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BRITAIN AND REVOLUTIONARY IRAN
1906-1909 AND 1976-1979:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Britain and Revolutionary Iran, 1906-1909 and 1976-1979: A Comparative Study

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This dissertation is a comparative case study of British policy towards and perceptions of Persia/Iran during the latter's two modern revolutions, 1906-1909 (Constitutional) and 1976-1979 ('Islamic'). The study covers both official perceptions and policy, meaning that of the Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service and the perceptions of the press, civil society, Parliament and wider public opinion; thus it is not a traditional exercise in diplomatic history. It explores British views of both the Shah/government and opposition forces during these two periods in detail and presents these views in a comparative perspective. The research paints a broad social and historical picture of how changes in both British and Iranian government, society and global status affected their mutual relations. Key themes relate to how the decline of Liberalism, the transformation of the Left in the twentieth century and Britain's decline as an imperial power affected its perceptions and policy-making in Iran; how civil society and public opinion exerted a disproportionately strong influence in the earlier period before Britain was even a fully democratic society; how notions of Orientalism and Aryanism shaped official and public perceptions; and how changing geopolitics impacted perceptions, particularly in the case of Tsarist Russia versus the Soviet Union. This study has revealed numerous counter-intuitive points about the foreign relations and perceptions of British government and society vis-à-vis Iran and prompts a reconsideration of the evolution of British public and official attitudes during the twentieth century as manifested in the case of Iran at two critical historical junctures.

Chapter 1: Introduction, History and Themes

I. Introduction

This dissertation consists of a comparative case study of British policies and attitudes to Iran at two of its twentieth century turning points, the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1909), hereafter referred to as the ‘first period, and the ‘Islamic’ Revolution (1976-1979), hereafter referred to as the ‘second period’. These two periods were chosen as the basis of a comparative evaluation because they provide sufficiently similar reference points for comparison, i.e. an unpopular monarch who is eventually toppled or deposed by a broad-based national coalition with strong religious and radical elements, and close British observation of both the domestic and international dynamics operating therein. At the same time, the political and social changes in Iran and Britain and global strategic shifts provide an interesting basis for evaluating the different nature of policies and public attitudes of the two periods.

II. Organization of contents

The thesis is organized into six chapters. The first (this chapter) covers five areas. Firstly, it provides a review of the existing scholarly literature with its strengths and weaknesses, a discussion of the sources used and their limitations and an outline of the primary questions to be investigated in the study. Secondly, a historical background for each time period is provided in order for the period to be understood in the context of its time. The background covers relevant historical developments in both Britain and Iran and addresses wider global trends which impacted developments in both countries. It also provides a brief summary of each of the two periods. Thirdly, it outlines the primary conceptual arguments which recur over the course of the study, namely the concept of Liberalism and its twentieth-century evolution and the notion of Orientalism as manifested in the case of Iran. In order to develop and elaborate upon the conceptual arguments, it has been necessary to draw on other fields. In the case of Liberalism and its evolution, the study makes use of literature in the field of British political and intellectual history, including Liberal attitudes to British imperialism. In the case of Orientalism, the works of Edward Said (*Orientalism*,

Culture and Imperialism) inform a substantial part of the argument, although critiques of Said such as those contained in the work of Robert Irwin are employed to refine the argument. The notion of Aryanism is also employed to further develop the conceptual understanding of Orientalism in the Iranian case by drawing on a few works devoted to this emerging area of research. Fourthly, it presents thematic comparisons in five areas which highlight the most salient contrasts between the two periods. This section seeks to adumbrate initial responses to the research questions by summarising the key findings of the study in light of the conceptual arguments elaborated in the preceding section. The final section in Chapter 1 provides brief biographical details on the key British figures who shaped British relations with and perceptions of Iran during the two periods. Chapters 2 through 5 present the primary findings of the study and cover eight areas. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the 1906-1909 period while Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the 1976-1979 period. The first chapters for each period, i.e. Chapters 2 and 4, present British views of the Iranian Shah and government during that period. Each chapter is further divided into two sections, consisting of official views, i.e. those of the Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service and unofficial views, i.e. those of non-governing members of parliament, the press and civil society. The second chapters for each period, i.e. Chapters 3 and 5, present British views of the Iranian opposition during that period and are organized in a manner identical to that of the first chapters. The dissertation is structured to incorporate sufficient detail in each section for the development of the arguments yet simultaneously allows for ease of drawing comparisons between the two periods, which is the primary objective of the study. The key findings of the research are summarised and its further implications are drawn out and assessed in Chapter 6, the concluding chapter of the study.

III. Literature review and discussion of sources

There is a substantial body of literature dealing with relations between Britain and Iran during the first period and in the years up to the 1970s. Works which address the constitutional period in particular include those of Mansour Bonakdarian, Janet Afary; Nikki Keddie, Hasan Javadi, David

McLean and Ira Klein. Bonakdarian's work primarily covers British civil society relations with and views of Iran and has done much to reveal the activism and dedication of groups such as the Persia Committee in shaping British policy towards Iran. Bonakdarian's work however does not focus in detail on official (i.e. Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service) British views of Iran and neither does it address the second period. Janet Afary has contributed an innovative study of hitherto overlooked aspects of the first revolutionary period, such as the role of women and peasant activism, but her work has a largely domestic (Iranian) focus and does not cover the foreign relations of the period in detail. McLean's articles provide useful insights on British radical activism vis-à-vis Iran in the first period but do not offer a detailed examination of official views. In her book *Endgame*, Jennifer Siegel offers a thorough review of Anglo-Russian relations in Central Asia (Iran, Afghanistan and Tibet) in the years between the conclusion of the 1907 convention and the outbreak of war in 1914, demonstrating to what extent Anglo-Russian rivalry persisted during those years and how British officials, including Sir Edward Grey, were committed to limiting Russian involvement in Iran. However, Siegel does not focus in detail on British domestic attitudes to political developments in Iran.

A certain number of works deal with British Liberal radicalism and foreign policy critiques in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, such as those of Bernard Porter, A.J.P Taylor and A.J.A Morris. These works touch on the virulent Liberal criticism of Edward Grey's Iranian policy but do not treat the subject of Iran in detail. Many studies have been devoted to examining and analysing the British relationship with its 'formal empire' in the first period, particularly in India. Studies which examine Liberal attitudes to imperialism can also be included in this category, such as recent works by Bernard Porter, Jennifer Pitts and Mira Matikkala. This study seeks to contribute to a deeper scholarly understanding of the British relationship with its 'informal empire' or sphere of influence, of which Iran in the first period and particularly the southern regions of Iran were prime examples. 'Informal empire' will be defined as a territory where a particular national group exerts considerable economic or political influence and is able to sway the course of local or national affairs without exercising formal imperial control over the said territory. During the first period,

Russian informal empire was paramount in the northern regions of Iran and at the royal court in Tehran, where Russia had powerful economic enterprises and ran a bank which granted loans to the Shahs and Iranian notables.¹ Thus this study touches on an important aspect of rivalry between two ideologically opposed informal empires on Iranian territory.

The smaller body of literature on the second period consists mainly of memoirs and an official FCO post mortem of British policy by Nicholas Browne. There is scant scholarly material dealing specifically with Britain and Iran in this period, apart from a 2010 University of Oxford M.Phil. thesis by Edward Posnett entitled *Treating His Imperial Majesty's Warts: British Policy towards Iran 1977–79* and another 2010 University of Oxford M.Phil. thesis by Yassmin Sadeghi entitled *Reacting to revolution: Britain's response to the 1979 Iranian revolution*, whose focus falls slightly after the second period of this study. Posnett's study convincingly demonstrates the remarkable degree to which Muhammad Reza Pahlavi maintained leverage over British officials of the second period through the mere prospect that he might cancel contracts or withhold his business from British companies.

Numerous works such as those by Paul Kennedy and Michael Turner deal with the topic of British imperial decline and its impact on foreign policy in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Such works are useful for understanding the British positions and policies of the period in an international context but they are not intended to provide detailed analysis of the relations between Britain and a particular country or region, as is the case with this study.

The present study differs from previous scholarship in that it treats the two periods in depth from a comparative perspective encompassing both official and public/press/parliamentary views. The juxtaposition of two different time periods has revealed diachronic social and political shifts which would not have emerged had the two periods been studied in isolation, whereas the simultaneous study of government, press and civil society perspectives has demonstrated the interplay between official and non-official actors in policy formulation.

¹ Elena Andreeva, "RUSSIA i. Russo-Iranian Relations up to the Bolshevik Revolution," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2014, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/russia-i-relations> (accessed on 26 April 2016).

This study does not seek to respond to or rebut any particular work but rather to expand the scope of the existing literature and deepen scholarly understanding of the complex twentieth-century relationship between Britain and Iran. It employs a historical methodology and falls firmly within the field of comparative history. Special attention is paid to analysing the nuances of the language used by commentators and observers as an indicator of wider social and political trends. The study does not employ any international relations theory nor does it pretend to be an exercise in the history of international relations. However, it is not a traditional exercise in diplomatic history because of its equal focus on official sources from the Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service and ‘unofficial’ sources from a wide cross-section of the press, non-government members of Parliament and civil society groups. It seeks to place British views of Iran within a wider twentieth-century social and political context and to demonstrate how these views were shaped as much by understandings of the ‘self’, i.e. Britain’s own self-perception, as by understandings of the ‘other’, Iran in this instance. Indeed, the two are often inextricably linked. This is not a study of British-Iranian bilateral relations and therefore does not pretend to give equal coverage to both British and Iranian sources. It employs predominantly English-language British sources, although select materials in French, Russian and Persian have been consulted where relevant. Persian words have been transliterated or otherwise rendered into Latin characters according to the International Journal of Middle East Studies guidelines and wordlist.

Primary sources

Official sources consulted include daily diplomatic despatches in addition to quarterly and annual reports and special thematic reports. Where available, the private papers and correspondence of Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service officials have been consulted in order to allow for a more nuanced understanding of official views and to counterbalance potential bias and self-censoring which may characterize formal official documents. One challenge in this regard is the relative paucity of personal correspondence in the second period as compared with the first, but this gap is partially compensated by the greater informality in style and content in the official correspondence for the second period, which affords insight into views of a more personal nature. The verbatim

statements of members of parliament as recorded in Hansard for both periods were also reviewed and analysed. These provide a valuable insight into the public expressions of both governing officials and non-governing public representatives and allow the public statements of the government to be compared against their privately expressed internal views.

The review of the press includes a selection of national daily newspapers which represent varying political perspectives. The press of the first period exerted considerable influence on public opinion as it was the primary source of information for a newly-educated generation of citizens who had benefitted from the introduction of compulsory elementary schooling in 1880.² As a major national newspaper, the *Times* reported more extensively and in greater detail than the *Guardian*, but both contained insightful editorials which shed light on their different perceptions of the Constitutional Revolution. The Manchester-based *Guardian* was not merely a provincial daily but the most important national paper based outside of London. Its editor during the first period was C.P. Scott, a prominent Liberal Radical whose political convictions were instrumental in shaping the newspaper's stance on Iran. Under Scott's editorship, *The Manchester Guardian* was especially influential and authoritative.³ Scott cultivated friendships and corresponded with many leading figures of the time, including the Lord Chancellor Lord Loreburn, Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey and Professor E.G. Browne.⁴ *The Times* was often denounced by Liberal Radicals as the mouthpiece of the Foreign Office, and although its views ostensibly reflected those of some officials, the reality was more complex. Valentin Chirol, the head of *The Times* Foreign Department, corresponded with Sir Cecil Spring-Rice and was aware of his sympathy for the Iranian reformers. Unlike most of *The Times*' editorship, whose stance then was to support the policies of the acting government, Chirol was lukewarm about the Anglo-Russian Convention.⁵ The press of the 1970s did not enjoy the same unrivalled prominence as in the first period given the presence of competing media such as radio and television, and no editor of the period, not even the illustrious William Rees-Mogg at *The Times*, could rival C.P. Scott for political connections and

² Douglas, *History Liberal party*, 6

³ Taylor, *Trouble Makers*, 95

⁴ Ayerst, *Guardian*, 365; Hammond, *C.P. Scott*, 149-176

⁵ *Times history*, 489, 502

leverage. *The Times* did not show any particular inclination to champion the Shah and its foreign editor, Charles Douglas-Home, defied the official view and expressed his doubts about the monarch's prospects for survival following his November 1978 visit to Tehran.⁶

Civil society in this study refers to any non-governmental association or group of private citizens which contributed substantially and influentially to commenting on the Iranian government or opposition during either of the two periods. A comparison of the civil society groups engaged with Iran during the two periods reveals the changing face of British political activism in foreign affairs. The committees involved with Iran in the first period were composed of Liberal Radicals, Imperialists, Labour Party members and some Conservatives while in the second period such groups were predominantly composed of Labour Party members and included many individuals with Socialist inclinations. Equally striking is the degree to which the ideals and attitudes of the Labour Party differ between the two periods.

IV. Primary research questions

This comparative study seeks to address questions in five areas. Firstly, it seeks to establish the nature of the views espoused by the British Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service on the one hand and by the British press and civil society vis-à-vis the Iranian Shah/government and opposition during the two periods and also to determine which factors contributed to the formation of these views. Secondly, it aims to assess the extent to which the British policymaking process during the two periods was responsive to considerations other than those associated with realist perspectives defined purely by rational power calculations and the extent to which the realist imperative was challenged both from inside and outside of the policy-making establishment by alternative views. The study will further seek to determine whether the degree of impactful dissent against the official line was stronger or weaker in the first or second period. Thirdly, it seeks to identify and investigate the causes which account for shifts in official British views and differences in the

⁶ Grigg, *Times*, 468

magnitude and character of dissent expressed inside and outside of the policy-making establishment. These may encompass diverse causes ranging from a simple variance in personal beliefs to the influence of wider political, geopolitical, social, economic and intellectual factors. Particular emphasis will be placed on investigating the role played by the political ideals of Liberalism prevalent in the Victorian and Edwardian eras and the influence of the Liberal Party, which was in power for the duration of the first period. Fourthly, it seeks to compare perceptions of Iran as a social and cultural entity and to investigate how these influenced British views of political developments during the two periods. This will include an interpretation of such views within the theoretical framework of ‘Orientalism’ as well as ideologies specific to Iran such as ‘Aryanism.’

Answers for the above questions will be provided by engaging in a thorough and critical review of the relevant primary and secondary sources identified in section III. This study will pay particular attention to the analysis of linguistic nuances in political, press and personal texts.

V. Historical overview of the two periods

This section will provide historical context and a brief summary of events which transpired in each period.

i. Britain up to 1906

In 1980, historian Paul Kennedy argued that “*the relative decline of Great Britain as an economic power is perhaps the most critical element in the formulation of the country’s external policy over the past hundred years*”.⁷ His statement highlights two important points for understanding Britain in the 20th century – the notion of British decline and the role of economic factors in shaping Britain’s global status and foreign policy. In 1906, Britain was far from its imperial zenith in the 1860s, when it had been animated by a “*cosmic*” sense of confidence. It was already in a state of economic, political and military decline relative to the rising powers of Germany, Russia and the

⁷ Kennedy, *Realities Diplomacy*, 21

United States, a reality which would shape forthcoming twentieth century conflicts.⁸ Britain's quest for counter-hegemonic alliances in the early 1900s was an acknowledgement of this state of relative decline.⁹ A Conservative government led Britain out of 'splendid isolation' and into an alliance with Japan in 1902 and with France in 1904. As an established European and imperial power, Britain's primary concern was to preserve the status quo, in contrast with Russia and Germany who could gain much from its disruption.¹⁰ British political and public opinion was split over whether Russia or Germany was a greater threat. From 1906 until 1914, the Foreign Office sought to counter German ascendancy by cultivating good relations with Russia, which required a settlement over their respective interests in Iran, Afghanistan and Tibet.¹¹ The result was the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention, whose chief architects were Sir Edward Grey, Liberal Foreign Secretary (1906-1914), Sir Charles Hardinge, Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs (1905-1910) and Sir Arthur Nicolson, Ambassador to Russia (1905-1910) and later Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs (1910-1915).¹²

ii. The Persian Question¹³

Britain's historic interest in Iran was first and foremost a strategic concern relating to the defence of India, and secondarily a commercial concern.¹⁴ Malcolm Yapp argued that *West of Iran, the interests of Britain in Europe predominated over her interests in India. East of Iran British policy was primarily influenced by the strategic situation of British India. In Iran, there was a collision*.¹⁵ Since 1834 Britain and Russia had pledged to respect Iranian independence¹⁶, but by the early twentieth century this independence was said to *"hang by a thread"*¹⁷. Iran was referred to as one of the world's 'sick men' – something between an imperial possession and an independent

⁸ Kennedy, 22, 30, 32-34, 57, 58

⁹ Kazemzadeh, *Russia Britain Persia*, 386; Ahmad, *Anglo-Iranian*, 260; McLean, *Britain Buffer State*, 37-39, 74

¹⁰ Steiner, *FO Edward Grey*, 68

¹¹ Beloff, *Liberal Empire*, 104, 108

¹² Steiner, *FO Edward Grey*, 24-36; McLean, *Britain Buffer State*, 74

¹³ Kazemzadeh, "Anglo-Iranian Relations ii. Qajar Period", 46-51

¹⁴ Greaves, *Iranian relations with Great Britain*, 423-424; Yapp, *Strategies Defense*, 24; McLean, *Britain Buffer State*, 25

¹⁵ Yapp, 23

¹⁶ Bonakdarian, *Britain and Iran Const Rev*, 7

¹⁷ McLean, *Britain Buffer State*, 25

state and for all practical purposes was part of the British and Russian ‘informal empire’.¹⁸ Commitment to the buffer state policy of militarily ‘stiffening’ Iran against Russia prevailed in the 1880s and 1890s but by the turn of the century British policy-makers were divided into those who continued to support the buffer state policy and those who saw it as futile, given the Russian preponderance at the royal court in Tehran.¹⁹ The latter camp, which included Edward Grey, advocated securing key British commercial and strategic interests in Southern Iran and the Persian Gulf and favoured an agreement with Russia to delimit their respective spheres of influence.²⁰ The former camp, which included Lord Curzon and Liberal MP Henry F.B. Lynch²¹, believed that Britain must stand firm against Russia throughout Iran or risk imperilling its commercial and strategic interests there. Russia was deemed untrustworthy and likely to continue its expansionism irrespective of any written agreement.²²

iii. The Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1909

Constitutionalism and Nationalism

In an age of imperialism, forces were emerging which spurred non-Western and colonised peoples to oppose imperialism and arbitrary rule alike and to seek political regeneration through constitutionalist and nationalist ideals. Nader Sohrabi argued that the revolutionary paradigm of the early 20th century was the constitutional revolution, based on the French revolutionary model. The early 1900s witnessed a ‘wave’ of constitutional revolutions in the developing world: Russia in 1905-06, Iran in 1906, the Ottoman Empire in 1908, Mexico in 1910 and China in 1911.²³ The Japanese victory over the Russian fleet in the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese war had profoundly impressed Iranian observers and planted a constitutionalist seed in their minds: Japan, an Asiatic

¹⁸ McLean, *Britain Buffer State*, 1-2

¹⁹ McLean, *Britain Buffer State*, 27- 33

²⁰ McLean, *Britain Buffer State*, 41

²¹ Henry Lynch (1862 – 1913) was a Cambridge-educated lawyer, entrepreneur, explorer and Liberal MP for Ripon from 1906-1910. He was a senior partner with Lynch Brothers, which won a concession for the navigation of the Karun River in Iran in 1890 and provided a river service. His firm also built roads through Bakhtiari territory in Western Iran. 443, *Who was Who*, v.1 1897-1915; Bonakdarian, *Britain and Iran Const Rev*, 421. For more information on Lynch and his business activities see the D.Phil thesis by Shahnavaz, Shabbaz, *Britain and the opening of the Kārūn River circa 1873-1910*, University of Oxford. Faculty of Oriental Studies 1980.

²² Curzon Papers

²³ Sohrabi, *Historicizing Revolutions*, 1383-85

constitutional power had defeated the Russian imperial juggernaut, a European, autocratic power. The possession of a constitution thus came to be seen as a panacea which would cure all the ills of Asiatic nations and conjure forth strength, progress and prosperity in one fell swoop. This decade also witnessed the rise of a more uncompromising Indian nationalism, which rejected the moderate platform of the Indian National Congress and advocated total Indian independence from British rule.²⁴

By 1905, numerous socio-economic and political factors in Iran conspired to produce mass popular demands for the implementation of a constitution to curb royal absolutism and foreign (largely Russian) influence. The national situation was critical. Poor harvests, cholera outbreaks and food price spikes combined with festering grievances against the corruption of the royal court.

Following the public bastinadoing of Tehran's leading sugar merchants by the Tehran governor, the merchants took mass sanctuary (*bast*) in the city's main mosque, the Masjid-i Shah and in late 1905 many leading clerics, merchants and other discontented groups took sanctuary again at the Shrine of Shah 'Abd al-'Azim outside the capital²⁵. They demanded the replacement of the Governor of Tehran, dismissal of the Belgian director of customs Joseph Naus, the enforcement of the shari'a and the formation of a House of Justice.²⁶ Again from June to August 1906, the clerics and people of Tehran took mass sanctuary in shrines and in the garden of the British Legation in Tehran and refused to budge until their political demands – including the demand for a constitution – were satisfied by Muzaffar al-Din Shah. The ailing Shah soon capitulated and signed the documents providing for a constitutional monarchy. He was succeeded in January 1907 by his son Muhammad 'Ali Shah, an inveterate autocrat who resented the constitutional restrictions placed on him and his court. The new monarch intrigued against the constitutional regime and colluded with his Russian advisors to overturn it and restore his absolute power. This culminated in the June 1908 coup, which resulted in the suppression of the constitution and bombardment of the parliament (Majlis) by the Shah's Cossack Brigade. Initial resistance to the autocratic coup in the north-western city of Tabriz sparked a civil war which gradually spread across the country. It

²⁴ Moulton, *British Radicals India*, 27

²⁵ Bonakdarian, *Britain and Iran Const Rev*, 24-29

²⁶ Abrahamian, *Causes of Const Rev*, 25

ended in July 1909 with victory for the constitutionalists under the leadership of Sardār As‘ad and Sipāhdār, the restoration of the constitution and the abdication of Muhammad ‘Ali Shah.

Throughout this period, Britain was seen by Iranians and indeed by many British themselves, both in official and unofficial capacities, as a friend of the constitutionalists and a defender of liberalism against Russian autocracy and its oppressive influence. However, the ostensible British commitment to defending liberalism and constitutionalism was at odds with its new foreign policy, namely the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention which laid the foundations for an understanding with Russia over their respective spheres of influence in Iran, Afghanistan and Tibet. Henceforth, Britain and Russia were supposed to cooperate in their Iranian policy rather than compete with each other. Britain’s new alignment with its long-standing, autocratic rival was seen as a fundamental betrayal of its identity as a beacon of liberalism for the oppressed nations of the world who fell within the British sphere of influence. Liberal-minded government officials, the Liberal press and civil society which concerned itself with Iran or with similar international causes railed against this new turn in policy and decried all acts of Russian-related tyranny in Iran with especial vehemence, given that Britain was now considered responsible by association for such actions.

iv. From Qajars to Pahlavis

Iran’s first Constitutional Period ended in tragedy with the crushing of the Majlis by Russian forces in December 1911, following a Russian ultimatum demanding the departure of the American Treasurer-General, Morgan Shuster.²⁷ Following the ravages of the First World War, when Iran suffered economic and political dislocation, famine, epidemics and military incursions from Britain, Russia, Germany and Ottoman Turkey, effective central authority had ceased to exist and the northern part of the country remained under Russian military occupation. By the terms of the Constantinople agreement of 1915, Britain was given a free hand in the so-called ‘neutral zone’ of Iran where the oil-producing regions were situated, and Russia was permitted to continue its occupation of the northern zone, although this agreement was repudiated by the new Soviet

²⁷ Ghani, *Iran and rise of Reza Shah*, 12-14

government in 1917. Lord Curzon, who became Foreign Secretary in October 1919, was intent on achieving his long-time objective of creating a quasi-protectorate in Iran. His brainchild, the 1919 Anglo-Persian agreement, provided British officers and military equipment for the modernization of the Iranian army and civil advisors to assist in the reform of administration and finances, all financed by a British loan. However, as a foreign treaty it required the assent of the Iranian Parliament (*Majlis*), and provoked public outcry when its terms became known. The treaty was never ratified and was assumed defunct by 1921, when Cossack Colonel Reza Khan took power in a coup d'état, aided and abetted by the influential journalist and Anglophile Sayyid Zīa al-Dīn Tabataba'ī. The British role in orchestrating Reza Khan's rise is contested. While it is improbable that the Foreign Office was directly involved, the British Field Marshall Sir Edmund Ironside appeared to have been instrumental in noticing and hand-picking Reza Khan to lead the coup, sensing his potential to bring stability and order to Iran.²⁸

The ascent to power of Reza Khan, who founded the Pahlavi dynasty and became Reza Shah in 1926, marked a new era for Iran. The country regained a degree of autonomy and stability which it had not enjoyed for a long time, although at the price of Reza Shah's heavy-handed despotism. He implemented an extensive programme of reforms intended to modernize his country and make it a respected, independent member of the international community. Many of his reforms were designed to promote secularisation and break the traditional power of the clerics in key areas such as education, the legal system and social mores, with particular emphasis on the status of women. Among his major reforms was the creation of a modern armed force, the secularisation of the judicial and legal system (1927), the abolition of the Capitulations (1928), and the 'unveiling' of women (1936). His desire to create a strong, centralized state underpinned by Persian nationalism pushed him to break the power of the tribes which then made up a large part of Iran's population and to attempt to assimilate Iran's other large minority groups such as Kurds and Azeris.²⁹ In his foreign relations, Reza Shah tried to curtail outside interference in Iran's internal affairs. He

²⁸ Hambly, *Pahlavi Autocracy*, 218-226

²⁹ Zirinsky, *Capitulations*, 81-86; Matthee, *Education*, 124; Boroujerdi, *Triumphs and travails*, 147; Bayat, *Tribes*, 217; Faghfoory, *Modernization ulama*, 277-285

cultivated relations with both Germany and the United States to counteract the influence of the old powers, Britain and Russia (now the USSR). Relations with Britain during this period were dominated by the issue of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC). Iran was largely excluded from participating in the management or benefitting from the revenues of APOC, a humiliating reminder that Iran's most lucrative resource was controlled by foreigners. In 1933, Reza Shah settled for a renegotiated agreement with APOC, which awarded Iran marginally greater royalties and a few other concessions. However, he ultimately failed to break APOC's hold over Iran's oil resources, a task which was left to Dr. Muhammad Musaddiq. Reza Shah cultivated cordial relations with Hitler's Germany in the 1930s, which aroused the suspicion of the Allies following the outbreak of war. He declared Iran neutral but his refusal to allow the Allied forces to transport war materiel across Iranian territory and to implement measures to 'prevent a German take-over' led to the British-Soviet invasion in August 1941 and subsequent occupation until the end of the war. Reza Shah abdicated in favour of his son, Muhammad Reza, and died in 1944 in South African exile.³⁰

By the early 1950s, Britain's adversarial relations with the Soviet Union and the importance of cheap Persian Gulf oil for the war-ravaged economy pointed towards a revival of the old 'buffer state' policy for Iran. The need for a strong buffer was underlined by the Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946, when the Soviet Army occupied the territories of Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. The crisis proved to be a landmark conflict in the development of the Cold War and signalled the gradual ascendancy of the United States over Britain as an influential outside power in Iran, a trend which would continue for the next three decades.³¹ Iran's location at the "*very core of the Cold War in the Middle East*" would powerfully shape its internal and external politics and development for the duration of the Shah's rule.³²

In 1953, Anglo-Iranian relations were indelibly marked by the joint CIA-MI6 covert operation to overthrow Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq following his 1951 nationalisation of the Anglo-

³⁰ Hambly, 239-242

³¹ Fawcett, *Iran Cold War*, 177; Hambly, 245-50

³² Chubin, *The Cold War and the Middle East: Iran*, 216

Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). By unseating Musaddiq, the British sought to ensure a continued cheap and plentiful national oil supply for rebuilding post-war Britain and to punish Musaddiq for dealing a blow to British prestige in a manner which could set a dangerous precedent for similar action against other British-owned enterprises.³³ British attitudes and actions during the Musaddiq episode were a clear demonstration that in the early 1950s, Britain's imperialistic mentality was still very much intact. British policy in Iran was thereafter closely linked to support for the new Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, and the Iranian monarchy.

In 1953, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles introduced the concept of the 'Northern Tier', a defensive anti-Communist bulwark along the southern Soviet frontier consisting of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan.³⁴ The following year, Prime Minister Anthony Eden asserted that Britain would maintain its world power status through the formation of anti-communist alliances.³⁵ The Northern Tier was formalised as the Baghdad Pact in 1955, a loose coalition which included Britain (but not the United States) as a formal member. It was renamed CENTO (Central Treaty Organisation) after Iraq withdrew following the 1958 revolution.³⁶ In 1959, Iran concluded a bilateral defence agreement with the United States³⁷ and in 1962 'normalised' relations with the Soviet Union, stipulating that no foreign military bases (which might target the USSR) would be allowed on Iranian territory.³⁸

v. Britain in the twentieth century

Britain's position following the First World War appeared favourable compared to that of many European nations and its great power status was relatively undiminished.³⁹ Indeed in the 1920s it

³³ Amin, *Iranian Foreign Policy*, 441; Bill & Louis, *Musaddiq*, 4,6

³⁴ Dimitrakis, *Failed alliances*, 30

³⁵ Dimitrakis, 8,188

³⁶ Dimitrakis, 31

³⁷ Ramazani, *Iran's Foreign Policy*, 282-85

³⁸ Ramazani, 311

³⁹ Kennedy, 150-151, 223

still seemed that Britain might be able to recover its pre-war imperial influence.⁴⁰ The 1930s however put an end to such illusions and saw conflicting tendencies between imperial nostalgia and public support for contemporary leftist causes such as the Spanish Civil War.⁴¹ On the home front, by 1929 Britain had become a fully representative democracy with universal adult suffrage.⁴² In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Britain had had lost one quarter of its pre-war wealth and had slipped to the bottom league of the industrialised powers.⁴³ However, it continued to be seen as a great power with international interests and its role in the Allied victory had rekindled a national sense of moral purpose. For nearly twenty five years following the Second World War, British policy was based on an overestimation of its own power and an ambitious set of goals. In 1948, Winston Churchill declared Britain at the juncture of ‘three circles of power’ – Empire/Commonwealth, the English speaking world and Western Europe.⁴⁴ Even the humiliation of the Suez crisis in 1956 was not seen as indicative of inevitable decline. The British Empire retreated gradually, as did its general sense of importance and status; in 1965, Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson was still claiming that Britain was a world power. By the late 1960s, officials were finally willing to accept the full implications of British weakness and it became possible to downsize in a way which would have been unthinkable in 1950.⁴⁵ The late 1960s and 1970s were a period of identity crisis and reaction to those overambitious post-war years, “*there was a new hesitancy in foreign policy following the East of Suez withdrawals...the realisation that Britain had lost its long battle to retain Great Power status....took its toll...there was now a tendency to set ambitions unduly low, with an emphasis on little more than damage limitation*”.⁴⁶ The decision to grant independence to most remaining colonies, divest itself of major overseas commitments and apply to join the European Economic Community (EEC) signified the end of

⁴⁰ Kennedy, 227

⁴¹ Kennedy, 228, 239-43, 247-50

⁴² Following the 1884 Reform Act, about 60% of male householders over the age of 21 were enfranchised. The 1918 Representation of the People Act extended the franchise to all men over the age of 21 and women over the age of 30 with certain property-based restrictions while the 1928 Representation of the People Act introduced universal adult suffrage over the age of 21. Cook, *Routledge Britain 19th Century*, 68. *Representation of the People Act 1918*, Internet Archive.

⁴³ Kennedy, 317-320

⁴⁴ Mangold, *Success and failure*, 125, 91

⁴⁵ Mangold, 119, 133

⁴⁶ Mangold, 131; Callaghan, *Challenges and Opportunities*, 1

four centuries of outward-looking policy.⁴⁷ Thus the 1970s were a nadir for Britain in terms of both self-perception and external influence. British policy-makers had largely lost a strong sense of conviction and identity. However, there were intangible British assets which made them powerful even when in decline. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wrote that even in the 1970s, it was “*psychologically impossible*” for the American government to ignore the expertise and views of the British Foreign Office. British leaders, said Kissinger, possessed the experience and intellectual resources of a great power, but acted less as if their actions mattered.⁴⁸ Many of the changes in British society and politics after the war were the consequences of Britain becoming a democratic welfare state. World War Two was a ‘people’s war’, and the people expected their sacrifices to be repaid with the provision of better public services, housing and living conditions. There was a concomitant shift in spending from defence to domestic issues, and as the breadth of the electorate grew, foreign policy mattered less as an election issue, since the average working Briton lacked the time and inclination to be heavily invested in foreign affairs.⁴⁹

Détente and the Soviet ‘threat’

In the 1970s, an uneasy superpower detente and the emergence of political multi-polarity had introduced further changes to the Anglo-Iranian relationship.⁵⁰ Iran was a rising regional power following the 1973 oil price bonanza when its per capita GNP soared by 41% while in keeping with the Nixon Doctrine, Iran and Saudi Arabia replaced Britain as ‘policemen of the Gulf’.⁵¹ The Shah’s newfound status was ultimately beneficial to the United States and Britain, as Iran was Britain’s largest export market in Asia and largest arms customer in the world during this period.⁵² Britain meanwhile was seeking to redefine its role in the region following the withdrawal of its forces from the region in 1971. Political and military decline, the onset of the ‘British disease’⁵³ and a general sense of post-imperial malaise are pervasive themes in the press and scholarly

⁴⁷ Kennedy, 320, 331, 375, 379; Mangold, 117-121, 127

⁴⁸ Mangold, 89, 131

⁴⁹ Kennedy, 321-324

⁵⁰ Turner, *Britain Intl Role*, 43

⁵¹ Lucas, *Collected Papers*, 214

⁵² FCO 8/2981, Parsons to FCO, 1 Jan 1977; FCO 8/3195, Cabinet Note on Iran, 10 November 1978;

Brenchley, *Economic History*, 203, 259

⁵³ Brenchley, 249

literature.⁵⁴ However, scholars such as Michael J. Turner have argued that while in absolute terms British power diminished over the course of the twentieth century, the perception of British power declined proportionally much less, a fact which was visible in the Iranian case.⁵⁵

In the 1970s, concern over a direct Soviet military threat to Iran was much less than in the early years of the Cold War. The vast quantities of arms sold to Iran had much more to do with countering British economic decline than with countering possible Soviet military aggression, although the Soviet threat was still frequently invoked in official discourse.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the governing wing of the Labour Party remained sceptical of the USSR. Prime Minister James Callaghan (1976-79), although committed to detente, vigorously promoted human rights and the final act of the 1975 Helsinki Accords with the aim of pressuring the USSR and opening up Soviet society.⁵⁷ The growing prominence of human rights in international relations led to the Shah himself being scrutinised in this respect. The dynamics of Britain's 'special' but unequal relationship with America also influenced its Iranian policy, particularly concerning arms sales and human rights matters. This study ends in early 1979, the year "*detente died*"⁵⁸, just before the resurgence of the Cold War following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 and the subsequent transformation of the strategic environment in the Middle East and beyond.

vi. The Iranian Revolution, 1976-1979

The initial rumblings of the Iranian revolution were heard in 1977. The election of President Jimmy Carter on a platform of promoting international human rights gave confidence to the nascent liberal opposition in Iran, who seized the opportunity to present their collective demands for the restoration of the constitution and respect for basic civil rights and due process. The Shah's regime, and in particular SAVAK, his notorious secret police force, had drawn international condemnation from humanitarian groups such as Amnesty International for their heavy-handed

⁵⁴ Turner, *Brit Intl Role*, 2,150 ; Turner, *Britain and World*, 224

⁵⁵ Turner, *Brit Intl Role*, 234 ; Turner, *Britain and World*, 228-9

⁵⁶ Dimitrakis, 154-56, 177-78

⁵⁷ Turner, *Britain and World*, 191

⁵⁸ Dimitrakis, 189

brutality and for the indiscriminate use of torture. Meanwhile, the 1973 oil price spike had quadrupled Iran's oil revenues and made the Shah into a towering figure of wealth and international influence. The British ambassador, Sir Anthony Parsons, enjoyed a position of special privilege and influence with the Shah and his elite circle of officials from his arrival in Iran in 1974 until his departure which practically coincided with the Shah's flight in early 1979. He was chiefly responsible for melding British policy to support the Shah's regime to ensure the continuation of the lucrative Anglo-Iranian trade relationship and ostensibly to maintain a bulwark against the Soviet Union.

As the revolutionary wave gained momentum and peaked in 1978, spearheaded by the clerics and eventually Ayatollah Khomeini, Parsons was adamant that the Shah would remain in power and that in any case, Britain had no option but to formally back him which it continued to do until December 1978. As in the earlier period, one of the key objectives of the opposition was to curb foreign influence in the country, not just British but also American and Soviet. In this respect, Shahram Chubin pointed out that Cold War security imperatives which dictated close alignment with an outside power did not mix well with the legacy of imperialism in Iran.⁵⁹ The growing domestic demand for human rights to be reflected in Britain's Iranian policy was grudgingly acknowledged at an official level and implemented to some degree, but the government continued to insist that the best chance for a human-rights respecting regime was a reformed government headed by the Shah rather than any republican alternative, whether Islamist, Marxist or of another variety.

The diplomatic and policy-making establishment of this period were mostly supportive of the Shah's rule (with important exceptions, like FCO Minister of State Frank Judd) thanks to the economic and strategic advantages conferred by their special relationship. Overall, they showed a greater indifference to the opposition than their Edwardian counterparts. However, in the press and civil society, particularly within the Labour left wing, there were fierce attacks on the Shah and concomitant support for the opposition. Criticism of the Shah centred on the contemporary

⁵⁹ Chubin, 217

discourse of ‘human rights’, especially prominent since the 1975 Helsinki Conference and frequently used to criticise the actions of Soviet leaders. Critics also placed a greater emphasis on class as a defining category in the second period, in accordance with the rise of class politics in Britain. British identity was no longer undergirded by a sense of Liberal duty, and the primary moral injunction was negative – to refrain from arms sales – rather than positive – to promote British liberalism.

Like its 1906 counterpart, the 1978-79 revolution was a harbinger of a new era, a transition between the last wave of post-war anti-colonial movements and the rise of political Islamism in subsequent decades. The earlier revolution disrupted received notions of Orientalism in a spectacular fashion; one contemporary British observer remarked solemnly that it would force his compatriots to revise “*all our ideas of the East*” and to reconsider their imperial position in Egypt, India and beyond.⁶⁰ On the other hand, the 1978-79 revolution and subsequent hostage crisis launched a neo-Orientalist outlook toward Iran and the wider Middle East following the appearance of political Islamism.⁶¹ Peter Gran argues that the events of 1979 in Iran together with the rise of neo-liberalism in world capitalism – which marked the beginning of the modern era of globalization – sparked a major intellectual shift towards the study of religions and civilizations and away from traditional historical scholarship centred on nation-states.⁶² In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said argues that the Iranian revolution and hostage crisis (along with the American defeat in Vietnam) marked a turning point for many in the West, after which “*lines had to be defended*”. There was a burgeoning sense in the West that faith in the capacity of non-Westerners to manage their own affairs had been overestimated, if not outright misguided. Western intellectuals who had championed anti-colonial struggles throughout the Third World – Said includes Iran in this category alongside such places as Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam and Palestine, although Iran was never a formal colony – reached a point of exhaustion and disillusionment after their cherished revolutionary causes were hijacked by seemingly barbaric and hostile new

⁶⁰ Gordon, *Reform movement in Persia*

⁶¹ Elmarsafy et al, *Orientalism*, 8

⁶² Gran, *Orientalism's contribution to world history*, 22

regimes.⁶³ The beginnings and development of this cultural and intellectual sea-change can be identified in both the official and non-official sources of the second period.

VI. Conceptual arguments and literature

i. From Liberalism to Labour

The ideals of Liberalism and the Liberal Party occupy an important place in this study. The period from about 1830 up to the first decade of the twentieth century is often referred to as Britain's 'Liberal Age'. The Liberal Party was in power for all but twelve years between 1831 and 1885 and in the early 1900s could still attract fifty percent of the vote, yet by 1945 it was a spent force and almost completely supplanted by Labour as one of Britain's two main parties.⁶⁴

A distinction must be drawn between 'liberal' with a lower-case and upper-case 'L'. The former refers to liberalism based on John Locke's philosophy, based on the observance of the natural rights and liberties of the individual. Britain has long been a 'liberal' state in this sense insofar as it has respected formal individual rights, including during times of Conservative government. 'Liberal' refers to the British Liberal Party and the particular programmes and attitudes linked with it. In this study, the word 'liberal' can refer to either of these two definitions, but in the first period it primarily refers to Liberal Party. Thus Britain had a firm tradition of 'liberal' beliefs, but 'Liberalism' as a political creed was a nineteenth century development, spurred by the growth of the provincial daily press and Christian Nonconformist beliefs.⁶⁵ Victorian Liberalism centred on the political freedom of the individual citizen, the importance of reason and moderation in government, a hatred of coercion and a preference for unstructured political representation.⁶⁶ While Victorian Liberals were not democrats in the modern sense, they nevertheless advocated the removal of social and political privileges which were integral to the Whig and Tory ethos.⁶⁷

⁶³ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 22-30

⁶⁴ Fawcett, *Liberalism*, 156

⁶⁵ Cook, *Short history Lib Party*, 3-4

⁶⁶ Brock, *Liberal tradition*, 16

⁶⁷ Cyr, *Lib Party Britain*, 49-50

The Liberal belief in the necessity of individual freedom and the conviction that social improvement would come from encouraging freedom rather than creating structures fostered a suspicion of interest groups and an aversion to enforcing party discipline. These attitudes led Liberals to reject not only the social and political hierarchies of the Conservatives but also the ideals of class struggle espoused by the nascent Labour Party, on the grounds that both represented collective interests and contravened individual freedoms.⁶⁸ Late Victorian Liberalism was famously embodied in William Gladstone's slogan of 'peace, retrenchment and reform'.⁶⁹ Towards the end of the 19th century the growth of Liberal Radicalism was inspired by the philosophy of John Stuart Mill and the ideals of Nonconformist industrialists such as John Bright. Liberal Radicals advocated the extension of the franchise and state education and were more willing to use the state in support of social reform. In parliament they often found common cause with the Irish Parliamentary Party, which advocated home rule for Ireland and championed nationalist and liberal movements throughout the world including in India, Egypt and Iran. The Victorian and Edwardian Liberal Party has been described as a "*coalition of convenience, not the instrument of a creed*", since its Radical wing coexisted uneasily with its Whig grandees.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, most Party members broadly favoured free trade, support for national self-determination and arms reduction and opposed reactionary European regimes and further colonial expansion, except where it was thought justifiable on humanitarian grounds.⁷¹

Liberals fell into both Imperialist and anti-Imperialist camps, although both tended to condemn what they saw as the bellicose and irrational aspects of imperialism.⁷² Liberal Imperialists condoned further imperial expansion on humanitarian grounds such as stopping the slave trade and eradicating 'barbarous' native customs and were committed to maintaining "*humanitarian and benevolent*" British rule within the existing colonies.⁷³ Radical anti-imperialists were influenced by the pacifist and internationalist doctrines of Richard Cobden and John Bright as elaborated in the

⁶⁸ Cyr, 50, 54, 58, 69; Clarke, *Liberals Social Democrats*, 31

⁶⁹ Brock, 24

⁷⁰ Beloff, 110; Kennedy, 40

⁷¹ Beloff, 110; Cook, *Short history Lib Party*, 3; Kennedy, 40-41

⁷² Brock, 24

⁷³ Cook, *Short history Lib Party*, 32; Matikkala, *Empire and imperial ambition*, 3

1850s and 1860s and advocated a gradual increase in colonial self-government while opposing further expansion.

By the turn of the century, British anti-imperialists and imperialists alike were in favour of spreading Western civilisation around the world, an endeavour which was only opposed by those who deemed non-Western peoples incapable of advancement or of benefitting from Western government. Thus anti-imperialists did not question the benefits of Western civilisation for the world, but rather opposed its forceful imposition and methods of its administration.⁷⁴ Unlike Cobden and Bright, who opposed interference in the affairs of other countries, many Liberal imperialists and Radicals of the Edwardian era followed the example set by William Gladstone during the ‘Bulgarian Horrors’ episode of 1876-77. Gladstone’s belief that a people struggling for freedom was a “*moral cause which overruled all else*”⁷⁵ became Liberal gospel and “*stamped the Liberal Party with the mark of moralism*” in foreign affairs.⁷⁶ From Gladstone’s time onwards, Liberals would distinguish themselves in politics by taking up a matter of principle in international affairs. This was manifest not only in their championing of the Iranian constitutional cause but other contemporary issues such as their protest against the Italian invasion of Tripoli in 1911, their campaigning for humanitarian reforms in colonial Africa⁷⁷ and their virulent opposition to Russian autocracy.⁷⁸ Indeed in his study on British foreign policy critics from 1792 to 1939, A.J.P. Taylor noted that foreign policy criticism and activism in the decade immediately preceding the First World War was more “*coherent, persistent, profound*” than at any time to date.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Matikkala, 4

⁷⁵ Cyr, 15; Cook, *Short history Lib Party*, 4

⁷⁶ Porter, *Critics Empire*, 18

⁷⁷ Agitation for African reform was most closely associated with E.D. (Edmund Dene) Morel (1873 – 1924), a journalist and activist best known for his humanitarian campaign to stop forced labour in the Belgian Congo. A pacifist, he founded and led the Union of Democratic Control which opposed British involvement in World War One, for which he suffered six months’ imprisonment. Initially a Liberal Radical, Morel became a Labour MP after the war and remained politically active until his death. Martin Ceadel, ‘Morel, Edmund Dene (1873–1924)’, rev. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37782>, accessed 9 May 2016].

⁷⁸ Morris, *Radicalism against war*, 251-53

⁷⁹ Taylor, 95

In December 1905, the Liberal Party took power and its mandate was confirmed by a landslide victory in the general elections of January 1906.⁸⁰ Foreign policy would prove a source of contention in the new government; some of Edward Grey's colleagues deemed his policies too closely aligned with those of the preceding Conservative government.⁸¹ Nationalism, still untainted by the experience of the world wars, was regarded by Radicals such as the journalist Henry N. Brailsford⁸² and renowned scholar and devotee of the Iranian cause Professor Edward G. Browne as a benevolent and liberating force, "*an instrument for the political and cultural elevation of the masses*" whose flourishing should be supported by British policy.⁸³ Nationalism was the ultimate manifestation of cultural heterogeneity, a cherished ideal for liberals given their credo that "*the world advances by the free, vigorous growth of divergent types*".⁸⁴ Browne condemned the twin evils of socialism and imperialism on the grounds that they suppressed diversity, "*as Socialism is bad because it destroys individual idiosyncrasies, so Imperialism is bad because it destroys national idiosyncrasies*".⁸⁵ Browne's championing of heterogeneity and idiosyncrasy would strongly influence his portrayal of the Iranian constitutional struggle.

Numerous factors ultimately led to the Liberal Party's demise, such as socio-economic changes leading to the rise of the Labour Party and the 'Whig revolt' over William Gladstone's support for Irish home rule in 1886.⁸⁶ A third more subtle factor was the transition from the 'Liberal' to the 'Collectivist' age of British politics and society as defined by Samuel Beer. In his analysis of British party politics, Beer argued that the primary reason for the Liberal Party's decline was an underlying shift in forms of representation and governmental power in the early twentieth century as British society came to accept large producer groups and organizations, a phenomenon which

⁸⁰ Beloff, 108

⁸¹ Bonakdarian, *Britain and Iran Const Rev*, 33-36

⁸² Henry Noel Brailsford (1873 – 1958) was an influential journalist and author on foreign affairs and foreign policy critic who was professionally active for over sixty years. Steeped in Victorian liberalism, his writing was driven by the conviction that readers would respond in an enlightened manner to issues that were properly explained. He moved away from the Liberal Party and towards what he termed a 'sane socialism' due to his displeasure with Edward Grey's foreign policy. A vocal supporter of the Iranian cause and critic of the Russian autocracy, he also championed Finnish and Balkan liberation. Leventhal, *The last dissenter*, 95-99.

⁸³ Leventhal, *Brailsford*, 210

⁸⁴ Leventhal, *Brailsford*, 219. See also Ernest Renan on the virtue of the nation: Renan, *Nation*, 28-29

⁸⁵ Bonakdarian, *Orientalism to activism*, 19

⁸⁶ Kennedy, 43-45

Beer termed the ‘new collectivism.’ This greater solidity in politics was founded on a “*new communalism in the electorate*” which was anchored in social class. The Conservatives and the Labour Party adapted well to this new solidity, given their class-bound identities and tighter internal structure and party discipline. The Liberals, however, suffered because of their focus on the individual, aversion to party discipline, rejection of class as a defining social category and their reliance on voluntary activism rather than organized interests. Liberals had failed to integrate the working classes, who had initially looked to them to represent their interests. In spite of this, the last Liberal government of 1906-1910 succeeded in implementing progressive legislation of the sort which was undertaken by socialist parties elsewhere in Europe.⁸⁷

The new collectivism had far-reaching social and political consequences. Most salient among these was a significant decline in the power of Parliament and influence of individual MPs over government policy, thanks to the enforcement of modern party discipline. In this sense, parliamentary democracy was curtailed following the end of the Liberal Age and the ‘solidification’ of British politics. Concomitant with this decline was an increase in the power of the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and the bureaucracy, which expanded over the course of the twentieth century in response to increasing government involvement in economic planning and the growth of the welfare state. Collectivist politics and administration brought its own set of challenges, most notably the paradox that attempts to create competent administration through specialized bureaucracies often undermine that very goal, which was evident in the case of Iran.⁸⁸

The demise of the Liberal Age and the onset of the new collectivism were clearly manifest in the decline in Liberal sentiment and conviction – or perhaps equally a decline in the confidence necessary to demonstrate it - among British officials and policymakers who form the subject of this study. Many officials who dealt with Iran in the first period were liberals not only in political affiliation but also in sentiment, something which was conspicuously absent amongst officials of

⁸⁷ Cyr, 69

⁸⁸ Cyr, 79-80

the second period. Iran may have been an outlier; views of that country were not indicative of the totality of British views of the 'Orient' and its wider informal empire. However, such views were broadly representative of Liberalism in that era, whose ideals were influential and formed part of a wider political ethos. Ambassador Anthony Parsons' irascibility towards the Shah's humanitarian critics and the remark by a prominent 1970s official that in his time FCO staff were "*too toffee-nosed*" to pay much heed to Amnesty International's reports on Iran – such attitudes would have inflamed the earnest sensibilities of the Edwardian Liberals.

Liberalism's decline took place in tandem with the lessening of Britain's military and economic leverage vis-a-vis the world in general and vis-a-vis Iran in particular. This brought about considerable changes in the machinery of government and the civil service, but also affected Britain's conception of its own identity and role in the world. By 1906 Britain was in a state of relative decline but still strong enough to feel that it played a determining role in world affairs and had an equally important symbolic role. For Liberals, Britain had a moral obligation to defend those fighting autocracy and demanding civil rights and liberties wherever it could, perhaps a quixotic ideal which in practice could amount to intervention in the internal affairs of foreign states and had to be reined in by practical considerations. By the 1970s, a decade when Britain's global influence was perceived to have troughed, such convictions had largely vanished among policymakers. Criticising or trying to save the 'Third World' was redolent of an outmoded and patronising imperialism, an image which Britain was keen to shed.⁸⁹ The devaluation of sterling in 1967 and the withdrawal of forces from the Persian Gulf and Aden had contributed to this new mood of malaise and apathy, in which "*poor little shrunken Britain*" and the West in general seemed to be cast adrift and "*unhappy, divided, faint-hearted*" in the words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn.⁹⁰

Ideological shifts in the Labour Party

⁸⁹ Guardian, 18 September 1978

⁹⁰ Telegraph, 28 December 1978

The Labour Party was in power from 1964-1970 under Prime Minister Harold Wilson (1916 - 1995) and again from 1974-1979, led by Wilson until his resignation in March 1976 and then by James Callaghan (1912-2005) until May 1979. The 1970s witnessed a shift to the left in the beliefs of the Labour Party rank and file, if not in ministerial and governing circles.⁹¹ The Labour Party election manifestos of February and October 1974 advocated an 'ethical' foreign policy, based on strengthening international organisations, global cooperation and supporting détente.⁹² These objectives were at odds with the preferences of the Labour government, which consisted of 'centre-right' figures such as Prime Minister James Callaghan, and Foreign Secretaries Anthony Crosland (1918-1977) and David Owen (1938 -). The foreign policy tenets of the governing centre-right were markedly less pacifist, anti-American and (especially in the case of David Owen) well-disposed towards the Soviet Union, although the government did support détente and was committed to upholding the outcomes of the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).⁹³ Thus, a rift emerged between the left-leaning NEC (National Executive Committee) and the centre-right government.⁹⁴ In this, it reflected the situation of 1906-1909 whereby a non-Conservative Foreign Secretary was at odds with his party in the type of policies he chose to pursue and his broader worldview; both Sir Edward Grey and David Owen pursued policies (in particular Iranian policies) which were thought antithetical to the ideals of their parties, although Grey was ultimately more responsive to parliamentary and public criticism than Owen. Moreover, both men were government ministers at a time of political and ideological transition, when old ideals were fading and new ones coming into being; Grey presided over the 'death' of Liberal England and the rise of the Labour Party during the first decades of the twentieth century, while Owen's stint in the late 1970s coincided with an ideological crisis in the Labour Party over

⁹¹ Rubinstein, *Labour party British Society*, 139,140; Vickers, *Labour party & world*, 91,92,111; Meredith, *Labours old and new*, 11; Callaghan, *Labour foreign policy*, 282.

⁹² Dale, *Labour Manifestos*, 191, 211

⁹³ Vickers, 96

⁹⁴ Vickers, 115, 118; Rubinstein, 142, 143, 146; Meredith, 5

future directions and the collapse of the post-war 'social democratic consensus' which paved the way for 1980s Thatcherism.⁹⁵

ii. Orientalism, Aryanism and history

In both periods, perceptions of Iran were coloured by Orientalism, the themes identified by Edward Said which recurred in British, French and American literary and political discourse from the late eighteenth century onwards for describing the Ottoman Empire, Arabs and Islam.⁹⁶ Said argued that "*Orientalism can be regarded as a manner of regularized writing, vision and study dominated by ...perspectives and ideological biases....suited to the Orient*". The conception of the Orient was itself a particular type of knowledge about places and people, characterized by certain idioms and undergirded by a common doctrine consisting of notions such as Oriental despotism, Oriental sensuality and so forth. Orientalist common doctrine also emphasized the inertia, senescence, penetrability, eccentricity and backwardness of Oriental cultures. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's concept of discourse which theorised the relationship between knowledge and power, Said argued that the discourses produced by Orientalist scholarship contained within them a diagnosis of the inferiority of the Orient and an implicit programme of action which aimed to subjugate Oriental peoples and lands and subject them to European dominion.⁹⁷

Said further expands upon these concepts in *Culture and Imperialism* where he identifies recurring themes in European literary discourses which were liberally applied to describe not only the denizens of the Islamic Middle East but also subject and non-Western peoples all over the world, including the Irish, Jamaicans, Africans and Chinese. Most prominent among these were themes of ethnic essentialism (references to the immutable 'mind' or 'character' of a particular ethnic group), a puerile character which responded best to 'firmness' and the application of violence and the unbridgeable difference between subject peoples and Europeans, as if they were separate and

⁹⁵ Meredith, 6,7

⁹⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 17

⁹⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 3-9, 200-208

inferior species who deserved to be ruled by Europeans.⁹⁸ However, with respect to Said's points it is important to highlight that those who insisted on essential and unbridgeable differences between Europeans and non-Europeans would likely have opposed imperialism altogether, on the grounds that it would be wasted on populations incapable of reaping the benefits of Western civilization.

In addition to these themes, a number of contemporary accounts feature non-Europeans or non-Westerners as idealised incarnations of the 'noble savage', pure and untainted by the depredations of industrial society. In his two-volume tome *Persia and the Persian Question*, Lord Curzon gives several examples of classic Orientalist tropes: "*Persia is of the East, most Eastern; the heart of the nation is unregenerate and is fanatically (and not always unfortunately) attached to the ancient order of things...where nomad Abrahams still wander with their flocks, where Rebecca still dips her water skin at the well...western man casts off the slough of an artificial civilisation, and feels that he is mixing again with his ancestral stock*".⁹⁹ Complete with purity, changelessness and a biblical atmosphere, Curzon painted a cathartic picture for the jaded Victorian traveller fleeing England's dark satanic mills (or in Curzon's case, the Great Hall at Kedleston).

Said's Orient primarily refers to Islamic Ottoman and Arab lands. In his work, only seven pages contain references to 'Persia', many of them relating to antiquity, although he concedes that a discussion of Persia and India cannot be omitted from a history of European interests in the East.¹⁰⁰ The brand of Orientalism under discussion in this study is distinctively Iranian and was the product of specific literary influences, such as James Morier's picaresque novel *Hajji Baba of Isfahan* (1824) about the misadventures of a mendacious barber from Isfahan which characterised Iranians as devious, dishonest and craven. There were also numerous translations of Persian poetry, including most famously Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1859). Marzieh Gail argued that Iran and Britain became "psychologically interactive"¹⁰¹ in the Victorian era and in fact some of the great literary successes of Victorian Britain were translated or inspired from Iranian

⁹⁸ Said, *Culture and imperialism*, xi-xii

⁹⁹ Curzon, *Persian Question*, 12-13

¹⁰⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 17

¹⁰¹ Gail, *Persia and Victorians*, 104

sources. *Hajji Baba of Ispahan* was so influential that in 1951 Gail could still write that “*the West cannot approach Persia except under the influence of an Isfahan barber*”.¹⁰² Edmund Bosworth argued that Victorian and Edwardian popular perceptions of Iranian culture were substantially shaped by Fitzgerald’s *Rubaiyat*, which showed “*Persian culture and its ethos as essentially hedonistic and self-indulgent, with a concomitant fatalism*”.¹⁰³ However, the *Rubaiyat* was also immensely popular since it captured the agnostic zeitgeist of the new “*post-Darwinian*” world, in spite of it predating Darwinism by numerous centuries.¹⁰⁴ It is important to note that British perceptions of Iran were by no means determined by Orientalist notions to the extent that Said claims was the case among Europeans in the imperialist era. Said’s argument that every European was “*a racist, an imperialist and...ethnocentric*” vis-à-vis the Orient and that the inhabitants of the Orient were not acknowledged as citizens or human beings but merely “*problems to be solved...or taken over*” is disproved by the findings of this study.¹⁰⁵ Likewise, Said’s casual inclusion of Professor E.G. Browne’s name in a list of Orientalist scholars who were heirs to the tradition of Orientalist scholarship established by Edward William Lane¹⁰⁶ is glib and erroneous, as is his claim that the work of men like Browne provided a frame of reference for early 20th century Middle Eastern adventurers and exponents of imperialism.¹⁰⁷ This point is also noted by Robert Irwin in his critique of Said’s work, who remarks that one can scarcely imagine two books more different than Browne’s reverent *A Year Amongst the Persians* (1893) and Lane’s *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836).¹⁰⁸

The prevalence of Orientalist themes in both public and private discourse varied according to the period. In the first period, a considerable section of liberal opinion, including most notably the Manchester Guardian, was assiduous in debunking the glib Orientalist statements which appeared

¹⁰² Gail, 63

¹⁰³ Bosworth, *British Orientalists*, 76

¹⁰⁴ Javadi, *Persian Literary Influence*, 184

¹⁰⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 207

¹⁰⁶ Edward William Lane (1801-1876) was an English Egyptologist and Orientalist scholar whose 1836 work is one of the most influential and widely cited works in Middle East studies. Said, while acknowledging his formidable corpus of work, accused him of being one of the progenitors of Orientalism in that he had created a vision of the Orient which was perverse, depraved and subordinate to the West. Thompson, *Edward William Lane*, 1-3.

¹⁰⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 224

¹⁰⁸ Irwin, *For lust of knowing*, 296

in reports by *the Times*. Furthermore, stereotypically Orientalist perceptions of Iran were mitigated to a considerable extent by contemporary theories of Aryanism and the impressive spectacle of Iranian history. Aryanism as a linguistic theory originated with Sir William Jones (1746-1794), the polyglot philologist who proposed a common origin for European and Indo-Iranian languages in Sanskrit. By the mid-nineteenth century, Aryanism had become a popular and widely-known theory which drew a tenuous connection between linguistics and race and posited the common origins of European, Iranian and north Indian peoples. The romanticism of the Aryan myth captured the imagination of certain scholars and was especially pervasive among German scholars. The Aryanist theory dominated 19th century Orientalist scholarship on Iran and India and held the defining traits of Aryan nations to be advanced intellectual ability and a capacity for dynamism and regeneration, thus countering the alleged intellectual inferiority, passivity and stasis which were attributed to Oriental peoples.¹⁰⁹ Aryanism is a recurrent feature of British perceptions of Iran, before and during the Constitutional Revolution. Professor E.G. Browne alluded to it to explain the Iranian “*passion for metaphysical speculation*” and also the “*host of heterodox sects born on Persian soil – Shi‘ites, Sufis, Isma‘ilis*” which “*arose to vindicate the claim of Aryan thought to be free, and to transform the religion forced on the nation by Arab steel*”.¹¹⁰ Aryanism was also invoked to explain the intellectual superiority of Iranians compared with the neighbouring Turkic or Semitic peoples; Browne argued that the subjugation of the Aryan Iranians to the Turkic Qajar dynasty was a great misfortune for this reason.

The grandeur of Iranian history and its subsequent decline was also a common theme in the first period and held a formidable grip on the imaginations of the classicists and historical enthusiasts who populated the Foreign Office, government and diplomatic service, such as Lord Curzon and Sir Cecil Spring-Rice. This historical spectacle was seen as a manifestation of the enduring principle of Iranian nationhood. Curzon wrote “*if Persia had no other claim to respect, at least a*

¹⁰⁹ Ballantyne, *Aryanism*, 27-30, 48; Motadel, *Iran Aryan Myth*, 120-125; Zia-Ebrahimi, *Aryan Discourse*, 452

¹¹⁰ Browne, *Year Amongst Persians*, 122-123

*continuous national history for 2,500 years is a distinction which few countries can exhibit*¹¹¹, in contrast with other Asian and African countries at the time which were perceived as bereft of history or nationhood. In an age when liberals preached the virtues of pacific nationalism, on the grounds that it preserved and promoted diversity which contributed to the flourishing and advancement of humanity, Iran's antiquity of nationhood commanded great respect. This stood in stark contrast to its present parlous state following a long, humiliating decline. There was a belief in conservative quarters, even among 'Persophiles' such as Curzon, that modern Iranians were a pale imitation of their ancestors. E.G. Browne characteristically rejected this claim, declaring them a people "*still singularly resembling their ancient forbears*"¹¹², and many Liberals who supported the Iranian cause followed suit.

Seventy years later, the British view of Iran was more prosaic. Aryanism had been thoroughly discredited by Nazi ideology and atrocities. Officials no longer waxed lyrical about Iran's historical grandeur, which probably seemed far removed from the vulgar modernity of 1970s Tehran. On the other hand, Reza Zia-Ebrahimi notes that since the early 20th century the ideals and discourse of Aryanism (and the glorification of pre-Islamic history) had emerged as a key theme among Iranian modernist authors and historians, whose works relied overwhelmingly on European Orientalist scholarship. Many Iranian thinkers eagerly latched onto European ideas about the inferiority of Turkic and Semitic races (Arabs) relative to Aryans and the pernicious effects of the religion imposed on Iran by the latter (Islam). Indeed both Arabs and Islam were convenient scapegoats for explaining away Iran's ills, thus obviating the need to confront these ills or connect them with internal causes.¹¹³ The Aryanist and historical discourses were enshrined as official Pahlavi regime ideology under Reza Shah and his son in order to emphasise Iran's pre-Islamic greatness, long tradition of kingship and distant yet shared roots with Europe.¹¹⁴ Muhammad Reza Shah proclaimed that Iran was an "*Asian Aryan power*" close in mentality and philosophy to that of European states and informed British ambassador Sir Anthony Parsons that Iran's location in the

¹¹¹ Curzon, *Persian Question*, 7

¹¹² Browne, *Persian Revolution*, xiii

¹¹³ Zia-Ebrahimi, 465-66

¹¹⁴ Motadel, 130-135

Middle East was “*an accident of geography*”.¹¹⁵ Zia-Ebrahimi further demonstrates how modern Aryanism was a Western import and distinguishes between the modern Persian term *ariyayi* and the ancient name of *ariya*, which was the self-designation of the ancient tribes inhabiting the Iranian plateau.¹¹⁶ The Pahlavi fixation on Aryanism and antiquity became a subject of ridicule among many British, particularly in light of events such as the 1971 celebration of the 2,500th ‘birthday’ of the Iranian monarchy, also known as the ‘Persepolis Party’, and the glorification of the Cyrus Cylinder as the world’s first human rights charter.

Aryanism and history thus disappeared from British discourse but were enthusiastically adopted and institutionalised by the Pahlavis themselves. On the other hand, literary-derived and quasi-Orientalist stereotypes of Iran lingered on in the FCO and among diplomats. A century and a half after his first appearance, the formidable Hajji Baba could not be dislodged from the collective imagination in Whitehall. In January 1978, Anthony Parsons reported that Iran was passing through a period of socio-political discontent and malaise due to popular frustration with government inefficiency and corruption.¹¹⁷ In a semi-serious response, FCO assistant undersecretary Michael Weir was incredulous that Iranians were suddenly indignant about inefficiency and corruption, since these were the defining traits of the Iranian character as immortalized by Hajji Baba.¹¹⁸ Such generalisations and stereotypes of Iranian society and national character coloured diplomatic reporting and analysis in both periods, although this trend was stronger in the 1970s than the 1900s. A noteworthy aspect of this residual Orientalism was the view of Muhammad Reza Shah as a uniquely wise and farsighted ‘Oriental’ potentate, although in fact he was a thoroughly modern dictator with only the accoutrements of a traditional despot. The antique roots of the Shah’s absolute authority and his subjects’ ‘inborn’ acceptance of this authority was a recurring theme in British official discourse of the 1970s. The Shah’s newfound wealth after the 1973 oil price surge and his perceived strategic value as ‘policeman’ of the Gulf

¹¹⁵ Zia-Ebrahimi, 446.

¹¹⁶ For further discussion see Reza Zia-Ebrahimi (2011) Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the “Aryan” Discourse in Iran, *Iranian Studies*, 44:4, 445-472.

¹¹⁷ FCO 8/3183, Parsons to Owen, 31 Jan 1978

¹¹⁸ FCO 8/3183, Weir to Parsons, 24 Feb 1978

compounded this view – he was at once Croesus and Solomon, and many were mesmerised by his persona. The officials of the earlier period were under no such illusions, partly due to the relative impotence of Iranian monarchy at that time and partly because of their better understanding of Iranian society, which obviated the need for Orientalist stereotypes.

A notable contrast between the two periods can be seen in the representation of Iranian culture. In the first period, Iranian national culture was integral to Liberal championing of the constitutional cause. E.G. Browne's passionate defence of Iran was profoundly shaped by his enthusiasm for and knowledge of Iranian culture (mainly literature and philosophy), and fellow Liberals echoed his sentiments. This cultural emphasis dovetailed with Liberalism's idealisation of national diversity and idiosyncrasy. In the second period depictions of Iran were culturally sterile; culture had practically vanished as a defining element of Iran for British observers. This could be caused by several factors. Firstly, it may have been influenced by the cultural void engendered by the Pahlavi regime's break with Iranian tradition and its pursuit of modernisation, Westernisation and the artifice of the 'Great Civilization', which was noted by many observers. Secondly, there was disenchantment with nationalism as a marker of progress and virtue and a taboo on racial panegyrics (especially Aryanism) following the twentieth century's nationalist wars and genocides. Thirdly, there was a wider trend of 'rationalization' in the political realm, with a move towards the statistical, technical and bureaucratic with diminished regard for the centrality of the artistic and cultural. Overall, there appears to have been a move from an all-encompassing view where the nation and culture are shaped by the Romantic notions of *Volksgeist* or Ernest Renan's idea of the nation as a spiritual principle based on shared heritage¹¹⁹ for a segmented view where culture occupied a discrete sphere adjacent to the political, economic and other spheres.

VII. Thematic comparisons

i. The Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service during the two periods

¹¹⁹ Renan, *Nation*, 26

In 1906, the Foreign Office began its transformation into a modern bureaucracy. An energetic new Permanent Undersecretary (PUS) was appointed in the form of Sir Charles Hardinge, who worked closely and effectively with another newcomer, Edward Grey. Hardinge injected his personal dynamism into the somnolent corridors of the Victorian Foreign Office, introducing more efficient working procedures and a more open environment where junior officials were encouraged to provide policymaking input. Grey, as a relatively young and inexperienced Foreign Secretary, tended to defer to his senior staff such as Hardinge and entrusted them with considerable responsibilities.¹²⁰ The Diplomatic and Consular Services continued to operate on much the same ‘family’ basis as during the 19th century, although by 1900, the age of the policy-making ambassador was over, due to telegraphic communication between Whitehall and foreign posts.¹²¹

From 1906 until the Second World War, the Foreign Office was largely dominated by a group of individuals whom one scholar refers to as the ‘Edwardians’. They had entered the Foreign Service at the beginning of this period and saw the world in terms of pragmatism and the ‘balance of power’.¹²² Steiner argues that the pre-war Foreign Office was “*conservative, socially, politically and diplomatically*” and failed to understand “*the disruptive tensions in its own society; it could only take a defensive stand against challenges coming from abroad*”. She attributes these characteristics to the exclusive, isolated and socially elite character of the Foreign Office and diplomatic officials.¹²³ However, in the case of Iran, this was not true; in spite of (or perhaps because of) their educationally and socially elite status, diplomats and officials’ views in the pre-war period were shaped by robust Liberal sentiment and genuine sympathy for the efforts of the constitutionalists. The Foreign Office may have prided itself on its alleged immunity to public and parliamentary pressure, but the reality was that effective pressure groups such as the Persia Committee succeeded in raising awareness over Russian activities in Iran and clearly impacted British policy.¹²⁴ The Foreign Office reached the peak of its power as a policy-making entity from

¹²⁰ Steiner, *FO 1898-1914*, 71-84, 121

¹²¹ Steiner, *FO 1898-1914*, 176

¹²² McKercher, *Old diplomacy*, 82-85

¹²³ Steiner, *FO 1898-1914*, 210-211

¹²⁴ Steiner, *FO 1898-1914*, 97, 172, 194, 197

1898 to 1914, and never recovered this level of unchallenged influence as its scope for action was curbed by the Prime Minister and the Treasury.¹²⁵ However, it generally retained the upper hand in foreign policy formulation in the interwar years.¹²⁶ The 1943 White Paper which proposed the amalgamation of the Foreign, Consular and Diplomatic services also advocated the need for a new type of diplomatic service for a world where economics had become interwoven with politics and where diplomats had to be aware of social issues and labour movements.¹²⁷ Immediately after the war, British leaders and diplomats struggled to “*shake off the consciousness that Britain was still a great force in world affairs*”.¹²⁸ British foreign policy was soon to undergo dramatic changes as long entrenched assumptions about Britain’s place in the world were challenged.¹²⁹

The Butler Report

In 1959, the Iranian oil nationalization (Abadan) crisis of 1951-1953 was chosen by the Foreign Office as the subject of an ‘internal history’, designed to test the value of history in making policy and to correct the tendency for amnesiac policy making. Rohan Butler, an internal historian and academic, was commissioned to take up the work. Butler’s study was completed in 1962 and he concluded that the Abadan crisis was a clear sign of Britain’s declining power and capacity for independent action.¹³⁰ He also found that policy makers dealing with Abadan had failed to adopt a proactive line or to gauge developments such as the rise of Iranian nationalism.¹³¹ Butler recommended the appointment of ‘continuity men’, a hybrid historian/forward planner who could study historical precedents and carry out contingency planning. Butler’s report was widely circulated in the Foreign Office and was not without impact. It influenced the 1962 Plowden Report, and was in part responsible for the ‘new look’ of British policy planning.¹³² However, the study soon fell into to obscurity and it is not mentioned anywhere in the 1970s correspondence. In

¹²⁵ Kennedy, 176; Steiner, *FO 1898-1914*, 209; McKercher, 79, 87

¹²⁶ McKercher, 91, 114

¹²⁷ Cromwell, *A world apart*, 8

¹²⁸ Kennedy, 343

¹²⁹ Mangold, 11

¹³⁰ Beck, *Using history*, 197, 203, 206

¹³¹ Beck, 208

¹³² Beck, 223, 236

his memoirs, Foreign Secretary David Owen regretted not having commissioned a study on the 1953 Abadan episode, evidently unaware that one already existed.¹³³

Civil service reform

Harold Wilson's 1964-1970 government launched the modernization of the British civil service to address the fact that Britain was still governed by an "*Edwardian establishment mentality*" in the jet age.¹³⁴ The 1964 Fabian Administrators Report and 1968 Fulton Report condemned the 'amateurism' of the civil service and called for the admission of people with more diverse backgrounds and technical or specialist expertise into its ranks, meaning those outside of the traditional Oxbridge humanities background. However, it was tenuous to assume that class background or education would entirely determine one's attitude to working-class issues.¹³⁵ The interwar Foreign Office for instance was not nearly as conservative as its radical Labour critics charged. One official estimated that during this period it was about half Liberal, one quarter Labour and one quarter Conservative in terms of its political proclivities.¹³⁶ Ironically, it was Harold Wilson's Labour government which had created the Defence Sales Organization in 1965, in order to restore Britain's place alongside the United States as one of the world's leading suppliers of military equipment.¹³⁷ Arms sales were perceived as a way to retain some of the old authority and influence, and to justify Britain's presence on the UN Security Council, giving an Orwellian twist to the concept of security.

The Labour government of 1974-1979 lacked the modernizing zeal of 1964-1970 and struggled with a host of economic and political challenges.¹³⁸ Callaghan and other Labour ministers were sceptical of reform and supportive of the Whitehall status quo, hence many ambitious 1960s

¹³³ Owen, *Time to Declare*, 389

¹³⁴ Theakston, *Labour Party Whitehall*, 119

¹³⁵ Theakston, 145, 116-119, 128

¹³⁶ Theakston, 145

¹³⁷ The Stokes Commission (1965) established the Defence Sales Organization, which encouraged a more coordinated and active policy of arms sales. Phythian, *Arms Sales*, 32, 69. Callaghan, *Labour Foreign Policy*, 280, 281

¹³⁸ Theakston, 135, 136; *Vickers*, 106

reform plans were shelved.¹³⁹ An exception was the 1969 Duncan Report, which recommended that the diplomatic service shift its concentration towards export promotion and commercial rather than political activities. Sir Anthony Parsons, Ambassador to Iran from 1974-79 admitted in his memoirs that the British Embassy in Tehran had primarily become a centre for British export promotion, where the study of internal politics was only subsidiary¹⁴⁰, a point which was fully corroborated by David Owen.¹⁴¹ Likewise, Ivor Lucas noted that 1970s diplomats had become “*brainwashed*” by the recommendations of the Plowden and Duncan Reports that British trade promotion was the alpha and omega of diplomacy.¹⁴² In reality, the Foreign Office had promoted British commercial interests since its earliest days; William Pitt the Younger had declared that “*British policy is British trade*”.¹⁴³ In those times Britain had been more commercially dominant but by the 1970s Britain’s political influence had been curtailed to the point where it was no longer deemed necessary to have a high level of political awareness;¹⁴⁴ better to just concentrate promoting Britain’s newly competitive exports following the sterling devaluation in 1967.¹⁴⁵ Another important factor was the virtual extirpation of British intelligence services from Iran in the late 1960s and the resignation of knowledgeable senior diplomats. David Owen admitted that “*a broad understanding of Iran was increasingly lost to us*”, which in combination with the new commercial emphasis led to the production of “*superficial*” analysis and a flawed understanding of the country.¹⁴⁶

ii. Political relationships and local knowledge

British authorities in the first period had a very different type of relationship with the Shah and his court than in the second period. During the first period, Britain was strong and the Shahs were weak. The British could and did make emphatic representations about the best course of action to take and often chastised him. Diplomats ‘on the spot’ acted in both subtle and overt ways to

¹³⁹ Theakston, 140

¹⁴⁰ Parsons, *Pride & Fall*, 40

¹⁴¹ Owen, *Time to Declare*, 391

¹⁴² Lucas, *Road to Damascus*, 182

¹⁴³ FCO Historical Branch, *The FCO 1782-1991*, 2-3

¹⁴⁴ Lucas, *Road to Damascus*, 182

¹⁴⁵ Brenchley, 182

¹⁴⁶ Owen, *Time to Declare*, 389, 390

constrain the Shah and bolster the constitutionalist opposition. By the 1970s the tables were turned, with Muhammad Reza Pahlavi perceived as all-powerful and Britain in the doldrums. In the ensuing role reversal, the British ambassador often kowtowed to the Shah, who in turn lectured him on good government. In both periods, Britain declared its official intention to avoid interference or intervention in the internal affairs of Iran. However, in both periods, this proved challenging, given the extent to which Iranian society was polarized between monarch and opposition and the degree of influence which Britain exercised over the Shahs. One constant factor in both periods was the degree of privileged access the British envoys had to the Shahs, and even in the 1970s, the ghost of British power loomed large, irrespective of economic and military realities. Britain was still psychologically implicated in Iranian affairs from the Iranian point of view, making British ‘neutrality’ a diplomatic abstraction rather than an achievable reality. Failure to act was nearly as conspicuous as action itself.

There were striking gaps in the level of knowledge, awareness and competence of the local diplomatic officials in the two periods. A single official from the 1900s such as Spring-Rice, Barclay or Marling (see Section VIII) was more knowledgeable and could grasp and assess situations more lucidly and holistically than entire dedicated departments in the 1970s, even when the latter had the benefit of expert academic input. In the first period, many officials were amateur enthusiasts of Persian art, philosophy or literature, well acquainted with religion and history, proficient in Persian and keenly aware of the local and national state of affairs. They were equally aware of the opposition – its composition, movements and objectives. The greater awareness in this period was in part related to the proliferation of consulates procuring first-hand information throughout the country. British merchants and administrators also came into extensive contact with ‘Persianate’ culture and the Persian language in India, where it had long been an unofficial second language. However, this diplomatic erudition was not the product of a deliberate recruitment policy but rather a corollary of the ‘gentleman amateur’ ideal then prevalent in the Foreign Office.

In the second period the British authorities were chary of anything which could perturb the Shah, however innocent or in line with standard diplomatic activity, such as gathering information on

opposition forces. They were typically poorly versed in Persian language, history and culture and lacked the powers of observation, analysis and common sense which were evident in the earlier period. These lacunae were compounded by limited consular representation in different corners of the country, a consequent lack of first-hand information and an emphasis in the Tehran Embassy on export promotion rather than political analysis. There was almost a sense that despatches were composed more as literary exercises than as actionable assessments. A perfect example is the remark by FCO assistant undersecretary Michael Weir that a despatch by a junior official was “*not v. literary*” as opposed to officials’ frequent commendations of Parsons’ despatches, whose style was notably droll and polished but whose content was not always analytically or empirically robust.¹⁴⁷

In the case of Iran, the bureaucratisation of government and the ‘professionalisation’ of the foreign and diplomatic service caused its knowledge and activities to become too compartmentalised. This bred indifference, diminished competence and policy-making myopia and prevented the holistic analysis which characterised the first period. This shift in the abilities and attitudes of diplomatic service personnel appears to have been a wider phenomenon; Leonid Shebarshin, the Soviet KGB resident in Iran from 1979-1983 made similar observations when perusing the Russian Embassy library in Tehran, comparing the erudition and scholarly dynamism of earlier diplomats with the relative ignorance and indifference of their 1970s/1980s counterparts.¹⁴⁸

iii. International dimensions

Britain’s absolute and relative power was greater in the first period than in the second. However, in both periods its influence was contested by foreign powers, namely tsarist Russia in the 1900s and the United States in the 1970s. Critics in the first period (mostly liberal) took for granted Russia’s nefarious anti-constitutional influence in Tehran, using this belief to emphasize Britain’s obligation to act as a moral counterweight during the constitutional struggle and 1908-1909 civil war. This

¹⁴⁷ FCO 8/3184, Lucas to Weir, 14 August 1978

¹⁴⁸ Shebarshin, *Ruka Moskvy*, 171-172. Shebarshin (1935-2012) was KGB resident in Iran from 1979-1983 and the last Head of the KGB Foreign Intelligence Department from 1989-1991.

attitude intensified following the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention, an event which divided official and public opinion over whether Russia was a source of good or evil in Iran.

In the 1970s, officials largely took the view that Jimmy Carter's policies were conducive to greater liberalisation in Iran and were a good influence on the Shah, although Leftist critics denounced America's sinister influence just as their Liberal predecessors had denounced Russia. If there was no longer a real expectation among officials, press or civil society for Britain to act as a moral counterweight to any other power, there was at least the hope that it could avoid complicity in morally objectionable activities such as arms sales. Containment of the Soviet Union was publicly invoked as one of the main justifications for the alliance with the Shah, although the perception of this threat had greatly diminished since the early years of the Cold War. Prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, there was little serious expectation of aggressive Soviet military activity on its southern border with Iran and CENTO (the Central Treaty Organization) was given low priority in terms of funding and military equipment.¹⁴⁹

In both periods there were tensions between the ethical and strategic aspects of foreign policy, but overall the two were more congruent in the first period than in the second. In the 1900s, the Shahs were morally discredited and associated with the Liberal nemesis, tsarist Russia. The opposition by contrast was seen as noble and virtuous. The 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention complicated this binary view. Its supporters and authors, such as Edward Grey, argued that it mitigated Russian influence in northern Iran by formally enshrining British influence in the south, whereas detractors argued that it merely implicated Britain in Tsarist acts of repression. After the convention was concluded, many Liberals saw Britain as 'guilty by association' and held their government responsible for Russian actions in Iran. Critics of Britain's Iranian policy in the first period could attack the Shah (and by extension, Russia) in the name of liberalism and as patriotic Britons, since it was Britain's duty to nurture nascent Liberal movements.

¹⁴⁹ Dimitrakis, 135, 154-56, 177, 188

In the 1970s, Iran was seen through the lens of Cold War politics. Opposition to the Shah was no longer associated with heroic resistance to a repressive juggernaut; rather it was often equated to sympathising with (or not being sufficiently vigilant against) a repressive juggernaut, namely the Soviet Union. British government policy was anti-Soviet and it was taken for granted that the USSR was a more pernicious evil than the Shah. It followed that criticism of the Shah could be conflated with pro-Soviet sympathies and construed as unpatriotic. Thus, controversy over Iran in both periods was tightly linked to perceptions of its imposing northern neighbour in both Tsarist and Communist guise.

VIII. The British and Iran: Key Figures

i. Key Figures, 1906-1909

Sir Edward Grey (1862 – 1933), Liberal MP and Foreign Secretary in the Asquith Government, 1906 -1916

Grey, a quintessential country gentleman fond of bird-watching and of his ancestral Northumberland home, was also the man who presided over an era of crisis which saw Britain enter World War One. His priority was to maintain the European balance of power and counteract the German threat, and for this reason he pursued the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention as the centrepiece of his foreign policy. He experienced great frustration over Iran because of Russian actions there following the 1907 Convention and was assailed over his Russian and Iranian policies, among others, with a “*vigour and ability*” which was unequalled for any government or minister up to and well beyond his time.¹⁵⁰ This criticism was a partial consequence of his failure to openly communicate his actions in this regard to parliament and his critics. In reality he was a relatively accessible Foreign Secretary, who unlike his immediate predecessors, sat in the House of Commons.¹⁵¹ Grey was not indifferent to public opinion and was privately “*indignant about*

¹⁵⁰ Hammond, 150

¹⁵¹ Steiner, *Foreign Policy Grey*, 21-40

Persia” and Russian actions there.¹⁵² He ultimately put considerable pressure on his Russian counterparts to restrain their activities in Iran.¹⁵³

Sir Cecil Spring-Rice (1859-1918), Minister at the Tehran Legation, 1906-1907

Arriving in Tehran as Minister in September 1906, Spring-Rice was an idealistic character whose ardent Liberalism and belief in the importance of the individual was anchored in his Christian faith.¹⁵⁴ He had previously served in Tehran as Charge d’Affaires from 1899-1901, during which time he had studied and developed an enduring passion for Iranian philosophy, literature and mythology.¹⁵⁵ From 1905 to 1906, he served as Counsellor in St Petersburg, which deepened his antipathy towards the Russian autocracy and convinced him still further of the value of Liberalism¹⁵⁶ and that “*England should support the cause of free institutions and honest government wherever that cause was asserting itself in a sphere which English influence affected*”.¹⁵⁷ Spring-Rice believed that Liberalism was universally applicable and that it was the “*last best hope for mankind in Persia and Japan no less than in England and America*”.¹⁵⁸ His political ideals and personal affection for Iran made him a sympathetic observer of the constitutional revolution, and both his private and official correspondence showed great respect for the ‘popular movement’ in Iran and hope that it could reform the country for the better. He finished his career as British ambassador to Washington during World War One.

Sir Charles Marling (1862 – 1933), Charge d’Affaires at the Tehran Legation, 1906 - 1908

Veteran diplomat Marling was first and foremost a pragmatist who often clashed with his colleagues and superiors, whom he took to be excessively doctrinaire.¹⁵⁹ He also criticised the British Indian government, complaining about its needless expansionism and the heavy-handed attitudes of its officers who were appointed to the consulates in South-eastern Iran and the Persian

¹⁵² Taylor, 114

¹⁵³ Trevelyan, *Grey of Fallodon*, 196, 201

¹⁵⁴ Burton, *Diplomat's Life*, 20

¹⁵⁵ Burton, 35, 115

¹⁵⁶ Burton, 138

¹⁵⁷ Gwynn, *Letters and friendships*, 81

¹⁵⁸ Burton, 138

¹⁵⁹ Marling, *West meets East*, 10,12,13

Gulf.¹⁶⁰ The editor of his autobiography described him as someone who was “*utterly objective, dispassionate and unsentimental*” about Iran and fully aware of the supposedly feudal and anarchic nature of Persian society.¹⁶¹ On the other hand, he was firm in his stance that Britain would not undertake any obligations to preserve the throne of Muhammad Ali Shah or the Qajar dynasty and he acted in subtle ways to boost the constitutionalists. He returned to Tehran as Minister from 1915 to 1919. Conversant in Persian, he became a connoisseur of Persian and Islamic *objets d’art*, contributing to numerous art exhibitions in his later years.¹⁶²

Sir George Barclay (1862 – 1921), Minister at the Tehran Legation, 1908 - 1912

Barclay arrived in Tehran in October 1908 for the “*extremely difficult and important post*” of Minister at Tehran, which he was judged to have carried out with aplomb.¹⁶³ He showed a strong vein of Liberalism in both his official and private correspondence. His views of the opposition were not unqualifiedly positive, but he greatly favoured them over Muhammad ‘Ali Shah and his reactionary cabal. In fact, such was Barclay’s anti-royalist reputation that the Shah reputedly saw him as the instrument of his downfall and referred to him as “*the Angel of Death*”.¹⁶⁴ He saw the revolution as a nationalist phenomenon, in contrast with the Russians who saw it as “*revolutionary and separatist*”.¹⁶⁵ However, he was afflicted with chronic insomnia while in Tehran and often in poor health,¹⁶⁶ which contributed to his early death at the age of 59.

Edward Granville Browne (1862 – 1926), Professor at the University of Cambridge

Browne, hailing from a wealthy Gloucestershire family of industrialists, devoted his life to Persian scholarship and political causes. Fellow of Pembroke College from 1887 and holder of the Sir Thomas Adams Chair in Arabic at Cambridge from 1902 until his death, he was the foremost British authority of his time on Persian language, literature and philosophy. His only sojourn in

¹⁶⁰ Marling, 72

¹⁶¹ Marling, 13

¹⁶² Marling, 9, 13; *Times* obituary, 17 February 1933

¹⁶³ *Times* obituary, 27 January 1921

¹⁶⁴ Fraser, *Persia Turkey revolt*, 145

¹⁶⁵ Grey Papers, Barclay to Grey, 25 November 1908

¹⁶⁶ Marling, 82

Iran in 1887 was recounted in *A Year Amongst the Persians* (1893) and proved to be a formative experience for the young Browne, who developed a rapport with a wide variety of Iranians by engaging them in intensive philosophical discussion.¹⁶⁷ He was the lodestar of the Liberal characterization of the Iranian struggle. Iranians were for him, “*an exceptional race*” whose great contributions to humanity’s “*spiritual, intellectual and artistic wealth*” made them exceptionally entitled to Western sympathy.¹⁶⁸ As a Liberal, Browne despised the Russian autocracy and valued diversity, arguing that “*diversity, not uniformity is the higher law and the more desirable state*” and that “*the destruction of a distinctive type [of individual or nation] is a loss to the universe and therefore an evil*”. He decried the current belief that ‘backward’ nations needed to be developed by Europeans, protesting that “*no amount of railways, mines, gaols, gas or drainage, can compensate the world, spiritually or intellectually, for the loss of Persia*”.¹⁶⁹ These beliefs shaped his ardent championing of the Constitutional Revolution and execration of the Anglo-Russian Convention because of the threat to Iran’s independence. Browne was also a redoubtable foreign policy critic, of whom A.J.P. Taylor said “*how would Grey have... checked Russia in Persia without Professor E.G. Browne?*”¹⁷⁰ He founded the Persia Committee in 1908 to monitor British Iranian policy and the Persia Society in 1911 as a primarily cultural organization, which has been known since 1935 as the Iran Society and continues up to the present day.¹⁷¹ A colleague recalled that Iranians who had known Browne at Cambridge held him the same esteem as the Greeks did Lord Byron.¹⁷² Browne remained a respected figure among Iranians and a street in Tehran is still named in his honour. In terms of erudition, idealism and zeal, there is no comparable figure to him in the 1970s.

ii. Key Figures, 1976-1979

Sir Anthony Parsons (1922-1996), Ambassador to Iran 1974-1979

¹⁶⁷ Bosworth, *Edward Granville Browne*, 77-81

¹⁶⁸ Browne, *Persian Revolution*, xiii

¹⁶⁹ Browne, *Persian Revolution*, xii

¹⁷⁰ Taylor, 15, 96,

¹⁷¹ Wright, *Iran Society*, 3

¹⁷² Ayerst, 364

Sir Anthony Parsons was British ambassador to Iran from 1974 to January 1979. An Arabist by training, the bulk of his diplomatic career was spent in Arab countries and in Turkey. Both his obituary and David Owen described him as ‘Liberal-minded’¹⁷³ yet he was a clear defender of the Shah and his security forces and once referred to himself as “*not even a man of principle*” but a “*diplomatic operator*”.¹⁷⁴ Parsons committed several errors of judgement during his time as ambassador, failing to understand socio-political forces at work in Iran and he later admitted to having drawn flawed parallels between Iran and the Arab countries, particularly in the case of relations between the state and military. He also gave short shrift to the Shah’s critics such as Amnesty International and the BBC Persian Service. Driven by commercial motives and the economic circumstances of the time, his concern for promoting British exports was paramount, but in this he was not much different from other officials of his time. To his credit, he did repeatedly advise the Shah against a military crackdown during the later stages of the crisis in 1978, and his counsel carried exceptional weight with the Shah during this period.

Sir David Owen (1938-), Labour Foreign Secretary 1977 – 1979

Owen, by training a medical doctor, became one of Britain’s youngest ever foreign secretaries following the sudden death in office of his predecessor Anthony Crosland.¹⁷⁵ He believed that Britain had a continuing diplomatic global role to play even in light of its receding power and was firmly within the ‘right-wing’ of the Labour Party.¹⁷⁶ Owen harboured a strong antipathy to the Soviet Union and was a self-declared supporter of human rights, even authoring a book on the subject in 1978, writing that no “*country can operate in the world without trying to project abroad its own ethical values, its own moral principles*” and that human rights were central to the development of British foreign policy. He further argued that no economic efficiency argument could justify the neglect of basic freedoms and rights.¹⁷⁷ Iran was seemingly given a dispensation from this view, and did not merit a single mention in the book. Under Owen, Britain’s Iranian

¹⁷³ *Times* Obituary, 14 Aug 1996; Owen, *Time to Declare*, 387

¹⁷⁴ Parsons, *Human rights*, 1

¹⁷⁵ Owen, *Time to Declare*, 55, 92

¹⁷⁶ Vickers, 96, 111; Owen, *Time to Declare*, 266

¹⁷⁷ Owen, *Human Rights*, 2, 17, 33

policy remained firmly wedded to the Shah and quite intransigent to public criticism. He justified this belief by arguing that the Shah was a friend of Britain, and Iran's best hope for long term liberalisation and that whatever replaced him would be an even greater human rights violator. As with Edward Grey, Owen's stance provoked great hostility from members of his own party, although he was less responsive to public attacks than Grey.

Hon. Ivor Lucas (1927 -), FCO Middle East Department Head, 1975-1979

During his time as Middle East Department Head, Ivor Lucas was one of the primary architects of Britain's Iranian policy, which he was said to have "*shaped more than anyone else*".¹⁷⁸ Predominantly an Arabist by training and diplomatic experience, Iran was not his area of expertise and he largely relied on the assessments of Anthony Parsons in crafting Iranian policy. As for most other officials of his time, human rights in Iran were not an area of especial concern. He was nevertheless a keen observer of the scene and was the first official to express concern that the Iranian government was in denial about the preponderant social influence of the clerics.¹⁷⁹ In December 1978, Lucas identified numerous flaws in Britain's Iranian policy, but he ultimately argued that that policy had been the only possible one for Britain in the circumstances, a view which he reasserted thirty years later in the face of renewed criticism.¹⁸⁰

Mr. Arthur Stanley Newens (1930 -), Labour MP for Epping (1964-1970) and Harlow (1974 – 1983)

Newens was a native of London's East End and worked in the North Staffordshire coal mines in the early 1950s.¹⁸¹ He was a prominent exponent of socialist and anti-colonial causes and one of the foremost critics of Britain's Iranian policy in parliament, press and civil society. He contributed to the Committee Against Repression in Iran (CARI), composed frequent letters to the press on the subject and initiated parliamentary debates about human rights and foreign policy with specific

¹⁷⁸ FCO 8/3189, Gorham to Lucas, 7 December 1978

¹⁷⁹ Lucas, *Road to Damascus*, 179-184

¹⁸⁰ Lucas, *Revisiting Fall of Shah*, 418-424

¹⁸¹ Who's Who 2014 online edition. Oxford: OUP, 2014. Online ed., Nov 2014.

reference to Iran. His interest in Iranian affairs dated to the 1965 ‘Marble Palace Trials’¹⁸² which prompted him to protest to the Foreign Office, and he was allegedly under SAVAK surveillance in the mid-1970s along with another pro-Soviet Labour MP, William Wilson.¹⁸³ Newens was in some respects the ideological heir to the Liberals of the first period given his idealism and his views on British foreign policy in general and Iran in particular, although he was distant from them in many other ways, such as his socio-economic background and Trotskyite views. He was firmly within the Labour left-wing and was frequently dismissed as an apologist for Soviet Communism, a charge he denied. Newens initially promoted global socialist revolution and lionised Nicolae Ceausescu’s Romania for representing the ideal marriage of a socialist economic system and a democratic political system which retained independence from the Soviet Union. He later abandoned such views in favour of a pro-European Union stance.¹⁸⁴

Alun Arthur Gwynne Jones, Baron Chalfont (1919 -)

Lord Chalfont contributed a column to the Times from 1975 until 1979 where he mounted an enthusiastic defence of the Shah’s regime, pitting him against the academic Fred Halliday. A former Minister of Disarmament in Harold Wilson’s 1964 government and Labour peer in the House of Lords, Chalfont left the Labour Party in 1974 in objection to the growing dominance of its left wing but remained in the House of Lords as an independent peer. He became interested in Iranian affairs in the mid-1970s following the OPEC crisis and first met the Shah at a St. Moritz ski resort while filming a *BBC* profile about him.¹⁸⁵ Further visits to Iran convinced Chalfont of genuine popular affection for the Shah and of his remarkably successful modernization programme. Chalfont noted the Shah’s powerful presence and mesmerising effect on all those around him while lamenting his inclusion in the “*demonology of the left*” by the Western media. He maintained that an important part of the Iranian opposition was the illegal Tudeh (Communist)

¹⁸² The 1965 ‘Marble Palace’ trials involved the trials of several Iranian engineering graduates of British universities (former Tudeh sympathisers-cum-Maoists) who were arrested on charges of conspiring with a conscript who had attempted to assassinate the Shah in the Marble Palace grounds. The group was led by Parviz Nikkhah, whose bold defence at his own trial attracted widespread attention. Katouzian, *Persians*, 290-291.

¹⁸³ FCO 8/2998, Meeting Notes, 23 March 1977

¹⁸⁴ Lilleker, *Against the Cold War*, 138-150

¹⁸⁵ Chalfont, *Shadow of Hand*, 50-180

Party, backed by the KGB, a view which was evident in his columns. Chalfont's professed "*concern for the preservation of individual liberty*" resulted in his antipathy to the Soviet Union and its collectivist ideology, which in turn caused his views of the Shah's regime to be distorted through a Cold War lens, as was the case for many observers of the period.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ Chalfont, 191

Chapter 2: Perceptions of the Shah and government, 1906-1909

I. Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service

In the 1900s, Iran (Persia) could be regarded independently from its ruling monarchs in the minds of British officials, while by the 1970s, Iran as a country was inseparable from the Shah. The last Qajars, Muẓaffar al-Din and Muhammad ‘Ali, were seen as weak, dissolute and lacking full control over the country. Furthermore, they were perceived to be under the sway of tsarist Russia, or in the case of Muhammad ‘Ali Shah, actively intriguing with the reactionary elements of the Russian Legation in Tehran. The preservation of Iran’s integrity and independence had been an established principle of British foreign policy since 1834 (in theory) and the Foreign Office line throughout the nineteenth century had been one of non-interference in the internal affairs of independent nations. But in the case of Iran, the realities of weak central government and ubiquitous foreign concessions had eroded this ideal.¹⁸⁷ In 1903, Edward Grey admitted that Iran’s independence and integrity was “*rapidly slipping away... a vanishing quantity*”¹⁸⁸, thus attributing little real power to the ruling Shahs. By contrast, in the 1970s, Muhammad Reza Shah was thought entrenched to the point that the possibility of Iran without him was alarming, even inconceivable to many British officials.

Muẓaffar al-Din Shah Qajar ruled from 1895 until his death in 1907. The signatory of the 1906 Constitution, he was in poor health during his last years and was perceived as dissolute and ineffective, but also soft-hearted. Legation Secretary Evelyn Grant Duff described the state of his government in vivid and damning terms “*...It is impossible to exaggerate the utter confusion and corruption existing here – Naples in Bourbons’ time was a New Jerusalem in comparison*”.¹⁸⁹ He repeated these views in an official despatch, deploring the “*utter rottenness of the government, the venality of the officials, the absence of all justice, the stupid cruelty of the punishments and the*

¹⁸⁷ McLean, *Britain Buffer State*, 2-4

¹⁸⁸ Times, February 18 1903

¹⁸⁹ Grant Duff (GD) Papers, GD to his father, 31 January 1904

degradation of the Court".¹⁹⁰ Grant Duff was similarly appalled by Muẓaffar al-Din Shah, a "degraded being...he has every vice except cruelty and avarice"¹⁹¹ who would do his country a great service by shuffling off his mortal coil.¹⁹² Grant Duff's disparaging views of the Qajars extended to Iranian society as a whole, at least until the Constitutional movement prompted him to change his outlook. He was angling to get the 'Ala al-Dawlah appointed as Governor of the unruly Fars province, since he was the "*only really capable Persian I think I have met*" on account of his heavy-handed approach to the punishment of criminals. These punishments were admittedly barbaric but inevitable in the relative lawlessness of Iran, where the best approach was to "*make a Persian see that you mean business and like a naughty child he almost invariably shuts up*".¹⁹³ This idea of targeted barbarism as a necessary evil in Iran and the corollary of a double standard between Iranian and Western society was in fact less common among the Liberal observers of the 1900s yet strongly evident in Anthony Parsons' despatches in the 1970s.

British officials' overall impressions of Muẓaffar ad-Din's successor, Muhammad 'Ali Shah, were underwhelming – at best he was comically pathetic, at worst an obdurate tyrant. The British Consul in Tabriz wrote of his extreme obstinacy, anti-constitutionalism and a tendency to see his country as existing solely for his personal profit while he was still in Tabriz¹⁹⁴ as Crown Prince (*Valia 'hd*).¹⁹⁵ He suppressed Muẓaffar al-Din Shah's proclamation granting a constitution, sparking a mass *bast* in the British consulate at Tabriz and a political crisis which was eventually settled thanks in part to the mediation of British Vice-Consul Stevens. The *Valia 'hd* was despised in Tabriz for his ruthlessness, which was to have important implications when he became Shah and suspended the constitution in 1908.¹⁹⁶

According to the Liberal Cecil Spring-Rice, Muhammad 'Ali Shah and his entire court were dead-set against the constitutional reforms and were colluding with the Russian representatives in

¹⁹⁰ FO 881/8802, Grant Duff to Grey, 18 June 1906

¹⁹¹ GD papers, GD to his father, 18 Nov 1904

¹⁹² GD papers, GD to his father, 13 June 1905

¹⁹³ GD papers, GD to his father, 12 Sept 1905

¹⁹⁴ According to Qajar tradition, the Crown Prince assumes the post of Governor of Azerbaijan and resides in Tabriz prior to ascending the throne.

¹⁹⁵ FO 881/8802, Wratislaw to GD, 15 September 1906

¹⁹⁶ FO 881/8802, Wratislaw to GD, 29 September 1906

Tehran. Spring-Rice intended to avoid an audience with the Shah unless summoned and would avoid talking politics, citing the Shah's 'special obligations' to Russia.¹⁹⁷ The new Shah was an "*arch intriguer*" who was testing the extent to which he could control the popular movement and act in tandem with his subjects – a possible prototype for the 1960s Shah-People Revolution. If he succeeded, the situation would improve, but if not, conflict was guaranteed and he would try to enlist the Russians on his side.¹⁹⁸ Spring-Rice felt a special kinship with the deputies of the fledgling Majlis, whom he saw as the "*Near Eastern champions of liberalism*".¹⁹⁹ He decried the dismissive attitudes held by other Europeans towards the new Majlis, writing to his friend Valentin Chirol of *The Times*, "*I can't tell you how refreshing it is to hear the Persians talking about their new liberties and the things they are ready to do for their country...I don't see that we are justified in laughing at the Members of the Mejlis because they sit on the floor instead of on chairs*".²⁰⁰ He echoed these sentiments in a despatch to Grey when the new constitution was signed in January 1907.²⁰¹

By February, the Shah had practically abandoned hopes of overcoming his subjects' antagonism and gaining the upper hand within the reform movement.²⁰² The Shah's reactionary entourage was thought keen to provoke Russia or another power to intervene and suppress the Majlis, which was curtailing the court's financial profligacy.²⁰³ By April, there were "*abundant signs that the Russian agents here are anxious to help the Shah to put down the reform party by force*"²⁰⁴ – in fact it seemed that "*the Russians are engaged in spoiling their own Duma at home and teaching the Shah how to spoil his Mejlis here*"²⁰⁵, thus establishing a clear link between the revolutionary struggles in Russia and Iran. The Shah became increasingly desperate and society increasingly polarised as the opposition – the "*enemies of Russia*" as well as the Shah - gained the upper hand and attributed

¹⁹⁷ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 3 January 1907

¹⁹⁸ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 30 January 1907

¹⁹⁹ Burton, 139

²⁰⁰ Gwynn, 88

²⁰¹ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 3 January 1907

²⁰² Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 28 February 1907

²⁰³ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 28 March 1907

²⁰⁴ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 25 April 1907

²⁰⁵ Gwynn, 98 (Spring-Rice to Lady Ferguson, April 1907)

most of his actions to sinister Russian influence.²⁰⁶ The Shah and royal court's attitude to England, on the other hand, was one of unbridled resentment - they "*attributed all their misfortunes*" to the English, probably due to the 'Great Bast' of 1906.²⁰⁷

In this testing atmosphere, Spring-Rice met with the Shah and made candid representations about the deteriorating state of the country and his obligations to honour the constitution to which he had sworn allegiance. He even invoked the wrath of the mujtahids of Karbala and Najaf, who might excommunicate the Shah if he betrayed his constitutional pledges – a useful lever for intimidation. This was the first of many representations made to the Shah by a succession of British officials imploring him with varying degrees of candour to honour the constitution for 'his own good'.

While the Shah-chief diplomat dialogue lost its candour for most of the second period, Muhammad 'Ali Shah's responses were not dissimilar to those of Muhammad Reza Shah; namely that he was not opposed to the constitution or parliament in principle, but in practice the Majlis had been a "*disorderly mob of ignorant persons, each pursuing his own selfish aims*", and that the country was awash in "*false rumours, spread by the enemies of the nation*".²⁰⁸ Spring-Rice's initial enthusiasm about the Majlis gradually gave way to disenchantment. On its first anniversary in August 1907, Spring-Rice wrote that it had done "*nothing of practical value*" and its own worst enemies were its members, who were lacking in "*discipline...[and] the spirit of self-sacrifice*", although its lack of productivity could be explained to some extent by the Shah's incessant intriguing.²⁰⁹

Charles Marling took over as Chargé d'Affaires following Spring-Rice's departure in September 1907. He often concurred with Spring-Rice, describing the Shah and his court in vivid and unflinching language. He noted Muhammad 'Ali's anti-constitutional, anti-democratic and pro-Russian proclivities, which were shaped during his upbringing with Russian tutors and doctors. As Crown Prince, he had been the "*the most hated man in Persia*" and was "*physically as unattractive*

²⁰⁶ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 24 May 1907

²⁰⁷ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 18 July 1907

²⁰⁸ FO 881/9296, Spring-Rice to Grey, 10 July 1907. This is similar to the last Shah's conviction that his opponents were traitors and public enemies.

²⁰⁹ FO 881/9296, Spring-Rice to Grey, 15 August 1907

a mortal as I ever saw. Short, fat, pig-eyed, with an expression of mingled timidity, cruelty and avarice, he was a sorry representative of the Kajars that had produced such fine specimens of manhood as Fath' Ali and Mohammed Shahs".²¹⁰ Marling's correspondence prior to the Royalist coup of June 1908 describes a fractious relationship between the four main actors in newly constitutional Iran: Muhammad 'Ali Shah, his ministers, the Majlis and the *anjumans*.²¹¹ On the one hand, Marling was satisfied that the forces in favour of constitutional government appeared to have triumphed against the members of the Shah's reactionary camarilla, who were greatly shaken by the assassination of Prime Minister Amīn al-Sultān in August and had now mostly sworn allegiance to the Constitution. On the other hand, the reformers had dismantled existing administrative structures and undermined moral authority of the old regime without putting anything in its place. Most parliamentary deputies still lacked a rudimentary knowledge of constitutionalism and the functions of parliament, which they perceived as "*something between a Debating Society, a Court of Justice and a Council of State*".²¹² Marling recounted in his memoirs that "*the Constitution was far in advance of the political education of the country*". The constitution itself was at the vanguard of democracy, but it was incongruent with a parliament where "*20% of the deputies had more or less vague notions of the general meaning of the term [constitution], but not 3% of whom had any idea of its practical application*"²¹³. Marling attended several Majlis sessions and noted the orderliness and dignity of the proceedings but also that the discussions usually ended by authorising the President of Parliament to take some form of executive action.²¹⁴ Cabinet ministers were hamstrung, caught between their traditional respect for the Shah and fear of the overbearing parliament, which frequently overstepped its legislative mandate to assume executive powers.²¹⁵ The ineffectiveness of government ministers he attributed to "*weakness of character*" in its members rather than any other default, since "*from the standpoint of Western ideas the Cabinet probably represents all that is intellectually best in Persia*", although

²¹⁰ Marling, 72

²¹¹ *Anjumans* were local political councils/societies.

²¹² FO 881/9299, Marling to Grey, October 10 1907

²¹³ Marling, 74

²¹⁴ Marling, 73

²¹⁵ FO 881/9302, Marling to Grey, January 2 1908

like Spring-Rice he conceded that the hostility of the Shah and his camarilla was hampering the government's work.²¹⁶

Violent clashes between reformists and reactionaries culminated in the December 1907 crisis, which foreshadowed the coup of June 1908. Marling agreed with the Russian Minister Hartwig that for the time being, keeping the Shah in power was the only way to stem the slide to anarchy. Both alternatives to the Shah – a Regency Council or a Republic – seemed unfeasible owing to the personal rivalries and vested interests which would predominate. The best chance for a constitutional government would therefore be with “*a Shah who has already had his lesson severely taught to him*”²¹⁷, but how far the reformists and revolutionaries would push to ‘teach this lesson’ was another matter. Marling met privately with the Shah a day after the monarch received a rebuke from Āzād al-Mulk, the head of his own Qajar tribe to the effect that he alone was responsible for the deterioration of his kingdom and that if it continued the tribe would depose him in favour of the Crown Prince. At the meeting, Marling warned the Shah that history showed the impossibility of stemming “*the flood of a nation's will*” and that attempting to reinstate the old autocratic system would be disastrous. The best course was to restrain the reactionaries in his entourage and let his ministers manage the task of government unencumbered.²¹⁸ The Shah objected that he in fact was the only “*true constitutionalist*” in his kingdom, while his opponents in the *anjumans* and Majlis were mere firebrands who constantly committed “*unconstitutional acts*”.²¹⁹ Indeed by the spring, the Majlis appeared to be losing public confidence due to its inefficacy and the increasing secrecy of its operations (deputies began meeting in private to make major decisions) and risked dying a “*natural death*” – that is, being dissolved at the behest of the public rather than by the Shah and his entourage, which included the Russian Minister Nikolai Hartwig and Cossack Brigade Commander Colonial Liakhov.²²⁰

²¹⁶ FO 881/9299, Marling to Grey, 6 December 1907

²¹⁷ FO 881/9299, Marling to Grey, 31 December 1907

²¹⁸ FO 881/9302, Marling to Grey, 29 January 1908

²¹⁹ FO 881/9302, Churchill to Grey, 30 January 1908

²²⁰ FO 881/9302, Marling to Grey, 27 March 1908; Marling, 76

By June 1908, public animosity against the Shah had reached alarming levels. Hartwig proposed to Russian Foreign Minister Izvolsky that Russia and Britain should jointly pledge to maintain the Qajar dynasty on the throne, by force if necessary. Marling, in spite of his previous admonitions that only monarchy could stop anarchy and his disenchantment with both *anjumans* and Majlis, firmly rejected his Russian colleague's provocative proposal. He declared that the Iranian public knew well of the Shah's visceral hatred of the constitution, and were anxious to dispose of him. Furthermore, maintaining the Shah on the throne by force, although perhaps suitable as a temporary 'fix' in Tehran, would exacerbate instability in the provinces and fail to produce a lasting reconciliation. Thus, the British government would reject any such pledge to maintain a dynasty or individual sovereign.²²¹ Grey immediately concurred in a telegram to St. Petersburg, clarifying that while his government wished to see order restored in Iran, this could only be achieved "*by the formation of a Government to which the Persian people will give their full confidence and support*".²²² When Izvolsky argued that Britain and Russia had moral obligations to the Shah, since they customarily jointly recognized the designated *Valia 'hd* as royal successor, Grey responded that he wished to avoid becoming "*burdened with the responsibility of maintaining in Persia an unpopular government which is resented by the people*".²²³ Furthermore, Grey stipulated that a joint Anglo-Russian representation should be made to the Shah advising him "*to abstain from acting in a manner hostile to the Constitutional party and the Medjliss, or...not to expect to be protected by either of the two Powers from any consequences which may ensue from such action*".²²⁴ All of these statements demonstrate a firm commitment to protecting constitutional government and the reformers from the autocratic grasp of Muhammad 'Ali Shah, albeit on the grounds of promoting stability and avoiding interference in Iran's internal affairs, both standard diplomatic principles and representative of British interests, in particular the former. Marling wrote to Spring-Rice and Grey that it was inconceivable that "*a man of so weak and irresolute character as the Shah should have maintained the externally uncompromising attitude which he has shown*

²²¹ FO 881/9307, Marling to Grey, 12 June 1908

²²² FO 881/9307, Grey to O'Beirne, 12 June 1908

²²³ FO 881/9307, Grey to O'Beirne, 15 June 1908

²²⁴ FO 881/9307, Grey to O'Beirne, 20 June 1908

throughout the existing crisis unless assisted by Russians” and noted the widespread belief in Iran – well-justified in light of the exchange of telegrams above - that Russian diplomats in Tehran sought to keep the Shah in power.²²⁵

Barely a week later, on 23 June 1908, the animosity culminated in the bombardment of the Majlis by the Shah’s Cossack Brigade under Colonel Liakhov, soon to be Governor of Tehran. This was followed by the arrest and murder of prominent opposition members (mainly journalists and *anjuman* members), the disbanding of the *anjumans* and ultimately the suspension of the constitution and parliament. Initially, it seemed that the Shah had “*complete mastery*” over the situation.²²⁶ This violent turn of events sparked a drawn-out civil war centred on the north-western city of Tabriz which lasted until the next summer. It also prompted fifty individuals to seek sanctuary in the British Legation, including some prominent figures such as Sayyid Hassan Taqizādah, the radical Majlis member from Tabriz. When the Shah protested to Marling that affording sanctuary to refugees contravened the declared British policy of non-intervention, Marling responded that denying sanctuary to those who were not guaranteed a fair trial and had reason to fear for their lives was “*inhumanity*” and would not be “*tolerated by public opinion in England*”. Furthermore, the Shah had assured Anglo-Russian delegations several times that he would respect the constitution, a pledge on which he had now reneged.²²⁷

The subsequent influx of *bast*-seeking refugees to the British Legation prompted the Shah to station his Cossack troops around the Legation doors in an attempt to prevent further entrants. This faux-pas resulted in a terse exchange of telegrams between the Shah and King Edward VII, where the Shah complained that the British Legation had become an “*asylum for malignant and mischievous persons*”, accusing the Legation servants of being members of the “*evildoing Enjumens*” and imploring the King to replace Marling with Minister who would more effectively bar asylum seekers. The King defended Marling and the refugees, demanding the immediate

²²⁵ Spring-Rice Papers, Marling to Grey, 18 June 1908

²²⁶ FO 881/9307, Marling to Grey, 25 June 1908

²²⁷ FO 881/9307, Marling to Grey, 25 June 1908

withdrawal of Cossack troops from the Legation gates and expressing hope that the Shah would govern his country “*as a constitutional Sovereign with justice and humanity*”, thus leaving no doubt in the Shah’s mind as to Britain’s preferred type of government.²²⁸ The Shah’s proclamation of an amnesty for the opposition did little to entice the refugees out. Many believed it was a trap – a suspicion which recurred in the 1970s when Muhammad Reza Shah proclaimed a similar amnesty for political prisoners.

By September 1908, the escalation of the conflict at Tabriz (outlined in *Chapter 4*) was beginning to endanger its many European residents. This prompted Grey to enlist the cooperation of the Russian government and its representatives in Tehran in pressuring the Shah to order “*fresh elections to be held, to reassemble the Medjliss and to publicly announce his decision to maintain the fundamental* (i.e. constitutional) *laws*” in hopes that this would placate the residents of Tabriz.²²⁹ Furthermore, Grey stipulated that a substantial joint Anglo-Russian loan to the Iranian government which had been under negotiation since 1906 would only be advanced on condition that it would “*not be employed for the suppression of the Constitution*” but rather in support of it.²³⁰ Marling even cautioned against a loan with such conditions attached, since “*the harpies about the Shah*” would do their utmost to sabotage reform if they received more funds; better to terminate all financial support – in any case the Shah would have to convene parliament before an advance could be formally recommended.²³¹

In early October, the new Minister George Barclay arrived in Tehran, and Marling left on 6 October. The joint Anglo-Russian pressure on the Shah appeared to have yielded some fruit, as Barclay’s first telegrams to Grey mentioned the Shah’s recent (albeit obscurely worded) proclamation that the Majlis would reconvene in November and a new Electoral Law would be drawn up before then, although in troubled Tabriz, the royal proclamation was not taken

²²⁸ FO 881/9307, Grey to Marling, 29 June 1908

²²⁹ FO 881/9416, Grey to Nicolson, 2 September 1908

²³⁰ FO 881/9416, Grey to Marling, 5 September 1908

²³¹ FO 881/9416, Marling to Grey, 10 September 1908

seriously²³² and amongst the well-informed sector of the population there was general incredulity that the Shah would permit the formation of an independent Majlis.²³³ On 7 November, a demonstration took place at Bagh-i Shah, the royal headquarters outside of Tehran, where emotional crowds implored the Shah to abandon the constitution, signing a petition to that effect, which was accepted by the Shah with a theatrical show of reluctance. Barclay however believed that the protesters were only signing “*through fear of the consequences*” and the ‘spontaneous’ demonstration was clearly a sham, which even the Russian Foreign Minister Izvolsky could not deny.²³⁴ Barclay, more so than Marling, had a marked antipathy to the Shah which emerged during their private audiences. When Muhammad ‘Ali argued that many of his subjects were opposed to the constitution on religious grounds and claimed that he would happily reconvene the Majlis provided that a “*suitable*” scheme be found for it, Barclay retorted that the monarch was considered devoid of any intention to fulfil these promises and furthermore mistaken in thinking his people were anti-constitutionalist.²³⁵ A few weeks later the Shah declared he would not permit any type of parliament that was contrary to Islam, which in effect meant there would be no parliament at all. Distressed by this news, Barclay berated the Shah for taking advice from his “*evil councillors*” and responding to a phony petition which did not reflect the “*real feelings of the nation*”, all the while insisting that the only way to pacify his people was to re-establish the constitution. To press home his point, Barclay exaggerated somewhat about the “*effervescence*” of the nationalists outside of Tabriz, who were in fact rather quiet.²³⁶ The Shah was incensed at Barclays’s curtness, but his remonstrations were apparently not without effect, as the Shah’s declaration was suddenly revoked (or explained away) and he restated his intent to convoke an assembly appropriate for Iran and Shi’ism.²³⁷ He appointed a ‘Council of Notables’ to help design the new Majlis, but Barclay decried the council members as “*ignorant and reactionary*”. Unless the Shah could be induced to accept members of more “*enlightened and liberal views*”, the council

²³² FO 881/9465, Barclay to Grey, 2 & 9 October 1908

²³³ FO 881/9465, Barclay to Grey, 8 October 1908

²³⁴ FO 881/9465, Barclay to Grey, 8 November 1908

²³⁵ FO 881/9465, Barclay to Grey, 12 November 1908

²³⁶ FO 881/9465, Barclay to Grey, 22 November 1908

²³⁷ FO 881/9465, Barclay to Grey, 25 November 1908

would be useless.²³⁸ Ultimately, Barclay concluded that it was doubtful whether Muhammad ‘Ali could ever reign as a constitutional monarch, not only because of his character but also because of his arch-reactionary cronies, Amir Bahadur Jang (Minister of War) and his Grand Vizier.²³⁹

Alarmed at the turbulence in Azerbaijan and under pressure to take action, Russian Foreign Minister Izvolsky drew up a memorandum in January 1909 which included a proposition that Russia and Britain would jointly loan the Shah funds to restore order. Izvolsky doubted that merely re-establishing the constitution – one of Britain’s stipulations as pre-condition for a grant – would be of any benefit.²⁴⁰ Grey insisted that his government still regarded the constitution as critical to the “*restoration of order*” in Iran, and that the disturbances at Tabriz and now Isfahan were probably exerting a “*wholesome influence*” on the reactionaries. Financing the Shah in the present circumstances would be “*worse than futile*”.²⁴¹ Nicolson further impressed upon Izvolsky that although the last *Majlis* was neither competent nor trustworthy, “*a very strong section of public opinion in England*” would decry any advance to the Shah as being a license to crush the popular movement.²⁴² Meanwhile, it seemed that Hartwig, the ex-Russian minister and a notorious reactionary, was returning to his post. Grey, dismayed, feared this would reassure the Shah that Russian sympathies lay with him and “*his creatures*” and against “*everything else in Persia*”; furthermore “*the public mind in England*” regarded Hartwig and especially Colonel Liakhov²⁴³ as the font of all evil in Iran. If these men were recalled, Grey could effectively defend the Russian government and the Anglo-Russian agreement against domestic attacks on the grounds of collusion with tyranny.²⁴⁴

The British view regarding a loan to the Shah was thus pro-nationalist, pro-reformist and invoked

²³⁸ FO 881/9465, Barclay to Grey, 1 December 1908

²³⁹ FO 881/9465, Barclay to Grey, 29 December 1908

²⁴⁰ FO 881/9535, Nicolson to Grey, 9 January 1909

²⁴¹ FO 881/9535, Grey to Nicolson, 13 January 1909

²⁴² FO 881/9535, Nicolson to Grey, 17 January 1909

²⁴³ Colonel Liakhov was in fact in the service of the Shah and his government, not Russia, although he was widely perceived as a Russian agent of repression.

²⁴⁴ FO 881/9535, Grey to Nicolson, 20 January 1909

domestic public opinion with remarkable frequency. It precipitated a behind-the-scenes diplomatic crisis which severely tested Anglo-Russian understanding. This view was much influenced by the liberal sympathies of George Barclay, evident not only in his official despatches but also in his personal letters to his confidant Charles Hardinge, who was then Foreign Office Permanent Undersecretary (PUS) and from 1910, Viceroy of India. Barclay wrote to Hardinge in January 1909 that he feared the persistence of covert Russian support – not from St. Petersburg but from the ‘men on the spot’ - which was ‘stiffening the Shah’. The present “*contemptible government*” was not fit to be trusted with any money, thus Barclay advocated a veto on foreign loans.²⁴⁵ Amir Bahadur Jang was exercising an especially pernicious influence over the Shah and would “*fight to the last against any reformed regime*” which would curtail his power. In any case, the constitution would not be restored without decisive exhortations to that effect from Britain and Russia.²⁴⁶ By the middle of February, Barclay warned that the Shah would be overthrown unless he dissociated himself from his reactionary advisers and embraced the nationalist movement or at least regained popular confidence.²⁴⁷ The chances for reconciliation, however, were diminishing as both sides became increasingly hardened in their views. Any loans under the current conditions would only “*prolong the agony of this detestable government, stiffening and strengthening the Shah and discouraging the nationalists*” resulting in a situation “*worthy of Egyptian finance in [Khedive] Ismail’s time*”, which infamously led to the Anglo-French dual control and British occupation of Egypt.²⁴⁸ He concluded that “*no money and no sympathy*” should be the message conveyed to the Shah by the Anglo-Russian representations.²⁴⁹

Barclay’s insistence prompted an acrimonious exchange between Grey and Izvolsky. In response to Izvolsky’s repeated loan proposition, Grey wrote that “*to lend money to the Shah in the present conditions...would be regarded as a demonstration against the Constitutionalists in favour of*

²⁴⁵ Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 1 January 1909

²⁴⁶ Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 29 January 1909

²⁴⁷ FO 881/9535, Barclay to Grey, 16 February 1909

²⁴⁸ The indebtedness of the Egyptian Khedives in the 1870s led to the British and French governments imposing a joint control over Egyptian finances in 1879. Discontent at foreign control led to the Arabi rebellion and ultimately the British occupation in 1881 and installation of a monarchy and protectorate which lasted until Colonel Nasser’s rebellion in 1952. Daly, *Cambridge History of Egypt*, 239-250.

²⁴⁹ Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 15 February 1909

personal government by His Majesty” and that HMG would not contemplate any loan which lacked the approval of an elected Assembly.²⁵⁰ Izvolsky kept pushing, furious at the “*doctrinaire*” British stance, but Barclay insisted that “*the Shah must be starved*” of financial assistance until the constitutional regime was functioning.²⁵¹ After a protracted tussle, in which Izvolsky threatened to “*part company*” with Britain and by implication dissolve the 1907 convention,²⁵² the British view prevailed and no loan was made to the Shah while he remained an autocrat²⁵³ although Russia did independently offer the Shah a substantial sum, ostensibly to ‘restore order’.²⁵⁴ The unwavering British refusal to aid the Shah until he fulfilled his pledges to the nationalists, even in light of a potential breach with Russia, was quite remarkable. No doubt Grey had little to gain from capitulating to Russian demands, which would be an affront to England’s honour, but there appears to have been a real desire to restore a constitutional regime. Constitutional restoration was constantly invoked as providing the basis for order and stability, but this was a normative rather than positive judgement on behalf of the British officials concerned and demonstrated a clear desire for a liberal regime. Also noteworthy was the recurrent invocation of British public opinion as a tool for resisting Russian demands.

Russian intervention in Iran appeared to be imminent in March 1909. Grey argued to the Russian Charge d’Affaires in London that any such intervention would be construed in Iran as pro-Shah, who incidentally was convinced that Russia would come to his rescue. If he could be disabused of such a notion and instead made to realise that Russian intervention may lead to his dethronement, he would promptly restore the constitution or allow a “*more capable government*” to be appointed.²⁵⁵

The removal of the Colonel Liakhov from the active list of the Russian army was perceived as a

²⁵⁰ FO 881/9535, Grey (Nicolson) to Izvolsky, 3 February 1909

²⁵¹ FO 881/9535, Barclay to Grey, 21 February 1909

²⁵² FO 881/9535, Nicolson to Grey, 23 February 1909

²⁵³ FO 881/9535, Nicolson to Grey, 28 February 1909

²⁵⁴ FO 881/9535, Nicolson to Grey, 18 March 1909

²⁵⁵ FO 881/9535, Grey to Nicolson, 16 March 1909

victory for the nationalists, although Liakhov remained formally in the service of the Shah.²⁵⁶ His principal duty as defined by the Russian government was to protect the person of the Shah, and the duty of the Cossack Brigade was to maintain order and protect the lives and property of foreigners in Iran. Beyond this, it was to intervene as little as possible in the civil conflict.²⁵⁷

By April the situation at Tabriz was desperate as the population starved. Grey was pushing for an Anglo-Russian representation to alert the Shah that the population of Tabriz should be treated humanely in the event of surrender to the royalist forces.²⁵⁸ Barclay meanwhile felt such representations would be superseded if the constitutionalist faction of the Bakhtiāri tribe marched on Tehran. Unless the Shah appealed to outside forces to halt their advance, they would face few obstacles in reaching the capital and dictating their own terms there.²⁵⁹ Before the Bakhtiāris could make any moves however, a substantial Russian force was deployed to lift the siege of Tabriz and introduce provisions in order to prevent attacks on foreigners by the starving population. The detachment commander was ordered to “*protect foreign subjects and Persians from the Shah’s brigands*”, hence the Russian arrival was seen as a boon to the nationalists and a veiled warning to the Shah.²⁶⁰ Grey assented to the proposed Russian deployment, since he doubted the Shah had instructed his troops to treat the population humanely. The Shah had also failed to restore the constitution, to appoint a sufficiently ‘enlightened’ cabinet and to allow provisions of wheat into Tabriz. However, Grey also wanted to issue a joint statement with Russia that any intervention which either of the two powers may undertake would be of an “*entirely temporary*” and limited character. This included a small-scale British naval intervention at Bushehr on the Persian Gulf Coast.²⁶¹ Barclay added that limited Russian intervention would have a salutary effect upon the Shah, making him more amenable to joint power representations and less inclined to regard the

²⁵⁶ FO 881/9535, Barclay to Grey, 28 March 1909

²⁵⁷ FO 881/9535, Barclay to Grey, 25 March 1909

²⁵⁸ FO 881/9540, Nicolson to Grey, 7 April 1909

²⁵⁹ Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 10 April 1909

²⁶⁰ FO 881/9540, Nicolson to Grey, 23 April 1909; Barclay to Grey, 23 April 1909; Nicolson to Grey, 20 April 1909

²⁶¹ FO 881/9540, Grey to Nicolson, 23 April 1909

Russians as his saviours.²⁶² The siege of Tabriz was lifted by Russian troops on 25 April 1909 and negotiations on the new government soon began between the Shah, royalists and nationalists.

In May, as per Barclay's prediction, the Bakhtiāris announced their intention to march on Tehran from Isfahan and compel the Shah to honour his constitutional pledges. Bakhtiāri chieftains Samsam al-Sultanah and Sardār As'ad (also known as 'Ali Quli Khān) expressed their gratitude to the foreign legations for saving Tabriz, but instructed them to refrain from further interference.²⁶³ The nationalists and revolutionaries under the command of Sipāhdār ²⁶⁴ at Rasht²⁶⁵ were also preparing to advance on the capital. The Shah had formally restored a limited constitution on 5 May, but this was not considered sufficient proof of good faith or commitment to reform by the aforementioned groups, and even Barclay was sceptical of the Shah's true intentions.²⁶⁶ Indeed the Shah was so unsettled by the prospect of a nationalist advance that he discreetly requested the Tsar's protection for himself and his family, but was rebuffed.²⁶⁷ Barclay was pleased at the "*most salutary effect*" produced on the Shah by his recent misfortunes, from the "*denouement at Tabriz...and his fears of the Caucasians at Qazvin* [under Sipāhdār]" to his pecuniary problems.²⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the prospect of a nationalist march on Tehran vexed the powers, who began devising schemes to dissuade the armies from undertaking their planned advance. One of the propositions called for the Russian and British consul-generals in Baghdad to request the Najaf mujtahids to decree that their followers in Iran should cooperate with the Shah in his new constitutional capacity, showing that the powers were keenly aware of clerical influence and did not shy away from using it for their own purposes.²⁶⁹ Barclay still hoped the Shah, "*worthless as he has shown himself*", would have another chance to reign constitutionally. His deposition would create "*unforeseeable complications*", but Barclay also admitted personal motives in this respect, namely

²⁶² FO 881/9540, Barclay to Grey, 26 April 1909

²⁶³ FO 881/9540, Barclay to Grey, 3 May 1909

²⁶⁴ Muhammad Vali Khan Tonekabuni, Sipāhdār -i Azam (Military Commander-in-Chief), 1847 – 1926. The Shah's former Prime Minister, he had switched sides to join the revolutionaries largely because of personal grievances. Ghani, 10.

²⁶⁵ City in northern Iran near the Caspian littoral.

²⁶⁶ FO 881/9540, Barclay to Grey, 5 May 1909

²⁶⁷ FO 881/9540, Nicolson to Grey, 14 May 1909

²⁶⁸ Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 21 May 1909

²⁶⁹ FO 881/9540, Nicolson to Grey, 14 May 1909

that he would feel remorse (and humiliation on behalf of the Legation) at having induced the Shah to make so many concessions in vain if he were to be deposed without an opportunity to reign constitutionally.²⁷⁰

The initial stages of the Bakhtiāri advance on Tehran, detailed in Chapter 3, were viewed with some alarm. Grey instructed Barclay to do his utmost to dissuade Sardār As‘ad from continuing his march, since the assurances given to the Shah in May obliged Britain to support him as long as his behaviour remained correct and constitutional.²⁷¹ However, this attitude changed when on 30 June the Russian authorities decided to despatch 1500 of their troops to Qazvin in light of the advancing nationalists under Sipāhdār, an action which met with disapproval from British representatives in St. Petersburg. The acting Russian Foreign Minister, Sazonov, argued that the despatch of troops was necessary not only for protecting the Russian bank, foreign subjects and property, but also because of a “*moral obligation*” to support the Shah since he had heeded the Anglo-Russian representations, echoing Hartwig’s exhortations to guarantee the Qajar dynasty by force if necessary. Grey and Councillor O’Beirne protested that Russian troops would only intensify the burgeoning anti-Russian sentiment in the country, warning the Russian Ambassador that if his country’s troops occupied Tehran, every Iranian would assume the Shah to be a Russian puppet and the whole country would disown him.²⁷² Grey conceded his “*great apprehension*” at the prospect of another Russian military incursion into Iran. Forgetting his earlier half-hearted assertion of ‘moral support’ for the Shah and the need to stop Sardār As‘ad, he wrote that “*many difficulties would be solved*” and “*a better state of things*” would prevail if the Shah were to claim foreign protection and depart – in effect, to be deposed. On the other hand, if the Russians tried to preserve the Shah’s position by force, it would perpetuate a vicious circle of antipathy to Russia and the need for more intervention, which would indicate a dramatic shift in Russia’s – and by association Britain’s – Iranian policy. Grey finally insisted that events should be left to “*take their*

²⁷⁰ Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 21 May 1909

²⁷¹ FO 881/9540, Grey to Barclay, 23 June 1909

²⁷² FO 881/9540, Grey to O’Beirne, 30 June 1909; FO 881/9540, O’Beirne to Grey, 30 June 1909

course”, a subtle indication that the Shah could be dispensed with and was no longer an integral part of Britain’s Iranian policy.²⁷³

On 2 July, Barclay had a painful audience with the Shah, who had finally restored the old constitution and replaced his reactionary advisers with supposed progressives, yet his concessions had yielded not the promised stability but rather an armed coalition intent on his demise. Barclay, although admittedly disappointed that the Shah had lost his opportunity to reign constitutionally, reminded the monarch of his long prevarication which had brought on the current crisis.²⁷⁴ The Shah may have been a “*scoundrel*”, but most of his subjects were not much better.²⁷⁵ The Shah made a last-ditch attempt to deter the nationalists from entering Tehran by promising to expel certain individuals from his entourage, but to no avail and on 13 July the nationalist armies entered Tehran in a relatively peaceful manner.²⁷⁶ On 16 July, the Shah took refuge at the Russian Legation accompanied by his family, several advisors and palace favourites. A newly formed nationalist committee proclaimed Sipāhdār Minister of War, under whose command Colonel Liakhov now placed himself. The same day, an extraordinary grand council of nationalists, princes, aristocrats and clerics convened in Tehran to depose the Shah and announce his succession by the *Valiahd*, under the regency of Āzād al-Mulk, the Qajar chieftain.²⁷⁷ Both Britain and Russia immediately agreed to recognize whichever new government in Iran was able to provide order and security.²⁷⁸ Barclay was adamant that the Shah leave Iran as soon as possible, lest any local or Russian intrigues conspire to restore him to power.²⁷⁹ With this phase of the crisis coming to an end, Grey heartily commended Barclay’s conduct and demeanour, especially for his role in restraining the Russian Minister in Tehran (and by extension the Russian government) from sending further troops to Tehran, which could have precipitated both the demise of Iran and Anglo-Russian cooperation in one fell swoop.²⁸⁰

²⁷³ FO 881/9552, Grey to O’Beirne, 1 July 1909

²⁷⁴ FO 881/9552, Barclay to Grey, 3 July 1909;

²⁷⁵ Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 2 July 1909

²⁷⁶ FO 881/9552, Grey to Lowther, 14 July 1909

²⁷⁷ FO 881/9552, Barclay to Grey, 16 and 19 July 1909

²⁷⁸ FO 881/9552, Grey to O’Beirne, 16 July 1909

²⁷⁹ FO 881/9552, Barclay to Grey, 19 July 1909

²⁸⁰ FO 881/9552, Grey to Barclay, 20 July 1909

In an emotive dispatch, Barclay admitted satisfaction at the recent turn of events culminating in the nationalist victory and deposition of the Shah. Although for reasons of “*amour-propre*” he regretted the failure of the official British programme of reforms, he admitted that a constitutional regime which was established independently within Iran and “*inaugurated by the dethronement of a detested and worthless Sovereign, stands a very different chance from one obtained for the country by outside pressure which stopped short of demanding the thing most needed, a change of Sovereign*”. Thus, ultimately Barclay ‘rejoiced’ at the failure of the British programme, since a monarchy headed by “*so false and intriguing a Sovereign*” as Muhammad ‘Ali Shah would prove little better than unfettered despotism.²⁸¹ The following month, Barclay noted to what extent the recent revolution was in fact a protest against Russian influence and the Shah’s image as a creature of Russia.²⁸² Overall, Barclay shared the ardent liberalism of his predecessor, Cecil Spring-Rice. His firm stance against royal absolutism, his personal antipathy against Muhammad ‘Ali Shah and his sympathetic (if not unqualified) support of the Nationalists is eminently clear throughout both his private correspondence and official despatches.

II. Press, parliament and civil society

Press, parliamentary and civil society views of this period were polarized into two camps, viewing the Shah as a buffoon or a cruel despot. For Liberals, a Manichean struggle was shaping up between the Shah, an inveterate tyrant linked to the despised Russian autocracy, and the opposition, who were illuminating the despotic darkness with modern liberalism. The views of the less liberally inclined were represented in *The Times*, for whom neither the Shah nor his opponents inspired particular devotion or enthusiasm, with each party playing a role in a ludicrous pantomime. The involvement of the clerics caused some controversy and bewilderment, although their centrality to Iranian politics and society was understood. This section will focus on

²⁸¹ CAB 37/100, Barclay to Grey, 23 July 1909

²⁸² CAB 37/100, Barclay to Grey, 10 August 1909

elucidating perceptions of the Shah and his government as expressed in selected major newspapers, civil society materials, and in parliament.

Iran in 1906 was widely deemed to be a suitable candidate for the adoption of liberal constitutional government (the reasons for this are discussed in *Chapter 3*). Standing in the way of this auspicious future was the Shah, the quintessential symbol of Oriental despotism. Until the advent of the 1906 constitution, Iran had been most “*backward of all Mahometan countries*” and the “*most absolute secular despotism in the world*”²⁸³, while *the Times* wrote that Iran had been ruled by the “*uncontrolled dominion of the ‘Great King’ since the days of Cyrus and Xerxes*”, that is, until August of 1906.²⁸⁴ Muzaffar al-Din Shah, who granted the constitution in August 1906 and passed away in January 1907, was barely deemed worthy of his expected role as a formidable despot. Instead, he was a “*foolish satire on absolute monarchy in the East*”, and while not tyrannical, one who did more than any predecessor to bring contempt upon his ancient throne while the nation cried out for a genuine leader.²⁸⁵ Muzaffar al-Din’s reign was one of “*profligate dissipation*” and Iran was more debased than at any other time in its modern history; he was “*the feeblest and most effete of Eastern monarchs*” who was able to reign only thanks to the desire of Britain and Russia to avert a war of succession.²⁸⁶ The new king, Muhammad ‘Ali Shah, was a controversial figure who soon became known as an enemy of both constitutionalism and his own people, especially among liberals. By August 1907, the *Times* counted the Shah among the “*forces of reaction*” and wrote that he only tolerated the constitution because he was afraid to attack it without foreign support, while around him were reactionaries who had grown rich on the spoils of the old regime. Whatever little money the Shah could get his hands on was spent on attempts to corrupt and divide the reform party.²⁸⁷

Two events in 1907 significantly changed the way in which Iranian developments were perceived.

First was the conclusion of the Anglo Russian Convention on 31 August, followed almost

²⁸³ Guardian, 10 January 1907

²⁸⁴ Times, 31 August 1907

²⁸⁵ Guardian, 10 January 1907

²⁸⁶ Times, 10 January 1907

²⁸⁷ Times, 31 August 1907

immediately by the assassination of Iran's Prime Minister, the Amīn al-Sultān on 1 September. For Liberals, both events intensified the contrast between the view of the Shah as a tyrannical Russian creature and the opposition as noble constitutionalists. This view continued to gain traction in the aftermath of the December 1907 coup attempt. The arrest of three 'inflammatory' Majlis members and the Majlis' subsequent demand for the expulsion of the reactionaries from the Shah's circle sparked a confrontation which the *Times* called the "*crisis of revolution*", with the Shah unwilling to relinquish his autocratic power, while his Court was "*powerful only for evil*". The nation was bereft of true leadership on both government and opposition sides and equally lacking an effective army which could impart stability to the decomposing state.²⁸⁸ Current events in Iran recalled "*a dramatic piece which belongs to no one particular school of literature but partakes of the qualities of all. It has its Hamlets, its Tony Lumpkins and its Sherlock Holmes, but the acting is weak and the characters require more life and movement*".²⁸⁹ This view of the revolution as a poorly executed farce became increasingly prevalent in the *Times* during the Azerbaijan civil war in late 1908 and early 1909, especially in the articles by David Fraser (1869 – 1953), who attempted to entirely strip the movement of noble revolutionary pretences.²⁹⁰

The Shah began to get some qualified sympathy from the *Times* after the revolution appeared to take an increasingly radical turn. The failed attempt on his life in late February 1908 prompted the *Times* to deprecate the increasingly fanatical character of the once noble nationalist movement. It warned of the damage being done to the constitutional cause by outrages such as the Amīn al-Sultān's assassination and the attempted regicide. The Shah was now portrayed more as a victim of circumstances, kept apart from his people by misunderstandings resulting from the intrigues of his courtiers, the difficulties of implementing radical change in government and "*the wrong-*

²⁸⁸ *Times*, 16 December 1907

²⁸⁹ *Times*, 6 February 1908

²⁹⁰ David Fraser lived in Iran from 1908 to 1909 and covered the Azerbaijan civil war for the *Times*. He had previously authored books on his experiences covering the Russo-Japanese War, traveling the Baghdad Railway and investigating Anglo-Russian rivalry in Iran, Tibet and Turkestan. He was a one-time soldier and apparently a hardened war correspondent, of whom one reviewer wrote that he was "*such an old war horse that the sight of men dying in their thousands is a subject for calm analysis*." Throughout his journalistic career, Fraser remained known for his scepticism that the 'East' could progress beyond its despotic past. Fraser, *Persia Turkey Revolt*, front matter ; *Times* obituary, 21 May 1953

headedness and exaggerated pretensions of the Mejliss” rather than his antipathy to reform.²⁹¹

While *the Times* adopted this new view on the struggle between monarch and opposition following the assassination attempt, the *Guardian* merely reported the incident without offering further comment.²⁹²

By early June 1908 *the Guardian* warned that another coup was imminent, with foreign sources suggesting that Russian intrigues in the court circle were largely to blame. The tensions between the Shah and parliament were however thought natural, especially given the influence of Iran’s aggressive despotic neighbours (the Ottoman Empire during the last days of Sultan Abdülhamid and Tsarist Russia) who were eager to torpedo the Iranian constitutional experiment. Muhammad ‘Ali Shah as the scion of an ancient tradition of despotism naturally chafed at checks on his authority. The implementation of the constitution was still being worked out and the legislature was indeed encroaching too much on the executive, but such hiccups were only to be expected given the radical change in government which the country had undergone. The assembly may have as of yet failed to maintain order, guard the frontiers or improve finances, but this litany of problems was the result of misgovernment by the present Shah and his predecessors. Moreover, the Shah’s parasitic courtiers felt challenged by the revolution, and were using him to fight against the curtailment of their privileges.²⁹³

On 24 June 1908, it was confirmed that the Shah’s troops were bombarding the Majlis, apparently with the support of “*Russian diplomacy*” in a bid to re-establish autocracy.²⁹⁴ *The Times* henceforth deemed that neither the Shah nor the Majlis were particularly deserving of support. The Shah’s constant vacillations towards the Majlis, alternating between abject compliance and foolish provocation, did not inspire confidence. Although the Shah had temporarily gained the upper hand through his forceful, “*truly Oriental*” method of cowing the populace, he was acting out of

²⁹¹ Times, 29 February 1908

²⁹² Guardian, 29 February 1908

²⁹³ Guardian, 11 June 1908

²⁹⁴ Guardian, 24 June 1908

desperation and was “*no Nadir Shah*”, lacking both the resolution and the means to impose his will. The reactionary courtiers in his entourage seemed to be his main source of encouragement. However, he was thought to have legitimate reasons to fear for his throne, and his actions were not entirely unwarranted. The editorial warned that Iran was entering a period of grave instability and that the Shah faced formidable obstacles to re-establishing his authority.²⁹⁵ This sympathetic attitude towards the Shah was only occasional; *the Times* never managed to take him seriously and he was often deemed a worthy target of hostility.²⁹⁶ *The Guardian* accused the Shah of having instigated a “*reign of terror*” in the city and pointed out that he by no means held the upper hand and would face serious trouble reasserting his authority in Azerbaijan, except by means of prolonged and costly war. The article also featured a menacing photograph of the sovereign in ceremonial garb, with the caption “*the Shah who declared war on his parliament*” beneath it.²⁹⁷

From this point forward, the *Guardian*, many liberals and socialists were preoccupied with the Russian menace to Iran and the terms of the Anglo-Russian convention. The Persian Cossack brigade, “*instruments of the Shah’s coup d’état*” provided incontestable proof of the Russian desire to trample Iran’s newfound liberties. The actions of the Russian-officered Cossack Brigade were deemed a gross violation of Anglo-Russian commitment to neutrality in Iran, even if they were the Shah’s troops.²⁹⁸ Cossack Commander Colonel Liakhov was a symbol of Russian tyranny and a major point of contention for many members of parliament and civil society. His ambiguous status as an officer in the service of the Shah, but equally on the active list of the Russian army was an endless source of controversy for the *Guardian* in particular, which pressed for Russian officers to be recalled from Iran.²⁹⁹ Socialist-inclined periodicals were equally incensed. Following the June 1908 coup d’état, the Social Democrat fumed that about the barbaric treatment of constitutionalist leaders at the hands of the Cossack Brigade, “*a Russian force, armed and drilled after the Russian*

²⁹⁵ Times, 25 June 1908

²⁹⁶ Times, 11 August 1908

²⁹⁷ Guardian, 25 June 1908

²⁹⁸ Guardian, 26 June 1908

²⁹⁹ Guardian, 8 December 1908

fashion by Russian officers, and commanded by a Russian general” although the soldiers were Iranians, a fact which was omitted.³⁰⁰ The *Guardian* bemoaned English inactivity in the face of Russian scheming to restore the Shah’s autocratic powers,³⁰¹ and warned that the brigand chief Rahīm Khān, dispatched by the Shah to quash the Tabriz rising, was likely a Russian agent who was Colonel Liakhov’s counterpart in Tabriz.³⁰² An editorial the next day went even further, denouncing Colonel Liakhov as “*dictator with the fullest authority... of Persia*” now that the country was under martial law. Although the Colonel was formally employed in the service of the Shah, his status as an officer on the active list of the Russian army and his responsibility for the bombardment of the Majlis and instigation of the present crisis was seen as a serious violation of neutrality. In light of this, his recall should be urged upon the Russian government by Edward Grey.³⁰³ In November 1910, the *Social Democrat* published a poem which touched on the classic liberal themes associated with Iranian cause and paid homage to Iran’s literary heritage. Entitled *The New Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, it merits inclusion despite falling slightly outside the time frame of this study:

*Forth from my tomb in Naishapur I break
Against the Bear and Lion³⁰⁴ leagued to shake
And strew my Rose of Asia leaf from leaf,
Averting how their interests are at stake*

*Not Muscovy roused old Khayyam from sleep,
But wonder England should such compact keep,
Till I beheld her people blind, and bound,
And led of sheepish wolves, and wolf-like sheep*

*Methought the sheep that evermore must cry
For Peace, Retrenchment, and Reform³⁰⁵ – or die,
Went bleating round a Grey Wolf³⁰⁶ in their midst,
“Why do you keep with us – oh why, why, why?”*

*Persia! Where Art and Science first had home
Persia that fought with Greeks, and lasted Rome!
Is she for sacrifice indeed? – One more
Victim on empire’s blood-smeared Hecatomb!*

³⁰⁰ Social Democrat, June 1908

³⁰¹ Guardian, 27 June 1908

³⁰² Guardian, 2 July 1908

³⁰³ Guardian, 3 July 1908

³⁰⁴ Russia and Britain

³⁰⁵ Gladstonian Liberal Party slogan

³⁰⁶ Edward Grey

In parliament, Grey was frequently interrogated by Liberal and Irish Nationalist MPs about Russian misdeeds in Iran and asked what actions Britain, as a natural protector of liberalism and now doubly responsible in Iran by virtue of the Convention, was taking to counter them. Liberal MP Henry Lynch cross-questioned Grey in July 1908 about Colonel Liakhov's role in the recent coup. It had to be established whether Liakhov was on the active list of the Russian army, and if he was, Grey should remind Russia to restrain their officers from suppressing the rights of Iranians guaranteed to them by their constitution.³⁰⁷ Irish Nationalist MP John Dillon³⁰⁸, another vocal supporter of the Iranian cause, argued that the Iranian "*Parliament was dispersed and the Constitution destroyed by Colonel Liakhoff and his Cossacks*".³⁰⁹ Shattered by the criticism, Grey accused his Russophobe liberal critics of seeking "*the maximum of interference and the minimum of friendship*" in the world, which was in his view a disastrous and alienating approach to foreign policy.³¹⁰ There was indeed a contradiction at the heart of the well-intentioned Liberal agenda, which advocated that Iranians should be left to settle their affairs independently but constantly exhorted British intervention in favour of the constitutionalists. What Liberals really seemed to want was for Britain to counter every illiberal incident in Iran which had a potential connection to Russia.

The Azerbaijan civil war between royalists and nationalists beginning in the summer of 1908 was portrayed by the *Times* as a muddled farce. In this context, the Shah regained some credibility as a symbol of stability, or at least as an identifiable element in the melee of Iranian politics, similar to how Muhammad Reza Shah was seen in the 1970s. The nationalists would do well to emulate the Young Turks and cooperate with the Shah, wrote the *Times*, since "*absolute anarchy*" would ensue if he left the scene.³¹¹ In this respect the *Times* was alone in its judgements, since the Liberal

³⁰⁷ HC Deb July 9 1908 vol 192 cc63-5

³⁰⁸ John Dillon (1851 - 1927) was a prominent member of the Irish Home Rule Party, the predominant force in Irish politics from the late 19th century until the Easter Rising of 1916. Lyons, *John Dillon*, 6, 480.

³⁰⁹ HC Deb November 26 1908 vol 197 cc664-5

³¹⁰ Trevelyan, 192

³¹¹ *Times*, 11 August 1908

newspapers were adamant that the Shah and Russia were the source of all ills and Foreign Office and diplomatic opinion already regarded the Shah as a liability, as shown in the first part of this chapter. On 8 September 1908, the Shah was presented with a joint Anglo-Russian note by Charles Marling and Nikolai Hartwig advising him to honour his pledges to restore the constitution and set a date for new elections with a view to convoking parliament. The event attracted considerable attention and commentary in the press and civil society, prompting editorials in the major newspapers and a terse letter from Professor E.G. Browne. The letter was the first of many of Browne's passionate public contributions to the coverage of the Iranian crisis. *The Guardian* editorial on the matter proclaimed triumphantly that England had salvaged its reputation as a great liberal power by producing the note and commended Grey for restoring British prestige. The Shah, possessing "*the instincts of a despot but not his power*", was thankfully becoming ever weaker with growing forces of opposition arrayed against him and now with the powers holding him to his pledges.³¹² Likewise, *The Times* was satisfied that the powers had stepped in to give the Shah a polite yet firm reminder of his constitutional promises.³¹³ The Shah's subsequent recalcitrance and announcement that he would convoke a National Council and then an Islamic Majlis in place of the previous 'godless' parliament, provoked consternation in the press.³¹⁴ It was denounced as a "*fraudulent sham*" by the *Guardian* and *Times*, and the exclusion of Azerbaijan, Iran's most liberal province, from the future elections also aroused concern.³¹⁵ The Shah would not even allow "*a shadow of a constitution*" to limit his autocracy.³¹⁶ At the same time, a visit by the *Times* correspondent (likely David Fraser) to the Royalist forces encamped at Tabriz did little more to inspire confidence in the Shah's government. Their leader the Sipāhdār, who would eventually go over to the constitutionalist side, was admirable enough but most the royalist troops were a ragtag bunch of "*village Yahoos*", hastily armed for the occasion. Fraser despaired that HMG treated on

³¹² *Guardian*, 10 September 1908

³¹³ *Times*, 9 September 1908

³¹⁴ *Times*, 26 September 1908

³¹⁵ *Guardian*, 1 October 1908

³¹⁶ *Guardian*, 28 October 1908

an equal footing with a government that asserted its authority by sending brigands to pillage its chief trading city.³¹⁷

On 8 November, a staged ‘demonstration’ against the constitution took place at Bāgh-i Shāh, the Shah’s camp outside Tehran. Clerics and nobles presented the Shah with a series of sham petitions and implored him to abolish the constitution, which was incompatible with Islam. The Shah then fulsomely obliged, promising to decree the constitution null and void. The entire episode was derided by the *Times* as the culmination of the Shah’s “*faithless*” conduct since the coup, “*a mixture of vacillation, subterfuge and autocratic obstinacy*” which must have undermined the last vestiges of his people’s respect for him. This type of behaviour would only spread the nationalist resistance across the country.³¹⁸ The only bright point was the Anglo-Russian convention, which had preserved amicable relations between the two powers in spite of the turbulence in Iran. The defence of the Russian government in general and the convention in particular was a mainstay in the Iran-related articles of the *Times* from this point forward. Indeed, the *Times* argued that the Russian government’s main concern was not bolstering the Shah but rather dealing with the burgeoning presence of Russo-Caucasian revolutionaries in the Iranian constitutionalist ranks.³¹⁹

The Shah’s constant vacillation vis-à-vis the constitution led a *Guardian* editorial to proclaim that “*British public opinion would not tolerate the open and formal abrogation of the Constitution and a return to despotism naked and shameless*”. If Russia withdrew her officers and both powers withdrew all financial assistance, a state of real neutrality would prevail and the Iranian conflict would be settled in accordance with the real wishes of the people.³²⁰ The *Guardian* continued to target the Shah’s “*right-hand man*” Colonel Liakhov and all Russian officers. It published an interview with Liakhoff in which he professed to be content with his role in the service of the

³¹⁷ *Times*, 23 September 1908

³¹⁸ *Times*, 9 November 1908

³¹⁹ *Times*, 21 November 1908

³²⁰ *Guardian*, 25 November 1908

Shah, a Russian cipher who well served the interests of Russia.³²¹ By the end of December, it seemed the tide was turning against the royalists, and the reactionary camarilla would fall. Meanwhile, the Russian government announced its intention to intervene in Iran to avert anarchy. The *Guardian* believed that this new plan, a disaster for “*Persian liberties*”, was put forward precisely because the Shah’s power was crumbling and urged Grey to oppose it with all his force.³²² The Russian proposal to loan the Shah money in January 1909 was also denounced by the *Guardian*, warning that it would result in the ‘Egyptianisation’ of Iran and eventual Russian occupation. The Shah was now bereft of power, and would have fallen already were it not for foreign financial support.³²³ The Shah, said *the Times*, had to engage in “*reasonable and indispensable reform*”, or be left to his fate without assistance.³²⁴ The *Guardian* in particular reproached Grey for his actions – or lack thereof - in Iran, holding him personally responsible for upholding England’s honour. By the end of January 1909, the *Guardian* portrayed the nationalist movement as recrudescing all throughout the country. A map illustrating the impressive extent of nationalist control appeared in an article referring to the Shah as “*Shah only of Tehran*”.³²⁵ The *Times* showed intermittent sympathy for the Shah during this period, although often mixed with disdain.³²⁶ The Cossack Brigade and Colonel Liakhov in particular were lauded as harbingers of stability and order in an otherwise chaotic country, although such comments were likely written with a partial intention to provoke the *Guardian*.³²⁷

By April, the two legations were imploring the Shah to decree an armistice in Tabriz and to allow the entry of basic foodstuffs to avert starvation. The Russian decision – with British consent - to intervene in Tabriz and lift the siege was seen by the *Times* as an indispensable humanitarian act, since neither power could hide passively behind the “*diplomatic abstraction*” of non-intervention while Tabriz became subjected to appalling horrors which “*Western civilization cannot in these*

³²¹ *Guardian*, 16 December 1908

³²² *Guardian*, 2 January 1909

³²³ *Guardian*, 19 January 1909

³²⁴ *Times*, 20 January 1909

³²⁵ *Guardian*, 25 January 1909

³²⁶ *Times*, 27 February 1909

³²⁷ *Times*, 15 March 1909

days condone” at the hands of the Shah’s brigands who lurked outside the city gates. The *Times* reminded readers that the unruly tribesmen lurking at the gates of Tabriz and nominally in the Shah’s service would massacre after the fashion of their fearsome ancestors, “*the armies who followed Jenghiz Khan and Timur*”. It was additionally hoped that the joint Anglo-Russian decision to intervene against the Shah’s armies would convince him of the two powers’ cooperation and prove that Russia would not intervene in his favour.³²⁸ On the other hand, the entry of Russian forces to Tabriz was regarded warily by the *Guardian* and liberal press. By early May, the *Guardian* was alluding to the dangers of what appeared to be turning into a Russian military occupation. The siege had been raised, thus the continuing presence of a Russian force several thousand strong in the richest and most strategic area of Iran was thought ominous.³²⁹ Equally ominous was the proposed Russian plan to move military forces onto the Caspian-Tehran road, a deterrent for the nationalists under Sipāhdār who were threatening to march from Rasht. The *Guardian* warned that this was thoroughly at odds with professed Anglo-Russian claims to minimise interference.³³⁰ Harold Williams, the correspondent of the *Morning Post* in St. Petersburg who also corresponded with E.G. Browne, was convinced that the “*real character of the Russian Government*” was not understood in Britain and that the despatch of twenty thousand Russian soldiers to Iranian Azerbaijan was tantamount to an occupation. He wrote to Browne in May wishing that “*people in England could realise how dangerous the type of thought represented by such papers as the Times, the Standard and the Daily Telegraph is, not only for the liberty and progress of other nations but for England herself*”.³³¹

When constitutional government was ostensibly restored in May, Britain sanctioned a small Russian loan to the Shah’s government, intended to pay the arrears of his troops and diplomatic officials. When this was announced in parliament, it aroused concern that the loan would prejudice

³²⁸ *Times*, 22 April 1909

³²⁹ *Guardian*, 1 May 1909

³³⁰ *Guardian*, 10 May 1909

³³¹ Browne Papers (Box 9), Williams to Browne, May 16 1909. Williams had covered all of the major events of 1905-1906 in Moscow and St. Petersburg as a *Guardian* foreign correspondent and his politics remained more closely aligned with the *Guardian* than the *Morning Post*, which described itself as the paper of ‘King and Conservative Party’. Ayerst, 357; Wilson, *Morning Post*, 4.

constitutional government in Iran.³³² It also provoked a spirited intervention from Henry Lynch, who cross-questioned the Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs on the justification for the loan, Russian troop presence in Iran and reasons why many Iranian nationalists remained in exile while the Shah's cabinet still contained reactionaries.³³³ The *Guardian* feared that the loan looked like British acquiescence in face of the increasing Russian military presence in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the Shah was sure to use the loan to once again suppress the nationalists.³³⁴ In parliament, Lynch continued to question the Foreign Secretary on whether a new parliament would be convoked before the return from exile of several former deputies from the first Majlis, and equally pressed for details of the new electoral law.³³⁵

By this point, the Shah had largely ceased to be a player in his own game. The threat of Russian troop incursions into Iran and the advancing nationalist armies (the Bakhtiāris under Sardār As'ad and Qazvin nationalists under Sipāhdār) had transfixed public attention, which only shifted briefly back to Muhammad 'Ali when he was deposed on 17 July in favour of Crown Prince Ahmad. The *Guardian* rejoiced over his deposition, writing of the Iranian people's passionate hatred for the ex-monarch whose reign was "*heavy with accumulated disaster*" and concluding that he had brought Iran to its lowest position in modern history. His presence was as damaging for constitutional Iran as that of recently deposed Sultan Abdul Hamid had been for a newly constitutional Turkey.³³⁶ The *Times* made scant comment but reckoned that he had greatly helped the situation by fleeing to the Russian Legation and thereby de facto abdicating. The entire episode was used by *The Times* to pursue its usual agenda in vindicating the Anglo-Russian agreement and showing how Russia had behaved honourably during the crisis.³³⁷

³³² HC Deb 26 May 1909 vol 5 cc1169-70 1169

³³³ HC Deb 27 May 1909 vol 5 cc1378-424

³³⁴ *Guardian*, 27 May 1909

³³⁵ HC Deb 29 June 1909 vol 7 cc206-7 206

³³⁶ *Guardian*, 17 July 1909

³³⁷ *Times*, 19 July 1909

Chapter 3: Perceptions of the opposition, 1906-1909

I. Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service

Sir Arthur Hardinge (1859 – 1933), was the British Minister in Tehran from 1901 to 1905.

Hardinge was a veteran diplomat whose postings had taken him across Europe, Asia and Africa, but he wrote that the most interesting years of his career were spent in Cairo, Istanbul and Tehran between 1887 and 1905. He recounted in his memoirs how his heart forever remained in the “*Mohammedan East*”.³³⁸ Hardinge appears to have possessed knowledge of ‘the East’ which matched the extent of his great affection for those regions. He was proficient in Persian, well-versed in the history of both ancient and modern Iran and had a good understanding of Shi‘ism and the religious aspects of Iranian society, going out of his way to meet many of the prominent *mujtahids* of Najaf when they denounced the Shah’s court in 1904.³³⁹ Before leaving Iran in late 1905, Hardinge identified three oppositional groups – clerics, liberal reformers and anti-dynastical radicals – who would form the ‘religious-radical’ alliance which powered the nascent constitutional movement.

The clerics were a potent socio-political force who deserved to be “*carefully watched and studied*”. He pointed out the distinctive features of Shi‘ism as opposed to Sunnism or indeed Christianity, such as the continuing exercise of *ijtihad*³⁴⁰, the notion of the Shah as a usurper of temporal power which rightfully belonged to the twelfth ‘hidden Imam, and the considerable influence wielded by the clerics, from the great *mujtahids* downwards, often prompting them into conflict with the civil authorities.³⁴¹ Hardinge noted that the middle to lower ranking clerics often championed popular causes against oppressive governors, making them “*to some extent the independent mouthpieces of national sentiment*”, albeit bigoted against non-Shi‘is and personally corrupt. Regarding the *mujtahids* at Najaf, he remarked that if one with the requisite statesman-like qualities were to

³³⁸ Hardinge, *Diplomatist in East*, 350

³³⁹ Hardinge, 306-320

³⁴⁰ Independent reasoning.

³⁴¹ Hardinge, 309

emerge from among them as their leader, he might be able to “*effect a revolution and even hurl the Shah from his throne*” – an interesting observation which in some ways anticipated the 1979 revolution by over seven decades. British relations with the *mujtahids* of Najaf were said to be very friendly, to the extent where Hardinge even addressed them on behalf of the Iranian government. The fact that the British resident in Baghdad administered the ‘Oudh Bequest’, a fund from the Nawabs of Awadh³⁴² to finance scholarship and infrastructure in Najaf and Karbala, gave a convenient form of leverage with the ulama.³⁴³

He referred to the second group – the liberal reformers - as the ‘Young Persian party’, the local equivalent to the Young Turks who sought to reorganise the Ottoman administration and restore the 1876 Ottoman constitution. This group sought its political ideals in the West and was decidedly anti-Russian (or anti-Tsarist). Hardinge argued Britain should encourage the younger generation of Iranians to follow this path and become “*imbued with the spirit of Liberalism*” through the diffusion of western culture and languages, primarily French.³⁴⁴ The third group consisted mainly of anti-dynastic ‘radicals’ who sought to overthrow the Qajars. This ‘revolutionary party’ was the directly descended from Jamal al-Din ‘al Afghani’ (1839-1897), the controversial 19th century Pan-Islamist theorist and advocate of Islamic unity who himself was an Iranian Shi‘i but styled himself as an Afghan Sunni to be acceptable to Ottoman and Arab Sunni Muslims. His doctrines apparently inspired the assassination of Nāsir al-Din Shah in 1895.³⁴⁵ These radicals watched carefully as the Russian upheavals of 1905 dealt a blow to tsarist autocracy, meaning that the “*Kajar dynasty loses its most powerful temporary prop against an attack from within*”.³⁴⁶ Indeed all eyes were on Russia, given its increasing preponderance in Iran since the late 19th century. The enormous psychological impact of Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904 was noted by many contemporary observers. Hardinge recalled the moment when the news of the Russian defeat reached the Shah’s court, arguing that it was a major catalyst for the outbreak of the

³⁴² Awadh (Oudh) was a Shi‘i kingdom in northern India. Litvak, *Oudh Bequest*, 1-2.

³⁴³ FO 881/8730, Hardinge to Grey, 23 Dec 1905

³⁴⁴ FO 881/8730, Hardinge to Grey, 23 Dec 1905

³⁴⁵ Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 108

³⁴⁶ FO 881/8730, Hardinge to Grey, 23 Dec 1905

constitutional movement soon thereafter.³⁴⁷ Many of the trends he noted would culminate the following year in the constitutional movement, by which time he had been transferred to new post in Belgium.

Chargé d’Affaires Evelyn Grant Duff’s views of Iran which had up until then reflected class Orientalist themes (as outlined in *Chapter 2*) began to change in 1906. He noted that “*the victories of Japan and the subsequent revolutionary troubles in Russia have not only put the entire Persian question on a totally different footing, but have raised new social, political and religious questions in the country itself. The Persians are showing a new restlessness, a new impatience of the bad Government which they formerly seemed to accept so philosophically, and a general resentment of the present state of things, which...may be traced all over the country*”.³⁴⁸ The ‘Persian Question’, which had hitherto concerned Iran’s strategic role in Indian and European security, had suddenly acquired a new socio-political dimension. Iranians were thought to be departing from their passive historical tolerance of tyranny – an Orientalist archetype. However, this notion of Oriental passivity and resignation persisted long after Grant-Duff and figured strongly in Anthony Parsons’ analysis decades later. Like other observers, Grant-Duff was somewhat incredulous of the clerics’ demands for constitutional government, which “*seems almost suicidal*” given their privileged status in Iranian society. He supposed that they lacked sufficient understanding of constitutionalism and were mimicking the demands of Russian opposition groups.³⁴⁹

During the ‘Great Bast’ of June – August 1906, nearly fourteen thousand refugees claimed sanctuary in the British Legation gardens at Qulhak in protest against the Iranian government’s failure to implement reforms as pledged. From there, the refugees first formulated the demand for a constitution, which convinced many Iranians and some scholars that the Constitutional Revolution was masterminded by Britain to undermine Russia³⁵⁰. As the primary British representative, Grant Duff was at the centre of this melee which ultimately led to the granting of the constitution later

³⁴⁷ Hardinge, 334

³⁴⁸ FO 881/8730, Grant Duff to Grey, February 27 1906

³⁴⁹ FO 881/8730, Grant Duff to Grey, 27 February 1906

³⁵⁰ Klein, *British Intervention*, 735

that year. Grant Duff rather enjoyed his newfound role as the intermediary between the refugees and the Iranian government, but Edward Grey was not amused and reprimanded the Charge that Britain could not get mixed up in the Iranian reform movement, since “*the Persian government is independent, and we cannot give guarantees for it*”.³⁵¹ Further asylum seeking at the Legation should be discouraged, although as a Persian custom it could not be completely prevented.³⁵²

Muzaffar al-Din Shah finally acceded to the constitutional demands and on 5 August 1906, the Royal Edict granting a constitution and elected assembly was proclaimed in the Legation grounds amidst much rejoicing. Grant-Duff, by now convinced the reform movement was serious, emphasized that “*the Government was face to face with a revolution and not a mere strike*” and advised them to heed and grant the public’s reasonable demands. He also noted the emergence amongst the people of a new sense of their own power and a determination to oust their oppressors³⁵³ and acknowledged that they were motivated by principles and not just personal grievances. Grant Duff left Tehran in September 1906 and was replaced as Charge d’Affaires by Charles Marling while a new Minister, Cecil Spring-Rice, also arrived.

Spring-Rice’s views as expressed in both private and official correspondence showed great respect for the Iranian ‘popular movement’ and a genuine hope that it could reform the country. His letters were peppered with insinuations and overt declarations of his anti-Russian and pro-Iranian sympathies and he bristled at the implications of the 1907 Anglo-Russian agreement. He wrote primarily about the permanent and genuine nature of the changes in Iran, the nationalist and potentially seditious character of Shi‘ism, the sinister Russian role in sabotaging reform and the increasingly radical character of the popular movement in 1907 which polarised the people against the Shah.

Spring-Rice continuously emphasised the serious character of the popular movement. Just after the constitution was signed, he wrote to Grey that the reformists had gone from strength to strength without English patronage in spite of the initial belief that the movement was “*a creation of the*

³⁵¹ FO 881/8802, Grey to Grant Duff, August 3 1906

³⁵² FO 881/8802, Grey to Grant Duff, September 21 1906

³⁵³ FO 881/8802, Grant Duff to Grey, August 13 1906

English Legation” funded by “*English money*”.³⁵⁴ In a similar vein, he told Valentine Chirol that the popular movement might falter but could not be permanently destroyed.³⁵⁵ A new and enduring sense of independence, liberty and patriotism was burgeoning among the people of Iran.³⁵⁶ This intense patriotism, a “*new element in Persian life*”, reached its violent culmination in the assassination of Prime Minister Amīn al-Sultān on 30 August 1907.³⁵⁷ Spring-Rice’s comments point towards a shift both in Iran and in its former image as changeless, unregenerate and incorrigibly antiquated in the words of Lord Curzon.³⁵⁸

Like Hardinge, Spring-Rice noted the political implications of Shi‘ism. He wrote to Chirol in April 1907, “*the Shiah religion is more national than religious...[the popular movement] is easily directed from race as well as religious motives against an alien dynasty [the Turkic Qajars] in the pay of an alien empire [Russia]. In Iran, unlike in Egypt, “you have the elements of a real race-religious-reform movement”*.”³⁵⁹ He referred repeatedly to the link between religion and ethno-nationalism in the Iranian “*national movement of a semi-political and semi-religious character*”, pitting the Turkic Qajars against their ethnic Persian subjects.³⁶⁰ He also remarked that the Shah was bereft of religious legitimacy in the eyes of clerics and pious Iranians, whose real allegiance lay with the twelfth Imam, hence “*the patriotism of the Shiite... is, or can be of a highly revolutionary character*”³⁶¹ and was being fomented from the pulpits.³⁶² He further remarked that “*the main feature of the agitation is the doctrine that the Mohammedan religion, rightly interpreted, is not a bar to political progress but contains in it the germs of ‘liberty, equality and justice’*.”³⁶³ Spring-Rice thus saw Shi‘ism as an ethno-nationalist and anti-dynastic force behind the reform movement, and understood how it presented itself in a progressive light.

³⁵⁴ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, January 3 1907

³⁵⁵ Gwynn, 88

³⁵⁶ FO 881/9078, Spring-Rice to Grey, May 23 1907

³⁵⁷ FO 881/9296, Spring-Rice to Grey, September 13 1907

³⁵⁸ Curzon, *Persian Question*, 12

³⁵⁹ Gwynn, 98

³⁶⁰ FO 881/9039, Spring-Rice to Grey, 27 February 1907

³⁶¹ FO 881/9039, Spring-Rice to Grey, February 27 1907

³⁶² Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 3 January 1907

³⁶³ Spring-Rice Papers, 1907

That being said, the position of the clerics was ambiguous. They derived power from the Shi‘i brand of revolutionary patriotism while being threatened by the constitutional aspects of the movement, although “*like the Irish priests they must swim with the stream, and there are some among them who are genuine patriots*”.³⁶⁴ Confusion over clerical motives for participation in the movement was a common theme. One of Professor E.G. Browne’s unnamed correspondents from the British Legation in Tehran (most probably Walter Smart, a former student of Browne’s employed at the Legation as a translator), wrote with amazement that “*the priesthood have found themselves on the side of progress and freedom. This...is almost unexampled in the world’s history. If the reforms which the people, with their help, have fought for become a reality, nearly all their power will be gone*”.³⁶⁵ However, it was clear that not all clerics were paragons of liberalism.³⁶⁶ A faction headed by Shaykh Fazlallāh Nuri was clearly opposed to the Majlis and the new constitutional order in general, with its attendant liberties.³⁶⁷

For the liberal Spring-Rice, the idea of an Anglo-Russian agreement involving Iran was thoroughly objectionable. The Russian diplomats in Tehran “*regard liberalism in all its forms as detestable and a liberal nation as a thing to be hated and despised...at present I don’t see how cordial cooperation is possible [between Britain and Russia]. It is like Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*”.³⁶⁸ Having only recently left St. Petersburg where he had been Chargé d’Affaires, Spring-Rice despised Russian autocracy and decried the thinly-veiled Russian attempts to suppress the constitutional movement. He could not bring himself to join the “*Russian bureaucracy in treading down a people trying to reform its own bureaucracy*”³⁶⁹, and cautioned Grey that British cooperation with Russia in Iran would depend on the Russians abstaining from “*overt action against the reformers*”. He further implored Grey to think how he as a member of the Liberal Party would defend “*common action with Russia in a sort of holy alliance in favour of one*

³⁶⁴ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 18 July 1907

³⁶⁵ Browne, *Persian Revolution*, 123

³⁶⁶ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 28 February 1907

³⁶⁷ FO 881/9078, Spring-Rice to Grey, 21 June 1907

³⁶⁸ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 24 May 1907

³⁶⁹ Spring Rice to Lord Cranley, April 1907. Gwynn, 96

of the worst systems of tyranny ever invented” in Parliament.³⁷⁰ In response, Grey concurred that his government would eschew any kind of action against the popular movement and assured Spring-Rice that he and his officials had been working to prevent open Russian interference in Iran.³⁷¹ Following the conclusion of the Anglo-Russian convention, Spring-Rice warned Grey that English public opinion would attack him for sabotaging the liberties of small nations and for being oblivious to the importance of the “*Mahommedan liberal movement*” burgeoning in Iran.³⁷² He had issued a similar warning to Grey in March that Muslims around the world were watching developments in Iran and Britain’s reaction to them with keen interest and later lamented to Chirol that Britain’s “*abandonment of cause of liberty as soon as it is adopted by a Mussulman nation – our alliance with the enemy of liberty, because it is a Christian power – all this leaves an impression*”.³⁷³ The danger of creating disaffection in Britain’s Muslim subjects in Egypt and India was a common theme among Liberals and imperialists alike, who often pointed out that the British sovereign ruled over the world’s second largest population of Muslims, the first presumably being the Ottoman Sultan.

Spring-Rice was forthright in his preference for the Iranian ‘reform movement’ over the established direction of British policy – a settlement with Russia – which was the centrepiece of Grey’s foreign policy. He acknowledged that British interests in Iran could be imperilled by the reform movement, but could not suppress his instinctive sympathy for both Iranian and Russian reformists and his conviction that they could produce a better alternative to the existing autocracy. Some may posit that Britain was guilty of hypocrisy in supporting the Iranian reform movement in a region of the world which was part of its informal rather than formal empire. Spring-Rice acknowledged that the Russian perspective on Iran was not dissimilar to what the British imperialist attitude would have been towards a popular movement in Egypt or India – “*they threaten our interests and we naturally object*”.³⁷⁴ Indeed the Russian consul at Tabriz later quoted directly from Lord Cromer to the British consul to draw an explicit parallel between the Russian occupation of Tabriz in 1911 and

³⁷⁰ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 28 March 1907 and 24 May 1907

³⁷¹ Spring-Rice Papers, Grey to Spring-Rice, 17 April 1907

³⁷² Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 13 September 1907

³⁷³ Gwynn, 99

³⁷⁴ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, March 28 1907

the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, which were both justified on the grounds of suppressing an uprising.³⁷⁵ This observation notwithstanding, Spring-Rice was no zealous imperialist and once remarked that the loss of India would not mean the end of England.³⁷⁶

By mid-1907, the opposition was acquiring an increasingly radical flavour, which it had had in northern Iran since the outset (for instance in Rasht, where it was controlled by groups from the Caucasus).³⁷⁷ Permanent Under-Secretary Sir Charles Hardinge remarked that the Russians had always denounced it as a revolutionary movement whereas the British called it a reform movement.³⁷⁸ The increasing gulf between the Shah and his court on the one hand and the opposition on the other (which included some Majlis factions, although in theory this was part of the government) was driven by an “*impulse...from the North and the influences are daily becoming more violent...It is now clear that the whole movement is part of the Russian revolutionary movement and is fed from the Caucasus which it in turn feeds*”.³⁷⁹ Spring-Rice also mentioned the growing power of the political societies, some of them anti-dynastic and desirous of provoking a crisis, although most of the Majlis deputies remained moderate in their aims and methods.³⁸⁰ This trend of radicalisation and increasing tension between the Shah and people culminated in the coup of June 1908. Meanwhile, Spring-Rice was obliged to leave Iran in October 1907 due to health problems, but continued to comment on developments there in his future correspondence.

Radicalisation, Civil War and Restoration

The departure of Spring-Rice left Charles Marling, the Chargé d’Affaires, as Britain’s main representative in Iran until the arrival of a new Minister, George Barclay, in October 1908. In his autobiography, Marling frequently mentioned the “*cult for the Young Persian*”, a reference to the

³⁷⁵ Deutschmann, *Iran and Russian Imperialism*, 155

³⁷⁶ Gwynn, 92

³⁷⁷ FO 881/9039, Spring-Rice to Grey, 1 Feb 1907

³⁷⁸ Gwynn, 82

³⁷⁹ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 24 May 1907

³⁸⁰ Grey Papers, Spring-Rice to Grey, 18 July 1907 and 26 July 1907

sympathy and support of many British Liberals for the Iranian reformist opposition. This ‘cult’ was espoused by many Legation staff (Military Attaché Major Claude Stokes, and student interpreters Walter Smart and Chick) and spearheaded by Professor E.G. Browne. Marling recounted his meeting with the “*delightful*” Browne, who unfortunately overestimated the virtues of the reformists, “*I told him quite frankly that nine-tenths of what he described as the accomplished work of the Constitution had never got beyond the discussion stage*”.³⁸¹ Although Marling’s view of the Iranian reformers was less idealistic and unconditionally supportive than that of Spring-Rice, he did ultimately champion the opposition against the Shah following the 1908 coup.

In December 1907, a violent confrontation arose between the Shah and some opposition members, and Marling intervened to save Nāsir al-Mulk from potential death at the hands of the Shah, on the pretext that the former had a British G.C.M.G.³⁸² By this time, radical influences seemed to be usurping both the Majlis and the reform movement in general. Threats from the *anjumans* to depose the Shah were circulating around the country and promises of armed support against the Shah were pouring in from all corners of Iran.³⁸³ By early 1908, it seemed that the struggle between the Shah and people had produced a “*complete victory for the latter*”, although this did not necessarily mean that the prospects for a stable, constitutional government had been improved; rather the mutual hatred between the Shah and reformist opposition only wrought instability. The Majlis was seen as largely ignorant and corrupt, with only a few prominent members who were sincere about and capable of implementing constructive reform.³⁸⁴ One of these, in Marling’s opinion, was the leader of the parliamentary radical faction and deputy from Tabriz, Sayyid Hassan Taqizādah, who met Marling in July 1908 when he claimed sanctuary in the British Legation following the coup against the Majlis. Although Marling mentioned Taqizādah’s sincerity and reformist zeal, he also described him as a “*wild-eyed fanatic*” whose “*inexcusable abuse of the*

³⁸¹ Marling, 70

³⁸² FO 881/9299, Marling to Grey, 31 December 1907; Marling, 75

³⁸³ FO 881/9299, Marling to Grey, 31 December 1907

³⁸⁴ FO 881/9302, Marling to Grey, 2 January 1908

Shah” had damaged the chances of survival for the constitution.³⁸⁵ Marling’s general opinion of Iran’s fledgling experimentation with liberalism, constitutionalism and democracy was that the country was simply not ready for representative institutions and instead needed a ‘strong hand’ to restore stability.³⁸⁶

By late April, the *anjumans* were at the heart of popular opposition to the Shah.³⁸⁷ Marling criticized the *anjumans* for their attempts to interfere in every branch of the administration, which was rendering the task of government impossible because of the “*ignorant and suspicious views of a majority of their leaders*”³⁸⁸. He also noted that the press was attacking the Shah with “*orgies of unbridled abuse of the most scurrilous kind*”.³⁸⁹ On the eve of the June coup, the *anjumans* dominated the country and functioned as the de facto national government. Many provincial *anjumans* were sending messages to Tehran promising armed support to the constitutionalists, but Marling doubted they would fulfil their promises unless the Shah “*committed the extreme folly of attacking the Medjliss itself*”. On the other hand, he acknowledged that the *anjumans* played an important role in supporting parliament against the reactionaries and were not all anti-dynastic. The wider population was largely neutral, but even they could be easily swayed against the Shah if his government failed to provide a basic level of security.³⁹⁰

The atmosphere became increasingly tense in the weeks preceding the coup. The public was depressed at the inefficacy of the government and increasingly hostile to the Shah, who was suspected of preparing a coup d’état.³⁹¹ Only mutual understanding between Shah and people could solve the problem, but the chances for this were remote given the Shah’s propensity for reactionary intrigue and the prejudiced nature of the masses against him. The British Legation received numerous messages from the provinces imploring it to support the constitutional struggle, to which Marling responded that England “*must always look with sympathy on a constitutional movement*”

³⁸⁵ Marling, 77-78

³⁸⁶ FO 881/9302, Marling to Grey, January 2 1908

³⁸⁷ FO 881/9307, Marling to Grey, 24 April 1908

³⁸⁸ FO 881/9307, Marling to Grey, 24 April 1908

³⁸⁹ Marling, 74

³⁹⁰ FO 881/9307, Marling to Grey, June 18 1908

³⁹¹ FO 881/9307, Marling to Grey, 22 May 1908

but would continue to avoid interference in Iran's internal affairs³⁹² – an oft-repeated claim which was difficult to honour in practice given the recurrence of sanctuary-seeking at the Legation. Marling sought to maintain an outward semblance of Anglo-Russian solidarity in light of the 1907 convention, but his private letters tell a different story. Shortly after the coup he warned Grey that cooperation with Hartwig, the Russian Minister, was practically becoming impossible and that a British Minister was desperately needed in Tehran.³⁹³ In his memoirs, he recounted Hartwig's insufferable ill-faith and his tendency to spread noxious rumours about the British legation staff.³⁹⁴ Following the coup and its attendant scuffles, hundreds of opposition members were continuously seeking sanctuary in the legation grounds. The stated British policy was to extend asylum to those whose lives were endangered while discouraging the use of the legation for conducting political agitation, but often such distinctions were difficult to make since the refugees were convinced they would never be forcibly expelled and in any case such an expulsion would be seen as active support for the Shah.³⁹⁵ Most of the refugees were eventually persuaded to leave after the British government was successful in obtaining an amnesty from the Shah guaranteeing their lives and property or at least reasonable terms of exile for them.³⁹⁶

By July, Legation Secretary George Churchill³⁹⁷ reported that although outwardly it seemed the opposition had been crushed except at Tabriz, there was still reason to believe that the movement would resurface, as the Najaf *mujtahids* re-asserted their opposition to the Shah.³⁹⁸ Furthermore, the news of the Young Turk Revolution and restoration of the constitution in neighbouring Ottoman Turkey was not without impact. The centre of pro-constitutional resistance shifted to Tabriz, where the news of the coup and attack on the Majlis had immediately triggered altercations

³⁹² FO 881/9307, Marling to Grey, 17 June 1908

³⁹³ Grey Papers, Marling to Grey, 3 July 1908

³⁹⁴ Marling, 78-79

³⁹⁵ FO 881/9416, 31 July 1908

³⁹⁶ FO 881/9416, Marling to Grey, 1 August 1908

³⁹⁷ George Churchill, born in Iran of an Iranian mother and an English father who had been British Consul at Rasht, was the 'eyes and ears' of the British Legation given his language abilities, extensive local knowledge and network of contacts. However Marling believed he incurred some local animosity because he "*knew too much*". Marling, 69-70.

³⁹⁸ FO 881/9416, Churchill to Grey, 12 August 1908

between constitutionalists and royalists (the latter group included many of the Shah's brigands).³⁹⁹ It seemed that the reform movement now suffered from an absence of real leaders, who had either gone underground or fled in exile, while the few remaining influential people who sympathized with the movement, "*conscious that Persia is not yet ripe for self-government*", were unwilling to openly espouse the principles of the movement at that point.⁴⁰⁰ Nevertheless, by September Stevens, the British Consul at Tabriz, reported that the revolutionaries of that city, which now numbered about ten thousand, had lost all confidence in the government and would settle for nothing less than the re-establishment of the constitution, the calling of elections and the reconvening of parliament.⁴⁰¹ Indeed, Marling soon came to believe – or sought to convey the impression to Grey - that the Shah would be incapable of suppressing the Tabriz insurrection, owing to the strength of popular feeling there and the unscrupulous nature of the Royalist brigands. However, elsewhere in Iran there was little pro-constitutional activity, only a sullen acquiescence in the new conditions.⁴⁰²

The disturbed state of Tabriz and Azerbaijan province in general caused disruptions in Russian trade and instability around the Russo-Iranian border. This, combined with the alleged participation of a large Russo-Caucasian revolutionary contingent in Tabriz under the nationalist leader Sattār Khān, raised the possibility of Russian military intervention. Upon hearing that two companies of Russian infantry and one hundred Cossacks were being sent to Tabriz from Julfa, Grey feared the "*very bad impression*" this would create in England⁴⁰³ and urged his ambassador in St. Petersburg, Sir Arthur Nicolson, to discourage intervention.⁴⁰⁴ Grey was firm that order could only really be restored if the Shah fulfilled his promises to re-establish the constitution and parliament.⁴⁰⁵ Meanwhile, the staged anti-constitutional protest and petition which took place on 7 November (covered in *Chapter 2*) triggered indignation in nationalists and several ex-Majlis deputies, clerics

³⁹⁹ FO 881/9416, Marling to Grey, 15 July 1908

⁴⁰⁰ FO 881/9416, Marling to Grey, 13 August 1908

⁴⁰¹ FO 881/9416, Stevens to Marling, Marling to Grey, 1 September 1908

⁴⁰² FO 881/9416, Marling to Grey, 10 September 1908

⁴⁰³ FO 881/9465, Grey to Nicolson, 17 October 1908

⁴⁰⁴ FO 881/9465, Nicolson to Grey, 18 October 1908

⁴⁰⁵ FO 881/9465, Grey to Nicolson, 31 October 1908

and merchants, who presented their own petition to all foreign Legations deploring the 7 November incident and hoping for the assistance of the Legations in re-establishing the constitution.⁴⁰⁶ This incident, among others, is a typical example of the practical difficulty for Britain (or for that matter, other major powers) to stay aloof from internal matters when their assistance was solicited by the opposition.

The escalation of the Tabriz conflict, the looming threat of Russian military intervention and the Shah's obduracy made the opposition's prospects look gloomy, but the new Minister, Sir George Barclay was firm in his sympathy and support for the opposition and made emphatic representations to the Shah to restore the constitution and parliament. Although he was ostensibly working in tandem with his Russian colleague Hartwig to this end, the two Ministers met the Shah separately, and in all likelihood Hartwig was not towing the official Anglo-Russian pro-parliament and constitution line. Hartwig was recalled to St. Petersburg on 14 November and replaced by Sabline, yet Barclay wrote that even from afar he dreaded "*the sinister influence of Hartwig*", who was likely inciting his government to intervene in Azerbaijan.⁴⁰⁷ By November, Russian Foreign Minister Izvolsky was again under pressure to undertake such military intervention. The Russian government continually impressed upon Nicolson that the "*active and moving spirits*" of the Tabriz insurrection were not Persian constitutionalists but Russian revolutionaries – to which it had the strongest objections.⁴⁰⁸ Meanwhile, Russian newspapers lamented the economic losses caused by turbulence in Azerbaijan and spoke wistfully of the 1860s when the khanates of Khiva and Kokand were occupied because of attacks on Russian caravans.⁴⁰⁹ Grey however insisted that only the restoration of the constitution could settle the anarchy which prevailed in Azerbaijan.⁴¹⁰ In December 1908 Nicolson met two Iranian officials in St. Petersburg who tried to convince him that Iran was not ready for modern representative institutions. They implored Britain to stop insisting on what was "*premature*" and possibly "*dangerous*" in Iran and to focus instead on the more

⁴⁰⁶ FO 881/9465, Barclay to Grey, 16 November 1908

⁴⁰⁷ Grey Papers, Barclay to Grey, 25 November 1908

⁴⁰⁸ FO 881/9465, Nicolson to Grey, 3 December 1908

⁴⁰⁹ FO 881/9465, Nicolson to Grey, 14 & 18 November 1908

⁴¹⁰ FO 881/9465, Grey to Nicolson, 23 November 1908

pressing need for financial assistance. Nicolson objected, arguing that the Shah had broken his promises to his subjects who “*ardently desired*” a parliament and constitution and that enough good men could be found in Persia to act as responsible deputies.⁴¹¹

The pro-constitutionalists and nationalist opposition were joined in early 1909 by a large faction of Bakhtiāris, one of Iran’s most powerful tribes. By January 1909, the city of Isfahan was under Bakhtiāri control. At Tabriz, meanwhile, Barclay praised the nationalists for maintaining order in the city and providing “*an exceptional degree of protection*” to foreign residents – a key concern for the British government, since any attack on foreigners would give Russia a pretext for intervention.⁴¹² Barclay’s letters to Charles Hardinge revealed his instinctive sympathies for the nationalists/constitutionalists, even when they were derided by other European observers and becoming increasingly radicalised. Whereas Marling sometimes argued that the Shah was unfairly attacked by the nationalists, Barclay squarely blamed the Shah’s obstinacy for radicalising the nationalists. In September 1908, it seemed that the nationalists of Tehran (but not Tabriz, who had old scores to settle with the Shah) would have accepted “*any scrap of constitutional comfort thrown to them*”, but by January, following months of vacillation and empty promises, they were adamant to re-establish the previous regime and its institutions in their entirety.⁴¹³ Furthermore, “*with every not strictly nationalist recruit*” who joined the movement, such as the Bakhtiāri tribe under Samsam al-Saltanah, their objectives were surpassing the mere demand for a constitution in favour of something more “*tempting*” – namely, the deposition of the Shah.⁴¹⁴ The Times correspondent David Fraser, who spent considerable time in Iran (primarily Tehran and Tabriz) during this period, was largely dismissive of the nationalist movement and questioned its constitutionalist credentials. Barclay wrote “[Fraser] *has no faith in the possibility of constitutional government...[he thinks that] the two powers will have to grasp their nettle and assume some form of foreign control*” although Barclay remained personally convinced that “*a liberal regime*” in Iran

⁴¹¹ FO 881/9465, Nicolson to Grey, 25 December 1908

⁴¹² FO 881/9465, Barclay to Grey, 30 December 1908

⁴¹³ Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 1 January 1909

⁴¹⁴ Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 29 January 1909

was deserving of another trial. However, he conceded the changing character of the nationalist movement. In Rasht, for instance, Caucasian revolutionaries appeared to have played the main part in the recent anti-royalist revolt and many Caucasians were now descending on Tehran.⁴¹⁵

Barclay maintained a pro-nationalist line in his official despatches. He reported that all over Iran the nationalist movement was recrudescing, and warned that the situation would continue to deteriorate so long as the Shah refused to honour his pledges. Whatever misgivings could be had about parliamentary government in Iran, Barclay believed that “*Persia would not be able to work out her own salvation*” until it was granted. Against Izvolsky’s claims that a mere constitution would not solve Iran’s problems, Barclay countered that it afforded the best and only realistic chance to improve the situation, and that any other policy which sought to encourage reforms would call for an undesirable degree of foreign control.⁴¹⁶ Barclay was always trying to give Grey the impression that the nationalists were indomitable and had to be accommodated in order to restore order in Iran. However, he lamented privately to Hardinge about the dismal prospects for besieged Tabriz and how unfortunate it would be if the city were forced to surrender, since this would make the Shah “*more obstinate than ever*” and might even deflate the entire nationalist movement.⁴¹⁷ Barclay’s confident assertion of nationalist strength revealed where his sympathies lay. He made every attempt to present the nationalists in a favourable light and bolster their position by shaping Grey’s attitudes in this respect.

By the end of March, it was said that only three weeks’ worth of provisions remained at Tabriz, and there was talk of inciting foreign intervention to lift the siege in order to avoid surrendering to the Shah’s rapacious troops.⁴¹⁸ George Churchill was passing through Azerbaijan in February and March and met with several notables in the area, including Sipāhdār, now Governor of Rasht. Sipāhdār affirmed his commitment to the constitution and said he was prepared to fight the Shah’s troops should they arrive in Rasht. Churchill was convinced that the entire movement at Rasht was

⁴¹⁵ Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 15 February 1909

⁴¹⁶ FO 881/9535, Barclay to Grey, 27 January 1909

⁴¹⁷ Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 15 February 1909

⁴¹⁸ FO 881/9535, Barclay to Grey, 28 March 1909

planned in the Caucasus and was being implemented by a small number of Caucasian revolutionaries and a few Iranians. He noted that the Tehran-Rasht road was under the control of armed Caucasian bands, and his steamer from Baku to the Iranian port of Anzali was loaded with heavily armed Caucasians bound for Rasht.⁴¹⁹ In Tabriz itself, localised combat continued between royalists and nationalists. Nationalist commander Sattār Khān distinguished himself through his personal courage, but his recklessness often put him in situations too dangerous for one “*on whose life the whole Nationalist cause in Tabriz depends*”. The British consul saw him as a valiant soldier and compassionate man who saved prisoners from an angry mob, in contrast to the Shah’s savage brigands.⁴²⁰ Marling however described both him and his comrade Bāqir Khān as “*little better than brigands*” in his memoirs.⁴²¹

The nationalist opposition was resurfacing in formerly quiescent regions such as the north-eastern province of Khorasān. As in the other provinces, it was thought to be led by Russian subjects and was instigated in part by the appointment of an unpopular governor. An assembly of the nationalist party was opened in Mashhad and disturbances spread to the regional town of Turbat-i Haidari.⁴²² In Astarabad, the revolutionary Panov, a Russian subject and former correspondent of a Russian newspaper in Tehran, had joined with the nationalists and was fighting the local royalist Turkmen tribes. In Shiraz, the local authorities decided in mid-March to inaugurate constitutional government in Fars province, and telegrams announcing this were sent to Tabriz, Isfahan, Najaf and Istanbul, the seat of an influential *anjuman*. By early April, it seemed that the “*Shah’s authority was dead...and there was no faith in the Assembly*”. Perhaps the only corner of Iran unaffected by constitutionalist or nationalist disturbances was the south eastern province of Sistan.⁴²³

In April, negotiations began at Tabriz between the royalists and nationalists. Barclay was initially optimistic that the negotiations might be fruitful since the Shah had contributed to bringing them

⁴¹⁹ FO 881/9535, Barclay (Churchill) to Grey, 23 March 1909

⁴²⁰ FO 881/9535, Wratislaw to Barclay, 7 March 1909

⁴²¹ Marling, 82

⁴²² FO 881/9535, Sykes (Barclay) to Grey, 21 March 1909

⁴²³ FO 881/9540, Churchill to Grey, 22 April 1909

about. However, he also mentioned that the so-called “*peace party*” rather than nationalist leaders Sattār and Bāqir Khān were to negotiate on behalf of the nationalists, indicating that important nationalists were opposed to negotiation.⁴²⁴ The likelihood of an attack on foreign consulates or nationals was dangerously high as Tabriz teetered on the brink of starvation. The redoubtable women of Tabriz were protesting at local shrines and had to be dispersed by force, an ominous sign since “*women are always pushed forward to start bread riots*”.⁴²⁵ Rumours ran rife that the nationalists were angling to provoke Russian intervention by attacking foreign property or nationals, which was preferable to surrendering to the Shah.⁴²⁶ On 23 April, it was confirmed that a detachment of Russian troops would enter Tabriz with food supplies and protect both foreigners and locals from the Shah’s troops. However, unity and sense of purpose seemed to be dissipating amongst the nationalists.⁴²⁷ The Tabriz assembly demanded the Shah to restore the constitution in its original form, without the amendments made in late 1908 to ostensibly accommodate Sharia law, and the nationalist commander Sattār Khān called on the consul to express his “*profound gratitude*” to Britain. Wratislaw, although impressed by his valour and martial skill, found him “*too changeable to be entirely trustworthy*”; indeed it appeared that his former comrade in arms, Bāqir Khān, had proven a mere mercenary and was now crossing over to the Shah’s side.⁴²⁸ Ultimately, Wratislaw was critical of the Tabriz nationalists, adding that even their admirers were now disillusioned. The local *anjuman* vacillated too much and “*being themselves always sufficiently fed, showed complete callousness towards the sufferings of their poorer fellow-citizens*”. Even Sattār Khān lost his previously well-deserved reputation for courage and had allegedly taken to drink.⁴²⁹

By May, the siege of Tabriz had been lifted by Russian troops, the Shah had officially reinstated a limited constitution on 5 May, and armed contingents of Bakhtiāris from Isfahan and ‘revolutionaries’ from Rasht were preparing to march on Tehran to ensure the Shah kept his

⁴²⁴ Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 10 April 1909

⁴²⁵ FO 881/9552, Wratislaw to Barclay (Grey), 2 May 1909

⁴²⁶ FO 881/9540, Barclay (Wratislaw) to Grey, 19 April 1909

⁴²⁷ FO 881/9540, Wratislaw to Barclay (Grey), 24 April 1909

⁴²⁸ FO 881/9540, Wratislaw to Barclay (Grey), 30 April 1909

⁴²⁹ FO 881/9552, Wratislaw to Barclay (Grey), 2 May 1909

promises. The re-establishment of a limited constitution met with little enthusiasm and the nationalists demanded the reinstatement of the full original version. Following his restoration to the cabinet as Foreign Minister at the insistence of Britain and Russia, Sa‘d al-Dawlah restored the full original constitution and the decree was signed by the Shah on 9 May.⁴³⁰ Barclay wrote that the Tehran nationalists, at first “*noisy, ungrateful and dissatisfied*” had calmed down somewhat and formed a committee, which was responsible for negotiating with the cabinet and representing the regional centres. He thought that the Shah would get another lease of life if the mujtahids of Najaf and Karbala and the radical Istanbul *anjuman* would tone down their denunciations. Even then, he despaired at the magnitude of the difficulties which faced the new government.⁴³¹

The continuing Russian military presence at Tabriz after the siege was lifted damaged prospects for stability. Barclay warned that the disproportionately large numbers of Russian troops gave credence to the nationalist belief that an occupation was underway.⁴³² Grey immediately urged a troop reduction, deploring this development for reducing the likelihood of “*a general restoration of confidence by means of a constitution*”.⁴³³ Grey warned Nicolson that the blatant intervention of Russian military authorities at Tabriz against the nationalists was making it impossible for HMG to “*maintain a passive attitude in Persian affairs*” and would compel him to interfere in the nationalists’ favour if this trend continued. He would have to admit in parliament that Anglo-Russian cooperation had broken down in Iran, and by implication admit the failure of the 1907 convention, the centrepiece of his foreign policy.⁴³⁴ Meanwhile the Turkish consul gave sanctuary to Sattār Khān and several hundred other nationalists, arguing that he needed protection from the oppressive action of the Russian military authorities.⁴³⁵ Grey pointed out that Sattār Khān’s circumstances – especially if he had to flee the country - would create a bad impression in Britain

⁴³⁰ FO 881/9540, Barclay to Grey, 11 May 1909

⁴³¹ Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 21 May 1909

⁴³² FO 881/9540, Barclay to Grey, 31 May 1909

⁴³³ FO 881/9540, Grey to Nicolson, 31 May 1909

⁴³⁴ FO 881/9540, Grey to Nicolson, 3 June 1909

⁴³⁵ FO 881/9540, Wratislaw to Barclay (Grey), 2 June 1909; FO 881/9540, Barclay to Grey, 3 June 1909

and be seen as an expulsion.⁴³⁶ Shortly thereafter, the Russian authorities decided to withdraw troops from Tabriz, much to Grey's relief.⁴³⁷

Barclay briefly waxed optimistic about the chances for a viable constitutional regime when the new electoral law was finally drafted and a date fixed for the elections. He conceded that a constitution was never expected to create instant order out of chaos, but rather to produce a *détente*, which it had. Rectifying the disorders which had arisen from the "*late corrupt and impotent regime*" was its next challenge.⁴³⁸ Meanwhile, the Bakhtiāri march finally appeared to be materializing. Bakhtiāri leader Sardār As'ad left Isfahan accompanied by a thousand armed men with the intention of overseeing the correct implementation of the constitution.⁴³⁹ Dismayed at this new turn of events, Barclay got the British (and Russian) consuls to implore the chief to abandon his endeavour, which would complicate a situation which finally appeared to be resolved.⁴⁴⁰ The British and Russian legations launched a protracted joint effort to dissuade Sardār As'ad and Sipāhdār, but their exhortations were brushed aside. The Russian Legation had meanwhile failed in its attempt to induce Sipāhdār to come alone to Tehran to negotiate with the Shah, and he remained for the time being at Qazvin with a retinue of 1700 revolutionaries.⁴⁴¹

Panic gripped Tehran as several thousand armed Bakhtiāris arrived at Qum.⁴⁴² British Consul Grahame and his Russian counterpart Consul Bogoiavlensky again warned Sardār As'ad that if he disregarded the advice of the two Legations, he would be held personally responsible for the consequences of the occupation of Tehran, and that his endeavour would likely jeopardise the establishment of a constitutional regime rather than support it. The chief explained that his only goal was the establishment of a 'real constitution', instead of the current 'sham' constitution which had deceived the legations.⁴⁴³ Barclay and his Russian colleague were in a bind. They had told Sardār As'ad to abandon his advance, in keeping with their assurances to the Shah. Their advice

⁴³⁶ FO 881/9540, Grey to Nicolson, 4 June 1909

⁴³⁷ FO 881/9540, Nicolson to Grey, 14 June 1909

⁴³⁸ FO 881/9552, Barclay to Grey, 16 June 1909; Hardinge Papers, Barclay to Hardinge, 2 July 1909

⁴³⁹ FO 881/9540, Graham to Barclay (Grey), 17 June 1909

⁴⁴⁰ FO 881/9540, Barclay to Grey, 21 June 1909

⁴⁴¹ FO 881/9540, Barclay to Grey, 23 June 1909

⁴⁴² FO 881/9540, Barclay to Grey, 25 June 1909

⁴⁴³ CAB 37/100, Grahame to Barclay (Grey), 26 June 1909

was being disregarded, and to persist would be inconsistent with the Anglo-Russian convention and an ever greater intrusion into internal affairs. All the while, there was a real danger that the Shah would seek sanctuary in a legation if the advance continued.⁴⁴⁴

At the second meeting with the consuls, the Bakhtiāri chief declared that only a fear of Russian retaliation was stopping him from deposing the Shah, whom in any case he intended to cripple.⁴⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the Russian government had indeed decided to send troops to Qazvin, with the object of dispersing Sipāhdār and the nationalists and monitoring the road to Tehran. The troop withdrawal from Tabriz, which had just begun, was countermanded.⁴⁴⁶ O'Beirne, St. Petersburg Embassy councillor, protested that Tabriz was sufficiently pacified, and that in any case the turbulence which the Russians were using as a pretext for keeping troops there was caused by the very presence of such troops.⁴⁴⁷ The British cabinet reported to King Edward that some of Iran's wilder tribesmen were marching on the capital, thus the withdrawal of Russian troops from Tabriz, whose presence was causing much outrage in parliament and among the British public, had regrettably been countermanded.⁴⁴⁸

The nationalists under Sipāhdār at Qazvin sent telegrams to the foreign legations, emphasizing their non-combative intentions and also the fact that they had always respected foreign persons and property. The same day, the Persian Cossack officers decided not to oppose the advancing armies, prompting Barclay to predict a bloodless victory for the nationalists.⁴⁴⁹ Grey, now lobbying hard to stop further Russian incursions in Iran, invoked the ostensibly peaceable intentions of the Qazvin nationalists as a further argument against the need for any intervention.⁴⁵⁰ He emphasized Barclay's expectation of a nationalist "*bloodless victory*" in Tehran, thereby obviating the need for increased Russian troops to protect foreigners and also that mentioned the *mujtahids* of Najaf and

⁴⁴⁴ FO 881/9540, Barclay to Grey, 27 June 1909

⁴⁴⁵ FO 881/9540, Barclay to Grey, 29 June 1909

⁴⁴⁶ FO 881/9540, O'Beirne to Grey, 30 June 1909

⁴⁴⁷ FO 881/9540, O'Beirne to Grey, 30 June 1909

⁴⁴⁸ CAB 41/32, Cabinet to King Edward, 30 June 1909

⁴⁴⁹ FO 881/9552, Barclay to Grey, 1 July 1909

⁴⁵⁰ FO 881/9552, Grey to O'Beirne, 1 July 1909

Karbala would not enjoin calm upon the masses so long as Russian troops were present in Iran.⁴⁵¹

However the Russian government (with the input of Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin) held firm, arguing that it had procrastinated thus far only in deference to Grey, and that it now felt compelled to act in order to avert a potential ‘massacre’ of foreigners.⁴⁵²

Soon after, yet another British entreaty to abandon their advance was put to Sardār As‘ad and Sipāhdār jointly by George Churchill and Major Stokes.⁴⁵³ However, this made little impression on either leader, with Sipāhdār putting forward his own list of demands for the British, which Barclay found to be somewhat audacious and impractical.⁴⁵⁴ The list included demands for Sipāhdār and Sardār As‘ad’s safe entry to Tehran, for the withdrawal of foreign military forces from Iran and for the expulsion of those regarded as traitors by the people. Barclay did however approve of the last demand and was prepared to urge its acceptance on the Shah.⁴⁵⁵ Both Sardār As‘ad and Sipāhdār continued to dismiss the restored constitution as a sham and Barclay did concede that promises from “*this untrustworthy Shah must be open to suspicion*”. He was sure that both leaders were receiving exhortations from “*certain persons in London and Paris and of course the Anjuman at Constantinople*” to carry out their programme.⁴⁵⁶ Most probably these were exiled Iranian nationalists; the Iranian *anjuman* in Istanbul was known for its radicalism, activism and political sophistication. During this period it was in close touch with the Turkish ruling party, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), which in 1908 under the leadership of the Young Turks had deposed Sultan Abdul Hamid and restored the constitution. In response to requests from the Iranian *anjuman*, Turkish President of the Chamber Ahmed Riza Bey declared himself ready to undertake all possible measures to support the Iranian constitutionalists and denounced the Russian occupation of Tabriz.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵¹ FO 881/9552, Grey to O’Beirne, 2 July 1909

⁴⁵² FO 881/9552, O’Beirne to Grey, 2 July 1909

⁴⁵³ CAB 37/100, Barclay to Stokes & Churchill, 5 July 1909

⁴⁵⁴ FO 881/9552, Barclay to Grey, 5 July 1909; CAB 37/100, Barclay to Grey, 12 July 1909

⁴⁵⁵ FO 881/9552, Barclay to Grey, 5 July 1909

⁴⁵⁶ CAB 37/100, Barclay to Grey, 12 July 1909

⁴⁵⁷ FO 881/9552, Lowther to Grey, 7 July 1909

Nationalist leaders were eventually invited to negotiate with the government based on their more reasonable demands. The Shah even secretly promised the British and Russian Ministers that if the nationalist leaders abandoned their military programme, he would expel the more objectionable members of his entourage from the palace.⁴⁵⁸ However, this last-ditch attempt proved futile, since the next day on 13 July the combined nationalist armies entered Tehran. Their entry, in spite of all fears, was peaceful, orderly and scrupulously protective of foreign subjects, a fact which both Barclay and Grey impressed upon their Russian counterparts as justification that no further troop incursions into Iran were needed.⁴⁵⁹ Churchill, who was dispatched to observe the nationalist entry to Tehran, noted that the crowds gathered at the Majlis were cheering for the British Legation soldiers and servants.⁴⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the *mujtahids* of Najaf and Karbala sent envoys to the British ambassador at Istanbul, beseeching Britain to exert her influence and hasten the withdrawal of Russian troops from Iran and promising that peace could be restored there as soon as the troops had gone. The envoys also bemoaned the apparent British indifference to the plight of Iran, in contrast with its former pro-constitutionalism.⁴⁶¹

Muhammad ‘Ali Shah was formally deposed by an extraordinary grand council on 16 July and external recognition of the new government, consisting of the Crown Prince under the regency of the Qajar chief Āzād al-Mulk, followed soon thereafter. Barclay, evidently eager for the Shah to leave Iran as soon as possible, reported that the Shah’s deposition had produced an “*excellent impression*” in the provinces.⁴⁶² In spite of his previous exhortations to the contrary, Barclay was clearly satisfied that the opposition had triumphed. He applauded the resolution shown by the nationalist opposition in achieving their objectives as well as their moderation, pacific character and the peaceful transfer of power to Muhammad ‘Ali Shah’s successor, all events which had “*surprised many with long experience of Persia*” and boded well for the future. He concluded optimistically that “*the field lies open for a second and more promising experiment in*

⁴⁵⁸ FO 881/9552, Barclay to Grey, 12 July 1909

⁴⁵⁹ FO 881/9552, Barclay to Grey, 13 July 1909

⁴⁶⁰ CAB 37/100, Churchill (Barclay) to Grey, 16 July 1909

⁴⁶¹ FO 881/9552, Lowther to Grey, 14 July 1909

⁴⁶² FO 881/9552, Barclay to Grey, 21 July 1909

parliamentary government” in Iran, with the hope that a liberally inclined government would take root.⁴⁶³

II. Press, parliament and civil society

The liberal sentiments expressed by Spring-Rice, Barclay and other officials – dislike of Russian autocracy, the sympathy for peoples striving for freedom, a sense of Britain’s duty to foster global liberalism – were echoed to a large extent in civil society, the liberal press and parliament. Both the *Times* and *Manchester Guardian* were initially enthusiastic about the constitutional movement, although the *Times* was more sceptical about its prospects for success than the *Guardian* and placed more emphasis on how it would affect British and Russian commercial and strategic interests in Iran. The *Guardian*, by contrast, prioritised respect for the nascent constitutional regime over British and Russian interests and tended to treat Iran as an equal to Britain in Russia, at least in diplomatic terms. For the *Guardian*, an outstanding feature of the revolution was the precedent which it could set for the Muslim and Asian world, striking a blow at prejudices about the incapacity of Asian states for internal regeneration and self-government.

The main exceptions to this view was the *Times*, particularly when it featured articles by David Fraser, war correspondent from 1908-1909. The other exception was Lord Curzon, who although enamoured of many things Iranian and resolutely Russophobe, was ultimately an imperialist who valued Iran for its role in imperial defence rather than incipient Asian liberalism. The press took a keen interest in Iranian events from the initial outbreak of the revolution in 1906 until the deposition of Muhammad ‘Ali Shah in 1909 and the liberal press and civil society activists engaged in heated sparring with the *Times* over Iran.

Both liberals and to some extent imperialists shared a belief that Iran occupied a unique place in the world and in particular among non-Western nations. This view was based on a variety of factors: Aryanism and the perceived superior abilities of (Aryan) Iranians, Iranian cultural and

⁴⁶³ CAB37/100, Barclay to Grey 23 July 1909

intellectual heritage and history, the high regard for nationalism as an emancipatory concept, and the view that Iran, not part of any formal empire, was “*a beacon for political experiment in the East*”⁴⁶⁴ and the worthiest candidate for liberal constitutionalism. Weinroth argues that for contemporary liberals, “*Persia had all the virtues yet none of the defects of the maturing nations. It was not a Turkey with a long tradition of cruelty towards its Christian subjects. It was not a Morocco, still politically backward, with little chance of avoiding the imposition of a foreign protectorate. Nor was it some remote African territory whose right of self-determination could safely be left to the distant future. The Persians were a cultured people attempting to construct a parliamentary regime on the Western model*”.⁴⁶⁵ Iran’s perceived special status is a recurring theme in the discourse of the press, parliament and civil society, and explains why for a few years “*Persia became the principal object of Radical sympathy...in those halcyon days Persia was virtually the only country in the world where constitutional liberties were being infringed by a foreign oppressor*”.⁴⁶⁶ On the other hand, this enthusiasm was frequently tempered by incredulity that constitutional government could arise so quickly and flourish in an uncongenial ‘Oriental’ environment.

The press immediately noted the important and unique role played by clerics in spearheading the revolution. The *Times* noted their influence in Iran even when compared with other Muslim societies and their position as the only “*body capable of standing between the rulers and the people*” and in recent years, the champions of Iranian national feeling against foreign influences. The *Times* also applauded the introduction of a national assembly, but was sceptical that anything resembling European style parliamentary and constitutional government could at present be established there.⁴⁶⁷ The *Guardian*, on the other hand, gloated that the “*Liberal revolution*” in Iran had knocked “*much sawdust*” out of longstanding European generalisations about Iranian politics. Ironically though, this liberal revolution was almost entirely brought about by the clergy, acting with the people’s sympathy and against the Shah, who lacked spiritual authority. The article

⁴⁶⁴ Weinroth, *Radicalism*, 221

⁴⁶⁵ Weinroth, 220

⁴⁶⁶ Taylor, 113

⁴⁶⁷ Times editorial, 13 August 1906

interpreted the present events as part of the perennial clash in Iranian history between spiritual and temporal power. This startling new state of affairs would bring Britain's Liberal government to its first major test of foreign policy. It was imperative for Britain as a Liberal power to avoid opposing “*any body which represents, however imperfectly, the popular wishes*”, a reference to the new Majlis. Furthermore, the talks underway with Russia over Anglo-Russian relations in Iran, Afghanistan and Tibet would have to be thoroughly revised in light of these new developments, since it was “*doubly indefensible now that Persia has shown signs of national life*” to talk of partitioning the country.⁴⁶⁸ A liberal reform movement was sacrosanct and could not be tampered with. The *Guardian* editors enthused about the Iran’s ground-breaking revolution, “*the most wonderful...that has ever taken place in a Mahometan country*”, accomplished without bloodshed, and most puzzling of all, led by the clergy, whose motives were unclear. It was possible they were mainly seeking to re-assert their power vis-à-vis the Shah. Another possibility was that they had undergone a radical ideological transformation under the influence of Babism, but overall the “*priestly reform party*” was not thought fanatical. In the space of a year Iran had changed from a benighted despotism to a constitutional democracy with an elected assembly and more outspoken ministers than those in Germany – a spectacular development.⁴⁶⁹ The *Times*, although less effusive, acknowledged that it was witnessing history in the making, and that the effect of European thought and institutions on the “*ancient politics of the East*” would be one of the most interesting chapters in twentieth century history.⁴⁷⁰ The *Times* readily acknowledged the vitality and authenticity of the reform movement which had brought about the constitution.⁴⁷¹ It was impressive how the new constitution had already resulted in the reorganization of local government and gained considerable sway over the traditional centres of power – the local governors, bureaucracy and the Shah himself.⁴⁷² It seemed certain that individuals of “*considerable intelligence and resolution and of a*

⁴⁶⁸ *Guardian*, 24 December 1906

⁴⁶⁹ *Guardian*, 10 January 1907

⁴⁷⁰ *Times*, 31 August 1907

⁴⁷¹ *Times*, 11 March 1907

⁴⁷² *Times*, 31 August 1907

considerable faculty for organization” were the driving force behind the movement, although most Iranians remained ignorant of democracy and constitutionalism.⁴⁷³

Iran was hurtling into a bold new era, which the *Times* proclaimed to be “*without parallel in the annals of politics*” and the world looked on.⁴⁷⁴ Similar sentiments were expressed in a lecture

entitled ‘The Reform Movement in Persia’, held at the Central Asian Society on 13 March 1907.

The primary speaker, General Sir Thomas Gordon, had previously served as Oriental and Military Secretary and Military Attaché at the British Legation in Tehran between 1889 and 1893.⁴⁷⁵

Gordon was careful to give historical context to his speech, recounting the ill-fated reform attempts by Nāsir al-Dīn Shah’s Prime Minister, the Amīr Kabīr. He noted the talents and intellectual abilities of Iranians, which became especially apparent when they were outside of Iran in a more secure environment, and ventured that being the “*most shrewd of all Orientals*”, they would quickly acquaint themselves with the workings of parliamentary government. The discussion which followed ranged from incredulity at the speed of events and the liberal role of clerics to cautious optimism to hearty enthusiasm. The revolution was most distinguished, however, by the epoch-making precedent which it could set if it proved successful. Thomas Hart-Davies, Liberal MP for Hackney North, said that it would force the British to “*revise all our ideas of the East*” and to reconsider their position in India, Egypt and beyond. This “*political earthquake*” was too incredible for some, not because of its empire-shattering implications or because they wished it ill, but because it seemed to lack natural foundations or staying power. Mr. Irvine could not conceive how such a “*clever constitution, of the European type...decreed between sunset one day and sunset the next*” could materialise and thrive in an Oriental country, while Sir Lepel Griffin⁴⁷⁶ cautioned that “*we do not expect figs to grow from thistles*” and he would be wary of such a “*botanical curiosity.....as representative institutions in Persia*” until he had seen them work. Representative government in that era was uncommon and even England was not a fully representative

⁴⁷³ *Times*, 31 August 1907

⁴⁷⁴ *Times*, 16 July 1907

⁴⁷⁵ Thomas Gordon (1832 – 1914) was a veteran of Indian and Afghan wars, including the 1857 Indian Mutiny. He authored numerous books about Iran and Central Asia. 284, *Who was Who*, v.1 1897-1915.

⁴⁷⁶ Lepel Griffin (1840-1908) was Chairman of the Imperial Bank of Persia and served in numerous other diplomatic capacities in Bengal, the Punjab and Afghanistan. 297, *Who was Who*, v.1 1897-1915.

democracy, with only 60 percent of male citizens entitled to the franchise. In spite of these misgivings, there was a general sense of optimism. The spirit of liberty in the east was a sign of the “*world marching on towards something better*” while on a material level, better government in Iran also meant a more secure Indian border and the flourishing of commerce, always an important concern.⁴⁷⁷ Parliamentary debates in late 1907 and early 1908 frequently mentioned the movement of the non-West (especially British colonies and protectorates) towards constitutionalism and self-government and saw Iran at the vanguard of this brave new world. Labour MP James O’Grady declared himself in support of gradual self-government for India, because “*the whole feeling of the world to-day was in [this] direction. Persia was granting self-government and Russia had been compelled to grant some form of self-government.*”⁴⁷⁸ Increasing nationalist agitation in India was attributed by Liberal MP Donald Smeaton to both Japan’s victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese war and to the “*struggles of Persia towards representative institutions*”⁴⁷⁹, and in defense of self-government for Egypt, Liberal MP John Robertson argued that the powers of self-government had not been denied to the people of Iran.⁴⁸⁰

For the *Times* however, the Iranian liberal reform movement was thought lacking in genuine liberal reformers. From this point forward the driving force behind the movement was no longer the clerics, who were concerned about challenges to their spiritual authority, but a network of ‘secret societies’, many of which were based in Russia and whose presence was most keenly felt in Iran’s northern regions.⁴⁸¹ The ascent of the secret societies and their usurpation of the popular movement was manifest in the assassination of Amīn al-Sulṭān, the Prime Minister, which showed Iranians adopting the terrorist methods of Russian revolutionaries. This radicalization discredited the noble (nationalist and constitutionalist) aims of the movement, but fortunately could be contained now that Britain and Russia were ostensibly allies in Iran.⁴⁸² The attitude and position of the clerics began to change over the inclusion of an article into the new constitution stipulating the legal

⁴⁷⁷ Gordon, *Reform movement Persia*

⁴⁷⁸ HC Deb June 6 1907, vol 175 cc865-948

⁴⁷⁹ HC Deb January 31 1908, vol 183 cc375-432

⁴⁸⁰ HC Deb January 31 1908, vol 183 cc375-432

⁴⁸¹ *Times*, 31 August 1907

⁴⁸² *Times*, 3 September 1907

equality of all religious denominations. Although they had initially “*outwardly professed conversion to the progressive tendencies of the time*”, the egalitarian clamouring of the secret societies had put clerics on the defensive and prompted them to close ranks and restore their lost prestige. There was no doubt that clerics could make trouble, but it seemed the people of Tehran and the secret societies would join forces against them in this case.⁴⁸³ Thus, the religious-radical alliance underwent one of its periodic changes into a religious-radical tug-of-war, which would characterise both the constitutional movement and later the 1978-79 revolution. The secret societies, although influential, could not hope to dislodge the power of the clerics, at least not outside of Azerbaijan. The *Times* noted that popular religious sentiment remained a considerable force to be reckoned with and that the ‘clerical party’ were fully able to manipulate this to their advantage and whip the masses into frenzy. In most provinces the clerics were the only literate and articulate individuals capable of standing for parliament, and indeed the assembly itself was three quarters full of turbaned heads, and would most likely remain so well into the foreseeable future.⁴⁸⁴

Along with the assassination of the Amīn al-Sultān, the Anglo-Russian Convention changed how the revolution was perceived. It drove a wedge between the radical Liberals (but also some imperialist conservatives such as Lord Curzon) for whom it was a shameful endorsement of Russian autocracy and its aims in Asia, and the cautious Germanophobe Liberals for whom it symbolised the preservation of peace and avoidance of ‘accidental’ war between Britain and Russia, the two great European powers in Asia. The radical Liberal journalist H.N. Brailsford argued in a lengthy letter to the *Times* that the convention had its origins in a set of obsolete circumstances, namely, the weakness of England in the Middle East, the apparent strength of Russia before the Russo-Japanese war and the “*apparently hopeless decadence of Persia before the Reform movement*”. The convention, having been signed at a moment when “*a hopeful nationalist revival ought to have taught us rather to win the confidence of the Persians*” was thus exceedingly

⁴⁸³ *Times*, 2 November 1907

⁴⁸⁴ *Times*, 3 December 1907

ill-timed.⁴⁸⁵ Liberal imperialists, i.e. those who were advocates of Britain's role as the 'midwife' of Liberalism throughout its empire, such as Henry Lynch, were equally critical of the convention. For Lynch, the convention was not only ill-timed, it was a betrayal of Iranians and their aspirations for liberty. Lynch warned that "*British Statecraft – and British Liberalism*" would suffer from the folly of allowing Tehran and the north, the epicentre of the reform movement, to fall into the Russian sphere of influence.⁴⁸⁶ Lynch and Brailsford were both adamant about respecting the reformist opposition, even when confronted with the countervailing imperatives of European high politics, to the extent that treatment of the Iranian reformers was seen central to British Liberal identity.

The impact of the convention on Iran attracted similar interest in parliamentary debates. Most debates centered on strategic and imperial considerations, but there were also references to the constitutional movement and to Iran's inherent value. Grey defended the convention on the grounds that it would enhance rather than cripple Iran's ability to "*work out her own constitutional problems*" without great power interference after years of misgovernment. The ensuing debate elicited a passionate panegyric on Iran from Lynch.⁴⁸⁷ His speech was reprinted in full in the April 1908 edition of the *Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review* and featured the main elements of the Liberal view: Britain's obligations as a Liberal power, "*whenever a people were engaged in a struggle for freedom...they always felt that England, and especially the party to which I have the honour to belong, would sympathise with them*"; support and sympathy for the constitutional cause, "*Persia made a serious endeavour to range herself on the side of reformed and progressive peoples...if Persia was only left to herself she might be able to work out her own salvation*" and the travesty of abandoning reformers by ceding the northern Iranian provinces to the Russians. Lynch also spoke of Iran's special status, "*this small nation which has contributed so much to the artistic and intellectual wealth of the world... is lying between life and death, parcelled out, almost*

⁴⁸⁵ Times, 10 September 1907

⁴⁸⁶ The spheres of influence demarcated in the convention were not formal political spheres of influence. Technically, they were zones in which Russia or Britain pledged to refrain from seeking concessions and acknowledge their counterpart's economic primacy.

⁴⁸⁷ HC Deb February 17 1908, vol 184 cc460-564.

dismembered, helpless and friendless at our feet".⁴⁸⁸ Lynch's remarks were most likely inspired by his exchanges with E.G. Browne, champion of the Iranian cause and undisputed authority on Iran at this time.

This theme became a mainstay for Liberals and Conservatives alike. Lord Curzon, although not a constitutional enthusiast, gave a forceful speech in the House of Lords condemning the Anglo-Russian Convention and speaking of Iranians as people with "*great quickness of intellect, capacity and charm, who have preserved their national existence for centuries*". Antiquity of nationhood commanded universal respect in an age which extolled the virtues of nationalism, while Liberals believed that global diversity was essential for progress.⁴⁸⁹ Another point which concerned the Liberals, Curzon and other imperialists was the treatment of Muslim nations by the British. Curzon reminded the House of Lords that "*the British Sovereign is the ruler of the second largest Mahomedan population in the world. It is one of the most valuable and loyal elements, and one of the most solid assets, in the fabric of the British Empire*".⁴⁹⁰ Thus it was imperative for Britain to curry favour with Muslim populations, and the convention violated this by way of its supplication to Russia and tacit acceptance of Russia suppressing Iranian (Muslim) liberties.

The Shah's attempted December 1907 coup and the subsequent reactions of the *anjumans* and Majlis led to a week in Tehran which "*Paris in its most revolutionary mood might have envied*", with the *anjumans* taking the initiative. The *Times* now favoured the moderate reformers, who were anxious to reconcile with the Shah and to restrain the more extreme elements in their midst.⁴⁹¹ The December crisis foreshadowed the coup of June 1908, which resulted in the closure of the Majlis, civil war, opposition victory and the deposition of Muhammad 'Ali Shah in July 1909. The *Guardian* showed no surprise that the Shah had been backed by Russia in his efforts to suppress the Majlis, since the turbulence in northern Iran was no doubt inciting revolution in the Russian

⁴⁸⁸ Lynch, *Anglo-Russian Convention*, 328

⁴⁸⁹ Leventhal, *Brailsford*, 219; Bonakdarian, *Orientalism activism*, 19

⁴⁹⁰ HL Deb February 6 1908, vol 183 cc999-1047

⁴⁹¹ *Times*, 16 January 1908

Caucasus and causing embarrassment to the Russian authorities.⁴⁹² The symbiotic relationship between revolutionaries in Iran and the Russian Caucasus was an oft-repeated theme, especially during the Azerbaijan civil war.

The *Guardian* cast scorn on the Shah and his reactionary circle, Russian or otherwise, whereas the *Times* criticized both Shah and the Majlis. It noted that the forces arrayed against the Shah - the powerful mullahs, the bulk of the upper classes and almost the entire mass of his subjects – could topple a character much stronger than himself. Although the *Times* was initially sympathetic to Iranian strivings towards democracy, the recent proceedings of the Majlis were said to be “*a signal example of the inability of Orientals to assimilate the principles of self-government*”. The members of the assembly had talked a great deal and done little work. Many deputies were connected with the revolutionary clubs in Tehran, betraying their real objectives.⁴⁹³ The Majlis was constantly encroaching upon the executive and was unable to maintain order in the country or collect taxes. The Iranian press had shown itself “*as mischievous and dangerous...as in other Oriental lands*”.⁴⁹⁴ The *Guardian*, by contrast, defended the new parliament and reformers, who “*had no need to be ashamed of their record, and certainly no need to despair of themselves*”. The constitutional movement was admittedly “*on trial*” and the world was watching, but the reformers needed more time to deal with Iran’s many problems, mostly caused by the Shah. The *Guardian* also emphasised the generally pacific character of the revolution in Iran to date, which compared favourably with the turmoil in neighbouring Russia.⁴⁹⁵

The restoration of the Ottoman constitution in July 1908 prompted comparisons with the apparently vanquished constitutional experiment in Iran. The *Times* argued that overall Turkey was more ‘constitutionally’ qualified than “*backward and comparatively isolated*” Iran. The orderly and dignified advance of the Young Turks to power suggested that a constitutional movement

⁴⁹² Guardian, 24 June 1908

⁴⁹³ Times, 25 June 1908

⁴⁹⁴ Times, 2 July 1908

⁴⁹⁵ Guardian, 11 June 1908

backed by an army as in Turkey was far more effective than one backed by the “*moral strength of the nation*”, as in Iran.⁴⁹⁶ *Times* correspondent David Fraser in particular extolled the efficiency, discipline and ‘martial virtues’ of the Young Turks. The *Guardian*, in keeping with its anti-Russian tone, preferred to draw a contrast between Russia and Turkey. It hoped that the influence of the Turkish revolution on Iran would be more powerful and direct than that of the Russian reaction. It was a great irony of the new twentieth century that an Asian Muslim power was “*rescuing the cause of liberty and constitutional institutions*” from the clutches of Russia, a Christian European power.⁴⁹⁷ H.N. Brailsford’s 1912 polemic pamphlet entitled *The Fruits of our Russian Alliance* included a substantial section on the Iranian revolution and its superiority to the Young Turk revolution. He cited the common arguments about the “*rare intelligence and ancient culture*” of Aryan Iranians, who were regrettably trapped under the dominion of the inferior Turkic Qajars. Brailsford argued that the first meeting of the Iranian Majlis was a “*victory for liberty even greater than that of the Young Turk movement*”, since the Young Turks were a top-down military conspiracy modelled on a European pattern which did not reflect any indigenous popular desire for freedom. On the other hand, Iranians “*gave proof of a passion for freedom and a fitness shown by no other Eastern people*” by carrying out a grass-roots revolution by themselves with minimal Western support and indeed in the face of Russian hostility.⁴⁹⁸

Further reflecting the theme of Aryanism, an article entitled *Popular Government Among Mussulman Peoples* by Lieutenant-General F.H. Tyrell from April 1908 argued that the Iranian adoption of free institutions was entirely in keeping with their ‘Aryan’ attributes. Notwithstanding centuries of Semitic and Mongol onslaughts, the ‘Aryan’ spirit still flourished there and Iranians could never accept the “*sterile monotheism*” which satisfied Jews and Arabs. The imposition of constitutional limits on the Iranian Shahs – an experiment which would be regarded “*with interest and sympathy by all Englishmen, to whom the welfare and prosperity of that ancient kingdom*

⁴⁹⁶ *Times*, 11 August 1908

⁴⁹⁷ *Guardian*, 17 August 1908

⁴⁹⁸ Brailsford, *Fruits Russian alliance*, 40-41

should be a cherished object” – was proof positive of Iranians’ greater mental acuity and freedom relative to their neighbours.⁴⁹⁹

The advent of constitutionalism in Turkey, coupled with escalating resistance by the “*Parliamentarians*” of Tabriz and the denunciation of the Shah by the mujtahids of Najaf and Karbala, described as “*the ultimate arbiters in political affairs*”, convinced the *Guardian* that the Shah was not master of the situation.⁵⁰⁰ The *Times* on the other hand had little respect for the opposition by the summer of 1908. The country was a mess and its inhabitants “*are like a nation groping in the dark, and no ray of light pierces their gloom*”. Tabriz, the centre of revolutionary agitation and post-coup resistance, was a disappointment for the combat-loving *Times* correspondent David Fraser with its lack of bloodshed and casual sham conflict – in other words, lack of ‘real’ fighting.⁵⁰¹ Fraser thought the situation at Tabriz was a disgrace for Iranians, “*a race which once held the whole of the Middle East in subjection*” and a sign of their present effete-ness.⁵⁰² Nevertheless, by August 1908, Tabriz was the centre of the constitutional resistance and firmly under the control of Sattār Khān, called its “*military dictator*” by the *Times* and “*military director*” by the *Guardian*.⁵⁰³ Described as “*keen and resolute...with considerable personal magnetism*”, he was initially lauded in the British press for his heroics and commanding ability to maintain order. Under his command, however, were many Russian Caucasians who were thought responsible for the terrorist methods which had corrupted the character of the nationalist movement. The Tabrizis themselves did not grasp “*the true spirit and correct limitations of national freedom*” and their affinity for constitutionalism was thought to spring from a desire to thwart the clerics.⁵⁰⁴ The Liberal papers had more faith in the capacity of non-Westerners to assimilate the principles and methods of modern government and condemned the Orientalist archetypes common in the *Times*. The *Observer* published a long editorial at the end of August

⁴⁹⁹ Tyrell, *Popular government*, 291-292

⁵⁰⁰ *Guardian*, 14 August 1908

⁵⁰¹ *Times*, 11 August 1908

⁵⁰² *Times*, 8 October 1908

⁵⁰³ *Guardian & Times*, 31 August 1908

⁵⁰⁴ *Times*, 17 July 1908

which was effectively a diatribe against Orientalism long before the concept had been formally elaborated. It railed against contemporary maxims such as “*East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet*”, citing the Turkish revolution, developments in Japan and indeed in the entire ‘East’, including in Iran, which would put paid to this myth. Western political forms and modes of thought, always deemed to be incompatible with Islam, were permanently altering the political landscape of Muslim countries. It was now impossible to “*sum up a race in antitheses and paradoxes*”, as nations revealed a new side of themselves. From “*the Bosphorus to Tokio*” the greater part of mankind was showing itself subject to the same political emotions and capable of realising similar ends as in the West.⁵⁰⁵

The joint note of September 1908 urging the Shah to restore constitution and parliament received considerable coverage. The *Times* used it as proof positive that Britain and Russia were working harmoniously in Iran and upholding the cause of constitutional reform as opposed to despotism, thus disproving the Liberal “*calumny*” that Russia was intriguing against the constitution. Reform in Iran should now be more sober and moderate, and future Majlis deputies should not attempt too much in haste.⁵⁰⁶ E.G. Browne wrote a pointed riposte to this editorial, or in particular to the claim that Russian anti-constitutional intrigues were a “*calumny*”, citing numerous examples of Russian interference. He argued that the composition of the next Majlis would be a litmus test of the effectiveness of the joint note, judging by whether it would include the “*brave and single-minded patriots*” of the first Majlis or merely be stuffed with the Shah’s creatures.⁵⁰⁷ The *Guardian* came out fully in support of Browne and deplored Russian interference in Iran, also supporting his argument that Britain should insist upon the “*most liberal interpretation*” of the joint note with regards to the character and composition of the new constitution, electoral law and Majlis.⁵⁰⁸

Two of the exiled ex-Majlis deputies, the radical Sayyid Hassan Taqizādah from Tabriz and Muazid al-Sultanah, deputy for Tehran, composed and signed a manifesto which appeared in the *Times*. The manifesto pleaded with the powers – Britain and Russia – to abstain from all

⁵⁰⁵ Observer, 23 August 1908

⁵⁰⁶ Times, 9 September 1908

⁵⁰⁷ Times, 17 September 1908

⁵⁰⁸ Guardian, 18 September 1908

interference in Iranian internal affairs so that the country could work out its internal problems unhindered, in which case it was expected that the nationalists would prevail and the restoration of a “*real*” constitution would remedy all of Iran’s ills. The *Times* said in an accompanying editorial that it was in complete sympathy with the eloquent plea of the “*distinguished...refugees*”, but that their request had already been granted, since in effect the powers wanted no part in suppressing the nationalists.⁵⁰⁹ By late October the Shah appeared to have lost the upper hand in Tabriz. The fact that this moment was chosen for Russian intervention to restore “*stability*” in Iran— understood as the Shah’s authority - incensed the *Guardian*.⁵¹⁰ To support its case, the *Guardian* published an appeal sent to Professor Browne by the Tabriz provincial council, warning that Russian intervention would bolster the Shah and prolong the civil war. Browne wrote that the appeal emanated from “*the last refuge of the defenders of Persia’s liberties, which...has so gallantly held out against the forces of reaction and tyranny*”.⁵¹¹ On 29 October in a session organized by Browne in a parliament committee room, the two exiled Iranian deputies addressed numerous MPs and members of the public imploring the powers to abstain from intervention in Iran.⁵¹² Following their speech, Lynch proposed the formation of the Persia Committee, a parliamentary pressure group concerned with the fate of Iran and the British government’s Iranian policy. The committee resolved to distribute pamphlets and hold lectures to raise awareness about the matter. It was initially largely composed of Liberal radicals who were involved in other foreign policy pressure groups such as the Balkan Committee, but grew to include individuals of diverse political persuasions such as Irish nationalists and the Conservative peer Lord Lamington, one-time Governor of Bombay, who was the Committee President.⁵¹³

The fledgling Persia Committee was reprimanded by the *Times* in an article where it cast aspersions on their “*Persian fairytales*”, namely the claim that the Majlis had been suppressed by Russia in collusion with Britain, and that Russia was on the verge of seizing Azerbaijan. The

⁵⁰⁹ *Times*, 15 October 1908

⁵¹⁰ *Guardian*, 21 & 30 October 1908

⁵¹¹ *Guardian*, 29 & 30 October 1908

⁵¹² *Guardian*, 30 October 1908

⁵¹³ Bonakdarian, *Britain and Iran Const Rev*, 133-137, 165

nationalist cause had plenty of sympathy in Britain as it was, and no-one was defending the Shah for his attack on the Majlis, but the unreasonable claims of the refugees were alienating their supporters.⁵¹⁴ Three members of the Persia Committee – Lynch, Lamington and MP James O’Grady plus Browne responded to the article in separate letters which were published on the same day, essentially reiterating their points about the nefarious character of Russian activity in Iran, to which the *Times* responded by praising Russian restraint in Iran, insisting on the good faith of the Russian government in St. Petersburg with regards to the Anglo-Russian convention (albeit making allowances for intrigues from ‘men on the spot’) and emphasising that Colonel Liakhov and other Russian officers had acted on the Shah’s and not Tsar’s orders.⁵¹⁵

When the Shah formally abolished the old constitution at the end of November, it was unclear which side would prevail. The Shah’s troops had crumbled at Tabriz, but the opposition outside of Azerbaijan appeared to be cowed. The clerics could be the deciding factor – even a “*zealous minority*” of mullahs could threaten the Shah, whereas he would be much strengthened if they backed him.⁵¹⁶ However, by the end of December, the tide appeared to be turning; nationalists had once again gained the upper hand and were slowly spreading their influence across the country. Russia’s intention to intervene in Iran at this time caused consternation among Liberals, and provoked an outcry from the Persia Committee, on whose behalf Lynch and Browne wrote letters to both the *Guardian* and *Times*, asserting that the constitutionalists were nigh on triumphant, and that if financial assistance to the Shah were to be refused and Russian officers withdrawn, the Shah would be forced to recognize the popular will.⁵¹⁷ When the mujtahids of Karbala and Najaf denounced the Shah in January 1909 for his suppression of the constitution, the *Guardian* published the full translation complete with all colourful invective. It explained that in the eyes of

⁵¹⁴ *Times*, 2 November 1908

⁵¹⁵ *Times*, 9 November 1908

⁵¹⁶ *Times*, 23 November 1908

⁵¹⁷ *Guardian*, 6 January 1909; *Times*, 5 January 1909

the Iranian people, the Shah now stood condemned “*by the highest tribunal*” which had spoken for the nation in favour of the constitution.⁵¹⁸

One of Browne’s articles for *Guardian* at this time encapsulated all the classic beliefs of contemporary Liberals who championed Iran. His piece was also a succinct summary of the themes upon which he would elaborate at length in his 1910 book, *The Persian Revolution*, intended as a rebuttal to the derisive views of David Fraser and his ilk. Browne outlined the historical background to the current crisis, referring to the 1906 constitution as the outcome of “*fifteen years’ hard struggle*” since the 1891 Tobacco Concession protest, attempting to demonstrate how Iranian constitutional and parliamentary government was a hard-won indigenous victory rather than a facile Western transplant. The Majlis, unfairly pilloried by the non-Liberal British press, had in fact accomplished a good deal, such as ending some of the arbitrary abuses of the *ancien regime* and curtailing the wasteful extravagance of the court. Browne deplored the “*glib*” talk about the virtues of Oriental despotism and the suitability of such government for ‘Asiatics’ – ideas which persisted into the 1970s – noting that anyone who argued thus had never experienced the horrors of arbitrary power. Imperialists were concerned about Iran setting a precedent for representative government in Egypt and India, but Browne denied any parallels between them, assuring his readers that Iranians had “*far more ‘grit’ and originality*” than either Egyptians or Indians, having preserved their national independence for millennia. He lauded the brave fighting men and women of Tabriz and their leader Sattār Khān, the “*Persian Garibaldi*”, since Azerbaijan was the only province where security and order reigned. Furthermore, the movement was recrudescing, and Isfahan had recently gone over to the nationalists. The opposition merited an exceptional claim on the sympathies of Britain, a great Liberal power, which must allow them to work out their problems free of interference.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁸ Guardian, 12 January 1909

⁵¹⁹ Guardian, 18 January 1909

The Russian proposal in January 1909 to loan the Shah money generated much controversy in the Liberal press and civil society. Two articles appeared simultaneously in the *Guardian* attacking the proposal in the strongest terms and warning that Persian liberties were now more threatened by the prospect of a European loan than by the Shah's armies. The Tabriz rebels were referred to as the "*Parliamentary party*", a benign choice of language which emphasized their desire for the reinstatement of the Majlis, in contrast to the language used by the *Times* which made them out be radicals. Thus, the "*Parliamentary party*" had now triumphed throughout northern Iran, and only Russian gold could stymie their inevitable triumph. The loan was offered on the condition that constitutionalism and parliamentary institutions were to be restored, but it was clear to the *Guardian* that this condition was a moot point for any patriotic Iranian, for whom such institutions were no palliative for foreign control. The editor was firmly convinced that nationalism was the wellspring of unrest in Iran, and indeed all the popular movements in the East. Why, asked the author, could Europe not comprehend that such movements were inspired "*by the ineradicable passion for liberty, the inalienable right of every country to work out its own salvation*" and not by efficiency or progress. A Russian loan to the Shah, with British tacit consent, would lead to the "*Egyptianisation*" and joint financial administration of Iran, with Britain eventually withdrawing from the Dual Control just as France withdrew from its Egyptian equivalent.⁵²⁰

Browne's incendiary editorial and the persistent rumours that Russia would loan money to the Shah provoked passionate letters to the *Guardian* from Irish Nationalist MP John Dillon and several Lancashire industrialists calling for a protest meeting. Dillon hoped that the appeal put forth by Browne and the nationalists to leave Iran in peace would be heeded by "*all Liberals in England who are faithful to true Liberal and radical principles in foreign politics*". He lambasted Grey's policy as an affront to the principles of Liberalism and to the convictions of most English Liberals.⁵²¹ A simultaneous *Guardian* editorial asserted that Iranians – that is the entire nation excepting the Shah and his cabal - wanted neither foreign gold nor foreign occupation, but simply

⁵²⁰ *Guardian*, 19 January 1909

⁵²¹ *Guardian*, 22 January 1909

to be left alone. The editors wondered whether any of the real constitutionalists would be invited to an upcoming St. Petersburg conference on Iran's future, such as Sattār Khān "*the banner-bearer of Persian liberties*", or the citizens of Isfahan, Iran's richest city now gone over to the nationalists, or the mujtahids of Najaf and Karbala who had excommunicated the Shah.⁵²² Another letter to the *Times* from Browne underlined the pacific, disciplined and respectful character of the Tabriz nationalists. Browne, who called the Tabriz opposition 'reformers' rather than 'revolutionaries' since they had never repudiated their allegiance to the Shah, pointed out that the only safe areas were those held by the 'reformers'.⁵²³ Another stern *Guardian* editorial admonished Grey that Britain could not "*blow hot in Turkey and cold in Persia*"; it was unacceptable to champion the newfound Turkish constitution while colluding with Russia to extinguish the same in Iran. British policy makers had to decide on a clear and consistent policy to deal with the "*Liberal and nationalist revival in Islam*". The editor was convinced that the Iranian conflict was "*as distinctively a struggle for Parliamentary liberties as was Simon de Montfort's in England*", thus equating Sattār Khān and the nationalists with the progenitor of English parliamentary democracy.⁵²⁴ In addition to being noble and liberal, the nationalist movement was portrayed in the *Guardian* as dominant once again. A map indicated where constitutionalists held the upper hand in major swathes of the country and important provinces and cities – Azerbaijan, Khorasān, Gilān, Māzandarān, Isfahan and Hamadān. The accompanying caption advised readers that the unshaded areas were not necessarily loyal to the Shah, but simply too remote from telegraphs to convey their dissatisfaction, thus giving a strong impression that most of populated Iran was constitutionalist.⁵²⁵

The *Times* by contrast acknowledged that the revolt was indeed spreading over Iran again, but cast aspersions on the motives of the rebels. It argued that most of the rebels were not actually Iranians but "*tribesmen and people of alien race*", such as Bakhtiāris, Qashqais, Kurds and Turkmen in addition to the Caucasians at Tabriz, who were merely using constitutionalism to engage in some

⁵²² *Guardian*, 22 January 1909

⁵²³ *Times*, 23 January 1909

⁵²⁴ *Guardian*, 23 January 1909

⁵²⁵ *Guardian*, 25 January 1909

“*filibustering*” and pursue their own interests.⁵²⁶ This article provoked a sharp response from Bakhtiāri chieftain Sardār As‘ad, then in Paris, who categorically denied that anyone from his tribe had pretensions to the Iranian throne and affirmed his intentions to preserve peace, prevent foreign intervention and hold the Shah to his constitutional pledges.⁵²⁷ The *Times* claimed that the threat from the disgruntled tribes and insurrectionary centres was lessened by their physical separation and lack of common action. The situation there, warned the correspondent, was not to be judged by European standards, according to which one might soon expect the Shah’s demise, for in fact he was more secure than it seemed and the people were satisfied by the recent good harvests – remarkably similar justifications to those put forward by Anthony Parsons in the 1970s. The overall impression conveyed by the *Times* was diametrically opposed to that of the Guardian, namely that the nationalist movement was fractured and less widespread than it seemed. The only exception was the Bakhtiāris who could take Tehran at any time.⁵²⁸ Overall, conditions were unexpectedly serene. Any other country in such trying circumstances would be consumed by fire and sword, but the lack of these was explained in reference to Hajji Baba, who had proclaimed how brave the Persians would be if only there were no bloodshed in conflict.⁵²⁹

Thanks to his business activities in the Karun River region, Henry Lynch had good Iranian connections and personally knew many Bakhtiāri tribesmen who lived in that region. Lynch sent a memorandum to the Foreign Office in February 1909 suggesting that the Persia Committee, as loyal supporters of the current Liberal government, could work in harmony with the Foreign Office with regards to their official Persian policy. Lynch had been working to convince the constitutionalists to maintain strict order and security and to reassure the Shah that they had no anti-dynastic motives, and on both counts he had complete faith in them. Both Shah and opposition had learnt their lessons, and there was “*every reason to believe that the new Medjliss will be productive of tangible benefits for the Persian people*”, given that it was afforded a fair chance. Lynch reported he had met Iranians who would “*not discredit any European administration*” and

⁵²⁶ Times, 29 January 1909

⁵²⁷ Times, 29 January 1909

⁵²⁸ Times, 11 February 1909

⁵²⁹ Times, 22 February 1909

implored his own government jointly with Russia to impress upon the Shah the necessity of reviving the parliament and constitution, which in fact they were doing.⁵³⁰ Lynch's proposal demonstrates the extent to which the views of civil society were in fact in line with those of diplomatic officials such as George Barclay. This contrasts with the more adversarial relations between the official and public/civil society point of view during the second period. Unaware that he had sympathisers in the Diplomatic Service and despairing of the *Times* which had once denounced Garibaldi as "*the leader of the worst enemies of Italy*" and now dismissed the 'Persian fairytales', Lynch lamented to Browne in February 1909, "*where is liberalism? Of genuine liberals – men who feel deeply and think widely and soberly – there must be very few. Nearly all of them are tainted with Little Englandism. As for the liberal imperialists, among whom I suppose I shall be numbered, most of them are Tories at heart*".⁵³¹ Lynch lamented the dearth of Liberalism in his country, but the very fact he was so concerned about its fate is noteworthy.

Grey's statement at the end of February that no loan would be made to Iran until it could be approved by an elected assembly was warmly commended by the *Guardian* for restoring a rightfully Liberal Iranian policy.⁵³² It also published the recent resolution taken by the Executive of the Persia Committee to press upon Grey the importance of restoring the original Iranian constitution without any compromising amendments.⁵³³ This point was also raised in parliament. Supported by John Dillon, Lynch insisted that the original constitution destroyed by the Shah had to be restored. Grey pointed out that he had refused to lend the Shah money even under extreme pressure from Russia until an assembly was reconvened, but that ultimately Britain could not dictate to the Shah what type of constitution and government he should have.⁵³⁴ Grey had in fact authorised Barclay to push for a liberal interpretation of the constitution close to the original version, although he declined to communicate this to his critics.

⁵³⁰ FO 881/9535, Lynch to Synge, 9 February 1909

⁵³¹ Browne Papers (Box 9), Lynch to Browne, February 20 1909

⁵³² *Guardian*, 24 February 1909

⁵³³ *Guardian*, 10 March 1909

⁵³⁴ *Times*, 25 March 1909

The nationalist (or revolutionary, according to the source) opposition was now predominant in the northern town of Rasht and the surrounding province of Gilān by March. Both *Guardian* and *Times* concurred that relatively few ethnic Iranians were part of the movement there. Within the armed contingents there was scarcely “*a single man of the race for the advancement of whose cause*” the rebels were fighting; they were all Kurdish, Greek, Armenian, Tartar or Russian. If in the north the ‘nationalist’ movement was dominated by Caucasians, in the south it was said to be hijacked by Arabs or hordes of Southern tribesmen, of which the latter in particular were “*hereditary freebooters*” tempted by loot rather than constitutionalism.⁵³⁵ The inhabitants of Rasht had been constitutionalists but also of a peaceable nature, which had made them think poorly of the swashbuckling Caucasians who descended on their city. These ‘soldiers of fortune’ were suspicious not only for their motives but also the source of their finances; they were mostly Christian foreigners who should have little sympathy for Iranian nationalism and the passage from Baku was costly.⁵³⁶ The *Guardian* argued that the Caucasian fighters were being organised, funded and dispatched by Iranian committees in Baku and Tbilisi. Thus it aimed to restore the nationalist character and honour to the movement which the *Times* had denied it. The atmosphere in Rasht was thoroughly revolutionary, with red flags flying and the local bands playing the Marseillaise in parks and city squares. The Sipāhdār, formerly dispatched by the Shah to pacify the Northern provinces, had now gone over to the nationalists.⁵³⁷ There was speculation as to why the Russian authorities had allowed the influx of Caucasians from Baku, itself a hotbed of radicalism. The *Guardian* supposed it may have been a deliberate ploy to create a pretext for Russian intervention in Iran.⁵³⁸

By April, the *Times* had begun to doubt whether the nationalists at Rasht or the Bakhtiāris at Isfahan had the resolution to march on Tehran and ventured that with sufficient money, the Shah could buy off a good deal of the opposition. Principles counted for little, since “*nobody in Persia*

⁵³⁵ *Times*, 12 April 1909

⁵³⁶ *Times*, 30 March 1909

⁵³⁷ *Guardian*, 30 March 1909

⁵³⁸ *Guardian*, 1 April 1909

cares to be on the wrong side, whatever his convictions”, a generalization of the sort which rankled the Liberal press.⁵³⁹ Tabriz meanwhile was in dire straits. The *Times* insisted that the powers had to step in and prevent the inevitable carnage which would accompany the capture of Tabriz by the Shah’s brigands.⁵⁴⁰ The *Guardian* reported that the Tabriz shrines were stormed by women demanding bread, noting that “*in Persia in such crises the women are the most powerful force*”, and that overall the situation was verging on calamity.⁵⁴¹

Iran henceforth figured very prominently in parliamentary debates, with MPs of varying political stripes grilling the Foreign Secretary for information. Labour MP (and future Prime Minister) Ramsay MacDonald asked whether Grey had any guarantee that the “*temporary*” Russian occupation would not interfere with the constitutional movement. Grey was also questioned on the precise nature of the constitution preferred by the Iranian people.⁵⁴² Liberal Arthur Ponsonby questioned Grey about the rumoured Russian plans to dispatch troops along the Caspian-Tehran road in order to block the nationalist advance of the revolutionaries from Rasht.⁵⁴³ The *Guardian* was incredulous that Grey had seemingly endorsed the prospect of Russian troop movement on this road, believing it to be a flagrant violation of international law.⁵⁴⁴ Grey was in fact vehemently opposed to Russian troop movement as shown in *Chapter 2*, but once again he declined to communicate this publicly.

The declared intention of Sipāhdār’s militia at Rasht and the Bakhtiāris to march on Tehran provoked derision from the *Times*, because of their failure to act until the Shah had granted all of their requests. It was now obvious that these upstarts wanted to get rid of the Shah altogether.⁵⁴⁵ The *Guardian* retorted indignantly that several of the key nationalist demands remained unfulfilled, such as the dismissal of the Shah’s reactionary advisers and the restoration of the 1907 constitution. Such claims as those made by the *Times* about the dishonourable intentions of the

⁵³⁹ *Times*, 2 April 1909

⁵⁴⁰ *Times*, 12 April 1909

⁵⁴¹ *Guardian*, 20 April 1909

⁵⁴² HC Deb 04 May 1909 vol 4 cc872-3 872

⁵⁴³ HC Deb 11 May 1909 vol 4 cc1638-9

⁵⁴⁴ *Guardian*, 12 May 1909

⁵⁴⁵ *Times*, 13 May 1909

nationalists were merely feeble attempts to provide grounds for a Russian seizure of the strategic Caspian road.⁵⁴⁶ The quarrel between the two papers over the opposition continued to escalate, as the *Times* would deprecate their irrational and militant character with its Caucasian mercenaries.⁵⁴⁷ The *Guardian* decried the *Times*' failure to mention the creeping Russian military penetration of Azerbaijan.⁵⁴⁸ The practical military occupation in conjunction with the recently approved Russian loan to the Shah, made the situation look especially grim for the nationalists.⁵⁴⁹

The loan was rejected by members of the Shah's cabinet and soon became a moot point, but the Russian occupation continued in spite of British efforts to end it. The *Guardian* endorsed Sattār Khān's view that "*the martyrdom of a nation which desires to regenerate itself*" was underway in Iran, and strongly objected to the *Spectator*'s view that British public opinion should remain silent over Russian activity in Iran for now because criticism of Russia could upset the precarious European balance of power. The *Guardian* asserted that in fact vociferous "*English opinion*" and press criticism was one of the most potent weapons wielded by the Foreign Secretary in his dealings with the Russian autocracy, allowing him to enforce a Liberal policy with greater authority.⁵⁵⁰ Indeed such was the power of English public opinion that had it not existed on a particular issue which concerned the government, Grey would have had to invent it.⁵⁵¹

A *Times* editorial condemned the nationalist opposition for indulging in "*armed sedition*" which would likely delay the convocation of the Majlis and thus play directly into the hands of the Shah.⁵⁵² The *Times* published two further articles, the first a lengthy disquisition by Arthur Moore, an Irishman who had voluntarily fought with the constitutionalists in Azerbaijan and remained in Tabriz all throughout the siege. He commented on the military inadequacy of both royalist and nationalist forces, and argued that if Tabriz had not been saved by Russian intervention, the

⁵⁴⁶ *Guardian*, 14 May 1909

⁵⁴⁷ *Times*, 19 May 1909

⁵⁴⁸ *Guardian*, 20 May 1909

⁵⁴⁹ *Guardian*, 31 May 1909

⁵⁵⁰ *Guardian*, 15 June 1909

⁵⁵¹ Robbins, *Public opinion, the press, and pressure groups*, 71

⁵⁵² *Times*, 2 July 1909

constitutional movement would have collapsed and the Shah would have triumphed. Iran, unlike Turkey, had shown “*constitutional incapacity*” and had not won its freedom for itself.⁵⁵³ An editorial the same day chastised the Iranians, “*once a brave and warlike race*”, for having fallen to such cowardly lows.⁵⁵⁴

From 6 July until the deposition of the Shah, Grey was subject to further interrogation from numerous MPs about Russian troop movements and the progress of the nationalists. When Lynch asked Grey why the British Legation did not push all of the demands put forward by Sipāhdār on the Shah, Grey replied with some exasperation, “*because Northern Persia is not in British territory*”.⁵⁵⁵ Dr. Rutherford reminded Grey that Iranian nationalists had always safeguarded the life and property of Europeans and that a “*large and growing body of public opinion*” in England considered Russian incursions into Iran to be both inimical to the establishment of constitutionalism there and unnecessary for the protections of Europeans.⁵⁵⁶ The entry of the nationalist armies into Tehran on the morning of 13 July was enthusiastically reported by the *Guardian*. Their successful march was the “*inevitable and indispensable means of guaranteeing the Persian Constitution*” and furthermore they were maintaining perfect order in the city.⁵⁵⁷ In parliament, Grey acknowledged that the nationalists had achieved all they had promised and established conditions of peace and stability in Tehran.⁵⁵⁸ Even the *Times* acknowledged the “*well-planned and skilfully executed*” nationalist entry, although it continued to insist that the presence of Russian troops nearby had a sobering effect on nationalists who might otherwise become unruly.⁵⁵⁹ The deposition of Muhammad ‘Ali Shah on 17 July was a triumphant moment for all Liberal observers. A *Guardian* editorial emphasized the role of the Bakhtiāris and Sardār As‘ad in bringing about the Shah’s deposition. It deplored the frequent insinuations by the *Times* that the ‘wild’ Bakhtiāri tribesmen were incapable of fathoming constitutionalism and were merely marching on

⁵⁵³ *Times*, 3 July 1909

⁵⁵⁴ *Times*, 3 July 1909

⁵⁵⁵ HC Deb 13 July 1909 vol 7 cc1834-5 1834

⁵⁵⁶ HC Deb 13 July 1909 vol 7 cc1838-9 1838

⁵⁵⁷ *Guardian*, 14 July 1909

⁵⁵⁸ HC Deb 20 July 1909 vol 8 cc250-3 250

⁵⁵⁹ *Times*, 14 July 1909

Tehran to seize the throne as “*an utterly false view of the ‘Asiatic’ mind*”. The old ideas about the ossification of Islam and the incapacity of the ‘Asiatic mind’ to assimilate European ideals could now be relegated to myth in light of recent events in Turkey and Iran.⁵⁶⁰ The *Times* admitted that the nationalists had ultimately accomplished their mission, but attributed their tenacity and success in large part to the martial qualities of the Caucasians in their ranks, a recurring *Times* theme.⁵⁶¹

The Shah’s abdication and the nationalist triumph were well received in parliament. Liberal MP Joseph Walton, a prominent Liberal radical and industrialist in the coal industry, spoke for many when he expressed confidence that the new Iranian government would receive full support and sympathy from Britain, and that in “*this great and ancient country with such a glorious history in the far past ages, there will at last arise a new nation*” which would take its rightful place in the world community. He praised the Bakhtiāris, whose chiefs he knew personally, as “*a warlike and independent race...who mean business*”.⁵⁶² On a darker note, John Dillon delivered a damning speech in Grey’s presence which addressed the wider question of British foreign policy and its relationship with the ideals of Liberalism. Dillon referred to the recent trend of separating foreign policy from party politics in order to achieve greater continuity of policy between governments, arguing that it was a “*detestable and illiberal doctrine*” which would ultimately eradicate Liberalism from politics and turn the foreign policy establishment into a bureaucracy, an observation which would prove remarkably prescient. He warned the Liberal party they could not be “*Tories abroad...you cannot be the friends of freedom at home and the enemies of freedom abroad at the same time*”, a course of action which would ultimately lead to war and degradation.⁵⁶³ This was five years before the events of 1914 brought war and arguably degradation as well, eventually leading to the very different circumstances of the second period to be addressed in this study.

⁵⁶⁰ Guardian, 17 July 1909

⁵⁶¹ Times, 19 July 1909

⁵⁶² HC Deb 22 July 1909 vol 8 cc621-732

⁵⁶³ HC Deb 22 July 1909 vol 8 cc621-732

Chapter 4: Perceptions of the Shah and government, 1976-1979

I. Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service

The Iranian monarchy exerted a fascination and influence over British officials in the 1970s which was unimaginable in the 1900s. While the illiberal Muhammad 'Ali Shah was reviled and derided, Muhammad Reza Shah was deemed to be a capable and farsighted, if heavy-handed ruler. There was a profound reluctance to acknowledge the possibility of the Shah falling almost right up to his departure from Iran. This was driven by an unconscious fear that it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy, like a trader who questions the value of a currency, sparking a run and its subsequent collapse. In a changing world and volatile region, the Shah was a long-established and seemingly reliable ally; a reassuring known quantity, to whom officials had privileged access.⁵⁶⁴ The 1970s witnessed the economic and political rise of Iran and the concomitant British decline, and the Shah's business was thought essential to combat British economic woes. Furthermore, many officials, in particular Anthony Parsons, were in thrall to the Shah's self-styled image as a sage 'Oriental potentate' and formidable autocrat.⁵⁶⁵

Characterising the Shah

The monarchy, as personified by the Shah, was perceived as the only capable guarantor of national stability by most officials, in spite of the increasingly conspicuous challenges to his rule from 1977 onwards. Any alternative government – whether clerical, secular, military, civilian, leftist – was thought incapable of adequate government. Anthony Parsons was largely responsible for this characterisation of the Shah and thus by extension for shaping Britain's Iranian policy, which revolved around the Shah rather than his country as a whole. In contrast with the earlier period, when several Ministers and Chargé d'Affaires worked in Tehran from 1906 to 1909, Parsons was the sole ambassador and predominant influence from 1974 to 1979. The junior embassy staff expressed contrarian views which were noted at Whitehall, but policy decisions were based

⁵⁶⁴ Parsons, *Pride and fall*, 140

⁵⁶⁵ Lucas, *Road to Damascus*, 181; Parsons, *Pride and fall*, 141

entirely on the views of the ambassador.

Parsons' 1975 annual review read more like a corporate summary than a political report. He focused on Britain's burgeoning commercial relations with Iran, a by-product of the privileged access enjoyed by British officials to the Shah and his ministers. He was confident that British commerce was taking full advantage of the lucrative Iranian market, in a stable country governed by the Shah's dynamic leadership. Economics aside, 1975 was marred by assassinations, bomb attacks and student discontent, although the "*success of SAVAK counter action*" had reined in the situation by year's end.⁵⁶⁶ FCO Middle East Department (MED) officials were hopeful that good relations with the Shah would persist, provided Britain took care to ensure that "*Imperial prestige is in no way diminished and above all provided [the Shah] still sees us as a valuable partner*".⁵⁶⁷ Commerce had become a defining feature of Britain's political relationship with Iran, and the Shah firmly had the upper hand, because he oversaw the awarding of contracts. This fuelled a reluctance to do anything potentially irksome to the monarch or his government and powerfully shaped British discourse and conduct.⁵⁶⁸ Thus, the Shah was perceived with a mix of misjudgement, intimidation and a touch of Orientalist fantasy – a sense of the far-sighted Oriental potentate was ever-present. This was acknowledged in the memoirs of Parsons, Ivor Lucas and David Owen, who admitted that the FCO had been "*far too deferential before [the Shah's] charade of leadership*" while "*the panoply of power surrounding the Shahanshah*" had obscured Parsons' judgement.⁵⁶⁹

This extreme sensitivity to the Shah was exemplified by two cases: the BBC Radio Persian Service and the FCO proposition in October 1976 to draw up a 'human rights' league table of principal global offenders. The Shah and his entourage had long been suspicious of the BBC Persian vernacular service, which they saw as a sinister force partially responsible for unseating Reza Shah

⁵⁶⁶ FCO 8/2728, Parsons to FCO, 15 December 1975

⁵⁶⁷ FCO 8/2728, Day to Lucas, 9 January 1976

⁵⁶⁸ Posnett, *British policy 1977-1979*, 119-137

⁵⁶⁹ Owen, *Time to Declare*, 387

Pahlavi following the Anglo-Soviet invasion in 1941.⁵⁷⁰ In June 1976, Parsons had an awkward audience with Asadallah 'Alam, the Court Minister and Shah's closest confidant, who objected to a recent broadcast announcing that the British Labour Party opposed arms sales and assistance to authoritarian regimes such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. 'Alam warned Parsons that although "*no-one who mattered in Iran*" listened to the service, such statements could produce misleading impressions among the many listeners in the Iranian provinces.⁵⁷¹ Parsons subsequently sought and obtained an iron-clad assurance from Foreign Secretary Anthony Crosland that "*HMG's policy is to maintain and develop the closest possible relations with Iran, including the supply of arms*".⁵⁷² The Shah's circumspection (later borderline paranoia) and Parsons' sensitivity were clearly manifest and this became a recurring theme vis-à-vis the Western media. Surprisingly, the Shah's touchiness about the Persian Service did not induce Parsons or others to question the stability of a regime which could be shaken by a foreign radio service that was not listened to by anyone who 'mattered'. A host of similar incidents provoked much enmity towards the BBC from Parsons and other FCO officials for upsetting the Shah.⁵⁷³ Assistant Undersecretary Michael Weir railed over the "*lunacy*" of the BBC broadcasting Labour Party rank-and-file criticism of Iran, suspecting the Iranian presenter of wanting to "*strike a blow for the opposition*" and comparing it to the infiltration of anti-Sadat Palestinians into the BBC Arabic Service a few years prior. He questioned the value of having a Persian service at all given it was making such trouble.⁵⁷⁴ The FCO Guidance and Information Policy Department conducted a brief investigation into the incident, noting that "*senior [FCO] officials shared the Ambassador's doubts about the value of the Service*" and were concerned that its Iranian émigré presenters were using it to broadcast their antipathy to the Shah.⁵⁷⁵ Following another grilling from the Shah over a similar broadcast, Parsons informed the Service of their unpopularity "*in the highest circles*" in Iran and hoped they could moderate their tone to avoid causing offense – showing that contrary to 'Alam's claim, the service was listened to

⁵⁷⁰ FCO 8/2762, Dodd, July 1976

⁵⁷¹ FCO 8/2762, Parsons to Crosland, 2 June 1976; Crosland to Parsons, 4 June 1976

⁵⁷² FCO 8/2762, Crosland to Parsons, 8 June 1976

⁵⁷³ FCO 8/2762, Parsons to Crosland, 30 June 1976

⁵⁷⁴ FCO 8/2762, Weir to Scrivener, 8 June 1976

⁵⁷⁵ FCO 8/2762, Kendall to Alston, 18 June 1976

by everybody who mattered in Iran rather than nobody.⁵⁷⁶ An investigation of the service was planned to determine whether it should be modified or abolished altogether.⁵⁷⁷ In a lively exchange with Nicholas Barrington from the Guidance and Information Policy Department, Parsons argued that it was useless for advancing British interests and was regarded in Iran as a propaganda organ like the Soviet and Iraqi radio services not to mention a great irritant to the government.⁵⁷⁸ Barrington was stunned by Parsons' "*short-term FCO thinking*" as opposed to the longer term aims of broadcasting which hoped to influence those who "*may one day form an alternative government or be part of the future establishment*". Was there not also a British interest in supporting Western democratic traditions and considering what would happen after the Shah?⁵⁷⁹ Parsons responded that the BBC vernacular services had done little to produce more pro-Western or democratic regimes in the Middle East and the notion of "*reinsuring with the younger generation*" was rhetorical; since 1954 the British had become so identified with the Shah and his policies that it was now impossible to separate them. Furthermore, British policies were dictated by British interests, and there was no benefit in adopting a public stance which contradicted these policies.⁵⁸⁰ Parsons thus rejected open discourse and criticism, which could only damage what he perceived to be the principal British interest in Iran, i.e. appeasing the Shah in order to maximise trade.

By October 1976, the question of human rights under the Shah had emerged in civil society and public discourse. The FCO noted the sensitivity among some ministers, Labour MPs, trade unions, the press and general public regarding the Shah's "*allegedly repressive regime*" and fretted that Iran would become "*next year's Good Cause*" following the recent Amnesty International report on torture. It requested embassy advice on how to respond to anti-Iranian campaigns in the UK without offending the Shah.⁵⁸¹ Meanwhile, a proposal had been circulated within the FCO to collate a comparative assessment of the human rights record of foreign governments (in light of a

⁵⁷⁶ FCO 8/2762, Parsons to Crosland, 30 June 1976

⁵⁷⁷ FCO 8/2762, Crosland to Parsons, 5 July 1976

⁵⁷⁸ FCO 8/2762, Parsons to Barrington, 4 July 1976

⁵⁷⁹ FCO 8/2762, Barrington to Parsons, 16 July 1976

⁵⁸⁰ FCO 8/2762, Parsons to Barrington, 1 August 1976

⁵⁸¹ FCO 8/2725, James to Alston, 1 October 1976

similar American initiative) which would be used as a basis for aid policy, among other things. The committee which considered the proposal objected to a human rights ‘league table’, arguing that it would be impractical to implement the findings especially in Iran where it would be economically disadvantageous (diverting trade from Britain to its less scrupulous competitors) and risky should it leak to the press.⁵⁸² Parliamentary Undersecretary of State Evan Luard suggested using human rights indicators such as the number of prisoners held without trial, use of torture, slavery, press censorship, independence of the judiciary, trade union freedom and freedom to emigrate.⁵⁸³ Robert Alston from the Tehran embassy duly submitted an assessment according to Luard’s indicators, remarking that opposition to the Shah’s regime was effectively illegal. Iran scored poorly on imprisonment without trial (6/10, where ten is worst), freedom of press and expression (6 or 7) but not so badly on torture (5) since it was thought less prevalent than in SAVAK’s early days and probably only the “*hard-core terrorists who now get roughed up*” and freedom for trade unions (4/5). The judiciary was thought largely independent, except for the military tribunals.⁵⁸⁴ All of the above documents were kept in a file entitled ‘Repression in Iran’. Together with the BBC Persian wrangles, they highlight the conflicted but largely cynical mentality prevalent among both FCO and embassy staff and their acquiescence in the nature of the Shah’s regime.

The embassy produced scant political analysis in 1976, with the exception of a December despatch from Parsons and the annual review which appeared in January 1977. In both despatches, Parsons outlined his key views of the Shah’s character and his government apparatus, shot through with a cynicism indicating his awareness of repression. The Shah was convinced of his “*divinely ordained*” role, seeing himself as “*Managing Director of Iran Limited, accepting no challenge to his authority*” and seeing his subjects as shareholders. His attitude was paternalistic, with the condescending affection of “*an early colonial administrator*” for his people. The Shah’s authoritarian style was moulded by a desire to avoid the past humiliations suffered by his country during the dissolute pre-Pahlavi era and memories of his own vulnerability from 1941 until the

⁵⁸² FCO 8/2725, Palliser to Luard, 13 October 1976

⁵⁸³ FCO 8/2725, Luard to Owen, Palliser, 15 October 1976

⁵⁸⁴ FCO 8/2725, Alston to Crowe, 30 December 1976

ouster of Musaddiq in 1953. He was a “*modernizer in a hurry*”, striving to seize the present unique opportunity to develop Iran into a modern industrialized state before oil resources ran out. However, the consequences of his style had resulted in “*arbitrary decision-making, insecurity of those in office, sycophantic media and effective secret police*”, intolerance of any alternative power base and coercion for all who rejected his vision. During the past two decades, “*much of the apparatus of a police state*” had been constructed in Iran, where those brave enough to directly oppose the regime were subject to detention without trial and probably worse at the hands of the “*nasty and pervasive*” SAVAK, although foreign critics allegedly exaggerated SAVAK’s scale and efficiency. In March 1975, the Shah had created the Rastākhīz or ‘National Resurgence’ party to resuscitate Iran’s political life. However, the Majlis remained a rubber stamp and Rastākhīz was equally impotent. In sum, the Shah’s regime was engendering an undeniable current of frustration among the population and the monarch himself was responding in a troubling manner. Parsons concluded the despatch by arguing that Iran’s political problems should not impede Britain’s vigorous pursuit of its commercial interests there.⁵⁸⁵ Ivor Lucas, the MED head responded that Parsons’ despatch showed the complexities of Iran without concealing the “*warts*” therein and proved there was no use for the FCO to try and whitewash Iran’s image, but rather to explain it as necessary stage of the country’s development.⁵⁸⁶ The conviction that regime stability was underpinned by the “*ruthless and effective*” SAVAK and the complete loyalty to the Shah of the Iranian Imperial Armed Forces (IIAF) was a recurring theme. The prying eyes of SAVAK would be sure to thwart and liquidate any genuine threats to the regime, while the military was the only area, except for foreign policy, where the Shah commanded absolute authority in making policy, and all of its upper echelons were unswervingly loyal to him.⁵⁸⁷ So long as this loyalty endured and SAVAK did their job, no opposition stood a chance of coming into existence.⁵⁸⁸ In his memoirs, Parsons admitted that he had misjudged the robustness of the armed forces by relying on a flawed analogy between the Turco-Arab model, where the military anchored state power, and Iran, where

⁵⁸⁵ FCO 8/2727, Parsons to Crosland, 6 December 1976

⁵⁸⁶ FCO 8/2727, Lucas to Parsons, 29 December 1976

⁵⁸⁷ FCO 8/2980, Parsons, 12 Apr 1977

⁵⁸⁸ FCO 8/2727, Alston to James (Comments on Staff paper), 18 January 1976; FCO 8/2727, Parsons to Crosland, 6 Dec 1976

the tradition of a centralised standing army was much less established.⁵⁸⁹

Parsons' 1976 annual review consisted largely of economic and commercial commentary, including defence sales. Internally it had not been a bad year, with the terrorists under control, repression "*marginally less severe than in recent years*" and the regime as a whole was "*fractionally less oppressive*" than in the recent past. Parsons enjoyed close access to the Shah and his Ministers, whose 'intimate dialogue' was conducive to continued good relations, in spite of the British media's increasing hostility to the Shah. There was nothing "*sinister*" about the Shah's arms acquisitions, since all of his strategic and military objectives were aligned with Britain's. In sum, the country was politically stable and would continue to grow as one of Britain's largest markets for both military and civilian goods.⁵⁹⁰

Meanwhile, Parsons' December despatch had caught the attention of David Owen while he was still Minister of State (he would become Foreign Secretary following Anthony Crosland's death in February 1977). Owen commented that the factors of instability in Iran which Parsons mentioned "*would be a cause for alarm in other countries*" and he was wary of believing that Iran was exceptionally immune to such factors. Owen ventured that it would be "*perfectly in keeping...with the Shah's personality*" to embark on military expansionism in the Gulf, attempting to seize the Arab oil fields and dominate the global oil supply, in order to deflect attention from his internal problems. Owen also wondered whether such an event would be followed by revolution and commissioned a study to assess Iran's future direction.⁵⁹¹ Parsons dismissed the notions of both revolution and military expansionism. He wrote that much of the Shah's bombast was demagoguery rather than megalomania, an attempt to shore up internal support and show off Iran's strength to the world. The Shah's basic approach to foreign policy was pragmatic and cautious; in other words he sought to recreate "*the spirit not the frontiers of the Achaemenian Empire*". The Shah was not belligerent or power-hungry, but a lone man with a mission.⁵⁹² Parsons' view was

⁵⁸⁹ Parsons, *Pride and fall*, 134

⁵⁹⁰ FCO 8/2981, Parsons to Crosland, 1 January 1977

⁵⁹¹ FCO 8/2981, James to Alston, 29 January 1977

⁵⁹² FCO 8/2982, Parsons to Owen, Weir, 9 March 1977

corroborated by Alston, who could not see the Shah going to war. Iranians, including the soldiers, were “*not martial*” and too sceptical to fight, preferring to strut around on parade.⁵⁹³ The Shah’s army was thus symbolic, a pillar of the regime and guarantor of stability rather than an offensive fighting force. However, this posed a serious contradiction which no-one addressed until 1978: the Iranian army was expected to defend the Shah’s regime although its men were deemed un-martial and unwilling to fight external enemies, let alone their own people. The claim that Iranians preferred parades and bombast over actual combat mirrored views expressed in the earlier period about the cravenness and un-martial qualities of Iranians on the battlefield.

The major question of early 1977 was how, if at all, to incorporate human rights into foreign policy vis-à-vis Iran, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Indonesia, the Philippines and the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries. The British Embassy in Washington was liaising with the FCO to assess to what extent human rights would play a role in present and future policy formulation, in light of President Carter’s election on a human rights platform and increasingly vocal US Congress and lobbying on the matter.⁵⁹⁴ Ministers eventually decided to proceed with the proposed human rights ‘league table’ and possibly to implement trade restrictions on this basis, much to the consternation of officials dealing with Iran. Crowe concurred with Michael Weir’s misgivings about this decision, but cautioned that “*we cannot stop this wagon rolling until we have some solid road blocks to put in its way*”. It was essential that ministers should avoid singling out sensitive countries like Iran.⁵⁹⁵ Weir said as much in a letter to Permanent Undersecretary (PUS) Sir Michael Palliser, arguing that there were no grounds for British ministers to adopt a vitriolic attitude to the Shah, who decided on all major business deals himself. Furthermore, the Shah’s regime was being unfairly vilified as a human rights offender and was improving in this respect according to some recent US State Department reports.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹³ FCO 8/2982, Alston to James, 13 March 1977

⁵⁹⁴ FCO 8/2997, Millington to Smith, 22 January 1977

⁵⁹⁵ FCO 8/2997, Crowe to Weir, 26 January 1977

⁵⁹⁶ FCO 8/2997, Weir to Palliser, 31 January 1977

Meanwhile, Parsons promised to help prepare a “*robust brief*” to help the FCO respond to the Shah’s critics, in particular for David Owen’s upcoming meeting with a group of Labour MPs led by Stan Newens, whose recent CARI (Committee Against Repression in Iran) pamphlet he thought “*grotesquely exaggerated*” on certain points.⁵⁹⁷ The pamphlet was designed to skew the reader’s impression of Iran and grossly exaggerated the number of political prisoners.⁵⁹⁸ The embassy staff agreed, arguing that the CARI pamphlet and Amnesty International report deliberately blurred the distinction between the harassment of intellectuals and harsh treatment of terrorists. The embassy also claimed that in Iran there was not “*much visible evidence of the apparatus of the police state*”, in the sense of NKVD style disappearances at night following a knock on the door. Although “*by Western standards*” there was a disturbing lack of civil liberties, people were fairly outspoken in private on certain topics, excluding criticism of the monarchy.⁵⁹⁹

The official British line remained that accounts of torture were exaggerated. This was reaffirmed in a briefing paper prepared for a March 1977 meeting between FCO Minister of State Frank Judd and six Labour MPs, including Robin Cook and Stan Newens, who had requested a meeting to discuss the Amnesty report and its implications for British policy towards Iran.⁶⁰⁰ The original paper for the meeting emphasized that the use of torture was probably declining, and implied that its use in Iran should be “*judged by Middle Eastern rather than by European standards*”, in addition to the usual point about Shah’s sensitivity to criticism. As far as political freedom, the creation of Rastākhīz was described as the Shah’s genuine attempt to promote political participation among his “*traditionally politically cynical and inactive*” people.⁶⁰¹ Judd, one of the FCO officials with a genuine concern for human rights, adopted an attitude which was open but also pragmatic. He advanced the usual arguments about Iran’s economic importance but on human rights, he distinguished between “*getting results and satisfying our own sensitivities*”, where a high-handed approach would merely alienate the Shah. However, Judd agreed to consider Cook’s

⁵⁹⁷ FCO 8/2997, Parsons to Lucas, 6 February 1977

⁵⁹⁸ FCO 8/2997, Parsons to Crosland, 14 February 1977

⁵⁹⁹ FCO 8/2997, Westmacott to Charlesworth, 14 February 1977

⁶⁰⁰ FCO 8/2997, Cook to Judd, 3 March 1977

⁶⁰¹ FCO 8/2997, Lucas to Lipsey, Judd, 15 March 1977

proposition that independent observers should be permitted to attend political trials. He also conceded the salience of Cook's point about an "*inevitable clash between a rapidly developing economy and a repressive political system*" in Iran.⁶⁰² The question of allowing independent observers at trials was put to Parsons, who agreed to broach the matter with the Shah at their next meeting, but he advised David Owen not to raise human rights during his upcoming (May) meeting with the Shah and advised the government to refrain from making public statements about the Amnesty Report.⁶⁰³

The combination of concerned MPs and Judd's receptiveness somewhat mitigated the previous indifference to ethical concerns and introduced a new (and for many, unwelcome) element to British Iranian policy, although the fundamental attitudes of Parsons and other officials remained unchanged. When it transpired that Amnesty International Secretary Martin Ennals was imminently to visit Tehran, Lucas was anxious to postpone Parsons' approach to the Shah about observers at trials, lest the Shah should come to harbour the dangerous notion that HMG was colluding with Amnesty over human rights.⁶⁰⁴ Parsons eventually broached the subject of open trials with the Vice Minister of Court Bahaduri, noting that lessening the secrecy over such events would do much to appease Iran's critics.⁶⁰⁵ Foreign observers, including an independent observer on behalf of Amnesty International, were thereafter authorised to attend an upcoming open trial. This and other developments until the crackdown of November 1977 gave the impression of a genuine thaw in the Shah's attitudes, dubbed the Iranian 'Thousand Flowers' by Parsons.

The 'Tehran Despatches' were three influential reports written by Parsons in late March and early April addressing Iran's foreign policy, human rights and the Shah's power. Foreign policy formulation remained the exclusive province of the Shah, which was no longer the case in economic and other technical areas. Parsons maintained that the Shah's approach to foreign policy

⁶⁰² FCO 8/2998, Meeting record, 23 March 1977

⁶⁰³ FCO 8/2998, Parsons to Lucas, 28 March 1977

⁶⁰⁴ FCO 8/2998, Lucas to Palliser, Luard, 1 April 1977

⁶⁰⁵ FCO 8/2998, Parsons to Owen, 6 April 1977

was fundamentally cautious and defensive, and his primary preoccupation was with the Soviet threat to ‘warm water ports’ on the Persian Gulf. His cordial relationship with the West, a counterweight to the Soviet threat, was equally rooted in a belief that “*Indo-European*” Iranians were genetically closer to Europeans than to their Semitic and Turkic neighbours and should therefore cultivate good relations with European states. The monarch was essentially benign; he insisted on maximizing oil prices and extraction because he was a ‘modernizer in a hurry’ rather than an “*OPEC hawk*”. Most of Britain’s foreign policy objectives dovetailed nicely with the Shah’s and he could be effectively used to leverage British influence in this area.⁶⁰⁶ This report was applauded by the FCO, with Lucas writing that the Shah would not abuse his international status or power so long as he maintained good health (unbeknownst to virtually all at this time, the Shah was stricken with cancer).⁶⁰⁷

In the April report on human rights, Parsons insisted that Iran’s record was decent by “*Third World*” or “*Middle Eastern*” standards and that criticism was overblown. In Arab countries he had witnessed much worse examples of torture and repression – an important point which explains much of his cynicism and advocacy of a double standard vis-a-vis ‘Oriental’ countries. In Iran, the present human rights quandary was the result of “*Orientals*” insisting on being judged by Western standards. SAVAK, censorship and sham democracy were the “*price paid for material progress*”, and on this count the Shah had delivered the White Revolution. Although “*claustrophobic and...distasteful*” to a Westerner, there was no “*central flaw*” in the Shah’s regime, which was not repressive or closed like a “*classical Communist*” society. Parsons did concede the unjust nature of trial procedures, but argued that physical torture was declining and had been replaced with psychological interrogation. Parsons argued that the best approach was to initiate a discreet dialogue with the Shah and his ministers rather than to publicly remonstrate against them.⁶⁰⁸ This telling report shows to what extent the earnest idealism of the first period when liberalism was thought relevant and necessary for ‘Oriental’ as much as Western societies had vanished in the

⁶⁰⁶ FCO 8/2986, Parsons to Owen, 30 March 1977

⁶⁰⁷ FCO 8/2986, Lucas to Parsons, 22 April 1977

⁶⁰⁸ FCO 8/2998, Parsons to Owen, 12 April 1977

embassy. A sinister array of ideological and military dictatorships, themselves a consequence of modernity gone awry, now provided the benchmark for judging the developing world.

Parsons' other April report, "*Is the Emperor Fully Clothed?*", argued that in military and security (including SAVAK) matters the Shah reigned supreme, but his control of foreign policy was equally absolute and politically he appeared "*in total command*", having quashed all opposition and able to switch Ministers, dissolve parliament and concoct parties at whim. The army top brass were fiercely loyal and he was firmly in control of SAVAK, whose head General Nasiri was a "*boneheaded super loyalist*". Thus he had firm grip on the main levers of power in the regime. Conversely, he was no longer able to inspire the type of enthusiasm in his subjects as Parsons imagined had been the case at the outset of the White Revolution in 1963. Public morale was at a nadir, but the presence of SAVAK and the loyal army would forestall revolution and ensure regime stability.⁶⁰⁹ All three of Parsons' reports were well received at the FCO, although they began to breed doubt in official minds. Lucas remarked that further economic stagnation could change the national mood from passive acquiescence to one of active resentment, and a handwritten comment noted "*it is worrying that...the Shah's rule, for all its real successes and benefits, engenders no popular enthusiasm and has built up no popular base*".⁶¹⁰ There was little consideration however as to why the Shah's rule was unpopular and Parsons' rationalisations of regime stability were tacitly accepted. The Embassy defence attaché Colonel Jones echoed Parsons' sentiments, writing in his annual report that the Shah was as "*firmly established as ever*", that his arsenal was entirely commensurate with the size and strategic importance of his country (neighbouring Turkey and Pakistan had larger armies) and that his critics were "*unduly influenced by...largely inaccurate accounts of political repression and of the secret police*".⁶¹¹

David Owen adopted Parsons' line for the May 1977 CENTO meeting in Iran, although human rights were raised against Parsons' recommendations thanks to the insistence of Frank Judd. The

⁶⁰⁹ FCO 8/2980, Parsons to Owen, 12 April 1977

⁶¹⁰ FCO 8/2980, Lucas to Weir, Graham, 22 April 1977

⁶¹¹ FCO 8/2990, Jones (via Chalmers) to Owen, 19 April 1977

meeting brief noted that the Shah's "*efficient but severe*" security force were firmly in control. It also noted that the Shah's regime was "*basically popular*" even if his autocratic methods were resented by the young and professional classes. On human rights, Iran was said to have a "*high reputation in the Third World*"; its critics exaggerated the negatives and gave the government too little credit for its socio-economic achievements. Relations seemed to be improving between Amnesty International and the Shah, although he remained highly sensitive about human rights issues.⁶¹² Owen touched on human rights at the end of his meeting with the Shah, expressing appreciation that he had authorised observers to attend trials, which would do much to appease his critics. Owen emphasized that his reason for raising human rights was to prevent Iran from "*succeeding Chile as the fashionable focus of criticism*" for human rights violations.⁶¹³

The visits to Iran of both Owen and US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in May had been accompanied by open trials, amnesties granted to hundreds of prisoners, visits by the ICRC (Red Cross), ICJ and Amnesty International and a draft bill on rectifying trial procedures. The Iranian government was also rebutting its critics by emphasizing its human rights virtues, such as religious toleration and lack of racism, although junior embassy attaché Peter Westmacott confessed he had "*certainly had enough of Cyrus the Great's declaration on human rights made 2,500 years ago*", a favourite royal theme.⁶¹⁴

A despatch from Alston about Iran's political future rattled this burgeoning optimism. He highlighted the urgent need for more knowledge of key elements in Iranian state and society, in particular the armed forces. The Shah, wrote Alston, had skilfully employed both "*traditional Persian*" methods of repression and modern techniques of "*imposed democracy*" to quash his critics and consolidate his rule since 1962. However, Alston feared that Iran's fifteen years of political calm, brought about by the Shah's use of "*carrot and stick*", i.e. the White Revolution and SAVAK respectively, was not going to last much longer as the opposition was likely to coalesce. Alston presumed that the Shah "*must know all of this*" and sense the vulnerability of his regime. It was unclear how he would proceed, but would most probably avoid a major crackdown,

⁶¹² FCO 8/2988, MED Brief Iran Internal Affairs, 13 April 1977

⁶¹³ FCO 8/2999, Meeting record, 14 May 1977

⁶¹⁴ FCO 8/2999, Westmacott to James, 23 June 1977

which would tarnish relations with the US and derail his economic plans. Most likely he would continue his present course of sporadic and limited liberalisation, although Alston doubted that he would ever become a constitutional monarch within a democracy, since this was not only contrary to his “*personal instincts*” but also would not be “*for the greatest good of the greatest number*” judging by the lessons of Iranian history, where democracy bred chaos. The despatch was forwarded to the Cabinet Office, while Alston was congratulated for his forward-thinking analysis.⁶¹⁵ However, no further discussion or action resulted from Alston’s discomfiting observations.

The Shah was expected to make a gesture showing his commitment to reform prior to his Washington visit scheduled for November. The local intelligentsia were capitalizing on the human rights orientation of the new Carter administration to prod him in this direction, knowing that any concessions after the Washington visit would appear to have been made under American influence. The Shah sought to avoid giving such an impression and Parsons assumed he was aware of the festering resentment against his regime.⁶¹⁶ Indeed, it was taken for granted that the Shah was conscious of the challenges around him and actively formulating the necessary responses, when this was not always the case. A cabinet shuffle followed shortly thereafter. Former head of Rastākhīz Jamshīd Amūzgār replaced Amīr ‘Abbās Hoveyda as Prime Minister (a position he had occupied since 1965) and Hoveyda replaced Asadallah ‘Alam, then in poor health, as Minister of Court. Parsons lamented that ‘Alam was “*irreplaceable*”, having been the Shah’s closest confidant and also a long-time loyal friend of Britain.⁶¹⁷

In two perceptive despatches⁶¹⁸, embassy attaché Peter Westmacott described the rise of the writers’ and lawyers’ opposition movement. He felt that the Shah’s concessions would beget endless demands for more and even amount to a gale eventually sweeping him away. On the other

⁶¹⁵ FCO 8/2980, Alston to Miers, 1 June 1977

⁶¹⁶ FCO 8/2980, Parsons to Owen (FCO), 6 August 1977

⁶¹⁷ FCO 8/2980, Parsons to Owen (FCO), 8 August 1977

⁶¹⁸ These will be examined in Chapter 5.

hand, with no concessions it would be impossible to re-inspire any enthusiasm in his people and give them a stake in their country. The Shah was in a quandary, and wracked with anxiety on the eve of his visit to Washington. In his October audiences with Parsons, he had unprecedented bouts of “*paranoid hostility*” to the Western media, especially the British press and BBC, accusing several prominent newspapers including the *Guardian* and *Observer* of conspiring against his regime and denouncing the lawyers’ opposition as agents of foreign imperialism. Parsons, shaken by the outbursts, attributed the Shah’s diatribes to him having received too little credit for his liberalisation measures to date, while media criticism continued unabated.⁶¹⁹ The Shah was particularly outraged at an Amnesty International league table which claimed Iran still had twenty thousand political prisoners, whereas other official sources cited figures of two to four thousand. This made it difficult for Parsons to convince the Shah that Amnesty was staffed by “*a group of sincere but poorly informed amateurs*” who were not acting out of spite.⁶²⁰ R.M James at the MED wrote to Miers, head of the embassy chancery, about the disturbing developments in Iran, professing concern over the Shah’s “*unbalanced behaviour*” which had “*frightening*” implications for Iran’s future.⁶²¹ Tatham at the MED wondered if the Shah would surrender to his “*natural inclination to ...turn the clock back*” and terminate the liberalisation experiment.⁶²² Meanwhile, in a BBC1 TV interview, Owen struggled in justifying the morality of British arms sales to Iran, defending the Shah and his arsenal with nebulous allusions to “*the culture, the tradition...the whole business of the authority of the Shah with its origins in Persian history*”, a view likely gleaned from Parsons on the Shah-worshipping Iranian character.⁶²³

The November visit to Washington proved pivotal. The Shah was emboldened by Carter’s apparently indulgent attitude towards Iran on human rights and over the next few weeks the Iranian ‘Thousand Flowers’ movement was swiftly nipped in the bud. Westmacott’s letters on the subject were depressing: student unrest over the banning of books and the forced closure of a poetry

⁶¹⁹ FCO 8/2999, Parsons to Lucas, 25 October 1977

⁶²⁰ FCO 8/2980, Parsons to Lucas, 3 November 1977

⁶²¹ FCO 8/2980, James to Miers, 10 November 1977

⁶²² FCO 8/2999, Tatham to Parsons, 10 November 1977

⁶²³ FCO 8/2999, Tatham to Miers, 29 November 1977

reading, among other things, was swiftly suppressed as police attacked unarmed students and academics with truncheons. The lawyers and writers received similar tough treatment. It seemed that the lack of emphasis on human rights during the Shah's meetings with Carter had prompted the police to hit back viciously at the opposition.⁶²⁴ At the same time, busloads of hired thugs broke up a gathering of unarmed professionals, mainly lawyers, with clubs, wire and chains near the city of Karaj. This incident appeared to confirm that the security forces were deliberately out to cow the opposition. The Shah, although back in Iran since 19 November, had quietly slipped away to Kish Island, prompting rumours that he had given the security forces "*carte blanche*" to act in his absence and wished to lie low until the troubles abated.⁶²⁵

Parsons argued the violent new developments were not a major setback for the regime's incipient liberalisation programme, since the violations were not "*gross by Middle Eastern standards*". The conflict between government and opposition had changed, with the former now publicising its intention to take a tougher line towards dissent, especially vis-à-vis the professional (lawyers') opposition, although the previous measures of liberalisation, like amnesties for political prisoners and legal reforms, would continue. The unrest did not amount to a real threat to the Shah, given army loyalty and the fragmented nature of Iranian society. The Shah continued to lie low, seemingly wanting to dissociate himself from the vigilantes. Michael Weir minuted that the Shah must be "*wondering whether releasing the safety valve a little is not worse than keeping it screwed down!*"⁶²⁶ Miers, however, was less sanguine about the government's new approach, writing that "*a change has taken place...The Shah is no longer obliged to tolerate the dissidents' activities for fear of offending President Carter (human rights issues were not a major subject in the Washington discussions)*", although this could only be temporary. Miers believed that the Shah's legal reforms and tentative liberalisation were almost exclusively spurred by external influences – President Carter (before November), meetings with Martin Ennals from Amnesty International,

⁶²⁴ FCO 8/2999, Westmacott to Sanderson (minute by Sanderson), 22 November 1977

⁶²⁵ FCO 8/2999, Westmacott to Sanderson, 24 November 1978

⁶²⁶ FCO 8/2999, Parsons to Lucas, 14 December 1977

William Butler from the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), the Red Cross (ICRC) and encouragement from other governments.⁶²⁷

1977, Parsons concluded, had not been a triumphant year for the Shah, although his anxieties about the Carter administration had been allayed by his Washington visit and the President's stopover in Tehran on New Year's Eve. With the departure of Hoveyda as Prime Minister and 'Alam as Court Minister, an era had ended. The tasks facing the new government were formidable, and even Prime Minister Amūzgār, a man of "*outstanding ability, intelligence and force of character*" would struggle to gain public and private sector acceptance for his contractionary economic policies. On the bright side, Parsons continued to insist there was no credible threat to the Shah's regime, given his hold over the army and security forces and British relations with him and his ministers continued to flourish.⁶²⁸ 1978 began with an incident which would shape the year and beyond, although no-one then realised it: the publication of a provocative article in Eṭṭela'at newspaper denouncing Ayatollah Khomeini as an agent of 'Red' (Soviet) and 'Black' (British) imperialism. The resulting protests in Qom and clashes with the police provoked a public condemnation from clerics, to which the government responded by organizing mass Rastākhīz meetings denouncing the 'Red and Black Colonialism' which sought to reverse Iran's progress. Parsons agreed with Hoveyda that the government's handling of recent events had been "*clumsy and...provocative*", partially because the Shah had been deprived of his sagest advisors (such as the ailing 'Alam) and was relying too much on incompetents and his own instincts. The continuation of this clumsy approach could well unify the diffuse opposition against him.⁶²⁹ Meanwhile, the 1976 human rights 'league table', still not publicly accessible, was updated in light of recent developments. The embassy saw improvement in some areas, such as arbitrary killings and physical torture, which had markedly declined. The accepted number of political prisoners was 2100, although only several hundred of these would have been detained in more open countries. However, freedom of expression and association were still severely constrained, in addition to a high degree of

⁶²⁷ FCO 8/2999, Miers to Jennings, FCO, 6 December 1977

⁶²⁸ FCO 8/3191, Parsons to Owen, 4 January 1978

⁶²⁹ FCO 8/3210, Parsons to Lucas, 19 January 1978

corruption and censorship. The assessment concluded that the Shah would gradually accept a degree of public participation in his government but not to the extent of full liberalisation, which would destroy the “*political stability*” he had established during his rule.⁶³⁰ Parsons concluded that the Shah faced a challenge to regain the initiative, but without facing any genuine threats. He was wielding his usual twin weapons of carrot – tentative liberalisation and economic incentives – and stick – the regime’s “*machinery for oppression*” in enforcing its will.⁶³¹ Weir confessed sympathy for the Shah’s predicament. He had initiated cautious liberalisation because of external pressure, only to be further harangued in the Western media and face more ungrateful demands from the opposition. Iran’s situation did not seem so bad relatively speaking; many Third World leaders such as Sadat would probably “*be glad to exchange their problems for the Shah’s*”. Fortunately there was no sign to date that his will to rule or confidence had been dented, but talk of his “*divine mission and...imperial megalomania*” had subsided.⁶³² Meanwhile, following criticism from the Labour Party NEC⁶³³ about relations with Iran and particularly arms sales, Owen objected to the NEC’s claim that the Shah’s regime had “*an international reputation for ruthless political repression and torture*”, arguing that such a description was more applicable to the “*dictatorial regime*” headed by Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq from 1951 to 1953. Owen also claimed that the Shah’s near-absolute power was legitimised by the ancient historical origins of Iranian kingship.⁶³⁴

Peter Westmacott left Tehran in March 1978. In his sobering valedictory, entitled “*Iran – What Price Democracy?*” he argued that in spite of limited liberalisation, the Shah retained complete control of the government and security forces and that critical comment on the monarchy was not tolerated, although he still saw the Shah’s rule as a “*more or less benevolent dictatorship*”. The Shah was a survivor, having outlasted all his old rivals from the time he ascended the throne. By investing in social and economic development, he had made the majority of his subjects believe that they would not be better off under an alternative regime. His “*very Persian way*” of ruling –

⁶³⁰ FCO 8/3210, Miers to Simpson-Orlebar, 18 January 1978

⁶³¹ FCO 8/3183, Parsons to Owen, 31 January 1978

⁶³² FCO 8/3183, Weir to Parsons, 24 February 1978

⁶³³ National Executive Committee

⁶³⁴ FCO 8/3210, Owen to Little, 7 February 1978

playing his subordinates off against each other and having them all report directly to him - was designed to ensure that no-one could emerge to rival him. His government was likened to a series of parallel columns culminating in his authority, which was hopeless for managing a complex modern society. The Shah wanted greater public commitment to his regime in order to ensure a stable succession. He had attempted this via Rastākhīz, an abysmal failure, but also through cautious liberalisation, which had whetted popular appetites for more and accidentally provoked clerical wrath. By turning on the intelligentsia in late 1977, the government had missed an opportunity for genuine change. The Shah was now unlikely to permit further radical changes, given his firm belief that Iran was unprepared for democracy and would disintegrate. Westmacott drew an ominous parallel between the Shah, Louis XVI and Tsar Nicholas II, namely that being forced to grant piecemeal concessions could be just as perilous as giving up too much power at once; this would give opposition movements time to consolidate and seize the initiative. Ultimately, the Shah remained unwilling to relinquish his power in any serious measure, and his meagre concessions would do little at this stage.⁶³⁵ Most officials were still far from having such sobering thoughts. During a March visit to Tehran to discuss arms sales, Defence Minister Fred Mulley asserted that the Shah's leadership was a "*great national asset*" not only for Iran but for all countries who willed peace and prosperity in the region.⁶³⁶

The April unrest, marking forty days since the Tabriz riots, was meticulously reported in the Iranian press. Parsons figured this was intended either to widely publicise opposition vandalism and thereby increase public acceptance for a crackdown, or, as the Shah claimed, to expose the true nature of the opposition and spur the passive majority of his supporters to make their voices heard. The Shah reaffirmed his determination to continue liberalising, primarily in order to ensure a smooth succession for the Crown Prince Reza. Ever-suspicious, the Shah was uncannily knowledgeable about British activities in Iran in the 1940s and discussed these with Parsons, convincing the latter that he had ordered a review of recently declassified Foreign Office

⁶³⁵ FCO 8/3184, Westmacott to Miers, 15 March 1978

⁶³⁶ Guardian, 11 January 1979

documents.⁶³⁷ The FCO was alarmed the Shah was allowing these distant events to influence his present attitude to Britain, and considered whether his access to the documents could in any way be curtailed.⁶³⁸ Both Weir and Lucas were worried that the Shah was losing the plot. Weir wondered if the Shah was deceiving himself over liberalisation, having resisted the devolution of his power and the establishment of independent institutions, while Lucas feared the Shah did not appreciate the religious revival gathering strength in Iran.⁶³⁹

Before taking extended leave, Parsons updated his 1974 report about the Pahlavi dynasty succession. He remained confident that although signs of instability had increased and the outlook was less optimistic than four years ago, the Pahlavi dynasty faced no serious threat. Muhammad Reza had weathered worse storms and his country remained stable by “*Third World standards*”. In theory, only the military could unseat the current regime, but Parsons deemed this less likely in Iran than any other country in the region because of the army’s loyalty and stake in the regime. This comment again reflects his analysis of Iran according to the Turco-Arab military model, a blunder which he admitted in his memoirs. As far as factors of instability, the royal family now had a much diminished pool of advisors upon which to draw in times of crisis and lacked a broad political base, with its only real power base in the armed forces. It also lacked a unifying national ethos, such as religion, ideology or a wider cause, and for the moment had lost some of the initiative to the (still fragmented) opposition. On the credit side, the Shah could easily clamp down if events got out of hand. Iran had a “*deep-rooted*” monarchical tradition and its abolition would be a much greater upset than that of other ousted monarchies in the region. Finally, both the United States and Soviet Union would favour stability over the regional upheaval which would follow revolution.⁶⁴⁰

Tatham was positively impressed during his May visit to Iran, where the relatively free and open atmosphere was like “*Liberty Hall*” in comparison to Baghdad. He mentioned that none of his

⁶³⁷ FCO 8/3210, Parsons to Miers, 9 April 1978

⁶³⁸ FCO 8/3210, Miers to Lucas, 12 April 1978

⁶³⁹ FCO 8/3197, Anglo-American Talks, 18 April 1978

⁶⁴⁰ FCO 8/3194, Parsons to Owen, 10 May 1978

interlocutors there, mostly businessmen, expected revolution and he personally reaffirmed the embassy view that further disturbances could be contained. A military coup was improbable, although the embassy had very little sense of what made “*the Iranian officer corps tick*”.⁶⁴¹ The last point is surprising given the perceived importance of the armed forces as the Shah’s principal power base and guarantor of stability. Parsons’ last despatch before going on extended leave reaffirmed his convictions of the regime’s solidity, but only after listing a litany of problems and admitting that not much had changed since 1963, in that the mullahs – disliked by reasonable Iranians – had lost none of their ability to stir up trouble, and the Shah was still reliant on his iron will and if necessary, iron fist, to remain in power. There was however every chance – “*Iran being Iran*” – that the opposition could crumble for lack of stamina, and the Shah prevail.⁶⁴² Lucas meanwhile was increasingly concerned at the Iranian government’s dismissive attitude to the religious revival and what it saw as “*incorrigibly primitive*” clerics. A recent meeting with an Iranian embassy official had led him to fear that high-ranking Iranians deeply misunderstood the social forces at work in their country.⁶⁴³

There was an illusion of normality in the summer of 1978 until the onset of various crises in August. In June, the Shah dismissed former SAVAK head General Nasiri and made a speech which demonstrated continued commitment to reform and liberalisation.⁶⁴⁴ By July, the forty day mourning cycles which had persisted since January had been broken and most visible political activity was once again taking place inside the government, with yet another attempt at the resuscitation of Rastākhīz.⁶⁴⁵ On 5 August, ‘Constitution Day’, the Shah made a televised speech promising fully free and fair parliamentary elections in 1979 and freedom of assembly and expression, which the embassy interpreted as his continued commitment to liberalisation and equally an attempt to stay above the political fray by allowing wider discussion of certain issues within the government. The embassy could offer only hazy or dismissive explanations for the wave

⁶⁴¹ FCO 8/3184, Tatham to Lucas, 18 May 1978

⁶⁴² FCO 8/3210, Parsons to Owen, 24 May 1978

⁶⁴³ FCO 8/3197, Lucas to Miers, 19 June 1978

⁶⁴⁴ FCO 8/3210, Lamport to Gorham, 15 June 1978

⁶⁴⁵ FCO 8/3184, Lamport to Sanderson, 6 July 1978

of disturbances erupting in Isfahan and other provincial cities. Lucas questioned the optimistic slant of embassy reporting, wondering how long before the Shah and security forces either began “*cracking up or cracking down*” and what implications this would have for future British policy.⁶⁴⁶

The tragic Abadan cinema fire of 21 August, when over 400 people perished, heightened tensions as recriminations flew between government and opposition. The subsequent change of government at the end of August was perceived as a major concession to the clerical opposition. The embassy thought the new Prime Minister Ja‘far Sharīf-Imāmi had “*impeccable religious credentials*” as he hailed from a clerical family. In fact, Sharīf-Imāmi was not such an auspicious choice because of his close links to the royal family (he was deputy President of the Pahlavi foundation), his reputation for corruption and because he was a Grand Master of Freemasonry, which was perceived to have extensive foreign links.⁶⁴⁷ His policies, such as the closure of casinos and restoration of the Islamic calendar, were clearly intended to placate clerics, although there was no evidence of any bargain struck with the clerical opposition to this effect. Sharīf-Imāmi’s concessions were expected to give the government some leeway at least until the end of Ramazan. The Shah was again vulnerable to criticism, having implicated himself in the recent change of government after a year of standing aloof, but he could still rely on the loyalty of the army to maintain order. Furthermore, a marked improvement in economic conditions had considerably defused the malaise of 1977. Explicit references to SAVAK as a ‘pillar’ of regime stability were now quietly dropped.⁶⁴⁸ Lucas was less optimistic. He cautioned Minister of State Frank Judd that the Shah – now reputedly ill and highly sensitive to the support of his foreign friends – was facing his greatest challenge since he launched the White Revolution in 1963. It remained undoubtedly in British interests that he should “*come out on top*”, although that was looking less certain than ever before. Sharīf-Imāmi was no “*strong man*” and his government faced the delicate problem of placating both the clerical and ‘liberal’ opposition, which could provoke the intervention of the armed forces if too many

⁶⁴⁶ FCO 8/3184, Lucas to Weir, 14 August 1978

⁶⁴⁷ Afkhami, *Shah*, 459

⁶⁴⁸ FCO 8/3184, Chalmers to Owen (FCO), 29 August 1978

concessions were made.⁶⁴⁹

A secret internal message from MED official Robin Gorham to Lucas the following day marked a turning point. Two reports from the Shah's confidant Humayun Bahaduri describing the Shah's withering morale convinced Gorham that the situation was grave enough to warrant alerting ministers. It appeared that the clerics and Shah were irreconcilable and the prospect for an orderly transfer of power before the 1979 elections was "*negligible*". However, it remained preferable that the Shah should prevail in some form and was now futile to begin courting the opposition.⁶⁵⁰

Thenceforth, the official attitude towards the Shah was a mix of reassuring sympathy and denial in equal measure, akin to the treatment of a terminally ill patient. David Owen recounted an anecdote from his time as a medical doctor about such a patient, who simply lost the will to live and passed away after she had been informed of the gravity of her illness.⁶⁵¹ Owen realized the value of tempering a diagnosis and giving a patient hope if nothing else, an approach which was unwittingly applied to the Shah in his last months. However, officials began to believe their illusory diagnosis and drew more comfort from it than the patient himself.

The declaration of martial law on 8 September and confrontation the same day at Zhāleh Square in Tehran between security forces and primarily religious demonstrators was the latest incident in a "*trial of strength*" taking place between the two sides. The Shah had clearly succumbed to depression; some of the recent concessions made to the clerics were personally humiliating for him, such as the reversion to the Islamic calendar. It was thought a fitting time reassure the Shah of British support for his policies by delivering a morale-boosting message from Prime Minister James Callaghan, amidst rumours that President Carter was about to do likewise.⁶⁵² The President's telephone call to the Shah from Camp David on 10 September reportedly elicited elation, and the American ambassador Bill Sullivan encouraged other friendly governments to send similar

⁶⁴⁹ FCO 8/3184, Lucas to Judd, 4 September 1978

⁶⁵⁰ FCO 8/3184, Gorham to Lucas, 5 September 1978

⁶⁵¹ Owen, *Time to Declare*, 73

⁶⁵² FCO 8/3184, Chalmers to Lucas, Parsons, 8 September 1978

messages.⁶⁵³ Lucas recommended sending a message expressing support for the Shah's liberalisation measures and sympathy for his current problems. He was convinced the Shah remained the best prospect for a "*moderate, well-governed Iran*" when one considered the alternatives regimes headed by either obscurantist clerics or communists.⁶⁵⁴ Frank Judd disagreed, arguing that the Shah's regime was "*failing to ensure the stability we consider necessary for the preservation of our interests*". He also questioned the expediency of sending a sympathetic message, which would "*add gratuitously to our already close and longstanding identification*" with the monarch.⁶⁵⁵ However, Owen and Callaghan agreed to convey a message via Parsons emphasizing the importance of Iran's stability and prosperity for her friends and allies and hoping for renewed calm and the "*resumption of the path of progress*".⁶⁵⁶ With the calm path of progress still elusive, Lucas tried to appease Judd by insisting the Shah was "*a vital bastion*" for ensuring British strategic and economic interests. It would now be unthinkable to abandon the hyper-sensitive Shah; this would sap his confidence and ultimately "*precipitate the very outcome we want to avoid*" – a clear instance of treating the Shah like a psychiatric patient or a faltering currency. He (and his liberalisation programme) would receive full British moral support, irrespective of domestic public opinion. The Shah reneging on his liberalisation programme was also – strangely - thought likely to provoke Soviet interference.⁶⁵⁷ Owen confirmed his full support for the Shah, whom he would supply with crowd control and "*internal security*" equipment (CS gas) from Britain.⁶⁵⁸ Judd was a lone voice in arguing for dissociation from the Shah if he reversed course on liberalisation.⁶⁵⁹ In fact, Judd was the only official who consistently valued liberalisation as an end in itself rather than an image-management tool. Officials were now compelled to justify their continuing support for the Shah by publicly invoking liberalisation, but this very process was hastening the regime's demise.

⁶⁵³ FCO 8/3184, Chalmers to Lucas, Parsons, 11 September 1978

⁶⁵⁴ FCO 8/3185, Lucas to Palliser, Judd, 11 September 1978

⁶⁵⁵ FCO 8/3185, Judd to Owen, 11 September 1978

⁶⁵⁶ FCO 8/3185, Prendergast, 12 September 1978

⁶⁵⁷ FCO 8/3185, Lucas to Judd, 13 September 1978

⁶⁵⁸ FCO 8/3185, Owen to Chalmers, 13 September 1978

⁶⁵⁹ FCO 8/3185, Judd, 13 September 1978

Lucas at last challenged the received wisdom about the stabilising role of the military. He wondered whether the ‘Persian character’ – even among soldiers – was tough enough to stomach firing on compatriots, predicting strained loyalties in the event of protracted confrontations. Incidentally the opinion that Iranians were not hardened soldiers had already been voiced, but the connection with the military’s stabilising role was not explicitly made. He also berated the embassy for insufficient knowledge of the army.⁶⁶⁰ This coincided with the publication of Owen’s latest book entitled *Human Rights*. Discussing the book in a TV interview, Owen argued that the Shah, a “*fashionable*” target of criticism, should be judged based on his progressive social programmes and in an appropriate cultural context which made allowances for “*the whole concept of the Shahanshah*” with its deep roots in Iranian history and tradition.⁶⁶¹

After a four month leave, Parsons returned to Iran on 13 September to a much-changed country. His first royal audience after returning was the most candid ever, and marked a new phase where the demoralised Shah actively sought Parsons’ advice on managing the crisis. He concurred with Parsons’ diagnosis of the social problems in Iran, agreed that Khomeini was implacable and confessed to not knowing what the moderate clerics wanted.⁶⁶² This prompted Michael Palliser to remark that few British ambassadors in recent times had been able to offer such frank advice to a head of state, and “*none at present...have such a relationship with as powerful a Head of State in as important a country*”.⁶⁶³ Iranian ambassador to Washington Ardashīr Zāhedi declared that such candid representation was in fact the traditional preserve of the British ambassador to Iran (unlike the American diplomatic neophytes who lacked the British depth of experience), a role which the British had forfeited in the 1970s to the detriment of all parties.⁶⁶⁴ Parsons himself remarked that the spectre of British power was once again abroad, noting his “*curious position of disproportionate influence*” vis-à-vis the Shah and other top officials.⁶⁶⁵ This also applied to the

⁶⁶⁰ FCO 8/3185, Lucas to Tatham, 14 September 1978

⁶⁶¹ Guardian, 9 September 1978

⁶⁶² FCO 8/3185, Parsons to FCO, 16 September 1978

⁶⁶³ FCO 8/3185, Lucas to Palliser, 29 September 1978

⁶⁶⁴ FCO 8/3185, Jay to MED, 12 September 1978

⁶⁶⁵ FCO 8/3185, Parsons to FCO, 25 September 1978

BBC Persian Service, whose anti-Shah broadcasts had convinced segments of the public that HMG was backing the opposition. Sharīf-Imāmi impressed on Parsons that Iranian public opinion still attributed overwhelming influence to the British government and its ostensible mouthpiece, the BBC.⁶⁶⁶

Iran, wrote Parsons, was experiencing its gravest political crisis since the days of Musaddiq and it would take at least nine months for the dust to settle although there were signs that the situation would improve – the new government had opened a dialogue with the moderate clerics under Shari‘atmadāri and was permitting open debate in the Majlis. However the Shah’s despondent mood persisted; he said he felt betrayed by his people as if by an adulterous wife. Parsons saw only two alternatives to the survival of the Shah and his liberalised regime: either a military takeover or prolonged anarchy, but reckoned that the Pahlavis would pull through, thanks to the steadfast armed forces and the mercurial public moods of the Middle East, which could ‘change overnight’ in the Shah’s favour.⁶⁶⁷ Because the Shah was likely to survive and because of Britain’s current disproportionate influence, it was imperative to stand by the Shah and shun the opposition, or risk earning contempt from all sides. To encourage the Shah, Parsons proposed organising a visit to Iran by top British businessmen with local business interests, since such visits (and the Queen’s upcoming Persian Gulf tour in February 1979) were a boon to the regime’s confidence.⁶⁶⁸

After a month of martial law, it seemed that the “*monolithic regime head by the Shah*” which had defined Iran for the past decade had gone forever. It had been replaced by a triumvirate consisting of the Shah, the Prime Minister and the armed forces; the latter two with enhanced executive powers and authority to administer martial law. It was promising that all parties agreed on minimising loss of life during the unrest, a point which Parsons claimed to be impressing on the Shah, although the paradox of pursuing ‘liberalisation’ under martial law created inevitable tensions and would be difficult to sustain. The government faced a race against time to muster

⁶⁶⁶ FCO 8/3185, Parsons to FCO, 24 September 1978

⁶⁶⁷ FCO 8/3185, Parsons to FCO, 25 September 1978

⁶⁶⁸ FCO 8/3185, Parsons to FCO, 25 September 1978

support before the 1979 elections and to produce a viable political party since Rastākhīz was defunct and most political activity was taking place outside the government. The future hung in the balance, but Parsons was not prepared to write off the Shah.⁶⁶⁹ He began to criticize the Pahlavi regime's "*fundamental flaws*", of which he claimed the embassy had "*always been aware*", even though his earlier despatches hardly attested to this (as recently as May 1977 he had claimed that the Shah's regime had no "*central flaw*"). He now felt that the military had lost its reliability and might waver in the event of mass strikes or a drawn-out confrontation with the opposition. It also might stage a coup and reverse course on further liberalisation.⁶⁷⁰

Parsons began giving the Shah 'pep' talks to stiffen his resolve, arguing that stamina would win the day. Lucas was not so sanguine, feeling that the Pahlavis would be "*lucky to survive until Christmas*" and arguing that Britain would have to distance itself from Iran in the event of a military takeover. Weir quoted Major General Lecky, the embassy defence adviser, that none of the Iranian generals had the ability to stage a coup or run a government, although they may remain outside and simply dictate to the government, a scenario which Weir thought advantageous for Britain.⁶⁷¹ Parsons however impressed upon the Shah his belief that a military takeover would play into the hands of the radical opposition, whether Khomeini or the Tudeh, by exposing the inability of the generals to manage civilian affairs and undermining their authority.⁶⁷² Mounting unrest and oil industry strikes soon brought the Shah to a new impasse. He summoned Parsons and US ambassador Bill Sullivan confessing his confusion; both advised him to stay on course with liberalisation. The Shah agreed that rule by generals would be a "*gift to the extremists*", but two weeks later Iran was under military government.⁶⁷³

Owen, who believed that Sharīf-Imāmi had been handling the domestic situation skilfully, was alarmed at developments in Iran and ordered the MED to begin contingency planning in light of

⁶⁶⁹ FCO 8/3186, Parsons to FCO, Owen, 6 October 1978

⁶⁷⁰ FCO 8/3186, Parsons to Owen, 9 October 1978

⁶⁷¹ FCO 8/3186, Lucas to Weir, Palliser, 12 October 1978

⁶⁷² FCO 8/3187, Parsons to FCO, 23 October 1978

⁶⁷³ FCO 8/3187, Parsons to FCO, 25 October 1978

the unrest.⁶⁷⁴ The Shah or any successor regime would probably cut military spending, which would terminate many defence contracts, including the massive Chieftain (Shir Iran) tank contract which would end Britain's capability to manufacture tanks for its own armed forces. A change of regime could result in either a military regime, least damaging for Britain in terms of trade prospects; an Islamic Republic, which would be detrimental but not fatal for trade and a communist regime, which would massively divert trade away from the West. Officials endorsed the continuation of arms sales (albeit on a lesser scale) to both a military and Islamic regime, but not to a communist regime. It seemed that a military regime would be the best bet economically speaking.⁶⁷⁵ Meanwhile at Cabinet meetings, both Callaghan and Owen emphasised that the survival of the Shah's regime was by far Britain's preferred alternative.⁶⁷⁶

On the eve of 5 November, Parsons and Sullivan had one of their habitual meetings with the Shah. He had decided to form a national coalition government, but was open to considering a wide range of options, including his own departure from Iran, and actively solicited ambassadorial advice. Britain, said Parsons, had offered him all possible moral support but could not play *deus ex machina*; the present conflict was internal and required an internal solution. The Shah was increasingly unsure of his own authority over the army and was under severe pressure from top generals to appoint a military government. In this trying atmosphere, Parsons reassured the Shah that the monarchy remained a national asset and – along with the Islamic “*church*” – a pillar of stability which Iran could not forego, given its “*factionous and divided nature*” which would render republicanism unworkable.⁶⁷⁷ He was convinced that the Shah should not leave the country to make way for a council, as proposed by Nasir Mīnāchi⁶⁷⁸, due to the weakening effect this would have on the armed forces.⁶⁷⁹ 5 November was the most dramatic day of civil unrest to date. Tehran was reeling following massive yet well-organised attacks on symbols of the regime, of foreign

⁶⁷⁴ FCO 8/3195, Owen to Weir, 24 October 1978

⁶⁷⁵ FCO 8/3195, Lucas to Graham, 31 October 1978

⁶⁷⁶ CAB 128/64/17, 2 & 9 November 1978

⁶⁷⁷ FCO 8/3188, Parsons to FCO, 4 November 1978

⁶⁷⁸ Mīnāchi was a lawyer and political moderate, erroneously referred to as an ayatollah in Parsons' despatches.

⁶⁷⁹ FCO 8/3188, Parsons to FCO, 6 November 1978

influence and of ‘western’ iniquity: British, American and Iraqi airline offices, banks, cinemas, liquor stores, department stores and finally the ransacking of the British Embassy, where the attackers wanted to inflict maximum material damage while avoiding harm to embassy personnel. Parsons noted that the armed forces made no attempt to restrain the attackers or protect property on that day, at the embassy or elsewhere. He concluded this was the army’s deliberate policy to force the Shah to appoint a military government, and that the British embassy in particular was left unguarded given Parsons’ widely-known opposition to military government.⁶⁸⁰ When military government came on 6 November, Parsons agreed that it was as the only alternative to anarchy. Lucas lost all optimism and felt like he was watching the “*inexorable progress of a Greek tragedy, powerless to avert the inevitable end*” of royal collapse, unless the “*illogicality*” of the Middle East, to which Parsons often alluded, would suddenly emerge and reverse everything. Nevertheless, the British would cling to the Shah unless Parsons advised otherwise.⁶⁸¹

Both the British and American embassies were soon thereafter approached by opposition figures – Mehdi Bāzargān, the moderate lawyer Nasīr Mīnāchi and Ayatollah Shari‘atmadāri’s son – who proposed that the Shah depart to make way for a Regency Council, which would appoint a government and hold a referendum on the monarchy. Parsons duly reported this approach to the Shah, and both agreed that his departure would cause the military to implode, thereby rejecting the proposal. Parsons suggested that a cabinet of prestigious “*pure neutrals*” could take over after the military government, assuming such men could be found. This would allow cooler heads to prevail and give the government another chance.⁶⁸²

After two weeks of military government, Parsons professed little optimism. Widespread rioting continued, the death toll rose, the bazaars and universities remained closed and the economy was floundering. It seemed unlikely that a moderate solution could succeed in the highly polarized atmosphere, but Parsons and Miers both believed Iran could not function without the Shah and he

⁶⁸⁰ FCO 8/3188, Parsons to FCO, 5 & 9 November 1978

⁶⁸¹ FCO 8/3188, Lucas to Parsons, 8 November 1978

⁶⁸² FCO 8/3188, Parsons to FCO, 12 November 1978

continued to regard the armed forces as central to the situation. There were two competing arguments: on the one hand, the Shah or possibly the entire monarchy would have to go in order to placate the people. On the other, the Pahlavis were inextricably linked to the armed forces, which could either destroy or save the country. Without the Shah as commander-in-chief, they would splinter and stage a succession of coups, descending into anarchy. Furthermore, there was psychological strain on the rank and file soldiers who were fraternizing with demonstrators. Either of the two extremes – end of the monarchy or long military dictatorship – would have global ramifications.⁶⁸³ General Azhāri, a shrewd Prime Minister, was now making most of the major decisions rather than the Shah (he had ordered Hoveyda's arrest), and was running a de facto civilian cabinet. He was careful to observe constitutional procedures and ready to welcome the opposition to his cabinet – on his terms.⁶⁸⁴

At a meeting with the Trades Union Congress International Committee, Frank Judd announced that the Shah was no longer effective ruler of Iran, the first such public admission, although Owen continued emphasizing that the Shah was still favourable to the most probable alternatives, a “*Pakistan-type*” military government or a reactionary Islamic state.⁶⁸⁵ Meanwhile, the British ambassador in Jordan telegraphed Parsons about King Hussein's views on the Iranian crisis. In response, Parsons noted that the Shah had finally shed his delusions and recognized the gravity of the crisis, but was loath to believe that he was “*the most detested person in the country*” and not a “*popular hero with a mystical link to his people*”. His rigid, introverted character could inspire “*awe but not affection*”, thus he could not go out and mingle with the clerics or opposition as recommended by King Hussein, which in any case would require a squadron of bodyguards; the structure of Persian monarchy was also more hierarchical than that of the Arabs, which was flatter and more accessible to the public.⁶⁸⁶

Since 1975, Ivor Lucas had been one of the primary architects of Britain's Iranian policy. By December 1978 he had already begun a ‘post-mortem’ on this policy, arguing that a fixation on the

⁶⁸³ FCO 8/3188, Parsons to FCO, 20 November 1978; FCO 8/3351, Miers to Webb, 21 November 1978

⁶⁸⁴ FCO 3/3189, Parsons to FCO, 23 November 1978

⁶⁸⁵ FCO 8/3189, TUC meeting note, 28 November 1978

⁶⁸⁶ FCO 8/3189, Parsons to FCO, 5 December 1978

Shah had been at the root of British misunderstandings in Iran, that the arms sales “*tail*” had wagged the “*foreign policy dog*” and that a commercial fixation had obscured a clear understanding of the political situation. Ultimately, he concluded that Britain’s policy in Iran, although flawed, had been the only possible one. In response, Gorham noted the dearth of Persian speakers at the embassy and the spectre of British power in Iran, which had bestowed “*special responsibilities*” upon Parsons and the embassy staff.⁶⁸⁷ Tatham mentioned the overly sanguine tone of embassy reporting, a result of a Parsons’ deliberate effort to counter the negative views of the Shah disseminated in Britain by the leftist press and civil society, and admitted that the “*unacceptable face of Imperial Iran*” was known to the embassy.⁶⁸⁸ At this point, Owen stood out among Western foreign ministers as the most supportive of the Shah, convinced he was still an asset rather than a liability. He told Cyrus Vance of his “*hunch – backed by no special evidence*” that the tide would soon turn back in the Shah’s favour.⁶⁸⁹

The colossal marches of Muharram polarised the country into two camps: Shah and armed forces versus Khomeini and the masses, who were clamouring for the Shah to leave. It seemed the Shah had undergone a genuine change of heart and was prepared to rule as a constitutional monarch, although not to abdicate or leave altogether, which both he and Parsons feared would lead to a succession of military juntas or anarchy.⁶⁹⁰ A Guardian article about the resumption of torture in Iran based on what Lucas called a “*distasteful*” Amnesty Report provoked consternation in the FCO, where officials were convinced that human rights had vastly improved in recent months.⁶⁹¹ The embassy likewise maintained that systematic physical torture had ceased in 1977, although this could not be verified.⁶⁹²

In this uncertain atmosphere, the British were trying to coordinate more closely with the Americans

⁶⁸⁷ FCO 8/3189, Gorham to Lucas, 7 December 1978

⁶⁸⁸ FCO 8/3189, Tatham to Lucas, 8 December 1978

⁶⁸⁹ FCO 8/3198, NATO Ministers meeting, 6 December 1978; FCO 8/3189, Bilateral meeting, 9 December 1978

⁶⁹⁰ FCO 8/3190, Parsons to FCO, 19 December 1978

⁶⁹¹ FCO 8/3351, Lucas to Weir, Judd, 13 December 1978

⁶⁹² FCO 8/3351, Parsons to Gorham, 21 December 1978

on policy formulation, but often in vain. US policy vacillated between the ‘hawkish’ Zbigniew Brzezinski and the National Security Council and the anti-Shah Department of State, with Jimmy Carter unable to chart a clear policy course between the two. A severe knowledge deficit aggravated the confusion; an NSC staff member admitted that American officials were “95% *ignorant*” of Iranian politics and no-one in the State Department had a “*full grip on Iran*” even after months of crisis, due in part to a preoccupation with the Arab/Israeli conflict.⁶⁹³ It was in this context that Owen called a secret policy review meeting on Iran from which three main points emerged. First, there was Judd’s usual desire to weaken Britain’s ties with the Shah, which Owen and the others resisted. Second, a rather belated decision was made to study the opposition in depth, especially student groups who might produce future leaders. Third, the urgent need for a detailed study of army lists, from which potential successors to the Shah might emerge. Owen expected a “*devout general*” with clerical ties to take power in the event of the Shah’s departure. Continuing close links with the armed forces, including arms sales, was still deemed vital. It was not inconceivable that the Shah would instigate a brutal crackdown as a last resort – politically unpleasant for Britain but perhaps more acceptable in Iran. Owen concluded the meeting by applying a naval maxim to his chosen policy - that in a fog, one should slow down but not change course.⁶⁹⁴ The analogy was not entirely apt; unlike physical geography which does not change during a fog, the tides and coastlines behind the revolutionary fog in Iran were constantly shifting.

On 21 December General Azhāri suffered a heart attack and was dismissed as Chief of Staff. As the Shah receded into the background, Britain’s stated policy was to steer clear of any intervention or advocacy of solutions, and to oppose the military crackdown favoured by Brzezinski and the American hawks. However, Britain’s influential position meant neutrality had already practically been foregone. The situation verged on absurdity: a military government was administering liberalisation by decree yet proscribed from using excessive force. Lucas remarked numerous times that the new official emphasis on ‘liberalisation’ was a palliative for the Labour Party and domestic

⁶⁹³ FCO 8/3190, Muir to Gorham, 20 December 1978; Muir to Carrick, 21 December 1978

⁶⁹⁴ FCO 8/3190, Policy Meeting, 20 December 1978

critics rather than a genuine commitment to that effect, although there was some desire to avoid the carnage of a crackdown. He also admitted that Britain was involved with the Iranian armed forces and SAVAK, obligations which they could not abandon even at this stage.⁶⁹⁵ Curiously, Owen seemed unaware of this involvement.⁶⁹⁶

The Shah was still determined to stay in Iran. Brzezinski and the Shah's hard-line generals were now itching for a military government "*with the wraps off*" and sought British advice. Parsons demurred, arguing that a crackdown would only intensify popular rage against the government, whereas the present 'war of attrition' might eventually exhaust both sides and allow cooler heads to prevail; however only the previous week he had argued the present attrition would soon lead to anarchy.⁶⁹⁷ In truth, no-one knew how to proceed, so it was decided to take minimal action while trying to mitigate the likelihood of a crackdown. There was an emerging official consensus that the Shah would have to leave Iran – for the short term - or at least step down as Commander-in-Chief so the political and religious moderates would come forward, establish a working government and stave off Khomeini. Since their first approach to the British and American embassies, Bāzargān and Mīnāchi had insisted that no credible government could be headed by the Shah. Lucas felt that the probable chaos following the Shah's departure could hardly be worse than the current chaos.⁶⁹⁸ 'Soft' military government had failed, attempts at civilian coalition government had derailed and 'hard' military government would be ugly and economically disastrous – there seemed to be no options left. However it was crucial to avoid the impression that Britain or the US were coercing the Shah to leave; he must do so of his accord.⁶⁹⁹ Owen, in Algeria for the funeral of President Boumedienne, was reluctant to endorse anything beyond opposing a crackdown, feeling that the West lacked a proper understanding of the situation.⁷⁰⁰

⁶⁹⁵ FCO 8/3190, Lucas to Weir, 21 December 1978. Portions of the document detailing British involvement were blacked out.

⁶⁹⁶ FCO 8/3351, Walden to Lucas, 15 December 1978

⁶⁹⁷ FCO 8/3190, Parsons to FCO, 24 December 1978

⁶⁹⁸ FCO 8/3190, Lucas to Parsons, 27 December 1978

⁶⁹⁹ FCO 8/3190, Weir to Parsons, 28 December 1978; Weir to Owen, 29 December 1978

⁷⁰⁰ FCO 8/3190, Owen to FCO, 29 December 1978

The next and last civilian government under the Shah was formed by Shāpūr Bakhtiār of the National Front, who was assembling a cabinet and soon due to assume office. As a condition of Bakhtiār's premiership, the Shah would have to temporarily withdraw from Iran, and he agreed to go abroad for 'rest' and appoint a regency council. Parsons agreed with Foreign Minister Afshar that Bakhtiār's chances were not propitious,⁷⁰¹ but deemed Bakhtiār to be a man "*with whom we would certainly be able to do business*",⁷⁰² while the FCO research department expected he would have good leadership prospects in Iran given his integrity, long record of opposition to the Shah and Western education.⁷⁰³

As 1979 began, Parsons reported that the country was still paralysed and only the military could deliver effective administration. Bakhtiār's government would be doomed and the restoration of calm impossible unless the Shah withdrew immediately. The Shah had not summoned Parsons in ten days, probably to avoid hearing such advice which would only stoke his ineradicable belief in a British conspiracy to topple him.⁷⁰⁴ Parsons' low-key approach was condoned by Owen, who barred him from seeing the Shah unless instructed to do so.⁷⁰⁵ Bakhtiār's credibility was further undermined by the fact that the new cabinet was lacking in prominent opposition figures and consisted of relatively unknown technocrats (with notable exceptions such as General Fereidūn Jam, former ground forces commander, although Jam ultimately declined to act as Minister of War), implying that Bakhtiār was unable to entice prominent figures to work with him.⁷⁰⁶

On 8 January Parsons had his final audience with the Shah, a poignant conclusion to a five-year relationship which was virtually unparalleled in modern British diplomacy. Both would soon be relieved of their respective positions as ambassador and monarch, although the Shah remained military Commander-in-Chief. His last words to Parsons were that his departure solved the dilemma of whether to cancel the Queen's controversial visit to the Gulf in February 1979.⁷⁰⁷

Following a shuffle which resulted in a stronger pro-Shah configuration among the generals and

⁷⁰¹ FCO 8/3190, Parsons to FCO, 29 December 1978

⁷⁰² FCO 8/3351, Parsons to FCO, 14 January 1979

⁷⁰³ FCO 8/3351, Rundle to Gorham, 4 January 1979

⁷⁰⁴ FCO 8/3351, Parsons to FCO, 2 January 1979

⁷⁰⁵ FCO 8/3351, Owen to Parsons, 3 January 1979

⁷⁰⁶ FCO 8/3351, Parsons to FCO, 7 January 1979

⁷⁰⁷ FCO 8/3351, Parsons to FCO, 9 January 1979

General Jam's refusal to join the Bakhtiār cabinet, Parsons reconsidered his earlier view that the military leadership could work with an opposition government without the Shah. Bakhtiār's chances to establish a functioning government were rapidly dwindling and few other figures would be acceptable to the generals as heads of government; thus the generals were likely to clamour for the Shah to stay, with all of its attendant consequences and the certain demise of Bakhtiār.⁷⁰⁸

Parsons wrote that a "*classic revolutionary situation*" now prevailed, with a dethroned monarch, impotent government and vacillating armed forces, whose retaliation against the masses might provoke civil war.⁷⁰⁹ Next afternoon, the Shah and his immediate family took off from Mehrābād airport for a latter-day flight into Egypt, ostensibly for a period of rest and with no mention of return. As with Muhammad 'Ali Shah seventy years prior, this was followed by a stint in the hospitality of a fellow foreign monarch in Morocco.⁷¹⁰ Parsons predicted a bitter contest for power to ensue, followed by a reversion to autocracy. He argued that Britain would again have to exercise circumspection and sever contact with the opposition in order to exploit commercial opportunities – in effect advocating a rerun of policy towards the Shah.⁷¹¹ In his final dispatch, Parsons conceded that the majority of people wanted an Islamic Republic under Khomeini and that Bakhtiār was unlikely to stem the tide by standing against the masses with only the army behind him. (Ironically, Parsons had long argued the Shah would do exactly this, suggesting he had jettisoned his military fixation and showing the extent to which he attributed unique powers to the Shah). Although the army might devolve into factions, it could not coerce the strikers back to work and the stalemate would continue. Parsons concluded his observations of revolutionary Iran with some parallels to its opening in 1906 – the disintegration of central government and emergence of centrifugal forces of ethnic separatism and tribalism in the form of Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Kurds and Qashqais in addition to the modern political and religious groupings.⁷¹² Reflecting on Parsons' term in Iran after his departure, Gorham lamented that the Embassy had provided the FCO with a paucity of

⁷⁰⁸ FCO 8/3351, Parsons to FCO, 10 January 1979

⁷⁰⁹ FCO 8/3351, Parsons to FCO, 15 January 1979

⁷¹⁰ Muhammad 'Ali Shah claimed sanctuary at the Russian Legation.

⁷¹¹ FCO 8/3352, Parsons to FCO, 17 January 1979

⁷¹² FCO 8/3352, Parsons to FCO, 20 January 1979

information on personalities and the political situation outside of the “*Shah-Parsons dialogue*”. This had deprived the FCO of sound-decision making and Gorham felt unable to defend the embassy against charges that they were not doing their job properly.⁷¹³

Since the Shah’s departure on 16 January, there had been no official British contact with him. The call on the James Callaghan by ex-King Constantine of Greece, who had recently met with the Shah, prompted attempts to glean information from him as to the Shah’s intentions to return and reclaim his throne.⁷¹⁴ However, events rapidly eclipsed all thought of the Shah and on 8 February a number of key ministries and public organizations, including the National Iranian Oil Company, proclaimed their allegiance to the new Prime Minister, Mehdi Bāzargān.⁷¹⁵ The clashes at the Doshān Tappeh airbase between rival factions led to two days of armed confrontation, during which time the opposition captured a multitude of weapons and police stations. On 11 February at 2 pm, Chief of Staff General Qarabāghi announced on the radio that the military was “*on the side of the nation*” and would withdraw to its barracks. An hour later, Bakhtiār tendered his resignation and Bāzargān’s government assumed power under the aegis of Khomeini. The new ambassador John Graham was subsequently informed by Khomeini’s envoy that the army was now the “*Imam’s army and the army of God*”.⁷¹⁶ The opposition had triumphed.

By the end of 1979, the monarchy had been abolished and the world’s first Islamic Republic came into being. Soviet armed forces invaded Afghanistan, triggering a radical jihadist insurrection and the American Embassy was occupied for 444 days by the Students Following the Line of the Imam, precipitating one of the gravest crises in diplomatic history and ending Jimmy Carter’s presidential career. Liberal nationalism in the Middle East – inaugurated with great fanfare and hope in Iran seventy years earlier - seemed to be waning and political Islamism was in the ascendant. For Iran, British-Iranian relations and indeed the wider world, it was the end of one era

⁷¹³ FCO 8/3352, Gorham to Lucas, 24 January 1979

⁷¹⁴ FCO 8/3352, Walden to Cartledge, 5 February 1979

⁷¹⁵ FCO 8/3353, Graham to FCO, 8 February 1979

⁷¹⁶ FCO 8/3353, Graham to FCO, 10 & 11 February 1979

and a transition into another, where the once titanic idols of liberal modernity were eclipsed by alternative visions of modernist Islam.

II. Press, parliament and civil society

The British press was divided in its view of the Shah in the 1970s. As in the 1900s, he found more favour with certain *Times* columnists, but even then its articles were frequently critical of the Pahlavi autocracy. The Shah was perturbed by the degree of criticism his regime was subject to in newspapers such as the *Guardian* and frequently raised these matters in his audiences with Anthony Parsons. To his detractors in British parliament, press and civil society, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi ruled viciously over an ‘Empire of Repression’ – he was cruel, vindictive, tyrannical and unscrupulous – and deserving of ostracism rather than privileged relations with Britain. His severest critics were members of the left wing of the Labour Party, humanitarian organisations such as Amnesty International and other individuals with trade unionist and left-leaning propensities. To his supporters, who hailed from the Labour centre-right as well as the Conservative party, the Shah was the archetypal benevolent despot, a victim of his own farsightedness and over-zealous ambition. It was unfair to judge him by contemporary Western standards, as he ruled over a Middle Eastern country which required a ‘firmer approach’. Views of the Shah’s regime also fed into a fierce topical about the role of human rights and morality in foreign policy and the extent of Britain’s ability to espouse such ideals in its own policy. These debates took place in the context of the Helsinki Process, relations with the Soviet Union and other left and right-wing dictatorships.

In early 1976, before Iran became a public *cause célèbre*, a letter to the *Guardian* set the tone for subsequent criticism of the regime. It had twenty two signatures, including those of Labour MPs Stan Newens and Neil Kinnock, decrying the treatment of dissenters at the hands of the barbarous Iranian regime, against whom the British authorities should make “*the strongest possible representations*”,⁷¹⁷ while a letter to the *Times* about the fates suffered by Iran’s thousands of

⁷¹⁷ *Guardian*, 31 January 1976

political prisoners, which included detention without trial and mediaeval tortures such as a human ‘toaster’, described the Shah’s regime as “*perhaps the worst in the world...to fall foul of*”.⁷¹⁸ A response to the *Times* letter from Conservative MP Peter Temple-Morris was a typical example of views held by the Shah’s supporters. Temple-Morris cautioned against the expectation that every country should have Westminster-style democracy and chided the left-wing lawyers who authored the piece for failing to acknowledge the social achievements of the Shah’s White Revolution and his ostensible long-term intention to make Iran a free, capitalist society.⁷¹⁹ Temple-Morris’ views were echoed by Lord Chalfont, a Shah aficionado who made frequent contributions to the *Times* on this subject of Iran. Chalfont argued that the Shah and his compatriots were rightly fed up with the demonization of his country by western “*Marxists...and other devotees of radical chic*”. Alienating the Shah and judging Iran by “*irrelevant criteria...and standards which bear no relevance to their problems and conditions*”, by which he meant Western standards, was both futile and ludicrous, a point he hoped Foreign Secretary James Callaghan would heed in his upcoming visit to Iran.⁷²⁰

The views of Amnesty International and MPs like Stan Newens were diametrically opposed to those of Chalfont. Echoing the earlier liberals, the Chairman of Amnesty’s British section argued that “*to conduct foreign policy without regard to oppression in other nations is intolerable*”, whether it be in Iran or the USSR.⁷²¹ In parliament, there were few discussions about Iran that year in a human rights context except for those initiated by Stan Newens; all other questions concerned OPEC, commerce, loans (the Shah had recently approved a £200 million loan to the National Water Council) or arms supplies. In February, a major debate on foreign policy and morality took place at Newens’ behest. He called upon the government to condemn rampant international human rights abuses and cease arms supplies to the transgressing regimes. Newens mentioned Brazil, Chile and Indonesia in the same breath as Iran, which he said had been ruled by secret military trials, torture and mass execution since 1953. Newens justified his demands with reference to the “*great democratic and humanitarian movement*” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which

⁷¹⁸ *Times*, 12 February 1976

⁷¹⁹ *Times*, 25 February 1976

⁷²⁰ *Times*, 1 March 1976

⁷²¹ *Times*, 6 March 1976

had regrettably suffered setbacks in the twentieth. Thus, Newens' appeal was rooted in humanism and internationalism, unlike that of his predecessors in the first period whose Persian panegyrics and excoriation of Edward Grey were firmly grounded in their identity as British Liberals and their conviction about Britain's duties as a great liberal power. Conservative Douglas Hurd⁷²² accused Newens of indulging in the naïve old British habit of 'lecturing' other countries. Hurd cited Newens' January letter to the *Guardian* as an example of this quixotic attitude and asked sarcastically whether he really believed impotent modern Britain had any leverage to influence the Shah, who was after all their creditor, adding that regimes would not change merely because of foreign disapproval. (In reality, Britain still had considerable leverage with the Shah, but this was not fully appreciated until the crises of 1978).

FCO Minister of State David Ennals remarked that Newens' speech fell firmly within the "*old Labour democratic socialist tradition*" but he made no reference to its Liberal predecessor. He conceded that Western-style democracy was gradually receding in a world plagued by illiberal authoritarianism, but that Britain could not act as the world's "*lawyer or social worker*" much less the world's policeman. As for halting arms sales to human rights violators, it was argued that they would merely buy elsewhere, with no consequent improvement in human rights and harm to British industry and workers.⁷²³ The *Guardian*, while admitting that such moralising could come across as paternalistic in a post-colonial world, nevertheless maintained that British businessmen could carry a copy of Amnesty's reports in their briefcases and use their commercial contacts in countries such as Iran as a catalyst for raising awareness and effecting gradual change.⁷²⁴

Humanitarian organizations were instrumental in drawing public attention to unsavoury aspects of the Shah's regime. The first major report was produced by the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in May 1976, denouncing SAVAK, a "*state within a state*", for its systematic use of psychological and physical torture on suspects charged with political crimes. SAVAK was said to

⁷²² Hurd was Foreign Secretary from 1989-1995 (John Major government). *Who's Who 2014* online edition. Oxford: OUP, 2014. Online ed., Nov 2014.

⁷²³ HC Deb 09 February 1976 vol 905 cc35-9935

⁷²⁴ *Guardian*, 14 June 1976

operate internationally wherever Iranian students were present. The report urged a return to just legal processes and the introduction of observers at political trials.⁷²⁵ The near coincidence of the report's release with Princess Ashraf's (the Shah's sister) official visit to Britain prompted disparaging commentary in press, particularly her denials of SAVAK torture.⁷²⁶ Soon after, documents found by the Confederation of Iranian Students alleged that Stan Newens and Labour MP William Wilson⁷²⁷, who was in contact with Iranian students in Britain and also a member of the Campaign for the restoration of Trade Union rights in Iran, were under SAVAK surveillance.⁷²⁸

Much press coverage in the second half of the year was critical of the Shah. A CIA psychological profile of the Shah described him as a brilliant but ruthless "*megalomaniac*" bent on recreating the Persian Empire and his Rastākhīz venture was subtly derided by the *Guardian*'s Iran correspondent Liz Thurgood. The one-party Rastākhīz system was merely a label for ineffectual "*throne-controlled...democracy*" and the apparent solution to the problem of generating popular enthusiasm.⁷²⁹ The dubious fruits of the 'Shah-People Revolution' and 'Great Civilization' were also subject to sarcastic scrutiny. The road towards these great ideals was "*littered with freak phenomena*" and seemed unsustainable to the casual observer⁷³⁰ while the Shah's rule was arbitrary and perversely ambitious, shown by his attempt to sustain staggering growth rates following the 1973 oil bonanza.⁷³¹ In the *Times*, Lord Chalfont came out in defense of the Shah's soundness of character and Iran's military build-up, which he thought fully commensurate with the country's physical size and strategic importance. He praised the Shah's prudence in matters of defense and

⁷²⁵ *Guardian*, 29 May 1976

⁷²⁶ *Times*, 7 June 1976

⁷²⁷ William Wilson (1913-2010), Labour MP for Coventry and Coventry East from 1964 to 1983, was a lifelong socialist and supporter of international humanitarian causes. However, his pro-Soviet sympathies and activities made him the object of criticism and scrutiny from both the centre-right of the Labour Party and Conservative Party. He later admitted to having been a 'confidential contact' of the Soviet embassy in London during his parliamentary career. Lilleker, 193 – 200.

⁷²⁸ *Times & Guardian*, 23 July 1976

⁷²⁹ *Guardian*, 16, 23 October 1976

⁷³⁰ *Guardian*, 20 December 1976

⁷³¹ *Guardian*, 21 December 1976

dismissed charges of his megalomania or expansionist ambitions, similar to views expressed by Parsons.⁷³²

Two influential reports on Iran from CARI and Amnesty International appeared in November 1976, prompting FCO concerns that Iran would be the ‘good cause’ of 1977. CARI was chaired by Labour MP William Wilson and founded to organize long-term campaigns against the repression of the Iranian opposition and working class. Its detailed thirty-seven page pamphlet with a foreword by Stan Newens, entitled “*Iran, the Shah’s Empire of Repression*”, painted a damning portrait of the Shah’s regime, with an analysis tilted towards class struggle and economic oppression. The pamphlet was divided into ten sections, starting in 1953 when the Shah was “*brought to power*” by the CIA (no reference was made to MI6) after toppling Musaddiq. Since then, the Shah had shown himself to be a corrupt and “*vicious enemy of the working class*”, squandering his country’s resources for the benefit a privileged few and employing barbaric methods to achieve this end. SAVAK, the Shah’s “*instrument of terror*” whose sinister tentacles had infiltrated all parts of Iranian society and operated abroad where students congregated, was the only thing keeping the regime in power, a point on which Parsons and the Shah’s critics found unwitting agreement. The regime was equally guilty of oppressing ethnic minorities and denying all democratic rights, including trade union rights, political rights and freedom of expression and association. In effect, everything related to the regime was at best a sinister sham and at worst savagery. The British Labour government’s support for this dictatorship was tragic, since it not only helped to “*perpetuate the suffering of Iranian workers but also [acted] against the interests of the British working class which it claims to represent*”. A socialist Labour government, argued the report, should pay attention to trade union rights and political prisoners rather than be preoccupied with maximizing profit margins for British businessmen at the expense of Iranian workers. Furthermore, its support for big business in a country like Iran with cheap labour and high profit margins was contributing to depressing workers’ wages, channeling investment overseas and causing factory closures in Britain. This all hurt the British working classes, thus refuting the

⁷³² Times, 11 October 1976

hackneyed argument that curtailing arms sales was undesirable since it would result in unemployment and factory closures.⁷³³

The Amnesty briefing, although equally damning, focused specifically on arbitrary arrest, trial procedures, political prisoners and torture and lacked the class focus and wider social context of the CARI report, although its influence on the press, civil society and wider public opinion was notable. The Amnesty Report singled out SAVAK, whose head was personally appointed by the Shah, as the prime perpetrator of ruthlessness responsible for the climate of fear in Iran.⁷³⁴ Since 1972, Amnesty had been attempting unsuccessfully to send observers to political trials in Iran.⁷³⁵ However, such matters were entering the wider global consciousness, as Amnesty International announced a 'Prisoners of Conscience' Year, beginning on 10 December, when it hoped to collect two million signatures for a petition to be submitted to the United Nations and all world governments demanding the release of all political prisoners.⁷³⁶ The briefing prompted six Labour MPs, including Stan Newens and Robin Cook, to request a meeting with Foreign Secretary Anthony Crosland to discuss the British government's response to the report. The MPs argued that Britain, as a major economic and defense partner, was obligated to make representations to the Iranian government about its human rights violations.⁷³⁷

The first article to hint at cracks in the Shah's regime appeared in the *Times*. It described the dislocations and challenges arising from rapid economic growth in Iran since 1973 and the people's rising expectations. The author was adamant that no external threat could justify the Shah's military arsenal, while likewise no alleged internal threat could justify the torture, executions and other violations of human rights documented in the Amnesty briefing paper. Economic growth was desirable, but without the accompanying progress towards a more humane society, it could generate uncontrollable tensions that would "*carry away the regime that has*

⁷³³ FCO 8/2998, CARI pamphlet, November 1976

⁷³⁴ *Guardian*, 29 November 1976

⁷³⁵ FCO 8/2998, Amnesty International briefing on Iran, November 1976

⁷³⁶ *Times*, 9 December 1976

⁷³⁷ FCO 8/2997, Cook to Crosland, 20 December 1976

presided over it".⁷³⁸ This article prompted an indignant rebuttal from the Shah himself. Who, he protested to Parsons, would overthrow him – "*the peasants who had been freed by the Land Reform? The workers who had been given 20% of the profits and 49% of the shares in industry? The Armed Forces?*" It seemed to him that even the *Times* now suffered from the same lack of objectivity which afflicted the *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *Guardian*.⁷³⁹

Nothing controversial on Iran came up in parliament in early 1977, with the exception of Robin Cook questioning British arms sales to Iran and asking the Defence Secretary whether it was conducive to regional stability for the Shah's regime to emerge as a military superpower in the Persian Gulf region.⁷⁴⁰ During a foreign affairs debate, Stan Newens declared that British foreign policy would be better based on the principles of "*humanity rather than on those of Machiavelli*" and that a Labour government should support peoples overseas who were struggling for social change.⁷⁴¹ While the sense of commitment to supporting foreign struggles echoed a central theme of classic Gladstonian Liberalism, earlier Liberals would have championed struggles for freedom rather than 'social change', which reflected contemporary Labour ideals about class struggle. In May, the House of Lords debated human rights, but mentioned Iran only once in passing, since members were convinced there were so many viler regimes to deplore such as those of Pol Pot in Cambodia or Idi Amin in Uganda. Lord Gladwyn added that "*Islam is...endeavouring to reform society on lines perhaps differing from those favoured by Western philosophers*", although in reference to the Arab states and not Iran.⁷⁴²

Meanwhile, the six MPs who had requested a meeting with Crosland to discuss Iran in December met with Frank Judd, the new FCO Minister of State, on 23 March 1977. Robin Cook agreed with the Director of Amnesty's view that the Shah should permit independent foreign observers at political trials, while John Watkinson, author of the 31 January 1976 letter to the *Times*, argued that the Shah's extreme sensitivity to Western criticism in addition to the lingering influence held

⁷³⁸ *Times*, 5 January 1977

⁷³⁹ FCO 8/2997, Parsons to Crosland, Lucas, 30 January 1977

⁷⁴⁰ HC Deb 25 January 1977 vol 924 cc1164-71164

⁷⁴¹ HC Deb 01 March 1977 vol 927 cc195-326195

⁷⁴² HL Deb 04 May 1977 vol 382 cc995-1060

by the British ambassador could be used to Britain's advantage in advocating human rights. During his visit to Iran in 1975, it had been abundantly clear the country was terrorised by SAVAK and the regime had major ethical failings. Newens echoed these sentiments and discussed both his involvement with Iranian issues since the 1965 Marble Palace trials and SAVAK's alleged surveillance operations in Britain. Cook noted that there was an inevitable clash coming in Iran between a burgeoning economy and political repression. Furthermore, a section of global opinion now championed human rights – manifest in President Carter's objectives to link these to arms sales – and Britain should move with the times.⁷⁴³ The MPs' approach to Judd ultimately resulted in Amnesty observers being granted access to political trials.

For some months, the press was as quiet on Iran as parliament. There were reviews and commentaries on a series of recently published biographies of the Shah – *Mind of a Monarch* by R. K. Karanjia, *The Shah* by Margaret Laing and a further account by a French author, Gerard de Villiers. Karanjia's work was dismissed as painfully sycophantic, while Laing's biography, although more insightful, was deemed overly apologist. She recounted the Shah's "*curiously naïve*" character, his self-proclaimed "*tender heart*" and surprising candour but also his fanatical loathing of Marxists or anyone who 'betrayed' Iran. For journalist Janet Watts, Laing's sympathetic portrayal recalled Winifred Wagner reminiscing about the gentle private face of Hitler.⁷⁴⁴ Academic Fred Halliday⁷⁴⁵ deemed Laing's work to be facile. He remarked that the Shah occupied a "*unique place in twentieth century history*", having retained absolute power in the midst of modernity and rapid social change while ruling over a major regional power.⁷⁴⁶

On the pro-Shah side, devotee Lord Chalfont returned from a visit to Iran proclaiming that the Shah had invited the Red Cross to inspect Iranian prisons. He castigated the alleged double standards of the British "*fascist left*", with their loathing of authoritarian right-wing regimes such

⁷⁴³ FCO 8/2998, Judd and MPs meeting, 23 March 1977

⁷⁴⁴ Guardian, 24 February 1977

⁷⁴⁵ Professor Fred Halliday (1946-2010) began his career as a committed Marxist on the editorial board of the New Left Review. In the 1960s and 1970s he undertook adventurous travel in the Middle East and Africa (including a stint with the Dhofari separatists in Oman), established connections with local thinkers and activists and wrote extensively about the region, developing expertise in its politics and languages. By the early 1980s he had abandoned his radical Leftist views and he became a professor of international relations at the LSE in 1985, where he taught until 2008. Owen, *Fred Halliday*, 1; *Guardian* obituary, 27 April 2010.

⁷⁴⁶ Guardian, 2 June 1977

as Iran and indifference to their left-wing counterparts.⁷⁴⁷ The *Observer* attacked Chalfont's 'cold warrior' view which held that the Shah was essential for the West to 'keep' Iran and stave off the Soviet Union, a chain of reasoning which implicitly condoned absolutism and torture. Central to the whole matter was not the Cold War but the question of torture, which was reprehensible and totally unjustifiable on any grounds.⁷⁴⁸

What Chalfont called the "*fascist left*" was meanwhile hard at work exposing the darker side of imperial Iran. The first CARI bulletin of spring 1977 reported on the activities of SAVAK in Britain, in light of the Shah's admission on BBC's *Panorama* in December 1976 that the organization operated on British territory. SAVAK, described as a "*huge terror machine*" unparalleled in its omnipotence and brutality, targeted Iranian students abroad whose opposition activities were tarnishing the benign image of the Shah's regime. SAVAK agents, working undercover at the Iranian embassy, monitored students and used intimidation and blackmail on them and their families in Iran. Although not actively cooperating with SAVAK, the British authorities and Labour government allowed the organisation to operate unhindered in Britain, an abominable state of affairs which CARI sought to end by mobilizing students and the labour movement. CARI was becoming increasingly popular among students in particular, with branches in thirteen colleges and universities where critical meetings and photo exhibitions about Iran were taking place.⁷⁴⁹

In June, documentary film-maker and former BBC correspondent Alan Hart wrote a spirited defense of the Shah's regime for the *Times*. Following seven months of research in Iran for his films, Hart argued that much nonsense was written about the Shah, his ambitions, political prisoners and the entire question of human rights in Iran. His visit made him question the allegations made by the Amnesty and ICJ reports and also the motivations of those who had convinced the Western media that the Shah was a monster ruling over a police state. Hart was instead convinced the Shah sought to establish the foundations of democratic government in his

⁷⁴⁷ Times, 9 May 1977

⁷⁴⁸ Observer, 22 May 1977

⁷⁴⁹ CARI Bulletin, Spring 1977

country, at considerable personal risk, and argued that the disappearance of his regime was not in the best interests of most Iranians or foreign powers, who would go into a tailspin. For Hart, this much-maligned monarch fit into the classic mold of the far-sighted, benevolent despot, who had realised long before most other leaders the importance of eradicating ignorance among the poor and diversifying domestic industry to insure against the inevitable dwindling of petroleum resources. By launching his White Revolution in 1962, the Shah was portrayed as heroically overriding his enemies, both foreign and domestic and delivering the benefits of health and literacy direct to the people – whom he sought to empower to “*think for themselves*”. The subsequent social upheavals had forged a new middle class which now comprised thirty to forty percent of the population. The real obstacle to the Shah’s benign vision for his country was the old establishment, whose sabotage in turn induced apathy among the wider population. To overcome the traditional “*fear of democracy*” rampant within the broader population, the Shah had been obliged to introduce political tutelage in the form of the Rastākhīz one-party system, which had become a catalyst for the emergence of real democracy. Hart concluded his piece with a strong vindication of the Shah as Iran’s real ‘revolutionary’ who was implementing policies that his opponents could only “*shout about*”.⁷⁵⁰ In addition to provoking a sharp response from the Director of Amnesty International on the subject of prisoners and trial procedures, Hart’s piece earned a decisive rebuttal from Fred Halliday. Halliday argued that the Shah was clearly the primary obstacle rather than conduit to democracy in Iran, with his authoritarian track record and antipathy to free expression; Hart’s claim that the Shah wanted people to think for themselves was “*nonsense*”. His much-vaunted social programmes had largely failed to improve the lot of peasants and economic inequalities were rife, while Halliday saw little evidence of his supposedly benign intentions either in domestic or foreign affairs. The ‘fear of democracy’ cited by Hart was a sentiment espoused not by the people but by the Shah, who had abrogated the constitution, quashed dissent and silenced

⁷⁵⁰ Times, 9 June 1977

the press, all aided and abetted by SAVAK. His regime would collapse because of his behavior, not in spite of it.⁷⁵¹

The de facto dismissal of long-time Prime Minister Hoveyda in August and his replacement with Jamshīd Amūzgār was deemed by the *Times* to be an event of considerable political import, even though the Shah was still the only person who mattered and his Prime Ministers had been little more than clerks. The appointment of Amūzgār was thought to herald a change in the style of government, if not the overall direction, with a focus on tackling economic problems.⁷⁵²

Meanwhile, the controversial human rights ‘league table’ which had been drawn up by the Foreign Office garnered a brief mention. Iran, as a politically and economically vital ally with a chequered human rights record, was seen as the ultimate litmus test for the practicality of implementing the league table. The article also misquoted a recent Amnesty International statement that the use of capital punishment in Iran was increasing.⁷⁵³ Amnesty director Martin Ennals wrote to the *Guardian* rectifying the statement about the death penalty, but simultaneously claiming that ‘unofficial’ shootings of protesters by security forces were increasing.⁷⁵⁴ These articles, among others, infuriated the Shah and placed him in a state of ‘paranoid hostility’ to the Western media, convinced it was part of an international conspiracy against him. Parsons nevertheless entreated the Shah to maintain his private dialogue with Ennals, which had begun earlier that year.⁷⁵⁵

For President Carter too, relations with the Shah’s regime were deemed to be the ultimate test of his professed dedication to human rights. To date Carter was falling short, having approved the sale of AWACS⁷⁵⁶ to the Shah despite congressional opposition and granted the monarch an effusive reception in Washington.⁷⁵⁷ The severe crackdown on dissident intellectuals which

⁷⁵¹ *Times*, 14 July 1977

⁷⁵² *Times*, 8 August 1977

⁷⁵³ *Guardian*, 30 September 1977

⁷⁵⁴ *Guardian*, 18 October 1977

⁷⁵⁵ FCO 8/2980, Parsons to Lucas, 3 November 1977

⁷⁵⁶ Airborne Warning and Control System, seven flying radar stations which could carry out internal surveillance.

⁷⁵⁷ *Observer*, 20 November 1977

followed the Shah's US visit attracted remarkably little comment in the press, with the exception of the *Guardian's* Tehran correspondent Liz Thurgood, who argued that the Shah had won the first round of the yearlong trial of strength with his opponents, albeit with gratuitous violence. She reckoned that the regime was more prepared to respond in kind to the sporadic attacks of the guerrilla terrorists than to address the peaceful demands of the moderate opposition.⁷⁵⁸

Outside of the press, university student unions and CARI were active in voicing their objections to the Shah's regime and the Labour government's connections therewith. Their depictions of the Shah's incomparably evil regime were coloured by socialist sympathies and sentiments, as evidenced by an emphasis on the working classes, denunciations of imperialism and implicit endorsement of regional leftist movements. The University of Kent at Canterbury student union passed a motion unequivocally condemning the Shah's "*fascist and oppressive*" regime, which protected "*imperialist*" interests in the oil-rich Persian Gulf, denied even the most basic rights to its citizens and terrorised them with SAVAK, which was comparable to the "*Nazi S.S.*". Meanwhile, Britain gleefully sold this regime huge quantities of arms which were used for both internal and external repression, such as against the liberation movement in Oman. The student union addressed a letter to Prime Minister Callaghan demanding termination of his government's relations with the Shah's fascist dictatorship until the "*restoration of full democratic rights*" to the Iranian people, since the Labour Party's links with such a regime contravened its traditional stance against fascism. The FCO responded with the usual arguments about Iran's economic and strategic importance for Britain, adding that it rejected many of the union's allegations against the Iranian regime and asserting that human rights in Iran were improving.⁷⁵⁹

CARI produced two pamphlets in late 1977: a 32-page document about the Iranian working class and another quarterly bulletin in the autumn. CARI's analysis of the Iranian regime centred on class struggle between capitalists and the proletariat. The 'working class' pamphlet argued that that since it was installed by the CIA in 1953, the main purpose of the Shah's dictatorship had been to

⁷⁵⁸ *Guardian*, 28 November 1977

⁷⁵⁹ FCO 8/2999, Robathan to Callaghan, 11 November 1977

ensure maximum profits for Iranian and foreign capitalists at the expense of the workers, who were deprived of the most basic rights. The country's considerable revenues had been squandered on consolidating its internal and external "*repressive machinery*" rather than invested in social programmes. The Shah, "*one of the biggest scroungers in the world*", ironically extolled the virtues of hard work and workers were subject to harsh discipline in the event of strike-type actions or non-compliance. Thus was the reality of the Shah's 'Great Civilisation' for most Iranians – vast income disparity, poverty, squalid and dangerous living conditions, torture, repression and unalloyed wretchedness. Particular emphasis was placed on Britain's commercial involvement which benefitted from this pernicious capitalistic setup, with a detailed list of British firms operating in Iran.⁷⁶⁰ The autumn 1977 CARI bulletin argued that the seemingly amenable new attitude of the regime on matters of human rights was merely image management to assuage the international media, just as President Carter's professed concern for human rights was a similar attempt to restore America's moral standing in the wake of the Watergate affair and Vietnam War. Both parties would in fact have preferred to continue as before, and Carter "*wouldn't have cared less if the Shah and his henchmen murdered half the country*". The USSR was Carter's usual target for human rights related attacks, but the Shah was thought guilty of far greater human rights violations than the Soviet Union. The Shah and his government, primarily concerned with protecting the interests of landlords and property speculators, dealt with housing shortages by bulldozing makeshift shanty towns and beating up their inhabitants. Equally repulsive was the Shah's drug-trafficking twin sister Princess Ashraf, whose instrumental role in facilitating the 1953 coup had resulted in untold "*murder, execution, torture and imprisonment*" while her alleged feminist credentials were thought an insult to the women's movement.⁷⁶¹ CARI's winter 1978 bulletin provided detailed coverage of the regime's counterattacks on the opposition in November and December 1977 where the mainstream press had been decidedly mute, reporting that the regime had abandoned its previous attempts at image sanitisation and reverted to its usual terror methods using hired thugs. The latter, incidentally, was precisely the manner by which the Shah

⁷⁶⁰ CARI pamphlet, *The Iranian Working Class: a survey of conditions, repression and struggles*, 1977, 3-5, 10, 25, 29.

⁷⁶¹ CARI bulletin, Autumn 1977, 3-5, 10, 11, 15, 17

was ‘put into’ power in 1953 by the CIA. The curious silence of the press was explained by SAVAK’s mob attacks on foreign correspondents, such as Andrew Whitley of the *Financial Times*. In response, CARI vowed to step up its campaign against the Shah and sent a letter of protest to Prime Minister Amūzgār signed by several British MPs. The Shah’s Washington visit, which incited world-wide protests organised mainly by Iranian students, was ridiculed for its failure to address human rights and for the Shah bringing a sponsored ‘rent-a-crowd’ of supporters with him.⁷⁶²

The sizeable stream of Iran-related coverage in 1976 and 1977 became a torrent in 1978. The year began with comments on Carter’s triumphant world tour which included a New Year’s Eve banquet in Tehran and fulsome praise for the Shah’s regime as an “*island of stability*” in the region, followed by the Qom unrest which sparked cycles of confrontation for the rest of the year. The *Guardian*’s Liz Thurgood reported police opening fire on demonstrators in Qom, but made no mention of the *Ettela‘at* article on ‘Red and Black Colonialism’ which sparked the demonstrations, nor of Ayatollah Khomeini who was one of the article’s main targets. She did however argue that the Iranian government was headed for open confrontation with the clerics, whose leading member, Ayatollah Shari‘atmadāri, had issued a formal denunciation of the Qom attacks.⁷⁶³ Parsons however rejected Thurgood’s claim that the events amounted to a “*serious clash*” between the Shah and clerics.⁷⁶⁴ The *Times* altogether omitted to mention the Qom clashes as they happened, while the CARI bulletin described it as a “*massacre*” and one of the bloodiest confrontations to date which again exposed the heinous nature of the regime following the whitewashing attempts of the previous year. Meanwhile, CARI reported that several London trades councils were taking an active interest in Iranian affairs. Wandsworth and Battersea trades council members met with Iranian embassy officials and in January 1978 passed a motion denouncing Iran’s lack of political and trade union rights, the activities of SAVAK and the Shah’s liquidation

⁷⁶² CARI bulletin, Winter 1978, 3-7

⁷⁶³ *Guardian*, 17 January 1978

⁷⁶⁴ FCO 8/3210, Parsons to Lucas, 19 January 1978

of his opponents and called on the Greater London Association of Trades Councils to protest British arms sales to Iran and expel SAVAK from Britain.⁷⁶⁵

Lord Chalfont's latest *Times* column on Iran was saturated with contempt for Britain's "*bleeding heart*" radicals and their persistent hostility towards that "*awesome figure in the demonology of the left – the dreaded Shah of Iran*". He presumed this hostility to be a peculiar feature of contemporary international relations, when unbeknownst to him it had a clear precedent in the first constitutional period. Chalfont, while rejecting charges of apologist Machiavellianism in his views of the Shah's regime and accepting that Iran's human rights record was tarnished, nevertheless reaffirmed the importance of viewing the regime in its rightful context, i.e. by applying a double standard which allowed for the 'idiosyncrasies' of Iran relative to the Western liberal democracies. British leftists who persisted in their abuse of the Shah knew full well that a pro-Soviet Communist alternative would replace him were he to go, a fact which fit neatly into their agenda but would jeopardize Britain and the greater 'free world'.⁷⁶⁶ This view clearly demonstrates how leftist opposition to the Shah could be distorted and closely linked with pro-Soviet or Communist sentiments and even construed as unpatriotic. This contrasts with the first period when opposing the Shah and championing Liberalism was deemed supremely patriotic and a function of England's role as a Liberal power.

The wider Labour Party, meanwhile, remained staunchly opposed to the pro-Shah stance of its governing members. In January, the international committee of the Labour NEC denounced the Shah's regime for "*ruthless political repression and torture*" and urged David Owen to cease arms sales. Owen's response that this claim was a gross exaggeration more applicable to the premiership of Dr. Musaddiq than the Shah's regime, his defense of royal authoritarianism as an Iranian tradition and his emphasis on Iran's commercial importance appalled the committee,⁷⁶⁷ to whom Owen seemed to be saying that "*we do have principles but we disregard them when trade and*

⁷⁶⁵ CARI bulletin, Winter 1978, 4-5, 12-13

⁷⁶⁶ *Times*, 6 February 1978

⁷⁶⁷ FCO 8/3210, Owen to Little, 7 February 1978

security...are paramount". At an April meeting it was decided to seek an urgent meeting with Owen to discuss the matter.⁷⁶⁸ Owen's letter comparing Musaddiq unfavourably with the Shah also provoked outrage from CARI, whose Spring/Summer bulletin reprinted his letter in full. The "unbelievable" letter, a "scandal and disgrace" which could have been mistaken for Iranian government propaganda, was said to be an obnoxious distortion of history. The Shah's authority, argued CARI, was no ancient tradition but a product of the 1953 CIA coup, while the Pahlavi dynasty itself sprung from the machinations of British General Edmund Ironside; thus Britain was directly responsible for the current dictatorship. Owen's denunciation of Musaddiq was merely a feeble attempt at whitewashing the ignominies of the Abadan crisis, which had involved Clement Attlee's Labour government. Furthermore, the recent violence in Qom made a mockery of Owen's claim that human rights in Iran were improving. The bulletin concluded that it was unacceptable for a Labour foreign secretary to get away with statements which incurred the strongest objections from the majority of Labour party members, including many trades councils, unions and MPs who were CARI affiliates.⁷⁶⁹ In May, members of the Labour Party and Tobacco Workers Union addressed delegates at the CARI-organised Brussels symposium on repression in Iran. Peter Duffy from the Tobacco Union accused the British media of whitewashing the Shah's regime and hoodwinking the public into believing he was a benevolent leader. The British labour movement, he argued, bore a "special responsibility" for the Shah's repressive regime, since Clement Attlee's Labour government had laid the groundwork for the ouster of Musaddiq, hence firm party action was needed to redress past wrongs.⁷⁷⁰

Following the Tabriz riots in February, the Shah was becoming a forlorn figure, beset by economic problems of his own making.⁷⁷¹ Patrick Seale's April article in the *Observer* acknowledged the pressing challenges facing the Shah and a growing political malaise in Iran, but insisted, using identical reasoning to that of Parsons, that "the most powerful and stable ruler in the Middle East"

⁷⁶⁸ FCO 8/3210, Stephen to Owen, 12 April 1978

⁷⁶⁹ CARI bulletin, Spring/Summer 1978, 21-22

⁷⁷⁰ CARI bulletin, Spring/Summer 1978, 20

⁷⁷¹ Guardian, 10 April 1978

had little to fear from street riots due to the loyalty of the army and security forces.⁷⁷² By May, Liz Thurgood argued that although secure in his position, Muhammad Reza was faced with a daunting challenge from the clerical opposition and the age-old dictatorial dilemma of how to “*loosen control without losing control*”. Having concentrated all authority in his own person, he faced popular resentment which could not be deflected elsewhere.⁷⁷³ The Shah’s overall image in the press was mixed, while for CARI and similar leftist publications he continued to personify unmitigated evil. CARI’s entire Spring/Summer bulletin was devoted to recording the atrocities committed under his aegis – many reputedly ordered by him personally, such as the “*military occupation*” of Tabriz following the February demonstrations, the force feeding of hunger-striking prisoners and the battering of striking workers. His military build-up was intended not for defensive purposes, but to protect his dictatorship and kill his subjects such as “*striking workers [and] those demanding democratic rights*” and as Iran’s second arms largest supplier Britain was an accomplice in this reprehensible activity. Photographs of student dorms at the University of Tehran following a ransacking by SAVAK gave an additional immediacy to the reporting. The Shah’s brutality might triumph in the short-term, concluded CARI, but long-term victory belonged to workers, who had “*knocked another brick out of the Shah’s crumbling pillar of dictatorship*” through their collective action.⁷⁷⁴ The *Times* wrote that the Shah’s supposed liberalisation policy had failed to help political prisoners for whom torture and maltreatment were still lamentably widespread⁷⁷⁵, although it commended his commitment to the development of his country and his admirable record on creating prosperity and raising living standards, unparalleled among developing countries. However, his persistence with the present authoritarian course and crackdown on protests would only further consolidate the forces arrayed against him.⁷⁷⁶ The dismissal in June of SAVAK head General Nassiri was seen as a major indication of the Shah’s

⁷⁷² Observer, 16 April 1978

⁷⁷³ Guardian, 11 May 1978

⁷⁷⁴ CARI bulletin, Spring/Summer 1978, 3-4, 6, 22-23

⁷⁷⁵ Times, 19 May 1978

⁷⁷⁶ Times, 26 May 1978

desire to mollify the opposition, for whom the despised secret police apparatus was said to exceed even the Soviet KGB for the fear it inspired in the population.⁷⁷⁷

The role of the Shah's regime as a guarantor of British and world security (and the attendant question of arms sales) was widely discussed in parliamentary debates for the first six months of 1978. There were two recurring themes: on the one hand, the government assertion that the Shah's regime deserved British arms because it was a regional pillar of stability and a CENTO ally. On the other hand, there was a humanitarian concern that arms sold to the Shah were being used against unarmed demonstrators in the opposition rather than the Soviet Union or any other army.

In a House of Commons debate, Stan Newens highlighted the contradiction that "*defence is urged upon us to protect our way of life and our democratic freedoms*" yet Britain supplied arms to regimes entirely incompatible with this goal, such as Iran where no such freedom existed.⁷⁷⁸

Newens also asked Callaghan how given human rights abuses and the denial of democracy in Iran, he could permit the sales of arms used to suppress demands for those very rights.⁷⁷⁹ Labour MP Martin Flannery, a CARI sponsor, asked Defence Minister Fred Mulley whether he would convey to his Iranian counterpart the revulsion in Britain about SAVAK surveillance of student demonstrators and reprisals on their families. He should also ascertain whether British arms were being used for actual defence purposes or turned against Iranian 'democrats'.⁷⁸⁰ Flannery further likened the Shah to President Mobutu of Zaire, who had turned his guns against his own people instead of the Soviet Union.⁷⁸¹ Labour MP and CARI member Tom Litterick asked the defence minister on several occasions whether the sale of British arms to the Shah would be terminated in light of the recent use of Chieftain tanks in the Tabriz and Qom demonstrations, which resulted in six hundred deaths.⁷⁸² Callaghan defended arms sales with the hackneyed line about regional

⁷⁷⁷ Guardian, 7 June 1978

⁷⁷⁸ HC Deb 14 March 1978 vol 946 cc232-372

⁷⁷⁹ HC Deb 16 May 1978 vol 950 cc235-7

⁷⁸⁰ HC Deb 25 April 1978 vol 948 c11671167

⁷⁸¹ HC Deb 07 June 1978 vol 951 cc209-330209

⁷⁸² HC Deb 25 July 1978 vol 954 cc1356-71356

stability while arguing that the Shah was beginning to truly liberalise.⁷⁸³ Conservative Eldon Griffiths, Chairman of the British-Iranian parliamentary group, spoke warmly of his long experience with the “*great country of Iran*” and his admiration for the visionary Shah, who now feared his allies were faltering. The monarch deserved a British message of support, plus an assurance that he would continue to receive whatever weapons he deemed necessary.⁷⁸⁴

Meanwhile in the House of Lords, Iran was said to be a great military power important for subsidising the research and development of arms companies.⁷⁸⁵ Lord Chalfont argued based on cold war ‘zero sum’ logic that if the Shah – or indeed any of the other contemporary bogeys of the left such as Mobutu of Zaire or Vorster of South Africa – were to be overthrown, the Soviet Union would “*reap the harvest*”, while the West would “*reap only the whirlwind*”, a statement which was re-quoted in a parliamentary debate on foreign affairs.⁷⁸⁶

By summer 1978 the press was beginning to see cracks in the Shah’s regime, although his position was still thought unshakable. *Guardian* correspondent Martin Woollacott noted that the Shah, despite being “*one of the most powerful rulers in the world*”, took second place in Qom where his usually ubiquitous portrait substituted by that of the Twelfth Imam.⁷⁸⁷ The potency of Iran’s religious forces was acknowledged for the first time. It now appeared to be prompting a softening of royal and government attitudes towards opposition participation in politics⁷⁸⁸ and ushering in a remarkable period of genuine liberalisation with a new emphasis on the rule of law, although its durability was questionable.⁷⁸⁹ The *Observer* wrote that the Shah now faced his most daunting challenge since the oil nationalization crisis of 1953, but this time would stay put and weather the storm.⁷⁹⁰ Patrick Seale however recognised the dilemma faced by this “*dyed-in-the-wool autocrat*”

⁷⁸³ HC Deb 16 May 1978 vol 950 cc235-7

⁷⁸⁴ HC Deb 08 June 1978 vol 951 cc384-511

⁷⁸⁵ HL Deb 21 February 1978 vol 389 cc109-50

⁷⁸⁶ Times, 29 May 1978; HC Deb 08 June 1978 vol 951 cc384-511

⁷⁸⁷ Guardian, 26 June 1978

⁷⁸⁸ Guardian, 28 June 1978

⁷⁸⁹ Guardian, 8 July 1978

⁷⁹⁰ Observer, 6 August 1978

– genuinely free elections could release a Pandora’s box of overwhelming forces, while anything less would be seen as inadequate and incite further demonstrations. His only hope seemed to lie in support of the middle classes.⁷⁹¹ Around this time, the Cambridge University section of Amnesty International wrote to the FCO requesting a presentation from one of their representatives to explain the official British position on Iran, citing their concern with improper trial procedures, torture, executions and unofficial deaths of prisoners there.⁷⁹² (Gorham declined, remarking that such a description of Iran was “*not one which we would recognise*”, although Ivor Lucas did speak to the Cambridge section in October).⁷⁹³

The eruption of further disturbances in Isfahan following the death of two clerics in early August led to the imposition of martial law. Unrest spread to Tehran, leading to the closure of the bazaar and a confrontation with the army. A *Guardian* editorial warned that “*tanks won’t save the tottering Peacock throne*” and chastised the Shah for employing the same methods as his father, only with armoured cars instead of Cossack cavalry.⁷⁹⁴ The CARI bulletin featured photographs of Iranian troops trundling into Isfahan on British-built Chieftain tanks following the imposition of martial law, which was portrayed as an unjustified and unjust move.⁷⁹⁵ The Abadan cinema fire tragedy of late August exacerbated an already fractious situation and was used as a political football by both government and clerics. The families of victims joined the clerics in blaming the government, intensifying anti-Shah hostility.⁷⁹⁶ CARI insinuated that the blame for the fire was clearly attributable to SAVAK.⁷⁹⁷ The appointment of Ja’far Sharīf-Imāmi as the new Prime Minister was universally interpreted as a concession to the clerics, an interpretation which was borne out by Sharīf-Imāmi’s immediate revocation of the ‘Imperial’ Iranian calendar in favour of the traditional Islamic calendar and the closure of casinos. Sharīf-Imāmi, the son of a cleric with many religious contacts, was seen as a suitable ‘bridge’ between the government and religious

⁷⁹¹ Observer, 13 August 1978

⁷⁹² FCO 8/3211, Wallis to FCO, 10 August 1978

⁷⁹³ FCO 8/3211, Gorham to Wallis, 16 August 1978; Lucas to Wallis, 6 October 1978

⁷⁹⁴ Guardian, 16 August 1978

⁷⁹⁵ CARI bulletin, Spring/Summer 1978, 22-24

⁷⁹⁶ Guardian, 24 August 1978

⁷⁹⁷ CARI bulletin, Autumn/Winter 1978, 3

opposition, although ominously his previous stint as Prime Minister from 1960-1961 had ended in resignation following popular unrest.⁷⁹⁸

‘Black Friday’, the 8 September confrontation between troops and demonstrators in Zhāleh Square following the declaration of martial law in the small hours that same day, was seen by the press as a dramatic turning point. The *Times* warned that the Shah’s once unassailable authority was crumbling, causing Western governments to panic.⁷⁹⁹ The *Guardian* wrote of the “*cracks in the Peacock Throne*”, as the government succumbed to an irreversible downward spiral, frantically swinging from concessions to repression. Three decades of the Shah’s coercive politics had sapped his opponents of goodwill towards him, and the Zhāleh Square killings may have finally robbed Iran of the chance to “*evolve peacefully toward a society based on consent and democracy*”.⁸⁰⁰ CARI maintained that the seven hours of shooting and helicopter strafing of crowds in the square was “*the personal act of an incensed and affronted Shah*” and fully in keeping with his ‘beastly’ personality.⁸⁰¹ The *Observer* however struggled to believe that the Shah and his top-notch army were really under threat from ragtag religious-radical coalition.⁸⁰² None of this seemed to deter his foreign admirers. A cartoon depicted the Shah in profile, enthroned like the bas-reliefs of Darius at Persepolis accepting tributes from vassal states, while a succession of modern-day powers (China, Russia, East Germany, UK, USA, Japan) lined up to pay him homage.⁸⁰³

The British government was under renewed pressure for its relations with the Shah. Commentary in the *Guardian* argued that British foreign policy was distorted by an obsession with the ‘Soviet threat’, resulting in alliances and arms sales to questionable dictators. This policy did not ensure British security, since such states could conceivably ‘switch sides’ in the Cold War. Indeed,

⁷⁹⁸ *Times*, 27 & 28 August 1978; *Guardian*, 28 August 1978

⁷⁹⁹ *Times*, 8 September 1978

⁸⁰⁰ *Guardian*, 9 September 1978

⁸⁰¹ CARI bulletin, Autumn/Winter 1978, 3

⁸⁰² *Observer*, 10 September 1978

⁸⁰³ *Guardian*, 9 September 1978

opposition movements in these regimes were thought to have few options but to obtain support from the Soviet-led bloc in their quest for power.⁸⁰⁴

Committed critic Martin Flannery called for the imposition of an arms embargo on Iran in light of the Zhāleh Square deaths.⁸⁰⁵ David Owen's recent remarks defending the legitimacy of the Iranian monarchy by virtue of its antiquity – ironically when discussing his new book, *Human Rights* – was derided in a letter to the Guardian. The author ridiculed Owen's argument that the concept of the Shah was 'rooted in history', since a similar argument could be advanced for "*the retention of the thumbscrew, the rack and the Inquisition*". The author suggested a simpler formula: "*some right-wing repressive regimes are more equal than others, especially when they buy our tanks*".⁸⁰⁶

In a scathing review, the *Labour Leader* remarked that Owen's book conveniently left him with all options open "*save that of fulfilling the aims of his Party*".⁸⁰⁷ Callaghan's 16 September letter to the Shah professing sympathy for his plight angered Stan Newens and Labour MP Frank Allaun, also a CARI member and Chairman of Labour Action for Peace. The two MPs issued a joint statement deploring all messages of sympathy and support for the Shah, noting that his 'liberalising' regime had just gunned down unarmed civilians in the streets. This was incontestable proof that Britain selling arms to dictators was simply wrong. The two MPs also accused large oil corporations of collaborating with the Shah and Allaun questioned the common assumption that the USSR would plunder Iran's oil reserves should the Shah fall.⁸⁰⁸ Following this statement, they wrote to Callaghan and Owen requesting the cancellation of the Queen's upcoming visit to Iran in spring 1979.⁸⁰⁹

Lord Chalfont jumped to the Shah's defence, deploring the "*poisonous vendetta*" against one of the rare absolute rulers who had used his power for the popular good. Chalfont also commended Callaghan and Owen for their support of the Shah, showing they understood the grave implications

⁸⁰⁴ Guardian, 1 September 1978

⁸⁰⁵ Observer, 10 September 1978

⁸⁰⁶ Guardian, 16 September 1978

⁸⁰⁷ Labour Leader, December 1978

⁸⁰⁸ Observer, 17 September 1978; Guardian, 18 September 1978; Times, 18 September 1978

⁸⁰⁹ FCO 8/3185, Newens & Allaun to Callaghan & Owen, 17 September 1978

should Iran lapse into anarchy or slip outside the Western orbit, i.e. a deterioration in British living standards, employment levels and even a threat to Britain's political system, a far-fetched allusion to the spread of Communism.⁸¹⁰ This exchange between editors, columnists and the public continued as Eldon Griffiths jumped in. Iran, wrote Griffiths, was neither a Western democracy nor a Soviet or Latin American dictatorship, but a transitional monarchy headed by an enlightened autocrat, in the throes of shock-therapy industrialisation and modernisation (this view was practically a cliché among observers from all points on the spectrum). It was fully in the Western interest that the Shah should persist in transforming his country, since the only alternative to his rule was "*near-Communism*" or "*near-chaos*".⁸¹¹ The debates over the Shah's modernisation by decree were highly polarised, with some commending it as enlightened and others denouncing it as unsustainable and barbaric. A press release from the Socialist International espoused the latter view, condemning the massacres of the Shah's troops and using the situation in Iran as evidence of the "*futility of attempting modernization by fiat*".⁸¹² Liz Thurgood, back in London following her expulsion from Tehran, also pointed out the absurdity of imposing liberalisation through martial law. The first point in the Shah's liberalisation programme was to protect his regime at any cost, as demonstrated by the Black Friday shootings. His ostensible reform programme was a farce and he remained intolerant of any real opposition.⁸¹³ The Labour NEC likewise issued a statement that the imposition of martial law and increase in prisoner numbers made a mockery of the Shah's pretensions to liberalisation, while CARI wrote bluntly that it was hard to estimate the number of victims cut down by Chieftain tanks.⁸¹⁴

Fred Halliday joined the chorus of protest against Chalfont. The monarch was in fact a highly ineffective modernizer, having destroyed Iranian agriculture, and Chalfont's 1975 claims about a "*mystical bond*" between Shah and people were ludicrous.⁸¹⁵ Chalfont however was supported by

⁸¹⁰ Times, 18 September 1978

⁸¹¹ Times, 26 September 1978

⁸¹² FCO 8/3185, Carlsson, 25 September 1978

⁸¹³ Guardian, 26 September 1978

⁸¹⁴ CARI bulletin, Autumn/Winter 1978, 14-15. (NEC statement, 2 October 1978)

⁸¹⁵ Times, 3 October 1978

another denizen of the upper house, Lord Shawcross, who extolled the Shah's benevolent despotism as beneficial both inside and outside Iran; without him the whole Middle East would rapidly succumb to Soviet domination.⁸¹⁶ The importance of Iran's stability was a perennial theme, yet none of the Shah's supporters could imagine that his presence might be a liability rather than asset in this respect. Stan Newens joined the debate, pointing out that both supporters and detractors of the Shah were all in agreement that his regime was by no means democratic. Support for such repressive and autocratic regimes was not only immoral, but not in the long-term British interest either, as the government claimed. Newens cited the long history of British critics of foreign policy critics who championed some form of overseas liberalism or humanitarianism, concluding that the national interest could never benefit from "*efforts designed to prop up a vicious despotism*".⁸¹⁷ His letter was a rare example of placing the Iranian controversy in a historical context. Chalfont next attempted to personally discredit Fred Halliday, his views on Iran and the "*Moscow-oriented...pernicious Marxist lobby*" of the Labour Party left wing. Chalfont alleged that Halliday's affiliation with the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam, whose former director had been a minister in the Chilean Allende administration, betrayed him as a "*Marxist apologist*" and Soviet sympathizer. Hence he and all Labour 'left-wingers' naturally despised right-wing anti-Communist autocracies like the Shah's Iran. Halliday and his ilk, wrote Chalfont, were traitors to the British nation and its ideals.⁸¹⁸ This clearly illustrates how liberal or left-oriented sympathies during this period could be distorted by a 'Cold War' zero-sum perspective to suggest anti-patriotism or even treachery, an implication which could not have been drawn in the earlier period with tsarist Russia in place of the Soviet Union.⁸¹⁹

David Owen's comments in the Shah's defense on ITV's *Weekend World* programme – to wit that Britain had to honour the favours received from the Shah and give succour in his hour of need – caused a Labour party uproar, particularly from Stan Newens and MP Russell Kerr, the latter

⁸¹⁶ Times, 5 October 1978

⁸¹⁷ Times, 9 October 1978

⁸¹⁸ Times, 16 October 1978

⁸¹⁹ Times, 26 October 1978

recently returned from a tour of Iran as part of a committee invited by the Iranian Jurists' Commission.⁸²⁰ Kerr, a veteran of the Labour left, denounced Owen's support for a "*bloody and detested regime*" which most Iranians saw as illegitimate. The committee's report warned the West that it should not see the Shah's floundering dictatorship as a source of liberalisation and stability, view which smacked of neo-colonialism.⁸²¹ The public also expressed distaste for Owen's stance in a series of letters to the *Guardian*. One reader equated Owen's support for the Shah with the Labour government's defense of the Vietnam War a decade earlier, and decried the misguided obsession with Cold War strategy at the expense of a regime's internal politics, remarking on the extinction of a "*radical independent foreign policy*" within the Labour Party.⁸²²

On the eve of military government, the *Times* reported that Western observers were finally realising how the Shah was dramatically less popular in Iran than once thought, and the Ayatollahs much more popular.⁸²³ The illusion of the Shah's regime as an oasis of placid prosperity had vanished, but Britain still needed the Shah, since no successor regime was thought capable of playing Gulf 'policeman'.⁸²⁴ Russell Kerr attacked this view. By virtue of its 'special' historical relationship with Iran, Britain was in fact best placed out of all the powers to remonstrate candidly with the Shah, and could no longer allow its reputation to be marred by a strategic fixation and the ignorance of "*decent human virtues*". This approach was incompatible with Britain's potential world role as a "*leading peacemaker*".⁸²⁵ Here was an overt appeal very much in the liberal tradition to use British leverage to influence the Shah, albeit from the Labour left and thus carrying less weight with the government.

The dramatic upheavals of 5 November, when mobs carried out targeted attacks all over Tehran, led to the appointment of a military government. The latest CARI bulletin implied that Owen's

⁸²⁰ *Guardian*, 23 October 1978

⁸²¹ *Guardian*, 24 October 1978

⁸²² *Guardian*, 28 October 1978

⁸²³ *Times*, 3 November 1978

⁸²⁴ *Sunday Times*, 29 October 1978

⁸²⁵ *Sunday Times*, 5 November 1978

strong support for the Shah and disdain for the opposition had contributed to the targeting of the British Embassy in particular.⁸²⁶ The following day in parliament Owen declared that Iran was now facing a historically traumatic period, sparking a major debate about the tensions between stability and liberalisation and the extent of their embodiment in the Shah. Shadow Foreign Secretary Francis Pym remarked on the gravity of the events, since stability in Iran was in the interests of Britain and the entire West; although stability, as a Labour MP subsequently pointed out, emanated from the “*faith and understanding of the people*”, thus it was imperative for the Shah to allow full democracy in Iran. Eldon Griffiths hoped the Shah would emerge victorious standing for stability, liberalisation and anti-Soviet defence, although neither he nor any of the Shah’s other supporters could explain how the first two elements could be reconciled when to date they had proven incompatible. On the other hand, Tom Litterick and Stan Newens challenged Owen as to why Iranians were not entitled to demand human rights and democracy as they would be in Britain or elsewhere.⁸²⁷ The House of Lords brought forth similar debates. The nonagenarian Lord Fenner Brockway, a venerable ILP⁸²⁸ member and humanitarian activist, protested vociferously at arms sales to the Shah and was shocked at the sight of “*British Chieftain tanks with their guns directed against the demonstrators for democracy*”.⁸²⁹ Meanwhile, the other Lords took up the usual theme of the Shah as the only capable guarantor of stability in Iran, of his benevolent progressivism and of his success in liberalising “*among people where it is extremely difficult to do things effectively*”.⁸³⁰ Lord Alport was fearful of Soviet intrigues to unseat the Shah – which were allegedly causing the current unrest - and expounded on the need to safeguard capitalist regimes near the Persian Gulf, of which Iran was the most important.⁸³¹ However, the point had arrived where the Shah no longer appeared capable of ensuring stability. In a staggering fall, the Kings of Kings now atoned for past sins on television in his speech announcing the establishment of military

⁸²⁶ CARI bulletin, Autumn/Winter 1978, 7

⁸²⁷ HC Deb 06 November 1978 vol 957 cc504-12504; HC Deb 21 November 1978 vol 958 cc1074-51074

⁸²⁸ The Independent Labour Party was at the vanguard of moves to secure representation for the working classes. Prior to 1918, it was the main vehicle for individuals joining the Labour Party. Brockway chaired the ILP from 1931-34. Cohen, *Failure of a Dream*, 1.

⁸²⁹ HL Deb 08 November 1978 vol 396 cc304-414304

⁸³⁰ HL Deb 14 November 1978 vol 396 cc652-6652

⁸³¹ HL Deb 08 November 1978 vol 396 cc304-414304

government, which itself was thought forced upon him by the army's deliberate inaction during the 5 November attacks. His 'oil weapon' which once made the West quake was now turned against him by his own striking workers.⁸³² The *Times* editors now openly wondered whether the Shah – more popular abroad than at home – could still be a legitimate guarantor of a regime which had officially admitted to “*corruption, inadequacy, even beastliness*” under his aegis.⁸³³

During the second week of military government under General Azhāri, the press reported a fleeting return to normality in Tehran, with the Shah getting a break.⁸³⁴ CARI scorned this “*journalistic myopia*” typical of Iran portrayals in the British media, as if to imply that recent disturbances were mere “*hiccoughs in the... smooth running of the Shah's regime*” and a return to full order books for British goods was imminent. In fact, fear and repression still defined life in Iran for all but the wealthiest – a view which again underlined the class focus of CARI's critique.⁸³⁵

The military was thought to be the most probable replacement government in the event of the Shah's departure, not an Islamic Republic or democracy.⁸³⁶ However, all was not lost. A consensus was emerging in the press that if the Shah himself must depart, he could at least salvage the monarchy with a regency council. The *Times* editors argued he must do his utmost to lay the foundations for the survival of his dynasty, in a constitutional form, by gradually surrendering all of his powers before his own departure, in the manner of the recent Spanish transition to constitutional monarchy. The editors lauded the “*resilient, cunning, ruthless*” Shah's past achievements and advised him to move forward and establish this new system. This proposition, however, ignored that scarcely anyone acceptable to the public or Khomeini could be found to join a regency council, a scheme which had already been proposed and failed.⁸³⁷ *Times* foreign editor Charles Douglas Home asked outright whether the Shah would soon be toppled. He had dragged his country unwillingly into the twentieth century, but now the backlash had come. He embodied

⁸³² Observer, 12 November 1978

⁸³³ Times, 13 November 1978

⁸³⁴ Times, 14 November 1978; Guardian, 15 November 1978; Sunday Times, 19 November 1978

⁸³⁵ CARI bulletin, Autumn/Winter 1978, 1,4

⁸³⁶ Guardian, 17 November 1978

⁸³⁷ Times, 28 November 1978

all that had “*gone wrong*” and could only salvage his position by making irreversible changes. The role of the armed forces was thought paramount, since it was the only ‘organised’ power in Iran and its disintegration would mean the disintegration of the country. It was also thought the most likely candidate to assume the Shah’s mantle; an Islamic republic was unlikely except insofar as the generals would style themselves as Islamic in the manner of Colonel Gadhafi or Pakistan’s General Zia.⁸³⁸ The *Guardian* editors were similarly supportive of a regency council but also adamant the Shah must depart. He had been a great patriot in spite of his failings, but his people were now demanding abdication. Following this, the editors feared that a military regime may be an inevitable consequence of the current military government under Azhāri.⁸³⁹

The Queen’s upcoming Gulf tour with a stop scheduled in Bandar Abbas was increasingly seen as support for “*a megalomaniac dictator who remained in power thanks only to an army equipped with British and American weapons*”⁸⁴⁰, an army which, although suffering from divided loyalties, was the “*institution around which modern Persia was built*” and the ultimate bulwark for the opposition to breach.⁸⁴¹ The Prime Minister was challenged in parliament about the Queen’s tour, which some MPs insisted on postponing until the Shah could show he had the confidence of the Iranian people.⁸⁴² Mass strikes in the Iranian oil industry were covered extensively in CARI’s autumn/winter bulletin. It was hoped that these would “*cut [the] Shah’s lifeline*” and undermine the apartheid South African regime, ninety percent of whose oil was supplied by the Shah. An accompanying cartoon depicted the Shah brandishing a pistol atop a writhing mass of victims while James Callaghan, also crushing bodies underfoot, called out to him, “*all this blood won’t get in the oil, will it your Highness?*”⁸⁴³ Finally, in a meeting between Owen and members of the Trades Union Congress, several members objected to the Foreign Secretary’s claims made on

⁸³⁸ Times, 28 November 1978. This will be the final *Times* reference since the newspaper was closed from 1 December 1978 to 12 November 1979 due to industrial action.

⁸³⁹ Guardian, 5 December 1978

⁸⁴⁰ Guardian, 8 December 1978

⁸⁴¹ Guardian, 9 December 1978

⁸⁴² HC Deb 12 December 1978 vol 960 cc227-34227

⁸⁴³ CARI bulletin, Autumn/Winter 1978, 8-9

Weekend World, arguing it was obvious the Shah would fall and the FCO should act accordingly.⁸⁴⁴

The West, argued the *Telegraph* editors, was facing its biggest crisis since the 1947 Berlin Blockade with the current Iranian unrest but unlike in 1947, it was powerless to act.⁸⁴⁵ A consensus was developing in the press that even in the unlikely event of the Shah's survival, his role and indeed the whole country and its foreign relations would be dramatically altered. Even his loyal army was finally showing signs of strain.⁸⁴⁶ The *Observer* asserted the West should henceforth "*keep quiet and keep out*" of Iran and avoid public displays of support which smacked of imperialism. The Pahlavi mystique had evaporated and exposed the Shah's maintenance of power through force; he had been both a "*tyrant and well-meaning modernizer*" but as a reformer he was now finished.⁸⁴⁷ The *Telegraph* chastised Western leaders for being oblivious to the pernicious effects of the Shah's 'crash modernization' programme which its businessmen had been so eager to capitalise on⁸⁴⁸ and lamented that President Carter's human rights initiatives had damaged "*semi-authoritarian friends*" like the Shah more than the real culprits like Brezhnev.⁸⁴⁹ In late December news emerged of the Shah taking a 'winter holiday' and appointing a civilian Prime Minister, National Front breakaway Dr. Shāpur Bakhtiār, to replace the floundering military government following General Azhāri's heart attack. A dangerous power vacuum now existed in Iran, which if prolonged would heighten the likelihood of a "*hard line military regime*" taking over.⁸⁵⁰ The *Telegraph* was pessimistic, warning that whatever followed the Shah would be "*far, far worse*" and probably lead to disintegration.⁸⁵¹ Looking back, the *Observer* declared the Iranian upheavals the "*most unexpected story*" of 1978, although unjustifiably since the signs were there

⁸⁴⁴ FCO 8/3189, TUC notes, 28 November 1978

⁸⁴⁵ *Telegraph*, 5 December 1978

⁸⁴⁶ *Guardian*, 19 December 1978

⁸⁴⁷ *Observer*, 17 December 1978

⁸⁴⁸ *Telegraph*, 14 December 1978

⁸⁴⁹ *Telegraph*, 20 December 1978

⁸⁵⁰ *Guardian*, 30 December 1978; *Observer*, 31 December 1978

⁸⁵¹ *Telegraph*, 29 December 1978

and people had taken the Shah too much at face value.⁸⁵² 1979 would be fateful in either cementing Soviet victory in the renewed Cold War or signalling the beginning of the end for the USSR, dependent on numerous factors, including whether or not the Shah would remain in Iran. The *Telegraph* maintained the Russians were trying to topple the Shah and seize Gulf oil reserves.⁸⁵³ In any case, the repercussions of the Iranian crisis were being felt worldwide and 1979 did prove momentous as far as the rise of political Islam and the reconfiguration of global forces which eventually ended the Cold War.

A new civilian government was formed under Bakhtiār, but its meagre chances of success were thought to depend entirely on how soon the Shah departed.⁸⁵⁴ The announcement of his planned ‘winter holiday’ was thought to be a crushing defeat for one so convinced of his divine mission. He was bemoaned as a tragic figure, neither vicious nor a fool, but “*responsible for much viciousness and lacking in wisdom*”.⁸⁵⁵ The *Telegraph* editors were stunned how the Shah, far from his previous image as a “*man of iron*”, had turned out to be made of “*blotting paper*”.⁸⁵⁶ His imminent departure triggered the habitual concerns about the army staging a coup, still thought by many to be the most likely course of events.⁸⁵⁷

The Shah’s departure on 16 January was perceived as the de facto end of the monarchy. *Guardian* editors argued the Shah’s departure was without parallel. He had followed the time-tested tenets for a ruler to secure his position, both Machiavellian and progressive. Many existing regimes enjoyed no greater popular consent than he had. Yet, he had been ousted from “*one of the world’s most secure seats of power*” by a disparate coalition.⁸⁵⁸ The *Telegraph* feared that his absence opened a Pandora’s Box of dismal possibilities, in all likelihood a bloody confrontation between Khomeini/the opposition and the army leading to civil war or prolonged military rule akin to

⁸⁵² Observer, 31 December 1978

⁸⁵³ Telegraph, 3 January 1979

⁸⁵⁴ Observer, 7 January 1979

⁸⁵⁵ Guardian, 9 January 1979

⁸⁵⁶ Telegraph, 13 January 1979

⁸⁵⁷ Guardian, 11 & 13 January 1979

⁸⁵⁸ Guardian, 17 January 1979

Turkey or Pakistan.⁸⁵⁹ The Shah's departure prompted a short, sharp exchange during Parliament question time. Owen was questioned on the lack of forewarning from his diplomatic corps of the Shah's unpopularity, after which Robin Cook remarked that Owen was in fact thoroughly forewarned by the members of his own party. His obliviousness to this counsel now meant he was in the "*worst possible position*" from which to establish friendly relations with the new regime. Owen praised the benefit of hindsight, while Skinner retorted that in fact foresight would have helped more.⁸⁶⁰

In the weeks between the Shah's departure and army's declaration of neutrality on 11 February, the atmosphere rankled with suspense, culminating in Khomeini's return on 1 February. Bakhtiār, with his "*impeccable liberal credentials*" was clearly favoured by the press; the *Observer* thought his government would be a logical successor to the Shah's autocracy, given Iran's large middle class where Westernised attitudes prevailed.⁸⁶¹ The *Guardian* editors rebuked the now absent Shah for prolonging the crisis with lingering fears of his return, when in fact he should abdicate and support the drafting of a new constitution.⁸⁶² All such rumination, however, was soon moot. On 12 February, the press proclaimed victory for Khomeini after two days of fighting as the redoubtable army declared neutrality, withdrew to its barracks and Bakhtiār resigned. The *Telegraph* bemoaned this "*shattering blow*", the greatest since the Suez crisis, for Western prestige and interests in the region. Khomeini's victory was a windfall for the Soviet Union, according to the *Telegraph's* bipolar zero-sum logic.⁸⁶³ The *Guardian* however disabused its readers of such notions. It concluded that the upheaval which replaced the Shah with the Ayatollah was outside the logic of bipolarity; it was "*not covered in the superpowers' trade union rule book*" but was spontaneous and native to the land where it had emerged.⁸⁶⁴ For perhaps the first time in decades, a seismic political event with international repercussions had superseded established Cold War logic and

⁸⁵⁹ *Telegraph*, 17 January 1979

⁸⁶⁰ HC Deb 17 January 1979 vol 960 cc1698-7011698

⁸⁶¹ *Observer*, 4 February 1979

⁸⁶² *Guardian*, 5 February 1979

⁸⁶³ *Telegraph*, 12 February 1979

⁸⁶⁴ *Guardian*, 12 February 1979

provided a new template for the post-Cold War order, which would not emerge fully for another decade. With this, the first phase of the revolution was complete.

Chapter 5: Perceptions of the opposition, 1976-1979

I. Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service

The liberalism of Spring-Rice and Barclay and the pragmatic anti-monarchism of Marling contrasted sharply with the views of Anthony Parsons and many of his colleagues at both at the FCO and in the Tehran embassy. One of Parsons' mainstays was an insistence on judging the Shah's regime by 'Third World standards' and emphasizing the peculiarities of Iran and the 'Iranian character', for whom political repression was the age-old norm and thus acceptable. This contrasted sharply with Spring-Rice's ideal of Liberalism as the world's optimal and most moral political system. The loyalty of the Iranian armed forces and effectiveness of the notorious secret police, SAVAK, were repeatedly cited by Parsons as the key factors assuring internal stability in Iran, yet the moral implications of such a claim were glossed over.

Opposition to the Shah's regime, even before it surged in the late 1970s, did not go unnoticed by British officials. Widespread student and religiously-fuelled discontent in Iran had been remarked upon by previous British ambassadors such as Sir Denis Wright (1963-1971) and Sir Peter Ramsbotham (1971-1974), although this was not deemed a cause for serious concern by the FCO.⁸⁶⁵ In the 1970s, when violent student and protest movements erupted all over the world, similar events in Iran were seen as part of the global *zeitgeist*, or even a sign that Iran was moving into the ranks of the developed world with its newly truculent youth. In fact, Parsons' despatches were remarkable not because challenges to the regime were ignored, but because they were so often mentioned. Up until late 1978, however, he rejected the likelihood of the opposition amounting to a serious challenge for the Shah.

In Parsons' judgement, three factors precluded the possibility of a serious challenge to the Shah's regime and therefore assured its stability - the peculiarities of the 'Iranian character', the loyalty and effectiveness of SAVAK and the IIAF (Iranian Imperial armed forces), and the fragmented

⁸⁶⁵ Bennett, *Documents on British Policy Overseas: Détente*, 10-14

nature of the opposition. Parsons relied on many generalizations heavily coloured by Orientalism to explain the Iranian national character and to justify why Iran was an exception to normal or 'Western' political development. In his 1975 annual review, Parsons noted the "*old Persian cynical acquiescence in authoritarianism*"⁸⁶⁶, which produced a double standard differentiating European and Iranian society. In 1976 he wrote "*in a European society I would be very concerned that the restrictions on political activity and the pervasiveness of the security apparatus would create pressures which must eventually threaten the regime*"⁸⁶⁷ and pointed out various aspects of Iranian political life that were disagreeable for European observers but maintained that Iran would not be affected in the same way,⁸⁶⁸ since people there had "*an impressive tolerance of a political atmosphere and methods which would be explosive in a European setting*". He argued that Iranians, accustomed to repressive government since time immemorial, were too cynical to fully support any type of regime, too materialistic to forego pecuniary incentives and fatalistic enough to withstand abuses that in European societies would be intolerable, "*despite their dislike of many aspects of the regime, they can live with it....[this atmosphere] has prevailed here for centuries, secret police, absence of freedom, autocracy, insecurity and all...people are used to being constrained and expect to be constrained*"⁸⁶⁹. Similarly, embassy attaché Robert Alston noted that "*the Iranians are first and foremost a materialistic people...so long as they consider that their material interests are likely to be better served by a direct succession than by any alternative [to the Shah] are likely to be hesitant about throwing in their lot with the limited number of those ideologically opposed to the regime*".⁸⁷⁰ These beliefs demonstrated classic Orientalist archetypes about the inherent passivity and fatalism of 'Orientals' who were fundamentally unlike Europeans and the static, ahistorical essence of Oriental societies, who despite being in the modern world, would continue to tolerate what 'has prevailed for centuries'. They also showed a weak knowledge of Iranian history, which contains many examples of resistance to repressive government and also of the revolutionary potential of Shi'ism which has often challenged the dynastic status quo. The

⁸⁶⁶ FCO 8/2728, Parsons to Crosland, 15 December 1975

⁸⁶⁷ FCO 8/2727, Parsons to Crosland, 6 December 1976

⁸⁶⁸ FCO 8/2727, Parsons to Crosland, 6 December 1976

⁸⁶⁹ FCO 8/2727, Parsons to Crosland, 6 December 1976

⁸⁷⁰ FCO 8/2727, Alston to Williams, 18 January 1976

claim that an indigenous 'secret police' had existed for centuries was notably bizarre in light of the fact that SAVAK was a modern import trained by and modelled on similar Western services such as the CIA and Israeli MOSSAD.

Parsons presented the self-interested and materialistic qualities of Iranians as inherent character traits rather than a consequence of the Shah's regime with its lack of channels for political participation, leaving little to concentrate on but the accumulation of wealth. Indeed, Parsons' ideas about Iranians may have been an unconscious projection of his own cynical view of the regime and desire to extract the maximum number of lucrative contracts from the Shah.

According to Parsons, another vital and deep-rooted element of the Iranian character was king-worship. The Shah, wrote Parsons, knew that "*unlike the situation in the majority of the Arab and other Moslem countries, the institution of the ruling monarchy still commands widespread respect and inborn acceptance in the popular mind in Iran*".⁸⁷¹ The Shah's vision of his 'pre-destined' role as ruler of Iran was one "*which the character of his people makes it impossible to shed*".⁸⁷² Parsons often alluded to king-worship to justify his longstanding belief that a 'silent majority' was behind the Shah and that the vocal opposition, whether students, clerics or liberals, were not representative of the docile and genuflecting masses. This view is diametrically opposed to views held by officials in the first period, who never mentioned notions such as 'king-worship' and on the contrary commented extensively on the assertive and outspoken nature of the Iranian opposition. Spring-Rice in particular noted the revolutionary qualities of Shi'i 'patriotism', whose allegiance was not centred on the Shah.⁸⁷³

In 1976, the opposition were predominantly characterised as 'terrorists or 'Islamic Marxists', reflecting the Shah's language. Information about most groups was scant, although the Mujāhidīn-i Khalq and the Charikhāyih Fadāi-yi Khalq were known by name. They were understood to draw support from both the radical left and clerical right and were opposed to the western, secular elements of the Shah's regime while resenting him for crushing the power of the clerics in the

⁸⁷¹ FCO 8/2727, Parsons to Crosland, 6 December 1976

⁸⁷² FCO 8/2982, Parsons to Owen, Weir, 9 March 1977

⁸⁷³ FO 881/9039, Spring-Rice to Grey, February 27 1907

1960s. These were the only indicators of overt opposition and did not threaten the regime, although deteriorating economic conditions and political constraints could change this and galvanize other groups into action, in particular the university students, frustrated young educated classes, the “*conservative/religious right*”, factory workers and the bazaar.⁸⁷⁴ The exiled cleric Ruhollah Khomeini was first mentioned in May of that year in a secret despatch, which reported that his supporters had murdered Ayatollah Shamsabādi in order to jolt clerics out of their complacency. Khomeini’s supporters had formed a group called ‘Shāhid-i Javīd’ (Immortal Martyr) to promote his ‘heretical’ views in Iran, but the authorities did not classify the crime as a political one. The despatch mentioned that there was a terrorist/opposition problem of considerable magnitude now facing the regime, although a handwritten FCO comment on the paper noted that SAVAK were clearly keeping the upper hand thus far.⁸⁷⁵

Parsons’ December despatch on the Iranian political scene summed up his views of the opposition to date – namely, that terrorist organisations were under pressure with minimal popular support and that opposition was likely to remain sporadic and fractured. Student activism was dwindling as students moved closer to the political centre. There was malaise among the population at large, brought about by economic problems (inflation), rising expectations and social dislocations resulting from urbanisation and modernisation, but as of yet no rallying point to effectively channel it. The clerical class was a potential catalyst for this, since it continued to enjoy considerable “*emotional support from the uneducated*”. Parsons felt the clerics had lost the ability to confront the regime following their crushing defeat in the 1960s, although they could provide potent fuel for any recrudescence of opposition movement. The Iranian Communist Party (Tudeh) might re-emerge from underground and exile, but would face rapid liquidation from SAVAK.⁸⁷⁶ Parsons long insisted that the diverse opposition groups would fail to unite,⁸⁷⁷ although in his memoirs he conceded this was an error of judgement. He furthermore claimed to have been familiar with

⁸⁷⁴ FCO 8/2727, Alston to Williams (Comments on Staff Paper), 18 January 1976

⁸⁷⁵ FCO 8/2727, Alston to Heath, 20 May 1976

⁸⁷⁶ FCO 8/2727, Parsons to Crosland, 6 December 1976

⁸⁷⁷ FCO 8/3191, Parsons to Owen, 4 Jan 1978

historical examples of unconventional coalitions in Iran, such as the religious/radical alliance in the Constitutional Revolution.⁸⁷⁸

In early 1977, increasing international media criticism of the Shah's regime over human rights and the upturn in student rioting prompted concerned queries from the FCO. On the question of torture and human rights, the embassy claimed that although many accounts of torture and detention without trial were probably true, for some *cause célèbres* such as those of Reza Barāheni, allegedly tortured by SAVAK but in fact an ex-SAVAK employee himself, and a theatre group arrested for performing plays by Maxim Gorky, the stories of torture and detention were presented out of context, embellished or outright fabricated.⁸⁷⁹ Reliable sources later confirmed that Barāheni was in fact an ex-SAVAK official in exile who was being used by opposition groups. Another famous case was that of Vida Tabrīzi, an imprisoned sociologist who was "*crippled by torture*" according to the Amnesty International and CARI (Committee Against Repression in Iran) reports, but in fact had recently been interviewed by Western journalists and was in good health.⁸⁸⁰ The growing prominence and public interest in damning reports from Amnesty International pushed the FCO to clarify its stance in this regard. Amnesty International was "*something of a curate's egg*", according to the FCO Information Department; it was clearly not pro-communist as shown by its support for Soviet dissidents, but had attacked British policies in Northern Ireland and had links with "*one-sided*" organizations whose attacks on the Shah's regime were politically motivated (i.e. Communist and Soviet sympathizers).⁸⁸¹ It was a 'respectable humanitarian organisation', but a guidance despatch from 1974 made it clear that no British diplomatic mission was expected to gather information or make representations on its behalf.⁸⁸²

By February, student unrest was returning to the dangerous levels of 1974. The Shah told Parsons this was merely a case of surly youth protesting against poor university administration rather than

⁸⁷⁸ Parsons, *Pride and fall*, 138

⁸⁷⁹ FCO 8/2997, Westmacott to Charlesworth, 12 January 1977

⁸⁸⁰ FCO 8/2997, Westmacott to Charlesworth, 14 February 1977

⁸⁸¹ FCO 8/2997, Spence to Charlesworth, 18 January 1977

⁸⁸² FCO 8/2997, FCO to Tehran, 8 May 1974

for political reasons.⁸⁸³ The Embassy concurred that the disturbances were largely related to administrative failings, and that student political opposition accounted for only a small minority of the rioting. Westmacott also noted the influx into urban universities of students from pious provincial backgrounds, who suffered from identity crises upon arriving in an unfamiliar and secular urban environment and reacted by protesting at “*almost anything*”. Overall, the disturbances were not deemed serious, given the expectation that students would eventually feel the sobering pressure to secure qualifications and a job and thus settle down.⁸⁸⁴

In an important report about the extent of the Shah’s power, Parsons argued that “*most Persians do not mind*” if the Shah retained absolute political power and took arbitrary decisions, so long as he continued to produce economic results, and that those who did mind were simply driven away. The potential opposition groups – landowners, clerics and Communists – had been routed in the 1960s, although the latter two could re-emerge under the right conditions. Iran was a “*complex and devious society*” whose inhabitants, “*amongst the most practised of the world’s survivors*”, were equipped with an array of survival tactics to mitigate the impact of repressive authority and protect their personal interests. The great majority of people did not object to the Shah’s absolute power and his “*de-politicisation*” of the country so long as they could make money. In fact, most Iranians associated constitutional monarchy and democracy with the chaos of the Musaddiq period and wanted nothing to do with it, although this attitude induced much apathy amongst the population. The Shah had lost the capacity to inspire his people as he had done, Parsons imagined, during the White Revolution, when he “*drove off the religious bigots and freed the peasants from their servitude*” to great popular acclaim.⁸⁸⁵ Parsons’ other report on human rights further reinforced these points. He argued that the “*hierarchical and authoritarian*” essence of Iranian society was inimical to the development of democracy, and much more responsive to the ‘strong man’ variety of government as offered by the Shah, a classic Orientalist trope. The whole human rights debate was focused on those who rejected the regime, which included a few genuine “*prisoners of*

⁸⁸³ FCO 8/2980, Parsons to Milne, James, 16 February 1977

⁸⁸⁴ FCO 8/2980, Westmacott to James, 23 February 1977

⁸⁸⁵ FCO 8/2980, Parsons to Owen (FCO), 12 April 1977

conscience” and a great many more terrorists who would not be treated lightly in any other country. These “*urban terrorists*”, mainly from educated middle class backgrounds, were motivated by a mix of youthful truculence, reactions against the excesses of the regime, uncritical idealism, frustration over political stifling and the challenges of adapting to a society where traditional religious and family ties were weakening. Some subscribed to Marxism, others to Islam. They enjoyed the respect of educated Iranians, but little sympathy from the lower classes who were preoccupied with money-making and saw their ideas as irrelevant. Meanwhile, opposition groups in exile were attacking the Shah over human rights to further their own interests, and Britain should take care to avoid them.⁸⁸⁶ Altogether, Parsons’ two reports implied the isolated, marginal and wrong-headed nature of the opposition, the support of the silent majority for the Shah, and the erosion of clerical power and traditional values. They were also based on an essentialist understanding of Iranians as being opposed to or disinterested in democracy, constitutionalism and other such Western ideals and thus fundamentally different from Western societies. In light of this, the outcome of the 1976 case involving the murder of Ayatollah Shamsabādi by ‘religious terrorists’ piqued much interest in the FCO, since religion had long since ceased to feature prominently in reporting from Iran. The case resulted in the sentencing of the self-declared supporters of the “*the Government’s most renowned religious opponent*” Ayatollah Khomeini for Shamsabādi’s murder.⁸⁸⁷

In Tehran, Robert Alston’s June despatch on Iran’s political future raised key points about the nature of the opposition which had been hitherto overlooked or dismissed by Parsons. Alston stressed the need for the embassy to become better acquainted with key elements in Iranian society, especially the bazaar network and the clerics. Iran’s fifteen years of political calm were drawing to a close and discontent was reaching “*politically dangerous levels*”, as resentment concentrated on the Shah and regime rather than just on the ministers and bureaucracy. There was a greater likelihood of the disgruntled groups coalescing than at any time since the early 1960s, and support

⁸⁸⁶ FCO 8/2998, Parsons to Owen, 12 April 1977

⁸⁸⁷ FCO 8/2998, Alston to James, 17 April 1977

for anti-regime clerics seemed to be on the rise.⁸⁸⁸ The writings of Dr. ‘Ali Shari‘ati, a sociologist living in exile in Southampton, would soon prove a catalyst for the coalescence of the Leftist and clerical/religious opposition, especially among youth, although officials were oblivious to his influence. Shari‘ati’s death was noted by the embassy, but the possibility of SAVAK involvement was rejected on the grounds that they would not take the trouble to eliminate “*a relatively insignificant dissident writer*” and risk further tarnishing their already bad reputation abroad.⁸⁸⁹

The following month, Parsons began to acknowledge the possibility of the urban poor cooperating with the increasingly frustrated intelligentsia, who since May had written a series of highly publicised open letters critical not only of Rastākhīz but also of the regime and Shah himself. To date, the intellectuals had not articulated their demands with the urban masses in mind, and the latter had not shown signs of active unrest, but this could change if the “*uncomfortable...socio-political temperature*” did not drop.⁸⁹⁰ Around the same time, Westmacott commented on the critical letters addressed to the Shah by prominent figures such as Shāpūr Bakhtiār, Daryūsh Forūhār and the Writers’ Guild demanding greater literary freedom and the lifting of censorship. The Shah seemed inclined to permit some liberalisation in the area of press freedom and censorship, but Westmacott was unsure how he would respond to the growing pressures, since he must have had some apprehension that fulfilling the writers’ demands would turn the oppositional “*breath of fresh air*” into a “*gale strong enough to blow away his whole power structure*”. In Iran, making such concessions could be taken as a sign of weakness rather than goodwill.⁸⁹¹

As the Shah’s Washington visit drew closer, the intelligentsia stepped up their campaigns to extract concessions. A group of prominent lawyers and judges put forward demands for an independent judiciary, while the Writer’s Guild organised an overtly political and exceptionally well-attended week of poetry readings at the German Club (the Goethe Institute) in Tehran, which was described

⁸⁸⁸ FCO 8/2980, Alston to Miers, 1 June 1977

⁸⁸⁹ FCO 8/2999, Westmacott to Charlesworth, 3 July 1977

⁸⁹⁰ FCO 8/2980, Parsons to Owen (FCO), 6 August 1977

⁸⁹¹ FCO 8/2980, Westmacott to James, 24 July 1977

by one lawyer as the most significant political event of the decade in Iran. There were also rumours of rallies organized in support of the exiled cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini, who remained a shadowy figure to the embassy. Nevertheless, Westmacott suspected that few of the intellectual groups expected to entirely succeed in their campaign, and would need international media support to do so. If they were indeed wholeheartedly committed to their objectives, and could not be bought off, intimidated or otherwise dissuaded in the usual Iranian fashion, then the Shah may face a real challenge. Westmacott concluded that in the long run, the Shah would be compelled to observe correct legal and judicial procedures and permit genuine freedom of speech in order to reignite a belief among his people that they had a stake in their country's future and to change their attitudes of "*alienated cynicism*" and materialistic opportunism.⁸⁹² Westmacott's observation clearly refuted Parsons' recurring insistence on Iranian cynicism, materialism and immunity to authoritarianism as inborn national features, instead arguing they were a product of the Shah's regime. James at the FCO responded in praise of embassy reporting, which looked forward rather than merely reacting to events, but he confessed an uneasy feeling that the mounting Iranian opposition could not be easily bought off and might increase.⁸⁹³

The escalation of repression during and after the Shah's Washington visit, including unprovoked violent attacks on students in Tehran and on a gathering of opposition lawyers and professionals in Karaj seemed to indicate the regime was clamping down in light of Carter's apparent willingness to let the Shah 'off the hook' on human rights matters. In an attempt to clarify the situation, Westmacott arranged a meeting with Hedāyatallah Matīn-Daftari, grandson of Muhammad Musaddiq and a leader of the lawyer's opposition. Matīn-Daftari had been present at the Karaj meeting, and he relayed the events of the day in detail, describing how busloads of hired royalist thugs dispersed the meeting and caused considerable bodily harm to its members with clubs and chains. Matīn-Daftari further noted that prominent dissidents were being harassed with bogus tax notices, and that a "*decision had been made....not to tolerate any more demands for reform*", either

⁸⁹² FCO 8/2980, Westmacott to James, 25 October 1977

⁸⁹³ FCO 8/2980, James to Miers, 10 November 1977

by Shah, government or security forces. The topic of the old National Front was also discussed, since many of its former members were in the present lawyers' opposition.⁸⁹⁴ Parsons later reviewed the November disturbances, rejecting the idea that they were either a threat to the regime or a setback for human rights, in spite of the fact that the opposition had filed mass complaints about their ill treatment at the hands of security forces and were appalled at the government's response to their peaceful demands for reform. The student unrest was not deemed to be of political importance, but the continued "*alienation and cynicism*" of the professional classes was a cause for concern.⁸⁹⁵

Parsons' 1977 annual review acknowledged the impact of President Carter's human rights platform on the internal situation in Iran, writing that there had prevailed a "*greater atmosphere of political freedom*" and tolerance of dissent than at any time since his arrival in 1974. The opposition was burgeoning, with the legal and literary professions having articulated their demands and signs that the National Front coalition was re-emerging. Student opposition included not only the "*conventional*" anti-regime Leftist groups, but also reflected a growing trend of Islamic radicalism. However, the student demonstrations were met with "*savage police brutality*" and gangs of thugs were let loose on demonstrators and respected political and academic figures, amounting to the temporary subjugation of the opposition, which Parsons insisted was fragmented and incapable of mounting a credible threat to the Shah.⁸⁹⁶

1978 began ominously with protests at Qom following the publication of an article in Ettela'at newspaper on 7 January vilifying Ayatollah Khomeini.⁸⁹⁷ For the first time in years, clerics publicly condemned the police who had opened fire on the protesters, prompting Parsons to note the importance of the incident in light of the "*revival of Islamic fundamentalism*" in the past year, although he rejected the notion that it was "*a serious clash between the clergy...and the Shah*". The opposition intelligentsia had joined forces during the recent visit of UN Secretary General Kurt

⁸⁹⁴ FCO 8/2999, Westmacott to Miers, 11 December 1977

⁸⁹⁵ FCO 8/2999, Parsons to Lucas, 14 December 1977

⁸⁹⁶ FCO 8/3191, Parsons to Owen, 4 January 1978

⁸⁹⁷ The Red and Black Colonialism

Waldheim (10-13 January) and redoubled their efforts to attract international support for their cause.⁸⁹⁸ The heightened troubles of early 1978 prompted a special report from Parsons on ‘Internal Difficulties in Iran’, wherein he noted that Iran was passing through a phase of social and political discontent. Numerous factors, predominantly economic, were actively contributing to this discontent, which was being articulated by a diverse array of social groups: students, the intelligentsia, clerical/religious groups in addition to a pervasive malaise amongst the general population. However, student unrest was attributed to the ‘restlessness of youth’ rather than political concerns and the conspicuous rise of Islamism in the past year was deemed “*not political but puritan*”, although it provided a pretext for political agitation. The clerics and their supporters were concerned that Iran had fallen prey to rampant Westernization and was being robbed of its Islamic identity and traditions. As an example of the primarily ‘puritan’ religious revival, Parsons cited the insistence of female students on veiling and gender segregation in class. Commenting on the Qum protest over the ‘Red and Black Reaction’ article when the police had opened fire, Parsons did not refer by name to Ayatollah Khomeini, rather describing him as one of the “*former religious opponents of land reform*”. In effect, Parsons either did not perceive – or hesitated to describe – the student or religious discontent as specifically political, in contrast with the lawyers’ and writers’ opposition who put forth precise political demands for legal reform, the lifting of censorship, and freedom of expression and association, although the latter group was not thought capable of mobilising mass public support for its cause.

Further violence against the clerics and their supporters were certain to provoke trouble and Parsons was sure the government would take care to prevent this. The dissatisfaction of the general population, especially the lower classes, was economic in nature, caused by developmental problems and a lag between expectations and reality. Overall, Parsons maintained that the regime was not confronted with “*a united opposition posing a significant threat or even voicing a coherent set of grievances*” and ultimately believed that the situation could be set right with economic improvement.⁸⁹⁹ Parsons gradually began to reduce his once ubiquitous references to the apolitical

⁸⁹⁸ FCO 8/3210, Parsons to Lucas, 19 January 1978

⁸⁹⁹ FCO 8/3183, Parsons to Owen, 31 January 1978

and materialistic essence of the Persian character, now arguing that people were becoming weary of corrupt, incompetent administration and the arbitrariness of government. This change was not lost on Michael Weir, who remarked that the profusion of diverse social groups, all “*disillusioned and fired with rebellion by inflation, corruption, inefficiency, autocracy*” was making him wonder “*whatever happened to Hajji Baba? Having been accustomed to regard your average Persian as the epitome of idleness, deceitfulness, corruption, charm and conceit, are we now in fact witnessing a change in the national character?*” Although made partially in jest, his remark exemplified the enduring grip of Oriental stereotypes on the perceptions of officials and policy-makers.⁹⁰⁰

On 18 February, Ayatollah Shari‘atmadāri called for the closure of the bazaar and all businesses to mark the fortieth day after the deaths in the Qum clashes, in accordance with Islamic custom. The demonstrations in most cities were peaceful and orderly, with the exception of Tabriz. Government departments and banks stayed open on official orders and many were attacked, with violent confrontations between the security forces and demonstrators – whom Parsons described as unemployed youth and *bazaaris* with nothing else to do that day. The army, equipped with British Scorpion and Chieftain tanks, was used instead of the local Tabriz police force, since the latter would have fraternized with their fellow Azeris instead of shooting them. The Tabriz unrest, argued Parsons, sprang from religious and ethno-nationalist motives, with particular emphasis on Azeri nationalism and its long tradition of resistance to central government. Students and the intelligentsia were apparently not involved in the disturbances, which Parsons nevertheless deemed the worst clash in a long time between government and opposition.⁹⁰¹ Westmacott visited Tabriz shortly afterwards, reporting that the destruction of banks, cinemas and institutions linked with the Pahlavi regime suggested considerable advance planning and coordination on behalf of the organizers. Westmacott agreed with Parsons on the Azeri ethno-nationalist motives behind the disturbances. Importantly, he argued that Tabriz was not the “*tip of the iceberg*” of wider social

⁹⁰⁰ FCO 8/3183, Weir to Parsons, 24 February 1978

⁹⁰¹ FCO 8/3210, Parsons to Owen, 21 February 1978

discontent, but rather a one-off incident which had been hijacked by local extremists, in contravention of the peaceful appeal made by Ayatollah Shari‘atmadāri. Nevertheless, the key lesson was that the clergy still had substantial political clout which seemed to be growing and their opposition to Pahlavi secularism was as strong as ever.⁹⁰²

Shortly before leaving the Tehran Embassy in March 1978, Westmacott produced a short paper on opposition groups in Iran and prospects for their future development. He identified four active opposition groups – students, extremists/terrorists (Mujāhidīn-i Khalq and Charikhāyih Fadāi-yi Khalq), middle class dissidents and clerics. The students were the most visible but least important of these groups. The middle class or intellectual dissidents, essentially the lawyers and writers who had staged campaigns in 1977, were increasingly coalescing into a single bloc, making broader political demands and were closely identified with the old National Front. However, this was detracting from their influence rather than enhancing it. Their original demands for legal reforms and freedom of expression were “*reasonable, patriotic and widely supported*”, but now closer association with the National Front and the “*bad old days*” of Musaddiq had tarnished their credibility. The extremist groups had been lying low for a year now, but the Mujahidin continued to participate in Palestinian ‘terrorist training’ courses to ready themselves for future action. It was widely believed that the intellectual dissidents had struck a deal with the terrorists, who agreed to reduce their level of activity and avoid embarrassing the former during their peaceful reform campaigns. The resurgence of the clerical class as an opposition force was recognised as the most important and complex of recent developments. This was bolstered by the Islamic revival in Iranian society since 1977, especially within the universities, in reaction to decadence and Westernization. The “*major political and religious figure*” of Ayatollah Khomeini was attracting increasing attention and generating anxiety in the government. Westmacott predicted that in the absence of further violent confrontations between demonstrators and security forces, the clerics would desist from agitation under the influence of ‘moderate’ leaders like Ayatollah Shari‘atmadāri. However, even this was questionable, since so far all peaceful attempts to reform

⁹⁰² FCO 8/3210, Westmacott to Miers, 23 February 1978

Iran's institutions had failed, and leading clerics could launch a powerful political assault on the government. Westmacott concluded that opposition activity would remain in the ascendant for the near future.⁹⁰³ In response, Tatham of the FCO acknowledged that things might get worse before they got better, but added that the FCO shared Parsons' view that the Shah would surmount the present troubles.⁹⁰⁴ Further disturbances in early April involved attacks on banks, cinemas and government property. Parsons could not identify any group which was clearly responsible for the disturbances and explained them away as "*the type of petty violence that must occur constantly in a country with a population the size of Iran*", which was peculiar since he also noted the simultaneous occurrence of meetings at the Tehran Bazaar praising Khomeini and criticising the government.⁹⁰⁵

In a May 1978 report, Parsons re-assessed the Shah's chances for creating a stable succession for his son. There were indeed motley opposition groups arrayed against him – the mullahs; the new National Front, championing the human rights, constitutionalism and multi-party system which "*their hero and mentor [Musaddiq] rode roughshod over*", and the extreme Leftists and Islamists at opposing sides of the spectrum. These were not considered a serious threat to the Shah, since his forces could swiftly crush them again as in 1963. However, should the Shah suddenly die, the various opposition groups would probably make separate bids for power (Parsons dwelt upon their fragmented nature) and the religious forces would undoubtedly carry the most clout.⁹⁰⁶ Parsons subsequently went on extended leave until September, leaving the embassy bereft of senior staff during what turned out to be a critical period of upheaval.

Seeking to learn more about the religious opposition, Christopher Rundle from the FCO research department attended a lecture at St. Antony's College, Oxford, by Professor Shaikholeslami of Washington University about the ideology of religious opposition in Iran. He sent a summary of his lecture notes to colleagues, identifying the leaders of the movement, its demands, objectives,

⁹⁰³ FCO 8/3183, Westmacott to Sanderson, 1 March 1978

⁹⁰⁴ FCO 8/3183, Tatham to Westmacott, 8 March 1978

⁹⁰⁵ FCO 8/3210, Parsons to Owen, 6 April 1978

⁹⁰⁶ FCO 8/3194, *What Happens if the Shah Dies?*, Parsons to Owen, 10 May 1978

methods and overall nature. The movement was described as puritan, activist, utopian, unsophisticated, anti-Marxist, anti-intellectual and totalitarian, in stark contrast to the traditional ‘conservative’ Shi‘ism which was passive and apolitical. Shaikholeslami warned that this ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ was a most dangerous type of opposition, whose appeal no secular ideology could match. It was communicated via the mosque network, where full freedom of speech was apparently permitted by the regime.⁹⁰⁷ Meanwhile the FCO grudgingly and “*with foreboding*” approved a request for the Iranian Students’ Society to stage a demonstration in Trafalgar Square about political prisoners in Iran, noting that Iranian students then represented the second largest group of foreign students in Britain after Malaysians.⁹⁰⁸ In Tehran, embassy officials lunched with Guardian correspondent Liz Thurgood and the opposition lawyer Matīn-Daftari, who denied any alliance between the clerical and ‘intellectual’ opposition on the grounds that they had disparate objectives, although there was some acceptance of the more reasonable demands of the clerics.⁹⁰⁹

Rundle’s paper on Islamic fundamentalism in Iran provoked little comment. In June, Lucas wrote to the embassy on the same topic, namely on a summary of lectures given by Professor Hamid Enayat of St. Antony’s College on the subject of Shi‘ite Modernism, broadcast as part of the BBC Radio 3 programme ‘Islam in the Modern World’. Shi‘ite Modernism, Enayat argued, was primarily concerned with the question of Shi‘ism’s relevance and adaptability to the modern world and was characterized by an activist approach to social and political problems. The modernist segment was still a minority in Iran, but was rapidly spreading its influence and gaining traction especially among educated youth, whose renewed interest in religion was part of an anti-materialist backlash and an outlet for political frustration. Lucas requested the embassy’s opinion on the paper and its implications for Iran, but received no response and only a belated acknowledgement in November of that year, by which time military government was in place.⁹¹⁰

⁹⁰⁷ FCO 8/3210, Rundle to Gorham, 3 May 1978

⁹⁰⁸ FCO 8/3210, Lucas to Weir, 10 May 1978

⁹⁰⁹ FCO 8/3210, Lamport to Miers, 10 May 1978

⁹¹⁰ FCO 8/3184, Lucas to Miers, 13 June 1978

The relative calm of the summer and apparent rupture in the forty day mourning cycles was shattered in early August during Ramadan, with further outbreaks of unrest in Isfahan. The embassy continued to deny that the disturbances were cause for alarm, but it was reporting based on second-hand information from the British Council and other sources, as they lacked consular representation and thus first-hand observers in Isfahan, a major city.⁹¹¹ The lack of a consular or official presence in important regional centres significantly impaired officials' ability to assess the condition and mood of the country, in contrast with the earlier period when provincial consulates provided detailed and timely intelligence. At any rate, Lucas was concerned about the Isfahan unrest following the Shah's speech on 5 August promising, among other things, free and fair parliamentary elections in 1979. Far from being mollified by the Shah's speech, the opposition had intensified their resistance, and the embassy seemed too sanguine, based perhaps on ignorance of provincial unrest.⁹¹² Lucas' concern increased when the next embassy despatch from an official named Stephen Lamport expressed surprise at the religious and moral – as opposed to economic – grievances of the protesters. Lamport noted that “*as a Westerner*” he would have expected an inverse correlation between economic improvement and discontent, whereas in Iran the economy had improved since 1977 but unrest was increasing.⁹¹³ Lucas was surprised at Lamport's pained attitude when describing the religious motives of the disturbances, which he thought probably accounted for the embassy's undue optimism and distorted reporting, and remarked tersely that a diplomatic observer should expect what is applicable to the country in question and not what is normal at home.⁹¹⁴

The Abadan cinema fire heightened the tense atmosphere in the country, with government and opposition making mutual accusations of arson. The ensuing attacks on banks, cinemas and restaurants however were not seen by the embassy as specifically directed against the government but rather a manifestation of the prevailing unease.⁹¹⁵ This precipitated a change of government at the end of August which granted significant concessions to all factions of the opposition, but

⁹¹¹ FCO 8/3184, Chalmers to Lucas, 7 August 1978

⁹¹² FCO 8/3184, Lucas to Weir, 14 August 1978

⁹¹³ FCO 8/3184, Lamport to Gorham, 17 August 1978

⁹¹⁴ FCO 8/3184, Lucas to Weir, 22 August 1978

⁹¹⁵ FCO 8/3184, Lamport to Gorham, 24 August 1978

especially the clerics. The latter however were a divided group without cohesive demands, and the ‘moderates’ represented by Ayatollah Shari‘atmadāri were temporarily being eclipsed by the ‘radical’ Khomeini camp, although religious fervour was expected to subside after Ramazan and the moderates were expected to re-assert themselves. There was no real interest for the “*Islamic Church*” to dispose of the Pahlavis, argued Chalmers, given how uncertain the alternatives were – possibly an implicit reference to a Communist take-over - so the Shah should be able to bargain with them. The student, legal and other intelligentsia-centred opposition would persist and be more difficult to contain.⁹¹⁶

Up to this point, Parsons and others lamented that the Shah had somewhat lost the political initiative and that the country was drifting off course. September 1978 marked a turning point when the initiative clearly passed to the opposition – namely, the religious opposition. Lucas sensed this when he wrote to Judd about the religious opposition’s implacable attitude to the new Sharīf-Imāmi government. To further complicate matters, concessions to the religious opposition would not enhance the cause of liberalization in Iran and would rile the intellectuals. The overall prospects for compromise between the Shah and his motley opposition were looking less promising.⁹¹⁷ It was reckoned that if Khomeini suddenly appeared in Tehran, he would command support from seventy percent of the population – this when the Ayatollah was still a shadowy figure for officials and the outside world.⁹¹⁸ The religious opposition – in particular the Khomeini camp - kept increasing in size and gaining momentum to the point where it was deemed the most influential segment of the opposition, although it was not referred to as ‘political’, a name reserved for the secular and liberal nationalist groups such as the National Front, which was considered to be the only “*organized opposition party*”.⁹¹⁹ Sharīf-Imāmi’s concessions did little to appease the clerics, who considered them to be only the first step towards proper respect for Islam. In spite of this, the embassy ventured there would probably be a backlash to the more extreme demands of the clerics amongst the entrepreneurial and middle classes, who wanted neither a Musaddiq-style

⁹¹⁶ FCO 8/3184, Chalmers to Owen (FCO), 29 August 1978

⁹¹⁷ FCO 8/3184, Lucas to Judd, 4 September 1978

⁹¹⁸ FCO 8/3184, Chalmers to Gorham, 4 September 1978

⁹¹⁹ FCO 8/3184, Chalmers to FCO, 7 September 1978

regime nor an Islamic state. Lucas felt vindicated that the embassy had disregarded his earlier concern that the Shah was underestimating the religious opposition.⁹²⁰ The embassy subsequently admitted its inadequate knowledge of the religious forces in Iran which had caused the present groundswell of opposition.⁹²¹

The unrest following the appointment of the Sharīf-Imāmi government convinced the embassy – still without Parsons who was on leave - that if any of the current opposition groups seized power it would seriously jeopardise Britain’s commercial, defence and political interests in Iran.⁹²² At the FCO Judd took exception to this claim, arguing that any attempts to thwart the opposition would also inevitably harm their interests in the long-term – thus, if the Shah fell, at least the British would not be too strongly associated with trying to prevent this.⁹²³ In response, Lucas reasserted the futility of fraternising with the opposition or distancing Britain from the Shah. All of the possible successor regimes to the Shah, irrespective of Britain’s current stance towards them, would be pro-Soviet or anti-Western by default, whether a “*Muslim reactionary administration...spearheaded by the National Front*”, a Communist Tudeh-led regime or a military regime like Gadhafi’s. The ‘red hand’ of Moscow never seemed to be far. A clerical regime was thought susceptible to exploitation by the Soviet Union, which was suspected of involvement in the current unrest.⁹²⁴ Lucas also felt that the Tudeh had been exploiting the first period of liberalisation in 1977 which had been spearheaded by the intelligentsia whereas the secular opposition such as the National Front was thought redolent of the “*xenophobic policies and attitudes*” of Musaddiq’s time.⁹²⁵ However, none of the various strands of opposition were thought capable of forming an alternative government, and the Shah’s fall could only precipitate chaos.⁹²⁶

Thus the opposition, especially of the religious bent, remained ‘untouchable’ in official eyes.

Callaghan’s message of sympathy to the Shah had sparked adverse reaction from left-wing Labour MPs, to whom the government responded that a substantial portion of the opposition was led by

⁹²⁰ FCO 8/3184, Chalmers to Lucas, 6 September 1978

⁹²¹ FCO 8/3185, Lucas to Tatham, 14 September 1978

⁹²² FCO 8/3184, Chalmers to Lucas, Parsons, 8 September 1978

⁹²³ FCO 8/3185, Judd to Lucas, 12 September 1978

⁹²⁴ FCO 8/3185, Lucas to Judd, 13 September 1978

⁹²⁵ FCO 8/3185, Lucas (Cabinet Speaking Note), 14 September 1978

⁹²⁶ FCO 8/3185, Tatham to Lucas, 15 September 1978

obscurantist clerics who were even less accommodating than the Pahlavis.⁹²⁷ Parsons reassured the Shah that since 1971 the embassy had severed all contact with clerics, even the moderates, for fear of displeasing him.⁹²⁸ When Sādeq Qotbzādah, the European representative of the ‘Liberation Movement’ and a close confidant of Khomeini visited the UK to attend the Labour Party conference in Blackpool, his request to meet with FCO officials was abruptly vetoed by Lucas on the grounds that it would undermine all recent British efforts to pacify the Shah and reassure him that no ‘hedging of bets’ was taking place with the opposition.⁹²⁹ When rumours began circulating about the imminent expulsion of Khomeini from Iraq, Parsons began speculating how the Ayatollah could be prevented from seeking his next place of refuge in Britain.⁹³⁰ In response to parliamentary critics, the FCO called the opposition an “*ill-sorted and unnatural coalition*” dominated by reactionaries bent on reversing the Shah’s progress.⁹³¹

Parsons believed that it was possible to contain and defuse the Shah’s inveterate opponents – Khomeini and the religious extremists, the National Front, the Tudeh - before the 1979 elections. These extremists were influential among the rootless urban masses and educated youth, although this was countered by the “*silent majority*” of village and small-town dwellers and modern sector workers who backed the Shah. A clerical government was not even mentioned as a possible alternative regime should the Shah go, suggesting that Parsons did not deem them capable of forming an administration.⁹³² Cooperation with the moderate clerics was thought critical to defusing the situation, and to this end Parsons sought to despatch a special British envoy to Ayatollah Shari‘atmadāri to reaffirm the British backing for the Shah, lest Shari‘atmadāri should harbour any doubts over the British position on the eve of his secret dialogue with the Iranian government.⁹³³

⁹²⁷ Guardian, 18 September 1978

⁹²⁸ FCO 8/3185, Parsons to FCO, 16 September 1978

⁹²⁹ FCO 8/3185, Lucas to Stephen, 21 September 1978

⁹³⁰ FCO 8/3185, Parsons to FCO, 20 September 1978

⁹³¹ FCO 8/3185, Prendergast to Sanders, 25 September 1978

⁹³² FCO 8/3185, Parsons to FCO, 25 September 1978

⁹³³ FCO 8/3185, Parsons to FCO, 25 September 1978

The moderate clerics however would soon become a moot point with Khomeini looming large. The FCO research department confirmed his intransigent opposition to the Shah and his unparalleled influence with the masses.⁹³⁴ He had just requested a Kuwaiti visa, forged an alliance with the Tudeh and National Front and was allegedly funding every theological student in the country to the tune of ten thousand rials per month. In a pained discussion between Parsons, US ambassador Bill Sullivan and Sharīf-Imāmi, the latter panicked about the consequences of Khomeini returning to Iran – civil war if he was arrested and the Shah’s collapse if he was left at large – and asked the ambassadors for advice. Parsons thought it best to entreat the Iraqis to keep Khomeini there where he could be monitored, and recommended immediate re-exile if he returned to Iran.⁹³⁵ Owen, incredulous about the rumoured Tudeh/Khomeini alliance, asked whether the government could not do more to bolster Shari‘atmadāri against Khomeini, for instance by financing him to compete for student loyalty or blocking Khomeini’s funds. He agreed that Khomeini was best kept in Iraq.⁹³⁶ Parsons replied that the problem was not bolstering Shari‘atmadāri, who was already strong enough, but bolstering the government and forging trust with the moderates. Subsidising Shari‘atmadāri was out of the question – this would immediately become public knowledge and discredit both parties. Khomeini was now a redoubtable force – religious seniority and prestige combined with the “*glamour of exile*” and a record of unwavering opposition to the Shah – whose appearance in the present conditions would convulse the country.⁹³⁷ Upon hearing of Khomeini’s departure from Najaf for Kuwait, Parsons assured Sharīf-Imāmi that HMG would implore the Kuwaitis to prevent the Ayatollah from leaving for Iran and preferably send him as far away as possible from the area. Sharīf-Imāmi asked if the Americans would do likewise.⁹³⁸ They demurred, concerned about the reaction from the State Department, but the FCO agreed to make such representations if confidentiality could be guaranteed, although this decision was ultimately overruled at ministerial level.⁹³⁹ In the end, Khomeini was barred from Kuwait by the local

⁹³⁴ FCO 8/3187, Grier to Gorham, 6 October 1978

⁹³⁵ FCO 8/3186, Parsons to FCO, 3 October 1978

⁹³⁶ FCO 8/3186, Owen to Parsons, 3 October 1978

⁹³⁷ FCO 8/3186, Parsons to Owen, 4 October 1978

⁹³⁸ FCO 8/3186, Parsons to FCO, 4 October 1978

⁹³⁹ FCO 8/3186, Weir to Judd, 4 October 1978

authorities and returned to Iraq. It was hoped he would go instead to Syria where the security forces could keep him under surveillance.⁹⁴⁰ Soon thereafter Khomeini resurfaced in Paris, having travelled there as a tourist on his Iranian passport. When the question arose of whether Khomeini would be given refuge in Britain, Parsons responded that there were some legal grounds for circumscribing his seditious activities there but no way to prevent his entry.⁹⁴¹ This was confirmed by the FCO and David Owen, who felt Khomeini could be neutralised if far removed from Iran and in Britain at least officials could keep an eye on his activities.⁹⁴²

Parsons confirmed that the clerical faction now predominated amongst the diverse opposition, thanks to the ease and speed of disseminating political views through the national mosque network and the near universal respect accorded to the clerics. The moderate ayatollahs of Qum and Mashhad simply wanted a constitutional monarchy with proper respect accorded to Islam rather than positions of power for themselves and the people allegedly did not want a theocratic government. However, Khomeini's consistent appeal to topple the Shah had tapped into a deep vein of popular antipathy and the traditional clerics feared being upstaged by extremists. The actual opposition parties had little clout, even the organized National Front, while the Tudeh was thought to be operating clandestinely through the mosque network. Protest slogans were primarily 'moral' and pro-Khomeini rather than the typical economic demands of the poor, reflecting a desire for less corruption and repression and more honesty and justice in the government.⁹⁴³ The latter demand was the one which united all the various strands of the opposition – urban proletariat, clerics, radical leftists and liberal intelligentsia alike. Thus for the first time, Parsons identified a common grievance for the disparate opposition.⁹⁴⁴ In a tense audience with the Shah, Parsons advised the monarch to 'keep calm and carry on', since the government still held most of the levers of authority, while the opposition relied primarily on "*emotional agitation*". Events had been moving with furious speed and sooner or later, if the government showed sufficient stamina, the opposition

⁹⁴⁰ FCO 8/3186, Parsons to FCO, 5 October 1978

⁹⁴¹ FCO 8/3186, Parsons to FCO, 7 October 1978

⁹⁴² FCO 8/3186, Lucas to Weir, 10 October 1978; Owen to Parsons, 12 October 1978

⁹⁴³ FCO 8/3186, Parsons to FCO, Owen, 6 October 1978

⁹⁴⁴ FCO 8/3186, Parsons to Owen, 9 October 1978

would collapse and the moderates may regain the upper hand, especially if Khomeini could be restrained at a safe distance.⁹⁴⁵ Indeed Sharīf-Imāmi and a significant number of Iranians believed that Khomeini had blundered by going to a far-off non-Muslim country where the Tudeh was headquartered (Paris), and that his influence would thenceforth wane.⁹⁴⁶

Parsons was alarmed at how all classes of Iranians seemed to have swiftly lost what he had understood to be their former “*respect and awe*” for the Shah, who was back in a dejected frame of mind. However, following a 19 October television address when the Shah professed his devotion to the constitution and liberalisation, Parsons reassured the monarch that the sentiments expressed therein would satisfy all moderates of good will and intelligence and detract from extremist influence. Overall, he expected the many Iranians in the ‘middle ground’ to soon reassert their position.⁹⁴⁷ The actual situation however seemed far from this, with political unrest and strikes in the oil industry, increasing street disturbances, opposition figures such as Mehdi Bāzargān and Karīm Sanjābi visiting Khomeini in Paris to forge a united front and a general wave of xenophobia sweeping across the country.⁹⁴⁸ Owen, meanwhile, caused an uproar with his comments in defence of the Shah on ITV’s *Weekend World* programme. He argued that were the Shah to go, his replacement would initially be a “*very right-wing*” government, which would quickly be usurped by the Left, a composite of Communists, the Soviet Union and terrorists. He also remarked that human rights would deteriorate under the Shah’s fanatical Muslim opponents, particularly for women.⁹⁴⁹

In a belated attempt to shed more light on the religious opposition, the embassy produced a paper on what they referred to as the “*Islamic church*”, which they admitted was superficial in character since they lacked the resources and knowledge to produce a more detailed assessment. The paper argued that clerics could not simply be placed in a conventional ‘left to right’ political spectrum

⁹⁴⁵ FCO 8/3186, Parsons to FCO, 11 October 1978

⁹⁴⁶ FCO 8/3186, Parson to FCO, 12 October 1978

⁹⁴⁷ FCO 8/3187, Parsons to FCO, 23 October 1978

⁹⁴⁸ FCO 8/3187, Parsons to FCO, 25 October 1978

⁹⁴⁹ Times, 23 October 1978; Guardian, 23 October 1978

and written off as reactionaries. It also noted that Shi‘ism was uniquely able to express the dissatisfaction of the masses. The main demand by the moderate ayatollahs was respect for the constitution and not a republic, Islamic or otherwise, although public respect for the moral precepts of Islam was essential. Iranians, however, were not deemed fanatical in the manner of Saudis, for instance, and the resurgence of Islamic symbols and ideals (e.g. veiling) was a mark of protest rather than puritanism – the inverse of Parsons’ view expressed in early 1978 that religious symbolism was ‘puritan’ rather than political. In sum, the clerics shared the demands of the wider opposition – more justice, more freedom, less oppression – but also sought a different style of government which respected Islam and native Iranian values and priorities over foreign ones.⁹⁵⁰ Lucas and others from the FCO expressed astonishment at how long it had taken the embassy to latch onto this vital issue, despite having receiving explicit prompting earlier that year (Lucas’ May letter on Hamid Enayat’s lectures). They remained convinced that an Islamic Republic would be “*disastrous*”.⁹⁵¹ Rundle seconded this apprehension, feeling the embassy paper was too charitable in its assessment of the democratic and progressive character of Shi‘ism.⁹⁵² Rundle, who had toured Iran in the autumn of 1978 to investigate developments there, wrote in his memoirs that the Islamic opposition was undoubtedly dominant by that time.⁹⁵³

The massive unrest of 5 November led to the appointment of military government the following day. This was seen as unfortunate but inevitable, since the other alternative, a national coalition government, could only yield to the extreme demands of the “*bitter, vengeful and backward-looking*” Khomeini. It was noteworthy that the perpetrators of the 5 November attacks were not “*mindless thugs*” but “*rational, educated middle and lower middle class youth*”, who were disciplined and refrained from indiscriminate violence. The prospects for a successful military government would depend almost entirely on Khomeini, whose verdict from Paris was awaited

⁹⁵⁰ FCO 8/3208, Lamport to Lucas, 5 November 1978

⁹⁵¹ FCO/3208, Lucas to Tatham, 8 November 1978

⁹⁵² FCO 8/3208, Rundle to Gorham, 24 November 1978

⁹⁵³ Rundle, *Colwyn Bay to Kabul*, 108

with bated breath.⁹⁵⁴ The same day, Khomeini denounced the government, calling on Iranians to resist until the Shah was overthrown. He cast special scorn on the British government and its responsibility for foisting the present dynasty upon Iran.⁹⁵⁵ Other main opposition groups were no more amenable and the National Front issued a joint call with the ayatollah demanding an Islamic style government. Officials conceded the “*eloquence and rhetorical command*” of Khomeini’s communiques and the effectiveness of his attacks on the credibility of the Shah, which explained his pre-eminent influence.⁹⁵⁶

During November and early December, numerous meetings took place between Miers and assorted members of the ‘political’ opposition, including Nasīr Mīnāchi and Dr. Mehdi Bāzargān of the Liberation Movement, Muẓaffar Baqā’i of the Toilers Party, and Dr. Shāpūr Bakhtiār of the National Front. Mīnāchi’s initial approach was to propose the Shah’s withdrawal and the institution of a regency council, which could restore normality to the country if it obtained the assent of Khomeini and the Shah, and requested the embassy to approach the latter with this proposition. Miers doubted the viability of the plan, feeling it would be rejected by the armed forces and said that as outsiders Britain could not involve itself in such schemes.⁹⁵⁷ Over the course of several meetings with Miers, Bakhtiār was “*strangely confident*” about the prospects for a reformist government to pacify the country and dismissive of Khomeini and the religious fervour sweeping the country. The National Front was clearly vying for power but sought to evade responsibility for keeping order during the impending Muharram demonstrations.⁹⁵⁸ The political opposition groups were engaged in a bewildering array of manoeuvres with the Shah via numerous intermediaries such as former Prime Ministers ‘Alī Amīni and Sharīf-Imāmi. Parsons identified two broad groupings: the National Front and the Liberation Movement. Shāpūr Bakhtiār, a member of the National Front executive committee met with Miers and expounded at length that a Prime Minister of irreproachable reputation could solve the current problems, and that Khomeini’s influence was

⁹⁵⁴ FCO 8/3188, Weir to Lucas, 6 November 1978

⁹⁵⁵ FCO 8/3188, Henderson to FCO, 6 November 1978

⁹⁵⁶ FCO 8/3208, Gorham to Lucas, 28 November 1978

⁹⁵⁷ FCO 8/3351, Miers to Lamport, 8 November 1978

⁹⁵⁸ FCO 8/3351, Miers to Lamport, 26 November 1978, 7 December 1978

declining. Bāzargān and Mīnāchi were still advocating the Shah's departure, a regency council, elections and a referendum, which they claimed would enjoy the support of the nation. Unlike the National Front, the Liberation Movement was more religiously oriented and not averse to Khomeini. Parsons felt that these manoeuvres had "*an atmosphere of unreality*" and quoted the Foreign Minister's view that the opposition were merely "*playing with words in a vacuum*" while Khomeini's prestige and influence mushroomed.⁹⁵⁹ Miers felt that Bāzargān and Mīnāchi's proposals were more viable, given their standing with Khomeini, but agreed that discussions between the Shah's representatives and the National Front – which excluded Bāzargān et al – had a touch of futility about them.⁹⁶⁰ During the approaching holy month of Muharram, heightened religious emotions were expected to severely test the government's mettle. Two days into Muharram, Parsons remarked that Tehran was reminiscent of "*Khartoum during General Gordon's time*" and noted the unreality of the situation as unpopular opposition parties hammed up their performance for journalists, while the streets and rooftops of the capital resonated with the piercing chants of 'Allahu Akbar'. The people of Tehran, following communiqués from Khomeini, had "*successfully and massively defied*" the military government and undermined its authority by ignoring the curfew and holding strikes and processions.⁹⁶¹

Should Khomeini eventually triumph, his initial foreign policy stance was expected to be intensely hostile to the West, especially the US and Britain, and to reflect his 'hysterically' xenophobic, Islamist and anti-Zionist views. However, on two important points his programme would coincide with important Western interests: his non-sectarian emphasis on the unity of Islam and his virulent anti-Communism. The former enhanced the likelihood of Gulf stability, since he would probably seek good relations with the other Islamic states of the Gulf, while the latter ensured that he would protect Iran's borders against Communist/Soviet infiltration as zealously as the Shah. It was expected that the initial revolutionary fervour of foreign and trade policy would soon be tempered by pragmatism, and that any religious regime would realize that Iran's "*economic survival and*

⁹⁵⁹ FCO 8/3189, Parsons to FCO, 27 November 1978

⁹⁶⁰ FCO 8/3351, Miers to Webb, 26 November 1978

⁹⁶¹ FCO 8/3189, Parsons to FCO, 3 December 1978

national security” was linked to the West, which provided essential resources.⁹⁶² The research paper underestimated the ideological zeal of a radical Muslim regime and overlooked the fact that a radical Shi‘i theocracy would alarm the Sunni kingdoms and emirates of the Gulf irrespective of Khomeini’s ideals and could prove equally provocative for Iraqi Shi‘is, although this was mentioned in other papers.

Massive, peaceful marches took place on Tasua and Ashura (10 and 11 December) which brought over a million people onto the street and convinced Parsons that the military government, having acquiesced in the demonstrations, did not have full authority. The seventeen point ‘Shahyad Declaration’ enumerated the demands of the masses and was read out to the crowds by a “*leading mullah*”; this was Ayatollah Taleqāni although Parsons did not refer to him by name or appear to know who he was. The first point designated Khomeini as the leader of the revolution and pledged the people to do his bidding, but the text made no explicit mention of an Islamic republic. The adoption of the declaration by the ‘political’ opposition, i.e. the National Front and Human Rights Committee had brought the secular/liberal and religious strands of opposition closer together, however Parsons questioned where the opposition would find the momentum to implement its demands now that the climax of Muharram had passed. Furthermore, he maintained that most of the main political elements in Iran – including the military, religious and political opposition and intermediaries around the Shah – were not “*republican at heart*” and may yet successfully broker a political solution which involved the Shah.⁹⁶³ Parsons somewhat changed his tone again after digesting the polarising events of Muharram. Under Khomeini’s sway, the opposition had paralysed the country with strikes and eclipsed the secular liberal opposition. This, he hoped, would compel the Shah, moderate religious leaders, liberal opposition and armed forces to realize that they faced disaster unless they cooperated in “*defusing Khomeini*”. How this could be done was unclear, particularly in light of Parsons’ observations since October that a large mass of the

⁹⁶² FCO 8/3189, Grier to Tatham, 6 December 1978

⁹⁶³ FCO 8/3189, Parsons to FCO, 10, 11, 13 December 1978

country was behind the exiled Ayatollah.⁹⁶⁴

Following his attendance at a meeting of the Labour Party Middle East subcommittee on Iran, which involved discussion of a paper by Fred Halliday, Frank Judd began to probe more seriously for information about opposition figures and the extent of embassy contact with them.

Judd also advocated the development of 'non-official' contacts between British nationals and those who might figure prominently in Iran's future and asked how to guarantee the continued release of political prisoners, prompting Lucas to comment in the margin "*we don't run the country!*"⁹⁶⁵

Owen queried whether potential future Iranian leaders should be invited to Britain, eliciting a marginal "*crazy!*" from Lucas.⁹⁶⁶ Miers duly produced a list of prominent opposition personalities

and their biographical information, including several such as Bāzargān, Mīnāchi and Shapur

Bakhtiār who had recently approached the embassy on their own initiative. However, Miers candidly admitted that since Parsons arrived in 1974, fear of the Shah had precluded all contact

with opposition personalities, however anodyne, while the Shah was duly informed of any

approaches to the embassy. Even now, any meeting between Parsons and figures such as Bāzargān could be seen as interference in Iran's internal affairs, although Parsons claimed he would be

thrilled to visit Qom and converse with the ayatollahs in Arabic.⁹⁶⁷ During a subsequent policy

review meeting, it was deemed imperative for the embassy to deepen its knowledge of the

opposition, especially of students who had studied abroad, whom Owen thought responsible (rather than the clerics or Communists) for the demonstrations which had been taking place for months.

Even at this stage, Lucas was chary of anything more than discreet contacts and rejected the idea of

meetings between Owen and any opposition member. He quoted Bakhtiār's optimistic prediction

that "*Khomeini's star may be on the wane*",⁹⁶⁸ that Iranians were allegedly waking up to the

unsettling implications of his radicalism and that if Khomeini had been in contact with the

PDRY⁹⁶⁹ as alleged, Britain could use this to undermine him.⁹⁷⁰ A few weeks later, Lucas tried to

⁹⁶⁴ FCO 8/3190, Parsons to FCO, 19 December 1978

⁹⁶⁵ FCO 8/3351, Judd to Owen, 14 December 1978

⁹⁶⁶ FCO 8/3351, Walden to Lucas, 15 December 1978

⁹⁶⁷ FCO 8/3351, Miers to Gorham, 14 December 1978

⁹⁶⁸ FCO 8/3351, Miers to Parsons, 26 November 1978

⁹⁶⁹ People's Democratic Republic of Yemen

absolve the embassy of charges of neglect by arguing that there had not been any leading opposition figures until late 1978 and thus no way of profiling or contacting them.⁹⁷¹

Bakhtiār was up next to try and form a government. His appointment as Prime Minister split the National Front into supporters and detractors, the latter headed by Karim Sanjābi.⁹⁷² Soon after Bakhtiār presented his cabinet to the Shah, Khomeini called it “*the work of the devil*” and ordered the oil strikes to continue. A national mourning day took place on 8 January for the deceased of the recent disturbances at the behest of Khomeini and the Qum ayatollahs and turbulence reigned in the provinces, especially in Tabriz. In Tehran, clerics acting in Khomeini’s name distributed food and fuel to the poor suffering in the cold.⁹⁷³ Khomeini announced he was forming an ‘Islamic Revolutionary Council’ to generate new constitutional laws and prepare for elections to a new assembly, and pro-Khomeini demonstrations continued at Tehran University and even in the Ministry of Justice. On the eve of the Shah’s departure, Khomeini’s precise intentions were unknown, although it seemed he could use his “*extraordinary degree of enthusiasm and popular acclaim*” to establish a provisional government and marginalise Bakhtiār.⁹⁷⁴

Prompted by the massive demonstrations over the past months, the embassy was finally investigating the organisational methods of the opposition. They cited the clerical-bazaar network, which had shown itself capable of mobilising and coordinating mass protests. They also noted the phenomenon of the *dowreh*, which was likened to a “*mafia*” type network where groups of friends and associates belonging to different *dowrehs* would gather weekly to exchange news and information. The nationwide network of overlapping *dowrehs* enabled the rapid dissemination of information and coordination of protest activities, an old system which ostensibly had been in use since the days of the 1891 Tobacco protests. The clerics were prime movers in this system, while the National Front was merely “*a junior and sometimes unwanted partner*”. However, the violence

⁹⁷⁰ FCO 8/3190, Lucas to Weir, 21 December 1978

⁹⁷¹ FCO 3/3351, Lucas to Weir, 10 January 1979

⁹⁷² FCO 8/3190, Parsons to FCO, 29 December 1978

⁹⁷³ FCO 8/3351, Parsons to FCO, 10 January 1979

⁹⁷⁴ FCO 8/3351, Parsons to FCO, 15 January 1979

and vandalism manifest in some of the demonstrations emanated from a sinister and obscure source of extremism, since the clerics had never advocated such violence. Miers dismissed the possibilities of communist, Soviet or SAVAK/agent provocateur activity, feeling that the “*Mujaheddin*” (presumably the Mujāhidīn-i Khalq) or other subversive groups could be responsible, and requested FCO background information on them.⁹⁷⁵

Khomeini remained an enigma to officials even when the Shah had virtually left the scene. On 16 January, the day of the Shah’s departure, Lucas submitted a note for Owen, stating there was a “*great deal unknown*” about Khomeini’s precise views and activities, beyond that he was Islamic, nationalist, and opposed to all forms of foreign dependence. He was also a “*political innocent*” and not a major theologian. His entourage consisted of intelligent and well-informed individuals who had impeccably managed his campaign on the ground in Iran. Weir commented that the “*Khomeini bandwagon*” now seemed unstoppable and perfectly poised to take advantage of the situation in Iran which was ready for the emergence of “*a Lenin*”.⁹⁷⁶ In his last dispatch as ambassador, Parsons admitted that Khomeini’s influence predominated and that the establishment of his Islamic Republic was inevitable because of great popular demand. Meanwhile, the “*real extremists*” would continue to thrive in the anarchy, although their identities were unknown.⁹⁷⁷ The research department attempted to elucidate the nature of these shadowy extremists and their links with clerical opposition leaders. There was some evidence of past links between Bāzargān, Khomeini, Tāleqāni and terrorist groups, and all would have an interest “*in using or sanctioning the terrorist weapon*”, but overall the research was inconclusive.⁹⁷⁸

In light of Khomeini’s imminent return, David Owen received a Cabinet speaking note stating that continued intransigence on Khomeini’s part could spark considerable conflict and army retaliation, implying that the army would hold fast and Khomeini could be forced to compromise.⁹⁷⁹ On 31 January, the new ambassador John Graham wrote that “*waiting for Godot*” was finally over and the

⁹⁷⁵ FCO 8/3351, Miers to Lucas, 13 January 1979

⁹⁷⁶ FCO 8/3351, Lucas to Weir, 16 January 1979

⁹⁷⁷ FCO 8/3352, Parsons to FCO, 20 January 1979

⁹⁷⁸ FCO 8/3352, Rundle to Gorham, 26 January 1979

⁹⁷⁹ FCO 8/3352, Munro, 31 January 1979

Ayatollah was due back. What would happen was anyone's guess; Khomeini had urged calm like the “*ringmaster in Beckett's play*”, but equally like the ringmaster he “*may have no answers*”.⁹⁸⁰ Khomeini duly arrived with clear answers, namely that the existing government was illegal and would be replaced by one with popular support. On 5 February he announced Mehdi Bāzargān as the Prime Minister of his provisional government, thereby instituting a period of dual rival governments. Graham paid a visit to Bāzargān and apologised for the use of Chieftain tanks against demonstrators, which was entirely contrary to their intended use.⁹⁸¹ This was his last meeting with Bāzargān as a member of the opposition; by their next meeting the soft-spoken engineer would have assumed his position as the first Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

II. Press, parliament and civil society

The opposition of the first period was lauded by press and civil society as a harbinger of progress and enlightenment to the benighted Persian kingdom, whereas in the 1970s it defied such clear categorization. In much of the press, the opposition was initially presented as the tragic victim of the Shah's and SAVAK's brutality. In their January letter to the *Guardian*, Stan Newens, Neil Kinnock and others decried the treatment suffered by novelists, artists and academics such as Vida Tabrīzi, Fereydūn Tonekāboni and a theatre group rehearsing ‘The Parasite’ by Maxim Gorky.⁹⁸² Protests were also made against the treatment of the same individuals and similar victims of the Shah's repression in the *Labour Leader*, the paper of the Independent Labour Party.⁹⁸³ The *Times* ran a column entitled ‘prisoners of conscience’, which often featured Iranians such as the young socialist Nāssir Kākhsāz, and detailed their gruesome treatment at the hands of SAVAK.⁹⁸⁴ The May 1976 ICJ report on legal processes in Iran report detailed the torture of poet Reza Barāheni,

⁹⁸⁰ FCO 8/3352, Graham to FCO, 31 January 1979

⁹⁸¹ FCO 8/3352, Graham to FCO, 5 February 1979

⁹⁸² *Guardian*, 31 January 1976

⁹⁸³ *Labour Leader*, April 1976

⁹⁸⁴ *Times*, 12 April 1976

whose case was known to the embassy but deemed suspicious based on his status as an ex-SAVAK employee.⁹⁸⁵

The second half of the year was dominated by the issues of torture and prisoners of conscience in Iran and elsewhere, with reports from Amnesty International and CARI appearing in November. The CARI report identified several incipient opposition movements in Iran and argued that the entire country was suffering under the Pahlavis and would soon turn against them. These included militant workers fighting for better pay and working conditions; the dissident intelligentsia such as academics, artists, writers and a radicalising student population; armed guerrillas groups such as the “*People’s Mojahedeen and Fadayee*” whose violent activities were deemed ‘inevitable’ since all other means for expression were stifled; and finally radical Muslim clerics who “*refuse to use their influence for the regime’s propaganda*” instead using it to fight injustice, given that religion was still a force to be reckoned with in Iran. The report went on to describe the incarceration of political prisoners and SAVAK interrogation methods in gruesome detail, sounding like a hybrid of Wormwood Scrubs and the Spanish Inquisition. Iran allegedly had the highest number of political executions in the world and most political prisoners were guilty only of refusing to accept the Shah’s barbaric regime – a statement displayed next to a disturbing photo of a firing squad carrying out an execution. Those not imprisoned were deprived of political and civil rights and declined to vote not out of innate political apathy – as Parsons was wont to claim – but because their votes were known to be meaningless. Empress Farah styled herself as a ‘Patron of the Arts’ and the regime sponsored costly international arts festivals, all the while engaging in censorship and repression of Iranian artists and writers. The report attacked the Shah’s supposed socio-economic triumphs, denouncing the “*Lie of the White Revolution*”, which had done little to benefit those most in need, and the ‘Great Civilization’, with its endemic corruption, wasteful prestige projects, loans to foreign governments and arms purchases. There was strong emphasis on the plight of the working classes and their squalid living conditions. The Shah’s profit-sharing decree was declared meaningless since the regime failed to provide basic amenities for workers and even murdered

⁹⁸⁵ Guardian, 29 May 1976

them if they went on strike. Accompanying photos showed the “*less well-known scenes of the Great Civilisation*” – lepers begging, ragged shepherds and child labourers.⁹⁸⁶ The Amnesty briefing estimated that Iran had anywhere from twenty-five thousand to one hundred thousand political prisoners, figures which were widely re-quoted, and along with Chile topped the list of global human rights offenders.⁹⁸⁷ The report detailed the insalubrious prison conditions, judicial deficiencies and torture practices mentioned in CARI – indeed it was the source of CARI’s material on these matters. It quoted the allegedly spurious case of Reza Barāheni, and mentioned other torture victims by name, in addition to clerical dissidents, ethnic minorities and Marxists which populated the Shah’s prisons. The report noted these groups had multiple motives, for instance a Muslim could be motivated by opposition to Western materialism as much as by religious precepts and a Kurd nationalist could have leftist sympathies.⁹⁸⁸ 1976 ended on a dark note, with Liz Thurgood reporting that repression was “*tighter than ever*”. Some leading writers, like Ahmad Shamlū had fled the country, while others such as Ghulamhusayn Sa’idi were under surveillance and subject to repeated torture and imprisonment.⁹⁸⁹

Following the January *Times* article about the discontent brought about by economic dislocation, covered in Chapter 4, there was surprisingly little comment on opposition activity or on the state of Iranian society until mid-1977. Several newspapers reviewed Margaret Laing’s biography of the Shah, where she adhered to double standards and argued it unfair to judge primitive Eastern societies by advanced Western ideals. On the subject of torture, Fred Halliday derided Laing’s claim that brutality in the Middle East was tolerable and mitigated by “*Asian stoicism in the face of pain, greater acceptance of death, and the teaching of the Koran*” – a vintage Orientalist stereotype which clearly retained public currency outside of Parsons’ dispatches.⁹⁹⁰ CARI’s first bulletin in Spring 1977 contained considerable information about Iranian students in Britain and how they were surveyed and victimised by SAVAK, apparently with the complicity of the Labour

⁹⁸⁶ FCO 8/2998, CARI pamphlet, November 1976

⁹⁸⁷ *Times*, 20 September 1976

⁹⁸⁸ *Guardian*, 29 November 1976; FCO 8/2998, Amnesty briefing on Iran, November 1976

⁹⁸⁹ *Guardian*, 30 December 1976

⁹⁹⁰ *Guardian*, 2 June 1977

government. It highlighted the case of one particular student who was apparently facing deportation because of his involvement in Kurdish and Iranian student societies in Britain, and railed against the Home Office permitting his harassment in order to preserve good relations with the Shah.⁹⁹¹

Documentary maker Alan Hart painted a glowing picture of the Shah's regime in his *Times* piece in June, with special emphasis on the apparently exaggerated scale of human rights abuses.

Numerous political prisoners who had been allegedly subject to torture and died under duress were found by Hart to be alive and well. Their candid descriptions of involvement in 'international terrorism' convinced Hart that the Shah was indeed subject to an international leftist conspiracy, as he often claimed.⁹⁹² Hart's experiences led him to cast aspersions on the motives of the Shah's humanitarian critics, provoking a sharp response from David Simpson, the director of Amnesty International's British section. Simpson rebuked Hart for distortion and omission of facts about political prisoners and trial procedures and pointed out that the very reason that such human rights improvements were materializing and prisoners were now accessible to western media representatives was due to intensive campaigns by organisations (including Amnesty) maligned by Hart.⁹⁹³ Indeed, pressure from Amnesty was widely accepted as responsible for bringing about the invitations for the Red Cross (ICRC) and later ICJ to inspect Iranian prisons.⁹⁹⁴

The opposition in 1977 was largely spearheaded by the intelligentsia and consisted of open letters and manifestoes from the Writer's Association of Iran (WAI) and judges and lawyers demanding freedom of expression and judicial rights. These culminated in late October with speeches and poetry readings to a mass audience at the German Club (Goethe Institute) in Tehran, where calls were made for an end to censorship, among other things. The authors of these various appeals couched their language in what a reporter called "*Persian subtleties*" and claimed to form a loyal opposition to the Shah, invoking their constitutional rights rather than revolution. They were presented as a respectable crowd, a world apart from the 'disloyal' terrorist opposition.

⁹⁹¹ CARI bulletin, Spring 1977

⁹⁹² *Times*, 9 June 1977

⁹⁹³ *Times*, 19 July 1977

⁹⁹⁴ *Guardian*, 28 June 1977

Nevertheless, these events were deemed extraordinary by the straitened standards of Iran and could amount to a major confrontation with the regime. Officials and security forces were thought to be lying low in the run-up to President Carter's November meeting with the Shah, after which they would either afford the dissidents some degree of accommodation or remorselessly crush them, depending on the meeting outcome.⁹⁹⁵ Immediately prior to the Shah's departure for Washington, there was an apparent coalescing of the various oppositional strands, as 56 prominent individuals released a joint letter to the press calling for the end of arbitrary rule and the reinstatement of the constitution. This latest development was thought reminiscent of the old National Front, and differed from previous letters submitted by individual lawyers and judges by virtue of its collective nature.⁹⁹⁶ The Shah's visit to President Carter in Washington was largely portrayed a humiliating debacle, as clashes between the monarch's opponents and supporters in America – the former largely consisting of 'aggressive' students and the latter a more affluent crowd, including air force trainees flown in from Texas specifically for the purpose – resulted in the most violent scenes and heaviest security presence in Washington since the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations of the early 1970s.⁹⁹⁷ The subsequent violent crackdown on the 'moderate' intellectual opposition received scant coverage, with the exception of the winter 1978 CARI bulletin. The *Guardian's* Tehran correspondent Liz Thurgood reported that these peaceful dissidents – lawyers, writers, judges and other intellectuals, as opposed to the violent guerillas who previously characterized the opposition – were temporarily disoriented but not cowed into submission. Their demands for civil liberties and constitutionalism were potentially more dangerous than terrorist bombs. Overall, the opposition movement had grown to become a force which the Shah could no longer dismiss as mere fanatics.⁹⁹⁸

In keeping with its socialist perspective, CARI's autumn 1977 pamphlet on the Iranian working class presented Iran as a society riven by class struggle and oppressed by the Shah's plutocratic dictatorship, with rapacious capitalism as its defining feature. The majority of Iranians were not

⁹⁹⁵ *Guardian*, 26 October 1977

⁹⁹⁶ *Guardian*, 14 November 1977

⁹⁹⁷ *Times*, 15 & 16 November 1977; *Guardian*, 16 November 1977

⁹⁹⁸ *Guardian*, 28 November 1977

benefitting from Iran's oil wealth, but rather struggled to survive without the advantage of a welfare state. The pamphlet enumerated a long list of social problems such as health, housing and education which had not been solved by the White Revolution and which in some cases had been aggravated. Roughly half of the pamphlet was devoted to describing the livelihood of the industrial working class in particular, which had greatly swelled in recent decades. Photographs illustrated the contrast between ruggedly proletarian "*jubilant workers*" demonstrating in Tabriz in 1946 before their flourishing movement was crushed by the CIA, and suited "*bored-looking workers' representatives*" from a state-sanctioned trade union participating in a staged vote in 1976, while a SAVAK agent looked on. Women workers – and women in general – were seen as particularly oppressed and exploited by regime legislation, while child labour was rampant. Strikes and industrial action were illegal, thus any attempts by workers to invoke their rights and mount resistance would be brutally put down by SAVAK. The strong tradition of the Iranian working class and trade union movement had twice been quashed – first by Reza Shah, and then again by his son since 1953, but could once again emerge as a potential force to be reckoned with if it were to regroup and receive empowerment from abroad, such as from the British labour movement.⁹⁹⁹

The CARI autumn 1977 bulletin was almost exclusively devoted to the opposition. It featured a dramatic front cover with six mugshots calling for the release of all Iranian political prisoners and quoting a statistic that more than one Iranian in a thousand was incarcerated for political reasons. Among the mugshots were prominent cleric Ayatollah Muntaziri, who became an important figure in the Islamic Republic, the sociologist Vida Tabrizi, whose case had attracted much Western media attention, and Mas'ud Rajavi, identified as a "*student*".¹⁰⁰⁰ The Shah's much-publicized recent release of five hundred political prisoners was dismissed as a public relations stunt, since tens of thousands of such prisoners still languished in his jails, prompting CARI to announce the official launch of its campaign in defense of Iran's political prisoners. On the positive side, the coalescing forces of discontent, ranging from workers involved in industrial disputes to writers

⁹⁹⁹ CARI pamphlet, *The Iranian Working Class: a survey of conditions, repression and struggles*, 1977, 5-22, 26.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Rajavi was the leader of the Mujāhidīn-i Khalq, the radical Islamist-Marxist organization whose members were largely liquidated or expelled from Iran in the 1980s. Rubin, *US-Iran relations*, 104.

protesting censorship were now making a real impact domestically and internationally, prompting both the Shah and Carter to profess concern for human rights. The bulletin reprinted the full text of two open letters dated June and July 1977 from the Writer's Association of Iran to Prime Minister Hoveyda protesting against censorship and the harassment of intellectuals and demanding basic freedom of expression. The letters, signed by a bevy of Iran's most distinguished literary and intellectual figures, were now in need of wide publicity and support in order to achieve their objectives and prevent reprisals against their signatories. To this end, a further appeal was addressed to Hoveyda in support of the open letters and was signed by Stan Newens, William Wilson and the Secretary of the National Union of Students. The religious aspect of the opposition was also featured in the bulletin. It reported the death earlier that year of Dr. 'Ali Shari'ati, described as a prominent writer, theologian and "*Moslem oppositionist*" to the Shah with a large following among radical Muslim students and youth – where radical meant Leftist rather than Islamic fundamentalist. CARI reporters squarely blamed SAVAK and the Iranian regime for Shari'ati's premature death, having subjected him to imprisonment and harassment. It is interesting to note that CARI was well aware of Shari'ati's activities and appeal to youth, in contrast with British embassy staff in Tehran who thought him an insignificant dissident writer. CARI members also sent a telegram of solidarity to a group of hunger-striking Iranian clerics in Paris, who decried the anti-Islamic, tyrannical conditions prevailing in Iran and demanded the return from exile of their leader, Ayatollah Khomeini as well as the release of imprisoned clerics such as Ayatollahs Tāleqāni and Muntaziri. The authors made no analysis or deeper commentary of the composition and motives of the Islamist movement, which was seen by CARI and the Left as inherently righteous by virtue of its resistance to the Shah.¹⁰⁰¹

CARI's winter 1978 bulletin provided considerable detail on the events leading up to the regime crackdown on the liberal-intellectual opposition in late 1977, noting the numerous unprovoked attacks, deaths, and injuries of prominent figures such as Mehdi Bāzargān, possibly the first time he was mentioned by any British source. This reversion to violence was sparked by the regime's

¹⁰⁰¹ CARI bulletin, Autumn 1977, 1-9, 12-15

fear following the October mass poetry readings and attacks on censorship at the Goethe Institute. Even outside of Iran, the opposition was not safe from the macabre grip of SAVAK, whose alleged surveillance of Iranian students in Britain prompted the NUS president to urge British institutions not to disclose information about these students to the Iranian embassy.¹⁰⁰² During this time, the number of Iranian students enrolled in British institutions of higher education totaled nearly ten thousand, representing the second largest contingent of foreign students (after Malaysians) in the UK.¹⁰⁰³

The *Guardian*'s Liz Thurgood noted that the 9 January Qum attacks elicited a vocal denunciation from Ayatollah Shari'atmadāri, an unprecedented move from a moderate cleric who usually refrained from taking political stances, although her article neglected to mention the inflammatory article about Ayatollah Khomeini which initially provoked the clashes.¹⁰⁰⁴ The CARI winter bulletin described the Qum incident as a 'massacre' of peaceful demonstrators, mainly theological students, reacting against "*provocative press attacks*" on exiled leader Ayatollah Khomeini. Public outrage in Iran followed the clashes, which CARI sought to further publicise by organizing a five-day picket outside of Iran Air's London offices and demanding an international inquiry into the matter.¹⁰⁰⁵

The press concurred that the Tabriz riots of February 1978, which followed the forty-day commemoration ceremony of victims of the Qum attacks, were Iran's worst for 15 years. They received brief mentions in the press, with particular emphasis on the use of British Chieftain tanks by security forces, but their origins, perpetrators and even number of casualties were difficult to establish, with government and opposition sources giving wildly varying information. They were officially blamed on "*hooligans...Islamic Marxists*" and leftist traitors while the opposition accused the government.¹⁰⁰⁶ Liz Thurgood argued that the Tabriz riots reflected the new position of Shi'i clerics within the ranks of the opposition. She noted the enduring power of Islamic traditions

¹⁰⁰² CARI bulletin, Winter 1978, 1-4, 10-11

¹⁰⁰³ HC Deb 19 June 1978 vol 952 cc84-6W84W

¹⁰⁰⁴ *Guardian*, 17 January 1978

¹⁰⁰⁵ CARI bulletin, Winter 1978, 5

¹⁰⁰⁶ *Observer*, 26 February 1978; *Times*, 22 February 1978

in Iran, which had visibly increased over the past two years, and predicted continued clashes with the regime over this – making her one of the first non-diplomatic observers to identify this trend.¹⁰⁰⁷ CARI's Winter 1978 bulletin also noted that in the past several months, open opposition to the regime had escalated to levels unseen since the Qom riots of the early 1960s, with ever-wider segments of the population joining the struggle. The bulletin also featured the first in a series of detailed dossiers on Iran's political prisoners, including a Kurdish nationalist and Ayatollah Muntaziri, described as a distinguished theologian and prominent figure in the Muslim opposition who had lost his hearing as a result of torture in prison.¹⁰⁰⁸ Thus CARI strove to emphasize the extent of the regime's repression by the breadth of opposition it engendered, from members of oppressed ethnic minorities (Kurds) to secular Western-educated students to traditional religious figures. Meanwhile, in the House of Commons on the few occasions the opposition was mentioned they were portrayed as "*democrats*" and beleaguered students who had to demonstrate with covered faces for fear of grievous bodily harm and reprisals against family by SAVAK.¹⁰⁰⁹

Unlike the subdued approach of the mainstream press, CARI gave extensive coverage to the Tabriz 'uprising' of February in its Spring/Summer bulletin in terms reminiscent of Liberal accounts of Tabriz during the 1908-1909 civil war. The bulletin described how the entire nation took heart that Tabriz, the vanguard city of the constitutional revolution, had risen once more to fight tyranny. CARI dramatically described the "*military occupation*" of the city, ordered personally by the Shah following one of Iran's largest ever demonstrations and the people's targeted attacks on symbols of the oppressive regime, such as banks and the Rastākhīz party headquarters. While violent, the attacks were not indiscriminate and were a perfectly justified response to decades of the regime's tyranny and oppression of ethnic Azeris. There was no mention of anti-Western or religious motives for the attacks, giving the impression that the protesters were motivated entirely by rage

¹⁰⁰⁷ Guardian, 3 March 1978

¹⁰⁰⁸ CARI bulletin, Winter 1978, 16-17

¹⁰⁰⁹ HC Deb 25 April 1978 vol 948 c11671167

against the Shah's tyranny. The bulletin went on to detail the further forty day cycles of protest which had taken place in March at Yazd in May at Qum.¹⁰¹⁰

The Shah officially blamed the unrest on 'international communism' and Soviet infiltrators but Liz Thurgood argued it was clearly rooted in social and economic problems arising from inflation and housing shortages.¹⁰¹¹ A subsequent *Guardian* article argued that these problems had created enough social discontent among the poor to allow the Shah's old rivals – the clerics – to incite riots. Thus for the first time a tentative connection was drawn between the economic and religious motives of the opposition, although it was not clearly explained or understood, working on the assumption that clerics opposed modernisation *per se*.¹⁰¹² The first press mention of Ayatollah Khomeini since the 1960s appeared in an article by Patrick Seale about Ayatollah Shari'atmadāri's sermon following the January Qum clashes. The recorded sermon, a "*religious samizdat*", had unleashed forty day cycles of protest not seen since the 1963 riots incited by Khomeini and showed that the 'White Revolution' had had little impact on public feelings about Islam. The core grievance of the opposition was the Shah's trampling of the constitution, whose espousal by the supposedly reactionary clerics was said to be a "*really new phenomenon*" although unbeknownst to Seale it had a clear precedent in 1906. In spite of all this, the opposition was still inchoate and a "*vast newly created and enriched middle class*" was invested in keeping the Shah in power. Seale's argument closely reflected that of Parsons, with his strong belief in a vast and loyal middle class and conviction that the opposition would remain disparate.¹⁰¹³ Persistent cyclical rioting prompted Liz Thurgood to argue in May that the Shi'is of Iran were now directing their wrath against the Shah, making her article first in the British press to highlight the full impact of clerical dissent. Although she continued to argue that the root causes of discontent were economic in nature, she made numerous salient points, namely that "*martyrdom...in the face of political oppression*" was the "*historical heartbeat*" of Shi'ism and that the entry of the clerics raised the potency of the opposition to a new level. While the Shah could imprison twenty thousand intellectual dissidents

¹⁰¹⁰ CARI bulletin, Spring/Summer 1978, 2-3, 9

¹⁰¹¹ *Guardian*, 7 April 1978

¹⁰¹² *Guardian*, 10 April 1978

¹⁰¹³ *Observer*, 16 April 1978

and carry on as before, he could not take down the mosques, whose “*direct hold on the emotions of millions of middle and lower class Iranians*” had the capacity to magnify every incident into a national crisis. Her recognition of enduring middle class piety contrasts with the assumptions of Seale, Parsons and others that the loyalties of this class were vested in the Shah. She argued that the intellectuals needed the clerics and not vice versa, since no political struggle in Iran could succeed without the “*weight of the [clerics] and their ability to command the masses*”, with specific reference to the constitutional revolution. The intelligentsia knew this, in spite of their overall mistrust of the ‘mosque’ and its heroes such as Ayatollah Khomeini, whose fatwas were described as the Muslim equivalent of papal bulls.¹⁰¹⁴ Tehran University students had also re-emerged as a major opposition force. The vast majority of them, being from rural backgrounds, were attracted to religious ideologies and were devotees of the late ‘Ali Shari‘ati, described as an “*Islamic purist*”, while many others were Marxists.¹⁰¹⁵

In contrast with Thurgood’s analysis, *Times* correspondent David Watts argued that the recent riots were fueled by complaints against the Shah which had little to do with religion and more to do with his suppression of the constitution and his ‘selling’ Iran to the West. Unlike Thurgood, Watts did not recognize how these grievances had often been championed by clerics, especially the latter, and he implied that the clerical support base was mainly rural. The persistent rioting in Tabriz was attributed to Azeri nationalism rather than religion and the link between the two in the form of Ayatollah Shari‘atmadāri was not noted.¹⁰¹⁶ A follow-up *Times* editorial argued that in spite of the disturbances, Iranians as a whole were concerned to keep the gains acquired under the Shah and did not seek his overthrow but rather a more open society. A coup in Iran, such as the recent one in neighbouring Afghanistan, was ruled out given the absence of a “*strong rival leader or....political group with army backing*”, thought to be necessary ingredients for regime change. Thus it advocated a “*real national consensus for moderate political change*”, thereby underestimating the intensity of anti-Shah sentiment and overestimating the appeal of moderation (and was rejected as

¹⁰¹⁴ Guardian, 11 May 1978

¹⁰¹⁵ Guardian, 16 May 1978

¹⁰¹⁶ Times, 11 May 1978

impracticable in a follow-up letter to the editor by Iranian ambassador Parvīz Raji).¹⁰¹⁷ The following day on 17 May, a London press conference chaired by Stan Newens featured talks by four former Iranian political prisoners about their incarceration and graphic descriptions of SAVAK torture, which were covered at length in the CARI bulletin and also mentioned in the *Times*, although the latter focused more on one speaker's claim that dissent was increasingly rife in the lower ranks of the Iranian armed forces.¹⁰¹⁸ CARI also reprinted the full text of two appeals from imprisoned Iranians to the United Nations Human Rights Commission detailing their appalling conditions of incarceration and provided further dossiers on both male and female political prisoners.¹⁰¹⁹

The mainstream press was becoming increasingly cognizant of clerical prominence within the opposition. The *Observer* published an interview with Ayatollah Shari'atmadāri (written as if Shariat were his first name and Madari his surname), described as the central figure in all the recent turmoil. The Ayatollah's only demand was for a return to the original constitution, but the overall protest movement seemed to be increasingly directed against the secularism of Iranian society and the emancipation of women, who were now seen in the streets wearing the tent-like chador. These developments concerned the liberal elements of Iranian society, although there was no denying the social potency of a "*bloody turban*", i.e. a clerical victim of the regime's violence.¹⁰²⁰ A *Guardian* article about a general strike marking the anniversary of the 1963 Qom clashes was the first in the mainstream press to mention to Mehdi Bāzargān, a leading opposition figure whose Liberation Movement party was composed of radical Muslim activists.¹⁰²¹

There was a general consensus in the press that Ayatollah Shari'atmadāri was the pre-eminent religious opposition leader, given Khomeini's exile and no expectation of his return to Iran. *Guardian* foreign correspondent Martin Woollacott expected that the uneasy coalition being forged between the religious and secular opposition would continue, given its apparent effectiveness to

¹⁰¹⁷ *Times*, 16 May 1978, 20 May 1978

¹⁰¹⁸ *Times*, 18 May 1978

¹⁰¹⁹ CARI bulletin, Spring/Summer 1978, 10-15, 19-20

¹⁰²⁰ *Observer*, 28 May 1978

¹⁰²¹ *Guardian*, 3 June 1978

date in extracting concessions from the Shah and the indispensable “*muscle*” provided by the religious side. In order to better understand the clerical forces at work, Woollacott visited Qum, where he found “*positively mediaeval*” bigotry, xenophobia and a puritanical atmosphere reminiscent of Calvin’s Geneva. Here was an alternative Iran which outsiders had long overlooked, undergirded by potent social forces such as clerics and the bazaar. It offered a glimpse of the “*repressive public morality*” which would engulf Iran if the religious opposition were to seize power.¹⁰²² The mainstream press began to treat the opposition with more caution and ambivalence, given its increasingly religious character and confusing objectives. The *Times* seemed baffled that clerics intended to get on the political bandwagon, citing Ayatollah Shari‘atmadāri’s keenness to ensure that free elections be held in 1979 and that pious deputies be elected.¹⁰²³ However, the *Sunday Times* still insisted that devout Iranian Muslims knew their country could not survive without the Shah, whose absence would create an inviting vacuum for Communists, while the middle classes feared the ayatollahs more than the monarchy.¹⁰²⁴

CARI, on the other hand, began to downplay the religious aspects of the opposition, perhaps out of deliberate intent to focus on workers, women and ethnic groups. When chador-clad women demonstrated outside of Qaṣr prison in support of hunger-striking women prisoners inside, CARI explained that the women were wearing black veils to conceal their identities from SAVAK.¹⁰²⁵ While this was not necessarily untrue, there was no mention of the chador’s religious significance.

Renewed unrest and the imposition of martial law in Isfahan were seen as the beginning of a new phase, distinct from the forty-day cyclical clashes which had ceased in June. By late August, the heightened disturbances following the tragic Abadan cinema fire seemed to confirm that leadership of the religious opposition was passing from Ayatollah Shari‘atmadāri to the “*angry young men*” behind Khomeini,¹⁰²⁶ who demanded a return to Islamic law rather than the ‘Western-style’

¹⁰²² Guardian, 26 June 1978; 8 July 1978

¹⁰²³ Times, 14 July 1978

¹⁰²⁴ Sunday Times, 21 May 1978

¹⁰²⁵ CARI bulletin, Spring/Summer 1978, 6

¹⁰²⁶ Guardian, 21 August 1978

democracy promised by the Shah. The emotional fervour of Ramazan was also playing a part.¹⁰²⁷ Incidentally, this was the first mention of Khomeini in the *Times* since the 1960s. Lord Chalfont, argued that external elements – perhaps Libyan or Soviet – were clearly behind the current unrest, although the root causes lay within Iranian society and the antagonism between the government and “*organized religion*”, exploited for political ends. Chalfont ultimately fell back on the Parsons view - that the ultra-loyal and well-equipped police and armed forces could swiftly deal with the fragmented opposition if necessary. However, Chalfont’s tone had shed its previous condescension, having been proven wrong in his paeans to the popularity of the Shah’s regime.¹⁰²⁸ Nevertheless, his column provoked a disgruntled response from an Englishman who claimed to be followed by SAVAK because his daughter had befriended Iranian graduate students. These were no Islamic Marxists but gentle intellectuals who were hounded by SAVAK, disgracefully denied asylum in Britain because “*we sell arms to the Shah and entertain his family at Windsor*” and finally obliged to flee overseas.¹⁰²⁹

Khomeini had now become prominent and influential enough that his presence in Najaf was humiliating for the Iraqi authorities, given their newfound good relations with the Shah and concern about their Shi‘i majority population. His anti-Shah injunctions, recalling the denunciations issued by his predecessors also based at Najaf during the constitutional revolution, were barred from publication in Iraq.¹⁰³⁰ Ayatollah Shari‘atmadāri was still very much seen as the leader of Iran’s Shi‘a faithful, although he appeared to be adopting an increasingly radical stance echoing Khomeini’s exhortations to overthrow the Shah. The political opposition parties meanwhile had been overshadowed in the aftermath of the Abadan cinema fire which had polarised government and clerics.¹⁰³¹

Following the Zhāleh Square killings, Ayatollah Khomeini – frequently called El-Khomeini, as if an Arab - burst into the collective consciousness of the press and was said to ‘own the streets’ of

¹⁰²⁷ *Times*, 21 August 1978

¹⁰²⁸ *Times*, 21 August 1978

¹⁰²⁹ *Times*, 26 August 1978

¹⁰³⁰ *Guardian*, 26 August 1978

¹⁰³¹ *Guardian*, 26 August 1978

Tehran. Suddenly, it seemed that there was no feasible solution to the crisis without the assent of this long-time exile and persona non grata, whose stated agenda was to oust the Shah.¹⁰³² Until recently it had seemed that the opposition was confined to a “*left-wing intellectual fringe*” and the majority of Iranians appreciated the Shah’s largesse, whereas now the Shah was undeniably one of the most despised figures in the country. There was an increasing convergence between the clerical and liberal nationalist opposition, both opposed to foreign domination. However, the *Times* remarked on the ambiguities inherent in this situation; manifestations of piety among students such as the veil or “*rosary*” recitation did not imply a conservative political stance.¹⁰³³ According to the *Observer*, Ayatollah ‘El-Khomeini’ and his puritanical followers were now leading the protest movement against the Shah; their appeal lay in the fact that half of Iranians were still illiterate but every single one could recite a few Qu’ranic verses. Sophisticated yet disenchanted liberals and radical Marxists had now joined forces with the devout, but it was thought highly improbable this odd coalition could unseat the Pahlavis.¹⁰³⁴ A *Guardian* article by Sayyid Rizvi argued that Iran’s ‘high priests’ were close to realising what was a mere dream for Muslim fundamentalists across the Middle East – a state governed by Islamic law.¹⁰³⁵ A subsequent letter to the editor objected to Rizvi’s heavily religious portrayal, claiming that the opposition had been compelled to assume a religious character since there was no political freedom and all formal protest channels protest had been stifled.¹⁰³⁶ A similar view was expressed by CARI, which argued that the regime had attempted to discredit the religious opposition by blaming them for the Abadan cinema fire. In fact, the prevalence of the Islam amongst the opposition was said to be largely because mosques were the only meeting places free from government intrusion. The “*key issue*” dominating all opposition activity was said to be the people’s antipathy to the monarchy rather than a religious agenda.¹⁰³⁷ This ardent Leftist support for the opposition and downplaying of religious factors would not have surprised Lord Alport, whose letter to the *Times* warned of the looming Soviet menace as their

¹⁰³² *Times*, 8 & 9 September 1978;

¹⁰³³ *Times*, 8 September 1978

¹⁰³⁴ *Observer*, 10 September 1978

¹⁰³⁵ *Guardian*, 9 September 1978

¹⁰³⁶ *Guardian*, 13 September 1978

¹⁰³⁷ CARI bulletin, Autumn/Winter 1978, 3

soldiers poured into Afghanistan following the April 1978 coup. The Shah's Iran, ever the strategic prize, was thus threatened on its northern and eastern borders and internally by a "*powerful religious movement which cloaks subversion manipulated from Moscow*".¹⁰³⁸ This 'red conspiracy' view of the opposition echoed that of the Shah himself and held some currency in the press and civil society; chaos in Iran was thought propitious for Soviet exploitation and the clerics in particular ripe for manipulation by Communists.¹⁰³⁹

Liz Thurgood's reports on the dramatic events of Black Friday and its aftermath showed her sympathy for the opposition in the face of martial law and the Shah's relapse to "*rule by the bullet*".¹⁰⁴⁰ Her subsequent expulsion from Tehran on 17 September was featured on the Guardian's front page and in an editorial which argued that such expulsions were often used to "*silence accurate correspondents*" and were typical response of governments in crisis.¹⁰⁴¹

Ambassador Parviz Raji retorted that the Iranian authorities deemed her articles, which had gained an undeservedly "*oracular*" status among anti-Shah groups, to be misleading and part of a vicious personal vendetta against the regime.¹⁰⁴²

The debate on the opposition now centred on the extent to which it was widespread, 'worthy' and indigenous to Iran. In this respect it mirrored similar debates from the earlier period. Left-of-centre sources emphasised the scale, sophistication and authenticity of the opposition. Its main virtue was its opposition to the Shah and its mass democratic nature; the fact that it involved potentially illiberal clerical elements was deemed less important. A *Socialist International* press release declared its unqualified support for Iran's "*progressive forces*", which were essential for democracy in Iran and noted that both progressive and conservative forces opposed the Shah,

¹⁰³⁸ Times, 13 September 1978

¹⁰³⁹ This contrasts with Soviet prudence in Iran, their cautious support for the Shah until he had fled and disinterest in the Iranian Communist Party. Up to 1979 the USSR sought to minimize the possibility of confrontation with the Americans in the region, although irked at American presence there. Brutents, *Triditsat' let*, 289-292, 334; Kuzichkin, *Inside KGB*, 205, 254; Vinogradov, *Diplomatiia*, 363, 373.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Guardian, 11 September 1978

¹⁰⁴¹ Guardian, 18 September 1978

¹⁰⁴² Guardian, 20 September 1978

showing his total failure.¹⁰⁴³ A Labour NEC statement held that it was not necessary to agree with all opposition views of the Shah to recognise the nationwide animosity against him, which would only change when the people chose their government in free elections.¹⁰⁴⁴ Liz Thurgood argued that modern dissidents were more educated and demanding than in the past. Dissatisfaction with the regime festered in all corners of society, fueled by economic failures and political repression.¹⁰⁴⁵ She also portrayed clerics and Iranian Shi‘ism in a favourable light, arguing that no Western political tag could be applied to them. Iranian Shi‘ism, “*radical and reformist*” and a traditional source of ballast for political dissidents, was distinct from the rest of the “*conservative and traditionalist*” Islamic world and had been essential for every successful revolt in Iranian history. Thurgood further more argued that by this point, Ayatollah Khomeini could claim to be the spiritual leader of Shi‘ism.¹⁰⁴⁶

Meanwhile, right-of-centre sources portrayed the opposition as a product of foreign manipulation (Soviet or Western leftist), reactionary and unrepresentative of majority opinion. Lord Chalfont warned that the unrest in Iran was not “*a spontaneous uprising of an oppressed people*” but rather a sinister alliance against the Shah; for the ‘right-wing’ mullahs the Shah had gone too far with liberalisation whereas for the extreme left he had not gone far enough, thus echoing the Shah’s denunciation of the ‘red and black’ alliance. Chalfont insinuated that ‘international communism’ was manipulating the opposition, arguing that the demonstrations he had witnessed in Iran were not spontaneous or reflective of the “*righteous indignation of an Islamic holy war*” but more like Western leftist demonstrations, which included un-Islamic practices such as the mass participation of women and the insertion of carnations into soldiers’ guns.¹⁰⁴⁷ Although Chalfont offered a simplistic description of the opposition, he raised a salient point about the hybrid nature of their mass demonstrations, which were a new form of protest combining contemporary leftist elements with the traditional symbolism of Islam.

¹⁰⁴³ FCO 8/3185, Carlsson, 25 September 1978

¹⁰⁴⁴ CARI bulletin, Autumn/Winter 1978, 15 (2 October 1978)

¹⁰⁴⁵ Guardian, 26 September 1978

¹⁰⁴⁶ Guardian, 27 September 1978

¹⁰⁴⁷ Times, 18 September 1978

Lord Chalfont's view of the opposition was pilloried by Fred Halliday as a propaganda mouthpiece for the Shah. In a long article entitled "*What the people say is what matters*", Halliday reproached Chalfont for his stereotyping of the opposition, his ignorance of lower class social conditions and his arrogant insinuations that democracy and constitutionalism for Iran were championed by misguided Western 'bleeding hearts' rather than native demands by Iranians.¹⁰⁴⁸ This terse exchange continued with a response from Lord Shawcross, who asked if the people's utterances were really what mattered. He argued that the vocal Iranian opposition was not representative of the people as a whole, implying the existence of a loyal 'silent majority', and maintaining that the "*extreme left*" was exploiting the mullahs.¹⁰⁴⁹

Meanwhile, following ten days under virtual house arrest in Najaf which had sparked some of the most violent demonstrations in Iran since the imposition of martial law on 8 September, Ayatollah Khomeini had left Baghdad for Paris.¹⁰⁵⁰ The exiled Ayatollah was said by the *Times* to be obdurate, rejecting all compromise and nursing a personal vendetta against the Shah, a blow for the opposition which would have accepted the Shah as a constitutional monarch.¹⁰⁵¹ Oilfield strikes, which were a new feature of opposition activity from October onwards, spread to other sectors and practically crippled the economy. The strikes received enthusiastic coverage in the Autumn/Winter CARI bulletin, which reported that virtually no sector was untouched by industrial action and strikers were making bold political demands, such as the release of political prisoners, lifting of martial law and extirpation of SAVAK. It was noted that white-collar government departments and factories alike were affected by the strikes, thus showing that professional and middle-class hostility towards the Shah was no less than among the working classes, a contrast with the oft-cited view that white-collar workers backed the Shah.¹⁰⁵² The oil strikes were said to be the opposition's trump card and the "*most devastating weapon in the Khomeini arsenal*".¹⁰⁵³ CARI proclaimed that

¹⁰⁴⁸ *Times*, 3 October 1978

¹⁰⁴⁹ *Times*, 5 October 1978

¹⁰⁵⁰ *Guardian*, 7 October 1978

¹⁰⁵¹ *Times*, 20 October 1978

¹⁰⁵² CARI bulletin, Autumn/Winter 1978, 8-9

¹⁰⁵³ *Observer*, 12 November 1978

the oil workers were now the decisive authorities on oil output. Their demands for the expulsion of foreign technicians were understandable, since the latter were strike-breakers and “*economic mercenaries*” with no stake in Iran’s political situation.¹⁰⁵⁴

The Lords Chalfont and Alport’s preoccupation with the ‘red elements’ of Iran’s opposition was shared by David Owen, whose comments on ITV’s *Weekend World* programme caused an uproar. Owen remarked that Iran’s government would ultimately be usurped by a composite of Communists, the Soviet Union and terrorists, who would displace the fanatical clerics.¹⁰⁵⁵ These views of the opposition were condemned in a report by MP Russell Kerr and two other visitors, freshly returned from Iran, who held that the entire nation wanted the Shah out and the religious opposition leaders were not so obscurantist as Owen made them out to be.¹⁰⁵⁶ The *Guardian* editors concurred, lamenting Owen’s crude presumption that all those desirous of social and political change in Iran were being manipulated either by mullahs or by Moscow. The great majority of the opposition were fighting for democracy, which was a necessary condition to work through all the current intractable disputes over the status of women, the future political system and so forth.¹⁰⁵⁷ The pursuit of democracy, with all of its complications, was also seen as a *sine qua non* for Iran’s progress by *Guardian* readers critical of Owen, who voiced their objections in letters to the editor.¹⁰⁵⁸

Meanwhile in Paris, Khomeini was said to have persuaded other opposition leaders that the Shah must make way for an Islamic republic. His influence was such that a mere word on his part could trigger armed insurrection in Iran, while the French government looked on haplessly.¹⁰⁵⁹ The *Times* editors acknowledged Khomeini’s pre-eminence, but declared the opposition should outline its programme and principles, asking what they stood “*for*” apart from opposing the Shah.¹⁰⁶⁰ The concept of Ayatollahs and Shi‘ism was still alien and one *Times* correspondent referred to

¹⁰⁵⁴ CARI bulletin, Autumn/Winter 1978, 9

¹⁰⁵⁵ *Times*, 23 October 1978; *Guardian*, 23 October 1978

¹⁰⁵⁶ *Guardian*, 24 October 1978

¹⁰⁵⁷ *Guardian*, 24 October 1978

¹⁰⁵⁸ *Guardian*, 28 October 1978

¹⁰⁵⁹ *Guardian*, 31 October 1978

¹⁰⁶⁰ *Times*, 2 November 1978

Khomeini as “*Mr. Ayatollah*”.¹⁰⁶¹ Liz Thurgood interviewed Khomeini at his refuge near Paris, finding him “*gentle but politically canny*”, acutely aware of his centrality to the Iranian crisis and utterly intransigent in his demand for the Shah to leave.¹⁰⁶² Professed concern over the fate of women’s rights under a Khomeini regime featured prominently among supporters of the Shah, with the Earl of Gowrie concerned that alternatives to his rule would “*set the clock back, especially where women are concerned, for hundreds of years*”, echoing Owen’s televised comments.¹⁰⁶³ The Lords Carrington (Margaret Thatcher’s future Foreign Secretary) and Maybray-King concurred that the opposition would be far less well-disposed towards democracy and human rights than the Shah.¹⁰⁶⁴

While noting the destructive nature of the 5 November rioting which preceded military government, the press was also cognizant of the targeted rather than wanton nature of the violence and its intent to minimise human casualties while maximising material destruction on buildings linked to the regime. The press noted the passivity of the troops who let much destruction proceed unhindered, including at the British Embassy, prompting speculation the security forces had deliberately stood back to turn Western opinion against the opposition.¹⁰⁶⁵ Much of the British Embassy was torched, but the staff were unharmed since the attacks were carried out by “*a reasonably civilised lot, not hoodlums with sticks*” according to embassy sources quoted in the press.¹⁰⁶⁶

The escalating crisis, with Khomeini and the ayatollahs now on centre stage, prompted recognition of the emergence of militant Islam, a “*distinct and powerful phenomenon*” in the Muslim world which had humbled even the Shah, the quintessential strong monarch. The *Guardian* saw it as an unprecedented phenomenon, arising from disenchantment with the crisis-ridden West, the failure of secular nationalism and the apparent solution in the completeness of Islam and Sharia law.

However this new Islamic fundamentalism was also thought inflexible with “*elitist overtones*”, an

¹⁰⁶¹ Times, 4 November 1978

¹⁰⁶² Guardian, 6 November 1978

¹⁰⁶³ HL Deb 02 November 1978 vol 396 cc51-166

¹⁰⁶⁴ HL Deb 14 November 1978 vol 396 cc652-6652

¹⁰⁶⁵ Times, 6 & 7 November 1978; Guardian, 6 November 1978

¹⁰⁶⁶ Times, 6 November 1978; Guardian, 6 November 1978

observation which neglected to notice that in Iran its character was populist rather than elitist.¹⁰⁶⁷

The *Times* took a broader view, arguing that the ideological ‘bipolarity’ used to describe the world since 1945 had been misleadingly Eurocentric, since liberal capitalism/the Western bloc and Marxism/the Soviet bloc were seen as equally ‘Western’ by much of the world. This bipolarity was now being disrupted by the growing assertion of Islamic identity and solidarity, which compounded by the newfound oil wealth of the Gulf states was forcing the West to interact with Muslim states as equals for the first time since the days of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰⁶⁸

In parliament, Stan Newens’ condemnation of the Shah’s atrocities led to a short discussion about the “*disparate and illogical*” opposition as an even worse alternative to the Shah. A Liberal MP even reprimanded Newens and his fellow Shah-haters for indulging “*a rather nasty and reactionary priesthood*” which would be first to chop off their hands should it seize power – presumably because of their socialist ideals - while James Callaghan acknowledged “*important movements of opinion*” transforming the Islamic world.¹⁰⁶⁹

The potency of political Islamism was increasingly acknowledged but the particularities of Iranian Shi‘ism were less known and understood, with some exceptions, such as a letter to the *Guardian* whose author argued that the obsessive Western desire for stability and unity in Iran would more likely be achieved through a religious-nationalist figure such as Khomeini than the “*Philistine and alien secularism*” of the Pahlavi dynasty. Iranian history was characterised by cycles of “*disintegration and....enforced unity*”¹⁰⁷⁰ and Shah-clerical confrontations, of which this was the latest manifestation. However, Khomeini and the Shi‘i clerics were “*the theological embodiment of the Iranian identity within Islam*” rather than mere right-wing fanatics as caricatured in the media. The exiled ayatollah was in fact the only person capable of “*replacing one symbol of the Iranian identity with another*” – insightful commentary which considered the full implications of the

¹⁰⁶⁷ Guardian, 10 November 1978

¹⁰⁶⁸ Times, 16 November 1978

¹⁰⁶⁹ HC Deb 16 November 1978 vol 958 cc597-9597;

¹⁰⁷⁰ This echoes Dr. Homa Katouzian’s theory that Iranian history is defined by alternating periods of arbitrary rule and social chaos. Katouzian, *The Persians*, 5.

Khomeini phenomenon.¹⁰⁷¹ The *Times* meanwhile gave extensive coverage to the various permutations of global Islam, whose socio-political potency was attributed to its ‘worldly’ nature. The article argued that Shi’ism was in essence a “*religion of opposition*” which championed the underdog, hence its significance in the current anti-Shah struggle, and the authorities’ dread over the impending Muharram demonstrations in December.¹⁰⁷² The concept of Shi’ism as inherently oppositional was taken up by other journalists such as *Times* foreign editor Charles Douglas-Home, who defined the Iranian mosque as a hybrid of a “*non-conformist chapel and working men’s club*” which provided better welfare services than the state, hosted social gatherings and was the only forum for dissent, an important fact noted by many observers.¹⁰⁷³ Khomeini himself remained an enigma and an underwhelming one at that; the BBC World Service initially deemed him “*a most unimpressive performer*” based on his interviews from Paris.¹⁰⁷⁴

The recurring application of Western-derived class analysis to Iranian society and the recourse to ‘Cold War’ logic skewed observers’ understanding of many social phenomena. *Guardian* correspondent Martin Woollacott and many others were incredulous that the emerging educated middle classes, from whom one would have expected gratitude to the Shah, recited prayers, marched under religious banners and danced while Tehran burned, and liberated women supported a creed which would enslave them. In fact Iran did not have a ‘bourgeoisie’ or middle class in the Western sense but rather various groups which occupied the middling socio-economic ranks: those from lower and traditional social strata with improving living standards and education, educated professional people and the modern propertied classes who were denied economic and political power.¹⁰⁷⁵ The rich reputedly treated the lumpen-proletariat with contempt reminiscent of “*feudal days*”; in reality Iran was never a feudal society with an independent landed class.¹⁰⁷⁶ The characterization of Iran’s opposition forces and political forces as ‘illogical’, ‘conflicting’, and

¹⁰⁷¹ *Guardian*, 13 November 1978. Interpreting Shi’ism as a religious-national phenomenon recalled the view of Cecil Spring-Rice in the earlier period.

¹⁰⁷² *Times*, 24 November 1978

¹⁰⁷³ *Times*, 25 November 1978

¹⁰⁷⁴ FCO 8/3188, Dodd to Weir, 9 November 1978

¹⁰⁷⁵ Katouzian, *Persians*, 309-310

¹⁰⁷⁶ Katouzian, *Persians*, 4, 395-396

‘incompatible’ begs the larger question of what makes a ‘logical’ or ‘compatible’ opposition, unless this was an implicit reference to the relative constancy of Westminster party politics.¹⁰⁷⁷ The Soviet menace continued to preoccupy Conservative MPs such as Julian Amery, who was convinced of Moscow assistance to the Tudeh to foment revolution in Iran as part of its grand strategy to surround and seize the Persian Gulf, as evidenced by the recent coup in Afghanistan and Soviet incursions into the Horn of Africa. A western show of strength against the USSR was sure to restore popular confidence in the Shah’s regime and entice the pro-Shah “*silent majority*” of middle classes and peasants to vocalise their support. The clerics were latching onto Khomeini’s extremism – who was thought to be funded by Colonel Gadhafi among others - in order to prevent the secularization of Iran, which was depriving them of both affluence and influence.¹⁰⁷⁸ (In fact it was precisely their influence which enabled the Khomeini phenomenon in the first place). Thus the Iranian problem was interpreted using simplistic Cold War logic, obscuring its complexities which operated independently of bipolarity. Another journalist contended that the religious opposition was incapable of governing a major modernising country like Iran and could easily be manipulated by the more disciplined Communist party.¹⁰⁷⁹ Finally, the *Guardian* broke the pattern of Cold War logic, arguing that while the stability of Iran and its fellow ‘Northern Tier’ states was critical, future developments in the region were unlikely to be determined by either the Western or Soviet bloc.¹⁰⁸⁰ Zero-sum game bipolarity had been superseded by the emergence of a ‘third way’ in the guise of political Islamism, in anticipation of Khomeini’s slogan for Iran of ‘Neither East nor West, Islamic Republic’.¹⁰⁸¹

Liz Thurgood continued her subtle vindication of Khomeini and the clerical opposition, reporting that Khomeini’s proclamations were being distorted by government propaganda,¹⁰⁸² while the *Telegraph* editors agonised over the burgeoning “*primitive forces*” in Iran, which were unabated

¹⁰⁷⁷ *Guardian*, 17 November 1978

¹⁰⁷⁸ *Telegraph*, 1 December 1978

¹⁰⁷⁹ *Telegraph*, 11 December 1978

¹⁰⁸⁰ *Guardian*, 28 December 1978

¹⁰⁸¹ Na Sharqi, Na Gharbi, Jumhuriyih Islami

¹⁰⁸² *Guardian*, 5 December 1978

even against gunfire, and rebuked the French government for handling Khomeini with kid gloves.¹⁰⁸³ In fact, the French government had asked the Shah if he wanted them to constrain or expel Khomeini, but the monarch apparently never replied.¹⁰⁸⁴ By this point, Ayatollah Shari‘atmadāri’s status as the country’s leading religious figure in the eyes of the British press had been usurped by Ayatollah Tāleqāni, who had called for mass marches on Muharram in defiance of martial law.¹⁰⁸⁵ The million-strong marches of Tasua and Ashura were described as orderly and peaceful¹⁰⁸⁶ but at night Tehran echoed with the anguished cries of *Allahu Akbar*; to emphasize this religious bent, the *Telegraph* showed a glowering chador-clad girl in a demonstration, her fist raised defiantly, flanked by portraits of Khomeini.¹⁰⁸⁷ CARI argued that the rooftop chanting emanated only from the wealthier ‘conservative’ quarters of Tehran, whose inhabitants feared venturing onto the streets lest they be gunned down. Their chants, although initially religious, were now purely anti-monarchical.¹⁰⁸⁸ Grim depictions of turmoil, with scenes of “*violence, death and chaos*” on the streets of Iran, filled the press throughout December. Chanting, fist-pumping crowds confronted the armed forces while upturned Pepsi Cola trucks showed increasing xenophobia and anti-Americanism.¹⁰⁸⁹ While anger at the Shah was genuine enough, a plethora of “*hotheads and troublemakers*” were exacerbating the situation, to the detriment of “*vast sectors of the population*” both rural and middle-class whose ‘traditional’ loyalty to the Shah was unshaken.¹⁰⁹⁰ The *Observer* identified Islam as one of the two principal causes of the turmoil which had swept across the ‘Northern Tier’ that year, acknowledging that its adherents could be at once socially radical yet conservative in their adherence to religion.¹⁰⁹¹ There was a gradual realisation that the Western left/right ideological binary was too simplistic and inadequate to describe the confrontation in Iran between regime and opposition. The *Guardian* editors concluded that using

¹⁰⁸³ *Telegraph*, 5 December 1978.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Ladjevardi, *Khāṭirāt-i Sharīf Imāmī*, 4-5

¹⁰⁸⁵ *Telegraph*, 8 December 1978

¹⁰⁸⁶ *Guardian*, 11 December 1978

¹⁰⁸⁷ *Telegraph*, 12 December 1978

¹⁰⁸⁸ CARI bulletin, Autumn/Winter 1978, 5

¹⁰⁸⁹ *Telegraph*, 28 December 1978

¹⁰⁹⁰ *Telegraph*, 29 December 1978

¹⁰⁹¹ *Observer*, 31 December 1978

‘right’ and ‘left’ made little sense in Iran, since if the Shah was ‘right-wing’ then how did one classify Khomeini?¹⁰⁹²

It was increasingly thought that the enigmatic ayatollah represented a distinctively Iranian phenomenon, one whose type was unlikely to emerge among the Arabs, given the peculiarities of Shi‘ism as a ‘religion of opposition’.¹⁰⁹³ The *BBC World Service* conducted several interviews with the Ayatollah in Paris, citing his image in the West as someone incapable of managing a complex and modernising society like Iran, a reactionary especially where women were concerned and guilty of inciting needless bloodshed.¹⁰⁹⁴ The *Financial Times* also interviewed him and felt his answers to demonstrate “*naiveté and lack of realism*” with regards to his future plans for Iran and his grounds for opposing Bakhtiār. Although undoubtedly free from the sway of Marxists, Khomeini had little of the expected charisma and did not seem to know how to use his undoubtedly enormous influence.¹⁰⁹⁵ Both the *BBC*’s John Simpson and Labour MP Russell Kerr were equally unimpressed by the Ayatollah, although his entourage was admittedly of a high intellectual calibre.¹⁰⁹⁶ The *Guardian* editors rebuked Khomeini for his continued incitement to mourning/rioting and rejection of compromise and peaceful initiatives when the Shah and Bakhtiār had made considerable concessions.¹⁰⁹⁷

With his oblique statements, indifference to political pragmatism and subdued gravitas, Khomeini baffled Western observers. In fact, he represented a type of authority which was far removed from that of the fiery revolutionary figure or calculating politician which the West had expected. This point was raised in a letter objecting to the *Guardian*’s 11 January rebuke, arguing that Khomeini was in fact the embodiment of Gandhi’s dictum that one must “*dissociate oneself from evil in total disregard of the consequences*”. Far from being a truculent old man sabotaging the peace, he was acting in the “*clear light of truth*” and had no interest in making a calculated grab for personal

¹⁰⁹² *Guardian*, 17 January 1979

¹⁰⁹³ *Guardian*, 12 January 1979

¹⁰⁹⁴ FCO 8/3351, BBC, 5 January 1979

¹⁰⁹⁵ FCO 8/3351, Owen to Parsons, 9 January 1979

¹⁰⁹⁶ FCO 8/3351, Lucas to Weir, 16 January 1979

¹⁰⁹⁷ *Guardian*, 11 January 1979

power; hence his rejection of compromise with the Shah and Bakhtiār, since the truth could not be compromised. This attitude was so unusual that it led to misunderstandings. Khomeini's "*selfless strength*" was the hallmark of a true spiritual leader and must be understood in this context. He was no Luddite and supported technology so long as it was used for the common good, unlike the Shah who had used it for his own benefit.¹⁰⁹⁸ The parliamentary question time 'I-told-you-so' exchange between Owen and his Labour left-wing critics following the Shah's departure also revealed positive views of Khomeini and the clerics, as Robin Cook spoke of the new "*more enlightened regime*" in Iran.¹⁰⁹⁹ The *Telegraph* responded maliciously to Cook's statement, writing that the Labour left-wingers (Tribunites) had presumably been tipped off by the "*Shi'ites in their midst*" that revolution would engulf Iran, as Robin Cook and his fellow "*Ayatollah*" MPs claimed to have forewarned Owen. Thus the Tribunites had a new 'Eastern hero' in the form of Khomeini, a peculiar development since this cleric was fundamentalist about Islam rather than Labour foreign policy but understandable since both parties were "*off their heads*".¹¹⁰⁰ With Khomeini's return from exile now imminent, Woollacott profiled this seismic character who had induced the worst spasms in Western powers since the appearance of Egypt's Nasser. Drawing parallels with clerical activism in the Tobacco Revolt of 1891, he argued that Khomeini was not the "*Mad Mullah of colonial demonology*" but a traditional religious intellectual who had successfully updated his thinking to incorporate modern notions of social justice. However, Khomeini was likely to be divorced from everyday realities and would struggle to understand the social forces which had abetted his rise, given his age and long absence from Iran.¹¹⁰¹ The *Telegraph* likewise ventured that his influence may wane after his return to Iran when faced with mundane political issues and because his key objective – expelling the Shah – had been accomplished.¹¹⁰² He was irresponsibly pursuing his callous vendetta against the Shah, irrespective of the "*cost in human and social terms*", and would never endorse a government under Bakhtiār. The question however was how long his antics could be sustained. He was thought incapable of managing major challenges when

¹⁰⁹⁸ Guardian, 13 January 1979

¹⁰⁹⁹ HC Deb 17 January 1979 vol 960 cc1698-7011698

¹¹⁰⁰ Telegraph, 18 January 1979

¹¹⁰¹ Guardian, 22 January 1979

¹¹⁰² Telegraph, 23 January 1979

coming to power, such as Soviet interference via the Tudeh and ethnic secessionism.¹¹⁰³ The *Guardian* argued that the liberal West could only look upon the Ayatollah's backward creed with repugnance, but he was nevertheless the "*largest political reality in the Iranian crisis*" and thus must be permitted to return to Iran.¹¹⁰⁴ The *Observer* offered its own profile of Khomeini, the man responsible for the "*most extraordinary [revolution] of modern times*" where an unarmed mass rising dethroned an absolute monarch. Khomeini, drawing on his reputation and the context of resurgent Islamism both within Iran and the wider Muslim world, was able to galvanize spiritual forces for political ends much like Gandhi. He favoured running the country on traditional religious principles, in contrast with the socialist devotees of Shari'ati (hardly hitherto mentioned in the press) and was a symbolic figure for the opposition, although he may be forced to assume a more practical approach when faced with the complexities of modern government.¹¹⁰⁵ The impact of Shari'ati's socialist-Islamist ideology, particularly on youth and students, was also mentioned by Liz Thurgood.¹¹⁰⁶ Shari'ati's influence was practically unnoticed until this time; his death in 1977 provoked virtually no comment in the mainstream press.

On the eve of Khomeini's return to Iran, Woollacott predicted that Iran would face a "*catastrophic breakdown*" as it was divided into two parallel societies, the traditional/Islamic and modernised/Westernised. This great schism had been previously concealed by the Shah's absolute power but was now laid bare. These two societies were further divided into left, centre and right-wing, as was the army, a perilous "*double-split*". In spite of some Islamic left-wing declarations, Khomeini's personality and principles identified him as an Islamic right-winger, although for his followers, his intransigence was more important than his ideas. Crucially, he was the only person who could steer the revolution away from chaos and contain the "*manic urge to destroy*" rampant among Iran's angry youth.¹¹⁰⁷ Khomeini, arriving in Tehran to a rapturous welcome on 2 February 1979, repudiated the Bakhtiār government and set up his own, an act which could precipitate civil

¹¹⁰³ Telegraph, 24 January 1979

¹¹⁰⁴ Guardian, 25 January 1979

¹¹⁰⁵ Observer, 28 January 1979

¹¹⁰⁶ Guardian, 30 January 1979

¹¹⁰⁷ Guardian, 1 February 1979

war.¹¹⁰⁸ His calls for an Islamic Republic, although wildly popular, were vague and seemed “*hopelessly naïve*” from a Western point of view.¹¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, he had astutely judged the Shah’s mighty army; after two days of clashes and mass desertions, it declared impartiality and withdrew from the streets. The grim spectre of civil war, coup or army bloodbath had not materialised. Civil war, argued Woollacott, would now be unlikely since the great majority of people, their ardour ranging from zealous devotion to acquiescence, now backed Khomeini.¹¹¹⁰ Against all odds, the Ayatollah had won.

¹¹⁰⁸ Telegraph, 2 February 1979; Guardian, 3 February 1979

¹¹⁰⁹ Observer, 4 February 1979

¹¹¹⁰ Guardian, 12 February 1979

Chapter 6: Conclusions

This concluding chapter will propose answers to the research questions laid out in the first chapter and will highlight further avenues for research and enquiry emanating from this study.

I. Defining revolutionary Iran

Events in Iran from 1906 to 1909 and again from 1976 to 1979 were perceived to run the gamut of the Western political spectrum. The revolutions were variously qualified as reformist, progressive, liberal, democratic and constitutional; as popular and nationalist; as obscurantist and reactionary; and as extremist, anarchist, and subversive. The two Iranian revolutions, very broadly defined, had different objectives – the first sought to establish a constitutional monarchy - a noble and legitimate aspiration in the eyes of many contemporary officials, although not all observers were convinced of the authenticity of Iranian constitutional sentiment. The first was part of a dramatic wave of constitutional revolutions which shook the non-Western world and altered the world's political landscape. The second revolution began with liberal and constitutional opposition in 1976 and 1977, but this did not attract official sympathy as in the earlier period. The opposition's subsequent shift to an anti-monarchical and Islamist character hardened official antipathy.

For British observers, the central element of the Constitutional Revolution was the opposition to the Shah and much ink was spilled discussing its worthiness, legitimacy, authenticity, characteristics, composition and its capacity (or lack thereof) to govern the country. This was likely due to the relatable, straightforward and 'worthy' nature of their objectives – to establish a constitutional monarchy enshrining modern rights and freedoms and a representative government. The influence and prominence of clerics was acknowledged, but it was widely believed that many in their ranks had adopted liberal constitutionalism as their new creed, as evidenced by the Najaf and Karbala *mujtahids* denouncing the Shah for his abrogation of the constitution. Clerical power was not associated with dark obscurantism as much as in the second period, perhaps since religion still played a substantial role in British public life and was perceived in a more benign light. The

Shahs – both Muẓaffar al-Dīn Shah and to a lesser extent his son Muhammad ‘Ali Shah, were not psychologically prominent in the British consciousness. Rather they were portrayed as impotent, timorous, discredited and in the case of Muhammad ‘Ali, as a creature of Russia.

On the other hand, from 1976 to 1979 British views of the revolution and indeed of Iran itself revolved around the vices and virtues of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, who occupied centre stage right throughout the unfolding drama, until he was eclipsed in late 1978 by the Ayatollah Khomeini. Muhammad Reza was powerful, conspicuous and an obvious target for British press, officials and civil society, who both attacked and praised him with abandon. His prominence was indisputable; whether lauded or despised, it was accepted by government and press/civil society alike that he was one of a handful of remaining absolute monarchs who occupied one of the world’s most secure seats of power. The world was thus stunned when this ‘cast-iron’ potentate turned out to be made of little more than ‘blotting-paper’ and fell without a struggle. The perceived security of his throne and stability of his regime were based on flawed assumptions. Both Parsons and the press were focussed on the power of the Shah’s army, SAVAK and enthusiastic foreign support as guarantors of his stability – that is, on everything except an internal support base. It was effectively an admission of the hollowness of the regime. A military ‘fixation’ in particular obscured Parsons’ judgement and was equally prevalent in the press right up until December 1978; should the Shah fall, the only realistic replacement was thought to be a military regime headed by his elite generals, given the intimate relations between the monarch and his armed forces and the privileged status of the latter.

Official (government) perceptions of the Shah passed through three phases, throughout which he was consistently favoured over any alternative. The first phase, from 1976 to mid-1977, was characterised by enthusiastic, borderline sycophantic Shah support and annoyance at the emergence of human rights challenges to the Shah; the second phase was from mid-1977 to September 1978, after international pressure over human rights matters became difficult to ignore and it was grudgingly acknowledged that the Shah could not remain oblivious to human rights demands, largely for his own good, and the third phase, from September 1978 until January 1979

was when human rights was relegated to secondary importance and the main concern was merely hope that the monarchy would survive without inflicting a bloodbath on the population.

The Shah's Western supporters often portrayed him as a benevolent potentate who ruled over ungrateful and truculent subjects. A similar point was made by E.G. Browne nearly a century earlier following his 1888 visit to Iran. Browne thought that Iranian popular antagonism to European ventures in Iran (railways, concessions, etc.) was entirely justified, since these things were profitable only to the Shah and their foreign promoters. Europeans failed to understand that the interests of the Shah and his subjects were not identical but often "*diametrically opposed*" and falsely assumed the Shah was "*an enlightened monarch, eager for the welfare and progress of a stubborn and refractory people who delight in thwarting his benevolent schemes, when in reality he is a selfish despot, devoid of public spirit, careful only of his own personal comfort and advantage, and most averse to the introduction of liberal ideas amongst a people whose natural quickness, intelligence and aptitude to learn cause him nothing but anxiety*".¹¹¹¹ These observations, although written in the 1890s, are strikingly similar to debates which took place in the 1970s about the relationship between Muhammad Reza Pahlavi and his subjects.

A prominent element in both official and non-official discourse of the 1970s was the belief that illiberal dictatorship was an inevitable phase in the development of backward countries such as Iran into modern states. Modernisation and efficient development in the Third World came with a heavy yet necessary price, that of repressive illiberalism. Such a notion bore some similarities to the 'strong man' theory of the earlier period, which maintained that Oriental societies like Iran were unprepared for democratic government and required the guidance of a strong leader to prevent anarchy. However, the notion also contrasted sharply with the Liberal view in the earlier period which maintained that liberal constitutionalism, whether in Iran or elsewhere, was not an eventual phase to be attained or a function of economic development but an essential and just political mechanism which should be implemented irrespective of socio-economic conditions

¹¹¹¹ Browne, *Year Amongst Persians*, 90

The 1970s opposition was defined more according to one's attitude to the Shah than on its innate qualities. For the Shah's supporters, it was seen an aberration and was often described as "ill-sorted", "illogical" and "unnatural" by the time it gained serious influence. In its earlier phase, i.e. before the groundswell of late 1978, a recurring feature of Parsons' analysis was his de-politicised portrayal of the opposition and indeed all of Iranian society. He argued that student protest was a result of youthful truculence and administrative problems rather than political demands, that the Islamic revival was 'puritan' rather than political and that Iranian society by its very nature was apathetic, cynical and apolitical. His analysis implied that Iranian opposition groups were unable to seriously challenge the Shah and lacked the sophistication, discipline and ideology required to function successfully in public affairs. In both periods, the Shah's supporters portrayed the opposition as foreign in origin and lacking in national authenticity. Critics of the opposition – those of a Conservative bent - accused it of being orchestrated and manipulated by the revolutionary Left, whether in the form of anti-Tsarist Caucasian revolutionaries during the first period or the Soviet Union and 'international communism' during the second period.

The views of the opposition held by the Shah's detractors were also contingent on their political leanings. The Labour left-wing portrayed it as class struggle against the capitalist-fuelled tyranny of the Shah, while the centre-left such as the *Guardian* and occasionally the more centrist *Times* emphasised its democratic, all-encompassing character in contrast with the narrow elitism of the Shah's regime. Dedicated Leftist publications such as CARI had their finger on the opposition pulse to a far greater degree than the mainstream press and the FCO. CARI bulletins wrote of 'Ali Shari'ati's religious-radical theories and their influence on students and youth and made references to important opposition figures like the Ayatollahs Ṭāleqāni and Muntaziri and Mehdi Bāzargān months before they were ever mentioned in any other British source, let alone analysed and evaluated. However, CARI's coverage of the opposition was not impartial. Its main

goal in presenting the opposition was to vilify the Shah as much as possible, and CARI writers downplayed the religious elements of the opposition while portraying it as a radical Leftist class-based movement against right-wing tyranny.

The religious-radical alliance of 1906 was reincarnated in the 1970s, although the religious element ultimately gained the upper hand over the liberal elements which had predominated in 1976/1977. The clerical element emerged in 1978 from what appeared to be a long-standing void, since the power of the divines was thought to have been eradicated by the White Revolution. *Guardian* correspondent Liz Thurgood was the first to analyse the wider impact of clerical dissent beginning in May 1978. By autumn 1978, the press had identified events in Iran as part of the emergence of political Islamism, a powerful new phenomenon and wider global trend. The application of Cold War binary logic and use of a Western left-wing/right-wing ideological divide which up to that point had heavily influenced British perceptions of the situation in Iran were increasingly understood to be analytically inadequate and were superseded by the emergence of Khomeini and political Islamism.

Observers from across the British political spectrum often portrayed the clerics as sinister and lugubrious anachronisms. Their sombre garments (black robes, turbans, chadors) and alleged 'return-to-the-Dark Ages' mentality created a powerful visual-ideological conjunction which reinforced this view, particularly in the press and in the case of Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini first burst into the public consciousness in September 1978 after the Zhaleh Square massacre on Black Friday. Although undoubtedly the new master of the situation, he was deemed an unrealistic candidate for taking over from the Shah. As a strictly political figure he was unfathomable and did not display the expected behaviours or calculated manoeuvrings of a revolutionary. The press expected him to waver when faced the immense practical challenges of managing a complex modern country like Iran; indeed the clerics as a whole were deemed incapable of assuming the reins of government. On the other hand, numerous observers acknowledged the role of clerics in the wider Iranian historical and social context, noting their centrality to Iranian national identity and their role as champions of the oppressed.

II. Policy-making and dissent

Official British policy in both periods was guided by a desire for stability in Iran. This desire had traditionally translated into support for the monarchy, as the Shah seemed to be a reliable firmament atop the bewildering galaxy of Iranian politics. However, this was not the case in the first period, when the Shah came to be seen as a liability rather than an asset. Although not unreservedly enthusiastic about the Iranian opposition, the officials examined in this study were sympathetic to the aims of the reformers and took a dim view of the Shah. Civil society and the liberally inclined press zealously championed the opposition and reviled the Shah whereas conservative elements in the press showed considerable initial support for the reformers which gradually gave way to disillusionment. Overall, criticism of the Shah and support for the opposition centred around liberal themes – antipathy towards tsarist Russia, sympathy for nationalism as positive force which nurtured idiosyncrasy and diversity, support for constitutional and parliamentary government, a conviction that liberal government and ideals were the optimal system for the whole world and that Britain's duty as a Liberal power was to nurture and encourage them as such.

External criticism of official policy was significant in both periods, but appears to have had a greater relative impact and was taken more into account at the highest policy-making levels in the first than in the second period. The officials of the first period covered in this study were more liberally inclined from the outset and were more in agreement with foreign policy critics than their counterparts in the second period. Edward Grey maintained a nonchalant public stance but in private he agonised over Persian affairs and repeatedly attempted to restrain Russia's pro-Shah actions, whereas David Owen remained unrepentant in his support for the Shah and disdain for the opposition, even after the regime fell.¹¹¹² In the first period, 'English' public opinion was repeatedly invoked to justify the pursuit of a more humane and liberal policy in Iran and to curb Russia's pro-Shah political interference and military incursions, whereas in the 1970s, the British media was closely monitored by embassy officials – for whom it was a great irritant - for fear of

¹¹¹² Guardian, 25 January 1979

causing potential offense to the Shah rather than as a barometer of public opinion or a way to censure illiberal actions. In the House of Commons, MPs interrogated Edward Grey more severely and persistently over his Iranian policy than their counterparts did to David Owen in the 1970s. Indeed, Grey took particular care to edit the Foreign Office ‘Blue Books’ on Iran with an eye to concealing the extent of Anglo-Russian discord over Iran and thereby attempting to deprive his radical critics of ammunition for attacking his policies. However, his efforts were largely in vain because his critics were often better informed about Iran than he was.¹¹¹³ To the modern reader it may seem counter-intuitive that Edwardian gentlemen reared in the halcyon days of the British Empire would champion liberal and constitutional causes in a distant Middle Eastern kingdom. However, Mira Matikkala points out that this era is frequently understood as one of “*monolithic imperial culture*” when in fact it was characterized by a variety of attitudes to imperialism and the non-Western world;¹¹¹⁴ indeed the late Victorian and Edwardian era was known as the “*heroic age of English [Liberal] radicalism*” and its most committed proponents, including many individuals examined in this study, were characterised by great integrity, progressive idealism and a rejection of double standards. Their views contrasted sharply with the “*pragmatism and cynicism*” which had infiltrated the Labour movement by the 1970s.¹¹¹⁵ In 1993, Anthony Parsons gave a speech arguing that the concept of human rights and concern with protecting the freedoms and livelihood of foreign peoples had been a new post-WWII phenomenon, spurred by atrocities committed by the Nazis. He justified this view on the grounds that the term ‘human rights’ was nowhere to be found in pre-war discourse.¹¹¹⁶ However, this study has shown that these ideals predated the modern terminology of ‘human rights’ and had been expressed in the old form of Liberalism long before the advent of the Holocaust or other WWII atrocities. (Parsons’ speech, somewhat ironically, was delivered at the National Liberal Club and published by the John Stuart Mill Institute).

¹¹¹³ Morris, 257

¹¹¹⁴ Matikkala, 2

¹¹¹⁵ Times, *Lord Fenner Brockway*, 30 October 1978

¹¹¹⁶ Parsons, *Human rights*, 1-3

Iran's first constitutional period came to an ignoble end, with the suppression of the Majlis by Russian forces in December 1911. The 'strangling of Persia' as it was dubbed by Treasurer-General Morgan Shuster provoked sustained and acute protest from Liberal Radicals; indeed from 1911 to 1912, Iran was the subject of more comment and coverage in the British press than it had been from 1907-1909 and Shuster's speaking engagements in England in January 1912 attracted fervent audiences.¹¹¹⁷ Russian preponderance in northern Iran had become an accepted reality for Edward Grey, who had long believed Britain had no chance of successfully implementing a 'forward' policy in Iran given the increase in military responsibilities it would entail. In 1912, Grey took great pains to conceal the degree of strain that Russian incursions into Iran were having on Anglo-Russian relations, since this would betray the extent of Russian bad faith vis-à-vis the 1907 Convention and wholly undermine his credibility as Foreign Secretary.¹¹¹⁸ By that time Grey and the Foreign Office were preoccupied with other crises, such as the Agadir crisis in summer 1911, the question of constitutional reform in the House of Lords and burgeoning industrial unrest.¹¹¹⁹ Thus Liberal Radical criticism of foreign policy had a triumphant, if brief shining moment in the first decade of the twentieth century. It was perhaps a singular moment in history, but this does not diminish its salience as a point of comparison with the second period.

III. Explaining changes between the two periods

In 1906, many British observers saw the world blazing forward on the irreversible path of progress. Modernity was equivalent to the spread of enlightenment and liberal ideals, and to quote Voltaire's *Candide*, humanity would 'live in the best of all possible worlds'. However, by the 1970s much of this liberal optimism had been extirpated following a century of war, genocide and totalitarianism. 'Modernity' had been diverted from this straightforward path and the modern world included an array of illiberal and repressive left-wing and right-wing dictatorships, even within Europe, a development which would have been unimaginable in 1906. The appropriate benchmark for

¹¹¹⁷ Morris, 257-58

¹¹¹⁸ Wilson, *Policy of Entente*, 76-83

¹¹¹⁹ Wilson, *Empire and Continent*, 121

judging the Shah's regime was not thought to be the liberal, developed West, but rather other Asian and Middle Eastern regimes, many of which were deemed considerably viler and more rapacious than the Shah's Iran. This produced a widespread sense that the Shah was really quite enlightened by regional standards and 'not so bad' in the grand scheme of global repression, especially relative to Western bugbears such as the USSR and Soviet bloc.

Liberal ideals were also affected by the repercussions of the transformation of the Left, with the emergence of socialism, the rise of the Labour Party and class politics, and later the emergence of the Soviet Union and then the Cold War, which frequently imposed a zero-sum bipolar logic on the analysis of international relations. Britain's loss of global status and confidence further compounded these trends, resulting in a concentration on commercial rather than political priorities in Iran and the erosion of the Liberal identity. Old ideals about British obligations to defend freedom endured in some sectors of civil society and parliament, albeit in the new guise of socialism, with its guiding principle of international proletarian solidarity rather than innate British duty. These factors contributed to the relative cynicism, ambivalence and malaise of the second period. In spite of, or perhaps because of this - a powerful international discourse on human rights was emerging in the 1970s, spearheaded by non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International.

In the 1900s, officials' pre-existing negative views of the monarch and sympathy for the opposition were compounded by the protestations of the dissenters, whereas 1970s officials maintained their fundamental sympathy and support for the Shah and monarchy. The 1970s officials were generally less liberal, less confident, less well-informed, more bureaucratic and more cynical than their Edwardian counterparts, although this does not reflect on them individually so much as on their era. Press, parliament and civil society showed differing shades of opinion but in general the indignant all-encompassing Liberalism of the first period was replaced in the second by a mix of class and capitalist-centred critiques, an acceptance of double standards for Iran and a targeted focus on humanitarian issues such as torture, civil liberties and trial procedures. Britain itself was less implicated in the depiction of events, which the press portrayed with less intensity and

emotional immediacy than in the first period. British identity was no longer that of a great overarching power bound to the gallant defence of smaller nations' liberties but rather a spectator on the side-lines, hoping for a decent outcome.

In both periods, there was a considerable degree of policy dissent expressed in parliament, civil society and the press, whose content and impact was explored in this study. In particular, Liberal public opinion of the first period was shown to have exerted a significant influence on government policy, remarkable in an era when Britain was far from being a democratic society and the parliamentary franchise and numerous other privileges were largely restricted to landowning males who only represented about 30 percent of the total population. However, the influence of individual MPs in parliament was considerably greater in the first period than in the second (for reasons discussed in Chapter 1, section VI 'From Liberalism to Labour') which imparted an additional layer of impact and urgency to parliamentary questioning. Furthermore, the small scale and restricted scope of the policy-making establishment and its circle of critics likely contributed to more direct and effective communication between the two in spite of acute disagreement between them. Dissenting MPs, civil society groups and many journalists had backgrounds which were not entirely dissimilar from the individuals in government whose policies they were criticising insofar as they shared relatively privileged backgrounds. Many critics invoked patriotic ideals to buttress their attacks on Grey's foreign policy and the preservation of England's honour and Liberal identity was a central theme.

The human rights-centred critiques of the second period were not without influence and did push officials to grudgingly review some aspects of their Iranian policy, but given the formal organisation, considerable resources and international networks of civil society groups in the 1970s, compared to the unstructured, domestic, ad-hoc groupings of the 1900s, they were less impactful overall than one might have expected. Whereas the civil society groups of the 1970s consisted of established humanitarian organisations such as Amnesty International and the ICJ, the civil society of the 1900s was numerically tiny but disproportionately influential, consisting of a handful of highly committed individuals with personal resources at their disposal and a high level

of scholarly and practical expertise in Iranian affairs. The difference between these two groupings reflected the larger shift from the ad-hoc individualistic affiliations of the 'Liberal Age' to the solid bureaucratic structures of the 'Collectivist Age', as discussed in Chapter 1.

By the 1970s, the circle of critics had expanded to also include student groups, non-members of the upper or upper-middle classes and those affiliated (or at least suspected of affiliation) with ideologies and politics understood to be fundamentally antithetical to British identity and interests, such as Communism or anything related to the Soviet Union. While the Labour left-wing critics of the 1970s were in some respects the ideological heirs to the Liberal critics of the first period and championed many similar themes such as supporting those struggling for civil liberties, they were different in important ways, such as being socialist and pro-Soviet (or at least they could be presented as such) and their critiques were less centered on English identity. Political culture had become more cynical and had lost some of the earnest ideals and righteous indignation characteristic of the late Victorian and Edwardian radicals, while the arrival of mass media and modern political spin doctoring had brought an end to the relatively candid and unguarded manner in which the government had once communicated with its critics. The limited Edwardian circle of officials and critics had been expanded to become a much broader and ultimately more democratic arena, but it also became an arena where indifference was more widespread and communication was less effective and impactful.

In his memoirs, Anthony Parsons argued that officials of his time sought to appear less paternalistic than their allegedly hubristic predecessors and wanted to shed Britain's reputation as an evil genius meddling in Iranian politics.¹¹²⁰ However, this study has endeavoured to show that the pompous pith-helmeted British diplomat of yore was not an accurate depiction, at least in the case of Iran. This attempt at image improvement pushed 1970s diplomats into a passive position whereby they refrained not only from criticism and commentary but from having any guiding policy at all beyond the promotion of commerce. This ironically compelled them to rationalise or explain away the objectionable aspects of the Shah's regime, which they did by advocating a

¹¹²⁰ Parsons, *Pride and Fall*, 5

double standard between the West and East and employing Orientalist stereotypes in diplomatic reporting to a degree which far surpassed the use of such stereotypes in the earlier period. These stereotypes were of a classic Orientalist vintage and spoke of the immutability, passivity, apathy and so forth of Iranian people and society and their inborn devotion to the Shah. The proliferation of Orientalist generalisations in the second period was also a result of the far more limited degree of first-hand knowledge and information about Iran and local developments which officials possessed as compared to the first period, due of a variety of factors discussed in this study. Thus the official mentality in the 1970s was an uncomfortable modern attempt at egalitarianism, which ironically rationalised British relations with an repressive and unstable regime by recourse to old stereotypes and double standards about 'Orientals' to try and make those relations seem acceptable and normal. Conversely, some Orientalist perceptions which were more prevalent in the first period, such as the idea of Iranians as juvenile and inexperienced in free government, induced greater feelings of paternalistic Liberal responsibility for their newly constitutional Iranian protégés among some officials in the 1900s. It is important to note that some Iranians – generally those who had the most to lose from constitutional and representative government, such as the Shah and his entourage – were staunch opponents of constitutional government, and declared to the British that their subjects were politically juvenile and unprepared for representative institutions.

One may object that the constitutional movement was so fervently supported in the 1900s because it did not substantially threaten British interests in Iran and even dovetailed with them (unlike a similar movement in Egypt or India where Britain had an established imperial presence), whereas in the 1970s the Shah was seen as a vital anti-Soviet bulwark whose weakness would enable Soviet expansionism and thus to oppose him would have been irrational. However, this study has shown that backing the constitutionalists was placed a substantial strain on the crucial pro-Russian component of Grey's foreign policy and conferred no pragmatic advantages. Officials and many critics were adamant that great power politics should not eclipse the liberties of smaller nations and that Russia could not infringe upon Britain's national honour, even at the risk of jeopardising the European balance of power. Even when strategic considerations were present, they did not entirely

eclipse Liberal ideals. In the second period, most officials would not entertain such quixotic ideals, never mind act on them. They arguably faced even lesser strategic risks than their counterparts in the 1900s, given that during the period of détente prior to 1979 there was thought to be little serious Soviet military threat to Iran in spite of persistent Cold War rhetoric, but humanitarian ideals were generally eclipsed in an atmosphere where economic pragmatism was paramount.

One might also critique the earnest ideals of the first period as the luxurious corollaries of wealth, status, erudition and great-power confidence. However, the point is precisely that many of those possessed of wealth, status, education and hegemonic confidence chose to wield their privileges in favour of ideals which they felt to be right without any particular opportunistic or self-serving motive. E.G. Browne, Henry Lynch and many ‘men on the spot’ in Iran possessed privileges unknown to the average Briton of the time such as an elite education, social connections and substantial private incomes but used them to study, finance and promote the causes they believed in. Power and privilege can corrupt and cause a disconnect from reality, but they can also facilitate freedom of action and conviction, allowing one to act without the humiliating constraints which bedevilled the officials of the 1970s and compelled them to rationalise repression. This, however, feeds into a complex philosophical question beyond the scope of this study of where and how morality fits into foreign policy and politics in general. It is worthwhile to note the hopeful words of the historian A.J.P. Taylor, who criticised the pursuit of bald *realpolitik* on the grounds that *"today's realism will appear tomorrow as short-sighted blundering. Today's idealism is the realism of the future"*. Taylor's observation applies well in the Iranian case examined herein, where the professed realism of Britain's 1970s Iranian policy looked very much like short-sighted blundering after the fact. Thus we end on an optimistic note that those who preach and promote a policy anchored in ideals, although derided as quixotic in their time and often facing apparent failure, are often vindicated by posterity.¹¹²¹

¹¹²¹ Taylor, 16,18

IV. Further research

This study has identified two main areas which merit further examination. The first would involve embarking on a wider study of British attitudes in the first period to determine to what extent liberal attitudes similar to those expressed in the case of Iran were prevalent in other countries where Britain had an ‘informal empire’ and how such attitudes interacted with the realities of informal imperialism. By doing so, researchers could establish conclusively whether Iran was an outlier as far as British devotion to liberal ideals was concerned or whether it was a part of a wider trend, as appears to be the case from a summary overview of available materials. A comparison with British attitudes to liberal and nationalist movements in their formal imperial spheres such as Egypt and India would also be instructive. A number of such studies already exist, such as Moulton’s piece on British Radicals and India included in the bibliography.

A second avenue for further research would involve a similar examination of Russian and Soviet perceptions of Iran in each of the two periods. The central position of Russia and the Soviet Union in British discourse surrounding Iran in both periods and its impact on international analysis of Iran’s position make them integral to understanding British perceptions of Iran. An elucidation of the Russian/Soviet point of view would also reveal whether to what extent negative perceptions about Russia/the USSR vis-à-vis Iran in both periods were justified and anchored in reality. Moritz Deutschmann’s work on Iran and the Russian Empire in the late Qajar period would provide a starting point for further research on the first period, while numerous Russian-language works would provide a starting point for research on the second period, such as the following: Agaev, Semen Lvovich. *Iran: Rozhdenie Respubliki*, Politizdat, Moscow, 1984; Arabadzhian, A.Z. (ed), *Iranskaia Revoliutsiia 1978-1979: Prichiny i uroki*, Akademia Nauk SSSR, Institut Vostokvedeniia, Nauka, Moscow, 1989; Reznikov, Aleksandr Borisovich, *Padenie Shakhskogo Rezhima*, Politizdat, Moscow, 1983 and the collection of pre-WW1 documents from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, known as the ‘Orange Book’: *Oranzhevaia kniga, do voïny. Sbornik diplomaticheskikh dokumentov*, St Petersburg: 1914.

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