



BELGIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS

BELGIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS: diplomatic relations and Belgian officials in Iran. Official diplomatic relations between Belgium and Iran date from the end of the nineteenth century. It is known that at that period Belgium was very eager to broaden its relations with the countries of Asia and Africa but also that it had already oriented its interests and explorations primarily toward black Africa and what was going to become the Belgian Congo. This dual policy explains why, though Belgian diplomats serving in Tehran had for half a century had the task of furthering their country's efforts at commercial and industrial penetration of Persia (MAE 2016.II, 2478, 2888.I, 2889.II, 2890.II-IV, VI-VIII), their role would have remained rather limited had special circumstances not suddenly caused Belgian-Persian relations to take a new turn. Indeed, the uniqueness of these relations is owing to the fact that, from 1898 until the eve of World War II, Belgium "lent" to Persia a relatively large number of officials, whose task was to organize or reorganize various administrative departments of the latter country. This "technical assistance"—before the phrase was coined—was undertaken at the behest of the Persian government, to be sure (MAE 2890.VII), but especially at that of Russia and Great Britain (Kazemzadeh, p. 315). In order to understand it, it is necessary to recall the disastrous financial situation of Persia at the end of the nineteenth century. Because of the wastefulness and improvidence of Persian officials, foremost among them the Qajar rulers, it had become necessary to contract ever more sizable foreign loans on more and more stringent terms. In particular the lending powers required the customs receipts as collateral for loans granted in 1892 by the Imperial Bank of Persia (British) and several



years later by the Russian State Bank (Kazemzadeh, p. 268). Persia, Russia, and England, equally anxious not to introduce into the Persian civil service officials from powerful and expansive countries, preferred to employ Belgians.

From that time on the Belgian legation at Tehran undertook to conclude an agreement on this matter, and Belgian-Persian relations, until then rather formal and not highly developed, took a new turn (MAE 2981.I-III; exchange of letters between the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Favereau, and the Belgian minister in Tehran, Beyens). The first three Belgian officials arrived at Tehran on March 15, 1898 (MAE 2981.I-III). Their initial task was to reorganize the customs service of the empire on the modern European administrative pattern, including elimination of tax farming, revision of tariffs to reflect the economic interests of the country, gradual elimination of internal taxes and tolls that hampered commerce, training of qualified Persian personnel, keeping of rigorous accounts, and—if possible—rooting out of the usual fraudulent and corrupt practices that infested the whole Persian civil service at that time. Joseph Naus, the highest-ranking of the three Belgian officials, was so energetic that in a short time he obtained very encouraging results. His competence and authority were the admiration of the Persians, and the spectacular increase in customs revenues (more than 35 percent) between the arrival of the Belgians in 1898 and the end of 1899 induced the grand vizier to accept a plan involving engagement of new Belgian officials (MAE 2981.I-III; telegram signed Şadr A'zam dated September 23 [1899?]). After that diplomatic dispatches from the Belgian legation allude more and more frequently to the customs officials, to their activities in Persia, to the difficulties that confronted them, to their successes and failures.

As for the scope of Belgian operations, it must be mentioned that, beside the customs service, the Persian government also appealed to them to reorganize the postal service, the treasury (Molitor papers; *L'œuvre*, p. 10), the cadastral survey, the supply services (especially during the first years of World War I), and, after the epidemics of plague and cholera in 1904, 1905, and 1908, the sanitation services (Molitor papers, “Fardes Téhéran” and “Deux ans au Seistan”). This great increase in responsibilities, however, also led to the first great difficulties: In agreeing to undertake the reform of the land tax, Naus and his successors were destined to clash with the interests of the ruling class, the great landowners, who had been quite comfortable with the previous anarchic situation.

From that time on, and despite the support of the shah and certain ministers,



criticism of Belgian administration became steadily louder and more frequent. As the integrity of the latter could not be taken as a target, it was Belgian political attitudes that were attacked instead. In fact, it should not be forgotten that the first ten years of the twentieth century, which were those during which the entire Belgian program of administrative reforms was accomplished, were also those of “Constitutionalist” agitation and those of Russo-British tensions, culminating in the agreement of 1907, in which the two powers divided Persia into spheres of influence for their own profit. Enmeshed in the hostility of the Persian ruling class, British distrust, and the sometimes burdensome support of the Russian legation, Belgian officials could hardly have avoided certain pitfalls. Their leader, Joseph Naus, succumbed to attacks mounted by the Constitutionalists and the British and was forced to leave Persia in the aftermath of the revolution and the installation of a parliamentary regime (see MAE 2981.VI-VII; and Browne, 1910, p. 137; for the typical, unfavorable view of Belgian officials in Persian sources, see Kasrawī, *Mašrūṭa*³, and *Tārīk-eḥīdārī*, ed. Saʿīdī Sīrjānī, indices, s.v. Nūz). His departure was, however, far from signaling an end to the activity of Belgian officials.

On the contrary, after a period of reorganization and calm, the new director general of the customs, Joseph Mornard, succeeded in enlarging his administration, employing new agents, and regaining the confidence of the Persians. For example, in 1913 there were sixty-three active Belgian officials in Persia (for the roster and number of Belgian officials in Persia between 1898 and 1915 see Destrée, pp. 329-49). The majority were accompanied by their families, and the Belgian colony was thus among the important foreign communities in the country. The situation in Persia changed, however. The beginning of World War I led to a shift in the attitude of the Russians. After having supported Naus and his men against the English in 1907, they now undertook to hamper the activities of Belgian civil servants in northern Persia. Their aim was the total disorganization of Azarbaijan and doubtless military occupation of the province (*Times*, December 11, 1911; and Kazemzadeh, pp. 615-18). In 1915 the situation became intolerable, both for Mornard in Tehran and for the Belgians working in the north. Many of them resigned and returned to Belgium (Demorgny, 1916, p. 73; Siassi, 1971, p. 74; MAE 10.640/5, letter of May 31, 1915).

This date can be taken as a turning point in the history of Belgian officials in Persia. Never again would the Belgians be so numerous or so influential. Their field of action was diminished until it was limited to administering the



customs and the postal service.

For completeness it should be mentioned that, in addition to Persian, Russian, and English adversaries, the Belgians had others: The Swedish heads of the Persian police got on badly with the Belgian customs officials (Sepehr, p. 117; Siassi, 1917, p. 83), and in particular high American officials, who were commissioned on several occasions to reorganize the treasury and finances, found themselves in a position of rivalry with Belgian administrative chiefs. The most noteworthy episodes in this connection were those in which the general administrator of the customs, Mornard, was pitted against the general treasurer of Persia, W. M. Shuster (see Shuster, *passim*), in 1911 and a dozen years later the quarrels between the Belgian Lambert Molitor and the American A. C. Millspaugh (see Millspaugh, 1925, *passim*). Despite petty daily difficulties and periods of more acute crisis, however, the administration of the customs and the postal service improved and was continually modernized under the authority of Belgian officials until the eve of World War II. It is certainly permissible to argue that this total success for a program of technical assistance, or rather of transfer of administrative expertise, was owing not only to the professional skills of the agents in charge but especially to the length of the tours of duty that they agreed to undertake in Persia.

If, in fact, the rapid turnover among technical-assistance specialists in developing countries today is compared with the duration of appointments for Belgian officials in Persia between 1898 and 1938, it is striking how long the latter, for the most part, resided in the country, taking time to learn to understand it and also to train in situ a new generation of Iranian officials who would be capable of taking over. These few lines written by A. Siassi attest to it: “. . . The Persian customs function today [1930] as do those of the most advanced European countries. They continue to have Belgian directors . . . to whom the Persians are grateful for services rendered . . . they preserve with warmth the memory of several among them, like Monsier Lambert Molitor, who passed twenty-five years of his life among them . . . ” (1931, p. 146).

After World War II and the end of the Belgian officials' activity, diplomatic relations between Belgium and Iran resumed a more uneventful course, comparable to those of all small European states with the countries of the Near and Middle East, based essentially on commerce, industry, and the transfer of technologies.



It should be mentioned, however, that the Belgian constitution, like the constitutions of other European states, served as a partial model for the Iranian constitution.

For further details see also *naus; priem*.

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