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'Memorandum by Sir W. Lee-Warner on the Lease to France of a Coaling Station in Muskat Territory - Statement of our Case (Political No. 1837/99).'

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About this record

A memorandum describing how it had emerged that the Sultan of Muskat had granted the French a concession to establish a coaling station on his territory, and stating that the Sultan had only produced the text of the concession upon threat of bombardment by the British. The memorandum goes on to describe the French Government's agreement to withdraw the concession, as it contravened a Treaty of 1862 in which the Sultan pledged not to lease any part of his territory to either Power, and notes the French Government's continuing desire to establish a coaling station on the same terms as the British. The memorandum concludes with a quotation from *The Times* newspaper, reproducing a statement in the House of Commons regarding the events. The memorandum is written by Sir William Lee-Warner.

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Memorandum by Sir W. Lee-Warner on the Lease to France of a Coaling Station in Muskat Territory—Statement of our Case (Political No. 1837/99).

On 20th November the "Journal des Débats" stated that a French man-of-war had established a coaling station at "Bender Gissah." In answer to an inquiry made by Her Majesty's Ambassador at Paris, Mons. Delcassé stated that this was the first he had heard of it. It appears from what follows that the concession had been granted as far back as the 7th of March 1898.

2. On the 13th of December the Viceroy was referred to, and a reference was made to Muskat. It was not until the 17th of January that the Sultan admitted that he had promised the French a coaling station, but he added that "the locality was not settled." He further stated that he had only given to the French the same coaling facilities that were enjoyed by the British. It should be explained here that in 1875 the Sultan, Seyyid Turki, allowed the Political Agent to build a go-down on the foreshore in a cove at Makalla in Muskat. In 1886 the adjoining site, which had been held free by the British India Steam Navigation Company, was also handed over to the Agent. There, on a cove open to all, the coal belonging to the British authorities is stored for use.

3. On 22nd January the British Consul pointed out these circumstances to the Sultan, and asked for proof that the French Government had received nothing more than the British had. The attention of the Sultan was called to his engagements, which prevent his alienation of any part of his territories to a foreign Power. The Sultan, on 28th January, refused to produce the text of his concession to the French; and it was not until threat of force was used that he finally complied with our demands, and showed our Agent the concession, dated 7th March 1898, giving to the French Government "a place for coal on the coast outside Muskat as a mark of favour and respect to the great French Government."

4. On 15th February M. Cambon had an interview with Lord Salisbury, in which he stated that the French Government had leased a site for a coaling station, which he maintained was not contrary to the Declaration of 1862. Lord Salisbury held that it was not competent for France, as a State, to accept a lease from Muskat; such a view would not "apply to a lease given to a French citizen in his private capacity."

5. On 18th February the Sultan, being confronted with a threat of bombardment, acquiesced in our demands. On 22nd February Mons. Cambon had a further interview with Lord Salisbury, and complained of the "excessive action which the Admiral had pursued, and of the publicity given to the affair." Lord Salisbury "quite admitted that the affair had not been conducted as quietly as he thought it might well have been, and said that he was very sorry that it had publicly taken the form of an apparent controversy with France." He "admitted that in the matter of sentiment" the French had a grievance, though in the matter of substance our action was "entirely right." He referred to stipulations and engagements of a special character between us and the Imaum, which must be taken into account if our action seemed to be rather summary. He regarded the Treaty of 1862 as seriously threatened if either Power, acting as a sovereign State, could take from the Imaum a lease of any portion of his territory. Mons. Cambon finally proposed that France should formally disclaim any inference from her possession of a coal dépôt which could be construed to

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be derogatory to the independence of the Imaum, and should provide "in some manner for the establishment of a coaling station." We thereon telegraphed to India on 24th February, and the Government of India replied at length on 25th February stating their objections.

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6. On the 27th February the French Ambassador informed Lord Salisbury that the French Government accepted our reading of the Treaty of 1862. They abandoned the proposal to keep Bandar Jisseh under the formal assurances indicated above. They wished now "to establish a coal dépôt on exactly the same terms as our own, that is to say, on sufferance." On 28th February the Secretary of State telegraphed to India suggesting *inter alia* that "if hereafter French Government ask for coaling facilities, the Government of India should not object provided that the request be limited to a shed or sheds, &c., and provided that any such proposal should be submitted by the Imaum to the Political Agent for approval."

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7. The Government of India* replied, but in the meanwhile it was necessary to deal with an interpellation in the French Chamber, and it was proposed that an unofficial note should be published in the Paris and London press. It was then suggested by Lord Salisbury that the *communiqué* to the French press should "take the form that, in view of the engagements existing between France and England with regard to Muskat, the French Government have decided to limit themselves to obtaining a dépôt of coal at Muskat under the same conditions as that of England, and that they understand that no objection is raised to this by the British Government."

* Telegram, dated 1st March 1899.

8. The "Times" now reports† the statement made in the Chamber, which is incorrect:—

I. It assumes that England does not aim at creating for herself a privileged situation. Lord Salisbury's remarks at A above distinctly show that England claims a privileged situation.

II. It ignores the abandonment of the Bander Jisseh concession—B above—which shows that France was not justified in substance.

III. It twists into an expression of profound regret the admissions of Lord Salisbury, marked C.

9. We have yet to inform India as to the course of events. To the Foreign Office we must make it clear—i., that the sheds must be in Muskat and nowhere else; ii., that the Sultan must refer the request of the French Government to our Agent on the spot.

W. LEE-WARNER.

7th March 1899.

"Times," 7th March 1899.

Statement of M. Delcassé, 7th March 1899.

"Three weeks ago the English Resident, who is in the service of the Indian Government, repaired to Muskat on a man-of-war and summoned the Sultan to withdraw a concession made to us for a coal dépôt in one of the Muskat creeks. Under the threat of the English cannon the Sultan asked us to return the act of concession, which we naturally refused to do. The Sultan then declared that the concession was annulled. The Government of the Republic was confronted by two questions—one of substance, and one of form. In substance, what grievance could be preferred against us? By the Treaty of 1862 France and England mutually undertook to respect the independence of the Imam of Muskat. France has now no more desire than in the past to impair that independence. She has always said so, and has no hesitation in repeating it. She does not aim, any more than, doubtless, England does, at creating for herself, indirectly and by separate compacts, a privileged situation, or at weakening to her own profit the force of the Convention of 1862. Ought the concession of a coal dépôt to have excited such alarms? England has long possessed a coal dépôt at Muskat. Could it be said that what England has been able to do without detriment to the Convention of 1862 would, if done by France, be a breach of that convention?

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The English Government, having been informed of the facts and of our intentions, has not been slow in recognising that the rights of England and France were identical, and that France could have a coal depôt on exactly the same conditions as England.

"We were justified, then, in substance. There remained the question of form. A satisfactory solution could not be doubted. It is not at the moment when the two Governments are negotiating an African frontier in the same spirit of conciliation, and are seeking a durable solution, because the essential interests of the two nations will have been safeguarded, that the intervention, equally unbecoming and spontaneous, of an agent of which we had complained could be admitted. The Queen's Government have expressed to us their profound regret.

"I thank the Chamber for having left to the Government the duty of settling this affair, and for allowing it time to do so. Whereas some journals—only a few, I admit—seized on the Muskat incident as an opportunity to announce a fresh *reculade*, as if they wished to enjoy beforehand a humiliation for their country, I thank the Chamber for having by its silence testified its confidence in the Government. It sees that the satisfaction obtained has not been the less prompt or less complete for having been asked for quietly." (Loud cheers.)

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