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'Memorandum by Lieutenant-General J. W. Schneider, C.B.'

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About this record

The file consists of a memorandum from Sir John William Schneider, Political Resident at Aden, on British interests in Socotra.

It includes opinions on Lieutenant-Colonel Kitchener's misapprehensions with regards to British influence at Socotra [Suqūṭrā]; discusses the treaty or agreement concluded in 1876 which bound the Sultan Ali Bin Abdulla El-Alfreer and his successors, and the necessity of acquiring certain rights over the island and its dependencies. It also notes the need for the construction and maintenance of a lighthouse at Cape Gardafui or Fas Hufoon; and raises the question of fortifying the island of Perim [Jazīrat Mayyūn] against attacks from the tribes on the African and Arabian coasts, and to protect the lighthouse.

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Memorandum by Lieutenant-General J. W. Schneider, C.B.

Lieutenant-Colonel Kitchener's remarks, in respect of Socotra and its dependencies, the adjacent islands, have apparently been written under some misapprehension. It is true that the Sultan of Socotra resides chiefly on the mainland opposite the island, that is to say, at Kisheen on the Arabian coast; but he is represented at Socotra by one or more of his sons, who rule there in his name.

When I concluded the existing treaty or agreement at Kisheen with the Sultan early in the year 1876, he had then three sons living on the island, the eldest being considered as Regent. The yearly subsidy of \$300 is payable at Socotra, and a reference to my report will, I think, show that I laid great stress on the necessity of the island being visited annually by an officer from the Aden Residency, in order that our interest and connection with the place should not be lessened. The very nature of the treaty or agreement will prove that the British flag was never hoisted at Socotra, and consequently it could not have been hauled down. The erroneous idea on the subject entertained by Lieutenant-Colonel Kitchener may have been derived from an historical sketch published by "Phil. Robinson" in the year 1878, where it is mentioned, "the island of Socotra upon which the British flag has recently been hoisted lies 148 miles east of Cape Gardafui."

I quite concur with Lieutenant-Colonel Kitchener as to the importance attaching to the possession of Socotra, and it was on this account that I urged on Government the necessity of acquiring certain rights over the island and its dependencies. The treaty or agreement is binding on the Sultan, his heirs and successors, and was signed by all the principal members of the El-Afreer family, including, of course, the three sons then resident on the island; and in the Despatch, No. 14, of the 6th April 1876, addressed to the Governor General of India, Her Majesty's Government stated that the terms of the agreement executed by Sultan Ali bin Abdulla El-Afreer appeared fully to secure the objects for which the negotiation was set on foot.

The necessity for the construction and maintenance of a lighthouse at Cape Gardafui or Ras Hufoon—the so-called False Cape—has been repeatedly brought to the notice of Government by the several Political Residents at Aden who have held office since the opening of the Suez Canal, from which time wrecks and loss of life have been of yearly occurrence during the south-west monsoon. The erection of a lighthouse is now only a question of expense, and how it is to be met. The very able Assistant Resident and Consul for the Somali Coast, Major Hunter, should be able to overcome all difficulties with the Myjerteyn or other local tribes. A fortified enclosure, somewhat similar to the one at Perim protecting the lighthouse, with a small garrison of Native troops provisioned for six months, would, of course, be necessary for some time. A condenser might also be required.

The ports of Berbera and Zeyla are, for all practical purposes, already occupied and protected by the British Government.

Referring to Lieutenant-Colonel Kitchener's observations regarding the island of Perim, it is well known that the question of fortifying this position has come under frequent consideration. The earliest report on the subject emanated from Sir W. Jervis, R.E., about the year 1870, when, in connexion with the strengthening of Aden, a large expenditure was proposed at Perim for new defences and the mounting of heavy guns. If I remember rightly, General Tremenhare, R.E., was opposed to any considerable outlay at Perim, being of opinion that, so long as we continued in possession of Aden and held the command of the seas, little or no advantage would follow from fortifying the island, which is a barren rock, quite waterless, and yielding nothing. The existing enclosure at Perim is intended to guard against attacks from the tribes on the African and Arabian coasts, and to

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protect the lighthouse. It also holds the garrison of Native troops and stores.

I think it has been overlooked by Lieutenant-Colonel Kitchener that there are two passages through the Straits of Bab-ul-Mandub. The one on the Arabian side is less than two miles broad, while the other on the African side—the longer and more circuitous passage—is ten miles in breadth. This passage is taken by steamers coaling at Perim. The width of the passage on the African side is one of the reasons why it has been held that the fortification and mounting of heavy ordnance on Perim would be useless to command the approach to and exit from the Red Sea. Even to mount a few large guns would entail the quartering at Perim of the whole or part of a garrison battery of artillery, let alone the erection of barracks and other heavy expenses that would be caused by the presence of British troops and their followers on a small island.

It remains to draw attention to the position of Shaikh Saeed, opposite Perim on the Arabian coast, and to the backwater or lake adjoining, where it has been reported, by an officer of the Royal Navy, that a harbour could be formed by dredging and excavation. If, in time to come, any foreign Power occupied Shaikh Saeed in view of establishing a fortified port there, this would doubtless be a menace against Perim, and the question of mounting heavy guns on the island, or adopting other measures, would then come under the consideration of the British Government. Until this period arrives, I cannot see the necessity for further strengthening Perim. The presence there occasionally of a man-of-war will, in my judgment, be sufficient.

Between 1872 and 1877 the Turks were in occupation of Shaikh Saeed, and a detachment of their troops was stationed there. It will be remembered that a French Company settled and erected a block-house at Shaikh Saeed, and that they were ejected by the Turks. This occurred shortly before I became Political Resident in July 1872. The Turkish detachment, which was drawn from Hodeida, is probably still located at Shaikh Saeed.

J. W. SCHNEIDER, Lieutenant-General, &c.

8, Queensborough Terrace,
23rd February 1886.