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'Persian Complaints of Smuggling in the Persian Gulf'

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About this record

Memorandum outlining the recent history of smuggling in the Persian Gulf, and the results of an investigation made by His Majesty's Government, the Government of India, and the Admiralty into the extent to which assistance could be given to Persia in the suppression of the contraband traffic. It records objections to assisting Persia given by Sir Lionel Haworth, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf.

Written by John Gilbert Laithwaite of the India Office.

'Persian Complaints of Smuggling in the Persian Gulf' [67r] (1/2)

CONFIDENTIAL. *Book copy.*
B. 408.
INDIA OFFICE, P. 5351/28.

Persian Complaints of Smuggling in the Persian Gulf.

1. The relevancy to the Persian attitude towards the independence of Bahrein and of the Trucial Sheikhdoms of recent Persian complaints about the prevalence of smuggling to the South Persian coast from the Arab littoral and from the Persian Gulf islands makes it desirable briefly to set out the recent history of this question, and the result of the investigation made by His Majesty's Government and the Government of India of the extent to which assistance could be given to Persia in the suppression of the contraband traffic.

2. On various occasions during the past year His Majesty's representatives at Tehran and the Political Resident have emphasised that the problem is one of very serious dimensions, and the Belgian Administrator-General of Customs informed Mr. Parr, in the summer of this year, in connection with the Tamb incident, that the Sheikhs on the Trucial coast were all associated with smuggling, and that "his people are at their wits' end how to cope with it." The serious development of the trade apparently dates from the imposition by Persia in 1925 of a monopoly tax on all consignments of tea and sugar imported from abroad. The situation is rendered difficult by the fact that the Persian Government have practically no means of coping with it on the sea, and very inadequate means for dealing with it on the coast, the corruption of the local officials being a serious factor, while the fact that the motor launches possessed by the Customs administration, although they carry an automatic gun, are not armoured, places them at a disadvantage in dealing with armed smugglers.

Teh. Desp. 137,
Mar. 22 1928,
P. 1975.
Teh. tel. 246,
Aug. 14, P. 4368/28.
Teh. tel. 236, Aug. 8
1928, P. 4219.

3. A formal request to His Majesty's Government to assist them in suppressing smuggling on the Gulf has not so far been made by the Persian Government, and there is no special reason to suppose that such a request is likely to be made in the course of the forthcoming negotiations. Active steps, in fact, are apparently being taken by Persia to deal with the problem in other ways, and there is reason to suppose that the Persian Government contemplate the purchase of half a dozen Italian vessels, and the engagement of an Italian Naval Officer for preventive service in the Gulf. As will be seen from what follows, the matter has, however, been brought to the notice of His Majesty's representatives on various occasions, both by the Minister of Court and by the Belgian Customs officials.

4. The importance to Persia of the suppression of the traffic was mentioned to Sir Robert Clive by the Persian Minister of the Court at the beginning of the present year, in connection with the Persian claims to Bahrein, and Sir Robert Clive then suggested to His Majesty's Government that it might be possible to dispose directly of the Persian claims to the island if it was possible to meet Persia in regard to the prevention of smuggling from Bahrein to the Persian coast. On the 27th January Sir Robert Clive reported an interview with the Administrator-General of Customs, in which M. Molitor had stated that during the past year the Persian Government had been hard hit by the smuggling conducted from Koweit, Bahrein and Dabai, and that all the reports received from his agents insisted that to take effective measures for the cessation of this illicit traffic British co-operation was necessary. The only practical suggestion which the Administrator-General could make, however, was that the resident British authorities in the ports mentioned "could help a great deal by having ships' manifests inspected, and the loading of the cargoes supervised."

Teh. tel. 13, Jan. 15,
P. 296/28.

Teh. Desp. 53,
Jan. 27 1928, P. 879.

5. In the light of the Minister's representations, which assumed particular importance in view of the desirability of disposing of the question of Bahrein in direct negotiation with Persia rather than through the League of Nations, the question of possible action to assist the Persian Government was carefully investigated by the Admiralty and the Government of India. The results, however, were not such as to show that any effective assistance could conveniently be given to Persia, the objections to action being partly of a general political character, and partly based on grounds of practicability.

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'Persian Complaints of Smuggling in the Persian Gulf' [67v] (2/2)

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Adm. to F.O., Jan. 25
1928, P. 406.

6. On the question of action by His Majesty's ships, the Admiralty, who drew attention to the fact that the Navy had no power to take action against persons infringing Persian smuggling laws, stated that it would be contrary to the policy hitherto pursued for the Navy to take any active steps in civil operations such as the prevention of smuggling. The only action which could, in their view, be taken without a departure from precedent would be to report cases in which smuggling appeared to be taking place which came under the notice of His Majesty's ships. They presumed that this would be unlikely to be of much assistance.

7. The matter was very carefully investigated by the Political Resident and by the Government of India. The result of its examination by Sir Lionel Haworth was to indicate that assistance to Persia was not merely politically undesirable, but unlikely to produce any result of value.

Tel. from Pol. Res.
to G. of I., Mar. 31
1928, P. 2005.

Tel. from Viceroy to
S. of S. for I., 1782 S.,
Sept. 4 1928, P. 4783.

8. The political objections seen by the Resident, with whose views the Government of India agreed, were that assistance could be given only by applying to the Arab rulers of the Arab littoral pressure which was not justified under the treaties between His Majesty's Government and those potentates, *vis-à-vis* whom His Majesty's Government had no sort of right to interfere; that any attempt to apply such pressure would react very adversely on the position of His Majesty's Government on the littoral in question; and that at a time when the consolidation of the British position in that area was more than ever important, the arguments for action of such a character in the interests of a Government which had done nothing to meet us on any point were not convincing.

9. Apart from the general political objections set out above, the Political Resident stated that to force the rulers affected to adopt the preventive measures which would be necessary if anything was to be achieved would be difficult at Bahrein, except at considerable expense; still more difficult at Koweit; impossible at Dabai, unless the whole policy of His Majesty's Government on the Trucial coast was altered, and completely impracticable at El Katr (close to Bahrein), except by an increase in the British Naval force in the Gulf, after the manner adopted in the case of the arms traffic, and its employment for the purpose. As for concentrating action against Bahrein, Sir Lionel Haworth reported that smuggling took place not only from Bahrein, but from the entire length of the Arab coast, and that the success of measures against the Principality would only drive the trade to other ports, over which no effective control is exercised by His Majesty's Government. A final objection to action on the part of His Majesty's Government was that the greater part of the smuggling done was done from Persia in Persian ships, and not from Bahrein; that it would be stopped to a great extent if Persia could spend money for patrolling her own coast; and that the real difficulty was that all the Persian Khans were interested in smuggling, that the Persian Customs officials were bribed, and that the country of Tangistan was out of Persian control.

Viceroy's tel. 1782 S.
Sept. 4 1928, P. 4783.

10. The Government of India, in expressing their agreement with the views of the Political Resident as set out above, add that *vis-à-vis* Persia "it is not our business to control harmless exports like sugar from our Arab Protectorates, and Persia's apparent expectation to the contrary . . . has, as far as we know, no basis in international usage."

Summary.

11. It appears quite impracticable, in view of the difficulties set out by the Indian authorities, and the objections of principle seen by the Admiralty, for His Majesty's Government to lend any effective assistance to Persia in dealing with the problem of smuggling. The political objections to the application of pressure to the Arab rulers of the Gulf are very strong in present circumstances, and they are reinforced by the practical difficulties to which Sir Lionel Haworth draws attention. It is to be regretted that it is impossible to assist Persia in this matter, for an offer of help by His Majesty's Government, if indeed it was likely to produce any effective result, might form a useful lever for bargaining purposes. But the objections to action appear to be insuperable.

INDIA OFFICE,
1st October 1928.

J. G. L.