



# EGYPT VII. POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS RELATIONS WITH PERSIA IN THE MODERN PERIOD

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## EGYPT

### vii. Political and religious relations with Persia in the modern period

The beginnings of modern diplomatic relations between Egypt and Persia may be dated from 1263/1847, when, on behalf of the Persian government, Mīrzā Taqī Khan Amīr(-e) Kabīr signed the second treaty of Erzurum (qq.v.) with the Ottomans. One of its provisions was that Persia had the right to send a diplomatic emissary to any city in the Ottoman empire in which Persian citizens had taken up residence for economic purposes, with the exceptions of Mecca and Medina. In 1271/1855 Persia established its first consulate general in Cairo. From then until 1302/1885 a series of consuls were appointed by the Persian ambassador to Istanbul to serve in Egypt for short periods before returning to Istanbul; one of them was the Persian constitutionalist Mālkōm (Malcolm) Khan in 1279/1863 (Algar, p. 63). As Persian tobacco became increasingly important in Egyptian markets and conflicts between Persian tobacco merchants and the Egyptian customs service intensified, this pattern



changed. In 1302/1884 the Persian ambassador, Ḥājī Moḥammad Khan Sarhang, himself took up residence in Cairo for a while (Wezārat, 1353 Š./1974 p. 86; idem, 1361 Š./1982, pp. 53-54).

In 1288/1871 the Persian political activist Jamāl-al-Dīn Asadābādī “Afḡānī” (q.v.) settled in Egypt, where he attempted to mobilize the people against Khedive Esmāʿīl (1279-96/1863-79; FATIMIDS).

Moṣaddeq was quick to recognize the new republican government of Jamāl (Gamal) ʿAbd-al-Nāṣer in Egypt, in July 1952 (Wezārat, 1361 Š./1982, p. 56). The two countries soon clashed, however, over Western and Soviet influence in the Middle East. Two years after American- and British-backed royalists brought down the Moṣaddeq government in August 1953 Persia joined the Baghdad Pact (q.v.), an anti-Soviet alliance orchestrated by the two Western powers. The Egyptian government, on the other hand, regarded the pact as a mechanism to permit Western military action against Egypt, and Persian adherence provoked deep anger in Cairo (Ramazani, 1975, p. 397). Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal in July 1956, and in early August the Persian foreign minister, ʿAlīqolī Ardalān, voiced concern that this move might jeopardize freedom of navigation through the waterway, on which Persia relied heavily for its foreign trade. Later that month Persian representatives attended the London conference called by the British to discuss the Suez crisis and were chosen to serve on the executive committee of the Suez Canal Users’ Association, established to ensure the doctrine of “free and innocent” passage. On the other hand, the Persian foreign ministry attempted to remain even-handed, maintaining Egypt’s sovereign right to nationalize the canal while emphasizing its responsibility not to impede traffic under the provisions of the Constantinople convention of 1888 (Ramazani, 1975, p. 398).

In July 1960, asked at a press conference whether or not Persia intended to recognize Israel, the shah replied that Persia “had recognized Israel years ago,” referring to Sāʿed’s de facto recognition, subsequently revoked by Moṣaddeq (Ramazani, 1972, p. 36). This statement caused a furor in Egypt; President Nāṣer attacked the shah’s “pro-Zionist” policies and broke diplomatic relations, claiming that Persia had also acted against Egyptian interests during the Suez war. Šaltūt, sent the shah a telegram declaring that Persia’s recognition of Israel “had hurt our sentiment as well as the feelings of the *ʿulama*’ of al-Azhar... . [It is an] action contrary to the religious and cultural measures which we have taken for strengthening ... brotherly relations” (Ramazani, 1972, pp. 37-38). The shah denied that any change Persian dealings



with Israel had occurred since 1950. It is possible that Egypt's breaking of diplomatic relations had more to do with growing Persian ties to the Arab states of the Persian Gulf than with the issue of Israel (Ramazani, 1972, pp. 38-39; Chubin and Zabih, pp. 140-42, 146).

*The period 1960-79.* Relations between Persia and Egypt continued to worsen in the 1960s. Egyptian sources repeatedly referred to Persia's oil province, Kūzestān, as 'Arabestān and even as "occupied territory." On the other side, the Persian government condemned alleged Egyptian meddling and aggressive foreign policy, especially in the Persian Gulf and Yemen. In February 1966 President Nāṣer condemned the shah for joining Saudi King Fayṣal in calling for an Islamic conference, which Cairo viewed as intended to promote Western, rather than Islamic, interests and to undercut Egyptian leadership of the Arab League. In response the shah attacked Nāṣer's "imperialist ambitions" in Yemen and in the region generally (Entessar, 1993, p. 162; Dessouki, p. 88; Piscatori, pp. 40-41; Chubin and Zabih, pp. 145-47, 151, 161).

After Israel defeated the Arab forces in the June 1967 war and the Egyptian military left Yemen, the shah began to mend his fences with Cairo. He attacked Israel for its preemptive strike against the Arabs and for its acquisition of territory (Wezārat, 1353 Š./1974, pp. 87-88) and sent teams of doctors and nurses with medical supplies to Egypt under the aegis of the Persian Red Lion and Sun Society, equivalent to the Red Cross (Chubin and Zabih, pp. 163-65).

President Nāṣer had already begun to signal his willingness to cooperate with Saudi Arabia, and other conservative Arab states were thus no longer constrained from seeking closer ties with Persia. On 29 August 1970 the Egyptian and Persian governments announced their intention to restore diplomatic relations. The Persian prime minister, Amīr-'Abbās Hoveyda, attended President Nāṣer's funeral a month later. In early 1971 Persia sent Kōsrow Kōsravānī as ambassador to Cairo, and in the autumn the Egyptian ambassador, Samīḥ Anwār, took up his post in Tehran (Wezārat, 1353 Š./1974, p. 88; idem, 1361 Š./1982, p. 57).

Nonetheless, relations again became strained in late 1971, when Persia reclaimed and occupied three islands in the southern Persian Gulf, also claimed by the United Arab Emirates. The leading daily newspaper in Egypt, *al-Ahrām*, publicly called upon Persia to withdraw its troops and to conduct peaceful negotiations with the U.A.E. (Ramazani, 1972, p. 64; Chubin and Zabih, p. 167). This relatively mild reaction reflected the desire of the new



Egyptian president, 'Anwār Sādāt, and the shah to forge closer ties. Sādāt stopped briefly in Tehran on his way to Moscow in October 1971, the first such visit by an Egyptian head of state in the modern era. In the same month Vice-President Ḥosnī Mobārak attended celebrations at Persepolis commemorating the “2,500th anniversary of the monarchy” in Persia (Wezārat, 1353 Š./1974, p. 89).

Diplomatic relations between the two countries reached their zenith during the 1970s, though it is clear that Persia was the stronger partner. As relations warmed, Persia granted Egypt loans totaling \$1 billion to help in reconstructing the Suez canal zone, which had been badly damaged during the 1967 war and the so-called “war of attrition” in 1968-70 (Wezārat, 1353 Š./1974, p. 90; idem, 1362 Š./1983, pp. 57-58). Persia again sent doctors and medicine to Egypt during the October 1973 war, and a number of wounded were sent to Persian hospitals for treatment (Wezārat, 1353 Š./1974, p. 91). Tehran also permitted the Soviet air force to overfly its territory to resupply Egypt with weapons. The shah paid a state visit to Egypt in early 1975, and Sādāt again visited Persia in 1975 and 1976. The shah also gave his “enthusiastic endorsement” (Ehteshami, p. 160) to Sādāt’s visits to Israel in November 1977 and to the signing of the Camp David accords in July and August 1978, the latter act leading to Egypt’s almost total exclusion from the councils of the Arab states (Entessar, 1993, p. 165).

During that period Persia hosted a number of ministerial meetings and on several occasions dispatched high-ranking delegations to Egypt to pursue further economic ties. Among the results of these meetings was the establishment of the Bank of Iran and Egypt (Bānk-e Īrān o Meṣr), the purpose of which was to invest in such Egyptian economic projects as fertilizer, textile, and cotton-spinning factories; joint energy projects; manpower programs; shipbuilding; and establishment of a joint chamber of commerce. In exchange Egypt was to send doctors, hospital technicians, and engineers to Persia. Egypt was also allowed to defer payment of its debts from the purchase of Persian oil (Wezārat, 1361 Š./1982, pp. 59-64).

*Since 1979.* The era of cooperation came to a sudden end at the end of the 1970s, when the revolution of 1978 in Persia led to the flight of the shah to Cairo. His reception there, together with the new Islamic Republic’s condemnation of Sādāt’s peace with Israel, led to a break in diplomatic relations in mid-1979, on Persian initiative. Although the shah moved on, Sādāt eventually persuaded him to return to Egypt, where he died in July 1980.



He was buried in Cairo, like his father before him, though his supporters no doubt hope some day also to return his remains to his native land.

The Egyptian religious opposition, including the Muslim Brotherhood, lauded the Persian revolution and its anti-Western character. They were emboldened to call for immediate implementation of Islamic holy law (*taqnīn al-šarī'a*) in Egypt. Although these movements antedated the Persian revolution and were driven by their own dynamics, Persian events nonetheless had shown what could be achieved by dedicated commitment. As elsewhere, Egyptian Islamic activists also tended to overlook the role of nonreligious forces in the overthrow of the Persian monarchy (Akhavi, pp. 132-50; Matthee, pp. 247-74).

Religious groups in Egypt fall into five categories, as far as their perspectives on the Islamic Republic are concerned. First, the establishment '*olamā'*', particularly the Higher council on Islamic affairs (al-Majles al-a'lā le-šo'un al-eslāmīya), the Ministry of endowments (Wezārat al-awqāf), and the community at al-Azhar have, not surprisingly, hewed to the government line and warned against a model of religious activism based on the activities of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Rūḥ-Allāh Komeynī; Binder, p. 258). Second, the Muslim Brotherhood, through its organs *al-E'tešām* and *al-Lewā' al-eslāmī*, trumpeted the "victory of Islam" supposedly betokened by the revolution but were suppressed soon afterward by the Sādāt regime. At the same time Brotherhood publications cautioned against the Shi'ite doctrine of the imamate and Khomeini's doctrine of *welāyat-e faqīh* (government by jurisconsult). More recently the Brotherhood has once again found itself free to publicize its own views, especially in the paper *al-Šāb*, though it is fair to say that its line has not changed much. In the writings of Shaikh Moḥammad Ġazālī and Yūsuf Qaradawī there are references to the important role they consider the Persian revolution has played in the recent *sahwa*, or Islamic revival (Matthee, pp. 251-65; Akhavi, pp. 144-48). Third, more militant groups like Jehād, mainly splinters from the Muslim Brotherhood, have compared the spirit of the Persian revolutionaries with that of early converts to Islam, declaring that the people ought to seek the leadership of those '*olamā'*' who have been in the vanguard of modern Islamic liberation movements, while minimizing doctrinal differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites. Lieutenant-Colonel 'Abbūd Zomar, the military leader of Jehād, which claimed responsibility for the assassination of Sādāt in October 1981, declared at his trial that Persia "taught us that the army and police cannot stand against an insurgency of the masses" (Akhavi, pp. 141-43). Fourth, the Islamic "left" is



today largely limited to the activities of its founder, Cairo University professor of philosophy Ḥasan Ḥanafī. He regards the Persian revolution as an “unleashing anew of Nasserism,” a revitalization of Nāṣer’s “national project” for the Egyptian and Arab peoples, albeit from an Islamic perspective: “And what is Khomeini but Moṣaddeq sent anew?” (p. 307; Matthee, p. 268). Ḥanafī argues that Khomeini failed to undertake a profound structural critique of the problems of Muslims, limiting himself to attributing their woes mainly to moral turpitude (Matthee, pp. 272-73). Finally, there are unaffiliated religious “liberals” like Ḥosayn Aḥmad Amīn and Aḥmad Kamāl Abu’l-Majd. Finally, Islamic “liberals” have acknowledged the self-confidence that the Persian revolution has given Muslims but have also expressed concern that Persia not isolate itself from the rest of the world, arguing that it can benefit from interaction while still preserving its cultural authenticity. They have also for greater understanding of Shi’ism, noting that Shi’ites know more about Sunnism than Sunnis do about Shi’ism. In their view, under the pressure of historical reality Shi’ite thought has begun to relinquish some of its old forms and to approximate Sunnism in at least some aspects of political thought; nevertheless, from a purely political perspective the doctrine of *welāyat-e faqīh* has the defect of resting upon a “theocracy” in which power is wielded by “men of religion,” the dangers of which are obvious to rulers and citizens alike (Abu’l-Majd, p. 285).

The revolutionary government in Persia promptly adopted a hostile stance toward Sādāt’s policies and urged the Egyptian masses to overthrow him. In May 1979 Khomeini condemned the March 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, declaring it treason against Islam. When Persian clerics began to bruit it about that Bahrain (q.v.) was Persian territory, a claim that the shah had advanced and abandoned in 1970, the Egyptian reaction was immediate and equally hostile (Entessar, 1993, p. 166). The Egyptian embassy in Tehran was stormed in June 1979, though the Persian foreign ministry dissociate itself from the action as serving neither the interests of Palestine nor of the Persian revolution. Persia broke diplomatic relations with Egypt later that month. Sādāt’s friendship with the shah, the latter’s burial in Egypt, his son’s enrollment at the American University in Cairo, and his family’s residence in the Egyptian capital provided additional grounds, if any were needed, for severing relations (Wezārat, 1361 Š./1982, pp. 66-70). On the other hand, Persian authorities admired such Egyptian opposition leaders as Bannā’ and Sayyed Qoṭb, some of whose writings had been translated into Persian by Khomeini’s eventual successor, Sayyed ‘Alī Kāmāna’ī. Otherwise, the Islamic



Republic has responded to developments in Egypt with measures ranging from symbolic (issuing a stamp commemorating Lieutenant Kāled Eslāmbōlī, the actual assassin of Sādāt) to more practical (probable financial and training assistance for Jehād and other militant groups; see below), while clearly ignoring the arguments of the religious “liberals” (Ḥosayn, p. 217).

In September 1980 Iraq invaded Persia, and Egypt supported Iraq in the ensuing war, which lasted until 1988. Although Baghdad had led the effort to punish Egypt for recognizing Israel, the war offered Egypt an opportunity to rejoin the Arab world; in fact, President Mobārak visited Iraq in March 1985. By then Egyptian military supplies to Iraq, including small arms, ammunition, tanks, and even versions of the Soviet Scud B missile, had reached an estimated value of about \$2 billion, which the Iraqis presumably paid in hard currency. These transfers continued from 1985 to 1987, amounting to another \$3 billion. Rumors circulated that Egyptian pilots flew Iraqi aircraft as well, (Cordesman, p. 268 n. 83; *The Baltimore Sun*, 16 December 1986, p. 6A), and Egypt may also have assisted Iraq in the development and storage of chemical weapons. The main supplier of weapons to Iraq was, of course, the Soviet Union, but Egypt still possessed Soviet equipment from its earlier relationship with Moscow (1955-72) and could furnish it to Iraq at a time when other pro-Soviet states, like Syria and Libya, were engaged in disputes with Iraq (Entessar, 1993, pp. 172-73; *idem*, 1992, pp. 217-18; Cordesman, pp. 104, 268 n. 83, 506, 541, 599; Hiro, pp. 116-17).

Furthermore, Egyptian governments had long encouraged workers to migrate to the oil-exporting states of the Persian Gulf, including Iraq, in order to reduce unemployment pressures and garner valuable foreign exchange through workers' remittances. Such workers not only provided needed manpower to the Iraqi economy but also were conscripted into the Iraqi army to fight against Persia (Hiro, p. 116; Cordesman, pp. 119-20, 135).

Mutual recriminations between Persia and Egypt seemed to peak in mid-1984, when a large number of mines were found in the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. Cairo quickly blamed Persia and Libya for laying these mines but later declared that it had no evidence of Persian involvement in the affair (Entessar, 1993, p. 171). The Mobārak regime has also accused the Islamic Republic of training radical Muslims in guerrilla methods and of providing them with significant support. Nevertheless, Persia and Egypt established interest sections in each other's capitals in 1991 (Hunter, p. 132).



The dispatch of some Persian revolutionary guards (*pāsdārān*) to Sudan, with which Egypt has been on unfriendly terms since the early 1980s, has done nothing to calm Egyptian fears of Persian intentions, nor have Persian contacts and involvement with Algerian and Lebanese fundamentalists. Both the United States and Egypt have condemned the Islamic Republic for providing financial and training assistance to militant opposition forces in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly Egypt and Algeria, but neither has publicly offered proof of the claim. It appears that either there is no unimpeachable proof or Washington and Cairo fear that public documentation of such support could compromise their intelligence operations in the region.

The modern history of Persian relations with Egypt has thus been characterized by periods of harmony, as well as conflict. Both countries have been extremely important political players in the politics of the region, with interests that have often diverged.

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