Joseph Rousseau on Georgia and the Planned Indian Expedition (1807)

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In the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France is a 222-page manuscript entitled *Tableau général de la Perse moderne ou mémoire géographique, historique et politique sur la situation actuelle de cet Empire* (AMFAE, MD/Perse, VI, doc, 19, fol. 59r-169r). It is dated 1807 and signed by J.-B. (i.e., Joseph) Rousseau, the son (J.-B. Rousseau fils). Who was J.-B. Rousseau, the son, and what was his purpose when he wrote this work of quite significant size, with highlighted notes about Georgia?

After the expedition against Egypt (1798-99), the First Consul, together with the Russian Emperor Paul I, planned a land expedition against India via Afghanistan (Rouir, p. 88). It is significant that, in that same period, Emperor Paul adopted a more active Caucasian policy (Markova, p. 245). On January 18, 1801, the Manifesto of Paul I regarding the annexing of Georgia to Russia was published in St. Petersburg, and on February 27, the regiments of the Cossacks of Don set out from Orenburg for the expedition against India, following the instruction of the emperor (Shilder, pp. 417-20). This plan was aborted, however, when Paul was murdered on March 11.

After two unsuccessful attempts, Napoleon decided to include Persia in the expedition against India, taking into consideration the territorial proximity of Persia and Afghanistan. With this purpose in mind, in October 1803, he sent the ambassador of France in Constantinople, Marshal Brune, and the commissars of the commercial relations of France in Baghdad and Aleppo, Jean-François Rousseau, and Allesandro-Louigi de Coranchez, to collect detailed information about Persia and to investigate the attitude of the court of Tehran towards France.

Jean-François Rousseau had been born and raised in Julfa, a suburban township of Isfahan, which makes the information he provides a source of special merit.1 In a letter of October 22/28, 1804 (an 13), he informs Talleyrand that

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1 The Rousseau family had settled in Persia in the beginning of the 18th century. Jacques
he had contacted influential persons in Persia, among them Shaykh al-Eslām of Isfahan, Mirzā Mortazā, with whom Jean-François Rousseau had long been friends (AMFAE, MD/Perse, VI, doc. 19, fol., 105r), and who had confided in him the eagerness of Fath-ʿAli Shah to establish relations with Napoleon. In this same letter Rousseau touches upon the detailed plan that he had made long before on how to drive away the British from India, and points out possible ways to proceed along with potential allies. In his plan, a tripartite alliance between France, Persia and Kandahar would take place, and Fath-ʿAli Shah would be the mediator between Kandahar and France. Should the emperor approve this plan and decide to send an ambassador to the king of Persia, Rousseau suggested that he choose a person whose interest in the mission would be complemented by a knowledge of the traditions and customs of Persia. He also, noting his solid knowledge of Persia, Persians and the current events at the royal court in Tehran, indicated his readiness to leave for Tehran, “notwithstanding his age,” in order to prepare the necessary grounds for the mission’s accomplishment. He further demanded that, should the emperor order him to go, his son, Joseph Rousseau, would accompany him (in many documents kept in AMFAE, J.-F. Rousseau and J.-B. Rousseau are mentioned as Rousseau, the father, and Rousseau, the son). According to him, his son, despite his relatively young age (24 years old), knew all oriental languages and was prepared for diplomatic service. He emphasized that, despite the considerable amount of money used by the British ambassador in Persia, he could achieve better success than the British, due to his experience and enthusiasm (AMFAE, CP/Perse VIII, doc. 64, fol. 182r-189v).²

Rousseau (1679-1753), father of Jean-Francois Xavier Rousseau (1738-1808) and uncle of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, had left together for Persia with the embassy sent by King Louis XIV to the Safavid court of Shah Sołtan-Hosayn (r. 1694-1722) in 1705. A jeweler and watch-maker by profession, he stayed on in Persia and worked as such for the court under the last Safavids and Nāder Shah Afşār. It was he who was entrusted by Nāder Shah to choose and process for his crown the diamonds that he had brought from India. After the death of his father, Jean-François left for Bandar Abbas, where he ran a profitable trade operation, accumulating substantial wealth. From 1756 until the end of his life he was in a trade and diplomatic service of France in the Near East (Éloge historique, pp. 2-3; Rousseau, pp. iv-x; Dehérain, II, pp. 26-27; Naraghi, p. 83).

² It is not impossible that the plan of the mentioned expedition, in a certain way, was conditioned by J.-F. Rousseau’s non-objective attitude. Jean Raymond, an ex-sergeant of the East India Company and an eye-witness, writes that the primary concern of Hartford Johnes, the Resident of Great Britain in Baghdad since 1798, was the urgent deportation of Jean-François Rousseau from this town (AMFAE, CP/Perse, VIII, doc. 165, fol. 399r). After the French invasion of Egypt, J.-F. Rousseau was put in shackles and thrown into the prison of Mardin. He remained in prison for eleven months before his friend, Solaymān, the Pasha of Baghdad (1777-1802), could liberate him (Rousseau, pp. iv-x).