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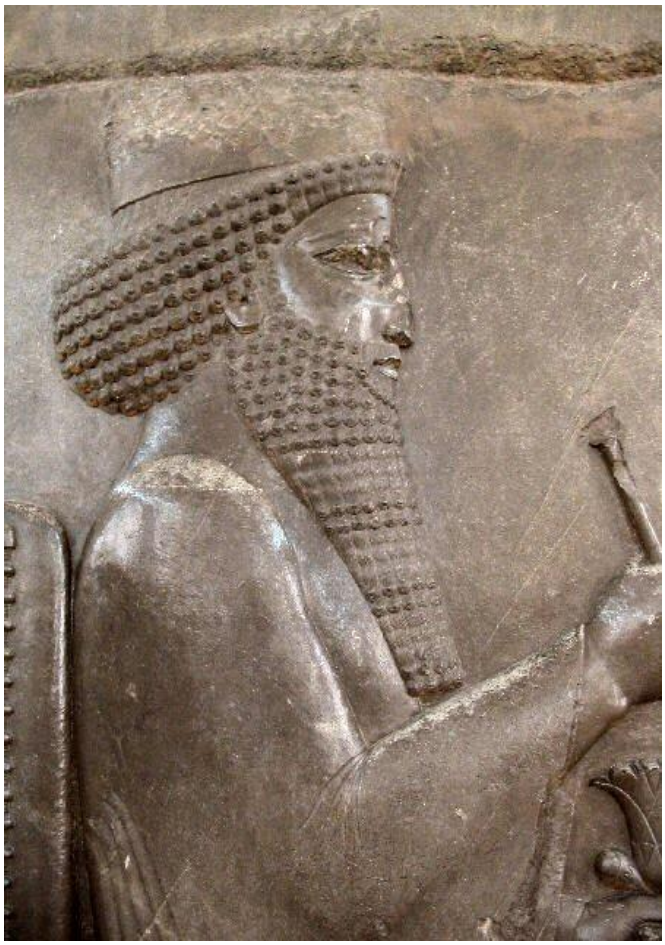

The Persian Complex: A Centuries-old Quest for Respect

Political, Cultural and Religious Antecedents of
The Iranian Worldview

A CNA Strategic Studies Workshop

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Rapporteurs: Mary Ellen Connell and Julia Voelker McQuaid

Introduction:

In September 2008, CNA convened several of the country's leading experts on Persian history and contemporary Iran for a workshop to examine some of the factors shaping Iranians' view of themselves and of the West. In Iran, the past is very much present—tangibly, in the pre-Islamic and Islamic monuments, which are among the world's cultural treasures, and metaphorically, in the collective consciousness. Workshop speakers first focused on two aspects of the Iranian past which differentiate the Iranian identity: the achievements of the ancient Persians and the acquisition of Shia Islam as the national faith. Speakers then examined 19th and 20th -century historical antecedents of Iranian resentment toward the West. Finally, two former U.S. officials who were close observers of Iranian events at the time discussed whether the U.S. could have predicted the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Key Insights:

Throughout the workshop, the speakers noted the specific ways in which history continues to resonate in the Iranian national consciousness. Most of the panelists agreed that Iranians tend to see current events through the lens of historical antecedents. This tendency is not unique to Iranians, nor does imply that the world view of Iranians is governed *solely* by their perception of history. Nevertheless, policy makers should consider the implications of history and its influence on the Iranian worldview as they seek to develop means of influencing, modifying, or otherwise engaging with the government of Iran or its people.

- *Iranians crave recognition*. Several of the speakers noted that Iranians are intensely nationalistic. They believe that their country is entitled to play a dominant role on the regional stage, not only because of their country's size and strategic location, but also by virtue of its history and cultural achievements. Likewise, Iranians are sensitive to perceived attempts to sideline their country in international affairs. In the words of one analyst, "Iranians desperately want to be acknowledged."

- *Iranians also distrust Western intentions.* Because of Iran's historical experience with the colonial powers and foreign meddling in its internal affairs, Iranians tend to distrust the West, and especially the United States. From the Iranian perspective, historical interactions with international powers have often left Iran on the losing side. According to one of the speakers, if we wish to make progress with the Iranians, we should focus on ways to built trust.

- *An attitude of "power equals strength" pervades the Iranian worldview.* There is a tendency in Iranian foreign policy to only negotiate from a position of strength. To do

otherwise might result in "giving in" or making concessions. The origins of this attitude stem at least in part from the debilitating consequences of the numerous political and economic treaties that Iran signed with the great powers, especially in the 19th century.

- *History and religion are important, but there are other factors too.* While the speakers agreed that the influences of history and religion on the Iranian worldview are important, it alone does not account for all of Tehran's actions. Speakers cautioned that the U.S. should avoid viewing all of Iran's policies through these lenses. For example, one speaker noted that Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon for should not be viewed as stemming from a Shi'a-inspired apocalyptic desire to bring about the end of days. While noting the importance of symbolism and narrative in Iranian political culture, many participants argued that it is pragmatism, rather than symbolism, is the prevailing force in Iranian foreign policy today.

- *We don't have a good record of understanding Iranian perspectives*. Several of the speakers pointed out that when it comes to understanding Iran, we have repeatedly gotten it wrong. One speaker noted that perhaps the most significant failure over the past several decades in our relationship with Iran has been our inability to *empathize* with Iranians. We misjudged the impact that the Mosaddeq affair would have on the Iranian psyche. We failed to predict the 1979 Revolution because we relied almost exclusively on the Shah and his cohorts for information. We also failed to comprehend the factors that motivated the revolutionaries and the ultimate direction that the revolution would take. Even today, we lack an adequate understanding of the various political, social, and economic undercurrents that operate in Iran. One of the speakers suggested that we should approach Iran with a little "intellectual humility."

- *While negotiations with Iran may seem extremely challenging, there are opportunities for progress.* Experts agreed that the best way to build the necessary trust to improve the relationship is to talk to the Iranians. In so doing, the US should keep in mind the following:
    - Tackle issues where interests align and overlap, such as Iraq, and Afghanistan, not where there is deep disagreement
    - Start with the tactical issues, such as counter narcotics cooperation, rather than strategic issues, such as the Arab-Israeli dispute
    - Keep expectations low
    - Consider a multilateral approach
    - Engage with individuals and groups across the leadership; there are multiple power centers in Iran
    - Consider removing preconditions to negotiations; it will be difficult to get started otherwise

Summary of Presentations

A Long and Glorious Past

For many Iranians, the past continues to resonate in the present. Iran's pre-Islamic history has played a pivotal role in the formation of that country's national consciousness. The original Persians were of Indo-European, not Arab, stock. Iran means "Land of the Aryans"—referring to those Indo-European peoples, some of whom settled on the arid plateau of what is now northern Iran. It was from the southwestern province of Pars (Fars) that Iran received the name by which Westerners knew it: Persia. For many centuries, Persian civilization, with its arts and architecture, its poetry and highly cultivated way of life was regarded as one of the great civilizations of the Near East— the greatest, in the view of the Iranians.

For most modern Iranians, the Achaemenid Persian Empire (550-330 BC), whose best- known rulers were Cyrus and Darius, signifies the pinnacle of Iran's pre-Islamic political and cultural achievements. It was the largest empire that the ancient world had seen, extending from Anatolia and Egypt across western Asia, to northern India and the Hindu Kush in what is now Afghanistan. The most visible symbol of Achaemenid power was the administrative capital at Persepolis begun by Darius and completed by his son, Xerxes. The symbolism of Persepolis has great political consonance in modern Iran. In the 20th century, General Reza Khan (later Reza Shah Pahlavi) and his son, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, focused attention on Iran's imperial pre-Islamic past in order to promote Iranian national identity. Mohammed Reza Shah famously hosted an opulent international party at Persepolis in 1971 to celebrate 2,500 years of dynastic rule in Iran. However, following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini denounced all kings as corrupt (*taghut*). In their zeal to overthrow the *ancien regime*, they attempted to expunge all elements of Iran's pre-Islamic past from the national consciousness. One of Khomenei's aides even sought to have Persepolis bulldozed, an action that was successfully opposed by the Pars (Fars) provincial government.

At the outset of the 21st century, ancient Persian symbolism is again in favor, cropping up on government posters and postage stamps. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made a highly publicized visit to Persepolis after he was elected in 2005. Some speculate that the leadership wants to tap into popular belief that Iran deserves respect by virtue of its heritage and civilization and thus should hold a dominant role in the region by right. Opponents of the Iranian clerical regime also embrace symbols of the ancient past to signal their preference for a secular, centralized national state.

Shi'ism and the Iranian Worldview:

Shi'ism, too, has played an important role in defining Iran as a nation. In the mid 7th century, Iran was overrun by Arab armies spurred on to conquest by their newfound Muslim faith. Over a period of several centuries, most of Iran's inhabitants converted to Islam, which gradually displaced Zoroastrianism as the dominant religion on the Iranian plateau. Contrary to popular belief, however, most of Iran's Islamic dynasties professed the Sunni form of the Islamic faith, and Sunnis outnumbered the Shi'a by orders of several magnitude until Iran underwent a second process of conversion following the rise of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722). Henceforth, Shi'ism became the official state religion, a fact which differentiated Iran from hostile neighboring Sunni states.

The Shi'a worldview has been profoundly shaped by a series of violent and traumatic events in its early history. These events are now woven into a religious narrative of injustice and suffering. Every year, the Shi'a faithful commemorate the martyrdom of the Imams, historical figures that embodied both temporal and spiritual authority in the Shi'a community. Key in this regard is Hussein, the "prince of martyrs," whose death at the hands of the tyrannical Sunni Caliph Yezid in 680 AD continues to inspire the Shi'a in Iran and elsewhere. For the faithful, the path to God's favor, and even the intercession of the imams, is gained by commemorating the earthly travails of Hussein and thus partaking vicariously in his suffering. In Iran, these themes have merged with national perceptions of centuries of political oppression by a series of unjust and venal rulers. Some have described this as a national "culture of grief" which has nurtured a cult of the fallen hero. Ever pragmatic, the Iranians also celebrate those who remain flexible and drive the best bargain possible with fate.

Persia in the Great Game: Caught Between Imperial Britain and Czarist Russia

Another persistent theme in the Iranian nationalist narrative relates to the constant meddling in Iran's internal affairs by outside—especially Western—powers. By 1796, when Aga Mohammed Khan, the leader of the Turkoman Qajar tribe, overthrew the Zand dynasty and proclaimed himself Shah, Persia had become a poor and backward nation. Faced with the growing power and imperial ambitions of Great Britain and Czarist Russia, the Qajar Shahs were in a difficult spot indeed. Persia became a prize in the Great Game, the Anglo-Russian contest for influence in Central Asia. A series of wars against Russia and Britain all ended in defeat for the Qajars. As a result, Persia was deprived of its rich provinces in the Caucasus (what is now Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) and its former eastern capital of Herat.

In addition to losing large swathes of Iranian territory, mounting debt forced the Qajar government to sign a series of debilitating economic concessions with the European powers. These culminated in the famous Reuter concession of 1872— an event described by Lord Curzon as "the most complex and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign hands" hitherto known. Although the Reuter concession was later cancelled due to popular unrest, the Qajar rulers continued to rely on concessions as a means of offset mounting debt.

In 1891, the reigning Qajar monarch, Nasir al-Din Shah, granted the British company Imperial Tobacco the right to produce, sell, and export Iran's entire tobacco crop. Public outrage over the concession prompted an outburst of religious and national feeling. Grand Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi issued a fatwa against using tobacco. Within a few months, the Shah was forced to cancel the concession, demonstrating the power of the Shi'a clerical elite (*ulema*) to block government policies. Four years later Nasir al-Din Shah was assassinated by Mirza Reza Kermani, an Islamic extremist follower of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who promoted the concept of unity of all Muslims against British rule in particular, and against Western interests generally. The struggle of the ulema and the Shah over the pace of modernization and involvement with Western powers prefigured the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Constitutional Rule Thwarted

Nasir al-Din was succeeded by his son Muzaffar al-Din, a corrupt, ineffectual prince whose need for revenue caused him to turn to the same sources which had brought about his father's downfall: indebtedness (particularly to Russia and Britain) and the granting of concessions to foreigners in exchange for substantial payments. Growing public dissatisfaction with the policies of the Shah resulted in demands for curbing royal authority and establishing constitutional rule. Eventually, Muzaffar al-Din was forced to issue a decree promising a constitution. In October, an elected assembly convened which drew up a constitution placing restrictions on royal authority and providing for an elected parliament (Majlis). Muzaffar al-Din Shah signed the constitution on December 30, 1906. He died five days later.

Muzaffar al-Din Shah's death was followed by nearly two decades of turbulence and the near collapse of the state. Mohammad Ali, who succeeded his father in 1906, tried to rescind the constitution. In 1908, the Shah ordered his Russian-officered Cossack Brigade to shell the Majlis building and arrest the deputies. With support from a pro-constitution group of merchants and modernizers, a military force was raised in Shiraz which marched to Tehran in 1909 to depose Muzzaffar al Din and re-establish the constitution. The Majlis named the Shah's 13-year-old son Ahmad Mirza as monarch. To put order into the national finances, the Majlis hired as treasurer general W. Morgan Shuster, a U.S. customs official recommended by the William Howard Taft administration. Shuster, who arrived in Tehran with a delegation of 16 American officials, was immediately perceived to be a threat to imperial Russian interests. The Russians demanded Schuster's ouster and, when the Majlis resisted, Russian forces occupied northern parts of Iran. In December 1911, a force of Russian-supported Bakhtiari troops shelled the Majlis, forcing the expulsion of Schuster, and again suspending the constitution.

Contemporary Iranians, particularly those who favor secular government, revere the period of the Constitutional Revolution (1909-1911) as a historical moment of great salience, the first democratic effort in the Middle East. Many elements of society came together—some imbued with a new sense of nationalism, others simply fed up with the corruption and fecklessness of the Qajars—to demand a modern government. For some, the suppression of the Constitutionalist movement by foreign powers provided sad confirmation of the Shi'a narrative of the righteous being unjustly deprived of authority, and thereby subjected to continued suffering.

Oil as the Prize: Outside Intervention in Iran

Oil added another dimension to Iran's relationship with the West. In 1901, Muzaffar al-Din Shah awarded British entrepreneur William Knox D'Arcy a 60 year concession to explore for oil and pump it if found. D'Arcy paid the Shah 20,000 pounds in cash and 20,000 pounds worth of shares plus 16 percent of undefined "annual net profits." Eight years later, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company was incorporated, inaugurating a new era in Iran's relationship with the West. Anglo-Persian's oil production gave Britain further strategic incentive to ensure that its interests in the country were protected. In June 1914, eleven days before Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated at Sarajevo, the British parliament approved a bill put forward by First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill. Under this bill, the British government would make a substantial investment in Anglo-Persian and acquire 51 percent of the stock. A secret agreement provided the Admiralty with a 20-year contract for fuel oil for its new oil-powered vessels.

During World I, Persia was occupied by Russian, Ottoman, and British troops. After the armistice of 1919, the British remained, as did the Russian forces, the latter now under the control of the new Soviet government. In 1921, when it appeared that Soviet troops were intent on marching on Tehran, the British encouraged Brigadier Reza Khan, Commander of the Persian Cossaks, to stage a *coup d'etat*. In 1925, he replaced the last Qajar monarch, ascending the Peacock Throne as Reza Shah Pahlavi–Pahlavi referring to the Persian people at the time of the Sasanian Empire.

Like his Turkish contemporary General Kemal Ataturk, whom he greatly admired, Reza Shah Pahlavi established a nationalistic, authoritarian government which undertook much needed development and socio-economic reforms. Reza Shah Pahlavi was able to renegotiate the earlier Anglo-Persian oil concession, securing an annual payment of 750,000 British pounds to the Iranian government as well as 20 percent of the company's worldwide profits and extending the concession for an additional 60 years. Using oil revenues, Reza Shah built roads and the Trans-Iranian railroad (the British and the Russians had earlier blocked a railroad, which one or the other might have used to transport troops). He established a national army, a national primary and secondary school system, and Tehran University. Men and women were instructed to wear Western dress. To offset clerical and traditionalist opposition, Reza Shah invoked the pre-Islamic past, visiting Persepolis and insisting that the country be called Iran as it had been in the time of Cyrus the Great.

Reza Shah's rule was cut short by World War II. In August 1941, two months after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the British and the Russians once again occupied Iran in order to secure the oil fields and open a transportation corridor to resupply the Soviet Union. Reza Shah Pahlavi, who the British believed to have fascist sympathies, was forced by the British to abdicate in favor of his 21-year-old, European-educated son, Mohammed Reza. During the early years of Mohammed Reza's rule, foreign intervention only increased. With British forces hard-pressed elsewhere, the U.S. Army assumed responsibility for logistical improvements and operation of the "Persian Corridor" with the U.K. retaining overall strategic responsibility for the

region. By 1943, nearly 10,000 American troops had been deployed to Iran to support the supply chain -- moving food and materiel by truck and rail from Persian Gulf ports to Soviet Azerbaijan.

Oil Nationalization and the Mosaddeq Affair

For many Iranians, the rapacious interference of outside power in Iranian affairs and denigration of Iranian sovereignty is personified in the tragic figure of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq (1951-1953). Following the Second World War, anti-foreigner, particularly anti-British sentiment was rife in Iran. The central object of popular resentment was the Anglo-Persian—now renamed the Anglo-Iranian—Oil Company. Between 1945 and 1950, Anglo-Iranian registered a 250 million British pound profit while Iran received only 90 million pounds in royalties. As a result of the perceived imbalance, Majlis members denounced the arrangement and demanded the nationalization of Anglo-Iranian. They chose a Qajar aristocrat and nationalist, Mohammad Mosaddeq, as Prime Minister and gave him a specific mandate to proceed with nationalization. Mosadedeq's government nationalized Anglo-Iranian, and by the fall of 1951, all the British employees of had de-parted the country. Through the loss of expertise, and a British led embargo of oil tankers visiting Iranian ports, oil production at the once again renamed National Iranian Oil Company was brought nearly to a halt.

With no oil revenues coming in, the economic situation in Iran deteriorated. Rebuffed by the West, and under pressure from various groups in Tehran, including the religious fundamentalists, Prime Minister Mosaddeq appeared to be reaching out to Moscow. In 1953, the British persuaded Washington to join in undertaking a covert operation to oust Mosaddeq and stop the Communist advance. In the tumultuous days preceding "Operation Ajax," the Shah fled to Rome. Directed by the CIA's Kermit Roosevelt, with support from Britain's MI6, "Ajax" succeeded; Mosaddeq was deposed and the Shah was brought back and re-installed on the throne. Mosaddeq was imprisoned by the Shah and then kept under house arrest for the rest of his life (he died in 1967).

Mohammad Mosaddeq had been a student and admirer of the Constitutional Revolution of 1909-1911. In the eyes of many Iranians, his arrest brought to an end yet another effort to establish and independent democratic government in Iran, and underscored the willingness of Western powers to interfere in Iranian politics, undermine national sovereignty, and keep Iran weak.

U.S. Misperceptions: Failing to Predict the Islamic Revolution

Mohammed Reza continued to rule Iran until—much to the surprise of the U.S. government—he was overthrown in 1979. During the final panel of the workshop, two former U.S. Government officials who were close observers of events at the time, discussed the Islamic Revolution. They noted that the United States failed to understand the Islamic Revolution on two levels: we failed to see the revolution coming and, once it was in progress, we failed to appreciate its nature, fury,

and direction. By the 1970s, the commentators noted that U.S. policy makers had forgotten Mohammad Mosaddeq and "Operation Ajax." The Iranians had not. The 1973 appointment of CIA Director Richard Helms to be U.S. Ambassador to Iran was seen as an insult to Iranian sovereignty and the nail in the coffin in public opinion (Helms served in Tehran until 1977). Successive administrations in Washington kept the Shah at the center of their attention, failing to take into account that the Shah was weak, that his regime was crumbling, and that opposition was growing and increasingly well organized. As one participant noted, when it came to Iran, the U.S. "had no Plan B." Additionally, the United States misjudged the will and capability of the Iranian military: when the revolution came, the military collapsed and did not protect the Shah. The U.S. misjudged Iranian secular groups; expecting to see secularists and nationalists take over the Revolution. Instead, Islamist militants who thirsted for vengeance against America's real or perceived transgressions, prevailed.