Chapter 36

Peace on Land, Peace at Sea
(1952–1977)

Peace on land meant peace at sea and nowhere was this better in evidence than in the Soviet-Iranian fisheries and naval relations in the Caspian Sea.

In fisheries, the 1927 agreement and the south Caspian fisheries concession held by the mixed Soviet-Iranian fisheries company expired on January 31, 1953 (11 bahman 1331) by its own terms, and Iran refused to extend it: In the words of Mohammad-Reza Shah, “the agreement worked to our disadvantage.” The demise of the agreement implied the reversion to Iran of the exclusive right to fish in the southern Caspian now that the joint Soviet-Iranian fisheries company had been made defunct. This freed up Iran in the management of its own fisheries in the Caspian, and it was also jurisdictionally significant because it carried with it the implied restoration of Iran’s exclusive fishing rights in the area below the Astara-Hassanqoli line.

In 1953, Iran nationalized the Caspian fishing industry and placed the production, domestic sales, and exports of fish products in the hands of the state-owned Iranian Fisheries Company, the Shilat. Nevertheless, two-thirds of the company’s sturgeon catch and one-half of its caviar production still were exported to Soviet Russia.

In 1963, Iran established the Iranian Northern Fisheries Company for the Caspian region and set up another company called the Southern Fisheries Company for the Persian Gulf and Sea of Oman. On its inception, Northern Fisheries received the exclusive national right to fish in the Caspian Sea and, simultaneously, a five year ban was put into effect ostensibly for conservation reasons against all other Iranian fishing activities. It divided its operations into four districts: The first district was centered at Bandar Pahlavi and it consisted of the coastal regions of Astara, Talesh, and western Gilan; the second district was made up of eastern Gilan and western Mazandaran, with its center at Hassan Kiyadeh; eastern Mazandaran was organized around Babolsar; and the fourth district consisted of the Gorgan coast and its center was at Qara Su (Siyah Ab) near Bandar Shah. In 1966, a fifth district centered around Astara was carved out of the first one. In the beginning of 1970, the Northern Fisheries put into operation in the Caspian a deep sea fishing fleet consisting of six Soviet-built boats.

In the Friendship Treaty, the Soviets had attached great importance to the Caspian fisheries. Certainly, their control of the joint Soviet-Iranian fisheries company had ensured...
great dividends to the Soviets in terms of supply of fish and revenue. In contrast, by 1970, the Soviets were not as passionate about being involved in the Caspian fisheries. The matter is captured in the conversation that the Iranian ambassador at Moscow had in 1970 with the Soviet minister of trade. When the talk turned to fisheries, the Soviet minister suggested that Iran and Soviet Union pursue joint operations in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. No doubt the reference was a veiled expression of the Soviet desire to have its navy and merchant marine gain a strategic presence in the Persian Gulf. The Iranian ambassador replied, “better yet, the two countries should embark on expanded fishing projects in the Caspian.” Dismissing the notion, the Soviet rejoined, “Forget about the Caspian, there are more boats there than there are fish; there are much bigger fish in that other place.”

While fish were not the story, oil was. In 1970, the U.S.S.R.’s ministry of oil and gas demarcated the Caspian into sectors for the purpose of petroleum exploration and exploitation. Furthermore, in the same year, the U.S.S.R. law on water space established lines of delineation for appropriate competencies between the various Union Republics, applying notions of strict territorial delimitation. With the Astara-Hassanqoli line in effect between Iran and the Soviet Union, there was no legal basis for Iran to object to the Soviet offshore oil exploitation or the internal subdivision of its sector in the Caspian. Consequently, no objection was made by Iran about Soviet activities north of the line.

Another beneficiary of the improved Soviet-Iranian relations was Iran’s northern navy. In the years immediately following World War II, the pace of its rehabilitation had been slow and modest. In 1956, the government created an amphibian operations and training center at Bandar Pahlavi. This was followed three years later with the upgrading of a ship repair facility at the nearby Miyanposhteh. By late January 1963, the Iranian navy in the Caspian included two 65-ton and two 45-ton gunships, several boats and launches, and the 60-ton imperial cruiser Shahsavar. In 1963, the government relocated the national naval training center from Khorramshahr to Bandar Pahlavi, where in 1966 a naval academy was established as well.

Among Iran’s naval acquisitions after World War II had been also a minesweeper bought from the U.S. government in 1959. Christened the Shabrokh, it arrived at Khorramshahr in late January 1963. In August 1966, it was sent for repairs to Italy and then from there it went in 1968 to England in order to assist in the training of the Iranian naval personnel there. At the end of its tour of duty in England, the Iranian navy decided to commission the Shabrokh for duty in the Caspian. Riding the waves of Soviet goodwill, in 1969 the Shabrokh steamed down the Volga, sailed along the western coast of the Caspian, and touched at the Soviet port of Baku before continuing on to Astara on its way to Bandar Pahlavi. In its entire passage through the Soviet Union and down to Astara, the Shabrokh was piloted by Soviet naval personnel. Off Astara, the Soviet personnel left the ship and placed its command with the Iranian naval officers, sending them off toward Bandar Pahlavi with the refrain “from here on, your waters, your pilots.”

The voyage of the Shabrokh evidenced once more the real limits of Iran’s sovereignty in the Caspian despite the platitudes about freedom of navigation heaped in the Friendship Treaty and the 1940 CN Treaty. Beginning with the precedent set in the case of the Shahsavar in 1937 and now with the arrival of the Shabrokh, when either of these two royal cruisers required repairs in Soviet or European shipyards, Iranian personnel would navigate them up to Astara, where the ships would then be boarded as a matter of routine by Soviet pilots and guided by them to the points north of Astara. A reverse protocol was observed on the voyage back to Iran.