

## TURBULENT HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES

Mohammad Reza Shah was made Shah of Iran not once, but twice—on both occasions, by foreign powers. He first ascended the Peacock Throne in 1941, following the forced abdication of his father, Reza Shah Pahlavi, in the wake of the joint Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran, which sought to open a direct route for the supply of wartime materiel from the United States to the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Reza Khan founded the Pahlavi dynasty—the briefest in Iranian history—when he assumed power through a coup d'état in 1921 and ascended the Peacock Throne as Reza Shah in 1925. An autocrat and modernizing nationalist, Reza Shah used his acute awareness of Iran's strengths and vulnerabilities to effect, sometimes violently, social and political change that continued through his son's rule. Iran (called Persia in the Western world until 1935) had been the seat of many great empires, both prior to and following its conversion to Islam in the late seventh century. From these empires, Iran inherited a civilizational and cultural richness, a fierce sense of Persian nationalism, and an identity rooted in Shia Islam, to which Iran's Safavid rulers forcefully converted their subjects from the start of the sixteenth century.<sup>10</sup> While these factors smoothed the path for Reza Shah's modernization programs, the country's strategic position on the Persian Gulf and on the Russian border, as well as the discovery of its oil riches, made it increasingly vulnerable to outside interference and serious domestic volatility.

Iran's emergence to a position of global geostrategic importance began in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the country became a centerpiece of Anglo-Russian rivalry. At the time, imperial Britain and Russia were locking horns across Central Asia in the Great Game,<sup>11</sup> which the two empires played against one another for regional domination from Tibet to Istanbul.<sup>12</sup> The rivalry of the two imperialist powers, which continued (albeit in a different form and with less intensity) after tsarist Russia's transformation into Soviet Russia in 1917, had several negative consequences for Iran. Two of these, however, would prove especially decisive for later events.

The first was a formal division of Iran into spheres of influence between the two powers by the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, signed at St. Petersburg. Britain largely dictated the terms, as the tsarist regime had been weakened by military defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 and an abortive revolution in 1905. Under the terms of the agreement, northern Iran was apportioned to Russia and the southeastern Iranian provinces to Britain, with the central strip and southwestern region remaining under the control of the government in Tehran. The whole development voided Iran's sovereignty in practice, seriously undermined the authority of the autocratic Qajar dynasty, and thwarted the Iranians' capacity to build strong domestic structures of enduring stability and security.<sup>13</sup>

The second was the discovery of oil in Iran at the beginning of the twentieth century. A British-born Australian, William D'Arcy, had purchased from the Shah a concession granting him exclusive rights to prospect for oil, gas, and minerals in an area amounting to three-quarters of Iran. The British, eager to secure an independent source of oil (in particular for their modernizing naval fleets) and to acquire prospecting rights on Russia's doorstep, soon purchased D'Arcy's concession. In 1909, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC; renamed the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, or AIOC, in 1935) was established to develop, exploit, and control Iranian oil resources, largely for the benefit of British interests. Apart from adding another bone of contention between Great Britain and Russia, the oil concession set the pattern for a client-patron relationship between the rulers of Iran and world powers. This, as well as the convention, heightened Iranians' distrust of outside powers, a factor that has grown to be an important element of their political culture alongside a traditional sense of fierce independence and national pride.

These internal and external developments drove the coalescence of a nationalist and reformist movement in the first decade of the twentieth century. The movement was spearheaded by an unlikely alliance between members of the intelligentsia, the *bazaaris* (petit bourgeois, composed of mainly small traders and merchants who

traditionally formed the backbone of the Iranian economy), and the Shia clerical establishment. These groups were united in the aim of transforming Iran into a constitutional monarchy and ending the Anglo-Russian rivalry in and over Iran. The movement had some success: a new constitution came into effect in 1906, marking Asia's first constitutional revolution; a parliamentary system was enacted; and the clerical establishment secured a constitutional role in overseeing and approving the passage of all national laws to ensure they stayed on the path of Shia Islam.<sup>14</sup> These successes, however, were rapidly eroded by a dysfunctional parliament, continual interference from Britain and Russia, and the ascent of a new Qajar Shah who reasserted autocratic rule with indispensable support from Russia.<sup>15</sup> In the face of these challenges, the alliance that had formed the Constitutional Movement broke up. Iran faced political fragmentation and economic and social stagnation, with the decaying Qajar monarchy struggling to hold on to power in the face of bankruptcy, a corrupt and inefficient administration, popular unrest, and a weak army.<sup>16</sup> Its deteriorating relationship with the British, who by the late 1910s were extracting far more exorbitant profits from the Iranian oil industry than the Iranians, did not help the situation.

The combination of domestic fragility and vulnerability to external forces opened the way for the commander of the Russian-trained Cossack Brigade, Brigadier General Reza Khan, to march from the north to take power in Tehran in 1921. Four years later, Iran's Majles elected to depose the Qajar dynasty and declared Reza Khan the new Shah. Reza Shah had risen through the military ranks from a very humble background. After losing his father (from the Iranian province of Mazandaran) while still an infant, he was raised by an uncle and his Muslim Georgian mother. His mother's family had migrated to Iran following the Russo-Persian War (1804–13), during which Iran had lost the territory of today's Georgia to Russia. Reza Khan's military training endowed him with not only a regimented attitude but also a single-mindedness about the problems—both internal and external—that had beset his country and the region.

By the time Reza Khan assumed power, the First World War had restructured the regional political landscape. The British and French colonial powers had carved up the Arab Middle East between themselves along the lines of the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, which preempted the defeat and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, along with its two Axis allies, Germany and Austria-Hungary. In 1923, the secular reformist Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had founded the new republic of Turkey. Reza Shah was deeply impressed by Atatürk's modernization program, as was King Amanullah Khan, who had taken the reins of power around the same time in Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> After dissolving parliament, suspending the constitution, banning political activities, and engaging in politics of suppression, the Shah instituted a top-down process of modernization, with emphasis on infrastructure building and the expansion of social services, most importantly in education and health.<sup>18</sup> His crowning achievement was the construction of a railroad that linked Iran from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea.

At this time of relative calm in the Anglo-Russian rivalry, Reza Shah was able to neutralize, with British assistance, Soviet encroachments in northern Iran in the late 1920s, while also managing to prevent British incursions into the territories that were consolidating into the Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup> Doing so, he realized, was essential in order to buffer Iran's own integrity against the Russians and the British. Like several of his predecessors, Reza Shah was keen to forge close ties with the more distant United States, a nascent power with a reputation untarnished by a history of imperialist expansion in the region.<sup>20</sup> However, despite American Christian missionaries visiting Iran in the second half of the nineteenth century, the signing of the US-Iran Treaty of Friendship and Commerce as far back as 1856, and the establishment of political relations between the two sides from 1883, full diplomatic ties at the ambassadorial level between the two states did not materialize until 1944. Up to this point, the US treated Iran largely as part of the British sphere of influence and did not reciprocate Tehran's diplomatic overtures.

To compensate for this, Reza Shah not only entered the defensive regional Saadabad Treaty with Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan

in 1937 but also forged close relations with Nazi Germany at around the same time. In fact, by the turn of the 1940s, Germany had become Iran's largest trading partner, with some six hundred German personnel involved in different fields of activity in Iran, where "German prestige stood high."<sup>21</sup> Under a rising tide of nationalism, he also renegotiated the first oil concession with the British in 1932, which did not increase Iran's control over its oil industry, but gave it a better cut of the profits.

Reza Shah's repressive politics at home and his ties with Nazi Germany set the stage for his undoing. In 1941, he rejected a US-backed Anglo-Soviet request to use Iranian territory for the transfer of wartime supply to the USSR. Although Reza Shah had declared Iran's neutrality in the war, the British and Soviets responded to his refusal by invading and occupying Iran along the lines of their previous spheres of influence to guarantee oil flows to the Allies and war materiel supply routes to the USSR. The occupying powers left Reza Shah little choice; he agreed to abdicate, but in return for the continuation of the Pahlavi dynasty under his oldest son, Crown Prince Mohammad Reza, who became Shah on September 16, 1941. His father sailed out to Johannesburg, South Africa, as a frustrated nationalist and modernizer, only to die in July 1944 in exile. Thirty-eight years later, his son would share his father's fate.

Reza Shah's departure ushered in another turbulent phase in Iran's historical evolution. At the time of his ascent to the throne, Mohammad Reza Shah was young and inexperienced. Aged only twenty-two, he had not expected to be thrust into such a position of responsibility so soon or so suddenly. After completing his primary education in Switzerland, he returned to Iran in 1935, where he graduated from a military school in Tehran three years later. As such, he was largely out of depth in the art of governance and led a largely boisterous life that left him with little understanding of the complexity of Iran's political and social dynamics and their connection with regional and global affairs. In any case, as his father's autocratic structures rapidly loosened, the emergence of a more assertive parliament, combined with interference from the occupying powers, meant that the Shah had little real power.<sup>22</sup>

To maintain his position, Mohammad Reza Shah found himself with no choice but to engage in the politics of compromise and consensus-building between two antagonistic forces. On the one hand, he was confronted with a new wave of nationalism, which sought to achieve what the Constitutional Movement had failed to accomplish. This movement was headed by a veteran reformist politician of noble origin, Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh, who had opposed Reza Shah's accession to the throne on the grounds that it would perpetuate dictatorial rule, and who had subsequently been imprisoned for his political activities in 1939. On the other hand, the new monarch was pressured by the occupying powers to comply with their competing political, strategic, and ideological agendas. The conflicting pressures from the domestic and the international front strongly conditioned the policy behavior of the Shah and his advisors, including even the highly experienced Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Foroughi, and a succession of another ten, short-term prime ministers over the next decade.<sup>23</sup>

Cajoled by the United States, which by now had abandoned its relatively noninterventionist policy in favor of an active involvement in the Middle East, Britain, the USSR, and Iran signed what became known as the Tripartite Treaty of Alliance in January 1942. The treaty acknowledged the presence of foreign troops in Iran, with a firm declaration that the signatories would respect the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Iran and that Allied troops would withdraw from Iran within six months of the termination of the war.<sup>24</sup> However, the treaty commitments did nothing to prevent the occupying powers from being closely watchful of each other's activities in Iran. To prevent this, the Soviets rapidly closed off the five northern provinces of Iran and set up Azeri and Kurdish socialist governments there. Meanwhile, the British sought to do everything possible to strengthen their hold on the oil-rich southern regions of Iran. Both powers forced the Iranian government to expel the Germans and competed against one another for its favor.<sup>25</sup> This competition, in effect, served as a precursor to the strategic rivalry of the Cold War, which would continue to drag Iran into the main fray of regional and global geopolitics.

While the Soviets relied on the Iranian communist party Tudeh (Masses) and disaffected Iranian ethnic Kurdish and Azeri minorities as their main political weapons, the British patronized various southern tribes and such parties as Erade-ye Melli (National Will) and Edalat (Justice) to achieve their objectives. They did so, as Sir Winston Churchill put it, to make “the Persians keep each other quiet while we get on with the war.”<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the American oil companies found an opportunity to demand access to Iran’s oil resources, which the Soviets countered with a request of their own. Iran thus became the site of a three-way contest between the three supposedly allied powers. When the Second World War ended in 1945, the British honored their treaty commitment by withdrawing their forces, but the Soviets were reluctant to do so, particularly because Stalin considered northern Iran as critical to the security of the southern flanks of the USSR, where the key oilfields were located.<sup>27</sup> He argued that given that the British had already used Iran to invade Bolshevik Russia in the 1920s, withdrawing the troops would allow anyone with a box of matches to ignite the oil fields of the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>28</sup> However, under threat of US and British retribution, and realizing that it had more at stake in Eastern Europe, Moscow found it expedient to announce the withdrawal of its troops in late March 1946. It did so only after signing an agreement with the Iranian government that Tehran would respect the autonomous status of the Soviet-installed Kurdish and Azeri republics. Yet, once the Soviets had gone, the Iranian government, supported by Britain and the US, sent its army to those republics and regained full control over them—a move that naturally soured relations with Moscow.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, the Iranian people had good reason to be distrustful of the British and concerned about the role of the United States in their country. These concerns fed into a growing call for an end to outside interference in Iran and to the authoritarian rule that had historically defined Iranian political culture. By 1949, Mosaddegh had succeeded in coalescing a rainbow alliance of different ideological, political, and social groups—secular, communist, socialist, liberal democratic, and devoutly religious—within the *Jebhe-ye*