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# CONSPIRACY THEORIES

**CONSPIRACY THEORIES** in Persia, a complex of beliefs attributing the course of Persian history and politics to the machinations of hostile foreign powers and secret organizations. In contemporary social psychology such theories are defined as elaborate and internally consistent systems of "collective delusions," often tenaciously held and extremely difficult to refute (Groh, pp. 2-5; Graumann, pp. 151-90, 245-51; Kruglanski, p. 228). Many conspiracy theories are based on a simple dualism in which the world is viewed as divided between good and evil forces, with the latter determining the course of history. Various failures and disasters, for example, defeats in war, revolutions, and general backwardness can thus be blamed on powerful enemies. Conspiracy theories often serve an important social function, helping to assuage certain kinds of anxiety among group members but also often limiting or hindering their capacity to respond effectively to external and internal social and political challenges.

Particularly since the beginning of the 20th century Persians from all walks of life and all ideological orientations have relied on conspiracy theories as a basic mode of understanding politics and history. The fact that the great powers have in fact intervened covertly in Persian affairs has led ordinary people, political leaders, even the rulers themselves to interpret their history in terms of elaborate and devious conspiracies. The acceptance of such theories has in itself influenced the course of modern Persian history, for it has engendered a sense of helplessness in dealing with the rumored activities of foreign conspirators. Conspiracy theories in modern Persia can generally be

divided into two categories: those focused on supposed plots by Western colonial powers and those focused on satanic forces believed to have been active against Persia from antiquity to the present.

Conspiracy theories focused on colonial powers

The weakness of Persia under the last three Qajar shahs (1314-43/1896-1924; Hedāyat, 1363 Š./1984, pp. 169-70, 330-34), coupled with such events as the Constitutional Revolution of 1323-29/1905-11, which had the support of Great Britain against Russian interests; the Angle-Russian Convention of 1325/1907, by which Russia and Great Britain divided Persia into zones of influence; the occupation of Persian territory by Great Britain, the Russians, and the Ottomans during World War I; the abortive 1337/1919 Anglo-Persian agreement, by which Persia was to become a kind of semiprotectorate; and the British-backed coup d'etat of 1299 Š./1921, which led to the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty (Hedāyat, 1363 Š./1984, pp. 150-392), encouraged the development of conspiracy theories focused on foreign powers. During most of this period foreign embassies openly intervened in Persian affairs through individual political notables, tribal khans, wealthy merchants, and members of the *ʿolamāʾ*. For their part these Persian notables found "Foreign patronage . . . extremely tempting: it was easy to overcome rivals and to mislead timid compatriots with the air of being "in the know"." Such notables, hinting at knowledge of the real intentions of the foreigners, fostered a general sense that Persian affairs were directed by hidden plotters in the embassies (Avery, p. 40; cf. Dawlatābādī, *Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* I, pp. 313-25; Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* III, pp. 571-75; Šayḵ-al-Eslāmī, 1368 Š./1989, pp. 49-240, 419-49; Sepehr, pp. 6, 70-88, 140-43; Shuster, pp. 85-276).

*Conspiratorial schemata focused on the British.* Although there have been conspiracy theories implicating all the Western powers that have competed in Persia, those involving the British have been most popular among members of the ruling and middle classes born before World War II. The basic premise is that the British have controlled the course of modern world history, including all major events in Persia from the Russo-Persian wars of the early 19th century to the Revolution of 1357 Š./1979. The British are depicted as cold-blooded, foxy, and cunning (*rūbāh-e makkār*), able to "cut off the heads of their enemies even with cotton"—that is, possessing nearly miraculous powers (*sīāsat-e Engelīs*) to achieve their ends. They are supposed to have duped and manipulated the "simple Russians" and the "naive Yankees." Such notions were influenced by conspiracy theories abroad in France and Germany since

the 18th century (see Schmidt) but imported to Persia in this century by students returning from Europe. Russian, German and Ottoman propaganda against the British in the late 19th and early 20th centuries encouraged fears of secret British designs against Persia and the Islamic world as a whole (Mojtahedī, pp. 2-22; Sepehr, pp. 6, 70-75).

The British first became influential in Persia in the early 19th century, and their influence grew rapidly after the Constitutional Revolution; except for an interval in the 1930s it persisted until the nationalization of the Persian oil industry in 1330 Š./1951. Belief in the *sīāsat-e Engelīs* led many Persians also to believe that most political events were stage-managed by the British (*kār-e Engelīsīhā*) and that almost all politicians were British agents (*ʿāmel-e* or *nowkar-e Engelīs*; for numerous examples, see Moʾassesa, passim; for a satirical depiction of this paranoia about the British, see *Dāʾī Jān Nāpeʾon*, a novel and television serial by Īraj Pezeškzād, pp. 164-225, 251-69, 286-88; cf. Ṭolūʿī). The assassination, execution, or murder of political leaders was also commonly attributed to the hidden hand of the British (for a long list of supposed victims of British plotting, see Torkamān, pp. 17-20). A significant role was also allotted to popular figures (*wajīh al-mella*) who "pretended" to oppose British interests (*naʿl-e vārūna zadan*, lit. "put their horse's shoes on backwards"). For example, even though the leaders of the pro-German Komīta-ye mellīūn-e īrānī (Committee of Iranian nationalists), founded in Berlin in 1334/1915; of the Tudeh party in the 1940s (see communism ii); of the campaign to nationalize oil in the early 1950s; and of the Revolution of 1357 Š./1979 overtly and vigorously opposed British interests in Persia, it was widely believed that their opposition was directed by the British themselves in the "puppet show of politics" (Bozorgmehr, II, pp. 682-83; Makkī, 1357-59 Š./1978-79, III, pp. 385-89; Moʾassesa, II, p. 255; N. Mālekī, p. 168; M. R. Pahlavi, 1980, p. 71; Parsons, p. x; Rāʾīn, 1346 Š./1967, pp. 420-48; Šahrī, V, p. 309).

The myth of *sīāsat Engelīs* was applied retroactively to the history of the 19th century, during most of which Russia had actually been the dominant foreign power in Persia. For example, in his influential book *Dast-e panhān-e sīāsat-e Engelīs dar Īrān* (The hidden hand of British policy in Iran) Khan-Malek Sāsānī, an influential diplomat and ardent conspiracy theorist, described a supposed great British plot to dismantle Persia. From this perspective the massacre of Alexander Griboedov, the Russian minister to Tehran, and his staff by a mob on 5 Šaʿbān 1244/11 February 1829 was intended to encourage Russia to annex the Caucasus and make further advances into Persia (pp. 1-6; cf. Rāʾīn, 1346

Š./1967, pp. 162-85; Avery, pp. 41-44). According to Sāsānī, the British induced the Ottomans to occupy Bahrain, the Turkmen Gorgān, and the Afghans Sīstān (pp. 19, 42-52, 104-05). They also had the grand vizier Abu'l-Qāsem Qāʾem-Maqām murdered because he championed the geographical integrity of Persia (Sāsānī, 1331 Š./1952, pp. 7-12; Rāʾīn, 1346 Š./1967, pp. 44-68; cf. Ādamīyat, 1352 Š./1973, pp. 5-27). Sāsānī explained the dismissal and murder (in 1268/1852) of Mīrzā Taqī Khan Amīr(-e) Kabīr (q.v.), chief minister to Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah (1264-1313/1848-96), as the result of a rumor that he had planned to usurp the throne, a rumor launched by British diplomats and spread by a group of Jews (1331 Š./1952, pp. 24-41; Šamīm, pp. 125-26; cf. Ādamīyat, 1355 Š./1976, pp. 682-760). He even claimed that British agents had tricked the Russians into bombarding the shrine of Imam Reżā in Mašhad in 1330/1912 in order to foster Persian hatred of the Russians (pp. 63-68; cf. Rabino, pp. 117-45). The British were also supposed to have meddled in religious matters, controlling the *ʿolamāʾ* through so-called "Indian money," donated by Shiʿites in British India and transferred to the *ʿolamāʾ* in Iraq through British diplomatic channels (Sāsānī, 1331 Š./1952, pp. 102-04); encouraging the Babis to rebel in the mid-19th century (Sāsānī, 1331 Š./1952, pp. 100-01; N. Malekī, pp. 145-46; Pašūtan, I, pp. 157-60, II, pp. 42-49; Rāʾīn, 1346 Š./1967, pp. 97-112, 367-79; Ṣafāʾī, 1344 Š./1965, I, p. 16; Šamīm, pp. 109-10, 170; see babism ii); instigating pogroms against the Bahais to force them to collaborate with British agents in return for protection (see bahai faith vii); and urging Jews to become Bahais so that they could forge closer ties with the families of Persian notables and spy on them (Sāsānī, 1331 Š./1952, pp. 100-02).

Sāsānī's theories culminated in his account of the supposed punishments for Persian notables who had opposed British policies: defamation, dismissal from office, imprisonment, and assassination, as well as political obscurity for their families. He claimed to have statistics showing that about twenty old families, aided by eighty less prominent families, had ruled Persia as British agents from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. "The descendants of the dirty dozen who collaborated with Colonel Sheil [the British minister in Tehran] in murdering Amīr Kabīr still, after a century, hold key positions." Finally, he proposed a criterion by which readers could identify British agents for themselves: "Any family whose members have occupied key positions in the last hundred years with no interruption are all the servants of Great Britain" (Sāsānī, 1331 Š./1952, pp. 78, 82-83; Rāʾīn, 1346 Š./1967, passim; Qāsemī, 1353-58 Š./1974-79, passim).

Maḥmūd Maḥmūd, a historian much respected in Persia, included a detailed study of the British plan for Persia in his well-received, eight-volume *Tārīḵ-e rawābeṭ-e sīāsī-e Īrān wa Engelīs dar qarn-e nūzdahom-e mīlādī* (A history of Anglo-Persian political relations in the 19th century), completed a few years after the work of Sāsānī just discussed. He argued that the Qajars were under Russian protection and British influence for more than a century. The Tobacco rebellion of 1309/1890-91 supposedly dealt a blow to this British influence, but in fact the British learned their lesson and began to take advantage of the effectiveness of the *ʿolamāʾ* in mobilizing mobs. The British envoy in Tehran was supposed to have used the "Indian money" to persuade some of the high-ranking *ʿolamāʾ* to demand a constitutional regime in 1323-25/1905-07 (VI, pp. 332-38; Rāʾīn, 1346 Š./1967, pp. 97-112). In Maḥmūd's view the Constitutional Revolution weakened the Persian state and made possible the rise of the "vile lower classes." The main British objective was to dominate Persia through the treaty of 1325/1907 (see above): "The British murdered the great and powerful Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah in order to replace him with the ailing Moẓaffar-al-Dīn Shah. They removed Moḥammad-ʿAlī Shah to bring to the peacock throne the ailing boy Aḥmad Shah" (VI, pp. 255, 370-71, 390-91; VII, pp. 181-83; VIII, pp. 37, 51-55, 181-206, 210-26).

The fall of the Qajars and the rise of the Pahlavis is a favorite topic of conspiracy theorists. Some believe that the British were plotting to overthrow the Qajars from the time of the treaty of Torkamāṇčāy in 1244/1828, in which the Russians successfully dictated the succession through the crown prince ʿAbbās Mīrzā (Makkī, 1357-58 Š./1978-79, III, p. 13). Although Reżā Khan had actually attempted a coup with German aid as early as 1335/1917 (Kaḥḥālzāda, pp. 299-308), the British did play a major role in the coup d'etat of 3 Esfand 1299 Š./22 February 1921, which brought him to power (Ironside, pp. 149, 160-61). This undisputed fact lies at the center of a mythology in which every event and every action by Reżā Khan (later Reżā Shah) is believed to have been controlled by the British. For example, General Edward Ironside, commanding the British forces against the Bolshevik army in northwestern Persia, presumably selected Reżā Khan to carry out the coup because he was an "illiterate, crude soldier" (Ḵomeynī, XIII, p. 151; cf. Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* III, p. 325). The next step was to force Aḥmad Shah to abdicate, a move often attributed to his supposed refusal to support the Anglo-Persian agreement of 1337/1919 (Bāmdād, *Rejāl* I, pp. 85-89; Golšāʾīān, pp. 637-46; Makkī, 1357-58 Š./1978-79, I, pp. 137-256; cf. Šayḵ-al-Eslāmī, 1368 Š./1989, pp. 312-25, 444-45; Reporter). It is widely believed in Persia that Reżā Shah was

commissioned by British intelligence to implement its schemes, including construction of the trans-Persian railway, which is said to have been designed by the British in anticipation of World War II. The deaths in the 1930s of some of Reżā Shah's strongest initial supporters, "Abd-al-Ḥosayn Teymūrtāš and Noṣrat-al-Dawla Fīrūz, who were murdered, allegedly on the orders of the shah, and ʿAlī-Akbar Dāvar, who committed suicide, are all attributed to British design. The insistence that women give up the veil, the attempt to purity Persian of Arabic loanwords, the uncovering of plots against Reżā Shah's life, and even the establishment of a national bank (Bānk-e mellī-e Īrān) and the issuing of paper currency were all supposedly intended to contaminate Persian culture, foment conflict with the Arabs, ensure control by the shah, and plunder Persian gold and silver supplies (Āl-e Aḥmad, p. 41; Golšāʾīān, p. 647; Kay-Ostovān, I, p. 34; Ḵomeynī, VI, pp. 182-87, XIII, pp. 151-52; Moṣawwer Raḥmānī, pp. 440-47, 517-18; Nīkbīn, pp. 31-33; M. R. Pahlavi, 1961, p. 84; Šahrī, II, pp. 219-21, 629; cf. Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* III, p. 325). The British have also been accused of having established the theological seminary (Ḥawza-ye ʿelmīya) at Qom, with the secret support of Reżā Khan, in the early 1920s as part of a scheme to contain communist encroachment (Dawlatābādī, *Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* IV, pp. 289-91; Ḥājī-Būšehrī). On the other hand, many members of the *ʿolamāʾ* believe that it was the British who were behind Reżā Khan's policy of suppressing activity at Qom (Ḵomeynī, I, pp. 200, 268-69, XI, pp. 86-87, 125-26, XIII, pp. 151, 177; Rāzī, I, pp. 24-36, 46-52, 114-16).

The granting of oil concessions ii. to the British and the activities of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) have been the subject of elaborate conspiracy theories since the turn of the century (Lesānī, pp. 578-79). A story invented by French and Austrian journalists to explain how the British government was able to "steal" the oil concession of 1319/1901 from William Knox D'Arcy was widely believed by Persians (Zischka, pp. 20-32, 145-55; cf. Hardinge, pp. 278-79; Ferrier, pp. 35-40; Lesānī, pp. 42-86; Fāteḥ, pp. 250-59). Also perceived as a British plot were rumors of the discovery of a miraculous fountain (*saqqā-ḵāna-ye Šayḵ Hādī*) in Tehran in July 1924; it attracted thousands of superstitious people and ended in the murder of the American consul, Robert Imbrie, who was "persuaded by the hidden hand of the British to make an appearance and take pictures." Many Persians believed that the British objective had been to scare off the Sinclair Oil Company, which was then in the process of acquiring concessions in northern Persia (Eʿẓām Qodsī, II, pp. 669-71; Hedāyat, 1329 Š./1950, p. 462; Lesānī, pp. 378-82, 578; cf. Avery, pp. 258, 263-64; M.-T. Bahār, II, pp. 115-27, 187; Makkī, 1357-58 Š./1978-79, III, pp.

93-115; Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* III, pp. 617-25). According to other conspiracy theories, Reżā Shah's cancellation of D'Arcy's concession and conclusion, in 1312 Š./1933, of a new oil agreement that extended the British concession until 1371 Š./1992 (for thirty-two more years than the original) were part of a carefully laid British plan (Lesānī, pp. 135-214; Moṣaddeq, 1365 Š./1986, pp. 198-201; Nīkbīn, pp. 38-40; Šahrī, II, p. 629; cf. Taqīzāda, pp. 225-26, 236-44; Šayḵ-al-Eslāmī, 1367 Š./1988).

The myth of *sīāsat-e Engelīs* surfaced once again during the Allied occupation of Persia in 1320 Š./1941 and its aftermath. It was firmly believed by many people that the British raised Reżā Shah to glory and threw him out when he became useless. The accession to the throne of the crown prince Moḥammad-Reżā; the selection of cabinet members; the results of Majles elections; the rise and fall of personalities, political parties, social clubs, and newspapers; and even famines and food shortages were all attributed to British scheming (Lesānī, pp. 353-93; Mahdī-nīā, pp. 167-71, 235-67; Šahrī, II, pp. 396-404). According to another theory, the pro-Soviet Tudeh party was organized by British agents to served the interests of APOC. This theory, originally introduced by dissidents who left the party in the mid-1940s, eventually became prevalent among nationalist groups. The accusation was based on the instrumental role of Moṣṭafā Fāteḥ, a director of the oil company, in creating the Jabhā-ye mottaḥed-e żedd-e fāšīst (Antifascist united front) in cooperation with the Soviet cultural center; in addition, several founding members of the Tudeh party were active in the cultural center, and some, including Bozorg ʿAlawī and Eḥsān Ṭabarī, found well-paid jobs at Victory House (the British cultural center) and the oil company. Although such episodes of cooperation simply reflected wartime tactics, they were interpreted as evidence of the secret hand of the British operating in the Tudeh party (Ḵāmaʾī, II, pp. 32-43, III, pp. 348-63; Ḵ. Mālekī, pp. 466-67; Moṣaddeq, 1359 Š./1980, p. 133; Pašūtan, II, pp. 54-55; Šaʿbānī, pp. 5-6, 18-19; Ṭabarī, pp. 46-49). Some even believed that the British and the Russians were cooperating in a secret plot against Persia. General Ḥājī-ʿAlī Razmārā, who served briefly as prime minister, for example, has been accused of involvement in a plot to establish a British-led pro-Soviet regime in Persia (Torkamān, pp. 443-45). Moḥammad-Reżā Shah (1320-57 Š./1941-79) believed that attempts on his life in 1329 Š./1950 and 1345 Š./1966 were anglophile communist plots (Alam, p. 122).

In another class of theories the imaginary formation of an underground religious organization, Ḥezb-e jehād-e eslāmī (Islamic jehād party), in the early

1940s was attributed to the British. The party was said to have directed the activities of the Shiʿite *ʿolamāʾ* in Qom and Najaf, as well as the operations of the Tudeh party and such leftist guerrilla groups as Fedāʾīān-e ḵalq and Mojāhedīn-e ḵalq (Pašūtan, II, pp. 40-41, 54-55; see communism iii). The court minister and former premier ʿAbd-al-Ḥosayn Hažīr and Prime Minister Razmārā were assassinated (in 1328 Š./1949 and 1329 Š./1951 respectively) by Fedāʾīān-e Eslām, an underground organization that was believed by many to be a British creation (Bašīrī, pp. 22-26, 92-93, 422-23; N. Malekī, pp. 79-86, 257-60, 357-92; Dreyfuss and LeMarc, pp. 14-31; for refutation of these allegations, see Ḵosrowšāhī, passim).

Even the shahs were influenced by such theories. Reżā Shah believed that "the British were behind all evils of the worlḍ . . . and even suspected his son [the crown prince, Moḥammad-Reżā] of being a British agent" (Taqīzāda, pp. 362-64). In his turn Moḥammad-Reżā Shah's "suspicions of the British are quite incredible; he tends to see their secret hand behind virtually every international incident" (Alam, p. 239). He believed, for example, that President Ḥasan al-Bakr of Iraq "may pose as an anglophobe but in reality he's a lackey of the British" (*ʿĀlam*, p. 176). The shah even suspected the anglophobe Moṣaddeq: "We always suspected he was a British agent, a suspicion his future posturing as an anti-British nationalist did not diminish. Certainly my father had long suspected his British connections and in 1940 jailed him on espionage charges" (1980, p. 71). The shah believed that "Moṣaddeq's negative nationalism . . . paradoxically, allowed the British more influence over Persia's national policies than ever before" (1961, pp. 82-110, 126; cf. Pašūtan, II, pp. 140-64, who believed that even the oil-nationalization movement was a British plot; for similar accusations against Moṣaddeq from the Tudeh party, see Ḵāmaʾī, III, pp. 206-13, 273-82; Ṭabarī, p. 32; cf. Moṣaddeq, 1345 Š./1986, pp. 338-97).

The notion of an anti-Persian conspiracy led by the British reappeared during the Revolution of 1357 Š./1979. The anti-American tone of the revolution and regular daily broadcasting by the British Broadcasting Corporation (B.B.C.) of news about events left the shah in no doubt (M. R. Pahlavi, 1980, p. 15), and many older Persians of the upper and middle classes also believed that British agents had stage-managed the revolution. For example, Princess Ashraf (A. Pahlavi, pp. 199-200) declared that "these riots took place during a steady campaign of biased anti-Shah news reports by the BBC, almost a reprise of the attacks made on my father a few decades earlier." The fact that mobilization

for the revolution progressed while Jaʿfar Šarīf-emāmī, grand master of the Persian national lodge of Freemasons (see below), was premier served to confirm suspicions of a British conspiracy (Āhaṇčīān, pp. 19-21; ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān, p. 51). The old suspicion that "the *ʿolamāʾ* had a historical connection with Indian money and with the British" also brought many members of the elite and old-guard politicians to believe that even the anti-Western Khomeini was a British agent (Basin, pp. 53-95; Dreyfuss, pp. 28-98; Pašūtān, II, pp. 311-21; Šafā, 1985, II, pp. 1119-21, III, pp. 1669-78). For example, the shah told the British ambassador that "if you lift up Khomeini's beard, you will find "Made in England" written under his chin" (Parsons, p. x). Some conspiracy theorists argued that the revolution had been instigated by the British to eliminate the shah because he had placed himself at the disposal of the Americans (Mālek, 1360 Š./1981, app., pp. 7-10). Others claimed that the main conspirator was the multinational oil consortium, which was allegedly dominated by British interests (Pašūtān, II, pp. 322-27). Some of these views received apparent confirmation from articles in such foreign publications as *Executive Intelligence Review*, sponsored by Lyndon LaRouche and his disciples in the United States, in which it was reported that President Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, Ramsay Clark, and Cyrus Vance, among others, had served as a "British fifth column" and had helped to bring about the revolution, "a carefully orchestrated British Military Intelligence operation" (Dreyfuss, pp. viii-x; idem and LeMarc, pp. 14-31; LaRouche, pp. ii-iii; for the influence of these theories on Persian authors, see Bašīrī, I, pp. 53-95, 410-11; Šafā, 1364 Š./1985, III, pp. 1740, 1858-59).

*Conspiracy theories focused on Russia.* In 1795 Polish emigrants in Paris sought to arouse the French public against Russia by concocting a document known as *The Testament of Peter the Great* (Groh, pp. 28-30; Atkin, pp. 100-14). Belief in its authenticity also spread among anti-Russian Persians (Makkī, 1357-58 Š./1978-79, III, p. 9; Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* II, p. 357-59). According to the Testament, the Russians had two major secret objectives: to subjugate Europe and to conquer Persia and thus obtain access to the Persian Gulf. In the words of Moḥammad-Reżā Shah (1961, p. 31), "Ever since Peter the Great, who ruled from 1682 to 1725, Russia had in fact been trying to expand southward to obtain warm-water ports on the Persian Gulf." The Russian Revolution of 1917 and V. I. Lenin's treaty with Persia in 1300 Š./1921 tempered Persian Russophobia for a while, but it was revived after Josef Stalin's abortive attempt to annex Azarbaijan in 1324 Š./1945. In the early 1950s the American Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) disseminated a forged memoir attributed to

Abu'l-Qāsem Lāhūtī, a poet and noted revolutionary leader who had lived in the Soviet Union since an abortive rebellion in Azarbaijan in 1301 Š./1922. The author of the forgery, the American Persianist and C.I.A. consultant Donald Wilber, claimed that Lāhūtī was a natural candidate for the premiership of a Soviet-dominated Persia. The memoir indicated, among other things, that the Russians planned to annex all the northern provinces of Persia ([Pseudo] Lāhūtī; Wilber, 1986, p. 191; Eʿẓām Qodsī, II, pp. 392-408).

Interest in *The Testament of Peter the Great* was revived once again in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Many old-guard politicians and members of the middle class considered the Islamic revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran as manifestations of a Soviet plot to fulfill the ambitions outlined in the *Testament* (Malek, 1360 Š./1981, pp. 14, 51). It was rumored that Moḥammad Mūsawī Ḵoʾīnīhā, the militant clergyman who directed the taking of the hostages, was one of dozens of Russian agents who had infiltrated Qom and that the "liberal nationalist Islamic" Abu'l-Ḥasan Banī Ṣadr, Ebrāhīm Yazdī, and Ṣādeq Qoṭbzāda were militant Marxists who had infiltrated and dominated Ayatollah Khomeini's group (Dānešjūyān, XXVII, pp. 2, 66, 70-71, 136-41, 154).

The idea of a conspiracy between the British and the Russians had been popular since the 1325/1907 agreement between the two countries (Meftāḥ, pp. 35, 41, 43; Pašūtan, II, pp. 322-23). Among others General Ḥosayn Fardūst, former head of Sāzmān-e bāzrasī-e šāhānšāhī (Royal inspection organization) and Daftar-e vīža-ye eṭṭelāʿāt (Special information bureau) and a close confidant of the shah, "believes British and Russians are cooperating in fomenting this crisis." Commenting on Fardūst's theory, the American ambassador William Sullivan noted that "we often hear this fantastic charge" (Dānešjūyān, XXVII, Eng. text, p. 130). The hostage taking of 1358-60 Š./1979-81 was considered by many to be simply a repeat of the "Imbrie affair" of 1303 Š./1924 (see above), in which the Russians and the British supposedly acted in concert against American interests in Persia (Malek, 1981, app., p. 10). The exiled shah attributed events in Persia to the "Unholy Alliance of Red and Black" (M. R. Pahlavi, 1980, p. 145).

*Conspiracy theories focused on the C.I.A.* After the C.I.A. had engineered the 1332 Š./1953 coup that overthrew the Moṣaddeq government, the dominant position of the United States in Persia began to be reflected in conspiracy theories (Gasiorowski; Roosevelt, passim; Wilber, pp. 187-95; Woodhouse, pp. 104-35). The Persian elite of the post-Moṣaddeq period, one American diplomat

noted, believed in the myth of “American omnipotence.” Imagining that prime ministers were chosen by the United States, “candidates or would-be candidates for prime minister come to advertise their assets and their availability” (Herz, p. 9). It was widely believed that the shah’s White Revolution and the land-reform program of the 1960s had been designed in detail by Americans, though in fact American officials had favored more moderate land reform (Ashraf, pp. 278-84). Leftists and many others in the middle class believed that the reforms had been designed to undermine the feudal basis of British interests in Persia (Malek, 1360 Š./1981, app., p. 7). Khomeini, among others, considered land reform part of an American plot to destroy Persian agriculture in order to create a market for surplus American produce and to ensure Persian dependence on food supplies from the United States (IV, p. 24, V, pp. 23, 136, VI, p. 181; cf. Tavānāyān-e Fard, pp. 131-33, 360-64; Moʾassasa, II, p. 226). Opponents of the shah accused Sāzmān-e eṭṭelāʿāt wa amnīyat-e kešvar(SAVAK) and other security forces of acting as agents of the C.I.A. Tens of thousands of people were rumored to have been tortured and executed by drowning in the salt lake in southern Tehran (Daryāča-ye ḥawż-e solṭān). The deaths of such well-known figures as Ḡolām-Reża Taḵtī (1346 Š./1967), Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad (q.v.; 1347 Š./1968), Ḥasan Arsanjānī (1348 Š./1969), ʿAlī Šarīʿatī (1354 Š./1975), and Sayyed Moṣṭafā Ḵomeynī (1356 Š./1977) were rumored to have been murders, though officially reported as resulting from suicide, heart attack, and stroke (Davānī, VI, pp. 331-70; *Keyhān-e farhangī* 5/6, 1368 Š./1989, pp. 32-35; Rafʿat, pp. 109-45; Saʿīdīān, pp. 64, 132).

The most important complex of conspiracy theories involving the United States is focused on the notion that the Persian revolution was masterminded by the Carter administration, either to create a barrier to the southward movement of the Soviet Union or to prevent Persia from becoming a major power. Many royalists adduced two major pieces of “hard evidence” for this theory: General Robert Huyser’s secret mission to Persia in January 1979, allegedly to neutralize the Persian armed forces, and the Guadeloupe summit meeting on 14 January 1979, at which Western powers supposedly decided to replace the shah with an Islamic regime. The shah wrote: “I believe that during these meetings the French and the West Germans agreed with the British and the American proposals to my ouster. These Guadeloupe meetings may prove to be the “Yalta of the Mideast”, with the notable absence of the recipient [U.S.S.R.] of the largesse.” He also quoted General Rabīʿī, the commander of the Persian air force: “”General Huyser threw the shah out of the country like a dead mouse”” (M. R. Pahlavi, 1980, pp. 171, 173). Some

Persians even consider the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran in 1358-59 Š./1979-80 as intended to provide a pretext for the Carter administration's freezing of $14 billion in Persian assets in the United States (personal interviews). According to the shah, events in Persia and Afghanistan were evidence of a grand Russian and American conspiracy by which they "have divided the world between them" (M. R. Pahlavi, 1980, p. 155).

The Persian left has also developed conspiracy theories about the United States, claiming that the American government seeks to keep the third world in a state of permanent dependency. Western capitalists and their Persian bourgeois agents are supposed to have been behind various plots, coups, regional wars, and so forth (Kīānūrī, 1983; "Sīāsathā"). The left also viewed the White Revolution and land reform of the 1960s as an American scheme, but with the goal of encouraging further development of dependent Persian capitalism, the decline of the agricultural sector, and mass migration to the cities (Dānā, pp. 46-121; Moʾmenī, pp. 504-11). The Revolution and the hostage episode are claimed to have resulted from a conspiracy between Khomeini and Ronald Reagan to bring about Carter's electoral defeat (*Iran Times*, 15 March 1991, p. 10). The American "Iran-Contra affair" is viewed as substantiation for this theory. Many leftists believe that the West, led by the United States, allowed Khomeini's group to "hijack" the revolution in order to repress the revolutionary left and keep Persia under Western influence (Arasī, p. 4). Persian Maoists, on the other hand, claim a conspiracy between the United States and the Soviet Union; some go so far as to declare that the entire policy of the Islamic Republic has been orchestrated by the United States and Great Britain in order to safeguard the interests of the world capitalist system (Bābak; Jonbeš; "Qāčāq-e aslaḥa"; Nāṭeq).

Ayatollah Khomeini and radical elements within the Islamic regime have dubbed the United States the "great satan" and blamed it for promoting an emasculated version of Islam (*Eslām-e āmrīkāʾī*) and plotting against Persia (Khomeini, XI, pp. 12-17, XII, pp. 133-41, 270-73; Dānešjūyān, XII, pp. 1-11, XVII, pp. 1-6, XVIII, pp. 1-4). In contrast, Banī Ṣadr, the ousted president of the Islamic Republic, is an ardent proponent of a "Reagan-Khomeini" conspiracy theory; he has cited numerous supposed secret contacts between the United States and leaders of the Islamic regime in Persia, which he believes is an American puppet (passim).

Satanic theories of conspiracy

According to the satanic theories, the failure of Persia to attain its "natural" position of political, military, cultural, and religious superiority is the result of conspiracy by inimical global forces, variously "Hellenic westernism," Freemasonry, Zionism, the Bahai faith, and even the Shiʿite clergy.

*Hellenic westernism.* The uneasy relationship between Persia and western powers from antiquity to the present has encouraged intellectuals like Aḥmad Fardīd, Ḏabīḥ Behrūz, and Ḥosayn Malek to adopt theories of conspiracy. The term *ḡarbzadagī* (lit. "plagued by the West" or "westoxification") was coined by Fardīd, who claimed that Freemasons and Jews are engaged in a great conspiracy to "hellenize" the entire world. The concept of "westoxification" appears to be derived from a recurring theme in Martin Heidegger's works, the "darkening of the world." The perceived decadence of the West had already begun, according to Fardīd, with the development of Greek philosophy, in which human beings (*wojūd*) were separated from the unity of consciousness (*delāgāhī*). The humanistic belief that man is at the center of the universe has determined the Western ethos since the time of the Greek philosophers. Western man is immersed in technology and more concerned with himself than with his spiritual calling in the world. This ethos is in conflict with the "spiritual ethos" of the East, but, on the other hand, the East has lost its cultural potency and is dominated by Western civilization. The liberal conception of a free society is useless in a world in which being and consciousness are no longer well integrated. Fardīd believes that the Constitutional Revolution in particular was tainted by Western Freemasonry and Judaism. His theories have been adopted by some intellectuals who claim that thepolicies of the current Islamic regime are manifestations of Eastern spirituality (e.g., Dāvarī, 1361 Š./1982; idem, 1363 Š./1984).

Behrūz has argued that clandestine Manichean societies, disguised under various names, have been the most vicious and destructive conspiratorial force in history and that since antiquity Persia has been the victim of a Western conspiracy to prevent it from assuming its "natural role" as the world's most powerful nation. As examples of this conspiracy he has cited the spread of the "false" notion that Alexander the Great actually conquered Persia (1343 Š./1964; cf. Ḡaffārī; Ḥāmī), the conquest of Persia by the Arabs in the 7th century, the Mongol invasions in the 13th century, and all rebellious movements in medieval Islamic Persia. The primary mechanism on which the Manichean conspirators relied was repeated distortion of every calendar

system, in order to confuse and divert the course of history (1331 Š./1952, pp. 10-13; 1343 Š./1964, pp. xxviii-xxix).

In *Tawallod-e ḡūlhā* (The birth of ogres) Malek has elaborated on the notions of Fardīd and Behrūz, arguing that the Western conspiracy was initiated when Persia—with a superior culture and civilization that were in fundamental contrast to those of the Hellenes—defeated Greece in the Peloponnesian wars of the 6th century b.c.e. [sic]. In retaliation for that defeat the West has ceaselessly opposed Persia (pp. 57-65). Malek believes that Judaism has persistently dominated the hellenized West, providing it with five poisonous gifts: Christianity from Jesus, communism from Karl Marx, psychoanalysis from Sigmund Freud, the atomic bomb from Albert Einstein, and the Club of Rome (see *Encyclopaedia of Associations* I, 1992, p. 1098) from Herman Kahn (pp. 9-10, 29-53). One example of the Western satanic conspiracy is the superimposition of alien, "Hellenic" notions of law and democracy on Persia through the Constitutional Revolution (pp. 68-71).

*The Crusaders' conspiracy against Islam.* Many Muslim intellectuals in Persia—notably Khomeini, Mortażā Moṭahharī, Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad, and ʿAlī Šarīʿatī—have believed in a general conspiracy of the Christian West to thwart the rise of Islam and its leading nation, Shiʿite Persia. Since the Crusades Western nations are supposed to have plotted to subjugate the Islamic world and to inhibit its prosperity and development, specifically to dissolve the Ottoman empire, foment conflict among Muslim communities, support Israel and world Zionism, and "brainwash" the younger generation of Muslims. Khomeini considered Salman Rushdie's novel *Satanic Verses* to be part of this conspiracy to humiliate Islam (I, pp. 86-92, 172; Āl-e Aḥmad, pp. 22-42; Qorbānī, pp. 421-70). In one variant of these theories the establishment of the Shiʿite Safavid empire reflected a Christian conspiracy to split the Muslim world and undermine Shiʿism, the true Islam (Šarīʿatī, pp. 236-38; cf. Pašūtan, I, pp. 121-25)

*Conspiracy between the Shiʿite ʿolamāʾ and world powers.* In the 1980s Šojāʿ-al-Dīn Šafā, a former Persian deputy court minister for cultural affairs, developed another conspiracy theory, based on ideas in the deposed shah's last book (M. R. Pahlavi, 1980, p. 145) that a "strange amalgam"—among the Shiʿite clergy, leftists, Western media, major oil companies, and the British and American governments—had set out to destroy the rapidly developing nation of Persia. Šafā suggests that "the emergence of the Shiʿite *ʿolamāʾ* in the 4th [10th] century constitutes the greatest conspiracy in Persian history and

perhaps the oldest conspiracy in world history" (1362 Š./1983, p. 58). The purpose was to emasculate true Shiʿism by transforming it into the instrument of corrupt Shiʿite leaders. Three "capital investments" ensured the loyalty of the *ʿolamāʾ*. First, they received financial support from temporal authorities and *bāzārī*s, a "sacred coalition" of the forces of tyranny (*estebdād*), exploitation (*esteṯmār*), and demagoguery (*esteḥmār*). Second, they accepted the "Indian money" and other contributions from Great Britain in the late 19th century. Finally, in the 1970s a gigantic coalition of big oil companies and the intelligence agencies of the United States, Great Britain, the U.S.S.R., and Israel used the *ʿolamāʾ* to mobilize the forces of Islamic revolution in order to halt the development of Persia and to prevent its impending entry into the "northern club" (Šafā, 1362 Š./1983, pp. 47-48, 61-62, 86-92; Bašīrī, I, pp. 408-11; N. Mālekī, pp. 1-8).

*Conspiracies of the Freemason, Bahais, and Zionists.* It is commonly believed in Persia that various elite groups are organized in secret lodges of Freemasons under the control of the British, who use them to advance their secret designs to control world affairs. Groups accused of being under the thumb of the Freemasons include former courtiers, landowners, tribal chiefs, intellectuals, leading *ʿolamāʾ*, wealthy merchants, contractors, influence peddlers, political bosses, and most politicians, including deputies to the Majles and cabinet members (Rāʾīn, 1348 Š./1969, III, pp. 580-636). The roles of well-known Freemasons like Jamāl-al-Dīn Afḡānī, Mīrzā Malkam Khan Nāẓem-al-Dawla, and Ḥasan Taqīzāda in the Persian Constitutional Revolution are taken as evidence that, "like the French Revolution," it was designed and led by Freemasons and "illuminati." Freemasons are also thought to have played an important part in bringing the Pahlavis to power (Bašīrī, I, pp. 48-52; Maḥmūd, V, pp. 25-34, VII, pp. 2-42; Rāʾīn, 1355 Š./1976, pp. 41-140; and Ṣafāʾī, I, 1344 Š./1965, pp. 4, 15, 41-63, 122-31, II, 1346 Š./1967, pp. 227-45; idem, 1352 Š./1973, pp. 95-112).

Belief in a conspiracy among adherents of the Bahai faith is based on a forged document attributed to Prince Dimitri Dolgorukov (known in Persian as Kīnyāz Dālgūrokī), the Russian minister to Persia in 1263-70/1846-54. It purports to be a memoir in which the prince described how he created the Babi and Bahai faiths as a way of weakening Shiʿism and Persia as a whole. It was first circulated in Tehran in various forms in the late 1930s and has since been widely cited in Muslim polemics as evidence that the Bahais were controlled first by the Russians and later by the British or the Americans or

both. A number of editions of this work have been printed, sometimes modified to reflect political developments (see, e.g., Eʿẓām Qodsī, II, pp. 549-80; Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī*, p. 44 n, 1; for a recent publication of the document in a monarchist newspaper, see *Šahfarāz-e āryān* 32, Bahman 2548=1368 Š./February 1989, pp. 2-7), although a number of scholars have refuted its authenticity (see, e.g., Eqbāl; Kasrawī, pp. 88-90; Maḥmūd, VIII, p. 143; Mīnovī, pp. 25-26; Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* I, pp. 42-44). In the 1970s the relative prosperity of Persian Bahais and the rumor that their numbers had grown to about 3 million (ten times the actual figure) engendered the belief that they had conspired to "buy" Persia. As proof the extensive holdings of several businessman who were known or thought to be Bahais were adduced. Furthermore, as Bahai world headquarters is located in Haifa, Israel, the Bahai faith is taken by some to be a Zionist political organization, rather than a religion. Some authors have connected it with Freemasonry (Zāvoš) and Islamic fundamentalism; Bahais have also been accused of funding the Islamic revolution (Bašīrī, I, pp. 9-26, 45-52).

Those who believe in an international Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world find their proof in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (Cohen), a document originally forged by the czarist secret police but still widely accepted as authentic in the Middle East. The Zionist conspiracy is thought to have supported the "despotic" rule of the shah; for example, the soldiers who are supposed to have massacred "thousands" of innocent people on Black Friday (17 Šahrīvar 1357 Š./8 September 1978) are said to have been Israelis (Davānī, VIII, pp. 49-59; for the view that they were Palestinians, see Šafā, 1354 Š./1985, III, pp. 1789-91). Some people have argued that Israel supported the Islamic revolution in order to weaken its only potential rival for domination in the region by replacing the shah with a "vulnerable and dependent Islamic regime" (Šafā, 1354 Š./1985, III, pp. 1697-744). In 1358 Š./1979 stenciled signs appeared on Tehran walls announcing the formation of an organization to fight against the conspiracy of Zionism, the Bahai faith, and Freemasonry (Sāzmān-e żedd-e Ṣahyūnīst, żedd-e Bahāʾīyat, wa żedd-e Ferāmāsonerī-e Īrān).

The appeal of conspiracy theories to Persians

The popularity of conspiracy theories among Persians arises from a combination of political, social-psychological, and cultural factors: frequent foreign interference during the period of semicolonialism in the early 20th century and great-power politics in the 1940s-80s; the legacy of deeply rooted pre-Islamic and Shiʿite cultural beliefs about satanic forces; and the

effectiveness of such theories as a collective defense mechanism, particularly during periods of powerlessness, defeat, and political turmoil.

The apparent absence of conspiracy theories in 19th-century Persia and their appearance and increasing popularity in the first quarter of this century suggest that they emerged largely as a result of the weakness of central authority and increasing foreign intervention in Persian affairs. The division of the country into zones of British and Russian influence in 1325/1907 and occupation by British, Russian, and Ottoman forces during World War I intensified the intrigues and rivalries among foreign embassies and consulates in Persia. Many of the country's political leaders did become clients of foreign powers and used foreign patronage to enhance their own political power. In this atmosphere conspiratorial tales were often disseminated in order to discredit rivals. At the same time students returning from the West brought with them German and French notions about a British conspiracy.

Certain deep-rooted aspects of the Persian cultural heritage, which seem to have no parallel in other Muslim societies, may also have contributed to the popularity of conspiracy theories. They include a dualistic world view, probably derived from pre-Islamic religious beliefs, in which good and evil powers were considered to be in conflict, with the latter directing the course of history (see, e.g., the creation myth, in which Iran, at the center of the world, is conspired against by Tūrān [Turks] in the east and Romans in the west; *Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, I, pp. 106-25); prevalent belief that the Shiʿite imams were victims of caliphal conspiracies; and a sharp distinction in Shiʿite theology between exoteric (*ẓāher*) and esoteric (*bāṭen*), as well as the practice of prudent dissimulation of belief (*taqīya*). The mythological character of traditional Persian historiography, which may reflect a particular receptivity to the mythological mode of thought; a propensity to poetic exaggeration (*eġrāq-e šāʿerāna*) among Persians at all social levels; and a long tradition of attributing miraculous deeds to the twelve imams (Baḥrānī, passim) are other probable contributing factors.

Although blaming others can help to assuage anxiety about failures, ready acceptance of conspiracy theories has also proved to be highly dysfunctional; in modern Persia it has contributed to political malaise that has sometimes precluded rational responses to internal and external crises (for the dysfunctional impact of conspiracy theories, see Arasī; Bāzargān, pp. 12, 58-59; ʿEnāyat, 1990, 1991; Herz, pp. 8-9; Mojtahedī, pp. 2-40, 72-75; Moḥīṭ Tabāṭabāʾī; Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* III, pp. 571-75, 642-49; Pezeškzād, pp. 164-225,

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