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TWENTIETH- CENTURY IRAN

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Introduction

by Sir Denis Wright, GCMG

The remarkable changes and developments that have occurred in Iran since the present Shah proclaimed the first Six Points of his reform programme in January 1963 need to be studied not only against the background of the innovations introduced by his father, Riza Shah Pahlavi, but also against the chaotic conditions which preceded the *coup d'état* of 21 February 1921. This dramatic episode marked the beginning of the end of the old Persia of the Qajar Shahs, though it was not until April 1926 that Riza Khan crowned himself Shahanshah, King of Kings, in the Gulestan Palace and thus founded a new dynasty in his country's long and chequered history.

If the Qajars had failed it was partly because during their reigns Iran lay isolated from the outside world by reason of geography and poor communications. Intermittent and limited contact with the West meant that there was little urge to abandon age-old Islamic ways in favour of the new ideas and inventions which had transformed the nations of Western Europe and placed power in their hands. None of the Qajar Shahs possessed the imagination or drive of a Peter the Great. Besides, the Qajars suffered from Anglo-Russian rivalry which tended to stifle any ideas which Iranian visionaries or European entrepreneurs might have for the economic development of Iran. There would have been railways in Iran long before 1927 but for this rivalry.

When Riza Khan seized power in 1921 he was determined to free his country from foreign tutelage. He also aimed to establish a strong central government backed by a national army and launch Iran on an industrial path. By the time of his abdication and exile at the end of 1941 he had largely succeeded in achieving his first two objectives but had only taken a few halting steps on the road towards industrialization. The Anglo-Russian occupation of Iran during the Second World War, subsequent Russian intrigues in Azarbaijan and Kordestan, and the chaotic aftermath of the war caused the most serious difficulties for the immature Iranian economy and confronted a young and inexperienced new Shah with daunting problems. For some years the country seemed to lose direction. Additionally the oil crisis, precipitated by Dr Musaddiq's nationalization of the oil industry, deprived Iran of much-needed oil

Iran was no more one society than it was one economy; like many other traditional societies it was a mosaic of social units. The village, the tribe and the urban quarter or guild provided species of economic association for their members but these groupings were endorsed or intersected by other allegiances. Iran was a country of many languages: Persian (Farsi) was spoken by less than half the population; fifteen per cent spoke Persian dialects so distinct as to be unintelligible to the main group; twenty-five per cent spoke Turkish languages; and the remainder spoke a variety of languages including Kurdish, Arabic and Baluchi. Nor, despite a common misapprehension, was Iran religiously united. It is true that the great majority of Iranians belonged to the so-called Twelver Shiite branch of Islam, although there were substantial numbers of Sunnis as well as some non-Muslims (Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and Babis). But Twelver Shiism is of its nature peculiarly prone to factionalism for the ultimate source of authority, the Imam, is held to be in seclusion—the Hidden Imam—and there is no agreement on who should supply his place. In the course of the eighteenth century most Twelver Shiites came to accept the guidance offered by the consensus of opinion among the *mujtahids*, the most eminent Shiite theologians of Iraq and Iran. Nevertheless there was still ample room for argument about which opinions should be given most weight in establishing the consensus and many hostile factions were formed such as the Usulis, the Akhbaris, the Shaykhis and the Muta-sharis.² In addition the various Sufi orders, notably the Nimatullahi order, provided important foci of loyalties.³ Thus economic, linguistic, religious and other associations (such as the numerous, popular wrestling clubs, *zurkhanehs*) formed the bases of the social life of Iranians and it was through such associations (and above all through his own family) that the Iranian sought both entertainment and all those services which are now provided by the state: education, law and security against the consequences of sickness and old age. In the nature of things such associations could not bear extensive burdens; insecurity was endemic and less than one in twenty Iranians could read or write.

The Iranian political system was characterized by that dominant trait of traditional societies—minimal government. Iranian governments were not expected to do more than to provide the conditions in which Muslims could live as good Muslims. All those economic and social functions which are discharged by modern governments were left to non-governmental agencies; only in the nineteenth century were such basic functions as defence and the conduct of foreign affairs assumed by the central government and then only imperfectly; in earlier periods they were confused with border problems and left to the appropriate provincial governors. Two simple tests may serve to illustrate the weakness of Iranian govern-

ment. First, modern governments appropriate as national revenue between twenty-five and fifty per cent of national income; in 1900 the Iranian government took only two per cent. Second, the ultimate guarantee of state authority is its army; the Iranian army was almost a music-hall joke and the only effective force at the disposal of government in 1900 was the Persian Cossack Brigade, a force of 1500 men which had been founded in 1879 and which employed Russian officers and NCOs. In such a situation the Iranian government could not coerce but was obliged to bargain with its subjects and its own local governors. The Iranian political system was no more than a giant bazaar. But by 1900 the bargaining system was beginning to break down.

In 1900 Iran was ruled by the Qajar dynasty which had seized power at the end of the eighteenth century. It is fashionable to dismiss the later Qajar rulers as essentially frivolous, absorbed in the enjoyment of the present pleasures of this world and in the contemplation of the prospective pleasures of the next. This view is unjust. It is true that the Qajars adhered to the ancient but currently unfashionable view that kings should enjoy kingship but they did possess other merits in the eyes of their subjects: they were pious; they strove to preserve some sort of order in Iran; and they resisted pressure from Russia and Britain. They also made intermittent efforts at reform—to strengthen their army and administration, to collect more taxes and to stimulate economic development—although with no great conviction; and these would-be reforms were greeted without enthusiasm by other groups within the Iranian political establishment to whom they appeared as curtailments of their own privileges.

The Iranian political establishment included three groups. First were those whose influence derived from their position in the governmental system: the Qajars, their numerous progeny and the bureaucrats reared in that long tradition of Persian administration and embodying more than any other group something which was peculiarly Persian. Second were those who commanded a religious following: the ulema. Third were those whose power derived from their local influence as great landlords or tribal chiefs. The categories overlapped: ulema and local notables sought government jobs; Qajars and bureaucrats sought local influence; and all coveted landed wealth. But all these men possessed wealth, patronage or position which could command followers and thereby influence the political system. The successful working of that system depended on some collaboration between them and it was the increasing want of such collaboration which imperilled the system at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴

Two factors menaced the ancient political consensus. The first was the influence of the West. This influence manifested itself directly through the

political and economic pressures applied differently by Britain and Russia and indirectly through the striking example of the success of European economic, social and political ideas and techniques. Iranians were led to try to exploit the new economic opportunities and to agitate for changes in Iranian institutions in order to bring them closer to those of the successful world of Europe. The second factor was the effort of the Qajar state to tilt the traditional balance of political influence in the favour of the state itself. Even at the beginning of the nineteenth century it seemed apparent to many Iranians that the traditional institutions would not protect Iran against the pressure of Europe, particularly the advance of Russia from the north. Iran required a new, European-style, disciplined army both to unite Iran and to preserve it from attacks from outside. Such armies cost money however and Qajar resources were pitifully small: virtually all the land tax that was not misappropriated was spent in the provinces and the central government was obliged to rely upon customs duties, the sale of concessions and whatever it could extract from its own officers as the price of their appointment to or continuance in office. The state needed to obtain more wealth either by appropriating a greater share of existing wealth through increased taxation, or by stimulating economic activity and hoping that its own revenue would rise in proportion, or by borrowing. In practice the Qajars had little success with any of these. Partly this lack of success was due to foreign pressure: Russia opposed concessions which would benefit Britons and Britain opposed concessions which would benefit Russians. Partly it was due to the inadequacies of the Qajars themselves and their willingness to throw over reforming ministers and their policies when the going became rough. Partly it was due to internal opposition to change, especially on the part of the ulema who regarded innovations as un-Islamic as well as being a threat to their own interests and who commonly secured the support of court factions. Fierce clashes took place within the Iranian political élite such as those which occurred over the mighty economic concession given to Baron Julius Reuter in 1872 and over the monopoly on tobacco given to a British company in 1890. In both cases the Qajar ruler, Nasir al-Din Shah (1848-96) was forced to give way.⁵

Nasir al-Din Shah was assassinated in 1896 by a follower of the Persian Pan-Islamic propagandist, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and was succeeded by his son Muzaffar al-Din Shah (1896-1907) in whose reign the conflict within the Iranian political system came to a head. Muzaffar, a weak, gentle man, who was known in Paris as 'mauvaise affaire de Din', was devoted to religion and cats but ignorant of government and diplomacy. He sought a foreign loan and after long negotiations with Britain had failed to produce a satisfactory result, found Russia more willing to

oblige him.⁶ 'The real friend', commented the British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, sadly, 'is the friend from whom one can borrow.'⁷ In January 1900 Iran borrowed £2.4 million at five per cent, although discounts reduced the sum to c.£2 million and increased the true interest rate to nearly six per cent. Three-quarters of the loan went to pay off old debts and the remainder was spent on pensions for Qajar supporters and on an expensive European tour by the Shah.⁸ In April 1902 Iran came back for another £1 million loan from Russia although skilful Iranian diplomacy frustrated Russia's attempt to attach a condition that would have given Russia the right to construct a pipe line to bring Baku oil to the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless Iran did concede to Russia a veto on railway construction in Iran as a condition of the loans. Before the end of 1902 the new loan was exhausted, helped by another visit by the Shah to Europe, and in April 1903 it was Britain's turn to aid the Iranian government to the tune of £200,000, guaranteed, like the Russian loans, on certain revenues.

The money raised by foreign loans had been frittered away. Admittedly it was not much. By comparison with that of Egypt and the Ottoman Empire, or judged in relation to the wealth of Iran, the Iranian debt was trifling; it was significant only in relation to the government's minuscule revenues. But what had been borrowed had been wasted. The only department of government which had been reformed was the customs administration which, as the only major source of central government revenue, was of particular importance to the state, the more so as future receipts were mortgaged to pay for the loans. The customs had been put in the care of Belgian experts, led by Joseph Naus, who sought to make the collections more efficient and to increase their yield by raising duties from the standard five per cent to which Iran had been held by treaty since 1828. In 1903 new customs agreements permitted an increase in tariffs although British Indian merchants complained that imports from India were unfairly penalized and joined their criticisms to the vociferous complaints of Iranian merchants. But the unpopular Belgians persisted in their efforts to improve revenue yields and extended their reform proposals to the general finances of the Iranian government, thereby menacing the interests of all those groups, notably the ulema, who evaded payment of revenue due on their lands.

Hostility to the foreign loans, to the concessions, to the customs reforms, to the extravagances of the court and to such un-Islamic practices as wine drinking manifested itself ever more strongly in Iran and frequently vented itself in attacks on non-Muslim minorities, especially the Babis, who could not claim foreign protection. Popular manifestations also took the form of bread riots, not infrequently caused by speculators

an agreement was reached with the Iranian government, ratified in October 1954, on the then generally established 50:50 profit sharing basis. Iranian oil again took its place in world markets.

Domestically, two immediate measures seemed to point to a serious interest in economic and social reform. First, the Seven Year plan was revived and Abdul Hasan Ebtehaj appointed as director.⁴⁶ If the principles of the plan could be put into action it meant that some Iranians believed, as expressed by E. A. Bayne in a university lecture, that man can change his environment. Second, the Shah resumed the sale to the peasants of lands inherited from his father which he had begun in 1951 but which had been suspended by Musaddiq.

On another level, too, a new era began. The Shah determined to rule as well as reign with a thoroughly restructured national army as his base. In the course of rooting out pockets of opposition to the régime, the scale of Tudeh infiltration was discovered. Over 500 members had penetrated the army officer corps. It was alleged that this network had planned a coup by which Musaddiq would have been succeeded by Riza Radmanesh, a long time promoter of the revolutionary cause in Iran. Riza Shah had imprisoned him for communism in 1938.

These revelations and the continued uncertain political atmosphere made any predictions about Iran's future hazardous. In 1955 a member of the Fidayan-i Islam shot at Prime Minister Ala.⁴⁷ His assailant and other members of the Fidayan-i Islam were executed in January, 1956 along with Razmara's assassin. Throughout 1955 and 1956 sentences of death or imprisonment were passed on numerous army officers and others with opposition views—Tudeh or religious. The anti-Bahai riots in May, 1955 gave a good indication of the power still exerted by the mullas. In spite of all this, there were many signs which pointed, certainly from 1956, to the Shah's taking a firmer grip on the conduct of affairs, foreign and domestic.

In foreign policy Iran seemed unreservedly pro-Western. But in the 1950s some evidence suggests vacillation on the part of the Shah. It would take nearly ten years to transform him into the more confident ruler he became. In 1955 the Baghdad Pact (CENTO after 1959) offered the security of formal association with the West. Despite strong Turkish pressure, the Shah hesitated, not because of lack of attraction on his part to the Pact but because of high level ministerial opposition, the lack of popular support in Iran, and the refusal of the British and American governments to give the guarantees he sought. Still, in February, 1959, Iran joined.

The terrible lessons of the Iraqi revolution of 1958 profoundly affected Iran. The fear of increased and hostile Egyptian influence there and the continued Russian propaganda, combined with other factors, caused the



Tehran, c. 1895. (By courtesy of BP Archives)

Khorramshar (formerly Muhammarah) in the early 1920s. (By courtesy of BP Archives)



heavily as in Mehriz and Shahrabak (near Yazd) where the farmer supplying oxen, labour, seed, manure, and storage might still only keep half to two-thirds of the harvest, and in the Bafq area only a third.⁶⁷ With and reform, the *boneh* system fell apart: it required the *abyar-kadkhoda-arbab* (work team leader, village headman, landowner) authority structure. In the Veramin villages attempts to reconstitute it on a voluntary basis have failed. In the villages of Yazd, however, which have long been owned by small holders, shares in a common irrigation system together with endogamous marriage patterns and late division of inheritance allowed a relatively harmonious quasi-joint land-holding system to emerge. This is clearest among Zoroastrian villages where much land was made *vaqf* (a religious endowment) and supported periodic communal feasts intended to ensure that even the poorest members of the village survived. Similar communal feasts accompanied Muslim village preachments (*rauzeh*).⁶⁸

Whatever has been lost, whatever temporary problems of new experiments, the issue that must worry planners is the decline in productivity in many areas and particularly the \$1,400 billion food import bill last year,⁶⁹ and the related inability of the rural population to provide a sufficiently increasing demand for domestic industrial production.⁷⁰ (See Chapter 6.)

4. Islam, Religion and Civil Society

After the now fading tribal-urban dualism, and the central economic reorganization, perhaps the third issue in Iran's modern nation-building effort is religion. Modernists do themselves a disservice when they make a simple identification of religion with outmoded tradition: the different styles of religious behaviour provide an extremely useful guide to cleavages in the social structure. Not only has Islam become a major idiom of protest against the stresses and disruptions that modernization involves, but religion plays at least four other socially important roles: it is a means of organizing local communities (villages and urban neighbourhoods); it has served in the past as the cultural environment of the intelligentsia and still provides symbols of self-identity as well as symbols for metaphysical contemplation; it has been used by the state to bolster claims to legitimacy. The role of minority religions, of which Iran has a sparkling variety—Armenians, Assyrians, Bahais, Ismailis, Jews, Sunni Muslims, Zoroastrians, and Sufi groups—must be viewed within the context of these four dynamic roles played by the majority Jafari Shiite Islam.

a. Religion and the Legitimacy of the State

Most Iranians are Jafari or Twelver Shiites because in 1501 Shah Ismail

Safavi made that form of Islam the state religion as a tool of national integration and anti-Ottoman mobilization. Previously the four Sunni schools, the several Shiite sects and the various popular Sufi movements competed for followers and achieved dominance in localized areas rather than nationally.⁷¹ Claiming religious as well as political leadership, the Safavids endowed shrines and madressehs and used ulema in official positions to promote a standardized state religion.⁷² There were, however, many ulema who were not integrated into the state, Iran remaining in this and other respects less centralized than its Ottoman rival; and a strong tradition was maintained by the ulema of independence and claim to moral supremacy over worldly politicians and the ulema in the latter's pay. After the Safavids, Nadir Shah (1736–47) attempted to play down Shiism,⁷³ but it had become too well established, and the Qajars (1785–1906), as outlined by Hamid Algar, were forced to appeal to Shiism and the ulema in their attempts to rebuild the state. In the nineteenth century the ulema became spokesmen against the concessions being given the Russians and English. The fact that the latter preferred to work through their coreligionists or nationals made charges of colonialism in terms of attacks on Islam credible, and worked to set off a number of riots against these minorities.⁷⁴ The most traumatic of the 'attacks on Islam' was the rapid growth of the Babi—later Bahai—movement, which tried to combine modernization with fundamentalist assumptions about prophecy, divine guidance and redemption; charged with heresy, apostasy (a capital crime), and treason (colonialist agents), blood flowed as late as 1956, and still today even relatively well-educated middle class Muslims will launch into a string of obscenities and curses against Bahais at the slightest excuse.

The position of the ulema as defenders of the Persian Islamic identity was solidified by the various battles of the nineteenth century, their participation in the Constitutional Movement to remove a monarchy which had bonded Iran financially to foreigners, and their continued fight afterwards against imperialism and the introduction of a secular society. Part of the legacy of their success remains in the provisions of the Iranian Constitution that five *mujtaheds* may veto legislation conflicting with the *sharia*; that freedom of the press and education be limited where it conflicts with Shiism; that King, judges and cabinet ministers be restricted to those of the Jafari Shiite faith; and that only four religions be granted legal recognition (Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism; but not the largest minority: Bahaism).

De facto freedom of religion is guaranteed today by strict enforcement of the civil order by the police and gendarmerie. The Shah and the bureaucracy are committed to a separation of religion from politics and relegation of the former to the private sphere. Riza Shah not only system-