



ANGLO-PERSIAN AGREEMENT OF 1919

ANGLO-PERSIAN AGREEMENT OF 1919, provisional agreement made between the British and the Persian governments which, if ratified, would have granted the British a paramount position of control over the financial and military affairs of Iran. From the days when Napoleon conceived the idea of invading India with the help of Alexander I, the Tsar of Russia, Great Britain contemplated with apprehension the invasion of India by Russia via Persia and Afghanistan. Under the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 (q.v.), which divided Persia into rival spheres of influence, southern Persia was assigned to Britain while Russia controlled the northern portion. Later, according to the terms of “The Secret Treaties of Constantinople” of 18 March 1915, Constantinople was promised to Russia, and England was allowed to incorporate within her sphere of influence the neutral zone of Persia (The Secret Treaties and Understanding, published by the Bolshevik Government, November, 1917; Wright, *Amongst the Persians*, p. 177 n.).

In the Spring of 1917, the domination of Persia by Russia and England was so complete that it would have caused the two powers no further concern, except for the Russian Revolution, which upset all diplomatic, political and military plannings. In July, 1917, the Kerensky government ordered the Russian commander, General Baratoff, to evacuate his troops from Persia (Kerensky’s statement published in *Century Magazine*, January, 1920). The Bolshevik government of Lenin went even farther in disclaiming any design upon Persia



and in February, 1918, Trotsky stated officially that so far as revolutionary Russia was concerned, all treaties and concessions imposed upon Persia were null and void (Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, see N. S. Fatemi, *Diplomatic History of Persia 1917-1923*, New York, 1952, p. 8). The British government, however, made no sign of following the Russians and declaring the 1907 and 1915 conventions abrogated. Lord Curzon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, announced in the House of Lords, "that the matter was temporarily in suspense and that it would be considered further after the termination of the war" (*British Parliamentary Debates XXVII*, p. 825).

With the collapse of the Tsarist and Ottoman Empires, England now not only dominated Persia itself, but had extended her control to most of the surrounding regions. The only potential threat to her supremacy was the Bolshevik Revolution. The British Foreign Office feared that if the Bolsheviks invaded Persia it would be a menace to Mesopotamia and India (Nicholson, *Curzon*, pp. 139-40). Curzon hoped "to create a chain of vassal states stretching from the Mediterranean to the Pamirs and protecting not the Indian frontiers merely, but our (i.e., the British) communications with our further Empire" (Skrine, *World War*, p. 56). But Iran, considered the most vital link in that chain, was also, from Curzon's point of view, incurably weak and incapable of self-government. Therefore, strengthening the Persian army and reinvigorating the country by dint of alliance, a new order would be established in Persia in accordance with the British imperial interests, and then she would be able to stand as a buffer state between Russia and the British Empire, in Arabia and India (Olson, *Anglo-Iranian Relations*, pp. 222-23, 226-27; Skrine, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59). By 1918, the pressure of the British Minister in Tehran forced the Shah to dismiss Prime Minister Najaf-qoli Khan Şamşām-al-salṭana Baḳtīārī who was replaced by the pro-British Mīrzā Ḥasan Khan Woṭūq-al-dawla (q.v.). Soon after the formation of this new government, England sent Sir Percy Cox, the former Political Resident of the Gulf, as its Minister in Tehran. In spite of his knowledge of the Middle East, Cox was quite insensitive to the nationalistic sentiments in Iran (Skrine, *op. cit.*, p. 58; Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 31).

The new government was confronted with many problems: The treasury was depleted, the British troops were roaming the country, armed rebels were looting the cities and infesting the roads, and the Bolsheviks were knocking at the gates of northern Persia. At this juncture, England approached Persia for an agreement of friendship and alliance (Woṭūq-al-dawla's statement to the



6th session of the Majlis, 1926).

It took six months of secret negotiations for the preparation of the Agreement which was announced on 9 August 1919. The preamble of the agreement concluded: “In virtue of the close ties of friendship which have existed between the two governments in the past, and in the conviction that it is in the essential and mutual interest of both in the future that these ties shall be cemented, and that the progress and prosperity of Persia should be promoted to the utmost.” In the body of the first agreement, the British government accepted the following undertakings:

1. It “reiterates, in the most categorical manner, the understanding which they have repeatedly given in the past to respect absolutely the independence and integrity of Persia.”

2. It promises to “supply, at the cost of the Persian government, the services of whatever expert advisers may, after consultation between the two governments, be considered necessary for the several departments of the Persian administration. These advisers shall be engaged on contracts and endowed with adequate powers, the nature of which shall be the matter of agreement between the Persian government and the advisers.”

3. It agrees “to supply, at the cost of the Persian government, such officers and such munitions and equipment of modern type as may be adjudged necessary by a joint commission of military experts, British and Persian, which shall assemble forthwith for the purpose of estimating the needs of Persia, in respect of the formation of a uniform force which the Persian government proposes to create for the establishment and preservation of order in the country and on its frontiers.”

4. “For the purpose of financing the reforms indicated in clauses 2 and 3 of this agreement, the British government offers to provide or arrange a substantial loan for the Persian government, for which adequate security shall be sought by the two governments in consultation in the revenues or the customs or other sources of income at the disposal of the Persian government. Pending the completion of negotiations for such a loan the British government will supply on account of it such funds as may be necessary for initiating the said reforms.”

5. The British government, fully recognizing the urgent need which exists for



the improvement of communications in Persia, with a view both to the extension of trade and the prevention of famine, is prepared to cooperate with the Persian government for the encouragement of Anglo-Persian enterprise in this direction, both by means of railway construction and other forms of transport; subject always to the examination of the problems by experts and to agreement between the two governments as to the particular prospects which may be most necessary, practicable and profitable.”

6. “The two governments agree to the appointment forthwith of a joint committee of experts, for the examination and revision of the existing customs tariff with a view to its reconstruction on a basis calculated to accord with the legitimate interests of the country and to promote its prosperity.”

The second agreement provided for a loan of β2,00000 sterling by the British to the Persian government at a 7 percent interest rate and payable monthly. The securities for this loan were all the revenues and customs receipts of the Persian Gulf ports.

There were added to the texts of the agreements two letters, dated 9 August 1919, from Sir Percy Cox to the Prime Minister. One conveyed the assurances to Persia of British cooperation in securing the “revision of the treaties actually in force between the two powers, compensation for material damages suffered at the hands of other belligerents, and the rectification of the frontier of Persia at the points where it is agreed upon by the parties to be justifiable.” The other letter assured the Persian government that Great Britain “will not claim from the government of Persia the cost of the maintenance of British troops which were sent to Persia owing to Persia’s want of power to defend her neutrality, and that, on the other hand, the Persian government will not claim from the British government an indemnity for any damage which may have been caused by the said troops during their presence in Persian territory” (J. C. Hurewitz, *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics: A Documentary Record* II, New Haven and London, 1979, pp. 182-84).

The fact that secret negotiations were carried out angered Persian politicians. They blamed the government that while their delegation was waiting outside the Peace Conference at Versailles (see below Anṣārī, ‘Alī-qolī Khan), and while the country impatiently waited for the British evacuation, their government conspired in a secret treaty. The Council of Peace in Paris was disturbed that the secret treaty would make Persia a British protectorate (Associated Press, 28 August 1919), since no provision was made for placing the treaty within the



archives of the League of Nations.

According to the Iranian Constitution (article XIV), no agreement was binding, and operative unless confirmed by the Parliament, but both the British and the Persian governments immediately proceeded as if the agreement had been in fact approved by the Parliament and were operative. A British military mission arrived in Tehran to organize a new army while a financial mission, headed by Armitage Smith, took over the ministry of finance. A railway syndicate was established to survey the country for possible trunk lines and the first installment of the loan was paid to Iran.

Finally what destroyed the agreement was the allegation that Prime Minister Woṭūq-al-dawla, the Minister of Finance Akbar Mīrzā Šārem-al-dawla, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Fīrūz Mīrzā Noṣrat-al-dawla, collectively referred to in the British sources as “The Triumvirate,” had received a sum of β131,000 to secure the ratification of the Agreement by the Majlis. The rumors were later confirmed in November, 1920, in the House of Commons (Wright, op. cit., p. 179; Olson, op. cit., pp. 237-40). According to Bāmdād (*Rejāl* III, p. 116) who, however, does not mention his source, the bribe money was later extorted from the Triumvirate by Reżā Shah. Aḥmad Shah Qājār, despite his later opposition to the Agreement, had also asked for a life-time subsidy of 20,000 tomans a month and assurances of support by the British for himself and the survival of the Qajar dynasty in return for his support of the Agreement (Olson, op. cit., p. 237). Woṭūq-al-dawla fell in Tīr, 1299 Š./June, 1920, and the new prime minister, Ḥasan Khan Mošīr-al-dawla suspended the Agreement on the grounds that it had not yet been ratified by the Majlis. It was finally annulled by the next cabinet under Sayyed Zīā’-al-dīn Ṭabāṭabā’ī and the unanimous vote of the fourth Majlis.

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