



Leonardo Davoudi. *Persian Petroleum. Oil, Empire and Revolution in Late Qajar Iran.* London/New York: I.B. Tauris. 2021. 240 pp. ISBN 978-1-8386-0684-8. \$ 85,00.

Sara Zanotta, Università degli Studi di Pavia

Maydan: rivista sui mondi arabi, semitici e islamici 2, 2022

<https://rivista.maydan.it>

ISSN 2785-6976

Leonardo Davoudi. *Persian Petroleum. Oil, Empire and Revolution in Late Qajar Iran*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris. 2021. 240 pp. ISBN 978-1-8386-0684-8. \$ 85,00.

The vast number of concessions granted by Qajar Iran to foreigners has been a crucial topic in Iranian historiography. Several authors have investigated in detail the concessions, their impact on the Qajar economy, and how they were related to Russian and British imperialism.¹ Among them, Leonardo Davoudi, a researcher with the Global History of Capitalism Project at the Oxford Centre for Global History, has added a new dimension to this field of research thanks to recently uncovered primary sources: the Kitabgi Family Papers. After the publication of an article on the negotiations leading to the Reuter concession (Davoudi 2014), Davoudi relied on these sources to investigate the emergence of the oil industry in his book *Persian Petroleum. Oil, Empire and Revolution in Late Qajar Iran*, published in 2021.

Despite some brief mentions of previous and later times, the book is set in a time frame that stretches from 1901 to 1914. It is composed of eleven chapters and two appendixes (the text of the D'Arcy concession and biographical details) that, starting from the genesis of the D'Arcy concession, explore the early development of the oil industry in Iran.

Persian Petroleum begins with an introduction to the imperial system and gives some preliminary information about the British and the Iranian empires. Here, the author provides us with a brief literature review of the Iranian oil venture. He stresses that the early publications on this topic were commissioned by the corporate heirs of the D'Arcy concession (p. 7)² and that also Ferrier's seminal work *The History of the British Petroleum* (1982) « [...] ambiguously circumnavigates sensitive matters, frames delicate issues in favour of the company and omits crucial details regarding the company's political and diplomatic activities» (p. 9). As a result, the book tries to overcome these limits and aims at examining the implications on British oil interests caused by the evolution and the differences between the Persian context and the British one (p. 9).

¹ There is an extensive scholarship on the evolution of the Qajar economy and the granting of concessions to foreigners. Among others, the works of Bharier (1971), Issawi (1971), Foran (1991), and Floor (1991) provide a very clear outlook of the transformation of the Qajar economy in the 19th and 20th centuries and offer different perspectives on the growing economic connections with Europe. Concerning economic concessions and how they were related to the relations with Russia and Britain, see Kazemzadeh (2013). Concessions were not granted exclusively to Britain and Russia. For an account of the ones to Belgium, see Dumoulin (1977).

² Here he mentions the works of Longhurst (1936) and Lockhart (1938).

Throughout the following chapters, Davoudi offers a very detailed account of the initial period of the oil industry. He shows how the concession granted by the Qajar government to the British businessman William Knox D'Arcy with the intermediation of General Antoine Kitabgi Khan was not a linear process from the signature of the concession to the discovery of oil and the emergence of one of the largest British companies. Conversely, the chapters of *Persian Petroleum* trace a development characterized by several distinct phases. In doing so, Davoudi particularly stresses the fluctuating relationship with the British government – depending on broader British imperial interests – and with the members of the Kitabgi family. Additionally, a leitmotiv throughout the book is the connection between the company's activities and the Persian situation, such as the necessity to find an agreement with the Bakhtiyari tribe and the impact of political events on the company.

As a result, a merit of the book is its in-depth description of the relations and discussions involving not only the actors that played a crucial role in the oil venture – such as D'Arcy and the Kitabgi family – but also those members of the British imperial élite that at one moment or another were more or less loosely connected to the project. This is linked to Davoudi's decision to focus on a rather brief time frame that marks a difference compared to other articles and books dealing with this topic.³

The book's detailed account of the events is also the result of its extensive bibliography. The secondary sources are mainly in English and include a vast number of books and articles relating to British imperial history, oil, and Iranian history.⁴ However, while Ferrier's *The History of the British Petroleum* (1982) is often mentioned, Shaffiee's *Machineries of Oil. An Infrastructural History of BP in Iran* (2018) is not present in the bibliography.

Concerning primary sources, Davoudi's book is based on several official documents and private papers consulted in the United Kingdom, the United States, and France. Most documents were found in British archives, including the Churchill Archives Centre in Cambridge, the BP Archive at the University of Warwick, the National Archives, and the Middle East Centre Archive of St Antony's College, Oxford. The author also referred to documents relating to Morgan Shuster at the Library of Congress in Washington. Eventually, and most importantly, Davoudi made extensive use of the Kitabgi Family Papers, privately held

³ See for example Longrigg (1961), Ferrier, (1982), Cronin (2004), and Shaffiee (2018).

⁴ Relating to Iranian history, some relevant works of prominent historians such as Janet Afary, Stephanie Cronin, Charles Issawi, Homa Katouzian, Firuz Kezmezadeh, and Nikki Keddie are listed.

in Paris. They include letters, papers, and diaries of the members of the Kitabgi family involved in the oil concession and provide a new valuable source for the study of Qajar Iran, and which the author had already used in his article “Divine Spark. The Prelude to the Tobacco Régie of 1890” (Davoudi 2014).

Conversely, a shortcoming of *Persian Petroleum* is the lack of attention to the Iranian side of the story. While the author stresses several times throughout the book that the Iranian point of view was often neglected by the British and even claims that the new documents reveal the Persian government’s decision-making process (p. 7), Iran sometimes remains in the background. Except for some crucial moments, such as the negotiations with the Bakhtiyari tribe (p. 55-64) and the Constitutional Revolution (p. 65-80), local developments – including crucial ones such as Amin al-Sultan’s assassination (p. 83) – are not sufficiently investigated despite their strong impact on the workings of the oil company. As a result, it would have been of interest to rely also on Iranian documents to shed some more light on the governmental position and the reaction of the local population.

Nevertheless, Davoudi’s book represents an important contribution to the historiography of the Iranian oil industry and, more widely, to the one investigating the Qajar concessions to foreign investors. Furthermore, it may stimulate further research that joins together the Kitabgi papers and Iranian primary sources.

References

- Bharier, Julian. 1971. *Economic Development in Iran 1900-1970*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Cronin, Stephanie. 2004. “The Politics of Debt. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company and the Bakhtiyari Khans”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 40(4). 1-31.
- Davoudi, Leonardo. 2014. “Divine Spark. The Prelude to the Tobacco Régie of 1890”, *Iranian Studies* 47(4). 505-518.
- Dumoulin, Michel, 1977. “Les premières années de la présence belge en Perse (1887-1895)”, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 1-2. 1-52.
- Ferrier, Ronald W. 1982. *The History of the British Petroleum Company*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Floor, Willem. 1991. “Traditional Crafts and Modern Industry in Qajar Iran”, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 141(2). 317-352.
- Foran, John. 1991. “The Concept of Dependent Development as a Key to the Political Economy of Qajar Iran (1800-1925)”, *Iranian Studies* 22(2-3). 5-56.
- Issawi, Charles. 1971. *The Economic History of Iran: 1800-1914*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.
- Kazemzadeh, Firuz. 2013. *Russia and Britain in Persia. Imperial ambitions in Qajar Iran*.

Persian Petroleum (Leonardo Davoudi)

London: I.B. Tauris.

Lockhart, Laurence. 1938. *The Record of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Ltd.* Unpublished.

Longhurst, Henry. 1936. *Adventure in Oil.* London: Sidgwick and Jackson.

Longrigg, Stephen Hemsley. 1961. *Oil in the Middle East. Its Discovery and Development.*

London/New York/Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Sara Zanotta

Università degli Studi di Pavia

sara.zanotta01@universitadipavia.it