Iranian Studies (2025), 1–18
doi:10.1017/irn.2024.65

Association for Iranian Studies
انجمن ایران‌پژوهی

ARTICLE

Iran's Man for all Seasons: The Rise and Fall of Taymourtash

Shaul Bakhash

History and Art History, George Mason University, Fairfax, USA
Email: sbakhash@gmu.edu

(Received 30 September 2024; revised 1 November 2024; accepted 2 December 2024)

Abstract

Abdol-Hossain Taymourtash, Reza Shah's first minister of court, was universally recognized as the most powerful man in Iran after the shah himself. He was the lieutenant, ran the government for him. He played a key role at the shah's side in selecting cabinet ministers and the deputies to be elected to parliament. He helped shape and realize Reza Shah's vision for the revival and modernization of Iran. Yet in 1933, royal favor was suddenly withdrawn, and Taymourtash was arrested and imprisoned where, in all probability Reza Shah had him put to death. This article focuses on the always fraught relationship between a powerful autocrat and his loyal and efficacious lieutenant, and on the dilemma of those who wish to serve their countries and end up doing so at the cost of serving as the agents of a dictatorship.

Keywords: Taymourtash; Reza Shah; majlis; Sir Robert Clive; APOC; comprehensive treaty; capitulations; prison

During his six-year tenure as Reza Shah's court minister, Abdol Hossain Taymourtash was universally acknowledged as the most powerful man in Iran, other than the shah himself. Tall, good-looking, polished in manner and speech, a charming interlocutor, a heartbreaker with women, and – during his time as a parliamentary deputy – a persuasive orator, Taymourtash dazzled all who encountered him. The American minister in Tehran, Charles C. Hart, who thought very little of Iranians in general, considered Taymourtash a man of "greatness… the most strikingly alert human being" he had known. "The man's gifts were so extraordinary as to appear unnatural," Hart wrote. A British diplomat in Iran described Taymourtash as "a sort of Persian superman"; the Soviet foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov, thought him "a man of exceptional capacity and the veritable ruler of Persia."[1]

When Reza Shah assumed the throne in late 1925, he appointed Taymourtash minister of court. Taymourtash quickly became the ruler's most trusted adviser, the lieutenant who ran the government for him and the intermediary through whom the shah made his wishes – really, his dictates – known to the government, individual ministers, and the Majlis (parliament). Taymourtash sat in on cabinet meetings, with the prime minister playing a secondary role. It was Taymourtash, not the foreign minister, who conducted Iran's foreign

[1] Hart, as cited in Mohammad Gholi Majd, *Great Britain and Reza Shah: The Plunder of Iran, 1925–1941* (University Press of Florida, 2001), 175–76; Sir R. Clive to Mr. A. Henderson, No. 3, January 30, 1930, FO 416/86; Litinov's remarks to the British ambassador in Moscow in Sir E. Ovey to Sir John Simon, No. 29, Moscow, January 19, 1932, FO 416/90.

policy and negotiated major agreements with foreign governments. In consultation with the shah, Taymourtash played a key role in picking cabinet ministers and determining, in almost all constituencies, who would be elected to parliament.

Yet, if Taymourtash's rise to the pinnacle of power was dazzling, his fall from grace and out of royal favor was equally dramatic. In 1933, after six years as court minister, Reza Shah's favor was withdrawn as thoroughly as it was once unreservedly granted. Taymourtash was unexpectantly dismissed, arrested, imprisoned, tried in court, and sentenced to a lengthy prison term. Once fawned over and seemingly invulnerable, Taymourtash was transformed overnight into a mere prisoner, a man helpless and humiliated. His death in a bare prison cell in October 1933, eight months after his incarceration, was officially attributed to heart failure; in all probability, Reza Shah had him put to death.

Taymourtash's rise and fall is a study in the fraught relationship between a powerful autocrat and his loyal and efficacious lieutenant, his man for all endeavors. There are many such examples in history. Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII, comes to mind. For fifteen years Wolsey acted for the king as the commanding presence in virtually all matters, domestic and foreign; but in 1530, the subject of Henry's displeasure, Wolsey was dismissed, stripped of power, and imprisoned, his magnificent residence – Hampton Court – seized by the king.

Taymourtash's career followed a similar trajectory. He played a major role in realizing Reza Shah's vision for Iran, shaping his plans, and bringing the shah's aspirations for the country's transformation to fruition. Taymourtash's privileged position as the shah's right-hand man had many rewards: there was the taste and reality of power; the satisfaction of solid accomplishments; the stream of officials and others seeking favors and craving access to the shah; the foreign ambassadors and diplomats with pressing business and issues to resolve; the honor he was accorded during his official trips abroad; and, perhaps, the opportunities for personal profit.

But in serving the shah, Taymourtash was also advancing his own agenda. He was one of a generation of Iranians who chafed at an Iran that was poor, weak, and foreign-dominated, wishing to see the country politically strong, economically prosperous, independent, and "modern," like the nations of Europe. If Reza Shah used Taymourtash for his own ends, Taymourtash also "used" Reza Shah. Always at the shah's side, wielding immense authority, he was positioned to influence Reza Shah's policies, choices, and decisions. Iran's iron ruler became the vehicle through which Taymourtash and his closest associates managed to achieve much of their own agenda for Iran.

Yet, there was a price to pay for privilege, power, and prestige. In the service of Reza Shah, Taymourtash, the once ardent constitutionalist, became the agent of dictatorship. Willingly or reluctantly, he enabled an autocrat who turned parliament into a rubber stamp and his ministers into ciphers; who controlled elections and muzzled the press; and who shut himself off from criticism and contrary opinion. It meant having to defend royal wishes and whims that Taymourtash no doubt found embarrassing – such as Reza Shah's 1931 decision that no provincial official, military officer, or local Iranian should attend national days or other receptions at foreign consulates and legations – alongside acquiescence when close friends ended up dishonored and imprisoned, the victims of royal displeasure. In the end, it meant falling victim himself to the suspicious mind and inscrutable impulses of a ruler whose success in modernizing Iran, and untrammeled power, Taymourtash had done so much to advance.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Early career

The details of Taymourtash's early life and career are well known.[2] He was born into relative privilege in or around 1883, the son of a major landowner and provincial notable in the northern province of Khorasan. His father, although not among the large and wealthy landowners who dominated the politics of the capital, had sufficient local influence and wealth to be appointed to governorships in Khorasan province; secure for young Taymourtash a seat in the Majlis at age twenty-six (a seat to which he was re-elected for an additional five successive terms); and for Taymourtash to marry well, taking as wife Sorour al-Saltaneh, the close relative of a wealthy Khorasan landlord and a woman who, through her mother, was related to the ruling Qajar dynasty.

After completing preliminary studies in Iran, Taymourtash, at the age of eleven by some accounts, was sent to Eshqabad, Russia, for further study and to learn Russian; then, like other sons of the upper classes, he enrolled in one of Russia's elite military academies, the Imperial Nikolay Cavalry School in St. Petersburg. He returned to Iran several years later, fluent in Russian and French, a cultured man of polished manners, high ambitions, and with a taste for literature, wine, women, gambling, and a passion to "modernize" Iran – to acquire for his own country the advances taking place in Europe. Later, during his early years as a deputy in the Majlis, Taymourtash often referred to how things were done and politics conducted in Europe as the model for Iran to emulate. With the support of his wealthy father, Taymourtash was able to establish himself in Tehran in a fine house, furnished in the European style, and begin pursuing a career in government.

Taymourtash's return to Iran coincided with the heady and tumultuous period following the constitutional revolution of 1906. Taymourtash supported the constitutional cause and helped defend it. Presumably, he too was caught up in the aspirations for a limited, constitutional monarchy, rule of law, freedom of the press, and popular political participation. The high hopes raised by the revolution's initial success, however, proved short-lived. A monarch, Mohammad Ali Shah, tried to overthrow the constitution, leading to armed conflict between royalist and constitutional forces, and resulting in widespread disorder before being quashed.

The new constitutional order did not prove a great success, however, as the Majlis was fractured and rapidly changing governments were weak and largely ineffective. Foreign interference in Iran's internal affairs did not end.

Taymourtash's early career played out against this background. He served briefly in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in minor positions and as a Russian translator. Then, in rapid succession, he served as governor of Gilan province, as commander of the Khorasan army, as minister of justice in one cabinet and as minister of public works in another, and as governor of Kerman province.[3] In a period of rapid turnover, none of these significant-sounding positions were of long duration – often lasting only a few months or a single year. Taymourtash had little opportunity to accomplish much during these brief tenures. As justice minister, his attempt at a sweeping reform of the judiciary made little headway before the cabinet was dissolved. The Khorasan "army" he briefly commanded was but a small force. Nevertheless, along the way, he established a reputation as a man of considerable

[2] Sources for Taymourtash's early political career include: Baqer Aqeli, *Taymourtash dar Sahne-ye Siyasi-ye Iran* (Tehran: Javidan Press, 1372/1993), 27–207; Cyrus Ghani, *Iran and the Rise of Reza Shah* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998), 175; and Meron Rezun, "Reza Shah's Court Minister: Teymourtash," *International Journal of Middle Easter Studies* 12 (1980), 119–137.

[3] As governor of Gilan province, Taymourtash dealt harshly with the Kuchik Khan's Jangali rebellion, and although leaders of the movement who turned themselves in were promised amnesty, Kuchik Khan's close associate, Ebrahim Heshmat, was subjected to a quick trial and execution.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

capabilities and a boundless capacity for hard work; and his early initiatives aimed at judicial reform and reviving Iran's cultural and archaeological heritage came to fruition later, in the reign of Reza Shah.

More significant to Taymourtash's political career and the maturing of his political ideas was his association with a group of parliamentarians who joined together in the fourth and fifth sessions of the Majlis (1920–1926) to form a party with an agenda for extensive reforms. Also critical was his role as one of Reza Khan's early supporters, following the 1921 coup and Reza's rapid consolidation of ultimate power.

The Reform Party was distinguished not so much by its accomplishments in a period of ineffective government as for the ideas its members espoused – ideas that later shaped Reza Shah's reign. These men saw an Iran that lagged far behind the industrialized states of Europe. Their country was economically poor; a large part of the population lived in poverty and was illiterate. The central government lacked a proper army, effective administrative system, and sufficient revenues. It relied on British subsidies to maintain the Cossack Brigade, the only effective military force in the country, and fund other government operations. The Iranian banknote was issued and controlled by a British bank. The large tribal confederations in the south and north were largely outside government control. In the province of Arabistan (later renamed Khuzistan), an Arab sheikh, Khazal, was practically independent, his position guaranteed under a treaty with the British government. A rebel chief of the Jangalis, Mirza Kuchik Khan, led a rebellion in the province of Gilan, while a gendarmerie officer led another rebellion in Khorasan province.

The 1919 Anglo-Persian agreement, long sought by Britain's foreign secretary, Lord Curzon, reflected Iran's dire straits. Secured only after the prime minister, Ahmad Vosuq, two of his ministers, and the monarch, Ahmad Shah, had been handsomely paid, the agreement provided Iran with a loan to finance roads and other public works alongside the appointment of British advisers to every principal government department to carry out a reorganization of the judicial and finance systems, the army, and government ministries. The agreement was widely unpopular and regarded countrywide and in parliament as turning Iran into a British protectorate; and with no prospect of parliamentary approval, it was ultimately abandoned.

It was these conditions that the Reform Party in parliament and others outside the Majlis – e.g., like-minded newspaper editors, intellectuals, and foreign-educated members of the younger generation – wished to urgently address. They stressed the need for industrialization, widespread public education (including for women), judicial reform, a reduction in the power and influence of the clergy, and a tax and revenue system that met the state's financial needs. They called for measures that would forge Iranians – who identified themselves by clan, tribe, or locality as Bakhtiaris, Lurs, Qashqai'is, Kurds, Turks, Baluch, Azerbaijanis, Isfahanis, or Khorasanis, and spoke different local dialects – into one Iranian nation, with Persian as the mother tongue and Iran's great past as their common heritage. The reformers looked to free Iran from foreign tutelage and intervention, and Taymourtash shared in the general thrust of this cluster of ideas.

Above all, these men believed Iran needed a strong central government and leader to lead such sweeping reforms. When Reza Khan joined hands with Seyyed Zia Tabataba'i to stage a coup in February 1921, beginning his rise to power, the reformers, Taymourtash included, saw in him the strongman who would make the revolutionary changes they sought possible. Taymourtash was among the first to champion Reza Khan's cause and help shepherd through the Majlis the measures that led to his appointment as prime minister in 1923 and his designation as shah and the founder of a new dynasty by a constituent assembly in 1925.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Solayman Behbudi, Reza Shah's private secretary, captured a telling moment of Taymourtash's role in Reza Khan's road to kingship: a morning when Taymourtash, with a list of parliamentary deputies in hand, arrived at Reza Khan's home and then stood by as the deputies trooped in, one after the other, to sign a letter calling for the deposition of the Qajar dynasty, the first step in Reza Khan's road to kingship.[4]

A chemistry and intimacy seem to have developed between the two men – to the extent Reza Khan/Reza Shah was capable of such intimacy. When prime minster, Reza Khan enjoyed playing cards, and Taymourtash and a few others were summoned to play, sometimes several times a month and often well into the night.[5]

Taymourtash had already served as an intermediary for Reza Khan, when prime minister, in his dealing with the Majlis – a knack the military man lacked. Taymourtash had shown himself to be an able legislator, with the tact to deal with both local politicians and foreign diplomats, and perhaps his military training appealed to the soldier in Reza Shah. All these factors explain Reza Shah's decision to appoint Taymourtash as his first court minister.

Taymourtash quickly became the man to whom much was entrusted, who seemed adept at managing all things. Taymourtash made the arrangements for Reza Shah's crowning ceremony in 1925, seeing to the design of the new Pahlavi crown, the courtiers' uniform, and the new medals the shah bestowed on that occasion on high officials and favorites. At the crowning ceremony, Taymourtash, not the prime minister, carried the Pahlavi crown and presented it to Reza Shah.

It was Taymourtash who visited the capitals of Europe to share the new monarchy's plans for Iran's regeneration. Later, when Reza Shah decided to send his thirteen-year-old heir to Switzerland to continue his education at Le Rosey school, it was again Taymourtash who was assigned to take the young prince to Europe; and, in another mark of royal favor, Taymourtash's son joined the crown prince on his voyage abroad and as a student at the school. In the early 1930s, Taymourtash crafted Iran's (largely unsuccessful) attempts to address the economic fallout from the Great Depression.[6]

All-powerful king, all-powerful lieutenant

Once Reza Shah assumed the throne, a regime of royal absolutism was rapidly put in place, with Taymourtash the instrument though which this royal autocracy was exercised. According to Wipert v. Blucher, the German envoy to Iran, Taymourtash was "all-powerful" due to the trust that had developed between himself and the shah. "Taymourtash," Blucher wrote, "was…the eyes…the very ears and the voice of his shah."[7] Between the two men, a kind of division of labor developed. Reza Shah reserved for himself all matters concerning the army, police, and security forces, while Taymourtash took care of everything else. It became Taymourtash's responsibility to ensure that the Majlis enacted the shah's desired legislation and the cabinet ministers pursued the shah's desired policies – policies and an agenda that Taymourtash had most certainly helped shape.

The press was closely controlled and newspapers were required to echo government policy, with no significant criticism tolerated. In addition, in Ali Dashti, the editor of *Shafaq-e Sorkh,* Taymourtash had a confidante and ally, whose commentaries and editorials mirrored and advanced the court minister's policies. The press, at least initially, chafed at and

[4] Gholam Hosayn Mirza Saleh, ed., *Reza Shah: Khaterat-e Solayman Behboudi, Shams Pahlavi, Ali Izadi* (Tehran: Tarh-e Now Press), 246.

[5] Ibid., 223, 228, 232.

[6] For two memos by Taymourtash on these economic issues, see: Abdol Hossain Taymourtash, *Asnad va Mukatebat-e Taymourtash* (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Riyast Jomhuri), 209–213 and 222–230.

[7] Wipert von Blucher, *Zeitenwende in Iran: Erebnisse und Beabachtungen* (Ravensburg: Koehler und Voighlander, 1949), 202, 225.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sought relief from government control. In June 1929, in a polite, self-effacing but nevertheless surprisingly forthright letter to the monarch, the editors of Tehran's eight principal newspapers pointed to censorship as the main roadblock facing the press. Censorship, they wrote, was preventing the press from fulfilling its "great and sacred role" as the fourth pillar of constitutional government, and asked Reza Shah to end it.[8] Taymoutash met with the editors, but nothing changed.

By 1928, parliamentary elections were also closely managed and, almost without exception, only candidates approved by the shah could be elected to the Majlis. In a secret memorandum addressed to all provincial governors and sub-governors regarding elections for the eighth Majlis, Taymourtash was blunt. Officials were to ensure "at whatever cost" the election of the shah's chosen deputies. "It is clear, the least foot-dragging will earn His Majesty's displeasure," the memorandum continued. Officials incapable of performing their assignments had to "resign within 48 hours" of receiving Taymourtash's directive; and those who sought to have their own candidates elected "must be stopped; and if they persist[ed] in their opposition, exile[ed]… at once."[9]

For the ninth Majlis, the instructions were equally clear. Provincial officials were provided with a table entitled "List of candidates desired by Taymourtash." One column was headed "current deputies" and a second column was headed "future deputies."[10] The Majlis, wrote the British minister in Tehran, Sir Robert Clive, "merely exist(s) to give effect to the decisions of the Minister of Court with the consent of His Majesty."[11] Some independent voices remained, and there were occasions in which Taymourtash had to work extra hard to secure the smooth passage of controversial pieces of legislation – such as the 1927 trade agreement with the Soviet Union. The Majlis's approval of this agreement, Clive observed, had been managed by Taymourtash, "with that masterful energy and lack of scruple which at times commands, if not my admiration, at least a certain respect for his Excellency's ability to achieve results."[12] In general, however, the deputies, owing their election to royal (and Taymourtash's) approval, remained docile.

Early in Reza Shah's reign, Taymourtash, with the shah's consent, also tried his hand at forming a political party. The Iran-e Now (New Iran) Party was conceived as a single, national party intended to attract all parliamentary deputies and other members of the political class, bring to an end fractious party politics, serve as the vehicle through which the shah's program could be carried out, and provide the impression, if not the reality, of popular participation and representation.

Reza Shah quickly tired of this experiment and Iran-e Now faded away, but Taymourtash very soon took up another political vehicle, the Tarraqi (Progressive) Party, to which the large majority of Majlis deputies belonged. Taymourtash kept the party firmly in hand. His projects and proposed laws and bills were first discussed at party sittings, which Taymourtash chaired, and then brought to parliament for smooth passage.

According to a contemporary, Qassem Ghani, Taymourtash was the dominant authority in all affairs of the state. "The government, the prime minister and the Majlis were all obedient to his orders," Ghani wrote. "Elections were conducted entirely as he wished…Foreign policy, broadly and in detail, was in his hands. The appointment of an ambassador, minister, governor or sub-governor could not occur unless he willed it."[13] By 1930, Clive wrote that

[8] The text of the letter is found in Taymourtash, *Asnad va Mukatebat*, 50–51.

[9] Ibid., 95–96.

[10] Ibid., 109–113.

[11] Persia. Annual Report, 1928. Sir Robert Clive to Mr. A. Henderson, Tehran, July 14, 1929, FO 371/14543.

[12] Persia. Annual Report, 1927. Sir R. Clive to Sir A. Chamberlain, Tehran, May 21, 1928, FO 371/13799.

[13] Cyrus Ghani, ed., Paul Sprachman, trans., *The Memoirs of Dr. Ghassem Ghani* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2005), I: 217.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"the Government, in fact, is completely master of the Majlis; just as, at present, the Minister of Court is completely master of the Government."[14]

Although, as court minister, Taymourtash was not a member of the cabinet, he sat in on and oversaw its deliberations, shaped its agenda, and directed its policies. The shah, recalled the prime minister, Mehdi Gholi Hedayat, told members of the cabinet that "Taymourtash's word is my word."[15] As another mark of royal favor, Reza Shah bestowed on Taymourtash the title of *jenab ashraf* (highness) in 1928, an honorific until then reserved for the prime minister.

There were occasionally cabinet members who had the direct ear of the shah, such as Mohammad Ali Foroughi (foreign affairs) and Hassan Taqizadeh (finance), or military officers selected for cabinet seats by the shah himself, but these were the exception rather than the rule. Taymourtash himself saw the shah every day. Cabinet ministers and even the prime minister could see the shah only by going through Taymourtash; and, in time, aside from the chief of the army and chief of the police, Reza Shah rarely received any of his cabinet officers, instead dealing with them through Taymourtash. Before the once-a-week meetings of the cabinet, which Reza Shah attended in person early in his reign, Taymourtash had already settled what the ministers would present or say to the shah. Cabinet ministers did not even have the liberty to resign. When Taqizadeh tried to do so, he received a curt note in Reza Shah's name: "My ministers are not at liberty to resign. Whenever necessary, I will relieve them of responsibility myself."[16]

In a December 1927 conversation with Prime Minister Hedayat, the British legation's oriental secretary, Godfrey Havard, put it to the premier that while he was highly respected by his countrymen, they considered him to be prime minister in name only: "in fact, the real Prime Minister was Taimourtache." Hedayat did not disagree: "His Highness replied that this was perfectly true, that Taimourtache interfered in everything, and he was powerless."[17] During negotiations between Clive and Taymourtash over various issues between Britain and Iran, Clive reported that the prime minister, who was present, "took no part in our…conversation, merely nodding his head from time to time" and then dozing off.[18]

This concentration of power served a purpose. The early years of Reza Shah's reign marked the rapid realization of the program already foreseen in the reform ideas described above and encompassed in a memorandum on urgent social, educational, and economic reforms that Taymourtash submitted to Reza Shah in the opening years of his reign: creating a national army and bringing the large tribal confederations under government control; rationalizing government bureaucracy and centralizing state authority; breaking the power of the clergy; establishing Iran's first national public school system and laying the foundations for its first university; building motor-capable roads connecting major cities and laying plans for a railroad stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea; organizing municipal government for the capital, Tehran, and other major cities; industrialization, in the form of factories to produce basic consumer goods; a thorough reorganization of the judiciary and creation of a graduated system of non-clerical courts; standardizing weights and measures; requiring the registration of documents, such as deeds of sale, through a national system of notaries public; abolition of honorary titles; requiring all Iranians to acquire birth certificates and family names; and a series of measures designed to forge Iranians into a nation unified by a common identity, language, and even form of dress.[19]

[14] Sir R. Clive to Mr. A. Henderson, Tehran, December 23, 1929, FO 416/86.

[15] Mehdi Gholi Hedayat, *Khaterat va Khatarat* (Tehran: Zavvar Press, 1244/1965), 371.

[16] Javad Shaykh ol-Eslami, trans, and ed., *Su"ud va Suqut-e Taymourtash: Be Hekayat-e Asnad-e Mahramaneh-ye Vezarat-e Kharejeh-ye Inglis,* Tehran: Tus Publications, 1379/2000, 272, citing a letter found in the files by a finance ministry official.

[17] Sir R. Clive to Sir Austen Chamberlain, No. 629, Confidential, Tehran, December 29, 1927, FO 416/82.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Aqeli, *Taymourtash*, 192–196.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In seeing to the realization of this program, for which there was general support in both the Majlis and among the educated classes, Taymourtash was not alone. Two close associates, Minister of Finance Firouz Mirza and Minister of Justice Ali Akbar Davar, played a major role as well. Firouz's financial integrity was questionable: as minister of finance under Vosuq: Firouz had shared in the large bribe paid by the British to facilitate approval of the abortive 1919 Anglo-Persian Agreement. But Taymourtash regarded Firouz as a close friend and skilled administrator, and had extracted from him a pledge of probity before he was appointed to the cabinet. Firouz began an overhaul of the tax system and Davar a thorough overhaul of the judicial system. Together, the three men formed what many observers regarded as the troika running the Iranian government. According to Clive, "apart from the army, which continued to be solely responsible to the Shah, all power was concentrated in the hands of [the] triumverate [sic] consisting of Taimourtache…Firouz Mirza…and Daver [Davar]…but the ultimate authority was vested in the Minister of Court."[20]

The reception Taymourtash was accorded during his 1932 visit to the Soviet Union was a mark of the dominance he had achieved, in Soviet eyes, in Iran's affairs. He was received "with unusual ceremony" at the railway station by the Soviet commissar for foreign affairs, Litvinov, a number of other officials, and a mounted guard of honor. He met with the chairman of the council of people's commissars, Molotov. Litvinov gave a dinner and reception in his honor to which foreign heads of mission were invited, while Molotov hosted a luncheon for him. Taymourtash also attended trotting races at the racetrack and found time to sit in on the first act of Rimski Korsakov's *Coq d'Or* at the opera.[21]

Capitulations, tariff autonomy, and the state bank

Taymourtash also became Reza Shah's main foreign affairs officer. This job entailed the negotiating of new treaties on a range of issues with Iran's two great-power neighbors, the Soviet Union and Britain; renegotiating the 1901 D'Arcy oil concession, whose terms greatly favored the concessionaire, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), in which the British government had acquired a majority share; abrogating treaties going back to the early 19th century that had incorporated what came to be known as "the capitulations"; regaining Iran's freedom to set its own customs tariffs; and ending a British bank's status as Iran's state bank.

The particulars of these various negotiations have been detailed elsewhere, but are touched on here to illustrate the sweeping authority Reza Shah granted Taymourtash, his role in shaping Iran's foreign policy, and the common thread that ran through his negotiations: the assertion of national sovereignty and a determination to undo disadvantageous treaties and agreements signed under the Qajars, at a time when European powers were dominant and Iran was weak.

A major first step was the abolition of the capitulations regime. Much resented, the capitulations meant Iran's courts exercised no jurisdiction in cases involving Europeans. A European charged with breaking the law or involved in a dispute (financial or commercial) with the government or an Iranian national would have the case heard by his or her own consular court rather than the Iranian courts. Other Qajar-era agreements and undertakings restricted Iran's ability to set its own customs tariffs on imports from foreign countries.

In May 1927, the foreign ministry informed diplomats in Tehran that the capitulations agreements would be abolished by May 1928. The announcement set off a flurry of feverish

[20] Persia. Annual Report, 1928. Sir R. Clive to Mr. A. Henderson, No. 389, Tehran, July 14, 1929, FO 371/14543.

[21] Sir E. Ovey to Sir John Simon, No. 29, Moscow, January 19, 1932, FO 416/90. According to Aqeli, *Taymourtash* 265–267, the Soviet commissar for military and naval affairs, Marshall Kliment Voroshilov, gave a luncheon party in Taymourtash's honor as well.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

diplomatic activity by European governments, whose nationals would now be subject to the uncertain vagaries of Iranian and *shari'a* courts. Britain was particularly concerned; there were over 3,000 Indian nationals and 1,000 British subjects working in the oilfields for the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. His government, the British minister in Tehran told Taymourtash, "could not but view with concern the sudden handing over to the new and inexperienced Persian courts of all these people."[22]

Individually and collectively, European diplomats in Tehran raised their many concerns with the government and pressed for guarantees and safeguards. Before they could agree to the cancellation of older treaties, these diplomats demanded that Iranian laws and prisons meet European standards; there be properly trained judges and judiciary officials; foreign "inspectors" with the authority to ensure correct procedures and fair treatment of foreign nationals be employed; and their consuls' presence in court before trials involving their nationals could proceed.

In fact, as previously noted, the Ministry of Justice – under Davar – was already in the process of a thorough reorganization of the Iranian judiciary: establishing a new system of civil courts and writing new civil and commercial law codes based, in part, on European models; training future judges and lawyers in certified law schools; and constructing a new, "modern" prison, and more. Once in place, such reforms would address European concerns. But Taymourtash was at pains to emphasize that these reforms were being carried out in the interests of the Iranian people, not because European governments were pressing for them. Taymourtash was not engaging in hyperbole. Judicial reform, as noted, was a goal of the reformers around Reza Shah.

"There is no connexion [sic] whatsoever between the abrogation of the system in question [capitulations] and the reforms in the judicial organisations of Persia," Taymourtash wrote to Clive in response to British (and European) demands for judicial safeguards. New civil and commercial law codes were intended to ensure the security of Iranians, "and in no way intended to obtain consent to the abrogation of Capitulations," he emphasized. And so it went regarding the new judicial order.

A European suggestion that foreign inspectors sit as members of Iran's highest court of appeals would be "incompatible with the judicial integrity of Persia," Taymourtash emphasized; and while consuls of foreign legations and embassies, as well as Iranians, were free to sit in on their nationals' public trials, their presence could not be a requirement for a trial to proceed, as the Europeans had demanded.[23]

Over a five-month period, Taymourtash succeeded in negotiating over a dozen new agreements with both the major European powers and other governments, doing away with all extra-territorial privileges. Capitulations ended, as planned, in May 1928. Clive, in a note to the Foreign Office, had to concede that the new order did not turn out badly after all.

Measures to secure tariff autonomy followed. Qajar-era undertakings and treaties limiting the customs tariffs Iran could impose on imports were cancelled, and governments were notified that Iran would set tariffs as it saw fit. The announcement raised hackles among several governments, which Taymourtash had to address and smooth over, but the case for tariff autonomy did not prove difficult to make. As Taymourtash noted, Iran's wish to enjoy tariff autonomy "is so clear that it is hardly necessary to put forth any arguments."[24]

Taymourtash was also engaged in steps Reza Shah's team took to end British domination of Iranian banking. Until 1928, a British bank, the Imperial Bank of Persia (IBP), dominated, as it was practically the only bank in Iran. Established in 1889 under a concession granted by the Qajar shah, Mozaffar ad-Din, the IBP, though British owned, served as Iran's state

[22] Sir Robert Clive to Sir Austen Chamberlain, No. 629, Confidential, Tehran, December 29, 1927, FO 416/82.

[23] Quotes from Taymourtash on judicial reform are all found in Sir R. Clive to Sir Austen Chamberlain, Enclosure 6 in No. 126, Confidential, March 17, 1928, FO 416/82, 19.

[24] Sir Robert Clive to Sir Austen Chamberlain, No. 26, Confidential, Tehran, January 13, 1928, FO 416/82.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

bank. The IBP issued Iran's currency and determined the size of the notes in circulation; acted as the government's main banker and source of credit and loans; exercised a virtual monopoly on foreign exchange transactions; served as a commercial bank for merchants, bazaar traders, and landowners; and remained the only bank with branches in many parts of the country.

In 1927, much to the consternation of the IBP, the Majlis enacted a bill establishing a national bank, Bank Melli, which opened the following year. In a series of measures that followed, the government took steps to curb IBP power to decide the level of currency in circulation and assumed the authority to issue Iran's currency, issue letters of credit, set foreign exchange rates, and monopolize foreign exchange transactions. Furious, Clive described these measures as "the most flagrant breach of faith in my experience"; the Persian government, he added, was trying to make IBP's position impossible.[25] The IBP, in turn, strongly objected to all these steps as a violation of the terms of its original concession (which they were).

In April 1930, the IBP sent a senior bank official, S. F. Rogers, to Tehran to resolve its differences with Iran. On the Iranian side, the negotiations were, as usual, handled by Taymourtash. In exchange for conceding its status as Iran's state bank, Taymourtash offered Rogers a number of minor concessions. Rogers complained that Taymourtash was "not playing the game" fairly, but Taymourtash dismissed these objections. The original concession was obtained, he pointed out, by the payment of an insignificant sum to the government and bribes to officials "still living in the jungle." Iran could not be expected to respect such a contract. Taymourtash's offer to the IBP, Rogers cabled to his home office, was a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. The IBP decided to take the offer, marking an end to the privileges it has previously enjoyed.[26]

Soviet and British treaties

In 1926, Reza Shah dispatched Taymourtash to settle outstanding issues with the Soviet Union, including the negotiation of a new Caspian fisheries agreement to replace the one greatly advantageous to the Soviet Union, a commercial treaty regulating trade between the two countries, and an agreement on delimiting borders along frontier rivers and in the Atrek and Moghan regions. Taymourtash spent two months in Moscow. The border issue was easily settled and a draft commercial treaty was drawn up, later finalized during follow-up discussions in Tehran. The new fisheries agreement outlined the creation of a joint Iran-Soviet company to regulate Caspian Sea fishing (the valuable catch being the caviar-producing sturgeon); and although the Soviets retained the upper hand in the joint company, Iran's position was much improved. The Russians also gave up control of the Iranian port of Enzeli (Pahlavi), removing their gunboat from its harbor.

Taymourtash's negotiations with the British over a comprehensive treaty were far more extensive, and understandably so.[27] Britain was more enmeshed in Iranian affairs than the Soviet Union, particularly in the Persian Gulf. Between 1927 and 1932, Taymourtash engaged in discussions with the British minister in Tehran, Sir Robert Clive, and the Foreign Office in London to settle all outstanding issues between the two counties. A commercial agreement was concluded in 1928. In the Persian Gulf, where Britain was dominant and Iran sought recognition of its legitimate role and rights, the issues proved more intractable.

[25] Mr. R. Clive to Mr. A. Henderson, No. 74, Tehran, April 15, 1931, FO 416/88.

[26] Geoffrey Jones, *Banking and Empire in Iran* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), I: 225, 217–233 (for the full account of the negotiations).

[27] Chelsi Mueller, "Anglo-Iranian Treaty Negotiations: Reza Shah, Teymourtash and the British Government, 1927–1932," *Iranian Studies*, 49: 4 (2016), p. 577–592 provides a detailed account of the negotiations between Taymourtash and British officials over a comprehensive treaty.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Iran's claim to the island of Bahrain and a number of smaller Persian Gulf islands, particularly Abu Musa and the two Tunbs, was the weightiest of these issues. Under treaties with the emirs of these islands, Britain served as their protecting power and foreign affairs representative.

There was also a host of other matters. British warships were in the habit of calling at Iranian ports at will, alongside their crews' use of inland facilities, without previous notice to the Iranian government. Britain had maintained naval facilities on the Iranian island of Hengam since the 19th century without Iranian government permission. The Basra port authority ran offices and a post office on Iranian territory, again without official Iranian approval. Iran wanted a role in controlling smuggling, lighting, and buoying in the Persian Gulf, alongside control over the Iranian portion of the Duzdap (Zahedan) railway and the Indo-European Telegraph (IET). The railway was constructed between 1916 and 1922, primarily for military purposes, as a link between British India and Iran, while the IET was installed after the 1857 Indian Mutiny, passing through Iranian territory and establishing the first telegraphic link between India and London.

In these often-difficult negotiations, Taymourtash's role was paramount: "For the purposes of the treaty," Clive wrote, "Persia was synonymous with Teymourtache. No one else counted, not even the Shah, who knew just as much as Teymourtache chose to tell him."[28] For Taymourtash himself, the assertion of Iranian sovereignty was the overriding goal. He insisted that permission from Iranian authorities be obtained before British ships docked and their crews disembarked at Iranian ports because, as he said, "Persia intended to have its territorial waters respected." When Clive described this attitude as "unfriendly," Taymourtash replied: "no man liked his friends, however intimate they might be, walking into his house without first knocking at the door."

In seeking control over the Iranian portion of the IET, Taymourtash rejected the legality of conventions signed when Iran had been, what he called, "a kind of mandated territory." Iranians "wished to be masters of their own house…to see telegraphs in Persia run by Persians," Taymourtash emphasized.[29]

Taymourtash succeeded in securing some of Iran's goals. The British agreed to cede Iran's sections of the IET and Zahedan railroad; remove Basra port authority offices from Iranian soil; lease the island of Hengam; and secure permission before British ships docked at Iranian ports. Resolving Iranian claims to Bahrain, Abu Musa, and the two Tunbs, however, proved unsurmountable. The British rejected outright any Iranian rights to the islands. Strategically, the islands mattered to Britain, indicating its dominant position in the Persian Gulf, and British prestige was tied to honoring their commitments to the islands'ruling emirs.

The negotiations over a comprehensive treaty ended by the summer of 1932, and by December, Taymourtash was no longer in office.

The APOC negotiations

Even as he was negotiating a comprehensive treaty with Clive, Taymourtash was engaged in negotiations to revise the D'Arcy oil concession.[30] In brief, Iranian nationalists had long believed that the 16 percent royalty of APOC's annual net profits due to Iran under the original concession was grossly inadequate, especially as APOC had become a worldwide enterprise using Iranian oil. Moreover, Iran had almost no say in APOC's operations in Iran; the manner in which APOC calculated Iran's royalty remained opaque; APOC sold oil to the

[28] Persia. Annual Report, 1930. Sir R. Clive to Mr. A. Henderson, Tehran, May 22, 1931, FO 371/15356.

[29] For these quotes from Taymourtash, see Persia. Annual Report, 1929. Sir R. Clive to Mr. A. Henderson, Tehran, April 30, 1930, FO 371/14543.

[30] For details of the Taymourtash-APOC negotiations, I drew on Gregory Brew, "In Search of 'Equitability': Sir John Cadman, Reza Shah and the Cancellation of the D'Arcy Concession," *Iranian Studies,* 50: 1, 125–148.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

British navy at a discount, benefitting the British but a loss for Iran; and Iran received no profit from APOC's worldwide operations.

With Reza Shah in power, Iran demanded better terms. In August 1928, APOC chairman Sir John Cadman arrived in Tehran to begin negotiations with Taymourtash over a revised agreement. A series of strikes and demonstrations for higher pay and shorter hours in the spring and summer of 1929 only further underlined the need for APOC to improve its terms of operation in Iran.[31] The negotiations continued on and off for four years, but the gap between Taymourtash's demands and Cadman's offerings could not be bridged. Reza Shah, furious at the company (and perhaps also at Taymourtash) ordered the government to cancel the APOC concession. Indeed, according to cabinet minister Hassan Taqizadeh, Reza Shah came charging into the cabinet meeting and threw the APOC file into the burning stove.[32] Negotiations were resumed, this time with Iran's finance minister representing the Iranian side, but in the end it was Reza Shah himself who settled the main points of a new agreement with Cadman: the concession area was reduced by four-fifths, from 500,000 square miles to 100,000 square miles; the royalty paid to Iran was increased and a dividend added; and the minimum annual payment raised. Cadman agreed, as Reza Shah demanded, that APOC build a new refinery in Kermanshah and surrender its monopoly over pipeline construction. According to Gregory Brew, Cadman noted in his diary, "I felt we had been pretty well-plucked."[33] Whether fair or not, however, the agreement was much criticized in the subsequent years for what it did not achieve. In any case, Taymourtash was no longer involved.

Clumsy with clerics

Adept at handling diplomats, fellow politicians, and even Reza Shah himself, Taymourtash proved less skilled in dealings with members of the clergy. In 1927, clergy members, already upset by Reza Shah's anti-clerical and anti-traditional measures, led an agitation against the new conscription law, which required all young men to serve a number of years in the army. Leading clerical figures journeyed from Isfahan to Qum, where they sought to widen the protests and get shops and bazaars to shut down. Taymourtash went twice to Qum but failed to persuade clerical leaders to call off the agitation. At a cabinet meeting, he urged stronger measures, even the use of force. The prime minister, Hedayat, counseled otherwise. Taymourtash, Hedayat later wrote in his memoirs, "is smoothly agile in negotiations with embassies. But he doesn't know how to talk to the ulama." Hedayat, on the other hand, was a religious man and knew his Islamic texts and the language of the clergy, and therefore knew how to speak to them. Through a combination of persuasion and promises, Hedayat thus helped bring the agitation to an end.[34]

In the subsequent years, Reza Shah's anti-clerical policies notwithstanding, Taymourtash attempted to keep at least some important members of the clergy content and on side. He authorized cash gifts to individual clerics to help them feed mourners during the holy month of Ramadan and, in one instance, tuition for a cleric's children. Taymourtash also arranged for three senior clerics to receive regular monthly salaries.

[31] The oil workers strike is covered in Stephanie Cronin, "Popular Politics, the New State, and the Birth of the Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 5 (2010): 699–732.

[32] Taqizadeh's memoirs cited in Shaikh ol-Eslami, *Su'ud va Suqut-e Taymourtash,* 290. This incident is not recounted by others who were present.

[33] The quote from Cadman and details of the agreement are in Brew, "Cancellation of the D'Arcy Concession." Brew believed that Reza Shah had been out maneuvered.

[34] Hedayat, *Khaterat va Khatarat*, 375–378. For the letter from Taymourtash and Hedayat to the clergy, see Aqeli, *Taymourtash*, 24–25.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Senior members of the clergy often asked to meet with him, possibly seeking assistance and favors.[35]

Working hard, playing hard

Taymourtash, all observers agree, was seemingly tireless. He had a striking capacity for long days and hard work, and pursued his night life with equal energy, often to excess. His contemporary, Qassem Ghani, remarked that Taymourtash overindulged in drink, high stakes gambling, and pursuing women.[36] Clive remarked on Taymourtash's "less creditable excesses," and Reginald Hoare, Clive's successor in Tehran, commented on Taymourtash's intemperate predilection for night life.[37]

There were the usual official and diplomatic dinners, alongside the dinners and parties he threw in his own home, which a friend and frequent guest described as "always gay and characterized by the polished lightness and sophistication of aristocratic circles in Russia before the revolution."[38] When not otherwise engaged, Taymourtash enjoyed spending his evenings at the Iran Club, of which he was president, had helped found, and became the gathering place for Tehran's political, social, and business elite. Here, Taymourtash could often be seen socializing, drinking his favorite champagne, and playing card games, in which it was rumored that substantial sums could be won and lost.

Taymourtash always seemed to be the center of attention. "At a dinner party," the American minister, Hart, reported to his government, "although he [Taymourtash] had been working laboriously all day at his office and was the last to arrive, he soon became the life of the assemblage." Taymourtash made it a point to shake hands with every one of the thirty to fifty guests present. "At the table, he instilled life into the dullest personalities…reflecting his own magnetism to every part of a long table or ballroom."[39]

Taymourtash often drove himself to exhaustion. In the summer of 1930, and not for the first or last time, he appeared to be nearing a breakdown. "He looks ill and worn. He is irritable and nervous," Clive noted.[40] Taymourtash's doctors ordered him to rest, eat meals more regularly, and not go out in the evenings. Again in 1932, he was reportedly seriously overworked and in need of rest.

There were, for Taymourtash, also more intimate gatherings. He and his second (Armenian) wife often got together with a group of Russian-speaking friends or those with Russian connections. Such friends included General Hassan Arfa and his English wife; Assad Bahador, a former minister to Russia, and his Polish wife; and General Morteza Yazdanpanah, who had attended the Cossack Cadet School.[41] When Taymourtash finally needed a complete rest, he would spend a few days on the Caspian shore, sometimes at the home of a friend, Reza Gholi Divanbegi. According to his host, while Taymourtash brought a pile of paperwork with him, there was no talk of politics on these occasions. Rather, Taymourtash and his friends spent their days swimming, riding horses, playing poker, listening to music, and reading classical poetry.

[35] In the collection of Taymoutash's official documents and letters (Taymourtash, *Asnad va Mukatebat*), there are numerous examples of such payments to members of the clergy during Ramadan (Ibid., 13, 14, 53, 85), cash gifts (Ibid., 83, 94, 104), and monthly "salary" (*mostamarri*) payments to Imam Jom'eh Kho'I, Behbahani, and Javad Zahir ol-Islam (Ibid., 113–114, 104).

[36] Ghani, *The Memoirs of Dr. Ghassem Ghani*, I: 213, 215.

[37] For Clive, see Persia. Annual Report, 1930. Sir R. Clive to Mr. A Henderson, Tehran, May 22, 1931, FO 371/15356. For Hoare, see Persia. Annual Report, 1932. Mr. Hoare to Sir John Simon, Tehran, April 29, 1933, FO 371/16967.

[38] Hassan Arfa, *Under Five Shahs* (London: John Murray), 220.

[39] Hart's dispatches are cited in Majd, Great Britain and Reza Shah, 175–176, 399 fn. 15.

[40] Sir R. Clive to Mr. A. Henderson, No. 220, Tehran, May 30, 1930, FO 416/82.

[41] Arfa, 220.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

There were moments, here, that suggest all was not well, that Taymourtash did not feel as untroubled as he outwardly appeared. He was happy, he told his friend, for a chance to calm his nerves and escape the environment of intrigue and suspicion, ill-wishers and enemies of the capital. Sometimes, Divanbegi wrote, while playing cards, listening to music, or just chatting, Taymourtash's attention would seem to drift elsewhere and he would recite to himself these lines of poetry (here, loosely translated):

From tumult and combat, weary is my soul
Happy is the ascetic with his sackcloth and his beggar's bowl.[42]

The fall

The ill-wishers and enemies to whom Taymourtash referred were not lacking. His dominance of and interference in the affairs of every major ministry bred resentment. His great power gave rise to jealousies. He was not popular with other cabinet officers, von Blucher wrote, because they had to work under his shadow and jurisdiction.[43] Over time, according to some observers, power went to his head. He was imperious and dismissive of other senior officials and members of the cabinet. There were men (Reza Shah's fearsome chief of police, Mohammad Hosayn Ayrom, is mentioned in this regard) who plotted against him.

Yet, enjoying the shah's favor, Taymourtash seemed to remain unscathed during crises that many observers thought would damage him. In June 1929, after an official salaam, Reza Shah suddenly ordered his chief of police to arrest Firouz Mirza, his long-time finance minister. The ostensible reason was financial corruption, and Firouz was subsequently charged, tried, and sentenced to prison. The underlying reason was more complex. There had been tribal unrest in the south, and the provincial governor, Akbar Mirza, a Qajar prince and Firouz's cousin, had proved incapable of dealing with it. At the same time, Salar od-Dowleh – a brother of former Qajar ruler Mohammad Ali Shah – in exile in Haifa and the recipient of a government pension, designed to keep him quiet and away from Iran, was growing restive. Reza Shah, putting these unrelated developments together, feared a plot was underway to overthrow Pahlavi rule and restore the Qajars to the throne. He either concluded that Firouz was part of the plot or thought it necessary to take steps to prevent him from joining it.

Firouz's arrest was a blow to Taymourtash's standing. Firouz was one of Taymourtash's most intimate friends, and Firouz's appointment and retention as finance minister owed much to Taymourtash's endorsement and support. Taymourtash's trust in a man now suspected of grave disloyalty may have raised questions in the shah's mind about Taymourtash's judgement. Moreover, the triumvirate that had run the government for Reza Shah had now been broken. For a brief period, Taymourtash was assumed to be under a cloud and rumors of his fall from favor became widespread. Before long, however, Taymourtash was again controlling every government department – a reaffirmation of the shah's continued reliance on his court minister.

In the summer of 1930, a small commotion arose from the publication of excerpts from the memoirs of Georges Agabekov, the former head of the Soviet OGPU (Joint State Political Directorate) spy network in Iran, in the Paris newspaper *Le Matin*. Agabekov's "revelations" were picked up by other French and White Russian newspapers that had made their way into Iran. The Soviet spy chief claimed he had a network of OGPU agents planted across the country and, through bribery and the corruption of Iranian officials in charge of the postal service, the Soviet Union had acquired copies of important Iranian government documents and correspondence by foreign missions in Iran. He asserted that the cipher specialist of the Iranian cabinet and other Iranian officials served as paid Soviet agents. The memoirs

[42] Divanbegi's account is cited in Aqeli, Taymourtash, 270–76, from an article in the journal *Salnameh Donya* 22 (1345/1966): 348–350.

[43] Wipert v. Blucher, *Zeitenwende in Iran,* 202.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

did not implicate Taymourtash, but Agabekov claimed that relatives of Taymourtash in the Ministry of Public Works also served as agents. Agabekov, moreover, made a special point of stressing Taymourtash's intimate relationship with the Soviet ambassador in Tehran, Yakov Davitian. Dozens of minor officials were subsequently arrested, but Taymourtash remained unaffected.[44] Agabekov was inclined to exaggeration, and in later years his memoirs were thought to be not entirely credible.

How secure did Taymourtash feel in the great power Reza Shah had bestowed on him? A remarkably frank conversation between Clive and Taymourtash in March 1930 provides a clue. Reporting to the British foreign secretary on this exchange, Clive wrote:

> I said to his Highness that I had a very great respect for His Majesty and could not but admire the great work he had done for his country, but if I may be allowed to say so, His Majesty appeared to me to have one serious shortcoming, and that was his avarice and lack of generosity…His Highness agreed, but said that His Majesty had, in his opinion, a still greater fault, and that was his suspicion of everybody and every thing. There was really nobody in the whole country whom His Majesty trusted, and this was very much resented by those who had always stood faithfully by him. It kept His Majesty in a position remote from his most faithful adherents, who all felt that, at any moment, His Majesty might turn against them.[45]

For more than two years after these remarks, Taymourtash's position remained unchanged. But in December 1932, that "moment" arrived; the sharp blade of Reza Shah's suspicious mind turned on Taymourtash and the monarch wielded the knife with Shakespearean deviousness.

As Taymourtash's daughter, Iran, recounted, two or three nights before he was dismissed as court minister, Taymourtash had arranged a dinner at his home for close members of the family to celebrate her birthday. The guests arrived, but Taymourtash, still at the court with Reza Shah, arrived late. At the end of the dinner, after the guests had left, Taymourtash asked his daughter to remain. He took her to his private study and told her that, for some time, he had felt that his relations with Reza Shah were under strain and, after the night's meeting with the shah, he knew he was "near to the last scene of my tragedy." [46]

Taymourtash went on to explain that earlier that evening, while in discussion with Davar in his office at the palace, the door swung open, Reza Shah appeared, and said he wished to speak to Taymourtash alone. Davar left. Taymourtash, paraphrasing for his daughter, reported what happened next:

> The shah came close to me and, in so many words, said to me: "Taymour, you are everything to me. You are my top aide and my comrade. Not only are all the affairs of the country administered due to your efforts; my private affairs and the affairs of my court are all in your hands. I think, what would I do without you? I wish you always to remain faithful to me." He then took my two hands in his and said: "Taymour promise me you will always remain loyal and faithful."

[44] A French translation of Agabekov's memoirs was published as *OGPU, The Russian Secret Terror*, trans. Henry W. Bunn (Westport, CT: 1931). For accounts of the impact of Agabekov's "revelations" in Iran, see Rezun, "Reza Shah's Court Minister: Teymourtash", 126; Donald Wilbur, *Riza Shah Pahlavi: The Resurrection and Reconstruction of Iran* (Hicksville, NY: Exposition Press, 1978), 136–37; Majd, *Great Gritain and Reza Shah*, 125–26; and Persia. Annual Report, 1930. Sir R. Clive to Mr. A. Henderson, Tehran, May 22, 1931, FO 371/15356. According to Rezun, there are discrepancies between the original Russian text and what appeared in the French press.

[45] Sir R. Clive to Mr. A. Henderson, No. 121, Very Confidential, Tehran, March 19, 1930, FO 416/86.

[46] Cyrus Ghani, ed., *The Memoirs of Dr. Ghassem Ghani*, Distributed by Ithaca Press, London, 1980–1984, I, 222–223. Ghassem Ghani recorded these details as told to him by Taymourtash's daughter, Iran.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Taymourtash told Iran that he had replied appropriately to Reza Shah's remarks, but when his daughter observed that all this seemed to augur well and hardly seemed a cause for concern, Taymourtash replied: "My daughter, you don't understand. His remarks tonight mean that my misfortune is near." Reza Shah, Taymourtash told Iran, had noticed that he was anxious:

> He feared lest, in my distress, I will do something to create difficulties for him. That is why he thought it necessary tonight to put my mind at rest. But I am certain that very soon he will ruin me.[47]

Taymourtash was not mistaken. A couple of days later, on December 24, 1932, he was dismissed as court minister and told to confine himself to his home. In effect, Taymourtash was placed under house arrest. He was transferred to Qasr Prison two months later, at the end of February 1933, after being formally charged with profiting from illicit foreign exchange transactions through Bank Melli and, more seriously, with helping a prominent merchant, Hajj Habibollah Amin, secure a lucrative monopoly over the export of opium in return for a bribe. A first trial on these charges was held in March and a second, the appeal, in June. Taymourtash was found guilty and sentenced to five years of solitary confinement, loss of his civil rights, and to repay the sum of 9,000 British pounds and 200,000 tomans he had allegedly received as a bribe.[48]

Reza Shah, according to a contemporary, became almost obsessed with Taymourtash while he was in prison. "You don't know what fantasies this son of a dog entertained," the shah is claimed to have said. "Never in creation has there been such a treacherous man."[49] Reza Shah showed no kindness to his former favorite in confinement, permitting only rare visits from his immediate family. The shah ordered all the furniture in Taymourtash's prison cell and anything that might ease his confinement to be taken away. "The man whose brilliant talents had placed him on a pinnacle of power far above all the Shah's subjects, was left by his ungrateful master without even a bed to die upon."[50]

It was in this empty cell that Taymourtash passed away, almost certainly put to death on Reza Shah's orders.

Why did Reza Shah turn against his most trusted lieutenant? Corruption, as alleged at trial, hardly suffices as an explanation. Corruption was rampant in Reza Shah's regime, both in the civil service and the army. It was routine for an individual to "reward" a high official in return for assistance in a financial matter, appointment to office, or for facilitating other business with the government. Contemporaries (and later commentators) considered a number of other possibilities, among them Taymourtash's failure to secure a satisfactory agreement with the APOC. But the oil negotiations had already been taken out of Taymourtash's hands; it was Reza Shah himself who negotiated the final settlement, presumably on terms he thought satisfactory and for which Taymourtash had laid the foundation.

According to the war minister, Asad Bakhtiari, Reza Shah was offended when Taymourtash continued to befriend and associate with the treasurer of the royal court, Abdol-Hosayn Diba, after he was dismissed for accepting a bribe to secure a seat in the Majlis for an aspiring deputy. But this indiscretion is hardly sufficient to explain Reza Shah's lethal animosity towards Taymourtash, nor does the notion advanced by others that the

[47] Ibid.

[48] Aqeli, *Taymourtash*, 301–323, provides an account of the charges against Taymourtash, the proceedings of his two trials, and his defense.

[49] Ibid. 326, 327, citing then judicial official Ahmad Matin-Daftari and newspaper editor Ali Dashti.

[50] This comment was made by V. A. L. Mallet, the number two man at the British legation in Tehran. See Mr. Mallet to Sir John Simon, Gulhek, July 1, 1933, FO 416/93.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

shah was offended by Taymourtash's extravagance during his stays in Paris and London. Some thought the exceedingly warm reception Taymourtash was accorded during his 1932 visit to the Soviet Union led the shah to suspect some secret arrangement between his court minister and Soviet officials – even the possibility of establishing a republic headed by Taymourtash after the shah's death. It is possible that Taymourtash's enemies fueled such suspicions in the shah's mind. Many pointed the finger at Reza Shah's chief of police, Mohammad Hosain Ayrom, "a snake with an attractive exterior."[51] Ayrom, with his spies to ensure internal security, had the means to poison Reza Shah's mind against his court minister. Reza Shah feared communist and Soviet influence in Iran, and Ayrom was suggesting, behind the scenes, that Taymourtash was suspiciously close to the Russians, defended them, and had obstructed attempts to neutralize Soviet agents operating in Iran.[52]

The most probable cause – offered by both contemporaries and later historians – is that Reza Shah feared for his young son's succession should the shah pass away with Taymourtash still in a position of power, a fear Ayrom may have fed. The final nail may have been a January 9, 1933, article "from a correspondent lately in Persia" in the *Times*, published after Taymourtash's arrest. After describing Taymourtash as "the brain behind the Persian government" and "guiding spirit" of the administration, the article (inaccurately) noted that Reza Shah was old and no longer robust, adding: "The prospect of a Regency occupies his mind today. What chance would his 13-year-old son have, should the Regency fall to a man still young, ambitious, and entirely unscrupulous?" The title of the *Times* article, "Dropping the Pilot," echoed the famous cartoon by John Tenniel published in *Punch* in March 1890, when Wilhem II of Germany demanded and secured the resignation of the "iron chancellor," Otto von Bismarck, who had shaped and dominated Germany's politics for thirty years. Both Bismarck and Taymourtash were discarded by rulers they had faithfully and effectively served. The difference was that Bismarck was honored and lauded by his countrymen in his retirement and after his death, while Taymourtash's life ended in a prison cell and his countrymen dared not mourn or honor him after his death.

Honoring Taymourtash was left to others to do. The American minister in Tehran, Charles Hart, wrote that Taymourtash had earned "a right to a place in history as perhaps the most commanding intellect that has arisen in the country in two centuries," and British diplomat Victor Mallet was reminded of Samuel Johnson's poem on Henry VIII's abasement of Cardinal Wolsey. The poem, after noting the great heights Wolsey had achieved as lord chancellor, records what happens once "the sovereign frowns."

> At once is lost the pride of awful state,
> The golden canopy, the glittering plate,
> The regal place, the luxurious board…
> Grief aids disease, remembr'd folly stings,
> And his last sighs reproach the faith of Kings.[53]

We can only guess at the thoughts that passed through Taymourtash's mind in his prison cell, knowing with certainty the fate that awaited him. He was a man, whatever his shortcomings, who had devoted his career to serving his country. He aspired for national renewal: an Iran that could hold her head high among the community of nations. Much had been accomplished during his six years in power. It might be said that, in the end, he laid down his life for his country.

[51] The quote is from Ahmad Matin-Daftari, a justice official at the time, as cited in Aqeli, *Taymourtash*, 265.

[52] Shaikh ol-Eslami, 307–8, 309–10, citing remarks by Ayrom to a British diplomat in Tehran.

[53] Hart is cited in Majd, Great Britain and Reza Shah, 183. For Mallet, see Mr. Mallet to Sir John Simon, No. 328, Gulhek, July 1, 1933, FO 416/94.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Was it, did he think, worth it? Did it have to end this way? Given the state of Iran in 1921, was dictatorship and the concentration of power in the hands of one man the only way to get the job done? Was it necessary that the ruler, not the rule of law, determined whether men lived or died? Did Taymourtash think he might have advised Reza Shah otherwise, to act differently, allowing freer elections, a freer press, a Majlis with authority, and cabinets with independence? Might Taymourtash have urged the shah to tolerate critics and men with power bases of their own? Even if Taymourtash had summoned the boldness to say so, would Reza Shah have listened?

These questions, by no means trivial, lie at the heart of the dilemma faced by men and women who wish to serve their country but find themselves doing so through the agency of a dictator, with the cost of achievement ultimately undermining and destroying much else. Taymourtash's life and death do not offer the answers, but instead present a graphic illustration of this dilemma.

Cite this article: Bakhash, S. "Iran's Man for all Seasons: The Rise and Fall of Taymourtash." *Iranian Studies* (2025): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.65