



NĀŞER-AL-MOLK, ABU'L-QĀSEM

NĀŞER-AL-MOLK, ABU'L-QĀSEM KHAN QARĀGOZLU (b. Şeverin, near Hamadan, Şawwāl 1272/July 1856; d. Tehran, 1346/1927; Figure 2), Qajar era courtier and statesman, who served as prime minister during the early constitutional period (see [CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION](#)) and as regent during the minority of the last Qajar ruler, [Aḥmad Shah](#); he also translated two plays of Shakespeare. (The date 1282 mentioned in some sources as his birthday is clearly inaccurate; cf. 'Alā', p. 301; *Times* of London, 27 December 1927.) His father, Aḥmad Khan, died when Abu'l-Qāsem was still young, and he was raised by his grandfather, Maḥmud Khan Nāşer-al-Molk, who served as Iran's envoy to London and was a member of Nāşer-al-Din Shah's consultative council (*dār al-şurā-ye kobrā*). He held various cabinet posts (Bakhash, 1978, pp. 386-87); granted the title Farmānfarmā, he was the fourth person (and the only non-Qajar) to hold the title ([Figure 3](#)).

Abu'l-Qāsem received his early education from tutors at home and was then sent to Tehran, where he was taught by some of the leading scholars of the time, including the philosopher Mirzā [Abu'l-Ḥasan Jelwa](#) and the mathematician Mirzā Sayyed [Moḥammad-'Ali Qā'eni](#) ('Alā', pp. 300-301). From an early age, he displayed a passion for learning and read widely on his own. In 1878, his grandfather accompanied Nāşer-al-Din Shah on his second trip to Europe and took the 22-year-old Abu'l-Qāsem with him. Abu'l-Qāsem Khan spent nine months boarding with a tutor in England, perfecting his Greek,



Latin, and English and reading other subjects to prepare for the Oxford University entrance examinations. His hard work paid off. In 1879 he was admitted to Balliol College, famous for the quality of its students and the vigor of its intellectual life under its famed Master, Benjamin Jowett (1817-1893). He was the first Iranian accepted to Oxford University.

At Oxford, Abu'l-Qāsem followed his habit of reading widely in a variety of fields. In addition to Persian and Arabic, he became fluent in Latin and Greek, and, even forty years later, he could easily read and translate Plato, Thucydides, and Virgil ('Alā', p. 298). At Balliol College, he formed lifelong friendships with later luminaries like Cecil Spring-Rice, Edward Grey, the future foreign secretary, and [George Curzon](#). Jowett took a liking to the young Iranian, and he was often a guest at Jowett's Sunday evening suppers, where he met many of the statesmen of the day and distinguished writers like Algernon Charles Swinburne, Alfred Tennyson, and Oscar Wilde. Malkam Khan, Iran's minister to London, became an early patron of the young Abu'l-Qāsem, praising his intellectual achievements and proposing him for various ministerial posts (Wright, p. 143; Yalfāni, p. 22).

After receiving his degree in 1882, he spent a brief time at the Ecole des Sciences Politique in Paris and returned to Iran in the following year. His grandfather, then foreign minister, secured for him from the shah the title of *mošir-e hožur* and appointed him as an undersecretary at the ministry. One of his duties was to translate the *Times* of London and other newspapers for Nāšer-al-Din Shah during lunchtime and to serve sometimes as translator at the shah's audiences with foreign ambassadors (e.g., Afzal-al-Molk, p. 29). Nāšer-al-Din Shah, under the influence of Malkam Khan and other reform-minded officials, was at this time considering a thorough reorganization of Qajar administration. At the shah's instructions, Abu'l-Qāsem drew up regulations for an overhaul of the tax system, reorganization of the foreign ministry and of internal administration, and the organization of the civil service. His proposals bore the imprint of Malkam Khan's reformist ideas (Yalfāni, pp. 30-33). Unlike Malkam, however, Abu'l-Qāsem believed that reform of Iranian institutions, while drawing on European models, must take account of Iranian practices, culture, and religious sensibilities (Yalfāni, p. 30).

When his grandfather, Maḥmud Khan, died in 1887, Nāšer-al-Din Shah conferred the title of *Nāšer-al-Molk* on him, along with the rank of *janāb* (a title approximately close to English "honorable, excellency"). The shah also named him head of the Qarāgozlu tribe and, contrary to his frequent practice,



allowed the elder Nāṣer-al-Molk's considerable wealth and properties in [Hamadan](#) to pass untouched to his grandson (Bamdād, p. 68).

He accompanied Nāṣer-al-Din Shah on his third and last trip to Europe in 1889 and served as his translator. Upon his return to Tehran, the shah rewarded him with a sword of honor. After the death of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah in 1896, he was sent as emissary to the major capitals of Europe to announce the accession of his successor, Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah. He was also charged with purchasing equipment for Iran's cannon casting works and armories (Yalfāni, p. 46). On this or on a subsequent royal visit, he was awarded the Order of St. Michael and St. George (KCMG) by the British government ('Alā', p. 292).

The new shah launched his reign by dismissing the long-serving and powerful prime minister 'Ali-Aṣḡar Khan Amin-al-Solṭān, and appointing Mirzā 'Ali Khan [Amin-al-Dawla](#) to head the government. Amin-al-Dawla had served for many years as Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's private secretary and in other senior positions. He was an advocate of change and had corresponded in secret with Iran's minister to London, Malkam Khan, on ways to induce the shah to launch a program of reforms. Amin-al-Dawla appointed Nāṣer-al-Molk his minister of finance. He employed Belgian [customs](#) officials to reorganize Iran's customs administration (see [BELGIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS](#)); and he took steps to reform the administration of the mint, where corruption and irresponsible minting of copper coin had led to a sharp fall in the value of Iranian coinage (Bakhash, 1983, pp. 19-22).

Nāṣer-al-Molk was associated with these initiatives and most closely with an attempt to end tax farming and centralize tax receipts in the treasury; to update land-value and crop-yield data, on which the all-important land tax was based; to control the spending of the shah, his court, and the military; and to curtail the government issue of *barāts*, or assignments on provincial revenue. The practice led to widespread corruption and abuses. These reforms threatened the interests of senior officials and also the *mostawfis*, or traditional accountants, of the finance ministry. A powerful coalition soon formed against the prime minister (Bakhash, 1983, pp. 19-23; Mostawfi, tr., II, pp. 352, 356-59, 363; III, pp. 687-88; Afzal-al-Molk, pp. 169-70; Yalfāni, pp. 51-54). In the face of this opposition and being unable to persuade the British government to assist with a badly needed loan, the Amin-al-Dawla cabinet fell in June 1898, a brief 14 months after it assumed office, with little accomplished in the way of reform.



Nāşer-al-Molk accompanied Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah on his first trip to Europe in 1900. Back in Iran, he was appointed governor of Kurdistan, probably due to the machinations of Amin-al-Soltan, who had returned to office as prime minister and wanted Nāşer-al-Molk out of the way (Yalfāni, pp. 59-60). He spent nearly four barren years in Sanandaj ('Alā', p. 293). In 1904, he was summoned to Tehran by the new prime minister, 'Abd-al-Majid Mirzā 'Ayn-al-Dawla and once again was appointed minister of finance, a post he held under subsequent cabinets. He resumed the financial reforms he had attempted during his first tenure as minister, but in a form designed to avoid antagonizing the *mostawfis* and other powerful officials (Mostawfi, tr., II, p. 380). Once again, entrenched interests and the short life of the cabinet frustrated these measures.

In December 1906, Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah yielded to public demand and signed a constitution that curtailed royal power and created an elected Majlis, or national assembly. He died soon afterwards. His successor, Moḥammad-'Ali Shah, was determined to crush the constitutional movement. However, to allay public opinion, in October 1907, he named the liberal-minded Nāşer-al-Molk as prime minister. Nāşer-al-Molk's government lasted only a few weeks.

Moḥammad-'Ali Shah, determined to do away with the constitution and the Majlis, instigated a confrontation with the parliament in December 1907 and instructed Nāşer-al-Molk to shut the Majlis down. When Nāşer-al-Molk refused and resigned, he was confined to one of the rooms of the Golestan Palace and offered the famous 'Qajar coffee'—an invitation to commit suicide. He was allowed to refuse and earned the shah's clemency due to the intervention of the British legation (Browne, pp. 162-63; Kazemzadeh, p. 513; Wright, p. 144). He left immediately for Europe.

In June 1909, Moḥammad-'Ali Shah bombed and shut down parliament, arrested constitutionalist leaders and suspended the constitution. The constitutionalists emerged victorious from their ensuing struggle with the shah who was forced to abdicate in favor of his 14-year old son, Aḥmad, which necessitated the establishment of a regent. Nāşer-al-Molk rejected an offer that he serve as regent, and the position fell to 'Ali-Rezā Khan 'Azod-al-Molk, the head of the Qajar tribe. Nāşer-al-Molk also refused the position of prime minister (Yalfāni, p. 159-60). When the regent died in Ramazan 1328/September 1910, a majority in the Majlis voted to offer Nāşer-al-Molk the post. He accepted, but with considerable reluctance (Yalfāni, p. 170). Citing the disordered state of affairs in Iran, the divisions in parliament, the lack of



parliamentary unanimity over his own election, he left France for Iran only in December, arriving home two months later. He did not take the oath of office until March 1911 (Yalfāni, pp. 180, 185-87; Shuster, p. 232; [Figure 4](#)).

As regent, he encouraged the deputies to organize themselves in political parties and laid down the principle that the government should be formed by the majority party (Shuster, p. 236). This gave the government to the majority E'tedāliun (Moderate party), whose members were more in line with Nāṣer-al-Molk's centrist views. The more radical Democrats continued to exercise influence, however, and to form future governments. Perhaps reflecting his unease at the disorders and radicalism engendered by the Constitutional Revolution, Nāṣer-al-Molk now favored caution and described himself as a "realistic conservative" (Abrahamian, p. 106). In 1911, he supported a law in Majlis to strengthen the authority of the cabinet and the regent as against that of the Majlis, but its effect was of short duration (Afary, pp. 324-25).

The first two years of his regency coincided with a tumultuous period in the history of the Constitutional Revolution. Many in the Majlis and the country looked to the new regent to lead the country out of its many difficulties; but Nāṣer-al-Molk took the view that the regent, as representative of the crown under the constitution, had few powers, that authority lay with the cabinet and the Majlis, and that the regent's responsibility was to offer guidance and advice in the best interest of the country. He seemed to have little stomach for the spreading disorder, the machinations of the politicians, and the mounting domestic and foreign problems facing the country (Shuster, pp. 231-36). Already in June 1911, he was talking of leaving for Europe for health reasons (Shuster, p. 61).

Factionalism and division between the moderate and more radical elements remained deep. The financial controls and reforms instituted by the newly employed American financial adviser, William Morgan Shuster (1877-1960), whom Nāṣer-al-Molk supported, aroused considerable opposition among entrenched factions at home and from the Russians abroad. The deposed Moḥammad-'Ali Shah attempted to stage a comeback and, with Russian support, returned to Iran with crates of weapons in July 1911, raised an army, and ignited a brief but costly war with the constitutionalists. The ex-shah was defeated, but the Russian government used these events to make onerous demands on the Iranian government, to land troops, occupy parts of the north, and eventually to bomb the shrine of Imam Rezā in Mashhad. The British government, eager for Russian cooperation on European matters, offered Iran



little support against the Russians; and Lord Grey, the British foreign secretary and Nāşer-al-Molk's old Oxford classmate, advised Nāşer-al-Molk to accommodate the Russians (Kazemzadeh, p. 577). In December 1911, with the Russian troops spreading across the north and threatening to occupy the capital itself, the Majlis rejected a final Russian ultimatum; but members of the cabinet, influential Bakhtiari chiefs and other leaders concluded that compliance with Russian demands was the wiser course. Under the threat of armed Bakhtiari tribesmen and police, who surrounded the Majlis building, the Majlis agreed to a procedure that allowed the cabinet to accept the Russian ultimatum. Parliament was then dissolved (Kazemzadeh, p. 644; Afary, pp. 334-36).

During this extended crisis, Nāşer-al-Molk managed to keep the government and individual ministers from resigning (Kazemzadeh, pp. 670-71), but he did not take the lead in dealing with it. He refused pleas from the cabinet and high officials that he take the difficult decision posed by the Russian ultimatum, taking the view it was for the cabinet and the Majlis to decide. However, he issued the decree dissolving parliament, when the cabinet asked him to do so (its formal term had in any case ended) and ordered new elections (Yalfāni, pp. 259-61; *The Times*, 27 December 1927, p. 9). The constitution did not vest significant powers in the regent, but most observers and historians fault Nāşer-al-Molk for insufficient forcefulness in a period when strong national leadership was sorely needed (Shuster, pp. 231-36; Yalfāni, pp. 340-44). Following the defeat of the ex-shah, Nāşer-al-Molk left for Europe in 1912, citing health reasons. Government business with the regent had to be conducted by telegraph. After repeated pleas from members of the Cabinet and other officials (Yalfāni, pp. 289-91, 298-99), Nāşer-al-Molk finally returned to Iran in September 1913. When Aḥmad Shah came of age in 1914, ending the regency, Nāşer-al-Molk withdrew from public life and left for Europe with his family. He returned to Iran only once before his death in 1927 ('Alā', p. 291).

In retirement, he translated into Persian two of Shakespeare's plays, *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*. The *Othello* translation was staged in Tehran in the 1930s, and both plays were published in Iran. The *Merchant of Venice*, illustrated by Nāşer-al-Molk's daughter, Fāţema, and with an introduction by his grandson, Fereydun 'Alā', was reissued in a bilingual edition in 2008.

Nāşer-al-Molk had three children; one of his two sons, Ḥosayn-'Ali, also attended Balliol College. His daughter married Ḥosayn 'Alā', who was to serve



as ambassador to London and Washington, prime minister, and minister of court.

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