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'The Trade in Arms with the Persian Gulf'

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About this record

This file consists of a memorandum written by William Lee-Warner, Secretary to the Political and Secret Department of the India Office, it concerns the arms trade in the Persian Gulf from 1881-98.

The following topics are covered:

- Persian prohibition of the trade in arms and ammunition with Persian ports;
- the enforcement of the law;
- the seizure of arms;
- British interests in coming to agreement with the Persian Government and assisting in enforcing Persian regulations;
- methods of trade – secrecy;
- policy for the future.

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Confidential.

1898.

The Trade in Arms with the Persian Gulf.

Persian Prohibitions.—On the 3rd of July 1881, the Persian Government notified to the British and other Foreign Governments that the trade in arms and ammunition with Persian ports was prohibited. "Importers," writes Colonel Meade on 22nd March 1898, "were well aware of this." The British Minister observed that we had at times applied to the Persian authorities to prevent Afghanistan obtaining munitions of war through Persia, and therefore he had raised no objection to the prohibition. Nevertheless, owing to the weakness of the central authority, and to the sale of the offices of Governor and Customs Collector, the traffic continued, and importers made secret arrangements with the local officials to evade the law. In 1895 the Persian authorities seized a large consignment of arms in Bushire, and in the following year a special preventive officer was appointed by the Persian Government to enforce the prohibition against the traffic. On the other hand certain British traders, who had landed in 1895 at Bushire some arms from the S.S. "Zulu," alleged to have been over-carried by mistake, appealed to the British Government against their confiscation by the Persians, and obtained the restitution of their goods. The Consular reports also, year by year, noticed the increasing trade in arms with Persia in terms which, if they referred to the prohibition, seemed to treat it as nominal only. In 1897, however, events occurred which brought to the front the danger to Persia and the Government of India arising from the neglect to enforce the law, and on the 1st of December 1897, the British Resident at Bushire was informed that the Persian Government had already authorised the Malik-ut-Tajir to seize any arms he could find at Bushire which had been illicitly imported. On the 18th December 1897 the Sadr Azam addressed the British Legation referring to the prohibitive laws and expressing satisfaction at the prospect of concerted action. The Persian Government announced its determination to enforce the law rigidly, and caused a communication to be made to the Sultan of Muscat inviting his co-operation. It also accepted an offer of the British Government to assist it by searching British vessels believed to be engaged in the illicit traffic, and by seizing any arms or ammunition found on them in Persian waters which might be on their way to Persian ports, and be owned by British or Persian subjects. The Sultan of Muscat readily promised his aid, and extended the prohibition against importation into Persia or British India to Muscat territory and its waters; and on the 13th of January 1898 His Highness issued a notification declaring that arms or ammunition destined for Persia or British India and found in Muscat waters would be confiscated. At various dates in December the premises of certain merchants in Bushire were visited by Persian officers in the presence of British consular officers, and stores of arms, &c., were seized. The steamship "Tresco" arrived at Bushire on the 25th of December 1897, and a few arms were also seized on board her, and the same operation was repeated on the arrival of the "Baluchistan" in that port on the 1st of February 1898. Previously to this the "Baluchistan" had been stopped on January 24th in Muscat waters by H.M.S. "Lapwing," which acted under the proclamation of the 13th of January 1898, and on the 15th of April 1898, a Court appointed by the Sultan found that the arms and ammunition seized on board were intended for Persian ports, although the marks on the cases had been fraudulently altered at Port Said on or about the 6th of January 1898, and it decreed that they were therefore justly confiscated.

The owners of the S.S. "Baluchistan" must have expected the fate which they provoked. They also owned the S.S. "Turkistan" which had carried

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in February and in July of 1897 a quantity of arms to the Gulf, and the S.S. "Arabistan" which had sailed in September 1897 with several cases of arms and ammunition. It is inconceivable that they were not aware of the restrictions and dangers of the trade. In fact on the 23rd of December, four days before the "Baluchistan" sailed from Marseilles, and long before it reached Port Said, or Jibuti, they wrote to the Foreign Office referring to the orders given by the Persian Government, and asking Lord Salisbury "to give such instructions as will enable our steamer to have protection in this matter." They admitted that the Resident had informed their agent that "the arms are liable to be seized and confiscated in Persian waters." On the 24th of December they were asked by the Foreign Office to give certain detailed information as to the consignee's names and other particulars. This, however, was an inconvenient request with which they did not comply, and on 13th of January their omission was referred to in these terms: "In the absence of that information there is nothing to show that the shippers and exporters were not, at the time of exportation, alive to the risks which they have incurred by engaging in a trade which is contrary to Persian law and regulations."

British Interests.—It is convenient here to summarise some of the reasons which induced the British Government to come to an agreement with the Persian Government, and to assist it in enforcing the Persian regulations:—

- I. For some years past it had been evident that Muscat was becoming a centre of trade in arms and ammunition, and the Sultan was anxious to stop its growth as dangerous to his own position. Rebellions against his authority in Dhofar and at Mattra had proved that the tribesmen were armed, and the British Government had given advice and even lent its active aid in restoring the Sultan's authority. It was at first proposed to put a heavy tax on the importation of arms, but the Muscat Treaties of Commerce, of 21st September 1833, with the United States, of 19th March 1891, with Great Britain, of 17th November 1844, with France, and the rights of other most favoured nations were found to be opposed to this solution. The alternative of prohibiting the export of arms to the Gulf from Great Britain was considered and rejected. There seemed then no other course open save that of stopping the trade with Persia and India through Muscat, and this course, after a discussion of some months, was finally proposed to the Foreign Office on 1st December 1897, the very day on which the agent of the Persian Government informed the Resident at Bushire of the orders which he had independently received from the Persian authorities to make a seizure of arms.
- II. Amongst other events which served to call attention to British interests in the matter were several piratical attacks on British Indian vessels trading with the Gulf and the Shatt-el-Arab. In the case of the Hari Prasad, and more recently in that of the Kalian Pasa which was attacked on the 2nd of December 1897 near Saihan Point, the fatal use of firearms and our failure to secure satisfaction for the piracies convinced Government that steps must be taken to protect British commerce by dealing with this question. There were precedents for such action, because in 1892 the Sultan of Muscat had, in the interests of Germany, been induced to prohibit the re-exportation of arms from Muscat for the coasts of Africa, and in the previous year their exportation to Gwadar was also forbidden. Now, British interests in the Gulf are bound up with peace, because we have a network of Indian treaties with the tribes for what is called "the Maritime Truce." Of recent years, at Koweit and Bahrein, and at Zobara in the El Katr peninsula, there have been grave disturbances requiring our intervention, and in each case the position was aggravated by the arms traffic.
- III. In Persia itself British interests had suffered from attacks upon the telegraph system of the Indo-European Telegraph Company, which the Persian Government and the local chiefs are bound to protect

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under agreements with the Government of India. Several lawless incidents culminated in the murder of Mr. Graves in December 1897, and the increase of these attacks was attributed to the arming of the robbers and tribes in southern Persia. Even at Bushire itself the Residency was not free from danger, while the roads into the interior were often unsafe.

IV. Beyond the borders of Persia and in Baluchistan itself a survey party was attacked on the 9th January 1898, and it became necessary to land a force of sailors and British Indian troops in order to protect the servants of the Indian Government.

V. It was also ascertained that arms were being imported into Afghanistan through Bandar Abbas, Charbar, and other ports opposite Muscat, and it was alleged and feared that the tribes in revolt on the Indian frontier were obtaining ammunition and arms from the Persian Gulf. In support of this last assertion it was proved that Afghan emissaries were awaiting the arrival of the "Baluchistan" at Muscat, and 20 packets of Martini-Henry ammunition, with paper showing that it was made in Belgium, were found at Pasni in Mir Suka's house in February last. It is worthy of note that the Belgian manufacturers of rifles obtained last year from the British Government contractors the exact measurements of the British Martini-Henry rifle, so as to ensure that the British ammunition would fit the rifles; obviously those who ordered the rifles expected to get access to British cartridges. Certain caravans have also lately started for the British Indian frontier from the Baluchistan coast with cases supposed to contain arms transported from Muscat, and steps have been taken to follow them up. The only doubt which has been thrown on the supply of these rifles and ammunition to the tribes arises from the fact that amongst the arms surrendered by the tribes none corresponded to the arms known to have been sent to Muscat. But the value of this evidence is discounted by the fact that the tribes have surrendered only their worthless, stolen, or specially made-up arms, and no rifles have been captured in the field, because rifles as well as the bodies of the slain are removed by the tribesmen. Information obtained in England shows that the importers in the Gulf ordered arms on account of the tribes, and it is noteworthy that the Belgian manufacturers took pains, after the outbreak of the disturbances in 1897, to erase all marks on the rifles and cartridge cases sent out by them for the Gulf.

Methods of the Trade.—The methods of the trade lend weight to the suspicion that the arms were known to be liable to seizure and were wanted for no proper purpose. Secrecy has been the rule in the last two years. Arms have been shipped or transhipped at the last moment in order to take advantage of confusion or hurry. In some cases the intention to ship at London has been altered in view of the vigilance of the Customs, and the cases have been shipped at Manchester instead. Although the exporters have in many instances received full payment before shipment, the bills of lading have even in those cases shown no names of consignees. Clearly in such cases the names were omitted by design, as the Bills did not pass through a Bank, and there was no need to adopt the vague generality "to order." In a recent case a false name of consignee, namely, Gopalji Walji, was entered as the consignee, and repudiated by the said Gopalji on arrival. Even the name of the exporter has been changed at the last moment in order to divert attention, as where Spencer was put in place of Carling & Co. The arms have been entered on bills of lading as "hardware," and when on one occasion a true copy of the bill of lading was called for, the shippers inserted "merchandise" for "hardware" which would have been a less inaccurate description, and when the bill was challenged they wrote that it was made out "from memory." The cases themselves bear marks only and no address. Even these marks and the destination are altered on board, either at Port Said or at sea. The shippers undertake

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to land not merely at the port originally named, but at another port in the Gulf as desired, and the desire of the consignee is signified at the last moment, and even at a port on the way to the Gulf. The practice of the trade has been carefully watched of late, and the main impression produced by the inquiries is the endeavour to obscure the destination and the names of the recipients of the arms. Some firms of repute have given up the trade, and the firms which take most part in it have Indians or Persians as partners. At the port of receipt the trade is largely in the hands of those, *e.g.*, Malcolm & Co. of Bushire, or Gopalji Walji of Muscat, who have secured a contract for the collection of the customs. Where the importer is not also collector, he secures the goodwill of the customs authorities by payment of a bribe in the shape of a special *ad valorem* duty. The receipts from these duties are not entered as customs receipts. The English firms have agents at Muscat or in the Gulf, whose proceedings are in accord with the whole spirit of secrecy that pervades the trade. Finally, the arms sent out are chiefly of Belgian make, and the greatest care has of late been taken to remove all marks from them.

Our policy for the future.—I have shown that despite the representations of Muscat, and the customs regulations of Persia, an illicit traffic in arms, chiefly of Belgian make, has been carried on by a few British firms in a secret manner with the Gulf, and that it is inimical to British interests. As to its extent, its registered value rose from Rs. 13,120 in 1892-93 to Rs. 23,87,195 in 1896-97, and when lately the operations of search and seizure were conducted at Bushire, Muscat, and Bahrein some two-and-a-half million rounds of ammunition, and nearly 16,000 rifles were seized. Our interests in the Gulf are to preserve peace and order for commerce, and in Persian territory we desire to maintain communications and open out trade routes. In Baluchistan we are more directly responsible for order, and it is important that Afghan and Pathan tribes should not have access to an unlimited supply of arms. Even on the Arab coast we have of late years actively interfered to uphold the Sultan's rule, and that rule is imperilled by the importation of arms. We must therefore continue to assist our allies in suppressing the illicit traffic in arms, and it is necessary that no favour should be shown by them to foreign merchants. We have a right to expect that Persia will uniformly exert itself to confiscate arms imported by any nation contrary to its regulations. As regards the British importers, whose arms have been seized, no intervention on their behalf will be justified unless they can prove in the Consular Courts that the arms seized were not intended for Persian or British territory, or if so intended were being sent under permission duly received from responsible authority. The trade is at present almost entirely suspended, and its revival would be unfair upon Persia and Muscat as well as opposed to our own interests.

W. LEE-WARNER.

3rd June 1898.