

KİTAP TANITIMI / BOOK REVIEW

Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh, *THE GREAT GAME Small Players of the Great Game: The settlement of Iran's eastern borderlands and the creation of Afghanistan* London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004, xv + 263 pages Hardback: US \$100.00

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Dealing with the events of the nineteenth century the author hopes to show the impact of the so called the Great Game played between Britain and Russia on the changing political map of Asia and achieve a better insight in to the current affairs in Afghanistan and West Asia.

The British maneuvered the uncompromising tribes of Afghanistan and formed an Afghan nation not as a favour to its inhabitants but rather to create a buffer state between Russia and the British India. This was the Great Game played between Russia and Britain. Since the documents vital for the study of this Great Game were compiled by their agents the author asserts to have read between the lines to obtain the truth.

After his introductory pages the author starts off his work tracing back the Great Game to the time Persian Empire versus Macedonian; Alexander's desire -seeing himself successor to Cyrus the Great- to over power the Persian Empire and build 'world order'. This in time, with Egypt upsetting the balance between the two empires, ended in a geopolitical vacuum that gave rise to Islam, the greatest challenge both to Eastern and Western hemisphere. The Islamic power through the hands of the Turks, mainly the Seljuks passed to the Ottomans, who did not only put an end to the

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Byzantine Empire, but also came to challenge the European powers. With the discovery of the new world and particularly the sea route to the Far East via Cape of Good Hope, the tide turned other way round. The Europeans eventually came to challenge the Ottomans as well as the whole Islamic world including Persia. Britain, France, Russia and other European powers intensified their colonialism in Asia and Africa. The British conquest of India and the Russian advance in Central Asia, particularly her desire to reach the warm seas, brought the two great powers on the verge of confrontation. Their preference was to play a political game on the soils of Central Asia and its principalities ruled by local khans and amirs who were officially dependents of Iran. The three major players, British, Russian and Persian empires, of this Great Game are thus introduced in the 1st chapter of the book while the minor players are left to the subsequent chapters.

The Khanate of Central Asia, the Abdalis of Afghanistan and the Khozimeh of Khorasan and Sistan were the small players in this game. The Khozimeh, a dominant power in Qaenat, Southern Khorasan, Sistan and Northern Baluchistan, had gained its glory during the Safavid rule as an autonomous frontier keeping amirdom. In the nineteenth century, due to its geographical situation, both Britain and Russia opened consulates in Birjand to monitor the events in the amirdom.

The role the Khozimeh dynasty played in the Great Game, the subject matter of the 2nd chapter, is sought in the amirdom's foreign relations during 'the time of Amir Ali-Akbar Khan, Heshmat al-Molk II, the first Khozimeh Amir to serve in Sistan (1891-1914) and his much younger brother in Qaenat and Birjand, Amir Mohammad-Ebrahim Khan Shokat al-Molk II, Amir of Qaenat (1891-1904) and their successors' (p. 90). The Khozimeh was dragged into this game by the British and Russian consulates established in 1990 on their land that fell in the midst of the boundaries between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan where the conflict and rivalry was taking place. Britain, Russia and Khozimeh were each using the situation to their own advantage.

The events revolving around Amir Ali Akbar Khan Heshmat al-Molk and his younger brother Amir Esmail Khan Shoket al-Molk I, Amir of Qaenat are dealt within the 3rd chapter. The younger brother accused the elder of wanting to give the British the province of Sistan which he considered the rampart of Persia against the Uzbeks, Afghans, and the Turkmens. The British in this dispute defended Amir Ali Akbar Kahn's position believing that the change of governors in Sistan would damage their interest. In July 1903 the local agents of Russian Consul instigated agitation in Sistan over the price of grain and when Amir Ali Akbar Khan with the assistance of *kargozar* brought it under control the Russian Consul undertook to dismiss him. The British, considering this a challenge to their

political influence and credibility in the region, supported the Khozeimeh Amir against the Russian Consul; knowing that this would put the reputation of the Khozeimeh Amir at risk. By mid-March 1905 both Khozeimeh amirs of Sistan and Qaenat lost their hereditary amirdom to Moazez al-Molk, an outsider. Amir Mohammad Esmail Khan Shokat al-Molk I died in March that year (1905), but his younger brother, Amir Mohammad Ebrahim Khan Shokat al-Molk II managed in Tehran to secure governorship of Qaenat for himself. Amir Heshmat al-Molk II retired and left the governorship to Amir Masom Khan. By April 1905 the British changed their attitude towards Khozeimeh amirs and the Great Game continued with very severe political intrigues that were never in favour of the people of Sistan and Qaenat.

The aftermath of the Great Game, the subject matter of the 4th chapter, was the partitioning of Khorasan and the creation of Afghanistan. Following the assassination of Nader Shah Afshar on 19th June 1747, Nour Ahmad Mohammad and Ahmad Khan Abdali held together the Afghan and Ozbak contingents in defense of the royal tents. However, about six years later (5th August 1753) Ahmad Khan Abdali of the Dorrani tribe laid the foundation of Afghanistan. Ahmad Shah Dorrani and Amir Alam Khan Khozeimeh, the two powerful generals among Nader Shah's successors, started having dispute over the sovereignty of Khorasan each wanted it to be included within his realm. Khorasan thus became the battle field for the two generals and the grave for Amir Alam Khan.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth Iran and Afghan principalities became political arena for British, Russian and French diplomacy that did not only create a dispute amongst the rulers and princes of Iran, Afghanistan and Khorasan, but led to the 'conclusion of the treaty of Golestan (between Tehran and Moscow) in 1813, whereby Iran lost many of her northwestern provinces to Russia' (pp. 129-130). About fifteen years later Iran fought another war with Russia that resulted in Turkmanchai treaty of 1828 with the mediation of Sir John MacDonal Kinner, British envoy in Tehran. With this treaty Iran did not only grant capitulations to Russia but also excluded Russian subjects to prosecution under the Iranian laws. Although British were later granted the same rights, their anxiety grew about the Russian threat via Iran to their possessions in India. With the treaty of 1838 between Mohammad Shah Qajar and Kohandel Khan, Iran gained a direct protection right over the principality of Qandehar. Britain, considering this treaty a Russo-Iranian design for another step towards India, got alarmed and decided for a direct intervention in Afghanistan and thus signaled the beginning of the Great Game. In 1839 the British invaded Afghanistan with a force of 45,000 strong and forced the chiefs of Herat and Qandehar to sign treaties that eventually in 1840s resulted in the formation of Iran-Afghanistan boundaries.

The Iranian troops put Herat under siege in April 1856 and captured it on 25th October. Meanwhile Dust Mohammad Khan, Amir of Kabul, occupied Qandahar to British delight. The British encouraged by the envoys of Isa Khan, the Nayeb of Herat, declared war on Iran on 1st November and occupied a number of Iranian ports and islands in the Persian Gulf in order to have an upper hand in their dealings. They demanded Iran to withdraw from Herat and renounce their claims to the 'counties of Afghanistan'. In order to pacify Iran they made an agreement with Amir Dust Mohammad Khan of Kabul on 6th January 1857 paying him monthly in return for keeping Iranian troops busy in war. Both Britain and Iran made overtures to Napoleon III of France that resulted in Paris Treaty of 4th March 1857. The Iranians once more accepted the conditions lay down by the British and withdrawal from Herat and the adjacent district giving up all their rights over the 'counties of Afghanistan' (p. 146). In 1863 Dust Mohammad Khan occupied Herat paving the way both for partitioning of Khorasan and creation of Afghanistan as a buffer state between Russia and British India. His joy however did not last long as he died on 19th June 1863.

The next step, explained in the 5th chapter, was towards the emergence of Khorasan and Baluchistan boundaries. The dispute arose over the irrigation canals (*qanats*) of Hashtadan Plain of Khorasan in 1885 between Afghanistan and Iran invited the British intervention once more. The British appointed Brigadier-General C. S. MacLean to arbitrate between Afghanistan and Iran. The negotiations lasted until July 1891 and resulted in giving the entire plain of Hashtadan to Afghans and its hills to Iranians, but with a dispute over Musa Abad that Lord Curzon in September 1932 clearly pointed out that it did not belong to the Afghans. However, a Turkish arbitration team led by General Fakhred-Din Altay in 1935 concluded it in favour of the Afghans.

Just about the dispute over Musa Abad was going on, Iran's 'claims of sovereignty to the whole of Baluchistan was revived by Mohammad Shah Qajar (1834-1847). This aggravated the British influence in Baluchistan and Sistan' (pp. 164-165). It was not until 1870s that the western half of Baluchistan was returned to Iran while the eastern half had come under the British protection and suzerainty. The dispute over the boundaries in the district of Baluchistan continued until 1948, the year the British Empire of India ceased to exist. The British Baluchistan was incorporated in the newly founded state of Pakistan.

Sistan, the subject matter of the 6th chapter, was part of Iran throughout the Safavid Federation (1501-1722). Nader Shah Afshar (1730-1747) also included it within his empire. Following Nader Shah's assassination in 1747, Sistan fell under the control of Ahmed Shah Dorrani for a period of 23 years until his death in 1772.

Herat and Qandehar were having claims over Sistan. Sardar Ali Khan Sarbandi of Sekuheh, the hereditary chief of Sistan, asked Tehran to appoint him as the official governor so that Sistan could remain a province of Iran. James Murray, British Minister in Tehran, objected to Sarband's appointment in 1858 arguing that Sistan was part of Afghanistan and therefore its occupation by the Persian troops would be a violation of Paris Treaty. Despite this warning Sardar Ali Khan entered Sistan with 300 cavalry. Soon after Taj Mohammad Khan, his nephew, murdered him and paid allegiance to Iran in October 1858. British India, for a time, accepted Iran's claim to the province. Meanwhile Dust Mohammad Khan captured Qandehar and Farah in July 1862 and gained important places in Sistan, such as Chokhansu, Qal'eh Fath and Qal'eh Nad-e Ali. The British remained silent to Iran's appeal to solve the problem in accordance with Paris Treaty. Dust Mohammad Khan died and his son Shir Ali Khan succeeded him. About a month later in July 1863 Shir Ali Khan sent an Afghan force under the command of his younger brother Dust Mohammad Khan against Sistan. Iran objected to the occupation of Sistan, but by the time they received the British consent to intervene in accordance with Paris Treaty, the Afghan Shir Ali Khan married his daughter to Ahmad Khan and also through similar intrigues attracted Ebrahim Khan, another chief of Sistan, to his side in order to have an upper hand over the district. Iran then had no choice but to intervene and sent a strong force under the command of Amin Alam Khan III Heshmat al-Molk. Sistan was subdued; Ahmad Khan and others were arrested and sent to Tehran. Ebrahim Khan's appeal both to the Afghan and the British authorities was turned down.

'The Afghan Amir Shir Ali Khan formally asked the British in 1870 to intervene on behalf of his government in Sistan'. The British appointed Major General (later Sir) Frederick Goldsmid as arbitrator on 9th August 1870 in accordance with Paris Treaty. Sistan was carved into two, 'Sistan proper' and 'outer Sistan'. The arbitrator gave the larger part to Afghanistan and the smaller part to Iran. He drew the boundaries along the channel of the Hirmand River that eventually gave rise to friction between Iran and Afghanistan in 1896 when it changed its course due to unusually heavy flood. The dispute over the boundary and on the water distribution from Hirmand River continued until the treaty of 13th March 1973 was signed in Kabul between Iran and Afghanistan

In conclusion the Great Game of geopolitics did not only leave an everlasting mark on the political geography of South, Central and West Asia, but also created a vacuum that was exploited both by Britain and Russia. The Great game was played between Britain and Russia on a chessboard where the tribes and their rulers were pawns and knights and the shahs of Iran not as one of the players but the king. The game ended as the Persians would say "Shah Mat!" and the British "Checkmate!"

In this Great Game, the Russians ended up with territorial expansion and the British breaking up the territorial integrity both at the expense of Iran's territorial rights. It is unfortunate the historians particularly British who have taken up this subject have fallen into the trap of distorted documents in Foreign Office file at Public Record Office or India Office Library and Records.

Mojtahed-Zadeh, the author, in dealing with the small players of the Great Game has thrown further light on the subject. The subject matter is so interesting that it covers some minor discrepancies such as dismissing the Shi'ite propaganda in Anatolia when dealing with the Ottomans and ignoring the controversy over the Ottoman sultans' claim to the office of caliphate (p. 5). Having not used a standard transliteration alphabet and inconsistency in giving dates Islamic and Christian calendars (p. 143) as well as some incorrect dates (pp. 27 and 39; 128; 134; 137-138; 214) can be confusing for the reader. Likewise one is confused between the reliability of sources and dates when the author quoting Ayati's *Baharestan* (Tehran 1948) claim that Nader Shah defeated an Ottoman army of 140,000 strong at Morad Tappeh near Iravan (Yaravan) (p. 57) in 1738 while Uzunçarşılı in his *Ottoman History (Osmanlı Tarihi, vol. IV/1 Ankara 1961. p. 299)* keeps quite about this and asserts that Nader Shah was busy from 1737 to 1739 with the conquest of Afghanistan and western part of India marching as far as Lahore. In any case the use of original documents and sources in the book deserves an utmost credit and gives assurance to the reader.