

The Father

On a soft October evening in 1919 a young theology student walked slowly along a narrow alley in a recently built part of Tehran, not far from the city gate that opened on the road to the town of Qazvin. He was headed to a house his father, also a cleric, visited often, sometimes taking the young man along. The young cleric remembered his father and the master of the house sitting on the stone platforms in the narrow street at each side of the entrance to the house chatting about various subjects. The elder cleric was a *hujjat al-Islam*, learned in shii jurisprudence, and a religious leader in this part of the town. As a member of the ulama, the body of mullahs trained in Islamic law and doctrine, he had the right and the duty to advise on practically all aspects of believers' lives and therefore wielded considerable social and political power. Tonight, however, the *hujjat al-Islam* was ill, unable to preside over the ceremony that would launch his friend's expected child into the world armed with his blessing. He had sent his son instead.

The man the young cleric was visiting, Reza Khan, was a Cossack, a member of a military establishment organized and run by Russian officers. The Cossack Brigade had been established in 1878, the year Reza was born. When Nassereddin Shah, the Qajar king, passed through Russia that year on his second visit to Europe, Tsar Alexander II entertained him with a parade of his personal Cossack guards at Champ de Mars in St. Petersburg. The shah fell in love with these mounted soldiers and forthwith asked the tsar to lend him a few officers to establish and train a similar outfit in Tehran as his own personal guard. The Russian, foreseeing the merits of the proposition for his country's interests in Iran, obliged, and the two royals put their signatures to an agreement drawn up for the occasion. Russian military officers, commanded by Colonel Alexey Ivanovitch Dumantovitch, arrived in Tehran in July 1879 and a Cossack Brigade was born.¹

Reza Khan was one of the thousands of ordinary Iranians who joined this force over the years. He had been born in Alasht, a village in Savadkuh in the

heart of the Alborz Mountains in Mazandaran, a province by the Caspian Sea. Many of the men in his family had military careers, and some had held middle-rank positions in the Cossack units protecting the Qajar shahs. His father, Abbasali, died of unknown causes when Reza was only a few months old. His mother, Nushafarin, who was of Georgian origin, died not long after, leaving Reza in her brother's care in Tehran. The uncle, Abolqasem Beig, was a warrant officer with the Cossacks. His ability to provide for the young boy was limited, though he tried to be a good father. Reza received no formal education and passed his time in the streets playing marbles with stray boys. Being taller and stronger than most, he was respected by some and considered a bully by others.

To take Reza off the streets, Abolqasem Beig enlisted him in the Cossack Brigade in 1891 when the boy was fourteen. Still too young to be a soldier, Reza was given odd jobs cleaning the canteen or working as an orderly for junior officers. A year later, he was allowed to join an artillery unit, where he became proficient in the use of machine guns, particularly the type called Maxim. His mastery of this sixty-rounder helped him become an officer and gained him the sobriquet "Reza Maxim." In the meantime, Reza learned the ways of the military and the culture of soldiering. Part of being a soldier in those days was to build a reputation for toughness. Reza became known as a rough soldier, strong-willed, hard drinking, and daring. Russian Cossacks had always fostered a certain rash adventurousness and now encouraged the same in the Iranian Cossacks. Reza built a reputation for himself as a kind of *luti*, a man somewhere between a lout and a knight, rough in manners yet ready to risk his life to help a friend, rescue a woman in distress, or save a man in need of saving. In time, he worked at learning how to read and write whenever he got a chance, though no one knows exactly who taught him the skill or how literate he actually became.

In 1903, at the age of twenty-five, Reza married a young orphaned girl named Tajemah, who lived in his uncle's house. The marriage, however, soon ended in sorrow. Tajemah died as she gave birth to a baby girl, leaving Reza with a baby whose needs he could neither comprehend nor fulfill. This time another uncle, Kazem Aqa, a mid-ranking Cossack officer, and his wife came to the rescue, taking Reza and the baby into their home. (The aunt and uncle became the baby's surrogate parents, and she remained in their care until she was grown.) For the next five years Reza worked and fought under Kazem Aqa's command and protection.



These were the fateful years in which ideas of individual freedom, limited and responsible government, and popular sovereignty, which had been germinating

for some time in the minds of a small number of Iranians, came to a head in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Widespread protests forced Mozaffareddin Shah to accept a constitution known as the Basic Law, which established a National Consultative Assembly (the Majlis) and included a Supplement defining the duties, obligations, and limits of the government and enumerating the rights of Iranian citizens.

The movement that led to the adoption of the Constitution had begun rather innocently within the tradition of the common folk seeking redress. The people were unhappy with the conductor of the only existing train in Iran that took them on pilgrimage to the shrine of Shahzadeh Abd ul-Azim, a few miles to the south of Tehran—the man was dictatorial and charged high prices. The people were also unhappy with Joseph Naus, the Belgian customs director recently appointed head of the treasury, for his strict observance of customs rules matched by a callous disregard of local lore. They were unhappy with the governor of Tehran for his tyrannical rule, particularly his proclivity to punish corporally anyone disobeying his edicts, including the clerics. What the simple folk wanted was “*adalat*,” justice according to the traditional rules of equity. What they asked for was an “*adalkhaneh*,” a house of justice, where their complaints could be considered and redressed. These demands, however, would be overtaken by ideas grounded in histories and cultures alien to the experience of a majority of those who participated in the movement known as the Constitutional Revolution.²

The Constitutional Revolution is commonly dated from the late autumn of 1905 when Tehran’s governor, Ala-ud-Daula, supported by the chancellor, Ain-ud-Daula, accused the sugar merchants of hoarding and ordered them to release their sugar to the public. The merchants refused. The governor went to the warehouses and ordered his men to open up the stores and distribute the sugar among the people. He also ordered two merchants flogged in public. After several like incidents, a group of ulama left Tehran in protest to take shelter (*bast*) first in the holy city of Qom and subsequently in the shrine of Shah ‘Abd al-‘Azim, where they were joined by some two thousand religious students, mullahs, merchants, and ordinary people.³ The *bast* lasted twenty-five days and, according to Edward Browne, was financed by disgruntled merchants and a former chancellor’s supporters.⁴ The shah dispatched his uncle to negotiate, but Chancellor Ain-ud-Daula ordered his troops to surround the Friday Mosque, where many had taken shelter, prevent food from reaching the refugees, and arrest anyone suspected of working against the government. On 20 July 1906 a small number of merchants, tradesmen, and ordinary people took refuge in the British legation in Tehran, according to the British against the wishes of

the legation, though provisions had been assembled in anticipation of the event. Gradually the number of refugees rose, reaching by some accounts twelve thousand and by others twenty thousand.⁵

The ideas of democracy, constitutionalism, a legislature, and elections came mostly from those who had taken shelter in the legation. From there they spread to other parts of the town and eventually to most of the country, taking on a life of their own, though not many citizens understood them in their historical context. The framework remained local until writing a constitution became the issue. In the meantime, popular pressure forced Governor Ala-ud-Daula to resign and the shah to dismiss Chancellor Ain-ud-Daula and to replace him with Moshirus-Saltaneh, a man on better terms with the revolutionaries. On 5 August 1906, the shah issued a *farman* (decree) for the establishment of “an assembly [Majlis] of the representatives of the princes, the ulama, the Qajars, the nobles, the landowners, the merchants, the guilds—in the capital to consult on the important business of the government . . .” and charged the chancellor to implement his decree.⁶ The chancellor invited the leaders of the groups mentioned in the shah’s *farman* to meet and asked them to choose from among themselves those who would prepare the code for electing a Majlis. The leaders chose five men—all grandes of the realm who would play important parts in the political events of the future, as they had in the past. They prepared the code in less than a month, according to which, of the 120 members of the proposed Majlis, 60 were to be elected from Tehran and 60 from the provinces, and had it signed by the shah. The Tehran elections were finished in October, and before the end of the month the shah, who was ill and had to be carried into the hall in a pushchair, opened the Majlis with an emotional message. This first Majlis, representing the estates general of Iran, wrote a Basic Law (Qanun-e Asasi), which the shah signed on 30 December 1906. This document and its Supplement, signed by Mozaffareddin Shah’s successor on 4 October 1907, became Iran’s Constitution.

The Basic Law set the number of deputies from Tehran and provinces at 136 (the number could be ultimately increased to 200), elected for two years and eligible to be reelected as long as the “electors were satisfied.” The Basic Law of 30 December 1906 also stipulated (articles 43–48) a Senate, to be composed of sixty members. Thirty were to be appointed by the shah and thirty elected by the people; in each category, half were to be from Tehran and half from the provinces. The two houses had equal power except in budgetary matters, in which the Majlis had the final say. In fact, however, no Senate was convened until 1949. The Basic Law and the Supplement further stipulated a governmental structure based on the principle of separation of powers, which meant that no deputy could serve as a government executive and Majlis deputy simultaneously.

When the constitutional decree was issued and the First Majlis convened, no one seemed to have a clear idea of the character, functions, and powers of this new assembly. The *farman* seemed to suggest that the proposed Majlis was to help the king's ministers in the discharge of their duties. A corrective to the original *farman* referred to the Majlis as the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Slowly ideas began to evolve within the Majlis that gave it a truly legislative role—not only watching over the government and holding it answerable for its deeds, but also making laws. The 1907 Supplement to the Basic Law was a document borrowed mainly from the Belgian and French constitutions, introducing a bill of rights and specifying the powers and responsibilities of the shah as well as those of the executive and judicial branches. Although it pronounced the shah exempted from responsibility, it gave him substantial powers as the head of state, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, head of the executive branch, with power to appoint and dismiss the ministers, and a partner in legislation, among others. At the same time, faced with the combined forces of the court and the clergy, the constitutionalists agreed to the inclusion of an article whereby a body of five *mujtahids* (those learned in Islamic law) was empowered to pass judgment on the admissibility of laws based on their agreement with the *shari'a* (Islamic law). Thus, the Constitution was at best a dream and a promise. Reza's future—and that of the son who would be born in 1919—would unfold largely against the incongruities between the ideals contained in the dream and the society that was to host them.



Mozaffareddin Shah died unexpectedly not long after agreeing to the new Constitution, which was soon rescinded by his son and successor, Mohammad Ali. War then broke out between the constitutionalists and the new shah, who sought support from Russia. In 1907, Russia and England, longtime rivals in the “Great Game” of influence in the Middle East and Central Asia, took advantage of the unrest and divided Iran into “zones of influence,” Russia in the north (including Tehran) and England in the southeast, with the central region left nominally to the Iranian government as a buffer. In the midst of this Reza saw himself as a soldier fighting for the king, or more likely for whomever Kazem Aqa fought for. Kazem Aqa, however, was killed in 1908 in a battle near Tabriz. Although Reza was by now indispensable for his prowess with the artillery, he nevertheless insisted on and received permission to take his uncle's body to the holy city of Qom for burial.⁷ The conflict ended in 1909 with the defeat of the government forces. Mohammad Ali Shah was forced to abdicate in favor of his

underage son, Ahmad, under a regency of constitutionalists. Now, Reza fought for the new shah, on the side of the constitutionalists against the enemies of the Constitution—the deposed shah and his allies, who wished to reinstate him as king. In due course, Mohammad Ali Shah’s forces were once again defeated, his claim to the crown coming to naught. In early 1914, Ahmad Shah came of age and was formally crowned. Two months later, the Austrian crown prince was assassinated, and World War I was launched.

The world war was, paradoxically, a godsend to Iranian nationalists. Many of them believed that it saved Iran from the disintegration that had threatened the country since the Russo-British Agreement of 1907 and even before.⁸ Neither the Russians nor the British had ever been shy when expressing what they expected from Iran. In 1904, Russia’s foreign minister, Count V. N. Lamsdorf, sent a memo to A. N. Shteyer, his minister in Iran, explaining to him Russia’s aims: “We have tried gradually to subject Persia to our dominant influence, without violating the external symbols of its independence or its internal regime. In other words, our task is to make Persia politically obedient and useful, i.e., a sufficiently powerful instrument in our hands. Economically—to keep for ourselves a wide Persian market using Russian work and capital freely therein.”⁹

By 1914, Russian influence in the Iranian north had become fully entrenched. Two months before the outbreak of the war, George Buchanan, the British ambassador in St. Petersburg, complained to the tsar that “Northern Persia was now to all intents and purposes a Russian province.”¹⁰ The tsar, according to Buchanan, offered to divide the neutral zone also, but fortunately for the Iranians the war broke out and nothing came of the offer.

Throughout the turmoil of the years before and during World War I, Reza mostly fought in western Iran—in Hamadan, Kermanshah, Kurdistan, and Luristan. He began as a captain, finished as a colonel. A good part of this period he served under Abdolhossein Mirza Farmanfarma, a major prince of the realm. Reza observed the ways of politics and the culture that framed the practice of ruling. He developed a close relationship with the prince, but had little taste for his politics. These were the years that built his military stature among his colleagues. His regiment, first the Hamadan, and later the Kermanshah, was recognized as the most valorous, used wherever the situation hardened and the circumstance demanded. He fought for the government, not necessarily the side he preferred and not always winning. But he was brave and increasingly respected by his colleagues. As he matured, he began to think about the plight of the country—the squalor, the inhumanity, the corruption, the weakness, the helplessness. He hated the cruelty of his command, talked to his officers about his feelings, and found them sympathetic to his complaints and receptive to his

ideas. These were the years he built both camaraderie and leadership; many of the officers who would serve him later — some with brutality, many with distinction — became his devoted followers during this time. He became more self-confident, mastered the details of military command, tried to learn about Iran and the world, and questioned the legitimacy of civilian politics. The higher he climbed in rank, the more he resented the Russian presence and control. But he understood hierarchy and submitted to the order of things.

The year 1917 was a particularly difficult time. The fighting in Iran had taken its toll, and by this time the country was in the throes of famine. Revolution in Russia deposed the tsar, confusing the line of command within the Iranian Cossack forces. Russia's new government under Alexandr Kerensky sent a Colonel Clergé to Iran to take command, but Clergé was accused of having communist leanings, which brought him into conflict with his second in command, a Colonel Starosselsky. Starosselsky managed to mobilize several Iranian officers, including Reza Khan, to oppose Clergé and demand his resignation. Reza brought his forces to the Russian commander's headquarters, entered his office after Starosselsky informed Clergé of the Iranian officers' demand, and extracted his resignation by force. Clergé left Iran in 1918, and Reza Khan, enjoying Starosselsky's patronage, was promoted to the rank of brigadier general. This event changed his position qualitatively, extending his moral authority beyond his regiment.¹¹ Reza still had no influence among the statesmen who ran the country, most of whom did not yet know him, but in the military he had become a force. Soon he would challenge Starosselsky and become known to others, particularly the British, as a personality to watch.



In 1916, Reza Khan married again, a girl named Nimtaj (later known as Taj-ul-Moluk, a title meaning “crown of kings”). He had to work hard for the marriage because the father of the bride — an officer named Ayromlu — thought Reza was rough, poor, and unlikely to have much of a future. Reza persisted and had several of his friends intervene, until, finally, he received the father's blessing. Reza's friends and the bride's family staged a major effort for the wedding and got several notables to attend. Many of those present would be given important offices of the state when the groom's fortunes changed. In a year's time Nimtaj gave birth to a daughter they named Shams. By this time Reza was a brigadier, well known in the Cossack division, commander of the Hamadan Regiment, stationed mostly near Qazvin. His family lived in the house he had rented in Tehran near Darvazeh-ye Qazvin, the gate opening to the road to Qazvin.

It was to this house that the young cleric made his way on 26 October 1919, for what would be the birth of twins, Mohammad Reza first, followed by his sister Ashraf. Reza had asked Sheykh Abdolhossein Malayeri to be present to recite from the Koran near the baby's ear at the birth. But Sheykh Abdolhossein was ill and sent his nineteen-year-old son, Abolqasem, in his place. Abolqasem recited from the appointed verse while Reza Khan held his two newly born babies in his arms. After the prayer, he put Ashraf down, held forth his son, and, turning his face skyward, prayed in a solemn voice: "O God, I place my son in your care. Keep him in the shelter of your protection."¹²



About two months before Reza Khan's first son was born, Prime Minister Hassan Vosuq (Vosuq ud-Daulla) had put his signature to a treaty that in effect placed all of Iran under British tutelage in military, financial, developmental, administrative, and foreign affairs. The Anglo-Persian Treaty, known to history as the 1919 Agreement, was the brainchild of Lord Curzon, an extraordinary man soon to become British foreign secretary—an avid reader and prolific writer, knowledgeable in many fields, arrogant, and authoritarian. His project was to preserve India for England at all costs (the Great Game again), his strategy to establish a *cordon sanitaire* to separate the subcontinent from putative predators—Russia always; other nations, Germany in particular, now and again as the opportunity arose. Iran was critical because it was independent, a rarity in that part of the world, and at the center of the protective belt. To achieve his goal, Curzon, who was at that time serving in the British War Cabinet with responsibility for the Near East, maneuvered into office an agreeable Iranian cabinet headed by Vosuq and appointed as British minister in Iran Sir Percy Cox, a man whom Curzon, while he was viceroy of India (1899–1905), had been grooming for such a part.

When Curzon became foreign secretary in October, he was able to carry out his policy in Iran almost at will. The 1919 Agreement, extremely unpopular among Iranians, needed to be ratified by the Majlis, which had not been convened since the Third Majlis had expired in 1916. Curzon, however, was adamant, and Cox, a former military officer who had spent much of his career in the Persian Gulf dealing with the Arab sheiks, relentlessly pushed for its adoption. The fight for the agreement became a sordid affair. Vosuq and two members of his cabinet, Nosrat ud-Daulla Firuz and Sarem ud-Daulla, were accused of receiving bribes from the British, as was the young king, Ahmad Shah. All this produced intense bitterness against both the British and the Iranian ruling class.¹³

A year and a half into the struggle to get the agreement ratified, Percy Cox was reassigned to the British mandate in Iraq (to deal with outright rebellion there) and was replaced in Iran by Herman Cameron Norman, a diplomat by métier who was intellectually quite different from Cox. The British government's decision to retrench and collect its forces at the end of the war, for both strategic and budgetary reasons, forced Norman to think about other ways and means of achieving stability in Iran. This brought him into conflict with Curzon, who would not accept rescinding the agreement as an option. He pressured Norman, as he had pressured Cox, to keep Vosuq and his cabinet in power until the agreement was ratified, disparaging Norman's arguments that the policy was failing and that ratification had become well-nigh impossible.

In the meantime, the British cabinet, forced to reappraise British military deployment in the Middle East, especially in light of the revolution occurring in Iraq, decided to recall its troops from northern Iran by early 1921.¹⁴ This put Curzon in a difficult position, and he increased the pressure on Norman and their Iranian allies to get the agreement approved. Conditions on the ground, however, took their own turn. The Soviets defeated the White Russian resistance to the Bolshevik Revolution in the Caucasus and pushed south into Iran, inciting various red-tinged movements along their route. The most defiant of these movements, the Jangali in the Caspian province of Gilan, led by Mirza Kuchek, presented a serious challenge to the Iranians and the British both. The Vosuq government commissioned Reza Khan to deal with the Jangalis, a successful campaign that further enhanced Reza's reputation and brought him, possibly for the first time, to the attention of the British advisory team that had come to Iran as part of the 1919 Agreement. Brigadier General William E. R. Dickson, whose charge in Iran was to reorganize the Cossacks, the gendarmerie, and provincial units into an integrated army, was impressed by Reza's military prowess. Dickson's mission, however, did not go well. Neither the Cossacks nor the gendarmes would acquiesce to unification under British command or to the new rules that stipulated Iranian officers would not be promoted above the rank of major. The humiliation was too much for Colonel Fazlollah Aghevi, a respected Iranian gendarmerie officer assigned to the Dickson mission, whose suicide reflected the bitterness that pervaded the country.¹⁵

Reza Khan was also unhappy, despite his initial success against the Jangalis. He had requested reinforcements and the salaries that had not been paid over several months, but he had received neither. He was disgusted with the parade of cabinets in and out of office, containing the same individuals who succeeded one another without making any noticeable difference in the country's domestic or international affairs. "If only God would help us rid this country of these

foreign masters that leech-like suck our blood," he complained to then lieutenant Mohammad Ali Saffari, later to serve as police chief and governor-general in several provinces.¹⁶ His complaints came to naught; what he received instead was a medal and a brigadier's baldric.¹⁷



In 1920, despite some fourteen years of constitutional experience, conditions in Iran were not palpably better than in 1900; in some cases they had deteriorated. The nation's military was controlled by foreign officers. The clergy, at the height of its power, influenced every aspect of national life. Socioeconomic conditions had worsened. Government coffers were empty, and the salaries of civil and military employees constantly in arrears. Roads were unsafe, and travel in much of the country was impossible without privately organized armed escort. Cities had turned into the bailiwicks of thugs, *lutis*, and *pahlavans*, who controlled their territories with iron hands, exacted booty, and meted out their version of justice.¹⁸ Around the country, Kurds in the northwest, Lurs in the west, Bakhtiari and Qashqais in the center and south, Baluchis in the southeast, and Turkmans in the northeast ruled their own territories, at best ignoring the government in Tehran, at worst openly opposing it. More important, the Jangali movement in Gilan, the Simitqu rebellion in Kurdistan, and the flirtation of Khaz'al, the Sheykh of Mohammareh, with independence in Khuzistan threatened the territorial integrity of the country. Adding to the chaos was Curzon's single-minded commitment to the 1919 Agreement and the pressure he continued to exert on the shah and government for ratification. Public displeasure finally forced Vosuq to resign on 24 June 1920. Norman spoke with Ahmad Shah and found him more concerned about the monthly allowance he received from the British than the fate of his country. To Norman's protestation that the money was tied to the duration and success of the Vosuq cabinet, the shah retorted that the money was promised him as long as he supported pro-British governments.¹⁹ Six months later Norman would reiterate to Curzon his own disappointment in the shah: "If the Shah had shown more interest in affairs of state and less in increasing his private fortune and remitting it abroad he might have become popular, but as it is his indifference to everything save his own interest has disgusted all classes of his subjects, and if he left the country it is unlikely that he would ever be able to return."²⁰

Into this muddle stepped General Sir Edmund Ironside, taking command of the British forces in Iran on 4 November 1920. Ironside's interest was mainly

to guarantee the safe redeployment of British forces out of Iran, and his success depended on grooming a support system that could protect his rear units to provide him safe passage. He needed a strong Cossack force under a command that was pro-British and that would assure authority and discipline, which he thought could not be had if the force was commanded by British officers. He found in Norman a like-minded soul. The two together became a hand of fate, able to set in motion a train of events, perhaps inadvertently, very much at variance with Curzon's wishes because no one in Iran imagined they might pursue a policy not explicitly directed from London. Reza Khan became the Iranian force in this game.

The new prime minister, Moshir-ud-Daula, had exacted from the Bolshevik government in Moscow a note that the Russians would not militarily assist any Iranian insurgents. He had then ordered Colonel Starosselsky, still in command of the Cossacks, to face the rebellious contingents in the north, which he quickly moved to do. Reza Khan was given command of infantry in the campaign. Starosselsky, however, failed to follow the rebels as they were retreating; instead he remained in Rasht to reinforce his troops. This hiatus gave the Bolshevik forces time to reorganize and to attack from both land and sea—and gave Ironside, who wanted to get rid of Russian officers in Iran, the opening to order his troops to attack Starosselsky by air, although he later claimed they had mistaken those forces for the Bolsheviks. Starosselsky and his Cossacks were defeated, with great casualties—two thousand men killed in battle, drowned in the marshes near the Caspian, or otherwise lost. The fiasco angered Iranian officers and, after much haggling between the British, the government, and the shah, led to Starosselsky's resignation. Meanwhile, Reza asked Tehran for uniforms, food, and back wages for what was left of his troops, but received none. He brought his men to Qazvin, where the British units were ensconced under General Ironside's command and there met Ironside for the first time.

It was a fateful meeting in a series of events that came together by a blend of chance, personality, and political will. Ironside entered the room where the Iranian officers were gathered and spoke to them about the importance of pushing the Bolsheviks out of Iran and cooperation between British and Iranian troops. He asked a senior Iranian officer to order the troops to hand in their weapons until the British military instructors engaged to train Iranian troops arrived. For a few moments a heavy silence fell on the room. Then, a tall, dark, strong-faced Cossack officer bearing a battle scar between the eyebrows, a medlar-wood cane in his hand, stepped forward and addressed the interpreter:

“Who are you and who is this man you have brought with you to this meeting?”

“My name is Kazem Khan Sayyah. I am a captain in the gendarmerie. This man is General Ironside, commander-in-chief of the British forces in Iran.”

“Well, then, will you kindly translate the following for the general. The officers of the Cossack Division obey the orders of His Majesty the Shah of Iran. The Cossack Division is His Majesty’s special guard. If the general wishes to make a request of us, he should first take it up with His Majesty or His Majesty’s government, and if the government approves, then it is the government that has the authority to talk to us, not a commander of alien forces.

“Now, on the question of surrendering our weapons: We remained noncommittal when the Russian officers were disarmed because we knew they had been dismissed by the order of our king and by the act of our government. They were traitors. It was our heartfelt desire to be rid of them. That is why, when you disarmed them, we said nothing. But such would not be the case with the Iranians. We hand our weapons to no one. To take our weapons you shall have to pass over our dead bodies.”

Ironside was impressed. He smiled, protesting that Kazem Khan had not translated correctly what he had meant to say. He did not mean to suggest that the Cossacks were to be disarmed; rather, they might temporarily leave their arms with the British military if they came into the city of Qazvin. “The Bolshevik threat in Gilan remains, and we should work together to defeat it,” he said as he shook hands with the Iranian officers, asking their names. He learned the officer who had spoken the brave words was named Reza.²¹



There is much that is not known, perhaps will never be known, of the details of the coup d’état of 1921. The murkiness has given wing to imagining all sorts of tales about what happened. The British have offered the gamut of possibilities over the years, from claiming total hands-off to claiming they masterminded the whole event, depending on what served their interests at various times. Iranians have almost unanimously attributed the coup to British machinations—some because they could not imagine anything of political importance happening in Iran without England’s involvement, others because of ideology or personal interest. England being everywhere in Iran, it must indeed have been difficult for the Iranian ruling aristocracy to think it possible for two relative unknowns to launch a coup unless directed by the British government. Still, history is ironic and events sometimes fall in the purview of chaos. It was probably impossible for the British not to be involved; and yet it is possible that no necessary connection

existed between their involvement and the end achieved. As noted, Ironside and Norman, apparently quite independently of the government in London, set a train of events in motion that could go several ways. Reza Khan and Seyyed Ziaeddin Tabatabai, being who they were and facing whom they faced, took it in their own direction, but only part of the way. Tabatabai, a politician of lower social status, had no chance of competing with the entrenched aristocracy once the latter overcame their stupor and the shock of events. Reza, on the other hand, commanded the military, which was matchless in power, and which could overcome, as did the master of arms in *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, by demonstrative reason.

In most of the accounts of the coup Ironside is depicted as a hero, in some Iranian accounts a hero of Herculean stature. But all we know about what Ironside did is by deduction based on his assumed qualities. He writes little directly about his role in the coup. To his immediate superior, General Haldane, he reported the Cossacks had gone to Tehran by the shah's order to arrest other unruly Cossacks who were looting the city. Privately, he was pleased that many people thought he "engineered the coup d'état," which, he wrote in his diary, he supposed he had, "strictly speaking."²² That is about it. He left for Baghdad the day the Cossacks left Qazvin for Tehran.



Reza Khan and Seyyed Ziaeddin Tabatabai, Ironside and Norman came together fortuitously in one place at one time to produce a dramatic set of events that would change Iran's history. But Reza was the mover. There would have been no coup without him, and every idea of a coup led to him. Several more Englishmen were involved in the process, however: Colonel Smyth, who recommended Reza to Ironside; A. W. Smart, the counselor at the legation who dissuaded the gendarmes from challenging Reza's Cossacks; Colonels Huddleston and Haig, who made a show of dissuading Reza Khan from proceeding to Tehran; and others who only tangentially affected the events. But it was the Iranian military that could make the coup, and there was only Reza who had the will to do it. To his friends he pretended to be only a soldier innocent of politics. In fact, he showed a high political acumen. Most of the time he was at the right place taking the right step. Not being the ranking officer among the Cossacks, for example, he realized he must have the support of his Iranian superiors. He spoke with those he knew and asked the most senior among them, Sardar A'zam, to talk to the others on his behalf. The old man did and received their approval for Reza to be appointed commander of the Cossack Division.²³ This endorsement greatly increased Reza's authority among the other officers.

Seyyed Zia and Reza Khan agreed on the need to revamp the government but differed on focus and intensity. Seyyed Zia had a more comprehensive idea of what was to be done. The 1919 Agreement was no longer tenable, but much could be done with British help to reform the existing political system, rationalize the administration, and improve the social and economic conditions. The titled aristocracy, particularly those who had governed in the past, however, would have to be discarded, surgically, in one swoop, as soon as possible. Reza agreed tacitly with most of this, but his focus was mainly the military. Much of this discourse may have been at the time beyond his intellectual compass, and he was smart enough to know his limitations. Honesty, military prowess, and nationalism were his assets, and they were indispensable virtues. The rest, his supporters thought, would follow. He impressed Ironside, who had come to believe that Iran needed a strong, honest leader, and that such a leader would satisfy his objectives—get his forces out of Iran safely, see a government installed that could stand on its feet, and keep the shah on the throne. He asked and received Reza Khan's agreement to these points. He wrote in his diaries: "Reza promised glibly enough and I shook hands with him. I have told Smyth to let him go gradually."²⁴

Seyyed Zia meant something to Norman but not much to Ironside. Norman, on the other hand, did not know Reza Khan and was not sure what to make of Ironside's confidence in him. Based on what the general told him, Norman suspected Reza might be dangerous to the status quo in Iran, including the future of the throne, which London wished resolutely to preserve. Not having many choices, however, he decided to fall in line with Ironside—to let the Cossacks go, as the latter confided to his diary on 17 February, the day before he left Iran. The phrase "to let him go" suggests that the Cossacks had been held back on a political and military leash. Now they were free to move, and once they moved there was not much that could stop them.



In the early dawn of 22 February 1921, the Hamadan Brigade, commanded by Brigadier Reza Khan, entered Tehran from the west and took over critical points. There was not much resistance—none by the Cossacks in Tehran or the gendarmes and very little by the police. On the 23rd, Reza announced martial law, the declaration signifying his character as much as the requirements of control. "I command," began the statement. Citizens of Tehran were ordered to abide by each and every article of the declaration on pain of severe punishment. The articles that followed were not unusual for martial law, but the tone was

patriotic, harsh, and serious. Kazem Khan, who had translated for Ironside in Qazvin and whose rank Reza Khan now identified as colonel, was appointed commandant of Tehran and forthwith arrested approximately seventy members of the aristocracy, including several members of the shah's immediate family. Seyyed Zia was appointed prime minister on 25 February, with the war portfolio going to his friend and ally Mas'ud Khan Keyhan. But it would not last long. Reza Khan was confirmed as commander of the Cossacks and was given the title *Sardar Sepah* (commander of the army) by the shah. Soon the war portfolio passed to Reza, who in fact had decided military policy from the beginning of the coup. In the meantime, Ahmad Shah found Reza amiable and in his own way loyal. Seyyed Zia, on the other hand, struck the shah and his allies as politically and ideologically suspect. Reza cultivated the shah's good will; Seyyed Zia befriended the crown prince, the shah's brother Mohammad Hassan Mirza. Within three months, the shah asked Seyyed Zia to resign; knowing he had no support from Reza Khan, Seyyed Zia acquiesced. The old crowd returned from dungeons to lofty government positions, if not to power. Qavam-us-Saltaneh, Moshir-ud-Daula, and Mostowfi-ul-Mamalek—great names from an era already past—succeeded each other as prime minister, but they merely followed *Sardar Sepah's* wishes until they handed him the mantle on 26 October 1923.



The old aristocracy had quietly acquiesced to Reza Khan's becoming minister of war, hoping his new position in the cabinet would put him in civilian clothes and thus separate him from the armed forces. They were disappointed. Reza Khan refused to surrender his uniform. The army was his home, his power, and his freedom. He would attend the cabinet when he pleased, sometimes refusing invitations from the prime minister or the crown prince purely to impress them with his independence and his power. He remained deferential to the shah, but not to the point of changing his word once he had uttered it. On 15 June 1923, a new cabinet under Moshir-ud-Daula was presented to the shah, who had come to town specifically for the occasion. Reza Khan, given the war portfolio for the eighth time in a row in a span of two and a half years, declined to attend on the ground that he was ill. The shah sent word he had something important to discuss and wished to meet with him in the afternoon even if he was sick. Reza refused. The shah sent word again, this time almost begging Reza Khan to go to him, "only for five minutes," said the messenger, but the general would not go.²⁵

Reza Kahn had amassed too much power to be trifled with, and he knew how to use it politically. By 1922, the military under his command had changed

into a more efficient fighting force, wielding considerable political influence. Whenever Sardar Sepah threatened to resign, the military threatened to rebel, forcing everyone to yield, including the current British representative in Iran, Sir Percy Lorraine, who had willy-nilly concluded that a stable and centralized Iranian government, regardless of who was in charge, would be more in Britain's interest than a weak government that would inevitably succumb to Soviet pressure. Lorraine had also concluded that the only man in Iran honest and capable enough to achieve the kind of stability both Iran and England required was Reza Khan.



Reza Khan was named prime minister on 26 October 1923. By this time his relationship to shah, aristocracy, and state had fundamentally changed. His authority now extended to every decision made, and his power became the arbiter of every action taken. The shah chose to travel to Europe on the day he appointed Reza Khan, leaving the affairs of the royal court mostly to the crown prince. He found the idea of Reza Khan becoming the arbiter of the realm repugnant, more so now that the aristocracy, the men who had run the state over the past twenty years, began to split into those for and those against the new rising power. The political horizon, however, became increasingly murky as those against, facing superior power, chose *taqiye*, the politics of stealth.

To a majority in the Qajar aristocracy Reza Khan's power implied a catastrophe. In Iran's neighborhood, the Ottoman caliphate had yielded to a new, republican Turkey and with it a host of ideas that would inevitably affect Iran's politics: republicanism, nationalism, populism, statism, secularism, and revolution, concepts still in the making in 1923 but containing enough substance and form to strike fear in the heart of the traditional believer. Though such ideas did not resonate with the masses, they were attractive to the intellectuals. For the first time in many centuries in Iran, religion and national identity began to diverge, creating a rift between the traditional masses and the emerging nationalistic elite. Patriotism, of course, had always existed among Iranians, but was expressed mostly in ethnic and religious terms. Nationalism, a modern concept grasped and variously defined by only a small contingent of society, rejected both ethnicity and religion. Many among the nationalists saw Islam as the main reason for Iran's backwardness. Iran, therefore, had to be purged, if not of Islam's core values, at least of its Arabisms. The pre-Islamic empire became the image toward which the new nation was to aspire.

Turkey, invariably, excited the imagination, but it was Europe that provided

the axis around which tradition and modernity clashed. A group of modernists argued that the only salvation for Iranians was for them in effect to become Europeans. “Iran,” declared Seyyed Hassan Taqizadeh, “must become Europeanized in form, substance, body and soul. That is the only way.”²⁶ By contrast, Ahmad Kasravi, the historian, a former cleric turned civilian intellectual, questioned the virtue claimed for the European vision. Does it lead to the good life? he asked. If not, how do we get the best we can from it without losing our soul? But how, too, to redeem the soul when religion, shiism in Iran, was soiled with so much superstition? Between them, Kasravi and Taqizadeh represented the strains of Iranian nationalism as it developed in relation to the West: admiring European law as the backbone of Europe’s advancement yet defining nationalism in opposition to European cultural and political domination; vaguely realizing economic and technological development as the cause of Europe’s superior power yet falling back on tradition as the only weapon of survival against the European challenge.

Such ideas were in the air, touching those in positions of power, each taking a portion according to his intellectual curiosity or political interest. Reza Khan, as prime minister, was caught in this web, recognizing the importance of the debate without absorbing all its intricacies. He was impressed with Mustafa Kamal Pasha in Turkey, what he had achieved and what he was about to achieve. Republicanism, nationalism, secularism — all resonated in his mind. Other forces were also at play. He had experienced the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 as a soldier with little political or intellectual involvement. Not much had happened in the constitutional era that he could think of as beneficial to the people. Same men, same ideas, same interests, same pettiness; no wonder the country was where it was.

What struck him most forcefully in all of this was the need for a strong state. Nothing could be done if the government did not establish control over the country, he told his adjutant, Lieutenant Morteza Yazdanpanah. He had effected some improvement in the army because he had power. State, however, was a different matter. To build a strong state you needed first and foremost intelligent, educated, and forward-looking men. These men hailed from social backgrounds different from his. They were likely aristocratic, better educated, ideologically sophisticated, but not comparably strong or committed. Almost all of them were old enough to have experienced the Constitutional Revolution, though by the time Reza Khan came to power many had lost their fervor for constitutionalism. They fell into two broad categories: those who held important posts in the Qajar government and those, generally younger, who had chosen or who had been forced to leave the country during Mohammad Ali Shah’s reign.

Reza Khan was better acquainted with the first category, as he served with them in the cabinet and called on them for political advice. Mostowfi-ul-Mamalek, Moshir-ud-Daula, Mohammad Mosaddeq, Yahya Dowlatabadi, Mokhber-us-Saltaneh Hedayat, Zoka-ul-Malk Foroughi, and their friends fell in this group. Most of them were social democrats. They wanted a separation of church and state, universal education, some kind of land reform²⁷—ideals they now realized they could not implement without power.

Reza Khan's eye was on the second category, younger intellectuals who now resided in Europe and who communicated with their compatriots in Iran through their writings in such publications as *Kaveh*, *Iranshahr*, or *Nameh Farangestan*. They were influenced by what had happened in Iran since the revolution and also what was happening around them in Europe. Fifteen years past, at the time of the Constitution, the debate was clear: secularism or Islam. The new generation found that debate simplistic. If Iran were to become modern, it had to change, and the change had to be fundamental. The right legal framework was necessary, but not sufficient. Iranians had to acquire new ways of looking at the world. They had to be reeducated. Whether one thought religion was good or bad, it was a fact of life. Religion cleansed of superstition led logically to a separation of church and state. But this had to be addressed, that is, Iran needed its Luther and Calvin. By the same token, it might be good for Iranians to become like Europeans, but that would not be perfect. The better way was to be eclectic, remain true to yourself by recreating in your image what you borrowed from the West. Where lay the golden mean?

There was much debate among the new intellectuals, and many opinions, but invariably everything converged on the state. In part this reflected the way Europe was going. The war had torn Europe asunder, and now the continent was rapidly diverging from the ideas of individual freedom and political democracy that Wilson and the League of Nations had so optimistically enunciated. In Russia, sovietism was beginning to take on the structural characteristics of Stalinism. In western and central Europe a specter of the power state tinged with racial overtones was rising, already becoming a reality in Italy. Fascism seemed to bring together within the nation-state security, discipline, development, and pride. Erstwhile democrats like Taqizadeh now spoke of the "enlightened despotism" of Peter the Great in Russia, the Mikado in Japan, and Mohammad Ali in Egypt as the preferred way for Iran; Mussolini was presented as a kind of philosopher king, a dictator possessing ideals and knowledge, an enlightened leader with an iron fist.²⁸ Constitutionalism now took a backseat to nationalism, and nationalism increasingly took on a German rather than an Anglo-Saxon tint.

The young Iranians studying in Europe returned to Iran in the first years of

the 1920s. They entered various professions, mostly in the government, and they remained interested in politics and in Iran's future. Several joined in establishing a political association named Iran Javan, or the Young Iran Society, whose members played important roles in the development of Iran during the next two decades. One of them, Ali Akbar Siassi, wrote the following in his memoirs:

Not long after we established the Iran Javan, Prime Minister Sardar Sepah summoned Iran Javan's representatives. The society accepted Sardar Sepah's invitation. Well, in truth, it could not do otherwise. Esma'il Mer'at, Mosharraf Naficy, Mohsen Ra'is, and I went to his residence, then facing the military schools on Sepah [Army] Street. We were told to wait for him in the garden. After a short time, we saw him approach from a distance, tall, awesome with his cape hanging down on his shoulders. He sat on a bench and pointed to us to sit on the bench near him. "You are all young energetic men educated in Europe. What is it that you are saying? What do you really want? What's the meaning of this society, Iran Javan, you have established?" he asked.

"The society," I replied, "consists of a group of patriotic young men. We abhor Iran's backwardness and the chasm that separates us from Europe. We wish to fill this chasm; we wish to see Iran great and progressive. That is the foundation of our beliefs on which we have based our charter."

"What beliefs?" he said. I handed him the society's printed charter. He read it slowly and deliberately. Then he fixed his piercing gaze on us and said in a kind and approving voice: "What you have written is laudable, very good. I see you are patriots, you want progress, and you entertain grand and sweet hopes for your country. It wouldn't hurt if you propagated your ideas, opened the people's eyes and ears, and acquainted them with these subjects. You will speak and I will act. . . . I assure you—no, not assure only—I promise you that I will fulfill all these wishes, and will implement your ideas, which are also my ideas, from the beginning to the end. Leave this copy of the charter with me. You will hear of it in a few years."²⁹

Iran Javan's charter proposed to repeal the capitulatory system, which provided special judicial procedures for certain foreign nationals; build railroads; establish an independent customs; liberate women; send students, both boys and girls, to Europe; reform the judiciary; expand knowledge and primary education; establish secondary schools; stress technical and industrial education; build libraries and museums; and adopt the good aspects of European civilization.³⁰ Siassi's account is important for the nexus it provides between the man and the idea. Reza Khan, disaffected with the failure of the state, wished to put Iran on the path to progress, but except in the army's case where he had some precise ideas, he did not know how. None of the proposals in the charter was new, but they had never been presented to him cohesively as a

program. He was intelligent enough to catch the relevance of their cohesiveness to policy and the relevance of power to their intellectual development and practical implementation. As prime minister and king he would adopt the charter as the main component of his program, call on the young men who had drafted it and on others like them to define and elaborate it, provide them with political support, and give them authority to implement it. It was the beginning of a symbiosis of power and idea—power inevitably defining the contours of the idea.

First, however, it was necessary to consolidate power. In the wake of the coup d'état a wave of republicanism spread across the country, particularly among the intellectuals. Many of them even expected the coup to culminate in a republic until it became clear that Reza Khan had become friendly with the shah. The Qajar king, however, continued to lose legitimacy, partly for sheer incompetence, partly for corruption, and partly for lacking any ardor for his office or his country. As time passed, Reza Khan appeared to assume that legitimacy and increasingly to be seen as the man to head a republic.

Then, a little over a month after Sardar Sepah was appointed prime minister, the Ottoman caliphate was dissolved, and the parliament elected Mustafa Kamal Pasha as the first president of the Turkish Republic. The event hit Iran with cataclysmic force. When the Fifth Majlis convened on 11 February 1924, changing the regime became the major issue. A majority of the deputies seemed to be for a republic, among them many of the Qajar grandees—including Prince Abdolhossein Mirza Farmanfarma—who signed a declaration in Reza Khan's residence pledging their support for a republic and exhorting others to join them.³¹ The aristocratic support, however, was disingenuous, again more in the spirit of *taqiye*, political dissimulation, than belief and commitment. As Mokhber-us-Saltaneh Hedayat, a signatory to the declaration, wrote in his memoirs: "Perhaps one could vote for his [Reza Khan's] kingship. But this country and republic don't go together. There will be an upheaval every so many years. Such discourse does not sit happily on one's heart."³² Direct opposition centered on religious leaders, led by Hassan Modarres, a frail but politically astute cleric; they thwarted the movement by obstructing legislation in the Majlis and by mobilizing the people in the street. Turkey had become un-Islamic, profane and lost in the eye of the Lord, claimed the clerics. Once the issue was raised in the street and cast in those terms, the republicans found it difficult to compete. Reza Khan soon realized he was losing support and, rather than continuing the fight for republicanism, met with the religious leaders in the holy city of Qom and renounced the idea of a republic. The movement fizzled out, but at the same time Reza Khan's stature suddenly shrank, and he was clearly rebuffed by his oppo-

nents for the first time since the coup. Unless he took the right measures he most likely would be pushed out of the political scene.

By design or chance, Reza Khan resigned on 7 April 1924, citing as his reason “domestic and foreign conspiracies” against him, and announced he would take up residence in a neighboring country. This was a risk that could have backfired. The shah sent a telegram to the Majlis expressing his satisfaction with the turn of events and nominating as prime minister Hassan Mostowfi (Mostowfi-ul-Mamalek), who had held the post many times in the past. Reza Khan’s supporters, especially the commanders of the armed forces, however, began a coordinated campaign to force the Majlis to reinstall him. Ali Dashti, a renowned writer and politician, lamented the departure of “the father of the Iranian people” in his newspaper *Shafaq-e sorkh* (The Red Dawn) and predicted a dire future if he did not return. Military commanders across the country threatened to march on Tehran. On the 8th, a delegation of Majlis deputies, clerics, guilds, and merchants went to Rud-e Hen, a small village to the north of Tehran where Sardar Sepah was staying, to ask him to return as prime minister, in defiance of the shah’s telegram. Now armed with a popular mandate, he agreed and returned to Tehran that same day.

During the next year, Reza Khan weathered several challenges posed by the clerics and tribal leaders. In the most important he forced Khaz’al, the Sheykh of Mohammareh, to yield to him unconditionally without a single battle, which raised his political stature among Iranians and impressed the British. It also diminished his opponents, particularly Modarres, who had openly plotted with the Sheykh to oust him and to have the Qajar shah return to Iran from his stay in Europe. As Reza Khan’s stature rose, ideas of regime change slowly transmuted to dynasty change. In fact, the shah had been urged to return to Iran or at least to devolve authority to the crown prince, but he refused until it was too late. Not until the fall of 1925 did he talk of return. The suggestion led to a flurry of telegrams from the provinces denouncing the idea. On 28 October, delegations representing various social and economic groups gathered in the military school and at the prime minister’s home to demand a constituent assembly to be convened to depose the Qajar dynasty. On 31 October 1925 the Fifth Majlis voted to abolish the dynasty and to convene a constituent assembly to decide the future government of Iran. The assembly convened on 6 December. In the course of five sessions it voted to change Articles 36, 37, 38, and 40 of the Supplementary Basic Law, conferring the Iranian kingship on Reza Pahlavi.³³