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KARUN RIVER III. THE OPENING OF THE KARUN

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iii. The Opening of the Karun

With the intensification of the Anglo-Russian rivalry in the late 1800s over Iran's geopolitical position and commercial resources, Great Britain began to exert immense pressure on the shah's government to provide it with access to the Karun trade route. This meant the opening of the only navigable river in Iran to British vessels, as well as the construction of a carriage road and/or a railway line in order to link the interior to the open seas. This entry will be divided into the following sections: Suitability for navigation; Great Britain and the Karun opening; Russian reaction and related events; and Conclusion.

SUITABILITY FOR NAVIGATION

At the time of the Karun opening, the town of Mohammara (Moḥammara), now Khorramshahr (q.v.), the chief port of Iran, was situated a little more than a mile from the Shatt al-Arab on the right bank of the Ḥaffar Canal; the latter carried the channel of the Karun to the Shatt from its junction with the Bahmanšir (q.v.) (Adamec, 1989, pp. 296, 557, map III-27-C; Lorimer, pp. 1262-64). Even at that time, the city presented unusual advantages as a port. It could be reached by ocean steamers of moderate tonnage by the Shatt al-Arab and by the Ḵor-e Bahmanšir (see bahmanšir; Champain, p. 125), which, unlike

the Shatt, was completely in Persian territory. From Mohammara to Ahvaz (see ahvāz; i.e., the lower Karun), the distance by water is about 120 miles and by land less than 80 miles. Throughout this distance the Karun is a broad river, commonly from 300 yards to a quarter of a mile (Curzon, 1890, p. 517) and sometimes more (Najm-al-Molk, pp. 94-95). On average, the draft of water to the vicinity of Ahvaz is said to be the same as that on the Tigris to Baghdad (i.e., 3.6 feet; comment of R. Shaw apud Champain, 1883, p. 136).

After the opening of the river, the average journey time from Mohammara to Ahvaz was sixteen-and-a-half hours, and in the opposite direction ten-and-a-half hours. There were no impediments from Mohammara up to Ahvaz. There the submerged rocks gave rise to a series of rapids that created a practical barrier to continuous navigation. Above the site of the ancient Ahvaz dam, other rocks which crossed the riverbed extended about 800 yards to the north (Najm-al-Molk, p. 95). Between the two reefs navigation could not take place, but from the upper reef to Šuštar it was continuously navigable. Between Ahvaz and Band-e Qir, a stretch of some 45 miles, the river is narrower. At this time the Dodānga was used for the river traffic to Šuštar (s.v. Gargar: Adamec, 1989, pp. 224, 271-76, maps III-19-B, III-12-D; Lorimer, pp. 563-72). The Karun from Šuštar upward was not navigable.

GREAT BRITAIN AND THE KARUN OPENING

The history of 19th-century Iran may be narrated as one of rivalries between Great Britain and Russia over a rich and resourceful country. The crucial importance that access to transportation routes attained in the last quarter of the 19th century should be studied from this perspective.

British trade routes. Direct British trade with Basra dates back to 1635, and the earliest record in the British archives regarding the affairs of Khuzestan (Ḵuzestān) is a dispatch dated 9 April 1767 referring to the Kaʿb tribe (Saldana, p. 2). The increasing commercial and political importance to Britain of the Persian Gulf and its littoral indicated the insufficient amount of information at her disposal. Hence the British attempts to carry out geographical surveys in southwest Persia and Mesopotamia in the first half of the 19th century. Henry Blosse Lynch, John Campbell (q.v.), Felix Jones, Henry Rawlinson, and Austen Henry Layard (q.v., online) were among those who between the late 1830s and early 1850s were actively involved in these surveys. Lieutenant Selby also studied the Karun with its branches and effluents. One of the principal aims of these missions seems to have been to open the southern provinces of Iran to

British influence and trade.

The latter part of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's reign (1848-96) was marked by increasing Russian influence and pressure in northern Persia, although this was more commercial than military in nature (Wilson, 1954, pp. 57-58). At the same time, Britain strove to increase its influence in the south. While the Russians were increasing their authority in the north, the British viewed the strategy of solidifying their own influence in the south as crucial, since, they believed, as soon as Russia had completed its control over the north, it would turn its attention southward (M. S. Smith to J. Stokes [F.O.], Edinburgh, 24 July 1885: FO 539/27). Under these circumstances, establishing the Karun trade route acquired ever greater importance in the 1880s.

Thus, in order to respond to the politico-economic challenge of Russia, Britain exerted concerted pressure on the shah to open this route, which was advantageous to Britain from a political, as well as a commercial, standpoint (Saldana, p. 28). Politically, it would allow Britain to gain paramount influence in southern Persia, while the possibility of bringing troops within a few hundred miles of Iran's important centers would naturally also contribute to the re-establishment of British influence in Tehran. As a commercial enterprise, the opening of the route had two major goals: (1) to divert British traffic from the long, arduous, and expensive route of Bušehr-Isfahan to the shorter one of Šuštar-Isfahan; (2) to develop and utilize the "vast resources of the fertile districts of Persia to the north of Dezful," as far even as Azarbaijan, and to attract the produce of those areas that "lie unused" (Col. E. C. Ross, Report an the Karun River Navigation, Bušehr, 12 January 1882). The opening of the Karun was, as an over-optimistic Englishman put it then, a question of opening "the whole of a vast empire, with many millions of inhabitants, and with rich and rare products to give in exchange to commerce with Great Britain and India" (Ainsworth, 1890, pp. x-xi).

In the 1870s and 1880s, numerous proposals were made to the shah for the opening of this route, but he had successfully resisted all the pressures and blocked them. However, it seems that the appointment of Sir Henry Drummond Wolff in 1888 as British Minister to Tehran changed everything.

Wolff and his mission. Wolff's appointment pointed to a renewed interest on the part of Britain in Persia. For over two years, a junior diplomat, Arthur Nicolson, had been in charge of the British Legation, whereas the Russian mission had been headed by Prince Alexis Dolgorouki. An ambitious and

aggressive diplomat with a conviction of his own and his country's superiority, Dolgorouki believed that "the torch of Russia's historic mission in the East had been handed to him personally that he might encompass some great deal by its light" (Morier to Salisbury, St. Petersburg, 14 November 1888, no. 383: FO 65/1355; cited by Thornton, 1959, p. 479). Upon arriving in Tehran, therefore, he assumed with the shah the tone of the ruler of a conquered province. Russia intimated that Persia should place itself under Russia's exclusive tutelage and protection (Nicolson to Salisbury, Tehran, 10 January 1888, no. 12: FO 539/37). The Prince's high-handed behavior offended and alarmed the shah, who found it "nearly intolerable" (ibid.). By 1888 the shah's despair became acute enough to convince Nicolson that some definitive statement of goodwill ought to be made by Britain in order to avert the shah's "wholesale capitulation to Russia" (Greaves, 1959, p. 108). The shah told Nicolson that he did not expect Britain to provide him with money or arms, but a firm guarantee. He wished to be assured that, should Russia seize Persian territory, Britain would respond with an unequivocal demand for Russian withdrawal from any occupied land, or that it would take measures to deter Russia from taking such action to begin with (Nicolson to Salisbury, Tehran, 5 January 1888, no. 9: FO 539/37).

This was the state of Anglo-Persian relations before Wolff's appointment to Tehran. Consultations between the India Office and the Foreign Office had been taking place since 1885 on the subject of Ronald Thomson's successor (Greaves, p. 120), and the decision was finally settled on Wolff. Son of the adventurous missionary Joseph Wolff (1795-1862), Sir Henry was well-educated, clever, and cynical, and was described as a "true representative of a nation that was becoming emotionally conscious of its imperial destiny" (Brockway, p. 37). He already had considerable diplomatic experience, and his work was praiseworthy. He was a multi-faceted and ambitious man, who energetically probed and investigated every line of procedure (Greaves, p. 121); he numbered among his friends the Rothschilds, the Sassoons, Julius de Reuter (idem, p. 185), and Randolph Churchill. Therefore, his past experience in high finance, domestic politics, and diplomatic missions in the Near East well suited him to play an eminent role in Iran.

It would be justifiable to consider Wolff's general policy on Iran and the particular interest he took in Khuzestan. He arrived in Tehran with elaborate plans. He believed in the primacy of economics. Government and diplomacy were only means towards the achievement of economic ends. When Wolff

came to Iran, his utmost goal was the so-called development of Persia's natural resources. "At present," Wolff informed the prime minister, Lord Salisbury only a few days after his arrival in Tehran, "Persia is a virgin soil; mines and forests of considerable richness remain perfectly untouched, and . . . railway enterprise is unknown" (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 10 May 1888, no. 51: FO 539/38). He was equally fascinated with Khuzestan's resources. He thought that, with the opening of the Karun, the province would regain its old prosperity (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 21 May 1888, no. 61: FO 539/38), and with a little care it could be transformed into "a second Egypt" (Wolff, p. 344).

In his aim of developing and thus opening up Persia, Wolff had great faith in the efficacy of British investment (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 10 May 1888, no. 51: FO 539/38). But there were difficulties ahead. First, British investors were skeptical of the shah's regime. Second, Russia would block all British projects if no measures were taken to offset Russian influence.

In Iran, he embarked on numerous projects and carried through more schemes than any British envoy had done in many years. As a successful negotiator, he finally managed to alleviate the shah's dread of a potential Russian reaction, notwithstanding the fact that the "assurance" which he eventually gave the shah was neither as strong nor as clear as the shah had sought.

Proclamation for the security of life and property. Wolff's initial efforts in Iran were directed towards inducing the shah to issue a proclamation securing the rights of property of his subjects (Wolff, p. 340). Soon after his arrival in Iran, Wolff observed that he was much struck by the "general demeanor of the Persians" and what appeared to him as their "aptitude for civilization" (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 21 April 1888: FO 881/5818). The soil too was "extremely rich wherever water touches it" (report by A. Herbert on "The Internal State of Persia," Tehran, 7 Decemcer 1886; enclosed in Nicolson to Iddesleigh, Tehran, 8 December 1886, no. 149: FO 881/5392). However, despite these potential sources of wealth, the country was generally in a state of decay. A British official observed that the poverty of Persia meant the poverty of the inhabitants (ibid.). There were no courts of law, and justice was administered in a purely arbitrary fashion (Col. Smith on Herbert's "Report," 14 March 1887: FO 60/490; for the Qajar period, see JUDICIAL AND LEGAL SYSTEMS iv. JUDICIAL SYSTEM FROM THE ADVENT OF ISLAM THROUGH THE 19TH CENTURY). Authority was exercised by a series of units in a descending scale from the sovereign to the headman of a small village (Curzon, p. 391). The

shah was in his own person the sole arbiter of Persia's fortunes, his word was law, and all policy emanated from him (idem, p. 433). He claimed absolute command over the life and property of every one of his subjects. This absolute power was exerted in various ways. He could order, for instance, any one of his subjects, from the Grand Vizier on down, to be executed. Confiscation of the fortunes of his subjects was a good source of revenue and wealth for the shah. It was no wonder then that even serious subjects were fearful of appearing "rich" (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 21 April 1888: FO 881/5818). Wolff rightly believed this issue to be a powerful impediment to the development of the country. The circumstances under which the sanctity of property rights were not recognized did not provide the nascent Iranian bourgeoisie with the "classical conditions" it needed to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the state and other social forces.

After coming to Tehran, Wolff was quick to inform the shah that a necessary condition for the development of Persia was "a decree securing to everyone his life, liberty, and property" (ibid.). By order of the shah, in one of his first interviews with Wolff, Amin-al-Solṭān (see atābak-e aʿẓam) raised the question of British assurances against Russian aggression. Wolff replied that Russia, being very sensitive to "civilized" opinion, boasted that it always improved the conditions of countries it annexed (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 13 May 1888, no. 55: FO 60/495)."The Shah," he went on, "should therefore justify us in any assistance we could give him" by reforming the laws, so as to "interest all commercial and maritime nations in the integrity of Persia" (ibid.). He therefore proposed the publication of a decree securing the rights of property as well as the formation of a commission to report upon the development of natural resources. The shah agreed and asked him to draw one up with Amin-al-Solṭān (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 17 May 1888, no. 57: FO 60/495). The shah was also willing to grant railway and other concessions, but he wanted certain assurances, preferably a renewal of the former joint assurances of Persia's integrity (in 1834 an "Understanding" was arrived at by Russia and Britain in regard to the integrity of Persia which was reiterated in 1838; see Greaves, p. 255). A few days later Amin-al-Solṭān presented Wolff with a draft of the proclamation, approved by the shah. Wolff believed that it was based "very much on the line of the Hatti-Sherif of Gulhaneh of 1837" (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 26 July 1888, no. 116; Wolff to Salisbury, Gulahek, 31 July 1888, no. 129: FO 539/39). Wolff proposed some amendments, such as further restrictions on the shah himself. Amin-al-Solṭān said that he was much pleased with the decree, which he said, "no Persian minister would have dared to

suggest" (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 21 May 1888, no. 60: FO 539/38).

On 25 May 1888 the proclamation was promulgated and officially communicated to foreign missions and Iranian officials. Internal reports, Wolff said, generally indicated that the people were willing to take this move seriously. Shortly after the proclamation, a branch of the New Oriental Bank was opened in Tehran, and a short while later Wolff was reporting that some Persians who had investments in India were inclined to deposit their funds with the new bank (Wolff to Salisbury, 31 July 1888, no. 129: FO 539/39). The bank was doing well and began to introduce a kind of banknote into the Iranian economy (see ESKENĀS). Wolff attributed its success to the proclamation. Not only, he said, "do Persians of wealth find that the nationality of the bank will preserve their property . . . , but the proclamation shields them from any danger in dealing with the bank" (ibid.). Several incidents, however, occurred which showed that neither the rulers nor the people should take such documents too seriously. For example, barely a month after its promulgation, a relation of the shah was murdered by a municipal officer and, instead of trying him in a court, the culprit was given up to the Qajars, who lynched him; this caused demonstrations of some thousands against the authorities in Tehran (Eʿtemād-al-Salṭana, pp. 655-61). Another event that further demonstrated the real nature of the regime occurred when a man called Raḥim Kan Kan died. His wealth was put between 100,000 and 150,000 tomāns. The shah was immediately informed, and he ordered Ḥājeb-al-Dawla to go to Kan Kan's house, confiscate his money and wealth, and deliver it to the royal purse (Eʿtemād-al-Salṭana, p. 708). However, regardless of its practical and tangible impacts, this document should be regarded as a landmark in the legal history of Iran and the seemingly eternal struggle of its people against official lawlessness, tyranny, and despotism.

With the proclamation and the bank, one chapter of Wolff's diplomatic activities came to a successful end. However, his major success and Dolgorouki's main setbacks, namely, the Karun opening followed by a British bank concession, were yet to come. For the shah and his country, meanwhile, this intensification of Anglo-Russian political and economic rivalry, which had been triggered by Wolff's persistent application of an aggressive policy, heralded more serious troubles ahead.

Assurances and the Karun proclamation. The next and by far the most important point which Wolff urged upon the shah was the opening of the Karun, about which, as he put it, "all the British mercantile interests in Persia

were anxious" (Wolff, p. 343). Prior to Wolff's arrival, the shah had almost agreed to the opening of the river, provided the concession was given to a Persian entity (Salisbury to Nicolson, FO, 18 February 1888, no. 7: FO 539/37). But after much skillful maneuvering, Wolff's diplomacy secured for Britain "the virtual monopoly of the Karun trade" (Saldana, p. 28). The Karun question had been brought up by Wolff at one his first audiences. The shah said that he was considering the matter with a view to speaking to Wolff later on the subject "in the fullest and frankest manner" (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 5 May 1888, no. 46: FO 539/38). Throughout the summer of 1888 Wolff was discussing, *inter alia*, the Karun question. In one of these meetings, he suggested that Persia should open the navigation to the whole world (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 21 May 1888: 60: FO 539/38). He knew, however, that, given the commanding influence Britain enjoyed in the south, it would be the only power to benefit from such a move. Furthermore, by doing so, he argued, there would be no concession and therefore no foreign reaction (ibid.). However, each time this question was raised, the shah would repeat his inquiry as to the assurances, since he knew that, if the Karun was opened for Britain, the Russians would ask for the navigation of the Anzali lagoon, which would give them control of Gilan (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 1 June 1888, no. 71: FO 539/39). Therefore, he once again sought Britain's assurances. Wolff advised the Foreign Office that "this assurance should only be given in exchange for an actual concession" (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 30 May 1888, no. 66: FO 539/38).

Although at this time there were many requests before the shah, he appeared as unyielding as ever. The main stumbling block was the dread of a Russian reaction and the assurances needed against it."We do not know how you will write that document nor how it will be composed; whether the Queen will sign it . . . or you will yourself write it at Tehran and give it to us. . . . It would be as well to let us know what you will write in order that we may correct it" (Statement by the Ameen-es-Sultan on behalf of the shah, Tehran, 14 September 1888; enclose. 3, in Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 15 September 1888: FO 539/40). Subsequently, on behalf of the shah, Amin-al-Solṭān made Wolff the following proposal: a formal secret agreement should be given to the shah against any Russian aggression. "In return, Persia would be guided absolutely by the advice of England in granting concessions" (Wolff to Salisbury, Gulahek, 5 September 1888, no. 171: FO 539/40). If England refused this offer, Amin-al-Solṭān said, the shah's only alternative was to temporize as previously between the two powers. Wolff, like his predecessor, advised the Foreign

Office that this overture “should not be summarily rejected.” So long as the shah was deterred by the fear of Russia, “our position in Persia must be secondary.” But, Wolff continued, if an assurance could be given which would encourage the shah to give a concession to British subjects, Russia could not openly use it as a pretext for aggression. The concession being a *fait accompli*, “we should establish our hold on the country, and Russia would be compelled either to acquiesce in it or to come to some understanding with us, as I have proposed to Prince Dolgorouki” (ibid.). Amin-al-Solṭān said that, if it was possible, as suggested by Wolff, to come to an agreement, then despite warnings from Russia the shah would be prepared to proclaim the freedom of navigation of the Karun and the construction of a road from Dezful to Qom (Memo. by Churchill, Tehran, 14 September 1888; enclosed, in Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 15 September 1888: FO 539/40).

Wolff then asked whether Russian threats were in written or verbal form. The shah replied that they say these things verbally, and maintained that “the only thing which will satisfy us, is a written pledge” (ibid.). It was not a personal matter, but a state question, “which must be placed in the State archives” (“Statement by the Ameen-es-Sultan,” 14 September 1888: ibid.). Wolff’s next move was to send to the shah a harsh note, in which he said that Her Majesty’s Government, as the friends and allies of Persia, whose integrity and independence they had guaranteed, “have instructed me to enquire when they may expect that the assurances and promises given (by the shah on the Karun, etc.) may be carried into effect” (Wolff to Ameen-es-Sultan, Tehran, 18 September 1888: Lorimer, 1970, p. 1717). This note was actually given to the shah to be shown to Dolgorouki and thus give him the impression that the shah was under serious pressure to open the Karun.

Amin-al-Solṭān also reminded Wolff that the necessity of consulting Russia was a recent development and that England alone was responsible for it. For some years, Nicolson had been pressing for a railway concession, and the Foreign Minster, Yahyā Khan, a notorious Russophile, had kept the Russians well informed (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 30 September 1888, no. 199: FO 60/495). Now Amin-al-Solṭān said that Ayyub Khan had escaped. Ayyub Khan—son of the late amir of Kabul Šēr-ʿAli Khan (d. 1879), governor of Herat, and contender in 1880-81 for the amirate vacated by his brother (see MOḤAMMAD-AYYUB KHAN)—had been exiled to Iran after ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Khan’s accession with British support (see also Greaves, pp. 49-50; ANGLO-AFGHAN WARS ii). Nicolson insisted on imputing the escape to the actions of

Russia and also the carelessness of Yaḥyā Khan (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 30 September 1888, 201: FO 60/495). In consequence of Nicolson's pressures, the shah replaced Yaḥyā Khan. Dolgorouki responded by pointing out to the shah that a minister had been dismissed on the demand of one single legation and said that he, in his turn, should demand the dismissal of Amin-al-Solṭān, the governor-general of Khorasan, and other Persian functionaries distasteful to Russia (ibid.). As a result of Dolgorouki's pressure and to avert Russian anger, the shah drew up an unsigned memorandum saying that: "we have decided not to give orders or permission to construct railways or waterways to companies of foreign nations before consulting with . . . the Emperor [i.e., the czar]; and this advice and consultation will meet with our consideration inasmuch as, should those concessions contain any article or clause detrimental to Persian interests, we can utilize the Emperor's . . . advice" 3 September 1887 (Memo, enclosed in Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 1 October 1888, no. 201: FO 60/495). Now the shah wanted to know the value of this paper as a diplomatic document. Had it the force of a treaty? Would it automatically cease to exist with the present Emperor's death? Did it cover the issue of the Karun Proclamation, which was not a concession? (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 30 September 1888, no. 199: FO 60/495). Wolff replied that in such cases the interpretation of the strongest generally prevailed (ibid.). The shah wanted to know Salisbury's opinion on whether he was bound to consult the Emperor for the Karun opening. Wolff, transmitting this message to Salisbury wrote: "much will depend on Your Lordship's opinion" (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 1 October 1888, no. 201: FO 60/495). He also reported that "once reassured by us he [the shah] would absolutely follow our lead" (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 11 October 1888: FO 539/40).

At this time the dreaded Prince Dolgorouki was not in Iran. In September 1888 he went to Tbilisi ostensibly to welcome the czar. Wolff, however, believed that he had gone there to discuss the shah's "secret undertaking," which, he feared, if dealt with "may produce conditions detrimental to us" (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 12 October 1888: FO 539/40). He thought that this might be forestalled by the opening of the river in Dolgorouki's absence, as a first installment of a larger scheme, thus obtaining access "to warlike tribes and strengthening our hold on the south and our position as regards both Turkey and Russia" (ibid.). This resulted in Salisbury's instruction that Wolff should press for a speedy and early execution of the shah's decision (Salisbury to Wolff, 10 October 1888, no. 77: FO 539/40), hoping that Russia might accept an irreversible situation. But the shah then informed Wolff that he was anxious

to open the river without a proclamation (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 16 October 1888, no. 198: FO 539/40). Wolff, however, pressed for a proclamation and insisted on the inclusion of "a fixed period of 25 years" in it, in order to prevent a quick withdrawal of the concession (Saldana, p. 28).

On 17 October 1888, Amin-al-Solṭān told Wolff that his government had decided to reply to his "harsh" letter of 18 September, and on the 24th and 25th of October Amin-al-Solṭān had further lengthy meetings, sometimes at night, with Wolff, in which the arrangements were finally concluded. As expected, Salisbury's reply on the shah's questions was that "this memo. applies evidently only to concessions given to companies, and had nothing to do with a restriction removed from foreign nations generally by the Shah's Decree" (Wolff to Amin-al-Solṭān, Tehran, 25 October 1888, enclosure 5, FO 539/40). The previous day Wolff had already given the following "Assurance": "In the event of any power making an attack without a just cause or provocation on Persia . . . Her Majesty's Government engages to make earnest representations against such proceedings and to take such steps as may in their judgment be best calculated to prevent any infringement of the integrity of Persia . . ." (Tehran, 24 October 1888 (enclosure 3, ibid.). Thus the road was paved for the Persian government to give the 25 October 1888 "Note" to Britain, in which, apart from the clauses concerning the Karun, Persia also undertook to construct a carriage road from Dezful to Isfahan or Qom (Amin-al-Solṭān to Wolff, Tehran, 25 October 1888; enclosure 2 in Wolff to Salisbury, 29 October 1888, no. 233: Wolff to Amin-al-Solṭān, Tehran, 25 October 1888, enclosure 5, FO 539/40). A further paragraph was later added to the "Note" on the tolls.

Immediately after receiving this news, the Foreign Office telegraphed Wolff that Mackenzie "will order steam-launch to proceed to Ahvaz at once," and that "Lynch's steamer will follow" (Salisbury to Wolff, 25 October 1888, no. 93: FO 539/40). On 30 October a steam launch owned by Mackenzie & Co. was dispatched from Basra to the Karun as a pioneer and to establish the right of way, and it was followed by the Lynch Brothers steamer which belonged to the Euphrates and Tigris Steam Navigation Co. and had been prepared and dispatched in just three days (Saldana, p. 28).

On 30 October, the following proclamation, in the form of an official "circular," was sent to all foreign representatives in the capital: "The Persian Government . . . has ordered that commercial steamers of all nations, without exception . . . undertake the transport of merchandize in the Karun River from

Muhammareh to the dyke at Ahvaz . . . from the dykes upwards the river navigation is reserved to the Persian Government itself and its subjects . . .” (The Persian Minister of Foreign Affairs to Wolff, Tehran, 24 Safar 1306 [30 October 1888], trans.; enclosure 1, in Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 31 October 1888, no. 238: FO 539/40; also see Wolff, p. 344). Salisbury instructed Wolff to express to the shah “cordial appreciation” by Her Majesty’s Government of this “spontaneous and enlightened policy” on his part (Wolff to the Persian MFFA, Tehran, 31 October 1888, enclosure 2, in Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 31 October 1888, no. 238: FO 539/40). He also made an important speech at the Guildhall in London and promised that the shah’s measure was the beginning of a policy that breathed new life into Persia and its commerce and industry (FO to Wolff, 10 November 1888: ibid.). In the long run, however, this optimism proved to be unfounded. Britain, it seems, had somewhat underestimated the influence that Russia had gradually acquired in Iran. P. M. Vlassov, a Russian official in Tehran, told Wolff that the opening of the Karun had created a strong impression in Russia, particularly owing to the comments of the English press on Salisbury’s Guildhall speech, and although Salisbury “had not claimed the opening of the Karun as a triumph, it was so represented by British journalists” (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 13 February 1889, no. 33: FO 60/500).

THE RUSSIAN REACTION AND RELATED EVENTS

Even before the circular had reached the Russian Legation, its Charge d’Affaires had protested against the proclamation (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 29 October 1888, no. 212: FO 539/40). On 28 October he had a long meeting with Amin-al-Solṭān. Strong objections were made against the Karun opening, which, he said, was “exclusively in English interests” (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 29 October 1888, no. 234: FO 539/40). The Russians were so angry with the shah and his vizier that, at first, they even boycotted Amin-al-Solṭān (Eʿtemād-al-Salṭana, 1966, p. 692). The shah, apparently alarmed, held numerous meetings with his ministers. But this time the shah, perhaps encouraged by the British assurances, made a firm stand. The Russian Charge d’Affaires, M. de Poggio, told Persian officials that the circular was a “breach of an understanding” with Amin-al-Solṭān, which would greatly anger the Emperor. The result of this measure, he said, would be to deliver the river, as well as the country adjoining it, to the English (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 3 November 1888, no. 242: FO 539/40). He asked the shah to remember India and Egypt (ibid.).

The shah dictated a very bold reply. By this time, as a result of his fear of Russia, his reliance on Britain had become so thorough that he asked Wolff to call on his Foreign Minister and advise him whether he should or should not give the answer to Poggio in writing. Wolff found the response "very sensible and well-argued" (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 3 November 1888, no. 242: FO 539/40). As this document was dictated by the shah himself, it bears closer scrutiny. It began by stressing that the Karun opening was a general permission to the mercantile vessels of the world. Then he asked: "Why must we not gather together the means of advancement and prosperity? Why must we not construct roads and workshops wherewith to make ourselves independent of foreign wares?" The situation of Persia, he said, had become unique "she is engulfed in the rivalry between England and Russia." "I repeat, the antagonism existing between Russia and England has become such that should I wish to go out on an excursion . . . in the north, east, and west of my country, I must consult the English, and should I intend to go south, I must consult the Russians . . . Are we not an independent state with full powers in our own borders, and cannot we go about as we like, and do what seems best? Of course Persia is independent, and whatsoever it conceives to be right . . . it can, without consulting or having to submit to demands or complaints from without. Were it to fail this, it would be acting the traitor to its government and its people" (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 3 November 1888, no. 242: FO 539/40).

At first the Russian government tried to play down the importance of the event in public. However, later the British envoy there, Sir Robert Morier, reported that they were "very much irritated" by this concession and warned Salisbury that "strong pressure will 'probably be brought to bear at Tehran' to have it withdrawn." Dolgorouki is talking very big," but, Morier commented, the Russians "can do nothing, and . . . Wolff is master of the situation if he keeps the shah up to the mark" (Morier to Salisbury, St. Petersburg, 14 November 1888, no. 65: FO 539/40). Initially, the Russian press too remained silent, although shortly afterwards they started their scathing attacks on the shah and his grand vizier. The seriousness of the case became apparent when Nicholas de Giers, the Russian Foreign Minister, told Morier that this concession was a disturbance of "the existing equilibrium" which would necessitate "corresponding measures" to redress the balance (Morier to Salisbury, St. Petersburg, 21 November 1888, no. 396: FO 539/40). Salisbury, obviously with Britain's assurances in mind, warned that Her Majesty's government "sincerely trust" that this "will not be made by Russia the ground

of any undue pressure on the Shah" (Salisbury to Morier, FO, 23 November 1888, no. 64: FO 539/40).

Meanwhile, the shah was earnestly proceeding with his plans. He had given orders for the construction of warehouses, wharves, and telegraph houses on the Karun, sending troops to secure the roads northwards. He had also sent Wolff "satisfactory messages" about Reuter (Wolff to Sal, Tehran, 24 November 1888, no. 23: FO 539/40), who, apparently encouraged by Wolff's successes had sent his son, George, to Tehran in order to negotiate the terms of his 1872 concession (FO to Wolff, 21 October 1888, no. 84: FO 60/494).

Under these circumstances, Wolff asked Salisbury to what extent he should inform the shah of Russia's threatening language (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 24 November 1888, no. 231: FO 539/40). He was instructed that, if he believed the threats would cause the shah undue alarm, it would be best to keep the information from him (Salisbury to Wolff, FO, 24 November 1888, no. 119: FO 539/40). Nevertheless, the hostile articles of the Russian press were regularly read to him by his translator, which alarmed him and made him "nervous of the possible demands of Russia" (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 20 January 1889, no. 16: FO 60/549). In fact, it was expected that the establishment of a Russian consulate at Mashad would be one of Russia's demands. After her advances in Central Asia, Russia intended to subordinate Khorasan, through which lay a convenient road network in the direction of Herat (q.v.), and in the event of military operations against India, Khorasan would form the base for Russian forces (*Novoe Vremya*, 1 December 1888; enclosure in Morier to Salisbury, St. Petersburg, 3 December 1888, no. 414: FO 539/40). Soon after receiving the Karun concession news, Russia appointed its consul at Rasht to Mashad (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 4 December 1888, no. 242: ibid.). Apparently, the shah was first well disposed to this move. However, when an article appeared in a French newspaper suggesting that under Dolgorouki's guidance Persia had become "a Russian Province and the shah a simple lieutenant of the White Czar," he began to resist it (ibid.). This infuriated the Russians even more. "This refusal," wrote *Novoe Vremya* "is more insulting that it comes from . . . a country with a barefoot army, and a population half composed of beggars, and tottering political institutions. And this country had dared to refuse Russia, its protector in years past . . . a Russian Consul at a place where there is already a complete English military mission" (*Novoe Vremya*, 1 December 1888; enclosure in Morier to Salisbury, 3 December 1888: FO 539/40).

Despite Dolgorouki's efforts to induce the czar to take strong actions (Salisbury

to Wolff, FO, 12 December 1888, no. 173: FO 539/41), Persia did not anticipate overt acts of enmity in the near future. The shah was also desirous of offering Russia some compensation for the Karun concession (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 23 December 1888, no. 293: FO 539/41) and anxious to find out the real reaction of the czar. As a result, he invited Dolgorouki to the palace. When he met the shah (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 13 February 1888, no. 33: FO 60/500), the prince discussed the Karun opening in a tone "more of sorrow than of anger" and did not allude to the "secret undertaking." As compensation he asked for a single commercial road for Russia (ibid.). The shah, who was considerably relieved by the tone of Dolgorouki's language, treated him very kindly and said he would willingly study the demand, though he needed more details (ibid.). Dolgorouki duly complied and, a few days later, put to the shah the real Russian demands, which predictably were as follows: (1) the opening to Russian vessels of the Anzali lagoon and all those rivers which flow into the Caspian; (2) the construction of a carriage road from Tehran to Gilān (i.e., Pir-e bāzār on the lagoon); and (3) the construction of a railway line from Tehran to Khorasan.

Russia had already proposed to appoint consuls at Isfahan, Bušehr, and Khuzestan (Wolff to Salisbury, Tehran, 2 February 1889, no. 29: FO 60/500). It is worth noting that at this time the shah and Amin-al-Solṭān dearly wanted to go to Europe via Russia, and the Russian government was holding out the formal invitation. Dolgorouki also intended on getting "an absolute assurance in principle" that the construction of any railway would be entrusted exclusively to Russia (memo by J. Mitchell, St. Petersburg, 6 February 1888: FO 65/1355) He finally managed to secure the shah's signature on a secret document, of which a somewhat distorted version appeared in *Novoe Vremya* ("Precise of Articles in the 'Novo Vremya'" of 21 March 1889, 6 April 1889: FO 539/42). According to it, the shah accepted the first two demands of the prince, and in addition to these he undertook to construct carriage roads from Tabriz to Julfa (q.v.) and from Āstārā (q.v.), a landing place of Russian goods, to Ardabil (q.v.). The important part of it, however, was the stipulation that: "for five years . . . the Persian Government will, before finally confirming any (railway) concession . . . submit such concession for the information of the Russian Government. If a Russian company will undertake the construction of such railway, to it shall be given the concession in preference to others," dated 11 March 1889 ("Precise of Articles in the 'Novo Vremya' of 21 March 1889"; communicated by the Intelligence Dept 6 April 1889: FO 539/42). The road from Julfa to Tabriz was to assist Russian commerce and to ward off

competition from nations that used the Trebizond-Erzurum-Tabriz route, and that from Āstārā to Ardabil was to monopolize the trade of eastern Azarbaijan (ibid.). After the signing of this agreement, the shah received the eagerly awaited formal invitation from Russia.

The Imperial Bank of Persia. Before these setbacks, Wolff had scored another diplomatic victory against Russia, namely securing a concession for Reuter to set up the Imperial Bank of Persia, a concession that proved to be of paramount importance and became one of the most successful foreign enterprises in Iran. On 30 January 1889, after much maneuvering and negotiations, just a few days before Dolgorouki's return to Tehran, the bank concession was finally signed by the shah (see the text of the concession in FO 60/506; FO 60/507). The principal points of Reuter's new concession were: (1) the grant of an Imperial Bank Concession for 60 years which would (2) have the exclusive right to issue banknotes [Art. 3], (3) provide the service of the treasury, (4) have a monopoly of all mines, except gold and silver, not already conceded and worked (ibid.). The mild opposition of Russia to this concession was somewhat surprising. However, the reason seems to have been omission from the new concession of the priority clause regarding railway construction and the fact that it settled the Reuter question once and for all.

CONCLUSION

With the benefit of hindsight, as far as Iran's position was concerned, we can say that the policies pursued by the British government at this time were not very far-sighted and well calculated. They intensified the big-power rivalry and consequently entailed great dangers for a defenseless Iran. Furthermore, with the exception of the Karun and the Bank, Wolff's other successes were all short-lived. These initial gains by Britain could be attributed to the fact that Russian advances in Central Asia had alarmed Nāṣer-al-Din Shah over Iran's integrity and independence as well as his own position. He had concluded that probably the best way out was to get Britain more actively involved in the affairs of his country. He was prepared to pay the price too, hence the concessions. Wolff's astuteness and Dolgorouki's dullness may also have contributed to the British envoy's initial successes. Later, however, either due to his miscalculations or because Wolff did not stay long enough in Iran to complete his plans, Russia managed to regain its preponderance in Tehran. With the shah's capitulation to its demands, Russia at one stroke managed to thwart all railway schemes, halt the commercial inroads of Britain in the north, and through the creation of a communication network secure for itself

a commanding position in the north. Nonetheless, the role of the Karun and the bank concessions in the subsequent expansion and consolidation of Britain's economic and political influence in the south generally, and in Khuzestan particularly, was significant.

See also ANGLO-IRANIAN RELATIONS ii. QAJAR PERIOD; GREAT BRITAIN iii. BRITISH INFLUENCE IN PERSIA IN THE 19TH CENTURY.

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