

Which Foreign Nation Had The Most Important Influence On Iran's History?

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Introduction

Iran's modern history has been shaped by repeated interaction with Russia, Britain, and the United States, making the question of which foreign nation had the "most important" influence dependent on the period and criterion used. Russia altered Iran's borders and dominated parts of the nineteenth-century political economy. Britain protected routes to India, acquired oil interests, intervened in constitutional politics, and helped shape the 1953 overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. The United States became the Shah's principal external supporter after that coup and later Iran's central adversary after the 1979 Revolution. This essay argues that Britain exercised the broadest long-term foreign influence, while recognizing that Russian territorial pressure and American Cold War power were decisive in particular eras. (Amanat, 2017; Abrahamian, 2013)

How Influence Should Be Measured

Foreign influence can mean territorial loss, economic control, military occupation, political intervention, institutional change, cultural exchange, or the creation of lasting public memory. A country that dominates one dramatic event may be less influential across two centuries than a rival that shapes trade, borders, and policy repeatedly. Iranian agency must also remain central. Foreign powers operated through local institutions, alliances, elites, movements, and resistance; they did not simply write history onto a passive society. The strongest answer should therefore compare duration, scope, and legacy. Britain's influence was especially broad because it connected imperial strategy, finance, telegraphy, oil, wartime occupation, constitutional politics, and the 1953 coup across the Qajar and Pahlavi periods. (Amanat, 2017)

Russia and the Transformation of Iran's Borders

Russia's nineteenth-century expansion produced some of the most concrete foreign consequences in Iranian history. Defeat in the Russo-Persian wars led to the treaties of Gulistan in 1813 and Turkmenchay in 1828, through which Qajar Iran lost territories in the Caucasus. These losses weakened the dynasty, altered regional identity, and demonstrated the military gap between Iran and European empires. Russian influence later expanded through loans, trade, military advisers, and pressure in northern Iran. The Persian Cossack Brigade became an important institution in modern state formation. Territorial loss gives Russia a strong claim to historical importance because borders,

populations, and strategic orientation changed permanently rather than for one administration or commercial agreement. (Amanat, 2017)

The Anglo-Russian Rivalry

During much of the Qajar period, Iran became an arena of British and Russian rivalry. Britain viewed Iran as a buffer protecting India, while Russia sought influence southward. This competition sometimes helped preserve formal Iranian independence because neither power wanted the other to control the entire country. It also weakened sovereignty through concessions, loans, military pressure, and interference in court politics. Iranian rulers attempted to balance the rivals but often lacked sufficient fiscal and military capacity. The so-called Great Game was therefore not merely a contest occurring around Iran; it structured Iranian choices. Britain's influence was partly defined by Russia, and Russia's by Britain. Comparing them requires recognizing that their joint rivalry produced outcomes neither could have achieved alone. (Amanat, 2017)

Britain's Commercial and Strategic Entry

Continuous British relations with Persia developed through the East India Company and intensified as India became central to British imperial strategy. Britain sought diplomatic agreements, trade routes, telegraph connections, banking interests, and influence over the Persian Gulf. It intervened to prevent Iranian control of Herat because British officials feared threats to India. These policies treated Iran less as an equal partner than as strategic space within a larger imperial map. British involvement also introduced infrastructure and commercial institutions, but benefits were shaped by unequal bargaining power. The ability to connect security, finance, communication, and diplomacy gave Britain a more varied influence than a single territorial conquest. Its priorities reached into both Iranian domestic politics and global imperial competition. (Amanat, 2017)

Concessions and the Tobacco Protest

Foreign concessions became symbols of Qajar weakness. The 1890 tobacco concession granted a British company extensive control over tobacco production and sale, affecting merchants, cultivators, consumers, and religious networks. The resulting protest united diverse groups and helped demonstrate the political power of coordinated economic resistance. The concession was cancelled, but the episode influenced later constitutional activism by showing that royal agreements with foreigners could be challenged publicly. Britain's role was therefore paradoxical. Imperial commercial pressure generated resentment, yet resistance to British privilege helped strengthen modern Iranian political organization. Foreign influence includes unintended consequences: an attempt to secure profit contributed to a language of sovereignty and public accountability. (Amanat, 2017)

The Constitutional Revolution

The Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911 sought limits on royal authority, representative institutions, and lawful government. Britain initially appeared more sympathetic than Russia to constitutionalists, and protesters took sanctuary in the grounds of the British legation. That reputation changed as Britain cooperated increasingly with Russia. The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 divided Iran into spheres of influence without Iranian consent, weakening confidence that constitutional sovereignty would be respected. Russian intervention directly attacked constitutional institutions, while British accommodation helped legitimize the pressure. Iranica's histories describe Britain as cooperating with Russia even as sovereignty and the constitutional movement were undermined. The episode reveals Britain's influence not through complete control but through decisions about when Iranian reform served or threatened imperial interests. (Amanat, 2017; Bonakdarian, n.d.)

World War I and Occupied Neutrality

Iran declared neutrality during the First World War, yet British, Russian, Ottoman, and other forces operated on its territory. The occupation disrupted trade, governance, food supply, and local security. Britain and Russia treated Iranian neutrality as subordinate to wartime strategy, illustrating the limited practical sovereignty of the Qajar state. After the Russian Revolution removed the old imperial partnership, Britain attempted to consolidate influence through the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919, which faced strong Iranian opposition. These experiences deepened nationalist suspicion of foreign promises. They also showed why Iranian leaders later pursued centralization and military capacity. Britain's wartime role had lasting influence because it linked imperial intervention with domestic arguments for a stronger state capable of resisting fragmentation. (Amanat, 2017; Bonakdarian, n.d.)

Oil and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company

Oil gave British influence a new economic foundation. The D'Arcy concession of 1901 led to discovery and the creation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, later Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Britain acquired a controlling interest before the First World War, connecting Iranian petroleum with imperial naval strategy. Revenue terms, working conditions, management, and foreign control became central political grievances. Oil was not merely a commodity; it represented sovereignty over national resources and unequal participation in modern wealth. The company's position gave Britain sustained leverage inside Iran while making British interests vulnerable to nationalist mobilization. The later nationalization crisis cannot be understood without this decades-long structure of concessionary power and resentment. (Amanat, 2017; Bonakdarian, n.d.)

Reza Shah and the 1941 Occupation

Reza Shah sought centralization, infrastructure, legal reform, and reduced foreign interference after becoming monarch in 1925. British influence changed rather than disappeared. During the Second World War, Britain and the Soviet Union invaded Iran in August 1941, citing strategic supply routes and concern about German presence. Reza Shah abdicated, and Mohammad Reza Shah succeeded him. This intervention demonstrated that great powers could still determine the monarchy's fate despite state-building efforts. It also created a pattern remembered later: the Shah's position was inseparable from foreign power. Britain's role in the occupation reinforces its claim to long-term importance, while Soviet participation shows that major interventions often occurred jointly rather than through one nation acting alone. (Amanat, 2017; Cronin, n.d.)

Mossadegh and Oil Nationalization

Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh became identified with the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951. The dispute concerned revenue but also constitutional authority, national dignity, and control of resources. Britain responded through legal, economic, diplomatic, and covert pressure, including an oil embargo. British officials sought Mossadegh's removal and approached the United States about cooperation in a coup. The crisis transformed public understanding of Britain from an influential imperial power into a direct opponent of Iranian sovereignty. Even where Iranian actors disagreed with Mossadegh, the conflict established nationalization as a test of independence. Britain's earlier dominance created the very nationalist project that threatened its position. (Abrahamian, 2013; Azimi, n.d.; Gasiorowski & Byrne, 2004)

The 1953 Coup and the Rise of American Power

In August 1953, a covert operation supported by British and American intelligence helped overthrow Mossadegh and strengthen Mohammad Reza Shah. Declassified U.S. historical documents identify planning and implementation of Operation TPAJAX, and President Eisenhower later acknowledged that the United States had helped restore the Shah's power. Iranian participants, clerics, politicians, military officers, street networks, and constitutional disputes also shaped the outcome; the coup was not a foreign action with no domestic agency. Nevertheless, foreign intervention became a lasting source of distrust. The episode marks a transition: Britain initiated and supported the effort, but the United States emerged as the dominant external power in the Shah's later reign. (Abrahamian, 2013; Gasiorowski & Byrne, 2004; U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.)

American Influence under Mohammad Reza Shah

After 1953, the United States supplied military aid, intelligence cooperation, development assistance, technology, education, and political support to the Shah. Iran became an important Cold War ally near the Soviet Union and a major purchaser of American weapons. U.S. influence supported modernization and state capacity but also associated Washington with authoritarian rule, SAVAK repression, and uneven development in the eyes of many Iranians. The White Revolution, oil growth, urbanization, and expanded education cannot be reduced to American control, yet U.S. backing altered the balance between monarchy and opposition. By the 1970s, the Shah possessed substantial independent ambitions, but the relationship remained central to both his security and his opponents' criticism. (Amanat, 2017; Azimi, n.d.)

The 1979 Revolution and Reversal of Influence

The Islamic Revolution transformed American influence from partnership into antagonism. Revolutionaries interpreted the Shah's rule through memories of the 1953 coup and feared another foreign intervention. The embassy seizure and hostage crisis destroyed diplomatic relations and embedded the United States within revolutionary political identity as the "Great Satan." Influence continued through conflict rather than alliance. Sanctions, regional competition, nuclear disputes, and security policy shaped Iranian economics and politics for decades. This negative influence was profound, but it grew from a shorter period than Britain's imperial involvement. It also demonstrates that foreign power can remain central even when direct presence disappears. Opposition itself can organize institutions, rhetoric, and strategy around an external nation. (Amanat, 2017; Abrahamian, 2013)

Why Britain Has the Strongest Overall Claim

Russia permanently altered Iran's borders and remained a powerful northern rival. The United States reshaped the monarchy after 1953 and became the Islamic Republic's defining external adversary. Britain, however, influenced the widest range of developments across the longest period: defense of India, Herat, telegraphy, banking, concessions, the Tobacco Protest, constitutional politics, the 1907 convention, wartime occupations, oil, nationalization, and the coup. Its policies affected both state institutions and nationalist movements. Britain's influence also bridged the Russian and American eras, first competing with Russia and later recruiting American power. This breadth makes Britain the most persuasive answer when the question concerns overall modern history rather than one decisive event. (Amanat, 2017; Azimi, n.d.; Bonakdarian, n.d.; Cronin, n.d.)

Iranian Agency and the Limits of Foreign-Centered History

Choosing one foreign nation can distort Iranian history if it turns Iranians into objects rather than actors. Constitutionalists, clerics, merchants, workers, monarchs, nationalists, leftists, reformers, and revolutionaries responded differently to external pressure. They formed alliances, resisted concessions, negotiated resources, and pursued their own political projects. Foreign intervention succeeded partly because domestic institutions and conflicts created openings, while resistance repeatedly limited imperial plans. Iran was never formally colonized, and its survival reflected both great-power rivalry and Iranian statecraft. A balanced interpretation therefore uses foreign influence to explain constraints and opportunities without treating every change as externally caused. The meaning of influence lies in interaction, not replacement of national history. (Amanat, 2017)

Conclusion

Britain had the most extensive long-term foreign influence on modern Iranian history because its involvement spanned strategy, commerce, constitutional politics, war, oil, and covert intervention from the Qajar era through 1953. Russia's territorial expansion and northern pressure were more decisive in the early nineteenth century, while the United States became the dominant foreign power under Mohammad Reza Shah and the principal adversary after 1979. The answer therefore changes with period and measure. Britain's strongest claim comes from continuity and breadth, not exclusive control. Iran's modern history emerged through the interaction of foreign ambition with Iranian resistance, alliance, reform, and revolution. Recognizing that agency prevents the comparison from becoming another account in which great powers alone make history. (Amanat, 2017; Abrahamian, 2013; Azimi, n.d.; Bonakdarian, n.d.; Cronin, n.d.)

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