give up philosophy and put all his spiritual investments into mysticism); or memoirs in general, which are usually a compilation of personal memories and impressions about life and times and family and self, evoking the life of a person in an entire era. Hajj Mohammad-Taqi’s text belongs to the latter category. For a theoretical analysis of such narrative style, see the Introduction in Janaki Agnes Penelope Majumbar (née Bonnerjee), Family History, ed. and with an introduction by Antoinette Burton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). It can perhaps be further noted that writing Memoirs (Khaterat) and other notes of such nature had become very much en vogue and many members of the elite as well as the middle-class merchants and also in particular, people who were involved with the constitutionalist movement, wrote such works. This genre was known among members of “polite society” and that is where the author probably received the idea. This may become clearer if we knew his wider contacts in Tabriz, Rasht, and elsewhere.
Memoirs, p. 158.

What Hajj Mohammad-Taqi seems to be doing at the outset of writing the Memoirs is, in effect, attempting to establish his own upright moral/ethical standards. In other words, he already has some future audience in mind—friends, descendants, or a larger readership—for whom, with dialogic intent, he is writing. His discussion of his own moral rectitude clearly underscores the fact that the “memoirs” was not simply a “personal diary” in the narrowest sense of the term but was intended to be read by others. A further parallel may also be drawn here with the long Iranian and Islamic traditions of moral/ethical writings and discursive practices.

Memoirs, p. 54.

Yafeth is the same as Japheth of the Bible (see, for example, Genesis 9:18–27, 10:1–2) associated with the well-known and often illustrated episode of the nakedness of Noah (when he became drunk and collapsed in a naked state). However, there is a conflict usually between Biblical sources and commentaries on the Qur’an (which often rely heavily on material outside the Qur’an). In the Bible Yafeth and his brother Shem cover Noah’s nakedness, but according to Tafsir-e Sourabadi (ed. Ali-Akbar Sa’idi Sirjani (Tehran 2001)), a widely consulted Persian commentary on the Qur’an, for example, Yafeth backs Ham, the father of Canaan, who had laughed at Noah’s nakedness and was subsequently cursed by Noah. Ya’juj and Ma’juj (Gog and Magog) and other “infidels” are all considered to have been issued from Yafeth’s lineage. There are recurrent references to Yafeth in classical Persian texts, mostly in passing.

Memoirs, p. 60. This is particularly indicative of Hajj Mohammad-Taqi’s occasional references to his interest in religious education, such as during pilgrimages. He is in effect also attempting to demonstrate his command of religious knowledge, and, hence, his overall erudition. Furthermore, a measured sense of self-aggrandizement can be noted here too, given that he could count himself as among the talented people because of his pursuit of commerce.

Memoirs, p. 59.

The Iranian civil war between constitutional and anti-constitutional forces first broke out in Azerbaijan, and subsequently spread to Gilan and Isfahan provinces, lasting from the summer of 1908 to the summer of 1909 and culminating in the constitutionalist march on Tehran and the overthrow of Mohammad-Ali Shah.


This section was published first, see note 11, above. For Russian interventions in Iran in general and Azerbaijan in particular, see, respectively, Saleh M. Aliev, “Significant Changes in Russian Expansionist Policy towards Iran (1906–17),” in


27 Reference to Ali Beyg appears in Mehdi Moqaddam, ed., “*Shajareh-Nameh-ye Khandan-e Jourabchi*” [Family Tree of the Jourabchi Family], unpublished. Mehdi Moqaddam’s work is a valuable source of information regarding the Jourabchi family and a relevant section of it is included in the new complete edition of the *Memoirs*.

28 *Memoirs*, p. 73.

29 Mohammad-Taqi’s siblings were Naqi (b. 12 Dhul-Qa’d 1286 AH/13 February 1869), Soghra (b. 4 Dhul-Qa’d 1288 AH/12 January 1872), Robabeh (b. 26 Dhul-Qa’d 1290 AH/15 January 1874), Reza (b. 5 Ramad 1294 AH/13 September 1877), Shafi’ (b. Muharram 1297 AH/December 1879), Fatemeh (b. 2 Rajab 1299 AH/20 May 1882), Mohammad-Baqer (b. 1301 AH/1883), Rokhsareh (b. 1 Muharram 1304 AH/29 September 1886), and Ma’soumeh (b. 4 Sha’ban 1306 AH/5 April 1889).

30 *Memoirs*, p. 80.

31 *Memoirs*, p. 73.

32 *Memoirs*, p. 77. Accordingly, his mother’s grandfather, Mashhadi Hossein (d. 1235 AH/1819), was “sha’r-baf” (maker of silk material) and originally came from Shiraz.

33 *Memoirs*, p. 82 and p. 91, in reference to the birth of his younger sisters, Robabeh and Ma’soumeh respectively, who were not mentioned by first name.

34 For a photo of Hajj Mohammad-Taqi’s sisters, taken in the Pahlavi period, see Fig. 7.

35 The Preface to Hajj Mohammad-Taqi’s *Memoirs* is signed by al-Ansari [?], and dated Shawwal 1338 AH/June/July 1920. As the date of Hajj Mohammad-Taqi’s passing has not yet been ascertained, the above observation could still apply to anyone from his associates or relatives who possessed the manuscript in 1920 when the Preface was written and added to it.

36 See Mehdi Moqaddam, *Shajareh-Nameh*.

37 *Memoirs*, p. 133.


39 *Memoirs*, p. 73.

40 *Memoirs*, p. 90.

41 “Karbalai” and “Mashhadi” refer respectively to those who had made the pilgrimage to Karbala (the mausoleum of Hossein (d. 680), the third Shia Imam, in Karbala, in southern Iraq) and Mashhad (the mausoleum of Ali al-Reza (d. 868), the eighth Shia Imam, in Mashhad, in north-eastern Iran). In due course, all brothers visited Mecca, thus climbing up the pilgrimage ladder and became “Hajji.”

42 *Memoirs*, pp. 83–6. Accordingly, in 1317 AH/1899 Hajj Reza went to Rasht to look after family business. His acquaintances in Rasht included a certain Mirza Mohammad-Reza, who was a poet in his own right, an encounter which must have inspired Hajj Reza to write some “meaningful” poetry himself – also while in Rasht, Hajj Reza learned Russian. *Memoirs*, pp. 41–2. The *Memoirs* also indicates that Hajj Reza was admitted into the constitutionalist society (the Anjoman) of Rasht and regularly traded with Baku and other towns in the Caucasus. In the summer of 1908 he was in Baku when he heard the news of the upheavals in Tabriz. He delayed returning to Tabriz and finally on 1 Sha’ban 1326 AH/28 August 1908 he went to Istanbul and stayed with Hajj Gholam-Reza Aqa (?) and began trading. The news from Tabriz of the passing of his wife, Robabeh Birang Hariri-Foroush (a relative of the above mentioned Ali Birang Hariri, who
was among the volunteer fighters of Tabriz trained by Howard Baskerville, further weakened his desire to return to Tabriz. In Istanbul he also picked up French and became associated with the Iranian constitutionalist society there (i.e. Anjoman-e Sa’adat). Memoirs, p. 44. Hajj Reza was a regular member and supporter of the Anjoman-e Sa’adat, which was active between 1908 and 1912. In fact many Azeri merchants who were residing in Istanbul were supportive of the Anjoman-e Sa’adat. See Ahmad Kasravi, Tarikh-e Mashrouteh-ye Iran, p. 724; see also Hodjatollah Djoudaki, “L’Anjoman-e Sa’adat des Iraniens d’Istanbul,” in Thierry Zarcone and Fariba Zarinebaf-Shahr, eds, Les Iraniens d’Istanbul (Istanbul and Tehran: IFÉA/IFRI, 1993), pp. 85–90; and Samad Sardarinia, Mashahir-e Azerbaijan, pp. 513–28. For additional observations on the Iranian merchants in Istanbul, see also Khan-Malek Sasani, Yadboud-ha-ye Seferat-e Estanbul [Memoirs of the [Iranian] Embassy in Istanbul] (Tehran: Ferdowsi, 1345/1966). For photos of Hajj Reza, see Figs 4–6. Fig. 6, taken at the Iranian Consulate in Istanbul (c. early 1920s, probably 1924), shows him with Sheikh Asadollah Mamaqani (1883–c.1950), who had earlier been a liaison of Ayatollah Mohammad-Kazem Khorasani (1839–1911), a leading pro-constitutionalist religious authority (marja’) in Najaf, to the Anjoman-e Sa’adat in Istanbul. Mamaqani had authored, among others, Maslak al-Imam fi Salamat al-Islam [the Doctrine of Imam for the Well-Being of Islam] (Istanbul, 1328 AH/1910; reprinted, Tabriz, 1329 AH/1911; new edition, Tehran: Nashr-e Tarikh-e Iran, 1363/1984), on the compatibility of Islam and constitutionalism. For a discussion on Mamaqani and his tract, see Ali Gheissari, Iranian Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998), pp. 32–6 and 139–40 (notes 88–97). In early 1920s Hajj Reza was a strong supporter of the Iranian Society (Anjoman-e Iranian) (founded in 1340 AH/1921) as well as the Iranian School in Istanbul, and kept close acquaintance with the Iranian literati, such as Hossein Danesh (1870–1943), among others. For valuable information on the intellectual life of the Iranian community in Istanbul during the constitutional period, with particular reference to Hossein Danesh, see John Gurney, “E. G. Browne and the Iranian Community in Istanbul,” in Zarcone and Zarinebaf-Shahr, eds, Les Iraniens d’Istanbul, op. cit., pp. 140–75. Hajj Reza also kept a close interest in political developments in Iran, an indication of which can be noted in his short essay, published in the Iran newspaper in 1919, protesting about the name change of Arran to Azerbaijan. See “Sevvomin Sourat-e E’teraz: Ma Cheh Hastim?” [Third Letter of Protest: What Are We?], Iran 462 (27 Ramadan 1337 AH/28 June 1919), reprinted in Kaveh Bayat, Azerbijan dar Mouj-Khiz-e Tarikh: Negahi be Mabahes-e Melliyoun-e Iran va Jarayed-e Baku dar Taghir-e Nam-e Arran be Azerbaijan, 1296–1298 Shamsi [Azerbaijan in the Tide of History: An Overview of the Nationalists’ Debates and the Baku Press on the Name Change of Arran to Azerbaijan, 1917–1919] (Tehran: Shirazeh, 1379/2000), pp. 134–6. 43 On one occasion Hajj Mohammad-Taqi regretfully mentioned the loss of a favourite volume, Majlesi’s Tohfat al-Za’er [Pilgrim’s Gift], while travelling on a carriage near Qouchan. Reportedly, one of the straps holding his luggage onto the back of the carriage broke and as a result he lost several of his personal belongings, including that book which he “liked more than anything else.” Memoirs, p. 205. Mohammad-Baqer Majlesi (1628–1699/1700) was a prolific Shia scholar of the Safavid period; some of his shorter writings on faith, prayer, and morality were intended to instruct common readers. 44 See Figs 1–3. Nevertheless, in these photos Hajj Mohammad-Taqi is seen wearing cylindrical Qajar hats, which were possibly made of fine Astrakhan lambs wool or felt (“mahout”). These hats differed distinctly from the traditional headdress for merchants in Iran at that time, which often consisted of a tightly wrapped small turban, made of a thin linen or cotton fabric, striped and with a crimped
or puckered surface, figuratively referred to as “šīr-shēkari” (i.e. “seersucker,” East Indian corruption of the Persian šīr-o-shakar lit. “milk and honey”), and which were soon to become less popular by early 1920s – for instance, according to a 1922 census, it was worn only by 1 per cent of the population in Tehran. See Baladiyeh-ye Tehran: Avvalin Salnameh-ye Elsā'iyeh-ye Tehran (Tehran Municipality: The First Annual Census of Tehran, 1305/1926), cited in Ja'far Shahri, Tarikh-e Ejtema'i-ye Tehran dar Qarn-e Sizdahom (The Social History of Tehran in the Thirteenth Century [AH]), 6 vols (Tehran, 1368/1989), here vol. 1, p. 88. For a general account of dress in the Qajar period, see Layla S. Diba, “[Clothing] In the Safavid and Qajar periods,” section X of the article on “Clothing,” in Encyclopaedia Iranica (http://www.iranica.com/newsiteln/).


46 The relative in question was his maternal uncle, Mashhadi Ali (b. 1271 AH/1854), who had reportedly been very interested in religion and mysticism and used to share this interest with the author. Memoirs, pp. 79–80.

47 Memoirs, p. 80.

48 References to actual business transactions are always in the context of certain personal or political events that Hajj Mohammad-Taqi writes about. However, references to “dad-setad” (transact, trade) are abundant throughout the Memoirs. So are references to “dokkan” (shop), “hojreh” (office in the bazaar), “tejarat-khaneh” (lit. trading house – i.e. their business office and outlet in the bazaar), and “qoumpaniyeh” (company). For reference to an occasion in which the “Jourabchis came together and became [sic., i.e. formed] a qoumpaniyeh,” see Memoirs, p. 99.

49 The text of the Memoirs is informative about trade routes and methods of transportation between Azerbaijan and the Caucasus, Ottoman territories, and Mesopotamia, as well as within Iran itself.

50 It may further be indicated that many of the Armenians who came to Azerbaijan or Gilan were no strangers to Iran, as they already had close associations with the country and its Armenian communities; they had “transnational” ties and characteristics. In other words (see Houri Berberian, “Traversing Boundaries and Selves: Iranian-Armenian Identities during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution,” Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 25/2 (2005): 279–96, here p. 282):

The nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Armenian communities in the Caucasus, Ottoman Empire, and Iran were in a sense early transnational communities in that members often lived their lives in at least two areas, considered two lands in two empires their homes, and maintained contact and traveled in more than one community.

It can further be pointed out that in fact the transnational networks and circuits of Armenian traders long predated the nineteenth century; see Philip Curtin, Cross-Cultural Trade in World History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 179–206. For the social and political aspects of the Armenians of Iran, see Cosroe Chaqueri, ed., The Armenians of Iran: The Paradoxical Role of a Minority in a Dominant Culture (Articles and Documents) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1998). For the tensions between Muslims and

51 For an early (c. 1290 AH/1873) indication of the Jourabchis’ opposition to ammunition (bullets) trade, as expressed by Hajj Hasan Jourabchi, see Memoirs, p. 71.

52 Memoirs, p. 108. Hajj Mohammad-Taqi’s rented residence in Rasht also functioned as his tobacco processing workshop and storage (see, Memoirs, p. 69). Jourabchis’ association with Rasht continued in later periods – in the 1930s, Abbas Jourabchi (son of Hajj Naqi Jourabchi), together with Mohammad-Ebrahim San’at, ran a hosiery factory in Rasht. See Willem Floor, Industrialization in Iran: 1900–1941, Occasional Papers Series 23, (Durham: Durham University, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1984), p. 50.

53 Memoirs, pp. 211–12. Reportedly, “Hartoun” (probably Harutun in Armenian) was also a deputy of the Constitutionalist Anjoman of Rasht, and in this venture had an associate, another farangi [European], called Foad [?].” Memoirs, p. 169. Presumably the reference here is to Harutunian Galoustian, who was a member of the provincial society (Anjoman-e Ayalati) of the constitutionalists in Rasht. See, Ebrahim Fakhra’i, Gilan dar Jonbesh-e Mashroutiyat [Gilan in the Constitutional Movement] (Tehran: Jibi, 1352/1973), p. 139. It has further been suggested that in fact the Anjoman of Rasht was “the only known provincial council that included an Armenian social democrat, Hartun Gulustian, in its leadership.” Afary, The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, p. 78, based on information from Mahdi Ahmad, “Andisheh-ye Demokrasi-ye Ejtema’i dar Nehzate Mashroutiyat dar Rasht” [The Idea of Social Democracy in the Constitutional Movement in Rasht], unpublished manuscript, n.d. For a study of the Armenian involvement in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, see Houri Berberian, Armenians and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911: “The Love for Freedom Has No Fatherland” (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001).

54 Barat was often used as a “trade bill” – i.e. it gave the right to payment of a specified amount at a specified time. It could also be endorsed, or used as a payment order – e.g., when the government gave somebody whom it employed a barat, with which the person could obtain payment (amount, location, and time were specified). Although a barat was not exactly a letter of credit, occasionally it was used in that way as well. See Willem Floor, “The Bankers (Sarraf) in Qajar Iran,” Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft 129 (1979): 263–81.

55 Memoirs, p. 211.

56 Memoirs, pp. 211–12.

57 For example, reference can be made to a Russian textile merchant, Baron Sedrak (not to be mistaken with one of the two socialist Sedraks in Tabriz at the time), who, according to Hajj Esma’il Bonakdarian, a Tabriz merchant who had dealings with him, had assisted people during the mass starvation in Tabriz in the civil war blockade period. Based on personal communication with Mansour Bonakdarian, the grandson of Hajj Esma’il Bonakdarian, dated 10 March 2006.
It can also be noted that the main northern road from Tabriz to Tehran, was built and maintained by Russian companies. During the civil war the main road to Tabriz was under the military control of Russian and royalist forces, who had enforced a blockade of the city. Foreign merchant communities of Tabriz included Italian, Greek, and Russian traders, who had an active role in Iran’s commercial links with Russia and the Ottoman Empire. See Willem Floor, “Commerce, vi. From the Safavid through the Qajar Period,” p. 73.

In 1907 two articles appeared in the paper *Mosavat*, admonishing those Iranian merchants who imported foreign products instead of producing the same products domestically and even criticized them for having failed to begin exporting goods – perhaps assuming that the merchants either individually or collectively could have afforded to do so or could have produced the same quality goods at a better price so as to compete with the foreign imported products. See “Qabel-e Motale’eh-ye Tojjar” [For Merchants’ Attention], a two-part article in *Mosavat* 1/2 (19 Ramadan 1325 ی/27 October 1907): 5–6; and 1/4 (5 Shawwal 1325 ی/11 November 1907): 3–5; the second part also included a reply from a merchant.

Hajj Sheikh Ali-Asghar Leylabadi, a pro-constitutionalist preacher. Reportedly he was arrested by the Russian soldiers on 9 Jumadi I 1327 ی/29 May 1909 and was never seen afterwards. See Amirkhizi, *Qiyyam-e Azerbaijan va Sattar Khan*, p. 428.

“Poletik” [sic], referring to “politique” (Fr.), which in common Persian usage implied “trick,” in the sense “politicking.”

Memoirs, p. 205.

Referring to his own wife, Alaviyeh, who was the daughter of Hajj Mirza Ali Tabatabai.

“Faytoun” (Rus.), an open carriage pulled by horse.

Julfá, a northern border town in Azerbaijan between Iran and the southern Russian Caucasus.

Possibly related to Hajj Abdol-Hamid Khameneh, a Tabriz merchant and father of Sheikh Mohammad Tabrizi (also known as Khiabani, 1880–1920) a well known clerical and political leader of the constitutionalist campaign in Tabriz.

Possibly “Qahveh-khaneh Khoy” (Khoy Coffee-House), which may have also provided lodging.

“Badkoubeh,” same as Baku.

“Vagzal” (Rus.), railway station.

Here again the reference is to his wife, Alaviyeh Tabatabai.

73 Taqiof was running a steam-boat line between Baku and Anzali. This is also a clear indication that in this period in order to travel from Tabriz to Rasht, most travellers and merchants used the Russian route, going first to Baku and from there travelling by water via the Caspian Sea to Anzali, which was the main maritime port of entry to north Iran with considerable commercial ties with the Caucasus ports of Baku and Astarakan. Anzali also functioned as the major trading point for Rasht. In 1880 a carriageway was opened between Anzali’s inner harbour, known as Pir Bazaar, and Rasht; shortly after 1900 the main road linking Anzali and Rasht directly was completed. See M. Bazin, “Anzali,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. II (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 143–5.

74 “Barkas” (Rus.), motor-boat.

75 They travelled by motor-boat on Mordab-e Anzali (Anzali Lagoon) to Rasht.


79 In 1905 Hajj Mohammad-Taqi went to Mecca. In his *Memoirs* he estimated the number of pilgrims to Mecca in that year at 280,000, including 12,000 Shia pilgrims; he also pointed out certain tensions among the Shia and Sunni pilgrims in Mecca during the ceremonies. See, *Memoirs*, p. 121.

80 Hajj Mohammad-Taqi himself might have been a member, or at least was an occasional attendant, of the constitutionalist Anjoman of Rasht – as can be noted in the following remark: “It was the third of Muharram [1330 AH/24 December 1911], and no one was coming to Anjoman except Aqa Mirza Abd al-Wahhab.” *Memoirs*, p. 219. Presumably the reference here is to Seyyed Abd al-Wahhab Saleh who was among the principal deputies of the Anjoman. See Fakhra’i, *Gilan dar Jonbesh-e Mashroutiyat*, p. 139.

81 It can further be noted that there is no indication in the *Memoirs* of Hajj Mohammad-Taqi’s own choice of *marja’* (source of emulation in religious matters), nor is any opinion voiced on the Sheikhi/Usuli divisions in Tabriz at the time – though, given their association with Mirza Ali Theqat al-Eslam (d. 10 Muharram 1330 AH/31 December 1911, hanged by the Russians for protesting their occupation of Tabriz), the Jourabchis may have had some interest in Sheikhism.
9 The politics of concession
Reassessing the interlinkage of Persia’s finances, British intrigue and Qajar negotiation

Roxane Farmanfarmaian

It is the purpose of this chapter to retheorize the position of the Qajar monarchy and more generally, the Persian government, during the latter part of the reign of Nasser-edin Shah and those of his successors Mozzafar-edin Shah, Mohammad-Ali Shah and Ahmed Shah, as Persian officials negotiated the concessions the country awarded to foreign nationals for the purpose of exploiting the nation’s natural resources and developing services such as banking and telegraphs. First, I address the economic and financial structure of the state system administered by the Qajar Shahs to illustrate the practical constraints, particularly as relating to British dominance of the Gulf and Bushehr through the East India Company, the silver linkage of the kran and the impact of the Great Game on trade. Second, I briefly discuss the developing culture of concessionary awards as a solution to the increasingly dire financial position Persia faced. The main focus of this chapter is on the oil concession awarded to William Knox D’Arcy in 1903, but soon taken over by the British government. I argue that the award and subsequent negotiations were not, as often pictured, a case of a backward nation grappling with the standard machinery of Western sophisticated big business. Instead, I show it to have been a uniquely politicized situation with experienced actors on both sides. On the one hand was the Persian government, already skilled at the art of concessionary wrangling, and on the other, a company–government partnership designed to protect the security of the Indian – and larger British – Empire and fully aware that oil and its worldwide distribution was the crux of that security. The players on the British side, two of whom I focus on particularly – Sir Percy Cox and Sir John Cadman – moved seamlessly between Whitehall and the East India Company and between Whitehall and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), while working closely with the Admiralty to turn the oil company into a purely British domain and instrument. Their remit was not just in southern Persia but the whole region, including northern Persia and Mesopotamia. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Persia’s aptitude in constructing the Sinclair concession in 1921 based on the lessons it had learned from the bruising experience with
APOC, and how, although that concession did not lead to a contract, it foreshadowed the nationalization process that took place 30 years later. It also examines Britain’s and Persia’s different approaches to sovereignty and national identity as reflected in the management of the concession and its territory.

IN THE EYE OF THE GREAT GAME

Qajar administration has frequently been judged through the prism of western state structure. However, as suggested in passing in the recent work of Mojtabahed-Zadeh, the system was more akin to that of a vast bazaar composed of semi-autonomous amirdoms and networks of ethnic, tribal, religious and commercial groupings.1 In a country of scant and tortuous communications, its population seeded along the peripheries of vast central deserts and divisive mountains, and with much of its trade and tax revenue still paid for in kind rather than being monetized, the delicate balance of locally-managed governance tied to a hierarchical system of allegiance served the state in ways often unappreciated by its chroniclers.2 Among its advantages was the ability to incorporate the religious establishment within the legal, political and social structures without constant friction, a challenge still not fully resolved within current paradigms of centralization. Additionally, it involved the local elite in national administration, incorporating local knowledge and interests in a system that would prove itself to have been more efficient and effective than the bureaucratized central decision-making that came to replace it as the state became more consolidated at the centre.3 Finally, the conflict between imported Western (and even Eastern) ideas and technologies, and the religiously freighted Persian traditions was muted, as new methods were adopted across the network, rather than purely top down. We see this in the agility with which foreign military experts were invited to affect the practices and capabilities of the Persian army (see S. Cronin in this volume). The hazard of conflict between tradition and dogma on one side, and Western ideology and systems on the other, of course remained. E. G. Browne’s comment about Seyd-Jamal ad-Din’s motivation toward the revival of Islam as one nation in the aftermath of Nasser-edin’s assassination is as apt today as then, and underlines the tension:

To check encroachment in the East is a necessary part of the scheme; any Mohammedan potentate who encourages or acquiesces in an extension of Western influence in his domains must be regarded by the promoters of this movement as an enemy to their cause.4

Yet, as Millspaugh pointed out, the Persian government continued to bring in outside expertise to streamline and modernize its administration, customs collections and military establishment, among others, with the effects
gradually disseminating across the country. It was thus well-attuned to working with foreign business and financial representatives at the point where the idea of awarding concessions took hold.

THE LOCAL EFFECTS OF THE GREAT GAME

Tipping the pivot of this intricate Persian administrative mobile were the pressures of the Great Game, which, as discussed in Schoffield, Cronin, Martin and Eskandari-Qajar in this volume, as well as in Kashani-Sabet and Mojtahed-Zadeh, were already dividing the nation between Russia and the British Empire, even though no agreement or convention was signed to that effect until 1907.5 In the south, the British Consul in Bushehr represented the power of the British Crown quite separately from the Legation in Tehran. Staffed and lavishly underwritten by the government of India and the East India Trading Co., it commanded its own military contingent (usually, the Bengal Rifles). Its purpose was as to manage British interests in the Gulf through contact with the Arab sheikhs and tribal leaders on both littorals, including Sheikh Khazal of Mohammerah (nominally, a Persian subject), and through the promotion of trade and the transport of goods up and down the Gulf. Often at odds with the Foreign Office’s Ambassador in Tehran, the Consul and his militia reported directly to India, considered themselves experienced in Oriental culture and language, and viewed their remit as much broader than that of just Iran. As observed by Elwell-Sutton,

In the South of Persia during the 19th century, the Indian government had turned the Persian Gulf and provinces bordering on it into something approaching a British dependency, where the authority of the British consul counted for more than the decrees of the Persian governor.6

The British success in the Gulf, first through its closure of the slave trade and piracy, and then by plying steamers up the Tigris and Euphrates, had, for all intents and purposes shut down Persia’s south-west trade.7 Trade in the west would suffer the same fate, as the route between Trabazond and Liverpool by way of the Black Sea became at last a direct line for British shipping in the latter part of the century, making it difficult for Persia to compete via the Tabriz-Erzurum-Constantinople route. At the same time, the loss of Herat and the positioning of British consuls in Mashad and Kerman, moved most of the servicing of goods along the eastern route into British hands and out of Persian control. Imports of British and Indian goods, meanwhile, rose dramatically, while exports of Persian goods fell. According to Wilson, imports consistently exceeded exports, often reaching twice their level, as in the case of 1901, the first year statistics became available.8

Where the policy in the British Empire had shifted in the nineteenth century from political domination to control over resources as well as creating
“colonies, protectorates and buffer zones”, the policy in Russia, was simpler: territorial occupation and preferential trade arrangements. This meant the shearing off of Persia’s north, Russian consuls in every major northern port and town, and the advantageous Turkomanchai Treaty tariff of 4 per cent on Russian goods, which was jealously maintained by the Russians after the Bolshevik takeover. By 1901, however, when Persia was in dire financial straits and the Shah negotiated a foreign loan from Russia which increased the tax to 4.75 per cent, Britain too insisted on a revision of rates on certain commodities of interest to itself which reached 26.77 per cent, a situation which Millspaugh quotes his predecessor, Morgan Shuster, as stating in The Strangling of Persia, was a tariff absolutely prejudicial to the interests of Persia and is so grossly partial to Russian interests and trade as to render it the most conspicuously unsuccessful tariff in the world from the viewpoint of the people in whose behalf it is supposed to be framed.

The result was a positive trade balance in the north for Persia, if at usurious rates (and often through forced barter), offset by a negative one in the south, which meant that much of Persia’s currency funnelled from north to south.

THE WOES OF SILVER CONVERTIBILITY

Though the reduction in trade opportunity across its territory in itself negatively affected Persia’s economic picture, it was in fact the pegging of the kran to silver that would plunge Persia seriously into financial straits and force her to seek alternatives by way of concessionary awards. Millspaugh notes that Persia had little margin for error or waste, as her resources at the time were thinly stretched, and the country had few options to ameliorate her position:

The first of the differences between Persia and some of the other countries that occurs to me, is that Persia has always been, up to this time, near the margin of financial subsistence; her budget has been small; her economic system almost stationary; her taxes inelastic; and her expenditures inadequate for her expanding needs. In Persia, therefore, any disorder, inefficiency, waste, leakage, irregularity, or error has been relatively more conspicuous and serious than in many other countries, which doubtless suffer from the same conditions, but which nevertheless enjoy a higher rating.

Without significant mines of either silver or gold on her own territory, Persia had traditionally bolstered her currency by conquest of treasure. This came to a halt under Fath-Ali Shah. Throughout his reign, and that of Mohammad
Shah, the currency remained bi-metallic, but by the time Nasser-edin mounted the throne, there was insufficient gold to continue convertibility and the *kran* was eventually pegged only to silver. The timing was unfortunate, as by the 1890s, both India and Russia suspended minting silver, while much of the West and Japan gradually took the same route. As noted by Avery and Simmons in their groundbreaking study of this issue: “The end of 1893 saw Persia’s silver practically isolated”.13 The value of the *kran* against the pound in the course of 26 years, from 1863 to 1889, for example, almost halved, and closely followed the drop in the market value of silver. Only the US dollar continued as a bi-metallic currency, the US Treasury propping up the price of silver through huge monthly purchases after several large American (as well as Argentine) mines were discovered and silver flooded the market.

An exception to the otherwise uninterrupted decline in Persia’s currency value was a short rally in 1872 that took place when de Reuter was awarded a staggeringly large concession according to terms which, unlike previous concessions, and due to the Shah’s “shrewdness”, according to Graham Storey, de Reuter’s biographer, “switched the real security from the Persian government to the profits of the enterprise itself”.14 The concession, which included railway and tramway construction and public works, including telegraphs, was cancelled a year later, and the *kran* resumed its fall. The lesson gleaned by Nasser-edin Shah and his ministers from the de Reuters concession, however, could not have been clearer. As noted by Avery and Simmons:

The very fact that the silver *kran* had bounced upwards, for however a brief period, indicates that flirting with a scheme for attracting capital from England . . . was by no means an unrealistic way of trying to cope with the [fiscal] crisis. The de Reuter concession promised the introduction of Western technology on an extensive scale, but it promised more. It promised unprecedented new sources of revenue: in hard currency.15

**CONCESSIONS AS A SOLUTION TO FINANCIAL DISTRESS**

Analysis of subsequent concessionary awards granted on Nasser-edin’s second visit to England, indicates growing sophistication on the part of the Persian government in hammering out terms, even as it had to balance the demands of the Russians against those of the British. In addition, from Tehran’s viewpoint, the terms were not always so disadvantageous to Persia as they might originally appear. Granting a general concession for navigation by ships of all nations on the Karun, for example, enabled the Nasiri Company, a Persian steamship corporation, to become established as well. The Imperial Bank, which de Reuter salvaged out of his original concession, offered a needed vehicle for foreign investment. Other concessions promised exports that
would bring in hard currency. These bolstered confidence in the kran, which appreciated in value against the pound and then stayed steady. However, conditions would conspire to dash all the gains brought by the new concessions. An excess of imports, based on what was viewed as a favourable exchange rate and bought on credit, coupled with the passage of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act by the US Congress, which effectively dropped the bottom out of the silver market, caused the kran to plummet. The Persian economy was hit by both inflation and depression. Hoarding of silver became widespread, and the government was forced to turn to copper, the infamous pul-e siah, or black money, making the destruction of Persia’s monetary system complete. It was against this backdrop that Nasser-edin Shah was assassinated.

By the time Mozzafar-edin Shah mounted the throne, it seemed that Persia had sold all there was to sell. Only oil apparently remained, and several concessionaries, including Baron de Reuter, had already tried and failed to locate and produce oil in any quantity. When a concession was signed in 1903, this time with William Knox D’Arcy, it reflected many of the lessons already learned by the Court in negotiating concessionary terms for other products and services, as well as the caution that ensued from the Tobacco Concession fiasco in 1985. In addition, the Russians’ experience in Baku on the Caspian, where oil was being exploited in quantity, was not lost on the Qajar negotiators, who included Amin-o Soltan, the powerful premier. The result was a very good concession, with terms that included a significant royalty of 16 per cent, based on profits; profits from any and all companies associated with the extraction, production and sale of Persia’s oil; the sale of oil and its by-products anywhere, not just on Persian soil; and a clause that refrained from committing the Persian government to responsibility for security in the field or of the company’s operations. The Persian government negotiated the right to 20,000 shares and a cash payment of £20,000. When D’Arcy formed the First Exploitation Co. on May 21, 1903, £500,000 in £1 shares were issued; 30,000 were presented to the Shah, and 20,000 to “other leading personalities”, while £450,000 was floated in London. The extra shares were viewed by D’Arcy’s management team as being equivalent to the cash payment, and hence, no cash ever was transferred to Mozzafar-edin Shah, although Antoine Ketabji Khan, who helped arrange the concession, was paid £50,000. Nonetheless, these terms were considered fair on both sides, until oil was struck in a huge gusher on 26 May 26 1908 at Masjed Suleiman.16

THE SEEDS OF CONFLICT IN THE BRITISH TAKEOVER OF SOVEREIGN AND FINANCIAL RIGHTS

It was at this point that British interest focused on what immediately promised to be a significant commercial venture in Persia. It was perhaps too early to imagine it as the financial and security successor to the East India Company, but the government power brought to focus on this development, the men
assigned to the task and the imperial perspective with which decisions were taken, indicate that its potential and importance were already clear to those both in London and Calcutta. Two lines of approach immediately went into operation.

First, even prior to the discovery of oil, British actions ensuring sovereignty over the oil area were made manifest in 1907 when security issues began to plague the drilling operation. Instead of enlisting Tehran’s help, the Indian government sent a small detachment of the 18th Bengal Lancers under the direction of Captain Arnold Wilson, “ostensibly” as Elwell-Sutton observes, “to guard the Ahwaz Consulate, but in fact, to protect the oil employees until oil was found or the attempt abandoned”.17 He goes on to note that this was “a remarkable violation of a country’s sovereignty”, beginning a tradition of “direct intervention in local affairs without reference to the legal authority of the land”.

The person taking this decision was Major Percy Cox, the British Political Resident in Bushehr. Previously an officer with the East India Company, and hence, representing closely the outlook and company mentality of the India Office, Cox was a figure who, though representing His Majesty’s government in various posts, would have significant impact on the decision-making and direction of the oil company. In 1909, a little over a year after oil was struck, he would negotiate the Cox-Khazal Agreement on behalf of APOC, which included no input from the central government of Persia, despite it being a major company shareholder. The deal allowed for the rental of one square mile of land located on the island of Abadan in domain claimed by Sheikh Khazal, to build a refinery and pipeline for an annual sum of £650 for 10 years, paid in advance. It also made arrangement for a British government loan of £10,000 to be paid to Khazal, but which, in fact, was paid by APOC.18 Denis Wright describes what ensued: “Cox steamed up to Mohammerah in his official launch to bestow on the Sheikh, with all the ceremony of a full-dress Indian durbar, the Insignia of a Knight Commander of the Most Eminent Order of the Indian Empire”.19 Over the following three years, Cox reported repeated signs of goodwill by the Sheikh, whose tenuous allegiance to the Qajar throne had always been one of the more tricky nodes to hold in balance.

From Bushehr, Cox would move to Baghdad as Head of Legation and he represented British interests during the key period of the Baghdad-Qazvin Railway concession agreement. He was also a significant negotiator in regard to British rights to the oil concession that would be awarded in 1911 in Mesopotamia, an issue that is addressed in greater detail below. After World War I he was posted to Tehran as Ambassador, an “unhappy” choice, according to Wright, as his Indian and Persian Gulf background evoked suspicion on the part of the Persians, a feeling that was borne out in his conduct during the oil negotiations that turned increasingly sour after World War I and culminated in the Agreement of 1919, which was rejected by the majles.20 Cox’s shifting position between the oil industry and the British government was not unique within British practice at the time, several others,
including John Cadman, having similarly engaged in dual roles that made them uniquely positioned to negotiate and haggle over interpretation and terms of the concession. This not only gave them an edge in relation to their Persian interlocutors, but often tainted them in the latter’s eyes, as the Persians were often at pains to discover to what extent they represented British government designs, as opposed to Company requirements.

The second development in Britain’s approach to the oil discovery was to consolidate control over the company (or companies) and turn it into an extraterritorial British resource for revenue and security. To this effect, the original D’Arcy company began to metamorphose into a series of companies, the control and financial ownership of which remained closely held in London. Already in July 1907, due to financial exigency, D’Arcy had transferred all his shares in the First Exploitation Co. to Burmah Oil, a Scottish company which paid him £203,067 in cash, and £900,000 in Burmah Oil Co. shares. The Persian government was not invited to become a party to this transaction, nor to receive any equivalent shares in Burmah Oil, though it was clear that already, D’Arcy was being offered a good return on his investment despite there being no oil discovery as yet. Burmah Oil, in turn, spun off all D’Arcy’s rights beyond the 1,000 square miles he had staked out in Khuzestan to another company, Concessions Syndicate, owned by Lord Strathcona.21

In 1909, a year after the gusher in Masjed Suleiman was hit, several new developments took place on the corporate front. On 13 April 1909 the Bakhtiari Oil Co. was set up ostensibly as a gesture of goodwill for the benefit of the tribal Khans: £300,000 in shares were issued, an annual commitment of £3,000 in cash was made and 3 per cent of the profits were promised to the Bakhtiaris. Again, no invitation was extended to the Persian government to participate. Worse, the annual £33,000 cash payment and the 3 per cent of profits was to be deducted from the Persian government’s 16 per cent of revenues, without giving it notice or gaining its authority for doing so. At the Persian government’s expense, therefore, the company established a relationship with the Bakhtiaris, that in return earned it their protection, and which allowed the 18th Bengal Army to be withdrawn. In addition, it served, at least to some degree, to complicate the ambivalent relationship of allegiance from the Bakhtiaris towards the central government.22

The day following the establishment of the Bakhtiari Oil Co., on 14 April 1909, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company was formed as a conglomerate of Burmah Oil, Lord Strathcona’s Concession Syndicate and extra shares that Strathcona had acquired during a previous share flotation. The deal involved dividing hundreds of thousands of new APOC shares among all three original British-based parties, and paying out £380,000 in cash. The only shares not owned by APOC were the Shah’s (and others’) £50,000-worth of shares, which played no part in the deal. APOC then offered £1.2 million-worth of preference and 5 per cent debenture shares to the public in Glasgow and London (but not in Tehran), which were bought up in half-an-hour by local investors. As an inducement to buy, the prospectus noted, “the outlet of the
company’s pipelines, though not in British dominions, will be at the head of the Persian Gulf, and so under British control”. Further it added that “substantial contracts for fuel oil may be confidently looked for from the Admiralty”. This was the first published reference to the involvement of APOC with the British Admiralty, and took place a full three years before Churchill would send a mission to the APOC oil fields to assess the nature of its oil, and whether it would be appropriate and sufficient for the needs of the British Admiralty. Plans to that effect must therefore be considered as likely to have been already on the table from the first days of APOC’s creation, and with the purpose of cornering Persia’s oil for the exclusive use and security of Britain. The collusion between government and company, though not as yet out in the open, was nonetheless referred to plainly at the first APOC Board of Directors meeting, when its Chairman, Sir John Cargill noted “the valuable assistance of the Foreign Office and the British Consul in Persia”. In 1912, Churchill established a Royal Commission, composed of, among others, John Cadman, to investigate sources of oil supply. Cadman had previously been a professor of oil engineering at Birmingham, but his move to offer government advice would signal an important shift in his career. Sitting on various government bodies, including the Petroleum Imperial Policy Committee (1919) and the Government’s Oil Secretariat, he, at the same time joined the APOC Board of Directors. He eventually became Chairman of APOC during the renegotiation of the original D’Arcy concession in the 1920s, travelling several times to Persia before ensuring the adoption of the Concession of 1933. Moving beyond the brief by the Royal Commission presented in 1913, supporting a switch from coal to oil for the Navy, Cadman worked closely with Churchill to structure a proposal that would give the British government control over the supplies it needed. As Churchill stated in the House of Commons, “Our ultimate policy is that the Admiralty should become the independent owner and producer of its own supplies of liquid fuel. . . . We must become the owners, or at any rate the controllers at the source.”

Real strain between the Persian government and its oil concessionaire developed publicly in 1914, when Churchill signed, and Parliament ratified, a contract with APOC to fuel the Navy, obtaining for it preferential terms for 32 years, and at the same time, agreeing to double the company’s shares, all of which would be taken up by the Admiralty. Informed only after the fact, Persia was told that the British government would appoint two directors with executive powers, to the Board. The contract, never made public, was not shared with the Persian government, nor was Tehran consulted concerning the real impact the cut-rates of fuel for the Admiralty would have on profits. Churchill himself, almost 10 years later, however, hinted at the magnitude of loss sustained by this deal on the part of the Qajar government, when he boasted that the government had saved no less than £7.5 million as a result of the contract. Based on this figure, Elwell-Sutton estimated that the total
return on the British government’s investment during that period amounted to £40 million; receipts for the Persian government in that period were little more than £2 million. In addition, during the period of the War, all payments were suspended even while Persia continued to import at full price 85 per cent of her own fuel needs from Russia in the north.26

Across the border in Mesopotamia, a simultaneous set of negotiations was taking place concerning the oil concession there. In 1908, flush with his payout from Burmah Oil the year before, D’Arcy formed the D’Arcy Exploration Company to carry out worldwide exploration, and immediately began pressing the Ottoman government for a concession in Mesopotamia. These concessionary rights passed to APOC at the time of that company’s establishment. At first shut out of the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC), APOC, after tireless efforts by Percy Cox, was included in a second round of negotiation that gave it 47.5 per cent of TPC. This was in addition to its claim to a Mesopotamian section of the Khaneh Naftun, which bridged the Persia/Ottoman border. A border dispute between the two empires had risked APOC’s monopoly over the Khaneh Naftun. The Foreign Office, again through Cox’s good offices, obtained a guarantee from the Ottomans that regardless of the border decision, APOC’s rights would be respected, a position that failed to bring any benefit to Persia after APOC’s request to begin exploration in the area was rejected by the majles,27 though the company later exploited the field through its position in TPC. Subsequently, it is worth noting that, in 1921, Sir John Cadman (recently knighted) negotiated the San Remo Oil Agreement, whereby Britain was able to build pipelines from Persia and Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean, through French-mandated territory.

**PERSIAN RESPONSES TO DISENFRANCHISEMENT**

The details of the escalating dispute between the Persian government and APOC (and by extension, the British government) is a matter of record, and amply documented elsewhere.28 Yet, despite, or perhaps by virtue of, having to face the powerful dynamic of British corporate/government interests in the pursuit of Persia’s own security and commercial gain, the third and fourth majles revealed a learning curve of concessionary expertise that is quite astounding in view of the newness of the democratic experiment in Persia. A brief illustration of Persia’s 1922 negotiations with an American company, Sinclair Consolidated Oil Corp., over concessionary rights makes an interesting comparison with the terms of the D’Arcy Concession.

The Sinclair concession was to cover five northern provinces near the Russian border for 50 years, though within 8 years, an area of 15 per cent had to have been selected by the concessionaire, with the rest reverting to Persia. Persian nationals were to be able to acquire up to 30 per cent of shares; profits were to be calculated on a sliding scale with Persia receiving 20 per cent of net at first, with a rise to 28 per cent as production rose, or 10 per cent in
gross revenue. Persians were to be trained to fill technical posts as rapidly as possible. One province was to be reserved for Persian prospecting, and no third party could take over the concession without a renewal of the award by the majles. Although machinery and production materials imported from abroad were to be exempt from customs duties (a similar clause existed in the D'Arcy Concession), a $10 million loan taken out by Sinclair was to be floated to the Persian government through American banks. In December 1923, Sinclair accepted the terms of the concession. Unfortunately, due to several diverse factors, the deal with Sinclair fell through. Conflicting Soviet claims to the concessionary territory, as well as competition between different factions within the government supporting Standard Oil, another claimant to the contract in opposition to Sinclair, have both been attributed as causing the concession’s failure. Two other factors may also have been involved: first, the strange death of the American Consul to Iran, Robert Imbry, at the Shrine of Sheikh Hadi Saga Khaneh, which temporarily caused a break in American-Persian relations. As a result of this, Sinclair had trouble raising the loan. Second, it has been argued that the changeover of power inside Persia to that of Reza Khan (later Shah), which began at that time, was likewise a key factor.

Nonetheless, the concessionary terms indicate how effective the majles, in conjunction with the members of cabinet, had become in working within its own government structures, as well as in anticipating the demands it could make for its resources. Based on a little over 10 years of experience with APOC, there were several specific areas the Persian government realized required spelling out, and further, it introduced the idea of phased controls over time in various other aspects of the deal. The bitter realization that Persian natural resources were being divvied up and traded as financial assets in the City of London without any involvement or look-in by the Persian government had led to the clause in the Sinclair concession, specifying that almost a third of the company’s assets would remain in Persian hands. This move anticipated by 30 years the 51 per cent insisted upon by Mohammad Mossadeq prior to nationalization of APOC’s assets in 1951, and which came to characterize the restriction on foreign investment in contracts more generally between Western corporations and resource-rich nations as nationalization became an issue 20 years later. The insistence on profits as a percentage of revenue likewise revealed shrewd Persian calculation. The next-door Mesopotamia concession had negotiated profits on a tonnage basis, which APOC directors touted as a much fairer arrangement, and which Sir John Cadman eventually succeeded in incorporating into the 1933 Concession signed by Reza Shah. However, percentage value would prove to be the more profitable over the long term, as it would offer producing nations control over pricing, which tonnage sales did not – as long as two sets of books were not being kept, which in fact APOC did.

By incorporating a clause specifying that shares could not change hands without the approval of the majles, the Persian government had devised a
means to protect against the hard lesson of D’Arcy’s sale of his company shares to the British government, and of the proliferation of subsidiary companies, such as the Bakhtiar Oil Company, which bled revenues from the central government while exacerbating its relations with regional players. The requirement that the concessionaire identify within eight years which 15 per cent of the concession’s territory it wished to exploit further, ensured that Persia would retain control over its land; this of course was confirmed by warning that one province would remain under Persian control for its own exploitation purposes. The final point included in the concession, again reflecting the painful experience of Persia’s relations with APOC, was the demand that Persian technicians be trained as soon as possible. This was and remained for years an extremely sore point in the southern Abadan facility, where APOC divided British from Persian nationals in all aspects, including living areas and job opportunities, keeping a ceiling on Iranian advancement within the company and failing to establish a training facility to ensure that Iranians drew even with their British counterparts in skill levels and responsibilities.32

How, one wonders, was it possible for Persia to insist on these terms, and for Sinclair to agree to them, rather than accepting terms similar to those originally granted to D’Arcy? Persia’s ability to play off the Russians against the British over these northern concessionary rights, as well as Standard Oil against Sinclair, served to highlight the value of these concessions within the domestic political and economic contexts of the competing states. Oil had rapidly gained value as a globally important commodity, and the Persian negotiators realized that it was worth considerably more to concessionary buyers than any other opportunity presented by Persia until then, rendering the elasticity within the negotiating terms very high. The willingness of Persia to experiment with increasingly greater demands thus anticipated the future direction of oil dealing.

Equally important, however, was the ire that APOC had engendered by its deceptive handling of profit-sharing, and its unwillingness to reveal its books, or sell shares, to the Persian government. This was exacerbated by APOC’s close partnership with the British government and its representatives, such that Sir Percy Cox and Sir John Cadman appeared to be pursuing British foreign – and economic – policy through the vehicle of APOC, usually at the expense of Persian interests. The avaricious (if typically, imperial) handling of APOC had planted seeds of suspicion on the part of the Iranians in all dealings with the company, and by association, with any other oil company, encouraging the drawing-up of airtight concessionary terms that delimited company rights while specifying Persia’s own rights and gains. The deep ambivalence with which Persians held British official representatives to Persia may best be seen in the way that the Agreement of 1919, and the Concession of 1920, both succeeded in discrediting the British Treasury accountant Sidney Armitage-Smith, even as they both foundered. Though the Agreement of 1919 can be argued to have been a half-measure advanced by
the British government in a concerted effort to dissuade the Persians from presenting their demands at the Paris Peace Conference (there were also promises to pay war damages and to resolve a boundary issue near Maku in Azerbaijan – neither of which were carried out), the Concession of 1920 was a different matter. In contrast to the subsequent 1932 Concession signed by Reza Shah, it offered generous terms and greater protection for Persian interests. Armitage-Smith, who had been assigned to do the accounting for both, and who had otherwise not been involved in Persian affairs, can, certainly in retrospect, be seen as having been fair – if not fully apprised of the full picture by the British government – in his choice of apportionments in the former. Thus, in his accounting for war damages and unpaid arrears, he was not privy to the fact that “Cox and Curzon had no intention to indemnify Iran for war losses and damages”, though they had led many in the Persian government, and others, to think so. Additionally, provisions were made to allow British claims against Iran for a wide range of losses during the war, and thus: “The Anglo-Persian Oil Company could claim damages against Iran, a non-belligerent in the war, for destruction of pipelines, instead of proceeding against Turkey or Germany” – something Armitage-Smith would not have been aware of at the time of drawing up the provisions of the Agreement.

In his work on the 1920 Concession, however, Armitage-Smith can be seen to have drawn up a contract that would have been of great benefit to Persia. Yet, due to the false promises of Cox, Curzon, Cadman and others, and the incestuous relationship between government and company, Armitage-Smith, though previously respected by many members of the Persian government, was no longer trusted by its ministers, and the 1920 Concession was scuttled as a result.

**FINANCIAL ASSESSMENT**

Persia’s currency value began consolidating permanently once oil revenues began to reach the country on a regular, if paltry, basis. Once guaranteed a source of constant income, Persia was no longer poor, and its currency no longer reflected the vagaries of a too lean economy. However, the vast quantities lost to Persia would, had they been equitably dropped into her treasury, have had a significant impact on her rapidly changing financial capabilities. Instead, APOC consolidated its marketing through subsidiary companies such as its tanker fleet (established in 1915) and its marketing arm (acquired and expanded in 1917), and invested in other oil ventures, only the first being TPC. In this way it ensured that APOC itself showed only small profits on its production activities, for which it had to pay Persia its 16 per cent while its subsidiaries racked up profits that made Britain’s oil industry a veritable successor to its East India Company.

Though Persia’s debt has been ascribed to the Qajar Shah’s propensity to be “venal and weak” by both Persian and European chroniclers, and the result
of their “capricious” and “avaricious” insistence on visiting Europe, the rise in Persia’s debt from £500,000 in 1900 to £10.6 million by 1919, cannot be attributed solely to the cost of three foreign voyages, nor to the fact that customs receipts were being used to pay off the debt.\(^{37}\) According to Arnold Wilson, imports exceeded exports on commodities by £1,500 in 1907; while total trade with Russia exceeded total trade with Britain by £5,250, a fact that deeply disturbed the British. This balance was altered as oil revenues began to flow. In fact, the rise in debt can be in no small part attributed first to the costs Persia was required to pay as war indemnities, despite being a neutral power in the conflict, and second, to the arrears still owed to it from APOC – against which Persia had already paid for rising imports, as well as administrative outlays. It can be seen in its currency valuation, however, that the financial backbone of the country had significantly changed subsequent to the exploitation and sale of oil, and although Persia’s share was paltry, it served to stabilize her currency. Once this occurred, Persia was able to move from the silver standard to gold.

**CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

To understand the requirements, particularly fiscal, that faced the Qajar monarchs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries enables a more nuanced analysis to emerge of their motivations, and that of their ministers and of the parliament, in engaging in concessionary negotiation. The D’Arcy Concession, however, was to prove unique, in that although it addressed resources on Persian territory, the British government, even from the outset, viewed the nature of that territory as contingent. Once the value of the oil was assessed both as a supply of security, and as a significant profit centre, the imperial approach practised in India was brought to bear in the south of Persia, and to all intents and purposes, Persia was offered no options by which to fight for control over what was undoubtedly hers. As Eyre Crow, Permanent Undersecretary of the Foreign Office put it, in regard to American concerns over British actions at the time in Persia: “Why not take the bull by the horns and tell the Americans that Persia for us is covered by what is our equivalent in Asia to the Monroe Doctrine.”\(^{38}\) An effective power structure in London, which moved government men to do company business, and vice versa, as illustrated by the roles adopted by Sir Percy Cox and Sir John Cadman, politicized the situation such that the Qajar administration was unable to initiate either arbitration or mechanisms of recompense. Although mistakes, intrigue and mismanagement no doubt coloured the Persian performance, this should in no way eclipse the narrowness of manoeuvrability in which it found itself as it fought for the right to its own oil and territory, as well as control over its Treasury receipts and currency. It can be seen, therefore, that the oil concession began a process in which Persian sovereignty over its own resources became an issue that would act
as the crucible for its exercise of imminent domain, and in the long run, frame its energies in withstanding both the incursions of the Great Game and subsequent challenges by the Great Powers.

Notes


6 Elwell-Sutton, op. cit. p. 53.


8 Sir A. T. Wilson, Persia (London: Ernest Benn, 1932), p. 79.

9 Mojtahed-Zadeh, op. cit., p. 25.

10 Millspaugh, op. cit. p. 59, quoting Shuster, p. 313.

11 Avery and Simmons, op. cit. p. 8.

12 Millspaugh, op. cit. p. 54.

13 Avery and Simmons, op. cit., p. 5.


15 Avery and Simmons, op. cit., p. 19.

16 Elwell-Sutton, op. cit., p. 18. See also Avery, op. cit., p. 258.

17 Ibid.


20 Ibid., p. 179.


22 Wright, op. cit., p. 179.

23 Elwell-Sutton, op. cit., p. 20.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p. 23.

26 Digard et al., op. cit., p. 225.


29 Avery, op. cit. p. 258.


31 Ibid., pp. 94, 209.

32 Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian, op. cit, pp. 95–103 passim.


34 Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian, op. cit., p. 95, footnote.

35 Ghani, op. cit., p. 51.


37 See, for example, Ghani, op. cit., pp. 7, 31, caption photo insert at p. 50. Ghani makes the extraordinary statement on p. 31, “All customs receipts were going toward repayment of debts incurred by capricious Qajar kings, and the treasury had no other source of income”, while failing to note that in 1916, the year of which he speaks, APOC owed Persia significant payments from the period of the War and the treasury was again receiving yearly payments on oil exports.

38 Quoted in Ghani, op. cit., p. 53.
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