
Letter to the Editor

Beware of British Historical Minefields

Dean Andromidas's article, "When Americans Fought for Iran's Sovereignty," EIR, Aug. 21, provoked this response from Iranian historian Pirouz Mojtahed-zahed. We publish it in full (subheads have been added), in the interest of broad discussion of the important events that were the subject of Andromidas's piece. Additional contributions are welcome.

To the Editor:

Having read Dean Andromidas's article on the historical background to the role of British Imperialism in the embryonic stages of emergence of U.S.-Iranian relations, I thought this letter might be of some use to your readers in better understanding that history.

My first comment after reading the article has to be confirmation of the fact that it is a very well written and useful assessment of the role Morgan Shuster played in Iran's recent political history, and the author has indeed succeeded in highlighting the way agents of the British Empire of India worked to sabotage U.S.-Iranian relations in late 19th and early 20th centuries. Indeed, he has diligently portrayed Morgan Shuster's story as an excellent example of this.

I also conclude that the good intentions by both the Iranian and American sides, to start their relationship in the second half of the 19th Century, need to be further explored, and that if they had not been sabotaged by the British, how differently Iran would have fared, through its constitutional movements towards a real democracy. This, as an alternative foreign policy, could have helped Iranians to overcome some aspects of the harm they were subjected to by the Anglo-Russian Great Game of colonization of Greater Iran (which included all of Central Asia, the Caucasus, Greater Khorasan, and Baluchistan, at the time, which was known as the Persian Empire, or what was left of it).

Unfortunately such studies are not welcome in Iran today, not only because of the way the British influenced a perversion in the Iranian way of reading and



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Prof. Pirouz Mojtahed-zahed addresses a conference of the Schiller Institute in Kiedrich, Germany, in 2007.

writing about political history of the past two centuries, but also because of the emergence and evolution of America's somewhat negative approach to Iranian politics since the 1970s, as a result of allowing itself to be influenced by a combination of Iran's leftist elements, who wished for a socialist regime for their country, and Zionist misgivings about the role of

the Shah in the Middle East after he declared peace in 1975 with Saddam Hussein, who was considered by Israel as its enemy No. 1 at the time.

Let us not lose sight of the fact that after the Algiers Accord of 1975, the Shah improved relations with the Arabs to an unprecedented extent, supporting President Anwar Sadat of Egypt to regain the Sinai Desert from Israel, giving \$300 million of financial aid to President Hafez Assad of Syria, and even \$100 million to Yasser Arafat of Palestine, to the dismay of the Israelis. This combination worked more effectively after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the sharp elevation of Iran's anti-Zionist stance, which was coupled with hatred for America's unconditional support for Israel's excessive behavior towards Muslims, which, in turn, helped foster the demonization of the U.S.A. in Iranian political culture.

Having said that, I have come across the following points in the article which I think need to be further explored.

1. The Falsification of History

I have to warn readers of Iran's political history of the recent two centuries, to be mindful of the many pitfalls and minefields that have been created by special foreign or domestic political interests. On so many points in this history, falsifications have taken place, to justify the unjustifiable foreign interference in Iran's domestic affairs in that period.

One example is the role the British played in the Court of **Naser ad-Din Shah** [1831-96], in favor of **Amir Kabir** and against **Mirza Agha Khan Nouri**, and at the same time encouraging the falsification of the same episode to introduce Amir Kabir as the hero and Nouri as the villain, simply because the latter seriously

Greater Iran in the 19th Century



challenged the British colonial strategy of de-Iranization of the Persian Gulf, and defeated British agents in Herat and Bandar Abbas.

Then there was the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran during World War II, forcing Iran's head of state, **Reza Shah Pahlavi**, into exile, on the incredible accusation that he sided with Nazi Germany, whereas, in fact, Reza Shah's government had declared impartiality in the war, which provoked the Allied occupation of Iran for the purpose of using the country as a supply route to Russia during that war.

In my vast research into British and Iranian documents hitherto unknown, I have discovered that the British, throughout the 20th Century, kept secret the fact that they were well aware that Reza Shah's admiration for Nazi Germany belonged to the pre-war economic and industrial progress of that country, and his impression of a German geopolitical challenge to the menus of British colonialism—an admiration which was shared by many throughout the world. Nazi Germany became known as an evil force after the start of the Holocaust. In contrast to Reza Shah's declaration of impartiality in the war, the British took great pride in Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's ability to strike a deal with Hitler, whereby he "brought peace to his country." More recently, it was discovered that Britain's King Edward VIII was actually spying for the Nazis before he was forced to abdicate.

Also, the British would not reveal the fact that they hated Reza Shah¹ for having given all his economic concessions for the reconstruction of Iran to the Germans, because of their superior technology, and ignored the British even when they decided to establish university and other modern education in the country, by sending Iranian students to France for training, and hiring French experts to teach Iranians in their own university. The British went as far as to falsify that part of Iranian history, by spreading rumors that they had installed Reza Shah on the Iranian throne, and enticed Iranian historians like Mahmood Mahmood, whose sympathy for Britain's anti-Pahlavi policies is very well known,

to play down the significance of the fact that they had actually, by the 1919 treaty with Iran, officially undertaken to keep the Qajar dynasty on the Iranian throne, and could not have betrayed the Qajars and their 1919 treaty by replacing the Qajar King with Reza Shah.

In the same way, they encouraged Iranians through their friendly Iranian historians to overlook the fact that their opposition to Pahlavi rule in Iran continued, as they officially declared support for the toppled **Ahmad Shah Qajar** in exile, and brought Prince **Hamid Reza Qajar** to Tehran in 1940, and installed him officially in their Embassy compound, as Iran's new monarch.

2. Ottoman Propaganda

The Ottoman and Pan-Turkic suggestion—that the British, patronized by the Venetian Empire in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, magically influenced political affairs in Asia long before their own emergence as a power, with aspirations beyond their European confines—is as incredible as other political paranoia that Ottoman leaders and historians have argued eternally, first, to justify their own atrocities, especially in Europe, and second, to shift the blame to everybody

1. Reza Shah (1878-1944) was forced to abdicate in 1941 by Britain and the Soviet Union, and was eventually replaced by his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The latter ruled until the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and died in exile in 1980—ed.

else for their downfall, which resulted from their own political shortcomings.

This incredible scenario can only be the result of total ignorance of the facts: that **Shah Ismail** [1487-1524] came from many generations of Sufis who believed in the formation of a Shi'ite State in Iran, on the basis of the political patterns the Sassanids had evolved in the pre-Islamic period. Thus, when capturing Tabriz in 1501, the 16-year-old crown prince declared himself the embodiment of everything that symbolized being Iranian: e.g., of Afreidun, the founder of the most ancient Iran; Cyrus, the creator of the first state in Iran; Khosro, the just king of the Sassanids; Rostam, the legendary defender of good against evil, according to Mithraism, etc. In short, Ismail had learned about what it was to be Iranian, and how he could re-create Iran after nine centuries of Islamic rule under the Arab Caliphate. This certainly did not occur because the British, who first visited Iran 100 years after Shah Ismail lived, encouraged him to re-create Iran. The Ottomans' scenario emerged only when Iran was perceived as a menace to Ottoman rule over Muslim lands.

3. Amir Kabir vs. Sadr Azam Nouri

Although you suggested that Mirza Taghi Khan Amir Kabir was the first to initiate relations with America [in 1856], you did not mention that his initiative was not seriously pursued, because of his close cooperation with the British at the time. The British were deeply involved in their task of de-Iranization of the Persian Gulf, turning Iran's Arab/Persian tribal dependencies into Arab Emirates, dependent on the British Empire of India, a process that had started with the peace treaty of 1820, which initiated the creation of the Trucial States of the lower Persian Gulf.

Haji Mirza Aghasi, Prime Minister before Amir Kabir, was the first Iranian politician to challenge this colonial strategy, by declaring in 1840, that all ports



Iranian Historical Photographs Gallery

Persian Prime Minister Mirza Taghi Khan Amir Kabir enjoyed British support and friendship.

and islands in the Persian Gulf were Iranian territories. This proclamation indeed slowed down the strategy of de-Iranization of the Persian Gulf, until the British, in 1851, obtained permission from Amir Kabir, Haji Mirza Aghasi's successor, to investigate Iranian vessels in the Persian Gulf, in an effort to combat slavery and piracy—which was their excuse for de-Iranization of the Gulf, by colonizing the entire region. Since Iran was the only actual State in the Persian Gulf at the time, it was important for the British to have some kind of official treaty permission from the Iranian government to justify their activities, in the wake of Haji Mirza Aghasi's official declaration of 1840.

It is of utmost importance to note that, in spite of what the British have put out as the history of their relations with Iran, and what Iranians inspired by the British way of writing history have disseminated, Amir Kabir not only never challenged British colonization of Iran in the Persian Gulf, but enjoyed British support and friendship, probably because he thought that if he were to challenge the Anglo-Russian interference in the affairs of his country, his reform programs would be stopped. The British went as far as granting him political asylum, to stop his execution by Naser ad-Din Shah, but, by the time asylum was granted, the victim had already been executed.

By contrast, we see in the historical documents, that those who really challenged British colonialism were those whom the British claimed, in their political intrigues with Iranians, to be Amir Kabir's enemies and traitors to Iran: namely, Haji Mirza Aghasi and Mirza Agha Khan Sadr Azam Nouri, who succeeded Amir Kabir as Prime Minister, and staged two wars against British colonial strategy in and around Iran.

In my recent book in Persian (2008) about Sadr Azam Nouri, I introduced a large number of hitherto undiscovered British and Iranian documents, showing how effective was his campaign against the British, especially in his war against British agents in Bandar



British influence in the Court of Naser ad-Din Shah (shown) favored Amir Kabir at the expense of Sadr Azam Nouri—but the latter subsequently waged two wars against British strategic interests.

Abbas (1855) and Herat (1857)—Herat remained loyal to Iran even after the signing of the Paris peace treaty of 1857, until the British helped their stooge **Dust Mohammad Khan** of Kabul to capture it in 1862, which resulted in the re-creation of Afghanistan.

It was in the heat of Mirza Agha Khan Sadr Azam Nouri's campaign against British colonialism that he signed a treaty with the United States, in December 1856, in the hope of bringing a better balance to Iran's foreign relations, just as he signed other treaties in 1857 with Austria, Poland, Sweden, etc., for the same purpose, and went so far as asking the French to establish their specially mandated consulate at Bushehr to rival the British Political Residence there, which was in charge of implementation of all British strategies in the Persian Gulf.

4. Not a 'Buffer State'

The assertion that, like Afghanistan, Iran was seen (by the British) as a buffer state, does not make historical sense, because Afghanistan was part of Iran in the 18th and most of 19th centuries.

In the wake of Nader Shah's assassination in 1747, four of his loyal generals attempted to revitalise his empire, but all that happened was that they divided his empire into four political quarters, each calling his quarter "Iran." One of those generals was **Ahmad Khan (Ahmad Shah) Dorani**, who created what was named, by the British, Afghanistan, in the second half of the 18th Century. There is no evidence that Ahmad Shah wanted to invent Afghanistan, as in all his documents that have come down to us, there is talk of Iran's reunification. It was after the capture of Herat in 1862 by **Dust Mohammad Khan** of Kabul, with the help of the British, that the British gradually fashioned the term Afghanistan, and began to use that territory as their buffer state, in the face of what they claimed to be a Russo-Iranian conspiracy to penetrate India. Thus Iran could not have been seen by the British at that time as a buffer state, like Afghanistan. I have studied these issues and presented full, documented details in my book *Small Players of the Great Game* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

5. Efforts Toward Modern Government

In the 19th Century, did the British convince the Shahs of Persia to finance a royal lifestyle? Well, I think this is entirely the case, but that it is overshadowed by the fact that the House of Qajar came to be influenced by the ideas of modernity, as from the time of **Fath-Ali Shah** [1772/3-1834], who gave latitude to the creation of a somewhat modern form of government in Iran, in which a prime minister aided by secretaries would preside over the affairs of the State. It was from then, that Iran's famous Qajari Prime Ministers (Kalantar-e Shirazi, Qaem Maqam Farahani, Haji Mirza Aghasi, Mirza Taghi Khan Amir Kabir, and Mirza Agha Khan Sadr Azam Nouri) appeared on the scene. Though Naser ad-Din Shah executed his prime ministers and got rid of "modern government," politicians of the court (unofficial ministers), influenced by the ideas of European modernity, are said to have encouraged him and his son to visit Europe, in order to learn about the European way of life.

Sincerely yours,

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