



THE CHANGES IN ENGLISH POLICY IN IRAN UNDER THE CONSERVATIVES AT THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to an interesting page in the history of the Anglo-Russian rivalry for Iran, in particular. The 19th century went down in history as a period of the "Great Game" of major European powers for dominance in Central Asia and the Middle East. Russia and Great Britain, the main actors of big politics, used a different arsenal of means, trying to prevent a competitor from establishing itself in those territories that were geopolitically and geoeconomically necessary. The article shows the change in the vector in foreign policy in Iran under the conservatives - supporters of the "forward policy"

Keywords: Iran, concessions, conservatives, British penetration, Anglo-Russian rivalry, Wolf's mission, interbank confrontation

1. Актуальность.

1. Relevance.

At the end of the 19th century, a fierce struggle for colonies and markets was underway. Entire countries were being conquered, and continents were being divided. The end of the 19th century brought a wave of political and economic rivalry between England and Russia over Iran. Each state sought to establish its dominance in the Middle East. Economic and political means were used to achieve this goal. The main agents of this expansion were diplomats and ambassadors.

2. Research methods and literature review

As the main methodological approaches for writing the article, the objective-historical, historical-comparative, logical and other methods were employed, which made it possible to take into account both objective and subjective factors in studying the main directions of Great Britain's foreign policy in Persia.

The problem of British penetration into Iran in the late 19th - early 20th century attracted the attention of scholars from various countries. Of particular note is the work of Professor R. L. Greaves of the University of London, «Persia and the Defense of India, 1884-1892». It opened a new page in the study of this issue. According to the author, the task of the British was to implement and encourage such measures "as might improve governance in Iran, in the army and in the life of the people, so that the Persians, if necessary, would not come to regard them



as deliverers”. Iran, in turn, was to become a “buffer state,” serving as an outer line of defense in the protection of India.

Among the works of Soviet and Russian researchers, the problem of Anglo-Russian rivalry was addressed in the monograph by L. M. Kulagina, «The Expansion of British Imperialism in Iran in the Late 19th - Early 20th Century», as well as in other studies. In this work, the author points to the scale of the Anglo-Russian conflict in Iran at the end of the 19th century, which constituted an integral part of the inter-imperialist struggle for the division of the world.

4. Research results

The political struggle for Iran resumed with the coming to power of the Conservative government headed by Lord Salisbury, during whose tenure a marked strengthening of Great Britain’s position was observed.

In June 1886, Colonel Murdoch Smith, the former director of the British telegraph service in Iran, at the request of the Duke of Cambridge, who held the post of Secretary of the Foreign Office, prepared a memorandum on the problem of the “strengthening of Persia,” in which he outlined his plan for consolidating Britain’s position in the country. It envisaged improving communications in southern Iran and in the adjacent Turkish and Arab territories, opening the Tigris and the Karun to navigation, and constructing a road from Shushtar to Qom.

The primary objective remained the strengthening of Britain’s political, strategic, and commercial positions in southern Iran. According to the author of the project, there were two British companies fully prepared to implement this plan. The first was the firm “Gray, Davies & Co.,” the London representatives of the British India Steam Navigation Company, whose chairman, C. Mackinnon, was also one of the co-chairmen of the board of the Suez Canal. The second company was managed by G. S. Mackenzie, who had already obtained certain rights over the Karun.

Murdoch Smith was fully convinced that the British India Steam Navigation Company would secure the necessary funds for the construction of a road from Shushtar to Qom if navigation on the Karun were granted to it and if permission were obtained from the Ottoman authorities for steam navigation along the Tigris between Basra and Mosul. “If such a plan were carried out,” wrote Murdoch Smith, “England would enjoy commercial and political supremacy over the entire territory south of the line Mosul-Kermanshah-Isfahan-Yazd-Herat. Russia would retain the territory north of that line” [1].

In 1875, a group of British magnates entered into negotiations with the Shah regarding the lease of the city of Mohammerah, which was the principal center on the Karun River for the development of Anglo-Iranian trade. However, the negotiations ultimately failed. The Shah, not without the influence of the Russian Tsar, who had his own objectives, refused the British proposal. At the same time, the Qajar government declared that the sale of any Iranian cities to foreign powers could not be a subject of discussion.

Nevertheless, the idea of gaining control over the city did not abandon the British, who began to undertake a number of indirect maneuvers. Soon they attempted to persuade the Shah to appoint Sheikh Mizal, long since bribed by them, as governor of the province of Khuzestan, with its center at Mohammerah. It was precisely through bribing the Shah’s government that British politicians achieved their aim, and in 1881 Sheikh Mizal was appointed ruler of Mohammerah. Thus, the key to the Karun - the city of Mohammerah - came into British hands in the person of their loyal protégé, Mizal.



In 1879, after thoroughly researching the possibilities of navigation through Karun, English diplomats first raised this issue during negotiations with Nasr al-Din Shah. According to the treaty of 1879, the English proposed a project under which Herat and Seistan would be transferred to Iran. In addition, a certain monetary subsidy was established for the Iranian government in exchange for the opening of navigation along the Karun River. The Shah, however, was warned in time by the Russian ambassador I.A. Zinoviev about the dangerous consequences of such a step and was forced to reject the British proposal"[2].

In 1884, Lord Granville, who had become Foreign Secretary in the new Liberal government of Gladstone, which had come to power in 1880, once again approached the Shah with a proposal to open navigation on the Karun. However, Russian diplomats once again succeeded in explaining to the ruler of Iran the political implications of the proposed arrangement and in pointing out the possibility that the local tribes might be turned into a compliant instrument of the British in their efforts to weaken the central government.

In 1885, Lord Salisbury returned to power for the second time, and his plans with regard to Iran became considerably more modest. He was now concerned with two issues. First, the preservation of British influence in the south-eastern provinces of Iran. In this connection, he engaged in continuous maneuvering with the Shah, promising him the whole of Sistan. Second, the strengthening of Britain's position in the south-western region of Iran, which was of great importance from the political, strategic, and economic standpoint of Britain's position in the Middle East. Consequently, the principal objective was to secure a concession for the construction of a road from Mohammerah to Tehran and for the opening of navigation on the Karun River [3].

To accomplish these objectives, Salisbury sent a special representative of the British government to Iran, A. Nicholson, in January 1886. Upon his arrival in Tehran, he began a systematic campaign to influence the Shah.

He intimidated Iranian statesmen with the prospect of Britain losing interest in Iran's fate. For his part, Lord Salisbury, in conversations with the Iranian ambassador Malcolm Khan, suggested that he carry out a series of reforms, after which Iran could expect British assistance. Among these, the main proposal was to move the capital from Tehran, due to its "inconvenient proximity" to Russian outposts on the Caspian, to the south, for example, to Isfahan. Moreover, the relocation of the capital was to be accompanied by the development of communications to the Persian Gulf [4]. According to the Russian ambassador in London, Butenev, Malcolm Khan took every measure to facilitate the British obtaining a concession for the construction of a road from Tehran to the Persian Gulf [5].

Salisbury was in a hurry. In Tehran, Arthur Nicholson literally gave the Shah no respite, demanding a swift decision regarding the development of communications in the southern part of the country. However, the methods of ultimatums and threats employed by Nicholson did not yield the desired results. Lord Salisbury therefore decided to recall Nicholson from Tehran and send in his place a more decisive and skilled diplomat in Eastern affairs [6]. The choice fell on Henry Drummond Wolff, who was serving as Her Majesty's chargé d'affaires in Constantinople. He was a man "well-educated, intelligent, cynical, and overflowing with energy" [7].

Wolff was sent as the British ambassador in February 1888. In the instructions signed by Salisbury, Britain's interest in maintaining the territorial integrity of Iran, developing its resources, and seeing the country's government strong, independent, and friendly was



emphasized. Lord Salisbury was not particularly concerned about Iran's actual integrity, believing that there had long existed an understanding between Britain and Russia on this issue, which served as a guarantee against any Russian annexation of Iranian territory. British diplomats gradually tried to persuade the Shah and his ministers to open the Karun for steam navigation, but due to strong, largely Russian, opposition, their efforts were unsuccessful [8]. The implementation of this project was considered the principal task assigned to Henry Wolff. Upon receiving his instructions, Wolff made several attempts to win over Prince Zil-es-Soltan. However, the results were disappointing. Even before Wolff's appointment to Iran, the negotiations with the prince had been initiated by the British Consul General in the province of Fars, E. S. Ross. His task was to secure from Zil-es-Soltan a promise to assist in obtaining the concession. The British attention to the prince did not go unnoticed by Russia, whose diplomats did everything possible to turn the Shah against his own son. In 1887, the Shah stripped Zil-es-Soltan of all his posts except for that of governor of Isfahan.

This resignation was not accidental, as the British had expressed their desire to see the prince ascend to the Iranian throne in the event of Nasr-ed-Din Shah's death. The prolonged struggle between the Prime Minister Amin-es-Soltan and Zil-es-Soltan for sole authority over the Shah ended in the latter's defeat. This allowed Lord Salisbury to regard it as a settling of scores for all the affronts Zil-es-Soltan had directed against Amin-es-Soltan. Subsequently, Lord Salisbury considered the attempt to use Zil-es-Soltan in political and diplomatic intrigues a mistake.

Henry Wolff developed a dual Persian policy. He sought to reach an agreement with Russia so that both parties would end their rivalry, cooperate in the development of trade, improve the Persian administration, and recognize each other's respective interests. Although the maintenance of influence by the two powers in Iran was declared, he did not foresee any territorial division of the country. The aim of his proposed Anglo-Iranian activities was the improvement of Persia and its transformation into a stable buffer state [9].

The other aspect of his diplomacy consisted in the direct "support" of Iran through various projects. Measures were adopted to promote trade, enhance internal security, and develop the country's natural resources. Actively facilitating the introduction of Western capital into Iran, he relentlessly pressured the Shah to legalize foreign enterprises.

On October 24, 1888, Wolff delivered to Prime Minister Amin-es-Soltan a written commitment from the British government. It stated, in particular: "In the event of an unprovoked attack on Persia or the annexation of Persian territory without the consent of the Persian government, Her Majesty's Government undertakes to offer serious opposition to such invasions and to take such measures as may help prevent any violation of Persia's integrity" [10]. "It is acknowledged that, for the fulfillment of this commitment by Her Majesty's Government, the Persian government will provide immediate notification of any demands threatening the integrity of Persia that may be made against it by a third power" [11].

This was a commitment without legal foundation. The British diplomats drafted the document in such a way that it was entirely at the discretion of the British government whether to implement it and how to do so. At the same time, the Persian government bound itself to Britain by an obligation that compelled it to notify Britain of any case threatening its territorial integrity.

On October 30, 1888, the Iranian government officially authorized the opening of the Karun River to navigation for all foreign vessels. The Firman stated that, with a view to expanding



trade, settling the region, and developing agriculture in Khuzestan and Ahvaz, the Iranian government decreed the following: all foreign trading steamships, regardless of nationality, as well as sailing vessels previously navigating the Karun, were permitted to transport goods along the river from Mohammerah to the Ahvaz dam under the following conditions:

First, the steamships and vessels were not to proceed above the mentioned dam, as the right to navigate above it belonged exclusively to steamships and sailing vessels owned by the Persian government and its subjects.

Second, the foreign steamships and sailing vessels were required to pay the duties established by the Persian government in Mohammerah and were prohibited from transporting items forbidden by the government.

Third, they were not to remain at any location longer than necessary for loading and unloading goods [12].

As soon as permission for navigation on the river was obtained, the British government began its development. To attract broader British investment, a general meeting of the London Chamber of Commerce was convened on February 13, 1889. General Murdoch Smith delivered a report titled "On the Prospects for the Development of British Trade in Iran Following the Opening of Navigation on the Karun River". He provided an economic analysis of the country's future opportunities [13].

A minimum program was proposed to be implemented as quickly as possible: to achieve navigation along the entire Karun, to construct a telegraph line along the river with branches to the main trading centers of Iran, and to establish British commercial agencies in these centers, thereby laying the groundwork for a more active and systematic development of the region by British capital.

At the meeting, it was decided to open a subscription among London business circles to cover the costs of developing the Karun. The first company to receive a substantial subsidy from the British government for organizing regular navigation on the Karun was the firm «Lynch Brothers». Attempting to establish itself in the upper reaches of the river in defiance of the restrictive rules set by the Iranian government, the company spent a year seeking - and ultimately succeeded - in having the Shah accept a British steamship as a gift for navigation on the upper river.

«Lynch Brothers» leased the largest quay in Mohammerah to develop trade and navigation on the Karun. Furthermore, in an effort to strengthen its privileged position on the river, the company proposed to the Shah to organize the transport of mail on its vessels.

Over time, the British seized all the opportunities provided by the concession for navigation on the Karun. From that point onward, only the British flag flew on the waters of the Karun, and only the British were able to dictate and determine the navigation regime.

Soon, other qualities of the Karun basin were revealed. After 1896, enormous oil reserves were discovered at the foot of the Bakhtiari range. This news sent shockwaves throughout the United Kingdom. In this way, the foundation was effectively laid for the future global giant in the oil industry - The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC).

The acquisition of this concession was the result of the activities of the British ambassador Henry D. Wolff. Britain was able to add yet another triumphant page to the list of peaceful conquests achieved by British officials and businessmen.



As for the Shah, he also benefited, since Persian garrisons stationed in Mohammerah and Ahvaz would now be responsible for maintaining order and the security of trade, which could strengthen Nasr-ed-Din Shah's position in the country.

Beyond concessions for opening navigation in Persia and building roads in Iran, there was an even more serious issue - the introduction of financial capital into the country. The struggle between Russian and British financial capital in Iran had many peculiarities, the main one being that financial capital functioned more as a political instrument in the hands of these governments than as an economic resource. The governments of both countries constantly had to find financiers willing to invest in Iranian economic structures and enterprises, each of which was more political than economic in nature.

Lord Salisbury approached the Treasury in an attempt to encourage its participation in the creation of a banking system for this Eastern state. He argued that Iran was then at "the most critical point in its history," and that without assistance in developing its resources, the decline that had begun several generations earlier could only deepen, ultimately leading to the country being absorbed by a more powerful military neighbor. "It is only a matter of time..." [14] On this basis, Lord Salisbury emphasized that the establishment of a commercial organization, through which such measures could be carried out, was of great importance.

The first bank to begin operations in Iran was the New Oriental Bank, headquartered in London. In 1888, branches were opened in Tehran, Tabriz, Mashhad, Rasht, and other cities. The bank's activities in Iran were greatly facilitated by the presence of a large number of foreign merchants and financiers in the country [15].

Henry Wolff skillfully took advantage of the favorable circumstances, as well as his friendship with Amin-es-Soltan, to secure a new concession. The idea appealed to the Shah, who told Wolff that he would grant Reuters the right to establish a national bank and asked him to prepare a draft of the future concession.

On January 15, 1889, Amin-es-Soltan informed J. Rabino, Reuters' representative in Iran, that the Shah approved the organization of the bank and agreed to the creation of a company to exploit the country's natural resources. Reuters drafted the terms of the concession. On January 30, 1889, Reuters, Ali Asgar Khan, Amin-es-Soltan, and Mirza Abbas Khan od-Dowleh signed an agreement to establish the Iranian bank. The 1872 concession was finally declared void, and the joint claims were settled.

At the same time, Russia began to take political measures to prevent the approval of the bank concession. Considering the overall situation in Iran, the Russian ambassador to Iran, Girs, decided to meet with the Shah to obstruct the planned establishment of the bank. On May 27, 1889, accompanied by Advisor of the Asian Department Vlangali and the head of the same department, I. A. Zinoviev, Girs visited Nasr-ed-Din Shah, who was then in St. Petersburg. The entire conversation focused on the Reuters concession.

Thanks to this concession, Girs noted, Baron Reuters effectively gained the ability to extend his influence over all branches of industry, making any enterprise unfeasible without his consent. The same applied to railways. The Shah had pledged to grant Russia a five-year period to implement the corresponding project and to find a contracting company, but, alas, this would now be impossible, since under the concession Reuters received the exclusive right to develop coal deposits, and no company would undertake the construction of railways without the right to extract coal. To fulfill his promise, the Shah would need to take immediate measures to substantially amend the terms of the concession.



Not wishing to quarrel with the Russians, the Shah sought “advice” on how to reject the concession. Girs proposed the following course of action: if Reuters failed to fulfill his obligations within the stipulated time, the Shah could use this as a reason to annul the concession. The Shah agreed. “I give my word,” added Nasr-ed-Din Shah, “that henceforth I will enter into no commitments with foreigners that might conflict with the interests of the Imperial Government” [16].

In August 1889, the bank’s charter was registered in London and approved by Royal Charter. It was named the Imperial Bank of Persia, or Shahinshahi Bank. The concession was set for a term of 60 years [17]. The bank’s scope of activity was quite extensive. In addition to purely financial functions, such as the monopoly on issuing banknotes valid throughout all of Iran, the bank held broad powers in the country’s commercial and industrial affairs. It enjoyed a monopoly on the development of iron, copper, coal, lead, mercury, oil, manganese, and drilling deposits, as well as on the construction of roads throughout Iran. Materials and equipment imported by the bank for the mines were exempt from customs duties, while the mines themselves and the adjoining land plots were exempt from domestic taxes.

The Shah’s government undertook, for the entire term of the concession, not to issue paper money and not to grant this privilege to any other institution. As a state institution of Iran, the Shahinshahi Bank assumed the role of intermediary in the settlement of payments both within Iran and abroad. The bank’s financial obligations to the Shah’s government consisted of 6% of the bank’s profits paid to the treasury, but not less than £4,000 annually. Upon its opening, the bank also committed to granting the Shah a loan of £40,000 at an annual interest rate of 6%, to be repaid over a period of ten years [18].

The bank’s authorized capital was to amount to £4 million. The idea of the Shahinshahi Bank generated such high expectations that the capital required for its opening - £1 million - was oversubscribed several times on the very first day. The nominal value of a share was £10, but the subscription price was set at £12, so that the surplus of £200,000 would cover Reuters’ expenses in arranging and obtaining approval for the concession [19].

The bank was primarily composed of English shareholders, while the participation of Iranian subjects was limited to one-fifth of the total capital [20].

On October 23, 1889, the bank commenced operations in Tehran. Its director was Rabino, whose idea was not to transport the bulk of the bank’s capital to Iran, but to attract as much money as possible locally through deposits and the issuance of banknotes. The funds obtained in this way were intended not only for banking operations, but primarily for the exploitation of mineral resources and the development of mines.

From the very first steps of its activity, it became clear that the English financiers had judged correctly. According to the Shahinshahi Bank’s report, in the first six months of operation alone, net profit amounted to £67,000, providing shareholders with an 8% annual return on their invested capital. A substantial sum (over £1,200,000), issued by the bank in bills and loans, indicated that its activities had rapidly expanded to a significant scale.

At the initiative of J. Rabino, a subsidiary of the bank was established in London - the Persian Mineral Bank - with a capital of £1 million. In England, it was reasonably believed that Iran possessed colossal mineral resources. Particular attention was focused on the territory around the Karun River, where enormous oil reserves had been discovered. Coal was found in Bushehr, and manganese near Kerman [21].



The granting of a concession to England for the establishment of a bank in Iran, effectively placing almost all of the country's key industries in British hands, provoked strong protests in financial and political circles both in Europe and in America. The main competitors of Britain in the East - Russia, Germany, and the United States - opposed this concession, as they were also interested in strengthening their positions in Iran. They had every reason to fear that Reuters' Shahinshahi Bank was not merely a commercial enterprise, but a powerful political instrument against Russia.

In addition to the possibility that the bank could eventually become a vast financial empire with uncontested control over Iran's economy, Russian diplomacy had information that it was being planned as a political tool directed against Russia. The activity of the bank's employees in provinces adjacent to Russian territories, particularly the Transcaspian region, was cause for concern. In October 1889, the Russian Consul General in Khorasan reported that two Reuters bank employees had arrived in the area, encouraging the local population to deposit money in the bank. They were collecting information of various kinds concerning the province's productive forces, trade, population, and relations among the authorities, and they intended to travel to the Transcaspian region afterward [22].

To achieve its objectives, including the weakening of Russia's position, the Shahinshahi Bank resorted to measures detrimental to the country's finances, such as artificially devaluing the kran. Taking advantage of its unrestricted right to supply silver to the Iranian mint, the bank, already in its first year, began shipping large quantities of krans to Baku. In Baku - the main center of Russia's trade operations with Iran - the average value of the kran was high, at 36 kopecks. In 1889, the bank sent several consignments of krans to Baku totaling about 300,000 tumans, which, combined with the existing currency there, amounted to 800,000 tumans. As a result of this massive influx of Iranian currency, the value of one kran in Baku instantly fell to 27 kopecks [23].

In a dispatch from the Russian agent in Iranian affairs in Tehran, Poggio, dated January 22, 1891, reference was made to the bank's report for the period up to September 20, 1890: "The bank's activity produced brilliant results, as net profit for the past six months was calculated at £67,000, and shareholders received an annual return of 8%."

The text of the concession agreement stated that the bank, as a state bank of Iran, was intended to assist the government in its financial activities and help implement them. All of this indicated that such assistance was expressed exclusively in the form of loans granted by the bank to the Shah's government. Thus, the bank's balance sheet listed an amount of £40,000 "loaned" to the Iranian government. Undoubtedly, the actual sum was much larger, since, to repay this debt, the government granted the bank the right to receive from the lessee of the Caspian fisheries, the Russian merchant Lianozov, payments of 150,000 rubles in silver over four years, which amounted to £80,000 [24].

All the bank's activities were shrouded in secrecy, raising the suspicion that its financial reports were fabricated and false. The bank carried out virtually no major projects that could have improved Iran's economy or promoted its development. Increasing expenditures on gifts to the Shah and his entourage reduced the bank's core capital. The value of shares steadily declined; by 1893, the market price of a share had fallen to £3, and upon the liquidation of its operations, shareholders would have received barely £5 per share [25].

The creation of the Shahinshahi Bank was primarily a political measure aimed against Russia. The bank was intended to open the way for British capital into Iran, which then flowed into the



country like a mighty river. It was a brilliant victory for D. Wolff, as it was through his efforts that Reuters obtained the support of the British government, and it was his energy that managed to sway the Shah toward dubious financial operations, which did not always end favorably for him.

The activities of Reuters' enterprise had no impact on the development of the country's economy or infrastructure, as it served mainly to enrich stock speculators and the corrupt, venal rulers of Iran. At the same time, the economy was undermined by an inundation of paper money, the sale of mineral resources to foreigners, and the devaluation of silver - the foundation of the Iranian kran. Systematic speculation in Iran's silver currency depleted the bank's reserves, and most of the banknotes in circulation were not backed by silver. This situation repeatedly sparked popular uprisings against the Shahinshahi Bank. For example, in 1897, riots broke out in Tehran when the bank was unable to redeem all bills and banknotes presented for payment.

Prominent Iranian moneylenders (safars) and some local banks actively participated in these disturbances. By concentrating the most important and profitable operations throughout the country in its own hands, the Shahinshahi Bank effectively sidelined Iranian bankers from financial affairs. Consequently, these bankers seized every opportunity to oppose their English competitor.

When it became known in Tehran that the bank's silver reserves were critically low, Iranian financiers formed an association, which included the Tumanyants brothers, Haji Lotfali, Haji Mohammad Bagir, Haji Mohammad Kazem Malek ot-Tojar, and others [26]. This association, both directly and through numerous agents, presented the Shahinshahi Bank with large quantities of banknotes for exchange into silver coin. This action greatly intensified popular unrest in Tehran against the British. The only factor that saved the bank was the intervention of the Shah's government, which, fearing the growth and escalation of the popular movement, hastily provided the bank with almost all available funds.

The Iranian government, burdened with heavy debts to the bank, had no means to resist British policy and was forced to comply with its demands. Naturally, the significance of Reuters' bank for Iran's economic and social development can be assessed in different ways. It is more accurate to say that the British ambassador H. D. Wolff used British financial capital to pursue his country's political interests in Iran, to assert monopolistic influence over the ruling circles, and to directly exclude Russia from the region.

5. Conclusion

In summing up the activities of British diplomacy, it is important to note the following: in those countries where political predominance played a decisive role in the future of the state and the interests of European powers, it was often not financial capital that drove policy, but rather politics and diplomacy that directed financial capital, seeking to use it as an instrument to establish monopolistic dominance on the continent, and in particular, in Iran.

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