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'Political control in the Persian Gulf'

Holding Institution	British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers
Reference	IOR/L/PS/18/B393
Date(s)	5 Oct 1928 (CE, Gregorian)
Written in	English in Latin
Extent and Format	1 file (2 folios)
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About this record

Written by John Gilbert Laithwaite of the India Office. It covers arrangements from 1616 to 1921 summarising the use of agents, establishment of the Bushire Residency, and role of Political Resident in the Persian Gulf. It considers arrangements since the Report of the Masterton-Smith Committee in 1921 concerning the question of redistribution of political responsibility between His Majesty's Government and the Government of India, the line of communication with Ibn Saud [ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz bin ʿAbd al-Raḥmān bin Fayṣal Āl Saʿūd] and Nejd, and the responsibilities of the Political Resident. The final section concerns Persia and the maintenance of a 'Political Resident' (as distinct from Consul-General) at Bushire.

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P. 4194/28

Political Control in the Persian Gulf.

Arrangements prior to 1921.

The first association of His Majesty's Government with the Persian Gulf is the establishment by the East India Company, in 1616, of the Factory at Jashk; and from that date until a very recent period the local interests of His Majesty's Government are substantially those of, or in the hands of, the Company and its agents. The date from which those agents can properly be spoken of as exercising political control is difficult to fix precisely; but it is not unreasonable to select, in an unbroken occupation of stations in the Gulf from 1616 onwards, the year 1763, when British headquarters were moved from Bunder Abbas to Basra and the Bushire Residency was established. During the century and a half between that date and 1921, political control in the Persian Gulf was exercised (with considerable intervals ending in 1873 during which responsibility rested with the Government of Bombay) by the Government of India on behalf of His Majesty's Government; and from 1824 onwards that control was concentrated in the hands of an officer in Indian Government service known as the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, who since 1878 held in addition His Majesty's Commission as Consul-General for the provinces of Fars, Khuzistan and Laristan, and the district of Lingah, and for the coasts and islands of the Persian Gulf being within the dominions of Persia. This official *qua* Political Resident was under the Indian Government, but *qua* Consul-General under the Foreign Office. The cost of his establishment was divided between the British and Indian Exchequers, and his headquarters were at Bushire. His judicial powers and extra-territorial jurisdiction as Consul-General were and are exercised by virtue of the Persian Coast and Islands Order in Council, first approved by Her Majesty in Council in 1889, and since that date substantially modified from time to time.

Lor. i, 187; ii, 1779.

Lor. i, 188, 220, 265, 1339.

Lor., i, 218.

Lor., ii, p. 2102.

Lor. ii, 2102.

2. Subordinate to the Resident in his political capacity, for which he was, prior to the War, solely responsible to the Government of India, were the representatives of the Indian Government (officers of the Indian Political Department) in Muscat,* the Trucial States, Bahrein† and Koweit,‡ and through these officers he exercised an undefined but considerable influence upon the political affairs of the States in question. On the Consular side, the Resident, in his capacity as Consul-General, had control of certain inland Consulates in South Persia.

* (Also holding H.M. Commission as Consul at Muscat, and exercising jurisdiction, subject to the Pol. Res., under the Musca Order in Council of 1915.)

† (Exercising jurisdiction, subject to the Pol. Res., under the Bahrein and Koweit Orders in Council.)

Arrangements since the Report of the Masterton-Smith Committee, 1921.

3. The question of redistribution as between His Majesty's Government and the Government of India of political responsibility in the Persian Gulf appears to have been tentatively under consideration in the years before the War, but, partly, no doubt, because of the desirability of reaching a comprehensive understanding with Turkey on the limits of British and Turkish interests in the Gulf, no decision had been reached in 1914. The pre-war system, the maintenance of which was the subject of considerable discussion from time to time during the War, continued in force until 1921. In that year the Masterton-Smith Committee, the conclusions of which were accepted generally, subject to the approval of the Government of India, by His Majesty's Government, recommended that henceforth the control of policy as affecting the Arabian littoral of the Persian Gulf should be transferred to His Majesty's Government and exercised through the Middle Eastern Department of the Colonial Office; that the functions on that littoral of the Government of India should be confined to administrative and local matters, the prior concurrence of the Colonial Office being obtained by them to any measures of political significance, and that the relations of His Majesty's Government with Ibn Saud (as Sultan of Nejd) should be conducted exclusively by the new Middle Eastern Department. The channel of control in all cases was to be the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf

Cf. para. 12 of Masterton-Smith Committee's Report.

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and His Majesty's Consul-General, Bushire, who was, as hitherto, to be found from the service of the Government of India. The position of the Resident *vis-à-vis* the Government of India on the Persian littoral of the Gulf (in which area he had, of course, at all times worked in very close relations with His Majesty's Minister at Tehran) and in Muscat, remained unaffected.

* Para. 3 of C.O. Desp. 13 to Pol. Res., April 15 1924, P. 1836/24.

4. While the formal concurrence of the Government of India in the recommendations of the Masterton-Smith* Committee has not been given owing to the necessity of disposing of the connected question of Aden, they have agreed to work provisionally on the lines which the Committee recommended, and it may be said that, broadly speaking, the arrangements approved by the Masterton-Smith Committee, so far as division of responsibility was concerned, have been in operation since 1921. Some discussion took place in 1922-3 on the question whether communications with Ibn Saud should take place through the Political Agent, Bahrein, rather than through the Political Resident at Bushire. The arrangement finally reached between the Colonial Office and India Office was that communications from His Majesty's Government as regards, and with, **Ibn Saud and Nejd** when sent through the Persian Gulf should pass through the Political Resident except in cases of a wholly exceptional character and of very great urgency; that the same should hold good in the case of **Koweit** (the internal administration and affairs of which were to remain a matter for the Government of India); that in the case of **Bahrein**, the India Office should continue to be the normal channel for the communication of the instructions of His Majesty's Government on matters of policy; that orders on a question involving both relations with Ibn Saud and local action or interests in Bahrein, should be prepared in consultation between the India Office and Colonial Office and should issue (probably) through the India Office to the Resident, but that in circumstances of a wholly exceptional character, the Colonial Office might communicate direct with the officers subordinate to the Resident who were in direct contact with Ibn Saud and the Sheikh of Koweit; and on a minor point, that questions affecting the development of the oil resources of the Arab littoral should for convenience be dealt with exclusively by the Colonial Office. The position as regards the **Trucial Sheikhs and the Islands in the Gulf** under the suzerainty of those Sheikhs has not been precisely defined, but, broadly speaking, it would seem to be similar to that in the case of Bahrein, and in dealing with the recent incident at Tamb the instructions of His Majesty's Government were communicated to the Political Resident through the India Office and the Government of India.

Paras. 4 and 5 of C.O. Desp. 13 to Pol. Res., April 15 1924, P. 1836/24.

I.O. to C.O., May 29 1923, P. 1760.
C.O. to I.O., June 7 1923, P. 2171.
C.O. to I.O., Mar. 24 1924, P. 1441.

5. The general effect of these arrangements is that the Political Resident is directly responsible to, and corresponds directly with, His Majesty's Government (as represented by the **Colonial Office**) on questions affecting Ibn Saud, except when he is in the Hejaz, and the political aspects of the Arab littoral of the Gulf: that he is directly responsible in his capacity as Consul-General, Bushire, to the **Foreign Office**; and acts as a liaison between the Minister at Tehran and affairs in the Gulf which are of interest to His Majesty's Government as affecting their relations with Persia; that he is directly responsible to the **Government of India** for the internal affairs of the various States on the Arab littoral, for Bahrein, the Trucial Sheikhdoms, and Muscat, and for keeping them in touch both with affairs generally in South Persia and the Gulf, and with developments *vis-à-vis* Persia in that area, which, from the large Indian interests represented in it and its strategic importance, is of the first importance from the standpoint of the Government of India. The responsibility for co-ordinating action in times of stress in the Gulf inevitably and naturally falls on the Political Resident, who is alone sufficiently closely in permanent touch with the political, strategic and commercial interests involved adequately to discharge this function, and on whom accordingly the immediate responsibility must fall, in consultation with the Air Officer Commanding, Iraq, the Senior Naval Officer, Persian Gulf, or the Government of India as the case may be, for a decision as to the points at which the assistance of naval, military or air units should be asked from the appropriate naval or air authority, or from the Government of India.

Persia and the

6. A minor but this connection. S representative at B in addition to the 1824, the title "C littoral of the Gulf, still performs impor from his headquarte has shown indicatio representative as Co the grounds of the the suspicions of the It is, perhaps, in the fact that functi him from a headqua the course of the attitude, it may be p Resident were spec the creation of a Con Treaty with Great Resident of the Br Government grants heretofore, and in li in . . . London the period since 184

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Persia and the maintenance of a "Political Resident" (as distinct from Consul-General) at Bushire.

6. A minor but connected question may conveniently be dealt with in this connection. Since 1878, as will be seen from para. 1 above, the British representative at Bushire has discharged Consular functions, and has borne, in addition to the title "Political Resident," which dates from as early as 1824, the title "Consul-General." *Qua* Political Resident on the Persian littoral of the Gulf, his functions appear now to be almost negligible, but he still performs important duties in that capacity in respect of the Arab littoral from his headquarters at Bushire or Shiraz. In the last few months Persia has shown indications of a disposition to recognise and refer to the British representative as Consul-General only, while the presence of a flagstaff in the grounds of the Residency at Bushire appears recently to have roused the suspicions of the Persian Minister of Finance.

It is, perhaps, improbable that the title of the British representative, or the fact that functions in respect of the Arab shore are discharged by him from a headquarters in Persian territory, will be raised by Persia in the course of the forthcoming negotiations, but, in view of her present attitude, it may be placed on record that the title, and the appointment, of Resident were specifically recognised by Persia thirty-seven years before the creation of a Consulate-General at Bushire in Article 2 of the Commercial Treaty with Great Britain of 1841 ("... as for a series of years a Resident of the British Government has resided at Bushire, the Persian Government grants permission that the said Resident shall reside there as heretofore, and in like manner two [Persian] Commercial Agents shall reside in . . . London and . . . Bombay"), and that there is no record over the period since 1841 of any Persian objection to the existing arrangement.

Aitchison, Vol. XIII, xi.

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