

## **Patriot of Persia**

*and a very British coup*

*C. de Bellaigue*

July 4-6, 2103

We all know about Persia, the huge Oriental empire at the time of the Ancient Greeks, the great adversary of Alexander, and subsequently never subsumed in the Roman Empire. Then in the 60's there was the exotic spectacle of the Shah on his Peacock throne, the stuff of the celebrity pages, Oriental but at the same time reassuringly Western, the epitome of the jet-setter. What happened in between? Was there any continuity between the past and the present aside from what was retroactively imposed? There was the Arab Conquest and the Muslimization of the country, a process so thorough throughout the Middle East (and beyond) as to make all talk about continuity, connecting what went on before with what came after, almost pointless. Of course for the student of culture there is the conservatism of language and customs, albeit the latter often are dressed up in prevalent religious garb<sup>1</sup> Later on Iran was overshadowed by the Ottoman Empire, which to the West represented not only Islam, but the Orient, the other. The Moguls of India were Central Asian nomads, who had acquired their culture from the Persians, and hence Persian became the language at their courts, beautifully scripted in Arabic calligraphy. When the West rediscovered the East in the 18th century, it was at first more or less on equal terms. The squalor and poverty we now associate with the East, was nothing strange to the Europeans, who instead were fascinated with the resplendent splendor and wealth that met their eyes. India was one thing, Afghanistan and Persia were another, pretty much the same. In the 19th century the European perspective changed dramatically. There was a sense of superiority and with that an ambition of mission. The East appeared backwards, and many of its practices were appalling and should be rooted out. The age of colonialism had arrived in earnest, and although after the War it has acquired a bad name, and to a large extent dismantled, the spirit of mission is far from abated. We now talk about bringing democracy, i.e. free elections and a liberal market economy integrated in a global structure. Regional differences may be exotic and fascinating, but should be seen as mere decorations and be subsumed under more universally accepted principles.

What made the age of Western supremacy possible? It is a large question and consequently is expected to require a large answer, drawing on a whole web of interrelated explanations. The standard explanatory drift goes approximately as follows. The Enlightenment was the crucial event in Modern Western (i.e. European) history. It paved the way for the secular approach to not only knowledge but also more to the point - public affairs, which characterizes our differences from the Middle Ages. The Scientific Revolution was initially an intellectual revolution with little impact on the life of ordinary citizens,

---

<sup>1</sup> One has only to be reminded of the many Christian customs that have very obvious heathen roots, such as Yuletide.

its pervasive influence on society did not become manifest until the 19th century when it was wedded to the industrial revolution producing a surplus of goods, that issued into the consumerist society we now live in, and which by modern politicians is considered Heaven on Earth.

Colonialism is about exploitations. The continuation of the exploitation of workers in Victorian Capitalism, so incentive to indignation and the rise of Marxism as an ethical economical theory, by other means. However, Colonialism would be much more marginal, would it only be a force for evil, as we have already noted, colonialism comes not only as a means of extraction but also as a force of good, and the latter is far more insidious and pervasive. Mere exploitation can easily be identified and fought, the other good force probes deeper and is far more difficult to isolate and expel, and ultimately why should it be? With the Enlightenment came a loss of innocence. The nature of innocence lies in the fact that once lost it can never be regained. For travelers in the 19th century, the Orient must have been truly fascinating. It provided a truly alternative reality, and also one which seemed to have a much more direct connection to our common past, producing in the sensitive observer nostalgia. Time seemed to have stopped, The East was still technologically innocent, the vulgarity of the Modern world had not yet sullied it. There was misery and poverty, but as a traveler, you can look upon it as a spectacle, not that different from a beautiful landscape or an exotic and exciting wild-life<sup>2</sup>, one which to savor, but not one with which really to take part<sup>3</sup>. This sentimental backwardness of the East continued in the 20th century, being even more accessible to the casual enjoyment of the tourist, one may only think of Byron in the 30's and Chatwin and others in the 70's and 80's; but now more of an exotic backdrop.

So now let us introduce the main protagonist of the story - Muhammad Mossadegh. He was born in the country in 1882, when it counted less than ten million people, and most of them destitute peasants or 'uncivilized' tribes. In many ways a No-Mans land, a ruin of an ancient empire, where herds of goats were roaming through what were once splendid manifestations of a rich and luxuriant civilization. It was a huge tract of land in a power vacuum anxiously guarded by the British in the south and the Russian in the north. The spheres of interest of these two great colonial powers<sup>4</sup> clashed along Persia and Afghanistan, which partly explains why neither of those two lands were ever under formal foreign suzerainty. There was still a Shah, a functioning dynasty with a very long pedigree, Mossadegh belonged to the royal family by blood and marriage, and in fact due to close intermarriage to strengthen bands of kinship as well as keeping wealth and

---

<sup>2</sup> Who ever asks whether animals are poor? In fact as Darwin noted inspired by Malthus, they live very much at the edge of sustainability, their numbers continuously culled, always on the verge of starvation, maintaining an equilibrium, known affectionately as the balance of nature.

<sup>3</sup> A good example of such a traveler in the 20th century is Thesiger, who roamed the Arabian Peninsula for personal experience, in a way taking part in the life he marveled at, but of course never really abandoning his identity as a traveler, making him free to leave when he felt like it, in order to sample other experiences.

<sup>4</sup> Russia as a great colonial power is obscured by the fact that its colonial acquisitions were adjacent to the country itself and hence subsumed, as in any classical war of conquest. During Soviet times, it went as far as the core country itself became its own colony as the Polish journalist Kapucinsky remarked in 'Imperium'

possessions intact, the distinction between the two was fine. Although he in his political life would be seen as a man of the people, by no means of stretching the imagination could he be thought of as a man out of the people. He was rich, well-connected and in all ways privileged, belonging to a thin layer of an elite herding a poor and destitute country. He was the favorite son of the Princess Najm al-Saltaneh, whose influence on him was profound. He was the issue of her second marriage, also to a much older man, whose marriage record also was serial. It is hard to talk about love when marriages were politically arranged for mutual benefit, on the other hand Mossadegh was also fixed up by his family, in fact never seeing the face of his bride until the nuptial night, but like many arranged marriages it was enduring and eventually led to strong bonds of mutual affection, that seldom develop in matches born out of irresistible passion. Much can be said for relieving partners of the emotional responsibility and the illusion of constant fire, but let us not digress. His mother instilled in him ambition and stiffened his resolve, and supplied moral support. His liaison with his father was distant and brief, but one thing he had inherited from him, the author is at pains to point out, and that was his scrupulous honesty and refusal to take bribes and be bought. The combination of honesty and ambition is a rare one and hard to maintain, and therein lies the unique character of a Mossadegh.

What should a son of an elite do? Apart from the obvious option, seductive enough, of indulging in the good life with wine, women and song, there was nothing but to go abroad (the two options did of course not exclude each other). Being educated there was no way of avoiding the awareness of a much bigger world outside, and Mossadegh went to Paris to study leaving his family behind. He lived frugally, studied hard, and did make an intriguing contact with a young French woman, who was fascinated by what she saw in him. It is easy to speculate, as the author does, of a more intimate relationship. After all, his Persian wife was far away, and with her he had very little common ground, especially when it came to the intellectual. On the other hand Mossadegh had a well-developed sense of compartmentalization, as the author points out elsewhere, and would certainly have had little trouble in keeping mental attraction apart from erotic (something we are encouraged not to do) and besides one should not underestimate the subconscious bonds that bring two people together (even in a pre-arranged setting) and are forged in the process. Some years later he returned to the West to study law in Switzerland, this time bringing his family with him and ended up getting a doctorate, a useful title to have, but most importantly nurturing his real talent, he was if anything of a lawyerly mind, and laying the intellectual foundations for his future political career. That he would have one was far from clear, at one point he seriously considered staying on in Switzerland following a judiciary career. Had he done so, the world would never have heard of him. But fate wanted otherwise.

The sage of the Qajar line came to an end after a succession of weak, corrupted or merely incompetent shahs, and a local strong-man - Reza Shah, took over and started a new, but as it would turn out, short-lived dynasty - the Palhavi. Reza, the type of a Cossack, quickly usurped land and power and predictably became a dictator bent upon a brutal modernization of the country to forcibly lift it out of the Middle Ages, inspired no doubt by his contemporary Atatürk. Mossadegh naturally approved of many of the changes, and the modernizing spirit, although he felt that the religious bit should be up to the conscience of the individual and not imposed by the state, but above all he disapproved

of the methods. He kept a low profile, but was eventually apprehended and sentenced to harsh imprisonment, which almost cost him his life, had not ironically the son of Reza, the future Shah, intervened and had him released. Reza Shah came to an ignoble end. Flirting with the Nazis as opponents to the two colonial powers he was caught in the vice of the latter in 1941 as the two had become allies. His toy army was no match for the more seasoned forces and he was forced to abdicate. The new Shah, was a young man, intelligent but without imagination, shy and insecure, indecisive and inconstant (the only constant thing about him), dependent on foreign advisors, for ever seeking the approval of the outside world. Clearly there was an internal power-vacuum here, to be filled. The day of dictatorship was over.

What did Mossadegh bring to the situation? As noted before a lawyerly mind, committed to constitutionalism, the great issue of the emerging political awareness of his youth. What it means is that there should be inviolate rules according to which the political game should be played. In modern usage, we speak about democracy, but that is a bit misleading, constitutionalism per se, has of course nothing to do with popular representation, in a way it is more fundamental, it is about logic and accountability, truth as far as truth can be had in public affairs. It is not a new idea of course, the rules of succession of Royal lines, is a primitive but yet poignant example of the principle. The authority of a King is vested in him by a principle, not something he can grab. From here to the conclusion that the principle of succession is made by God is short, after all axioms are given by God, not for mere mortals to propose. On a more personal temperamental side he was honest and incorruptible, and not to be bought. Of course this trait harmonizes with the lawyerly dedication to principle, the judicial mind at its high-minded best<sup>5</sup>. As a governor he had showed his competence by scrupulous accounting and fair deals, thus ironically increasing revenues. He had also made a mark by a simple way of life, with no ostentatious displays. His asceticism, reminding you of Gandhi, certainly contributed to his benign popular image, but may very well have been genuine and not calculated<sup>6</sup>. Now Mossadegh was always rich, but the point of being rich is not to be able to consume with unchecked profligacy. Being rich and wealthy is not incompatible with a very simple life-style. The point of being rich is security and freedom, and as such it is intimately tied up with a well-developed net of contacts. Mossadegh's wealth was of course crucial to his career, not only in its initial stage getting an international education, but allowed him to retreat comfortably when he needed so.

In short with Mossadegh we had a man who on one hand was firmly embedded in Iranian culture and on the other hand, one who had absorbed the liberal values of the West and made them his own<sup>7</sup>. These two aspects could be beautifully combined in Nationalism, a Western movement that was born in the beginning of the 19th century, became a leading but unfortunate principle in the aftermath of the First World War and

---

<sup>5</sup> Another aspect of the lawyerly mind is slyness, the challenge to circumvent the principle, by exploiting the letter not the spirit of the law, that calls on cleverness. One is here reminded of the sophists in Ancient Greece. No lawyer is immune to such temptations.

<sup>6</sup> Which to some extent could have been the case with Gandhi.

<sup>7</sup> One defining element of a liberal political mind is the issue of free speech. Mossadegh was a champion of free speech and made no attempts to stifle critical voices.

which provided the driving force for the Third World after the Second World War. And what better way of expressing this Nationalism than to nationalize the Oil industry, which at the time was in the hands of the British, with the Iranians as despised junior partners<sup>8</sup>.

So after the Second World War, with a weak Shah, parliamentary democracy had a window of functioning. Mossadegh provided a face for it, and what a face! The first piece of real meat for the caricaturists, according to Anthony Eden. He enjoyed wide-spread popular support, partly because of his public Gandhi-like persona, partly because of his arousing public speeches based on something simple that anyone could understand, the nationalization of the oil industry. Of reclaiming what was morally theirs, and thereby re-instituting national pride. This move did of course engender powerful international opposition and antagonized powerful (and not so powerful) adversaries. Mossadegh pursued the Nationalization card with ferocity, well-knowing that any compromise on the issue, such as negotiating a much better deal, would be construed as a betrayal of principles. He may not have been fully aware of the complexities of the situation. The Persians may not have had the know-how at the time to fully assume responsibility for the operations, which after all had been installed with the know-how of the company. More seriously still, the distribution of oil was in the hands of the West, and the domestic market was far too small to justify any more ambitious exploration<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore the need for supplemental Iranian oil was drastically reduced as new, seemingly interterminal sources were discovered on the Arabian Peninsula. Add to that a definite anti-British bias on the part of Mossadegh, and there was little love lost. The British wanted him out. Would he prevail, what was left of the British Empire after the War would irrevocably crumble. The American administration had little sympathy for the waning imperial ambitions of their war-time ally, special relationship or not. Mossadegh tried to exploit it playing, unwisely as it turned out, the communist card, representing himself as the guarantee that Iran would not go Communist. This eventually backfired. The Americans came around to the British perspective, partly because they had after all similar ambition as the British as to oil, and partly out of paranoia of the Communist threat, this was after all the virulent beginning of the Cold War. The author makes a point, which in my opinion, is a bit mistaken, that a Republican administration took over after Truman. This was almost thirty years before Reagan and before the Republican party became this coalition of evil, it has become subsequently, and the basically apolitical Eisenhower, could as well have been wooed by the Democrats as well as their traditional rivals. I suspect that an administration under Democratic control might not have acted very differently, there is after all a high degree of continuity, as sadly exemplified by the transition from Bush to Obama.

Crucial to the toppling of Mossadegh was the role of the Shah. He was an unreliable card to play, the only constant thing about him, being as hinted his inconstancy. He was terrified lest the coup would misfire, and hence needed, coward as he was, absolute guarantees of success. But Mossadegh played in his hands, by dissolving the majles (parliament) and having a new election, rightly suspecting that many of the deputies were bought, and that previous elections, had been rigged. Politics is a dirty game, and if you are not prepared to play dirty, you will come to grief. The problem with Mossadegh was that he was

---

<sup>8</sup> The Royalties the Iranians received were less than the tax the company paid to the British.

<sup>9</sup> For some time operations were cut down to a level sufficient to satisfy the modest internal needs.

prepared to go to the limits, but not really beyond them. Too much a sense of fair play. Either you stay clean or you go all the way, any halfway measures leave you with the worst of two worlds. That happened to Mossadegh. Having the Parliament dissolved, something that constitutionally only could have been brought about by the Shah. The latter then had the legal right to appoint a new Prime Minister, or at least was persuaded that so was the case. Only then, assured that his tracks would be covered by the law, did he dare to join. The situation for the coup was well prepared by foreign provocateurs, the most prominent and active being a grandson of Theodore Roosevelt. Nevertheless, the first attempt on August 15, 1953 backfired. The Shah and his young wife<sup>10</sup> fled heads over heels to Baghdad then to Rome, which unleashed a Republican fury. Incidentally Mossadegh was for a constitutional monarchy, on the other hand the hysterical actions of the Shah made his return impossible. But in four days events changed very quickly and overtook Mossadegh and his staff, preoccupied with minor matters when Rome burnt. It is not clear to me the reason for this sudden reversal, on the other hand the momentum for the coup may have been so powerful that the initial setback was merely in the nature of a minor hitch the rest going according to plan. Politics was brought to the streets. Thuggish associates which formerly had benefited the cause of Mossadegh were now absent and antagonized, partly because he had refused to grant favors they had expected. He had a commendable aversion against the use of violence, which in the situation was lethal. His private home was attacked and shelled, then more or less leveled to the ground and looted, but he could, along with his faithful associates escape unharmed, invalid as he was. The end of a short period of parliamentary democracy was over in Iran, and instead a period of law and order (and growing prosperity?) was introduced. The Shah took over.

Some people seek greatness and even acquire it, others have greatness thrust upon them. The latter was the case with Muhammad-Reza Pahlavi. He became a dictator with extensive powers and with an efficient repressive police force - SAVAK, to keep them. The West was very happy, and of course the Shah well knew that his power had been bestowed upon him by them, not through any efforts of his own, and thus could be taken away from him. The Shah comes across as a despicable individual, more of a puppet than a strongman. The delineation of his personality is not the subject of the book, but some glimpses of a somewhat complicated personality comes across. The typical dictator, a self-made one, so to speak, is ruthless and manipulative and above everything else has an almost unlimited capacity for hard work, one only needs to recall a Napoleon, a Stalin or a Hitler. Clearly the Muhammad-Reza did not have that calibre. He was no doubt in many ways decent, he did not have Mossadegh executed for one thing, although this decision could be due to the political hazards of such a step. His indecisive nature belies a ruthless temperament, and I suspect his inclination was more towards pomp and the easy living, than hard work. However, he was not devoid of national pride, and was probably motivated by a desire to improve the standing of Iran in the realm of nations and improve the living standards of his people and above all the prosperity of the country, which certainly would benefit him as well. Thanks to the stand of Mossadegh he had a strong position when it came to re-negotiating the deal with the oil-companies<sup>11</sup>, and along with other players in the

---

<sup>10</sup> It is not clear that she was not underage at the time of the marriage.

<sup>11</sup> The Anglo-Iranian company was marginalized, changed name to British Petroleum, and left the road

Middle-East the revenues from oil would be central to the economic development. When the Shah fell in early 1979 that seemed to have come as a complete surprise to Western observers, confident as they were that the Shah would be in full control in the future as well. The invidious involvement of the American administration in 1953 seems not to have been generally known or at least appreciated at the time, but its full disclosure goes a long way to make you understand the uprising and the staunchly anti-Western stand of the country. Needless to say, much of it is exaggerated and self-defeating but nevertheless Iran seems to be the last country that credibly can defy the American hegemony and to achieve a regional power from which it cannot easily be toppled. Whatever you think of clerical involvement in politics your sympathies tend to go for the underdog. But of course the instrument of oppression of the late regime - SAVAK, seems to have been taken over, if under another notation. There is always a need for expertise in the exercise of power politics, and you do not ask after the ideology of the man, as long as he can do his job.

Just after the Revolution of 1979, there was a large interest in Mossadegh, who had been allowed to live out his last years in isolation and confinement in his retreat Ahmabad until he died in 1967 at the age of 85 (not bad for an invalid). His home became an object for pilgrimage. But of course the authorities soon clamped down on this interest, he was not a man to their taste. The message of the book is clear, and in the counterfactual vein. Had Mossadegh been allowed to continue, Iran would have been a very different country. A truly Western country in the sense of a liberal constitution, the rule of law, freedom of speech, regime changes without bloodshed, in short the whole package, at the same time as it would have been spared brutal modernization, and thus have been a model and source of inspiration for the entire region. Instead after the longish interlude (a quarter of a century in fact) with the Shah there has been a brutal and pointless war and constant antagonization, and a regress back to a clerical Middle-Age. It is in the nature of counterfactual speculation that it can never be falsified, this makes the exercise as tempting as it is ultimately pointless. Yet a certain amount of counterfactual speculation is inevitable in any kind of planning and reflection. In your mind, as opposed to reality, you make thought experiments, the outcome of which is there to guide you, because there is precious little else to do. The authors speculations belong to an optimistic frame of mind, the Shah was more cynical and pessimistic when he claimed that when the Iranians learn to behave like Swedes, I will become a King like that of Sweden. In other words, the people of the Middle-East are more unruly than their Western counterparts, hence we have to have different expectations. Although there is a certain undeniable truth to it, the proposition as such is of course deeply racist and as such bound to be rejected. Good behaviors requires good role models and the unfortunate coup, with its undeniably short-term advantages, removed such a one from the region.

July 7, 2013 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*

---

open for American companies to step in