



GREAT BRITAIN IV. BRITISH INFLUENCE DURING THE REŽĀ SHAH PERIOD, 1921-41

GREAT BRITAIN

iv. BRITISH INFLUENCE DURING THE REŽĀ SHAH PERIOD, 1921-41

During the reign of Režā Shah (1925-1941) a profound transformation took place in both the character and the scope of British influence in Persia. Although Britain remained an imperial power, the British capacity to intervene directly in Persian politics, whether at central or provincial levels, underwent a general decline, with a shrinking of channels of patronage and a closing down of mechanisms of informal control.

British intervention in Persia was at its height during the coup d'état of 1299 Š/1921 (q.v.). Although the coup itself was executed by Persians, it received vital assistance from, and was probably actually initiated by, certain British military officers and officials in Persia, most importantly Major-General Sir Edmund Ironside, Commander of Norperforce, Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Smyth, who was unofficially and "almost secretly" attached to the Cossacks at Qazvin (Public Record Office (PRO), Kew, U.K., FO 371/6400/E1188/2/34, Norman to Curzon, 24 January, 1921; Cronin, 1997, p. 84), and Walter A Smart, the Oriental Secretary. Herman Norman, the British Minister in Tehran, was



apparently not an original party to the plan, but gave his full support to the coup as soon as he was informed of it, although this was probably not until as late as the 19 February, as the Cossacks (see [COSSACK BRIGADE](#)) were already marching on Tehran. Lord Curzon at the Foreign Office knew nothing, and even after the coup's success, the British personnel in Persia continued to deny responsibility, both publicly and in internal correspondence.

For the British involved in its planning, the coup was envisaged as an alternative route to the achievement of the main objectives of the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919 (q.v.). Their role, Ironside and Smyth at Qazvin and Smart in Tehran, was crucial in a number of ways. Firstly, the leadership of the coup was assembled by the British. Secondly, Ironside and Smart encouraged the planning and facilitated the execution of the coup. Thirdly, Smart neutralized any potential political and military opposition in the capital. Finally Norman, in the days immediately following the coup, threw Britain's weight fully behind the stabilization of the new regime (PRO, FO 371/6403/E4926/2/34, Norman to Curzon, 1 March 1921).

At the end of October 1920 Ironside had removed the Russian officers from the Cossack Division without the authority of either the Persian government or the shah and Norman had installed Sepahdār-e A'zam (Fath-Allāh Akbar, q.v.) as prime minister expressly in order to obtain ratification of this action (PRO, FO 371/4914/C9573/267/34, Norman to Curzon, 25 October 1920; FO 371/4914/C9759/276/34, Norman to Curzon, 26 October 1920). Ironside and Smyth had revived the Cossack Division, had arranged the departure of the new Cossack commander appointed by the shah, Sardār Homāyun, and had personally placed Rezā Khan in command. Smyth had brought with him to Qazvin two gendarme officers, Captain Kāzem Khan Sayyāḥ and Major Mas'ud Khan Kayhān, who were close to Sayyed Žiā'-al-Din Ṭabā-ṭabā'i (Sayyed Žiā'), thus facilitating contact and co-operation between the military and civilian wings of the coup movement, and between the Gendarmerie (q.v.) and the Cossack Division.

Ironside encouraged the preparations which Rezā Khan and the other officers at Qazvin were making for a coup while Smyth engineered a pretext for Rezā Khan's mobilization by asking Sardār Homāyun to order the Tehran and Qazvin Cossacks to change places to assist with the force's reorganization (FO 371/6403/E4926/2/34, Norman to Curzon, 1 March 1921).

In the capital, Smart calmed the shah and dissuaded him from fleeing. He and



Norman neutralized the Gendarmerie and the police and Smart then arranged with the prime minister, Sepahdār, that representatives of the Persian government and the British legation should go out to meet the Cossacks, ostensibly to try to persuade them to return to Qazvin. Norman appointed as representatives of the British legation Lieutenant-Colonel Wolseley Haig, acting Counselor, and Lieutenant-Colonel Hubert J. Huddleston, acting Military Attaché, both of whom had in fact been, with Smart, deeply involved in the coup preparations. The deputation met the leaders of the coup near Mehrābād on the evening of 20 February and after some rather ambiguous discussions, returned to Tehran and “reported their failure” (Katouzian, 2000, p. 245).

Shortly after midnight on the 21 February, the Cossacks took possession of Tehran and the Persian government collapsed immediately. Next morning Norman reassured the shah regarding the intentions of the leaders of the coup towards him and advised him to get in touch with them, ascertain their wishes and grant whatever demands they might make, advice the shah readily accepted. Meanwhile the Imperial Bank of Persia made available to Sayyed Žiā’, who still lacked any legal authority, a large amount of government funds that he distributed among the leading officers of the coup.

Although the British had been instrumental in bringing Reżā Khan to power, their influence in Tehran after the coup diminished rapidly and visibly. Norman was unable to prevent Sayyed Žiā’'s fall, lamenting that all his efforts to dissuade the conspirators had failed, a failure he attributed to the fact that since the withdrawal of Norperforce the new War Minister no longer feared Britain (Ghani, p. 217). By the end of 1921 another powerful tool of British policy, the South Persia Rifles, had ceased to exist, while British officers serving with the Cossacks on the Gilān front and British financial advisers had all had their contracts terminated. The gravitational pull exercised by Reżā Khan's increasing dominance also undermined another pillar of British influence as influential Persian families began to find their former links to the imperial power embarrassing or even a liability, and maneuvered to realign themselves. Nonetheless Britain could still exert financial pressure. On 28 May, five days after Sayyed Žiā’'s flight, Qawām-al-Saltāna (Aḥmad Qawām) had been asked by the shah to form a government. He accepted and announced his cabinet on 3 June. But within a few weeks, Curzon had instructed the Imperial Bank to cease making any further advances to the Persian government, and Curzon also refused to allow SPR rifles and machine guns to be sold to Persia.

Although Reżā Khan's rise was diminishing Britain's ability to intervene in the



capital, in southern Persia, where British strategic and economic interests were concentrated, British power and influence remained intact and Britain's clients and allies still retained all the protection of their imperial patron.

British influence in southern Persia mainly derived from the relationships which had been established between the British government and various tribal leaderships, including especially Shaikh Ẓāʾal of Moḥam-mara (later Ẓorramšahr) and the Baḳtiāri (q.v.) khans, and also, though less importantly, the Qawāmis of Shiraz and many of the minor khans of the Persian Gulf littoral. The consuls at Ahvāz and Isfahan, at the south-western and north-eastern extremities of Baḳtiāri country, and the consul at Moḥammara, the seat of Shaikh Ẓāʾal, had become important conduits of British influence and, by the early 1920s, the only major tribal grouping which still remained outside the British orbit was the Qašqāʾi under Ṣawlat-al-Dawla. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company (q.v.) was another important lever of British influence in the south, acting to some extent independently of the legation, with its own sources of information and its own official representatives, Dr. Morris V. Young, for example, who dealt directly with the Baḳtiāri khans.

Curzon advocated the maintenance of these relationships. However Percy Loraine, who arrived in Tehran as new British Minister on 18 December 1921, began a fundamental reassessment of British policy which was to culminate, by 1923-4, in the abandonment of Britain's friends in southern Persia in favor of good relations with the central government. Until his departure from Persia in 1926, all Loraine's efforts, both formal and informal, were directed towards achieving the peaceful submission of Britain's clients to the new regime in Tehran. These efforts included facing down members of his own consular establishment in the south, mostly recruited from the Indian Political Service, who were in favor of maintaining the alliances with the tribal leaderships.

The methods employed by Loraine in the furtherance of this policy are clearly illustrated by the case of the Baḳtiāri. The Baḳtiāri khans were a mainstay of British influence in the south in general, were specifically important in guarding the oil fields and keeping the Baḳ-tiāri (Lynch) road open for trade, and had been provided with arms, money and consistent political support (Garthwaite, 1983). In early 1921 certain British officials had proposed the establishment of a semi-autonomous Baḳ-tiāri state in the south should the Bolsheviks occupy Tehran; and, in the aftermath of the coup, had discussed the formation of a force of Baḳtiāri Levies to protect their southern interests. For the first year and a half of Loraine's tenure, he remained hesitant about



Tehran's centralizing policies. He did nothing to discourage the formation of a Southern League among the tribal leaderships and when, in July 1922, Reżā Khan ordered an army detachment to proceed to 'Arabestān (Kuzestān), an ambiguous remark from Loraine to the Baḳtiāri khans led to an attack on the army on the Baḳtiāri road at Šalil. This incident unleashed a storm of nationalist anger against both the Baḳtiāri and the British, who were accused of complicity. The press, imputing too much coherence to Loraine's policy, specifically alleged that the British had instigated the attack in order to prevent troops being sent to Kuzestān and were aiming at the partition of the country (FO 371/7828/E10849/285/34, Intelligence Summary no. 33, 19 August 1922; FO371/7808/E8403/6/34, Loraine to F.O., 22 August 1922; FO 371/7828/E10188/285/34, IS no. 35, 2 September 1922).

Loraine played a vital role in mediating between the Baḳtiāri khans and Reżā Khan. At every stage of the negotiations the khans consulted Loraine and he, together with the various concerned British officials in the south, especially the consuls at Isfahan and Ahvāz, and Dr. Young of the APOC, consistently advised them to do everything they could to come to an accommodation with the government. Loraine and other British officials in Tehran simultaneously urged restraint and compromise on the war minister. During the first part of 1923 Loraine also repeatedly attended gatherings of the khans in their homes in Tehran, continuing previous British efforts to encourage the khans to conduct relations between themselves amicably and to present a united front to the government.

Although by mid-1923 Loraine was ready to abandon the political alliance with the khans, he still attempted to limit damage to them. He tried to modify the sums demanded by Reżā Khan from the Baḳtiāri as compensation for the Šalil attack and finally involved the APOC as the guarantor of a loan from the Imperial Bank of Persia to the khans to enable them to make reparation. The company was anxious at all costs to avoid fighting in the vicinity of its operations and declared itself ready to make the loan but insisted that its involvement in the transaction must be kept secret and in particular must not be divulged to Reżā Khan. On 23 May 30,000 Pounds Sterling, a secret loan from the APOC, was paid on behalf of the khans directly from the Imperial Bank of Persia to the ministry of war in full settlement of the Šalil incident.

Loraine and Eardley Garforth Bryan Peel, consul at Ahvāz, also mediated between the Baḳtiāri khans and Arthur Chester Millspaugh, the American financial adviser, regarding the payment of arrears of taxes. Peel helped the



khans to prepare a financial statement and also, at Loraine's request, had a number of meetings with the American official who was handling the case, challenging the finance ministry's claim. Peel played a crucial role in assisting the khans in the presentation of their case in a number of conferences, and Millspaugh finally accepted a compromise settlement (FO 371/9043/E10191/1416/34, Loraine to Curzon, 6 September 1923).

In the case of Shaikh Kāz'al, the British also at first attempted to persuade and then finally compelled the Shaikh to submit to Tehran. Britain restrained the southern tribal elements who sympathized with the Shaikh's resistance, to the extent that the Bakhtiāri khans, for instance, became confused and paralyzed, without any idea of where the British actually stood in the conflict or what they required them to do. Finally Peel compelled Kāz'al to write a letter of apology to Rezā Khan while Loraine, the Oriental Secretary Godfrey Havard, and Peel combined to oblige Kāz'al to send telegrams signaling his submission and to agree to a humiliating meet-ing with Rezā Khan to arrange his outright surrender (Ghani, p. 344).

By the mid 1920s British channels of influence in Persia were rapidly diminishing. In 1929 Britain lost its last remaining southern client when Qawām-al-Molk of the Kamsa was removed from all his tribal and governmental positions. The APOC was also no longer allowed to make agreements directly with the tribes. Since the arrival of the US financial advisers, who had established some fiscal order, the financial weapon of cutting off advances on oil royalties had lost much of its effectiveness and in 1928 Rezā Shah founded Bank Melli Iran (see BANKINGINIRAN i.), which took over the functions of the Imperial Bank. In 1930 the Indo-European Telegraph Department ceased operations. On 1 March 1924 Britain agreed to remove all her troops from the Persian Gulf ports. Open coercion, in the form of gunboat diplomacy, remained an option, but of the last resort only. In 1932 the option of direct military intervention was discussed as a possible means of dealing with the oil concession crisis but it was only in 1941 that Britain fell back on this strategy.

By the late 1920s the British connection with the southern tribal leaderships was effectively broken. Yet the tribes continued to try to cling to the vestiges of British protection and the suspicions of Tehran regarding British efforts to manipulate tribal politics remained unabated. The tribal rebellions in southern Persia in 1929 particularly reawakened the suspicions of the shah. Although British officials in Tehran and in the southern towns remained aloof,



both the government and the tribes attempted to enlist them as mediators. In June several Qašqā'i *kalāntars* addressed a petition to the British consul in Shiraz outlining their grievances and asking the consul to transmit them to the League of Nations (PRO, FO 371/13781/3350/95/34, Clive to Henderson, 16 June 1929). When, a little later, the government offered concessions to the Baḳtiāri, the rebels requested that they be guaranteed by either the APOC or the British legation. In July Teymurtāš himself suggested to the British minister that they use their good offices to help calm the situation, perhaps through the influence of the APOC (PRO, FO 371/13781/E3589/95/34, Clive to FO, 16 July 1929). However, so far had the British moved from their former patronage of the southern tribes that, following the arrest in 1933 of Sardār As'ad and other Baḳtiāri khans, Sir John Cadman (q.v.), APOC chairman, used "much personal persuasion" to have a leader published in the Times repeating the official Persian version of the reasons for the arrest: that it was an important stage in the struggle between the crown and feudalism (PRO, FO 371/16942/E7695/47/34).

During the nineteen twenties, British influence also weakened in other tribal areas abutting British-controlled territory, in western and southeastern Persia. At the beginning of 1924 Britain withdrew its garrisons of British-Indian troops from the Sarḥadd, in northern Baluchistan, and transferred control to an Persian military administration. Nonetheless the British consul in Sistān continued to be a figure of some influence among the Sarḥaddi sardars and their rising in 1925 was only ended by his direct intervention and mediation. Throughout the nineteen thirties the Sarḥaddis continued to look to Britain for support against the Persian government and to take refuge across the frontier, although the authorities in British-Indian Baluchistan increasingly attempted to distance themselves.

In western Persia the Persian government also saw the involvement of the British mandatory government of Iraq with the Kurds as a direct threat to the stability of the western fringe of the state, fearing both the stimulation of Kurdish nationalism and the disruption caused to border stability by migratory tribes. Tehran repeatedly accused Britain (and Iraq) of encouraging unrest, and deeply resented the asylum given by Iraq to Simko in 1922 and to Sardār Rašid in 1923. However Britain was by now committed to the integrity of the Persia-Iraq border and the British High Commissioner in Baghdad frequently addressed stiff warnings to migratory tribes such as the Piždar. In 1931 the Persian and Iraqi governments exchanged military liaison officers to



facilitate frontier control.

By the early nineteen thirties the British in Persia found themselves confined to formal communications with the Persian government through official channels. The decline in British influence is clearly mirrored by a decline in their intelligence-gathering ability. In 1931 a confidential order was issued to all army officers forbidding them to have any dealings whatsoever with foreigners, and in particular military attachés (PRO, FO 371/16077/E3354/3354/4, Annual Report, 1931, Hoare to Simon, 12 June 1932). In an atmosphere of increasing paranoia, personal contact between Persians and British officials ceased almost entirely. Not only the legation in Tehran, but also the provincial consuls and military attachés, found themselves increasingly cut off from all their former sources of information.

During the later nineteen thirties, Britain's relations with Persia remained stable, although British officials were increasingly conscious of the shadow cast over their position by growing German influence. This stability continued with Persia's declaration of neutrality after the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, although covert activities of various kinds by Britain, as well as by Germany and Soviet Union, increased in proportion to the rising stakes. However, the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 led to a major review by Britain of policy towards Persia. Britain demanded the expulsion of the German colony from Persia arguing that the presence and activities of a large number of Germans were a danger to Allied interests and contrary to Persia's neutrality. As a result partly of the isolation of the regime, Persian officials do not at first seem to have taken the Allied demands seriously and, when finally they did, dared not tell the shah, who was himself out of touch with British thinking. The British government examined the options of diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions and other methods of pressure and persuasion, eventually deciding that military action with Soviet co-operation was the only possible way to secure Allied demands (Eshraghi, 1984). In August 1941 Britain, together with the Soviet Union, once more resorted to force to achieve their objectives in Persia.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Moḥammad-Taqi Bahār, Malek-al-Šo‘arā, *Tāriḳ-e moḳtasĀar-e aḥzāb-e siāsi-e Irān*, 2 vols., Tehran, repr., 1371 Š./1993.

Stephanie Cronin, *The Army and the Creation of the Pahlavi State in Iran, 1910-1926*, London and New York, 1997.

Idem, “Riza Shah and the Disintegration of Bakhtiari Power in Iran, 1921-1934,” *Iranian Studies*, forthcoming.

F. Eshraghi, “Anglo-Soviet Occupation of Iran in August, 1941,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 20/1, 1984, pp. 27-52.

Idem, “The Immediate Aftermath of Anglo-Soviet Occupation of Iran in August 1941,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 20/3, 1984, pp. 324-51.

Gene Garthwaite, *Khans and Shahs: A Documentary Analysis of the Bakhtiari in Iran*, Cambridge, 1983.

Cyrus Ghani, *Iran and the Rise of Reza Shah: From Qajar Collapse to Pahlavi Power*, London and New York, 1998.

Homa Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran: The Eclipse of the Qajars and the Emergence of the Pahlavis*, London and New York, 2000.

Houshang Sabahi, *British Policy in Persia 1918-1925*, London, 1990.

William Theodore Strunk, “The Reign of Shaikh Khaz‘al ibn Jabir and the Suppression of the Principality of ‘Arabistan: A Study in British Imperialism in South-western Iran, 1897-1925,” Ph.D. thesis, University of Indiana, 1977.

Michael P. Zirinsky, “Imperial Power and Dictatorship: Britain and the Rise of Reza Shah, 1921-1926,” *IJMES* 24, 1992, pp. 639-63.