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## France among the Most-Favored Nations: The French Commercial Policy and Influence in Iran (1815–48)

*Iran's subjection to Russo-British influence has received the bulk of attention of modern scholarship dealing with the country's interaction with the outside world in the nineteenth century. This article, while not denying the central role played by these two powers in Iran's domestic affairs at the time, draws attention to a third power with long-standing claims to influence in the country by way of trade policies—France. From the fall of Napoleon in 1815 until the French Revolution of 1848, the French monarchy was especially keen to encourage commerce with Iran, less as a source of increased wealth than to restore and expand French prestige and political influence. This strategy became more significant, when the British and Russian superpowers opposed an active French presence in Iran and prevented France from asserting influence in the country. To contain those powers, France pursued its plan of reaching a trade treaty with Iran as a means of obtaining commercial concessions and privileges as well as to secure its permanent presence in the country. France also aimed to connect Iran to its network of regional trade extending from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean.*

**Keywords:** Qajar diplomacy; French policy in Iran; Anglo-Russian competition; Commercial Treaty; Political Influence

The history of France's relationship with Iran between the fall of Napoleon I in 1815 and the rise of Napoleon III in the mid-nineteenth century remains poorly known and underappreciated.<sup>1</sup> This applies to both parties. Coming out from under the long shadow of Napoleon, French imperial history under the Restoration (1815–30) and the Monarchy (1830–48) has received relatively little attention by comparison to the much-studied Napoleonic period.<sup>2</sup> As for Iran, a relative paucity of source

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<sup>1</sup>The only major study dealing specifically with Franco-Iranian diplomatic relations in the first half of the nineteenth century is Iraj Amini's *Napoléon et la Perse* (1995). Louis' *La question d'Orient sous Louis-Philippe*, which is devoted to the study of French diplomacy in the East in the period under discussion, almost entirely overlooked Iran's significance in French Eastern policy.

<sup>2</sup>Todd, "A French Imperial Meridian 1814–1870," 155.

material especially for the reign of Mohammad Shah (1834–48) has left this period in the country's history poorly covered as well. Franco-Iranian relations in this period have received some scholarly attention, but mostly confined to rather narrow and straightforward diplomatic accounts, which are often derivative of the more important relations between Iran and Great Britain and Imperial Russia, respectively.

This article seeks to widen our horizon with regard to France's designs on Iran in the post-Napoleonic phase. In search of precedents and patterns, it presents these plans in great detail while discussing them on a larger canvas encompassing the historical record of overall French involvement in Middle Eastern and North African affairs.<sup>3</sup> It aims to demonstrate that during this period, a weakened France conducted a policy in West Asia designed to capitalize on new commercial opportunities in the region, and that Iran was part of this policy. Trade with Iran, however, was costly and risky for France, hampered as it was by the remoteness of the country, the long distances and poor communications involved, the arduousness of the caravan routes, and the fact that Iran had little to offer by way of exportable goods. The question then is why, despite these obstacles, France initiated plans to establish a commercial footing in Iran.

France emerged from the Napoleonic period a weakened country, both militarily and politically, turning into a secondary power compared to Russia and Britain, both of which achieved worldwide supremacy in the course of the nineteenth century. The defeated French empire of 1815 did not pursue its previous expansionist policy but instead sought to develop an informal network of political influence through trade.<sup>4</sup> This informal type of imperialism involved an occasional use of limited military force to protect colonial interests, if necessary.<sup>5</sup> Due to the utter incapacity to deploy military power to back their colonial objectives in Iran, the French resolved to promote their influence and active presence by playing a sensitive game, finding niches of power and influence in the interstices of Russian and British control. Iran's search for a third, "balancing" party, which at the time meant France, in order to escape the noose of Russia and Britain, encouraged France in its informal encroachment.<sup>6</sup> French plans included the establishment of a permanent presence in the country by way of French consular and commercial agents in order to capture the Iranian markets, particularly those of northwestern region of Azarbaijan, and linking French trade in the Black Sea region to that of the Indian Ocean through

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<sup>3</sup>This paper – partially based on my master's thesis at the University of Strasbourg, France (supervised by Nader Nasiri-Moghaddam) – is part of my broader project and further research in the French archives is planned.

<sup>4</sup>There was, as of the late 1830s, a religious/civilizational element, because "civilization" and French missionary activities were from the beginning part of the French imperial project; see Poole, "Eugène Boré and the Vincentian Missions in the Near East."

<sup>5</sup>Gallagher and Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," 6.

<sup>6</sup>This was a long-standing, natural policy, not just of Iran, but of any weaker power—to play off the bullies against each other. In Iran this was already visible in the Safavid treatment of the Portuguese, the English and the Dutch. Even then, the French were in part welcomed as a counterbalance to those forces. Never mind that the French never "delivered." See Matthee, "A Sugar Banquet for the Shah," 196–9.

Iran. French interests were not confined to transit trade through Iran, however, and France's relationship with Iran, as a country neighboring Turkey, could advance French goals and interests in the Ottoman Empire. More importantly, the French government attempted to strengthen its position vis-à-vis its main competitors, the Russians and the British, by concluding arrangements with Iran.

After the Congress of Vienna of 1815, which established a new world order, the roles of France and other European powers, both in Europe and globally, changed in profound ways. The European powers with imperial ambitions, which were in the process of acquiring political and commercial interests in non-European countries, either by way of pacts or through outright subjugation, tended to engage more than ever in diplomatic activities with non-Europeans. From the Congress of Vienna to the outbreak of the Crimean War (1853), a period during which Europe experienced relative peace and stability, colonization fueled by industrialization and rapidly improving communication enabled Europe's imperial powers to access the markets of non-European countries at an increasing rate. As a result, non-European nations became entangled in intra-European imperial rivalries and international trade to an unprecedented extent, and the number of agreements reached between European powers and non-European nations, compared to previous centuries, increased significantly.<sup>7</sup> Relations between Europe and non-European nations became global in scope and significance, with imperial powers tending to pursue a dual purpose: to establish peaceful trade relations and to resolve colonial and global issues.<sup>8</sup> The two were related; one of the requirements for the creation of a durable relationship was to negotiate favorable terms of trade with local powers in the aftermath of war followed by domination.<sup>9</sup> This requirement was achieved through concluding treaties of commerce, navigation and friendship, whose scope went beyond certain commercial privileges, aiming to achieve strategic goals for European powers in non-European countries.

Iran's trade relationship with the European powers of Russia, Britain, and France was part of this complex picture. It should be emphasized, though, that Iran's foreign trade was not as significant to European powers as the country's strategic position under the Qajar dynasty (r. 1796–1925). The commercial treaties the two superpowers of Russia (1828) and Britain (1801, 1841) concluded with Iran were complementary to their main treaties that addressed European strategic and political concerns and demands.<sup>10</sup> These treaties placed Iran under the economic pressure and the ongoing political influence and interference of Russia and British India, both sharing a common border with Iran. This proximity also made military intervention

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<sup>7</sup>Keene, "The Treaty-Making Revolution of the Nineteenth Century," 490.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 485.

<sup>9</sup>Alimento and Stapelbroek, "Trade and Treaties," 7.

<sup>10</sup>Given that there was a relatively limited number of Iranian manufacturers and merchant companies practicing trade in or exporting goods to these countries, Russia and Britain were indeed the only beneficiaries of these commercial treaties that negatively affected Iran's balance of trade and damaged its local industries. See Amanat, *Cities & Trade*, xv–xvii.

or threats of intervention by both much more likely. France had no such advantages, no means to promote its objectives, and no adequate military support. Moreover, both Russia and Britain sought to gain intelligence not only about each other but also about any potential relationship and agreement between Iran and any other European or non-European countries. At the same time, British and Russian influence prevented countries like France having a political say in Iranian affairs, let alone the ability to conclude a political treaty to guarantee their influence.<sup>11</sup>

The agreement France reached with Iran in 1847 was both the culmination of the French efforts and a predictable failure due to the British and Russian influence. It was also partly due to France's failure in its long-standing projects in the Middle East, beginning with Louis XIV and a focus on "la gloire du roi" as opposed to a more pragmatic British-type approach. Napoleon's failed policy in Iran, following his Alexander-type dreams and outsized ambitions, was rooted in that tradition. Boosted by the conquest of Algeria (1830), however, and its attendant increase in authority and prestige on the European stage, France strengthened its position in the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> French support of Mohammad Ali of Egypt and its increasing influence in Iran under Mohammad Shah are indicative of the country's policy shift in the Middle East. Finally, a series of political events and circumstances, in France as well as in Iran, conspired to prevent the French mission in Tehran from coming to fruition. These included the 1848 troubles in France, leading to the collapse of the monarchy, as much as the coming to power of a new government in Iran under Naser al-Din Shah in the same year. Franco-Iranian relationship did come to fruition, though, as late as 1855—using the 1847 treaty as a basis for a new, more advantageous treaty—mostly because of external circumstances, most importantly the Crimean War (1853–56) that brought France and Britain to a common front and considerably weakened Russia's power.

### *French Approaches to the Commercial Relationship with Iran*

In the seventeenth century, French minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1661–83), through the foundation of the French East India Company (1664–1719), sought to open trade with the East, including Iran, to increase French wealth and power and to compete with the Dutch and the English, whose maritime companies were already active in Iran. This objective received a boost when Louis XIV (r. 1643–1715), in his final days, signed a trade agreement with Safavid Iran that was favorable to France. Although a change of government in both Iran and France prevented this treaty from ever being implemented, the French government, for over a century,

<sup>11</sup>The treaties that Iran negotiated with other Western contracting parties during the first half of the nineteenth century were limited to commercial treaties, all based on the commercial protocol of the Treaty of Torkamanchay (1828), which set an example for subsequent commercial treaties between Iran and all other European states, including Britain, until the end of the nineteenth century. See Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, 553; Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, 215.

<sup>12</sup>Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria*, 6–7.

sought to revive it in one way or another. Napoleon I, in addition to his military ambition for an invasion of India through an alliance with Iran, desired to regain the privileges of the Franco-Safavid treaty in the form of a new commercial treaty, signed in January 1808 and attached to the Treaty of Finkenstein (1807).<sup>13</sup> Due to the collapse of the treaty, however, France lost its political influence and any potential commercial benefits in Iran. Following the French Revolution, France had also lost its uncontested position in the Levant trade, conducted between Marseille and the eastern Mediterranean port cities.<sup>14</sup> Numerous commercial rivals and intermediaries, such as Armenian and Greek merchants, challenged French merchants' trade in the Ottoman Empire. These obstacles prompted the French government of the Duke of Richelieu (1820–21), who had served in Russia as governor of Odessa (1803–14), to promote French commerce in the Caucasus, the region which Richelieu knew well. To that effect, he appointed Jean-François Gamba as the first French consul to Tbilisi (1821–24). Between 1817 and 1820, Gamba had widely traveled in the Caucasus and southern Russia to study the region's economic prospects for French commerce. Gamba's nomination was based on an account he had written, suggesting building French ties with newly Russian-occupied Georgia, by way of expanding the Black Sea trade. Russia intended to take advantage of the opportunity that France was offering to attract French goods to boost the economy of the region it had gained with the Treaty of Golestan in 1813. Tsar Alexander I (r. 1801–25), similarly keen to promote foreign trade in the Caucasus, in October 1821 issued a royal decree (*ukase*) in favor of European goods that could open a new market for French industry. General Alexei Ermolov, governor general of Georgia (1816–27), also had ambitious plans to turn Tbilisi into a prosperous commercial center of trade between Russia, Iran, and the Ottoman Empire. Ermolov promised Gamba to support French trade in the Caucasus, in the awareness that this would be equally advantageous to the Russian economy.<sup>15</sup>

Gamba, who had studied Tbilisi carefully, identified the town as a prospective outlet for French goods that could also provide safe and rapid communications with the Black and Caspian seas, enabling the passage of French exports to Iran. As a result, Gamba proposed to the French government a commercial association with Russia, aiming to jointly capture the exclusive trade of the Caucasus and northwestern Iran.<sup>16</sup> His basic goal, however, went beyond trade. Inspired by Napoleon's Continental Blockade, he sought to establish an alliance with Russia against the British commercial (and territorial) power in Asia.<sup>17</sup> In this alliance, the Black Sea and the Caucasus played a key role since these regions would extend the sphere of French influence, reaching Iran and the shores of the Caspian Sea. At the time Gamba developed his project, France had been substantially frustrated in terms of military and commercial

<sup>13</sup>Matthee, "From Splendour and Admiration to Ruin and Condescension," 11–12; Lambton, A.K.S., *Qajar Persia*, I.B. Tauris, 1987, p.117.

<sup>14</sup>Eldem, *French Trade in Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century*, 32–3.

<sup>15</sup>Gamba, *Mémoire pour le chevalier Gamba*, 3.

<sup>16</sup>Victor Letellier, "Mémoire sur la Perse, Intérêt pour la France d'une liaison avec cette contrée." 1833. AMFAE/MD/Perse 8, f. 1.

<sup>17</sup>*The Monthly Review*, appendix to vol. 3, September–December 1826, no. 15, 447.

aspirations and had lost its most important colonies around the world, including Saint-Domingue. Gamba was determined to establish new French colonies and colonial domination in Asia, not through conquest but informally through trade treaties and concessions.<sup>18</sup> He spoke of spreading European colonial and civilizational institutions, particularly to Iran, and believed that these institutions were also in the best interest of the Iranian people. Having consulted Mirza Mas'ud Ansari, Crown Prince 'Abbas Mirza's counselor at Tabriz, by way of a brief correspondence, he thought the Qajars would equally welcome his project as well. Mirza Mas'ud's response, as reflected in Gamba's account, illustrates that 'Abbas Mirza had welcomed commercial transactions between Iran and France and "desires what assures the happiness of our people."<sup>19</sup> This communication shows that neither 'Abbas Mirza nor Gamba had a proper understanding of each other's ideas, and that 'Abbas Mirza's pursuit of a Western-style reform project was far from Gamba's colonial objectives.

Gamba's expectations were also contradictory to Russia's ideas about French participation in the Transcaucasian trade. Immersed in his ambitious plans, he did not even notice that the cheap price of Russian goods would make it difficult for relatively more expensive French quality goods, transported all the way across Europe, to compete in the Georgian market. Moreover, the accession of Tsar Nicholas I (r. 1825–55), who revoked the *ukase* of 1821 to increase duties on foreign goods and encourage Russian domestic industries, showed that Gamba had either miscalculated the situation or was ill-informed.

No matter how illusory Gamba's project was, it grabbed the attention of the French government of the time, which was convinced that his plan for promoting French trade and influence by establishing a close commercial relationship with Iran through Tbilisi was feasible. Tbilisi had a long way to go before reaching its economic boom in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Russia managed to pacify the Caucasus and implement administrative reforms. The French officials who had sent Desbassayns de Richemont to Tbilisi and Tabriz in 1826 to investigate the possibility of implementing Gamba's plan soon learned that the Caucasian trade even lacked the potential of being a substitute for trade through the Ottoman Empire.<sup>20</sup> Even more than ten years later, the overland routes that connected Tbilisi to Baku and Tabriz were still unsuitable for transporting goods because of the region's mountainous terrain and a lack of proper roads.<sup>21</sup> Hence, the prospect of establishing a French trade with Iran through Tbilisi was apparently destined to fail, particularly after the Treaty of Erzurum (1823), which had eased tribal tensions on the Ottoman–

<sup>18</sup>Gamba, *Voyage dans la Russie méridionale*, lvii–lviii.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, lix.

<sup>20</sup>Belanger, *Voyage aux Indes-Orientales*, 422–3; Prior to this embassy (in 1823), Chaumette des Fossés, French diplomat, had requested to be assigned on a mission to Iran as French consul and believed that France should take advantage of the British vacuum in Iran at that moment to improve its balance of power with Russia, Britain, and Turkey. See Chaumette des Fossés to Count de la Ferronnays, AMFAE/MD/Perse 2, ff. 266–7.

<sup>21</sup>*Safarnāmeḥ-ye bāron Fiodor Kurof* [The Travelogue of Baron Feodor Korf], 118; Atkin, *Russia and Iran*, 151–2.

Iranian border and regulated custom duties based on the value of the products.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the transport of commodities through Istanbul (via Trabzon and Erzurum) to Tabriz was more rapid, shorter, and cheaper than through the Caucasus, especially during the winter months.<sup>23</sup> Eventually, the outbreak of the Second Russo-Iranian War (1826–28) obstructed the Caucasian trade, rendering the French consulate at Tbilisi dysfunctional in terms of trade with Iran, while the Istanbul route (via Trabzon), especially from 1830 onward, became more commonly used as a European trade route to Tabriz.<sup>24</sup>

The Treaty of Torkamanchay, concluded as a result of the war, increased Russia's influence on commercial and political activities in Iran and raised the Russian threat, first and foremost to Britain's commercial and strategic position in the country to an unprecedented level, and forced Britain and France to seriously reconsider their policy toward Iran. Russian hegemony in Iran and the Ottoman Empire could present a serious danger to commercial traffic in the Black Sea and the Turkish Straits, which would have been especially detrimental to British maritime trade. As a result of this treaty, the struggle for a trade agreement with Iran started between Russia, Britain, and France as a diplomatic rivalry during the 1830s and 1840s, and the trade with Iran, which until then was usually run by royal concessions, took a turn toward treaty-based policies.<sup>25</sup> Britain, realizing that Russia had surpassed it, made all efforts to regain the role it had in the Napoleonic era, and only at this point did its leaders reconsider the neglected preamble of the Anglo-Iranian Treaty of Tehran (1814), which promised "what relates to commerce [...] will be drawn up and concluded in a separate commercial treaty."<sup>26</sup>

In 1835, the Foreign Office took charge of the British missions to Tehran from the East India Company and replaced John Campbell with Henry Ellis, signatory to the Treaty of Tehran, tasking him to congratulate the reign of Mohammad Shah (r. 1834–48) and, more substantially, to study the Russian influence in Tehran and negotiate a commercial treaty. Ellis attempted to convince the Iranian Foreign Minister Mirza Mas'ud Ansari to sign a commercial treaty with Britain, but he only managed to achieve the issuance of a royal decree (*farman*) in 1836.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, in the last stage of this diplomatic plan, the British government in 1836 appointed one of its most experienced ministers, John McNeill, who had been party to negotiations over the Treaty of Torkamanchay, as minister to Tehran.

McNeill not only openly opposed Russia, whose "system of successive encroachments," he believed, had put British commercial interests at risk in Iran and Turkey, but, like his superior, Foreign Minister Lord Palmerston (1835–41), he

<sup>22</sup>Belanger, *Voyage aux Indes-Orientales*, 86.

<sup>23</sup>Fontanier, *Voyages en Orient*, 78–9.

<sup>24</sup>Werner, *An Iranian Town in Transition*, 95; Issawi, "The Tabriz–Trabzon Trade, 1830–1900," 18.

<sup>25</sup>Lambton, *Qajar Persia*, 137.

<sup>26</sup>*Correspondence Relating to Persia and Afghanistan*, 308; Yapp, *Strategies of British India*, 119–120.

<sup>27</sup>The decree did not accord consular privileges to the British and could be revoked by the shah under Russian pressure at any time; see Connell, *Regina vs. Palmerston*, 32; In 1833, 'Abbas Mirza issued a similar firman offering British merchants the same customs advantages accorded to Russian merchants.

was also suspicious of French activities.<sup>28</sup> McNeill was concerned that in case of a likely alliance between France and Russia in Iran, France would be more of a threat to Britain than an impartial role player. The British did not find relief from this concern until the end of Mohammad Shah's reign in 1848, as Justin Sheil, McNeill's successor, equally stated his concern about a potential Franco-Russian alliance in the 1840s.<sup>29</sup> The reason was more because of the Russian nationalists at Tsar Nicholas' court, who were in favor of strong relations with the French monarchy. They thought that France, which had gained power and influence in North Africa, particularly in Egypt, could outperform the British in the Mediterranean as Russia outdid the Austrians in the Balkans.<sup>30</sup> The idea of a Franco-Russian alliance against Britain to restore French prestige and to create protectorates, particularly in Egypt and Syria, had also captured the minds of a group of French nationalists since the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the French government's policy was never designed to oppose Britain over Iranian affairs despite France's pursuit of long-standing political objectives in Iran. After the Treaty of Torkamanchay was implemented, however, French efforts, instead of seeking an association with Russia, ended up mostly grappling with Russia's increasing influence and threat to Western interests.

Victor Letellier, the French consul at Tbilisi in the aftermath of the treaty, was one of the first French diplomats to learn of the danger of Russian expansionist policy in Iran, the northwestern part of which he visited during his travels. In a lengthy account addressed to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1833, he rejected Gamba's Franco-Russian association and warned the French government of Russia's southern thrust.<sup>32</sup> His communication equally addressed economic issues and emphasized that it would not be in the interest of France and its prestige as a great power to remain uninvolved in Iran. He argued that a commercial treaty with the Qajars was both crucial and beneficial for a permanent French establishment in Tabriz to essentially counter Russian influence. In a word, Letellier attempted to convince Paris that France must establish and strengthen ties with Iran to advance French influence, and also spread its network of trade and markets there; but to implement the task France first needed a treaty. Letellier saw himself as the most suitable person to carry out this mission because he believed he had the experience and determination to reinvigorate France's old relationship.<sup>33</sup> He composed his account at a crucial time, with Russia having signed a strategic treaty with the Ottoman sultan in 1833 that might give it control over the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, deemed to be detrimental to French and British interests.

<sup>28</sup>McNeill, *The Progress and Present Position of Russia*, 122.

<sup>29</sup>Sartiges, "Compte-rendu de la mission envoyée à Téhéran en 1844 et considération sur l'état actuel politique et commercial de la Perse." AMFAE/MD/Perse 9, f. 209.

<sup>30</sup>Ingle, *Nesselrode and the Russian Rapprochement with Britain*, 34–5.

<sup>31</sup>Blanc, *The History of Ten Years 1830–1840*, 195–7.

<sup>32</sup>Letellier, "Mémoire sur la Perse," f. 136.

<sup>33</sup>Letellier to Molé, 28 November 1836, AMFAE/MD/Perse 8, f. 94.



Letellier's miscalculation, however, was that he believed and hoped that it would be easy to reach an agreement with Iran because of the shah's eagerness to reestablish relations with France. His solid evidence for this assumption was the encounter Khosrow Mirza, son of 'Abbas Mirza, had had with the Duke of Mortemart, the French ambassador to Russia (1828–30), in St Petersburg during the mission that Iran had sent to apologize for the massacre of the Russian Embassy at Tehran in 1829. During their meeting Khosrow Mirza had expressed to him 'Abbas Mirza's favorable opinion regarding a relationship with France. Khosrow Mirza and the principal members of his mission told the Duke of their desire to see commercial relations established between Iran and France, and "promised [...] to support with all their power the measures that a special envoy would adopt for this matter."<sup>34</sup>

Letellier was not the only voice among the diplomats to take an anti-Russian stand at that point.<sup>35</sup> This issue was equally taken into account by the notable French statesman, Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, who at the time was the French ambassador to London (1830–34). Talleyrand suggested that France and Britain should form a defensive alliance to oppose Russian policies in the East.<sup>36</sup> Yet, this alliance never took place, because France was still too busy with building its empire in Algeria to pay serious attention to plans suggested by its agent in the Caucasus regarding Iran. Moreover, Fath 'Ali Shah's death (1834) and the ensuing succession struggle in Iran appeared to offer the French government few chances of success in its trade and politics at that time.

### *Competition for Commercial Treaties*

The Anglo-Iranian question of 1838 regarding Iran's sovereignty over the city of Herat changed the diplomatic scene and brought France back to the attention of Iran for the first time since the fall of Napoleon. The Herat conflict, which suspended the diplomatic relationship between Iran and Britain for almost three years became a matter of great significance, creating a new opportunity for ties between Iran and France. Iran took advantage of this opportunity to appeal to France in a much more serious and realistic way, as a third power on the Iranian scene. France, in turn, could benefit from this occasion to restore the relationship with Iran and to use it as a lever in dealing with other Europeans in Ottoman affairs.

French envoy Count de Sercey left for Iran in November, 1839 in response to the Iranian embassy of Hosayn Khan Ajudanbashi to Paris, who had offered an intimate alliance with France by way of a treaty covering both politics and commerce. Sercey departed for Iran despite Britain's objections, although his instructions explicitly prevented him from rendering any judgment against Britain. Any French interference

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<sup>34</sup>Letellier, "Mémoire sur la Perse," f. 131; Mortemart to Polignac, 10 December 1829, AMFAE/MD/Perse 2, f. 278.

<sup>35</sup>John McNeill had the same opinion on the Russian threat to Europe, especially to France. See McNeill, *The Progress and Present Position of Russia*, 146–8.

<sup>36</sup>Dwyer, *Talleyrand*, 197.

even as a mediator between Britain and Iran could possibly worsen the French position vis-à-vis Britain, because the Franco-British relationship had already been damaged due to the Egyptian–Ottoman War (1839–41). The British ambassador to Paris repeatedly wrote in French newspapers, trying to build a case against the Iranian embassy and make the French government regret sending the envoy.<sup>37</sup> The British sensitivity toward the French mission increased when London realized that the purpose of the French mission would be “to prevail on the Shah of Persia to support the pretensions of Mehemet Ali [Khedive of Egypt],” whom the French, in opposition to British policies, supported against the Ottoman sultan.<sup>38</sup>

Prime Minister Duke de Dalmatie advised the French envoy to reach a conclusion after examining all circumstances regarding whether a commercial agreement could be reached with Iran and to negotiate a treaty if circumstances were appropriate.<sup>39</sup> The negotiations did not even occur because the Iranian government refused to accept France’s request for a commercial treaty.<sup>40</sup> Duke de Dalmatie knew that since Britain had not yet reached a trade agreement with Iran, the likelihood of reaching a French deal was exceedingly small. In a letter to Sercey, he expressed his desire that Sercey’s embassy obtain a decree from the shah to protect French trade and establish the foundation of future French relations with Iran.<sup>41</sup> Thanks to the Francophile prince Malek-Qasem Mirza, the uncle of the shah, Sercey managed to obtain a royal decree that accorded to the French merchants a fifteen-year exemption from customs duties for the import of French goods.<sup>42</sup>

However, Sercey soon learned that trade with Iran would be unprofitable for France. In his account on Tabriz, Iran’s most prosperous city and the main target of French trade initiatives, Sercey outlined difficulties France should address to establish its trade there. First, despite the royal decree, as long as France did not have a consul or official representative in Tabriz, the security of French trade in the city was not guaranteed.<sup>43</sup> The failure of the Ottoman government to secure trade routes connecting the Black Sea to Tabriz, and Russia’s prohibitive policies, closing access to the Russian Black Sea ports for European trade, would also considerably restrict French trade with Tabriz.<sup>44</sup> Sercey also believed that the price of French products would be another reason for the failure of prospective French trade in Iran. French trade could not thrive or compete with other countries’ products as long as French manufactures were rejected in Iran due to their higher prices. Thus, neither in Tabriz nor in other regions of Iran did Sercey see any prospects for French profits; indeed, he predicted difficulties for French trade in its ability to compete with British and Russian trade.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Garmrudi, *Safarnāmeḥ*, 884.

<sup>38</sup>*The Times* (London, England), Monday, 9 March 1840, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup>Sercey, *Une Ambassade Extraordinaire*, 32.

<sup>40</sup>Amanat, “ĀQĀSĪ.”

<sup>41</sup>Hellot-Bellier, *France–Iran*, 120.

<sup>42</sup>“Avantages commerciaux et religieux accordés aux Français,” 1840, AMFAE/MD/Perse 11, f. 81.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, ff. 82–3.

<sup>44</sup>Sercey, *Une Ambassade Extraordinaire*, 138.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 144.

Since the prospects for French trade through Tabriz looked dim, Duke de Dalmatie decided to explore opening the Persian Gulf to France—reviving an idea that went back to Colbert and the *Compagnie royale des Indes Orientales*. He appointed Paul-Émile Botta, archeologist and future consul in Mosul, as the French representative in Bushehr and commercial attaché to Sercey's embassy. In terms of politics, Dalmatie had reached the conclusion that France's inability to directly access Iranian territory and its challenging and fitful relations with Iran did not allow France to seek direct political influence there.<sup>46</sup> Thus, he hoped that Britain would be unconcerned about a French presence in Bushehr to facilitate commerce through the Persian Gulf. Dalmatie encouraged his potential envoy, Botta, to explore the political issues related to the southern regions of the Persian Gulf. Since France was involved in the Egyptian–Ottoman War and supported Mohammad-Ali Pasha, those regions were of particular interest to a French alliance with Egypt.<sup>47</sup> It was nevertheless clear from the outset that the French plan was impractical, even though the relationship between Iran and Britain was still unfriendly at the time. Britain, which historically had by far the largest trade with Iran in this region, was not supposed to accord any opportunity to France in the south of Iran. As a result of British opposition, Botta's appointment did not occur, and Sercey's mission did not meet Dalmatie's expectations to advance France's objectives in the crucial years in which French involvement in the Second Ottoman–Egyptian War (1839–41) had turned the Franco-British alliance into one of resentment. The French government recalled the envoy to France in 1840 after his short-lived mission resulted in failure.<sup>48</sup>

At that point, Iranian Prime Minister Mirza Aqasi (1835–48)—who had first come up with the idea of appealing to France as a third power—realized that France had had neither the ability nor the desire to replace Britain and that by removing Britain from the diplomatic scene, Iran would inevitably be placed under the Russian yoke. He knew that achieving a commercial treaty was a priority for the British government that the Iranian government had refused for years. The Qajar court had resisted the British treaty not only because of Russian pressure, but also because the shah believed that expanding trade with industrial countries would be damaging to domestic industries.<sup>49</sup>

Palmerston had addressed the issue of the commercial treaty, which McNeill had already arranged, as one of the nine British points required to reestablish the Anglo-Iranian relationship.<sup>50</sup> To resolve the tensions with Britain, Mirza Aqasi, in a letter of apology to Palmerston, declared that “a commercial treaty agreeably to the arrangement made with Sir John McNeill [...] shall be concluded upon the

<sup>46</sup>Dalmatie to Botta, 20 January 1840, in Hellot-Bellier, *France–Iran*, 119.

<sup>47</sup>Lord Palmerston had already instructed the British consul in Egypt to warn the pasha of Egypt, whose army had reached Arabia, against any attempt to establish his power on the shores of the Persian Gulf. See Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*, 301.

<sup>48</sup>His main achievement was to obtain a decree from Mohammad Shah in favor of the Catholic Christians in 1840.

<sup>49</sup>Ellis to Palmerston, 16 January 1836, in Issawi, *The Economic History of Iran*, 78.

<sup>50</sup>“Memorandum (enclosure in No. 47),” 11 July 1839, in *Correspondence Relating to Persia*, 57.

arrival of an English minister.”<sup>51</sup> *The Times* on 7 January 1840, announced that “a definitive arrangement of the matters in dispute between England and Persia had taken place,” following Ajudanbashi’s mission to France and Britain in 1839.<sup>52</sup> It took quite a while for Mohammad Shah to evacuate Afghanistan and to unwillingly comply with British demands.

The Qajar court had been under pressure from Russia to resist a British commercial treaty, since 1828. The Russian ambassador in Tehran, Count Simonich, suspected that Britain, by obtaining a commercial treaty, wished to expand the trading posts of the East India Company to the shores of the Caspian Sea and threaten Russian trade operations there.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, after the shah’s failure in Herat, Russian Foreign Minister Count Nesselrode changed Russian policy, dismissed Simonich, pursued a policy of rapprochement with Britain and used his country’s influence to bring peace to Iran.<sup>54</sup> Nesselrode realized that Russia then needed to limit its expansionist policy, despite disagreements with Britain, to avoid threatening the existing European equilibrium.

Hence, the circumstances had changed in favor of Britain, and McNeill, upon his arrival at Tehran “was received with marked attention and profuse expressions of friendship.”<sup>55</sup> He consequently negotiated with Foreign Minister Mirza Abul Hasan Ilchi (1838–45), and, within a few days, finalized the delayed treaty on 28 October 1841.<sup>56</sup> It seems improbable that McNeill would have achieved this as easily and quickly in ordinary circumstances and prior to the Herat crisis. On the other hand, if this treaty had been signed at a later date, the negotiation process conceivably would have been more difficult. In less than three months after the signing of this treaty, the British army was devastated near Kabul by Afghan tribesmen during the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839–42), and the image of this disastrous defeat could have diminished Britain’s position at the negotiating table to a considerable extent, turning the circumstances to McNeill’s disadvantage.

In drafting the treaty, McNeill exactly followed Ellis’ instructions that only two articles comprising the most-favored-nation clause and the right to establish consular agents, added to the Anglo-Iranian treaty of 1814, would satisfy all British demands. Ellis had argued that the Russian commercial treaty with all its details could provide sufficient protection to a British trade benefiting from the most-favored-nation clause.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the British commercial treaty, like its Russian counterpart, was an additional protocol, guaranteed by the updated treaty of Tehran.

The Qajar court saw the treaty as a way to end Britain’s resentment over the siege of Herat. However, Mohammad Shah had made it clear that he opposed the establishment

<sup>51</sup>Palmerston to Aqasi, 18 January 1840, in *ibid.*, 97.

<sup>52</sup>*The Times* (London, England), Tuesday, 7 January 1840, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup>Yapp, *Strategies of British India*, 131.

<sup>54</sup>Nesselrode to Pozzo di Borgo, 25 March 1839, in *Correspondence Relating to Persia and Afghanistan*, 279–285.

<sup>55</sup>*Memoir of the Right Honorable Sir John McNeill*, 255.

<sup>56</sup>For the text of the treaty, see Hertslet, *Treaties*, 9–11.

<sup>57</sup>Ellis to Palmerston, 1 September 1836, in Issawi, *The Economic History of Iran*, 80.

of the British consular representation in Bushehr, and only permitted the British Residency to continue its activities there as before.<sup>58</sup> As for Britain, the ratification of the treaty, placed its nationals in Iran on the same footing as Russian nationals and also re-calibrated the balance of power that had been in Russia's favor for a decade.<sup>59</sup> As a result, Britain and Russia reached a better understanding in Iran, and, in McNeill's own words, "the good understanding between us and the Russians at the moment [...] is very valuable to us, and I hope it will be preserved."<sup>60</sup> Nesselrode also demonstrated his determination "to uphold the new system" based on "reconciliation with England."<sup>61</sup>

The 1841 treaty was instrumental in the conclusion of other European treaties in the 1840s, including the Franco-Iranian treaty of 1847. Naturally, France could not have imagined to conclude any commercial treaty with Iran as long as Britain was deprived of this advantage. However, after the British treaty was ratified in 1841, not only France, but also Belgium and Spain managed to strike treaties of friendship and commerce with Iran, something which appeared unlikely prior to the signing of British treaty.

Both the Belgian and Spanish treaties were signed basically at the initiative of the Iranian government and followed the same policy of Mirza Aqasi in the hope of appealing to more European players to change the Anglo-Russian balance of power.<sup>62</sup> It became his policy in general to attempt to "connect [...] more closely and intimately with another European government," in case of tensions with either of the two superpowers.<sup>63</sup> The Belgian and Spanish treaties, however, made clear that neither of these countries was willing to interfere in the Iranian affairs, reflecting the fact that Britain would not allow them to sign treaties that would threaten British interests in Iran.

Since Belgium and Spain did not have representation in Iran, their treaties, both in seven articles, were signed in Istanbul by the Iranian ambassador, Ja'far Khan Moshir al-Dowla, and the Belgian and Spanish ambassadors to the Porte. The treaty between Iran and Belgium was ratified by Mohammad Shah on 30 December 1841 (signed on 14 July 1841), more than two months after the British treaty was ratified. Possibly at Britain's suggestion, the shah amended the third article and removed the most-favored-nation trading clause before ratification. The Belgian government did not agree to the change and instructed the Belgian ambassador, Baron de Behr, to request that this clause be appended to the treaty. As a result of further negotiations, both Iranian and Belgian ambassadors to Istanbul signed a joint statement that recog-

<sup>58</sup>Mohammad Shah to Mirza Mas'ud Ansāri, 1253/1838, in *Asnādi az ravābet-e irān va englis dar abh-e Mohammad Shah Qājār*, 199–200.

<sup>59</sup>Entner states that, after 1840, Russian trade in Iran became much less prosperous. See Entner, *Russo-Persian Commercial Relations*, 10; Amanat, *Cities & Trade*, viii.

<sup>60</sup>*Memoir of the Right Honorable Sir John McNeill*, 255.

<sup>61</sup>Nesselrode to Duhamel, 7 November 1839, in Ingle, *Nesselrode and the Russian Rapprochement with Britain*, 151.

<sup>62</sup>Avery, "The Dream of Empire," 15.

<sup>63</sup>Fowler, *Three Years in Persia*, 220.

nized both parties' right to most-favored-nation trading treatment as requested by Baron de Behr.<sup>64</sup> Although Mohammad Shah approved attaching the statement to the treaty more than one year after signature (26 October 1842), he never enforced it, and consequently the Belgian parliament neither ratified nor published the treaty. The Spanish treaty, which was signed on 4 March 1842 in the name of Isabel II (r. 1843–1868) under General Espartero's regency (1840–43), suffered the same fate as the Belgian treaty.<sup>65</sup>

### *The French Commercial Treaty of 1847*

Although the Belgian and Spanish treaties were both instrumental to the process of the French treaty, France's position as a third power in Iran was completely different from that of those countries. France had a long history of relations with Iran, which was partly due to its leaders' enthusiasm to interact with France. France had extended its network of influence in North Africa and the Ottoman Empire, and challenged the power of Russia and Britain in the region.

Beginning in the 1840s, some changes occurred that encouraged France to open the prospect of a new relationship with Iran. The Eastern Crisis (1839–41) that led to the deterioration of the Franco-British alliance had been resolved, and France had returned to the Concert of Europe. The new government of the pro-British François Guizot,<sup>66</sup> who advocated an *entente cordiale*, had come to power in France, and Palmerston had left office after peace had returned to the Iranian diplomatic scene once the Herat crisis was resolved. All this had created a new diplomatic climate that facilitated a resumption of Franco-Iranian relations.

Nearly four years after the return of Count de Sercey, Guizot decided to send Count de Sartiges, secretary at the French embassy in Istanbul, to Tehran, essentially to secure the protection of French missionaries who had been active in northwestern Iran since the late 1830s. Obtaining a treaty was not therefore Guizot's priority. The Iranian and French delegates in Istanbul made the necessary arrangements for Sartiges' travel to Iran. The troubles of the French Lazarists made it imperative for Sartiges to first see Bahman Mirza, the governor-general of Azarbaijan, in Tabriz, to resolve their issue. He also gathered information about European trade activities from European merchants residing there—and only arrived in Tehran in August 1844.

Sartiges, like his predecessor Sercey, reported on the shortcomings of prospective French trade activities with Tabriz. He admitted that Russia, due to its common border and attendant influence in northwestern Iran, and Britain, which saturated

<sup>64</sup>Garcia de la Vega, *Recueil des traités et conventions*, 603.

<sup>65</sup>The Spanish treaty was never ratified under Mohammad Shah's mandate and remained a dead letter until it was redrafted in 1870. Although signed under pro-British Espartero, who wished to pursue British free-trade policies, the treaty did not grant the right of most-favored-nation status to Spain, except in "customs dues and other imposts". More importantly, consular representations for both Belgium and Spain were only allowed, according to their treaties, in Tehran and Tabriz, indicating Britain's sensitivity to any other European consulates in the port of Bushehr. See Hertslet, *Treaties*, 140–143.

<sup>66</sup>Although Guizot was the Foreign Minister (1840–47), he was *de facto* head of the government.

markets with cheap goods, had all the capability to capture the trade of Tabriz. Sugar, linen, and silk fabrics were the only French goods effectively sold in the Iranian markets; Lyon silk fabrics, however, were luxury goods with limited supply.<sup>67</sup> Sartiges reported that the insecurity of trade routes had discouraged French commerce firms to make shipments to or to invest in Tabriz; and he emphasized that for the sake of French trade in Iran, it was crucial to establish a French consulate at Iran's two main commercial points of entry, namely Tabriz and Bushehr.<sup>68</sup>

Upon Sartiges' arrival in Tehran, Mohammad Shah received him with "perfect kindness and told me the friendliest things about France and its government."<sup>69</sup> However, Sartiges, in his first encounter with Mirza Aqasi, realized that the latter was "mistrustful and cautious of me and my mission." Mirza Aqasi was disappointed by the failure of Sercey's mission. It was not worthwhile for Mirza Aqasi to again run the risk of confronting Russia and Britain for the sake of a short and unprofitable relationship with France. In fact, at the time of Sercey's mission, Iran and France were seeking closer relations, and both were under pressure from Britain and Russia. France was deeply involved in the Eastern Crisis, and Iran was entangled in the Herat crisis. Mirza Aqasi was annoyed that France had abandoned Iran, and Guizot, in turn, complained that Mohammad Shah was reluctant to sign an agreement with France and had rejected Sercey's request for the establishment of French consulates in Iranian cities.<sup>70</sup>

However, Sartiges believed that France should be on friendly terms with Iran and assume the role of a "benevolent friend" that Britain had also desired since the early nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup> Sartiges' ambitions apparently went beyond securing commercial benefits and protection for French missionaries, and extended to gaining French political influence in the Ottoman Empire through a close relationship with the court of Tehran.<sup>72</sup> By concluding a commercial treaty with Iran, he expected to stabilize the French position in order to ensure his country's influence not only in Iran, but especially in the neighboring Ottoman Empire.

However, Sartiges needed first to explore whether he could achieve a new decree on terms favorable to French merchants and missionaries.<sup>73</sup> One of the main concerns of the French government was the protection of its nationals working in Iran, particularly Lazarist missionaries and military officers. The achievement of a treaty was Sartiges' final step and conditional to considering all aspects of Iran's foreign policies and the willingness of the Iranian government. For this reason, the French government, at the outset, did not confer full authority on its envoy, so he first had to decide whether there was an opportunity to develop the relationship.

<sup>67</sup>Sartiges, "Ecrit sur le commerce." AMFAE/MD/Perse 11, ff. 106–7.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., f. 109.

<sup>69</sup>Sartiges, "Compte-rendu de la mission envoyée à Téhéran," f. 117.

<sup>70</sup>"Instruction à M. le comte de Sartiges," 14 February 1844, in Hellot-Bellier, *France-Iran*, 803.

<sup>71</sup>Sartiges, "Compte-rendu de la mission envoyée à Téhéran," f. 207.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>In November 1844, he obtained from the Shah a decree ensuring that French missionaries could freely continue their activities in Iran. see Nateq, *Irān dar rāhyābi-ye farhangī*, 305.

It took six months for Sartiges to examine the circumstances and, more importantly, to gain Mirza Aqasi's favorable stance regarding the signature of a commercial treaty with France similar to those concluded by Belgium and Spain. Mirza Aqasi had come to think that France was now more powerful than during the time of Sercey's mission, and as an "impregnable country" France might be able to match Russia and Britain in Iran.<sup>74</sup> In response to Sartiges' demand, he finally agreed to issue a royal decree in favor of the French merchants in Iran, but Sartiges could not make a similar promise, with regard to Iranian merchants, without his government's approval.<sup>75</sup>

Mirza Aqasi therefore sent Mirza Mohammad 'Ali Shirazi as envoy extraordinary to France, to further negotiate on this matter. Mohammad 'Ali was appointed as a substitute for his uncle Abul Hasan Ilchi, who was first chosen for a mission to France, but died in 1845. Sartiges welcomed Mohammad 'Ali's departure, as he had welcomed his appointment, because Ilchi was a pro-British diplomat who, Sartiges claimed, kept reporting the confidential dealings of the court to the British legation in Tehran.<sup>76</sup>

Mirza Aqasi first commanded Mirza Mohammad 'Ali to regularly send communications describing in detail his negotiations with French authorities.<sup>77</sup> He then urged his envoy to avoid any delay and any unnecessary stop en route to France. But, at the same time, negotiations to delineate the Ottoman–Iranian border with the mediation of Russia and Britain had reached a conclusion at the Erzurum Conference (1843–47), resulting in the signing of the Second Treaty of Erzurum (1847). Immediately afterward, the Ottoman government claimed that parts of the treaty needed to be revised, and the Ottoman government, along with Russia and Britain, insisted that the Iranian envoy should stop in Istanbul to negotiate with the Ottoman representatives. Although he had first instructed his envoy to stop in Istanbul only briefly, Mirza Aqasi later assigned him the task of addressing Ottoman concerns, as well as exchanging the ratifications of the Erzurum treaty. Therefore, the envoy's stay lasted longer than foreseen. The talks in the Ottoman capital had also failed to achieve any results. Suspicious of Mirza Mohammad 'Ali's mission to France, British and Russian representatives in Istanbul also sought to discourage him from traveling to France.<sup>78</sup> Sartiges, meanwhile, urged the French envoy in Turkey to make every effort to facilitate the envoy's immediate departure for France.<sup>79</sup> As a result, the ratification process and further negotiations regarding the border treaty were deferred until the envoy's return from France. Despite these obstacles, Mirza Mohammad 'Ali managed to leave for France on 26 August 1847 aboard a French naval ship. This Ottoman affair negatively affected Mirza Mohammad 'Ali's French mission, forcing

<sup>74</sup>Hommaire de Hell, *Voyages en Turquie et en Perse*, 340.

<sup>75</sup>Mirza Aqasi to Guizot, January 1847, in Hellot-Bellier, *France-Iran*, 517; for the text of the decree, see Adamiyat, *Amir Kabir va irān*, 552–553.

<sup>76</sup>Qāem-Maqāmi, "Yek qarārdād-e bāzarghāni beyn-e irān va farānsa," 186.

<sup>77</sup>*Asnādi az ravand-e en 'eqād-e 'ahdnāmeḥ-ye dovvom-e Arzanat or-Rum*, 202.

<sup>78</sup>Adamiyat, *Amir Kabir va irān*, 559.

<sup>79</sup>Nateq, *Irān dar rāhyābi-ye farhangī*, 124–5.



him to postpone his French embassy and then accelerating his return from France halfway into his mission, when he was in the midst of negotiations with the French authorities in Paris.

While he was stuck in Istanbul in the summer of 1847, Sartiges and Mirza Aqasi engaged in negotiations with the aim of reaching a treaty. Sartiges used the Spanish treaty of 1842 as a model for his preparation of the French treaty, but then added the most-favored-nation clause, exclusively accorded to Russia and Britain. According to this provision, French nationals, in addition to trade advantages, received consular protection, and could decide over their disputes with the Iranians. In addition, Sartiges believed that the Iranian government was too weak to ensure the security of foreigners and that France, therefore, should prioritize the security of its nationals in Iran.<sup>80</sup> Although Article 5 of the Spanish treaty was devoted to this issue, Sartiges dealt with it in more detail in Article 3 of his treaty.

By amending Article 4 of the Spanish treaty, which allowed the creation of the legation in Tehran and a consulate in Tabriz, Sartiges included in Article 5 of his treaty the right to a French consulate in Bushehr. To have a presence in the most important Iranian port was an ambitious demand for France, and it was regrettable to Britain. Francis Farrant, British chargé d'affaires in Tehran (1847–49), later claimed that the French consul in Bushehr would incite riots against Britain in the Persian Gulf.<sup>81</sup>

However, Sartiges was hesitant about that stipulation being implemented because “we must expect to meet on this question the resistance from the Persian Government [...] committed with respect to England by official acts [...] not to grant recognition to other agents than to British consuls residing at Bushehr.”<sup>82</sup> In that case, to convince the Iranian government, Sartiges proposed, instead of a consulate at Bushehr, a delegate of the French legation, entitled to fly the flag in Bushehr and enjoy consular immunity. It was essential for France to connect southern Iran to its possessions in the Indian Ocean and East Africa such as Bourbon Island.

Sartiges and Mirza Aqasi, who represented the ailing shah “with unconditional authority,”<sup>83</sup> eventually finalized the negotiations and signed the treaty, known as the Treaty of Niavaran, in six articles on 24 July 1847.<sup>84</sup> As expected, the signing of the treaty could not be kept secret. Russian and British ministers soon learned about it because of their imposing influence at the court. Not only had the Russians and British been informed, but news of the treaty was divulged to the European public through newspapers.<sup>85</sup> The treaty brought Mirza Aqasi the hostility of Russia and Britain’s ministers in Tehran, who pushed to block its ratification and implementation. Concluding and implementing a treaty with France having the status of most-favored nation would elevate France’s position in Iran to the level of Russia

<sup>80</sup>Sartiges, “Considérations sur le traité conclu entre l’Espagne et la Perse,” f.151.

<sup>81</sup>Adamiyat, *Amir Kabir va irān*, 557–8.

<sup>82</sup>Sartiges, “Considérations sur le traité conclu entre l’Espagne et la Perse,” 14 December 1850, AMFAE/MD/Perse 11, f. 150.

<sup>83</sup>Adamiyat, *Amir Kabir va irān*, 554; Nateq, *Irān dar rāhyābi-ye farhangi*, 313.

<sup>84</sup>For the only available printed version of the treaty, see Adamiyat, *Amir Kabir va irān*, 554–6.

<sup>85</sup>Nateq, *Irān dar rāhyābi-ye farhangi*, 233.

and Britain. Francis Farrant stated that the only reason for a French presence in Tehran was to intervene in the political affairs of Iran and therefore a rupture in Franco-Iranian relations and the departure of the French legation would satisfy Britain.<sup>86</sup>

In order to avoid British suspicions, Guizot's government, although it invested Sartiges with the authority to remain and act as minister in Tehran, was reluctant to fulfill Mohammad 'Ali's demands regarding the commercial treaty. Another reason why Guizot disregarded the agreement was his plan to unilaterally increase tariffs on Iranian goods imported into France.<sup>87</sup> Although the French national economy, during this period of industrialization, pursued international ties and colonial markets, it was primarily set up to increase protective tariffs on imported goods so as to help France advance its domestic production through additional income from tariffs.<sup>88</sup> However, Guizot promised the Iranian minister to further discuss the matter and to send the French response, to Sartiges to inform the shah and Mirza Aqasi.<sup>89</sup> Guizot's unwillingness is evident in his memoirs, in which he described the Iranian embassy as a vain attempt rather than a serious proposal.<sup>90</sup>

The French government delayed the dispatch of the ratified copy to the point where the six-month deadline for its ratification elapsed. Two months after Mirza Mohammad 'Ali's departure on 11 December 1847, the state of affairs in France changed considerably due to the Revolution of 1848, which overthrew the French monarchy and established the Second Republic (1848–52). Unable to gain control of the situation, Guizot's government collapsed and King Louis-Philippe was forced to abdicate on 24 February 1848.

In those troubled months, Sartiges had to make repeated queries about the ratification before receiving an answer from the officials of the new French Republic. Republican president Louis-Eugène Cavaignac (1848) finally endorsed the treaty in July 1848 and appointed Alphonse Dano as secretary to the mission, to carry the ratification along with Sartiges' new credentials as envoy of the Republic.<sup>91</sup> But when Dano arrived at Tehran in September 1848, Mohammad Shah had just died of a long illness, and Sartiges had to negotiate with a new Iranian government.

When Naser al-Din Shah (r. 1848–96) ascended to the throne in October 1848, the political situation of both Iran and France had entirely changed. In conversation with Sartiges, Naser al-Din Shah and his grand vizier Amir Kabir both raised internal issues with which the new government had yet to contend.<sup>92</sup> Along with domestic issues, Iran also had to deal with the Russian and British burden, which was the main obstacle to the French or any foreign relationship, not to mention the French

<sup>86</sup>Adamiyat, *Amir Kabir va irān*, 557–8.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 567.

<sup>88</sup>Clough, *France: A History of National Economics*, 140–41.

<sup>89</sup>Shirazi, "Ruznāmeḥ-ye sefārat," f. 8.

<sup>90</sup>Guizot, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de mon temps*, 243–4.

<sup>91</sup>Hellot-Bellier, *France–Iran*, 128–9.

<sup>92</sup>Amir Kabir to Mohammad Khan maslahat-gozār, in *Nāmeḥ hā-ye Amir Kabir*, 221; Sartiges, "Compte-rendu de la mission envoyée à Téhéran," f. 124.

treaty. In better circumstances with respect to Russia and Britain, Sartiges noted, both Naser al-Din Shah and Amir Kabir would have adopted a “proper approach” to the relations with France.<sup>93</sup> Amir Kabir had initially promised Sartiges to approve and implement the treaty, but then he changed his mind.<sup>94</sup> The shah himself later, in 1850, expressed through his interpreter, the Armenian Jean David, his desire to revive the French treaty and ultimately agreed to a comprehensive French treaty of commerce in 1855, based on the same terms that Sartiges had proposed and advanced.<sup>95</sup>

Both Russia and Britain disagreed with Sartiges’ five-year presence in Iran, and they were seeking an opportunity to expel the French delegation. The changes in Iran, after the death of Mohammad Shah, and in France, due to collapse of the monarchy, provided an opportunity for them to end this relationship. The Revolution of 1848 had “destroyed the French influence” in Iran, as acknowledged by an eyewitness closely familiar with Sartiges.<sup>96</sup> Although the Qajar court did not reject the treaty and even made efforts to retain Sartiges in Iran, both superpowers applied pressure on Tehran until it practically invalidated the treaty. Under British and Russian pressure, the council of ministers under Amir Kabir, who had great influence at the court and over the shah, after eight days of discussion, ultimately decided not to sacrifice the friendship of Britain and Russia for the sake of France.<sup>97</sup> However, public opinion in Iran and that of “rational elites,” as the French observers called them, favored France at that time.<sup>98</sup>

There were other disagreements that prevented the treaty from being ratified. The type of new French government that had assumed power after Louis Philippe’s regime was a republic, an unfamiliar term perceived as a threat to the monarchy. Naser al-Din Shah refused to recognize the president of the republic on an equal footing and essentially ignored his ratification of the treaty.<sup>99</sup> He even went so far as to “manifest his ridiculous fear of me [Sartiges] introducing new republican ideas into his kingdom.”<sup>100</sup> However, the influence of revolutionary thought on Iranian politics of the time cannot be denied.<sup>101</sup> Edward Burgess, a British merchant, active in Iran at the time, claimed that his translations of the European newspapers regarding the French upheaval were widely read by the educated Iranians.<sup>102</sup> An interim council that was held immediately after the death of Mohammad Shah, until Naser al-Din

<sup>93</sup>Sartiges, “Compte-rendu de la mission envoyée à Téhéran,” f. 127.

<sup>94</sup>*Journal de Constantinople*, Saturday, 9 June 1849, p. 1.

<sup>95</sup>“Négociations relatives à un traité de commerce,” 1853, AMDAE/MD/Perse 11, f. 304.

<sup>96</sup>Burgess, *Letters from Persia*, 102–3.

<sup>97</sup>Sartiges, “Compte-rendu de la mission envoyée à Téhéran,” f. 125.

<sup>98</sup>*Revue d’Orient*, 107.

<sup>99</sup>Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, 105.

<sup>100</sup>Sartiges, “Compte-rendu de la mission envoyée à Téhéran,” f. 124.

<sup>101</sup>In 1834, the Foreign Minister Mirza Abu’l Hasan Shirazi, in order to justify Ali Mirza Adel-Shah’s claim to the throne, argued that, according to European tradition, the late Shah’s opinion in choosing his successor was subject to the People’s consent. See Sepehr, *Nasikh al-Tavārikh*, 601.

<sup>102</sup>Burgess, *Letters from Persia*, 103.

Shah arrived in Tehran from Tabriz, became prone to republican ideas, including the notion of promoting collective efforts in running public affairs.<sup>103</sup> Various council members were likely inspired by Sartiges, who as envoy of the French Republic was not well received at the Qajar court, partly because of the long-standing abhorrence for republicanism in Iran.<sup>104</sup> Sartiges' five-year affiliation with Mohammad Shah and Mirza Aqasi, both of whom had fallen out of favor with the new administration, had also made his presence unwelcome.

In his communication with Sartiges, Amir Kabir expressed concerns that sounded like an excuse to negate the agreement. Despite being aware of unusual circumstances both in Iran and France, Amir Kabir stated that "when state documents were referred to, neither the Shah's authority in the name of Mirza Aqasi nor the treaty in Mirza Aqasi's seal and sign were found," and, even if this was not the case, "eight months had passed from the scheduled date, and not approving during the time limit is the sign of disapproval."<sup>105</sup>

Amir Kabir's council had also rejected the treaty, claiming that it was against the national interest, demanding a new treaty which would ensure "the interest and satisfaction of the government and the welfare of the people and the consistency of trade."<sup>106</sup> However, the treaty itself resembled the other commercial agreements signed by Iran in the same period. Amir Kabir himself was instrumental in concluding a commercial treaty in October 1851 with the United States, which, according to George Marsh, US minister to Istanbul and the signatory of the treaty, was substantially like the French treaty.<sup>107</sup> The US treaty, in turn, was, like the French treaty, inspired by the Spanish treaty of 1842, in addition to including the most-favored-nation clause and envisioning the establishment of an American consulate at Bushehr. Because of these additions, this treaty also shared the same fate as the French treaty because it was neither ratified nor enforced due to "British intrigue," as US officials claimed.<sup>108</sup>

Amir Kabir similarly claimed that France should commit itself to supporting Iran with French warships through the Persian Gulf in the event of a potential war with a third country.<sup>109</sup> Perhaps he had in mind the British naval action against Iran during the Herat crisis, or, the contemporaneous French support for Mohammad 'Ali Pasha of Egypt, but this strategic issue had not been raised in any treaty with Iran after the fall of Napoleon. Amir Kabir likely knew that the Russian and British neighbors essentially intended to preserve Iran's sovereignty because they preferred it as a buffer region, and any war with Iran would obviously damage their commercial interests and strategic influence. Moreover, it was not customary to include a joint defense provision in a commercial treaty.

<sup>103</sup>Jahāngir Mirza, *Tārīkh-e now*, 306–7; Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, 104.

<sup>104</sup>Mathee, "Between Aloofness and Fascination," 232; Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, 105.

<sup>105</sup>Amir Kabir to Sartiges, in *Nāmeḥ hā-ye Amir Kabir*, 218.

<sup>106</sup>Amir Kabir to Sartiges, in *ibid.*, 218–19; Adamiyat, *Amir Kabir va irān*, 568.

<sup>107</sup>Marsh to Webster, 18 December 1851, in Miller, *Treaties and Other International Acts*, 458.

<sup>108</sup>Hurewitz, *Middle East and North Africa in World Politics*, 337.

<sup>109</sup>Adamiyat, *Amir Kabir va irān*, 567.

Russia and Britain had pressed Amir Kabir to reject the treaty or to make substantial changes to it: eliminating the most-favored-nation clause and concessions such as establishing a French consulate at Bushehr. When the negotiations failed to produce results, Sartiges issued an ultimatum for the Iranian government urging it to ratify the treaty, while threatening to void the relationship. As his deadline passed, the French envoy first left for Tabriz and remained there for three months. Farrant was informed that Amir Kabir had demanded, through an intermediary, that Sartiges stay three months in Tabriz to provide Amir Kabir enough time to resolve the issue.<sup>110</sup> His correspondence with Amir Kabir gives the impression that Amir Kabir was forced to cut ties without intending to do so. He sent repeated messages to Sartiges demanding that he not leave Iran or cut off relations. When nothing happened after three months, Sartiges left for Istanbul, through Trabzon, with his entire delegation in July 1849. In a news article published in Istanbul, he sent an implicitly threatening message to the Iranian government as well as to the British, saying that “if France is offended by motives that forced her mission to leave Tehran, by sending four war brigs from Bourbon Island to Bushehr, France will impose on the Shah’s government all the required conditions.”<sup>111</sup> Sartiges actually compared himself to John McNeill, who had left Iran ten years earlier after issuing a similar threat. France did not have the British power and position in Iran to make such a threat, nor did the French government risk its position to save the Iranian relationship in such a way.

The problem, however, was that both France and Iran pursued ambitious objectives beyond the framework of this treaty, and both were frustrated as they realized those goals were unachievable. Mirza Aqasi’s approach to an open relationship with France during his term illustrates his zeal to create a counterbalance to the Russian and British influence. However, preserving French alignment with Britain as well as France’s European and colonial issues affected French relations with Iran in this period. Since Iran’s political circumstances worked against the French treaty, Guizot did not insist on ratifying it. He had reservations about overseas imperial projects that could not satisfy first and foremost France’s European interests.<sup>112</sup> Sartiges, however, did endeavor to salvage the treaty because it was the result of his five-year mission to Tehran, and without it he appeared to have achieved nothing.

Fereydoun Adamiyat put the blame on Sartiges, however, saying he destroyed the relationship because of his arrogant and threatening attitude toward Iran.<sup>113</sup> Abbas Amanat in turn argues that the break in Iran’s relationship with France was mainly due to what he calls “one of Amir Kabir’s obvious policy errors”; his failure to take advantage of an opportunity to affect and contain the influence of Russia and Britain in Iran.<sup>114</sup> In my view, however, the influential role of Britain and Russia was the main factor in the break of the relationship, which deprived both France

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., 569.

<sup>111</sup>*Journal de Constantinople*, Saturday, 9 June 1849, p. 1.

<sup>112</sup>Pinkney, *Decisive Years in France 1840–1847*, 146.

<sup>113</sup>Adamiyat, *Amir Kabir va irān*, 569–70.

<sup>114</sup>Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, 105.

and Iran of the opportunity to develop their relationship at that crucial point. The French relationship was restored, however, through redrafting Sartiges' treaty in 1855 under the Second Empire (1852–70), when France managed to conclude a series of commercial treaties with foreign powers, enabled to do so because the French Constitution of 1852 allowed Louis Napoleon to strike treaties through his imperial power, without obtaining the Legislature's approval.<sup>115</sup> As a result, his reign marked a new stage in the French Middle Eastern policy and the Franco-Iranian relationship in the context of a new, post-Crimean War world order.

### Conclusion

After the collapse of Napoleon's empire in 1815, France no longer had the political influence of Russia and Britain in Iran, and it resolved to assert its presence through a policy of developing a trade network there—by way of a *pénétration pacifique* that would later become the hallmark of German attempts to gain traction in Iran. The commercial situation of France in Iran and the accounts of the French envoys indicate that establishing trade in Iran was not a profitable option for France. As statistics for the mid-nineteenth century show, there were only a handful of French merchants who invested in bringing French goods to Iranian markets, and the amount of French trade with Iran was insignificant.<sup>116</sup> Yet France was pursuing long-standing, multipurpose plans that were more ambitious than solely establishing its trade in Iran. Ultimately, Iran was more attractive for France from a political and strategic standpoint than for its commerce. The French were particularly interested in Iran's strategic position for transit of goods and products, creating a network of trade from the Black Sea to the Indian Ocean. French aims in Iran were in line with expansion of the French trade network linking French Mediterranean trade to Iranian markets through the Ottoman Empire and the Black Sea. Through the Persian Gulf, France could connect Iran to its Indian Ocean colonies. These were the policies that French diplomats pursued in Iran, as they insisted that France should not remain a passive observer simply monitoring political undertakings that were occurring in Iran, but instead should actively take part in them. They equally insisted that should the value of the Iranian relationship be underestimated, Russia and Britain, in the absence of France, would benefit commercially and politically from their dominant position in Iran.

Following Iran's willingness to attract France as a counterpower, France, first and foremost, determined to form a network of influence at the Qajar court, which it eventually created in the 1840s, and then to seek a commercial treaty aiming primarily to obtain an influential French presence in Iran. Based on the treaty, France could equally use its influence as an asset in dealing with Russia and Britain, advancing its policies in the Ottoman Empire that was vital for French interests and in which France had invested both politically and commercially.

<sup>115</sup>Crandall, *Treaties, Their Making and Enforcement*, 306.

<sup>116</sup>Issawi, *The Economic History of Iran*, 146.

Russia and Britain jointly attempted and finally succeeded in preventing France from achieving its goals.

Failure in achieving goals in diplomacy depends on various factors, however, and countries tend to measure various costs and benefits of their diplomatic actions.<sup>117</sup> Occasionally, what seems to be a success in some respects may cost a great deal to a specific country. A French treaty with Iran could have been costly for France in the 1830s and 1840s, but the circumstances changed completely in the 1850s. With the advent of the Second Empire, the French military, industrial, and political powers were entirely transformed, and Louis Napoleon's colonial ambitions once again extended to the Middle East. During this period, France now a world power again, returned as a force to be reckoned with in Iranian politics, opening a new page in the history of the relationship by striking an advantageous treaty in 1855 that finally accorded it the most-favored-nation status.

This period, dominated by the early stages of the Great Game in Central Asia and Iran, marked the French failure in Iranian diplomacy and in its rivalries with the two other European powers.<sup>118</sup> Iran, on the other hand, was forced into this competition of power and influence, being the weakest of all parties, but it also acted deftly, even with gusto; playing off the various parties competing for its attention and bringing in France as a third and presumably less self-interested party so as to balance the two real bullies, the British and Russians. This turned into a pattern: Although, France remained an attractive great power in Iran during the rest of the nineteenth century, Germany would be Iran's "third" party between the turn of the twentieth century and, say, 1940, and later on the United States would take on that position - until the inevitable disappointment of 1953.

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<sup>117</sup>Baldwin, "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy," 171.

<sup>118</sup>The Great Game was a British plan against Russia to defend Britain's interests in Asia between 1828 and 1907. However, the period and purpose of the Great Game both for Russia and Britain still remain a subject of debate. See Edward Ingram, *The Beginning of the Great Game in Asia 1828-1834*, 13; Yapp, "The Legend of the Great Game," 180.

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