



## COUP D'ETAT OF 1299/1921

**COUP D'ETAT OF 1299/1921**, the military coup that eventually led to the founding of the Pahlavi dynasty. The coup was directed not at the Qajar monarchy as such but at the cabinet of Sepahdār-e A'zam Faḥr-Allāh-e Akbar and the oligarchy of landowners and bureaucratic officials that controlled the regime. It was led by Sayyed Żīā'-al-Dīn Ṭabāṭabā'ī and Colonel Reżā Khan Mīr Panj—the future Reżā Shah Pahlavī.

Sayyed Żīā'-al-Dīn was a young reformist journalist, sympathetic to the socialist views of Alexander Kerensky (Ḥakīm-Elāhī, pp. 7-53; Farroḡ, p. 68; minute by G. P. Churchill, 22 February 1921, FO/6401/2243). He enjoyed the confidence of British military and diplomatic personnel in Tehran and had semiofficial ties with the government (Avery, pp. 222-23; Jamālżāda, pp. 208-09; Makkī, pp. 186-87). Reżā Khan was a Cossack officer of humble origins who, as a result of his forcefulness and military achievements, had been chosen by Major General Edmund Ironside, head of Norperforce (the British forces in northern Persia), to take charge of the Cossack unit stationed near Qazvīn after its reorganization by Lieutenant Colonel Henry Smyth (Wilber, pp. 5-15; Bahār, pp. 69-73; Ironside, p. 149). Also involved in the coup were a senior Cossack officer, Brigadier General Aḥmad Āqā (Amīr-Aḥmadī), who had fought alongside Reżā Khan in Gīlān, and two reform-minded officers of the gendarmerie, Major Mas'ūd Khan (Keyhān) and Captain Kāẓem Khan (Sayyāḥ), who belonged to Żīā'-al-Dīn's circle and had been assisting Colonel Smyth in Qazvīn (Šehāb-al-Dawla, in Makkī, p. 615; Balfour, p. 220; Jamālżāda, pp. 208-09; Dawlatābādī, *Ḥayāt-e Yahyā IV*, p. 150).



During the tumultuous years of the Constitutional Revolution (q.v.) and World War I provincial leaders and foreign powers had gained ascendancy in Persia, and the Qajar state had lacked the financial and military means to assert its sovereignty. The Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919 (q.v.) had been designed to strengthen the central government under British tutelage, but British pressure for implementation, which met with strong opposition in Persia, and a new Russian intervention in northern Persia had merely aggravated the instability of the Qajar state. Many, including local British officials, feared that the withdrawal of British troops from northern Persia would be followed by an attack on Tehran with Bolshevik backing and looked for preventive measures (Sabahi, pp. 116-21; Bury and Butler, nos. 586, 599, 616, 640, 676, 677; Reporter, pp. 149-50). Others hoped that the signing of the pending Perso-Soviet treaty of friendship would relieve the threat and open new possibilities for the country (Dawlatābādī, *Ḥayāt-e Yahyā IV*, pp. 204-10).

Under these circumstances, on Friday, 29 Bahman 1299/18 February 1921, 2,200 men of the Cossack Brigade (q.v.) and 100 gendarmes began a march from Qazvīn toward Tehran under the command of Reżā Khan, ignoring repeated royal orders to return to their barracks (Wilber, pp. 43-46). On the outskirts of Tehran Reżā Khan told representatives of the cabinet, the shah, and the British legation that the Cossacks intended to install a strong government in Tehran in order to forestall the anticipated Bolshevik assault. He professed allegiance to the shah but accused the ruling elite of having ruined the country (Bury and Butler, no. 681). The capture of Tehran, which was secured on Monday (3 Esfand/21 February), was almost bloodless. Historical sources differ, however, on whether the Persian government, following the advice of the British legation, had decided not to resist the attack (Norman to Curzon, FO 371/6403/4926; Makkī, pp. 225-27) or whether the soldiers under its command had refused to fight (Balfour, p. 225; Jamālzāda, pp. 291-92).

Once the coup had been effected many political activists and members of the oligarchy were immediately arrested, in order to prevent organized opposition and to extract money from some of them (Makkī, pp. 236-42, Bahār, pp. 88-89, 95; Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī III*, pp. 212-14; Bury and Butler, no. 681; Balfour, p. 228). Martial law was imposed on Tehran: All gatherings were banned, the press was suspended, government departments were closed for reorganization, and bars, gambling clubs, and theaters were closed down (Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī III*, p. 215). Military governors were appointed for



Tehran and its vicinity, and provincial governors who did not submit to the new government were replaced by military officers (Makkī, pp. 242, 258-63, 313-14, 321; Hedāyat, p. 328). The shah, while rejecting Żiā'-al-Dīn's request to be granted the title "dictator," appointed him prime minister with full powers and confirmed Reżā Khan in his new position as commander of the armed forces, with the military title *sardār-e sepah* (commander of the army; Norman to Curzon, FO 371/6403/4926). Żiā'-al-Dīn's cabinet included men considered honest and well-meaning but, with the exception of two senior civil servants, they were believed to be inexperienced (Makkī, p. 264; Balfour, p. 231; Moqaddam, p. 368).

Żiā'-al-Dīn's program called for major reform of the state and society, with priority given to building up the armed forces (Dawlatābādī, *Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā IV*, pp. 233-38). The program also included a proposal to abrogate the Anglo-Persian Treaty of 1919 and to sign the Perso-Soviet treaty of friendship. Although the program and the early activities of the new government held considerable appeal for the common people and reformers (Dawlatābādī, *Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā IV*, p. 243; Makkī, pp. 293-94, 308-11, 323-24, 388-92; Hedāyat, pp. 365-67; Sabahi, p. 125), most observers, including the foreign colony in Persia, remained skeptical, suspecting British involvement in the coup and in formulation of the policies of the new government (Dawlatābādī, *Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā IV*, pp. 219-29; Lesueur, pp. 149-70; Dickson to Engert, U.S. National Archives, 891.00/1202). The coup was widely believed to be a British attempt to enforce at least the spirit of the Anglo-Persian agreement (see [conspiracy theories](#)). Moreover, it was argued that the coup could not have been launched without the financial and logistical support of British military personnel in Qazvīn (Dickson to Curzon, U.S. National Archives, 891.00/1202). The Cossacks themselves boasted of having received money and support from the British (quarterly report, U.S. National Archives, 891.00/1996; Norman to Curzon, FO 371/6403/4926). In fact, Żiā'-al-Dīn did intend to rely on Great Britain for assistance in reforming the financial and military apparatus, but the British Foreign Office was not forthcoming (Bury and Butler, no. 683). At any rate, his failure to create a strong constituency for himself and his policies allowed his opponents to gather their strength and bring about the downfall of his cabinet, only three months after its formation, leaving Reżā Khan in sole control of the government.

The role played by each individual in the planning phase of the coup remains uncertain. In later years Żiā'-al-Dīn and Reżā Khan each claimed to have been



the sole originator of the coup (Jamāl-zāda, p. 210; Wilber, pp. 62-64); in fact, both seem to have played important roles (Dawlatābādī, *Ḥayāt-e Yahyā IV*, pp. 223-24; Makkī, pp. 202-05; Wilber, p. 40). Both had been concerned about the fate of the country, and Żiā'-al-Dīn in particular had drawn up various proposals for dealing with the “Bolshevik threat” (Reporter, pp. 148-49; Sabahi, pp. 123-5).

Contrary to Żiā'-al-Dīn's assertion that the British had been deceived about the real purpose of the transfer of the Cossacks (Wilber, pp. 41-42; Sabahi, p. 120), British military personnel do appear to have been involved in the coup. Indeed, none of the accounts in which British involvement in the coup is denied can be substantiated (Balfour, pp. 218-22; Avery, pp. 224-28). The British had been concerned about “Bolshevik propaganda” in Tehran and its effect on the military. Smyth had been pressing Sardār-e Homāyūn Qāsem Khan Wālī, the nominal head of the Cossack Brigade, to employ the troops stationed near Qazvīn against the opposition to forestall a Bolshevik invasion (Sabahi, pp. 121-22). The plan approved by the British minister in Tehran, Herman Norman, called for the replacement of the 600 Cossacks stationed in Tehran with an equal number of newly trained men from Qazvīn, under the command of Reżā Khan (FO 371/6403/4926). It is very likely that the shah and the prime minister, who had just reconstituted his cabinet, had agreed to this plan, in hopes of strengthening the government (Bahār, pp. 64, 66-67; Makkī, pp. 136-41, 148; U.S. National Archives, 891.00/1195). Sardār-e Homāyūn dispatched a much larger force, however, claiming to have done so at the insistence of Smyth (Norman to Curzon, FO 371/6403/4926). Smyth later admitted to the role that he and W. A. Smart, the Oriental secretary of the British legation, had played (Dickson to Engert, U.S. National Archives, 891/00/1202; Grey, p. 35). Ironside had probably encouraged the move, without having been involved in the details of the plan. His diaries indicate that he was in favor of a military coup and had Reżā Khan in mind for its execution (quoted in Wright, pp. 181-84; Makkī, pp. 196-211). Judging from the comments of Foreign Office officials, however, British involvement was apparently not directed from the Foreign Office (Ullman, pp. 388-89nn.). Even Norman seems to have been unaware of the real purpose of the Cossack march until Ironside told him a few days before the coup (Wright, p. 184; Sabahi, p. 123; Ullman, pp. 388-89nn.).

It is likely, however, that the British government of India had encouraged the coup and the formation of a moderate nationalist government in Tehran, the



more likely as it was in accord with the Indian government's previously pronounced views (Stanwood, p. 56). Its officials had argued against the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919 as offensive to nationalist sentiments and detrimental to long-term British interests in the whole region (Olson, pp. 190-91, 193-94, 205). India's chief adviser in Tehran, Ardeshir-Ji Reporter, favored the establishment of a strong government and had been in close contact with Reżā Khan since October 1917. In his memoirs he claimed credit for having introduced Reżā Khan to Ironside (Reporter, pp. 147-51; Wright, p. 181n.).

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