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GREEKS IN MODERN IRAN

GREEKS IN MODERN IRAN, economic and political trends beginning in the 19th century led to the establishment of a significant Greek community in Iran.

The Arrival of Greeks in Iran in 19th century. The establishment of an independent Greek kingdom in 1830 and the significant role of Qajar Iran in the Middle East, along with the gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire, resulted in the fragmentation of commercial activity in the eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and the Caucasus. These developments, combined with British-Russian economic rivalry in the Caucasus, favored economic and political collaboration between Persia and Greece.

In the 1830s, along the Istanbul-Tabriz commercial route, Greek and Iranian traders specialized in silks (see ABRIŠAM) and cotton. The Rallis family and other Greek merchants were the driving force behind Greek business in Iran. On 6 May 1837, P. A. Rallis swore his consular oath before King Otto of Greece and became the first official consul-general of Greece to Iran (Tabriz), establishing formal diplomatic relations between the two countries again after many centuries. Tabriz, Rasht, and Anzali accommodated Greek companies such as E. Manouilovitch and Rodokanakis, Rallis and Mavroyiannis, I. Nomikos, N. Negrepontes, P. Mavrokordatos, and Yenidunia Bros (Issawi, 1971, p. 101).

The Greeks of northern Iran, coming chiefly from Chios, Istanbul, and Pontus, were involved in silk production, lumber, tobacco, mercantile trade, and

steam shipping. Among Greek-Iranians there were many affluent families, in businesses such as entrepreneurs, steamships owners on the Caspian Sea, land-tobacco plantation, owners and big investors, while at other times they operated in a more superficial capacity such as farmers and laborers (Venetis, tr. 2014, p. 62).

There are scant written sources as to the population of the Greeks in northern Iran. It is estimated that during 1870-1914 there were about 150 Greek families living there (between 800 and 1,000 individuals). Among them were A. and N. Laskarides, Th. Kallivrousis, D. Pilides, F. Parigores, Amvrosiades, Kandiles, T. Michailides (Venetis, tr. 2014,pp. 65-72). In the late 19th century, the Greek population was gathered mainly in Rasht, where they built the first Greek Orthodox Church in Iran in 1910, and in Anzali.

A treaty of friendship, commerce, and navigation was the first one signed between the two countries in modern times, restoring diplomatic relations between the Greek and Persian worlds after an interval of twelve centuries. The treaty was the result of the active political role of Persian and Greek merchants in the commercial activity in the region, especially on the Caucasus trade route. The treaty was signed in Istanbul on 16 October 1861 by the Greek ambassador Markos Renieris and Mirzā Ḥosayn Khan, the Persian ambassador to the Ottoman court (Venetis, tr. 2014, pp. 50-53). Thus Greek financial interests were promoted in an official way, with the Ottomans accepting this development under British encouragement. For Qajar Iran, this treaty ensured the expansion of its economic and political influence westwards, beyond the Ottoman Empire.

Greeks in Iran in the 20th century. Historical developments during the first decades of the 20th century led to an increase of the Greek population in Iran. Following the Pontic Greek genocide by the Ottoman Government from the World War I period until the ratification of the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, many Pontic Greeks sought, albeit temporarily, refuge in the Russian and then the Soviet Caucasus (1914-23), where most of them were successfully settled. Soon, though, they had to move elsewhere to avoid Stalin's Sovietization program. Although most Pontic Greeks were located forcibly from the Caucasus to Siberia and Central Asia, some of them managed to escape to Greece and a few of them to neighboring Iran in the late 1920s (Avedian, p. 40; Zimmerer, p. 10; Venetis, tr. 2014, pp. 76-79, 86).

Under the Pahlavis (1925-79). The diplomatic framework for the entry and

settlement of Greek refugees in Iran was set by the Treaty of Friendship between Greece and Iran ratified in London (1931) by the Iranian Ambassador in Paris Ḥosayn ʿAlā and the Greek special envoy Demetrios Kaklamanos. Pontic Greek refugees were assisted by the Iranian government and the preexisting Greek communities in Rasht and Anzali to settle in the region, where they would be involved in agricultural and construction projects until World War II as part of the modernization process of Iran. Other groups of Greek craftsmen and stonemasons from Greece (Epirus, Western Macedonia, Euboea, and Karpathos Island) also participated in the construction of the Trans-Iranian railway project in the period 1927-38 (Venetis, tr. 2014, p. 90-107).

The Greek community of Tehran. During the 1930s, an increasing number of Pontic Greeks in central Tehran (especially around the streets Manučehri, Lālazār, and Saʿdi) shaped the backbone of the Greek community in the city. In 1941, prominent Greeks such as Theodoros Mericas, Polyvios Zacharoff, and Nikolaos Georgopoulos established the Greek community of Tehran during the Anglo-Soviet occupation of the country (Venetis, tr. 2014, pp. 110-11). In those years malnutrition and political instability reinforced social and economic allegiance among the Greeks of Tehran in order to protect their common and personal interests.

In 1942, a Greek expeditionary force of 108 men was dispatched from Tehran to Egypt to join the Greek army there under the command of the Greek government in exile and its British allies (Venetis, tr. 2014, pp. 149-52).

The 1944-49 residence in Tehran of Archimandrite Demetrios Papadopoulos, the future Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (1972-91), was a milestone in the history of the Greek Orthodox community in Iran; it opened the way for the systematic presence in Tehran of Greek Orthodox priests from the Ecumenical Patriarchate until 1979. In 1951, the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation of the Mother of God (PLATE I) was inaugurated (Venetis, tr. 2014, pp. 132-33), forming the core of the Greek community compound in the city center (at the intersection of Roosevelt and Taḵt-e Jamšid streets, renamed Ṭāleqāni and Mofatteḥ after the Islamic Revolution of 1979). The compound also sheltered the Greek school Aristotle, “The Hive” youth community, the Women’s Charity Sisterhood of the Greek Ladies of Iran, and the Experimental Center of Fine Arts (Venetis, tr. 2014, pp. 134-40).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Greek population in Iran reached 3,000; many of

the Greeks were engaged in the development projects in Iran. For example, the famous Greek banker and entrepreneur Minos Zombanakis contributed to the Iranian Development Plans and the formation of the country's Central Bank (see Venetis, tr. 2014, pp. 162-67; BĀNK-E MARKAZI-E IRĀN). Elli Antoniades, the only woman president of the Greek community of Tehran worked to eradicate illiteracy in Iran. Konstantinos Keletsekis was the leading Greek businessman in fisheries and construction. Greek development companies, such as Elliniki Techniki and Skapaneus, participated in construction projects in Tehran and Zāhedān. Greek artists like the composer Yannis Xenakis, the painter Michalis Makroulakis, the jeweler Ilias Lalaounis, the designer Yannis Tseklenis, and the renowned decorator Alkis Valaïs lived in or repeatedly visited Iran.

Under the Islamic Republic (since 1979). The lack of internal security during and after the Islamic Revolution and during the Iran-Iraq war forced Greeks to abandon Iran *en masse*. The average Greek population in Iran had plummeted to fewer than 100 persons by 1981. In the 1990s, a few dozen Greeks returned to Iran to revive their business and daily life (Venetis, tr. 2014, pp. 208-9). By 2016, Greeks living in Iran probably numbered less than 20 individuals. The number rose in 2017 to around 100 and continued to grow. The economic crisis in Greece since 2009 stimulated some Greek entrepreneurs to engage in business with Iran in various fields, including telecommunications, shipping, commerce, and tourism.

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