

What Goes Up Must Come Down

An analysis of the power and influence of the Iranian Shah over time

Jason Stewart · RCSOCSCI 360 · Professor Tom O'Donnell · December 6, 2006

INTRODUCTION

Iran has been the stage on which political power and influence has greatly effected the inception and outcome of many revolutionary events. The role and influence of political and religious representatives during these events not only shaped the future of this Islamic nation but the lives of the Iranian people. Over the course of Iranian history the power to make such heavy decisions has fallen in the hands of many individuals or groups including religious leaders, political leaders, conservative Islamic groups, etc. The position of the Shah is of particular interest in terms determinative ability because of how Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was the Shah after WWII and preceding the Iranian revolutions in 1979, came in and out of favor and power on more than one occasion. The goal of this paper is to analyze the role, power, and influence of the Shah over the course of Iranian history in terms of the changing Iranian political system.

BIG SHOES TO FILL

A brief synopsis of Iran before Mohammad Reza Pahlav

Before the modernization movement from 1926 – 1941 Iran was extremely resistant to change. Reza Khan, who would later become Reza Shah, would be one of the first to try to change all that. He understood the importance of tradition and made his position with the traditionalists known in a declaration against establishing a republic in 1924:

“From the very first both I and, indeed, the whole army have considered the care and the preservation of the glory of Islam as one of the greatest of our duties and objectives, and have always striven that Islam might advance daily in the path of progress and exaltation, and that the honour owed to sanctity might be completely observed and respected, therefore at the time when I went to Kum [sic] to bid

*farewell to the ulema, I took the opportunity of exchanging views with them, and finally decided that it was expedient to proclaim to the whole people that question of republic be dropped.”*¹

Even though Reza Khan had firmly established his position with the traditionalists he also understood the importance keeping Iran in step with the rest of the modern world. To appease the traditionalists Reza Shah² established symbolic policies that accentuated traditional role of the monarch and simultaneously stressed the importance of Islam. With the support of the traditionalists Reza Shah began to take measures that would ensure his authority throughout the changes that lie ahead.

Once in power Reza Shah applied strategic policies to ensure his reign. Having control of a powerful military would guarantee his supremacy so the Shah increased the military budget by five hundred percent and took steps to ensure the loyalty of the troops. He made the careers of some military personnel highly beneficial by permitting the sale of discounted land and gave them high paying salaries. Reza Shah even implemented policies that would guarantee his power in the event that one or more of his military commanders mutinied: he split up the army to make each brigade small enough as to not pose a threat independently to the state. Now with the support of both the military and the traditionalists, Reza Shah focused on bringing Iran ‘kicking and streaming’ into the modern age.

Nationalism was a hot topic among the Iranian people and politicians and Reza Shah embraced this idea to further his vision of a modern Iran. European dress was encouraged in professional settings and the Shah was quoted as saying unified dress

¹ Foreign Office, General Correspondence E3748/455/34 enclosure, Prime Minister’s proclamation from *Sitareh Iran* dated 1 April 1924,

² Reza Shah was Reza Khan’s new title when he was proclaimed the leader of the Iranian people

would “lead the uniformity in life and politics, and would finally weld Persia into a unified whole³”. Nationalistic laws were also put into effect. One law mandated that all school children’s and government employees’ uniforms must be made of Iranian cloth⁴. The National Bank of Iran was established in 1928, which would serve to break the British economic dominance in Iran. To further promote economic expansion the Shah put pressure on the British to increase the revenues that was given to Iran from domestic oil production. Tehran University was established so that Iranians would study inside Iran and not have to go abroad and be subjected to an education that might be contrary to the aims of the current dynasty. Nationalism was on the rise and the Shah’s vision of a unified Iran was coming together, however Reza Shah would prove to be weak in his foreign policy.

In 1933 Reza Shah signed an agreement with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) to extend Britain’s concession until 1993 without significant economic benefits⁵. With the popularity of nationalism the idea of foreign powers having almost complete control over domestic resources did not sit well proponents of a free and independent Iran. Additionally, many believed that Reza Shah’s quest for a modern Iran was politically suffocating so when allied forces occupied Iran the Shah was seen as expendable. A bitter Shah went into exile and abdicated the throne to his son Mohammad Reza Shah.

A NEW PLAYER TAKES THE STAGE

The Pahlavi dynasty continues in an increasingly nationalistic Iran

³ Foreign Office, General Correspondence 13071 E4672 dated 24 September 1928.

⁴ Foreign Office, General Correspondence 371 14548 E1804 dated 7 April 1930, and Foreign Office, General Correspondence 13542 E2447 dated 14 May 1930.

⁵ Siavoshi, Sussan. *A Century of Revolution*. Ed. John Foran. Vol. 2. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1994. 112.

When Reza Shah went into exile his vision for a modern Iran was not complete and Mohammad Reza Shah inherited from his father a nation amidst transition. Both ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ Iran existed within the state partly because Reza Shah didn’t finish what he started and partly because he couldn’t finish what he started:

“Each laid claim to authenticity and legitimacy. Yet in 1941, the distinction between these two ‘Irans’ was neither clear nor apparent, in part a reflection of the incompleteness and ambiguity of Reza Shah’s policies.”⁶

This battle between the traditional and modern philosophies led to a rise in socialist thought especially among the young people⁷. The idea of greater social and economic equality spread throughout Iranian society including the industrial and working classes, which had considerably grown during the rule of Reza Shah⁸. The nationalist and anti-imperialist interests of the now formidable middle class clashed with those of the traditional upper class, whose interests were upheld by the monarchy. In an effort to establish hegemony of the state, the middle class had become increasingly politically active and as a result power of the state shifted from the monarchy to the prime minister and the Majlis. Additionally, continued British⁹ and Soviet¹⁰ intervention in Iranian domestic policy made the Shah appear weak in the eyes of the anti-imperialists. It was the combination of all these factors that contributed to the lack of respectability and effective power of Shah at the beginning of his reign.

⁶ Ansari, Ali M. *Modern Iran Since 1921*. 1st ed. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2003. 75.

⁷ Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921*, 76.

⁸ Gasiorowski, Mark J. *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah*. 1st ed. Ithica and London: Cornell UP, 1991. 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰ Zabih, *Communist Movement in Iran*, chapter 3. *New York Times*, June 15th, 1946, 2:2; U.S Department of State, Office of Intelligence and Research, *The Tedeh and Associated Parties in Iran*, OIR No. 3523.5, April 1, 1946.

In spite of the general lack of faith in the Pahlavi dynasty the monarchy was still the spotlight of political loyalties, activities and sympathies. The Shah used the sympathy he had among politicians to try to reestablish the power and reputation of the monarchy but it was only after his apparent success in the liberation of Azerbaijan¹¹ that his new initiative would become clear.

Recognizing the power of the growing middle class, the Shah attempted to reinvent his image by distancing himself traditional social alliances of the monarchy and becoming “a champion of the young radical intelligentsia”¹². Mohammad Reza Shah made his ardent position on social reform known and it was apparently well received by the young population:

*“The Shah was given a very enthusiastic reception by a crowd of about 10,000 spectators at a football match between British and Persian teams in Tehran, which may indicate that attempts that have recently been made to represent him as a champion of the youth have not been without success”*¹³

The Shah then attempted to become ever more radical in the face of criticisms by leftwing by announcing the redistribution of crown lands to the peasants. This was not popular among the elite landowners who feared similar legislation applicable to their own estates¹⁴ and since the funds from the sale of the lands went to a charity that was overseen

¹¹ The Shah and his army marched in to Baku, the capitol of Azerbaijan to the north, and freed them from Soviet influence and returned them to the state of Islam. However, that government was quickly overthrown and thousands fled to the Soviet Union. See: Robert, Rossow, Jr., “The Battle of Azerbaijan,” *Middle East Journal* 10 (Winter 1956), 17-32.

¹² Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921*, 101.

¹³ Foreign Office, General Correspondence 35109, Intelligence Summary file 110, E552/110/34 dated 27 January 1943.

¹⁴ Foreign Office, General Correspondence 91519, The Shah’s Sale of the Crown Lands, file 1461, E1461, dated 12 February 1951.

by the unpopular Princess Ashraf¹⁵ the Shah effectively estranged himself from both his traditional and radical supporters.

Toward the end of his first reign it would become apparent that the Shah was becoming desperate to obtain some form of political respectability and power. Using the public and political sympathy the monarchy had accumulated from a failed assassination attempt the Shah pushed a number of constitutional reforms through the Majlis that would give him more power: A second representative house, the Senate, of which he would appoint half the senators, was established¹⁶; the Tudeh political party, which was blamed for the recent assassination attempt, was outlawed¹⁷; and land that was placed under government control after Reza Shah was given back to the Monarchy¹⁸. With control of half of the senate representatives the Shah would have the power to dissolve the Majlis, however his new political power would not go uncontested.

Following these apparent victories the Shah attempted to further solidify his power by rigging the Sixteenth Majlis elections in 1949. In an era of Nationalism and Socialism this did not sit well with the public. Protesters, led by Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq, entered the royal palace grounds in a public display of objection to the upcoming elections. The Shah met with a committee appointed by the protestors, including Mosaddeq, and agreed to hold free and open elections. The National Front

¹⁵ Foreign Office, General Correspondence 75504. Royal Family Affairs, file 1944, no date or file number. Dated 1949.

¹⁶ Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921*, 104.

¹⁷ Foreign Office, Consular Files 1485, Persian Government and Internal Situation file 21, file numbers 21/44/49 dated February 1949, 21/36/49 dated 7 February 1949.

¹⁸ Gasiorkski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 48.

party would form as a result of this successful demonstration and Mosaddeq would step into the political spotlight¹⁹.

IRAN'S PEOPLE PERSON

Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq and the Oil nationalization movement.

As French and Swiss educated lawyer and a scion of the Qajar royal house Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq had been politically active in Iranian politics since 1919 however his well-known political contributions are known from his involvement of the Oil nationalization movement. At the time Mosaddeq may have been seen as an unlikely candidate to lead the Iranian people through the oil nationalization movement²⁰ but despite his 'slippery' reputation and years in the Pahlavi induced political wilderness²¹ he would become the eight hundred pound gorilla that Mohammad Reza Shah would no longer ignore.

Following Mohammad Reza Shah's string appointing pliant and weak Prime Ministers²², all of which either resigned or were assassinated, the Majlis looked to a newly elected member of the house: Mosaddeq. Sympathetic to the anti-imperialist and nationalistic public outcry, Mosaddeq knew that the proposed "supplemental agreement", which was Britain's feeble attempt to appease Iranian oil nationalization sentiments, was a far cry from what the Iranian people deserved. At the time the current oil concession

¹⁹ Discussion in the previous paragraph draws mainly on Abrahamian, Ervand. *Iran between Two Revolutions*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982. 242-267.

²⁰ British Ambassadors regularly described Mosaddeq as a lunatic, cunning and slippery, etc... see Jones, G. *Banking and Empire in Iran: The History of the British Bank of the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. 318.

²¹ Mosaddeq spoke out publicly about some of Reza Shah's policies so the Shah made sure Mosaddeq was kept out of important political circles and decision-making processes. See Ansari, Ali M. *Modern Iran Since 1921*, 106.

²² From 1947 to 1951 there were six prime ministers either appointed or endorsed by the Shah and none of which were in power more than a year. For more information see: Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 47-50.

granted to British was grossly unfair to Iranians: from 1932-1950 the British Government earned approximately £194,100,000 while the Iranian Government only earned £100,500,000 during that same time²³. Mosaddeq, with strong support of the people, the National Front, and the Majlis contested further policies to renew oil concessions, including a tardy 50/50 deal²⁴, and instead advocated the nationalization of Iranian Oil. So strong was Mosaddeq's support base he was nominated by the Majlis for premiership in April of 1951, a decision that the Shah reluctantly accepted.

Mosaddeq, as a newly elected leader of the Iranian people, posed a considerable threat to the Shah and his power. Mosaddeq had the support of the people, and with a growing middle class this support went a long way towards political goals. The Shah, who lacked the support of almost all except the British at the time, had very little influence in the political arena. Mosaddeq's charisma, as noted by a number of authors²⁵, enabled him to rally the mob together and unite for a common political goal. With the backing of the largest group in Iran Mosaddeq was able to pursue nationalistic, socialist and anti-imperialist agendas and all the Shah would do, for the time being, was sit back and watch.

The nationalization of Iran's oil took place despite the Shah's wishes. It would of course benefit the Iranian people by bringing more money into the economy, creating jobs, etc. but from the perspective of the monarchy the nationalization was a more complicated matter. If it were to take place it would mean that the plans for the future of

²³ Quoted in R. Ferrier, 'The Anglo- Iranian Oil Dispute: A Triangular Relationship', in Bill and Louis (editors) *Mosaddeq, Iranian Nationalism and Oil*. London: Tauris, 1988. 171.

²⁴ Keddie, Nikki R.. *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*. 1st edition. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981. 134.

²⁵ For example: Siavoshi, *A Century of Revolution*. Ed. John Foran. 118.

Iran were no longer in the hands of the Shah but in the hands of the people. One would think that since the Shah tried so desperately early on in his reign to be the “champion of the young radical intelligentsia” nationalization of Iranian oil would have been something that he wanted as well, but this was not the case. True to his royalist roots the Shah still wanted absolute power of what he perceived as “his country” and “his people” and would pursue agendas that would not occlude his authority²⁶.

The British, of course, had significant interests in the political state of Iran in that they wanted to keep those in power who would continue to send oil relatively cheap to Great Britain. Still recovering economically and in the process of liquidating its’ vast colonial empire Britain need the tax revenues it was collecting from the AIOC. Mohammad Reza Shah, having been educated in Europe and having a great respect for Western ideology²⁷, was Britain’s ideal Iranian leader because he rarely listened to the needs and wants of the Iranian middle class²⁸ and, most importantly, he would support their oil concession and continued presence in Iran ensuring Britain’s economic oil interests. For these reasons the British were adamantly opposed to nomination of Mosaddeq and bolstered the Shah by using their political influence to ensure his continued influence and power. From 1951 to 1952 Britain would try repeatedly to overthrow Mosaddeq but it was not until the U.S. got involved that a coup d’état would be successful.

Toward the end of Mosaddeq’s premiership he had grown increasingly impatient with the slow political processes of the Majlis and the Senate, being cut off at every

²⁶ See Ansari, Ali M. *Modern Iran Since 1921*, 111.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁸ But only when it would serve to aggrandize him. See Ansari, Ali M. *Modern Iran Since 1921*, 99-106.

corner by the British, and being curtailed by Iranian politicians who feared social and political mobilization²⁹. This political suffocation would ultimately lead Mosaddeq to rule without the consent of the Majlis. Absolute rule was entirely disparate to Mosaddeq's own ideology and his image suffered greatly in the eyes of his supporters. When the U.S. staged a coup in 1953 to ensure Iran stayed in the Western camp³⁰ it was likely successful due to not only strategic C.I.A. planning but also because of Mosaddeq's already tarnished image.

WELCOME BACK

After the demise of the Mosaddeq regime the Shah returns to power

The fall of the Mosaddeq's regime marked the end of political pluralism and social dynamism. The twelve years preceding the coup of 1953 had served as an example to both the people of Iran and the international community that democratization, at least at this point, was an anachronism. The Shah returned to power with the support of the U.S. despite his weakened image among Iranians³¹. The Shah was apparently unaware of this weakened image when he said this in a *New York Post* interview about the events of 1953: "Previously I was ready to die for my people, but the uprising demonstrated that my people were also ready to die for me"³². The Shah would remain in power with minor fluctuations in his power and political influence until the Iranian revolution in 1979.

THE END OF AN ERA

The fall of the Pahlavi state in Iran

²⁹ Ansari, Ali M. *Modern Iran Since 1921*, 114.

³⁰ Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah*, 67.

³¹ Cottam, R.W., *Nationalism in Iran: Updated through 1978*. Pittsburg, 1979. Chapter 16.

³² Foreign Office, 133007 EP 1015/62 dated 9 December 1958.

In 1977 President Jimmy Carter was quoted as saying that “Iran was an island of stability in one of the more troubled parts of the world” and this was a consequence of “the great love that [the Iranian] people give [the Shah]”³³. Iran was indeed in a steady state: critics had either been silenced or lured into the ranks and economic growth the nation had seen under Pahlavi rule gave reason for its’ continued existence. However, the Shah would soon make choices that would ultimately lead to his dynasty’s demise.

Late in 1977 the Shah approved the printing of an article entitled “Iran and the colonization of the red and the black” apparently responding to Ayatollah Khomeini’s latest callous comments. The article outlined the Shah’s beliefs, his conception of the historical narrative, the opposition of the “red and the black”³⁴, and the reactionary role of Ayatollah Khomeini³⁵. The publication of the article would mark the point at which the political elite would become divided and the Islamic revolution would gather momentum.

Ayatollah Khomeini, who had been in exile for 14 years³⁶, was becoming an increasingly viable option for ruler, especially among the young whom he had maintained a core of support within:

“For the young, idealistic students who were to become the ideological vanguard of the movement, he represented unorthodoxy and rebelliousness. They saw him as a champion of the national independence and integrity. Khomeini did not simply think about the world, he wanted to change it. This was an immensely attractive mantra to the young”³⁷.

³³ Quoted in Bill, J., *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. 233.

³⁴ Mohammad Reza Shah regularly inveighed against the potential tyranny of "the Red and the Black" with the "Red" signifying communists, and the "Black" signifying the clergy.

³⁵ *Etela'at Siyasi-Eqtisadi*, dated 8 January 1978. Translated from Persian via Internet translator.

³⁶ Moin, B., *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*. London: Tauris, 1999. 136.

³⁷ Ansari, Ali M. *Modern Iran Since 1921*, 201.

In addition to the young, Khomeini was also in favor with the Shi'a who saw him as representing "all that was traditional and authentic about Shi'a Iranian culture"³⁸. Protests began to take place in the streets, and exemplifying his disconnectedness from his people the Shah effectively ignored them by dismissing such acts as "healthy reaction which could easily be contained"³⁹. It would be his inaction here that would set off the downward spiraling power of the state. Instead of addressing the needs of his people the Shah flexed his political muscles by declaring marshal law in Tehran during which the security forces, who were untrained in for this liberal environment, open fire on them. The Shah might as well have gotten shot himself at this point because his political power and influence would be unable to recover from this incident.

Further horrific events, that may have or may not have been the result of political forces⁴⁰, such as a fire killing 400 Iranians, served be the nail in the coffin for the Shah. After realizing that his nation was at the beginning of a revolution the Shah, in perhaps his last act of political guile embraced the changing state and advocated for his own leadership through the revolution⁴¹. His plea would largely fall on deaf ears and soon there after the military would announce its neutrality which left the Shah with nothing to ensure his power. The Shah went into exile in 1979 and Khomeini established an interim government in place of the monarchy and the existing political structure.

³⁸ Ansari, Ali M. *Modern Iran Since 1921*, 201.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴⁰ It is unclear whether events such as Fire at the Rex Theatre, which killed 400 people, was carried out by terrorists (which is what the Shah advocated) or the SAVAK (which is what the Iranian people believed). See. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*. 249.

⁴¹ BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts*. Part 4 Middle East, Africa and Latin America, 1967-78. ME/5962/A/10-11, 7 November 1978, "The Shah's 6 November Speech". Tehran Home Service, 6 November 1978.

CONCLUSION

Mohammad Reza Shah's power and political influence throughout his reign and the existence of the monarchy in general was largely due to its' control over the armed forces. However, as some may apparently forget, the military is comprised of PEOPLE, and if the people are continually carrying out orders with which they disagree those who control the military will lose their basis of power.

The seeds for a revolutionary Iran were planted as soon as the firm rule of Reza Khan was over and the thrown was abdicated to his son. At first Mohammad Reza Shah seemed connected with the needs and the wants of his people but as soon as the increasingly politically aware middle class presented opposition the Shah's real colors would show through. He was more concerned about the continuity of the Pahlavi state than the well being of his people. Once the middle-class was large and powerful enough to present a considerable opposition to the Shah it was only a matter of time before the different agendas of the two forces would concede in the people's favor.

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