O Iranians! O brethren of my beloved country! Until when will this treacherous intoxication keep you slumbering? Enough of this intoxication. Lift up your heads. Open your eyes. Cast a glance around you, and behold how the world has become civilized. All the savages in Africa and negroes in Zanzibar are marching towards civilization, knowledge, labor, and riches. Behold Your neighbors the Russians, who a hundred years ago were in much worse condition than we. Behold them now how they possess everything. In bygone days we had everything, and now all is gone. In the past, others looked on us as a great nation. Now we are reduced to such a condition that our neighbors of the north and south already believe us to be their property and divide our country between themselves. We have no guns, no army, no secure finances, no proper government, no commercial law. All this backwardness is due to autocracy and to injustice and to want of laws. Also your clergy are at fault, for they preach that life is short and worldly honors are only human vanities. These sermons lead you away from this world into submission, slavery, and ignorance. The monarchs, at the same time, despoil you . . . And with all this come strangers who receive from you all your money, and instead furnish you with green, blue, and red cloth, gaudy glassware, and luxury furniture. These are the causes of your misery.

Tehran Sermon (1907)

ROOTS OF REVOLUTION

Iran’s Constitutional Revolution – like many other revolutions – began with great expectations but foundered eventually in a deep sea of disillusionment. It promised the “dawn of a new era,” the “gateway to a bright future,” and the “reawakening of an ancient civilization.” It produced, however, an era of strife that brought the country close to disintegration. The same reformers who had championed radical changes were withdrawing from politics by the late 1910s, distancing themselves from “youthful follies,” even
from their own writings, and looking around for a “man on horseback” to save the nation. They did not come round to writing histories of the revolution until the mid-twentieth century. Paradoxically, the relative ease with which the revolution was both made and later unmade was linked to the same phenomenon – the lack of a viable central state. The revolution initially succeeded in large part because the regime lacked the machinery to crush opposition. Similarly, the revolution eventually failed in large part because it lacked the machinery to consolidate power – not to mention to implement reforms.

The roots of the revolution go back to the nineteenth century – especially to the gradual penetration of the country by the West. This penetration weakened the tenuous links that had connected the Qajar court to the wider society. It did so in two concurrent ways. On one hand, it introduced a mutual threat to the many dispersed urban bazaars and religious notables, bringing them together in a cross-regional middle class that became conscious for the first time of their common grievances against the government and the foreign powers. This propertied class, because of its ties to the bazaar and the clergy, later became known as the traditional middle class (tabaqeh-e motavasateh-e sunnati). This vital link between mosque and bazaar, which has lasted into the contemporary age, can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. On the other hand, the contact with the West, especially through modern education, introduced new ideas, new occupations, and eventually a new middle class. Their members described themselves as “enlightened thinkers,” adopting first the Arabic term monvar al-fekran and later coining the Persian equivalent rowshanfekran (enlightened thinkers). In many ways, they resembled eighteenth-century intellectuals in the Tsarist Empire who had coined the Russian term “intelligentsia.” These new intellectuals had little in common with the traditional “men of the pen” found either in the royal court or in the theological seminaries. They perceived the world not through “Mirror for Princes” literature, but through the French Enlightenment. They venerated not royal authority but popular sovereignty; not tradition but Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity; not Shadows of God on Earth but the inalienable Rights of Man. They talked not of social equilibrium and political harmony, but of the need for radical change, fundamental transformation, and the inevitable march of human progress. They promulgated not the advantages of absolutism and conservatism, but of liberalism, nationalism, and even socialism. Their outlook was shaped not so much by the Koran, the shari’a, and the Shi’i Messiah, but by the Age of Reason and its radical notions of Natural Rights – rights citizens possess by virtue of being humans.
In the words of Ali Dehkhoda, a leading reformer who in later years compiled the first comprehensive Persian lexicon, these new concepts cried out for new terms.² He and his disciples popularized such words as demokrasi, aristokrasi, oligarki, feudalism, kapitalism, sosyalism, imperialism, and bourzhuazi (bourgeoisie). They introduced novel concepts such as chap (left) and rast (right), and qorun-e vasateh (middle ages). They gave new colorations to old words, changing the meaning of estebdad from “legitimate absolutism” to “illegitimate despotism”; of dowlat from patrimonial court to national government; of mellat from “religious community” to “nation”; of vatan from locality to fatherland/motherland; of majles from gathering to parliament; of tabaqeh from medieval estate to economic class; of taraqi from physical ascent to historical progress; of mardom from the populace to the “People”; and of adalat from appropriate treatment – as the shah was supposed to mete out to the various strata – to equal justice for all.

The most contentious of the new terms was probably mashruteh (constitutional). For some, the term came from “charter” – as in Magna Carta. For others, it came from shari’a (holy law) and mashru’eh (conditional) – implying that temporal laws should be conditioned by the divine shari’a.³ As Dehkhoda noted, the struggle over these new concepts was most visible during the revolution, but the genesis of that struggle was in the previous century.

Western penetration started early in the century. It began with military defeats, first by the Russian army, then by the British. The Russians – armed with modern artillery – swept through Central Asia and the Caucasus, defeating the Qajars in two short wars and imposing on them the humiliating treaties of Gulestan (1813) and Turkmanchai (1828). Similarly, the British, who had been in the Persian Gulf since the eighteenth century, started to expand their reach, forcing the Qajars to relinquish Herat, and imposing on them the equally humiliating Treaty of Paris (1857). Iranians began to refer to the two powers as their “northern” and “southern” neighbors. The treaties had far-reaching consequences. They established borders that have endured more or less intact into the contemporary age. They turned the country into a buffer and sometimes a contested zone in the “Great Game” played by the two powers. Their representatives became key players in Iranian politics – so much so that they had a hand not only in making and unmaking ministers but also in stabilizing the monarchy and influencing the line of succession throughout the century. This gave birth to the notion – which became even more prevalent in the next century – that foreign hands pulled all the strings in Iran, that foreign conspiracies determined the course of events, and that behind every national crisis lay the
foreign powers. The “paranoid style of politics” which many have noted shapes modern Iran had its origins in the nineteenth century.

The treaties also paved the way for other foreign powers to obtain a series of commercial and diplomatic concessions known as capitulations. They were permitted to establish provincial consulates, and their merchants were exempted from high import duties as well as from internal tariffs, travel restrictions, and the jurisdiction of local courts. The term capitulation became synonymous with imperial privileges, arrogance, and transgressions. These treaties – together with the opening of the Suez Canal and extension of the Russian railways into the Caucasus and Central Asia – initiated the commercial penetration of Iran. The process was further accelerated by the Baku “oil rush” in the 1890s. By the end of the century, some 100,000 – many undocumented, unskilled, and seasonal workers – were crossing every year into the Russian Empire. These migrants, almost all from Azerbaijan, formed the bulk of the Baku underclass.4

Foreign trade – dominated by merchants from the two “neighbors” – increased eightfold in the course of the century. Imports consisted mostly of guns, tools, and textiles from Western Europe; sugar and kerosene from Russia; spices, tea, and coffee from Asia. Exports consisted mainly of carpets, raw cotton, silk, tobacco, hides, rice, dried fruits, and opium. The last was transported by British merchants to the lucrative Chinese market. Zill al-Sultan, the governor of Isfahan, became so concerned about opium undercutting food production that in 1890 he decreed that for every four fields planted with poppies one had to be set aside for cereals.5

In 1800, Iran had been fairly isolated from the world economy. By 1900, it was well on the way to being incorporated into that economy. This was especially true for the north, which supplied agricultural goods as well as unskilled labor to the Russian market, and for the south, especially Isfahan, Fars, and Kerman, which provided carpets and shawls, as well as opium, to the British Empire. Not surprisingly, the Russian government took special interest in the port of Enzeli and its road to Tehran. The British government took equal interest in the roads connecting the Gulf to Isfahan, Shiraz, Yazd, and Kerman. In 1888, Lynch Brothers, a London firm already active on the Tigris–Euphrates, started running stream boats from Mohammarah to Ahwaz along the Karun – Iran’s only navigable river. To help their merchants, the British in 1889 established the Imperial Bank of Persia. The Russians followed suit with their Banque d’Escompte de Perse. Curzon began his Persia and the Persian Question with the claim that the country was vital for Britain not only because of the Great Game but also because of its commercial prospects.6 He threatened to “impeach” any
“traitor” who contemplated giving Russia a foothold in the Persian Gulf: “Every claim that can be made by Russia for the exclusive control of the Caspian Sea could be urged with tenfold greater force by Great Britain for a similar monopoly of the Persian Gulf. Hundreds of British lives and millions of British money have been spent in the pacification of these troublous waters.” He concluded his magnum opus with this pontification:

I trust that, from the information and reasoning that have been supplied in these volumes, the importance of Persia to England will have been made sufficiently manifest. The figures and calculations which I have given relating to trade, and more particularly Anglo-Persian trade, the analysis of the indigenous resources of Persia, the character and chances of the still undeveloped schemes for internal amelioration, the field thus opened for the judicious employment of capital are all of them appeals to the practical and business-like instincts of Englishmen. In the furious commercial competition that now rages like a hurricane through the world, the loss of a market is a retrograde step that cannot be recovered; the gain of a market is a positive addition to the national strength. Indifference to Persia might mean the sacrifice of a trade that already feeds hundreds of thousands of our citizens in this country and in India. A friendly attention to Persia will mean so much more employment for British ships, for British labour, and for British spindles.

The Qajars tried to limit foreign penetration by strengthening their state through measures which later became known throughout the world as “defensive modernization.” These efforts, however, failed, largely because of their inability to raise tax revenues, a problem compounded over the century by a staggering sixfold rise in prices. By 1900, government deficits were running at a rate of more than $1 million a year, yet the Qajar state was too weak to raise the tax revenues it needed. In an effort to break this vicious circle, the state tried selling concessions and borrowing money. Nasser al-Din Shah initiated this process in 1872 by selling the sole right to construct mines, railways, tramways, dams, roads, and industrial plants to Baron Julius de Reuter, a British citizen after whom the famous news agency was later named. The price was $200,000 and 60 percent of annual profits. Curzon described this sale as “most complete surrender of the entire resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that has ever been dreamed of, much less accomplished in history.” Indeed, this prospective monopoly created such a furor – especially in St. Petersburg and among pro-Russian courtiers – that it had to be cancelled. But it sowed the seeds for the oil concession that was to bring so much turbulence in the next century. In a second gambit, Nasser al-Din Shah in 1891 sold to Major Talbot, another Englishman, a monopoly for the sale and export of tobacco. This too had to be cancelled, in part because of Russian opposition...
and in part because of a nationwide boycott spearheaded by merchants and religious leaders. This tobacco boycott was in many ways a dress rehearsal for the Constitutional Revolution.

Although these monopolies had to be withdrawn, the Qajars were able to sell a number of more modest concessions. British firms bought the right to dredge as well as navigate the Karun; build roads and telegraph lines in the south; finance carpet factories in Isfahan, Bushire, Sultanabad, and Tabriz; establish the Imperial Bank with full control over the printing of banknotes; and, most important of all, the concession to drill for oil in the southwest. This paved the way for the D’Arcy Concession, which, in turn, paved the way for the formation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Meanwhile, Russian firms bought the right to fish in the Caspian Sea; dredge Enzeli; drill for oil in the north; and build roads and telegraph lines linking their borders to Tehran, Tabriz, and Mashed. What is more, Belgians – deemed to be neutral between Britain and Russia – built in Tehran not only the railway to the Abdul ‘Azim Mosque, but also a tram line, street lights, a sugar mill, and a glass factory. By the turn of the century, foreign investments in Iran totaled $60 million. This sum may not have been huge but it was enough to cause consternation among some local commercial interests.

The Qajar attempts at “defensive modernization” did not amount to much – and that little was confined to a few showpieces in the capital. The Cossack Brigade, the most visible example, could muster no more than 2,000 men. Nazmieh, the Tehran police force, had fewer than 4,600 men. The central mint, which replaced the many provincial ones, could now debase the coinage, and thereby provide the government with some extra cash – but, of course, at the cost of further fueling inflation. The telegraph office – centered in Cannon Square – linked Tehran to the provinces and thus provided the shah with the means of keeping closer tabs on his governors. Ironically, it also provided the opposition with the means to challenge him during the tobacco crisis and the Constitutional Revolution.

The ministry of posts and telegraph, created in 1877, issued stamps and distributed mail. The Government Printing Office published two gazettes – Ettelah (Information), listing new appointments, and Iran, summarizing official views. Both tried to substitute Persian for Arabic terms.

The crown jewel of reforms, however, was the Dar al Fanon (Abode of Learning). Founded in 1852, its mission was to train “sons of the nobility” for public service. By 1900 it was a fully fledged polytechnic with more than 350 students. Top graduates received scholarships to study in Europe – mainly in France and Belgium to limit Russian and British influence. Its faculty also came mainly from France and Belgium. At the turn of the
century, the government opened four other secondary schools in Tehran, Isfahan, and Tabriz; and five new colleges affiliated with the Dar al-Fanon – two military colleges and schools of agriculture, political science, and foreign languages. The last, through the Government Printing Office, published more than 160 books. These included 80 medical, military, and language textbooks; 10 travelogues – including Nasser al-Din Shah’s tour of Europe; 10 abbreviated translations of Western classics such as Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Dumas’ *Three Musketeers*, Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*, Descartes’ *Discourses*, Newton’s *Principia*, and Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*; 20 biographies of world-famous figures – including those of Louis XIV, Napoleon, Peter the Great, Nicholas I, Frederick the Great, and Wilhelm I; and, most significant of all, 10 histories of Iran, including pre-Islamic Iran, written mostly by Europeans. Thus Iranians began to see their own past as well as world history mainly through Western eyes. The elder Musher al-Dowleh, the founder of the School of Political Science, was typical of the new sentiments. Returning from long service in embassies abroad, he began to write increasingly about *mellat* (nation), *melliyaṭ* (nationality), state sovereignty, and the need for *ra’yaṭ* (flock-subjects) to become fully fledged citizens.

Nasser al-Din Shah began his reign in 1848 encouraging contacts with Europe. But by the end of his reign he had grown so fearful of alien ideas that it was rumored that he preferred ministers who did not know whether Brussels was a city or a cabbage. Nevertheless, he continued to send diplomatic representatives abroad and a steady stream of students to France and Belgium. He also tolerated Christian missionaries so long as they limited themselves to medical-educational activities, and proselytized only among the religious minorities. French Catholics began working with Armenians and Assyrians around Lake Urmiah; they then established more than thirty facilities spread throughout the country. American Presbyterians tended to focus on the north; Anglicans on the south; and Alliance Française in Tehran, Tabriz, and Isfahan. L’Alliance Israelite, the French Jewish organization, opened schools in Hamadan, Isfahan, and Tehran. Similarly, the Zoroastrian community in India financed a school for their coreligionists in Yazd.

Meanwhile, Iranian private entrepreneurs established a number of modest enterprises: electrical plants in Tehran, Tabriz, Rasht, and Mashed – the latter illuminated the main shrine; a sugar mill in Mazanderan; a silk factory in Gilan; a cotton mill in Tehran; and printing presses as well as papermaking factories in Tehran and Isfahan. They launched stock companies with the explicit purpose of protecting home industries from foreign
competition. They funded public libraries in Tehran and Tabriz as well as ten secondary schools, including one for girls. They financed reformist newspapers: *Tarbiyat* (Education) in Tehran, *Hemmat* (Endeavor) in Tabriz, *Habl al-Matin* (The Firm Cord) in Calcutta, *Akhtar* (Star) in Istanbul, *Parvaresh* (Education) in Cairo, and *Qanon* (Law) in London. They also organized semi-formal groups—the National Society, the Society for Humanity, the Revolutionary Committee, and the Secret Society modeled after the European Freemasons. By the end of the century, such groups were meeting quietly to discuss the urgent need for government reforms. In short, the country now contained a distinct intelligentsia even though its numbers totaled fewer than three thousand and most of its members came from the ranks of the old elite. Not surprisingly, when a lone dissident in 1896 assassinated Nasser al-Din Shah in the Abdul ‘Azim Mosque, some felt that the age of absolutism had finally come to an end. The new monarch, Muzaffar al-Din Shah, was reputed to be far more open to the new world. The assassin’s bullet ended more than Nasser al-Din Shah’s life. It ended the old order.

**COMING OF THE REVOLUTION**

The revolution’s long-term causes were rooted in the nineteenth century; its short-term ones were triggered in 1904–05 by an economic crisis brought about by government bankruptcy and spiraling inflation. Unable to meet government expenditures, Muzaffar al-Din Shah threatened to raise land taxes and default on loans from local creditors. He also turned to British and Russian banks for new loans on top of the £4 million he had already borrowed from them. They obliged on condition he handed over the entire customs system to Belgian administrators headed by a Monsieur Naus. The latter assured Britain and Russia that he would give priority to repaying their previous loans. It was rumored that Naus had Jewish origins, preferred to employ Armenians over Muslims, planned to raise drastically the tariffs on local merchants, and aspired to become minister of finance even though he was completely ignorant of the traditional mostowfi system. During Muharram in 1905, his opponents distributed a photograph of him masquerading as a mullah at a fancy dress ball. The British legation summed up the financial crisis:

The year 1906 has been a very important epoch in Persian history, for it has brought the introduction of parliamentary institutions. The condition of Persia had been for some time growing more and more intolerable. The Shah was entirely in the hands of a corrupt ring of courtiers who were living on the spoils of the government
and country. He had parted with the treasures he had inherited from his father and with most of the imperial and national domains. He had been obliged to have recourse to foreign loans, the proceeds of which he had spent in foreign travel or had lavished on his courtiers. There was a yearly deficit and the debt of the country was growing daily. There appeared to be no recourse but another foreign loan and it was generally believed that the loan would be granted under conditions which would practically extinguish the independence of the country. A certain number of young and independent men were aware of the facts, and were engaged by the government in the negotiations which were being carried on with a view to the loan.

At the same time, the whole country was suffering from acute inflation—the price of bread shot up 90 percent and that of sugar 33 percent. This inflation was caused by a combination of a bad harvest, a cholera epidemic, and a sudden disruption in the northern trade prompted by the 1905 Russo-Japanese War and the subsequent upheavals in the Tsarist Empire. By June 1905, angry women were demonstrating in Tehran, and, in the words of an eyewitness, giving the royal governor a “piece of their mind.” And by November 1905, the governor was trying to divert public attention by blaming the bazaar and bastinadoing three prominent sugar merchants. One was a seventy-year-old importer highly respected because of his philanthropic activities. The whole bazaar closed down and demanded the governor’s dismissal. According to an eyewitness, news of the bastinadoing “flashed through the bazaars” like lightning, and prompted shopkeepers to close down their stores. Meanwhile, in Mashed, bread rioters assaulted the home of a court-linked corn dealer, and the latter retaliated by having his private gunmen shoot down forty protestors who had taken sanctuary in the Imam Reza Shrine. One local senior cleric attributed the riot to the general mood of discontent.

Your majesty. Your realm is deteriorating. Your subjects have been reduced to begging. They are being oppressed and exploited by governors and officials whose greed and blood thirst knows no bounds. Last year, tax payers who could not pay cash had to sell their daughters to Turkmans and Armenian merchants who then sold them into slavery in Russia. Thousands of your subjects have had to flee this oppression and go to Russia . . . if remedies are not found, the country will be dismantled. The British will take over Sistan and Baluchestan; the Russians other parts; and the Ottomans have their own designs . . . Your majesty, listen to the plight of fifteen million souls who live in fear of being imprisoned by the foreigners.

This passing mention of the slave trade in women has been used by one sociologist to claim that gender formed the “central” issue in the Constitutional Revolution.

The crisis was further compounded by other conflicts. In Kerman, Sheikhi–Mutasherri riots prompted the resignation of the governor, the
bastinadoing of a local mojtahed, the killing of two demonstrators, and the scapegoating of the local Jewish community, whose quarter was looted. In Tehran in the summer of 1906, the Russian Bank, needing office space, bought an adjacent abandoned cemetery. The digging up of the dead prompted widespread protests, even in Najaf, and led to physical assaults on the bank. In the ensuing week, which coincided with Muharram, the Cossacks arrested a well-known luti, deported protest organizers, and shot into the Friday Mosque, killing an elderly sayyed. The funeral for the sayyed drew large crowds with women denouncing the governor as a latter-day Yazid and men wearing white shrouds as a sign of their readiness to be martyred.

These confrontations paved the way to two major protests, which, in turn, paved the way for the drafting of a written constitution. In June 1906, Sayyed Abdallah Behbehani and Sayyed Muhammad Tabatabai – two of Tehran’s three most respected mojtaheds – led a procession of some one thousand seminary students to the sanctuary of Qom. Later accounts anachronistically described these mojtaheds as ayatollahs. In fact, the clerical title of ayatollah, as well as that of hojjat al-islam, did not gain currency until well after the Constitutional Revolution. At Qom, the two were joined by Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri, the other senior mojtahed. The three threatened to move en masse to Karbala and Najaf, and thus deprive the country of religious services unless the shah dismissed both Naus and the governor, resolved the Kerman crisis, stopped the bank construction, and, most important of all, established an Adalat Khaneh (House of Justice). In short, the ulama were threatening to go on strike. Female demonstrators joked that if the crisis continued marriages would have to be notarized by Monsieur Naus.

In the same week, a group of Tehran merchants, some of whom had been active in the secret societies, approached the British legation in its summer retreat on the northern hills of Tehran. The Legation, in a confidential memorandum to London, explained how it got involved in the events that followed:

> After the shooting, it appeared as if the Government had won the day. The town was in the hands of the troops. The popular leaders had fled. The bazaars were in the occupation of the soldiers. And there appeared to be no place of refuge. Under these circumstances the popular party had recourse to an expedient sanctioned by old, and, indeed, immemorial custom – the rule of bast (sanctuary). It was resolved, failing all other recourses, to adopt this expediency. Two persons called at the Legation at Gulak and asked whether, in case the people took bast in the British legation, the Chargé d’Affairs would invoke the aid of the military to remove them.
Mr. Grant Duff expressed that he hoped they would not have recourse to such an expedient, but, he said it was not in his power, in view of the acknowledged custom in Persia, to use force if they came . . . The following evening, fifty merchants and mullas appeared in the Legation and took up their quarters for the night. Their numbers gradually increased, and soon there were 14,000 persons in the Legation garden.

The protestors were drawn predominantly from the bazaar. A committee of guild elders allocated tents to the various trades and crafts. One visitor counted at least five hundred tents, “for all the guilds, even the cobblers, walnut sellers, and tinkers had their own.” The Legation reported that order was so well maintained that little was damaged except some “flower-beds” and “some tree barks bearing pious inscriptions.” Meanwhile, the organizing committee both arranged women’s demonstrations outside and strictly controlled entry of newcomers into the compound. Only faculty and students from the Dar al-Fanon were permitted in. These new arrivals transformed the compound into “one vast open-air school of political science” lecturing on the advantages of constitutional government and even of republicanism. Some began to translate the Belgian constitution with its parliamentary form of government headed by a titular monarch. The organizing committee also raised money from wealthy merchants to help those who were unable to afford the prolonged strike. One participant wrote in his memoirs:

I clearly remember the day when we heard that the reactionaries were busy sowing discontent among the young carpenters and sawyers. The former, angry at having been taken away from their livelihood, demanded to know what they had to gain from the whole venture. The latter, being illiterate and irrational, were reluctant to accept any logical arguments. If these two irresponsible groups had walked out, our whole movement would have suffered. Fortunately, we persuaded them to remain in bast.

Finally, the organizing committee, on the advice of the modern educated colleagues, demanded from the shah not just a House of Justice, but a written constitution drafted by an elected National Assembly (Majles-e Melli).

At first the court dismissed the protestors as “Babi heretics” and “British-hired traitors” and tried to mollify them with the promise of setting up an ambiguous-sounding Islamic Majles. But faced with an ongoing general strike, a barrage of telegrams from the provinces, threats of armed intervention by émigré communities in Baku and Tiflis, and, as the “fatal” straw, the threat of defection from the Cossacks, the court backed down. As one eyewitness asked rhetorically of Edward Browne, the famous British...
historian, “the Shah with his unarmed, unpaid, ragged, starving soldiers, what can he do in face of the menace of a general strike and riots? The Government had to climb down and grant all that was asked of them.” On August 5, 1906 – three weeks after the first protestors had taken refuge in the British legation – Muzaffar al-Din Shah signed the royal proclamation to hold nationwide elections for a Constituent Assembly. August 5 continues to be celebrated as Constitutional Day.

Meeting hurriedly in Tehran, the Constituent Assembly drew up an electoral law for the forthcoming National Assembly. Most of the delegates were merchants, clerics, guild elders, and liberal notables – many of whom considered themselves members of the new intelligentsia. They drafted a complex electoral law dividing the population into six classes (tabaqats): Qajar princes; ulama and seminary students; a’yan (nobles) and ashraf (notables); merchants with “a definite place of business”: landowners with agricultural property worth at least 1,000 tomans; and “tradesmen and craftsmen” belonging to a legitimate guild and paying at least the “average rent” in the locality. Low-paid occupations, such as porters, laborers, and camel drivers, were excluded. The law also divided the electorate into 156 constituencies, allocating 96 seats to Tehran. Candidates had to be able to read, write, and speak in Persian. Elections in the provinces were to be in two stages: each “class” in every district was to choose one delegate to the provincial capital where they were to elect the provincial representatives to the National Assembly. Tehran was divided into four districts each representing the four main wards outside the royal Ark. The Tehran elections were to be in one stage: four seats were allocated to Qajar princes; ten to landowners; four to clerics; and as many as thirty-two to the established guilds. The voting age was set at twenty-five. Needless to say, the issue of women’s suffrage was not raised.

These dramatic events – especially the elections for the National Assembly – sparked the formation of a large array of parties, organizations, and newspapers. In the provinces, the local populations, invariably led by the bazaars, created regional assemblies (anjumans). In Tehran, some thirty occupational and ethnic groups formed their own specific organizations with such names as the Society of Asnafs (Guilds), Mostoufian (Accountants), Daneshmandan (Scholars), Tolabs (Seminarians), Zoroastrians, Armenians, Jews, Southerners, and Azerbaijanis. The last was led by merchants from Tabriz who had contacts with the Social Democratic Party in the Caucasus.
In fact, two years earlier a group of Iranian intellectuals working in Baku had formed a circle named Hemmat (Endeavor) and had started to work closely with the Russian Social Democratic Party.

The press was even more active. The number of newspapers jumped from six at the eve of the revolution to more than ninety at the opening of the Constituent Assembly. Intellectuals rushed to air concepts deemed too dangerous in the previous decades. These concepts, especially liberty, equality, and fraternity, inspired the names of many of the new publications – Bidari (Awakening), Taraqqi (Progress), Tamadon (Civilization), Vatan (Fatherland), Adamiyat (Humanity), Omid (Hope), ‘Asr-e Now (New Age), Neda-ye Vatan (Voice of the Fatherland), Esteqlal (Independence), Eslah (Reform), Eqbal (Progress), Hoquq (Rights), Haqiqat (Truth), Adalat (Justice), Azadi (Liberty), Mosavat (Equality), and Akhvat (Fraternity). As in other revolutions, the lifting of censorship opened up the floodgates. According to Browne, one of the most popular of the papers was Sur-e Israfil (Israfil’s Trumpet), which, despite its religious title, was forthrightly radical and secular. Written mainly by Dehkhoda, the lexicographer, it blended satire and poetry with political commentary, all in plain modern Persian. It took to task the whole upper class, including the landed ulama, for exploiting and keeping “ignorant” the “common people” (‘avam). Its circulation of 5,000 topped that of other papers. Since Dehkhoda had studied theology and was well versed in Islam, his satires on the ulama were especially biting. Not surprisingly, it did not take long for conservatives to target Sur-e Israfil.

The National Assembly opened in October 1906. It contained more than sixty bazaaris – merchants and guild elders; twenty-five clerics; and some fifty landlords, local notables, and senior officials. The members gradually coalesced into two fluid parties: the Mo’tadel (Moderates) and the Azadikhah (Liberals). The former were led jointly by a wholesale scarf dealer who had led the 1905 demonstrations against Naus, and by a former royal coin minter who had helped finance the venture into the British legation. They enjoyed the backing of Sayyeds Tabatabai and Behbehani, who, while not actual deputies, nevertheless participated in parliamentary debates. On most days, the Moderates could muster a majority. The Liberals were led by Hassan Taqizadeh, an eloquent speaker from Tabriz. Although he had begun his career as a cleric and still wore his turban, he had become increasingly enamored of modern ideas – in particular modern science – especially after visiting Baku. In many ways, Taqizadeh – like Dehkhoda – was typical of the first generation of the intelligentsia.

The Liberals and Moderates worked closely to draft a constitution that would be acceptable not only to Muzaffar al-Din Shah, who died soon after
signing the original proclamation, but also to his successor, Muhammad Ali Shah, who tried to water down royal promises by substituting the term *mashru* (conditional) for the more modern concept *mashrutiyat* (constitutional).  

The final two documents – known as the Fundamental and the Supplementary Fundamental Laws – were modeled after the Belgian constitution. According to eyewitnesses, the drafters of the two documents – all graduates of the Dar al-Fanon – intended to establish a constitutional monarchy with classic separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judiciary. These two documents, with minor amendments, survived as the fundamental laws of the land all the way to the 1979 revolution – at least on paper.

The fundamental laws gave the shah the nominal prerogative to head the executive, command the armed forces, declare war and peace, sign bills into laws, and appoint the highest state officials, including cabinet ministers. But the shah had to take an oath of office before the National Assembly, accept ministers elected by it, and sign into law bills passed by it. The shah retained only one real prerogative: the right to appoint thirty senators to a sixty-man upper house. But even this proved to be a hollow power since the first senate was not convened until 1949.

The Majles was designed to be the central piece of the new constitution. Described as the “representative of the whole people,” it had final say over all “laws, decrees, budgets, treaties, loans, monopolies, and concessions.” It even controlled the court budget. It had the power to investigate and propose any measure “deemed conducive to the well-being of the government and people.” Its sessions were to last two full years during which its members were immune from arrest. It had the authority to select cabinet ministers. The constitution even spelled out that “ministers cannot divest themselves of responsibility by pleading verbal or written orders from the shah”: “If the National Assembly or the Senate shall, by an absolute majority, declare itself dissatisfied with the cabinet or with one particular minister, that cabinet or minister shall resign.”

The constitutional laws had many other significant provisions. They formalized the provincial assemblies and set them up as parallel institutions to the governor-generals. They gave citizens a bill of rights including protection of life, property, and honor; freedom of speech, assembly, and organization; equality before the law; habeas corpus; and safeguards from arbitrary arrest. They designated a national flag with three equal and horizontal strips of green, white, and red – colors historically associated with Shi’ism. This has remained the national flag to the present day. As a concession to the Qajars, the new tricolor incorporated the Lion and the Sun.
The most important concessions, however, went to Islam in general and to Shi’ism in particular. Shi’ism was declared to be Iran’s official religion. Only Shi’i Muslims were to hold cabinet positions. The executive could ban “heretical” books, “anti-religious” associations, and “pernicious ideas.” The judiciary was divided into state and religious courts with the clergy retaining the authority to implement the shari’a in the latter. The legislature was not permitted to pass laws that conflicted with the shari’a. To ensure compliance, the National Assembly was to elect senior clerics to a Guardian Council whose sole task would be to vet all legislation. This council was to function until Judgment Day and the reappearance of the Mahdi. Such a Guardian Council, however, was not convened until after the 1979 revolution.

The person instrumental in writing the constitution was a recent returnee from Europe named Mirza Hussein Khan Musher al-Mulk, who, on his father’s death in 1907, inherited the title Musher al-Dowleh. In many ways, the young Musher al-Dowleh typified the new notables who were to play leading roles in national politics during the course of the next twenty years—until the emergence of Reza Shah. He had inherited large landholdings from his father who came from a long line of mostowfis from Nain and had married into a prosperous clerical family. Having studied in Moscow and Paris, Musher al-Dowleh was fluent in Russian and French. He not only drafted the first electoral system and the fundamental laws, but also designed the national flag and modeled the interior ministry after its counterpart in Russia. In the next twenty years, Musher al-Dowleh headed four cabinets and served in another eighteen—eight times as minister of war and five times as minister of justice. He also served as the country’s chief representative in London and St. Petersburg. In retirement, he wrote a bestseller entitled Iran-e Bastan (Ancient Iran) giving readers a highly patriotic account of pre-Islamic Persia. His younger brother, Mutamin al-Mulk, was active in parliament from 1909 until 1925, first as a deputy and then as Speaker of the House. With the introduction of family names in 1925, the two brothers adopted the surname Pirnia. At times the British praised them as “progressive,” “honest,” and “intelligent.” At other times, especially when their interests did not coincide with those of London, they dismissed them as “timid,” grossly “wealthy,” and overly “nationalistic.” This typified British attitudes towards the liberal notables.

Notables dominated the first cabinet chosen by parliament in August 1907. Musher al-Saltaneh, a relative of Musher al-Dowleh, headed the cabinet and the interior ministry. He too came from an old mostowfi family and had previously served as provincial governor and royal treasurer. The British legation described him as coming from the “old school” and having
not taken part in the “reform movement.” Mushur al-Dowleh himself inherited his father’s post as justice minister. Sa’ad al-Dowleh, the foreign minister, had represented Iran in Brussels for more than ten years and had helped organize the protests against Naus. Qavam al-Dowleh, the finance minister, had studied in France and came from a wealthy landowning family. He had a flair for literature. Mostowfi al-Mamalek, the war minister, had inherited his title as well as his huge fortune from his father who had been a grand vezir under Nasser al-Din Shah. He himself had lived in Paris from 1900 until 1907. Majd al-Mulk, the commerce minister, came from a merchant family that had produced a number of vezirs and controllers of the royal mint. Nayer al-Mulk, the education minister, had been in charge of the Dar al-Fanoun from 1897 until 1904. Since he was old and infirm, his son acted on his behalf as education minister. Finally, Mohandes al-Mamalek, minister of public works, was a distinguished French-educated mathematician who had accompanied Muzaffar al-Din Shah on his European trips. The British legation claimed that he used his position to extort money from British companies building roads in Iran. Not surprisingly, the new order was soon dubbed that of “al-dowlehs, al-saltanehs, and al-mamaleks.”

CIVIL WAR

When Muhammad Ali Shah ascended the throne in January 1907 he had no choice but to bend to parliamentary will and sign the fundamental laws. His position, however, gradually improved in the next few months, and by June 1908 he felt strong enough to lead the Cossacks in a typical military coup against the Majles. The change of fortunes was brought about by three separate pressures.

First, the constitutionalists suffered a major setback in 1907 with the signing of the Anglo-Russian Convention. Britain, having grown fearful of the rising power of Germany, decided to resolve long-standing differences with Russia throughout Asia, including Iran. The convention divided Iran into three zones. It allocated the north, including Isfahan, to Russia; the southwest, especially Kerman, Sistan, and Baluchestan to Britain; and demarcated the rest as a “neutral zone.” The two powers agreed to seek concessions only within their own zones; to retain the Belgian customs officials; and to use the customs revenues to repay the previous loans. The constitutionalists felt not only betrayed but also isolated in their dealings with the shah. The convention also taught Iranians a hard lesson in realpolitik – that however predatory the two “neighbors” were, they were
even more dangerous when they put aside their rivalries. The 1907 convention continued to haunt Iranians well into the mid-twentieth century.

Second, the Majles created an inevitable backlash once it tried to reform the tax system. It restricted the practice of auctioning off tax farms. It transferred state lands from the royal treasury to the finance ministry. It gave the ministry jurisdiction over provincial mostowfis. It reduced allocations to the court treasury, which, in turn, was obliged to streamline the palace stables, armories, kitchens, kilns, warehouses, harem, and workshops. It was even forced to close down the Drum Towers. Abdallah Mostowfi, in his long memoirs, reminisced that young deputies were so enamored of all things modern that they summarily dismissed such venerable institutions as medieval “relics.” One Liberal suggested that the finance ministry should update the scales by which landlords paid taxes in cash rather than in kind. Another demanded the termination of all court pensions and tuyuls. Yet another suggested that the shah could pay his debts simply by selling off his family jewels. He added sarcastically that he was losing sleep worrying about the financial plight of those in the royal harem. A veteran of these debates writes that a common form of abuse in those days was to call someone a “court groom” or “court doorman.” “These lackeys,” he explained, “had been so pampered that they had become the most fanatical advocates of absolutism in the whole population of Tehran.”

Third, some Liberals compounded the backlash by proposing far-reaching secular reforms. They accused the ulama of covering up slimy interests with sublime sermons. They advocated immediate improvements in the rights not only of religious minorities but also of women. They criticized the constitutional clause that gave the ulama veto power over parliamentary legislation. They even argued that the shari’a had nothing to say about state laws (qanons). By mid-1907, Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri, whom some considered to be the most senior of the three mojtaheds in Tehran, had broken with his two colleagues. He formed a Society of the Prophet, rebuilt bridges to the shah, and issued a major fatwa denouncing the Liberals for opening up the floodgates to “anarchism, nihilism, socialism, and naturalism.” This denunciation could well have been written by a counter-Enlightenment Pope. He also hammered away on the theme that Babis, Bahais, and Armenians were scheming to destroy Islam with such heretical innovations as elected parliaments, secular laws, and, worst of all, religious equality.

Sheikh Nuri showed his strength in December 1907 by holding a rally in Cannon Square. According to eyewitness accounts, the “reactionary crowd” filled up the whole expansive square. It drew participants from diverse walks of life: students and former students from Nuri’s seminary; lutis
under his protection; pensioners; muleteers, craftsmen, doormen, and servants employed in the royal palace; peasants from the royal estates in the nearby village of Veramin; and urban poor suffering from rising food prices. One eyewitness reported that even “common folk” from the bazaar flocked to hear Sheikh Nuri speak in Cannon Square. Nuri accused the Liberals of being latter-day Jacobins undermining religion and “sowing corruption on earth” – a capital offense according to the traditional interpretation of the shari’a. Aroused by such inflammatory language, vigilantes attacked pedestrians who happened to be wearing European-style hats.

The shah struck in June 1908. He did so immediately after receiving £10,000 in cash from Mukhber al-Dowleh who treated the ministry of posts and telegraph as his family fiefdom. The cash was promptly distributed as special bonuses among the 1,500 Cossacks who garrisoned Tehran. Declaring martial law, the shah appointed Colonel Liakhoff, the Russian Cossack commander, to be military governor of Tehran. Liakhoff banned all newspapers and public meetings, including Muharram processions; issued arrest warrants for the leading deputies; and sent his Cossacks to occupy the telegraph office and to bombard the Majles building. According to British reports, the fighting took some 250 lives. Most parliamentary leaders managed to escape – into exile or took sanctuary in the Ottoman Legation. But Behbehani and Tabatabai were placed under house arrest. Six others were imprisoned in the royal gardens and accused of “sowing corruption on earth.” Three of them were executed there.

The coup triggered a civil war. While Cossacks seized Tehran and royalist Shahsaven tribesmen besieged Tabriz, the parliamentary side drew support from three sources. First, some one thousand volunteers, known as *fedayis* (self-sacrificers) and *mojaheds* (holy warriors), rallied to the parliamentary cause. They came not only from Tehran, Tabriz, Mashed, and Rasht, but also from the Iranian, Armenian, and Georgian communities in the Caucasus. Some fought under the Red Flag; others under the Iranian tricolor. The volunteers from abroad were organized by the Russian Social Democrats, the Armenian nationalist Dashnaks, and the Iranian Hemmat Party in Baku – all of whom had turned their attention to Iran once the 1905 revolution had been crushed in Russia. They fought under the slogan “Love of Freedom has no Fatherland.” The Armenians were led by Yeprem Khan, who, because of his anti-Tsarist activities, had been exiled to Siberia before escaping to Rasht where he worked as a brick manufacturer and headed the Dashnak Party. He became known as the “Garibaldi of Persia.” The Tabriz volunteers were led by Sattar Khan and Baqer Khan. The former, the kadkhuda of the main Sheikhi ward, was a luti and a former
horse dealer. The latter, the kadkhuda of the neighboring Sheikhi ward, was also a luti and a former bricklayer. They had first made their mark in Tabriz by forcing grain dealers to sell their goods at “just prices.”\textsuperscript{43} The volunteers from the Caucasus were particularly lethal since they brought with them hand grenades and knew how to assemble bombs. A British reporter described them as “walking arsenals.”\textsuperscript{44} These volunteers, despite their religious backgrounds, received a major boost when three of the four leading Najaf mujtahids issued a proclamation opposing Sheikh Nuri and instead supporting Sayyeds Behbehani and Tabatabai.

Second, the parliamentary side was significantly strengthened when Muhammad Vali Sepahdar, the leading magnate in Mazanderan, threw his weight against the shah. The India Office described him as “one of the biggest feudals in the country” with estates not only in his home region of Tunkabun but also in Qazvin, Khurasan, and Gilan.\textsuperscript{45} On various occasions he had governed Gilan, Ardabil, Talesh, and Astarabad. At the time of the coup, he was the nominal commander of the army and was sent to help the Shahsavans take Tabriz. But instead he had defected, taking with him his men – many of whom were peasants from his Mazanderan estates. He joined forces with Yeprem Khan in Rasht. This proved to be a good career move. In the following years, Sepahdar not only gained the title Sepahsalar al-A’zam (Great Army Commander), but also headed eight cabinets and ten ministries – often as minister of war. His brother also served in many of these administrations.

Third, the parliamentary side obtained the decisive support of the Bakhtiyaris. The Ilkhani patriarch, Samsam al-Saltaneh, was persuaded by his cousin Sardar As’ad, who had been moving among liberal exiles in Paris ever since his father had been murdered by Zill al-Sultan, to cast his lot with the revolutionaries. The two khans secured their flank by selling border villages at discount prices to Sheikh Khaz’al of the Arab Ka’ab tribe. They then captured Isfahan and marched on to Tehran with some 12,000 armed tribesmen – by far the largest force on the parliamentary side. They were the only tribal leaders who could afford to finance a large and prolonged expeditionary force outside their home region. This gamble paid off. In the next two decades, Samsam al-Saltaneh headed as many as six cabinets. And Sardar As’ad, even though semi-blind, worked behind the scenes to turn the finance ministry into a virtual tribal fiefdom. The two also brought into the finance ministry a number of Armenians from Chahar Mahal. These Armenians, who had originally been tutors to Bakhtiyari children, eventually became self-taught accountants.

In July 1910, Sardar As’ad, Sepahdar, and Yeprem Khan converged on Tehran. The shah fled to the Russian Legation from where he negotiated his
abdication, agreeing to go into exile in return for a generous pension. The Majles deputies, together with representatives from the bazaar and the victorious armies, convened a constituent assembly of some five hundred delegates known as the Grand Majles. They replaced Muhammad Ali Shah with his twelve-year-old son Ahmad Shah; and named as regent his aged uncle, Azud al-Mulk, the liberal-inclined Ilkhani of the Qajar tribe. According to tradition, the only person permitted to sit down in the presence of the shah was the Qajar Ilkhani.

The Grand Majles retained Colonel Liakhoff as commander of the Cossacks; created a new Cossack Brigade for Tabriz; and named Yeprem Khan to be Tehran’s chief of police. Four hundred of his men were integrated into this police force. It set up a special tribunal to punish those responsible for the civil war. Five leading royalists, including Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri, were executed. The Sheikh was hanged with much publicity in Cannon Square after being found guilty of facilitating the recent executions in the royal gardens. He was charged with the capital offense of “sowing corruption on earth” – the same charge he had levied against his liberal opponents. It was rumored that his son, a volunteer fighter on the parliamentary side, had celebrated these executions.

The Grand Majles, moreover, democratized the electoral system. It abolished class and occupational representation; increased provincial representation; decreased Tehran’s representation from sixty to fifteen; eradicated the ward divisions within Tehran; and created five seats for the religious minorities – two for Armenians, one for Assyrians, one for Jews, and one for Zoroastrians. The new electoral law also lowered the voting age from twenty-five to twenty; and decreased the property qualification from 2,000 tomans to 250 tomans – a year later this was entirely abolished. Thus universal male suffrage came to Iran as early as 1911. This was to have unforeseen consequences.

The Grand Majles further elected a provisional government, leaving vacant the post of prime minister. It elected Sardar As’ad, despite his blindness, interior minister; Sepahdar, war minister; Mostowfi al-Mamalek, finance minister; Abdul Hussein Mirza Farmanfarma, Fath Ali Shah’s grandson, justice minister; and Abul Qasem Khan Nasser al-Mulk, the patriarch of the Qajar Qarahgozlu clan, foreign minister. Browne, the British historian, was convinced that Nasser al-Mulk, a class mate of Curzon from Oxford, had survived the coup only because of British intervention. He soon succeeded ‘Azud al-Mulk as regent. The British minister reported that the dominant figures in the new government were Sardar As’ad and Sepahdar, and that the two, especially the latter, really “belonged to the old school of politics,”
instinctively “distrusting parliamentary interference.” He added that they enjoyed the “confidence of clergy and merchants” nervous about the safety of private property.\(^47\)

Bakhtiyari influence continued to increase. By 1912, Samsam al-Saltaneh was prime minister; Sardar Muhtesham, a close relative, was war minister; one cousin headed the palace guards; another governed the newly created district of Bakhtiyar; other cousins governed Isfahan, Behbehan, Yazd, Kerman, Sultanabad, and Boroujerd. In short, the Bakhtiyaris governed much of central and southern Iran. Also they signed, without informing the government, lucrative agreements both with the British oil company to protect the latter’s facilities in their territories and with Lynch Brothers to build a toll road from their winter to their summer quarters. The British minister explained that the Bakhtiyari chiefs had gained this “paramount importance” mainly because of their “energetic role” in the civil war. He even claimed that the “real power behind the throne” was Sardar As’ad “the Great.”\(^48\) The British consul in Isfahan further explained: “By obtaining fiefs from the Qajars and by dispossessing other landlords by simple robbery, the khans came to own most of the fertile district of Chahar Mahal. They added to their wealth by acquiring other lands, collecting taxes from their tribesmen, levying tolls on the Lynch road, and receiving a steady income from the Anglo-Persian Oil Company.”\(^49\)

**Sisititutional Dilemma**

When the Second Majles convened in November 1910 it seemed that the constitutional struggle had finally come to a fruitful conclusion. This, however, turned out to be deceptive. The new government soon discovered that it lacked the instruments to administer, let alone to reform, the country. It faced the same dilemma as the ancient regime: it was a state without a centralized machinery. It had ministers but no real ministries. The parliamentary victory turned out to be hollow.

Financial constraints – in plain English, bankruptcy – lay at the root of the problem. Since revenues did not match expenses – even though expenses were often less than £1.5 million a year – the government had no choice but to live year-to-year by obtaining emergency loans from London and St. Petersburg. It survived a series of crises in 1911–13 by borrowing £440,000 from the British Imperial Bank.\(^50\) Customs revenues remained in Belgian hands and all their income went to pay off existing loans, which reached £6.2 million by 1911 – shared equally by Britain and Russia.\(^51\) Northern customs, together with income from Caspian fisheries, went to the Russians.
Southern customs, as well as income from the telegraph system, went to the British. Oil revenues did not trickle in until 1912–13. The British-owned Burma Oil Company, which took over the D’Arcy Concession in 1905, struck the first well in 1908. It soon became the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, and its first payment to Iran came in 1912–13 – totaling the paltry sum of £2,900. The overall situation was so dire that in 1914 the Belgians were telling the government that it could only avoid bankruptcy by selling islands in the Gulf to Britain and parts of Azerbaijan and Gurgan to Russia.

The British legation repeatedly told the government both during and after the revolution that the “only way” to solve the problem was to increase state revenues, especially the land tax; that the only way to do so was to create a new tax-collecting machinery; and that the only way to do that was to overcome entrenched “vested interests” – mostowfis eager to preserve traditional practices, landlords averse to paying taxes, and provincial governors, as well as tribal chiefs and local magnates, jealously guarding their turf. It was precisely to meet this task that the Second Majles armed the finance ministry with a new police force named the gendarmerie. It hired thirty-six Swedish officers to train and lead this force. It also hired Morgan Shuster, an American financial advisor, as Iran’s treasurer-general. Since Shuster was given full authority over the state budget, he was implicitly and intentionally placed on a collision course with mostowfis as well as with the Belgians, Russians, and British. His goal was a 12,000-man gendarmerie whose main function would be to collect taxes throughout the country. It soon cost £150,000 a year, the largest bite from the annual budget – twice as much as the Cossacks and seven times as much as the education ministry. Even so, the gendarmerie could muster no more than 1,000 men in 1911, 3,000 in 1912, and 6,000 in 1914 – most of whom guarded the roads from Tehran to Rasht, Enzeli, Qazvin, Hamadan, and Qom, and from Shiraz to Bushire. The British minister summed up the pitiful state of affairs in 1912:

The Persian Government have handed to the two Legations memorandum showing that the advance of £50,000 would be no use to them in their present financial difficulties, and asking that it may be increased to £200,000. It shows that £40,000 is wanted for gendarmerie for five months; £25,000 for the police in Tehran; £15,000 for the garrison in Tehran; £35,000 for the Cossack Brigade in Tabriz for two months; £30,000 for arrears to pay due to government departments; £30,000 for purchase of arms and ammunitions; and £40,000 for reorganization of army . . . The memorandum argues that Persia can not start reforms without money.

With the central government in financial straits, the provincial magnates further enhanced their power. Sowlat al-Dowleh, the Qashqa’i Ilkhani, took over trade routes passing through Fars to the Persian Gulf. The
British Political Resident in the Gulf reported that Sowlat al-Dowleh had become the “biggest magnate in Fars,” levying taxes on his tribesmen, building a “large private army,” and taking advantage of the “so-called constitution.” He added that other tribal khans along the Gulf had become virtually “independent”: “The Governor of the Gulf Ports never meddles with the districts, nor sends soldiers or officials there, and it would be beyond his power at the present time to dismiss or change the khans.” Qavam al-Mulk, the Khamseh Ilkhani, had taken over Shiraz and mobilized his tribes against the Qashqa’is. Sheikh Khaz’al, the Ka’ab chief, by wooing the Kuheglyeh tribes, was extending his reach out of Mohammerah into Bakhtiyari territory. For their part, the Bakhtiyaris were undermining Sheikh Khaz’al by supporting rival Arab tribes. The British consul reported that he was trying to prevent the Bakhtiyaris and the Ka’ab from fighting each other since he needed them against the Qashqa’is. Meanwhile in the north, Rahim Khan of the Shahsavens continued to reap havoc in Sarab and Ardabel. Turkman chiefs rose up in support of the ousted shah. The British minister noted: “Being Sunnis, the Turkmans did not readily submit to a Parliament which, according to their views, is subservient to the dictates of a few Shia mojtabahs.” What is more, Salar al-Dowleh, another contender for the throne, rose up in revolt in Kermanshah. In the words of the British minister: “The situation in the provinces is far from reassuring. Robber bands appear to infest the country from one end to the other, more or less unmolested, and the central authorities are quite unable to supply the provincial governors either with men, arms, or money that they require, in order to be in a position to restore even a semblance of order.” Despite these upheavals, urban centers remained remarkably peaceful. Foreign travelers found it “extraordinary” that people remained “peaceful” and avoided “bloodshed” even though the “central government had almost no real power.”

The notables even pursued their own foreign policies. Sheikh Khaz’al sought British advice on whether to support the “nationalists” or the “royalists.” He was assured protection from naval attack, respect for his autonomy, and recognition for his heirs if he supported the former. The British consul commented that “Mohammerah has an Arab, not a Persian, body politic, and a constitution of its own, of which the main feature is the need for the consent of the heads of the tribes.” The Consul also arranged for the oil company to build its refinery on Abadan, an island belonging to the Sheikh. The Sheikh rented it out to the company for £1,500 a year plus £16,500 in gold sovereigns. The agreement was to be “kept secret” from Tehran. He also conducted – through British mediation – his own relations
with the Ottoman Empire, and accepted the sultan’s sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab estuary. A British journalist remarked that the Sheikh was in actual fact an “independent” ruler since he had armed men whereas the official governor of Arabestan was more or less unarmed.

Likewise, the leading Bakhtiyari khans — especially Sardar As’ad, Samsam al-Saltaneh, and Amir Mofakham — agreed to protect the oil installations on their territories in return for an annual subsidy and a 3 percent share in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. The agreement completely bypassed the government. Soon Bakhtiyari leaders were lending money to the central treasury to pay for road guards in the south. Proceeds from the 3 percent were shared by the main khans. The British minister commented that the Bakhtiyari khans retained their “tribal custom” of sharing property: “This government dependence on the tribe is undesirable but unavoidable until the gendarmerie is built. The khans cannot be ignored because they are too powerful. They can, of course, always count on as many of their own men (as armed fighters) as the situation requires.”

The institutional dilemma was compounded by the ongoing struggles in the Second (1909–11) and Third (1914–15) Majles between the two main parties: the Moderates and Democrats. The Democrats, most of whom had been Liberals in the First Majles, were led by Taqizadeh, the well-known orator from Tabriz, and Sulayman Iskandari, a radical prince who was to be prominent in the socialist movement for the next forty years. His brother had been one of the main casualties of the 1909 coup. The Democrats could muster twenty-four to twenty-seven deputies. Most came from the north. They included eight civil servants, five journalists, one doctor, and five young clerics — three from Sheikh families and one from a former Azali household. Their party program and organ Iran-e Now (New Iran) called for land reform, industrialization, railway construction, improvement in women’s status, equal rights for the religious minorities, abolition of the property qualification, expansion of public education, termination of capitulations, progressive taxation, national conscription, and, most immediate of all, creation of a viable central state with proper ministries and standing army.

The Moderates, led by Sepahdar, Farmanfarma, Behbehani, and Taba-tabai, could muster as many as fifty-three deputies. These included thirteen clerics, ten landlords, ten civil servants, nine merchants, and three tribal chiefs. Thus parliament became an exclusive club for the notables. In the Second Majles, 27 percent of the members were landlords, 19 percent clerics, 24 percent civil servants, and 9 percent merchants. The guild presence had drastically diminished. This process was accelerated by the abolition of the
property qualification. By introducing universal male suffrage, the electoral system ironically strengthened the hands of the tribal chiefs and landlords. In the Third Majles, the landed representation jumped to 48 percent. Representing the landed classes, the Moderate Party advocated support for traditional values, private property, and, most important of all, the shari’a. They also advocated religious education to instill “cooperative attitudes among the masses”; financial assistance to help the “middle class”; the convening of the senate to fulfill the laws; and a vigilant campaign against “anarchism,” “atheism,” and “materialism.”

The conflict between Moderates and Democrats began with debates over secularism, especially over minority rights, women’s function in society, and the role of the shari’a in the judicial system. It intensified with the two sides jockeying to place their favorites in charge of the cabinet: the Democrats preferred to give the premiership to Mostowfi al-Mamalek or Musher al-Dowleh; the Moderates preferred Sepahdar or Farmanfarma. The conflict eventually broke into violence when fedayis linked to the Moderates assassinated a Democrat. The Democrats retaliated by assassinating Sayyed Bebahani. Clerics promptly pronounced Taqizadeh an “apostate,” forcing him to flee to Europe where he launched his paper *Kaveh* named after the legendary *Shahnameh* blacksmith who had raised the banner of revolt. The crisis was contained only because of the timely intervention of Yeprem Khan. He surrounded the pro-Moderate fedayis, totaling some three hundred men led by Sattar Khan, with his own force of more than one thousand made up of policemen, gendarmes, Bakhtiyaris, and Armenian fighters. After a brief confrontation that took fifteen lives, Yeprem Khan forced the fedayis to exchange their weapons for life pensions. Some claim that the wound Sattar Khan suffered in this confrontation caused his death two years later. Yeprem Khan himself was killed a few months later fighting rebels in Kermanshah.

The institutional dilemma was compounded by external pressures. In 1909, Russians occupied Azerbaijan on the pretext of establishing law and order. Their real aim was to implement the 1907 convention. In December 1911, they occupied the rest of their zone, including Tehran, after giving the government an ultimatum demanding the immediate dismissal of Shuster. They accused him of violating the 1907 convention by sending gendarmes into their zone, employing a British military advisor, and arresting wealthy tax delinquents with Russian citizenship papers. The British, who had initially welcomed Shuster’s reforms, ended up supporting the ultimatum. Even though the government accepted the ultimatum and dismissed Shuster, the Russians continued to tighten their hold. In Tabriz, they
hanged forty-three men in retaliation for the assassination of one of their soldiers. Among the hanged were refugees from the Caucasus, Sattar Khan’s relatives, and, most scandalous of all, the Sheikh mojtahed who had played a key role in the revolution. In Mashed, they caused an even greater scandal by bombarding the Imam Reza Shrine and thereby killing some forty pilgrims. The British, meanwhile, dispatched troops from India to take control of the main trade routes between Bushire, Shiraz, and Kerman.

Foreign occupation intensified during World War I. Even though Iran declared neutrality, it soon became a battleground for the major powers. A coalition of Democrats and Moderates, headed by Iskandari and Sadeq Tabatabai, the son of the famous sayyed, postponed elections for the duration of the war, and left Tehran for Kermanshah where they set up the Government of National Resistance. The Ottomans, allied to the Germans, in their drive to the Caucasus and Baku, first occupied Urmiah where they armed Ismael Khan Simku, a Kurdish chief, against Iranian authorities as well as against local Assyrians and Armenians. The Ottomans then moved into Azerbaijan which they claimed as part of their Turkic world. In their brief occupation of Tabriz, they deported Sheikh Khiabani, the popular leader of the local Democrats, on the grounds that he was helping Armenian insurgents against the Caliphate.\(^75\) They also tried to woo Mirza Kuchek Khan, a veteran of the civil war who had taken to the forest of Gilan with some 300 armed men. By 1916, Kuchek Khan and his band of guerrillas, known as Jangalis (Men of the Forests), controlled much of rural Gilan and posed a major threat to the local magnates, especially Sepahdar.

To counter the Ottomans, the Russians augmented the Cossacks into full division strength with brigades in Tabriz and Qazvin as well as Tehran. They also strengthened their own troops in Azerbaijan, Gilan, Tehran, northern Khurasan, and Isfahan. Zill al-Sultan, the arch enemy of the Bakhtiyaris, found it expedient to place his properties under their protection. The British expressed understanding since they could no longer provide him with protection against the “rapacious” Bakhtiyaris.\(^76\) The British, however, signed a new secret treaty with the Russians, taking over the “neutral” zone. In return, Russia was promised the Dardanelles. The British dispatched troops into Abadan; forged alliances with more southern tribes; and created the South Persian Rifles. At its height, this force had some 8,000 men and cost as much as £100,000 a week – paid mostly by the India Office. With the Russian revolutions in 1917, the British took charge of the Cossacks, appointing their officers, paying salaries, and providing supplies. They also dispatched two expeditionary forces: one from India to Mashed; the other from Mesopotamia via Kermanshah and Gilan to Baku.
The Germans were also active. Wilhelm Wassmus, their “Lawrence of Arabia,” instigated uprisings among Qashqa’is, Khamsehs, Boir Ahmadis, Sanjabi Kurds, and, most serious of all, Arabs who in 1915 were able to cut the main oil pipeline. The Germans also persuaded a number of Swedish officers in the gendarmerie to desert. One historian writes: “The Swedish-officered gendarmerie, organized in 1911, had been as close as Britain could hope to come to a force in the south to maintain order; but that particular institution proved to be an unmitigated disaster during the war when most of the force defected to the Germans, refusing even to obey instructions from the Persian Government.” The British attributed German popularity to the “aggressive,” “uncouth,” and “unscrupulous” behavior of the Russians.

These wartime disruptions coincided with bad harvests, cholera and typhus epidemics, and, most deadly of all, the 1919 influenza pandemic. Altogether between 1917 and 1921 as many as two million Iranians – including one quarter of the rural population – perished from war, disease, and starvation. One British eyewitness wrote that by 1919 hungry tribesmen were taking to rural banditry while starving peasants were rumored to be resorting to cannibalism.

Peace did not bring an end to these difficulties. Curzon, now Britain’s foreign minister, saw the defeat of Germany and Russia as providing Britain with the perfect opportunity to take over the whole of Iran. As viceroy of India he had described Iran as vital for the security of the Raj, and had denounced in no uncertain terms the 1907 convention for conceding too much to Russia. He now drafted his Anglo-Persian Agreement to incorporate the whole country into the British Empire. Harold Nicholson, who served in the British legation in Tehran before turning to literature, wrote in his biography of Curzon that his protagonist aspired to create “a chain of vassal states from the Mediterranean to India.” “Curzon’s imperialism,” he added, “was founded on the belief that God had personally selected the British upper class as an instrument of the Divine Will.” One London newspaper mocked that Curzon acted as if he had “discovered” the country and consequently owned it. According to the Anglo-Persian Agreement, Britain obtained the sole right to provide Iran with loans, arms, advisors, military instructors, customs administrators, and even teachers. Frenchmen were to be barred from the Dar al-Fanon on the grounds that law and politics often seeped into international relations. In return, Britain was to provide Iran with a loan of £2 million. It was also to have the monopoly right to help the country build railways, combat famine, find entry into the League of Nations, and seek indemnity for damages suffered in World War I.
The 1919 Anglo-Persian Agreement was as far-reaching as the 1872 concession to Baron Reuter which Curzon had minced no words in denouncing.

The prime minister, Mirza Hassan Khan Vossuq al-Dowleh, who helped draft the agreement, received an advance of £160,000, presumably to steer it through the Majles since all foreign treaties required parliamentary ratification. Vossuq al-Dowleh, a member of the famous Ashtiyani family, began his career as a liberal Democrat and served in eleven different cabinets. Ahmad Shah appointed him premier in 1919 when the Majles was not in session. He had done so for a British stipend of £6,000 per month for an indefinite time. In signing the agreement, Vossuq al-Dowleh took the precaution of obtaining from Curzon the explicit promise of political asylum in case things went awry.

The agreement turned out to be an unmitigated disaster – especially when the public grasped its full implications. As Nicholson admitted, Curzon had completely “misjudged” the mood and thought that Iran remained anti-Russian and pro-British, as it had been at the time of the Constitutional Revolution. On the contrary, it was now overwhelmingly anti-British. The main political figures, as well as the leading newspapers, wasted no time in denouncing the agreement. The Bolsheviks published the secret wartime treaties, including the 1915 deal, and promised to withdraw promptly from the whole of Iran if the British did so as well. The Jangalis sought Bolshevik help and set up in Gilan the Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran. Sheikh Khiabani, who had escaped from Ottoman detention, took over Azerbaijan, defied the governor, and warned that the central government was selling out the nation. Mojtaheds in Karbala issued fatwas denouncing the British and praising the Bolsheviks as “friends” of Islam. Ultra-nationalists in Tehran formed a Punishment Committee and threatened to “execute” any one who supported the detested agreement. To show they were serious, they assassinated four of Vossuq al-Dowleh’s close associates. This “reign of terror” prompted Vossuq al-Dowleh to resign. It also scared others away from replacing him.

The British minister informed Curzon that it was impossible to find a prime minister who would be willing to submit the agreement to the Majles. He added: “Persians friendly to Great Britain do not dare to publicly support the Agreement”: “Our friends are unanimous in begging us to save them from a position of increasing embarrassment by giving it up. Fifty-five well disposed deputies have publicly declared themselves opposed to it in order to rebut charges freely brought against them of having been bribed by us to support it.” He further added: “there is widespread belief
that the Agreement, and presence of British troops and advisers in Persia, has brought Bolshevik danger on the country and that the latter would disappear if these were withdrawn. This sentiment was echoed by both General Dickson of the India Office and General Ironside of the British expeditionary force in Mesopotamia. They both concluded that Curzon had placed an impossible financial burden on the empire. In other words, Britain was suffering from a classic case of imperial overreach. Dickson did not mince his words.

It does not appear to be realized at home how intensely unpopular agreement was in Persia and how hostile public opinion had become to Vossuq’s Cabinet before it fell. It was believed that agreement really aimed at destruction of independence and that Vossuq had sold their country to Britain. Secrecy with which agreement had been concluded, fact that Majles was not summoned and attempt created to pack Majles by resorting to most dishonest methods . . . all added to conviction that Great Britain was in reality no better than the hereditary foe, Russia . . . The feeling grew that Britain was a bitter foe who must be rooted out of the country at any cost. Revolts in Azerbayjan and Caspian provinces were due to this feeling and to it was spread of Bolshevik propaganda, for it was thought that Bolsheviks could not be worse and might, if their profession of securing justice for the down-trodden classes were sincere, be much better.

By 1920 Iran was a classic “failed state” – to use modern terminology. The ministries had little presence outside the capital. The government was immobilized not only by rivalries between the traditional magnates and between the new political parties, but also by the Anglo-Persian Agreement. Some provinces were in the hands of “war lords,” others in the hands of armed rebels. The Red Army had taken over Gilan and was threatening to move on to Tehran. The shah, in the words of the British, was “no longer accessible to reason,” and was packing up his crown jewels to flee. What is more, the British, having realized they had overreached, were evacuating their families from the north, withdrawing their expeditionary forces, and preparing to streamline their South Persia Rifles. The British minister in Tehran told London that Britain had two choices: either let the “county stew in her own juices,” or “concentrate in the center and south where some healthy limbs remain.” He warned that the trouble with the first choice was that “British interests would inevitably form part of the stew.” He ended his warning with the observation that “owners of property” had grown so “desperate” that they were looking for a man on horseback with “drastic measures” to ward off “anarchy” and the “Bolshevik poison.”