



# LUND UNIVERSITY

## The Formative Years of Anglo-Iranian Relations (1907-1953): Colonial Scramble for Iran and Its Political Legacy

Behravesh, Maysam

*Published in:*  
Digest of Middle East Studies

*DOI:*  
[10.1111/j.1949-3606.2012.00157.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1949-3606.2012.00157.x)

2012

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Behravesh, M. (2012). The Formative Years of Anglo-Iranian Relations (1907-1953): Colonial Scramble for Iran and Its Political Legacy. *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 21(2), 386-400. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1949-3606.2012.00157.x>

*Total number of authors:*  
1

### General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:  
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00



# *The Formative Years of Anglo-Iranian Relations (1907–1953): Colonial Scramble for Iran and Its Political Legacy*

*Maysam Behravesht*  
*Lund University*  
*Lund, Sweden*

## Abstract

As the title largely illustrates, this study seeks to investigate, from a diplomatic-history and geostrategic perspective, the key developments in Anglo-Iranian relations during what may best be dubbed their “formative years,” ranging from 1907 to 1953. Having thus provided a glimpse into pre-twentieth-century Persian–British relations, it moves to analyze the division of Persia into two spheres of influence between Great Britain and Tsarist Russia in 1907, the Anglo-Iranian agreement of 1919, the English control of Iranian oil during the first half of the twentieth century and the nationalist struggle against it, and finally the 1953 coup d’état orchestrated by the United Kingdom and the United States against the democratic government of Mohammad Mosaddeq, which managed to topple him and bring Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi to power. While the article focuses mainly on the complex history of Anglo-Iranian relationship, it strives to shed light on the implications of such a history for future bilateral relations, its impact on the contemporary Iranian perception of the British, and finally the cultural-political legacy it has left behind in Iran. The study follows a chronological order and draws on a range of English and Persian sources in trying to fulfill its task.

When on November 29, 2011, a crowd of Iranian protesters stormed the British embassy and residential compound in Tehran, tore up the Union flag, and damaged London-owned property, there came many enunciations from within Iran’s political establishment that the action, although politically incorrect and diplomatically unconventional, served Britain right. It “was a symbol of the atmosphere [prevailing] in the public opinion of Iranian nation,” said Ali Larijani, the Speaker of Islamic Consultative Assembly (*Majlis*), following the takeover (Radio Farda, 2011). Although this was largely a misleading exaggeration of the facts on the ground pronounced mostly for domestic consumption, one could hardly dismiss it as entirely false propaganda. While the attack was widely perceived as a premeditated action sponsored by the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) leadership, and more accurately, as part of a struggle for a greater share of power between dominant conservative factions in the Islamic Republic, it also reflected some powerful sentiments of



Anglophobia still running deep in parts of the Iranian society, and more so in the securitized mentalities of those in power.

The embassy seizure and the earlier parliamentary decision to downgrade the bilateral ties marked the third time political relations between the IRI and Great Britain experienced a systematic rupture since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The first fissure had occurred in 1980, when Britain under the then Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher closed its embassy in Tehran following a number of unsavory incidents, including the American hostage crisis of November 1979 in Tehran and the Iranian embassy siege of April to May, 1980, in London. Along parallel lines, the second diplomatic cleft came after the late Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a religious decree (*fatwa*) in February 1989 against Salman Rushdie—a British author born to a Muslim family in India—for the authorship of *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a novel that was construed by many Islamic authorities, not least Iranian revolutionary leaders, as a grave affront to the holy *Qur'an*, Prophet Mohammad, and Islam on the whole, hence blasphemous and deserving capital punishment.<sup>1</sup>

Significantly, perhaps Iran's post-revolutionary relations with no nation in the world have been so complex and tumultuous as those with Britain; this is also the case with its popular and elite perception of the British. While political considerations of the day at each juncture, conflicting interests, and ideological differences have all influenced the development of bilateral ties, the *history* of engagement and interaction, represented quintessentially by Iranians' collective memory of their victimization at foreign, not least British, hands, has played an undeniable role in plaguing the relationship, particularly at the governmental level. Given this, it might be compelling to argue that the first half of the twentieth century constitutes the most seminal and decisive part of such a history, due primarily to a number of epoch-making episodes characterizing it. Exploring these developments from a diplomatic-history and geostrategic perspective and in the light of their perceptual/subjective implications for future Anglo-Iranian ties is the principal task this article seeks to carry out.

### A Glimpse of Pre-Twentieth-Century Anglo-Iranian Relations

Diplomatic contacts between Persia and Britain can be traced back to as early as the late thirteenth century when Edward I of England (1272–1307) dispatched Geoffrey de Langley, an English knight and envoy, to the Mongol court in Tabriz to enter into alliance with Ilkhanid rulers reigning over Persia at the time (Clawson & Rubin, 2005; Phillips, 1998). The relations between the two empires, however, started mostly in the form of informal trade and military cooperation against the Ottomans in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but could be expected to take on a unique political flavor after a while as the critical geostrategic position of Persia in the Near East constituted a useful bridge to the British Empire and its trading arm in the region and beyond, the British East India Company (Yapp, 1980).



Later on during the era of high British colonialism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Persia and its expansive territory came to be seen by Britain as a largely reliable buffer and barrier against French and Russian colonial invasions of India. Protection of British interests in the Indian Subcontinent at this time appears to have been a key and constant consideration in the Kingdom's alliances with or against Iran (Pelletiere, 1992; Sadoughi, 2005). To this end, at one time, it strengthened its ties with France against the ambitious expansionism of Russian monarchy, and then, it found itself in alliance with Tsarist Russia to contain the colonial moves of Napoleonic France, with all of this affecting, in one way or another, the Persian interests and territorial integrity.

In 1813, in the wake of Russia's war with Iran and the French assault on Russia as part of the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), Britain halted its support for Persian rulers, and Sir Gore Ouseley, the then British envoy in Iran, helped to conclude the Treaty of Gulistan (1813) and make peace between Iran and Russia—whereby the former lost large swathes of Caucasian territory to the latter—to better secure British interests in the Near East and Europe (Hairi, 1993). In 1825–1826, however, when disputes over the territorial provisions of this treaty between Persia and Russia ran high and the latter refused to withdraw from occupied Iranian lands, the British preferred to keep clear and declined to mediate, leaving an enfeebled Iran alone in a conflict with a militarily superior Russia, which culminated in another substantial territorial concession on the part of Tehran under the Treaty of Turkmanchai in 1828. Iran was on the way to turn into a rather convenient political instrument of considerable weight in the dynamics of colonial rivalry between Great Britain and Russia. In the words of Saikal (1991), “while Russia regarded Iran as vital to its security and as a gateway to the wealth of India, Britain found it increasingly important to the defence of its colonial interests” (p. 427).

### **Iran's Division into Spheres of Influence in 1907**

Gradually, as Russia expanded its territory in Central Asia and strived to access the sea routes and warm waters of the Persian Gulf, the British government perceived it as the most formidable potential adversary in the East, a factor that played a key role in shaping its interventionist policies toward Persia (Marlowe, 1962). Thus, from the mid-nineteenth century, the British scramble for economic concessions in Iran was practically brought into force and increasingly gathered momentum until a century afterwards. It should be noted here that at an age of fierce rivalry between the well-established European powers, such a struggle was to some extent expected, and one may not blame the British semi-colonial intervention in Iran solely on their *purported historicized* greed and opportunism as many Iranians, grass roots and elite alike, tend to do. The colonial *zeitgeist* required that countries either be powerful themselves or find themselves subject to the whims and wishes of the powerful. This was certainly not a one-sided process. There is no escape from the stark fact that



Iran's *Qajar* rulers at the time, and the way they ruled the country, contributed a good deal to its economic and geostrategic victimization.

In 1872, Naser al-Din Shah of Iran granted Baron Paul Julius von Reuter, a German-born British subject, a monopoly over exploiting the country's mineral resources, constructing railways and collecting its customs revenue. The move was so unusual in terms of its scope that Lord Curzon, the then British Foreign Secretary, famously described the "Reuter Concession" as "the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that has probably ever been dreamt of, much less accomplished, in history" (Curzon, 1966, p. 480; also cited in Coughlin, 2009). Following this were the offer by the Shah of a 50-year-long concession over the production and trade of Iranian tobacco to the British citizen Major G. Talbot in 1890, and an epoch-making concession to another British citizen, William Knox D'Arcy, in 1901 to exclusively explore and exploit oil in Iran's vast territory, except in the northern provinces that were viewed as Russia's domain of political and economic maneuver.

Notably, after a long period of heated British–Russian rivalry over Persia in the context of the "Great Game" and following the nationalist Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906, which both perceived as a threat to their interests in the country, the Anglo-Russian Treaty was signed in 1907. The agreement laid new ground for cooperation between the two imperial powers by allying them against an emerging Germany—which posed a daunting potential challenge to British interests in the Persian Gulf and Russian interests in Europe—and dividing Iran into two northern and southern spheres of influence as well as a central "neutral zone" (Marcel & Mitchell, 2006, p. 16). The new policy of rapprochement between Britain and Russia cost the Iranian government all its remaining independence in foreign policymaking and a great deal of its authority over domestic affairs (Greaves, 1991; Saikal, 1980). For all its disregard for Iranian sovereignty, the deal could serve the monarchy well by joining forces to undermine the emergent constitutionalist movement inside the country and thus was perhaps interpreted as a blessing in disguise by Mohammad Ali Shah and his political circle. These years constituted a critical moment in the development of deep-rooted sentiments of distrust and antipathy toward the British among the Iranian public and elites, who saw their failure in taming internal despotism and initiating political reforms a direct consequence, *inter alia*, of foreign, especially British and Russian, interference.

### The 1919 Anglo-Iranian Agreement

With the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 between central and entente powers, Britain faced new challenges concerning its foreign alliances, homeland security, and wide interests overseas. Some of the British leaders had made it clear in a letter to Herbert Henry Asquith, the British Prime Minister (1908–1916), that "any hesitation in now supporting France and Russia would be fatal to the honour and to the



future security of the United Kingdom” (Powell, 2004, p. 59). The discovery of oil in the early 1900s and the ensuing establishment of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1909 added to the strategic significance of Iran in the eye of Britain. The British strategy in the Near East was, to a great extent, influenced by its sustained effort to prevent any adversarial penetration into the Persian Gulf, first to defend the vital communication routes and supply channels between Britain and British India, and then to protect the newly discovered Persian oil, which was used to power the Royal Navy and further its war campaign, from falling into alien hands (Fain, 2008; Johnson, 2003; Mohammadi, 1998).

Lord Curzon’s admonishing assertion about the issue is enough to demonstrate the geopolitical import of the region for London at the time: “I should regard the concession of a port upon the Persian Gulf to Russia, by any power, as a deliberate insult to Great Britain and as a wanton rupture of the status quo, and as an international provocation to war” (cited in Engdahl, 2004, p. 20). By that time, Britain had lost all its popularity with the Iranian public opinion as well as any status of decency in some key decision-making circles and corridors of power in Tehran. “Some of the emergent Iranian policy makers,” argues Ramazani, “were so intense in their hatred of Great Britain and Russia that they could only adopt a policy of neutrality as a façade behind which flirtation and even secret agreement with Germany might take place” (Ramazani, 1966, p. 137).

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which had drawn Russia’s attention to the turmoil within its borders, coupled with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1920s, presented Britain with an unprecedented opportunity to project maximum power in the region without having to worry about rival reactions and to assume full control over Iran and its precious oil fields. Along this line, it concluded the Anglo-Persian agreement with the pro-British government of Hassan Vosouq al-Dawleh in 1919. From the British standpoint, another chief purpose of the treaty was to enhance Iran’s security and defense capabilities and to empower it into a more reliable buffer state between India and European powers (Daniel, 2001). The Iranian government, which had long become dependent upon the financial and political assistance of the British, viewed the agreement as a convenient means that could help it crush widespread dissent and restore the lost status-quo order at home. Hailed as a “diplomatic masterpiece and a great triumph” by Lord Curzon, the arrangement required Britain to supervise Iranian military, administration, and economy by providing the government with military advisers and administrative experts and by renovating its economic infrastructure. The sole formidable obstacle in the path of the treaty implementation was the constitutional requirement for its approval by the National Assembly, which finally rejected it on nationalist grounds—a measure that saved the country from turning into “a virtual British protectorate” (Saikal, 1991, p. 428).

In fact, there are differing views of the Vosouq government’s close relationship with Britain and its embrace of British engagement in Iran’s domestic politics.





Gheissari and Nasr (2006), for example, argue, in contrast to the majority of Iranian observers who consider Vosouq as a British puppet, that he “was not a mouthpiece for British interests” and entertained a certain sense of nationalism whereby national interests would be secured by lying better in line with foreign, in this case British, interests, a conception that encouraged him to hope that the Anglo-Iranian Agreement of 1919 “would lead to large-scale British infrastructure and economic interests in Iran” (p. 35). According to these authors, this was also a type of nationalist reasoning that decades later underpinned Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi’s pro-Western policies. It should be finally added that the agreement was opposed by other foreign powers, particularly France and the United States, as they saw it a near monopoly that could deprive them of any share of the new-found oil wealth in the country.

### Iranian Oil at British Hands

Since the discovery of oil in Iran by D’Arcy’s oil exploration company in 1908, and especially after the end of World War I in 1918, until the start of the Mosaddeq premiership in 1951, the bulk of British imperial struggle in the country was driven by “oil politics”—a concerted effort to secure as large a share of the petroleum output as possible through a vast range of conciliatory and coercive mechanisms from extracting concessions and deploying military forces to mounting coups and helping to install puppet/proxy governments (Sadoughi, 2005). The first in a series of attempts by the British government to officially, however secretly, monopolize the exploitation and production of Iranian oil in the south was the establishment in 1909 of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company.<sup>2</sup> As the Iranian government at the time lacked the necessary expertise, capital, and facilities to tap oil fields within the Iranian territory, the concession appeared to some extent natural. However, in later stages, it generated the outrage of Iranian oil nationalists who considered the terms under which the company operated to be at Iran’s substantial economic and political disadvantage.

The foundation of Pahlavi’s reign in Iran in 1925 constituted, in spite of what some Iranian conspiracy theorists have dubbed as the period of “unrivalled English dominance” (Mohammadi, 1998, p. 22), the initiation of a critical and difficult era for the British oil enterprises in the country. The bloodless coup of 1921 that toppled the last Qajar ruler Ahmad Shah and finally put the first Pahlavi monarch Reza Khan on the throne of Iran was orchestrated, among others, by Seyyed Zia al-Din Tabatabai, a pro-British journalist, and encouraged by General Ironside, the commander of British military forces in Iran at the time. Differing accounts of the degree of British involvement in the February 1921 coup that effectively brought Qajar rule to an end have been presented by historians. Sabahi (1990) maintains that H. Norman, the then British Minister in Iran, “and the Legation, as well as the Foreign Office and the War Office were completely in the dark about the planned



coup” (p. 123). Others such as Ghani (1998) and Cronin (1997) have observed that the British served as an encouraging or inspiring force behind the coup. Majd (2001), however, argues, apparently on the basis of relevant historical letters and reports provided by American diplomats, that “[a]t least from the middle of 1920, the British had made preparations for the coup,” and that “it was a completely British undertaking” (p. 61). He cites a dispatch from John Lawrence Caldwell, the then-American Minister in Tehran, on February 26, 1921, that directly ascribes the coup to the British:

It is perfectly apparent that the whole movement is of British origin and support, in furtherance of the scheme of forceful control of the country, its people and resources, and is looked upon with horror and deep indignation by the better class of Persians, who see in it but another and perhaps final attempt to compel them by coercion and corruption to accept a policy of undesired advisers operating through native tools. (cited in Majd, 2001, p. 63)

Britain was the first government that recognized Reza Khan as the head of the new Iranian state. Although assuming absolute power with the assistance of the British government, Reza Shah, galvanized by paternalist-nationalist sentiments<sup>3</sup> and determined to implement his modernization plans, strived to lessen foreign interference in Iran’s legal, political, and economic sectors. As a consequence and in the wake of heated political negotiations and controversies, all existing British capitulations were declared null and void in 1928, the D’Arcy concession of 1901 was cancelled in 1932 by the Shah himself, and thus preparations were made for the conclusion of an oil agreement in 1933, economically more in favor of Iran (Marcel & Mitchell, 2006).

Abdul-Reza H. Mahdavi (1995), a historian of Iranian foreign policy, contends, however, that the main rationale behind British acquiescence to the Shah’s demands was their assurance that a powerful anti-Communist government in Iran could better safeguard their geostrategic interests in the long term and that a conciliatory behavior might help bolster their reputation with the emergent intellectual elite and discontented public opinion. The 1933 oil agreement between Reza Shah and the British government was in fact an extension, however modified, of the D’Arcy concession for another 60 years; that is, until 1993. Mahdavi (1995) suggests three hypotheses why the Shah made such a compromise: (1) the British intimidation of Reza Shah that they could depose him as they had brought him to power; (2) threatening to separate the southern province of Khuzestan from Iran and to take it under their own control directly or by proxy; and (3) bribing the Shah into satisfying their demands and agreeing to the deal. All bilateral concurrence notwithstanding, the oil dispute as well as Reza Shah’s “third power policy”—which aimed first and foremost to counterbalance growing British and Soviet influence in the country—served to sour Iranian-British relations under him with the consequent strained atmosphere continuing until the end of his reign in 1941, when Iran was forcefully occupied by Britain and Russia in the thick of World War II.





## Oil Politics and Coup d'état against Mosaddeq

Upon his succession to the throne of Iran in September 1941, Mohammad Reza Shah found himself under enormous foreign, not least British and American, control that inclined him to design Iran's foreign and domestic policies in accordance with the Western interests. The first sign of the Shah's pro-Western policy was his open support for the involvement of American political advisors and companies in Iranian politics and economy, which was encouraged and approved by the British government, as Sir Reader Bullard, the then British ambassador to Tehran, reveals in a private letter to his wife.<sup>4</sup> The turbulent political ambience of the country generated by growing popular discontent with Mohammad Reza's misguided policies, along with his Westernization plans, led to the election in April 1951 of Mohammad Mosaddeq as Prime Minister, a prominent member of the nationalist Iranian organization, National Front. An ardent advocate of an independent Iran, he set out from his early days in power to pave the way for the nationalization of the petroleum industry in the country. By then, calls for nationalizing oil or at least altering the terms of oil concessions were being clearly heard from Venezuela and Saudi Arabia, which sought a 50/50 share in the total oil revenues.<sup>5</sup>

The 50/50 compromises took effect and succeeded in restoring a considerable degree of calm in most of the Middle East oil-producing countries. This was not, however, the case in Iran, at least not until Mosaddeq was heading the government and pushing firmly for the full nationalization of oil production and exploration. His disagreement with foreign control of Iran's oil industry effectively started years earlier in 1943 when Iran was under Allied occupation and major oil companies—American “Standard Vacuum” and “Sinclair” as well as British-Dutch “Royal Dutch Shell”—were approaching the Iranian government for oil concessions in the South East provinces, mostly due to the Shah's endearing policies toward the American and British governments. A year later, having become aware of the rival negotiations over new concessions, the Soviets put forward similar demands to carry out exploitation in the Northern provinces. Mosaddeq, then a lawmaker elected from Tehran, passed a bill through the parliament, banning all government negotiations with any foreign persons or entities, official or non-official, as well as related agreements unless they were ratified by people's representatives in the *Majlis*.

Around the same time, Great Britain, which was precipitously losing its grip on the empire in the wake of Indian independence in 1947, was building up its efforts to maintain its far more lucrative oil empire with U.S. help (Engdahl, 2004; Mahdavi, 1995). Its conviction in the face of mounting pressure from Iranian nationalists in the *Majlis* for reducing foreign monopoly over oil was that employing a soft approach and thus appeasing Iranians via giving more concessions would only embolden them in their struggle for independence while demonstrating single-minded determination and fiercely resisting their demands would ultimately compel them to submit (Azimi, 1988). In fact, the British discounted the sweeping wave of



political protest over their control of Iranian oil possessions and furthermore were, as Ansari (2007) argues, “contemptuous of Iranian nationalism” in spite of a sacred aura that had come to surround the struggle and to intensify the religious-nationalist sentiments about it as a result of the involvement of Iran’s *ulema*, not least Ayatollah Kashani, in it (p. 29). Notably, he cites a Western historian as noting that, “Mosaddeq . . . was regularly described by the British Ambassador of the time in his dispatches to London as a ‘lunatic’ and characterized as being ‘cunning and slippery,’ with ‘short and bandy legs’ and ‘a slight reek of opium’” (cited in Ansari, 2007, pp. 29–30). Mosaddeq’s preoccupation with the nationalization of Iran’s oil sector, however, derived arguably from his belief that such a venture, once realized, could bring economic prosperity, national autonomy, and political sovereignty for the country in its wake.

The die was cast: The Supplemental Agreement of 1949—according to which oil payments to the Iranian treasury were to be raised—to appease the nationalists was rejected by the parliament. It also refused to ratify a 50/50 profit-sharing agreement in 1951 when, by virtue of Mosaddeq’s resolute endeavors and in the absence of Razmara, the pro-British prime minister who was assassinated by an Islamist group in March 1951, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) nationalization bill was overwhelmingly passed by the *Majlis* into law. Ayatollah Kashani, then an influential Iranian cleric, even went so far as to suggest marking “a day of hatred against the British Government” as a national holiday (Yergin, 1991, p. 463; also cited in Farber, 2005, p. 53).

The loss of the Abadan Oil Refinery dealt Britain’s imperial prestige a stinging blow at a time when it was struggling to adapt itself to the disintegration of the Empire, and come to terms with the unpalatable ascendance of the United States in its stead in the Middle East and Persian Gulf. Another concern of the British government over the Iranian oil nationalization was its potential domino effect spreading throughout the region, which could encourage other oil-producing countries to follow suit. However, the Americans who favored tackling the rapid spread of communism over throwing their weight behind the British interests in Iran initially showed sympathy to the liberal nationalist government of Mosaddeq.<sup>6</sup> The divergence of British and American policies toward the Iranian government had worried London. Anthony Eden, then British Foreign Secretary, raised the point in August 1952 that “Mr. Acheson [the U.S. Secretary of State] and the State Department, in their anxiety to ward off communism in Persia, have long desired to assist Mussadiq [sic] at the expense of the rights and interests of the AIOC and Her Majesty’s Government” (cited in Fain, 2008, p. 39).

Yet the British were hatching a third scheme that was believed to serve the strategic interests of both sides better. Eden (1960) notes in his memoirs that:

I did not accept the argument that the only alternative to Mussadiq [sic] was communist rule. I thought that if Mussadiq [sic] fell, his place might well be taken



by a more reasonable Government with which it should be possible to conclude a satisfactory agreement. I knew that the country was possessed of an elasticity and resilience which appearances did not suggest. Iranians have always been good at coming again. (p. 201; also cited in Saidabadi, 1998, p. 47)

Britain, however, was careful not to antagonize the United States as far as Iran was concerned, which could enable it to retain its influence in Washington. Early 1953 witnessed the gradual convergence of American and British policies in Iran. As Fain (2008) argues, U.S. politicians had gained the erroneous impression that Mosaddeq was gradually inclining toward Soviet Russia by broadening his political base through affiliations with the communist Soviet-oriented *Tudeh* party.<sup>7</sup> The election of Dwight D. Eisenhower as the U.S. president, who held forthright views against communism, also contributed to the adoption of “less conciliatory and more confrontational” (Fain, 2008, p. 39) policies toward Iranian nationalists. A third reason for the convergence was the Anglo-American conclusion that a pro-Western government in Iran was indispensable to the development of a “northern tier” defense establishment in the region comprised of Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey (Fain, 2008, p. 39; Freedman, 2008).

A more cogent and compelling explanation for the consensual foreign opposition to the Mosaddeq administration appears to have been his maverick foreign policy of “negative equilibrium”—categorized within what Adibzadeh (2008) rather aptly calls the “strategy of two-faceted confrontation” as the emergent discourse of the time (p. 146)<sup>8</sup>—that had its roots in his aspiration to cut foreign hands off Iran’s national wealth and bring independence, freedom, and democracy to it. According to Mosaddeq:

Our nation aspires to political equilibrium, namely, an equilibrium that is to the benefit of this country, and that is negative equilibrium . . . . The Iranian nation will never agree to positive equilibrium. . . . The nation knows that through this policy, it will not take long to lose all it has. . . . The Iranian nation views the governments that betrayed the country negatively. . . . In my opinion, negative equilibrium is achieved when elections are held freely . . . and whenever political balance is established; then concerns about not only one country but all surrounding states will be eliminated. If only the surrounding states . . . would treat us justly. (cited in Mahdavi, 1995, p. 162)

In another speech denouncing oil concession to the Soviets, he opposed the political equilibrium this could bring, stating significantly that:

[G]ranting [this] concession is as if a person whose one hand has been mutilated consents for the sake of maintaining equilibrium to have his other hand cut off too, whereas such a handicapped person should seek an artificial hand at least to keep up appearances, and any handicapped person who wants to lose his other hand too, had better rid himself of life’s burden and commit suicide before his second hand is cut off. (cited in Mahdavi, 1995, p. 163)



With this in Mosaddeq's mind, there was allowed little room, if any, for any foreign power to play a leading role in the country's domestic affairs or steer its economic policies in its own strategic interests. The argument may safely account for why Mosaddeq has been hailed as the pioneer of "non-alignment policy" in the third world (Mahdavi, 1995, p. 165).

The Operation Ajax/Boot against his government, orchestrated by the U.K. and U.S. intelligence services on August 19, 1953, made it clear for many Iranian intellectuals that their historical victimization did not have solely internal origins as was primarily the case with Iran under the *Qajar* rule. It was not simply due to the political incompetence or imprudence of its rulers or the moral volatility of its masses, but that foreigners did have a central part in causing it, either by deception or by coercion. However, it should be admitted, as Gheissari and Nasr (2006) point out, that the Iranian public perception of national interests as increasingly diverging from that of Mosaddeq, most Iranians' mounting concerns about his hard-headed rejectionism as well as their sympathies for the monarchy contributed to his fall, "though popular perceptions in later years would deny this" (p. 54). In any case, Mosaddeq struggled to remove from Iran's political and economic theatre the very forces who removed him, by putting his faith in the national independence movement of Iranians that had started decades earlier with the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. During his trial after the coup, he avowed that, "[a]s Prime Minister, I relied upon the movement the nation of Iran had set up and the sentiments it expressed, and overcame the English government everywhere. I dismissed England from Iran" (cited in Bozorgmehr, 1983, p. 28; also in Mahdavi, 1995, p. 159).

### Conclusion

Either one acknowledges the socio-historical fickleness and inconsistency of the Iranian populace—what Eden seems to euphemistically call "elasticity"—as a sociological catalyst for the overthrow of Mosaddeq or not, the British-sponsored coup d'état against him was indeed the coup de grâce to its identity-image in Iran; a coup that served to revive the declining monarchical autocracy and to demoralize the emergent force for democracy in the country; a coup without which, as Azimi (2008) pithily puts it, "Iran might well have escaped the cataclysmic later revolution [of 1979]" (p. 13). Indeed, it helped reinforce those deep-rooted feelings of Anglophobia in the Iranian collective psyche that had developed since the *Qajar* era.

Even before the 1979 revolution, pro-Western Mohammad Reza Shah also suspected the British (and others) for various reasons that often went beyond his own unique and characteristic blend of paranoia. Much like his father, he had been restored to power by a coup d'état and, as his father was forced to abdicate the throne by foreign powers, he saw his position susceptible to a similar fate. Such a deep suspicion appears to have been fueled, more specifically, by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio's Persian-language service that extensively covered



revolutionary discontent in Iran along with Ayatollah Khomeini's statements from France where he lived in exile at the time. This continued to take place in spite of the British government's formal support for his regime—which it saw as a strategic ally in the Middle East and a defensive shield against the spread of Communism—as well as Tehran's "endless" objections to the Foreign Office, then run by Lord Owen, through Iranian Ambassador to the UK Parviz Radji, only to be met by the assertion that BBC is "independent" and "we [do] not control their policy" (Radji, interviewed in Cloke & Cameron, 2009).

Thanks in part to the complicated history of Anglo-Iranian relations, there has been developed a moribund political culture of suspicion in Iran marked by the abundance of conspiracy theories and threat perceptions about foreigners in general and the British in particular (Behraves, 2011). While a great majority of the IRI officials view the United Kingdom and its policies, however favorable or friendly they might turn out at times, from a threat-based perspective, there are a good number of Iranians among the general public who believe that even the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was primarily masterminded by Britain and America. Others take a further cynical stride and, in spite of the strained relations and almost constant tension between the Islamic Republic and Great Britain since, maintain that the ayatollahs themselves are originally a British product, and that bilateral cooperation on how best to take advantage of Iran's national wealth goes on behind the scenes.

With this in mind, drawing a crude comparison between the Iranian and Indian experiences of British presence in the respective countries might enable one to set out two primary reasons for the profusion of conspiracy theories among the Iranian public. First, in contrast to the United Kingdom's evident and apparent colonization of the Indian Subcontinent and its colonialist practices there—which lasted for over two centuries—the British presence in Iran primarily took the form of hidden intervention and surreptitious exercise of influence—a practice that can work to raise unresolved questions in the public opinion and is more likely to leave a lasting imprint upon the collective memory of a nation than obvious control would be. Second, whereas India is an established parliamentary democracy, where power is exerted through transparent democratic mechanisms and processes, the Iranian system of governance is too complex and personalized at the highest levels of national decision making to deliver such a transparency, which in turn gives rise to speculation as to who really orders the things and pulls the strings, predisposing the public to jump to the most oversimplified and at-hand conclusions on the basis of their historical memory and life experience.<sup>9</sup>

All told, Iranian–British relations, as they stand currently, are arguably a victim, *inter alia*, of their history. Given Iran's post-revolutionary politics, however, what matters more now—over three decades after the 1979 Revolution—is that the conspiracy-minded and thus demonization-prone<sup>10</sup> political culture such a history has helped produce in Iran lends itself most conveniently to abuse and instrumentalization by its leaders for political gains. How Iranians should free their relations with the Western world from the discontents of its history, and more significantly,



how they should emancipate themselves from the ill and insidious politico-cultural legacy it has bequeathed are fundamental questions the progressive political scientist and historian of contemporary politics should endeavor to answer.

### Notes

1. For greater details on all three cases, particularly a close analysis of the November 2011 crisis, its causes as well as geopolitical implications for both Iran and Britain, see Behravesht (2012).
2. For further details on the role played by Sidney Reilly, a member of the British spy agency, and the Scottish businessman Lord Strathcona, in securing “Britain’s major petroleum source” in the Middle East, see Engdahl (2004, pp. 20–22).
3. For a succinct explanation of Reza Khan’s nationalist authoritarianism, see Gheissari (1998, pp. 46–47).
4. For excerpts from and further details on the letter, see Saidabadi (1998, p. 38) and Mahdavi (1995, p. 88).
5. For a concise account of how the 50/50 agreements were reached between companies and home and host governments, see Parra (2004, pp. 14–21).
6. For details on the Harry Truman administration’s position and Averell Harriman’s mission to Iran to negotiate with Mosaddeq, see Farber (2005, p. 53).
7. To get a good grasp of Mosaddeq’s relationship with the *Tudeh* party, see Behrooz (2000, pp. 3–16).
8. According to Adibzadeh, this strategy consisted of two tactics, with the first being opposition to the (dominant) *status-quo* power—its internal or domestic facet—and the second opposition to foreigners—its external or foreign-policy facet. For further details, see Adibzadeh (2008, ch. 6, p. 146).
9. I should acknowledge the intellectual contribution of Dr. Zhand Shakibi, Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), to this argument during a personal conversation.
10. For a rigorous examination of the politics of demonization in Iran, see IRANalyst (2010).

### References

- Adibzadeh, M. (1387/2008). *Zaban, gofteman va siyosat-e khareji: Dialectic-e baznemayi az Gharb dar jaban-e nemadin-e Irani* [Language, discourse and foreign policy: The dialectic of the representation of the West in the Iranian symbolic world]. Tehran: Akhtaran Publishing.
- Ansari, A. M. (2007). *Confronting Iran: The failure of American foreign policy and the next great crisis in the Middle East*. New York: Basic Books.
- Azimi, F. (1988). The reconciliation of politics and ethics, nationalism and democracy: An overview of the political career of Dr Muhammad Musaddiq. In J. A. Bill & W. M. Roger Louis (Eds.), *Musaddiq: Iranian nationalism and oil* (pp. 49–68). London & New York: I. B. Tauris.
- Azimi, F. (2008). *The quest for democracy in Iran: A century of struggle against authoritarian rule*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Behravesht, M. (2011). A crisis of confidence revisited: Iran-West tensions and mutual demonization. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 3(3), 327–347.





- Behraves, M. (2012, January 23). Downgrading Iranian-British relations: The anatomy of a folly. *e-International Relations*. Retrieved from <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/01/23/downgrading-iranian-british-relations-the-anatomy-of-a-folly/>
- Behrooz, M. (2000). *Rebels with a cause: The failure of the Left in Iran*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Bozorgmehr, J. (1362/1983). *Mosaddeq dar mahkame-ye nezami [Mosaddeq in the military court]* (Vol. 1). Tehran: Iranian History Publishing.
- Clawson, P., & Rubin, M. (2005). *Eternal Iran: Continuity and chaos*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave.
- Cloke, E. (Producer), & Cameron, N. (Director). (2009). *Iran and Britain* [Television documentary]. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.
- Coughlin, C. (2009, January 29). Why Iran hates Britain so much. *The Daily Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/concoughlin/5689752/Why-Iran-hates-Britain-so-much.html>
- Cronin, S. (1997). *The army and the creation of the Pahlavi state in Iran, 1910–1926*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Curzon, G. N. (1966). *Persia and the Persian question* (Vol. 1). London: Frank Cass.
- Daniel, E. L. (2001). *The history of Iran*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Eden, A. (1960). *The memoirs of Sir Anthony Eden: Full circle*. London: Cassell.
- Engdahl, W. (2004). *A century of war: Anglo-American oil politics and the new world order*. London: Pluto Press.
- Fain, W. T. (2008). *American ascendance and British retreat in the Persian Gulf region*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave.
- Farber, D. (2005). *Taken hostage: The Iran hostage crisis and America's first encounter with radical Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Freedman, L. (2008). *A choice of enemies: America confronts the Middle East*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Ghani, C. (1998). *Iran and the rise of Reza Shah: From Qajar collapse to Pahlavi power*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Gheissari, A. (1998). *Iranian intellectuals in the 20th century*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Gheissari, A., & Nasr, V. (2006). *Democracy in Iran: History and the quest for liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Greaves, R. (1991). Iranian relations with Great Britain and British India, 1798–1921. In A. Peter, G. R. G. Hambly, & C. Melville (Eds.), *The Cambridge history of Iran: From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic* (Vol. 7, pp. 374–425). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hairi, A. (1372/1993). *Nokhostin rouyarouyiba-ye andishegaran-e Iran ba do rouye-ye tamaddon-e bourjouvazi-ye Gharb [The early encounters of Iranian thinkers with the two sides of the Western bourgeoisie civilization]*. Tehran: Amirkabir Publications.
- IRANalyst. (2010, October 19). The power politics of demonization in Iran: The “necessitated” enemy and its functions. *e-International Relations*. Retrieved from <http://www.e-ir.info/2010/10/19/the-power-politics-of-demonization-in-iran-the-necessitated-%E2%80%98-enemy%E2%80%99-and-its-functions/>



- Johnson, R. (2003). *British imperialism*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave.
- Mahdavi, A. H. (1374/1995). *Siasat-e khareji-e Iran dar doran-e Pahlavi [Iranian foreign policy in the Pahlavi period]* (2nd ed.). Tehran: Alborz Publishing.
- Majd, M. G. (2001). *Great Britain and Reza Shah: The plunder of Iran, 1921–1941*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Marcel, V., & Mitchell, J. V. (contributor). (2006). *Oil titans: National oil companies in the Middle East*. London and Washington, DC: Chatham House and Brookings Institution Press.
- Marlowe, J. (1962). *The Persian Gulf in the twentieth century*. London: The Cresset Press.
- Mohammadi, M. (1377/1998). *Morouri bar siyasat-e khareji-ye Iran-e doran-e Pahlavi [A review of Iran foreign policy during Pahlavi reign (sic)]*. Tehran: Dadgostar Publishing.
- Parra, F. (2004). *Oil politics: A modern history of petroleum*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Pelletiere, S. (1992). *The Iran–Iraq war: Chaos in a vacuum*. New York: Praeger.
- Phillips, J. R. S. (1998). *The medieval expansion of Europe* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Powell, D. (2004). *British politics 1910–35: The crisis of the party system*. London: Routledge.
- Radio Farda. (1390, Azar 9/2011, November 30). *Hemayat-e Ali Larijani az hamleh be sefarat-e Britania dar Tebran [Ali Larijani supports attack on British embassy in Tebran]*. Retrieved from [http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f4\\_larijani\\_support\\_attack\\_britain\\_embassy/24407011.html](http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f4_larijani_support_attack_britain_embassy/24407011.html)
- Ramazani, R. K. (1966). *The foreign policy of Iran: A developing nation in world affairs, 1500–1941*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia.
- Sabahi, H. (1990). *British policy in Persia, 1918–1925*. London: Frank Cass.
- Sadoughi, M. A. (1384/2005). *Raveshshenasi-e fa'aliyat-e siyasi-ye Englis dar Iran [The methodology of England's political activity in Iran]*. In Tehran International Studies and Research Institute, *Ravabet-e Iran va Engelestan [I. R. Iran–UK Relations]* (Vol. 1, pp. 168–184). Tehran: Tehran International Studies & Research Institute.
- Saidabadi, M. R. (1998). *Iranian–British relations since 1979. Unpublished doctoral dissertation*. Canberra: Australian National University.
- Saikal, A. (1980). *The rise and fall of the Shah, 1941–1979*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Saikal, A. (1991). Iranian foreign policy, 1921–1979. In A. Peter, G. R. G. Hambly, & C. Melville (Eds.), *The Cambridge history of Iran: From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic* (Vol. 7, pp. 426–454). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yapp, M. E. (1980). *Strategies of British India: Britain, Iran and Afghanistan 1798–1850*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Yergin, D. (1991). *The prize: The epic quest for oil, money, and power*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

