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“Sheer Madness” or “Railway Politics” Iranian Style? – The Controversy over Railway Development Priorities Within the Persian Government in 1919–1920 and British Railway Imperialism

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ABSTRACT

Using Iranian and British primary sources, this essay studies the heated dispute over Iran’s immediate priorities in railway building that erupted within the Iranian government in the autumn of 1919, at which moment in time making a serious start with the development of Iran’s so far virtually non-existent rail infrastructure involving, first and foremost, though not necessarily exclusively, Britain, appeared to be imminent due to the related stipulations of the Anglo-Persian treaty that had been signed in August of that year. Seeking conceptual inspiration from Ronald E. Robinson’s thought on *Railway Imperialism* and drawing on seminal work on the issue of railway building ambitions in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Iran by Paul Luft, this analysis seeks to contribute to two separate areas of inquiry. One the one hand, it represents an intriguing case study for a (yet to be written) history of how Iranians made foreign policy during the early constitutional period (as opposed to histories of Iran’s place in the foreign policies of the Great Powers during that time). On the other hand, it aims at contributing to the study of the impact of European Imperialism on the Middle East in the immediate aftermath of the First World War.

KEYWORDS

Anglo-Iranian relations; Iranian foreign policy; railways; Mirza Hasan Khan Vosuq od-Dowleh; Firuz Mirza Firuz Nosrat od-Dowleh

“The proposed Trans-Persian railway” is the title of a well-documented article published in the *Scottish Geographical Review* in early 1911.¹ In this piece Lieut.-Col. Arthur Campbell Yate, formerly of the Indian Army, who had travelled in the wider region extensively since his service with the Afghan Boundary Commission of 1884–1886, knew Iran well and also seemed to have had good Persian,² discusses the then ongoing negotiations about plans for constructing a railway across the length of Persia. This was conceived of as an extension of Russia’s existing rail network in Transcaucasia but while being a Russian-led scheme, prominent investors from all major European financial market-places were to chip in too. Yate analyses various aspects of the project in relation to the regional interests of Britain, Russia, France, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire at length and with a great deal of insight. However, it is only in a brief paragraph at the very end of his essay that he at last mentions Persia herself. At this point he admits that in the “carrying out of this scheme, Persia may be no more than the instrument of the ambitions

of greater Powers”, but he concludes very optimistically that “none the less the prospect is full of promise for her, and now, if ever, she has the opportunity of reviving the past glories of Naushirwan and Shah Abbas.”³

This opportunity, if it had ever existed at that particular juncture in early 1911, came and went without Persia having been able to seize it. On the contrary, the humiliation that Russia visited on the Persians at the end of that same year made them look anything but “glorious” while the Trans-Persian railway project also failed to take off in earnest until the arrival of the First World War into the Persian realm, and the events that unfolded in its wake eventually put paid to the plan altogether.⁴

However, at the time that the controversy within the Persian government that is the focus of this essay erupted, i.e. in the autumn of 1919, Persia’s then leaders clearly believed that they had managed to seize the unexpected potential that the present international situation, which had arisen in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, seemed to harbour and thus having indeed created the perfect opportunity for getting started with

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¹Yate, “The Proposed Trans-Persian Railway.”

²See Yate, *England and Russia Face to Face in*

confounded with his more famous brother

³*Ibid.*, 180.

⁴See Spring, “The Trans-Persian Railway Project” and Fisher, “Lord Curzon and British Strategic,” 137–43. On railway developments pertaining to Persia during the

First World War from a British perspective, see Fisher, “Lord Curzon and British Strategic,” 144–50.

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1849–1940

also a member of the Afghan Boundary Commission and later Chief-Commissioner of British Baluchistan (1900–1904) as well as Conservative MP for Melton (1910–1924).

1910–1924.

144–50.

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the revival of Persia's "past glories" at long last. An important aspect of this was their belief that they had established the proper political and economic framework for Persia to embark on an accelerated railway building programme aimed at quickly remedying to Persia's woeful lagging behind her neighbours in terms of rail infrastructure. Yet, while the men at the helm of Persia's government at the time agreed on this in principle, their views on how to proceed with this in concrete terms were diametrically opposed to each other. The antagonists in this controversy over Persia's immediate priorities in the arena of railway building were Mirza Hasan Khan Vosuq od-Dowleh, who had become Prime Minister for a second time in August 1918 and Prince Firuz Mirza Firuz Nosrat od-Dowleh, who had just moved from his position as Minister of Justice to take over as Persia's new Foreign Minister when these two leaders started clashing on the issue in the autumn of 1919.

To some it might come as a surprise to find this particularly duo on the opposing sides of a controversy because both men are usually depicted as the very closely collaborating accomplices in the greatest act of treason ever committed in the history of Iran, namely having been bribed by the British into conceding to what has become known as the – much derided – Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919, which has gained notoriety as a framework for turning Persia into a British colony in all but name. My own research into this matter has led me to putting forward an entirely different assessment of these two reviled historical figures and their foreign policy and thus of the so-called 1919 Agreement.⁵ However, even I was very surprised when the primary sources that I studied revealed Firuz and Vosuq as being so utterly at loggerheads over a question of policy. During most of the period, for which I had been retracing their collaboration in government, which included a close reading of their related correspondence,⁶ they seemed to have got on very well indeed, and I formed the impression that the somewhat older and thus more cautious Vosuq had played a role not unlike that of an older brother to his fiercely intelligent yet somewhat impatient younger colleague Firuz.

Framework of analysis

Thus, quite regardless of the specific issue that was actually at stake, analysing this rare instance of a documented major policy disagreement between the two

key members of Persia's government at that time provides a fascinating glimpse into the decision making processes involving Persia's foreign policy makers during this period of crisis, which harboured various severe challenges but also seemed to present a number of attractive opportunities. That is not to say, however, that a critical comparative assessment of the two antagonists' diametrically opposed opinions on what in 1919 constituted Persia's most urgent needs in terms of railway building – both from an economic and from a military-strategic point of view – would not be equally illuminating, not least when taking into consideration which railway lines were later actually built and in which order.

Therefore, this essay seeks to make a contribution to (at least) two separate areas of inquiry. One the one hand, it represents an intriguing case study for a (yet to be written) history of how Iranians made foreign policy during the early constitutional period (as opposed to histories of the place of Iran in the foreign policies of the Great Powers during that time). On the other hand, it aims at contributing to the study of Imperialism, in particular to the specific sub-field of Imperialism research that Ronald E. Robinson conceptualised as *Railway Imperialism*⁷ in a ground-breaking collective work bearing this very title that he edited together with Clarence B. Davis and Kenneth E. Wilburn Jr. in 1991.⁸ Students of Railway Imperialism are interested in the interdependent relationship between imperialism, railways, and informal empire attempting to account in equal measure for both the imperial(ist) and anti-imperial(ist) aspects of railway construction in the non-metropolitan areas of the world during the Age of Empire. Ronald E. Robinson summed up this approach pithily: "The railway has often been studied from the standpoint of imperialism; this book makes a beginning with studying imperialism from the standpoint of the railway."⁹ Thus, when analysing the railway planning controversy inside the Persian government in 1919/1920, this essay takes its cues from Robinson and colleagues who invite scholars to focus on "the imperial and anti-imperial effects of railways whose rails traced the divergent paths of expanding capitalism, imperial strategy, and modernizing nationalism".¹⁰ In this regard, Robinson notes that "[p]rogressive elites in Asia and Africa also were well aware that a country without trains was unarmed and likely to remain poor and incapable of modern

⁵See Bast, "Les 'buts de guerre' de la Perse."

⁶Ettehadiyeh (Nezam-Mafi) and Pira, *Majmu'eh-ye Mokatebat, Asnad, Khaterat*.

⁷See Robinson, "Introduction."

⁸Davis, Robinson, and Wilburn, Jr., *Railway Imperialism*.

⁹Robinson, "Introduction," 5.

¹⁰Ibid.

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administration” but that “importing the technology was expensive and too risky for local capitalists to undertake [...]”.¹¹ This led to contractual arrangements with metropolitan firms and/or governments that were “unequal” but Robinson points out that these contracts “[...] were not that unequal; they offered patronage to politicians, markets for farmers, profits for land speculators, fees for lawyers, employment for town workers, and convenient travel for the general public”.¹² He goes on observing that therefore the politics of such Asian and African countries became to a greater or lesser degree “railway politics”.¹³

It is from this observation that our essay’s overarching concern derives: especially since *Railway Imperialism* lacks a chapter on Persia,¹⁴ we ask to what degree Robinson’s understanding might be applicable to Persia and its quarrelling key cabinet members in 1919/1920. How does the controversy within the Persian government unfold along the above-mentioned triad of “divergent paths of expanding capitalism, imperial strategy, and modernizing nationalism”? What concrete forms did these “divergent paths” take in the Persian case? Did any of those become the dominant one? What about the issue of “patronage to politicians” and profits for “land speculators” in the Persian case? In other words: to what degree were Persia’s politics – and more specifically the politics of Persia’s international relations – “railway politics” in 1919/1920?

Having formulated these questions, we need to pause for an important qualifier before we can proceed to trying answering them: It is true that *Railway Imperialism* lacks a chapter on Persia as stated above but it could be argued that Paul Luft had, in actual fact, already published that very chapter seven years earlier. Indeed, in his “The Persian Railway Syndicate and British Railway Policy in Iran”,¹⁵ which surveys the period from approximately 1890 to 1925, Luft appears to have been very much informed – as it were *avant la lettre* – by Robinson’s “experimental notion of ‘railway imperialism’ [which] suggests that the railroad was not only the servant but also the principal generator of informal empire; [and i.e.] imperialism [...] a function of the railroad”.¹⁶ Furthermore, despite the title of his piece, Luft’s is not a Eurocentric viewpoint, quite to the contrary. Luft is

very keen to give the Persians their due voice in his account; he is far from considering the Persian side a mere *quantité négligeable* as the above-quoted Lieutenant-Colonel Yate did in his 1911 essay. Thus, Luft’s 1986 piece shows a high degree of balance and completeness in its analysis although in order to achieve this, Luft had to read between the lines of his, mostly, British sources. Our essay, therefore, adds an entirely new dimension to Luft’s ground-breaking work: studying how the question of railway building in 1919/1920 was contested within the Persian government, we are specifically privileging the Persian viewpoint by grounding our analysis in Persian sources, most of which were not yet accessible at the time of Luft’s writing.

Given the nature of these sources, the analysis presented here will be able to cover only certain of the many aspects that students of *Railway Imperialism* have focused on in their studies. Thus, questions such as the intricacies of the proposed projects’ financing, the deeper technical and technological dimensions but also the interaction with these plans at the grass-roots level, and many more remain to be tackled in further research. The same is true for any attempt at comprehending the question of Persia’s rail development in the wake of the First World War as part of a colonialist-imperialist discourse of “development” and “technology” in discourse-analytical terms or through the prism of *Ideologiekritik*, as desirable as this might be.¹⁷ For the time being, this essay (merely) analyses the top-level controversy over Persia’s priorities in railway building and the ensuing arguments about the tracing of the lines as they relate to the context of Persian foreign policy making during the period under consideration. It does so by adopting the hitherto hardly explored point-of-view of the Persian protagonists.

Context

The context of the controversy within the Persian cabinet is the immediate aftermath of the First World War, which sees – or better perhaps: during which *I* see – the *seemingly* pro-British government of Vosuq manoeuvring between the powers in an effort to pursue a set of clearly defined Persian “peace aims” that were all

¹¹Ibid., 3.

¹²Ibid., 4.

¹³Ibid. On “railway politics” or “Railpolitik” as they dub it, see also Otte and Nelson, “Railpolitik: An Introduction”, although their attempt at conceptualising the link between railways and international politics lacks a specific and exclusive focus on Imperialism.

¹⁴In his explanation of the conceptual notion of Railway Imperialism, Robinson mentions Persia only once and then he does so also merely in passing, see *ibid.*, 2.

¹⁵Luft, “The Persian Railway Syndicate.” Aspects of the place of Persia in *Railway Imperialism* from a strictly British point of view are also discussed in Fisher, “Lord Curzon and British Strategic”, which is richly documented with English-language archival and other primary source references, but Fisher does not seem to have been aware of Luft, “The Persian Railway Syndicate.”

¹⁶Robinson, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁷For the type of analysis (even though concerning a different subject matter) that I have in mind here, see Satia, “Developing Iraq.”

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designed to contribute to one overarching goal.¹⁸ Thus, Vosuq and his colleagues were hoping that they would be able to exploit the unique post-war constellation that had arisen in international politics in order to secure once and for all Persia's sovereignty and territorial integrity as an independent state, over which there had been hanging severe doubts ever since the early nineteenth century and especially since the 1907 Anglo-Russian convention. This peace aim diplomacy led to Vosuq's sending, in late 1918, of his Foreign Minister, Ali Qoli Khan Moshaver ol-Mamalek, to Paris as head of a Persian delegation whose task it was to gain admission to the Peace Conference, which would begin in January 1919, while at around the same time, Vosuq also entered into parallel – secret – negotiations with Britain's government through their representative in Tehran, the acting British Minister, Sir Percy Cox, that culminated in the signing of an Anglo-Persian Treaty on 9 August 1919. This treaty, which gained notoriety as the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919, consisted of three different parts. However, only the content of the first two parts is well known, namely firstly the agreement proper, made up of six paragraphs stipulating amongst other things that Britain would supply financial and military advisers to help Persia modernise, and, secondly, a credit agreement providing for a £2 million British loan for Persia to facilitate the envisaged programme of reforms. One important provision of the treaty in the context of modernisation plans was that Britain would assist Persia with railway development.

What is often overlooked is that this Treaty, which Vosuq conceded only grudgingly, and not without having tried hard for an alternative, as the mere second best option for the realisation of his “peace aims” also included an exchange of notes between him and Sir Percy Cox. The Persian Prime Minister interpreted the content of this correspondence that was appended to the six-clause agreement and the loan contract, as a firm promise, if not a guarantee, that the British would throw their support behind his continuing pursuit of ambitious Persian foreign policy goals to be realised during the ongoing Peace negotiations in Paris. These goals being part and parcel of Vosuq's overall package of peace aims as mentioned above included territorial gains at the expense of both, the defeated Ottoman Empire (in Ottoman Kurdistan) and the imploded Russian Empire (in Transcaucasia and Trans-Caspia) as well as reparations, and a revision of Persia's existing treaties and agreements with foreign powers, e.g. those regarding tariffs. Thus, contrary to what is commonly assumed, *after* the signing of the Treaty, the Persian delegation

in Paris *continued* its efforts, albeit now under a new leader, namely Firuz, who had not only replaced its hitherto leader Moshaver ol-Mamalek as Foreign Minister shortly after the Treaty's signing but was also immediately sent on his way to Europe by the Persian Prime Minister.

Having arrived in the French capital on 12 September 1919, Firuz began immediately shuttling back and forth between Paris and London engaging in meetings at the Foreign Office to negotiate with Lord Curzon, the acting and soon-to-be actual Foreign Secretary as well as with other British officials, such as Lancelot Oliphant of the Central European and Persian Department or Charles Hardinge (1st Baron Hardinge of Penshurst), the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office who had both been posted to Tehran earlier in their careers. One very important aspect of Firuz' regular visits to London during the autumn of 1919 was his attempt to kick-start railway building with British assistance as stipulated by the Anglo-Persian Treaty that he had helped bring about.

Background

It is important to note here that the question of railway construction had been on the agenda of successive Persian governments already for quite some time when the Anglo-Persian Treaty was signed. Indeed, railway building had been contemplated by Iranians already during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah who had soon realised that such plans could not be executed without the involvement of foreign capital.

At that time, however, questions of railway building were closely linked to the strategic location of Persia within the Great Game. This meant that virtually no progress was made until 1910 because until then each side in that Game preferred sacrificing their own railway building potential in Persia if that allowed preventing the other side from realising theirs.

In the meantime, however, Persia had witnessed the Constitutional Revolution, on the one hand and the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, on the other. It was under those auspices, that railway building had made it back onto the agenda by 1910. An inter-departmental committee that had been established by the Persian government to assess Persia's railway needs concluded that a consortium, which was ideally to be multi-national in its complexion, should be entrusted with building an integrated trans-Persian railway to run from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea with several lines branching out eastward and westward. Such an integrated, nation-wide, and multi-power supported

¹⁸See Bast, “Les ‘buts de guerre’ de la Perse,” on which the context-setting account provided in this section is based.

approach was considered preferable to the building of isolated railway lines by either purely Russian or purely British conglomerates in their respective zones of influence. Indeed, from the Persian point of view an integrated multi-national approach was obviously the most sensible one. The logic of the Anglo-Russian Convention, was, however, more powerful. This led to the situation that pre-war Persia witnessed two purely Russian and one purely British project being pursued totally independently from one another.

The first, and more ambitious, of the two Russian projects proposed building a Trans-Persian railway from Tehran via Kerman to Bandar-e 'Abbas. It was, as mentioned above, in actual fact, merely to be Russian-led while also involving money and expertise coming from other European powers. It was, at last, submitted formally in December 1914 but, as mentioned above, nothing would come of it because of the war.

More success was had by the other, more small-scale, Russian project, which was for a railway line from Jolfa on the Russo-Persian border to Tabriz with a possible branch line down to Orumiyeh. Despite the war having started the Russians were able to complete this line (but not the branch to Orumiyeh), which opened on 21 February 1916.

The British project on the other hand proposed the construction of a railway line from Mohammereh (today's Khoramshahr) and/or Khor Musa on the Persian Gulf through what is now called Khuzestan up northward to Khorramabad. On 4 March 1913, an option for this project was given to a firm called the Persian Railways Syndicate (PRS), a consortium that was dominated by the Imperial Bank of Persia and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) although neither of these two held a majority of the shares. This consortium was headed by Charles Greenway, who was also the chairman of the APOC. The PRS' option stipulated that a survey of the projected tracing of the line be carried out under the joint auspices of the PRS and the Persian government. Upon completion of the survey expected for early 1915, the Persian government would have had until 4 March 1915 to decide whether in light of the survey's results, it wanted to grant the concession to the PRS or not. However, only the southern part of the

planned line, namely the section Mohammereh-Dezful, had been surveyed when the war broke out. Thus, the PRS' option lapsed when the 4 March 1915 deadline passed without a concession being granted. As the war progressed turning some areas of officially neutral Persia into a battleground with devastating consequences for the population there were no further major developments in the area of railways.¹⁹

The controversy over railway priorities within the Persian cabinet

However, August 1919 and the relevant clause within the Anglo-Persian Treaty, as mentioned above, brought the question of railway building once again to the top of the agenda. Thus, already during his very first visit to London as Foreign Minister in mid-September 1919, Firuz made it clear to his British interlocutors that the Persian side was extremely keen to get things going on that front.²⁰ Firuz also stressed that it was necessary to draw up a comprehensive and binding railway building strategy first, rather than to start on individual projects in an uncoordinated manner. No more concessions should be granted before agreeing on such a strategic plan.²¹ It seems that Firuz' caveat was aimed at curtailing the PRS, which had renewed its activities once the war had come to an end. Thus, the syndicate had begun pressing the Persian government to finally grant them the concession for the line from the Persian Gulf to Khorramabad arguing that their 1913 option was in actual fact still perfectly valid since the reason for missing the above-mentioned 4 March 1915 deadline – the outbreak of the war – had to be considered *force majeure*.²² The PRS' representative in Persia was Colonel C. Willoughby Wallace, who also worked as APOC's special envoy²³ and who seems to have enjoyed close links with Akbar Mas'ud Mirza Sarem od-Dowleh, the then Persian Minister of Finance.²⁴

Taken together, the 1919 Treaty with its related clause, the Persian government's keenness on making a start as conveyed to the Foreign Office by Firuz during his first visit, and the renewed activities of the PRS meant that the interested parties within the British

¹⁹The above account of the background is based on Luft, "The Persian Railway Syndicate," 158–90 who in turn draws partially on the ground-breaking Spring, "The Trans-Persian Railway Project." See also Fisher, "Lord Curzon and British Strategic," 137–50.

²⁰See the "Note by Earl Curzon of a conversation with the Persian Minister for Foreign Affairs", Foreign Office, 23 September 1919, *DBFP 1919-1939*, I/4: n° 789. For the British views on railway building in Persia at that time, see Luft, "The Persian Railway Syndicate," 192–8 and Fisher, "Lord Curzon and British Strategic," 150–1.

²¹See Curzon to Cox, London, 6 October 1919, in note 1 to *DBFP 1919-1939*, I/4: n° 823.

²²See Cox to Curzon, Tehran, 5 September 1919, *DBFP 1919-1939*, I/4 n° 757. This document contains the gist of a lengthy memorandum on railway building in Persia that had been produced at the British Legation in Tehran.

²³See Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum*, 358–64.

²⁴For the link between Sarem od-Dowleh and Wallace, see e.g. *DBFP 1919-1939*, I/4: n° 830.

government felt that they needed to put their heads together in order to decide on an official British position on the matter of Persian railway development. They met on 9 October 1919, which was shortly before Firuz would return to London from Paris for a second round of Anglo-Persian negotiations. In this meeting, representatives from the Foreign Office, the India Office, and the Department of Overseas Trade reached the conclusion that from the British point of view it would be best to begin by linking Persia to the Mesopotamian railway network. A line branching off the Baghdad-Railway near Sadijeh would lead to the Mesopotamian border town of Khanaqin and from there to Tehran.²⁵

Firuz himself *also* considered the linking of Tehran with the Baghdad railway via Khanaqin, and further on in passing via Kermanshah and Hamadan as Persia's first priority. In his view, this would then have to be followed by a continuation of this line from Tehran up to Mashhad. His ultimate aim was to go eventually beyond Mashhad and to link Persia up with the trans-Caspian network via Sarakhs and Tejen. Hence when he met Curzon again on 15 October 1919, Firuz simply stated that, bar a few minor details, the railway building priorities of the Persian government matched those of the British completely, although he hastened to add that he thought it *absolutely vital* to continue the planned Khanaqin–Tehran Line all the way up to Mashhad.²⁶

In the mean-time in Tehran however, Vosuq had told the representative of the PRS that, *in his opinion*, priority ought to be given to the building of a line from Mohammereh via Khuzestan to Khorramabad and then on to Teheran, i.e. extending the line, for which the PRS had been given the above-mentioned option back in 1913.²⁷ This was the exact opposite of what Firuz was telling the British in London.

Indeed, it transpires that the Persian Prime Minister and his Foreign Minister differed radically in their conception of what were Persia's immediate priorities in terms of railway building. The fact that they held diametrically opposing views on the matter would give rise to a quite heated argument between the two men, which took the form of a series of increasingly angry telegrams being exchanged between the Prime Minister in Tehran and his Foreign Minister in Europe. Let us now take a closer look at this intra-Persian debate.

At the end of October 1919, after his return to Paris from his second round of negotiations with the British in London, Firuz, full of satisfaction with himself, informed Vosuq proudly that he had reached an agreement with the British over how to proceed with Persia's railway building programme. The first priority would be Tehran's connection with the Mesopotamian railway network via Hamadan and Khanaqin. The next step would have to be the building of two branch lines, namely one to Anzali and another one to Astarabad (today's Gorgan), these towns both being ports located in the opposite corners of Persia's share of the coast of the Caspian Sea respectively. This step would be followed by the continuation of the Khanaqin–Tehran line toward Mashhad and beyond with the aim of establishing a connection with the trans-Caspian railway system. As long as the railroads were not yet built regular motor transport services should be set up along the projected lines. Firuz argued that Persia would thus get two railheads on the Caspian and access to the markets of Central Asia. He proposed granting the concessions for different lines to different companies from a variety of different countries in order to avoid monopolies. Firuz was particularly satisfied that he had managed to obtain Curzon's assurances that the British would see no objections to the involvement of other foreign investors in Persia's railway building programme. Thus, on the one hand, he wanted to attract French investment since he was aware of French interest in building a railway from Asia Minor to Tabriz and from there on to Mashhad and beyond into trans-Caspia, while on the other hand, Firuz proposed seeking the involvement of American capital into Persia's railway building plans. Firuz told Vosuq that he had become aware of how eagerly the British were trying to placate America's irritation²⁸ over the conclusion of the Anglo-Persian Treaty, specifically mentioning the efforts of the British ambassador in Washington, Sir Edward Grey. Hence, he informed Vosuq that he had tried to exploit this in order to sell the idea of an American involvement in the railway building programme [which was highly desirable for the Persians in any case but less so for the British] to Curzon as an ideal means to calm down the irate Americans. What Firuz, however, does not seem to have known, was that Curzon was far less willing to

²⁵See Luft, "The Persian Railway Syndicate," 192–3. Ironically, this proposed connection between Tehran and the Baghdad Railway had once been a project that the Persian government of the day had hoped to get Germany involved in which caused a lot of anxiety in Russia and led to shrill protests in the St Petersburg press when it was first muted in 1906, thus playing a role in the coming about of the 1907 Anglo-Russian Entente. Yet with the 1911 Potsdam Agreement between Germany and Russia, the Germans eventually swore off pursuing any such ambitions formally in return for Russia's acquiescence and potential significant capital investment in the Baghdad Railway project, see Bast, "Germany. i. German-Persian," 508–9.

²⁶See Curzon to Cox, London, 21 October 1919, *DBFP 1919-1939, I/4*: n° 823.

²⁷See Vosuq to Firuz, Tehran, 4 November 1919 (9 Safar 1338q.), Ettehadiyeh (Nezam-Mafi) and Pira, *Majmu'eh-ye Mokatebat*, n° 65.

²⁸For the negative reaction of the U.S. government to the announcement of the conclusion of the Anglo-Persian Treaty in the context of a discussion of other negative reactions to it, both in Persia and abroad (especially on the part of the French), see Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran*, 88–163.

take American concerns into consideration than his ambassador in Washington who, much to Curzon's annoyance, had seemed to be prepared to go so far as to invite the Americans to become an additional partner in the Anglo-Persian Treaty in order to calm them down.²⁹ It was for this reason that Curzon's response to Firuz' strong requests for American involvement in the railway building programme had remained somewhat elusive.³⁰

Firuz telegraphed all this to Tehran on 29 October 1919 and while he also asked the Prime Minister politely to express his own opinion on these issues it was clear that he expected nothing else but Vosuq's wholesale approval of the commitments that he had after all already made.³¹

For obvious reasons, this does not seem to have gone down very well with the Persian Prime Minister. The only question where Vosuq agreed with his Foreign Minister was the need to involve *non*-British expertise and capital in the railway building programme. He stressed that it was necessary to shop around for the most reliable firms and for the best conditions. Furthermore, Vosuq wrote that it was obvious that it would be best to get Americans involved wherever possible since this might then help to give the Treaty a better press worldwide.

Other than that, however, the Prime Minister expressed his dissatisfaction with Firuz for having made all sorts of declarations about Persia's priorities *without* prior consultation with himself. He instructed Firuz to *always* seek Tehran's opinion first and to allow enough time for internal discussion before committing the Persian side to anything. The Prime Minister's anger would have been understandable merely on account of Firuz' acting without authorisation. In the event, however, the Foreign Minister had also managed to make Vosuq look like a fool because, as already mentioned, in discussions that Vosuq had been holding with Sir Percy Cox and the PRS representative, Vosuq had told them the *exact opposite* of what Firuz had claimed vis-à-vis Curzon, namely that Persia's first priority ought to be constructing a line leading from Mohammereh up northwards and eventually connecting Tehran to the Persian Gulf! Contradicting one another in that manner was hardly bound to strengthen Persia's position in the negotiations.

Having thus rebuked his young Foreign Minister for his insubordination, Vosuq went on presenting four specific arguments in favour of giving priority to building a North-South axis.

Vosuq *first* pointed out that Mohammereh had access to the open sea and hence to all trade centres of the world, which must be seen as an argument against Firuz' emphasis on railheads on the Caspian and the latter's stressing of the potential access to the Central Asian markets.

Second, the North-South line would open up the hard to reach provinces of Khuzestan and Lorestan and their potential wealth in natural resources.

It would *third* be no problem to establish regular motor transport along the route that Firuz favoured while the area to be crossed by the North-South line currently had no transport infrastructure whatsoever thus potentially benefiting far more from the advent of a railway.

Vosuq argued *fourth* that starting to build the line from Mohammereh would be very handy as building material and workers could be transported there easily by sea.

Therefore, Vosuq instructed Firuz firmly to pursue the North-South line as Persia's first railway building priority in any further negotiations with the British, except if the Foreign Minister were to have specific reasons in favour of the East-West axis that he had not already mentioned.³²

Nevertheless, before these instructions were to reach Firuz, the situation took yet another twist when Curzon told Firuz that Cox had just reported from Tehran that an agreement between the Persian government and the PRS regarding the construction of the North-South axis was imminent, something which he, Curzon, could not support if it was not part of a comprehensive strategic railway building plan, about the principle need for which both him and Firuz had after all already reached agreement.³³

Indeed, the Foreign Office was puzzled by the contradicting signals coming from the Persian side and alarmed by the news about the PRS' alleged closeness to obtaining a concession. Curzon was unhappy about the eagerness of the PRS, which he did not view too favourably in any case, especially because of its close links to the dreaded (by him) APOC. At the point of

²⁹After the controversy between Curzon and Grey about the best way to placate the Americans had been raging for several weeks, on 30 October 1919, an exasperated Curzon would scribble on yet another telegram by Grey that asked for a more conciliatory attitude toward the Americans over the question of Persia that he had not sent Grey to Washington to create "trouble" over the Anglo-Persian Agreement, which, however, the latter apparently considered being his main task as British Ambassador to the United States. See *DBFP*, I/4, document n° 826, note 6.

³⁰See Curzon to Cox, London, 21 October 1919, *DBFP* 1919-1939, I/4: no 823.

³¹See Firuz to Vosuq, Paris, 29 October 1919 (3 Safar 1338q.), Ettehadiyah (Nezam-Mafi) and Pira, *Majmu'eh-ye Mokatebat, Asnad, Khaterat*, n° 60.

³²See Vosuq to Firuz, Tehran, 4 November 1919 (9 Safar 1338q.), Ettehadiyah (Nezam-Mafi) and Pira, *Majmu'eh-ye Mokatebat, Asnad, Khaterat*, n° 65.

³³See Firuz to Vosuq, London, 4 November 1919 (9 Safar 1338q.), Ettehadiyah (Nezam-Mafi) and Pira, *Majmu'eh-ye Mokatebat, Asnad, Khaterat*, n° 66.

planning where priorities had to be decided from a geo-strategic point of view rather than by economic considerations Curzon did not want to leave the initiative to private business although he reckoned that in the long run, i.e. once the building stage would have been reached, there would be no way around involving the seemingly very deep-pocketed consortium.³⁴ Although Firuz had grandly declared the congruence between his and the British priorities, Curzon was also deeply annoyed by Firuz' insistence on the necessity of a continuation of the agreed East–West route to Mashhad and beyond and by the latter's demand for two branch lines to the Caspian. For Curzon, all these plans were “sheer madness”.³⁵

Faced with a situation where all sorts of interested parties seemed to be pursuing their often contradictory railway plans without paying much attention to one another, let alone to Curzon and his priorities, the latter fumed in early November 1919: “I did not conclude the Anglo-Persian Agreement in order to be humbugged either by the Persian Government or the Minister for Foreign Affairs or Col. Wallace.”³⁶

Having been confronted with Curzon's wrath and in defence of his own view of Persia's railway building priorities Firuz, who at this point in time *still* had not received his Prime Minister's instruction mentioned above, informed Vosuq that he had rigorously denied the news that the granting of a concession to the PRS for building the North–South line was imminent. In what can only be described as a jibe at Vosuq, he wrote that he had told the British that it was unthinkable that the Persian Prime Minister would have made such a far reaching decision without informing him, i.e. Firuz, beforehand. Firuz concluded his telegram by stating that it would be quite wrong to start the building programme with the Mohammereh-Khorramabad line and that his view was shared by the Foreign Office.³⁷

Firuz explained the rationale behind his view at length once he had finally received Vosuq's remonstrations.³⁸ First of all, though, he rejected the accusation that he had been acting without authorisation from Tehran with his trademark arrogance: He would never enter into any commitments without prior consultation except in cases where he would be one hundred per cent sure that his actions would be in Persia's best interest. Mirroring, as it were, the Prime Minister, Firuz then also put forward exactly four arguments to explain why a link

with the Mesopotamian railway network and the eastward continuation of this line toward Mashhad and beyond ought indeed to be Persia's first priority.

First, a connection with the Baghdad Railway would give Persia access to the Mediterranean, which was truly an “open sea” unlike the Persian Gulf that the Prime Minister had invoked in his argument.

Second, by linking up with the Baghdad Railway Persia would also get a connection to the railways of French dominated Asia Minor and thus access to Mediterranean ports that would be beyond British control [!]. Such a link would furthermore provide rail access to Istanbul.

Third, the continuation of the East–West line to Mashhad and the possibility to connect with the trans-Caspian railway network would make Persia into an important bridge for Europe's trade with Central Asia.

Fourth, it would also be of great geo-strategic importance to possess a railhead in Khorasan because in that case, Persia's [long-term] territorial claims in Trans-Caspia could be pursued more realistically while in the short-term, Khorasan itself could be defended more easily against potential attacks from Turkestan or Afghanistan. Bringing the railway to this area would also help pacifying it domestically. By comparison, the North–South line would not bring any significant benefit to Persia apart from the relatively less important opening up of the provinces of Khuzestan and Lorestan. Firuz claimed that the only real beneficiary of this line would be the APOC. Hence, the bosses of Col. Wallace in London (i.e. the leading figures within APOC) would put as much pressure on him in Europe as the latter would on the Prime Minister in Tehran. Firuz also argued that it would be difficult to bargain for the best conditions if the construction of this line was to be made Persia's priority since the PRS already held an option on building this line.³⁹ Not least for that reason it would be better to start on the East–West line, where Persia would not be bound by previously granted options. At a later stage one could of course still grant the current option holders a concession to build the North–South line so much favoured by the Prime Minister.

Persian foreign-policy making in the shadow of the First World War and “railway politics”?

What are the merits and demerits of the points made by either side of the argument? The supporters of the

³⁴See Luft, “The Persian Railway Syndicate,” 192–3 as well as Curzon to Cox, Tehran, 31 October 1919, *DBFP 1919-1939*, I/4, n° 831.

³⁵Luft, “The Persian Railway Syndicate,” 193, note 123.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷See Firuz to Vosuq, London, 4 November 1919 (9 Safar 1338q.), *Ettehadiyeh (Nezam-Mafi) and Pira, Majmu'eh-ye Mokatebat, Asnad, Khaterat*, n° 66.

³⁸See Firuz to Vosuq, London, 12 November 1919 (17 Safar 1338q.), *Ettehadiyeh (Nezam-Mafi) and Pira, Majmu'eh-ye Mokatebat, Asnad, Khaterat*, n° 70.

³⁹Here Firuz obviously exaggerates somewhat since, as we had seen above, as far as the Persian government were concerned at least, this option had lapsed when the PRS failed to take the contract in 1915.

North–South line, in favour of which Vosuq had argued, could of course claim that the proposed track had been already at least partly surveyed and that starting to build from a port city would be beneficial. However, if we disregard this modest head-start more seems to speak for the audacious East–West plans pursued by the Foreign Minister. The connection with different railway networks that Firuz stresses appears to make a lot of sense. It also seems hard to dismiss the argument about the geo-strategic potential of the East–West line and its proposed branches both in terms of strengthening the authority of the central government domestically and with regard to potential external threats. The same is true for the reference to the problem of the existing option limiting Persia’s bargaining power.

However, while we have no reason to doubt that Firuz genuinely believed in his own argument, there is some evidence to suggest that his dogged resistance against giving priority to building the North–South line might have been also, at least partly, motivated by other considerations.

His attempts to delay the building of a North–South line do indeed appear in a different light if we take into account that at the same time, Prince Abdolhoseyn Mirza Farman Farma, Firuz’ highly influential father, pursued the establishment of a motor transport company, which was to be granted the exclusive right to carry goods along the route Būshire – Shiraz – Isfahan.⁴⁰ A railway line running partially in parallel to this route further to the west could of course prove a rather unwelcome competitor to the planned motor transport company.⁴¹ Did this consideration inform Firuz’ stubborn insistence on starting the envisioned railway building programme on a West–East axis?

The oddities of the dispute between Firuz and Vosuq do not, however, end with this coincidence: amongst the prospective share-holders of said motor transport company, alongside Farman Farma, Firuz, the latter’s brothers, Sarem od-Dowleh, and some wealthy traders we also find ... Vosuq!⁴² It might well be argued that this ultimate congruence of business interests, which existed between the two antagonists of the controversy inside

the Persian cabinet might have helped them coming to a compromise over their views on the country’s immediate priorities in terms of railway building. Yet, in this context it is worthy of note that during the negotiations about the distribution of shares in the future company, Farman Farma complained about Vosuq because the latter had not been satisfied with just the one out of the overall fourteen shares that Farman Farma had allocated to him but had in actual fact claimed two out of the fourteen.⁴³ This in turn gives rise to the question whether the Prime Minister did only insist so much on the priority of the south–north railway line, because he wanted to put Farma Farma under pressure in the tussle over his demand for a second share?

Be that as it may, as I hinted at, the two warring factions inside the Persian government eventually came to settle on a compromise over Persia’s priorities and they reached agreement with the British side about the implementation of these plans in early 1920. This meant that priority would indeed be attributed to the East–West trajectory that had been championed by Firuz but the concession to build the line would be granted to the PRS. The PRS was asked to co-operate on the project with two experienced engineering companies, namely Vickers Ltd. on the one hand and Armstrong, Whitworth & Co. Ltd. on the other hand. Importantly this Anglo-Persian deal also recognized and hence extended the continuing validity of the PRS’ 1913 option for the North–South line. Both lines were eventually to be linked, which thus promised delivering a truly Trans-Persian railway in the end. Somewhat to the dismay of the Foreign Office, the Persian government then also started liaising with the PRS in an attempt to seriously pursue the “mad” project of continuing the East–West line toward Mashhad and beyond.⁴⁴

Contrary to the hopes that had been expressed by both, Vosuq and Firuz, none of these plans did stipulate any explicit American involvement but Firuz would soon seek out American firms to get them involved in another sector, namely the oil industry.⁴⁵

As is well known, none of these concessions and options agreed upon in 1920 would be given the

⁴⁰See Ettehadiyeh (Nezam-Mafi) and Sa’dvandiyan, *Majmu’eh-ye Asnad-e ‘Abd ol-Hoseyn Mirza*, n° 93 & n° 97–99. The monopoly for transport on this route was up for grabs at that time since the seven-year concession held the Persian Transport Company – a joint venture owned one third by the IBP and two thirds by Messrs. Lynch & Co.’s Euphrates & Tigris Steam Navigation Co. (E&TSNCo.) – which had been granted in mid-1912, had run its course by 1919, see McLean, “Constructors in a Foreign Land,” 497, 501.

⁴¹Ironically, the previous concession holders for the route, i.e. the Persian Transport Company embodied by Henry Lynch of E&TSNCo., had feared exactly the same and thus managed to get representation on the board of the above-mentioned PRS where they were able to claim three out of the six director posts coming under the lead of the PRS’ independent chairman. As a result, and probably unsurprisingly, “Lynch’s new business associates [in the PRS], however, soon found him to be an exasperating partner and concluded that his immediate purpose was to obstruct all railway development [...]” See McLean, “Constructors in a Foreign Land,” 501.

⁴²See *ibid.*, n° 97.

⁴³See *ibid.*, n° 98.

⁴⁴See Ettehadiyeh (Nezam-Mafi) and Pira, *Majmu’eh-ye Mokatebat, Asnad, Khaterat*, n° 78, n° 83, n° 85, n° 88, n° 107 as well as *B DFA, II/B/16*, n° 151, n° 158–161 & n° 163.

⁴⁵See Rubin, “Stumbling Through the ‘Open Door’.”

necessary parliamentary approval back then.⁴⁶ And when Persian railway building would at last seriously get under way during the late 1920s and the 1930s, it did *not* start along the East–West axis as agreed between Persia and Britain in 1920 (which in actual fact got never built in this shape) but along the north–south corridor with the first sector that was eventually built stretching from the Persian Gulf at Khor Musa up to Dezful via Ahvaz, in other words running along what had been the old PRS option of 1913. However, the contractor now was not the PRS but rather an American company very much as Vosuq had been hoping back in 1919/1920. Only a little later, a German conglomerate began putting into reality part of what Curzon had considered “sheer madness”, namely Firuz’ daring dream of connecting Tehran with the Eastern corner of the Caspian: a railway running from Bandar-e Shah via Shahi and Sari to the Persian capital.⁴⁷

Thus, if we consider the building of which railway lines would be eventually tackled first in 1928, and which countries the companies who did so, came from, we see that both opponents of the controversy within the Persian government had been utterly prophetic with their respective visions, each in their own way.

To sum up, it would therefore appear that the antagonists in the controversy that split the Persian government over the country’s immediate railway building priorities in 1919/1920 had both put forward well thought-through and highly valuable arguments aiming at improving the country’s transport infrastructure for Persia’s economic, political, and military-strategic benefit. Their approach to the question of the immediate priorities in terms of railway building appears to be that of Robinson’s above-mentioned “[p]rogressive elites in Asia and Africa [...] well aware that a country without trains was unarmed and likely to remain poor and incapable of modern administration” and, i.e. aimed at developing Persia’s rail network with foreign, and ideally not merely British, capital and know-how as part and parcel of their broader general agenda for reform and modernisation from above but within an – at least outwardly – constitutional framework. This was an oligarchically conceived reading of the legacy of the Constitutional Revolution (during which Vosuq had played a prominent role) and its as of then still largely unachieved objectives. Yet, in similar fashion to many of the cases analysed in *Railway Imperialism*, Persia’s “railway politics” did not stop with pure infrastructure matters.

Believing in and adhering to the constitutional principle Vosuq and even more so his youthful Foreign Minister, the son of the extremely powerful and extremely wealthy magnate ‘Abdolhoseyn Farman Farma who could trace his lineage straight back to Fath ‘Ali Shah Qajar (r. 1797-1834) might well have considered themselves as, if not the “first”, than probably the second and the third “servant[s] of the state” but by-and-large they, alongside a select few other major families, also pretty much *were* the state at this particular moment in time. And thus, as shown by the haggling over the shares in the to-be-established motor-transport company for the southwest of Persia that occurred in parallel to the controversy over the immediate priorities for railway development, they had no compunction to try and use their, at that time temporarily nearly completely unchecked,⁴⁸ access to the levers of power for their personal benefit. In their view, there was little, if any, difference between what benefitted the interests of the state and what benefitted their private interests and it would mean to subscribe to an ahistorical view if we were to be overly surprised by this example of “patronage to politicians” in the context of 1919/1920 “railway politics”. Indeed, it is something else that is noteworthy in drawing conclusions from the above vignette, namely the issue of the agency in their interaction with the ambitions of British railway imperialism of the Persian elites, who, in terms of Robinson’s above-mentioned “divergent paths” represented Persia’s “modernizing nationalism” against the PRS’s “expanding capitalism” and the “imperial strategy” of the British government. Vosuq’s and Firuz’ ideas about what constituted the immediate priorities in launching Persia’s railway development might have been, at least for a short while, diametrically opposed and, as we have seen, there might well have been ulterior motives (partly?) informing their preferences, but there was always full agreement between both of them that Persia should push for a diversification in the sources of the capital as well as of the know-how involved in it. This proved a tall order, since the Persian government’s room for manoeuvre at that particular juncture was fairly limited both at home, where the authority of the central government did not reach very far beyond the capital and certainly did not cover all of the envisaged railway lines, and also on the international stage. Yet, they certainly did not consider themselves, nor were they, “instrument[s] of the ambitions of greater Powers”.⁴⁹ For all its apparent similarities, Persia’s

⁴⁶See Luft, “The Persian Railway Syndicate,” 196–203.

⁴⁷See Lemańczyk, “The Transiranian Railway,” 239–41.

⁴⁸There was no sitting parliament and the constitutionally rather powerful monarch was far away from the capital having accompanied Firuz to Europe for an extended stay.

⁴⁹Yate, “The Proposed Trans-Persian Railway,” 180.

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“railway politics” in 1911 – when the *Scottish Geographical Review* published Lieut.-Col. Yate’s insightful yet patronising essay, with which we opened this discussion – differed profoundly from that of 1919/1920.

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