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RUSSIA'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE IRANIAN CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION AND ITS SUPPORT OF COUNTER-CONSTITUTIONALISM*

*İRAN MEŞRUTİYET HAREKETLERİNE RUSYA'NIN BAKIŞI VE MEŞRUTİYET
KARŞITLARINA DESTEĞİ***

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Abstract

Russia was one of the two states that dominated Iran in the beginning of the 20th. century. In 1907, the territory of Iran was divided into three zones among Russia, Britain and the Qajar Dynasty. The northern part of Iran was under the Russian dominance. Due to weakness of the central government, that is the Qajar administration, Russia and Britain had great influences on Iran's political, economic, and military conditions. In a word, the Qajar Shahs became nominal monarchs of Iran. However, the Constitutional Revolution (Mashrutiyat) that started in 1906 alarmed Russia. Therefore, the Tsarist Russia supported Mohammad Ali Shah and other counter-constitutionalist forces in order to protect her interests. To thwart the Constitutional Revolution, Russian appointed Colonel Vladimir Liakhov as commander of Persian Cossacks Brigade. Liakhov gave an order to shell Majlis-e Melli (The National Assembly). However, in reaction to this, the rebel forces in Tabriz and some other parts of Iran united against Mohammad Ali Shah and his

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army. Tabriz rebellion took about 8 months. In July 1909, pro-Constitution forces marched from Iran's province of Azerbaijan towards Tehran and deposed the Shah and, consequently, re-established the constitution. Mohammad Ali Shah fled to Odessa, Russia. He plotted his return to power from Odessa. In 1911, with Russian support, he landed in Iran but his forces were finally defeated. Mohammad Ali Shah again fled to Russia. Russia, with the support of Britain invaded Iran in 1911. Based on British archives, Persian, and Turkish sources, this article gives a detailed analysis of the Russian attitude towards the Iranian Constitutional Revolution.

Key Words:Iran, Constitutional Revolution, Russia

Öz

Rusya 20.yüzyılın başlarında İran'da etkili olan iki büyük devletten biriydi. 1907 yılında yapılan Rus-İngiliz Antlaşması'yla İran toprakları Rusya, İngiltere ve Kaçar Hanedanı arasında üç nüfuz bölgesine ayrıldı. Buna göre İran'ın kuzey bölgeleri Rusya'nın nüfuzunda bırakıldı. Kaçar Hanedanlığı'nın zayıflığı Rusya ve İngiltere'nin İran'da siyasî, ekonomik ve askerî alanlarda önemli ölçüde söz sahibi olmalarını sağladı. Bu nedenle 1905 yılında Kaçar Hanedanı'na karşı başlayan meşrutiyet hareketleri Rusya'yı tedirgin etti. Kendi çıkarlarını korumak amacıyla üzerinde nüfuz sahibi olduğu Muhammed Ali Şah'ı desteklemeye başladı. Meşrutiyet hareketlerini önlemek için Rus Albay Vladimir Liakhov'un İran Kazak Tugayları'nın komutanı olarak atanmasını sağladı. Liakhov ise kendine bağlı birliklere emir vererek Haziran 1908'de Meclis-i Millî'yi bombalattı. Bu olay Tebriz başta olmak üzere ülkenin her yanında Muhammed Ali Şah ve Rusya'ya karşı gösterilerin başlamasına neden oldu. Şah'a bağlı ordular Rusya'nın da desteğiyle Tebriz'i sekiz ay süreyle kuşattılar. Tebriz halkının güçlü direnişini kırmak için Nisan 1909'da şehir Ruslar tarafından işgal edildi. Ancak bu durum Muhammed Ali Şah'ın kaderini değiştiremedi ve Temmuz 1909'da tahttan çekilmek zorunda kalarak Rusya'ya bağlı Odessa'ya kaçtı. Bu çalışma, İngiliz arşiv belgeleri ile Farsça ve Türkçe kaynaklar ışığında İran Meşrutiyet Hareketi'ne karşı Rusya'nın politikalarını ele almaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler:İran, Meşrutiyet Hareketi, Rusya

Introduction

History of relations between Russia and Iran goes back to Safavid Era (Lockhart, 2004, p.299). However, close relations started in the end of the 18th century due to Russia's new Caucasian policy. Therefore, the first quarter of the 19th century witnessed Russo-Iran wars and culminated in Russia's victory (Shamim, 2008, p.77). After Golestan (1813) and Torkmanchai (1828) treaties almost all Caucasian area was occupied by Russians (Shamim, 2008, p.94). Hereafter Russia became not only a neighbor but also one of the two states (with Britain) dominating Iran.

During the 19th century, Russia and England engaged in a political, economic, and military rivalry for Iran. This brought some disastrous results for the country. The two European powers established banks in Iran, gained control over the customs receipts as collateral for loans, exempted their merchants from local laws, tariffs, and road tolls and were given valuable concessions all over the country (Foran, 1991, p.799; Abrahamian, 1979, p. 391).

1. Russia's Hand in Iran: Persian Cossacks Brigade (*Berigad-e Qazzaq*, 1879–1921).

In order to modernize the Iranian Army, some countries, such as France, Austria and England, had been invited to Iran in the 19th century. These invited countries were seeking for influence in Iran. After these countries the Russian military mission was invited to Iran to form a Cossack cavalry division in 1879. Persian Cossack Brigade or *Berigad-e Qazzaq* thus came into being, organized and trained by Russian officer-instructors according to Russian service regulations (Rabi and Oganov, 2009, p.446; Atabaki, 2005, p.34). The Founder of the Brigade was Lieutenant-Colonel of the General Staff *Aleksei Ivanovich Domantovich* (Kazimzadeh, 1956, p.353).

Thus the establishment of the Brigade paved the way for Russians gain center-power it within Iran, mainly because the Russians endeavored to increase the Brigade's influence and prestige. Officially, the Brigade was directed by political instructions sent from the Russian envoy to Tehran, as well as from the command of the Caucasian military district. The Iranians, too, were able to rise through the ranks to become officers. However sometimes this led to tensions within the brigade. During its nearly half century of existence, the Persian Cossack Brigade served Tsarist Russia and the Qajar Dynasty faithfully, particularly by maintaining Russian hegemony in Iran against the British. The majority of scholarly literature has viewed the Persian Cossack Brigade as a tool to implement Tsarist policy in Iran (Rabi and Oganov, 2009, p.446; Kazimzadeh, 1956, p.363; Atkin, 2013, mentioned web page).

2. Reasons for Russians opposition to the Iranian Constitutionalist Movements

Economic interests were the First and foremost reason was the economic. Because under Naser al Din Shah (1848-1896), Russia won some concessions in Iran, such as a Russian company, the *Cie. de la Route*, that acquired contracts and the right to construct highways along Anzali-Qazvin, Qazvin-Hamadan, Tabriz-Qazvin and Sistan-Mashad routes. Also construction of the railway concession between Jolfa-Tabriz and Sofian was given to Russian companies (Velayeti, 1374, p.3). In 1869, Another Russian company, *Lianazov Brothers*, obtained some monopolies over the fishing industry in the Caspian and over the insurance of transport on the northern roads of Iran (Abrahamian, 1982, p.96-97). In 1898, concession to use mines in

Azerbaijan-Karacadag was given to another Russian company for 70 years (Karadeniz, 2004, p.258).

Another important concession was the construction of the telegraph lines along the routes Odessa-Tbilisi and Tehran-Ofusky via Tabriz. Also Russians were given permission to set up of Banque d'escompte de Perse, *Bank-e Estiqraz*, to fulfill these concessions. Thanks to this bank, which later entered into competition with the Imperial Bank of Persia, *Bank-e Shehenshahi*, founded by Baron Julius De Reuter, Russia was trying to increase and expand her economic influence in Iran. For example, by giving large sums of loans to merchants, government officials and the Iranian Royal family was trying create dependence to Russia among Iranians to obtain some further concessions (Karadeniz, 2004, p.238). The Bank had branches in cities such as Tehran, Mashhad and other commercially important parts of the country (Velayeti, 1374, p.3).

As mentioned before, both Russia and England gave large long-term loans to the Iranian government in order to weaken Iran economically. For instance, England loaned £ 500.000 for a 40-year term with a treaty in 1892 (PRO,FO, 252/258).

According to Brown, the first Russian loan of 22,5 million of rubles (£ 2,400,000), lent at the rate of 5% and guaranteed by all the customs' receipts with the exception of those of Fars and the Persian Gulf, was repayable in 75 years. It was further stipulated that another loan of £500,000 at 6 % made to the Persian Government in 1892 by the Imperial Bank of Persia, to pay off the indemnity exacted by the Imperial Tobacco Corporation, should be paid off immediately, so that Russia should become Persia's sole creditor, and England should no longer have any claim on the Persian revenues. This loan, concluded on January 20, 1900 (Brown, 1910, p.99).

Another loan of 36 million Rubles was given by Russia to Iran. Monthly payment was 850.000 Rubles for 75 years. Iran has paid 60 million rubles at the end of the loan (BOA, YMTV, 245/99). Interestingly, even Russian economy in trouble borrowed with low interest rates from other states such as France and loaned with high interest rates to Iran (Kılıç, 2002, p.148).

Consequently and essentially in the pre-constitutional period Russian companies were quite active in Iranian cities such as Mashhad, Rasht, Anzali and Babol. Russian diplomats were also working for Russia's interests; in some additional cities; in the north of Iran, such as Hamadan, Kermanshah, Bushehr and Bandar Abbas (Velayeti, 1374, p.3).

The second reason for Russia's interest in Iran was strategic. Since mid-19th century, Iran was under the dominance of Russia and Britain. The northern part of Iran was under the Russian dominance and the southern part was under Britain's. Due to weakness of the central government, that is the Qajar administration, Russia and Britain had great influences on Iran's political, economic, and military conditions. However, Russia had bigger advantage and dominance than Britain in Iran before the Constitutional Revolution. The main reason for this was Russia's influence on the

Brigade. In addition, the geographical situation of Iran was very strategic both for Russia and for Britain. Therefore, none of them wanted to ever lose their influence in Iran.

The third reason has to do with the anti-Tsarist attitudes of the Iranian Constitutionalists partly because the Iranian Constitutionalists had been influenced by the ideas of social democracy from Russian Caucasia (Afary, 1994, p.26). Especially some of the clergy (Ulamas) with strong allegiance to traditional lines of religious thought -Takizadeh, Dovlatabadi and Mosawat- were quite impressed by these ideas (Dilek, 2007, p.55). Another reason was support for and participation in Iranian Constitutionalist movements by Caucasian constitutionalists. Also Russia's defeat against Japan in 1905 made a major impact in Tehran. According to the Constitutionalists the main reason for the defeat of Russia was the Tsarist despotic regime.

In that time, the Tsarist regime was involved in its own struggle with democratic forces within its empire that were seeking to limit royal autocracy and institute the elements of a representative government (Clark, 2006, p.200). For these reasons, Tsarist regime decided to prevent the occurrence of the same events in Iran as it deemed these ideas dangerous for its own status-quo in for the future.

3. Iranian Constitutional Revolutions (1905-1911) and Russia's Attitude towards It

The First Iranian Constitutional movement that, started in 1905 is considered to be one of the most important events in the recent history of Iran. The First Constitution was signed and put into force on December 31st 1906 by Mozaffar Al Din Shah (1896-1907). The First Constitutional Revolution was abolished due to the bombing of the Majlis e Melli (National Assembly) on June 23rd 1908 by his son Mohammad Ali Shah (1907-1908). Soon after, in June 25th, a struggle started against Mohammed Ali Shah especially in Tabriz and in the other big cities of Iran.

Though an agreement was signed between Russia and Britain for their interest in Iran in 1907, a clandestine rivalry continued among them both before and after 1907 Convention. According to Vanessa Martin, this was because of Russia's variable policy in Iran: "Russia having in effect two policies in Iran from 1906-8, the first, that of Izvolsky, to work with the British and compromise over mutual problems in Iran, and the second, that of Hartwig, backed by his powerful friends in St Petersburg, to pursue the old forward policy, protect and advance Russian interests, and thereby also undermine the Anglo-Russian Agreement" (Martin, 1993, p.1-2).

When the movements started in Tehran, Russian representative Izvolsky visited Sir A. Nicolson, ambassador of England in Russia, and recommended that had better determine a common attitude towards the events. Izvolsky said that he had instructed

the Russian Ambassador to speak to you on the subject and he thought it was a matter of common interest to the two countries. Nicolson asked him if he had any suggestions to offer but he replied that he had none (FO, 416/28. *Sir A. Nicolson to Sir Edward Grey*, St. Petersburg, August 1, 1906).

Meanwhile, in reaction to harsh attitudes of Iranian government against the constitutionalists, about 14.000 people took refuge in the British Embassy in Tehran (FO, 416/28, *Sir Edward Grey to Sir A. Nicolson*, Foreign Office, August 3, 1906). Despite the recent close relationship between Russia and Britain this event led to emerge of some question marks for their relations. Russia was trying to understand England's attitude towards the happenings. To understand Britain's policy M. İzvolsky asked Sir. A. Nicolson whether His Government could have encouraged the refugees to have come to British Legation (FO, 416/28. *Sir A. Nicolson to Sir Edward Grey*, St. Petersburg, August 1, 1906).

Nevertheless the growth of the events revealed that the attitude of the countries on the Constitutionalist movements was different. Therefore, Britain took side with the Constitutionalist movements when the movements started in 1906. Consequently, this situation frightened Russia for her interests in Iran, because in case of victory of the Constitutionalist movements and weakness of the Qajar Dynasty; supported by Russia, it could be destructive for Russia's interests and dominance in Iran. Therefore, when Iranian Constitutional Movements started, Britain and Russia participated in the game and, as a matter of course, Russia supported the Shah.

The constitutionalists' leaning towards Britain made the Russians to take even harder measures against them. Hereafter, Russia took an attitude exactly against the Constitutionalist movements in Iran. She also took some measures to prevent the movement especially after the ascension of Mohammed Ali Shah in 1907, supported, of course, by Russia. Hartwig, Russian ambassador in Tehran, played a major role in most of these measures.

The first was appointment of *Vladimir Liakhov*, a Russian colonel, as the commander of Persian Cossacks Brigade and the second was having a military governor for Tehran appointed by Mohammad Ali Shah in 1906. The relationship forged between Liakhov and Mohammad Ali Shah was unusually close their mentalities and attitudes were closely attuned. Both shared an unflinching commitment to the maintenance of absolute rule, whether in Iran or in Russia, and both saw defense of Russian interest in Iran as an essential bulwark for the Qajar and Romanov dynasties (Cronin, 2013, p.167).

A further reason was to increase the pressure on the constitutionalists and break their morale. For this purpose, celebration of the first anniversary of the Iranian Constitution was sabotaged with the Russia's support in June 25, 1907. According to Edward Brown, "The Russian threat was embodied in a note drawn up by M. Pashkoff, first secretary of the Russian Legation, and addressed to the President of the Assembly to the effect that if the present disorders continued, Russia would be compelled to take

"certain active measures to assure security... not with any sinister intention, but to appease strife." This note provoked a remonstrance which led to its being presented in a modified form two or three weeks later, but even then it was not read, as the objectionable expression "active measures" still occurred in it (Brown, 1909, p.24). However, when applying these measures Russia wished to counteract any view that Russia sympathized with the government against the people, though he felt the movement would collapse for want of organization" (Martin, 1993, p.5).

During the first half of 1908 the struggle between Mohammad Ali Shah and the Constitutionalists polarized, the increasingly radical and secular demands of the constitutionalists led to loss of religious support. By June, the Shah and Liakhov were ready to act. The Russian officers led their men in bombarding both Majlis or Parliament itself and the adjoining *Sipah Salar Mosque*, which housed members of revolutionary *Anjumans*¹ (city councils) who offered armed but futile resistance. The Shah proclaimed martial law and appointed Liakhov as military governor of Tehran, with full powers over all police and military forces. Some deputies like Hadji Mirza Ibrahim Agha were killed and some were arrested. Many arrests and executions took place, all constitutionalist activity in Tehran was crushed and the city was cowed (Cronin, 2013, p.167-168; Elwell-Sutton, 1944, p.63; The New York Times, September 12, 1909).

According to some historians, "The bloody events of 23 June 1908 dramatically changed the public image of the Brigade and Russia. Because the Shah used the Brigade forces to violently disperse a crowd of members of Majlis and Anjumans as well as thousands of armed *fedais* (saviors), all of whom supported the implementation of constitutional reform in Iran. This sharply altered the Iranians' attitude towards the Persian Cossack Brigade, transforming its image from a respected military institution into a discredited unit that was feared and resented by many Iranians" (Rabi and Oganov, 2009, p.446-447).

4. Russian Intervention of Tabriz

After the bombing of the Majlis some of its members took refuge in Ottoman and British Embassies. This operation launched a civil war against the Shah's army and Russia. Demonstrations began in favor of the constitution all over the country. These demonstrations led into rebellion in some cities. The most important of these occurred in Tabriz (Djalili and Kellner, 2011, p.45).

As mentioned earlier Tabriz was the biggest city in Azerbaijan the majority of whose population was Turks. After the bombing of the Majlis, this city became a center

¹ "The anjumans were of two kinds, the official and the non-official. The former were established by law, and were of three kinds, municipal, departmental and provincial. The latter were simply clubs or societies of persons", see for more details: Brown, "A Brief Narrative...", p.244.

for the Constitutionalists. Basically Russian policy had major repercussions for Azerbaijan in this period, both because of the province's proximity to Russian territory in the Caucasus and because of the leading role its constitutionalists were playing within the Constitutional Movement as a whole (Clark, 2006, p.203). Therefore, Russia attached great importance to the suppression of the rebellion in Tabriz.

The struggle for the constitutionalism started in Tabriz after the bombing of the Majlis. Anjuman and people of Tabriz have an important role in the initiation of events. Neither group ever accepted the Shah's interfere in the Majlis. Anjuman immediately announced itself as the provisional government of Azerbaijan and took some decisions against to the monarchy. This event marked the beginning of the war between the two sides (Abrahamian, 1982, p.393). In the meantime, the Russian consulate in Tabriz began to circulate rumors in the city that royalist forces were moving towards Tabriz. This news frightened the people of the city. Therefore, some of them hanged a white flag on their houses to indicate their intentions for peace (FO, 416/37, *Mr. Marling to Sir Edward Grey*, Tehran, July 1, 1908, Sykes, 1915, p.416).

Tabriz was surrounded by armies, depending on the Shah to suppress the rebellion in September of 1908 (The Newyork Times, September 19, 1908). However, they met with unexpected resistance. The constitutionalists of Tabriz were fighting under the leadership of Sattar Khan and Bagher Khan². But many constitutionalists (Mojahids) from other cities of Iran, some Armenians (Fedais) under the leadership of Yeprem Khan and numerous social democrats and constitutionalists from Caucasia, Georgia and Caucasian Azerbaijan also united with them (Ajodani, 1372, p.433-434; Afary, 2004, p.68). At the end all royalist forces were ejected from the city. Tabriz siege took 8 months. During this time all the roads were closed to Tabriz to weaken the constitutionalists. Many people died from starvation. Despite all the supports of Russia, the constitutionalists were continuing to resist. This situation brought worries in Russia. Therefore, Russian sent troops to Iranian border.

Russia was looking for ways to intervene into Tabriz. To do this, negotiations started with Britain. Finally, Britain accepted Russian intervention nominally for the protection of the Consulates and the lives of Europeans, and assurances were given that the occupation by Russian troops should be only temporary (Browne, 1912, p.4).

Russian troops under General Znarsky arrived to lift the royalist siege of Tabriz in the last days of April, 1909 and deliver food to a starving population. That action brought the unwelcome arrival of troops into the province (Clark, 2006, p.199). Some leaders of the constitutionalists took refuge to Turkish Embassy after Russian occupation. They stayed there until the Shah left the throne and a general amnesty was declared for the constitutionalists (Saltanah, 1995, p.2784).

² Turkish origin, from Azerbaijan. Until the revolution they were ordinary men but after revolution became heroes with the title Sattar Khan Sardar-e Melli (National Commander) and Bagher Khan Salar-e Melli (National Leader).

The Russian occupation of Tabriz and the long resistance of townsfolk encouraged the constitutionalists in other cities of Iran. All the constitutionalists in Iran began to organize and to unite against the Shah. It was a complete disappointment for Russia. Because it had never calculated that the constitutionalist forces would be able to overcome the resistance of the Shah's Cossack brigade. Finally the Shah took refuge to the Russian Embassy and then fled to Odessa in the Russian territory in July, 1909 (Browne, 1912, p.4).

For Russia, the game was not over yet. Russian troops were still in Tabriz. The troops repeatedly tried to weaken the constitutionalists. The troops went on the offensive, increased pressure on the constitutionalists arrested and executed many of them (Clark, 2006, p.199). In 1911 Mohammad Ali again returned to Iran with support of Russia. But his forces were defeated for sure. Mohammad Ali Shah fled to Russia.

Conclusion

Iran's constitutional revolutions led to the emergence of some important developments in both domestic and foreign policy. One of them was a disagreement between Russia and Britain. Although an agreement was signed between the two states in 1907, both sides showed a different attitude in the face of the revolutions. Russia supported the monarchy because of some ideological, political and economic factors. However, Russia's attitude has caused growth of events and deaths of more people. In the end of the revolutions Russia, won as military, political and economic however, ideologically lost.

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