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## 'Settlement of Turkey and Arabian Peninsula. Note by India Office on Foreign Office memorandum'.

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### About this record

The note was written by Sir Frederic Arthur Hirtzel for the India Office, 30 Nov 1918, and consists of remarks on three points drawn out from the Foreign Office memorandum:

- The Trucial System - disputing the assumptions made in the original memo that Great Britain effectively kept the peace over a large part of the Arabian Peninsula; and that no treaties had been made with Chiefs of inland tribes, that all had been coastal tribes. Stating that the object of the treaties was maritime peace; that His Majesty's Government had always been firmly against interference in the interior of Arabia; the terms of the existing treaty with Bin Saud [ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz bin ʿAbd al-Raḥmān bin Fayṣal Āl Saʿūd, Ibn Saud]; and the India Office's opinion that there would be no benefit to extending the trucial system to the interior of Arabia.
- The Hejaz - detailing the India Office's thoughts on what a treaty with the King of Hejaz should consist of and how diplomatic relations should be handled.
- Syria - regarding what the alternative approach to Syria should be if the French refuse to give it up, and citing the opinions of Captain Wilson and Gertrude Bell that the French should be persuaded to give up some areas of Syria within their control for Armenia.

Mention is also given to the Baghdad Railway and the importance of ensuring that it is British controlled.

The appendix to the note contains further details on the British Government's agreement with Bin Saud, setting out the full history of events leading up to the signing of the agreement; later modifications to it; and the definition of the term 'foreign power' within the treaty.

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Settlement of Turkey and Arabian Peninsula.

(NOTE BY INDIA OFFICE ON FOREIGN OFFICE MEMORANDUM.)

The Foreign Office Memorandum calls for remarks on three points :—

I.—The "Trucial System."

1. First, as regards Arab countries generally, and the Arabian peninsula, too much stress seems to be laid on what the writer calls "the trucial system," and on the responsibility which Great Britain is to assume for the maintenance of internal peace. The facts also are rather overstated. It is too much to say that by this system "the peace is effectively kept already over a considerable part of the Arabian peninsula" (page 11), for it is only on a narrow strip of coast between Katr and Oman that it prevails. Again, the rulers with whom we had treaties before the war were not "nearly all coastal chiefs": except in the Aden Protectorate (which is *sui generis*) they were *all* coastal. Nor is it the case that the rulers with whom we have made treaties during the war "are mostly chiefs of inland tribes and oases," for we have made no treaties with anybody but the Idrisi and Bin Saud, both of whom are coastal chiefs (our treaty with Mavia has lapsed).

2. The fact is that the object of the trucial treaties was the suppression of maritime piracy, and that before the war His Majesty's Government always set their face rigidly against intervention in the interior of Arabia. They would not even respond to Bin Saud's overtures until, by ejecting the Turks from Hasa, he, too, became a coastal chief, and a potential danger to the peace of the Persian Gulf. The reason for this attitude is obvious: intervention was physically impossible. It is no less so now. Our only weapon for enforcing our will in the interior is the blockade. But we cannot blockade the Hejaz without offending Moslems everywhere. We cannot blockade Asir and the Yemen without constant friction with the French and Italians. We cannot effectually blockade the East Coast of Arabia because the blockade can so easily be evaded through Koweit and Mesopotamia, and evasion will be the more easy as railway communication is improved.

3. If it is impossible for us to intervene, it is necessary to avoid treaty engagements requiring intervention. At present it is claimed that we have none. This point should be cleared up, for the Foreign Office Memorandum suggests (page 12, top) that we are pledged to Bin Saud in this respect. But this is more than doubtful. All the treaty binds us to is (a) to recognise him as independent sovereign of certain territories hereafter to be defined, with the implication that we will assist in defining them; (b) to protect him against aggression by any foreign Power. It is submitted that (a) does not oblige us to compel anyone else so to recognise him, though we should doubtless use our good offices in his behalf, and refuse to recognise, *e.g.*, the Shereef's claim to any part of his territories as defined with our approval. As to (b), it has been laid down from the first that "any foreign Power" does not include Arabs (Secretary of State to Government of India, 19th September 1916)<sup>1</sup>; and in this connection it may be noted that our obligation (undertaken in 1899) to use our good offices in behalf of Koweit, if attacked, was held to refer to attacks by the Turks or by tribes *under Turkish control* (India Office to Foreign Office, 8th April 1911).

4. And if we have at present no such engagements in the interior, neither do our own interests call for any. The Arab tribes have always roamed the interior and raided one another at will, and they will probably always continue to do so—"for God hath made them so." But so long as they had not the Turk behind them they did, and could do, us and our Arab friends little harm. With the elimination of Turkish intrigue, these internecine wars will to some extent cease, and will lose most of their danger for us. And our concern will be limited to (i) seeing that no other foreign Power (*i.e.*, neither Italy nor France) takes the place of Turkey as a disturber of the peace; (ii) controlling the traffic in arms; (iii) providing that caravan and pilgrimage routes are kept open—if necessary, by the payment of subsidies.

5. An extension of the "trucial system," either in the interior or on the Red Sea coast is therefore of very doubtful expediency. We are committed to adjudicating

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix.



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after the war between the territorial claims of the Idrisi and the Imam or any other rival, and to protecting the Idrisi against foreign aggression. This we must do, but we should not go any further. And on the other hand, it should be understood by foreign Powers that while we claim to have special political interests in the peninsula and will protect the chiefs against unprovoked aggression, we ourselves undertake no responsibilities as regards the protection of foreign subjects or their trade.

6. This point has been dwelt on at some length because the prospect of His Majesty's Government having to maintain the peace throughout Arabia and the Arab countries is so alarming as to be absolutely prohibitive. We shall have quite enough on our hands in those regions without the addition of that impossible duty. For it should not be too easily assumed—as it sometimes is, when we talk of “having the Arabs behind us” and the like—that the Arabs love us and are coming to feed from our hands. So long as the Turk was a real danger, the Arabs disliked us less than him. But when once that danger is permanently removed, the balance of dislike will almost inevitably be transferred to us, and there will be a strong tendency on their part to minimise the evils and magnify the advantages of the Government which they no longer endure or enjoy. The less we have to intervene in their domestic affairs the better.

**II.—The Hejaz.**

7. It seems desirable that the least possible limitation should be imposed on the independence of the Hejaz, and even the “trucial treaty on a restricted basis” proposed on page 12 of the Memorandum is of doubtful expediency. Every limitation and everything savouring of protectorate will be looked upon with the utmost suspicion by Moslems, at all events in India. As is pointed out in the Memorandum, the Hejaz will, to a large extent, be self-sterilised. We ought to provide by treaty that the King shall receive pilgrimage agents, and that they shall not have diplomatic status; but it is very doubtful whether we ought to require that his diplomatic relations shall be conducted through us. It would, of course, save us a vast amount of inconvenience; but on the whole it seems better to leave him absolutely free, and to rely on our own energy and the other factors mentioned on page 12 for maintaining our influence. If the King of the Hejaz became Caliph there would obviously be considerable disadvantage in allowing him to fall under the influence of another Power; but it is not easy to see what practicable measure of sterilisation will effectually prevent this, if we allow our own activity and watchfulness to slacken, and these will be our best safeguard. For the rest, the more we can keep our own sphere apart from the Hejaz and its influences, the less anxiety we need feel about the Hejaz itself. This, as far as it goes, is an argument against setting up Abdullah in Mesopotamia.

**III.—Syria.**

8. It is doubtless worth while to try to persuade the French to give up Syria, but very doubtful whether we shall succeed. In any case we ought to be ready with an alternative. From our point of view the most important thing is to get them out of Area A and perhaps a strip of the blue area up to and including Diarbekr. In Syria itself, as the Foreign Office Memorandum admits (page 13), we have less direct political interest than anywhere else. In fact, apart from Alexandretta (which is to remain French under any revision of the Agreement), our only interest lies in the relations between Syria and the tribes of the desert. The Memorandum points out on page 14 that the present arrangement cuts the Ruwallah-Anazeh country into three, with the possible result that these tribes would “realise their natural destiny and gravitate towards Syria,” the effect of which “would be to carry French influence into the heart of the Arabian peninsula.” Somehow or other this risk must be averted. The point has been put to Captain Wilson and Miss Bell (who knows that side of the desert better than anyone), and their reply is as follows:—

“Our view is that it should be excluded from all spheres, Syria and Iraq maintaining right to police caravan road west and east respectively of, say longitude 39°. It is clear that no Government will exercise effective control over Syrian desert. Governments are concerned only with the administration of settled districts, and the relations of tribes to borders of cultivated



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land. These borders in southern Syria, south of Hauran, will be under British influence, Ruwallah of Jof will turn to native market towns (such as Salt or Madabah) which we choose to organise and enlarge in Moab, and unless hand of British Political Officer on the Euphrates loses its cunning, the Anazeh of Central Arabia will turn more readily to him than to his French colleagues in Damascus, charm they never so wisely."

9. It is suggested, therefore, that if the French cannot be induced to quit Syria altogether, we should at all events endeavour to persuade them, in exchange for Armenia, to give up Area A, or at least the part of it east of the Euphrates, and to recognise the Ruwallah-Anazeh country as lying outside either sphere. The status of Nuri Shaalan would then be the same as that of Bin Saud or Bin Rashid.

IV.

10. It is noticed that the Memorandum does not mention the *Baghdad Railway*. But it is a British desideratum of the first magnitude that the section in the British sphere should be the property of the Arab State and British controlled, without any foreign voice in either the finance or the administration. The same applies to that part of the concession which relates to the construction of ports at Baghdad and Basra, and to mineral rights, as well as to any rights to participate in the navigation of the rivers which may have arisen out of the concession.

A. H.

30th November 1918.

APPENDIX.

(*Guarantee to Bin Saud.*)

The point is so important that it is worth while to set out the facts at length.

Bin Saud's original draft, which was communicated to us in January 1915, when our negotiations with the Shercef were in their infancy, and the only enemy on the horizon was the Turk, proposed that "Great Britain shall undertake defence of his territories from all external aggression and encroachment on the part of any other Power, whether by land or sea." On this Sir P. Cox commented (telegram of 16th January 1915):—"When we invited Bin Saud to move on Basrah we undertook to protect him against reprisals by Turks, so that, as far as latter are concerned, what Bin Saud now asks us to give does not amount to much more. Apart from Turks, Central Arabia is practically inaccessible by land to any Power but ours, and I venture to think that we should incur little risk by giving the desired undertaking subject to the reservation that aggression be unprovoked." (P. 561B/15.) Accordingly Article 2 of the British counterdraft ran:—"In the event of unprovoked aggression by any foreign Power . . . the British Government will aid Bin Saud to such extent and in such manner as the situation may seem to them to require." Bin Saud, replying on 24th April, struck out "unprovoked" (on the ground that it was tautological, since the Arabic word meant "molestation without a cause"), and for the last words substituted "will aid Bin Saud in all circumstances and in any place." (P. 2832/15.) On 16th August His Majesty's Government ordered that "unprovoked" should be restored, and that if Bin Saud would not agree to the original language the following might be accepted:—"Will aid Bin Saud to such extent and in such manner as British Government, after consultation with Bin Saud, may consider most effective for protecting his interests." (P. 2966/15.) Bin Saud was obdurate as regards "unprovoked," but accepted another important modification, and in the Treaty signed on 26th December 1915 the material part of Article 2 runs:—

"In the event of aggression by any foreign Power . . . without reference to the British Government and without giving her [*sic*] an opportunity of communicating with Bin Saud and composing the matter, the British Government will aid Bin Saud to such extent and in such manner as the British Government, after consulting Bin Saud, may consider most effective for protecting his interests and countries." (P. 668/16.)



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The question of the meaning of the term "foreign Power" was soon raised. For in September 1916, Bin Saud having expressed mistrust of the Shereef's intentions, Sir P. Cox proposed to reply that "no present or future understandings between us and the Shereef would prejudice our adherence to the terms of Articles 1 and 2 of our Treaty with him of 26th December 1915" (telegram of 8th September 1916), and the India Office (with Foreign Office concurrence, W. 183725/16) instructed Sir P. Cox on 19th September that "reference to treaty should be confined to Article 1, as we could not admit that Article 2 is binding on us as against other Arabs." (P. 3827/16.) Accordingly Sir P. Cox wrote to Bin Saud on 18th October:—"As for ourselves *vis-à-vis* yourself and the Shereef, have we not our treaty with you, in Article 1 of which we have recognised you as independent ruler of your territories of Nejd? Of course the Shereef must naturally recognise this treaty also, and His Majesty's Government would by no means support him in any other attitude towards you." (P. 4918/16.)

The question came up again in August last, when Captain Wilson, in his telegram No. 6491 of the 8th August, recommended that Bin Saud should "be informed in writing that Article 2 of Treaty of 26th December 1915 [*i.e.*, the Article guaranteeing him against aggression by 'any foreign Power'] applies equally to aggression by King Husain." The point was considered by the Eastern Committee on the 15th August, and on the same day the Secretary of State telegraphed to India and Baghdad that the proposal was "open to objection that it *places a doubtful interpretation on Article 2 of Treaty with Bin Saud.*" It does not appear that the Eastern Committee was aware of the earlier and more categorical decision to the same effect.

Captain Wilson reverted to the point in his telegram No. 8789, of 16th October 1918, in which he again invited His Majesty's Government "to consider possibility of making a declaration on the lines of paragraph 1" of his telegram No. 6491 quoted above. The Secretary of State replied to Captain Wilson, with Lord Curzon's concurrence (28th October):—"We do not think it advisable to make declaration in terms of Baghdad telegram No. 6491." The utmost length to which His Majesty's Government appear to have gone in their commitments to Bin Saud is to "recognise our obligations to use every influence in our power to prevent encroachments upon Bin Saud's territories" (telegram of 15th August 1918, communicated to him 27th August, *see* Baghdad telegrams 7548 and 7550 of 10th September 1918).

It may be added that Bin Saud himself does not seem ever to have appealed to Article 2 of the Treaty. His complaint has been that he was being attacked not by a foreign Power, but by an ally of Great Britain, who was using British gold to fight against him instead of against the Turk. But after the war the flow of British gold to potential aggressors will presumably cease, or be reduced to an insignificant stream; and our most effective means of securing that such order as is necessary for our purpose is maintained will probably be the grant of small subsidies to those who are charged with the duty of keeping the routes open, and their prompt withdrawal from those who offend.