Agha Mohammad was succeeded by his nephew, Fathali Khan, who, not unlike Agha Mohammad, received his instructions in government early on as the ruler of Mazandaran. In 1780–1781, Fathali Khan, nicknamed Baba Khan, was made ruler of Barfurush, present-day Babol, a town some 18 miles east of Amol and 25 miles west of Sari. Fathali Khan’s only rival to the Persian throne was Agha Mohammad’s brother, Aliqoli Khan, whom Fathali Shah (1797–1834) had blinded and banished quickly to Barfurush in 1797.1

For a brief moment it looked like Persia under Fathali Shah was about to regain some measure of control along its Caspian coast and ports. In return for the Persian monarch’s overtures of peace, Tsar Paul I “agreed that Russian warships should not enter the port of Anzali needlessly.”2 As it would turn out, however, Fathali Shah’s rule would coincide with massive losses of Persian territories, including those in the Caspian region.

In consequence of renewed Russian-Persian rivalry over Georgia, in 1799 Russian troops entered Tbilisi, and when Tsar Paul died, in March 1801, his successor, Alexander I (1801–1825), revived Catherine the Great’s forward policy in the Caucasus and all this ignited the Russian-Persian wars of 1804–1813. In July 1805, the Russian troops landed in Anzali but were defeated and put to flight by the governor of Gilan, Mirza Musa. Eventually, however, the tide turned in Russia’s favor3 and produced on October 12, 1813 a treaty of “peace and perpetual friendship,” known also as the Treaty of Golestan.4

Articles 2 and 3 of Golestan produced a boundary line extending from Odina Basara in the east along the Aras River to the south of Baku on the Caspian. Persia recognized as belonging to Russia those territories on the northern side of the boundary line that were bound in the west by the Caucasus and in the east by the Caspian Sea, inclusive of all the rivers, lakes, forests, mountains, lands, and islands in the said area. Among the territories ceded by Persia were Karabagh, Shirvan, Georgia, Armenia, Abkhazia, Dagestan, Daghestan, Baku, and parts of the Talesh coastal strip, which extended from Lankoran south to the Aras River.

With respect to general navigation in the Caspian Sea, Golestan established a reciprocal and equal arrangement. “Russian merchant marine vessels,” Article 5 provided,
shall have, like before, the right to navigate the length of and land on the shores of the Caspian, to which ships in case of shipwreck, the Persians amicably shall extend help. The Persian commercial vessels also shall have, like before, the same right of cabotage along the length of the Caspian coast and to land on Russian shores and in the case of shipwreck, the Russians shall give to them all necessary assistance.” However, Article 5 also made it clear that “[a]s it was before the war, as well as it was the case in the time of peace and at all times, only Russian warships have sailed on the Caspian and they now shall have the same exclusive right; accordingly, no power other that Russia shall deploy warships in the Caspian Sea.”

With the war over, in April 1814, Fathali Shah left Tehran and set up camp at Firuzkuh, a summer resort situated in a valley 80 miles east of Tehran and on the road leading to the southeast corner of the Caspian coast. He stayed at camp until September; in the interim he had the disobedient governor of Astarabad brought to him and blinded. Four years later, in February 1818, the royal court once again headed north to seek recreation in the mountains and plains of Mazandaran and on the shores of the Caspian Sea. He visited Barfurush, Sari, Amol, and Ashraf for entertainment and hunting and then returned to Tehran. At this time the government of Gilan was in the hands of Mohammad-Reza Mirza, one of Fathali Shah’s sons.

Another round of hostilities with Russia in 1826–1828 resulted in further loss of Persian territories and produced on February 10, 1828, the treaty of “peace and friendship,” also known as the Treaty of Turkmanchā. The prelude to the start of hostilities and the signing of the treaty are detailed elsewhere; suffice it to say, the territories ceded to Russia included Yerevan and Nakhchevan down to the Aras River.

Articles 3 through 5 of Turkmanchā established a boundary that, with minor modifications, survives to this day as Iran’s frontier with the countries of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Under this treaty, the Russian-Persian boundary line extended eastward from the source of the Qarasu River to the Aras River, then continued along the Astara River until it reached the sea. Other parts of the Talesh coastal strip lying to the north of the line and not already lost under the treaty of Golestan, as well as areas near Lankoran farther north, all became Russian territory. Persia also recognized as Russian “all the lands and islands” that were situated north of the boundary line and bound by the Caucasus on one side and the Caspian Sea on the other.

In matters of navigation on the Caspian, Article 8 of Turkmanchā provided for a reciprocal regime in the areas of merchant marine and general navigation. “Russian merchant marine vessels shall have, like before,” Article 8 stated, “the right to navigate freely the length of and land on the shores of the Caspian and which in the case of shipwreck in Persia shall find rescue and assistance. The same rights are accorded to Persian merchant vessels, to navigate sur l’ancien pied [as previously], the Caspian and land on Russian shores, where in the case of shipwreck the Persians shall receive, reciprocally, rescue and assistance.” However, Article 8 also went on, “[a]s for men of war, Russian warships, which have been ab antiquo [from old times], the only warships with the right to navigate the Caspian, shall have the exclusive privilege to navigate the Caspian, by which reason, as reserved and ensured today and hereby, with the exception of Russia no other Power can have warships in the Caspian.”

The Treaty of Turkmanchā was accompanied by a commercial treaty of the same date. Article 1 of this agreement recognized the right of Persian subjects “to import goods to Russia by way of either the Caspian Sea or the land frontier which separates Russia from Persia.” The indemnity provisions of the “peace and friendship” treaty itself