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THE IRAN SOCIETY

OBJECTS

The objects for which the Society is established are to promote learning and advance education in the subject of Iran, its peoples and culture (but so that in no event should the Society take a position on, or take any part in, contemporary politics) and particularly to advance education through the study of the language, literature, art, history, religions, antiquities, usages, institutions and customs of Iran.

ACTIVITIES

In fulfilment of these objects, the Society, which is registered in Great Britain as a charity, shall, among other things:

Hold meetings and establish, promote, organise, finance and encourage the study, writing, production and distribution of books, periodicals, monographs and publications,

Do all such other lawful and charitable things as shall further the attainment of the objects of the Society or any of them.

The full text of the Rules of the Society may be inspected in the Society's offices.

Those wishing to apply for membership can do so through the Society's website, or by writing to the Hon. Secretary for an application form. Students are encouraged to join.

ACTIVITIES OF THE SOCIETY 2017-18

Lectures

- 23rd October Niloufar Raeesi Chahartaghi
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- 14th November Austin Vince & Mohammad Ali Ala
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- 13th December Performance of ‘Bards Apart’?
The poems of Robert Burns and Hafez,
Accompanied by *santur* and guitar.
- 17th January John Harding
Memories of Mountaineering in Iran
- 12th February Antony Wynn
Sir Percy Sykes, Founder of the British Consulate in
Kerman and of the South Persia Rifles in the Great
War
- 9th April Dr Francesca Leoni
Portents, Presages and Predictions:
Art and Divination in Pre-Modern Iran
- 29th May Roberta Marin
Flowers, Trees and Poetic Inscriptions:
The Art of Carpet-Making in Safavid Iran.
- 18th June Savka Andic
Thwarting Iranistan: Iran and the USSR
in the 1970s and early 1980s

TRAVEL GRANTS

This year five grants were awarded to graduates and undergraduates either planning to carry out research in Iran or to spend time in one of the Tehran universities as part of their Persian language degree courses. Of those awarded grants two were Exeter University, one from Oxford, one from SOAS and one from Kent. A grant was also made to the Edinburgh Iran Festival which opens on the 10th February 2017.

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JOURNAL

The aim of the Journal is to reproduce edited versions of some of the lectures given over the year, to review books of interest to members and to publish short articles of general interest. The editor welcomes contributions and suggestions. The journal is financed by a benefaction from the Kathleen Palmer-Smith Publication Fund.

Memories of Mountaineering in Iran

**Based on an illustrated lecture given by John Harding on
Wednesday 17th January 2018.**

Our Chairman's kind invitation that I address this learned society on as mundane a subject as mountaineering overstates my qualifications. For my experience of Iran's mountains was limited to three separate visits to the Alborz in 1956, 1970 and 2001 respectively. Nonetheless, this retrospective down memory lane might add perspective to things present. And I make no apology for taking as my subject the 600-mile-long Alborz Range, the highest and most dramatic in Iran which Zoroastrian cosmology placed pivotally in the Hara Beresaiti, the universal range that encompassed the earth and which, in Iranian mythology, was linked with demi-gods, demons, the sacred bird Simurgh and the *Shahnameh's* epic heroes Zal, Kai Kaus and Feridun.

But first, let me set the scene for my first foray in 1956, 62 long years ago. In that fateful year, General Abdul Nasser's seizure of the Suez Canal resulted in the disastrous Suez Operation which the Soviet Union took as an excuse to invade Hungary. Dramatic times indeed, yet for many Cambridge undergraduates the 1950s, once described as 'the last decade of the 19th century', these were our salad days when attitudes and aspirations were very different from those of today. Hallowed traditions and conventions were generally respected and archaic restrictions such as wearing gowns after dark; fines for late entry to college (best avoided by cunning climbing techniques to surmount the revolving iron spikes that capped college walls) and all the rest, cheerfully accepted by young men whose self-confidence had been bolstered by a school regime of prefect rule and National Service. Inspired by the successful British 1953 Everest and 1955 Kanchenjunga expeditions, Cambridge at this time was seized by a form of 'collective expeditionitis', and in its fervid atmosphere was born the 'Cambridge North Persian Expedition 1956' to the Alborz Mountains.

But why Alborz? For aspiring, but mostly inexperienced mountaineers, this little-known yet exotic range had the advantage of relative accessibility by motor transport from England. Yet the most

significant factor that determined the choice was a long-standing friendship between General EF Norton and Sir Clarmont Skrine.

Norton had been the leader of the 1924 Everest Expedition, popularly remembered for Mallory and Irvine's fatal summit bid, though Norton had himself climbed to within 1,000ft of the summit solo and without oxygen, a record that lasted for another 54 years. Norton at least came back to tell the tale and his second son, Bill, who is here tonight was the worthy leader of the 1956 Cambridge expedition, or 'CNPE' as we chose to call ourselves.

Sir Clarmont Skrine, well remembered by some members of the Society, had a long and distinguished consular and diplomatic service in Iran that had stretched intermittently from 1916 to 1948. He had been awarded the Royal Geographical Society's prestigious Gill Memorial Medal for the 49-day journey he undertook in 1922 along the outliers of the Pamirs with his dauntless wife Doris to take up his appointment as British Consul General in Kashgar. He was also a member of the Alpine Club and the Himalayan Committee that made the contentious decision to appoint John Hunt rather than Eric Shipton to lead the 1953 Everest Expedition. And as it was Skrine who had first suggested the Alborz as a possible objective, it was only appropriate that he should become the CNPE's principal sponsor.

I was the last to be invited to join the CNPE to make up a round half dozen. Four of its members – Bill Norton, Julian Mustoe, David Cook and me – were as designated climbers with Keith MacDougall and Bruce Anderson naturalists. Bill was himself an expert ornithologist. Our basic aims were to explore, climb and undertake natural history research in the Alborz massifs of Takht-i Sulaiman, some 80 miles NW of Tehran, and the mysterious Orim Niswa 200 miles to the East, which the then current Bartholomew map of the Middle East (and even that of 1963) had awarded the barely credible height of 18,000 ft.!

Our basic plan was to drive from Cambridge to Iran through Eastern Europe and Turkey and then return through Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, visiting en route some famous sites of antiquity. This overland journey of more than 9,000 miles was not novel, but visa formalities had taken months to sort out and the Foreign Office had warned of numerous political problems along the way. Marshal Tito's Yugoslavia was a hostile, austere communist state and in

Greece, anti-British feeling was running high as a result of Cyprus's EOKA emergency. Turkey, NATO'S eastern bulwark, was a maze of military zones, while travel through the Arab countries with the Suez crisis looming, was fraught with uncertainty.

Nonetheless, on Midsummer's Day 1956, the CNPE set off from Cambridge in two ex-US Airforce jeeps with trailers attached, each carrying a ton of equipment. Preparations had taken over a year and the total cost eventually worked out at over £1,600, perhaps £24,000 today. Individual members had each contributed £350, but after heavy canvassing the bulk of the money was put up by the Mount Everest Foundation, the Royal Geographical Society; its *Geographical Magazine*, and individual Cambridge colleges. The British Museum of Natural History provided us with collecting boxes; the War Office loaned (reluctantly) camping equipment; both BP and Petrofina supplied free petrol in most countries, and a score of British firms generously donated clothing, equipment, medical supplies and tinned food.

Though chosen primarily for reasons of economy, the jeeps proved to be our most expensive items. They were 'as faithful as a dog and strong as a mule' if fitted with the correct radiators, but ours unfortunately, and as first discovered when crossing the Austrian Alps, were of the cold rather than hot- weather variety so persistently overheated once exposed to the unrelenting summer heat of the Middle East. Both jeep and trailer tyres had looked fit for purpose on initial inspection, but after several years sitting in an Army-surplus dump had severely deteriorated. And because of necessity, we had to carry twelve jerry cans of petrol in addition to climbing and camping equipment, tinned food and collecting boxes, the trailers were always over- loaded. As a consequence, once outside Europe, travel along un-sealed rutted roads in choking dust clouds became a slow-motion saga of boiling radiators by day punctuated by exhausting drives by night to make up lost time. The final tally of 39 punctures and 16 written-off tyres became the expedition treasurer's recurrent nightmare.

On the morning of that first day, Bill had enterprisingly arranged a Lord Mayoral reception at the Mansion House to ensure we got off with due ceremony. After flying across the Channel from Lydd to Le Touquet, we camped that same night in the fair fields of Picardy to

close almost the only day for the next four months when travel arrangements went broadly according to plan.

The traverse of Turkey's 1,000-mile sub-continent took ten days. Today it is criss-crossed by metalled roads, but in 1956 these were still in the process of construction, thanks to lavish American NATO aid. BP's free petrol was a god-send, but as it was only available at pre-arranged stations and dates, we were sometimes unable to meet these deadlines due to unavoidable delays. Trailer overturns were frequent, particularly in Turkey where for one spell of 24 hours the jeeps completely lost contact with one another. Here too were giant spiders and centipedes alarming enough to drive Julian Mustoe, our matchless mechanic, to sleep on the top of his jeep.

After a twenty-two-day journey of thrills and spills, we reached the safe harbour of the British Embassy's summer compound at Gulhak late on 13th July. With drivers exhausted and their battered vehicles in need of urgent repair, Bill's meticulous schedule had been put back by days. We might reasonably have expected a short recuperative break, but were now confronted by unexpected diplomatic complications.

Back in 1941, Clarmont Skrine had made himself unpopular with both Mohammad Reza Shah and the Iranian establishment for his role in escorting the Shah's father, Reza Shah, and his family into forcible exile to Mauritius. In 1956, on his own admission though for reasons undisclosed, this flawless product of Winchester, New College, and the 'Heaven Born' Indian Civil Service, had blotted his copy-book with the British ambassador Sir Roger Stevens, recently appointed as a 'new broom' to patch up Anglo-Iranian relations in the aftermath of the Mossadeq crisis. Undaunted, Skrine had not only given us permission to camp at Gulhak without first seeking HE's permission but had then had the gall to ask Stevens to instruct the Iranian Minister of the Interior to afford us free passage through the Iranian frontier post at Maku, and then confirm to him that this instruction had been carried out!

Sir Roger and Lady Stevens could not have been kinder and more helpful, but after they had given us a delicious welcoming lunch at Gulhak, the Embassy's First Secretary, Reggie Burrows, took Bill aside to warn him not to band about Skrine's name with HE. He then pointed out that the name *Cambridge North Persian Expedition* had given rise to unfortunate diplomatic repercussions as

Iran rather than Persia had been the country's official name since 1934 and that any reference to 'North' was doubly unfortunate because the clandestine 1907 Anglo-Russian division of Iran into two spheres of influences still rankled with Iranians as blatant imperialism. And anyway, 'Cambridge' might be anywhere.

An additional solecism took the form of an early morning visit from Miss Palmer Smith, another of Skrine's Tehran friends who, as a relic of the *ancient regime*, was anathema to Sir Roger Stevens. Arriving without warning with an immaculately uniformed but stony-faced Iranian Army captain, she announced that this gallant officer was to be our official liaison officer from now on. Captain Ghaffari then expressed extreme disappointment that as the first British mountaineering expedition ever to visit Iran, we had not bothered to inform the Iranian Mountaineering Federation of our arrival.

We had never previously been aware of this organisation, but a meeting was swiftly arranged and diplomatic feathers smoothed with a palace reception hosted by the Federation's President, the Shah's brother, Prince Gholamreza. Sir Clarmont, foreseeing such an eventuality, had insisted that we take suits with us to Iran, and with Burrows's injunction that bearded expeditions were *never* invited to Embassy functions, we arrived clean shaven and be-suited for Prince Gholamreza to pin Mountaineering Federation medals to our lapels.

After five hectic days in Tehran dealing with vehicle repairs, permits and re-provisioning, we drove to our road-head Rudbarek, a village in the Kalardasht, to engage our first objective the Takht-i Sulaiman massif. But exploration in the true sense this was not. In 1843 an Austrian botanist, Theodore Kotschy, had spent several weeks based on the Hazarchal, an upland basin dominating the massif's southern versant. In 1902 a pair of Austrian botanists, the Brothers Bornmuller, climbed Alam Kuh the highest peak in the massif. In 1931 Freya Stark had passed this way when crossing the Alborz and had charmingly recounted in her *The Valleys of the Assassins* the legend of how King Solomon's wooing of Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, on the mountain's frozen summit had forced her to share his bed rather than perish from the cold. Freya saw, but never got within striking distance of the Takht-i Sulaiman itself. Douglas Busk, a British diplomat and alpinist serving in the Tehran embassy during the mid-1930s, was also to be disappointed. For after basing himself on Hazarchal on three occasions and twice climbing Alam

Kuh, he found his way to the elusive Solomon's Throne barred by Alam Kuh's formidable northern precipices. In 1936, Dr Hans Bobek's powerful Austro-German expedition, basing themselves on the Sarchal Glacier on the massif's north versant, not only climbed Takht-i Sulaiman, but put up a hard, modern route on Alam Kuh's north face. Bobek, leader of several scientific expeditions during the 1930s in both Iran and Turkey, produced an excellent map of the massif which was not then available to us, so it fell to David Cook, a Royal Engineer officer, to produce our own. And then, literally within days of our leaving for Iran, an account of Bernard Pierre's Franco-Iranian climbing expedition to the Alborz appeared in the May 1956 edition of the *Alpine Journal*. A disappointment certainly, but at least Takht-i Sulaiman itself still awaited a British ascent, while the mysterious Orim Niswa was surely virgin territory. And anyway, it was too late to change horses. .

Crossing the Alborz watershed from the range's parched southern slopes to the deciduous rainforests of Mazandaran dramatically illustrated Iran's geographical diversity. Once on the Caspian versant, rain and mist characterised the weather for the next three days. At our Rudbarek road-head we hired mules and muleteers in a sea of mud with John Hunt's warning that we might have underestimated the cost of portage ringing in our ears. Eventually, Captain Ghaffari's (now 'Aki' to all of us) negotiating skills reduced the mule-train from 15 to 10, notwithstanding the muleteers' raucous gripes.

The approach march to our base in Hazarchal up the Sardab Rud followed what had once been an important trans-Alborz caravan trade route but since made obsolete by the construction of Reza Shah's motor highway across the range. Its lower reaches passed through the magnificent Mazandaran deciduous forest which, until the end of the 19th century, had been the haunt of the Hyrcanian tiger, exported to Rome some two-thousand years earlier to enhance Coliseum extravaganzas.

On the morning of the third day, we reached the Hazarchal, the Place of a Thousand Hollows, a beautiful glacial valley set high on the massif's southern versant. Chosen by Bill as a more suitable base than the Sarchal Glacier, it had been scorned by the Mountaineering Federation and was unpopular with the muleteers as it involved an extra day's carry.

However, at over 14,000 ft, Hazarchal made a most agreeable base camp from which all members of the expedition duly climbed the 4,828m Alam Kuh, Iran's second highest peak, on our third day. This ascent was little more than a scramble, but it gave panoramic views of the whole massif including Takht-i Sulaiman itself though seemingly unattainable from this side due to Alam Kuh's 800 metre-high cliffs. Also at our feet, lay the impressive four- kilometre long Sarchal Glacier, thus confounding Sir Percy Sykes's pronouncement in his *A History of Persia* that there were 'no glaciers in Persia'. This view had been endorsed by the Head of Chancery and today might be correct for global warming has shrunk the Sarchal to a remnant.

Wild life was plentiful not only on the heights above Hazarchal where Keith MacDougall, accompanied by Safar al-Negani, the one muleteer who stayed with us throughout, shot a moufflon with the rifle that Keith had somehow managed to magic through successive customs post en route. Lower down, inquisitive bears gave us some anxious moments.

Idyllic though Hazarchal might have been, the climbing on this southern versant was disappointing. We made a couple of modest pioneer ascents, but the rock was dangerously friable. And so, to get into a better position to climb Takht-i Sulaiman, our primary objective, it was decided that the four climbers plus Aki – now an indispensable member of the team - should shift camp to the North West Glacier. This feature had been clearly visible from a high col west of Alam Kuh, but was only accessible by way of the vertiginous scree slopes that both Busk and the Mountaineering Federation had considered impossible to descend with heavy loads. While the climbing party was thus engaged, Keith, Bruce and Safar struck south across the 14,000 ft Hazarcham Pass to make valuable collections of fauna and flora.

The NW Glacier crossing included some double-carries and proved the most challenging day of the entire expedition. Nonetheless, by nightfall all five of us were safely ensconced on the glacier moraine where we spent the next five days camped under a single tarpaulin and living off tinned soup, ships biscuits and cold corned beef. On 2nd August, my 22nd birthday, we made the first British ascent of Takht-i Sulaiman with little difficulty. The scattered remnants of ancient summit cairns indicated that local shepherds would have reached Solomon's Throne long before any European.

This belvedere gave a stunning view of Alam Kuh's three-kilometre-long north face, sheer save for the impressive NE buttress first climbed in 1936 by the Germans Steinauer and Gorter in seventeen hours. Steinauer, an 'Iron Age' alpinist in the National Socialist *sturm und drang* tradition, had only the previous year made the fourth ascent of the Central Spur of Mont Blanc's Grandes Jorasses, then regarded as one of the 'last great problems of the Alps'. Predictably. Steinauer named his buttress 'the Persian Jorasses'. At this time, only Bill and Julian had ever climbed in the Alps, so we decided that it was above our station. Yet yesterday's 'last great problems' become today's standard routes. Seven years on, another Cambridge expedition made light of the route and Leyla Pope, later the first woman president of the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club, rated it 'an easy day for veiled Iranian ladies'. For years, I regretted that we never had a crack at it.

From 'Glacier Camp' we also made what we assumed (incorrectly as it transpired) to be the first traverse of the NW Glacier's Haft Khan ridge and Bill and Julian pioneered a good rock route up one of its buttresses. But by now it was time to return to Hazarchal as rations were exhausted. And so, with mixed feelings, following an altogether easier route discovered by David and Aki over the glacier's southern headwall, we made our way back to our enchanted valley to find that its snows had given way to meadows of alpine flowers already occupied by shepherds and their flocks.

We left Hazarchal with heavy hearts and reached Rudbarek within a day. Largely inhabited by Kurds who had originally been resettled from their north Zagros homeland at the end of the 18th century by Agha Mohamed Khan to stabilise what was then an unruly corner of his kingdom, Rudbarek was a near replica of a 19th century alpine village. Although the Rudbarekis' traditional occupations of brigandage and brawling had long been replaced by logging, agriculture and hunting, we caught the fag-end of an inter-village scrap that left four for dead. And while they might have abandoned their Azeri national tongue, they still clung to their Sunni religious affiliations and traditional culture. Gaily dressed women went about unveiled and the village Headman treated us with bounteous hospitality. After three days, we headed for the mosquito-

ridden Caspian shore for a brief sojourn before embarking on the second phase of the expedition.

Bartholomew's 18,000 ft spot height for 'Kuh i Niswa' had always looked too good to be true. And so it had proved when, at our meeting with the Mountaineering Federation, Orim Niswa had been dismissed as a 'molehill'. I later discovered that this plateau, 3,720 metres high, had once been a hunting ground for shahs and been traversed on horseback by a certain Beresford Lovatt in the late 19th century. Instead, we decided to follow the Federation's recommendation to explore the 'ice-girt Mountains of Palur'.

Aki had left us at Rudbarek to rejoin his regiment and so, at the village of Abigarm we hired a muleteer and two mules and then, humping most of the food and equipment ourselves, set forth into the foothills up a likely-looking tributary in search of Palur's fabulous mountains. Two days later, no thanks to our bolshie muleteer whose intransigence compounded our own faulty map-reading, we chanced upon Yurt-i Khan, the British Embassy's Lar Valley summer camp. Losing a whole day in the process, we bashed on northwards by an ancient trade route and, as night fell, settled for a make-shift camp at Saphid Arb, 10,000 ft high and within shouting distance of the Shahsavan tribe's main summer encampment.

Over the next five days we searched vainly for Palur's mythical mountains only to find limitless scree slopes capped by rounded ridges. One sere summit, Baresang Kuh, was eventually attained after a broiling fourteen-hour trek, but a cairn bearing a Cyrillic device confirmed that Russian surveyors had forestalled us many years before. The two naturalists collected some rare specimens, but the highlight of our stay at Saphid Arb was to witness something of the harsh lives of the semi-nomadic Shahsavan, another Kurdish tribe re-located by Agha Mohamed Khan from distant Azerbaijan. Reza Shah's brutal attempts at enforced settlement of the tribes in the 1930s had almost destroyed their traditional way of life, but it was motor transport that eventually delivered the fatal blow by depriving them of their trade and dues from the trans-Alborz caravans. Now reduced to bare survival from the produce of their flocks and the sale of woven rugs sold for a pittance in Tehran, most of their young men had drifted away for work in town and only returned to Saphid Arb for their summer holidays. Our own departure coincided with the Shahsavan's autumn migration to the plains south of Tehran. This

magnificent spectacle, with proud young women bestriding camels bedecked with tassels and bells, would only have had a few more years to run.

No self-respecting mountaineer could have left Iran without climbing Damavand, at 5,670 metres the highest peak in Iran whose first ascent in AD 905 established an altitude record until the Andean volcano Cotopaxi was climbed in 1872. But long before that, Damavand had occupied a special place in Iranian legend and imagination as the abode of Jamshid, Rustam and the Persian Prometheus Yasid bin Jigad. Here too the hero Feridun has imprisoned the giant Zohak whose foul breath seeping out from vents takes the form of noxious sulphur fumes. In fine weather Damavand's ascent by the normal route is little more than an exhausting slog, and thanks to the construction of intermediate huts is now climbed by scores of Iranians every year, though sudden storms high-up can prove fatal. Due to self-imposed time constraints, we allowed ourselves only 24 hours to get up and down non-stop and starting at night below Rehneh, climbed 10,000 feet straight to reach the summit in 13 hours, taking under 21 for the round trip.

Back in Tehran our novelty value had worn thin. Our unpremeditated visit to the Lar summer camp had given embassy wags and wives endless amusement. The chairman of the Mountaineering Federation congratulated us on our exploits in the Takht-i Sulaiman massif and fast time up Damavand. But neither his promised photograph of the mountain signed by the Shah nor Aki's celebratory reunion ever materialised.

After over two months in Iran, we began the four-week homeward journey on 5th September. This became a hectic race against time to get back to Cambridge before the start of the Michaelmas term and involved six all-night drives to fulfil Bill's ambitious programme of visiting the Sasanian palace of Ctesiphon; the bazaar at Baghdad; the Street that is Straight in Damascus, Baalbek, the port of Byblos, the millennium water wheels at Hama, Syria's beehive villages, Palmyra (after a furious drive across the desert) and the great *suq* at Aleppo. I count myself lucky to have seen such wonders which have since been badly damaged or destroyed.

On 3rd October, only one day late for the start of term and 104 days after leaving Cambridge on the balmy mid-summer's day that now seemed a lifetime ago, our two battered jeeps drove slowly

down King's Parade. On 5th December Bill gave a lecture to the Royal Society for Asian Affairs illustrated by Keith's expedition cine-film. For the occasion, Sir Clarmont Skrine, our champion to the end, took the chair and pronounced that the CNPE was '*an admirable specimen of the modern expedition of the youth of England, and in fact of Europe*'. The Mount Everest Foundation, which had contributed £400 (perhaps £8,000 today) was somewhat less sanguine, but Keith and Bruce's collections of fauna and flora were well received by the British Museum of Natural History. By the time we graduated the following year, the expedition's overdraft was almost paid off, though the quality of our degrees might have suffered.

Perhaps you should never look back, but Iran proves an exception to the rule. Fourteen years after the CNPE, when returning from Australia by air in 1970, I stopped off in Tehran to stay with old friends Anthony and Sarah Wood at the British Embassy. We decided to make a whirlwind weekend visit to Rudbarek for a short walk up the Sardab Rud. Rudbarek had been transformed into a thriving tourist resort, so it came as no surprise that our faithful muleteer Saphar should have become the Mountaineering Federation's chief guide and warden of its Rudbarek headquarters. The CNPE might even have sown a seed, for the eldest of Safar's sons later became the first Iranian to climb Everest.

In 1956, we had walked up the Sardab Rud in thick mist. Now bathed in radiant sunshine and clad in a mantle of snow, the mountains were transformed. At the Vanderbon *chaikhana*, I took leave of the others to climb up the Barir Rud for a fleeting glimpse of Alam Kuh's great north face and then, as darkness fell, raced down again to join them for a bitterly cold night on the bare boards of the *chaikhana*. Next morning, the sky was overcast with the threat of snow. The sad, leafless trees of the Mazandaran forest made me wonder whether I really should have made this journey.

But inevitably, I felt compelled to return to Iran and did so in 2001 with my wife Georgina and our friends John and Patricia Ducker and Alan Pardoe. Our twin objectives were to climb the great volcano of Kuh-i Sabalan above Ardabil and follow the route of Freya Stark's 1931 Alborz crossing from Garmerud to the coast. Flying on to Ardabil from Tehran, we spent two days there to see a replica of the Victoria and Albert Museum's famous Ardabil carpet

being re-woven on a gigantic loom set up in the tomb of Shah Ismail, founder of the Safavid dynasty. That evening, we slipped into a Zurkhaneh where prodigious feats of strength were accompanied by drums, cymbals and dervish-style dancing. Originally devised as a Sasanian form of martial arts to combat the Roman legions, it was subsequently developed by Hasan-i Sabah, the founder of the *Hashishin* or Assassins. Georgina swore she detected a whiff of hashish.

Accompanied by our chief guide Mehran, a young architecture student, and our mountain guide Parviz, a judo and karate expert married with children, we camped for one night at the foot of Sabalan overlooking the stupendous Shiven Barch gorge. A second day's march past the black, goat-haired tents of a Shahsavan encampment – Azeri-speaking cousins of their Saphid Arb compatriots - took us to the Hoseini Moghadas refuge, part-mosque and part mountain-hut. Half filled with snow, a boisterous party of 25 young Isfahanis recited odes to the mountain in the best Iranian tradition to boost morale, though the effects of altitude and an ice-covered, concrete floor made sleep near-impossible.

At 4,711 metres, Sabalan is Iran's third highest peak at whose foot Zoroaster reputedly composed the *Avesta*. An extinct volcano which holds snow all year round, it is altogether more shapely and complex in structure than Demavend. Sir Roger Stevens considered it 'the most haunting of all the mountains of Iran' while both Parviz (who had climbed it 25 times and Demavend 53 times!) and Mehran preferred it to any other. The 2,000-metre climb to its frozen summit lake was no more than a tough scramble with Georgina coming in first after our guides. In descent, the mountain showed its darker face when snow flurries and thunder sent us scuttling down to the refuge.

We moved on to Alamut, the quintessential Valley of the Assassins for it was on the Rock of Alamut that Hasan-i Sabah, the Old Man of the Mountains, had built his seemingly impregnable fortress from whence he despatched his assassins. In the 13th century, the Mongol Hulagu Khan destroyed both the castle and its priceless library. From its ruins, I glimpsed far away to the east the dim but unmistakable profile of Alam Kuh. As had Freya Stark, we began our Alborz crossing from the ageless village of Garmrud led by Mehran, Parviz, four muleteers and four mules.

On that magical three-day journey, we camped in meadows bright with wild flowers set against a backcloth of snow peaks. Near the ruined caravanserai on the Salambar Pass, I gazed eastwards to take in the view of Takht-i Sulaiman and Alam Kuh that Freya's fuzzy, sepia photograph had imprinted on my youthful imagination. During a long descent towards the coast, we passed an extended caravan of heavily-laden mules and a procession of villagers coming up to re-establish themselves in their solid, stone-built houses for the summer. And then, quite unexpectedly around a corner of the track framed by steep forested ridges, Takht-i Sulaiman and Alam Kuh burst into view to bring back another host of half-forgotten memories. Both Parviz and Mehran had climbed Steinauer's buttress on Alam Kuh and confirmed that both the Sharchal and NW Glaciers have all but disappeared.

On the road back to Tehran, we had one last glimpse of Takht-i Sulaiman from the pass that overlooks the Kalardasht. Modern Rudbarek was barely recognisable, but I took some comfort that in retracing Freya's path, so little altered in seventy years, my memories of the 1956 Cambridge expedition that had so changed my life had been vividly refreshed.



Alborz crossing in steps of Freya Stark, 19/20 June 2001



Kuh-e Sabalan (4,711m), Azerbaijan, 15 June 2001



Shahsavan summer camp in upper Lar Valley, August 1956.

Thwarting Iranistan: Iran and the USSR in the 1970s/early 1980s.

Lecture given by Savka Andic on 18 June, 2018.

A very generous grant from the Iran Society allowed me to conduct research in Moscow from April - July 2013, where I worked at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF)¹, the State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI)² and the State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI)³; and the Foreign Policy Archive (AVP RF). In addition, I consulted the library and interviewed faculty members from the Oriental Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IVRAN)⁴ and gained further valuable contextual information from Russian-language memoirs by diplomatic and political figures of the time.

The Russian Foreign Ministry is located at one end of Moscow's famous Arbat street, a long row of elegant pastel-hued facades and also the one-time residence of Pushkin which is now rather more prosaically studded with McDonalds and shops hawking superlatively dreadful tourist tat. A vast, lugubrious edifice, the Foreign Ministry building, was one of Stalin's famous 'Seven Sisters' skyscrapers, built in the late 1940s, which also included Moscow State University. There was a well-known Soviet joke about a tourist who saw the building and asked his guide, how many people work there? To which the guide responded – about 20 percent of them. It may still be the case.

Further down the Arbat, on a quiet side street, the Foreign policy archive sits in an unmarked building. A bored guard in full uniform peers out from under his gigantic cap and checks your papers as you enter. He then waves you down the dingy corridor past potted palms and other wilting greenery. The archive is in the basement behind a door with the following sign 'Dear patrons. Don't arrive too early, work quietly, don't ask too many questions, leave quickly'. I initially

¹ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii

² Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsialno-politicheskoi istorii

³ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii

⁴ Institut vostokovedeniia Rossiiskoi Akademii nauk

took this to be Russian dark humour but it turned out to be an accurate summation of staff attitudes. The foreign policy archive seemed rather odd, until the first day I turned up at the main State Archive and found the receptionist behind the front desk peeling onions as she glared at the new researchers. At the same archive, on another occasion, the mad-looking security guard proclaimed love at first sight and refused to relinquish my passport until I gave him my phone number. I don't know how far the MeToo movement has gone in Russia, but suffice to say that it flies in the face of local courting traditions.

I could do an entire lecture on local colour and the quirks of Russian archives, but you probably want to hear something about the documents I eventually found there. The title of my talk is a reference to the Shah's comment in a 1978 interview that he would not allow Iran to become Iranistan - that is, just another Soviet-controlled Republic or satellite swallowed by the great socialist federation. The threat of Soviet infiltration and domination, or as he termed it 'international communism', appears to have been one of the Shah's long-held and deep-rooted phobias which was shared by Western policymakers throughout the Cold War period, particularly Britain and the United States, and was arguably the most influential factor in shaping Western attitudes towards Iran.

In Soviet political terminology Iran was classified alongside Turkey and Afghanistan as the 'Middle East'⁵ or *Sredniy Vostok* and was always distinct from the predominantly Arab 'Near East'⁶ (*Blizhniy Vostok*). This classification broadly corresponds to US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's concept of the 'Northern Tier' which he coined in the 1950s.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Iran was a focal point for Soviet wartime and post-war strategy. This era witnessed the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran from 1941-1945 and the 1946 Azerbaijan Crisis, considered by many scholars to be the inaugural confrontation of the Cold War. The activities of the Communist People's Party of Iran (the PPI, popularly known as the Tudeh) were closely followed in Moscow, and a substantial amount of Soviet political correspondence concerning Iran was written by or circulated amongst top-level officials, including Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov (he of

⁵ *Sredniy Vostok*

⁶ *Blizhniy Vostok*

Ribbentrop Pact fame or rather infamy), Nikita Khrushchev, CPSU Chairman Georgy Malenkov who briefly led the USSR from 1953-55, the notorious NKVD chief Lavrenty Beria and frequently, even Stalin himself.⁷ CPSU funding to the PPI was substantial - in 1954, a total of \$60,000 USD was disbursed to the PPI from the CPSU coffers. At the time, the PPI was one of only 17 foreign communist parties in political opposition (therefore excluding the Eastern bloc parties) to receive this funding, and one of only two non-Western parties – the other being the Indian Communist Party. Overall it ranked 11th out of 17 in terms of funding received – below parties in Italy, France, England, the USA and India but above Sweden, Israel, Norway, Denmark and Belgium.⁸ Thus Iran was firmly on the radar and indeed quite high up the list of Soviet global priorities.

Iran's accession to the Baghdad Pact in 1955 (later CENTO following Iraq's 1958 revolution and exit) and conclusion of the Bilateral Defence agreement with America in 1959 enraged many in Soviet ruling circles, who felt betrayed by the Shah's American rapprochement. CPSU Chairman Nikita Khrushchev sought revenge - prompting the Central Committee (CC) of the CPSU to pass a strongly-worded resolution in March 1959 creating the National Voice of Iran (Sedaye Milli-ye Iran) radio station as part of its wider goal to "*destabilise the Shah's regime and mobilise the Iranian masses to fight for radical change in the country*".⁹ According to the memoirs of Vladimir Kuzichkin, a Soviet consular attaché and undercover KGB agent in Tehran from 1977 until his defection in the early 1980s, Khrushchev even ordered a clumsy assassination attempt on the Shah in February 1962, sending an explosive-laden Volkswagen to follow his entourage on parade in Tehran, but the bomb failed to go off.

However, events took a turn for the better that year, with the Shah's conciliatory pledge to ban US missiles on Iranian territory. This led to a détente of sorts between Iran and the USSR and laid the foundation for a series of official visits, beginning with Brezhnev's visit to Iran in 1963, and also paved the way for numerous agreements on technical cooperation, trade and cultural exchanges.

⁷ RGASPI, 82/2/1217-1221

⁸ RGANI, 89/38/28

⁹ RGANI, 89/13/2

This working relationship persisted right up to the end of the Pahlavi regime.

Official correspondence between Soviet and Iranian officials throughout the 1970s was exceedingly cordial even by the standards of diplomacy. The Shah and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev were fond of sending each other fulsome birthday congratulations, and their bilateral correspondence spoke endlessly and a bit obsessively about the “*friendly relations*” between the two countries, based on “*good neighbourliness, cooperation, and mutual understanding*”.¹⁰ The Shah was congratulatory when the Soyuz-17 space shuttle successfully completed its flight in 1975 and sent his condolences when Brezhnev’s mother died¹¹. The two countries supported each other in various international forums, including in the United Nations, where among other things, the USSR supported Iran’s candidacy for the ECOSOC Human Rights Commission in 1977¹² -- an ironic scenario considering neither party was particularly known for a shining human rights record.

All of this cordiality even led the Shah to hail the October Revolution on one occasion. When the Shah’s brother, Prince Abdol Reza, visited the outer reaches of Yakutia for some big game hunting in October 1977, he met with CPSU functionaries and expressed great joy that his trip had coincided with the 60th anniversary of the October Revolution. The prince conveyed the Shah’s warm greetings to Brezhnev on the auspicious occasion, explaining that the Revolution had a special meaning for Iran, since Soviet Russia had been the first state to reject oppressive, imperialistic relations and move forward on a brave new basis of equality and friendship – something which Iran would never forget.¹³

The archives abound with documents detailing the numerous cultural, technical and economic exchanges and collaboration between the two nations. Major technical projects included the Isfahan steel mill, the Arak hydroelectric plant and machine works, and the trans-Iranian gas pipeline opened in 1970, which was described by Radio Moscow as “*without precedent in the history of*

¹⁰ AVPRF, 94/68/012

¹¹ AVPRF, 174/59/140

¹² AVPRF, 94/67/011

¹³ GARF, 612/1/312

international economic cooperation”¹⁴. The 1976 Soviet-Iranian trade agreement was said to be the “*largest in Iranian history*”¹⁵. There were five-year plans in place for Scientific-Technical Cooperation and Cultural Exchange (which included cooperation in the prevention of Caspian Sea pollution, collaboration on seismology projects, academic exchanges between leading Soviet and Iranian universities, performing arts and ballet visits, film festivals, youth delegation exchanges and athletic events.)¹⁶

The Shah appears to have enjoyed a good working relationship with the Soviet ambassador, Vladimir Vinogradov, who served in Tehran from 1977 to 1982. Vinogradov, previously ambassador to Egypt until he was expelled alongside other Soviet military advisers by President Sadat in 1972, was a lofty figure in the Soviet political hierarchy, a member of the Central Committee who counted amongst the ranks of elite Soviet ambassadors such as Anatoly Dobrynin, longtime ambassador to the United States. His appointment to Iran was a clear symbol of the respect and value the USSR placed on its relations with the Shah’s regime. In his memoirs, Vinogradov recalled his numerous conversations with the Shah, whose demeanour was pleasant and attitude pragmatic and who understood the importance of good relations with the USSR. The Shah frequently expressed a desire for better relations with the Soviets, but Vinogradov felt he was hindered by his ‘transatlantic disinformation line’ – that is, the Americans who were constantly exacerbating the Shah’s fears of Soviet infiltration.

In their conversations, the Shah frequently emphasised his independence from the United States and his desire to exploit American friendship for all it was worth, apparently once exclaiming, “let the Americans train us up in their weaponry; after that we’ll expel them!” He complained that relations with America caused him more trouble than any other country, decrying President Carter’s human-rightism, and was adamant that the Americans would obey him if necessary and that CENTO membership in no way constrained him. Although well-informed about foreign affairs and fond of discussing them, Vinogradov noted the Shah’s extreme reluctance to discuss Iran’s internal affairs, and when he did only in a

¹⁴ AVPRF, 174/60/040

¹⁵ AVPRF, 174/60/040

¹⁶ AVPRF, 174/59/042

superficial manner. Vinogradov also appears to have enjoyed a close relationship with Amir Abbas Hoveyda, the Shah's long-serving Prime Minister until his dismissal in 1977. Hoveyda was jovial, open and well-disposed to the Soviet ambassador; he disclosed his resentment of the British, whose past humiliating treatment still smarted in his memory, and was dismissive of Americans, who he claimed would be discarded once Iran had acquired their military and technical know-how. Hoveyda defended the Shah's anti-Soviet statements on the grounds that they were necessary for impressing the Americans, but was no Leftist, once remarking "God forbid that socialism becomes established in Iran – that would completely discredit Socialism". Altogether, these conversations gave the impression that the Shah and his Prime Minister were continuing to play the age-old game of their predecessors – playing off the great powers against each other to safeguard Iran's independence.

By the late 1970s the international mood was shifting and new forces were about to be unleashed which would impact not only Soviet-Iranian relations but the wider world. Following a decade of Soviet adventurism and intervention in Africa, détente was faltering and Soviet foreign policy had fallen into disarray. Karen Brutents, who as head of the Central Committee's International Department for much of the 1961-1991 period was the key figure in charge of managing relations with Asian and African communist parties, argued that in his time the USSR never had an overarching 'grand' strategy towards developing countries, including Iran, and was simply reacting to events on an ad-hoc basis. The atavistic drive towards warm water ports and desire to encircle the Persian Gulf, ascribed to Russia by Western observers since the time of Peter the Great, was purportedly pure fiction.

Moreover, by the late 1970s, Soviet policy-makers' genuine commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideology was wavering and the ideal of solidarity with foreign communist parties had been eroded. Cynicism was rife in the party ranks, a far cry from the halcyon days of the 1950s and 60s, or as Brutents put it, "the illusions and euphoria of the Khrushchev days". This left pure political and military strategy and pragmatism as the driving forces of Soviet policy. As a rule, the USSR did not give serious backing to leftist or communist parties in regions where they were thought to have little chance of coming to power and there was an implicit acceptance

amongst policy-makers that most Communist-type parties would have little chance of coming to power in the Middle East. KGB agent Kuzichkin recalled how the USSR had no contact with the *Mujahidin-i Khalq* or the *Fada'iyan* while the Shah was in power, despite both having interests and ideologies coincident with that of the USSR. In fact, Soviet diplomats and agents in Iran were under the strictest instructions from the Central Committee to avoid all contact with both organizations, which had made numerous approaches to the Soviet embassy in the 1970s. Not only were they thought to have a negligible chance of coming to power, the Shah's regime was still seen as unshakeable and the Soviet leadership wanted to avoid the possibility of the Shah severing diplomatic relations, as he did with Cuba when Fidel Castro met Iraj Eskandari, then Tudeh secretary-general, in Moscow in 1976.¹⁷ A Soviet-Iranian split would please the United States, so the USSR trod very carefully indeed.

This caution is borne out by the official figures. By 1973, the PPI (the Tudeh) had effectively fallen off the list of Soviet priorities and received a paltry sum of \$20,000 USD, ranking ten places from the bottom of the global list of beneficiaries. Even the Communist party of San Marino – which could probably have fit into a kitchen cupboard– received more money!

It was the exiled Tudeh leadership which took the initiative in approaching the CPSU with plans and requests for assistance, not vice versa. In 1976, Secretary General Iraj Eskandari appealed to Brezhnev to find a new location for the party's illegal broadcasting, which had recently been discontinued from Bulgarian territory. The Soviet response was lukewarm. The Bulgarians could not be convinced to reinstate Tudeh broadcasting, so another location would have to be found. Mongolia was ruled out on the grounds that it would seem the broadcasts were coming direct from the Soviet Union, which constituted most of the territory between Iran and Mongolia – an impression which had to be avoided. Such was the extreme degree of Soviet caution.¹⁸

Instead of aligning themselves with local leftist groups, Soviet policy-makers deemed it expedient to target charismatic regional leaders and attempt to gain their broad support for Soviet foreign

¹⁷ Kuzichkin, 203, 205

¹⁸ RGANI, 89/27/26

policy.¹⁹ KGB agent Kuzichkin recounts how in late 1978 a secret approach was made to Khomeini, then still exiled in Iraq, with promises of Soviet support if he came to power in Iran. Needless to say, they were rebuffed. Ironically, the large numbers of American-educated individuals in Khomeini's entourage, including Sadegh Ghotbzadeh and Ibrahim Yazdi, led some Soviet analysts to conclude that the United States had in fact dropped the Shah, who had lately lost authority in Iran and was becoming too independent in his foreign policy, in favour of the opposition. Added to the fact that many Soviet analysts saw clerics as servants of capitalism, Khomeini was at first perceived as a natural ally of the West and even a possible protégé of the United States – a distorted conclusion produced by binary Cold-War thinking which unfortunately plagued much analysis of the time in both the Eastern and Western blocs.

Much like the British and American governments, the upper echelons of the Soviet leadership – the Politburo, which took all the major foreign policy decisions – was convinced the Shah's regime was unshakeable and was relatively late in predicting its demise. In spite of this, according to Iran KGB Resident Leonid Shebarshin, by September 1978 the KGB 1st chief directorate had predicted that the Iranian monarchy's days were numbered.²⁰ The KGB, although influential in Soviet foreign policy formulation, often had views at odds with the Politburo and was usually overruled by the latter when it came to policy implementation. According to Kuzichkin, the Soviet embassy in Tehran was positively crawling with undercover KGB agents – out of the fifty diplomatic personnel working there, 15 were straight KGB and another twenty were KGB informers. The remainder were so-called 'straight diplomats' and GRU (or military intelligence) agents. There was considerable rivalry between these different arms of the Soviet diplomatic apparatus, which sometimes led to policy inconsistencies. Both ambassador Vinogradov and the two agents, Kuzichkin and Shebarshin, described with some humour and much irritation how the Embassy was under 24-hour SAVAK surveillance from a drinks kiosk by the embassy entrance and an entire house adjacent to the embassy.

Vinogradov remarked with surprise how the press and diplomatic corps appeared to pay scant attention to the Qum clashes

¹⁹ Brutents, 289,291,292,333,334; Kuzichkin, 203,205

²⁰ Shebarshin, 108

of January 1978 which sparked the 40-day cycles of mourning leading up to the revolution. By March 1978 he felt that momentous and perhaps irreversible changes were afoot in Iran, but was dismayed at the Shah's constant blaming of "international communism" for domestic problems. Against whom, he wondered, was the Shah arming himself – surely not the USSR? During a frank discussion in June 1978, the flummoxed Shah asked the ambassador why his people were turning against him after all he had done for them – a common theme repeated in the Shah's conversations with the British and American ambassadors. The monarch was dubious of Vinogradov's Marxist-Leninist analysis of Iran's developmental stage and the inevitable class struggle, but apparently did act on his suggestion that a member of the court should visit South Tehran to witness the appalling living conditions of Iran's lumpen-proletariat. At their next meeting in October 1978, the Shah appeared to have lost the plot, asking the Soviet ambassador bluntly – what would you do in my position? The Shah explained how he had acted upon some of Vinogradov's previous recommendations, such as trying to improve living conditions of the poor, but felt he was continuously thwarted by some unknown internal force, leaving the ambassador wondering who this could possibly be.

Following the introduction of military government on 5 November, Vinogradov recalled the Carter administration issuing a thinly veiled threat to the USSR to refrain from intervention in Iran's internal affairs. As a US naval force gathered in the Persian Gulf and Newsweek magazine proclaimed that the US would not give Iran away to the USSR, Vinogradov wondered what the US was up to behind the scenes if they spoke so brazenly in the open! This was followed by Brezhnev's statement of 19 November accusing the US of attempting to interfere in Iran's internal affairs, and warning that any such interference would be seen as an affront to Soviet security. The statement does not appear to have been published in Iran's domestic press and only came to public attention through Radio Moscow broadcasts. Even the Shah was said to have learned of the statement by word of mouth; its reception in Iran was not entirely unwelcome as the public mood was considerably more anti-American than anti-Soviet.

The demonstrations of Muharram 1978 culminated in the million-strong Ashura march led by Ayatollah Taleghani, whom

Vinogradov recognized as Iran's most popular and esteemed religious leader. Following a momentous string of events, culminating in the Shah's departure, the first Tudeh members began to arrive back in Iran from exile at end of January 1979. Iraj Eskandari was replaced by Nureddin Kianuri as Secretary-General, whom the Soviet leadership understood to be Khomeini's relative and thereby expected his appointment to strengthen the Tudeh under the new regime. From January to April 1979, Kianuri had been receiving special training in Moscow at the Central Committee's International Department to organise future work in Iran.

When Khomeini returned to Tehran on 1 February 1979 amidst scenes of mass elation, a Soviet delegation was dispatched to Behesht-e Zahra cemetery to record his first speech, which Vinogradov described as the "intelligent, lively, persuasive and well-crafted speech of a major political figure, who knew his objective and was able to motivate the masses to work towards this objective". On 11 Feb 1979 the imperial military declared neutrality and the following day Radio Moscow broadcast a message from Soviet premier Kosygin to the new Prime Minister, Mehdi Bazargan, thus making the USSR the first country to recognize formally Iran's revolutionary government. Vinogradov went with a delegation to meet the new government the following day, making his way through streets where every second man was armed. People waved and gave victory signs at the sight of the Soviet flag. Bazargan was delighted to receive a telegram of official recognition, as was the new Minister of Foreign Affairs Karim Sanjabi upon receiving a congratulatory message from his Soviet counterpart, Andrei Gromyko.

Vinogradov and his colleagues were warmly received by the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Karim Sanjabi who spoke sympathetically of the USSR. He reminisced how Russian Bolsheviks had made a great impression on him in his youth by calling upon Iranian Kurds to fight oppressors and imperialists. The USSR, said Sanjabi, had well understood the popular democratic character of the Iranian revolution and he appreciated its quick recognition and first friendly gesture - sending medical aid for the people wounded in the skirmishes.

On 14 February, acting on direct orders from the CPSU Central Committee, the KGB residency finally established direct contact with Mujahidin and Fadaiyan leaders. The Soviets proposed to keep in

touch with both groups, but they agreed to maintain contact only outside of Iran, in Europe. Both groups asked for weapons. A few days later, Prime Minister Bazargan legalized all political parties, including the Tudeh. However, the old SAVAK surveillance points around the Soviet embassy remained intact and apparently functional.

A special Politburo session was convened in spring 1979 to determine Soviet policy towards Iran's new regime, attended by the likes of Brezhnev, KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov, Defence Minister Ustinov and International Department Head Boris Ponomarev. From this point forward the Central Committee was more disposed to grant Tudeh requests for espionage and intelligence training in Moscow and for small sums of money, usually for travel expenses on party business.²¹ However, in more sensitive areas it continued to vacillate. In August 1979, Kianuri requested a substantial quantity of weapons of non-Soviet manufacture from the KGB and Soviet Ministry of Defence to 'help the Iranian progressive forces defend themselves against reactionaries or in case of civil war'. The Soviets stalled for a year before deciding that, due to the "*sharp political character of the question, and current status of the Tudeh and leftist forces in Iran*", the matter required further consideration and was shelved. The document was signed by KGB chairman Andropov and Ponomarev.²²

Back in Tehran, a new KGB resident, Leonid Shebarshin, had arrived at the Embassy in May 1979. A fluent Urdu speaker, he quickly picked up Persian and was a contemplative observer of those turbulent times. At this time the KGB's duty was to monitor the internal situation, determine the balance of political forces and to build contacts within the most influential circles, particularly among clerics where they noticeably lacked good intelligence sources. The summer of 1979, thought Shebarshin, was a short blink of freedom for Iranians, with the anti-Shah revolution over and the Islamic one yet to come. He remarked on the unusual peacefulness of Tehran considering it was in the throes of a major upheaval, with a relative absence of crime and armed robbery, remarking that 'Iranians don't use violence for profit'. Although he had a low opinion of clerics, calling them 'professional agitators', he denied the existence of

²¹ RGANI, 89/27/45; 89/32/33; 89/43/2

²² RGANI, 89/32/10

Shi'ite fanaticism, noting that the people's so-called fanaticism was defensive rather than aggressive.

Meanwhile Ambassador Vinogradov was getting to grips with the new political order. Moscow wanted a meeting with Khomeini as soon as possible, and one was organized, but with difficulty, given Khomeini's reluctance to meet with foreign dignitaries. In fact, the Soviet ambassador appears to have been the only foreign dignitary Khomeini ever met, at the urging of Sanjabi. The two men met at Khomeini's home in South Tehran. Vinogradov recalled Khomeini as one of the most alert and 'internally mobilized' leaders he had ever met, wary and deeply reserved. The ayatollah was attentive but emphasized he would brook no interference in Iran's internal affairs. Every time they stepped out of Khomeini's home Vinogradov and his colleagues were mobbed by adoring crowds who wanted to touch someone who had been close to the Imam. Moscow kept sending Vinogradov to court Khomeini and bombarded him with proposals for friendship, cooperation, aid, trade agreements and cultural links. They had several more meetings and conversations after Khomeini relocated to Qum, but the ayatollah remained largely non-committal. He never tried to ingratiate the Soviet side, and his manner was solemn, but occasionally one sensed joking and sarcasm on his part.

Although Khomeini was pragmatic in his approach and broadly in favour of maintaining good relations with the USSR, there was ultimately little common ground between him and the Soviets. Vinogradov felt that he lacked a broad perspective and tolerance, while Shebarshin spoke in chilling terms of 'his indomitable will, steely determination, pragmatic, calculating mind, his total devotion to his goals...his ability to send millions to their death (in war) was terrifying – he could have sent the whole of humanity to be sacrificed' and decried the 'cult of death' he promoted during Iran-Iraq war.

Following the fruitless encounters with Khomeini, the International Department shifted gears, attempting to get the Tudeh to infiltrate the upper echelons of Iran's government. They were, however, being rather misled by Kianuri's exaggerations as to the party's size and influence at the time. The leadership also pursued another channel via Ayatollah Taleghani, known as the "Red Ayatollah", who became Khomeini's representative in Tehran after he left for Qum. Taleghani was wildly popular, almost to Khomeini's

level, and in particular was idolised by the Mujahidin and Fadiayan – an interesting point for the Soviets. A meeting was arranged in March 1979 between Vinogradov and Taleghani, who proved much more open and amenable to the USSR than Khomeini. Vinogradov recalled him as a jovial character, smoking Winston cigarettes and waxing lyrical about the bond between Iranians and Soviets, both anti-imperialists who as ‘Eastern peoples’ had a better mutual understanding than they did with Western Europeans or Americans. Taleghani was sanguine about the future of Irano-Soviet relations and assured Vinogradov that anti-Soviet rhetoric on the street was merely a passing phase of revolutionary fervour. Vinogradov noted Taleghani’s desire – unusual in those divisive years – to unite all the revolutionary forces, including the Left, and create a broad national coalition. This earned him more than few enemies.

Their next meeting took place in September 1979. Vinogradov, fresh from leave in Moscow, told Taleghani how the revolution had been well received in the USSR and brought up Lenin’s points about revolution in the East. Taleghani, again very amiable, said the USSR carried the important global burden of fighting imperialism and admitted that if he had lived in the time of Marx and Engels, he too would have opposed religion, because at that time religion (including Islam) served the interests of the oppressors. There was no conflict between Islam and Communism, he continued - they were different paths to the same goal. Among other things, Vinogradov expressed annoyance that his country was being blamed for the turbulence in Kurdistan, and Taleghani agreed to address the matter in his next Friday sermon and refute claims of Soviet interference. By the following day Taleghani was dead, apparently of an overnight heart attack, prompting mass convulsions of public mourning. Vinogradov and Kuzichkin both suspected foul play, noting that he was buried unusually quickly even by Islamic standards and that high clerics refused public demands for an autopsy on his corpse.

Vinogradov and Taleghani’s last conversation highlighted Soviet attention to a dramatic new development which had implications within their own borders – the rise of political Islamism. When the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee (which counted long-time Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko among its members) met in March 1980, Islam and Islamism were the hot topics. Much of the discussion revolved around crafting Soviet responses to the situation

in Iran and Afghanistan, where the population had to be persuaded that the Soviet Union, although founded on an atheist ideology, was in fact a friend of Islam and “*not opposed to religion, only to fanaticism*”.

It was imperative, said Gromyko and the committee delegates, to continuously emphasize the shared ‘anti-imperialist’ character of both the Iranian Revolution and the USSR, and to show how the USSR was much closer in spirit to Iran than the “*Christian Imperialists, whom Brzezinski and Carter are trying to present as the protectors of Islam*”. (a reference to the Afghan mujahidin). The important thing for Soviet citizens was to avoid taking offence from fiery anti-Soviet rhetoric – one delegate said that Bani-Sadr²³ and Khomeini should not be written off for raging against “*Western oppression and Eastern Communism*” since Lenin himself had said that some clerics are closer to socialism than many atheists.²⁴

Many delegates remarked that the conflicts and overall situation in the Middle East had acquired a new dimension - that of social/revolutionary struggle. The situation in Iran was seen as evidence that “*freedom-seeking revolutions are increasingly acquiring an anti-capitalist character*”, as shown by the anti-Americanism of the US embassy hostage crisis in Tehran, which had started in November 1979. Foreign Minister Gromyko was present throughout this meeting and broadly endorsed the views expressed by other Presidium members.²⁵

Thus, after the revolution the Soviets first tried cautious alignment with the Tudeh, but equally attempted to muster Islamic goodwill by showing Soviet acceptance of Islam and to spark further antipathy against America/the West by playing up the ‘anti-imperialistic’ character of the Iranian revolution. This became amply clear in July 1980, when the CPSU Central Committee drew up a secret plan for intensifying its ‘informational-propaganda work’ in Iran. Designed to counter both the recent onslaught of ‘Western/imperialist propaganda’ in Iran and the increasingly anti-Soviet bent of some clerics in government circles, the plan sought to increase the volume of Persian language TV and radio broadcasting to Iran from Tashkent and Baku, to promote closer collaboration

²³ Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, President of Iran 1980-81

²⁴ GARF, 9540/1/453

²⁵ GARF, 9540/1/453

between Soviet and Iranian news agencies and broadcasting corporations, to prepare and distribute brochures on 'Soviet attitudes to Islam' and the journal 'Muslims in the USSR', to invite Iranian journalists and writers to visit the USSR and especially to the Muslim-majority areas and to publish and distribute greater quantities of socio-political literature in Persian and Azeri. The plan was approved by CPSU heavyweights including Mikhail Gorbachev, who had recently ascended to the Politburo.²⁶

To sum up, the Soviet-Iranian relationship was remarkably settled during the late Pahlavi period. It seems that Shah was able to effectively temper his outwardly pro-Western orientation by establishing many cultural, technical and economic ties to the Soviet Union – just enough to provide insurance against a possible souring of relations without causing the US too much concern. The Soviet leadership reciprocated the Shah's attitude – as much as was diplomatically possible in the circumstances.

The cordial and restrained nature of Pahlavi-Soviet relations was followed by a period of Soviet activism from 1979-1980, when the turbulent internal situation provided more opportunities and incentives for the Soviet Union to enlist Iranian sympathy and support for its policy. Soviet policy towards Iran during the late Pahlavi and early revolutionary years was largely motivated by opportunism and coloured by realpolitik rather than ideology - even if traces of nostalgia for the ideal of Socialist solidarity lingered in some quarters.

This brings my talk to a close. But it does not provide a full picture of the situation. The jigsaw is large and complex and many pieces are still missing. A visit to the KGB archives and less restricted access to the foreign policy archive and Politburo papers would undoubtedly shed further light on the matter. However, the available evidence clearly suggests that the Shah and indeed the Western powers need not have concerned themselves too much with thwarting 'Iranistan' – since this does not appear to have been a genuine Soviet objective during this period.

Far from engineering a Communist vassal state – which would have been impossible in the given circumstances – the USSR instead sought to establish a stable relationship with Iran's acting governments and following the revolution, was hopeful of gaining a

²⁶ RGANI, 89/39/6

resolutely anti-Western ally, receptive to its influence, on its southern border.

BP IN IRAN FROM 1902 TO THE 1950s

Mohammad Ali Ala

BRIEF REVIEW OF PRE-1902 OIL EXPLORATION ACTIVITIES

The first agreement concerning oil exploration in Iran was granted by Nassereddin Shah (Qajar king, 1848-96) to Baron Julius de Reuter, founder of the Reuters News Agency, in 1872. A wide-ranging agreement, which covered the entire territory of Iran, its terms included an oil concession, the first to be granted in the Middle East, as well as the construction of railways, irrigation systems, creation of post and telegraph services, banks, industrial plants and the administration of the southern ports. Domestic protests and Tsarist Russian pressure led to the cancellation of the agreement without the implementation of any of its terms.

Drilling for oil was first attempted in 1884. The operation was mounted by a Dutch trading firm, Hotz and Co based in Bushehr, which obtained a concession to drill in an area called Dalaki, 40 km southwest of Kazerun, where copious oil seeps were present, but it failed to establish production..

A second but much more limited oil concession was granted to Reuter in 1889. The terms of the concession included the establishment of a bank which was duly formed in the same year and named the Persian Bank Mining Rights Corporation. During 1892-93, three wells were drilled by the enterprise in southern Iran: two at Dalaki, one of which reached a depth of over 800 ft, and one 700 ft deep borehole on Qeshm Island. All three failed to establish commercial production and Reuter abandoned drilling operations in 1893. No further drilling activity took place in Iran until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Our story begins with the granting in May 1901 by Mozaffradin Shah (Qajar king, 1896-1907) of a sixty-year concession to William Knox Darcy, a financier who had made a fortune in the Australian gold rush in the 1880s and was looking for an investment opportunity. The concession covered an area of 1,200,000 km². In deference to Russian sensitivities, however, the five northern provinces of Khorasan, Astarabad (today's Gorgan), Mazandaran, Gilan and Azerbaijan were excluded from the concession.

MILESTONES IN THE HISTORY OF THE DARCY ENTERPRISE

As manager of his field operations in Iran, Darcy appointed George Bernard Reynolds, a civil engineer and self-taught geologist with experience in oil well drilling in the Netherlands East Indies. Reynolds proved to be an admirable choice; he was a man of unusual fortitude and resolve, a tough pioneering character with a flair for dealing with peoples of different backgrounds and culture.

Working conditions were very difficult and it was Reynolds' tenacity, perseverance and unshakable faith in a positive outcome of his mission that ensured the ultimate success of Darcy's venture. Chiah Surkh, in western Lorestan close to the Turkish border, was the first area targeted for exploration drilling. It now lies in Iraq due to transfer of territories resulting from border revisions between Iran and Ottoman Turkey in 1914. Two wells were drilled during 1902-04, the first of which reached 2,135 ft, which was deep for that time. Both wells found encouraging shows of oil and gas but not in commercially viable quantities. In 1905 the focus of exploration activity shifted south-eastwards to an area generally known as Maidan-e Naftun (Masjed-e Soleyman) in Khuzestan province, the prospects of which were favourably assessed by Darcy's own geological advisers. By May 1905, however, Darcy, was brought to the verge of bankruptcy, having personally funded the entire operation to the tune of £250,000 (£21.3 m today) and was forced to seek financial assistance which came by way of a farm out to the Burmah Oil Company. Three further disappointing years ensued but success was achieved by the discovery of oil in commercial quantities at Maidan-e Naftun in the early hours of 26 May 1908. This was a defining moment: success was snatched from the jaws of failure, marking a truly momentous date in Iran's 20th century history and the birth of its oil industry.

The Anglo-Persian Years

In 1909 the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) was formed and took over the operations in Iran. Important discoveries followed: Naft-e Shah (1923), Haft Kel (1927) and Gachsaran (1928),

establishing Iran as the first producer and exporter of oil in the Middle East. The construction of the Abadan refinery and a pipeline connecting it to Masjed-e Soleyman began in 1910. Crude oil processing began in 1912. The Abadan refinery grew steadily over the next seven decades and with a capacity of 600,000 barrels per day, it was the world's largest refinery at the time of its destruction in the early days of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980.

Underfunding was a perennial problem and limited the expansion of APOC's operations in its early years. Its prospects took a turn for the better, however, as the result of a change in political circumstances in London. In 1911, Winston Churchill was appointed First Lord of the Admiralty and, encouraged by Admiral Sir John Fisher (Chairman of the Royal Commission on Fuel and Engines), made the momentous decision to convert the British navy to an oil burning fleet. APOC was awarded an exclusive contract to supply the navy - at a discount, the amount of which has never been disclosed - with bunker fuel in 1914 and, at the same time, in order to safeguard the long-term security of this vital source of supply, the British government acquired a 51% stake in the APOC for the payment of £2,000,000 (£177.5 million today). This injection of cash was a watershed in the history of the company – securing its long-term future by enabling a struggling enterprise to expand its activities outside Iran and propelling it to the oil industry's 'top table' in the 1920s.

The Inter-War Years

As far as the APOC-Iranian government relations are concerned, disagreements developed right from the beginning of the company's operations. The earliest arose during World War I and centred around the way in which the company calculated the revenues payable to the Iranian government (16% of its net profits) under the terms of the concession and the discount granted on the oil sold to the British Navy. The post-World War I years also witnessed major changes in the internal political dynamics of Iran.

The Qajar dynasty was deposed in 1925 and Reza Khan, an army officer who had risen to power after a *coup d'état* in February 1921, was crowned as the first Pahlavi shah in April 1926. At the same time, there was a rise in nationalistic sentiments and the Darcy

Concession became a target of public resentment as a symbol of foreign influence. Its terms, the high-handed manner in which APOC dealt with the Iranian government, its refusal to pay income tax which had been introduced in Iran in 1930 and the poor living conditions which its Iranian work force was compelled to endure came under criticism in an increasingly strident campaign in the press. Attempts were made to revise the terms of the concession but, despite protracted negotiations in London and Tehran over a five-year period (1927-32), no agreement was reached. This resulted in unilateral revocation of the concession by Reza Shah in November 1932.

After a break of four months, negotiations were resumed in Tehran in April 1933. On behalf of the company, they were conducted personally by APOC chairman, Lord Cadman, and his deputy, William Fraser (company chairman at the time of nationalisation and the ensuing political crisis which assumed international dimensions during 1951-53). An Iranian negotiating team was designated, but the negotiations were difficult and inconclusive since the Iranian team lacked the necessary authority due to Reza Shah's autocratic rule and decision making style. Frustrated by the lack of progress and in an attempt to break the deadlock, Cadman invited Reza Shah to act as chairman in a final session. At the negotiating table, Cadman increased the pressure by presenting a new and unexpected demand: extension of the concession period by 75 years to 2008. Taken by surprise and off guard, Reza Shah was outmanoeuvred and agreed to an extension of 60 years in exchange for some improvements in the concession terms, increased royalty payments for 1931 and 1932 as well as a reduction of its area from 480,000 square miles to 100,000 square miles. The new agreement became known as the 1933 Concession. The name of the enterprise was also changed to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC).

Other significant developments during the inter-war years included the extension of exploration activities resulting in new oil and gas field discoveries, rapid expansion of the Abadan refinery, building of products distribution infrastructure and the establishment of education and training facilities. In 1939 the Abadan Institute of Technology (AIT) was established, dedicated to the training of

personnel for the oil industry. It is now renamed The University of Petroleum Technology and has campuses in several cities in Iran.

POST-WORLD WAR II EVENTS UP TO THE 1950s

The year 1941 marked an important milestone in the modern history of Iran. Despite having declared its neutrality from the beginning of World War II in 1939, Iran's important strategic position as a supply route to the Soviet Union, which was engaged in a desperate struggle with Germany following the invasion of its territory in June 1941, and the importance of the country's oil to the British war effort, led to its occupation by the Allies. In an act that is seen as a settling of scores with a troublesome leader with perceived pro-German sympathies and who had pressurised the AIOC to maintain Iran's oil revenues during the depression years of the 1930s, the British forced Reza Shah's deposition and replaced him by his heir, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in September 1941. AIOC's hold on the Iranian oil industry was thus secured for the duration of the war.

Reza Shah's fall transformed the political landscape in Iran. Opposition leaders emerged from detention or returned from exile and political parties began to proliferate. The most prominent among these leaders was Dr Mohammad Mosaddegh, a nationalist politician with a long history as a proponent of liberal democracy and freeing the country from foreign domination. Rise of nationalist sentiments in Iran and protests against the terms of the 1933 Concession followed the lifting of the lid on political debate and led to the passage of two milestone acts through the Majles, to which Mosaddegh had been elected in the first post-Reza Shah poll. The first was the introduction by Mosaddegh of the 1944 Bill, preventing Iranian governments from entering into negotiations with or granting oil concessions to any foreign interest without the assent of Majles. This became known famously as his *Doctrine of Negative Equilibrium*. The second was the *Single Article Law* of 1947, requiring the Iranian government to regain its national rights over the country's oil industry, paving the way to nationalisation, an event that reverberated around the world when it came to pass in 1951.

With political pressure building up, efforts began in late 1948 to revise the 1933 Concession under the guidelines set out in the *Single Article Law* of 1947. Preliminary discussions were held in Tehran

between Neville Gass, an AIOC director, and the Department of Oil Affairs in Iran's Finance Ministry, but no substantive agreements were reached. A major source of discontent on Iran's part was the meagre amount of its revenues from taxation and royalty payments - these were about half of what the British Treasury received in taxes from the company in the post-war years. Negotiations were resumed in early 1949, this time being conducted on the Iranian side by Golshaian, the Finance Minister, resulting in the Gass-Golshaian or the Supplemental Agreement. Despite some improvements in the terms of the concession to secure higher revenues for Iran, the agreement failed to gain ratification by the Majles due to filibustering tactics employed by its opponents who were against reaching any accommodation with the AIOC. Ultimately, the Supplemental Agreement was overtaken by events, shifting the political focus inexorably towards nationalisation. In the same year, the Iran Oil Company (IOC) was formed with the mandate to explore for oil outside the AIOC concession area.

In 1950, a fifty-fifty profit-sharing agreement was reached between the Arabian American Company (ARAMCO) and Saudi Arabia. AIOC failed to recognise the rising tide of change and shortsightedly resisted the demand to offer Iran the same deal. This fanned the flames of resentment against the AIOC, resulting in a deterioration in Anglo-Iranian relations and the inevitable accession of Dr Mossadeqh to the premiership as the leader of a National Front government in March 1951. A bill nationalising the AIOC and the formation of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) was swiftly ratified by the Majles and NIOC was charged with taking over the operations of the AIOC. The latter refused, however, to accept nationalisation and placed obstacles in the way of the committee designated by the Iranian government to oversee the takeover. This marked the start of the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute and the boycott of Iranian oil in international markets. Over the next two years, several attempts were made to resolve the dispute. These included the Jackson Mission, the Stokes Mission, the International Bank's proposal, the Harriman Mission and finally the Churchill-Truman Proposal. None of them was successful, however, since any agreement with even a hint of a compromise as far as the principle of nationalisation was concerned was unacceptable in the politically charged atmosphere prevalent in Iran at that time. On the British

side, personal antipathy felt toward Mosaddegh by Herbert Morrison and Sir Anthony Eden – respectively Labour and Conservative foreign secretaries at the time - as well as by Sir William Fraser, the AIOC chairman, and their preoccupation with maintaining Britain's international prestige injected an element of inflexibility into the British position, precipitating a lack of interest in reaching an agreement with Iran. There was a concern, also shared by the American petroleum companies and the US government, that if Iran's nationalisation of its oil industry was allowed to succeed, it would encourage other producing countries to follow this example, thereby threatening the control of the international oil cartel – the *seven sisters* - in the world markets.

Because of its majority interest in the AIOC, the UK government stepped in, attempting to portray the nationalisation as an act contrary to the provisions of the 1933 Concession, a dispute between two governments and referred the case to the United Nations and the International Court of Justice (World Court) at The Hague. Judgements were delivered at the United Nations and the World Court in 1952; they went against Britain. Both bodies rejected Britain's case and ruled in favour of Iran's claim that the dispute was between a company and a government, and consequently neither body was competent to intervene. The World Court's judgement was particularly poignant: By a majority of nine to five, its panel of fourteen judges upheld Iran's contention that the Court 'had no jurisdiction to deal with the case'. Those voting against Iran were the US, Canada, France, Chile and Brazil. The British judge, Sir Arnold McNair, in a commendable act of honesty and decency, made history by voting against Britain, since he felt that 'the British case was weak'.

Mosaddegh reached the zenith of his domestic popularity in 1952, when, encouraged by the British and American governments, an attempt was made by the Shah to remove him from power in order to break the deadlock in the settling the oil dispute. The attempt backfired spectacularly, however, and he was reconfirmed in office within a few days. Despite the immediate resumption of negotiations to reach an agreement with the Anglo-American parties, no progress was achieved in this regard; the boycott of Iranian oil on the international markets, orchestrated by the AIOC, held firm, economic hardship set in and Mosaddegh's efforts to run a 'non-oil' economy

were unsuccessful. Disunity developed within the National Front government and by late 1952 a significant number of Mosaddegh's allies deserted him and political turmoil, fomented by the agents of the British embassy in Tehran, gathered momentum. In August 1953 Mosaddegh's National Front government was ousted in a *coup d'état*, conceived by MI6, the British secret service, and funded and executed by the CIA in August 1953 (*Operation Ajax*).

The demise of the National Front government paved the way for the formation in 1954 of the '*Consortium*', a grouping of 16 Western oil companies to take over the operations of the AIOC on the basis of a fifty-fifty profit sharing principle with Iran for a period of 25 years. The next issue to be settled was the magnitude of the compensation to be paid to the AIOC for its nationalised assets. After weeks of intense negotiations, punctuated by some acrimonious wrangling between the AIOC and the *Consortium* members, the AIOC received compensation from Iran and the *Consortium* members as well as retaining a 40% stake in the *Consortium*. From Iran, the Company received a net sum of £25 million in ten equal instalments starting on 1 January 1957. From the *Consortium* members, the Company received £32.4 million in the first year of the recommencement of the operations plus a further payment per ton of oil produced until the sum of £182 million was reached. It is worthy of note that Sir William Fraser 'suggested' that the AIOC should also receive 110 million tons of 'free' oil over 20 years from Iran in lieu of loss of its profits following the nationalisation of its assets in Iran. This was considered as unreasonable and dismissed by the Iranian government as well as the *Consortium* participants.

CONCLUSION

It is pertinent at this juncture to ponder whether Iran achieved the ideals and aims of the nationalisation of its oil industry in 1951. The reality was that Iran lacked access to the international oil markets, the means of transporting its oil as well as the ability to set the price of its crude petroleum and products exports. These were under the monopoly of the international oil cartel – the *seven sisters* – which was not prepared to admit outsiders to this exclusive club. Mosaddegh and his advisers underestimated the challenges associated with this *de facto* state of affairs and their initial optimism

proved elusive. A further factor impeding progress was the British government's decision to play for time and unwillingness to engage in serious negotiations with Mosaddegh to settle the dispute. Thus, supported by the British government and the oil cartel, the AIOC succeeded in preventing the Nationalisation Act from bearing immediate fruit. Consequently, after enduring two years of internal political turmoil and economic hardship resulting from the boycott of its oil exports, Iran was obliged to accept terms (*the Consortium Agreement* of 1954) only marginally more favourable than the previous concessionary arrangements. The main difference was that the country's oil industry was now administered by all the major companies instead of by only one.

Undoubtedly, the conclusion of the *Consortium Agreement* marked a watershed in AIOC's history. Although it held a 40% interest in the new enterprise, Iran was no longer the centre of the Company's operations or the focus of its forward planning. It moved on to diversify its sources of oil supply and assumed a more multinational character. Finally, the end of the Company's fifty-year era in Iran was marked in December 1954 when the AIOC morphed into British Petroleum, originally a German distribution network - established by Deutsche Bank as the UK outlet for the products of its Rumanian oil.

Our story ends here but the influence of the international oil companies continued well beyond the 1950s. International consortia remained in control of Middle East oil until the early 1970s. For Iran, the story of oil has been an emotive and politically charged issue. As the country's economic life blood, it has been the focus of great national interest and debate for well over a century. Certainly, that fateful spring morning in 1908 marked a milestone in Iran's 20th century history; it ushered in a new era – an era not only of prosperity, but also of social and political upheaval and turmoil that has not yet ended.

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Incidents in a Shepherd's Life: Shahrud – 1967/1968

Anthony Fitzherbert

In August 1967, aged 27, I left England to manage the landed inheritance in Shahrud belonging to the two Azodi sisters, Azizeh and Hamoush: Azizeh the elder, unmarried, intellectual free thinker, educated at the Sorbonne, with a highly developed sense of humour; Hamoush (Hamideh Khanom), a social phenomenon, married (for the third time) to the British engineer, Ian Bowler. Ian was the joint founder and inspiration of IMEG, the company contracted to plan and oversee the construction of a gas pipeline, stretching from the oil fields of Khuzestan up the entire length of the Zagros to the border of Soviet Armenia. Although it was Ian and IMEG who officially employed me, it was the formidable figure of Hamoush's and Azizeh's mother who dominated my life and the little world that was Shahrud. Turantaj Azodi (Turi Khanom), Khanom-e-Bozorg to the Shahrudis, daughter of the Qajar prime minister Vossuq ud-Dowleh (1868-1951), educated by French governesses, was a force to be reckoned with. She deeply disapproved of her daughters employing a 'farangi' (English to boot!) until she decided that she liked me, when she became a pillar of support, but always in command.

Shahrud is a small town situated half way between Teheran and Mashhad, on the main road and railway line that connects the two cities south of the Alborz mountain range. The town sits astride an ancient caravan road, among its surrounding villages and leafy walled gardens, established where *qanats* traditionally brought life-giving water to a strip of fertile plain lying between the mountains that rise like a wall to the north and the wastes of the Dasht-e Kavir stretching away across the horizon to the south. The town owes its existence to the governorship of a late Qajar grandee, Amir Azam, who as military governor of Semnan province was commissioned by the Shah to defend the Alborz passes against the predations of Turcoman horsemen, whose *alaman* (raiding parties) traditionally harried the villages and caravans of the Iranian plateau, carrying off men, women and children to sell into bondage in the oasis cities of Turkestan.

Amir Azam established Shahrud as his personal power base in the district in order to bypass the influence traditionally held by the

hereditary guardians of the tomb of the sunni '*pir*', Sheikh Bayazid, which lies a few miles to the north east at Bastam. In this he was successful. As was traditional for a Qajar governor, Amir Azam used his position to establish himself locally as the feudal overlord of numerous villages and their inhabitants, controlling the distribution of the *qanat* water to the agricultural land and walled gardens. Whilst Reza Shah diminished the power of the old Qajar landed classes, the construction of the Tehran to Mashhad railway between 1938 and 1957 brought added prosperity to Shahrud, at the expense of Bastam. Change of dynasty, Russian occupation in two world wars, the division of land through inheritance and the land-reforms of the early 1960s, reduced Amir Azam's original landholdings to a remnant of three or four villages and gardens in and around Shahrud and limited the family's control over the *qanat* water. In addition there also remained a scattering of strategically located gardens and summer grazing (*yeilaaq*) in the Alborz valleys to the north, originally acquired to command the Tash valley and the Shah Kuh pass through the mountains to Gorgan and the Turcoman steppe beyond.

In the present generation ownership had been further divided between Turi Khanom and her two daughters. After the death of her diplomat husband, Turi Khanom had returned to his wasted estates in Shahrud where, almost single handed, she pulled them together, becoming a one woman development agency and a deeply respected 'power in the land' despite of, or possibly because of her gender. Among other things, she established a school for girls and a sugar factory, for which local farmers were encouraged to cultivate sugar beet, a crop then new to Iran. It was the daughters' share of this inheritance that I was to manage, into which Ian Bowler had invested a share. Rumour had preceded my arrival that I knew something about sheep farming and shepherding and this encouraged Turi Khanom to hand over her flock of about 1200 Sangesaris (the local breed of fat-tailed sheep) to her daughters, for me to manage. To some extent the rumour was true, but sheep and shepherding as practised in Iran are very different from the breeds and shepherding systems of Galloway, Perthshire and Sussex, that had been my experience up until then. There was much for me to learn about fat-tailed sheep, 'biblical' shepherding practices and systems of transhumance, the migration of flocks between summers spent in the high mountain *yeilaaq* and winters in the lowland *qeshlaq*.

The transfer in ownership of Turi Khanom's sheep to her daughters caused some consternation, coming when it did so late in the season. It was already mid-August and, with winter fast approaching, no provision had been made for housing or fodder to keep the flocks through the long, bitter Shahrud winter. It looked like a deliberate test of initiative, as I am sure it was. We had no option but to immediately cull 125 of the oldest and most broken toothed veterans, which proved a saga in itself, as it met with the disapproval of the great lady. Too late as it turned out, for she was in Paris and by the time she returned, the veterans had been sold and butchered, necessitating a hasty 'diplomatic' visit to Tehran by the night train to make peace and eat humble pie. Hasty arrangements were made to refurbish an old caravanserai that stood on land belonging to the family, as winter quarters for the main flock of breeding sheep. This ruined monument to an ancient trade route from Central Asia was situated strategically at the entrance to the Tash valley and the Shah Kuh pass. This had been the scene of a fierce encounter between Turcoman tribesmen and Amir Azam's personal militia, which had entered local legend.

At the same time, by hook or by crook and at short notice it was also necessary to procure and store enough straw and hay, supplemented with beet pulp from the Khanom's sugar factory to keep the sheep alive until the next spring. This left about 300 young sheep, male and female (in the dialect of Khorasan - *toghli*), born that spring, unprovided for. These would not normally be sold or mated until the following year. On the advice of the shepherds it was decided to adopt the custom of the Shahrud mountain villages, from which they came, and arrange for grazing across the mountains to the north east where winters are warmer, if indeed this was possible so late in the season.

It was at this point that Ismail appeared to save the day. Ismail was a 'flock-master' from the mountain village of Tash and a relative of Reza Jannati the foreman of the hill farm and *yeilagh* of Farahzad, on which stood the old caravanserai. For many generations it had been traditional for the flock-masters from the independent mountain villages – which had never been subject to a land lord – to rent winter pastures in the valley of the Atrak River, northwest and down-stream of Bojnurd, from the Göklan Turcoman, whose territory this is. The valley lies in the lee of the Kopet Dag mountains, which form the

frontier with Turkmenistan, then still part of the USSR. A meeting was duly arranged with Ismail, who agreed that as there was pasturage to spare on the grazing land he was already renting, and as these sheep belonged to the Khanom-e Bozorg, he would be happy to share it with us. It was agreed that we would share the rent, the grazing and the herding. As our shepherds also came from Tash and the neighbouring village of Mojen, everyone knew each other and so all was arranged with no difficulty and an agreement drawn up and signed.

One bright autumn day in the second week of October we met with Ismail, his shepherds and his sheep in a meadow by the Tash river. After the sheep of the two respective flocks had been marked, checked and counted, the shepherds, their donkeys laden with supplies, set off on their six week trek across the mountains. Two shepherds went on ahead of the others to repair and prepare the *aghal* (shepherds' encampment) where they would be based for the winter, in a place known as Samangan, a side valley a few miles from the village of Ashkhaneh. I was not to see or hear of them again until mid-November when news came that they were nearing their winter quarters.

In the meanwhile, my life in Shahrud had been more than fully engaged in harvesting the potato crop; waging war on the wild boar that descended from the mountains in bristly sounders to ravage the potato fields of landlord and peasant alike; rebuilding the old caravanserai, buying winter fodder and building silage pits for the beet pulp. It was only then that I had time to drive across the mountains in the estate Land Rover, which had seen better days, to see how they were getting on in the Atrak valley. With me came Ibrahim, a young mechanic, to share the driving and help to keep the Land-Rover going, Ismail Tashi our grazing partner, and another Tashi flock-master, Mahmad Ali Aghnami. The drive over the mountains was full of incident, near disaster and frequent breakdowns, most of it in pouring rain and mud. This was to be the first of several expeditions across the mountains, taking supplies to the shepherds and changing the guard so that those who needed to could return to their villages and families, and treating the sheep for their various ailments. When we finally got there on this first occasion we found that the sheep had not yet arrived, as they had found good pasturage in a neighbouring valley and had decided to linger there a

little longer. This was where we eventually found them, in good order, only having lost five along the way to wolves and accidents. We spent time with the shepherds who were repairing the *aghal* in Samangan for their arrival and made our number with the Turcoman khan, whose grazing we were renting. This friendly gentleman, complete in his fine *karakalpak* hat, lived a mile or two away in his village of Incheh, together with his wives and children. After some heated discussion in Turki about the grazing arrangements agreement was reached and we were regally feasted.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the *aghal* where the sheep and shepherds were to spend the winter was neolithic. The stabling for the sheep, where they were to spend the cold winter nights, was half a cave dug into the hillside and half a shelter roofed with juniper poles felled from the surrounding mountains, covered with brushwood, topped by generations of sheep dung. From a distance it was indistinguishable from the brown hills that surrounded it. The only ventilation was through a low doorway and the interior, stygian and stifling. In fine weather, the flock went out to graze the surrounding brush covered hills during the day. At night and in bad weather they repaired to this odorous cavern, the doorway closed and defended against wolves and thieves with spiny bundles of berberis and christ-thorn. The shepherds took turns to guard the sheep at night and herd them by day, whilst further defence was provided by four or five large crop-eared sheepdogs, with bells round their necks. These roamed freely about the camp at night and accompanied the shepherds and flock as they grazed the surrounding hills during the day. Intelligent and brave in defence of their charges and the camp, they well understood who was welcome and who was not.

An additional primitive shelter known as the *makhzan khan*, provided the shepherds with a place to shelter, eat and sleep. The *makhzan khan* was a slightly better furnished, smaller model of the sheep stable. A low circular dry-stone wall was topped by a conical roof of juniper poles covered with brushwood, covered in turn with a layer of clay mixed with chopped straw. The low doorway was closed by a heavy felt blanket hanging across the entrance. A simple metal stove in the centre of the floor provided warmth and a means of cooking. A metal stove pipe let out the smoke, which it did very ineffectively, accounting for the shepherds' complexions, which resembled the best Aberdeen kippers. At night simple brown *namad*

felts were rolled out to sleep upon with quilted *lahaf* filled with raw cotton to sleep under. I took my own sleeping bag. The sleepers lay like the spokes of a wheel, their feet towards the stove, which was fed with sticks and small logs cut from the surrounding brush. Niches in the stone wall provide places for the storage of their few possessions, as well as oil lamps, the *qalyan* (water-pipe) and simple cooking utensils. There were also roosting places for a rangy and vocal cockerel and his harem of four or five hens. For safety, these shared the *makhzan khan* with the herdsman at night, as foxes and stone martens were plentiful and bold, in return for providing a few eggs and the occasional scrawny feast. A few boxes and sacks held essential supplies of tea, *qand* sugar-loaf, flour, rice, lentils, *roghan* (cooking fat) and small hard balls of *qurut* (dried whey), plus a few pots, pans, kettles, knives, spoons, bowls and heavy pliers for cutting lumps of sugar off the loaf, to be held between the teeth when drinking *chai*. Meals were eaten with the fingers of the right hand, although the concession of a spoon was allowed me. The herdsman took turns at cooking. The meals were simple and repetitive, but always eaten with thick rounds of coarse *naan* bread baked every few days in a simple *tandur* oven, outside the *makhzan khan*, heated by burning dry artemisia bushes.

From the beginning I decided that while I was with them it was more appropriate for me to share their lives, rather than find lodgings for myself miles away in some bug-ridden *mehman khaneh*.. This way not only would I get to know them better and how they lived, but they would get to know me. I realised that I had a lot to learn and this was the best way to do it. I never regretted it. The *makhzan khan* might not have been the government 'hotel' in Bojnurd or even the *mehman khaneh* in the village of Ashkhaneh but, for all its primitiveness, it was warm and convivial. Furthermore, the smoke discouraged fleas and bugs. The niche which served as the nightly roost for the cockerel was across from the oil lamp that glimmered all night to frighten off the *djins* and *ghouls* that apparently prowled the hills after dark, fooling that incorrigible bird into thinking that dawn was forever breaking and should be constantly greeted. After several sleepless nights, my head ringing with cock-crows, I ordered chanticleer's execution and found an excuse for a celebration. His revenge was to be extremely chewy, but his widows continued to lay eggs.

After my first visit I would go across the mountains, as often as time and my other responsibilities permitted, to visit the shepherds and the sheep. The drive across the mountains over the pass north-east of Shahrud from the village of Tilabad down to the Turcoman *sahra* and Gonbad-e Kavus with its tall tomb-tower was always an adventure, especially when the snow was driving sideways in the pass. Down on the steppe were the Turcoman with their Central Asian faces, tall black *karakalpak* hats, gaily dressed women, rangy horses, hairy camels and high wheeled carts. From Gonbad a dirt road headed north-east into heavily wooded mountains through the Golestan forest with wild boar rooting for acorns under the oak trees. So on and upwards to the high plateau and crossing the watershed at Chaman Bid before descending over open steppe down into the Atrak valley and the village of Ashkaneh. From here a recently constructed military road headed towards the Soviet frontier, off which a dirt track led into the side valley in which our sheep were wintering.

Days were spent dosing and vaccinating the sheep, getting to know the surrounding country, paying courtesy calls on our neighbours and, when time allowed, taking a walk through the scrubby hills that surrounded our *aghal* with my shotgun in pursuit of a partridge or two for our supper, a welcome change from greasy gruel and rice and coarse dry *naan* that was our usual fare. Nights were spent in the smoky gloom of the *makhzan khan* where, after we had eaten, stories were told and tea and the *qalian* went their endless rounds. Sometimes we would call on the Turcoman khan and his family in his village, where we would invariably be feasted until we could eat no more. A couple of times we visited the always hospitable Quchani Kurds and their chieftain Hussein Al-Rahim, whose bat-winged goat-hair tents lay scattered through the length of the next valley. The lovely Kurdish ladies knitted splendid thick woollen stocking boots, of which I bought two pairs. On one occasion we were visited by two wandering minstrel story tellers. Belonging to no recognisable tribe or ethnic group, they earned a meagre living travelling round the Turcoman settlements and the Kurdish and Shahrudi herding camps, where they were well known and welcomed by all. For a small sum of money, a meal and a place to lay their heads, helped by a 'puff' of something to inspire the imagination, they would play haunting music and sing strange quavering songs. They recited the sagas of the steppe, stories from

the epic of K roghlu, in a jumbled mixture of Turki and Persian, to the accompaniment of a three stringed fiddle, a primitive drum and a double flute made from the hollow thigh bones of a vulture. To the delight of all, and with a little improvisation they wove into these epic tales scurrilous stories about the private lives of well known local dignitaries and officials, including the local chief of police and even the Governor of Bojnurd himself.

Once, on a night of the full moon in the depths of winter, the evening meal eaten, the *qalian* lit and on its bubbling circuit, with the devout preparing to say their evening *namaz*, our *aghal* was invaded by a small pack of marauding wolves. Pipe and prayers forgotten, we tumbled out into the bright moonlight to find a confusion of sheepdogs and wolves in ferocious and noisy battle. Grabbing the old Mauser rifle that I usually brought with me, just in case, fumbling for bullets, shoes and socks forgotten, we set off in pursuit. One shepherd, Mamd'Ali, was close behind me with my flash-light, its beam waving madly across the opposite hillside. In the confusion I could just make out the shadowy shapes of the sheep-dogs with the wolves in full retreat. More to speed them on their way than with any hope of hitting anything but the mountain side, I aimed in the general direction of the retreating shadows and pulled the trigger, the report echoing back from the surrounding hills. After this we returned to the *makhzan khan* to pick the prickles from our toes. Peace and order restored, we settled down for the night and slept like the dead until roused next morning with the usual glass of tea as the shepherds released the sheep from their nightly incarceration and led them out to pasture. They had not gone very far when the shepherd Abbas, whose turn it was to lead them out, started to wave in excitement, shouting for us to come quickly. There, lying stone dead with a bullet through its head was one of the wolves from the night before. Thus are undeserved reputations made!

Although we always drove from Shahrud to the Atrak via Gonbad and the Golestan forest, we usually returned the long way back via Mashhad. Whoever was coming back to Shahrud with me always wanted to visit the tomb of the Imam Reza in Mashhad to receive his blessing before returning to his family. As a non-believer, I was not officially permitted to enter the sacred precinct. However, returning on my second trip with Ali Asghar, who looked after one of the Shahrud gardens (*Bagh-e Seeneh*), and Ismail, they hatched a plot

together that despite my lack of faith I should be introduced to the Imam. I believe they thought that this would surely bring about my instant conversion, which they often told me was their earnest desire, “....so that nothing would then stand between us”. Thus, unshaven and grubby from days in the hills, we paid a visit to the old bazaar that then surrounded the complex of buildings that comprise the magnificent mosque built on the orders of the remarkable Timurid queen, Gohar Shad, and the shrine of the eighth Shi’a Imam Reza. When we came to the main entrance, instead of leaving me there they escorted me towards two guards armed with impressive maces and unsmiling faces, who were persuaded that I was a devout Pakistani who did not speak Persian. So in we went and duly paid our respects to the Imam. There was little time to look around, and I must admit that I was relieved to leave the holy precinct without incident. When crossing the central courtyard we had passed several enthusiastic groups of self-flagellating devotees, who I think would not have been friendly had they known who I was. Once we were safely clear of the shrine I said to Ali Asghar and Ismail, “*Were you not taking a terrible risk telling such a fib to the guards? You know I am not of your faith.*” To which they charmingly replied. “*Agha-ye-Mohandes, you have a good heart and that is sufficient for us and for the Imam.*” Thus emboldened, I later dared to go inside again on another occasion without any problem, so suppose that I can claim to call myself a ‘*mashdi*’.

There was other lighter entertainment to be had in Mashhad, which we could all share together without hazard, such as the folk theatre-cum-music-hall where charming naïve dramas were performed to an enthusiastic audience of rural pilgrims, almost in the shadow of the shrine. For a few *toman* paid at the door one waded to a seat across a floor ankle deep in the husks of sunflower and melon seeds sold to the audience in twists of newspaper. The plots were simple, delivered in the vernacular and full of bawdy humour, enlivened by bursts of song and wise proverbial sayings. The rich cast included classic characters, such as the effete, profligate and inebriated *shahzdeh* (princeling), his wicked and scheming *arbab* (bailiff) with designs on the virtue of the heroine, a beautiful and innocent village maiden, daughter of a worthy but impoverished *dehqan* (peasant farmer) and his ample and bossy wife. The hero was usually the poor but honest son of the village blacksmith, who is in

love with the virtuous maiden, and his widowed mother. Also for additional bathos and comedy as required, an Indian or Jewish moneylender, the local 'tart with a heart' with designs on the *shahzdeh*, a wandering *darvish* dressed in his rags, tall hat, *tabar* and *kashgool* (axe and begging bowl) and last but not least the village mullah as the fool – sometimes a wise fool, like the Mullah Nasruddin – but sometimes just as a fool, and of course the mullah's termagant wife.

The climax of my first winter in Shahrud came a few days after the Nowruz holiday. Hamoush and Ian and Azizeh, who had her own house in the garden, plus a selection of relations, foreign friends and diplomats from Tehran had descended on Bagh-e Sarcheshmeh for the holiday. Turi Khanom was ensconced and held court in her own garden, the Bagh-e Sarab, across the usually dry bed of the Shahrud river. These periodic Chekhovian visitations that usually extended over many days enlivened my life, in sharp contrast to the rustic existence I was growing accustomed to. I found my presence in constant demand to help with the entertainment. Depending on the season, this might involve hunting expeditions into the mountains in pursuit of *kabk* (chukar partridge- *Alectoris chukar*) or wild sheep (Urial - *Ovis orientalis*), or walking up the lines of *qanat* mounds shooting rock-pigeons flushed out of the well shafts where they roosted. There were picnic expeditions to sacred springs and *ziyarat*s (shrines). Always there were dinner parties in the Bagh-e Sarcheshmeh, with the *qanat* water quietly gurgling between the division stones below the veranda of Hamoush's house, in a cold clear stream, full of small fish. The wine flowed almost as freely as the *qanat* water and the conversation, which gushed in a bewildering Babel of languages and a conflation of the serious and intellectual, the philosophical, the sacred, the profane, the humorous, the risqué and the anecdotal, sometimes benign and sometimes cruel, invariably dominated by Hamoush. In the background Ian, a gifted guitarist, filled the house and the garden with the music of Andalusia, while Turi Khanom skilfully and triumphantly trounced yet another distinguished foreign diplomat at *takhteh* (backgammon), which she played with the speed and deadliness of lightning.

This visitation took place not long before the shepherds were due to start their long trek back from the Atrak valley to Shahrud. I was not planning to go over again myself as I was too busy with other

duties and lambs were being born thick and fast. Ismail had gone over to make sure that all was well and to see that they set off for home in good order. One evening in the middle of one such dinner party, I was summoned from the table by my faithful cook Mehdi to return immediately to my little house at the far end of the garden. There I found the shepherd, Mamd'Ali, waiting for me in floods of tears. He had returned in great haste, hitching lifts and by bus, to report that fifty-two of our sheep had been stolen, as well as some of Ismail's. Ismail had left the *aghal* in search of them, having sworn by the Imam Reza that he would not return until they were recovered. I must come immediately, he said. At that moment the geriatric Land Rover was once again 'hors de combat' waiting for spare parts to come from Tehran, their arrival delayed by the Nowruz holidays, so it was a day or two before I could leave. But leave I did with Mamd'Ali and Reza Jannati, the foreman from Farahzad.

We arrived at our *aghal* the following evening as dusk was falling, having stopped at the last petrol pump on the military road. Ismail was still wandering the hills, Bo-peep like, in search of the missing sheep and had not yet returned. Supper in the *makhzan khan* was eaten in deep gloom and we settled down to sleep and see what the morrow might bring. At about midnight the sheepdogs set up a hullabaloo and in walked Ismail with a stranger. He was grey with exhaustion from ten days spent scouring the country and the black-tented encampments of the Kurds, on foot and by donkey. Now he was triumphant as he reported that the missing sheep had been located, or at least he hoped they had. The stranger with him turned out to be the *kadkhoda* (headman) of a Turcoman village on the Atrak River some twenty-five miles away towards the Soviet frontier. Ismail had ridden up to the petrol station on a donkey hoping to get a lift into Bojnurd to go and see the gendarmes. There he was told that we had just passed by on our way to the *aghal*, so he changed his mind and found a lift in a passing jeep going up the military road. Also hitching a lift happened to be this *kadkhoda*. Ismail told him his story, to which the *kadkhoda* replied that a few days earlier he had come across two Baluchis from Zabol with a flock of sheep on the hills behind his village. His suspicions were aroused because there had been a lot of sheep rustling going on in the area recently. On questioning the Zabolis it became clear that the sheep had indeed been stolen. They were brothers who had come up

from Baluchistan to pick cotton on the Turcoman *sahra* and had 'lifted' the sheep on their way home to Zabol while the shepherd was asleep and the dogs somehow distracted. The *kadkhoda* had impounded the sheep and locked up the two Zabolis in his village, where they were presently incarcerated while the matter was being dealt with by the local gendarmes. Food and tea were immediately produced and, sleep forgotten, we decided to set off there and then in the middle of the night for our new friend's village. By now it was about one o'clock in the morning and we hoped to reach the Atrak River by dawn. Very soon we left all trace of a marked road behind and under a bright moon took off across the shadowy steppe past Kurdish nomad tents with their barking dogs, across the plains and hills and up and down dry river courses until as dawn was breaking we reached the Atrak River.

Here we were forced to stop as there was no bridge; the banks were steep and there was no motorable ford. At this point we rested for an hour before crossing the river on foot and with the help of the *kadkhoda* found horses in the village on the further side. From there we progressed in grand equestrian style, quickly covering the next six or seven miles to our new friend's village. As we approached the village through the graveyard, we spotted a small flock of black and brown Sangesari sheep disconsolately chewing on the few thistles that grew there. Dismounting to take a closer look, wonder of wonders, ours were among them and Ismail, myself and our shepherds were soon able to identify our respective sheep from their ear marks. By then the authorities had become involved, which entailed endless filling in of forms and general frustration while we proved our ownership. The gendarmes cheerfully admitted that, had we arrived a day later, they would have sold the sheep and pocketed the money themselves. Eventually everything was settled and we returned in triumph to the *aghal*, two shepherds following on foot with the sheep. All the missing sheep were safely recovered.

The equinox having passed, spring was in the air and the *sahra* covered with crimson tulips and sky blue grape-hyacinths, with the judas-trees (*Cercis griffithii*) that covered the hill-sides in deep purple bloom. Larks were singing in the sky and rock-thrushes from every outcrop. Cuckoos were calling among the junipers so that, closing my eyes, I could imagine that it was rural England in May. Everywhere flocks were on the move. The Kurds had already packed

up their black tents and belongings and loaded them on their horses and camels, new born lambs and infants tucked cosily into saddlebags, and were starting their own migration to pastures in the higher mountains. The magnificent Kurdish, women heads held high, were striding out beside the loaded beasts, their many coloured petticoats swinging, as if they owned the world. Two days later, our flocks having been reunited, the shepherds packed up the camp and set off with their charges on the long trek back to Shahrud. In a spirit of thankful triumph we also set off for home and the shepherds made it back six weeks later. The grazing on the way had been exceptionally good that year, so the sheep returned sleek and fat without any losses. From Shahrud they headed straight down into the *kavir* south of the town. There had been much snow in the winter, followed by good spring rain, and the desert was in bloom with many flocks moving there to take advantage of the spring flush. Here the young sheep rejoined the rest of the main breeding ewes and their lambs, now old enough to follow their mothers, with everyone happy to see the end of winter. They remained in the *kavir* until the time came to return to the comparative cool of Farahzad for the summer and the mountain grazing.

This was not quite the end of the story. A week or so after we returned word came from Bojnurd that the two Zaboli thieves were to be tried and Ismail and myself had to be there as witnesses. So back we went to Bojnurd where the prisoners were in gaol. They had admitted their guilt and, having been caught red-handed, the verdict was inevitable. Having passed judgement, the *qazi* (judge) turned to Ismail and myself, as the injured parties, and asked us to state what sentence would satisfy us, which came as a bit of a surprise to me. The *qazi* suggested a fine of 22,000 tomans (about £1,100 at that time), which was clearly a sum that these poor people would never be able to pay in several life times. What were we to say? Ismail and I asked be allowed to confer in private. Without difficulty we agreed that as these Zabolis were obviously very poor there was no question of ordering them to pay such a fine. After all –*alhamdulillah* – we had got our sheep back safe and sound and the Zaboli brothers had admitted their guilt. There should be some recognition of their misdemeanour, but clemency was what we both preferred. So we returned to the court and suggested that a few weeks in prison was quite sufficient and would satisfy us. As far as I recall eight weeks

was decided upon, after which they were to be released and free to go home to their families in Zabol, with a reprimand and a warning. The *qazi* commended us for our clemency and agreed the sentence, which he then pronounced. With this we were satisfied that justice had been done and returned home, myself to Bagh-e Sarcheshmeh, the family garden on the outskirts of Shahrud, and Ismail to his family in the rocky village of Tash.

The Last Zoroastrians of Zanzibar, by Dr Shadi Ganji
– Archaeologist and Traveller.

Translated from the Farsi by Antony Wynn

Two years ago, in September, I was in Zanzibar's Stone Town, waiting for a sudden rain storm to stop. When the sun came out in an unexpected blaze, I stepped out into the street, looking for an address for which I had long been searching. The door was up some wooden steps. A lean, ascetic-looking, pale skinned old man, wearing a white pyjama appeared. Clearly not an African, this must be the man I was looking for. I introduced myself as an Iranian looking for the last Zoroastrian family on Zanzibar. Without a word he invited me in, as if I were an old family friend, and sat me down in a room with tall white pointed arches. He opened the double windows to let in the sea breezes, as if to give air to our conversation.

'You have come to the right place. My daughter Diana and I are the last Zoroastrians on the island.'

I was tongue-tied. What should I say to this old man, whose ancestors had abandoned their homeland hundreds of years ago? Should I start talking about our common history, or just about the flood after that morning's rain? He came to my rescue:

'Are you a Zoroastrian, too?'

I said that I wasn't, but that in Iran many Zoroastrian customs had not been forgotten and were still being observed. Then his daughter Diana came in from the street, to find a stranger in the house. As I embraced her smiling face I told her she looked just like an Iranian.

'And you look just like a Parsee.'

She began to talk. On the mother's side her grandmother had been born in Zanzibar, but her grandfather had come from Bombay on business and had settled in Zanzibar. Her father had spent all his life in Zanzibar. They spoke English, Swahili, Gujarati and Hindi, but had long forgotten Persian. Life for Asians had become hard after the coup of 1964 and most of them had had to leave. They had gone back to India or to England, Canada and America, but this family had stayed on. Her mother, who had died five years before, had refused to leave her parents behind and, once they were dead, there had been

no reason to leave. Diana, although she had studied art at university, preferred to stay at home to look after her widowed father. They didn't know when Zoroastrians had first come to Zanzibar. Maybe two thousand years ago, they said, they had come in sailing ships to trade and some had settled. Some had come over in the 1940s to work for the English. It was in those days that the father of Farrokh Bulsara, who later became the singer Freddy Mercury, had come over. One can see traces of Zoroastrian customs among the natives of the island, even as they become ever fainter; the midsummer festival²⁷ of Mwaka Kogwa {New Year in Swahili} has similarities with the Nowruz of the Parsees, where they sing, dance and make merry round a bonfire. Zanzibar is the only place in Africa where this festival is celebrated.

Diana took me some way out of Stone Town to see the old fire temple and cemetery. The locals call it the Shamba-ya²⁸ Parisi, having long forgotten what it used to be. The watchman, recognising Diana, let us in. The first tombstone had the name Parviz on it.

'That's my mother's grave.'

'But Parviz is a man's name.'

She smiled. The name on the next grave was Khorshid. Nearby was the grave of her grandfather Jamshid, who had been born in Zanzibar. Some of the names were inscribed in English and some in Gujarati. Most of the names were common Persian names. Diana was surprised that I had a friend called Khorshid Parsi, but was a Muslim. She supposed that all Muslims should have Muslim names.

Diana told me that she and her father paid someone to come twice a year to weed the graveyard to stop it reverting to jungle. They are the only ones who come to visit its eternal residents. After the departure of the Zoroastrians following the coup, the fire temple was left without either priest or congregation and was sold to a rich Indian Muslim, who undertook to preserve the building and not let it fall into ruin. However, the temple had been turned into a warehouse and

²⁷ The old Zoroastrian calendar of 365 days added an extra month every 120 years to make up for the lost days, but over the years they had forgotten to do this. This meant that 1st Farvardin (i.e. spring equinox) had slipped back into the summer, which is why Mwaka Kongwa does not correspond with the current Persian calendar.

²⁸ Shamba – Swahili for a small plot of cultivated land.

was now being used as a carpenter's workshop. We picked our way through the scrubby trees to find it.

The temple had a tin roof and a veranda with a white balustrade round it. A carpenter was sawing away at a plank. Behind him a doorway gave into what looked like a store room. There were some other doors, all locked. The store room was a mess, a jumble of shavings and off-cuts, broken chairs, salvaged doors, bits of planking, and stray rusty saws and hammers. Diana pointed at a locked door, painted in flaking blue and said, 'The fire altar used to be in there.'

We stood for a while on the veranda, as Diana recalled her childhood. 'There used to be roses climbing all over that door, so high that I couldn't reach them. This is where all the Parsees gathered for their weddings, feasts and funerals.' As she spoke, I thought of the Zoroastrian priests in Yazd quietly intoning the *gathas*. We went behind to look at the priest's house. It was a two-storey building with ornamented half-columns and lancet archways. Its blue painted walls were falling away. The doors were locked and bits of timber were stacked against the wall, waiting for the carpenter.

I have wandered among many ruined temples, churches, and mosques, but why was I so affected by this one? This fire temple, although the soul had gone out of it, was still standing, but the sound of the carpenter sawing away on the veranda was like the death knell of the Zoroastrian community.

We came out and sat at an open-air café by the sea. The sky was overcast and a soft breeze wafted the sound of the waves over our heads. Diana went off to buy some samosas so that we could sit and talk, while small dhows were sailing back and forth in front of us. It was in such boats that, hundreds of years ago, Zoroastrianism had been brought to the island – the beliefs that had once been those of the widest empire of the world and had in turn influenced, directly or indirectly, all the Judaeo-Christian religions. Now only 200,000 Zoroastrians are left in the world, and just two of them live in Zanzibar's Stone City. There is no spring as such in the tropics, nevertheless at the spring equinox Diana and her father celebrate Jamshid's Nowruz, as they call it. Even though there is no renewal of year, whatever else they do, they spring clean their house, put on new

clothes and pine for their absent relations, on whom they cannot make the customary New Year calls.



The house of the Zoroastrian priest



The Zoroastrian fire-temple



The Zoroastrian graves.

Observations on a wooden door in the shrine of Shah Ni'matullah Veli at Mahan, by Antony Wynn.

Carved almost unnoticeably into the top right hand corner of a wooden door in the main wall next to the Cheheleh cell in the shrine of Shah Ni'matullah Veli is a small figure no more than six inches square. I have walked past it many times in the past and only noticed it on my last visit, while waiting my turn to go into the Cheheleh cell. The carving shows a near naked man astride a lion, brandishing a snake.

The Cheheleh room is where advanced Sufis would retreat for forty (*chehel*) days to fast and meditate – forty days in the wilderness. There their spirits would be assailed by all manner of visions, as illustrated on the walls and ceiling of this little cell. If they had been well prepared by their master, the adepts would emerge as masters themselves.

What can this carved figure represent other than Sheikh Kharraqani? The story of the unfortunate young seeker of the truth at the feet of the sheikh is narrated in the Masnavi of Jalal ud-Din Rumi. In Nicholson's translation it appears in Book VI *Story of the disciple of Shaykh Abu Hasan Kharraqani*.

In brief, the young aspirant makes his way to the village of Kharraqan, in the hills between Hamadan and Takestan. The way was long, the country covered in knee-deep snow. The young man reaches the house of the famous sheikh and knocks on the door. An upper window opens and a foul-mouthed harridan asks him what his business is:

"I have come to seek wisdom from the Sheikh."

"Be off with you, you fool. Why waste your time with that charlatan? He is an impostor, a trap for fools... A braggart, a lick-platter, a parasite..." With that, she emptied a noisome bucket of verbal slops over the freezing young man, who trailed off, bitterly disappointed.

He had not gone far when he saw, bounding over the snow towards him, a lion and, astride the lion, guiding it with a live snake, was the Sheikh himself, who halted the lion and asked the young man what he was doing:

"I have come to seek wisdom from you, that I might attain some of the great powers for which you are famous. What is your secret, O master?"

“Have you been to my village?”

“Indeed I have, O master.”

“Ah, then you will have met my wife.”

This story is adduced to discourage celibacy among Sufis, who need to acquire the virtue of patience if they are to make progress on the path. It has obvious echoes with the story of Xanthippe, the termagant wife of Socrates.



Xanthippe pouring slops over Socrates, from *Emblemata*



The wooden door.

Iran: A Modern History by Abbas Amanat. Yale University press, New Haven and London, 2018, pp. 979.

Reviewed by Vanessa Martin.

Amanat introduces his study of Iranian history from 1500 to 1989 by explaining that there have been three sources of authority – kingship, and aligned to it but also separate, clerical authority, and challenges to the above based on popular support, which called for reform of the established order. The autocratic rulers were also vulnerable to foreign invasions and dynastic rivals. Whilst the army and the state were frequently oppressive, successful shahs managed to balance their impact by demonstrating justice to the people. In addition, Iranian history has been characterised by struggles between the centre and powerful tribes seeking autonomy or even independence. Highly significant in Iran's history has been its sensitive geographical position at the junction of western and eastern Asia and at the head of the Persian Gulf. In earlier centuries Turkic and Mongol hordes penetrated it from the East and more recently the Russians and the British came from the north and west.

Towns have been important centres of trade dominated by a commercial and clerical elite prone to well-organised protest, while in the wider country other ethnic groups, Turks, Kurds and Arabs, have both contributed to and challenged the Iranian polity. In Iran's rich culture, poetry has played a significant role, as has music from Sufi chants to Zoroastrian hymns. In Amanat's view, Persian culture has been characterised by a desire for reconciling opposites in art, social norms, political practice, and mystical and philosophical discussion.

The emergence of the Safavid dynasty was a new point for Iran in that it brought a Shi'i identity, and, at the height of the overland trade routes, established diplomatic and commercial ties with Europe, leading to Iran's initial encounter with European modernity. The first Safavid Shah, Isma'il (1501-1524), supported by his tribal forces of Qezilbash, seized power with the agenda of creating a centralised state with Shi'ism as its binding ethos and Persian as its

administrative language. A threat to its consolidation came from the Ottomans, who won an initial encounter at the battle of Chaldiran in 1514, largely because they, unlike the Iranians had cannons. Fortunately, the Ottomans had to retreat because of infighting in Istanbul, and the Safavids survived.

The reign of Isma'il's successor, Tahmasp (1524-1578), was vital for the consolidation of Shi'ism in Iran as prominent Shi'i jurists, brought from Lebanon, introduced the then current rituals and practices and thus legitimised the state. The result enabled a decline in the messianic Shi'ism of the divisive and troublesome Qezilbash, and thus facilitated the collection of taxes. Amanat comments that, unlike the practice in Europe, Safavid Iran never institutionalised intrusion into the life of individuals. Struggles in the Caucasus enabled the capture of Christian slaves of whom the men went into the army and the women into harems. A slave corps in the army was played off against the Qezilbash leading to Persianisation of the empire. In 1555 the border between Iran and the Ottoman Empire was demarcated. This period also saw exceptional production in painting and books, especially exquisite illustrated manuscripts of texts such as the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi.

After a bitter struggle for the throne, the most remarkable of all Iranian rulers of the period since 1500, Shah Abbas I (1588-1629) came to the throne. His reign saw the destruction of the Qezilbash and the concomitant strengthening of Shi'ism and the clergy as the allies of the state. In Amanat's view, he strengthened national culture, ensured urban tranquillity, and encouraged outstanding artistic and cultural productivity, as well as commercial growth. Intelligent, shrewd, brave, and visionary, he was also crafty, cruel and violent. He saw the key to national security as being in the use of firearms and development in military technology, especially cannon. However, he kept a mobile light cavalry loyal to the state. He also reinforced his rule by buttressing Shi'i orthodoxy, though non-threatening mystical and philosophical thought was not discouraged. His patronage of Baha al-Din Amili is said to have produced a master plan for Isfahan and the engineering of an irrigation network.

Many would see Shah Abbas's greatest achievement as Isfahan itself. Chosen for being in the centre of Iran, in reach of the Persian Gulf and the borders, it was reconstructed as a new capital, emphasising his power and legitimacy. Between 1598 and 1629 a

new quarter was built, consisting of a network of mosques, madrasas, gardens, bazaars and a new palace, embellished with fine turquoise tilework. The shops around the main square emphasised Iran's new spirit of trade and enterprise, and the whole was designed to give accessibility to the people. The import of European luxury goods was a sign of a new age of wealth and consumption.

This visionary project required revenue and human resources. The traditional source of funds, booty, yielded declining returns, so Shah Abbas turned to land and changed hereditary fiefdoms into state controlled renewable land tenure assigned as estates in place of cash salary. Silk production was advanced, Armenians were forced into migration to Isfahan, under gruelling conditions, to build the silk weaving industry there. Amanat is critical of the Safavids depending too much on silk development and not establishing a role in maritime trade.

In fact, Shah Abbas was very well-informed on the politics of Europe and strove to establish connections there. The Portuguese came to Hormuz in 1507, English merchant adventurers, such as the Shirley brothers, came offering trade and alliance, and 1616 the East India Company was established at Jask. English trade in particular opened opportunities in European markets. However, shifts in world trade, especially that in the large volumes of gold and silver from the new world, gradually weakened the Iranian economy.

The Safavid dynasty declined after Shah Abbas and fell in 1722 with the Afghan invasion, when it also faced a threat from Russia. Iran had a brief resurgence of strength under Nadir Shah of the Afshar tribe (1736-1747) who terminated foreign invasion, gained control of Iran, and invaded India, whence he brought back the Mughal crown jewels, now reposing in the National Bank of Iran. The country's weak economy could not sustain Nader's ceaseless campaigns, and he was assassinated in 1747. There followed the rule of Karim Khan Zand, Vakil of Shiraz (1765-1779), a wise and benevolent ruler, resident in Shiraz, who only controlled parts of the south. He encouraged a cultural revival, and was responsible for the innovative open design of the Vakil mosque. He fostered an enlightened culture which, for example, allowed the career of female entertainers, such as Mulla Fatemeh.

The demise of Kham Khan was followed by a civil war, which resulted in the rise of a new dynasty from the north, the Qajars. The

first Qajar ruler, Aqa Mohammad Khan, (1789-1797) was indefatigable, determined, ruthless, violent and astute, whereby he succeeded in defeating all enemies to unite Iran once more. Clear sighted, he settled on Tehran as his capital for its strategic advantage in 1786, and initiated a close connection with the main Shi'i jurists to support and legitimise his claim to the throne. He was murdered by an attendant in 1797, and succeeded in by his nephew who became Fath Ali Shah Qajar (1797-1734). At this point the British, briefly the French, and then the Russians entered the scene of Iranian politics, and with them came the impact of modernity.

A main feature of the era was Anglo-Russian rivalry, which, given Russia's relentless advance in the east by contrast with Britain's desire to protect India, was to some extent the salvation of the Qajars, who grew adept at playing them off against each other. In the process, in Amanat's view, it also helped consolidate the Qajar state. Russia's advance in the quest of a warm water port led to war with Iran and its defeat, resulting in the Treaty of Golestan in 1813, and again at the Treaty of Turkmanchai in 1828, with substantial loss of territory in the Caucasus. However, British officers and financial support kept the Russians north of the Aras River. Russia gained the right to open consulates throughout Iran in 1828, a right the disgruntled British only achieved in 1841.

A second significant feature of the Fath Ali Shah period was the fostering of the consciousness in Iran of Shi'i identity and the alliance with Shi'i clergy, albeit as an independent body, with the Qajar state. Increasingly, senior clergy gained control over religious institutions and their significant financial resources, especially endowments. Allied to this was doctrinal change, particularly in the role of the clergy in jurisprudence. In addition, the principle of emulation of a senior cleric by ordinary believers gave the clergy increasing control over sections of society, particularly in the towns where they were allied with the bazaar.

Fath Ali Shah sought stronger bonds with the urban elite whilst reviving clerical prestige and influence as a means of buttressing the state, particularly in its control of the tribes. To the same end, the shah exalted the image of monarchy by self-portrayal as the King of Kings. Conscious of his image in every detail he had himself depicted in the elaborate jewelled Kayanid crown with a magnificent beard indicative of prowess. His significant attention to the Iranian

past in the form of rock reliefs similar to those of the Sasanians emphasised continuity from the glory of that time. Meanwhile, the growing royal family of his descendants marginalised others in state offices. The crown Prince, Abbas Mirza (1789-1833), encouraged modernisation in Tabriz, especially in military reform.

Abbas Mirza, admired for his new style national awareness and understanding of modernity, pre-deceased Fath Ali Shah, and a question hung over the succession. United and vigorous support by the British and Russians averted a dynastic power struggle, in favour of the most rightful heir, Mohammad Shah (1834-1848). He was advised by his eccentric tutor and favourite, Haji Mirza Aqasi, in a period characterised by state indigence, decline in order and a disastrous disease in the silk crop. Amanat also sees the mid-century as a period of the triumph of the power of Usuli Shiism over the Akhbari branch, accompanied, however, by a greater toleration of Sufism, especially the Nematullahis. Sufi interest in turn encouraged music and painting. However, a movement perceived as deeply dangerous to the religious orthodoxy, and therefore the state, emerged in 1846 the form of Babism, whose leader, the Bab, claimed to be the gateway to the Shi'i Hidden Imam. It produced a noted and gifted women poet, Qurrat al-Ain, described by Amanat as standing in contrast to the misogynist norm of patriarchal society. The Babi movement was suppressed with great brutality.

By the time of Nasr al-Din Shah (1848-1896) the world economy was increasingly penetrating Iran and eroding its old financial and economic system, and, as elsewhere, undermining the traditional political structure. This led to growing financial problems for the government, but the country was opened up to foreign entrepreneurs by the introduction of new technology, notably the steamship and the telegraph. The dream of building a rail network was to remain unfulfilled because of British fear of Russia developing a railway to the southern coast. At the commencement of the reign the Prime Minister was Amir Kabir, one of Iran's most remarkable politicians. He had a vision of a strong Iran, politically reformed, economically modernised, militarily powerful, governed by a reformed state according to a uniform law. Thwarted by foreign envoys defending their interests, and a court resistant to cuts, he irritated the Shah, who contrary to Amanat's view as being under his mother's influence, was emerging from adolescence and trying to

assert his right to rule. Perceived by now as a threat, in 1853 Amir Kabir was murdered. His vision, nevertheless, influenced the reformers who brought on the Constitutional Revolution of 1906.

Not long afterwards, and for the second time, the first being 1838 to 1841, Iran was at war with Britain over Herat from 1856-1857. Iran had an ancient and generally recognised legitimate claim to Herat, and was further anxious to take it to control Turkoman raiders who were carrying off Iranians into slavery. However, Russia was advancing increasingly eastward and southwards causing Britain anxiety over the defence of the route to India. Britain won both wars, from which Iran then learnt to avoid military action and to continue playing the two powers off against each other.

The remainder of the reign of Nasr al-Din Shah was marked by continual attempts at reform which were only slightly successful. A substantial army was beyond the resource of the country, but the Cossack Brigade, established in 1879, gave the Shah some security. An attempt to develop the country through concessions, such as the Reuter Concession in 1872 and the disastrous British government sponsored Tobacco Concession in 1890, led the country into serious debt as a result of the reparations.

Nasir al-din Shah was assassinated in 1896 and succeeded by his son Muzaffar al-Din Shah (1896-1907) who proved to be a weak ruler. The state was virtually bankrupt and heavily in debt to the Russians as a result of two substantial loans. The outcome was the Constitutional Revolution, a transformational event, described by Amanat as defining Iran's modern identity, which at the same time tried to offer Iranian answers to the problems of social justice. It began with a protest organised by merchants resentful over reform of the customs under Belgian officials. In July 1906, the clergy went into *bast* (sanctuary) in Qum and 14,000 bazaaris in the British Legation garden. A constitution was granted in August 1906 (and modified in 1907), and a national assembly elected. The constitution brought in nationalism, the rule of law, limits to state power and the promotion of individual rights. It, however, also introduced a secular law which was resisted by the conservative clergy, who published antagonistic pamphlets against it, and were ultimately to have a lasting influence in curtailing secularism in Iran.

One of the strongest features of the Revolution was the growth and influence of a varied and articulate press, in which cartoons

lampooning secular and religious figures alike, were a notable feature. The press aspired to advance modernisation of education, health and industry, as well as address the insuperable problems of the economy. In reality, the Revolution initiated modernisation of the state, but in accordance with many visions, not one ideology, so Reza Shah, Mosaddeq, the socialist left, and Khomeini were all its progeny.

Ideologically lasting in its profound influence on the future of Iran, the Revolution had largely failed in its goal of securing a constitutional government by 1908, when a coup was carried out by Mohammad Ali Shah. The assembly returned in 1908 and remained in being thereafter but much weakened, above all by the continuing financial crisis which led to insecurity throughout the country and the disruption of trade. However, a significant event in the period was the British discovery of oil in Khuzestan in May 1908 and the formation of the APOC. The oil was protected by a new force, the South Persian Rifles. Otherwise, Iran suffered greatly during the 1914-18 war when it was overrun by foreign armies and the people endured starvation.

A coup in 1921 by Reza Khan initiated the Pahlavi era which was to be characterised by an authoritarian driven transformation of Iranian society which consolidated a new style military as a basis for power, centralised the government, modernised education, marginalised the clergy and created a new secular nationalism. The regime consisted partly of new men, and partly of co-opted members of the old elite. In 1925 Reza Khan crowned himself shah, opposed openly only by the liberal politician Mosaddeq and the cleric Modarres, who was not as Amanat says, pro-Qajar, but against the impending autocracy, for which he would pay with his life. To buttress his secularism and to legitimate his rule, Reza Shah identified his new dynasty with the pre-Islamic past, especially Cyrus the Great, which encouraged both Iranian and foreign archaeological excavations of ancient sites. The shah's centralising policies included the eradication of anomalous pockets of foreign influence, resulting in the removal of Shaykh Ghazal of Khuzestan, who had guarded the oil areas for the British. They in turn accepted this *fait accompli* since Reza shah offered security not provided by the late Qajar regime.

The rationalisation of government that proceeded rapidly under state hegemony included an overhaul of the judicial system and rationalisation of the law. A network of roads and railways opened up Iran to trade. Modern urban planning ploughed streets and avenues through traditional Iranian cities, especially Tehran, but at least facilitated trade. Landownership did not change, and there was a widening gap between living standards in town and countryside. Industrialisation was encouraged, but child labour remained in the textile mills. A considerable achievement of the new state was its educational policy and the growth in the number of schools and of literacy. In 1934 Tehran University was founded. Meanwhile there was a decline in religious schools and the banning of the veil. Amanat argues that the regimental nationalism and militant secularism of the Pahlavi state threatened to undermine Iran's intellectual heritage. He does not discuss in detail the oil agreement with the British of 1933, but it caused Reza Shah loss of prestige and made him turn increasingly pro-German. As a result, in 1941 the British removed him from power. In Amanat's view, Reza Shah was the most influential leader in Iranian history since Shah Isma'il in view of the massive changes in society, culture and the economy he brought about.

The war years were marked by hardship due to inflation and scarce provisions, and the emergence of the organised left with a range of views. Iran found itself in an exceptionally sensitive strategic position, given its border with the U.S.S.R., and the location of the oil rich Persian Gulf to the south.

Essentially, Mohammad Reza Shah (1841-1979) continued the policies of his father. Early in his reign he was faced with the problem of the National Front movement to nationalise oil led by the Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, elected in 1951 in alliance with the Tudeh (communist) Party. The assembly voted for nationalisation that year, causing acrimony with the British. The Shah, who was regarded as too pro-western, was obliged to flee Iran, but a coup in 1953 led by General Zahedi and supported by the Americans, now the major foreign power in Iran, and the British, brought him down, allowing the Shah to return. In 1963 he began The White Revolution, a programme of modernisation that included land reform, which was opposed by a movement lead by Ayatollah Khomeini. As a result, Khomeini was exiled in 1964. The years 1963-

73 were a period of successful economic development for Iran. However, a massive rise in the price of oil in 1973 brought about rapid inflation and political destabilisation. Widespread grievances led to the overthrow of the Shah and the return of Khomeini to Iran in 1979, whereafter Iran became an Islamic republic.

The era of Mohammad Reza Shah was characterised by significant state patronage which produced a certain synthesis in the arts, as in the new style of music played on Radio Iran. Innovations mingled western instruments with the Persian *tar*, *nai* and *santur*. The talented singer, Marziyeh rose from modest origins to fame with songs in the new style. Theatre also won wider interest, and actresses, at first mainly Russian and Armenian, but soon Iranian, appeared on stage. New plays subtly ridiculed the glory of the state and its repressive policies. New styles of sculpture flourished, notably Parviz Tanavoli, with his representation of words, for example *heech* (nothing). Meanwhile, popular heroes emerged, such as Takhti in the *zurkhaneh* (sporthouses), with their roots in the Persian culture of *javanmardi* (chivalry).

Many well-informed books have been written about the Islamic Republic with a variety of approaches. Amanat's own view may be summarised as that the 1979 Revolution had its origins in Iran's experience of the previous seventy years, and the triumph of the new regime caused great conflict. He considers that the origins of the Islamic revolt derived from a century long struggle between the state and the Shi'i establishment. It was also influenced by ancient messianic tendencies in Iranian Shi'ism. One notable feature was that the US became the Great Satan, thus finally replacing Britain as Iran's arch enemy in the West. Eventually, ideological differences arose within the Republic itself from the expectations of the younger generation for social freedom and democracy. However, despite the regime's nepotism, ideological rigidities, and socio-economic difficulties, Iranian society changed substantially. In particular, the 2009 Green Movement demonstrated deep discontent within that society.

In the post-revolutionary period, the Iranian gift for imagery and its significance found exceptional vitality, not least through the wide availability of video cassettes. The new cinema was partly shaped by the strict Islamic code on the performing arts, and partly resistant to it, notably by engagement with such subjects as the plight of women,

socio-ethnic bias, drug addiction and prostitution. In particular, *Basha* a film about an Arab-Irano refugee, had a unifying message for Iran beyond ethnicity and race. Directors, such as Jafar Panahi in *The Circle* explored the lives of young women in Tehran in the 1990s in the battles with misogyny, family tyranny and the ubiquitous state. Amanat considers that the new wave of Iranian cinema demonstrates an ethos very different to that of the state, and one with wide popular appeal. Finally, despite initial government disapproval, classical music flourished in alliance with Persian lyrical poetry.

Amanat's history of modern Iran is a *tour de force* which interweaves the complex factors in Iranian history, culture and society, while tracing the themes of its development over a long period with deep and original insight. He is very conscious of how change in Iran relates to the evolving situation in other countries and the wider world, though he needed to be more explicit on the change to the trade routes from overland to sea and its dire effects on the Ottoman Empire, Iran and India. Further, the implication of the difference between Russian expansion in the Caucasus and the British policy of defending India, is not duly clarified. A learned book, it demands a certain knowledge and understanding of Iran, without which it is at times daunting, as the prose is eloquent but in the nature of the subject conceptually complex. It should provide many illuminating insights to readers with a deeper knowledge of Iran and to university students for whom it would be a most engaging and informative source of reference.

Russians in Iran: Diplomacy and Power in the Qajar Era and Beyond, Edited by Rudi Matthee and Elena Andreeva, I.B.Tauris 320 pp

Reviewed by Hugh Arbuthnott.

This is a volume of essays by scholars from universities in a number of countries, including Russia, who have been able to draw on new material, particularly from Russian archives.

When I was first in Iran as a very junior diplomat in the early 1960s and again when I returned in the early 1970s, both times of course during the Cold War, Iran's relations with the Soviet Union were among the most important concerns of the British Embassy in Tehran. The USA and Britain were encouraging the Shah to undertake social, economic and political reforms in order to outflank political movements on the left which were thought, if not openly supported by the Soviet Union, would come to be totally subjected to its influence. One of the reasons for the coup against Mossadeq, for example, had been the fear that his government would be under the thumb of the USSR. So my experiences then greatly influenced my thinking about the history of Russia's relations with Iran and I turned eagerly to this book.

I was immediately struck by Rudi Matthee's introduction in which he referred to the widely held view among Iranians that British influence in their affairs had been negative and "even destructive" while they ignored the invasive presence of the Russians; and that "in some ways the presence of the British and the balance and 'protection' they provided may even have prevented a more drastic Russian role in Iran's affairs". This has certainly been my view while acknowledging that although Britain's own role may not have been destructive, our policies towards Iran were as self-interested as any other country's would have been in our place, even if they contributed towards countering Russian efforts to dominate the country. Do the essays in this book bear out this view?

The subject is tackled in chronological order so the first essays cover the nineteenth century. There is little doubt about Russia's role in the early part of the century with its invasion of Caucasian territory claimed by Iran and the struggle between Iran and Russia

for dominance there. An essay on Russian deserters in Iran in the nineteenth century illustrates the extent of Russian pressure on the Qajar Government through its demands to have the deserters sent back to Russia and the threats it made if Iran did not comply. Firuza Melville's essay on Griboedov, the Russian poet, composer and diplomat who was murdered in his Legation in Tehran by a Persian mob in 1829, is less about Griboedov's influence on Persian affairs than about his relations with members of the British Legation. Dr Melville suggests that the origin of the massacre at the Russian mission might have been the rivalry between Griboedov's close friend MacDonald, who was appointed British Minister in Tehran on behalf of the East India Company; and Henry Willock who had been appointed British charge d'affaires by London 18 years previously. Willock, not surprisingly, resented MacDonald's appointment and had managed to delay MacDonald's presentation of credentials for two years. Dr. Melville suggests that this was through the influence of the mission's doctor and interpreter, John McNeill, who was also the doctor of Fath Ali Shah. Willock went to London and succeeded in being appointed as Ambassador to Persia. He returned there via Moscow where he became a friend of the Russian Foreign Minister Nesselrode. Dr Melville argues that it is possible (my underlining) that Nesselrode and Willock "agreed on a joint plan of action against Griboedov and MacDonald". Dr Melville presents no conclusive evidence to support this argument but it does indeed sound possible and makes entertaining reading.

The section on the 20th century starts with an account of revolutionary movements in the Caucasus and describes the spread of revolutionary ideas both in the countries of the Caucasus and from there into Turkey and Iran thanks to faster communications (described as "time-space compression"). An essay on the Russian Loan and Discount Bank argues that, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, new material from the Russian archives shows that the bank "concentrated on furthering Russian Imperial domination in the political, economic and cultural spheres of life in Iran". In the cultural (perhaps) sphere may be counted, in the early part of the century, the showing of propaganda films about the Russian Empire to the crown prince, Mohammed 'Ali. It would be interesting to compare the activities of the Loan and Discount Bank with those of the British Imperial Bank of Persia.

The account by Rudi Matthee of the Russian shelling in 1912 of the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashad is of particular relevance to the question of Russian policy towards Iran; did the Russian Government order the bombardment or was it an initiative taken by Prince Dabizha, the Russian consul in Mashad? Our chairman, in his book 'Persia in the Great Game' wrote that the British consul there, Percy Sykes, throughout maintained that Dabhiza's actions were all part of Russian government policy. Yet Prof Matthee argues in his conclusion that "...the Russian central government....does not seem to have authorized the violence perpetrated in Mashad." Yet again, later on he writes that "...Dabhiza was fully aware of the popular hatred that entering the sanctuary by force might unleash, and did everything he could to avoid such drastic action", the implication being without success, which suggests he was obeying an order. This fits in with what Prof Matthee mentions earlier, and repeats in his conclusion, that the British Minister at Tehran, Sir Walter Townley, "grudgingly had to accept the veracity of Sykes' allegations", referring to Antony Wynn's book. It looks as if Prof Matthee was originally not convinced. This is understandable. A major reason for the difficulty in establishing responsibility is that, following the Anglo-Russian convention of 1907, it was the policy of both governments to maintain friendly relations with each other. This was one reason for Townley's reluctance to believe Sykes's earlier reports of Russian official responsibility and only "grudging" acceptance of the evidence (another being Sykes's habit of doing his own bombardment, of his superiors in the Legation in Tehran with frequent, long and sometimes conflicting reports).

An essay based on a Soviet officer's letters to his wife during the First World War reveals the contemptuous attitude of a Russian officer towards the Persians which seems to have been typical but unfortunately not many of the letters have survived. A notable essay is about Vladimir Minorsky, the Russian scholar and diplomat who was the most effective member of the Iranian-Turkish border commission of 1913, the border which was the cause of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980. In this work, Minorsky not only forwarded the interests of his country by favouring a frontier which gave more to Iran than to Turkey, i.e. to the area in the north in the Russian sphere, but also favoured the Kurds to whom Minorsky was sympathetic. This is followed by a fascinating essay about Nikolai Markov, originally a

member of the Cossack Brigade who, after the Russian revolution, settled in Tehran and was the architect responsible for several renowned public buildings of the 1920s and 1930s in Tehran like the Alborz College and the Qasr Prison (now a museum).

Of the remaining essays, one on the occupation of Iran by the USSR and the Allies in 1941 sees the British as the instigators of the invasion but not for the official reasons, which were because the Persian government did not take timely action to expel Germans from the country and because of the need to send supplies to the USSR. The author, Nikolai Kozhanov, argues that the overriding British motives for the invasion were to protect the oil fields and refinery at Abadan and the route to India. If the German invasion of Russia had been successful, their troops could have entered Iran from the north. The USSR government, however, was hesitant to take troops away from defending Russia but in the end decided that they would be in danger of losing their sphere of influence in the north of Iran if the British invaded on their own. The USSR therefore decided to join in the invasion and also acquiesced in the British proposal to remove Reza Shah. Later, as the German invasion of the USSR was checked, the Allies started sending supplies through Iran which they had initially been reluctant to do when it seemed anything they sent would be captured by the Germans.

I have not attempted to draw attention to all of the essays, some of which general readers of this book, of which I am one, will find heavy going and overloaded with jargon. We must note too that some of the authors are of course not writing in their native languages. Nevertheless, there is much here to recommend the book to both the general reader as well as, I imagine, to the scholar. As for the original question I put at the beginning of this review, I believe this book bears out the contention that the British, whatever their motives may have been, prevented at least the north of Iran if not the whole country suffering the same fate as the countries of the Caucasus, that is being absorbed first into the Russian Empire and then into the Soviet Union.

Sir Clive Bossom Bt (1918-2017)

Sir Clive Bossom was born in 1918 in New York, the son of Alfred Bossom, an architect with an international practice who had worked for the Iranian government and later became Conservative MP for Maidstone, a baronet and then a life peer. In 1935 Alfred Bossom had also been a founder member of the Iran Society and served as president of the Society from 1959-1965.

Clive Bossom first visited Iran with his father, and on the latter's death in 1965, he continued to take an active interest in the country. He and his wife Barbara travelled widely in Iran, often at the invitation of the Iranian government. He was chairman of the Iran Society from 1973 until 1976. He visited villages in both the north and south of the country to assess progress in health, education and social work following the Shah's White Revolution, by which he was most impressed; on another visit he was given an extended tour of the country's oil facilities; and in 1971, together with Lord Shawcross, the then president of the Society, he was an official guest at the celebrations to commemorate the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy at Persepolis. As a director of Vosper Ltd, he helped to sell frigates to the Iranian navy.

On leaving school, in 1937 Clive Bossom was commissioned into the Royal East Kent Regiment ("the Buffs"). He landed in Normandy on D Day and when the war in Europe was over, he joined Lord Mountbatten's staff in South East Asia, retiring as a Major in 1948. He started his political career as a Kent County Councillor. After two unsuccessful attempts, in 1959 he was elected to parliament as Conservative member for Leominster, where he spoke mainly on agriculture and chaired the Anglo-Iranian parliamentary group. In 1961 he became parliamentary private secretary to Margaret Thatcher in her first ministerial post. A committed European, his attachment to the European cause led him to become chairman of the Anglo-Benelux parliamentary group, twice chairman of the Anglo-Belgian Union and president of the Anglo-Netherlands Society.

When he left parliament in 1974, Bossom was appointed to chair the RAC committee reviewing British motor racing, and the next year he became chairman of the Club. He also became vice-president of the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile and president of the

British Automobile Racing Club. In view of Bossom's wealth of international contacts, it was no surprise that it was to him that Mrs Thatcher turned to locate her son Mark, who in 1982 was lost in the desert during the Paris-Dakar Rally. Immensely energetic and gregarious, among his many other business and charity activities, he was Master of the Grocers' Livery Company, in which post he was able to install Mrs Thatcher as an honorary freeman of the company, and during his thirty-two-year link with the Order of St John of Jerusalem, he became a Knight of the Order and retired as its almoner in 1993. His connection with the Order's ophthalmic hospital in Jerusalem enabled him to visit units working in rural Iran and treating trachoma cases there. In his later years, he regularly attended the Iran Society's Annual General Meeting, a genial presence in the front row, dispensing encouragement and bonhomie to successive chairmen.

Clive Bossom died on March 8th 2017 in his hundredth year.

Lord Temple-Morris (1938-2018)

Peter Temple-Morris was president of the Iran Society from 1995 until 2009, years in which, following a period of decline in public interest in Iran and its culture, the Society was once again seeking to expand its activities.

His close links with Iran dated back to his Cambridge days, when he met and later married Taheré, the daughter of Senator Amir Hossein Khozeimé Alam, a senior member of one of the oldest and most distinguished Iranian families. After Cambridge, he was called to the Bar (Inner Temple) in 1962 and practised as a barrister, before in 1974 being elected Conservative MP for Leominster, where he succeeded Sir Clive Bossom, a previous president of the Iran Society. He increased his majority at every election until 1997, after which, disenchanted by the Conservative Party's continuing move to the right, he crossed the floor of the House and was made a life peer by Tony Blair in 2001.

Peter had a wide interest in foreign affairs. He was a member of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs from 1987 until 1990 and

he was for many years a leading figure in the British branch of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. He chaired a number of parliamentary groups linking the UK to other countries and, as the first British co-chairman of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Union from 1990 until 1997, he played an important role in the lead-up to the Good Friday Agreement.

After his marriage, he and his wife spent their summer holidays at Birjand, the Alam family estates in Khorasan, and travelled widely in the country. Following the Islamic Revolution, he helped to arrange the escape of members of his wife's family, who had been particularly targeted by the new regime. Nevertheless, he was one of the first British politicians to seek closer relations with the Islamic Republic, and as long-standing chairman of the British-Iranian Parliamentary Group, in 1999 he led the first parliamentary delegation to visit Iran after the Revolution. He was president of the British-Iranian Chamber of Commerce from 2002 until 2004, and in 2002, with relations between the two countries once again deteriorating and in the absence of a British ambassador in Tehran, he represented the British government at the Oil and Gas Show there. He was also a member of the Advisory Council to the British Institute of Persian Studies (BIPS) from 1998 until 2000.

Jovial, moderate and blessed with a wonderful speaking voice, welcoming and full of good will towards Iran and Iranians, he was assiduous in furthering relations between our two countries and he presided over the Society's Annual General Meeting with style and wisdom.

Peter Temple-Morris died on May 1st, 2018.

Professor Ehsan Yarshater (1920-2018)

Just as we were about to go to press, we received the news of the death of Professor Ehsan Yarshater, one of the most outstanding scholars in the field of Iranian studies. Unfortunately, it was too late to commission and publish a full appreciation of Professor Yarshater's life and work in time for this year's edition of the Journal, but we hope to do so next year.

For the past sixty years, Professor Yarshater was Hagop Kevorkian Professor, later Emeritus Professor, of Iranian Studies at Columbia University, New York, where he founded the Centre for Iranian Studies, which is now named after him. Among Professor Yarshater's many remarkable achievements is the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, of which he was the founding editor, with its articles by the world's leading scholars on every conceivable aspect of Iranian civilization. It is now hard to imagine doing any work on Iran without it.

Professor Yarshater died on September 2nd, 2018.