

Reforms and Reorganizations in Iran under

Hadji Mirza Agassi Yerevantsi

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Abstract: A new era of social, political, and economic development began in Iran after Qajar Dynasty came to power in 1786. This era witnessed changes in government, agriculture, military, politics, and socio-culture under the influence of super powers, namely, Britain, France, and Russia. Iran sought to maintain foreign influence by balancing super powers' interests and using them against each other with Ali Hadji Mirza Agassi making great contribution to this end. Ali Hadji Mirza Agassi was born in 1783 in Yerevan in a wealthy and respected religious family. He began his education under his father until age 14 and continued with Abdul-Samad Hamadani who introduced him to Sufism. He setup a theological school in Khoy after Hadj pilgrimage. His anchoritic and sagacious life earned him fame and respect in northern part of Iran attracting young students to his school. He later moved to Tabriz to educate notable students, including crown prince Abbas Mirza. Mirza Agassi's associations with Qajar crown princes earned him Chancellorship for nearly 13 years to play an important role in domestic political life of Iranian state during a turbulent period. Shah Mohammad gave Agassi free hand in running state during this period, which was marked with Qajar's internal rivalry, tribal insurgency, foreign meddling, and neighborly conflicts. Mirza Agassi sent the second wave of students to attend European universities; reduced government spending by lowering salaries and benefit buying displeasure and animosity from many; obtained duty free transit from Russia for goods imported from Europe and Caucasus; gained agreement from Russia to guard Iranian ports and sea lines against smuggling and rubbery; built water supply channels for Tehran, Kerman, Yazd, Gorgan, and Khozestan; hired foreign specialist for land explorations; and imported print presses and established print shops for printing newspapers and books. Mirza Agassi had to confront insurgency by Qashgai, Kurd, Turkmen, Baluchi, and Arab Tribes who raided and looted cities by meddling of super powers or neighboring countries. Mirza Agassi approached insurgent tribes in different ways including negotiations and army operations. Many unresolved issues ignited several wars between Iran and Turkey without conclusion. Another major conflict became eminent after Turkish army took over Karbala and massacred Shiite. Russia offered to mediate and Iranian side invited Britain to the table to balance them. Negotiations started in Erzurum and lasted four years. Negotiations broke up and resumed several times with threat of armed conflicts from one or the other side. Iran and Turkey finally made a settlement that included several demands made from Iran with Russia and Britain acting as guarantors. Erzurum conference was a diplomatic victory for Iran, a result that an armed conflict could not have produced.

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A new era in social, socio-political and economic development of Iran was marked by the accession to power of Qajar dynasty in 1786. While in Europe we see the end of the Middle Ages and obsolescence of the old feudal relations that occurred in the 16th – 17th centuries, in the history of the Iranian state this medieval period of development lasted until the mid of 19th century, the era of emergence of Babism movement in the historical arena. If we look at the internal structure of Iranian society in 30's – 50's years of 19th century, we see that this is the period of transformation of society in all spheres of life. Changes occurred in public administration, agrarian relations, military affairs, ideology and culture under the strong influence of European powers. First of all we observe

the increased activity of British, French and Russian diplomats and missionaries, seeking to enslave the Iranian government and put it in dependence on them. (3. pp. 25 – 26; 1. pp. 18 - 19).

The rulers of Iran during the reign of the first Qajar shahs from Agha Mohammad, Fath Ali Shah and Mohammad Shah sought to balance the interests of great powers and to contrast them with each other in order to keep the Iranian state with the least losses. (5. pp. 41 - 43). It was not easy because Iran lagged far behind the leading European powers both in military and in technological terms. Country's backwardness in the historical development is precisely that fact that explains the defeats of Iran in two wars with Russia. (1804 – 1813 and 1826 - 1828).

At the beginning shahs of the Qajar dynasty were little different from other tribal chiefs, who have ever captured the supreme power in Iran. Such tribal nominees by will of fate and Allah (God) in Iran called "muluk at-tavaif" ("kings from the tribes"). But in the first decades of the 19th century the geopolitical situation in the world has changed a lot. If someone wanted to stay on top of padishah power and control such a large state as historic Iran, which stretched from the Caucasus to Afghanistan and India, he had to create a strong central state apparatus and firmly connect to the center outlying districts of the country.

The first Qajar ruler Agha Mohammad Shah was dreaming about the greatness and the size of the Iranian state as in Sefevkidah's time, and the great Shah Abbas I served him as an example to emulate. (5. p. 28). However, he didn't rule enough to create stable central apparatus of power.

Fath Ali Shah began to solve that problem during his reign (1797 - 1834), his reforms continued under his successor, Mohammad Shah (1834 - 1848). As soon as Mohammad Shah sat on the throne, he immediately appointed Ali Hadji Mirza Agassi, who was his teacher since childhood, sadrazam of the state. It is known that Ali Hadji Mirza Agassi was born in 1783 in Yerevan, the capital of Shokur Saad province (which included also lands of Nakhichevan khanate), that province was part of Iran state since the shah Abbas the Great, from 1604 year. His father was one of the richest and most authoritative religious leaders in Yerevan khanate and had also a lot of property in Khoy, Salamas and in other cities of northern Iran. Much of that wealth has been lost as a result of Russian-Iranian war (1826 - 1828), when Russian troops not only took Yerevan and annexed its land to the Russian Empire, but went into Khoy, Salamas, Marageh, Tabriz, Ardabil and looted muslim clerics and officials of the Iranian state. His father later recalled that because of Russian entry into Yerevan and other towns of northern Iran in 1828, he lost his property and valuables to the sum of 900 ths. tomans.

Up to 14 years Ali Hadji Mirza Agassi received primary education from his father in Yerevan. Then he continued to study in Iran being taught by mullah Abdul-Samad Hamadani. Here begins his acquaintance with religious mysticism of sufism, which was popular in the early 19th century in some religious circles of society in Iran. He even had contact with Nur Ali shah's dervishes who were well-known in the Iranian world at that time. Four years later, grown up Mirza Agassi witnessed another military raid on Karbala by warlike nomads, during which his teacher, Abdul-Samad was killed. In 1801 Mirza Agassi took the entire family of his teacher out to Hamadan, where it was more tranquil. Then he reawakened his interest in mysticism and became a few years dervish. In 1810, in

the guise of a dervish, he made a pilgrimage to the holy places for all muslims in Medina. After returning from the hajj, he added the nickname "Hadji" to his name and settled in Knoy, in northern Iran. His life of hermit and sage soon earned him indisputable prestige and respect in every city of northern Iran and young people from all corners of Iran, from Ardabil to Hamadan, came to his religious school (madrasah) based in Khoy in order to study theology. Then there was a rise in his career of teacher and religious authority - a few years later he was invited to major city of the northern Iran, Tabriz, where he became a tutor for Mirza Qasim Bozorg Mochami's son, who was one of the most distinguished man in town. Just in Tabriz he met hereditary Prince Abbas Mirza. Prince liked knowledgeable and expert, well-versed in sufism young teacher of theology and made Mirza Agassi closer to him. He was appointed clerk and custodian of all the documents in the council (Majlis). However, he lost in the ensuing struggle and intrigues for the post of the first vizier in the chancellery of Crown Prince Abbas Mirza, and was forced to leave Tabriz and temporarily moved back to Khoy, where he took service with the Qajar ruler whose name was Amir Khan Qajar. Soon he became a teacher of one of Qajar princes, Mohammad Mirza, who was destined to become the third Qajar shah in 1834.

The student and the teacher established the most cordial and friendly relationship with each other for whole their life. In 1834 year Mohammed Mirza was put to the throne after the death of Fath Ali Shah, because Prince Abbas Mirza who considered the official valiahd (heir to the throne) for a long time died in October 1833. Mohammed Mirza was in the Iranian army sieging of Herat, when he learned about Fath Ali Shah's death. Mohammed Mirza's headquarters was in Meshhed, Khurasan. He hastened to make peace with Kamran Mirza, pursuant to which Fortress Gurian had to be demolished, fortifications around it had to be destroyed, all the prisoners who were Persians had to be released, and the governor of Heart was obligated to pay a 6 ths. tomans tribute to shah Iranian government annually. Meanwhile, it became known that one of the contenders for the throne Hassan Ali Mirza had raised an army in Fars, Kerman and Khuzestan and was moving towards Tehran. Hassan Ali Mirza's supporters were found out in Khurasan, which was up to these events considered a region where Mohammad Mirza had many associates. Mohammad Mirza appointed Allahyar Khan Assef-ed-Dowleh governor of the Khurasan province in order to have time before Hasan Ali Mirza would come in Tehran and secure the rear of Khurasan. Even before the arrival of Allahyar Khan in Khurasan, loyal to shah Kahraman Mirza, Mirza Masood and Pole Borovsky managed to smash uzbek

and turkmen troops and drive them beyond the Iranian border.

In 1834 the young shah appointed Mirza Abul Kashem Farahani sadrazam, but after about a year he was assassinated to shah's order, and Hadji Mirza Agassi Yerevantsi, who was Mohammad shah's tutor in childhood and adolescence, was appointed sadrazam and head of government.

So from 1835 to 1848 years, nearly 13 years, Hadji Mirza Agassi Yerevantsi played primary role in domestic political life of the Iranian state. There were rumors in Tehran that he took advantage of ordinary court intrigue to bring discredit on Mirza Abul Qasim Mochami and to present himself as the only worthy candidate for head of government. Many Iranian historians note that Padishah Mohammad (1834 - 1848) wasn't fond of dealing with the affairs of governance and delegate all the authorities to his former teacher Hadji Mirza Agassi (8. pp. 33 – 34; 9. pp. 343 – 345; 10. pp. 638 – 639). Renowned historian Abbas Iqbal wrote: "For all 13 years being the head of government, in fact shah of Iran was Mirza Agasi, not one who sat on Qajar's throne". In the contemporaries' opinion, shah infinitely trust his former teacher, and brushed aside all the complaints and appeals, which indicated the greed, selfishness, abuse of power, corruption and bribery of his first minister, sadrazam.

Got into favour with shah, Mirza Agassi surrounded himself with loyal people from the Muslim clergy, who were paid at least 6 ths. tomans from the treasury in the form of pensions and lump sum benefits every year, and purchased dozens of abandoned villages between Tehran and Tabriz. (10. p. 639). Russian traveler I. Berezin recounted that Mirza Agassi owned Mazandaran fisheries in the Caspian Sea, which at his insistence, the shah took away from the Russian industrialists and merchants, and conveyed to Mirza Agassi, even the income from these fisheries was not brought into the treasury but sadrazam of Iran personally earned 20 thousand rubles annually. He wrote: "Hadji Agassi was a great evil in his extensive and unfair influence on the course of affairs in Iran, and only Mohammad shah's aversion to the affairs of state could keep in his place the first minister being such not a gifted personality as Hadji Mirza Agassi". (2. pp. 201 - 202). And the shah believed that Mirza Agassi was doing everything only for the benefit of the state and dismissed from all denunciations against him. The English mentioned his medieval ignorance and deep religious fanaticism, a great prejudice and distrust of all foreigners in Iran, especially the British and the French. But there is another point of view; analysis of Mirza Agassi's activities as a head of government may objectively indicate its interest in cooperating with Europe like involvement of foreign specialists in various fields of life of Iranian society. He organized

the second wave of sending young people to study at European universities which yielded in a few years after his resignation took place, the first wave of this kind can be considered in the 20's years of 19th century, when some young people were sent abroad to study by Crown Prince Abbas Mirza. As head of government, Mirza Agassi first thought of reducing the cost of the state apparatus - he reduced the salary of all the ministers and other employees of the Government which provoked shower of grumblings and the frustration of many rulers of nobility. He didn't lead a life of luxury; he lived modestly dressed and ate simply, and aristocracy of Iranian society could not forgive him for such lifestyle. Mirza Agassi patronized the dervishes, the ulama, and all the priests of religion, but this can be explained by the fact that he well knew about their not easy life.

In regard to Hadji Mirza Agassi's political views it may be noted that he believed the main objective in foreign policy to be opposition to colonial Britain, France and Russia, who were taking advantage of the weakness of the Iranian state under the Qajar dynasty in the first half of the 19th century and trying to invade the northern and eastern provinces, become firmly established in the domestic market, occupy the most important ports and trade routes, impose a regime of capitulations on Iran and control its foreign and domestic policy. He believed that the great powers had made Iran the ongoing target of their policy and their actions could have the most fatal consequences for the country. That's why most of what he did caused discontent and ill-concealed irritation of the Great Powers. For instance, in 1835 Fazal Ali Khan, the ruler of Mazandarana, told him the Russian merchants earned a livelihood by catching fish in the waters adjacent to his province, and somehow they had the permission from Turkmen leader Kiyat-beck, so money of the Iranian shah was paid the Turkmen leader. (3. pp. 117 - 118). Mirza Agassi immediately appealed to Russia with the requirement not to take permission for catching sturgeon, beluga, and stellate sturgeon from the Turkmen leaders, but to buy such permits of the Iranian Shah's government (4. pp. 170 - 171), besides all goods from Astrakhan and Kizlyar, which were sent to Iran by sea, was compulsory for direct payment of customs duties in the port of Rasht (4. pp. 170 - 171). In response, Russia has tightened customs duties on goods from Iran in 1841. The Russian government banned European merchants from trading with Iran through the southern Caucasus, wishing to take control over all trade with this country. Mirza Agassi's correspondence with count V. Vorontsov, who was the deputy of Caucasus, had been designed to show the disadvantageous situation for Russia itself and count Vorontsov put an application to Nicholas I for abolition of prohibitive duties. On September 1846 Nicholas I

allowed duty-free transit of Iranian goods through the territory of Caucasus and goods to Iran from Europe. In his correspondence with the Russian government Mirza Agassi asked to send warships for crossing smuggling near the coast of Iran, reminding that Iran had no right to keep the ships in the Caspian Sea under the terms of The Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828) and couldn't combat maritime smuggling. In 1842 the tsar of Russian Empire Nicholas I ordered to organize the permanent cruising of warships around the coast of Iran, captain Putjatin was ordered to enter Astrabad bay and to protect russian merchants and industrialists from contrabands' robberies. (3. p. 121; 4. p. 176).

Hadji Mirza Agassi spent his personal funds on building the canals in abandoned lands; where there were many villages abandoned by peasants because of the long civil wars occurred in the end of 19th century. For example, in 1840 some canals were installed by his means in the area of Kerman and a number of canals were built for water supply of Tehran in Yazd, Gorgan and Khuzestan, a dam was erected for the reservoir Naseri in Kirkuk, number of young Iranians was specially sent to Britain in order to learn experience of land reclamation. (7. pp. 186 - 187). In 1842 he sent a letter to St. Petersburg with a request to send several mining engineers for exploration and discovery of mineral and ore deposits in various regions of Iran. The Russian government sent major Voskoboynikov to search for coal deposits in Gilan, Mazandaran, Gorgan, but they were not successful.

The appearance of the first printing house in Iran is ascribed to Mirza Agassi. As for newspapers, the first Iranian newspaper was published under the patronage of Crown Prince Abbas Mirza back in the second decade of the 19th century, and it was called "The Notifying newspaper". Mirza Saleh Shirazi was responsible for the monthly publication of that newspaper. He was also instructed to bring the first printing presses from England. In 1836, by Mohammed Shah, who was persuaded by Mirza Agassi, the first stone printing plant was built in Teheran and imported new printing presses from England. Mirza Agassi directed building and opening of the second printing press in 1845, and a year later - another printing plant was opened in Isfahan. Thanks to those printers there were printed the first books on medicine, chemistry, physics, history of the French revolution of the late 18th century, and several other books. At the same time, all the Iranian ambassadors, traveling to France, Britain, Russia, Italy, were instructed to purchase and bring into the country the books of technical and natural-scientific natures. (7. p. 197)

Hadji Mirza Agassi led a purposeful struggle to preserve the unity of the country and its further integration. Many tribal leaders of Qashqais, Kurds, Turkmen, Baluchis, and Arabs often raided and looted

the population in different provinces. Great powers often maintained relationships with influential tribal leaders, bypassing the shah's government. Many European travelers thought that there were at least two million nomads and semi-nomads in Iran, the Iranian government itself believed there were three million nomads in the country. The Kurds lived on the border areas with Ottoman Turkey and affiliation of those or other tribes with Iran or Turkey led to conflicts on the border. Bakhtyars and Lurs lived on the south-west of Iran, and Baluchis – on the border with India, a colony which belonged to England. Turkic tribes - Afshar, Qajars, Shahsavans - lived in Iranian Azerbaijan, along the northern borders with the Russian Empire, and Turkmen tribes settled along the borders of Khurasan. (6. pp. 224 - 227).

As many Iranian historians suppose it was suggestion of Hadji Mirza Agassi that Shah appointed ilkhans, sardars, lords, khans, kalantars for the Kurds, which up to 40's years was considered the privilege of the Kurdish nobility - they had been electing a tribal leaders. Appointment of heads of tribes increased the influence of the shah's government on the Kurds. Interestingly enough, the Kurdish tribes acknowledged dominion of the shah's governor in the Iranian Azerbaijan, but rejected authority of the Central Government in Teheran. Thus, in 1838 Weily tribe recognized the governor of Tabriz and disagreed to obey the Tehran authorities. (1. pp. 1987. pp. 87-89; 1983. p. 64).

In regard to the Turkmen tribes it was often pursuing a policy of fomenting enmity and opposition to each other. The government of Khurasan at one moment gained favours of khans and tribal lords of the goklans by gifts, at another stirred them up the yamuds or sent troops for punitive purposes against both of them. In 1835, by decree of Mirza Agassi's Government 4 thousand army led by Mir-Sadek was sent against the Turkmen. The Turkmen were defeated and scattered across the steppe. Some of the Turkmen khans obeyed Iran, but most still adhered to Russian position. In 1837, Iranian troops on orders from Tehran again ravaged yamud tribes – 500 thousand sheep, 60 thousand cows, 20 thousand camels and 10 thousand mares were driven away to Khurasan. (3. pp. 119). Mirza Agassi sent letters to all the leaders of the Turkmen tribes, offering reconciliation and acknowledgment of Iranian shah's dominion. However, the Turkmen did not believe sadrazam's letters, so in 1841 the shah's Government sent against them another punitive expedition. 22 thousand army led by Salar Khan set out from Mashhad and ruined 3 thousands of turkmen families in 22 villages. In tote the Iranian border with the Turkmen in Khurasan was uncertain and mediation of Russia made a little difference in that problem. This situation continued till the 80's of 19th

century, following which Russia conquered the Turkmen land and the border of Khurasan established between Iran and Russia through the mediation of the British, who were very anxious about the advance of Russian troops against the south.

Sadrizam Hadji Mirza Agassi's foreign policy was especially displayed by opposing Britain and Russia in their attempts to further enslave Iran and bring the situation under their control. Concerning relations with Afghanistan, The Emirate of Bukhara, The Khanate of Khiva and British India, the Iranian government considered it as a minor question of foreign policy at that time and did not pay much attention to these countries. That's quite another story about relations with Turkey. Starting from signing the treaty of Qasr-i Shirin in 1639, and in the 18th century - Nadir Shah's treaties with Turkey, the border between the two major Muslim countries had a very imprecise and often broken on either sides, although both sides agreed that the boundary line run from Mount Ararat in the south up to the Shatt al-Arab (Basra). The Iranian-Turkish War of 1821 – 1823 years did not actually regulate the question of the boundary between two countries. Both Turkey and Iran were reacting very sensitively to the question of which of them should belong to the territory of Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan; on what terms should be made an annual pilgrimage of Iranian Shiites to Karbala, Qom, Najaf; how to regulate the annual migration of nomadic tribes in border areas - Kurds and Arabs; how to determine the terms and conditions of official trade and stop the huge flow of contraband, crossing the border in both directions without any hindrance. The entire border between Turkey and Iran stretched more than 1000 km at that time. Conflicts, which almost spilled over into war, took place between those two largest Muslim countries in 1835, 1836, 1838 years. During the campaign against Herat by Persian army in 1837, pasha of Baghdad (governor of Turkey), Ali-Reza occupied port Mahameru and massacred all Shiites there - both Persians and Arabs. In 1842, Iranian shah Mohammad's troops broke into Iraq and occupied Karbala, one of the Shiite holy cities. In response, Turkish army led by Ali-Reza entered without a blow in Karbala after leaving of the Persian troops and then massacred thousands of Shiites - the Persians. That massacre caused a particularly large response and outrage in Iran. At the suggestion of Mirza Agassi Mohammad Shah announced the mobilization of troops and appointed Hamadan as a gathering place for army. It seemed new war was inevitable, but Russia actively interfered in a dispute between Turkey and Iran. Mohammad Shah personally presented a letter to the Emperor Nicholas I with a request of intermediation in the conflict. Learning about that British Ambassador in Tehran immediately came to the reception of Hadji

Mirza Agassi and offered mediation service of England. Without refusing the service of England, he suggested that negotiations with Turkey should take place with participation of Russia and England. He hoped to take advantage of the Anglo-Russian disagreements and gain better conditions for Iran. That was the demonstration of the balancing policy between two great powers of 19th century. (10. pp. 639 -640).

In January 1843 the delegation of four states arrived in Erzurum to start negotiations on a final settlement of all contentious issues but new provocation occurred. Turkish Pasha of Baghdad again fired at Karbala and organized general massacre of the population. According to the British, there were massacred by the Turks from 15 to 22 thousand Shiites in Karbala. (7. p. 190). In February 1843 Mohammad Shah ordered to cease negotiations in Erzurum and gather troops in Hamadan for the invasion of Turkey. British Foreign Secretary, Lord Aberdeen said to the Iranian ambassador in London that "war is inadmissible," and Russia, through its ambassador in Tehran, demanded to immediately commence negotiations in Erzurum and forget about the massacre in Karbala. Buckling under pressure from Russia and England, Iranian government draw back and four-power talks began in Erzurum on May 15, 1843.

Conference sessions were held in Erzurum 18 times and lasted for 4 years. This single fact already speaks about the great dissensions and difficulties in negotiations. In 1845 Turkish troops stormed into Iranian Kurdistan, and demanded that all Kurds migrate to Turkey. Great struggle started for the port Mahameru - Turks demanded to cede that Iranian port to them. In response England brought military ships into Shatt al-Arab (junction of Tigris and Euphrates), and Russia brought troops in Caucasus to the Turkish border. That was to make Turkey more compliant, and in 1847 the treaty of Erzurum between Turkey and Iran with the participation of Britain and Russia eventually was signed.

Hadji Mirza Agassi in his instructions and letters to the head of the Iranian delegation Taghi Khan demanded that Iran maintain its port Mahameru, not to accept the transfer of Kurdish areas of Hulvana to Turkey and insist on free travel to the holy cities of Iraq for Shiite pilgrims from Iran. He strongly supported the status and authority of the head of the Iranian delegation Mirza Taqi-khan. Representatives from England and Russia played the role of guarantors of that treaty. The Treaty represents a triumph of Iranian diplomacy and policy of balancing between the great powers, which Mirza Agassi consistently pursued.

Thus, summarizing the activity of sadrazam Hadji Mirza Agassi and its results, we can see that his activities as head of the Iranian government have

strengthened the positions of the Iranian state both domestically and abroad. Surely, his detractors and enemies first of all speak about that he could not or did not have time to do. But he was among the first who began reforms, perhaps not very profound, but still they changed the Iranian society, besides, thanks to its firm and consistent position on the Erzurum conference (1843-1847) Iran managed to win a diplomatic victory over their major opponents in all East. No war could lead to such positive results for acute and contentious issues, as it happened in Erzurum conference.

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