In the aftermath of the First World War, Britain was juggling a series of complex and weighty problems over the territory of the Middle East, the resolution of which would be fateful for the future in several different contexts. The size and shape of postwar Turkey had to be resolved, as well as the nature and borders of the post-Ottoman states in Palestine, Syria, and Iraq. The British were concerned also to contain, or if possible overturn, the new communist regime in Russia. All of this came at a time of greatly reduced financial means, as a result of the crippling debt incurred during the war, and with the United States under Woodrow Wilson preaching a new philosophy of international relations—essentially a democratic principle of self-determination—that appeared to undermine the very foundation of British imperialism. Iranian nationalists welcomed Wilson's principles, and again were encouraged to think of the United States as Iran's great hope among the great powers. But like other Middle Eastern states, notably Egypt, representatives of the Iranian government were refused access to the peace negotiations at Versailles.

Anglo-Persian Non-Agreement and Reza Khan

So Britain, having won the war and having achieved supremacy in Persia, was overstretched—too many calls on too scarce means, and with important distractions elsewhere. The British foreign secretary at the time, Lord Curzon, knew Persia well and had written a thoughtful, magisterial book, *Persia and the Persian Question*, on the basis of his travels in 1889–1890. But although that book was sympathetic to the people of Iran in many respects, Curzon seems to have overlooked some of its guiding principles, and to have failed to absorb the significance of the constitutionalist period.[29] In 1919 he proposed—or, rather, he attempted to force through—an Anglo-Persian Agreement that would have reduced Persia to the status of a protectorate (parallel with the mandate arrangements being set up at the same time for Iraq and Palestine), with the military and fiscal responsibilities of government given over to the British. The agreement was rather like earlier

concession agreements writ large: security guarantees, promises of infrastructure development for the Persians, and a dollop of cash (a loan of two million pounds sterling—much of which would have been absorbed by the salaries of various British officers, officials, and advisers).

The government of the young Ahmad Shah obligingly accepted the agreement (it was signed in August 1919), but when its details became known it was thoroughly unpopular, over the whole range of opinion from democrats to the ulema. Although the agreement might have yielded some benefits for the development of the country, it was further discredited by the plentiful bribes with which the British were rumored to be smoothing its passage. All sectors of opinion condemned the agreement, from socialists and nationalist former members of the Majles to leading mojtaheds blasting it by telegram from Karbala. A revolt broke out in Azerbaijan, asserting democrat constitutionalist principles and renaming the province Azadistan ("freedom land"); it was not put down until September. The shah's government sent five leading members of the Majles into internal exile, but gradually even the government signatories of the agreement began to recognize the opprobrium heaped on it from all sides, and avoided convening a Majles to ratify it—without which it could not, under the constitution, be legally applied. The British tried to apply the provisions of the agreement willy-nilly, bringing in British officers to command army units, but succeeded only in hastening the collapse of the government and the resignation of the first minister in June 1920.[30]

In London, Lord Curzon still expected to be able to force through the Anglo-Persian Agreement. But local British commanders on the ground thought differently—to them and everyone else in Iran, the agreement looked like a dead duck. The British forces that had been commanded by Dunsterville—forces which had been resisted successfully by the Jangalis and their Bolshevik allies—were commanded from October 1920 by General Ironside. Both men embodied certain Edwardian virtues, and both had literary connections: Dunsterville was the model for Kipling's Stalky, and it has been suggested that Ironside inspired John Buchan's hero Richard Hannay.

The British troops (now based in Qazvin) were unpopular with the Persians and, after their retreat from Gilan, were somewhat discredited—a dangerous combination not calculated to overawe nationalist dislike. Ironside was an intelligent, tough, decisive career soldier and had been given the responsibility of helping reequip the Cossack Brigade, now grown to division strength, which had also recently withdrawn from the Caspian coast to a position near Qazvin. He decided almost as he took up his appointment to exceed his orders. With the reluctant agreement of the shah, he dismissed the remaining Russian officers of the Cossack corps, judging that although the Persian troops were good, sound soldiers, the Russian officers were demoralized, anti-British, and susceptible to Bolshevik infiltration. When Curzon found out, he did not approve, but by then it was too late. Ironside reassured the Persian Cossacks that he had no intention of imposing British officers on them, and Persian officers were appointed. Acting through his second-in-command, Lieutenant Colonel Smyth, Ironside then selected a former sergeant, Reza Khan, as the most effective soldier, and arranged matters so that Reza Khan became the de facto commander. Ironside was worried that, as time went on, the position of the British would deteriorate. The Bolsheviks might move on Tehran, and if that happened, the Persian Cossacks might side with them. He thought that perhaps it would be better to let the Cossacks take over while the British were still in a strong position. The British troops could then make a peaceful withdrawal. Shortly afterward, in January 1921, Ironside wrote in his diary,

> Personally, I am of opinion that we ought to let these people go before I disappear. . . . In fact, a military dictatorship would solve our troubles and let us out of the country without any trouble at all.[31]

The whole question of Britain's role at this point is controversial, but there is no direct evidence of a plot as such. The idea that the world of politics revolves only through the agency of plots and conspiracies is dangerously misleading. Ironside knew what he wanted—he wanted British troops out of Persia (he was personally due to leave in April, but his departure date

was brought forward to February 18)—and he had a lighter touch. All he really had to do was let the Cossacks understand that the British would not intervene if they acted against their government. He felt no pressing need to consult London or the British minister in Tehran. Ironside had an eye for an able soldier; events were to show that he also had a canny political sense, and his choice of Reza Khan showed that, too. Reza Khan also proved to have a sharper political sense than expected, or than ordinary soldiers are usually credited with.

On February 16, 1921, Reza Khan marched twenty-five hundred of his Cossacks from their camp near Qazvin toward Tehran. On February 21, he was able to take them into the capital without opposition, and the shah allowed him to set up a new government headed by a nationalist journalist, Seyyed Zia Tabataba'i—not to be confused with the mojtahed Seyyed Mohammad Tabataba'i, who had died in 1918. Reza Khan became Sardar-e Sepah, commander of the army. A few months later Tabataba'i fell from power, having alienated both the shah, by reducing the court, and Reza Khan, by proposing the appointment of British officers to the army. Reza Khan had managed in the interim to make new friends and broaden his support. Now he enhanced his position and became Minister for War.

Later in the same year Reza Khan moved against the Jangalis in Gilan and quickly overcame them, their Soviet allies having departed under the terms of a new treaty with the Persian government. Their leader, Kuchek Khan, took refuge in the mountains but died in the snow; when his body was found his head was brought to Tehran. After this important early success, Reza Khan's priorities turned to regularizing state revenue, strengthening the armed forces, and enforcing government control over the whole territory of Persia. This last task meant tough action against tribes like the Bakhtiari and the Lors, and later the Shahsevan in Azerbaijan and the Turkmen in the northeast. He also acted against one of the Arab tribes allied with the British in the southwest, and was again successful. These actions were popular with most Persians because the tribes had so often facilitated foreign interventions. Also there was the ancient, uneasy hostility between tribesmen on the one hand, and the peasants and townspeople on the other.

The fourth Majles convened in 1921, and Reza Khan was able to keep them broadly supportive of his reform programs by allying with conservative elements. In 1923 he made himself prime minister, and the shah went on what was to prove an extended holiday in Europe. At the end of the year, a fifth Majles convened, later approving a controversial initiative to introduce conscription, after the ulema had been conciliated with an exemption for religious students. In 1924, Reza Khan (inspired by the example of Atatürk's reforms in Turkey) encouraged a movement to create a republic, and acquired four Rolls-Royce armored cars to help him keep order in Tehran. But he misjudged the mood of the country and had to stage a resignation for a time, abandoning the republican project. In 1925, Reza Khan consolidated his support by visiting Najaf on pilgrimage, temporarily concealing his Westernizing intentions. He also took the name Pahlavi, which resonated with nationalists as the name of the Middle Persian language of pre-Islamic times. The Majles deposed Ahmad Shah and the Qajar dynasty in October, after Ahmad Shah had let it be known that he intended to return to the country. Shortly before the end of the year, a constituent assembly agreed to a changeover from the Qajar to the Pahlavi dynasty, and Reza was crowned shah early in 1926. Ahmad Shah never did return and died in Paris in 1930.

Reza Khan's rise to power was facilitated in 1921 by local British commanders for their own reasons, but it is incorrect to see his success as a success for British foreign policy, or him as a British stooge. On the contrary, Ironside supported an action by Reza Khan precisely because he perceived current British policy to have failed. Reza Khan took advantage of Ironside's willingness to give him his chance, but made no commitment to future pro-British alignment, and there is no indication that Ironside expected or asked for any such guarantees. The coup of 1921 and its aftermath came about as a result of a temporary coincidence of interests.

As for the people of Iran, it is not entirely correct to see Reza Khan's success as the outcome of the desire of the people for a strong man on a white horse to overcome political chaos, after a failed democratic experiment. The period 1921–1926 has been compared with the period of regency leading up to Nader Shah's coronation in 1736, in which he too prepared the way with

military successes; but the comparison, though attractive, is not entirely apposite. The Constitutional Revolution had aimed, among other things, at modernization, centralization, strong government, and an end to foreign meddling in the country. Reza Khan became shah in 1925–1926 with the connivance of the Majles, because they judged he would fulfill those purposes, where earlier attempts by others had failed. He largely justified their confidence in him. But his reforming success was achieved at the expense of liberal, representative government. He was to an extent the nemesis of the Constitutional Revolution, but he was also the child of it.[32]