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**'Sir Percy Sykes's Position. Viceroy's Telegram of 28 February 1917. Note by  
Political Secretary, India Office.'**

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**About this record**

This file consists of a note which concerns Sir Percy Sykes's position as commander of the South Persian Rifles [South Persia Rifles]. The note, written by the Secretary to the Political Department, India Office [Sir Arthur Hirtzel], is written in response to a telegram, dated 28 February 1917 and attributed to the Viceroy of India [Frederic John Napier Thesiger].

The note responds to points made in the telegram, particularly those which discuss Sykes's judgement as a commander and the circumstances in which Kazerun and Dashtarjin [Dashtestan] were captured by rebel forces in December 1917.

The note also refers to the Viceroy's estimations for the South Persian Rifles' budget for 1917-18; it concludes that a great deal too much money is being spent, and that Sykes's accounts ought to be audited.

'Sir Percy Sykes's Position. Viceroy's Telegram of 28 February 1917. Note by Political Secretary, India Office.' [75r] (1/4)

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SECRET.

Sir Percy Sykes's Position.

Viceroy's Telegram of 28th February 1917.

NOTE BY POLITICAL SECRETARY, INDIA OFFICE.

The Political Department cannot very greatly mitigate the force of the Government of India's indictment—in fact the main points in it had already been made here. But there are perhaps one or two things that may be said. To take the counts *seriatim* :—

(1) There is no doubt that Sir P. Sykes misjudged the situation at Kerman and on the road, and it was a serious error of judgment to entrust 14 European prisoners to the keeping of 20 sowars (afterwards increased en route to 23 prisoners and 30 sowars). The facts are as follows :—

The party consisted of 14 prisoners and three or four servants, escorted by 20 sowars under a "reliable Persian," and left Kerman on 15th July. In Sirjan (probably at Saidabad) it was to be joined by nine more prisoners and the escort to be increased by 10. From Saidabad it was to proceed to Daulatabad (68 miles), where it was due on 2nd August, and was to be met by (1) 10 Persian sowars who had escorted Major Lorimer to Kerman and were to wait at Daulatabad on their way back to Bunder Abbas; (2) a regular escort brought over from Muscat, consisting of 40 Indian rank and file under one British and one Indian officer, and 13 Persian sowars under a Persian officer. They left Bunder Abbas on 22nd July and were due at Daulatabad one day before the prisoners, but the Chief of the General Staff, Simla, had directed (16th July) that they should relieve the Kerman escort as far up the line as possible—so apparently they were not to wait at Daulatabad.

Chief of General Staff, Simla, had pointed out to Sir P. Sykes on 13th July that it was most important that the prisoners should have no chance of escape, and said that the escort should be under a British officer. Sir P. Sykes replied that neither a British officer nor regular troops could be spared, and that, on the other hand, it was unsafe for the prisoners to remain at Kerman after he himself had left (which he did on 26th July). Again on 18th July, Chief of General Staff telegraphed :—"It is presumed you realise great importance of ensuring that none of the prisoners escape, and that for this purpose you are satisfied that your orders and arrangements are adequate." Sir P. Sykes replied next day, "I made best arrangement I could, realising importance of matter."

On 23rd August they were rescued from Saidabad by Husain Khan and 50 of the democratic party.

(2) This is rather vague but not an unfair description.

(3) In the five weeks that elapsed between 23rd November and 31st December, a great deal happened. But first as to his "optimism." His telegram of 23rd November merely says "Farman Farma confident can re-establish authority of Persian Government to Bushire which we might possibly visit." His despatch of 25th November describes in rather glowing terms his arrival at Shiraz (where Farman Farma and Colonel Gough had arrived a month earlier), but concludes with this warning :—"In conclusion, Sir, I consider that the situation justified some optimism, but it would be unwise to ignore the fact that hostility in Fars is stronger than at Kerman and that the presence of the column alone enables the restoration of order to make solid headway." His despatch of 9th December does not deal with the political situation, but gives his impressions of the gendarmerie whom he had taken over at Shiraz, and ends thus :—"In conclusion, I am favourably impressed with the force which I have taken over. There will

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"be many difficulties to overcome, but I am confident of ultimate success provided that the Indian column is kept at my disposal until the new force is ready to fight the tribes, and that I am given, when available, the most modern instruments of war in the shape of aeroplanes, armoured motor cars, and perhaps even a 'Tank.'"

Farman Farma and Colonel Gough had arrived at Shiraz on 15th October—"reception accorded" (the latter telegraphed) "was enthusiastic and everything very satisfactory". On 23rd Colonel Gough reported "situation generally satisfactory," and though there was a scarcity of foodstuffs, nothing in his telegrams suggests cause for anxiety before Sir P. Sykes's arrival on 12th November. But shortly after his arrival the scarcity became acute, and was used by the hostile elements as a stick to beat Farman Farma and his British advisers. Moreover, Sir P. Sykes's position was difficult, because, though he had taken over the gendarmerie, the Persian Government refused to instruct Farman Farma to recognise the fact officially. Soulet's attitude, too, was doubtful. On 11th December, Colonel Gough telegraphed that the price of bread was rising daily and that "we are threatened with serious disturbances." On 17th December the Kalantar of Kazerun attacked the gendarmerie force of 100 men and captured them and their gun, and after seeing Farman Farma, with Colonel Gough, Sir P. Sykes decided to go out with the majority of his column to "strike hard and at once" (Colonel Gough, 18th December). Next day, however, Colonel Gough reported that "in view of somewhat unsettled conditions here he is not moving out yet." In this attack Soulet was certainly implicated and the Qawam's principal agent, a fact which threw some doubt on the loyalty of the Qawam. On 21st December the rebels followed up their success by capturing the small gendarmerie post at Dashtarjin, and Sir P. Sykes sent out 200 regular infantry with 2 mountain guns and 100 gendarmerie with 3 mountain guns to recapture it (the rebels being reported to number 400). This force advanced to Dashtarjin without opposition on 24th December, but next day was obliged to evacuate it, with considerable loss, to escape being surrounded. "Effect of retirement on public opinion will be very bad indeed," Sir P. Sykes telegraphed on 26th December. It was in these circumstances that he sent his "pessimistic" telegram of 31st December, which runs as follows:—

"All information received strengthens view that we are opposed by tribes in Fars and strong party in Shiraz hostile to introduction law and order by 'infidels,' and especially hostile to Indian troops. It was expected that column would consist of at least one brigade, and its smallness is now known everywhere.

"Farman Farma, Consul, and I hope that with reinforcements asked for in my telegram No. 1282 C., we shall be able to maintain our position, and we urge most earnestly that they be despatched without delay to reach Shiraz by March."

I do not think that the Government of India have a good case on this point. It would have been a better charge if they had pointed out that the stagnation that has set in since proves that he was over-pessimistic.

(4) This is too vague to criticise effectively; Sir P. Sykes is by temperament an optimist and has no sense of humour.

(5) This is a good point. As regards the particular incident—he sent from Bunder Abbas, on 16th May 1916, a "preliminary budget estimate of the regiment, South Persia Military Police." The Government of India replied *ad interim* on 13th June that it would "require considerable revision," and on 17th June they asked him 13 questions arising out of the estimate, to which he replied on the 19th:—"My letter of 16th May was prepared under circumstances of sickness and constant change of staff, and in stress of organising move to Kerman. Kindly cancel it." It is

<sup>1</sup> The experience of the next few weeks showed that even this qualified optimism was excessive, and on 20th January 1917 Lieutenant-Colonel Gough telegraphed:—"S. P. R. can be looked upon as a negligible quantity for the present—perhaps even as a danger, until their British officers have arrived and have gained confidence of the men."



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certain that Sir P. Sykes has failed to produce any adequate scheme. Whether that is because he is incompetent or because he has had too much else to do, and has not a sufficiently experienced staff, is uncertain.

(6) The reference is to the despatch of 9th December quoted above. As I have said, he has no sense of humour.

(7) The reference is to the evacuation of Dashtarjin. If Sir P. Sykes's own statement is correct, the force sent was as stated above—200 Indian infantry and 100 gendarmierie. The reason why he did not go out himself with a stronger force has been quoted from Colonel Gough above. But it would clearly have been better to do nothing than to send so small a force. Moreover, Sir P. Sykes is apparently responsible for the smallness of the gendarmierie force (100 men) originally stationed at Kazerun.

(8) (a) This charge cannot be sustained in full. Note the dates:—

17th December. Capture of Kazerun by rebels.

20th December. Sir P. Sykes asks for 200 infantry.

21st December. Capture of Dashtarjin.

22nd December. Sir P. Sykes (on recommendation of Farman Farma, and with entire concurrence of Colonel Gough) asks for 600 infantry.

25th December. Evacuation of Dashtarjin ("effect on public opinion will be very bad indeed").

10th January. Sir P. Sykes asks for 1,000 infantry "in view of serious political situation and large size caravan."

But this last remark does show that, as the Government of India say, when he was content to ask for 200 men he "showed disregard of the danger of an inadequately guarded convoy."

(b) As regards his reiterated demand for immediate action, it may be said in his defence that he was familiar with Russian military methods, and that the Russians, when there is a serious emergency such as he believed (wrongly, as it turned out) to exist, do not spend a great deal of time on "preparations," but move quickly. What the Government of India mean by "dispersion of force" in this connection I do not understand.

A. H.

3rd March 1917.

P.S.—When the above was written, the Viceroy's telegram of 1st March had not been seen in the Political Department. We were, indeed, aware from the Government of India's telegram of 14th February ("Ways and Means"), that they had budgeted for 600,000*l.* in the present year, and estimated for the same amount in 1917–18, and we were so alarmed that we telegraphed at once for details to be sent by mail. It seemed incredible that 600,000*l.* could be spent in a year on a force which, on 1st April 1916, did not exist, and on 1st November numbered only 3,000, especially as we had rejected a grandiose scheme of barrack construction, and the Secretary of State in July last, whilst saying that it would be a mistake to economise in British officers, had generally enjoined "all possible economy." It is obvious that a force which is eventually to be paid for by the Persian Government must not be launched on extravagant lines. The present telegram suggests that the 600,000*l.* includes the whole cost of the regular force that is with Sir P. Sykes, and of its operations. If that is so, on the one hand it is not clear what basis he had for estimating 1,000,000*l.* for next year, and on the other the Viceroy's last remark about the strength and quality of the South Persian Rifles is a little misleading. It is clear, however, that a great deal too much money is being spent, and that Sir P. Sykes's accounts ought to be audited.



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