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THE BEGINNING OF BULGARIA-IRAN INTER-STATE RELATIONS

FACTS AND CHALLENGES

ABSTRACT Cultural bonds between the peoples of Bulgaria and Iran have been vibrant throughout the ages but it was not until Bulgaria’s Liberation from the Ottoman rule in 1878 that we can talk about inter-state relations. This article reveals the main bilateral developments in their initial 25-year period, challenging some existing assumptions. The establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations in 1897 is correlated with the launching of official contacts between both heads of state much earlier. Iranian consular presence in the Principality of Bulgaria, directed by Iran’s Embassy in Constantinople, had a fairly long record but lacked consistency. Consular cases provoked disputes over the rights and privileges of Iranian subjects residing in Bulgaria and an attempt to solve them by a mutual arrangement. The first Iranian diplomatic agency in Sofia functioned in 1898-1902 and contributed to the preparation of the historic visit of Iranian monarch Mozaffar ed-Din Shah to Bulgaria in September 1900.

Keywords: Bulgaria, Iran, relations, diplomatic agencies, consuls, subjects, visit, monarchs

Bilateral relations between Bulgaria and Iran in their historical dimension have never been subject of a thorough and dedicated study in either of both countries. In Bulgarian historical literature, a general idea of their development is provided in the studies of prominent scholar Maria Mateeva on diplomatic and consular relations of Bulgaria, which contain small sections concerning Iran.¹ Still, a whole lot of issues need to be explored and highlighted in order to be able to make substantiated assessment. Several events (conferences, seminars, exhibitions) were organized by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the Diplomatic Institutes, and academic circles in Sofia and Tehran a few years ago to mark the 115th and 120th anniversaries of the establishment of diplomatic relations.² Presentations made and documents displayed nourished discussions and raised the interest of both sides in the past record of their contacts.

The peoples of Bulgaria and Iran have known each other since ancient times, and cultural and economic links between them have been vibrant throughout the ages. The situation is different, however, when we talk about inter-state relations. History has so decided in ancient or medieval times that whenever one of the two states was on the ascendancy, the other one had either not yet appeared on the political map or its statehood had been lost to foreign invaders. Only the late 9th and 10th centuries AD, when the First Bulgarian Kingdom enjoyed its Golden Age while the Iranian lands saw the revival of Persian statehood from the embrace of the Abbasid Caliphate, were a brief exception from that pattern. However, Persian dynasties of that period were focused on reinforcing their realms rather than on external contacts. The reign of the mighty Safavid dynasty in Iran spanned the late Middle Ages, but the entry to the 19th century was marked by the rise of the Qajars, who gradually succumbed to the pressure of European powers, though formally retaining independence. Bulgarian lands in those times had long been suffering from the oppression of Ottoman rule, which had denied the nation's statehood for nearly 500 years.

¹ М. Матеева, Хр. Тепавичаров, Дипломатически отношения на България 1878-1988, София 1989 [M. Mateeva, Hr. Tepavicharov, *Diplomatic Relations of Bulgaria 1878-1988*, Sofia 1989], pp. 156-160; М. Матеева, История на дипломатическите отношения на България, София 2005 [M. Mateeva, *History of the Diplomatic Relations of Bulgaria*, Sofia 2005], pp. 221-225; М. Матеева, Консулските отношения на България 1879-1986, София 1988 [M. Mateeva, *Consular Relations of Bulgaria 1879-1986*, Sofia 1988], pp. 71-72.

² Printed materials on those events are contained in the following collections: Международна конференция „Иран и Балканите в огледалото на историята /минало, настояще и перспективи/“, ред. И. Панов, А-Р. Пурмохаммад, София 2014 [*International Conference Iran and the Balkans in the Mirror of History /Past, Present, Future/*, eds. I. Panov, A-R. Pourmohammad, Sofia 2014]; Международна научна конференция „Иран и България в огледалото на историята /минало, настояще, перспективи/“, ред. И. Панов, А-Р. Пурмохаммад, София 2015 [*International Scientific Conference Iran and Bulgaria in the Mirror of History /Past, Present, Future/*, eds. I. Panov, A-R. Pourmohammad, Sofia 2015]; K. Sharif Kazemi, G. Petrov (eds.), *Bulgaria-Iran bilateral relations, Collected papers and historical documents*, (Seminar papers and Exhibition of historical documents on the occasion of the 120th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Islamic Republic of Iran, Tehran, 17 September 2017 & Sofia, 27 November 2017).

Bulgaria re-emerged as a nation-state in 1878 following the Russo-Turkish war launched the previous year and in compliance with the decisions of the Berlin Congress of June-July 1878. The young Principality of Bulgaria was concerned first and foremost with the issues of reunifying all Bulgarian lands, settling border disputes, and winning the sympathy of big powers, while priority in the economic field was attached to infrastructure, especially railway construction.³ During the late Qajar period, the Iranian monarchy was grappling with the colonial thrust of the British Empire and Tsarist Russia, which were severely competing to overpower its economy and foreign policy, at the same time thwarting its timid attempts to seek support from a 'third force.' Traditional animosities with Ottoman Turkey persisted although both Islamic states' rivalries no longer had decisive impact on the region.⁴

In those circumstances, Iran happened to be the first Asian country outside the Ottoman Empire to interact with the Bulgarian Principality. Iranian monarch Nasser ed-Din Shah (1848-1896) was among the not so many heads of state who replied officially to Bulgarian Prince Alexander of Battenberg's message announcing his ascension to the throne in 1879⁵ following the adoption of the Tarnovo Constitution. In his 1880 congratulatory letter, whose transcript in Persian has been preserved in the Iranian archives (see Annex 1),⁶ the Shah pointedly inspired the new Bulgarian ruler, assuring him of Iran's friendliness and sympathetic attitude. Quite tellingly, the letter refers in three places to the notion of independence although Bulgaria, as stipulated in the Berlin Treaty, had been shaped as a tributary Principality vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire,

³ For more details on those issues in the initial period (1879-1886) see: История на българите. Т. 4, Българската дипломатия от древността до наши дни, ред. Е. Александров, София 2003 [*History of the Bulgarians, Vol. 4, Bulgarian Diplomacy from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. E. Alexandrov, Sofia 2003], pp. 241-256.

⁴ For more details on those issues see: A-R. Hushang Mahdavi, *Tarikh-e ravabet-e khareji-ye Iran az ebteda-ye douran-e Safaviye ta payan-e Jang-e dovom-e jahani* [*History of Iran's Foreign Relations from the Beginning of the Safavid Era to the End of the Second World War*], Tehran 1377 [1998], pp. 283-289, 295-299, 301-304, 312-314, 319-321; *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. 7, From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic*, eds. P. Avery, G. Hambly, Ch. Melville, Cambridge 2008, pp. 179-180, 341-344, 397-418; М.С. Иванов, История Ирана, Москва, 1977 г. [M.S. Ivanov, *History of Iran*, Moscow 1977], pp. 238-239, 256-264.

⁵ The Prince's message of November 1879 has not been preserved but there is a trace in the Bulgarian archives that it was sent by the Prince's Chancery via the Bulgarian diplomatic agency in Constantinople to the Iranian Embassy in the same city. See Външната политика на България, документи и материали, Т. 1, 1879-1886, София 1978 [*Foreign Policy of Bulgaria, Documents and Materials, Vol. 1, 1879-1886*, eds. N. Todorov, L. Petrov, T. Dobrianov, A. Alexiev, Sofia 1978], pp. 50-51; Централен държавен архив (ЦДА) [Central State Archive (CSA), Sofia], фонд [fund] 321К, опис [inventory] 1, архивна единица [archival unit] 14, лист [sheet] 37-38.

⁶ *Bulgaria-Iran bilateral relations. Collected papers and historical documents*, p. 92. In this collection as well as in the exhibition of 2017, the document has been mistakenly described as 'Response of the Tsar of Bulgaria to a congratulations letter from the Shah of Iran on the Independence of Bulgaria.' In fact, it is a transcript the Shah's congratulatory letter itself in reply to Prince Alexander's message, announcing his ascension to the throne. The translation has been made by the author with the assistance of Iranian lecturer and researcher Alireza Pourmohammad.

and therefore, did not enjoy a fully independent status.⁷ The language thus used, apart from merely praising Prince Alexander, may have been motivated by Iran's historical enmity with the Ottomans as well as by a sensitivity on the issue in view of Iran's own dependence on foreign powers. Anyway, the exchange of letters of both heads of state marks the beginning of official contacts and should be properly recognized in the history of bilateral relations, as the role of monarchical institutions in promoting interstate relations at that time cannot be overestimated.

The first diplomatic contacts between the two states were set forth and maintained in the initial period almost exclusively through their legations in Constantinople. The Bulgarian diplomatic agency in that city was one of the first three missions abroad inaugurated by a Princely Decree of July 1879⁸ and henceforth became the most important outpost of Bulgarian foreign policy.⁹ Agents there were selected among top Bulgarian political leaders of the time like Dragan Tsankov, Marko Balabanov, Georgi Valkovich, Ivan St. Geshov, etc. In spite of their immanent inferiority in the diplomatic corps due to the Principality's vassal status, many of them enjoyed great popularity and maintained fruitful contacts with the Ottoman administration and the foreign legations. As to Iran, its mission in Constantinople benefitted from the peaceful period in Iran-Ottoman relations in the aftermath of the 1847 Second Erzurum Treaty. It was elevated to the level of a first-class Embassy in the 1860s thanks to the relentless activities of Ambassador Mirza Hossein Khan *Moshir od-Dowleh*, one of Iran's most prominent statesmen of the second half of the 19th century, who later was awarded the honorific title of *sepahsalar* (commander-in-chief).¹⁰ In the 1870s and 1880s, the ambassadorial post was long held by the masterful diplomat Mohsen Khan Mozaher (Tabrizi), who upon return home, was assigned important government posts.¹¹ The Iranian Embassy

⁷ According to Art. One of the 1878 Treaty of Berlin the Principality of Bulgaria acquired the status of a "self-ruled tributary principality under the sovereignty of His Majesty the Sultan." See M. Матеева, Хр. Тепавичаров, Дипломатически отношения на България 1878-1988, с. 48.

⁸ Държавен вестник, София, бр. 1, 28 юли 1879 г. [Darzhaven vestnik (State Newspaper), Sofia, issue 1, July 28, 1879], p. 3; Външната политика на България..., Т. 1, с. 16. The first three diplomatic agencies were opened in Constantinople (on the recommendation of Russian imperial commissioner Prince Dondukov-Korsakov, on the purpose of avoiding conflicts between the Principality and its Turkish sovereign), Bucharest and Belgrade. See А. Стрезова, Българската дипломация: институции и представители 1879-1918, София 2017 [A. Strezova, *Bulgarian Diplomacy: Institutions and Representatives 1879-1918*, Sofia 2017], pp. 30-31.

⁹ А. Стрезова, Българската дипломация: институции и представители ..., с. 39.

¹⁰ On the activities of Ambassador Mirza Hossein Khan *Moshir od-Dowleh* (*Sepahsalar*) see *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 7, pp. 184-190.

¹¹ Mohsen Khan Mozaher (Tabrizi) (1820-1900) entered the Iranian Foreign Ministry as an interpreter speaking four foreign languages: Arabic, English, French, and Italian. He was posted abroad several times, including as Ambassador to Paris (1866) and Chargé d'Affaires to London (1867). He was recalled from Constantinople in 1891 and later was assigned a number of ministerial posts in Amin os-Soltan's government, temporarily assuming even the functions of Prime Minister for two months. See *Mohsen Khan Mozaher (Tabrizi)*, articles in Persian, Russian, and German, Wikipedia; ЦДА, ф. 321К, оп. 1, а.е. 572, л. 6-7 (on his bidding farewell to the then Bulgarian diplomatic agent Dr. Valkovich in May 1891).

in Constantinople used to overlook the country's diplomatic activity in the whole Balkan region, including Bulgaria, in the late 19th century and was often involved in issues concerning Iranian nationals and Iranian consular presence.

Iran was adamant to have consular presence in order to protect its nationals on Bulgarian soil. In the immediate aftermath of Bulgaria's Liberation in 1878, Iran apparently strove to extend the missions of its consuls residing there from Ottoman times. Those attempts, however, proved futile because the Principality was struggling to emancipate itself from Ottoman bonds and was eager to ascertain its control over foreign appointments. Iran's consular interests were mainly directed toward North-Eastern Bulgaria, which was home to most of its subjects, so the first new consular exequaturs requested by Ambassador Mohsen Khan in 1879-1880 were issued in favor of Peter Sukhora in Varna¹² and Antoin Yaldezji (Yaldezjian) in Ruse.¹³ Later, in the end of the 1880s, Haji Mohammad (Mehmed) Agha took over as consul in Ruse and Shumen,¹⁴ whereas Agop Mavi (Mavian) was appointed honorary vice-consul in Varna in 1890. The designation was *honorary* because Mavi was actually a Bulgarian subject of Armenian descent and wished to retain his nationality.¹⁵ On the other hand, the government of Stefan Stambolov (1887-1894), famous for his concept of "state nationalism," followed a more coherent policy and introduced strict regulations in this respect. Some Iranian proposals were not endorsed by Bulgarian authorities for different reasons – bad record or lack of integrity of the candidate¹⁶ or a judgment that there was no need to open yet another consulate, as was the case with the city of Burgas, where the Iranian side presented a nomination in 1892.¹⁷

Iranian consuls as well as envoys of Iranian Ambassadors from Constantinople were involved in a number of consular cases concerning trade activities, rights of inheritance, crimes committed, etc.¹⁸ Abovementioned honorary vice-consul Mavi, for instance, was quite busy in the 1890s, and at times even operated beyond his consular district.¹⁹ Cases were more frequent in the northeast but were not untypical for other parts of the country as well, including the South, which according to the Berlin Treaty, constituted the autonomous region of Eastern Rumelia within the Ottoman borders and was only reunified with the Principality in 1885. A good deal of the cases were connected with the easy access to Iranian citizenship and Iranian passports, which was used by

¹² ЦДА, ф. 176К, оп. 1, а.е. 29, л. 1-3; а.е.418, л. 4-12.

¹³ Ibid., ф. 321К, оп. 1, а.е. 9, л. 26-28; а.е. 41, л. 234-235.

¹⁴ Ibid., а.е. 267, л. 7-12, 26; а.е. 740, л. 1-2; ф. 176К, оп. 1, а.е. 580, л. 1-6.

¹⁵ Ibid., ф. 176К, оп. 1, а.е. 418, л. 1-14; Външната политика на България, документи и материали, Т. 3, Част 1, 1887–1890, ред. Е. Стателова, Р. Попов, Т. Бакалов, София 1995 [*Foreign Policy of Bulgaria, Documents and Materials, Vol. 3, Part 1, 1887-1890*, eds. E. Statelova, R. Popov, T. Bakalov, Sofia 1995], p. 411.

¹⁶ ЦДА, ф. 176К, оп. 1, а.е. 30, л. 1-11; ф. 321К, оп. 1, а.е. 738, л. 1-3.

¹⁷ Ibid., а.е. 736, л. 1-4.

¹⁸ Ibid., ф. 176К, оп. 21, а.е. 21, л. 7-9; ф. 284К, оп. 1, а.е. 59, л. 89-97; ф. 321К, оп. 1, а.е. 20, л. 170-172; а.е. 41, л. 98-101, 110-111; а.е. 894, л. 1-13.

¹⁹ Ibid., ф. 176К, оп. 21, а.е. 21, л. 27-38, 42.

some members of Bulgarian ethnic and religious minorities (most often Armenians and Jews) in order to avoid military service or acquire certain privileges.²⁰

In the course of dealing with consular cases, both sides developed basic differences concerning the validity for Iranian subjects of the Ottoman capitulation regime proliferated in the Principality by the provisions of the Berlin Treaty. The Iranian Ambassador to Turkey in the early 1890s Assadollah Khan²¹ claimed that Iranians were entitled to extraterritorial treatment like the nationals of the big European powers on the grounds of an 1875 Turko-Iranian Convention, which had arranged the immunities and privileges of both sides' nationals residing in the other country on a reciprocal basis.²² Bulgarian Foreign Minister in Stambolov's government Dimiter Grekov,²³ driven by strong desire to end up with all provisions harming Bulgarian sovereignty, vehemently opposed that interpretation and was ultimately able to uphold the country's interests in dispute not only with the Iranian side but also with the French and British diplomatic agents engaged with protection of the rights of Iranian nationals.²⁴ Moreover, a Bulgarian-British Arrangement with the British agent acting on behalf of Iran was signed in Sofia in 1897, providing for a mechanism to identify Iranian subjects on Bulgarian soil.²⁵ Although the launching of that mechanism was frustrated in view of deficiencies on the Iranian side,²⁶ the conclusion of the Arrangement was a definite success for the young Bulgarian diplomacy, as it was instrumental in averting harmful activities involving abuse of privileges and foreign passports.

Of course, Iran never gave up care for its nationals, whose problems were a persistent concern for its Constantinople Ambassadors. Its intermittent consular presence in Bulgaria, however, gives the impression of inconsistency, which may well have been due to insufficient data to be dug out in the Bulgarian archives given the fact that a lot of documents had been destroyed or damaged by fires. A more relevant explanation may be sought in Iran's lack of capacity in sustaining well-funded and organized consular

²⁰ Ibid., ф. 321К, оп. 1, а.е. 41, л. 211-233; а.е. 742, л. 1-3; а.е. 744, л. 1-16.

²¹ Assadollah Khan *Nazem od-Dowleh* was a Russian-educated Iranian diplomat with postings to St. Petersburg, Tbilisi, and Constantinople (1891-1894). Upon return home from Constantinople, he was appointed Minister of Justice. See *ibid.*, ф. 321К, оп. 1, а.е. 572, л. 21-25 (correspondence on his presentation of credentials with Bulgarian diplomatic agent Dr. Valkovich of September 1891); *Assadollah Khan Nazem od-Dowleh*, article in Persian, Wikipedia.

²² ЦДА, ф. 176К, оп. 21, а.е. 21, л. 43-44, 46-50.

²³ Dr. Dimiter Grekov became for the first time a nominated Minister for Foreign Affairs in Stefan Stambolov's government in 1890 after having served temporarily on that post on three other occasions. He was an eminent lawyer, holder of doctoral degree from France, former leader of the Conservative Party. He shared Stambolov's views on strong statehood and centralized rule. At the beginning of 1899, he took over as Prime Minister of a short-lived cabinet of liberals and non-party affiliates, in which he assumed the post of Foreign Minister. See Е. Стателова, Р. Попов, В. Танкова, *История на българската дипломация 1879-1913 г.*, София 1994 [E. Statelova, R. Popov, V. Tankova. *History of the Bulgarian Diplomacy 1879-1913*, Sofia 1994], p. 154; *История на българите. Т. IV*, с. 283.

²⁴ ЦДА, ф. 176К, оп. 21, а.е. 21, л. 45-45а, 51.

²⁵ Ibid., оп. 1, а.е. 1001, л. 6-16, 19-22.

²⁶ Ibid., л. 34-48.

agencies capable of projecting regularity and continuity in terms of staff and policies. Consular services were often entrusted to deputies, substitutes, and local staff with questionable standing with Bulgarian local authorities.²⁷ On the other hand, there was a case in Ruse in the late 1890s whereby the Iranian side clearly ignored a consular officer recognized by the Bulgarian government and instead tenaciously promoted a new candidate (Mardiros Papazian), encountering outright negative attitude in Sofia.²⁸ It was also not uncommon for the Iranian side to revert to the assistance of agencies of third countries such as Russia, France, Greece, and most markedly Britain, which went so far as to sign the abovementioned Arrangement with Bulgaria on its behalf.

Being obviously unhappy about Iran's hitherto performance in the Principality, the revamped government under new monarch Mozaffar ed-Din Shah, who succeeded his father to the throne following the latter's assassination in 1896, made a decisive step by accrediting a diplomatic agent in Sofia. The granting of agrément by the Bulgarian government to Iranian diplomat Mirza Hossein Khan was communicated to the Iranian Embassy in Constantinople on November 15, 1897 – the so far accepted date of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two states. The above assumption was based on the only existing document pertaining to that event: a letter by Bulgarian agent in Constantinople Dimiter Markov addressed to Prime (and Foreign) Minister Dr. Konstantin Stoilov, informing him about the notification to the Iranian Embassy (Annex 2).²⁹ There is no sign of any special act testifying to the establishment of diplomatic relations, be it a declaration, a communique or an exchange of verbal notes. It may be worthwhile, therefore, to encourage a bilateral discussion over the issue, given also that official contacts and consular relations between the two sides had been in place much earlier.

Despite some uncertainties concerning documented bilateral developments in that period, evidences clearly show that the first Iranian diplomatic agency in Sofia functioned between 1898 and 1902.³⁰ No correspondence has remained about the inauguration of the agency, though and its head Mirza Hossein Khan apparently suffered health problems, which prompted Tehran to recall him very soon.³¹ Subsequently, in July 1899, the dragoman of the Iranian Embassy in Constantinople Ohanes Khan was sent on a mission to Sofia and was received by Bulgarian Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Confessions Dimiter Grekov, a person well acquainted with bilateral developments with Iran from his previous assignments. The most important issues discussed featured the appointment of a new Iranian diplomatic agent in Sofia, the implementation of the Bulgarian-British Arrangement, the Iranian consular

²⁷ Ibid., a.e. 580, л. 1-6; ф. 321К, оп. 1, а.е. 41, л. 211-216, 220-233; а.е. 740, л. 1-2.

²⁸ Ibid., ф. 176К, оп. 1, а.е. 1434, л. 1-24.

²⁹ Ibid., а.е. 1136, л. 2.

³⁰ *Bulgaria-Iran bilateral relations. Collected papers and historical documents*, pp. 90-91; в-к „Пръпорец“, год. IV, бр. 38, 13 септември 1901 [“Pryaporetz” (Flagpole) newspaper, Sofia, year IV, issue 38, September 13, 1901], p. 4.

³¹ ЦДА, ф. 176К, оп. 1, а.е. 1001, л. 41.

nomination in Ruse, and exchange of protocol practices on awarding medals and decorations.³² The second Iranian agent Montazam os-Saltaneh, whose presentation of credentials to His Royal Highness Prince Ferdinand (1887-1918) in May 1900 is recorded in the Iranian archives,³³ did not stay long, either. He was, however, quite active in his communication with both Tehran and the Bulgarian authorities,³⁴ and had the transit visit of Mozaffar ed-Din Shah to the Principality accomplished during his tenure. In 1901, he was succeeded by another short-lived agent, Sadiq ol-Molk, who directed his deputy Ali Mohammad Khan in early 1902 to tour the country for the purpose of inspecting, surveying, and renewing the passports of Iranian subjects residing in Bulgaria.³⁵ The latter took over in the capacity of Chargé d'Affaires of the agency a little later but left for good by the end of the year handing over the protection of Iranian interests to the Belgian agency in Sofia.³⁶

The first Iranian diplomatic mission in Bulgaria was definitely a significant achievement in the course of development of bilateral relations. Its inauguration was for sure primarily a product of Iran's diplomatic activity, precipitated by care for the Iranian subjects but also by desire to diversify its foreign ties and expand its presence in the Balkan Peninsula. From Bulgarian perspective this development fitted well into the atmosphere of uplift of the Principality's external relations featuring the reappointment of a Russian diplomatic agent in Sofia after a long break (December 1896), a tangible expansion of the network of Bulgarian diplomatic representations (1896-1897), and the adoption of structural regulations of the Foreign Ministry (December 1897).³⁷ The record of the Iranian mission in Sofia challenges the so far accepted view in Maria Mateeva's works that no such mission was opened and the abovementioned Iranian diplomatic agents were accredited from Belgrade.³⁸ The wrong perception of this kind might have been created by the fact that in 1899 visiting Iranian envoy Ohanes Khan

³² Ibid., a.e. 1433, л. 4-5.

³³ *Bulgaria-Iran bilateral relations. Collected papers and historical documents*, p. 103.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 90-91; ЦДА, ф. 3К, оп. 8, а.е. 101, л. 67.

³⁵ ЦДА, ф. 176К, оп. 14, а.е. 512, л. 2; ф. 3К, оп. 8, а.е. 214, л. 1-2; *Bulgaria-Iran bilateral relations. Collected papers and historical documents*, p. 101; Archive of the Centre for International Research and Education, affiliated to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran (CIRE Archive), GH [Islamic Lunar year] 1318 – K [file box] 4 – P [dossier] 6 – [serial number] 80.

³⁶ ЦДА, ф. 176К, оп. 14, а.е. 512, л. 6-7, 11-12.

³⁷ Bulgaria opened diplomatic agencies in St. Petersburg, Paris, Athens, and Tsetine (Montenegro), as well as trade agencies in a number of cities under Ottoman rule in Macedonia and Aegean Thrace. See E. Стателова, Р. Попов, В. Танкова, *История на българската дипломация 1879-1913 г.*, с. 219-221.

³⁸ М. Матеева, Хр. Тепавичаров, *Дипломатически отношения на България 1878-1988*, с. 157, 160. It is worth noting in this respect that a review article in Belgrade newspaper "Večernje novosti" does not mention any Iranian legation or diplomatic representative in Serbia and instead, the only foreign diplomat quoted by name among the attendees at the gala-dinner in honour of the Shah's delegation in Belgrade is Ottoman Ambassador Fethi Pasha. See *Вечерње новости (Večernje novost)* Београд, год. VIII, бр. 204 (24.IX.1900 г.) [*Evening News*, Belgrade, year VIII, issue 204 (September 24, 1900)], p. 2. The article may also be found in ЦДА, ф. 176К, оп. 1, а.е. 1575, л. 8.

had entered Bulgaria from Belgrade, where he had been entitled to present a state order to the Serbian king.³⁹

The first stage of inter-state relations culminated in the historic visit of Iranian monarch Mozaffar ed-Din Shah to the Balkans in 1900, which also included Bulgaria. It was part of the Shah's first journey to Europe, which started from Russia at the end of April and took more than five months, encompassing most of the European countries with France being the main target, while Britain was not included because of Queen Victoria's ill health.⁴⁰ Mozaffar ed-Din was keen to match the experience of his father's three trips to Europe but unlike him was mainly focused on his own personal goals such as medical treatment, entertainment, attending events and exhibitions, and receiving decorations.⁴¹ The Shah and his impressive retinue actually transited the Bulgarian Principality twice on a train provided by the Ottoman Sultan: first, heading from Vienna via Budapest and Belgrade to Constantinople, and one week later, on the way back. While on Bulgarian territory, the delegation was accompanied on the train by high-ranking Bulgarian officials – ret. gen. Racho Petrov, a prominent military figure, who was personally attached to the Shah, as well as Cabinet Minister of Public Buildings Dimitar Tonchev and diplomatic agent in Constantinople Ivan Geshov. At each and every railway station in the Principality, the train was greeted by cheerful crowds, and military units paid tribute to the delegation.⁴²

The brief stopover in Sofia took place on the way back from Constantinople on Friday, September 22. The delegation was met at the railway station by Prince Ferdinand, surrounded by General Staff officers, the Chairman of the National Assembly and his Deputy, Cabinet Ministers, the Mayor of the city, and a host of other dignitaries. The Shah was saluted with a volley of twenty-one cannon shots and was then taken by a royal procession for a short visit to the Prince's palace. Thereafter followed a call on the Military College and an observation of a light artillery maneuver. A gala-dinner, well attended by civil and military officials and the diplomatic corps, was offered in honor of the Shah at the Central Military Club in the evening, which ended up with a demonstration of fireworks. It was not until after 11 p.m. that the Shah returned to his carriage, where he spent the night before leaving for the Serbian border the next morning.⁴³

The visit, however short, was definitely a significant event of its time. It mobilized the efforts of the Principality's administration and diplomacy and provided a unique

³⁹ ЦДА, ф. 176К, оп. 1, а.е. 1433, л. 1-3.

⁴⁰ A-R. Hushang Mahdavi, *Tarikh-e ravabet-e khareji-ye Iran...*, s. 310; „Вечерње новости“, год. VIII, бр. 264, с. 1-2.

⁴¹ A-R. Hushang Mahdavi, *Tarikh-e ravabet-e khareji-ye Iran...*, pp. 308-311, 317.

⁴² ЦДА, ф. 176К, оп. 1, а.е. 1575, л. 1-5; в-к „Мир“, бр. 871 (16 септември 1900 г.) [“Mir” (Peace) newspaper, Sofia, issue 871 (September 16, 1900)], p. 2-3; бр. 872 (19 септември 1900 г.), с. 2-3; бр. 873 (21 септември 1900 г.), с. 3; в-к „Свят“, бр. 33 (10 септември 1900 г.) [“Svyat” (World) newspaper, Sofia, issue 33 (September 10, 1900)], p. 3; бр. 34 (17 септември 1900 г.), с. 3.

⁴³ В-к „Мир“, бр. 874 (23 септември 1900 г.), с. 1-3; бр. 875 (26 септември 1900 г.), с. 2-3; бр. 875 (26 септември 1900 г.), с. 3; в-к „Свят“, бр. 35 (24 септември 1900 г.), с. 2-3.

opportunity for the first face-to-face contacts between the Heads of State, Prime Ministers, and other dignitaries. It transpired from a reception in Belgrade the next day that Iran's Grand Vizier (Prime Minister) Ali Asghar Khan *Amin os-Soltan*⁴⁴ had been impressed by the Principality and its well-trained and highly disciplined troops. The visit was widely reported in the Bulgarian press with some newspapers mentioning its political importance with regard to the Shah's close rapport with the Russian tsar but also Iran's strategic location at the other end of the Ottoman Empire, giving it a natural leverage in the developments of the Eastern Question.⁴⁵ There were, as usual, critical remarks in the opposition press, too, blaming the government for the lavish expenditures without a clear practical benefit in view of the alleged absence of political or commercial interest in dealing with Iran.⁴⁶ Something of an epilogue of the visit was the exchange of decorations, awarded on each side to officials from the other side, who took active part in the preparation and carrying out of the visit.⁴⁷ It is worth mentioning in this context that two years before Prince Ferdinand had been honored with the Grand Cordon with diamonds of the highest Iranian Order of the Lion and the Sun, which had prompted him to send a letter of gratitude to Mozaffar ed-Din Shah.⁴⁸

In conclusion, the revealed facts about the first period of Bulgaria-Iran inter-state relations present an intriguing picture with a number of lines to follow: official correspondence, consular presence and cases, basic disputes on interpretation and implementation of documents, establishment of diplomatic relations and the follow-up steps, and finally, bilateral visits and contacts between officials and diplomats of both countries. Those facts pose challenges to some accepted views such as the relevance of the date we commemorate as the beginning of diplomatic relations, and the opening of the first Iranian diplomatic agency in Sofia. A more thorough investigation of Iranian archives may be instrumental in clarifying and explaining certain developments, thus enriching our knowledge about the period. Having this in mind, it is highly recommendable

⁴⁴ Amin os-Soltan was one of the most outstanding Iranian politicians and statesmen of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. A long-standing Minister of Finance since 1886 and Prime Minister (1893-1896) during the last years of Nasser ed-Din Shah's reign, he organized the latter's third and last trip to Europe in 1889. Under Mozaffar ed-Din Shah he was first deposed and banished to the holy city of Qom, but in 1898 he was restored to the post of Prime Minister, which he held until 1903. He was involved in awarding most of the concessions to foreigners, as well as in receiving the two Russian loans of 1900 and 1902. He played a decisive role in carrying out the first two European tours of Mozaffar ed-Din Shah (1900 and 1902) and was given the honorific title of *atabak-e a'zam* ("grand preceptor"). See „Amin os-Soltan dar safar be atraf-o-aknaf-e jahan andar ahvalat-e Iran va Iraniyan” [*Amino'soltan* in his Journey around the World on Iran and Iranians], ed. M. Hadidi, Tehran, *Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies*, vol. 1390 (2011), pp. 5-7, 22-23, 28-29, 36-45, 54-65, 70-73, 125-132.

⁴⁵ В-к „Мир“, бр. 872 (19 септември 1900 г.), с. 2; в-к „Свят“, бр. 34 (17 септември 1900 г.), с. 3.

⁴⁶ В-к „Нов век“, бр. 225 (20 септември 1900 г.) [“Nov vek” (New Age) newspaper, Sofia, issue 225 (September 20, 1900)], р. 3; бр. 226 (22 септември 1900 г.), с. 3; бр. 227 (25 септември 1900 г.), с. 3; в-к „Пряпорец“, бр. 38 (17 септември 1900 г.), с. 3; бр. 40 (23 септември 1900 г.), с. 3.

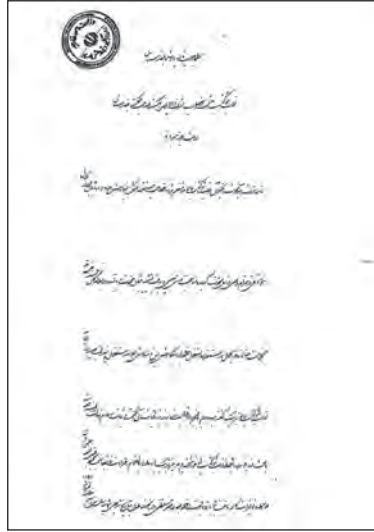
⁴⁷ ЦДА, ф. 3К, оп. 8, а.е. 101, л. 6-7; *Bulgaria-Iran bilateral relations. Collected papers and historical documents*, р. 99-100; CIRE Archive, GH1318-K4-P6-103; GH1319-K22-P5-151.

⁴⁸ ЦДА, ф. 3К, оп. 1, а.е. 87, л. 1-4.

that a joint research be conducted with the Iranian side aimed at achieving common understanding and adequate interpretation of facts from both the perspective of their historic impact and the legal point of view.

ANNEX 1

Transcript of Nasser ed-Din Shah's congratulatory letter to Prince Alexander of Battenberg on the latter's ascension to the throne. Tehran, May–June 1880⁴⁹



Translation from Persian

Response to the letter of the Bulgarian monarch

His August Honorable Highness
 Prince Alexander,
 Ruler of the Bulgarian State

My Dear and Courteous Friend,

Your August Highness's joyful and amiable letter bearing the good news of (Your) assuming of independent reign over the Bulgarian State on June 27, has fallen into friendly hands, met with utmost delight and esteem. In the spirit of sincere amity and resolve to consolidate friendly ties and strengthen the pillars of well-intentioned understanding,⁵⁰

⁴⁹ K. Sharif Kazemi, G. Petrov (eds.), *Bulgaria-Iran bilateral relations. Collected papers and historical documents*, p. 92.

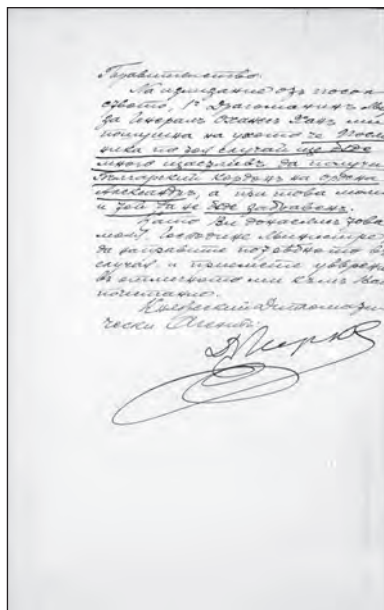
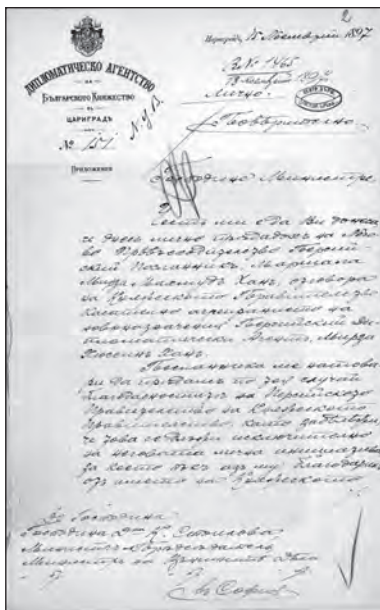
⁵⁰ Metaphorical description of the royal (state) institutions.

which shall be accomplished by the will of the majestic God in an atmosphere of stability and independence, we are hereby sending this friendly letter to congratulate Your Princely Highness on the attributes of independence of the new Government. It is our hope that at the lucky behest of fate, (Your) State shall achieve more and more progress with each passing day and the Government shall become more stable and durable, thus making us happier. Your August Highness is kindly asked to accept our congratulations coupled with our most cordial regards in assurance that our boundless respect for You shall abide in eternity.

Done in the Royal Palace *Dar ol-Khalafeh* in Tehran in the month *Jomadi oth-Thani*⁵¹ in the thirty-third year of the reign (of the incumbent monarch), 1297.⁵²

ANNEX 2

Letter from Bulgarian diplomatic agent in Constantinople Dimiter Markov to Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Confessions Dr. Konstantin Stoilov on the issuing of agrément in favor of Iranian diplomatic agent Mirza Hossein Khan. Constantinople, November 15, 1897.⁵³



⁵¹ The sixth month of the Islamic Lunar Calendar, corresponding for that particular year to the period 11th May – 10th June of the Gregorian Christian Calendar.

⁵² 1880 of the Gregorian Calendar.

⁵³ ЦДА, ф. 176К, от. 1, а.е. 1136, л. 2.

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