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'Letter from Sir M. Durand to Foreign Office'

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About this record

The file consists of a letter from Henry Mortimer Durand, Minister at Tehran to the Foreign Office, introducing an enclosure from Captain Percy Molesworth Sykes regarding the proposed telegraph line from Kerman to India, dated 22 September 1898. Sykes details the potential starting points for the new line at either Ispahan [Isfahan] or Kashan, assesses the geography and climate of alternative routes, outlines his experience traversing route sections, and provides recommendations.

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Letter from Sir M. Durand to Foreign Office.

No. 110. Tehran,
My Lord, 18th October 1898.
I have the honour to forward, for transmission to the India Office, if your Lordship sees fit, copy of a letter from Captain Percy M. Sykes, regarding the proposed land line from Persia to India.
I wish to reserve my opinion until the officer deputed by the Telegraph Department has surveyed and reported, but in the meantime the India Office may like to see Captain Sykes' letter.
The Marquess of Salisbury, K.G., I have, &c.,
&c. &c. &c. H. M. DURAND.

ENCLOSURE.

Captain Sykes to Sir M. Durand.

No. 3. Ispahan,
Sir, 22nd September 1898.
With respect to the proposed telegraph line *viâ* Kerman to India, I have the honour to make the following report:—
It would appear that for a starting point from which the new line would branch off from the already constructed line, Ispahan and Kashan are the only towns that need be considered. Starting point of new line Kashan to Yezd.
The first-named city is a great commercial centre, possesses a good climate, and is already joined to Kerman by a line running through Nain and Yezd, which is, however, in a decrepit condition. The drawbacks are unfortunately great, as not only would the line be longer but both the Kohrud Pass to the north of Ispahan and the Lazarek Pass, with an altitude of 8,400 feet to the east would have to be considered. 8,750 feet.
Kashan, with an altitude of 3,200 feet, or some 2,000 feet lower than its rival, can only boast of a fair climate, while as a commercial centre it is far less important than Ispahan. 8,400 feet.
On the other hand, by following the main caravan route from Kashan to Yezd, which also runs through Nain, the telegraph line would run down through the centre of a valley averaging some seven miles in width, whilst the greatest altitude to be crossed would consist in the pass lying between Nayistanak (5,721 feet) to the south, and Jogund or Zaferkund (5,412 feet) to the north, where there is a very gradual ascent to 6,338 feet, with hills to the western side of the track only, the descent being equally gentle. The fact that this pass, or perhaps more correctly this watershed is nameless, tends to confirm local statements to the effect that it is never blocked. Height of pass or watershed 6,338 feet.
Both of the above-mentioned villages have a good climate and produce supplies in abundance, so that either of them would appear to be suitable for a telegraph station.
In 1895, I travelled from Kashan to Yezd, *viâ* Natunz, Kuhpa and Nodushan. A reference to the new Route Book will show (Sect. I, No. 9, p. 329) that this route is essentially a summer one, and, as it crosses the Godar-i-Khut (8,500 feet), a narrow pass at a considerable elevation, it would not appear to be as suitable as the route referred to before.
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In case it be desired to take advantage of the construction of the new line for the purpose of avoiding the Kohrud Pass, the town of Ardistan has a good climate, plenty of supplies, and is connected with Ispahan by an easy pass.

The climate of Yezd is hot, and its inhabitants fanatical, so that it might be desirable to keep the staff outside. In this case, the Baghi-Khan, some four miles from Yezd on the Taft Road, might be examined. It is well situated above Yezd, and could, I believe, be purchased for a small sum.

Yezd to Kerman, *vide* Route Book, p. 322. With respect to the section from Yezd to Kerman there are again two routes to choose from, along both of which I have travelled, but the one *viâ* Anar and Bahramabad, which is the Persian telegraphic route, was well chosen by General Schindler, as not only is it the caravan and postal route but, in the case of a branch to Bunder Abbas, the point of departure must be at or near Bahramabad, the road to the coast *viâ* Saidabad being alone open during the winter.

Girdkuh and Hosseinabad instead of Zehn-u-din and Kermanshahan. To take this section in detail, in order to avoid the two desert stages of Zehn-u-din and Kermanshahan, the line might be slightly deflected to the north to Girdkuh (which appears in the I. D. W. O. too far west) and Hosseinabad, the extra distance would perhaps be six or seven miles.

Nearer Kerman, during the spring, the district of Rafsinjan suffers a good deal from floods, while further east the Lalazar River is lost in a swamp. For this reason it might perhaps be advisable to keep along the skirt of the Kuh-i-Nuk and avoid the open plain.

Kerman. Kerman would, I presume, be an important telegraph station, and I think that the best site for a garden would be found in a "Baghistan," about half a mile from the south-east gate. It is there that I rented a house in 1895-96.

From Kashan to Kerman about 424 miles. Kerman to Bam. 8391. The Persian Telegraph Office is close to the west gate of the town. So far the telegraph line has run for more than 400 miles between the same ranges of mountains without crossing a pass or a river, but the section to Bam and Rigan presents considerable difficulties if the caravan route be adhered to, as the Hanaka Pass is very narrow and over 8,000 feet in height, which conditions are, I believe, unfavourable to the maintenance of a telegraph line. Some five years ago I had formed the opinion that the main line would finally run through Kerman and Bampur to India, so that, when stationed at Kerman, I undertook two short journeys (*vide* my Third Journey, App. I., p. 98) in order to see how this very serious obstacle might be avoided. A description of a pass to the west of the Kotul-i-Hanaka will be found in the new Route Book, p. 328, which I traversed during the summer of 1895, but, during the autumn of the same year, I hit upon a route by which all passes are avoided.

Not having my note books with me, I cannot give the names of the stages, but from Mahun a route running E.S.E. should be followed, passing to the south of Sagoch at six miles, and Arababad at nine miles, while I think that the name of the stage is Mianabad. From there the hills on both sides of the valley decrease in size, the Kud-i-Surkh being passed on the south side of the track, while the usual route is re-joined near Tehrud. Supplies are scarce by this road, which also avoids the small town of Rayin, but, in other respects, the wide valley presents no obstacles to a line.

With this exception there is no difficulty to be encountered in the section, the track following the left bank of the Bam River until the district of Narmshir be reached.

Bam 3,480 feet. Kazerun 2,850 feet. The climate of Bam is somewhat cooler than Kazerun, the summers being hot, but snow occasionally falling during the winter. It is the seat of Government, and, in consequence, all the Khans reside in gardens near or in the town, so that all arrangements for the desert section must be completed before proceeding to Rigan. As far as Narmshir the route I have indicated appears to be undoubtedly the best, and Rigan may, in the future, be an important telegraphic station, as there is an easy route running down to Bunder Abbas from Narmshir, but, beyond this oasis, a decision has to be arrived at whether the line is to run east *viâ* Ladis and Nushki to Quetta, undoubtedly a most direct route, or whether it should shape its course *viâ* Bampur and Magas to Kohuk, with either Quetta or Karachi as termini.

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To consider the northern route, if the line were to run *viâ* Ladis and Nushki, it would pass through the most desert tract of country that lies between Persia and India, while there is not even a village of any size for a distance of at least 500 miles, Basman, Kwash, Ladis, and Chageh, the only inhabited places in this appalling waste, being little better than hamlets, while Nushki can scarcely be termed an important centre.

Again, there is a most meagre supply of water along this route, the climate is, with the exception of some 60 miles across Sarhad, most trying, and it is the most disturbed part of east Persia, with its local name of Yaghsitan, or the "outlaws' home," Jend Khan, the Damani Chief, having been in open rebellion for more than a decade.

Jend Khan
the outlaw.

Finally, the line would pass for hundreds of miles along the Afghan frontier, a strong strategical and political disadvantage, so that I cannot but think that this route will be inadvisable, while a preliminary survey, besides being dangerous and arduous, would apparently not be of great benefit, the whole region being inhospitable and sterile to a maximum degree.

It would appear that the re-opening of the Quetta-Nushki-Seistan route has tended to attract attention to this part of Beluchistan, but, to give a proof of the general accuracy of my description of the country, I may mention that when travelling to Seistan on plague duty in April 1897, Major Brazier Creagh stated (Major Brazier Creagh, R.M.S., on the Quetta-Seistan route), I am quoting from memory, that he had to carry "all supplies for twenty days" while he marched some 20 miles per diem. Had his journey been from India to Rigan he must have had transported nearly double the amount.

Re-opening
of Quetta-
Seistan
Caravan
route.

We will now return to Rigan, but before discussing the next section, it will be as well to note that Pahra or Fahraj, the capital of Persian Beluchistan, according to Beluchi or Persian pronunciation, a large village lying some 15 miles to the east of Bampur, is now the seat of Government, so that all calculations will be made to and from the new not the old capital.

From Rigan to Pahra there are three alternative routes, the least desirable of which was followed by the Seistan mission, the fear of Sarhaddi raids making them or rather their guides keep to the south *viâ* Giranrig and Kalanzahu.

Rigan to
Pahra
viâ Giranrig
and Kalan-
zahu.

Captain Jennings and myself both travelled by the middle route *viâ* Gehgan and Dar-i-Kishkin, finding a fair quantity of water but no supplies.

B. *viâ*
Gehgan and
Dar-i-Kish-
kin.

Finally there is, telegraphically speaking, an infinitely more desirable route *viâ* Basman village, which is only a few miles longer and passes the village of Maksan a stage to the west of Basman, thus breaking up the desert section at two points.

C. *viâ*
Maksan and
Basman.

The village of Basman lies at the south end of the range which bears the same name, its altitude is 3,120 feet, while the great peak runs up to 11,217 feet, with camping grounds at 6,000 feet. This is evidently a suitable place for a telegraph station, while I should recommend that the line be run direct to Pahra, keeping to the north of Bampur.

Basman
village, *vide*
Third
Journey
Nos. 7 and 8.

If it be desired to construct a line *viâ* Gwadur to Karachi it is from Pahra that this must be done, but, as it is probably intended to abolish the coast line *in toto* we will proceed to examine the Pahra Kohuk section.

Possible
Pahra-
Serbaz-
Gwadur
section.

The line would now run through a comparatively populous and well-watered portion of Beluchistan. It is fully described in my Third Journey No. 4, as far as Magas.

Pahra to
Kohuk.
Magas.

This village lies at an elevation of 4,000 feet above the sea, or more than 2,000 feet above Pahra, so that the climate is comparatively salubrious and cool.

Beyond Magas lies the village and district of Sib, which is generally a separate Governorship, but is at times joined on to Dizak.

Sib.

In 1896 I kept to the south of the route shown on the map, and thereby avoided the difficult pass that is said to lie to the east of Suran and Sib, while I passed, perhaps, 15 miles to the south of Dizak.

Kohuk, the frontier village, produces but little in the way of supplies and lies about a mile or less from the left bank of the Mashkel or Mashkid River, which forms the boundary at this particular point. Its bed is, perhaps, 600 yards wide, but it only contains isolated pools except when in flood, and

Kohuk.

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Kohuk to
Quetta, *vid*
Panjkur and
Kelat.

is chiefly remarkable as being the only river of any importance that lies between Kashan and Quetta, a distance of more than 1,300 miles.

Beyond Kohuk we are in British Beluchistan, and the only route that I have travelled along lies up the Rakshan River to Panjkur, Kelat, and Quetta.

This would be suitable for a telegraph line, but Quetta lies 3 degrees to the north of Pahra, Magas, and Kohuk, while no doubt a more direct route can be found *vid* Bela to Karachi.

In conclusion I would venture to suggest that the new line should run *vid* Kashan, Nain, Yezd, Anar, Bahramabad, Kerm, Kerman, Bam, Rigan, Basman, Pahra, Magas, Sib, Isfundaka to Kohuk, and from Kohuk either to Quetta or Karachi.

P. M. SYKES.