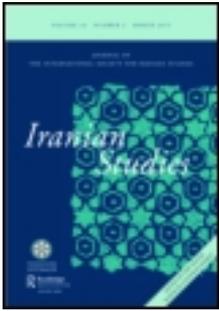


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Maziar Behrooz

Revisiting the Second Russo-Iranian War (1826–28): Causes and Perceptions

This paper re-examines the causes of outbreak of Second Russo-Iranian War and the factors that played a role in its escalation into fully fledged war. The paper challenges the common perception that Qajar Iran played a major role in the outbreak of the war and proposes that the Qajar court took a defensive posture vis-à-vis aggressive Russian provocation originated in Tiflis and was merely reacting to it. The paper then examines policy differences between Tiflis and the court of St Petersburg as a contributing factor in the outbreak of the war. Finally, the paper examines two different and contradictory views of imperial Russia and its internal politics and military capabilities among Qajar Iran's decision makers during 1825–28. It is argued that the two perceptions eventually translated into two factions, each lobbying the shah for and against escalation of hostilities with Russia.

On 12 June 1826, when Fath Ali Shah Qajar arrived at the pasture of Sultanieh at the head of the imperial army, intense lobbying had already started for and against escalation of hostilities with Russia. The shah's move from Tehran to Sultanieh (near Zanjan west of Tehran) usually took about twelve days and was part of the monarch's annual routine of seeking a cooler climate away from the summer heat of Tehran and an opportunity to gather part of the army in one place for performing military drills. But this year's gathering at Sultanieh (also referred to as the Council of Sultanieh) was happening at a particularly tense period in relations between Iran and Imperial Russia. Russian policy in the Russian occupied eastern Caucasus throughout the 1820s, Russian border incursions in 1825 and developments in St Petersburg in late 1825 had caused much excitement and agitation in Iran. With the arrival of a group of top mujtaheds from various parts of Iran and Iraq, the Prince Regent Abbas Mirza Qajar from Tabriz and the Russian envoy Prince Alexander S. Menshikov by early July, the stage was set for making the final decision. The problem of what to do about Russia in this moment of crisis depended much on the seriousness of Russian incursions into the shah's guarded domain (*mamalek-e mabruseh*), as well as how events in Russia were understood in Iran. How serious were Russia's provocations? This is a question that is often either left out of studies of the second war with Russia or not given enough attention. How badly were the Russians treating the Muslim population of the occupied

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territories? How much difficulty did Russia face in its handling of ongoing rebellions in the Caucasus? How weak had Russia become after the accession of the new tsar and the Decembrist rebellion which had followed it? How did various interest groups in the shah's court understand these developments? There are various, and at times conflicting, analyses by contemporary observers and later historians as to why the Second Russo-Iranian War broke out. A majority of these observations blame the Iranian side for starting the war but differ on the extent to which one or another Iranian player was responsible for the war. This paper will revisit the Second Russo-Iranian War and reexamine its root causes, various policy differences in St Petersburg and Tehran as well as in Tiflis and Tabriz and perceptions of each side of the conflict about the motives and developments of the other side. Finally, the paper will attempt to determine the actual perpetrator of the conflict and the motives behind it.

In terms of the "blame game," official Russian and pro-Russian narrative has blamed Iran for starting the war and pointed to British influence in convincing the shah to open hostilities. According to this narrative, it was Iran that had breached the arrangements of the Treaty of Golestan (1813), thus provoking Russia into occupying Lake Gokcha (Sivan) territory leading to the crisis of 1825, which then led to war the next year. Furthermore, this genre of historiography has suggested that because of British influence over Prince Regent Abbas Mirza, British diplomacy managed to influence Iranian policymakers and promote the war option.¹ Accounts of the two wars with Russia written by local Muslim historians of the Caucasus region basically follow the above narrative. These historians were those who in effect collaborated with the Russians.² Even Soviet era historical studies of this period go a long way to claim British influence in the outbreak of the war and to put the blame on the Qajar court of Tehran. One such study claims, without providing much evidence: "The English not only encouraged Iran to start a war with Russia, but also prepared the Iranians for the conflict in every way they could including with military and financial aid."³

Qajar period Iranian sources on the other hand blamed the Russians for starting the war by illegally occupying the northern shore of Lake Gokcha (Sivan) 1825 and then trying to dictate terms to Iran during the follow-up negotiations. The Iranian line of argument was best captured by Mirza Abu al-Qasem Farahani, the Second Qa'im Maqam, in his letter to an unknown British diplomat.⁴ Here, Qa'em Maqam explains

¹John F. Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus* (London, 1908), 155, 176; for Russian government blaming Iran for breaching the arrangements of the Treaty of Golestan see a translation of the text of Russian war declaration in October 1826 in Sa'id Nafisi, *Tarikh ijtema'i va siyasi-e Iran dar douran mo'aser* [A social and political history of Iran in the modern period] (Tehran, 1344/1965), 2: 124–27.

²See the accounts written by *Tarikh-e Qarabagh* written by Mirza Jamal Javanshir and *Qarabagh Nameh*, by Mirza Adigozal Beg, in George Bournoutian, *Two Chronicles on the History of Karabagh* (Costa Mesa, CA, 1994).

³Fathallah Abdallahyev, *Monasebat-e Iran va Russiyeh va siyasat Inglis dar Iran dar aghaz qarn-e noz-dahom* [Iran's relations with Russia and the policy of England at the beginning of the nineteenth century], trans. Gholam Husayn Matin (Tehran, 1356/1977), 137.

⁴The letter is dated 13 September 1826 and addressed to an unknown member of British mission in Tehran. See Jahangir Qa'emaqami, ed. and comp., *Nameh-baye parakandeh-ye Qa'em Maqam Farahani*

the nature of territorial dispute between Russia and Iran dating back to the Treaty of Golestan (1813). According to him the cease-fire of 1813 and the subsequent Treaty of Golestan were based on *status quo praesentem*, which meant that each side would remain in possession of territories under their control pending future negotiations. According to Qa'em Maqam, the Russians broke this agreement by unilaterally occupying some territory in Talesh (south of the line of cease-fire) after signing the treaty. In addition, endless negotiations had been going on over Iranian control of a territory in the southern part of the Khanate of Qarabagh (the territory between Qapan (Kapan), toward the southwest, to Meqri (Meghri), just north of river Aras). It was presumably in exchange for this territory that the Russians had unilaterally occupied the Gokcha territory, triggering the crisis. Other Iranian sources of the Qajar period basically follow Qa'em Maqam's narrative and blame the Russians. Where these sources differ is who to blame for the escalation of the confrontation with Russia. In this context, some blame the ulama for pressuring the shah to escalate the confrontation, while others blame the deposed immigrant khans of Russian occupied Caucasian territories, and yet others the shah and the prince regent.⁵

Iranian observers and historians of the Pahlavi period exclusively blame the Qajar court for the outbreak of the war. Those who are blamed include Fath Ali Shah, or the prince regent, or both, as well as the ulama. This genre of writings shows much disregard for historical facts and context when dealing with the subject.⁶ In this context, Sa'id Nafisi at one point goes as far as blaming the shah and the court of Tehran for the outbreak of war while exonerating Abbas Mirza and at another point in the same volume he blames the prince regent for the outbreak of hostilities.⁷ Homa Nateq's impression on the causes of the war puts the blame entirely on the Qajar court as well. She argues that the British played a significant role in encouraging the Iranians to open hostilities.⁸ Interestingly, while the author dismisses Russian provocations, she remains un-phased by the fact that the chief British diplomat in Iran

[The scattered letters of Qa'em Maqam Farahani] (Tehran, 2537/1978), 1: 70–75. Both Russian and Soviet narratives of the causes of the second war omit Russian provocations or distort such events as the Russian occupation of Gokcha, followed by further expansion into Iranian territory in 1825 and 1826.

⁵Abd al-Razzaq Donboli, *Ma'aser-e Sultaniyyeh* [The heritage of Sultanieh], ed. Gholam Husayn Zargari-nejad (Tehran, 1383/2004), 505–7; Hasan Fasa'i, *History of Persian under Qajar Rule*, trans. Heribert Busse (New York and London, 1971), 174–76; Muhammad Taqi Lesan al-Molk Sepehr, *Nasekh al-tavarikh: tarikh Qajarieh* [Complete history: Qajar history], ed. Jamshid Kianfar (Tehran, 1377/1998), 356–67; Jahangir Mirza, *Tarikh-e no* [New history], ed. Abbas Iqbal (Tehran, 1327/1948), 7–15.

⁶A good example in this case is Sa'id Nafisi, *Tarikh-e ejtema'i va siyasi Iran dar dowreh-ye mo'aser* [Iran's political and social history in the current era] (Tehran, 1344/1965), 2: 1. He blames the Qajar court for preparing for war with Russia in order to retrieve territories lost in 1813.

⁷Ibid., 115; Nafisi's work is valuable in that it has extensive translation of a Russian book (in French) which includes translation of documents and letters related to the conflict. See Le General Prince Stcherbatow, *Le Feld Marechal Prince Paskevich* (St Petersburg, 1890). This document is primarily the writings of Paskevich in two volumes and it includes other primary sources.

⁸Homa Nateq, *Az mast keh bar mast* [From us the blame comes to us] (Tehran, 1978), 13–15.

was against the war and did all he could to discourage the Iranians from responding in kind to Russian provocations. The fact that the new British representative, George Macdonald, the person Nateq accuses of promoting war between Iran and Russia, arrived at the shah's camp after hostilities had already started, does not seem to change her analysis of the root causes of the conflict either.

The voice of British policy in Iran before the outbreak of the second war was the *chargé d'affaires* in Tehran, Henry Willock. His meticulous note taking in his diary and reports he sent to London has left a wealth of information on the day-to-day development of the crisis from his perspective. Willock also translated into English correspondence between various parties. These letters were either given to him by Iranian officials to view and translate or were acquired by what seems to be his extensive network of spies at the court of Tehran. It should be noted that from 1814 the British Empire had committed itself, both militarily and financially, to the defense of Iran against Russia. For British commitment to go into full effect, it was stipulated that aggression against Iran had to be started by the other side. This meant that if Iran started hostilities against Russia, the British government was free of all treaty obligations. Hence, Britain had no real interest in igniting a war between Iran and Russia and actually did its best to prevent it. In addition, in order not to adhere to its treaty commitments toward Iran, British policy had real interest in pressuring the shah to give unilateral concessions and, if that did not work, to accuse Iran of initiating the war, thus freeing Britain of any treaty commitment.

As representative of British government at the court in Tehran, Willock was against the war and basically blamed Abbas Mirza for its outbreak.⁹ He also made it clear to the shah that British policy was against the war.¹⁰ Interestingly, Willock rather clearly admitted that Russia had initiated hostilities by "forcefully" occupying the Gokcha territory.¹¹ In his study of the causes of Iran's second war with Russia, P.W. Avery rejects Willock's assertion that the prince regent was responsible for the outbreak of the war but then adds: "He [Abbas Mirza] tried to keep a precarious balance between peace and war, but nearer war than peace. Circumstances went beyond his control and he lost this balance."¹² However, as we shall see, Avery's assertion does not pass the test of available evidence. Finally, Muriel Atkin made the following observation about the causes of the second war between Iran and Russia:

⁹FO/60/27, Willock to Canning, 27 June 1826.

¹⁰Ibid., in his audience with the shah at camp Sultanieh and in the presence of Ilchi Foreign Minister Willock advised the shah that in his opinion he should settle his border dispute with Russia in a definitive manner even if it meant some sacrifice on his part. He also noted that Russian treatment of Muslims under their control did not warrant war and advised the shah to stop the approach of top ulama to his court. Finally, he advised the shah that he should prepare to open negotiations with the approaching Russian envoy, Prince Menshikov.

¹¹FO/60/27, Willock to Canning (Tehran, 13 January 1826).

¹²P.W. Avery, "An Enquiry into the Outbreak of the Second Russo-Iranian War 1826–28," in *Iran and Islam*, ed. C.E. Bosworth (Edinburgh, 1971), 21.

[After 1813 m]any Muslims were not reconciled to being part of the Russian Empire. Empire builders were displeased that some of the land north of the Aras remained in Iranian hands and that the British seemed to have much influence over the Iranian government. Members of the government were disheartened by the costly, humiliating defeat. The various problems led to a second war during the late 1820s.¹³

This keen observation of the causes of the second war is perhaps the most nearly complete overview of this conflict and its root causes and provides an adequate context for reexamination of causes and perceptions of the second war between Iran and Russia.

Russian Policy toward Eastern Caucasus

The above contradictory observations of why and how the second Russo-Iranian war started points to the challenge facing any observer of this period. In this context, the first logical step seems to be to try to establish the strategies of Russia and Iran toward the disputed region. In terms of Imperial Russia's strategic view of the Caucasus in general and eastern Caucasus in particular, Russian strategy was formulated during the reign of Catherine II. In the late eighteenth century Russian seem to have developed both commercial and military interest in the region. Commercially, the region potentially gave Russia the opportunity to dominate trade with Iran and expand beyond into India. Militarily, the Russians had become interested in dominating the region in order to be in a better position to face off the Ottomans in western Caucasus.¹⁴ Hence, conquest of the Caucasus was in turn linked to a larger strategy of competing against the Ottoman Empire over control of the Black Sea and beyond. As part of Russian strategy it had become necessary for the rivers Kur and Aras to become new borders between Iran and the Russian Empire. This meant that for Russia, the territory north of the river Aras had become an integral part of its imperial ambition in the region. Russian sympathy for Christians under Muslim rule also played a role, albeit secondary, in Russian decision-making processes. In this context, Iran and Russia were set on a collision course when in 1783, under the Treaty of Georgievsk, Irakli, the vali/king of Gorjestan, eastern Georgia, officially severed his small kingdom's 400-year relation with Iran and put Georgia under Russian protection.¹⁵

Russia's interest in eastern Caucasus coincided with Iran's reunification under Aqa Muhammad Shah, the khan of Qaja tribe and head of the new dynasty. As part of the process of reunification the Qajar khan demanded the submission of the eastern Caucasian principalities called khanates, including eastern Georgia. It seems the Qajar shah

¹³Muriel Atkin, *Russia and Iran 1780–1820* (Minneapolis, 1980), 145.

¹⁴Abdallahyev, *Monasebat-e Iran va Russiyeh*, 52, Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, 1–23, Khanak Ishqi, *Siyasat-e nezami russiyeh dar Iran 1790–1815* [Russian military policy towards Iran 1790–1815] (Tehran, 1353/1974), 299–30.

¹⁵Ishqi, *Siyasat-e nezami russiyeh dar Iran*, 22–23; Atkin, *Russia and Iran*, 10–13.

was unimpressed with the new Russo-Georgian alliance and with the Russian military presence in the region. In the summer of 1795 Aqa Muhammad moved to bring the Caucasus under his rule, culminating in September 1795 sack of Tiflis.¹⁶ The shah's sack of Tiflis in turn resulted in the Russian invasion of 1796 under General Valerian Zubov, the *Qizil Iyaq* (the golden leg) as he was known to the locals, which in turn resulted in the shah's second invasion of the region, where he was assassinated in the fortress of Shusha in May 1797.

Qajar Iran's relationship and approach to eastern Caucasus was inherently different than that of Russia. For Russia, annexation of the territory north of river Aras was a small but significant part of a much larger imperialist design involving the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, the Ottoman Empire and the Balkans, as well as the status of Imperial Russia among world powers. For Qajar Iran, reabsorbing the khanates of Caucasus was the logical completion of the process of unification under the new dynasty which had begun in 1779. The region was ruled by Moslem rulers, with the exception of Georgia and some territories in Daghestan (the Qajar state did not have serious claim on the latter). Much of these territories were inhabited by Muslims and Christians with long historical ties to Iran-based empires. Should Iranian sovereignty have been established in this region, in line with tradition and after taxes were paid, the Qajar state would have left the rulers of the khanates with much local autonomy. Even in the case of Georgia, had Irakli submitted to the Qajar shah, he would have remained in power with much local authority. It seems in the final analysis he would have received a much better deal than the one he received from the Russians, which was the toppling of his dynasty and annexation of his kingdom in 1801. Hence, for Iran under both Aqa Muhammad Shah and his successor Fath Ali Shah (Baba Khan Jahanbani), confrontation with Russia was a defensive posture as the shah's guarded domain of Iran was under aggressive colonialist attack. Therefore, an important aspect of this conflict was that throughout this period Russia was the initiator of active policy of aggression and annexation and Iran was merely showing reaction in a defensive posture.

The first Russo-Iranian war started wholeheartedly in 1804, with the sack and massacre of Ganjeh by the Russian army in January of that year and full-fledged combat in the Khanate of Iravan (Yerevan) between the two armies by the summer of 1804. The first war lasted until 1813 and came to an end with the Treaty of Golestan. During the first war Iran fought hard but was often on the defensive against the far superior and more modern Russian army. But Russia also faced a number of problems which made winning decisively over Iran problematic. These problems included Russia's engagement in a number of military confrontations, notably with France under Emperor Napoleon and the Ottoman Empire. These confrontations made war with Iran less of a priority for Russia, which provided Iran a slight advantage, but which in the final analysis did not compensate for its military inferiority. Iran's hope seemed to have been to continue to confront the Russians in a defensive posture while reforming

¹⁶Atkin, *Russia and Iran*, 39; Ali Qoli Mirza E'tezad Saltaneh, *Eksir al-Tavarikh* [The elixir of history], ed. Jamshid Kianfar (Tehran, 1377/1998), 46–55.

and modernizing its armed forces with the aid of European instructors. This way, the Iranians hoped they could deter Russia and even force it to retreat from at least some of the conquered lands.

During the first war, on a number of occasions (during 1809–10) the Russians approached Iran with “peace proposals.” The tsar’s military governors of the Caucasus, generals Ivan V. Gudovich and Alexander P. Tormezov, wrote to Abbas Mirza and proposed peace by making the line from river Aparchay to the intersection of rivers Aras and Kur the border between Iran and Russia. This meant Iran would have had to give up territories it had already lost plus some that it still controlled in exchange for peace with Russia. Both proposals were rejected.¹⁷ Iran was defeated in two major battles in October 1812 and January 1813. The defeat, however, was not decisive and Iran was still in a position to continue, especially in light of Russia’s continuing war with France. But Fath Ali Shah, who had the final say in this and other matters, reluctantly agreed to sign the treaty because of advice from his chief minister Mirza Shafi’ Mazandarani and others in his court, and British pressure and promises, as well as financial problems and military challenges elsewhere. In terms of British influence, it seems that the shah naively accepted British ambassador Gore Ouseley’s promise that the British government would use its influence with Russia to have some parts of the lost territories returned to the shah. In Tabriz, however, Prince Regent Abbas Mirza and his chief minister Mirza Isa (Bozurg) Farahani, the first *Qa’em Maqam*, were against signing the treaty and voiced confidence in Iran’s ability to regroup and continue the war.¹⁸ In this context, the Treaty of Golestan was drafted and signed in haste by both sides. For Iran, pressure of a costly long war as well as troubles elsewhere (especially in the eastern region of Khorasan) were strong incentives to accept a cease-fire. British pressure on the shah, based on a strategic policy of helping Russia and other allies to come together to fight Bonaparte, was an added element in convincing the shah to accept a cease-fire. The British ambassador to the court of Tehran in fact played a crucial role throughout this process. As for Russia, the need to divert all resources in its war with France must have been overwhelming pressure, but leaving Iran in charge of two important khanates north of the Aras was not Imperial Russia’s ideal outcome either. This meant that both sides had accepted Golestan, but that both sides were unhappy with it. Golestan was at best a temporary cease-fire line, leaving the rest of the disputed issues, especially the actual new border, to future negotiations. This is why both sides accepted *status quo praesentem* pending future negotiations, a process that did not go well and in fact became a pretext for the second war.

¹⁷Ishqi notes that both times Russia proposed the line between river Aparchay (on the Ottoman boarder) and the intersection of rivers Aras and Kur, near Caspian shore, to be the border. This would have meant that Iran had to forfeit parts of northern Iravan (namely Gomri and Shurehbol) and areas in southern Qarabagh, south of Shusha (still under its control) as well as Ganjeh, Baku, Shirvan, Shakki, Qobbeh and Darband. See Ishqi, *Siyasat-e nezami russiyeh dar Iran*, 52–53 and 59–60, and Fasa’i, *History*, 123–30.

¹⁸Gaspare Drouville, *Safarnameh-ye Drouville 1812–1813* [Voyage en Perse 1812–1813], trans. Javad Mohi (Tehran, 1337/1959), 181; Ishqi, *Siyasat-e nezami russiyeh dar Iran*, 124.

The Interwar Years

Any hope of Russian concession or goodwill or the ability of the British to intercede on behalf of Iran came to nothing with the ambassadorial mission of Mirza Abu al-Hasan Khan Shirazi the Ilchi to the court of St Petersburg. The mission lasted nearly three years (1814–16) and was designed to ratify the Golestan Treaty and to negotiate the return of some of the lost territories. Mirza Bozorg Qa'em Maqam's observation upon return of the Ilchi mission was telling and provided a window into Qajar policymakers' state of mind. He observed "that not only had Persia nothing to expect from the generosity or forbearance of Russia, but that further encroachments in that quarter were to be dreaded."¹⁹ But, in order to fully understand Russian policy toward eastern Caucasus and the Iranian reaction to it, the role of General Alexey P. Yermolov needs to be examined with care. Appointed governor of Georgia and the Russian occupied eastern Caucasus in 1816, Yermolov (Yermol as he was known to the locals) was also the commander of the independent Georgia corps which gave him considerable autonomy in dealing with the newly occupied territories as well as with Iran. The fact that he seemed to have enjoyed the full trust of Tsar Alexander I gave the general a special position in Russia and much authority to improvise policy toward both Iran and the newly acquired territories. Yermolov's special relationship with the Tsar Alexander and the degree of independence given to his command allowed him to pursue a policy that at times looked as if it contradicted the general policy of Russia toward Iran. Yet the fact remains that such authority was bestowed upon Yermolov and could have only been possible as part of overall Russian policy toward the Caucasus and Iran. Yermolov would use his power to pursue a policy which led to a second war with Iran as well as eventual loss of his command.

Yermolov traveled to Iran in 1817 and visited both Tabriz and Tehran. His visit to Tabriz immediately created friction with Abaas Miza and Qa'em Maqam, a bitterness which was both mutual and enduring. Yermolov's own recollection makes it clear what was at least one of the reasons for the mutual dislike: "The shah was generous in his praise and no one dared contradict him. Crown Prince Abbas Mirza, however, did not like me because I refused to recognize him as heir to the throne finding nothing beneficial for us, though my instructions stipulated this."²⁰ The following exchange between him and Qa'im Maqam is a good example of the deteriorating relationship between Russia and Iran after Yermolov's tenure began. In answering Yermolov's question as to why the prince regent was continuing to build up his military defenses, Mirza Bozorg answered: "To repel any further aggression attempted by your government, or any State."²¹ In Tehran, while he showed respect to Fath Ali Shah, he

¹⁹W. Monteith, *Kars and Erzeroum* (London, 1856), 104.

²⁰Alexey Yermolov, *The Czar's General: The Memoirs of a Russian General in the Napoleonic Wars*, trans. and ed. Alexander Mikaberidze (Welwyn Garden City, UK, 2005), 229. For more on Yermolov and his mission see Atkin, *Russia and Iran*, 152–55.

²¹Monteith, *Kars and Erzeroum*, 105.

was arrogant toward court officials and refused to observe court procedures.²² More importantly, Yermolov refused the shah's request of partial reinstatement of Iranian rule over the lost territories and only offered minor concessions, prompting Abbas Mirza to make the following remark: "Your mission appears to have had no object, except that of presenting us with some glass and china."²³

The general would spend the rest of his tenure until 1827 subduing the occupied population and preparing the ground for annexation of the rest of eastern Caucasus. According to one observation, "Yermoloff's central idea was that the whole of the Caucasus must, and should, become an integral part of the Russian Empire."²⁴ This view was very much in line with that of Catherine II's court when hostilities over the Caucasus began. By all accounts, Yermolov was a capable administrator and military leader, but he was also brutal and cruel, especially when it came to dealing with the local population. He also dealt with Iran in a condescending manner, and held all Muslims in contempt. Perhaps the most important legacy of Yermolov was his intention from early on to prepare the ground to conquer the remaining khanates under Iranian rule and make the river Aras the border. This task was part of an overall Russian imperial ambition and to accomplish it, Yermolov adopted a policy of provoking conflict with Iran accompanied by employment of force if necessary. As part of this strategy, during his tenure pressure on the Muslim population of occupied Caucasus increased. The pressure included implementing direct Russian rule on some of the khanates by removing the autonomous khans who had sided with Russia during the first war, substituting Shari'a law with Russian law and undermining the position of the Muslim ulama, and finally by favoring the Christian population over the Muslim peoples of the region.²⁵

As noted, there seems to have been a degree of policy disagreement between Tiflis and the court of St Petersburg in regard to how to deal with Iran during the inter-war years. Correspondence between Yermolov and the Russian Foreign Ministry and also with Tsar Alexander I provide a window into the depth and roots of the differences. The nature of differences seems to have been tactical rather than strategic. The focus of Yermolov's strategy regarding Iran seems to have been primarily neutralizing the court of Tabriz under Abbas Mirza and Qa'em Maqam. This was because the court of Tabriz was in charge of governing and defending Azarbaijan, the remaining Caucasian territories of Iran, and of diplomatic dealing with Russia through Tiflis. Hence, Yermolov essentially viewed the court of Tabriz as the prime threat to Russian imperial ambition in the region and weakening Abbas Mirza's position in Iran became a key aspect of the general's policy toward Iran. In his correspondence with the Russian Foreign Minister Count Karl Nesselrode, the general reported on his diplomatic trip to Iran in 1817 and presented Abbas Mirza as a reformer who was rapidly improving the armed

²²Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, 101.

²³Monteith, *Kars and Erzeroum*, 101.

²⁴Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, 99.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 135–51.

forces to challenge Russian power in the region once again. He did not consider the prince regent as a progressive figure, but one who promoted reforms to consolidate his own power against his rivals.²⁶ It seems the Iranians tried their best to show off the strength and state of readiness of their army as a way to impress the Russian envoy and perhaps to deter Russia.²⁷ However, there seems to be a degree of exaggeration in Yermolov's assessment of how rapid and effective Abbas Mirza's military reforms were. Only a few years later another observer of the prince regent's military had a different impression of its state of readiness. In his observation of the military and the arsenal in Tabriz, in the middle of a war with the Ottoman Empire in 1822, James Fraser wrote about inadequacies of weapons, disorganized state of factories and "the sorry state of pay for soldiers."²⁸ The only possible purpose for exaggerating the state of military reforms in Iran and the state of Iranian army's readiness could have been an attempt by Yermolov to impress his superiors and convince them of a more aggressive policy toward that country as well as allocation of more men and material to his command. If so, Yermolov's action fits well with his desire to use his powerful position in Tiflis to steer Russian policy toward Tehran rather than being a simple executor of policy emanating from the Russian Foreign Ministry. Yermolov also reported on how he refused to recognize Abbas Mirza as heir apparent, and how he antagonized both the prince regent and Qa'em Maqam on a variety of other issues including overtly and secretly making contact with Abbas Mirza's half-brother and chief rival Muhammad Ali Mirza, the Dowlatshah. The Russian foreign minister admonished him for his secret contact with Dowlatshah, proposed a more moderate approach and asked Yermolov to be more accommodating toward the shah.²⁹ Overall, it seems that as long as Alexander I was alive, Yermolov could feel safe in playing a cat and mouse game with St Petersburg without putting his own safety and job in jeopardy.

In this context, the year 1825 was an eventful one and holds a special significance in the narrative of the second Russo-Iranian war. Back in 1823, Iran proposed to establish a joint commission to study the border between Iran and Russia in the Caucasus and propose guidelines for final demarcation. By 1825, the commission's work had reached an impasse. Hence in early 1825 Yermolov escalated hostilities with Iran by ordering the occupation of an area northwest of Lake Gokcha, a territory clearly on Iranian side of the border. Some historians have wrongly suggested that the occupied territory had been under Russian control since 1813 and was a subject of negotiation between Iran and Russia over border demarcation.³⁰ This is not the case, as the exchange between a Russian general and governor of Qarabagh sometime after 1813 shows that the Russians were asking Abbas Mirza for permission to allow the tribes

²⁶As translated in Nafisi, *Tarikh-e ejtema'i va siyasi Iran*, 95.

²⁷Yermolov mentioned the rebuilding and rearming of Iranian army with the help of English instructors; see Abdallahyev, *Monasebat-e Iran va Russiyeh*, 109–11.

²⁸James B. Fraser, *Travels and Adventures in the Persian Provinces on the Southern Bank of the Caspian Sea* (London, 1826), 308–9.

²⁹Nafisi, *Tarikh-e ejtema'i va siyasi Iran*, 95.

³⁰Nateq, *Az mast keb bar mast*, 19.

under their rule to spend summers around Lake Gokcha for pasture.³¹ Another observer has noted that Yermolov ordered: “guards on the Persian territory at the northern and southern extremities of the lake of Goukcha.”³² 1825 was also the year that Tsar Alexander I, Yermolov’s chief benefactor, died and was succeeded by his younger brother followed by the Decembrist rebellion. In his correspondence with the tsar on 25 July 1825, Yermolov once again asked for military preparedness in the Caucasus to be ready for the presumed Iranian threat. Alexander’s reply on 12 September pointed to the core of policy differences between Tiflis and St Petersburg as the monarch told his commander that based on the information available to him, it was hard to believe that the shah was getting ready to start a war over the lost Caucasian territories.³³ Interestingly, at the end of the tsar’s letter, General Yermolov was ordered to maintain peace while at this very time he had already commenced the occupation of the Gokcha territory. The fact that there is no mention of this occupation and the negotiations that had been going on between Tabriz and Tiflis in correspondence between the general and the tsar may suggest that Yermolov did not report on all the developments, perhaps as part of his overall plan to provoke a conflict with Iran. On the other hand, the fact that Yermolov was able to carry on his own strategy despite hesitation and even direct orders from St Petersburg opposing any provocative act, points to his special position and his relationship with Tsar Alexander I. It seems that the general had the trust of the tsar and was allowed to maintain a high degree of autonomy in making decisions with regard to his jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the policy of providing Yermolov with considerable independent decision-making power was a clear policy of the court of St Petersburg and cannot be separated from overall Russian policy toward Iran. Yermolov would lose his special relationship in December 1825, and eventually his command, with the death of the tsar, the accession of Nicolas I and the Decembrist rebellion.

It is clear that the north and southeast territory around Lake Gokcha came under Russian occupation in spring 1825 as a unilateral and provocative act on Yermolov’s part. Despite all his differences with the court of Tehran, the British chargé d’affaires in Tehran, Henry Willock, admitted to Russian aggressive behavior in this case.³⁴ Furthermore, occupation of this territory was a clear violation of the Treaty of Golestan and was the most significant provocation to date by the Russian side. By all accounts, the occupied territory was not inhabited at this time and had no material value in terms of tax revenue or otherwise.³⁵ But it would have given Russia access and legal claim to the lake and was seemingly a valuable military position for further incursion onto the Khanate of Iravan. At any rate, Russian occupation was viewed by the Iranian side as a direct threat to its territorial integrity. Initially, the court of Tabriz was in

³¹Conversation between Prince Regent Abbas Mirza and General V. Madatov, documented in Bour-noutian, *Qarabaghnameh*, 224.

³²Monteith, *Kars and Erzeroum*, 120.

³³For a Persian translation of both letters see Nafisi, *Tarikh-e ejtema’I va siyasi Iran*, 105–6.

³⁴FO/95/591/2, minutes of conversation of Sir Henry Willock’s presentation to the Emperor Nicolas (October 1827, St Petersburg).

³⁵Monteith, *Kars and Erzeroum*, 120.

charge of negotiating with Tiflis over the new point of dispute, and, as such, Abbas Mirza dispatched Fath Ali Khan, the Governor (*biglerbeigi*) of Tabriz, to negotiate with Yermolov. The appointment of this particular envoy was not perhaps the best choice. He in effect signed an agreement handing over the Gokcha territory in exchange for the Qapan/Meqri territory in southwestern Qarabagh which Iran already held.³⁶ As noted, this was a territory under Iranian control but in dispute between Iran and Russian since 1813 with no resolution in sight.

Fath Ali Khan made two trips to Tiflis and on his second trip signed an agreement to swap the Qapan/Meqri territory for the territory occupied by the Russians in Gokcha. The signing of this agreement may be characterized as a major diplomatic failure on the part of the Qajar state which failed to treat relations with Russian as a most delicate matter. Hence, instead of appointing a seasoned diplomat to negotiate with Tiflis, the responsibility was given to the court of Tabriz which then made the most unfortunate decision of appointing Fath Ali Khan. Nevertheless, as protocol had it, no negotiated settlement was final until it was ratified by the sovereigns of both sides. The Treaty of Golestan, for example, was signed in 1813, but the final ratification was not complete until 1817 after further negotiations and back and forth diplomatic missions. Similarly, an agreement with Britain during Hartford Jones' mission in 1810 was not finalized until 1814, after going through revision and ratification. This time around, however, Yermolov contended that the agreement was final and could only be revised at the pleasure of the tsar. In his letter to the Iranian foreign minister, dated March 1825, Yermolov contended that Fath Ali Khan had negotiated with the full power to resolved the border disputes, and that the territory acquired by Iran was worth much more than the Gokcha territory acquired by Russia, and finally that this agreement puts an end to the territorial disputes dating back to Golestan.³⁷ This act was an unprecedented breach of diplomatic protocol and nothing short of a diktat by the Russian general to the shah of Iran. As expected, the shah did not ratify the treaty and the Russians refused to evacuate the territory, thus creating the most significant crisis in Russo-Iranian relations since 1813.

Interestingly, when discussing the Qapan/Meqri territory, which the Russians had made into an important point of contention since 1813, they did not even seem to have known the region and its geography well. In their correspondence the Russians kept referring to the area "between the two rivers," which were then identified as "Kapan" and "Kapanik Chay." As the letter from Mirza Abu al-Qasem, the second Qa'em Maqa, indicated, there was/is no river by the name of "Kapanik Chay" and the Russians were probably referring to a small river near the settlement of Meqri.³⁸ These developments suggest that the Russian occupation of Gokcha territory and the follow-up negotiations were stage-managed by Yermolov in line with his

³⁶Ibid., 121–22. Atkin describes this territory as having an unpleasant climate which the Russians found lethal, see Atkin, *Russia and Iran*, 153.

³⁷Yermolov's letter to Mirza Abd al-Hasan Khan, the Ilchi, Iranian Foreign Minister, was translated and dispatched by Willock: FO 60/27, p. 71.

³⁸Qa'em Maqam, *Nameh-haye parakandeh-ye*, 72.

policy of provoking Iran into either a war or capitulation which would then have set the scene for further expansion in the region. The occupation of Gokcha was in fact the beginning of the second war with Russia, some year and a half before the actual combat started in the summer of 1826. The Qajar court would spend this time actually trying to prevent an all-out war by attempting to get Yermolov to compromise. But events in Russia and perceptions in Iran made finding a solution rather difficult.

Russian and Iranian officials spent the rest of 1825 in increasingly angry correspondence, with the tone of letters becoming more undiplomatic, pointing to rapidly deteriorating relations. Fath Ali Shah took charge of the situation after late March 1825, signing of the treaty in Tiflis. In October 1825, he dispatched a confidential officer named Safi Khan to the Gokcha region to report on the situation. His assessment was that most Russian troops had left but that the Russian pickets remained in place and the occupation had not ended.³⁹ Next, the shah ordered his envoy, Mirza Sadeq Khan Marvazi, to leave for Georgia. The envoy left Tabriz on 23 October arriving in Tiflis on 23 November and immediately opened negotiations. However, as General Yermolov had left Tiflis to take command of a new war in Daghestan, Sadeq Khan conducted negotiations with his next in command, General Wilhelmov until 1 December 1825. Sadeq Khan was apparently treated poorly by the Russians, a clear insult to the shah.⁴⁰ Negotiations did not go far, but it gave Sadeq Khan a chance to assess the situation in Tiflis, the nerve center of Russian operations in the Caucasus.⁴¹

Negotiations came to an end in December with the news of the death of the tsar and the Decembrist revolt. Willock translated the text of a letter written by General Wilhelmov to the shah in early 1826, which may have been delivered to the shah by Sadeq Khan who returned to Tehran in March 1826. This letter provides a comprehensive and definitive view of the Russian position from the vantage point of Tiflis. In the letter, the Russian general told the shah that Iran had been in illegal occupation of Qapan/Meqri region and that the land swap settled territorial dispute dating back to Golestan and finally that if Iran wanted the Gokcha territory evacuated, he was authorized to order evacuation but only after Iran handed over the Qapan/Meqri territory.⁴² Interestingly, in January 1826, the new Tsar Nicolas I wrote a letter to Yermolov emphasizing the need to maintain peace with Iran based on the Golestan Treaty. Furthermore, the tsar noted the delicate situation in Europe and problems with the Ottoman Empire (the Greek war of independence), and asked for any dispute with Iran to be resolved and not to be allowed to escalate to the point of breakdown of relations.⁴³ Yermolov however moved toward the opposite direction and started to escalate hostilities with Iran. By the time Sadeq Khan had arrived in Tiflis, Russian forces had moved to occupy Balagh lu, using their position at

³⁹FO/60/27 Willock to Canning (dispatch #1, Tehran, 13 January 1826).

⁴⁰Nafisi, *Tarikh-e ejtema'i va siyasi Iran*, 73.

⁴¹For example he reported that Yermolov was defeated in Daghestan and lost many guns, see FO 60/27 Willock to Canning (Dispatch #1, Tehran, 13 January 1826).

⁴²FO/60/27 Willock to Canning (Tehran, 20 May 1826).

⁴³Segments of a Persian translation of the letter is provided in Abdallahyev, *Monasebat-e Iran va Rus-siyeh*, 141.

Gokcha as a staging post. By the time of Council of Sultanieh, in June 1826, the Russians had attacked and occupied Bash Aparan (Aparan) north of the city of Iravan, deep inside Iranian territory.

Besides these provocations, two more events played a crucial role in escalating confrontation between the two sides. First, news of the treatment of Muslims in Russian occupied Caucasus created a highly charged atmosphere in Sultanieh, where the court had moved in June 1826. The treatment of the Muslim population was directly related to General Yermolov's contempt for Muslims and his high-handed treatment of them. After removing from power some of the uncooperative khans who had sided with Russia during the first war (e.g. the khans of Shiravan and Qarabagh), the general moved to subdue the remaining populations in the region, often causing uprisings, especially in the mountainous regions. One observer has noted that while under his command, the general state of the internal economy improved: "We cannot say as much for the system pursued towards the population in general, for nothing could be more tyrannical than the manner in which they were treated, whether Christian or Mohamedans."⁴⁴ Some reports indicated raping of Muslim women by Russian soldiers.⁴⁵ Even if some of these reports were exaggerated or inaccurate, they created much agitation and rage in Iran. More importantly, cultural complications related to the above development played a role in the escalation of hostilities. In an interesting conversation with Mirza Abd al-Vahhab, the Mo'tamed al-Dowleh, and while trying to explain British policy toward conflict with Russia, Willock mentioned the treatment of Muslims under Russian occupation and noted that the treatment of Muslims by Russians was not a concern of Iran in accordance with Treaty of Golestan.⁴⁶

Here, the relevance of Muslim mistreatment by the Russians needs to be taken into consideration within the cultural and religious context of the period, in order to understand the type of pressure being exerted on Fath Ali Shah by the Shi'i religious establishment. In this context, while it was true that by treaty and by law the shah of Iran no longer had jurisdiction over a Muslim population which had now become subject to the Russian tsar, it was also true that by moral obligation, precedent and religious duty, the shah was expected to take action if that population was being mistreated. Fath Ali Shah Qajar was not a mere king of the guarded domain of Iran, but a protector of Muslims—in this case Shi'a Muslims. If the Shi'a community was threatened with harm anywhere, be it the Ottoman Empire or the Wahhabi movement in Arabia, the Iranian shah was expected to react accordingly. Hence, even at the best of times, mistreatment of Muslims under Russian occupation was not something the shah could easily ignore.

The second set of events that played a role in escalating hostilities between the two sides was developments in Russia in December 1825 as they were understood in Iran. The death of Tsar Alexander I, the accession of his younger brother Nicolas I and the

⁴⁴Monteith, *Kars and Erzeroum*, 110.

⁴⁵Fasa'i, *History*, 172.

⁴⁶FO/60/27 Extracts from Mr. Willock's Journal, 3 July 1826.

outbreak of the Decembrist rebellion in support of Constantine, the older brother of Nicolas, all occurred in rapid succession in December 1825. The rebellion was by more liberal-leaning elements in the Russian army against the conservative-leaning military establishment. The rebels supported Constantine, whom they viewed as having liberal leanings, but also demanded a constitution and had other liberal reforms in mind. The new tsar was also less popular than his older brother, which helped the rebels. Nevertheless, the rebellion was put down with relative ease by the end of December. These developments were a surprise to many Russians and those who observed Russian society. But in Iran, where the country had no permanent resident ambassador in St Petersburg, and where time and again information on Russian society was in short supply, developments in Russia were misinterpreted and misunderstood.

For Qajar Iran, with its history of tribal warfare, rivalry between brothers for the throne was a fact of life. Centuries of tribal/dynastic rule had established a unique set of cultural habits. In this context, in the event of open warfare between contending brothers for the throne, it was assumed and expected that opportunities would be opened to others, even foreign actors, to take advantage of the situation. Put simply, from the cultural perspective of Qajar Iran, many Iranian statesmen could have and did interpret the Russian events as a sign of weakness which could be used to Iran's advantage at a point when Iran was clearly being bullied by the general in Tiflis. One observer of the time has suggested that, "Just at that period intelligence arrived of the military revolt at St Petersburg, after the death of the Emperor Alexander, this revolt was magnified in Persia into a civil war."⁴⁷ News of setbacks for Yermolov and other uprisings in the region only strengthened this view. Hence, while clearly some Iranian statesmen had some knowledge of what had happened in Russia in 1825, as attested by Willock, news and details were sketchy and many inaccuracies existed.⁴⁸ Hence, an exaggerated sense of events in St Petersburg and the Decembrist rebellion existed in Tehran and Tabriz which fueled the argument of those who argued for escalation of hostilities with Russia.

Council of Sultanieh

Under these circumstances, the June/July 1826 Council of Sultanieh found a special meaning and turned the Council into an historical gathering. Also of importance was the expected arrival of Prince Menshikov, the new tsar's envoy to the court of Tehran, who was believed not to be associated with Tiflis policymakers. The expectation was that the prince would arrive with new orders from the new tsar that would show Russian flexibility and/or a solution to the crisis which would then help avert all-out war. Already two factions were formed in the shah's court over developing policy toward Russia. Both factions were intensely engaged in lobbying the shah and his chief military commander, the prince regent. The main issues at stake were, first and foremost, what to do if Russia did not evacuate the occupied Gokcha and

⁴⁷Monteith, *Kars and Erzeroum*, 125.

⁴⁸FO/60/27, Willock to Canning (Dispatch #2, 17 February 1826).

Balagh lu territories. By this time the names “Gokcha” and “Balagh lu” had gained such prominence in Iran that one observer suggested that “these names had been introduced into too many discussions and had become too notorious in Persia.”⁴⁹ In addition, as noted earlier, by this time Russian forces under Yermolov’s command had used their position in Gokcha to make deep incursions into the rest of Iran. Other secondary issues were the condition of the Muslim community under Russian rule, and finally whether and how much Russia had been weakened as the result of its internal problems.

The two factions could perhaps be named the “war party” or the hawks and the “peace party” or the doves. The hawks had powerful personalities among them. These included a number of high ranking ulama led by Aqa Sayyed Muhammad (Mojahed) Isfahani and Allahyar Khan Qajar Develu the Asef al-Dowleh, the shah’s recently appointed chief minister (*sadr-e ‘azam*). Finally, mention should be made of the immigrant khans. These were khans of the Caucasus who had been displaced as a result of the Treaty of Golestan (1813), or those who had fled to Iran in the post-Golestan period. The immigrant khans had been given new duties in Iran but had remained in contact with their former dominions. Among them, Husayn Qoli Khan Badkubeh, the former Khan of Baku, and his cousin Ibrahim Khan Badkubeh, Sultan Ahmad Khan Qobbeh of Darband and Qobbeh, Mustafa Khan Shirvani of Shirvan, and Mehdi Qoli Khan Javanshir of Qarabagh may be mentioned.⁵⁰ The war party’s basic position was that clear insult and aggression had been committed by the Russians. In a letter to the shah, Aqa Sayyed Muhammad, the chief mojtahid of Iraq who was on his way to meet the shah, pointed to Russian occupation of Iranian territory and mistreatment of Muslims and made mention of the shah’s responsibilities, “both as Sovereign of Persia, and as the head of the Mohamedian faith.” He then went on to make it clear to the shah that he was expected to act in defense of his realm and the faithful.⁵¹ In addition, the war party’s assessment of Russian events was more optimistic than realistic and it maintained that Russia was in a weak position both generally and in the Caucasus in particular because of the recent defeats suffered by Yermolov and because of December 1825 events in St Petersburg. Finally, the hawks advised that the shah’s cause was just and his army ready and that his reign would not witness such an advantageous state of affairs again.⁵² Mention should also be made of a reluctant Mirza Abol Qasem Farahani, the second Qa’em Maqam. He had inherited his father’s honorific title and had become a close advisor to the prince regent. But he also had many enemies at the court who accused him, and even his master Abbas Mirza, of being soft on the Russians. He had been removed from the court of Tabriz by the shah but now was asked to join

⁴⁹FO/60/27 Willock copying from Colonel MacNeill’s Journal, 10 July 1826, p. 177.

⁵⁰For a discussion of the immigrant khans see Mirza, *Tarikh-e no*, 6–7.

⁵¹FO/60/27 Willock to Canning (Camp Sultanieh, 27 June 1826), 126.

⁵²There is summary of the hawks’ line of argument in Willock’s Journal, FO/60/27 Extracts from Mr. Willock’s Journal (23 July 1826), 164.

others in Sultanieh. It seems, in order to save his own position and to ward off criticism, he had cautiously joined the war party.⁵³

The doves also had a number of powerful figures among them. These included Mirza Abd al-Vahhab Neshat Isfahani, the Mo'tamed al-Dowleh, the shah's chief scribe (*monsbi al-mamalek*) and head of royal office, Manuchehr Khan Gorji (the Georgian), the shah's chief of protocol (*ishik aqasi bashi*), Mirza Abu al-Hasan Khan Shirazi, the Ilchi, the shah's foreign minister, and Mirza Saleh Shirazi, an influential diplomat and court translator. The doves generally dreaded Russian power and preferred military confrontation to be avoided at all cost. The doves were men who had more interaction with the outside world and were better acquainted with Russia. Among them two, Mirza Saleh and the Ilchi, had visited Russia and had first-hand experience. This faction had high hopes for the Menshikov mission and believed that with a little flexibility on the part of the tsar, war could be avoided. As Ilchi put it to Willock on 9 July 1826, two days before Menshikov's arrival at Sultanieh, if the Russians acted justly "matters might be concluded to the satisfaction of all parties."⁵⁴

Any evaluation of Iranian attitudes toward events in Russia and Russian-controlled Caucasus should perhaps pay a good deal of attention to the role of Prince Regent Abbas Mirza and the court of Tabriz as well as to Fath Ali Shah and the court of Tehran. Regarding Abbas Mirza's role, it should be noted that since the early years of Fath Ali Shah's reign, the court of Tabriz had acted as a junior partner to the shah's court. Tabriz had had more contact with the outside world and its officials were relatively more aware of international events, and more reformed-minded compared to the court of Tehran. The prince regent was in charge of defense of the Caucasus and Azarbaijan and the effective commander-in-chief of the army in the first war with Russia and would be again in the upcoming conflict. In this context, the importance of his decision as to what course of action to take was second only to that of his royal father. As noted, together with his chief minister, Mirza Bozurg, the first Qa'em Maqam, the twenty-four-year-old Abbas Mirza was against the peace treaty of 1813 and believed he could regroup and continue the war despite major defeats in 1812 and early 1813. During the interwar years, he was in charge of dealing with Yermolov and his provocative activities. On the other hand, both Abbas Mirza and his close advisor, the second Qa'im Maqam, were accused by the hawks of being indecisive against Russian aggression. The choice of Fath Ali Khan and the treaty he signed in Tiflis in 1825 was used as a case in point. However, as noted before, Yermolov and other Russians accused Abbas Mirza and the court of Tabriz of being under British influence. Willock blamed the prince regent for the outbreak of the war and asserted that he had joined the hawks just before arriving at Sultanieh.⁵⁵ Willock's own diary

⁵³For more on Qa'em Maqam's role see Abbas Amanat, "Russian Intrusions: Reflections of a Qajar Statesman on European Expansion," *Journal of American Oriental Society* 113, no. 1 (January–March, 1993): 35–56.

⁵⁴FO/60/27 Extracts from Mr. Willock's Journal (9 July 1826), 172.

⁵⁵FO/60/27 Extracts from Mr. Willock's Journal (8 July 1826), 169.

records as early as 25 June 1826 that the thirty-seven-year-old Abbas Mirza dreaded war with Russia and that the army of Azarbaijan, the core of the Iranian forces, was not in a state of readiness.⁵⁶ One would expect that someone who had gone from dreading war in June to advocating war in July would at least put his forces on alert, which in Willock's admission was not the case. Clearly fighting the Russians for the second time and losing for a second time could not have been advantageous to Abbas Mirza's position in Iranian politics. The prince regent's behavior suggests that he was a reluctant warrior to the end and did not belong to either of the two factions. It seems clear that Abbas Mirza entered Sultanieh with much apprehension regarding the wisdom of war with Russia and at a time when he was being accused by the hawks of being soft on Russia.

As noted, P.W. Avery rejected Willock's conclusion in this regard but suggested that Abbas Mirza and Mirza Bozorg (d. 1822), the first Qa'em Maqam, had devised a policy toward Russia often referred to as maintaining a state of "no war, no peace." The purpose of this policy, according to Avery, was to keep the Russian threat real so that the flow of money from Tehran would remain undisturbed thus helping to secure Abbas Mirza's position against competition from his brothers. This analysis is not dissimilar to Yermolov's impression of Abbas Mirza, namely that his reforms were meant to strengthen his own claim to power. Avery's analysis undervalues two important historical facts. First, the "Yermolov factor" is underrated, and it is assumed that if Abbas Mirza wanted to resolve all border disputes with the general, it could have been done. From this perspective, the "Russian threat" is viewed as "made up" by the court of Tabriz rather than a real strategic threat to Iran, which Russian imperialism was. Knowing what we know about General Yermolov, Abbas Mirza could not possibly have resolved border disputes with Russia, nor could he have predicted or prevented the Gokcha occupation. As noted, even when he sent Fath Ali Khan to negotiate a solution to the Gokcha occupation, the situation got worst. Furthermore, Avery concluded that Abbas Mirza's policy eventually backfired as he was largely responsible for creating an atmosphere of agitation against Russia, a situation that he eventually did not manage to control. In this case he is presumably talking about events after the occupation of Gokcha in early 1825 to the end of July 1826, when full-scale combat started. In this context, in a letter to his son, the shah spelled out the steps he had taken in accordance with the prince regent's council. These included moving with the army to Sultanieh, providing money to the Abbas Mirza, and allowing the ulama to approach the royal encampment.⁵⁷

Abbas Mirza's courting of the ulama has been interpreted as his hawkish support for war with Russia. One historian has summed up his behavior as, "[after failure of negotiations and refusal to ratify the Tiflis agreement] He was no less eager than the ulama in taking the final steps to war and many of these steps he in fact coordi-

⁵⁶FO/60/27 Extracts from Mr. Willock's Journal (dispatch #3, 25 June 1826).

⁵⁷Fath Ali Shah's letter to Abbas Mirza, FO/60/27 Extracts from Mr. Willock's Journal (9 July 1826), 171.

nated with them.”⁵⁸ As the effective commander-in-chief in case of actual war, Abbas Mirza had to prepare and posture for combat. All of the mentioned steps were in line for preparing for war should peace efforts fail and points to Abbas Mirza’s attempt at preparing the ground. This is particularly true on writing to the ulama and soliciting their support as part of bringing public opinion behind the cause should it become necessary. This was a common practice of this time period and had been done before, as for example during preparations which led to the first war with Russia. That the commander of the armed forces and the prince regent of Iran had taken steps to prepare the shah’s dominion for war in case it broke out cannot be equated with Abbas Mirza either wanting war or creating a situation that led to war. It made much sense to show to the Russians and the arriving envoy that the Qajar army, the royal court and public opinion were ready to defend what the Iranian side considered as rightfully belonging to it. Such readiness could have acted as deterrence at a time when Iranians thought Russia was in a weak position due to its internal problems. It is also worth noting that all these steps could have probably been undone had there been a resolution to the Gokcha crisis. Willock recording from the journal of Colonel McNeil, a member of the British mission in Iran, noted the following conversation between him and Prince Menshikov: “McNeil then told Menshikov that if the land of Gokcha and Balaku [Balagh lu] were returned, then peace had a good chance but if they were retained forcibly by Russia, then war was a strong possibility.”⁵⁹

The position and attitude of Fath Ali Shah also needs to be noted. The shah had a special relationship with the prince regent and seems to have listened to what he and his court at Tabriz had to say. The shah was the ultimate decision maker even as he allowed all parties to voice their opinion. Similar to his predecessor, Fath Ali Shah seems to have had some religious conviction and much respect for the ulama, which made the latter a strong voice at his court and for the hawks. Unlike his uncle and predecessor, the shah was not a notable military commander, although in his younger years he was known to have led his uncle’s army into battle. Yet, in all the years of war with Russia he rarely joined the front and, with one exception, never took direct command of troops in the field. Fath Ali Shah also dreaded war with Russia and would have taken the extra step to prevent it if he was given the choice. He seemed to be aware of the lack of preparedness of his son’s military for a major confrontation. In his conversations with the shah, Willock encouraged compromise with the Russians and expressed high hopes for the Menshikov mission.⁶⁰

The shah had attempted to reason with Yermolov by writing to him and offering various solutions. These included returning to pre-Gokcha crisis borders and negotiating any exchange of territory based on good faith and good neighborly relations. If the

⁵⁸Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran (1785–1906): The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (Berkeley, CA, 1969), 84.

⁵⁹FO/60/27, Willock from the Journal of Colonel McNeil, 10 July 1826, 177–78.

⁶⁰FO/60/27, Willock to Canning (from Camp Sultanieh, 27 June 1826), 131.

above did not work, then the shah proposed mediation of a third neutral party, presumably Britain.⁶¹ All such offers were refused by Tiflis. By summer 1826, the shah's assessment of the situation was that the Russians were looking for a pretext to go to war and that Iran was in no condition to fight. Also, the shah expressed that he wanted a settlement but that the Russians pushed beyond their limits on the frontier and that Russia was set to destroy him.⁶² Hence, the shah too was hopeful that the Russian envoy would bring enough good news of flexibility to ward off escalation of the conflict. Only two days before Menshikov's arrival, on 9 July 1826, the shah was recorded as suggesting that he would work toward a settlement with Russia if the Gokcha dispute could be resolved.⁶³

Thus began in Sultanieh in June and July 1826 a grand game of chess by two court factions to try to neutralize one another by jockeying for a better position and trying to convince the shah and Abbas Mirza to follow their respective advice. The shah spent the month of June and early July listening to various parties and contemplating his decision. By 11 July the Russian envoy had arrived at Sultanieh. His mission had originated in St Petersburg and not Tiflis, therefore his message came from Nicolas and not Yermolov, which raised hopes for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. During his stay in Tabriz, the Russian envoy was well received and left a good impression to the extent that Willock's hope for a conciliatory message and attitude from the court of St Petersburg was high. In Tabriz, the envoy delivered a letter from the new tsar to the prince regent. The letter was vague and general in content and talked about orders having been given to the governor of Georgia about maintaining the interest of Russia while not upsetting relations with the neighbors. The letter left details of the tsar's message to be delivered by Menshikov in person.⁶⁴ But Menshikov, who held a number of audiences with the prince regent, refused to provide any details, prompting Abbas Mirza to tell Willock on 8, July 1826 that while, like Willock, he too was hopeful that something good would come out of Menshikov's mission, he also expressed his doubts. Abbas Mirza further elaborated that in his conversations with the Russian envoy, Menshikov had insisted on the ratification of the 1825 agreement with Yermolov concerning the Gokcha occupation.⁶⁵

Prince Menshikov's arrival in Sultanieh with expensive gifts and a presumed olive branch momentarily strengthened the cause of the peace party. He had a public audience with the shah on 13 July where he presented the monarch with a letter from Tsar Nicolas I. The prince's mission was to calm the atmosphere and provide information about the transition of power in Russia. However, he was not given authority to offer anything of substance, or anything that would remotely solve the crisis.⁶⁶ Hence he had nothing to offer regarding the crisis of Gokcha. As negotiations were going on,

⁶¹FO/60/25 Willock's translation of a letter by Fath Ali Shah to General Yermolov, 28 November 1825, 307–10.

⁶²FO/60/27 Extracts from Mr. Willock's Journal (dispatch #3, 25 June 1826), 145.

⁶³FO/60/27 Extracts from Mr. Willock's Journal (9 July 1826), 173.

⁶⁴Nafisi, *Tarikh-e ejtema'i va siyasi Iran*, 122–23.

⁶⁵FO/60/27 Extracts from Mr. Willock's Journal (8 July 1826), 167.

⁶⁶Monteith, *Kars and Erzeroum*, 122, Nafisi, *Tarikh-e ejtema'i va siyasi Iran*, 119–23.

in came the news that a large Russian force had moved against Bash Aparan (Aparan), in northern part of Khanate of Iravan, and had captured the town on 8 July 1826.⁶⁷ This development at a time when the Russian envoy was conducting negotiations with the shah, plus the fact that the envoy had nothing of substance to present, added fuel to the flames in the tense and highly explosive atmosphere of Camp Sultanieh. While even a semblance of a resolution to the Gokcha dispute would certainly have gone a long way in calming the mood at Sultanieh, the Russian ambassador could only offer the shah the best friendly wishes of the new tsar and some expensive gifts while Russian forces expanded their zone of occupation. Negotiations with the envoy stopped at this point and Menshikov was sent on his way. But since he was still on Iranian territory when the war broke out, he was treated rather undiplomatically near the Russian border by his hosts in Iravan, who apparently managed to confiscate some of the gifts meant for the shah (but were not accepted) and by the Sardar of Iravan who wanted to arrest him.

Conclusion

As noted earlier, the second war between Iran and Russia had already begun in 1825 with the Gokcha occupation and then expansion of Russian zone of control to Balagh lu and Bash Aparan by the summer of 1826. The Council of Sultanieh was convened to advise the shah and develop policy in this regard and it ultimately decided to open full-scale hostilities. The anti-war party at the shah's court was outmaneuvered by events outside its control. Yermolov, it seems, had achieved his goal of triggering a confrontation. Ironically, perhaps because he thought so little of Iranians, he expected them to capitulate and not fight back. This partially explains why despite having 35,000 troops under his command, he was initially caught off-guard and had to order a retreat on all fronts.

The shah personally ordered various military units to attack from different directions under the overall command of Abbas Mirza. Local rebellions against Russian garrisons in Talesh, Ganjeh, Shirvan, Shakki and other locations helped the Iranian cause. Despite impressive initial victories in the summer of 1826, the second war with Russia was ultimately a catastrophe for Iran and resulted in the loss of Iravan and Nakhjavan.

In regard to Russian policy, differences between St Petersburg and Tiflis seem to have been of a tactical nature at best. Tsar Alexander's political arrangement with Yermolov had afforded the general a great degree of autonomy which he used to pursue the very imperial ambitions Russian statesmen had sought since the reign of Catherine II. In this context, blaming Iran for the outbreak of the second Russo-Iranian war is similar to blaming the victim for fighting back. Russia became the aggressor by attacking the region and by occupying the Gokcha territory in 1825, and then attempting to dictate terms to Iran. The treaty signed by Fath Ali Khan of Tabriz in Tiflis and Yermolov's behavior after that was a blatant insult to Iran and an unprecedented attempt

⁶⁷Jamil Qozanlu, *Jang-e Iran va Rus* [The Russo-Iranian war 1827–1828] (Tehran, 1314/1935), 4.

to strip the shah of his right to ratify the treaty. The reality was that in Russia, the Qajar ruling class was faced with an aggressive and persistent imperial power. The choices available to the Iranians were narrowing down to either war and resistance or capitulation or a solution half way between the two.⁶⁸ The war of 1826–28 would be the last time the Qajar state would confront Russia as an equal or be treated as an equal by European powers. Fath Ali Shah had started the nineteenth century confident he could resist Russian incursions, thus engaging in a defensive nine-year war, while trying to find global allies and reform Iran's army. This phase ended with the Treaty of Golestan in 1813, after Iran suffered a number of military setbacks and the shah realized that the war was just too costly. From 1814 to the end of Yermolov's mission in 1817, the shah attempted without success to negotiate the return of some of the lost territories. Between 1817 and 1825, attempts at negotiating a final demarcation of the Caucasian border, between the arch imperialist Yermolov, and Abbas Mirza's team in the court of Tabriz failed to produce results. From 1825, Russian policy under Yermolov was on the offensive again. Yermolov was able to use his unique position as the commander and governor in Tiflis and his special relationship with Tsar Alexander, to direct Russian policy to fulfill its own strategic vision of controlling all of the Caucasus.

In this context, had Iran accepted Willock's recommendation and settled the Gokcha dispute, it is highly doubtful that the settlement would have been the end of the story. In an audience and conversation with Tsar Nicolas I in St Petersburg on 28 October 1827, Willock actually told the tsar that had Menshikov had the authority to order a temporary retreat from Gokcha, war could have been avoided. By the time Menshikov reached Sultanieh, almost a year and a half had passed since Russian occupation of Gokcha and over seven months since Nicolas had come to power. The tsar surely should have had some idea about what was going on in the Caucasus even if not fully aware of Yermolov's activities. Without answering Willock directly, the tsar responded that had the shah referred the dispute to his (the tsar's) adjudication, war would not have occurred.⁶⁹ While the tsar certainly had a historical opportunity in the form of the Menshikov mission to deescalate the crisis, he chose not to, and his statement on adjudication sounds disingenuous when one notes that Menshikov's only solution for the crisis was for the shah to ratify the Tiflis agreement on Gokcha and then take the issue up with the tsar.

However, the fact that Russia wanted the rest of the Caucasus as part of its imperial ambition did not necessarily mean that events had to lead to all-out war in the summer of 1826. Here the miscalculation of the Qajar statesmen and factionalism at the court of Tehran played an important role. Certainly, compared to 1812–13, when Iran and Russia fought the last battles of the first Russo-Iranian war, Russia's internal situation

⁶⁸Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, the Qajar ruling class would try all three paths and would eventually settle for what it could hold on to by trying to play various world powers against each other.

⁶⁹FO/60/27 Minutes of conversation at Sir Henry Willock's presentation to the Emperor Nicolas, 28 (16) October 1827, St Petersburg.

was much stronger by 1825. Back in 1812, Russia had just ended a war with the Ottoman Empire and was engaged in a life and death war with Napoleon's Grand Army, while fighting Iran. In 1825, Russia was engaged in minor conflicts, namely promoting Greek independence, but not a major war. Clearly the events in December 1825—Alexander's death, the Decembrist rebellion and Nicolas' accession—created a sense of Russian vulnerability in the eyes of some statesmen in Iran. Hence, the Gokcha crisis could have been deescalated had Iran, as the weaker party, accepted the dictates of Russia. After all, it seems that both the shah and his main commander, Abbas Mirza, dreaded war with Russia and believed their armed forces were not ready for war. But a number of events, including major miscalculations, led to the blunder by Iranian decision makers. In this context, before and during Menshkov's visit to the royal encampment, news had arrived of further Russian incursions into the Iranian region which only fueled the situation. Furthermore, the impasse of talks with Menshikov coincided with news of the successful revolt in Talesh and the expulsion of the Russian garrison. The miscalculation was that Russia was sufficiently weakened, and that this would compensate for Iran's own shortcoming, thus providing a window of opportunity for victory. Hence, the hawks won the day due to a combination of circumstances and miscalculations. But, at the end of the day, Iranian statesmen may be blamed for miscalculating "the window of opportunity" to respond to Russian aggression and not for starting the war.

Finally, even if Iran was more successful in the battlefields of the Caucasus and even victorious against Russia during the second war, such victory would probably have been short term. If Russian history is any witness, from the time of Peter I, Russia had shown stubborn persistence at pursuing the subjugation and annexation of peoples and territories belonging to its neighbors. The pattern of Russian wars with Sweden, Poland and the Ottoman Empire suggests that tactical military setbacks did not stop Russia's imperial ambition. With regard to Qajar Iran, Russia's imperial ambition in eastern Caucasus was not stopped with the Treaty of Golestan. The treaty was considered a convenient pause in a conflict that imperial Russia envisioned would absorb all of the Caucasus up to the border of Iranian Azarbaijan.