

# Foundation for Iranian Studies

## Program of Oral History

SIR DENIS WRIGHT

RESTRICTED

INTERVIEWEE: SIR DENIS WRIGHT

INTERVIEWER: SHUSHA ASSAR

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, ENGLAND:

APRIL 11, 1986

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## PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a series of tape-recorded interviews conducted for the Oral History of Iran Program of Foundation for Iranian Studies by Shusha Assar with Sir Denis Wright in Buckinghamshire, England in April 11, 1986.

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*[Signature]*  
Interviewee  
*12 April 1986*

*[Signature]*  
Interviewer

*12 April 1986*  
Date of Agreement

*Iran - 1952-71.*  
Subject of Tapes

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Denis Arthur Hepworth Wright was born in Hong Kong in March 23, 1911. After an education at Oxford, he joined the world of business. Upon the outbreak of World War II he joined the Diplomatic Service. After appointments in Eastern Europe and the U.S., he was appointed the Counsellor at H.M. Embassy in Tehran between 1954 and 1955. He served as the British ambassador to Ethiopia between 1959 and 1962. Then from 1963 to 1971 he acted as the British ambassador to Iran. Sir Denis' long tenure of office in Tehran, and his position as the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps in Iran, made him privy to much of the decision-making in Iranian government circles. Moreover, his ambassadorship coincided with important foreign policy decisions in Iran such as, rapprochement with Bahrain, fulfilling Britain's position and role in the Persian Gulf, and increase in arms procurements from the U.S. Sir Denis was also personally close to such Iranian statesmen as Alam, Aram, Hoveyda, as well as the Shah himself.

After his ambassadorship in Tehran, Mr. Wright has acted as a member of the Council of British Institute for Persian Studies, and has himself authored a number of books on Iran:

### Persia

#### The English Among Persians

#### The Persians Among the English

Interviewee: Sir Denis Wright

Interview #1

Interviewer: Shusha Assar

Place: Buckinghamshire

Date: April 11, 1986

England

Assar: This is Saturday, the 11th of April, 1986. Interview with Sir Denis Wright at his home in Buckinghamshire, England.

And, Sir Denis, shall we go right to the beginning of your involvement with Iran. You went to the Diplomatic Service and followed your career actually, and then at some point, you got involved with Persia. I believe it was at the time of the Mossadeq --

Wright: Well, it was after Mossadeq fell in August 1953, and I was the head of the Economic Department of the Foreign Office and was meant to be responsible, among other things, for oil. There was only one man dealing with oil in the Foreign Office. He was under my supervision, and that was Peter Ramsbotham, who later took over from me as Ambassador in Iran. And I was asked whether I would go out and reopen diplomatic relations after the fall of Mossadeq, because he had turned us all out in October, 1952.

Assar: And in what capacity at the time?

Wright: As Charg d'affaires .

Assar: So you went there as Charg d'affaires, and what happened?

Tell us all about it.

Wright: Well, I was met at the airport by the Swiss Minister, Mr. Alfred Echar, who was in charge of British interests at the time, and had been since the break in diplomatic relations. And as we drove into the Embassy in Avenue Ferdowsi, he said that he had arranged for me to meet two emissaries of the Shah the following evening. I didn't like the idea, but I was absolutely brand new to Iran, and I asked him who they were. He said one was an Iranian, whose name he said -- I'm not certain -- was Bahram Shahrokh, and the other one was a Swiss subject named Ernst Peron, who he said was very close to the Shah. Well, I didn't like this idea at all -- of meeting someone before I had even presented my credentials as Charg d'affaires to Mr. Entezam, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. But the Swiss had let me in for this, and so next night I went and had dinner with the Swiss Minister and his English wife up in the Qolhak Compound of the British Embassy, which the Swiss were living in, and I met these two gentlemen. I knew nothing about them.

On my staff when I got out to Tehran, I had only one member who had ever been in Iran before. He had been the second secretary in the Commercial Department and wasn't familiar with their personalities and so on. The reason we only had that one person was, about ten days before I was due to go out to Iran, just before Christmas, 1953, the Iranian government told us via the Swiss that they did not wish any member of the British team I was to lead out there to have served in Iran before. This was a decision by Mossadeq, and there was a feeling that they must stick by this.

Anyway, Anthony Eden decided that at least one member of the staff should know something about Iran, so I took with me someone called John Fernley, the second secretary in the Commercial Department, before the break in diplomatic relations.

And I say, I met these two gentlemen for dinner, and immediately after dinner, the Swiss minister and his wife withdrew and left me alone with them. Well, to my great surprise, the spokesman, Bahram Shahrokh, started criticizing the Prime Minister, General Zahedi. They asked me whether the British government would have any objection if the Shah dismissed the Minister of Court, Mr. Hosein 'Ala', and they wanted an assurance there would be no interference in internal affairs. And they also said the Shah wished to know how I proposed settling the oil problem. Well, I said that as far as General Zahedi was concerned, only a few days previously in the House of Commons Sir Anthony Eden I think he was, has praised General Zahedi for his courage in resuming diplomatic relations, and it seemed to be rather out of place to criticize him now. As regards dismissing Mr. Hosein 'Ala', I said this wasn't my business at all. What the Shah did with his ministers was his business, not mine. With regard to interference in internal affairs, I said that I'd give British solemn assurance that there'd be no interference in the offing. As regards an oil settlement, I said, "I have no settlement with me. I've come out to explore the possibilities of a settlement, but I cannot do more than that. Then it will be for the oil companies." Well, in due course they went off, and that was on the 22nd of December, 1953.

The next day I called on the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Entezam, and presented my credentials, as I wasn't an ambassador,



so I didn't go see the Shah. I was dealing with the Foreign Minister. And I just mentioned to him as a precaution that I had seen these two emissaries of the Shah, because I thought if it got to his ears by other means, it would do me damage -- so I just told him what passed on. Well, that was the 22nd of December. The 23rd of December I saw Entezam, and two days later was our great festival, Christmas Day, and I was having a party for the fourteen members of my staff plus one or two British subjects, who had come out to Iran -- who had been in Iran or hadn't been expelled by Mossadeq -- on drink which we had borrowed from the American Embassy, because our embassy was empty. And in the middle of this, a telephone call from the Swiss Embassy from the delegation to say that the two gentlemen I had seen wished to see me again urgently.

Well, they came back and repeated, more or less, what they'd said to me the first time. In particular, they wanted to find out what I could do about settling the oil problem. They wished to report to the Shah, etc., etc. And I made it clear that I had no solution in my pocket, but I said two things were absolutely essential -- that there should be fair compensation for the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and, secondly, that any solution must be such that Iran did not do better out of oil than the other Middle Eastern oil producing countries -- in other words, should not be rewarded for nationalizing oil. Well, they also told me that the Shah did not want an ambassador appointed, because the Iranian public, he said, had gotten used to Mr. Wright. Well, that was nonsense. I'd only been there forty-eight hours. Well, I said to them that I had no oil solution and that I could not negotiate anything behind the back of the Foreign Minister. If they want, I

was very happy to go and see the Shah and explain this to him, but I was not prepared to work behind the back of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and that as regards an ambassador, I said, "I already have the name of an ambassador whose agreement I am to ask for as soon as I judge the situation right." I said, "I'm only here as Chargé d'affaires."

Well, they went off again, and I continued with my drinks party. We had a Christmas lunch, and then in the afternoon I was feeling a bit sleepy. Perhaps I'd had too much to drink, I don't know. Anyway, the telephone went again, and Mr. Peron and Bahram Shahrokh said they wished to see me again. They came back about four o'clock in the afternoon. And Shahrokh, who did all the speaking -- talked good English -- had a piece of paper -- two pages -- which he handed to me, and he said, "We have consulted the Shah after the morning's talk, and these are his views." And I have no doubt they were his views -- again saying that whereas, the Shah had no objection to my discussing oil with Entezam on minor details, on all matters of principle, I was to deal with him direct through Peron and Shahrokh. And I said, "I'm very sorry. I would go and explain this to the Shah." And I repeated what I'd said in my earlier talks. Well, I was very worried about this, because I made it feel as a confrontation with the Shah as soon as I arrived in Tehran, so I slept on it. It's sometimes a good thing not to take too much quick action, so I slept on it and discussed it with the other members of my staff. Next morning -- Boxing Day -- I sent a telegram to London giving the full text of the piece of paper that I'd been given and saying that I thought I should tell Mr. Entezam, the Foreign Minister, in whom I had complete confidence -- I'd only

met him once, but he struck me as an absolutely honest, straight man.

Assar: That was Nasrollah, was it?

Wright: No Abdollah. And I said that I would like to tell him. Well, this was a big decision to have to be taken by Sir Anthony Eden personally, and so I got a telegram back a day later saying I was authorized to tell the Foreign Minister what the Shah was up to. So, next time I saw Entezam -- I think on the 27th of December -- I told him. I gave him a complete recount of what had happened and what I'd said, and I gave him assurance, I said, "So long as I'm in charge here, I shall do nothing behind your back."

Well, the only person I told was the American Ambassador, who was a very good ally of ours on this, Loy Anderson, who had been very helpful in getting diplomatic relations resumed. And I told him all this and sat back.

Well, a few days later, I was at a party where a French lady married to the Iranian, Fernande Forughi, whose husband was private secretary to Princess Shams and was very close to the Shah at that time, attacked me and said, "How dare you behave so badly towards the Shah?" I said, "What do you know about this? You don't know my version of the story." Her husband was in bed with a cold or influenza, and she said, "Well, my husband should hear all this." So I went up and saw Mohsen Forughi at his house in Elahiyyeh where he was in bed and explained why I was not prepared to deal with Peron and Shahrokh behind the back of the Foreign Minister.

Well, a few days later, the Belgian Ambassador came to see

me. He'd heard the story I was having a first class row with the Shah. I said, "I'm not having a first class row. I haven't seen him. I haven't asked to see him. I'm not a --" Then a few days after that the American Ambassador telephoned me and said, "Come around and have a drink." I went round, and he said, "I've just seen the Shah. He's back from the Caspian." And he said, "He's absolutely hopping mad with you and with me too," because he thought the Americans had put me up to this. Of course, the Americans hadn't. I'd done nothing -- I'd not told them until it was all over. And he said, "Don't worry. It won't do you any harm."

Well anyway, I didn't see the Shah for some time until the anniversary of his wedding to Queen Soraya, which was early in February -- I think about the 10th -- I've forgotten the date. And I was invited because all the diplomatic corps were invited. And the new Iranian Ambassador to London by this time -- Roger Stevens was nominated for Tehran, and Ali Soheyli was nominated to go back to London, where he'd already been ambassador. And he, of course, knew all about this. All Tehran knew about this row I was having. He said to me at this party, he said, "Stick by me. I'm going to make the Shah talk to you." Well, it was a very glittering party in the marble palace and glass mirrors all over the place and so on, and the Shah and Queen Soraya came down a long line of diplomats and ministers and generals, and the Shah got to me. I was the bottom of the line -- the junior diplomat. He took me by the hand and didn't say a word -- just passed on. Queen Soraya did the same, but then after the line broke up and we went to eat, Soraya talked to me for a bit. And then Soheyli beckoned to

me, and I went over to see the Shah by the dinner table, which was a buffet, and he got into quite obviously quite a heated argument with the Shah. And later he told me this was because the Shah said he wouldn't talk to me. And Soheyli said, "Why should I talk to this man? There's a new ambassador arriving next week -- this was Roger Stevens -- and why?" But Soheyli is a tough character, and he stuck to his guns, and after about ten minutes I was summoned up to see the Shah and talk to him. And we had a very friendly talk. He didn't refer to this incident at all. That was my first contact with him.

Assar: What did you talk about then?

Wright: Well, we talked about his plans for the future. He said he had plans to modernize his country, and some people say I'm a socialist. I don't think we talked about oil at all. I've forgotten. But anyway, he did all the talking until Queen Soraya got impatient and wanted to get started with the dancing and things and pulled him away, and that was that. So after that, of course, an ambassador came, and I didn't have many dealings with the Shah except indirectly. But he didn't seem to bear me any ill will. And when he went to New York in America after the settlement of the oil at the end of 1954, he told one British diplomat -- an old friend of his, Lawford, who had been in Tehran -- he said very nice things about Roger Stevens and about me. So he had no feelings. Usually the Shah, as you know, is very vindictive and never forgives anybody. But in this case, he apparently bore me no ill will, and indeed, when I left Tehran in October, 1955 -- I was

called back to London to be under secretary in the Foreign Office -- I was in charge again, because Roger Stevens was away on leave -- he gave a dinner for my wife and myself at the Sad-Abad Palace where he made a little speech thanking me for having contributed to Anglo-Iranian friendship, etc., etc. There were only about fourteen or fifteen people there, but it was a very touching occasion, because to my knowledge, he's never given a farewell dinner to any charg d'affaires or counsellor and not even to an ambassador, because when I was later eight years ambassador and was on very good terms with the Shah and was dean of the diplomatic corps, he never would dream of giving a farewell dinner to me. But then I was just a junior member starting out, he gave this farewell dinner to my wife and myself. So that's it.

Assar: So that was your first trip to Iran. There's one thing that I would like to ask simply because I'm sure that a lot of people will ask in the future when they read about the whole history of that era is this -- about the British policy towards Iran -- I mean, why were the British so acharn, so adamant against Mossadeq where later on they accepted every nationalization, and indeed, they fostered them in their various zones of influence, whereby they wanted to pull out. And if they hadn't done that, of course, all of the subsequent troubles would have been avoided, and probably we would by now have a constitutional monarchy and a much more advanced case. I mean, why was it?

Wright: Well, I wouldn't agree at all with you on that, because I hate to have idealized Mossadeq. The reason why we were against

Mossadeq was quite simply that it seemed impossible to make an agreement with him.

Assar: You mean you were not against the principle of nationalization?

Wright: No, we accepted that. We said there must be fair compensation, and he would never accept that, you see. We never got the decision as you know that ultimately the British and then the Americans would carry it out, but the coup to get rid of Mossadeq was decided on when they had come to the conclusion that it was totally impossible to make an agreement with Mossadeq. He has proved very, very slippery. And I haven't got all the details, but if you read all the accounts that are available in the public record of this, and move after move by the World Bank, by the Americans. The only person who thinks he got near an agreement, I think, is George McGee, at one stage, the American. And he was the under-secretary of the State Department. But then it was too late when he came along with us. And anyway, they never managed to pin Mossadeq down to doing what you call a fair compensation, because for the British, it was absolutely vital that there should be some fair settlement way of compensation, because after all, we had major interests all over the world at that time and still have, but -- including then, of course, the Suez Canal. And to let Mossadeq get away without any compensation would have encouraged Nasser. In fact, it did encourage in any case, and all sorts of other enterprises. So we were determined to have fair compensation and a proper settlement, and that was the reason.

But to take up your other point, if anybody really believes that Mossadeq would have led to a nice constitutional government, I think they're just living in cuckoo land, because you've only got to look at the chaotic state Iran was in under Mossadeq without any British interference at that time. I mean, Mossadeq was unlikely, I think, to ever have made a success any more than previous politicians. I mean, he wasn't strong enough. He was already at loggerheads with the Shah. He hadn't got the Army behind him. I don't think there was a ghost of a chance of Mossadeq being a successful Prime Minister. He was named a national hero, yes, because he kicked the British out, but that's quite a different thing. But as a successful Foreign Minister in avoiding all the troubles, it's a very easy way of the Iranians to excuse what is really their own many mistakes.

Assar: Yes quite. Now I only asked the question because I was sure that other people weren't, and this is a question, you see.

Wright: The real thing is to study the papers in the public record of this, and quite a lot of them -- In fact -- no, I haven't got the book here -- Roger Louis, a professor of history at the University of Texas, has written a book called The British Empire in the Middle East, and the first volume came out the year before last, and there's a new volume coming out, in which there'll be a lot about the oil crisis. I mean, and that will give, you know, the whole picture, I think, because it's a very dispassionate, American view of the thing.



Assar: But it's very interesting what you say that Mossadeq wouldn't have been any more successful than the previous people had been. Why do you suppose that is? Because of the differences between the Shah and --

Wright: Well, partly. Given the constitution in Iran, the Shah was a key figure, and he was not supportive of Mossadeq. He had very briefly at one time supported him, but on the whole, he was anti-Mossadeq. He wouldn't have backed him for long. And the economic condition of the country was such -- because of the embargo on oil and all that sort of thing -- because Mossadeq greatly misjudged the effect of nationalization too, you see. He seemed to think that you'd have no difficulty in extracting the oil and selling it. Well, of course, all the oil companies rallied together with Anglo-Iranian because although many people in this country were inclined to say, "Well, the Americans got us out of Iran." It was untrue. They didn't like to see this happen, because if it had happened in Iran and Mossadeq had got away with nationalizing the -- after all, the British enterprise, in which we had invested millions of pounds. And maybe we made a lot of money out of it too, but we did invest enormous sums, and but for the British, it would not be an oil industry at that time. And the American oil companies saw that if Mossadeq got away with, you might say, stealing British investment, this would happen in Saudi Arabia. It would happen all around the world, you see.

Assar: But as a result, you got fifty years of free oil. Wouldn't that be enough?

Wright: What?

Assar: Fifty years of free oil. Was it enough?

Wright: But that wasn't --

Assar: That's what Mossadeq's argument was. I mean, I'm being just the devil's advocate, because it's interesting. His argument was, all right, you invested some money, extracted the oil, but as a result, you got forty years of oil free -- thirty years or whatever it is -- that is your compensation.

Wright: Yes. Oh, it wasn't free at all. I mean, how many million pounds went into building the refinery? How much went into drilling oil? For eight years -- or they got the concession was 1903 -- didn't find oil until 1908. All that time they were drilling, drilling. What do you think that costs? What do you think it costs to have tankers to market the oil, you know. I mean it was an enormous investment in the country. All right, they made a lot of money in the end, but it's risk capital. I mean, if you're going to put money into -- it isn't just in oil -- but in something risky, you've got to get a good return on it. I mean, that's the way capitalism works.

Assar: Yes, well let us move on from there. So you came back to London, and then what happened? Did your involvement with Persia end at that point, or did you carry on with oil consortium

negotiations?

Wright: No, I was under-secretary in charge of economic affairs, and, among other things, I had to do with the Baghdad Pact. And of course, I got involved again with Persia there, because I used to go to the Baghdad Pact meetings. Jamshid Amuzegar would be leading the Iranian delegation. And one noted occasion when I had been to Karachi in January, 1959, and Dr. Eqbal was there. He was Prime Minister. Hasan Arfa was Ambassador to Pakistan and to Ankara too, and they both got hold of me -- they knew me well from my first days -- and hinted that something very funny was happening in Tehran. They didn't say what. I couldn't quite make out, but they seemed to think the British Embassy got involved and were encouraging the Shah to do a deal with the Russians. You know, I was rather perplexed. But then I was going to take a week's holiday in Iran on my way back from Karachi. And well, at dinner my first night in Tehran, I met Hosein 'Ala', Minister of Court, and he urged me to see the Shah. I hadn't gotten the right clothes. I hadn't come to see the Shah. I was on holiday.

Assar: What year was that?

Wright: That was in January, 1959.

Assar: And that was Geoffrey Harrison who was British Ambassador?

Wright: And we knew from top secret sources that a Russian delegation had arrived in Tehran the same day as I did, and we,

putting two and two together, assumed that Ala wanted me to see the Shah because of this, because the Russians, we had learned from secret sources -- so secret we couldn't let on we knew -- that to negotiate a non-aggression pact with the Iranian government. And this was why Dr. Eqbal and Hasan Arfa in Karachi were so worried, because they didn't like the idea. Anyway, the result was that I said to 'Ala', "I will go and sign the Shah's book just to show I'm here, but I don't want to see him particularly." I went down the next day to the court, the Marble Palace, signed the book and was met by Mohsen Qaraqozlu, who was then the grand Master of Ceremonies. And he said, "Mr. 'Ala' wants to talk to you on the telephone." Well, Ala, who had always before addressed me as Mr. Wright, this time on the telephone from his office in the court said, "My dear Denis, I have arranged for you to see the Shah," -- either it was tomorrow or the next day or something -- "and I beg you to speak to him very frankly." Well, in other words, he was telling me to try and stop him signing the deal with the Russians. At lunch that same day -- I wasn't at the lunch but -- 'Ala', not knowing that we knew the Shah was doing this, told Geoffrey Harrison that the Shah was doing a secret deal with the Russians -- a very brave thing for Ala to do, but he felt so passionately it would be wrong to be tied up with the Russians, that he told Geoffrey Harrison. Well, Harrison telegraphed to London and said I was seeing the Shah the next day or the day after -- I've forgotten which -- and asked for instructions. So I got a brief to try and persuade the Shah not to sign with the Russians. So I went in to bat with the Shah, and I had an audience which was -- instead of lasting just half an hour, lasted an hour and a half. We had a

great battle, and I told him that if he signed up with the Russians, he would sooner or later lose his throne. This inevitably would happen.

Assar: Why?

Wright: Well, because, you know, it would have been pulling out of the Baghdad Pact, and I said the Russians don't like monarchies, and you can't believe that the Russians are not going to try and upset your regime. And well, the interview went on for an hour and a half. At one stage, the Shah -- his complaint was that as a member of CENTO, he wasn't being given as many airplanes and as many guns as the Turks were getting, who were members, and also he complained that the Afghans were doing better, although they weren't even members of CENTO. And he went on to complain -- I think it was called Baghdad Pact -- that it wasn't good. At one stage, he said, "You treat me like a kept woman, not like a married partner." I said, "Well, Your Majesty, kept women earn fur coats if they behave themselves or something." I even got a smile out of him then. At any rate, at the end of it all, I left him, feeling rather despondent that I hadn't influenced him, but we know later -- For when he came to London in May on a state visit, he told the then British Prime Minister MacMillan and our Foreign Minister, I think was Selwyn Lloyd then, that it was my intervention which had stopped him. Other people intervened. Eisenhower sent a telegram. Duncan Sands came. He was on his way back from Karachi, Pakistan. Turkish Prime Minister stopped off in Tehran. They all put pressure on him, but he did tell MacMillan it was my intervention. But typical of

the Shah, he put all the blame for this episode on Seyyed Ziya Taba taba'i, because he said Seyyed Ziya was known as a British agent, and he had gone to the Shah and had told him that the British wanted him to do this deal with the Russians. Well, of course, it was a complete lie. First of all, Seyyed Ziya was not a British agent. He was a friend of ours, but we just used to go and spend a day in the country with him. He was never a British agent. And I used to go and see him occasionally just as other members of the Embassy in intervals of one month or six month's time. But this --  
[end of side one, tape one]

Seyyed Ziya was a friend. I used to go out to his farm out in the hills occasionally, but never to my knowledge did we ever use him as a secret agent. But anyway, the Shah maintained that he was known to be a spokesman with the British Embassy. I mean, the Shah was very gullible like a great many Iranians and believed all sorts of people were spokesmen with the British Embassy when they're not. And it was the last thing Seyyed Ziya was. So that was that.

Assar: And so after the week holiday, you came back, and your involvement with Persia continued?

Wright: Yes, on the economic side, so it wasn't very great.

Assar: Well, you mean just oil and then --

Wright: Well, oil to some extent, but, you see, the oil agreement had been reached in 1954, and I'd come back in 1955, and after that

there were no serious problems of oil. I mean, there were disputes, maybe, between the oil companies, but not involving the Foreign Office at all.

Assar: So what other economic --

Wright: Oh, I was dealing with the free trade area, with the Common Market, with control of arms, control of shipments to the Soviet Union. I was dealing with the whole world, I mean, on economic affairs and Argentine meat -- I mean, everything I was dealing with.

Assar:

Yes. And then you were appointed Ambassador. When was that?

Wright: April, 1963.

Assar: And you went out there, and you spent about seven years?

Wright: Eight years.

Assar: Eight years. Amazing. So, tell us about that, because obviously, it's a part --

Wright: Well, it would take far too long to tell you about it. I've recorded this for Harvard, and it will be released in the year 2,000. But all I would say is that it was a very agreeable time for me, and the Shah then seemed to be -- he'd got over the

referendums. He got a backing from his people in January or February, 1963. He had been married for the third time to Farah Diba. He'd got a son and heir. And so although when I first arrived in April, 1963, I had certain doubts about the Shah, arising from these earlier experiences, and I said so. I said in my first dispatch to the Foreign Office, "So long as the Shah is here, no good will come to this country despite" -- And I changed my mind in the course of the next two or three years, because it seemed to me he had taken the grip of himself. He was behaving more rationally and become stronger and particularly after the Moharram riots of June, 1963, when I think the Shah did the right thing. I mean, he clamped down on the mullahs, and there were a good many people killed, but I was there, and I don't believe for one minute the accounts one reads by opposition to the Shah -- that 5,000 people were killed, 15,000. At the time, I asked Mr. Alam, who was then Prime Minister, how many people had been killed, and he told me -- I think the number was ninety-four. And he said that was based on the people who had done the burials, the people who had asked for compensation, for pensions and things. And years later when he was no longer Prime Minister, but when I was still Ambassador, I asked him again, "Were you telling me the truth." He said, "Yes, as far as I know about ninety-four." Well, years later when I was sent by Mrs. Thatcher -- I'd retired -- to see the Shah at Bahamas to tell him he wasn't coming to England, I asked him then, "How many people were killed on the Moharram riots?" And he said, "One hundred and ten straight on." So I said to him, "Well, that's very interesting, because Mr. Alam told me ninety-four, and there's not much difference between the two." And I said, "I've always maintained I



was there. I heard the shooting. I was moving up to Qolhak everyday." And he repeatedly said, "No, one hundred and ten." Well, I just quote these figures, because I believe that that's the sort of figure. It wasn't a great slaughter. And therefore, I always felt that that Moharram Riot and the Shah getting tough with the -- it was Alam rather than the Shah, I think, but nevertheless, it was the Shah's policy -- was a turning point in the development of Iran for the next eight years -- until 1971, I think -- when Iran made remarkable progress economically. And internationally the Shah became a worldwide figure. And I changed my views from my earlier criticism of him to think that here was a man who had got a grip of himself, who was happily married. As we know, he wasn't quite so happily married, but still, I mean --

Assar: Was he not?

Wright: Well, he got married to another girl, and --

Assar: But weren't those all just rumors?

Wright: No, Entezam told me when he came here one day -- he said there was quite definitely a lady, the daughter of some governor in Kurdistan, and Entezam was quite firm on this. But I don't know. I won't speculate about that. But nevertheless --

Assar: Yes, it's not enough. That doesn't stop. A lot of people have mistresses on the side. It doesn't mean that they are not happily married.

Wright: Yes, well, I don't like to -- Because Alam used to say to me that from about 1968, that he could no longer influence the Shah or make any impression on him, and he said he was very worried for the Empress, because she was also running far off the Shah for championing this or that cause. But I don't know. It's all speculation, so it's not -- But anyway, I believed up to the time I left Iran, that the Shah was moving in the right direction. Although in my last two or three dispatches before retiring in April, 1971, I did foretell that there was trouble ahead for the Shah unless he could satisfy the liberals and the intellectuals and the students. I didn't anticipate trouble from the mullahs. I didn't see it at all, and I don't think it necessarily existed then. But I also said I thought the Shah was libel to take impetuous decisions, and he might make some mistakes, but I thought on the whole not. But in fact, of course, we know he did make terrible mistakes.

Assar: I was told myself by some Foreign Office friend that the British were so afraid of antagonizing the Shah because of their trade dealings and so forth, that they appointed people who didn't speak Persian deliberately.

Wright: They did what?

Assar: Appointed people at the Embassy who didn't speak Persian. The instructions to the diplomats were that they shouldn't be in touch with any opposition -- intellectual, nationalist, anybody.

Isn't that rather shortsighted?

Wright: It's shortsighted, but I think there's some truth in that. You see, the trouble is the Shah was an extremely jealous person, and he had SAVAK. If an ambassador and his embassy is to be successful, it's got to deal with the ruling few -- the top people -- I mean, your accredited government. In the case of Iran, the Shah was so jealous of anybody having any dealings with anybody in opposition to him, that it would compromise the ambassador if his staff were involved. So we had to be very cautious, and I'll give you an example of this.

When John Lauden -- the chairman of Shell, the Dutch chairman -- he was retiring, and he had negotiated with Americans and the British the oil agreement in 1954. He didn't know the Dutch Ambassador, and he asked if he could stay with me. And we put him up, and I said, "What would you like me to do by way of entertainment?" And he said he would like to meet the men he had negotiated the oil agreement with in 1954. They were Ali Amini, who had been Prime Minister later and been dismissed by the Shah, Fu'ad Rowhani, who had been the first Director General of OPEC, and Abdollah Entezam, who had been the Minister of Foreign Affairs. They were the key figures in the oil negotiations. All three of them, by the time Lauden came to Tehran, were in disgrace. They had quarreled with the Shah. And I knew if I had them to dinner and the Shah heard about it, I would be in trouble. So I decided I would have them to dinner, but I saw Mr. Alam and said, "Look, I'm having these people to dinner at Mr. Lauden's request, and please tell the Shah." Well, that was all right if the Shah

knew. But my American colleague, Armin Meyer, he had met Ali Amini's sister-in-law -- I've forgotten her name, but a rather handsome, well-dressed lady -- and she introduced him to Ali Amini, who after all, had been Ambassador in Washington. And Armin Meyer had Amini to dinner with his sister-in-law. The Shah heard of this through SAVAK or somebody. He was furious, and for a good many months Armin Meyer was in trouble with the Shah by having had Amini to dinner. That was what one was up against in Iran, and that was why the British and I think the Americans decided that it was not good policy to flirt with the opposition in the country.

Assar: So how did you collect your intelligence then to see what was the opposition, how strong it was, what --

Wright: Well, the trouble was we didn't collect enough intelligence about it. And I think that is one of the troubles. I mean, we knew there was discontent in the country. I don't know what happened after 1971. I was out of the picture. And the opposition to the Shah when I was there was relatively small. I mean, the country was behind him. They had been successful with land reform. I remember Nancy Lambton, who was a very -- Again the Shah coming to me one day after she'd done one of her great trips around the country and telling me that she was pleased and surprised to find there was so much support behind the Shah. And I think up until probably about 1969 or 1970, the Shah was riding on a successful wave, and it wasn't there. What happened afterwards I don't know. I wasn't there. Whether I would have been any wiser than others, I don't know. But I do know in 1977 when I went two

years before the revolution, I saw Dr. Eqbal at his office. I was launching my book, The English Amongst the Persians, and I was very busy. I would have a whole succession of invitations on signing copies of the book, and I allowed myself ten minutes with Dr. Eqbal. Dr. Eqbal, as you know, the yes man of the Shah -- baleh qorban as they call him -- I went to see him, and he kept me for one hour, and it was one long tirade against the Shah, against the corruption, against the activities of the Royal Family, against the discontent. That was April, 1977. And I was told that. Now, I've got that, of course, in the diary I've got here. I reported to the Ambassador. I don't know whether this was reported back to London or not. But, you know, one wasn't entirely without sources of information at that time.

Assar: But now during your tenure of office.

Wright: Well, I had friends. I won't name them, but I had a number of friends who were against the Shah and used to come and see me. I mean, one of them leads the old liberals of the -- you know, the old constitutionists -- older generation. They used to come and talk to me, and I was well aware that there was a certain amount of discontent.

Assar: And did you let the Foreign Office know about this?

Wright: Oh yes.

Assar: And what was their reaction?

Wright: Well, they didn't react. I'd just tell them there was -- It wasn't a discontent to lead to any serious trouble at that time. There wasn't any trouble in 1970 when I left.

Assar: What about the mullahs, because you see, as you say, the Persians really believed very firmly that the cause at the time of the constitutional revolution, the British backed the mullahs who were pro-revolution. They managed to keep in touch with them right through and that they influenced the course of events with Khomeini.

Wright: One of the great Iranian myths is the British link with the mullahs. Such a link goes back to 1901 to about 1905 and had certainly come to an end by the time of the Anglo-Russian agreement in 1907, and it was never resumed to the best of my knowledge. I've looked through a great many papers in the Foreign Office and so on, and I don't believe there was any -- It was a very temporary one, and if you want the record of that, you should read the introduction to my latest book. I give the record of where the papers are to be found in the Foreign Office, why we established contact with the mullahs, which was not to undermine the position of the Shah, but to try and restrain him being too pro-Russian.

Assar: I would like to ask you a few questions about your relationship with certain personalities there. I gather that you didn't get on very well with Ardeshir Zahedi and that at one point it became so difficult that you went to the Shah and said, "How can

I operate as an ambassador if I can't deal with your Foreign Minister?"

Wright: Quite untrue. I didn't get on particularly well with him, but I never went to the Shah and complained about him at all, and I always was well received by Zahedi. We were temperamentally quite different people, and I think he always rather resented that when my first Christmas in Tehran, when he was Ambassador in London, he sent a very handsome present of a gold watch with the image of the Shah on it to my wife and also a couple of rock crystal and silver salt cellars, and we have a strict rule in the Foreign Office about accepting gifts when we're in office. So I wrote a letter to Ardeshir Zahedi and said I was very embarrassed by these handsome presents. If he'd sent me something simple like a book, I would have been very happy to receive it. But under Foreign Office rules, I could not accept such expensive presents and returned them. And I think he always resented this action of mine. But apart from that, we got on reasonably well. And when I left the country altogether, I went to say goodbye to him at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and not only did he kiss me on both cheeks, but he went to his safe in his office and produced the same watch which he had given to my wife and I'd sent back and asked me to accept it. And I accepted it because I was retiring. But I also had a certain amount of problem with him over the Bahrain issue, and he took a very emotional line about it. But the Shah, realizing this -- he didn't hear it from me -- when it came to really negotiating on Bahrain, he instructed me to deal exclusively with Amir Afshar, who was Deputy Foreign Minister. But it's totally untrue that I ever

complained about Ardeshir Zahedi or was not on reasonably good terms with him.

Assar: So that takes care of Ardeshir Zahedi, who at the time was Foreign Minister. And then you had dealings with Afshar over a number of years, both over Bahrain and when he was ambassador in London and that kind of thing. Would you tell us about your relationship with him and your impression of his personality and the kind of dealings that he --

Wright: Well, he was a very polished diplomat, a man of I'd say very false pride at his position, I think. But on Bahrain he was skillful. I didn't always agree with him, and I happened to appeal to the Shah, as you heard the broadcast I did the other day with Tony Parsons on the Bahrain thing. There were problems over how we tackle the problem of sectioning Bahrain, and where I disagreed with him, I went to the Shah. And on a couple of very crucial points, the Shah overruled Afshar. But he was acting as a good Iranian diplomat, and I have no complaint on that score. My only complaint is that when we finally got caught up in the problem of the wording of the letter to be sent to the Secretary General of the United Nations asking him to use his good offices in settling it, the wording used by the Iranians as drafted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran -- I don't know by whom -- was so offensive to the British and to the Iranians, that it was unacceptable. And this was contrary to what I had originally agreed with Afshar. And I was home on my last leave before retirement, and in the end it was decided the only way to settle this was for me to



see the Shah, who was at San Moritz. So I went to see him there, and I said it is central that Afshar be there. Although then Ambassador to London, he was still handling these very delicate, very secret Bahrain negotiations. And the Shah gave instructions that I was to work out a formula with Afshar in the next room, which I did and agreed -- I said, "I accept this on the part of the British government." And he said, "Well, I'll take it to the Shah." He went in to see the Shah, who said, "When we left, he'll probably be here until seven o'clock. Any problems come and see me." And after ten minutes or so, Afshar returned and said, "The Shah agrees." So because I was a little bit suspicious, and I'm cautious by nature, I said, "Please read out exactly what has been agreed so there's no misunderstanding." So he read out and had put back almost everything which I had cut out. So I exploded and said this was not what I had agreed. So Afshar said, "His Imperial Majesty the Shahanshah, etc., etc. has agreed. You cannot alter it." I said, "Damn what the Shah says. This is not what I agreed for the British government, and I don't accept it." Afshar tried to bully me into accepting it, and I refused. I said, "Well, I'll go and see the Shah myself." And then he crumbled, and he went back to the Shah, and a few minutes later he was back and said the Shah agreed. So then because I didn't trust Afshar one inch after that, I said, "You get it typed out, and give it to me, and then I will accept it." And so I made him go off and have it typed out, and then I accepted it and telephoned to London. And he asked me to have dinner with him, but I refused. I was not going to sit down at the same table with him.

Assar: But after that you sort of were on amicable terms. I mean, after this --

Wright: Well, while he was Ambassador to London, he blacklisted me here. I know I was never invited to the Iranian Embassy because he was Ambassador. And at the first dinner, after I retired, of the Iran Society -- there were five hundred and something people in the Savoy Hotel -- Lord Shawcross was chairman -- Princess Alexandra was a guest of honor. And Afshar made a speech in which he attacked the British government about the islands, Abu Musa and the Tumbs, which had not yet been settled. This was October, I think. And a most unhelpful speech when I knew perfectly well, and Afshar knew, that we were moving towards a settlement on these islands. And I was asked after dinner. I was absolutely furious because people like Chairman of B. P., the head of the Foreign Office were all that, and I'd been building up Iran as a country we should help, and they were, you know, decent people; and here was Afshar making this monstrous speech. And Shapuriyan, who was the press attach, came up to me and said, "What do you think of the speech by Mr. Afshar?" I said, "It's the most disgusting performance I have heard for a long time, and you can tell him so." Well, two days later Shapuriyan telephoned from the Iranian Embassy, and I'm sure Afshar was listening in, and said, "The Ambassador has heard your message. He wants you to know that he was trying to help the British government." I said, "Don't talk such bores to me." I said, "If I'd been Princess Alexandra, I should have walked out." Well, from then onwards, I was on his black list. And a few days after that, Dr. Egbal came down to have lunch with us here. He had been at the

dinner, and he asked me what I thought about the speech. I said I was not impressed. And Eqbal said he thought it was a very bad performance and "I'm going back to tell the Shah." And there's no doubt that Afshar got into trouble -- not through me but through Eqbal. But he blamed me, and of course, from then on I was on his black list. So I was never invited to the Iranian Embassy.

Assar: So you haven't seen him since?

Wright: No. He once put out feelers. Also, Isa Sadiq's son asked me to have lunch with Afshar about two years ago, but I refused.

Assar: Now, although I heard your debate on the radio about the Bahrain situation with the other politicians involved, people who are going to listen to these in twenty years' time haven't, so could you sort of tell us about what it was all about over Bahrain and how the negotiations went and what happened eventually?

Wright: Well, Bahrain had been in dispute with the British for one hundred and fifty years or more. The Iranians had, as BBC may have pondered, quite a good claim historically to have been part of the Iranian Empire. And there was one period, I think, one of the British representatives made some mission of Iranian sovereignty over it. But the British, by and large, had been consistent throughout the 19th Century that this belonged to the Sheik of Bahrain, and the Iranians had no claim to it.

Assar: And you were protecting them?

Wright: We had a Treaty of Protection, as we had with all the other Gulf sheykdoms. Well, when the British government decided to announce publicly that they were going to withdraw from the Persian Gulf -- I think it was made by 1968 -- they decided the best way to leave behind a sort of stable position in the Gulf among the Sheykdoms was to try and encourage a federation. And they announced this, and the sheyks announced it, and we wanted a federation of all the Gulf sheyks, including Bahrain. And this worried the Iranians, who saw this as a very devious British move to confront them with accepting the surrender of Bahrain, Abu Musa and The Tumbs. So there was a very violent Iranian reaction. I haven't forgot the word in which you were going to talk to, but there was an official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, talking about how these territories had been acquired by fraud and deceit by the British government, etc., etc., and so we were in a jam. I went to see the Shah twice, I think in June and again in August, 1968, to see whether we couldn't reach some overall agreement -- not just about Bahrain, but about Abu Musa, about the median line for oil, about all the issues in dispute. But the Shah wouldn't play ball, except on Bahrain he said, "I don't want to take it over, but historically I've got a claim to it, and therefore, if I'm going to give it up -- And after all," he said, "the pearls have run out. The oil is running out. It's no good to me. I must have some face saving formula." And he wanted a referendum or a plebiscite to work with. And I had to tell him that it was impossible, because Bahrain has no voting system. They've got no means of having a referendum, and any attempt to have one would have not been acceptable to the

Sheykh. And he wouldn't accept this. So for August, when I had a meeting down in the Caspian with him right through until November or December, we were in a deadlock, impasse. Senator Mascudi -- Abbas Mascudi -- who was the editor and publisher of Ettelacat, used to come and talk to me about Bahrain. He's always felt it's something that should be settled, and we had a number of talks. And his English was nil, his French wasn't frightfully good, and my Persian was not very good. But we did our talks mostly in Persian and in some French. And I -- without any authority from London, but on the strength of one sentence of a telegram I'd received from the Foreign Office -- said, "Well, what about trying to do this through the United Nations -- settling it that way?" But I say, I had no authority for doing this. But he said, "Well, I'll talk to the Shah. I'm seeing him tomorrow night," and so on. Two days later he telephoned me and said, "Come and see me -- have a tea with me." We used to take turns having tea. And I went to see him, and he said, "The Shah likes this idea." So I then telegraphed to London and said this United Nations idea was something the Shah seems [to like]. So then the Foreign Office worked on this. There was a great deal of doubt there whether it was possible. The UN people didn't know if it would be possible, and Bahrain didn't know. But anyway, in the end I got instructions just before Christmas that "Yes, we will try this, but because we don't trust the Iranians, the Iranians don't trust us, the Bahrainees don't trust either of us, we've got to have everything in writing at every stage." And I went to the Shah on Christmas Eve, 1968, and said, "Look, this is a possible way of getting the United Nations to go and sound public opinion in Bahrain." The Shah, who had been prepared a little bit