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‘British political relations with Koweit.’

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About this record

The memorandum, prepared by John W Field of the Foreign Office and dated 29 March 1922, is an historical overview of relations between the British Government and the Shaikh of Kuwait during the period 1897 to 1921. The first paragraph of the memorandum suggests that it was compiled in response to a ‘question that has arisen as to the position of foreigners in Koweit [Kuwait]’.

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BRITISH POLITICAL RELATIONS WITH KOWEIT.

IN view of the question that has arisen as to the position of foreigners in Koweit, it may be of interest to give a brief account of the relations of His Majesty's Government with that territory.

2. Although from about the middle of last century friendly intercourse had been maintained with the representative of the British Power in the Persian Gulf, nothing of consequence occurred until early in 1897, when Sheikh Mubarak, alarmed by the arrival of a Turkish sanitary official and other developments, requested an interview with the British Resident, and, representing that he was much concerned by recent incidents, strongly urged that Great Britain should undertake to prevent the absorption of Koweit by Turkey; if this were done, he was prepared to assist, with all the force at his command, in maintaining law and order in his part of the Gulf. At that time no definite arrangement was made, though at the end of the year (1897) a threatened attack on Koweit by the sheikhs of El Katr was prevented by the despatch of a British gunboat, and Sheikh Mubarak renewed his request for British protection.

3. Various forward moves were made by the Turkish authorities, and, in view of the developments which took place, an agreement was concluded on the 23rd January, 1899, by His Majesty's Government with the sheikh, binding him, his heirs and successors not to cede, sell, lease, mortgage, or otherwise give for occupation any portion of his territory to foreigners without the previous assent of the British Government, or to receive the agent of any foreign Power at Koweit. His Majesty's Government, on their part, assured the sheikh of their good offices. The relations of the sheikh with the Ottoman Government remained in a more or less unsatisfactory condition until September 1901, when a temporary settlement was reached by the latter undertaking to His Majesty's Government that they would not send troops to Koweit and that they would maintain the *status quo* there on condition that His Majesty's Government would not occupy the place or establish a British protectorate; and the Marquess of Lansdowne gave an assurance to the Turkish Ambassador to that effect.

4. The sheikh's promise of 1899 as to non-alienation of territory was confirmed in a secret agreement of the 15th October, 1907, respecting the lease of the Bunder Shiveikh lands; and these two agreements continued until July 1913 to form the basis of British relations with Koweit.

5. The British and Ottoman Governments, having felt for some years that it was desirable formally to regularise the situation at Koweit, arrived at the agreement contained in articles 1-10 of the Anglo-Turkish Convention of the 29th July, 1913,* by the terms of which the territory of Koweit was recognised as an autonomous kaza of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman flag was to be flown by the sheikh, but he was to have the right to insert a distinctive emblem in the corner; he was to continue to be a Turkish *kaimakam*; and his successors were to be appointed to a similar position by the Ottoman Government. The boundaries of the sheikh's immediate territory and his wider tribal jurisdiction were delimited; the Ottoman Government recognised the existing agreements between the sheikh and His Majesty's Government, and His Majesty's Government undertook, on their part, not to alter the nature of British relations with the Government of Koweit, or to establish a protectorate there, so long as the *status quo* as defined in the convention underwent no change.

6. On the 8th August, 1914, Sheikh Mubarak was informed officially by the officiating Resident in the Persian Gulf that a state of war existed between Great Britain and Germany, and on the 21st August he made a declaration of loyalty to His Majesty's Government on behalf of himself and his tribes, placed "his efforts, his men and his ships" at Great Britain's disposal and expressed a desire to eject the Turkish garrisons from the islands at the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab, which he claimed to be lawfully his. He repeated this declaration in a letter of the same date to the officiating

* This convention was never ratified.

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Resident in the Persian Gulf, which was formally acknowledged by the latter on the 25th August, 1914.

7. In view of the increasing likelihood that Turkey would intervene in the war on Germany's side, it became clear that His Majesty's Government's previous undertakings to the Sheikh of Koweit would have to be renewed, and contingently extended, against the event of a state of war arising between Great Britain and Turkey. Accordingly a letter containing the following assurances was despatched to the sheikh on the 3rd November, 1914, by the acting Resident in the Gulf:—

"In return for the valuable co-operation which we expect from you, I am authorised by the Government, in the event of success—and, insha Allah, we shall succeed—to assure you again that Basra will never again be subject to Turkish authority.

"I am further to give your Excellency personally the following special assurances:—

"(1.) The date gardens which you now possess between Fao and Gurnak shall remain in the full possession of you and your heirs and for ever be immune from taxation.

"(2.) You are guaranteed by the great British Government against all consequences of your attack against Safwan, Umm Kasr and Bubiyan.

"(3.) Koweit shall be recognised as an independent principality under British protection."

8. On the 28th February, 1917, upon the death of Sheikh Mubarak-bin-Subah, these undertakings were renewed in the "Kharita" to his son, and after the latter had also died and had been succeeded by his brother, Sheikh Salim-bin-Mubarak, the Government of India forwarded to Sir P. Cox, for presentation to the new ruler, a "Kharita" from the Viceroy renewing to him likewise the undertakings given to his father.

9. Sheikh Salim, during the first half of 1918, made considerable difficulties for His Majesty's Government over the question of the control of the blockade in Koweit territories and ports, and in that connection the following message was conveyed to him through the Resident at Koweit on the 5th July, 1918:—

"Government have deeply regretted the events of the last two years at Koweit, but they welcome your declaration* as affording an opportunity for re-establishment of our traditional friendship. In order that there may be no misunderstanding in the future, they desire to explain their policy towards your Excellency.

"On the one hand, should you show to Government same friendship and assistance which they have experienced for many years in their dealings with the rulers of Koweit, they will continue to you the assurances given to your illustrious father, the late Sheikh Mubarak, especially that 'the town of Koweit and its boundaries likewise belong to Sheikh Mubarak-us-Subah, ruler of Koweit, and to his heirs after him,'† and will extend to you the friendship and protection and assistance which they gave to him; and, finally, they hope that you will raise the name of your house and of Koweit to the high position which it held in the past in eyes of British Government and of peoples of Arabia.

"On the other hand, it is the plain duty of ruler of a State which is on terms of friendship with Government to prevent all acts, either by his own subjects or by other persons in his territory, which may be contrary to interests of Government; and since they know that, if you wish to do so, you have the power to control your subjects and others in your territory, Government will be compelled to hold your Excellency personally responsible should any such act unfortunately be committed in future. They hope your Excellency will fully realise your responsibility as the ruler of Koweit towards Government under whose protection and friendship Koweit has so greatly prospered in the past, and will understand that prosperity depends entirely on preservation of true friendship, both in word and deed, with Government."

10. The Political Resident in the Persian Gulf having apparently suggested, in November 1918, the declaration of British protectorates over Bahrein, Koweit, &c., the

* Accepting the measures of control desired by the British authorities.

† From article 9 of secret agreement of the 15th October, 1907, referred to in paragraph 4.

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Viceroy considered that such declaration would (1) excite the suspicions of the neighbouring peoples, who would regard it as a prelude to annexation, and (2) provoke jealousy of other Powers, and involve us in heavy obligations, both military and financial. The Viceroy suggested that the better policy would be at an inter-Allied conference to put our cards frankly on the table, explaining our special interests and prescriptive position in the Persian Gulf, and the measures into which we have been driven by the special protection of those interests, and to express the hope that those interests and position might be fully recognised without need for further definition.

11. In December 1919 the Civil Commissioner at Bagdad raised again the question of the making of a jurisdictional Order in Council for Koweit (which question, as will be seen on reference to my memorandum* in E 7915/6681/91/1921, was considered in 1911 and then left over until a settlement should have been arrived at with Turkey in regard to the Arab littoral), but the India Office considered that although the order was desirable in itself, and there would be an advantage in issuing it at an early date, that moment, when the question of the machinery for the administration of the mandate for Mesopotamia was unsettled, and the effect of the mandate upon the relations of His Majesty's Government with contiguous countries was still uncertain, did not appear opportune for its issue, a view that was endorsed by this Office.

12. On the 9th July, 1921, the Colonial Office, who had become responsible for policy on the Arab littoral of the Persian Gulf, communicated an enquiry from the High Commissioner, Bagdad, as to the status of Koweit as a result of the war, and asking whether it could not be placed on a similar basis to that of Bahrein, and whether an Order in Council could not be issued now that Turkey had lost suzerainty over it. The Colonial Office were told in reply that, from the legal point of view and on the supposition that there was no intention of including Koweit within the boundaries of Mesopotamia, the status of that territory would seem to be governed by article 132 of the Treaty of Peace.† In practice, provided some prior agreement were reached with the Sultan of Koweit, it would appear unlikely that any foreign Power would challenge the issue of an Order in Council on the lines of "The Bahrein Order in Council, 1913," although the extension of British jurisdiction, as in that order, to foreigners might involve the prior concurrence of some foreign Powers. It was further suggested to the Colonial Office that the High Commissioner, Bagdad, might be instructed to open negotiations with the Sultan with a view to ascertaining the measure of British supervision which the latter was prepared to accept, but that the actual issue of any Order in Council consolidating any agreement that might be reached with the Sultan should be postponed until the coming into force of the Treaty of Peace with Turkey.

JOHN W. FIELD.

Foreign Office, March 29, 1922.

* Not printed

† By article 132 of the Treaty of Sèvres, Turkey renounced in favour of the Principal Allied Powers all rights and title over territories outside Europe not otherwise disposed of by the treaty.

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