



REUTER İMTİYAZININ JEOPOLİTİK PERSPEKTİFLERDEN YENİDEN DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

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REVISITING THE REUTER CONCESSION FROM GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVES¹

ÖZ 1872 Reuter İmtiyazı, İran tarihinde yeni bir bölümün başlangıcını işaret etmektedir. İmtiyaz avcılığı döneminin başlangıcı ve ekonomik alanın İngiliz-Rus rekabetinden kapsamlı bir şekilde etkilendiği ilk zamandır. Araştırma, Reuter İmtiyazını jeopolitik perspektiften analiz etmeyi amaçlamıştır. Çalışma, İran kurucuları Mirza Hüseyin Han ve Malkam Han'ın jeopolitik algılarını ve akıl yürütmelerini incelemiştir. Malkam'ın sözleşmeyle temel amacı, İngiliz çıkarlarını harekete geçirmek, böylece İran'ın toprak bütünlüğünü garanti altına almak ve modernleşme gündemini ilerletmektir. Çalışma, imtiyazın geri çekilmesinin koşullarının İran jeopolitiğinin işlemesi gereken güç yapısını ve çerçeveyi vurguladığını savunmaktadır. Araştırmanın diğer amacı, İngiliz jeopolitiğinin tepkilerini ve akıl yürütmelerini ve imtiyazın bunlar üzerindeki etkisini analiz etmektir. İngiliz Dışişleri Bakanlığı Reuter İmtiyazını desteklemese de İngiliz Hindistanı ve İran merkezli aktörler tarafından çok önemli olarak görülmüştür. İkinci grubun stratejisi, sonraki on yıllarda oldukça etkili olduğunu kanıtladı, İngiliz ekonomik konumlarının kurulmasını ve güçlendirilmesini kolaylaştırdı ve Rus etkisine karşı koydu. İmtiyaz, İngiliz jeopolitik gelenekleri ve düşünceleri üzerinde de etkili olmuştur.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Reuter İmtiyazı, Jeopolitik, Çok taraflılık, Malkam Han

ABSTRACT The Reuter Concession of 1872 marked the beginning of a new chapter in Iran's history. It was the beginning of the concession-hunting period and the first time when the economic sphere was comprehensively affected by British-Russian rivalry. The research has aimed to analyze the Reuter Concession from a geopolitical perspective. The study sought to examine the geopolitical perceptions and reasoning of the Iranian founders, Mirza Hosein Khan and Malkam Khan. Malkam's main objective with the contract was to engage British interests, thereby guaranteeing the territorial integrity of Persia and advancing the modernization agenda. The study argues that the circumstances of the withdrawal of the concession highlighted the power structure and framework within which Iranian geopolitics had to operate. The other main objective of the research is to analyze the reactions and reasonings of British geopolitics and the impact of the concession on it. Although the British Foreign Office (FO) did not support the Reuter Concession, it was seen as crucial by British India and Iran-based actors. They successfully kept it alive. The strategy of the latter group proved highly effective in the following decades, facilitating the establishment and strengthening of British economic positions and countering Russian influence. The concession also had an impact on British geopolitical traditions and thinking.

Keywords: Reuter Concession, Geopolitics, Multilateralism, Malkam Khan

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INTRODUCTION

The Reuter Concession of 1872 opened a new chapter in Iran's history. This was interpreted by the literature and by the actors of the time, who set this date as the beginning of the period of the 'concession hunt' (Abrahamian, 1982:55; Floor, 1991:337). According to Cadman, who was the head of the Anglo-Persian Oil company in the 1920s, the concession was the first time when Britain sought to exploit the Iranian oil wealth (Cadman, 1927:431). Vakili-Zad also stated that the contract was a milestone because it was the first time when tradition and modernity clashed over economic issues (Vakili-Zad, 1996:147). The concession-hunting period lasted until Reza Khan came to power in 1921. The treaties issued during this era were significant in the history of Iranian politics, international relations, economy, and society in the 19th and 20th centuries, and as a result have a large literature (See: Gheissari, 2023; Teymouri, 1954). These contracts have become intertwined with the Qajar rule in the historiography, and thus, the period and its perception are generally negative. This is also true for the Reuter Concession. This historical contract has been evaluated and analyzed from numerous perspectives. According to Keddie and Guity, the Reuter Concession was a naive idea (Keddie, 1999:38; Guity, 1982:132). Vakili-Zad concluded that the Iranian creators did not take the threat of Western colonial empires seriously enough (Vakili-Zad, 1996:149). While other studies have drawn attention to the perceived "greed" of the contractors (Galbraith, 1989:250; Algar, 1973:115). In his analysis, Kazemzadeh argued that the concession was a product of the zeitgeist, a result of the spread of global capitalism (Kazemzadeh, 2013:101). There are also positive interpretations, such as the progressive historian Adamiyat. He argues that British diplomacy made a mistake by not supporting the treaty and its Iranian supporters (Adamiyat, 1973:348).

The present research aims to expand the above-mentioned explanations and to make a modest contribution to the discourse on the Reuter Concession from a geopolitical perspective. It intends to examine and analyze: The Iranian geopolitical reasoning behind the creation of the contract; The reactions and reasonings of the British geopolitical discourse; And the long-term geopolitical effects of the concession. The research argues that the question of Iran's modernization was intertwined with Russian and British interests. The major question was how the Iranian state should have fit into the Asian geopolitical order. This was also significant from a regional perspective, as the modernization of the state would have linked two crucial regions, the Caspian Sea, and the Persian Gulf. The research argues that the Iranian modernists sought to integrate Iran into the world order, both economically and geopolitically. They attempted to fulfill the main 19th-century Iranian geopolitical agenda of guaranteeing the territorial integrity of the state. In addition, the research claims that the analysis of the contract helps us to better understand how British geopolitics worked. The study states that British geopolitics was highly diverse, shaped by many actors and geopolitical schools with different perceptions and priorities. Consequently, the author states that its main strength was its diversity and the space it provided for individual ideas (See: Vác, 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research is based on two key concepts. The first is modernization, which can be approached in many different ways. In this paper, this is understood as the creation of capitalism and the modern state structure, as defined by Giddens and Habermas (Mirsepassi, 2000:4). The second key concept is geopolitics, which is also generally approached from many angles. The paper means two things by this. On the one

hand, geopolitical world orders, which, according to the 'Braudelian' categorization, belong to the medium-term structures (See: Braudel, 1996). According to Peter Taylor's world system and transition theory, geopolitical world orders are stable, while transitions are characterized by rapid change (Taylor, 1993:33,38–39). The research's approach is that there are structural geopolitical frameworks that change slowly and have different phases (See those in Modelski, 1987). In addition, the critical geopolitical approach and its conceptual tools are used in the research. The different geopolitical traditions or schools have to adapt their agendas to the framework of the world order and the processes taking place within it. The term of geopolitical tradition is defined as: "*competing schools of geopolitical thought*" (Kolossoff and Toal, 2008:203). Another key research term is "geopolitical reasoning" which means "*justifying concrete foreign policy actions*" (Mamadouh and Dijkink, 2006:355).

RIGHTS AND HISTORY OF THE REUTER CONCESSION

Before moving on to the objectives set out earlier, this chapter will briefly review the history of the Reuter Concession. The concession was granted in 1872 to Baron Julius de Reuter² by Naser al-Din, Shah of Qajar Iran. The extensive contract was for 70 years and gave the contractor rights to build roads and railways, establish a bank, extract raw materials – excluding gold, silver, and gemstones –, establish industrial plants, extract oil, and build irrigation and infrastructure. Besides, Reuter would have operated the customs system for 25 years (Sadeqian, 2010:12; Rawlinson, 1875:125–126; Sykes, 1951:370; The Earl of Carnarvon, 1873, July 14). In other words, Reuter was essentially allowed to manage the entire economic modernization program. He could even organize it, since he had the right to sell parts of the concession (Rawlinson, 1875:125–126). In exchange for these broad competencies, the Iranian central government was to receive 20% of the railway profits, 15% of the profits from other sectors, and a portion of the customs duties (Rawlinson, 1875:125–126). This concession did not materialize in this form, as the Shah withdrew it in 1873. Both contemporary and modern experts stated that this was due to the opposition of Russia and the Iranians, as well as the passive attitude of the British Foreign Office (Rawlinson, 1875:126; Axworthy, 2008:194).

THE IRANIAN MODERNIZATION PROGRAM AND THE REUTER CONCESSION

In the 19th century, Iran was one of the main areas of the struggle between the two dominant powers of the era, the British and Russian Empires. Because of these developments, Iranian elites had to find answers to the combined geopolitical and modernization challenges. The former meant that they had to find a way to fit into the 19th-century world order by averting the threat of Russian conquest and defending their territorial integrity. In terms of modernization, it meant a complex and conflict-ridden socio-economic-political transformation from a pre-modern state status. In his study, Vakili-Zad divided the reactions to the challenge of modernity into three groups. The first group included intellectuals who rejected all aspects of modernization. The second were the 'modernists', who wanted to uncritically adopt everything from the West. The third were the 'social engineers', who only wished to integrate only the technological development (Vakili-Zad, 1996:140–141). However, the geopolitical code of the different groups of the Iranian elite and the emerging middle class was diverse, but the maintenance of territorial integrity was their primary objective.

² He was a German-born British citizen and one of the leading entrepreneurs of his time. He founded the Reuters news agency.

During the century, several attempts were made to respond to the emerging geopolitical and modernization challenges by the Iranians. The literature identifies Abbas Mirza as the first great reformer, who introduced the 'Nezam-e Jadid' – New Order – reform of the armed forces, following the Ottoman model (Vakili-Zad, 1996:146; Cronin, 2008:204). The next great modernizer was Amir Kabir, who wanted to implement a broader program (Shahriari, 2017:269–270). During his time, the first – unsuccessful – railway construction project with foreign capital was planned. It was to be led by the famous British engineer Robert Stephenson (Adamiyat, 1973:334).

The next major comprehensive modernization experiment that is the subject of this research was the Reuter Concession. This was initiated by the Grand Vizier – Sepahsalar – Mirza Hosein Khan and his advisor Malkam Khan, who, as Guity noted, were bound together by their European education and goals (Guity, 1982:38). Therefore, they belonged to the modernist camp. Their main objective was to modernize Iran based on Western models and to defend its territorial integrity against Russia. The product of these aims was the Reuter Concession, in which Mirza Hosein Khan and Malkam Khan granted Reuter unprecedented rights that would have essentially created a British protectorate. The research aims in this chapter to examine and analyze the geopolitical perceptions and reasoning of the Sepahsalar and his advisor. Malkam was the theorist who elaborated on the details of the concession. Therefore, the main focus of this part of the paper is on Malkam Khan.

The Geopolitical Perception of Mirza Hosein Khan

The primary threat for Mirza Hosein Khan was the Russian expansion, which was steadily advancing towards Iran and annexing regions from the state (Keddie, 1999:37). Hosein was convinced that his country must therefore involve Britain in its development and defense (Keddie, 2008:187). The Grand Vizier was greatly influenced by his personal experience in the Ottoman Empire as the Western powers pressured it to implement various reforms (Algar, 1973:114). On the one hand, this means that Hosein counted on Britain as an external actor to exert pressure to achieve the Western-style modernization goals he desired. On the other hand, there was also a geopolitical rationale, as the British were acting against Russian expansion, including in the Ottoman Empire. The Sepahsalar wanted to engage Britain by building economic links (Algar, 1973:114). According to his logic, this would have brought political influence with it. His perception of the British was positive and in line with his modernist agenda. He viewed their role in both the Ottoman modernization program and British India favorably (Khalili, 2009:55). Thus, the British Empire was an ally in his geopolitical code, whose involvement was intended to resolve the two intertwined challenges.

Malkam Khan's Geopolitical Analyses and Agenda

Sepahsalar's advisor and the principal architect of the Reuter Concession, Malkam Khan, had a more sophisticated geopolitical concept and reasoning. He came from an Armenian background and had a European education, studying at the French school in Isfahan and later in France (Vakili-Zad, 1996:142–143). Malkam's career included a period of exile until 1871 when he became ambassador to London (Abrahamian, 1982:66–67). His character was given additional weight by the fact that few Iranians of the time had as complex a knowledge of economics as he did, as Dadkhah noted (Dadkhah, 2003:145). Moreover, the study argues that Malkam Khan also saw geopolitical developments with exceptional acuity, and on this basis, he developed a "grand strategy". This had two pillars, development and integration. He explained his reform program and vision in depth and detail in his 1875 work, 'Principles of Progress'. The



research aimed to analyze his geopolitical thought and reasoning based on this essay. Although, it was written after the withdrawal of the Reuter Concession, the intellectual gathered his arguments here. Therefore, the analysis of this essay is essential to understand the concession.

Malkam made several statements that set the framework of his strategy. The first of these was that the European powers were so strong that they could occupy a country at any time and that Iran could not stay out of international relations (Malkam, 2003:191, 198). He wanted to adapt to this situation progressively and proactively. He argued that they must be cautious with the outside world, but at the same time, they should be open, because they will not solve the problems by isolating themselves (Malkam, 2003:199). In his view, there was only one way forward for the countries of Asia, including Iran, and that was progress. Like Hosein, he also believed that this goal, as well as territorial integrity, could be ensured by importing foreign interests (Malkam, 2003:201). He thought that their development depended only on economic relations. Iran's problem, he explained, was that it could not count on international support in the event of a conflict because it was not involved in international trade. Consequently, events within Iran did not significantly impact the interests of other states nor have broader repercussions (Malkam, 2003:202). In other words, Malkam linked economics and geopolitics and interpreted them together. In this spirit, besides the modernization agenda, he sought to expand Iran's geopolitical space and defend its territorial integrity, with the involvement of external actors. This was reasonable, because a weak state that correctly assesses its potential and defines its goals is interested in multilateralism rather than bilateralism. In the case of the former, it has much more room for maneuver, since it can form and participate in coalitions and alliances. Multilateralism with more players increases the relative weight of the small state and reduces the risk of unilateral pressure and vulnerability. Moreover, Malkam argued that isolationism was not a real response to the challenges, and his policy can be described as a strategy of 'connectivity'. This meant integration into the world economic and geopolitical order.

Malkam argued that international relations should be interpreted fundamentally from an economic perspective. In his opinion, trade relations are the primary determinant of relations between states. He further asserted that those states which trade extensively with each other are the true 'friends' (Malkam, 2003:202). This thesis led him to reject foreign policy gestures and alliances based on political considerations alone. For example, according to Malkam Khan, Germany's friendship with Iran was meaningless, as there was no substantial commercial relationship between them (Malkam, 2003:202). This idea permeated the later period, adopted by the Iranian modernist-nationalist geopolitical tradition, which repeatedly attempted to attract German and American capital for similar considerations. In this case, the intellectual again demonstrated his ability to analyze geopolitical processes. Following this logic, Malkam's essay also made a specific reference to England. In his analyses, he well pointed out that although the British said they were interested in Iran's territorial integrity and prosperity, this did not mean anything. Because they had no significant economic interest in the country at that time (Malkam, 2003:203).

If his program was rejected, he saw a dark future for Iran, which would end up like Turkestan (Malkam, 2003:191), which means that it would become a field of Russian conquest. The intellectual's education and perception of world issues led him to have a positive view of the "liberal" superpower of the time, the British Empire. It is also clear that he rightly perceived Russia as the primary threat and that is why he worked to establish a long-term alliance with her old enemy. However, the involvement of British economic interests came with a price, the extensive rights of the Reuter Concession, which he saw as inevitable

(Malkam, 2003:192). Nevertheless, the logic of his analysis suggested that these were necessary and worthwhile steps in the longer term. His pro-British arguments were not only based on geopolitical considerations. In his opinion, Britain played a prominent role as a model, both politically and economically. This can be seen in the way he wrote that Iran should do everything as Britain does (Malkam, 2003:170).

Overall, Malkam wanted to manage both the modernization transformation and the geopolitical challenges simultaneously through the Reuter Concession. The present author agrees with Dadkhah, who argues that Malkam can be accused of having a positive view of colonialism, but the advisor-diplomat's analysis was complex and ultimately highly accurate (Dadkhah, 2003:145). In addition, the economic and geopolitical situation of Iran was not easy, with poor harvests in the 1860s and the Russian Empire roaring ahead in Central Asia. Besides, as Farmanfarmaian noted, the concession would have provided new resources to Iran's weak central government and stabilized the struggling Iranian currency (Farmanfarmaian, 2008:217). The research found that Malkam presented a logical argument, explored the major geopolitical issues and problems, and proposed valid solutions. However, a reform of this magnitude could not be implemented without external support and very strong domestic political power. Neither of these existed. The research agrees with Tabatabaei, who argues that Malkam's goal was to achieve independence through progress (Tabatabaei, 2020:147). It should be added that other attempts were made to achieve the geopolitical goals. In 1873, Malkam tried to obtain Iran's territorial integrity officially recognized by Russia and Britain through diplomatic channels, but was unsuccessful (Granville to Sadr Azam, 1873.07.02. 'Confidential':478v).

The Iranian Opposition to the Reuter Concession

The geopolitical perceptions and agendas of Mirza Hosein Khan and Malkam Khan were not shared by the Iranian elites and the middle class. There was also strong opposition from the clergy (Governor General to FO, 1874.03.16. QDL, Abstracts of Letters 1874:68r), which had a broad social base and enormous influence and was almost a state within the state, as Keddie stated (Keddie, 2006: 28). The ulama refused the concession, motivated by their domestic political interests, as they were not interested in having a strong central government (Katouzian, 2009:160). Nor did they want to import of Western values (Rawlinson, 1875:134). Another dominant group, the bazaar merchants, who feared for Iranian industry and trade, also resisted (Rawlinson, 1875:134). Besides their own domestic goals, these actors saw the contract as an instrument of colonialism, and the sacrifice of sovereignty was not a viable option for them. Their perception was well expressed in the statement of Mullah Ali Kani, who saw that if the concession had succeeded, then Iran would have ended up like India (Guity, 1982:93). This view was shared by all dominant social and elite groups, which therefore rejected the concession, even the progressive forces (Kazemzadeh, 2013:110). Because of the strong opposition of the Iranian elites and middle classes, the government delayed the implementation of the concession (Keddie, 1999:38). Another consequence was that Hosein Khan lost his position.

Another important player in the granting of the concession was Nasser al-Din Shah himself, who initially supported the Grand Vizier and his advisor's project. He believed that the concession was good for Iran but not good for Russia (Adamiyat, 1973:347; Teymouri, 1954:114). Despite this, external pressure, the passivity of the British Foreign Office, and internal dissatisfaction led to the termination of the contract which was further undermined by the fact that Malkam and some other Iranian officials were paid substantial sums by Reuter (Teymouri, 1954:107). According to the literature, Hosein was not bribed



(Katouzian, 2009:161), unlike Malkam (Guity, 1982:108). In conclusion, the position of the opponents of the contract was also more than logical, since a state cannot give up its sovereignty to such an extent and outsource its economic life to an external actor. The research states that Malkam's geopolitical analysis was accurate, and his strategy had a rationale. This was shown by the fact that one tradition of British geopolitics wanted to export capital to Iran in order to increase their influence there. However, the consultant's plan for the Reuter concession was very poorly implemented, with serious negative consequences.

THE PERCEPTION OF THE BRITISH FOREIGN OFFICE ON THE CONCESSION

Part of the literature sees Reuter as a major figure in the promotion of British interests (See for example: Qorbanian, 2011), but the picture was not that clear at the beginning. The Foreign Office led by Lord Granville, was passive about the concession. The Foreign Secretary belonged to the 'Eurocentric' tradition, which had a passive attitude towards Iran. A further feature of this approach was that it sought to develop a cooperative relationship with Russia. In this context, Reuter asked for support and protection of British policy, but the Foreign Office's response was to reject this, saying it was outside their scope (Granville, 1873 July 14). There were several reasons for this reaction besides the basic characteristics of tradition. Firstly, Reuter's person was problematic for them, because he was not part of the British aristocracy. That is why they questioned his loyalty and feared that he would place himself under Russian protection (Kazemzadeh, 2013:110). Griffiths added that Reuters' Jewish background also played a role (Griffiths, 2017:49). All of these elements united in Granville's opinion, who considered him a "low-class adventurer" (Galbraith, 1989:250–251). In other words, because of Reuter's origin and class position, the Foreign Office reacted with mistrust and exclusion.

There were also geopolitical arguments for not supporting the contract. Actors of the 'Eurocentric' school of British geopolitics feared that the planned railway would help the spread of Russian political and economic interests, as it would be connected to the Russian network (HM Minister at Tehran to Secretary of State, 1873.04.17. QDL, Political No. 150:245r). This meant that Russian influence would have extended southward along these lines, and the British wanted to avoid this scenario. Granville followed the same logic and predicted the end of Iran's independence if the railway was built (Gov. of India, Foreign Department to Duke of Argyll, 1873.09.01. QDL, Political No. 150:244r). In addition, supporting the concession would have meant that Britain would have been actively involved in the modernization and future of Persia. This would contradict the buffer-zone-building and status quo-maintaining geopolitical fundamentals of the 'Eurocentric' school. According to this interpretation, the concession could have led to a myriad of unintended consequences. These included the deterioration of relations with Russia, which would certainly have occurred if the concession had been supported. This scenario also ran counter to the Foreign Office's basic concept at the time, which was to avoid conflict with the Russians (Adamiyat, 1973:358).

THE BRITISH SUPPORTERS OF THE REUTER CONCESSION

Contrary to the dominant tradition in the Foreign Office, other actors in British geopolitics, such as British India and Iran-based officials, took a radically different view of the Reuter Concession. They mostly

belonged to the 'Curzonian tradition'³, which attached particular importance to Iran's position in the global geopolitical processes. During this period, British India, and Henry C. Rawlinson, one of the leading opinion makers on Iranian affairs, also sought to advance Iranian-British relations. This can be seen in Rawlinson's 1868 Memorandum, where he floated various ideas about how to rebuild British influence in Iran. These included: Sending military officers to lead the army; Educating the children of Iranian elites in British schools; Supplying arms; Investing in Persia by companies backed by British policy, opening banks and mines, and building railways (Extract from Memorandum by H.C. Rawlinson, 1868.07.20. QDL, 'Persia':63v). On this basis, it can be concluded that Malkam Khan's plan had a certain realism, as there was a British geopolitical school whose main aim was to strengthen Iran and contain Russian interests. In these visions, one of the ways to achieve these goals was the involvement of British companies in the Iranian economy, which would have been supported by diplomacy.

Hence, the Reuter Concession was born in a context where it fitted into the agenda of one of the dominant traditions in British geopolitics. Consequently, British Indian and Iran-based actors supported Reuter and took a position in favor of the concession in their geopolitical reasoning. The Minister of Britain in Tehran, Alison, expressed the view that it would be important that the construction of infrastructure in Iran should be British-initiated and controlled (Alison to Granville, 1871.07.17. QDL, Railways in Persia:272r). This also shows that the planned modernization transformation, and one of its pillars, the construction of infrastructure, was perceived by these actors not only as a threat but as an opportunity. There was a high stake in gaining influence over the sector. Because it would have meant long-term benefits and influence as the development of Iran's modernization and the building of a modern state and economy could have been shaped by British interests. The Earl of Carnarvon (Henry Herbert) in London also argued for the significance of the concession and British influence in Persia: „*and of all the neighbouring States around our Indian possessions, none could be held to be of greater importance to us than the kingdom of Persia*” (The Earl of Carnarvon, 1873, July 14). In his complex analysis, Henry Herbert argued that it would be a big problem if Russia were to build the Caspian Sea-Gulf railway along its interests. Besides, the conservative politician also referred to Persia's strategic position in the context of British India and the Ottoman Empire (The Earl of Carnarvon, 1873, July 14). Another influential character, Rawlinson also supported the contract and saw its political importance very sharply. He believed that if Britain did not support Reuter, the Iranian elite would inevitably gravitate towards Russia (Greaves, 1959:96). His prediction later came true. In addition to the official actors, the Reuter Concession became an important issue in popular geopolitics, and articles in the press also supported the businessman. According to an article in the Pall Mall Gazette, a huge fortune had fallen into their hands, but the Foreign Office failed to take advantage of it (Pall Mall Gazette, 1873.07.15:5). Overall, the argument of the 'Curzonian school' was based on the emphasis on Iran's geostrategic importance and the desire to gain rights to the construction infrastructure construction and the influence it would bring. This geopolitical course was not able to impose its will at the time, but it kept alive the demands of Reuter, who did not give in to the withdrawal of his concession. These British officers and diplomats, who supported a more active Iran policy, viewed the withdrawal negatively and the Iranian forces involved in it as enemies of progress and reform (See: Dismissal and Reinstatement of the Grand Vizier of Persia, QDL, Abstracts of Letters:9v).

³ Research calls it 'Curzonian' because later Lord Curzon was the most prominent theoretician and representative of the school.



THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF THE CONCESSION

Despite its withdrawal, the Reuter Concession remained influential in later decades, and its issuance catalyzed several long-term processes and consequences. This chapter attempts to trace, categorize, and analyze these impacts.

The Impacts on Iranian Geopolitics

The controversy surrounding the concession, and the circumstances of its withdrawal had a fundamental impact on Iran's geopolitical space and objectives. Firstly, the geopolitical dynamics between Britain and Russia were established, which strongly delimited Iran's modernization prospects until 1917. After the cancellation, Iran was definitively trapped in the buffer state status, with all its negative features. Although the Iranian elites made several attempts to break out of this situation, such as the Morgan Shuster Affair in 1911, they were unsuccessful. The research agrees with Valeriano and Benthuyzen, who have examined the characteristics of the buffer state. They concluded that this is an extremely precarious status, which significantly increases the risk of state collapse and is accompanied by a continuous loss of control over domestic and foreign affairs (Valeriano and Benthuyzen, 2012:1165–1166).

The context in which the concession was annulled had a major impact on relations among the Iranian elites and their geopolitical perception. Both Hosein and the Shah subsequently considered its issuance to be one of their greatest mistakes (Teymouri, 1954:120). Hosein Khan noted the withdrawal with visible disappointment and stated that Lord Granville was more afraid of the Russians than the Iranians were (Adamiyat, 1973:358). Because of the failure, the Sepahsalar blamed the attitude of the British government and their lack of support (Adamiyat, 1973:359). This meant that the Anglophile concept of Iranian geopolitics and reform had been severely defeated. Furthermore, the ambivalent nature of British geopolitics, which was the result of its different traditions, was already being experienced. The failure and its consequences were felt by Iranian actors, who then also began to seek closer relations with Russia, as the power structure and its consequences became clear to them, just as Rawlinson predicted. The buffer status had another characteristic. According to Amanat, it marked the beginning of what he calls Iran's 'double game'. This strategy aimed to use the rivalry between the two great powers to secure geopolitical space. He stated that this has been misinterpreted by the Pahlavi nationalist historiography (Amanat, 2003). The rapprochement with the Russians and the consequences of the lack of British support were communicated by Hosein to the British actors (Abstract of Secret Letters Received from India, 1873.02.03. QDL, Abstracts of Letters 1873:29r). Nevertheless, the Foreign Office did not change its policy.

However, despite the failure of the Reuter Concession and the period of 'swing politics', the recognition of territorial integrity and the idea of Malkam Khan – and Rawlinson – of importing British economic entities and interests did not disappear. In 1884, Granville advised Malkam in a letter that if he wanted to increase British sympathy, the Karun River should be opened to trade (Granville to Malkam, 1884.08.16. QDL, 'Confidential':479v–480r). At this time, Iran's territorial integrity was again under extreme threat by Russia, which by the 1880s had become its neighbor to the east of the Caspian Sea. In addition, the case of the Reuter Concession made it clear that railway construction could only be achieved through the great power consensus. The opening of the Karun River had been proposed to the Iranians by the British Minister in Tehran, Henry Drummond Wolff, alongside the Foreign Secretary (QDL, 'Confidential':482r). In his argument, Wolff explained that the Russians could not object to this, as it was essentially different from a



concession (QDL, 'Confidential':482v). In this respect, despite the contract's failure, Malkam and the Anglophile tradition achieved partial success in integrating British economic and political interests into the country's affairs, albeit within a limited geographical scope. Malkam was also right about the link between economic connectivity and British interests, because British geopolitics then and later was focused on the southern regions. That was where most of its economic interests were concentrated.

The Implications of the Reuter Concession from British Perspectives

The Reuter Concession and its termination had various long-lasting and significant effects on British geopolitics. First of all, it served as a pretext for the British to prevent Russian attempts to gain economic influence. Secondly, it provided a basis for the construction of their subsequent economic positions. Thirdly, it shaped British geopolitical traditions in two ways, strengthened the geopolitical assumptions of the 'Eurocentric' tradition, which meant a cooperative attitude with Russia. Furthermore, it also influenced the concepts of the 'Curzonian school', which maximum goal envisioned the Iranian modernization under a British umbrella. Finally, the concession started the period in which British soft power capabilities started to erode, and the contract became a symbol of colonialism.

In the first category, the case of the Russian Falkenhagen⁴ contract should be mentioned. Russia wanted to use the granting and withdrawal of the Reuter Concession as a pretext to obtain a similar deal for itself. This became the Falkenhagen Concession, which was created under strong Russian pressure (Kazemzadeh, 2013:139). Ironically, this was also finally terminated in 1875, for very similar reasons to its British predecessor. From the Iranian side, one of the players in this case was Mirza Hosien Khan, who did not want to make this deal with Falkenhagen and therefore turned to the British for political support (Kazemzadeh, 2013:142). The Tehran Minister, William Taylor Thomson perceived that the case of Reuter, who refused to give up his compensation claims, could be used as a pretext, and was eventually supported by the Viceroy of India, Lord Salisbury (Robert Gascoyne-Cecil) (Kazemzadeh, 2013:144; Galbraith, 1989:251). The strategy was successful, although the fact that St Petersburg did not want to have a bad relationship with London at the time also played a role (Kazemzadeh, 2013:145–146). This meant that British geopolitics now considered the contract to be valid. Thus, they changed their previous approach, and it also became clear to the Russians that the British did not let go of Iran's hand.

The second effect of the concession was to help establish British economic interests. This is partly due to the Russian plan and the Falkenhagen affair, and partly due to the influence of the 'Curzonian tradition'. Thus, the British arsenal incorporated the claim of Reuter, who in those years tried to obtain compensation through various channels. He was helped in the beginning by the Tehran Minister, Thomson, and British India and later by the changing British geopolitical agenda, which by the 1880s was already aimed at creating economic interests. Although Reuter had ideas in 1885 of allying with Bismarck (the Chancellor of the German Reich) and the Rothschilds (one of the most influential capitalists of this time) for his cause (Greaves, 1959:98). But these plans did not materialize. In the same year, more and more actors in British geopolitics wanted to take advantage of the canceled concession. Lord Hartington, the head of the War Office in London, believed that it would be useful to establish influence in Persia (Greaves, 1959:97), and Lord Salisbury's government also wanted to settle the issue of the contract in this spirit (Galbraith, 1989:251). Thus, by the second half of the 1880s, Britain's geopolitical objectives had partly shifted, thanks

⁴ Falkenhagen was a Russian engineer.

to the change in the decision-makers and the lobby of British India and Iran-based actors. They still wanted to maintain the status quo but realized that the passive policy of the past could not be continued. This was the context in which the new British minister, Henry Drummond Wolff, arrived in the country. Salisbury described his job in this way: – maintain – *“the integrity of Persia; the development of its resources, and the maintenance of a strong, independent, and friendly Government”* (Wolff, 1908:337). The research agrees with Kazemzadeh, who stated that Wolff was energetic and talented. He also had a strong network in the City, with friends including the most important businessmen like Reuter. His policy was based on two pillars, the primacy of the economy and the Anglo-Russian partnership (Kazemzadeh, 2013:184–185). The minister himself also admitted that he had strong allies like British India in achieving the above-mentioned goals (Wolff, 1908:332–333). He also embodied the changing face of British geopolitics by linking and unifying political and economic goals and actors. Moreover, the Reuter concession gave him a base to build on.

Because of the Russian influence and the Iranian context, Wolff had two options related to the Reuter Concession to achieve his goals. The first was the opening of the Karun River, which allowed the British trade to reach the interior areas of the country. For Wolff, the river was a natural opportunity to develop and deepen the British economic positions. He said: *“The result of opening the Karun would be to give Persia what she urgently needed — an easy highway from some of her richest and most inaccessible provinces”* (Wolff, 1908:343). This made British interests in southwestern Persia much more extensive, but it was inherently a geographically limited zone. This fact and the successful agreement also contributed greatly to the birth of ‘South Persia’ as a geopolitical concept. This area, in the British understanding, covered their economic and strategic interests. The second was the settlement of the Reuter case. Again, Wolff achieved success which was to have a profound impact on the following decades, as the British entrepreneur was compensated by the establishment of the Imperial Bank of Persia (IBP) in 1889. This institution, besides banking, also had the right to extract raw materials (Lockhart, 1971:316). The company became Iran’s first modern financial institution and state bank. This meant a huge British influence, as through the company the British became both a permanent player in Iranian finances and had access to constant first-hand information. The financial institution was also crucial for the further directions and possibilities of the modernization process. It either provided capital, mediated, or opposed other financial interests that were not in its favor, while presenting itself as an important source of British influence. The establishment of the bank had such an impact that it is no coincidence that Qorbanian, in his analysis called it the most important part of the Reuter Concession (Qorbanian, 2011:142). His view was shared by other actors at the time. It is exemplified by the Army Headquarters India’s report in 1911, which described the IBP as the most valuable political instrument essential for them to avoid Persia’s one-sided financial dependence on Russia (Army Headquarters India, 1911:326–327). The company’s significance and historical role was further demonstrated by the fact that it operated as a state bank until 1929. Furthermore, it was also an important pillar of British economic and geopolitical interests during these decades.

The geopolitical struggle around the Reuter Concession influenced British geopolitical traditions in two ways. Firstly, it reinforced the British ‘Eurocentric’ and ‘Curzonian’ tradition’s idea that the modernization of Iran and its integration into the geopolitical world order could not be achieved alone. For this reason, Wolff had already proposed to his Russian counterpart, Dolgouruki, that the two great powers should reform Iran together and that relations between the three parties should be settled by a convention (Wolff, 1908:347–348). This finally happened in 1907. In addition, the economic focus of influence building became

important for them as well. On the other hand, it also had a considerable influence on the development of the 'Curzonian' tradition. Rawlinson, a member of this school, expressed it as follows: *"There was something grand, something heroic in the idea of sacrificing national pride— almost national independence—to the eventual resuscitation of a fallen country, but the scheme was hardly practical"* (Rawlinson, 1875:126). The commentary of the scholar and diplomat is worth analyzing in more depth, as it contains the essence of the attitude of the school. On the one hand, he saw Iran as a failed state that needed outside help to modernize. To achieve this, it would have to give up its 'national pride', in other words, its sovereignty. These ideas have remained important throughout this period and are reflected in the ideas of Lord Curzon himself and his major diplomatic work, the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919. With this agreement, he sought to settle the 'Persian question', so the integration of Iran into the world order and global capitalism (See: Vác, 2022). Under the terms of the 1919 treaty, the British government recognized Iran's territorial integrity and independence, but essentially made the country a British protectorate, as all economic, military, and administrative bodies would have been under their control. Furthermore, the necessary investments would also have been financed by British sources (See: Agreement, 1919).

Finally, the Reuter Concession also had a significant and long-term impact on British soft power capacity. On the one hand, according to the Iranians, it was the beginning of an infamous period in which the British did not act as they should have. At the same time, from this soft power perspective, it can be seen as a failure of British geopolitics, since the great power was the model state in the geopolitical code of Iranian decision-makers like Hosein and Malkam. The research agrees with Joseph Nye, who argues that this is extremely important. By using soft power, the model state can achieve its goals when others want to follow the achievements and values of a country (Bíró, 2022:151). The Reuter Concession is important in this respect. In the period 1872–1921, British realpolitik steadily eroded their prestige in the eyes of the Iranians, and this process began at that time. It is another question of whether the expectations of the Anglophile Iranians were realistic and achievable.

CONCLUSION

The research aimed to contribute to the analysis of the Reuter Concession from a geopolitical perspective. The study concluded that the contract was intended to settle Iran's geopolitical and economic modernization at the same time. It can be seen that the Iranian statesman's geopolitical reasoning was logical. Malkam and Hosein wanted to achieve the territorial unity of their state and modernization objectives through the strategy of connectivity and multilateralism. They aimed to ensure that Iran would not face the threat of Russian conquest alone, and parallelly they wanted to achieve the modernization goals. Their worldview and geopolitical perception made them see Britain as the ideal partner. However, renouncing sovereignty in this way and to this extent was not possible and was rejected unanimously by Iranian elites and society. The research states that while Malkam's geopolitical analyses were sharp, the implementation of his thoughts was unrealistic and infeasible. The study argues that the Reuter Concession can be seen as a failure on the part of the Iranians, as it opened the economic arena of competition to the great powers and made Iran's role as a buffer state clear to all. The concession highlighted the fact that the two great powers would not tolerate the exclusive dominance of the other in the various economic fields. Consequently, a dual Anglo-Russian structure emerged in this period, and Iranian geopolitics had to balance between these two giants. In other respects, however, as the economic arena was opened up to great

power rivalry, Malkam's plan was in some ways a success. The British were able to counter Russian conquest with the creation of economic interests which they expanded and defended in the later decades. These companies, such as the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and the Imperial Bank, became important actors in British geopolitics and played a role in ensuring that the focus of British geopolitics in Iran remained durable and strong. Nevertheless, while these economic positions ensured that Iran was not left completely alone, they played a contradictory role from the perspective of territorial integrity. The buffer state status threatened to divide the country, despite the British corporates. However, Britain and Russia, in the 1907 Agreement, agreed on the territorial integrity of Persia but created their own influence zones. As a result, the disintegration of Iran began, and the collapse of territorial integrity was a real scenario. Besides, the Reuter Concession became a symbol in the Iranian mind, where economic colonization started.

The other objective of the research was to examine and analyze British geopolitical reactions and long-term effects. The research described and analyzed how the British actors and traditions had a very different understanding of the concession. The plurality of British geopolitical actors and schools meant that while in the first half of the 1870s, those in the dominant decision-making positions did not support it, British Indian and Iran-based actors did, and kept it alive after its withdrawal because it served their agenda. A decade later, the Foreign Office recognized this, and based on Reuter's compensation claims, wanted to create British economic interests. From the British perspective, apart from the failure of the contract and the damage to soft-power capabilities, the Reuter Concession was overall a success story. It was subsequently used by their geopolitical actors to counter Russian pressure and to build economic positions. These provided long-term geopolitical and economic influence, most notably the Imperial Bank of Persia and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. The oil company became a major global player, causing a series of conflicts between the Iranian governments and Britain until the Islamic revolution. The contract also had a major impact on British geopolitical thinking, integrating economic instruments into it. Furthermore, it was also incorporated into the agenda of the Curzonian geopolitical tradition. Both the Eurocentric and the Curzonian British geopolitical traditions accepted the geopolitical status quo. This meant that the external conditions for Iran's modernization were jointly determined by the British and Russian empires. Consequently, the failure of the contract contributed to the birth of 'South Persia' as a British geopolitical concept. Besides, after the collapse of Tzarist Russia in 1917, the Curzonian school's maximum aim was a modified and expanded Reuter Concession that envisioned the Iranian modernization under the British umbrella.

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