

SOME CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF “UNCLE NAPOLEONISM”

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You know Uncle Napoleon. He is the protagonist in Iraj Pezeshkzad's novel of the same name—a retired officer who in his youth chased bandits but in his later life elevated these experiences to the status of “Mamassani and Kazerun wars.” Indeed, he believed that the bandits were British agents and he lived under the fear, for himself and his family, of British revenge. His servant, Mash Qassem, played the role of sidekick and embellished his master's stories. You probably have encountered many Uncle Napoleon's in your life—Iranians who attribute each and every event in Iran, and by extension in the world, to machinations of the British, Americans, and sometimes an unspecified group representing supranational interest on world scale, the “Committee of Five.”

While it is not the point of this essay to document such instances of Uncle Napoleonism in the writings of Iranians, it is interesting to give one egregious example. Mahmood Mahmood, the author of an eight-volume book on diplomatic relations between Iran and Britain, onetime governor of the province of Tehran, and a deputy to the Iranian parliament wrote thus in his introduction to *Qavamsaltaneh* by Mehdi Davoudi, 1948, p. v., “When I review historical events in Iran, I notice strange happenings among them.... In 1309 (A.H.), Nassereddin Shah canceled the tobacco concession by paying 500 thousand pounds compensation to England. In the next year (1310) there appeared a terrible cholera in Iran that killed more than a million people. In the years 1318 and 1320 [the Iranian government] obtained two loans totaling 32 million gold roubles from Russia.... [At the same time] cholera appeared in Iran and caused tremendous casualties and troubles for the Iranian people.”

The comments that follow are my speculations on the causes of such thoughts and their consequences for political dialogue and rational thinking among Iranians. I will suggest that these beliefs are detrimental to the development of democracy. Indeed, if no harm came from them, they could be considered a national pastime like backgammon.

Iranians do not have a monopoly on conspiracy theories. After the tragic death of Princess Diana, some Egyptians suggested that the British Intelligence was behind the

accident. The theory goes thus. Had Diana and Dodi Fayed married and had offspring, the future king of England would have had Moslem siblings with Egyptian ancestry; therefore, Diana and Dodi needed to be killed. Conspiracy theorists are not confined to the Middle East. The market for speculation on President Kennedy's assassination is quite hot. However, in advanced countries, conspiracy theories are confined to a lunatic fringe and, at any rate, they do not form the main mode of political discourse.

Causes of Uncle Napoleonism

I suggest that a belief in the omnipotence of an external factor to which all of Iran's problems can be traced has several roots. Over the past 300 years, Iranians have suffered many defeats. Despite their bravery and humanity in the Constitutional Revolution, sacrifices in the oil nationalization movement, superhuman bravery and martyrdom in the Islamic revolution, and eight-year war with Iraq, they have consistently found themselves on the losing side. Instead of asking why, which might point to their own irrationality or false calculations, they have blamed foreigners. And by doing so, they have absolved themselves of responsibility for what has happened to them and to their country.

The absolution has a religious overtone because the idea of an omnipotent external foreign power ties in well with the religious belief in the existence of an all-knowing and all-powerful supreme being. It is also consistent with the pseudo-religious belief in fate (*qismat*). Instead of saying that what happened was because of fate or God's will, they say that it was because of the British, the Americans, or the Committee of Five.

During the nineteenth century and all the way to the end of World War II, Iranians had to experience Britain's influence as the dominant world power. Then, it was the turn of the United States and the Soviet Union, and finally, the United States alone. Many Iranians may have wished they had been born British, or later, American. Neither Nasserolmolk Hamedani (the regent) nor Ahmad Shah (the last Qajar king) could wait to get out of Iran. Many Iranians who studied abroad never returned, and some who returned "to improve the country" found the task daunting and joined the former group. But an Iranian will remain an Iranian, even after he or she has become a British or American citizen. Is it farfetched to propose that Iranians, both inside and outside Iran, may harbor a secret wish that British and Americans have no better business than to concern themselves with Iranian affairs and to plot against Iran? Could it be similar to a man who falls in love with a woman, and no matter what she does, interprets her actions as somehow directed toward him, as in the famous poem: "If Leylee was in love with someone else, / Why did she break my plate?"

That Iranians and other Middle Easterners have attributed devilish cunning, and almost supernatural powers to Western governments may be due partly to ignorance about Western societies. The ignorance is both cultural and political. Iranians often refer to the British or the Americans, as if each were a single political entity. Yet, in fact, different organs of democratic governments, be they British or American, are frequently at odds over, and having their own influence on policy. It was hard for many in the Middle East and other developing countries to understand how a break-in could bring down Richard Nixon. These countries, after all, are not democracies. Rather, in some of them, presidents have

been known to order killing and maiming of their opponents, to gas the inhabitants of an entire region, and to massacre the population of a town with impunity—never mind eavesdrop.

In Cairo, there are no paparazzi, and even late at night, traffic congestion does not allow high speed chases. So how could an Egyptian comprehend the accident that occurred in a tunnel? Similarly, it would be difficult for a Middle Easterner to understand that had the British government or the royal family tried such a game, the end of monarchy would be sealed when the plot was discovered. Not to mention the fact that the French would have had to be at least silent co-conspirators.

Conspiracy theories can be very handy in cocktail party conversations, where one is able to participate in discussions and express opinions in a haughty manner, without even knowing the subject. The issue may be the end of the Bretton Woods Agreement, skyrocketing prices in the stock market, the civil war in Zaire or Bosnia Herzegovina, the 1953 coup in Iran, or the collapse of the communist regime in Russia. One simply assumes an air of superiority and insider's knowledge, and says: "it is their own (i.e., a British or Americans) game, one day they play it one way, another day, the other way." No one asks how British and American secret policies and schemes become so readily discernible to every man in the street. Indeed some will shake their heads in agreement.

Consequences of Uncle Napoleonism

Pezeshkzad's book is fun to read, and it can be amusing to hear Iranians spin conspiracy theories that would put Oliver Stone to shame. But this mode of thought, which runs deep in the Iranian psyche, is an anathema to rational thinking and is hindering the development of a modern civil society.

Thinking rationally means searching for a chain of causes and effects based on factual evidence. If at every juncture one can invoke the *deus ex machina* of foreign intervention, precious little is left to search for. If the cholera epidemic is the evil tactic of a foreign power, then Nassereddin Shah and his inept and corrupt court can be exonerated. If despite a thriving economy and vast popular support, Dr. Mossaddiq was toppled by foreign powers, then we cannot inquire into his miscalculations regarding the international oil market, inept handling of the economy, unconstitutional closing of the parliament, and personal vendetta against the Shah. If Western powers decided on the removal of the late Shah in the Guadeloupe summit, the fact that he thwarted political development of the country, presided over corruption, trampled on human rights, and disregarded religious sensibilities of the populace are immaterial.

The idea of a supreme foreign power breeds cynicism, and democracy can hardly exist in an atmosphere of suspicion, conspiracy, and a cynical attitude towards everything. Every Iranian statesman, politician, and public figure has at least once been denounced as a foreign agent. Even Ahmad Qavam, who single-handedly saved Azarbayejan for Iran, hasn't escaped the label. Democracy requires reasonable trust. It also requires an appreciation for those who do good for the public. Why should one bother to vote if the outcome is in the hands of

foreigners? Incidentally, in the last presidential election of Iran, the people rejected the notion that everything in Iran is determined in foreign capitals—a point noted by some Iranian commentators. A high percentage of the population went to the polls and an overwhelming majority chose the candidate representing change.

Perhaps the most dangerous effect of Uncle Napoleonism for Iranians has been a paralysis in confronting foreigners. The perception has become reality, and a weapon in the hands of those dealing with Iranians. Whether the British or Americans could actually wield such a power has been rendered irrelevant. Iranians act as if they do. Suppose someone is threatening you with a gun. What is the difference between the gun being loaded, and you believing it is? Denial by the British, accompanied by an amused smile, has been taken by Iranians as airtight proof of their controlling influence in Iran. A reading of the late Shah's *Answer to History*, as well as *Alam's Memoirs*, provide convincing evidence of such fears. It is noteworthy that the primary activity of many, so-called opposition groups is to seek the endorsement of Western governments. A point of strength of the late Ayatollah Khomeini was his bold rejection of such fears.

Those who subscribe to Uncle Napoleonism insult the Iranian nation. When a revolution in which millions participated and sacrificed their life is said to have been instigated by the British, Americans, or whomever, the status of Iranians is reduced to below that of a herd of cattle. No one can instigate even cows and horses by the millions. Perhaps those who utter such words have not thought their implications through, or perhaps they are venting their own personal anger. Nevertheless, they are insulting a nation of which they are members. Such an attitude has even seeped into writings and research on Iran and the Middle East. Books published in Iran are full of assertions regarding evil intentions of imperialists—how they brought Reza Shah to power, and how they overthrew Mossaddiq. It is even claimed that the British allowed Reza Shah to build the trans-Iranian railroad so they can use it in World War II. Nobody asks that if such were the goals of the project, why did Germans help in the endeavor. Authors writing in the West are more circumspect and, therefore, subtle in putting forward conspiracy theories. Some denounce such an approach and come back, a few pages later, to spin their own conspiracy theory in a different context.

Final Notes

Before ending, I would just mention that all governments, including Iran, both overtly and covertly do interfere in other nations' affairs. One can only imagine the outcome of the 1980 American presidential elections had Iranians released their hostages six months earlier. Similarly, one can question if the United States would have so energetically involved herself in Bosnia Herzegovina had it not been for the presence of Iranian volunteers in that country. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that Iran has indeed suffered sometimes at the hands of foreign powers. The Russian ultimatum of 1911 during Iran's Constitutional Revolution, and the complicity of British and American intelligence services in the 1953 coup are only two examples. But in order to put an end to such sufferings, first and foremost Iranians have to reject irrational fears, and search for their own shortcomings with an eye to correcting them. Blaming foreign powers doesn't do any good.