



# TELEGRAPH I. FIRST TELEGRAPH LINES IN PERSIA

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Electric telegraph was first introduced in Persia by one of the leading reformists of the Qajar period, the Armenian Mirzā Malkom Khan (1833/34-1908). In 1851, upon completing his higher education in Paris, he returned to Tehran soon after the foundation of the *Dār al-Fonun* ('Polytechnic College'), where he gained employment as both translator and geography teacher (Malkom Khan, 1948, p. 2). He told the new and young monarch, Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (r. 1848-96), about the telegraph, but it seems that the advent of the electric telegraph into Persia was blocked by the newly-appointed Prime Minister, Mirzā Āqā Khan Nuri, who "regarded the establishment of telegraph for Persia as problematic, unsuitable, and the source of suffering" (Malkom Khan to Sepahsālār, n. p., 4 Rajab 1292/6 August 1875, quoted in Ṭāheri, II, pp. 459-60).

In 1858, after the removal of Mirzā Āqā Khan Nuri from office, the time seemed more suited to introducing the telegraph into Persia. Upon returning from the Anglo-Persian peace negotiations in Paris, Malkom Khan brought up the issue of the telegraph and its advantages before the Shah once again. The Shah's interest was aroused and he immediately ordered him to carry out a telegraphic experiment. Preparations took one month, and, using the telegraphic kit which Malkom Khan had brought with him from Europe, along with the assistance of Lieutenant August Kržiž (Austrian artillery teacher at the *Dār al-Fonun*), some of the latter's students, and 'Aliqoli Mirzā E'tezād-al-



Salṭana (then the Superintendent of Dār al-Fonun), Malkom Khan carried out a successful experiment of connecting two opposite rooms of the Dār al-Fonun (Afšār, pp. 229-30). Next, with the assistance of the same group, Malkom Khan connected the Dār al-Fonun to the royal palace of Golestān and the latter to Bāḡ-e Lālazār, the Shah's pleasure garden, at a distance of a few city blocks (Afšār, pp. 230-31; E'temād-al-Salṭana, 1877-80, III, pp. 238, 255; Kormuji, p. 236; *Waqā'e-e ettefāqiya*, no. 375, p. 1). On Sunday, 10 Ramadan 1274/24 April 1858, Nāṣer-al-Din Shah was invited to operate the line connecting the Golestān Palace with Bāḡ-e Lālazār for himself. Amazed at the speed and accuracy with which messages were exchanged, the Shah praised the participants of the project and ordered the line to be made permanent—an order which was carried out by Kržiž (E'temād-al-Salṭana, 1877-80, II, p. 219). These first steps in telegraphic experiment attracted enough interest from the Shah to lead to a gradual expansion of telegraphic lines in Persia.

During April and May 1859, about twenty miles of wire were laid down between Tehran and Karaj (Doria to Stanley, 6 June 1859). Since Solṭāniya, near Zanjān, was the royal summer residence and one of the Shah's favorite sites, he ordered it to be connected to the Tehran-Karaj line (E'temād-al-Salṭana, 1877-80, II, p. 235; Idem, 1889, p. 93; Mostowfi, I, p. 86). E'tezād-al-Salṭana was entrusted with the general supervision of this project, and 'Aliqoli Khan Mokḡber-al-Dowla was appointed director of operations in charge of the superintendents and contractors (Afšār, p. 232; E'temād-al-Salṭana, 1877-80, II, pp. 239, 248; Idem, 1943, III, pp., 1812, 1822, 1833). The actual supervision of the technical side was entrusted to Focchetti, a Neapolitan who taught physics, chemistry, and pharmacology at Dār al-Fonun. After the latter received the required quantity of cable from Astrakhan, he was able to complete the 180 miles of line by the middle of 1859 (E'temād-al-Salṭana, 1877-80, II, p. 241; Doria to Stanley, 6 June 1859).

After the completion of the Tehran-Solṭāniya line, the Shah left Tehran for Solṭāniya, where he arrived on 2 Du'l-Ḥejja 1275/3 July 1859. For the first time, the news of the Shah's arrival was telegraphed to Šemirān, north of Tehran. Nāṣer-al-Din Shah was delighted by the outcome; he bestowed presents and money on E'tezād-al-Salṭana, appointed him Minister of Sciences, and made Mokḡber-al-Dowla the First Officer of Telegraphs acting under E'tezād-al-Salṭana's command (Afšār, p. 232; E'temād-al-Salṭana, 1877-80, II, p. 248; Idem, 1943, III, pp. 1822, 1833). Out of 4,500 *tomāns* (approximately 2,045 British Pounds), which were allocated for this project, some 2,000 were spent on



training (Mokber-al-Saltana, p. 62).

William Doria, the British Chargé d’Affaires in Tehran, criticized this initial small telegraphic network in Persia. He thought that it was expensive, did not have any public benefit, and was created only for the amusement of the Shah. He believed that only the extension of the line to Tabriz “could be of any real service.” Doria also criticized the technical side of the constructed lines, considering the wires used to be too thin “to endure the exposure to climate for anything like a reasonable time” and believing that it would “fall to decay” like “everything in the East” (Doria to Stanley, 6 June 1859).

Whether he originally planned it himself, or was moved to do so as the result of Doria’s criticism, the Shah ordered E’tēzād-al-Saltana to extend the Tehran-Soltāniya line to Tabriz (E’tēmād-al-Saltana, 1877-80, II, p. 272). The extension started from Tabriz in the middle of 1860 and reached Soltāniya via Miāna by 11 Moḥarram 1277/30 July 1860. The first message on this line was sent from Zanjān to Tabriz, announcing the divorce of a royal couple (E’tēmād-al-Saltana, 1877-80, II, p. 272; Idem, 1943, III, p. 1812; Kormuji, p. 236; Mokber-al-Saltana, pp. 62-63).

The line repaid its outlay within the first year of operation. Because it had been carelessly constructed, service was frequently interrupted (Abbott, p. 279), but Focchetti, who supervised its construction, believed that the Persians could themselves maintain it and construct new lines in the future (Gobineau to Thouvenel, 20 February 1862, in Gobineau, 1959, pt. 2, p. 170).

The telegraphic connection with Tabriz provided the central government in Tehran with the means to have, for the first time in Persian history, speedy communications with the periphery. Indeed, after its completion, the Shah would visit the Tehran telegraph office daily, passing “a couple of hours in questioning the Tabreez authorities on various subjects” (Alison to Russell, 26 January 1861).

After the completion of all the telegraph lines within Tehran and between it and Tabriz, other telegraph lines were gradually constructed throughout Persia, with the ‘quantum leap’ in telegraphic expansion starting with the construction and operation of the Indo-European telegraph line completed in 1865. It passed through the heart of Persia and connected major and lesser places in Persia not only with each other, but with many other countries as well.



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(Soli Shahvar)

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