

## BRITISH COLONIALISM IN QAJARID IRAN AND ITS IMPACT ON ISLAM AND MUSLIM

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**Abstract:** With the advent of Islam and Islamization of Iran, it remained united under the Pious, Umayyad and early Abbasid Caliphate. With the disintegration of the Muslim World many dynasties and petty principalities were established in Iran. Finally it got completely unified by the founder of the Safavid dynasty in 1501 under Shi'ism and Iran obtained a separate identity. This unification continued under Qajar (1779 – 1925), Pahlavid (1925 – 1979) and the modern rule, started in 1979, known as “Islamic Republic of Iran”. As it was the period of western colonization and various Muslim countries came under European powers, Iran also came under the influence of these foreign powers especially the British and the Russians. While the Qajars were ruling Iran these countries not only put their impact on it and its people but also interfered the affairs of the country, got various concession and exploited its resources. It's worth mentioning that Britain always played a diplomatic role in Iran by signing treaties to get more and more concessions. On the other hand, Russia being a neighbour of Iran many times adopted the aggressive policy and conquered its various areas in Central Asia. Nasir al- Din Shah was able than others but the influence of Britain and Russia increased over Iran during his regime. It is worthy to mention that Britain, despite of disobeying the agreements at several times, got more concessions than Russia. The concessions included the construction of telegraph from London to India through Iran in 1870, the building of railways in 1872, the control over the mines in 1872, the establishment of Imperial Bank of Persia in 1889, the payments received from custom and excise duties, the monopoly over tobacco in 1890, the Oil concessions in 1901 and others. This may also be termed as “The British Imperialism” in Iran. These concessions and imperialism created unrest among the Iranians as they directly affected the people. As a result many movements started against the Qajars. The tobacco and the constitutional movements are of importance. Under the pressure of the constitutionalists an assembly called ‘*Majlis*’ was formed in 1906 having the representation of all sections of the society. This ‘*Majlis*’ not only curbed the powers of the then Qajari ruler, Muzaffar al-Din Shah but also passed the laws in the interest of the country. Though the constitution movement ended in 1910, it paved the way for the establishment of Pahlavid dynasty in 1925 and later for the Islamic revolution of 1979.

**Keywords:** Ancient time, Sassanid rule, Roman Empire, Zoroastrians, Qajarid, Safavid Dynasty, Constitutional Movement, Golestan, Caucasus, Turkamanchi, Anglo-Persian company

**Introduction.** The Arab conquest of Iran ended the Sassanid Empire and then the spread of Islam was started there by the Arabs in 642 A.D. and very soon Islam became the religion of the majority population of the country. After its conquest Iran was ruled by the Arabs, Iranians and Turks. In 1501, Safavids established an independent dynasty there in Iran under Ismail and set Shi'ism as the official religion. Before its establishment Iran was ruled by the pious Caliphs, Umayyads, Abbasids and semi independent and independent dynasties and their rulers were mostly Sunnis. So the majority population of Iran before Safavids was Sunnis. It was Shah Ismail, who forcibly converted Sunni Muslims to Shi'ism. After Safavids when Qajar came into power they also maintained the same religious policy because Shi'ism has become dominant faith in Iran. The Qajar dynasty that ruled Iran for about 130 years was established by Agha Muhammad Khan in 1779. This rule came to an end in 1925 and its last ruler was Ahmad Shah Qajar. When the Qajars came into power the whole Muslim world in general and Iran in particular was facing the baffling problem of the western imperialism. The Qajar period have distinct features from other Iranian Empires. It was full of political turmoil, wars and economic drain under the west. Under Qajars, British and Russian influences became so dominated on the political, economic and social life of the country that Iranians found it a threat for their independence and culture. Consequently many leaders, religious scholars and local population stood up against the European power and played pivotal role in the formation of constitutional movement.

The Qajar was a Turkish tribe who settled in Iran under the Safavid period. In Safavid period, after Afghan occupation a state of anarchy was spread in Iran. Shah Tahmasp exiled in Mazandaran and was crowned as a king there. He appointed Fateh Ali Khan, a Qajar leader as the chief minister. After Safavid, Mohammad

Hasan a son of Fateh Ali Khan captured Azerbaijan and declared his independence. When Karim Khan established Zand dynasty in Iran, he attacked Qajars and carried Muhammad Khan to Shiraz. But after the death of Karim Khan Zand, Mohammad Khan who was also known as Agha Mohammad Khan established his rule in Mazandaran in 1779. After that he extended his authority to Tabriz, Hamdan, and Tehran. He defeated numerous rivals including Lutf Ali Khan, the last ruler of Zand dynasty and gained the throne of Iran in 1794 with Tehran as his capital.<sup>1</sup> He has also maintained Iranian sovereignty over the former Iranian territories in Georgia and the region of Khurasan.<sup>2</sup> Agha Muhammad formally crowned as Shah in 1796 and declared himself as a devotee of Shia religion. He was assassinated by his own servant in 1797 after a year of his rule as Shah. Agha Muhammad Khan was succeeded by his nephew, Fath Ali Shah. Fath Ali Shah's reign was full of many disturbances. After overcoming of his internal disturbances he was called upon to make international problems. Under Fath Ali Shah fought many disastrous wars against Russia, which was expanding from north into the Caucasus Mountains, an area of historic Iranian interest and influence.<sup>3</sup> Fath Ali Shah was not prepared for it, so he sought help from western powers and established good relation with British government.

**Political Interference-** The first formal British contract established with Qajar when in 1800 captain John Malcolm an ambassador of East India company came to Iran. He induced the Shah of Iran to put pressure on Zaman Khan, ruler of Afghanistan that he would not attack on India. Under this favourable condition a political and commercial treaty was speedily negotiated between Malcolm and Haji Ibrahim the vizier.<sup>4</sup> According to this treaty Shah agreed to make no peace with Afghanistan unless he renounced his idea on British possession over India. The British Ambassador on this part agreed to support the Iranian rulers in case he was attacked by the Afghan or the French. On the commercial side it was stipulated that Indian and English merchants should be permitted to settle free of taxes at the ports.<sup>5</sup> But this treaty could not serve the purpose of Iran because the British had good relation with Russia and they refused to help Iran against Russia. Then, Iran turned to France and Napoleon promised to help Iran against Russia. In 1803, Napoleon persuaded Fath Ali Shah to sign a treaty of alliance with France against Russia and in return Napoleon sent a large military mission for the purpose of training the Iranian army and setting up foundries for making cannon and other weapons. A few months later all this became worthless because the treaty of friendship has been done between Napoleon and the Tsar ruler Alexander I at Tilsit in 1807.<sup>6</sup>

Taking advantage of this opportunity, the British government sent a mission under Sir Harford Jones in 1808 and signed a treaty of alliances with Iran against France and Russia. The treaty had provision to train the Iranian army plus a subsidy of \$120,000 for the Shah. The Russians had carried on a campaign of expansion at the expense of Iran in the Caucasus. The campaign weakened only when Russia got involved in the struggle against the Ottomans or with any of the European countries. The Iranians were fighting with Russian and many British soldiers were serving in the army of Iran. After many years of challenges, the major battle was fought between them at Aslanduz in 1812. In this battle most of the British officers who were commanding the Iranian army withdrawn because in the meantime the Britain made an agreement with Russia against Napoleon. The Iranian army was under the command of Abbas Mirza, the crown Prince, who was considered the most able man among the Qajar princes. The army was trained on European lines, sometimes by the French and some other times by the British. From all accounts, it seems that the command was not uniform and the soldiers were confused.<sup>7</sup> Due to this chaos that was spreading among the Iranian army the Russian gained a great victory.

**Golestan treaty** – Golestan treaty was signed by Russian agent Yermolouph as a commander of Georgian force and Iran agent, Abul Hasan Khan Shirazi in Garbage suburbs on 12<sup>th</sup> Oct, 1813. The text was prepared by British Diplomat Sir Gore Ouseley who served as a mediator and had great influence on Persian court. According to this treaty of Golestan, Iran recognized Russian's annexation of Georgia and ceded to Russia most of the Caucasus region. Moreover Iran had no right to navigate in Caspian Sea and many facilities were provided for Russian traders. For its part Russian promised to support the claim of Abbas Mirza to the throne.<sup>8</sup> Iran hoped to consolidate its position and then attempt the fortune of war by British authorities. In this way this peace proved to be temporary and not a final settlement.

Due to the increasing pressure, Abbas Mirza invited Britain and Russia to interfere in the internal affairs of Iran. After this, every Qajar crown prince, except the last, appointed British ministers in his court when he ascended the throne. The involvement of Russia in the Napoleonic wars prevented her from becoming firmly established in the new territory in the Caucasus. During the period when Russia was fighting for her life against Napoleon Britain strengthened its position in Iran.<sup>9</sup> The British representative Sir Gore Ouseley came to Iran who was an intelligent, knowledgeable and shrewd man has striving for well being and prosperity of his country. He signed a treaty with Iran in 1814. According to this agreement, Iran promised to break her alliances with the European power at war with Britain: to prevent any army hostile to Britain from entering Iran and declare war on Afghanistan if it would attack India. For its part, Britain agreed to assist Iran settle her boundaries with Russia, to send troops to assist Iran in case of war with any European country and to pay Iran an annual subsidy of £150,000.<sup>10</sup> That was the commitment which Britain did not honour in practice.

The treaty of Golestan was so vaguely worded that implementation of this arose disputes about the territories of Erivan and Gokhsha. The Russian army did not follow the treaty and became offensive against Iran in 1826. Hence it occupied Gokcha Lake in the region of Erivan.<sup>11</sup> The Qajar ruler, Fath Ali Shah was preferred

to hoard jewels and gold rather than expend money on national defence. That was the reason that this time the arsenal was empty and a good deal of army disbanded due to the lack of payment. In 1827 Russia after realizing the condition of Iran's inadequate army and defenceless condition, captured Herat.<sup>12</sup> The British, who were supposed to come for the support of Iran according to the treaty of 1814, refused to do so claiming that Iran was aggressor. But in reality Britain has signed a friendship treaty with Russia.<sup>13</sup> Consequently the Iranian could not sustain for long and had to retreat.

**Treaty of Turkamanchi** – Treaty of Turkamanchi was more disastrous for Iran which took place in 1828, acknowledging Russian sovereignty over the entire area north of the Asia River (territory comprising present day Armenia and the republic of Azerbaijan). Furthermore, Russia was allowed to have a commercial agent in any Persian city, the Russian subjects were allowed to purchase and own property if they engaged in the trade, to own also storage, duty on Russian imported goods was limited to 5 percent and Iran accepted to an indemnity amounting to £3000,000.<sup>14</sup> The treaty of Turkamanchi was a humiliating for Iran because after that Iran was not altogether independent. The condition of Iran became very pathetic due to the British, who had failed to aid Iran. With the payment of £150,000 to the penniless crown prince, Britain enabled itself to cancel that portion of the definitive treaty of 1814 in which Great Britain had promised to aid Iran if it was attacked by a European nation.<sup>15</sup>

Mohammad Shah, grandson of Fath Ali Shah succeeded him in 1834 and his period was under complete control of Britain and Russia. The main trend in the military and political history of Iran from 1828, the date of the treaty of Turkmanchai until about 1900, is the story of the slow but sure advancement of Russian from the northeast and Britain from the southeast. Most of Iran was spared outright annexation due to less of the strength of Iran and more to the unwillingness of Russia and Britain to allow the other complete control of the country. Mohammad shah spent most of his thirteen years rule to strengthen his position in Afghanistan. The Qajar emperors, who were not endowed with much ability themselves, could not even endure able grand viziers for long. Mohammad shah ordered the death of the very able Abol Qasim Qa'em Maqam and gave the office to his tutor, Haji Mirza Aghasi, who's superstitious, ignorant and avarice attitude accelerated the ruin of the country even more.<sup>16</sup> Mohammad Ali Shah died in 1848 and the succession passed to his son Nasir al- Din.

After a series of political manoeuvres by both Iran and British in Afghanistan, Iran occupied the city of Herat. This action was considered serious enough by Britain. Britain prevented Iran from reasserting control over Herat, which had been part of Iran in Safavid period but had been under non Iranian rule since the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. Britain supported the city's incorporation into Afghanistan; a country Britain helped create in order to extend eastward the buffer between its Indian territory and Russian's expanding Empire. A British army marched to Herat, while other British force took the city of Mohamareh and Ahvaz. Iranians troops offered no resistance and accepted the defeat. A treaty of peace was concluded in Paris in 1857.<sup>17</sup> According to this treaty, Iran agreed to evacuate Afghanistan and recognize its independence. Iran also accepted to use good offices if Britain faces any dispute in future with Afghanistan. At this time the Indian munity began and the defence of India was made easy by Britain's dominance in Afghanistan. This left Central Asia and the land east of the Caspian Sea open for the Russians to do as they pleased. Russian troops occupied Bokhara in 1868, Khiva in 1873 and Khokand in 1876. With the capture of Marv in 1884, Russia became master of the territories east of Caspian and whole Central Asia.<sup>18</sup>

**Economic Interference-** During the long period of Qajar, Iran became a buffer state in which Russia and Britain hold political and economic authority without having to assume any responsibility for the welfare of its inhabitants. Nasir al- Din Shah reigned for nearly fifty years and proved to be ablest and most successful of the Qajar rulers. During his period western sciences technology and educational methods were introduced into Iran and the modernization was begun. When Nasir al- Din Shah succeeded to the throne Amir Nizam was given the position of prime minister and the title of Amir Kabir. At this moment Iran was virtually bankrupt, its central government was weak and its provinces were almost autonomous. Government revenues were so low that they could not cover the lavish expenditures of the royal court. This was so miserable situation that it led the ruling class to accept bribes from outside powers in exchange that were contrary to national interest.<sup>19</sup> Nasir al- Din Shah contracted huge foreign loans to finance expensive personal trip to Europe. Nasir al- Din Shah also faced growing European influence which was difficult to combat it due to the weakness of the Persian government. Nasir al- Din Shah tried to exploit the mutual distrust that was between Great Britain and Russia in favour to preserve Iran's independence, but foreign interference and territorial encroachment increased under his rule. He was not able to prevent Britain and Russia from encroaching into regions of traditional Iranian Influence. It was the time when Amir Kabir initiated important reforms in virtually all sectors of Iranian society. Nasir al- Din fully supported Amir Kabir's reformist act in an early years of his rule. The instruments of central administration were overhauled and Amir Kabir assumed control of all areas of the bureaucracy. He created new offices, reformed tax system and established a chain of command within the bureaucracy and provinces. Unfortunately Amir Kabir could not survive enough due to continuous intrigues against him by courtiers and dignitaries. Under their pressure the Shah dismissed him and exiled him to Kashan, where he was murdered on the Shah's order.<sup>20</sup> It led to the emergence of reformist, Malkan Khan, who advocated that Persia could be strengthened politically and economically if it emulated and mastered the European methods. Oppression of the people and abuse of power and privilege were accelerated in the last decade of Nasir al- Din's reign when he gave lucrative concessions to both Britain and

Russia. Nasir al- Din Shah was assassinated by Mirza Reza Kermani in 1896. There is another narrative regarding the assassination of Nasir al- Din Shah that he was murdered as a result of the arrest of Syed Jamal al- Din Afghani on Shah's order.<sup>21</sup> He was succeeded by his son Muzaffar al- Din Shah. Muzaffar al- Din Shah was a weak ruler and royal extravagance and the decrease of revenue income to the state treasury exacerbated financial problems. As a result he had to take loans from Russia, partly on trips to Europe.<sup>22</sup> Public anger fled on the Shah's propensity for granting concessions to Europeans in return for generous payment to him and his officials.

**Telegraph-** After the Indian munity British government realized importance of speedy communication between London and India by telegraph. The Indo European Telegraph Company was formed and telegraph services were started through Iran. The establishment of these lines was a great boon to Iran. It not only made effective control of the Iranian provinces possible by the central government, but also ended the isolation of Iran and helped to bring it closer to the ideas and institutions of Europe. Several trade concessions were given to the British by the Iranian government. The telegraph concession in 1870 was the first of many concessions given to Britain. These concessions and loans gradually put the resources of the country and economic affairs under the British control and culminated in the most far- reaching concession of all- those concerning oil which was given to the British in 1901 and to the Russians in 1911.<sup>23</sup>

**Great concessions-** In 1872, Baron Julius de Reuter, a naturalized British Subject, received a seventy year concession from Nasir al- Din Shah and got monopoly over the building of railways, the control of mines, the establishment of a Bank and regulation of rivers and so on in exchange for the customs receipts and many other resources of the country. But soon Shah was surprised and disappointed when he saw the strong indignation prevailed in England against this extraordinary concession. The Persian was also against the concession. In 1888 British received a concession to develop the lower Karun River for navigation. <sup>24</sup> This was greeted with enthusiasm in the British Press.

**Imperial Bank of Persia-** Baron de Reuter did not receive any compensation for the annulment of his wide concession. Indeed his caution money amounting to £40,000 was retained. In 1889 the Shah signed a concession in his favour for the foundation of a bank to be called Imperial Bank of Persia.<sup>25</sup> The Imperial Bank printed paper money that was negotiable only in cities designated on the bill. It is interesting that travellers going from city to city had to pay commission to exchange their money for the money accepted in that city, as though they were in a different country. <sup>26</sup> Soon it became an institution of special value both to the government and to the merchants.

**Tobacco Concession -**In 1890, the monarch gave the tobacco concession to the British. This ill judged concession gave full control to British over production, sale and export of all tobacco produced in Persia. In return, the Shah was to receive an annual payment of £15000 plus one fourth of the profits. The concessionaries, according to their advertisement for the sale of shares, expected a profit of £5000, 000 per annum. This concession affected the tobacco producers, sellers and smokers alike. Its gross unfairness was aggravated by the fact that many of the employees were from low classes and by the lack of tact displayed in dealing with Persian rights. <sup>27</sup> The whole nation that was upset with the constant submission to outsiders' interest boycotted tobacco. As a result of this disturbances had started in the country and intense hostility had been displayed towards Europeans. Haji Mirza Hasan Shirazi the leading mujtahid, issued a fatwa the tobacco concession and declared it unlawful for Iranian Muslims to smoke until the concession was withdrawn.<sup>28</sup> That forced Shah to revoke the concession. Since then people continued to oppose the monarch policies. In 1896, Nasir ud Din was assassinated and his son Muzaffar al- Din took the charge of the king of Iran.<sup>29</sup>

**Irnaian oil** The discovery of oil has become a tool for imperialism and a battle cry for Iranian nationalism. It was of great importance in the social, economic political upheaval that rocked Iran in the twentieth century. The presence of oil in the Middle East was known to the people for a long time. In certain parts of south-western Iran the seepage of oil to the surface had formed small pools and distribution of Oil became a small industry in nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> In 1872 when Baron de Reuter was granted the comprehensive concession by the Shah, Iranian oil was one of the many items mentioned in the agreement. The history of Iranian oil industry began in 1901 when British speculator William D'Arcy received a concession from Iran to explore and develop the southern Iranian oil resources. This new concession was signed by Muzaffar al- Din Shah in favour of Britain. The term of concession was for sixty years after which all the machinery, buildings and installations would revert to Iran without compensation. The concessionaries agreed to pay the Iranian government £20,000 in cash and £20000 in paid share, plus an annual royalty of 16 percent of the net profits. After seven years of hard work and heavy expenditures, oil was found in commercial quantities in Ahvaz on 26 May, 1908. A year later an Anglo-Persian oil company (APOC) was formed.<sup>31</sup> In 1914 British admiralty purchased such a number of shares in APOC that it became its major and controlling partner. From this date until the nationalization of Iranian oil industry in 1951 the British Navy bought oil from APOC at a special price. The company never revealed this price. Muzaffar al- Din Shah was a weak and inefficient ruler and he was unable to reverse the tide of political and economic turmoil that had began during his father's reign. He exacerbated the situation by his own extravagant expenditure. He received two major loans from Russia, which he spent on his luxury including a trip to Europe. The Iranian public was suffering from inflation and mounting poverty. Public anger fed on the Shah's propensity for granting concession to Europeans in return for generous payments to him and his officials. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Iranians believed that rulers were beholden to foreign interests.

**Literary and cultural interference** - The Iranian thought that they are different from rest of the Muslim world as they had distinct culture from Arabic –speaking Muslims. In Safavid period when Shi’ism developed as an official religion of Iran it also isolated the Iranians more. This isolation was broken by encounter with the west during Qajar period. Amin al- Dawla, the prime minister of Muzaffar al- Din Shah was an enlightened officer was familiar with Europe, he advocated changes in government system with European lines. He was among the pioneers of the educational reform in Iran.<sup>32</sup> In Nasir al- Din Shah’s time education was based on the traditional curriculum of Islamic studies, Persian and Arabic languages and literature but it also included French, history. He also encouraged the translations of the European Books on different subject.<sup>33</sup> Mirza Taqi khan, grand vizier in the time of Nasir al- Din Shah thought that the salvation of Iran was to reform along western lines. Mirza Taqi reorganized the government, facilitated commerce with Europe, built bazaar and warehouses and reorganized the army. The greatest accomplishment was the establishment of *Dar ul Fonun* in 1851 which became an important centre of learning. For this centre teachers were brought from Europe who taught western sciences and technology, history and philosophy.<sup>34</sup>

Western influence came to Iran also through students who travelled to Europe for study and returned as teachers, newspaper publishers, translators and authors. The most important newspaper was *Akhtar* published from Istanbul in 1875. In early period it advocated Pan –Islamism but after sometime it became a proponent of westernization. The other paper was *Qanun* published in London in 1860. Its editor Malkan Khan was very close to Nasir al- Din and acted as his envoy to England but Malkan’s progressive ideas could not be tolerated by the Shah who saw westernization as a danger to his position.<sup>35</sup> The publication of books also played an important role in introducing western ideas. **Constitutional Movement**- In Nasir al- Din Shah’s reign the monopoly concession that was given to Britain awaken the Iranian people. Now people began to demand a curb on royal authority and establishment of the rule of law as their concern over foreign influence growth, especially of the Russians. This caused the people to question, criticize and finally revolt against the monarchy. The masses, merchants and many others started strikes all over the country. In the rivalry between Russia and Britain the revolutionaries sided with Britain because of its liberal and democratic institution. Britain, for its part, joined the revolutionaries because such a policy would hurt Russia.<sup>36</sup> The monarch was unable to receive support from Russia which was dealing with own internal issues. Therefore Muzaffar al- Din had no choice but to promise the people about the establishment of a house of justice or constitutional assembly. In October 1906, an elected assembly was formed that drew up a constitution that provided for strict limitation on royal power, an elected parliament or Majlis with wide powers to represent the people and a government with a cabinet subject to confirmation by the Majlis. The shah signed the constitution on 30<sup>th</sup> December 1906. The supplementary fundamental laws, approved in 1907, provided within limits, the freedom of press, speech and association and for security of life and property. The constitution faced challenges before it became a reality. After Muzaffar al- Din Shah’s death, his successor Muhammad Ali Shah became successful in gaining Russian support and close down the Majlis. This started a prolonged struggle between the monarch and the supporters of the constitution. Eventually, the supporters of the constitution marched to Tehran and overthrew the new king, who was exiled to Russia. His eleven years old son Ahmad Shah was chosen as the new Shah of Iran. The constitution revolution marked the end of medieval period in Iran. Ahmad Shah was powerless against the British and Russian influence. In 1914 World War I started and the Qajar monarch had no choice but to remain neutral. British, ottomans and Russian armies fought on Persian soil that brought death and distraction to innocent Persian civilians. This war also gave the opportunity to local population to rise up against the Qajar monarch. In 1921 Reza khan became a prominent and powerful political personality in Iran. After various developments and moves and counter moves Ahmad Shah was formally deposed by majilis in 1925 while he was in Europe. With this the Qajar rule ended and Pahlavi dynasty came into existence.

**Conclusion**- However the interference of Britain, Russia and other Western powers including USA in the Iranian affairs continued. These powers exploited the Iranian resources ever during the Pahlavi regime. In spite of the fact that, Iran developed and modernized as a result of the reforms introduced by Raza Shah in different fields including economic, educational military, agriculture, industry and trade and commerce.

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