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'Arms traffic in the Persian Gulf, 1908-1928'

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About this record

Memorandum outlining developments in the suppression of the trade in arms in the Persian Gulf from 1908-28.

Covering:

- introduction to arms traffic in Muscat, and the reduction in arms traffic in the Gulf as a whole;
- treaty engagements, etc., of states bordering on the Persian Gulf – including Persia, Bahrein [Bahrain], Koweit [Kuwait], the Trucial Coast, Turkey, and Muscat;
- the Arms Traffic Convention of 1919 and 1925 – the effect of the First World War, and objections of Persia to being classified as a prohibited area for the purpose of arms traffic;
- arms traffic in the Gulf, 1908-1919 – the suppression of arms traffic from Muscat in 1912, and agreements with Ibn Saud [ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz bin ʿAbd al-Raḥmān bin Fayṣal Āl Saʿūd];
- arms traffic in the Gulf, 1919-1928 – conference held at Karachi in August 1921 concerning the danger of revival in the arms trade, and recommendations to combat this;
- summary.

Written by John Gilbert Laithwaite of the India Office.

'Arms traffic in the Persian Gulf, 1908-1928' [71r] (1/4)

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P. 5406/28.

Arms Traffic in the Persian Gulf, 1908-1928.

Introductory.

1. The Foreign Office (Supplementary) Memorandum of 1908 deals with the earlier history of the arms traffic in the Persian Gulf. At the date of that Memorandum the States, other than Muscat, bordering on the Gulf, had declared the trade illegal, or had agreed with His Majesty's Government for its suppression. The absence of any restrictions on the import and export of arms from Muscat, which was prevented from imposing restrictions by its treaties with foreign Powers, had, however, led to the concentration of the traffic in that State, and so to a situation which the Government of India and His Majesty's Government, vitally interested in checking the flow of modern arms of precision to Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier of India, regarded with the utmost gravity.

2. The period now under review is marked by the conclusion of arrangements which have effectively curbed the arms traffic in Muscat and by the reduction to insignificant dimensions of that traffic in the Gulf as a whole. The present Memorandum proposes briefly to set out the treaty engagements and agreements concluded on the subject between His Majesty's Government and the States bordering on the Gulf, and, after a reference to the Arms Traffic Conventions of 1919 and 1925, to refer to the more important developments in the Gulf between 1908 and 1928 in connection with the suppression of the trade in arms.

Treaty Engagements, &c., of States bordering on the Persian Gulf.

3. With the exception of the King of the Hejaz and Nejd, the rulers whose States border on the Persian Gulf at the present date are bound by treaty or agreement to prohibit and suppress the arms traffic in their territories. The import of arms into Persia was prohibited by the Shah in 1881, and again in 1900. In 1897 Her Majesty's Government secured from the Persian Government a *firman*, under which the Shah empowered Her Majesty's ships in the Persian Gulf to examine and search all merchant vessels in the Persian Gulf and confiscate and hand over to the Persian Government all prohibited arms found on board. This *firman* remains in force.

On the Arab littoral of the Gulf, the Sheikh of Bahrein agreed in 1898 to prohibit the traffic in arms in Bahrein territory; the Sheikh of Koweit gave a similar undertaking in 1900, as did the Trucial Chiefs in 1902. The import of arms into Turkey (and so, up to 1914, into El Hasa and El Katr) was prohibited in 1862; and the Sheikh of El Katr, under his treaty with His Majesty's Government of 3rd November 1916, undertook the same obligations in the matter as the other Trucial Chiefs. By a Proclamation of 1898, the Sultan of Muscat, who in 1881 had prohibited the import of arms at Gwadur, his dependency on the Makran coast, authorised British and Persian war vessels to search British, Muscat, or Persian vessels for arms in Muscat waters, as well as Muscat vessels in Indian and Persian waters, and to confiscate arms and ammunition intended for Indian or Persian ports. In 1903 he empowered British (and Italian) vessels to search Muscat vessels suspected of carrying arms on the high seas; and in 1912 an agreement was reached with His Highness by His Majesty's Government for the establishment in his State of a warehouse regime, the result of which has been to dispose of the Muscat arms traffic as a serious issue. Ibn Saud alone of the rulers whose States border on the Gulf remains unfettered by any agreement in the matter.

The Arms Traffic Conventions of 1919 and 1925.

4. Save in the case of the Sheikh of El Katr, the engagements referred to in the preceding paragraph had been concluded before the European

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7. The strongest exception was taken by the Persian delegates at the League to the last-mentioned proposal, and, in deference to their representations, it was decided that Persia should no longer be classified as prohibited or special area. Persian agreement to the inclusion of the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman in the "special" maritime zone was secured only with the greatest difficulty, and consequent on earnest representations at Teheran by His Majesty's Government, while it proved impossible to secure Persian concurrence in the inclusion of Persian vessels in the category of native craft (it may be remarked that a specific reservation on this last point was again made by Persia in connection with Article 3 of the League of Nations Slavery Convention on the occasion of the signature of that Convention (*ad referendum*) by her representative at Geneva in September 1926). In the event the Convention, which has not yet been ratified by any of the principal arms-producing countries, was not signed by Persia. For practical purposes, therefore, while His Majesty's Government endeavour, in dealing with the arms trade, to be guided so far as possible by the spirit of

the Convention, the binding instruments, so far as the Persian Gulf is concerned, are the treaty engagements and other Agreements referred to in para. 3 above.

Arms Traffic in the Gulf, 1908-1928.

(a) 1908-1919.

8. The question of most importance during this period is the suppression, in 1912, of the arms traffic from Muscat. The history of this question, and of the successful efforts made by His Majesty's Government to establish control over the traffic, is given in paras. 7 to 16 of the Memorandum on Muscat on page 30, and it is not proposed to deal with it in detail here. Suffice it to say that, after lengthy negotiation, an arrangement was reached with the Sultan in May 1912, under which His Highness, in return for certain considerations, and for the payment of certain compensation, agreed to establish in his State a bonded warehouse under efficient control, to be in charge of a trustworthy person from among his subjects, in which all arms and ammunition should be deposited on importation. Issues from the warehouse were to be regulated by licences prepared by the Superintendent and countersigned by the Sultan personally, and such licences were to be issued only to individual purchasers or their authorised agents, subject to satisfactory proof that the issue involved was free from justifiable objection, and were not to be issuable to traders. After long diplomatic discussions, the regulations in question were recognised by the French Government in February 1914, and from that date the arms traffic in Muscat—save possibly in certain areas of the Batineh coast, on which the Sultan's writ does not run—may be regarded as under effective control.

9. The closing of Muscat to the arms traffic disposed of the most serious problem. But the conquest of Hasa in 1913 by Ibn Saud, and the reduction of effective Turkish authority in the peninsula of El Katr, which from 1910-11, consequent on the action taken by His Majesty's Government to prevent smuggling from the Muscat coast to Persian Makran, had become an important centre for the arms traffic, afforded new openings to the trade which called for the attention of His Majesty's Government.

10. No undertaking as regards the arms traffic was secured from Ibn Saud either in the Treaty of December 1915 or in the Treaty of Jeddah of May 1927, but the dominions of the Ruler of Nejd do not seem to have given rise to serious difficulty in this connection between 1908 and 1928. The outbreak of the war similarly reduced for the time the seriousness of the problem presented by El Katr; the Sheikh, under his Treaty of 3rd November 1916 with the Government of India, undertook the same obligations in regard to the suppression of the arms traffic as had already been undertaken in 1902 by the other Trucial Chiefs, and no incident of importance occurred in connection with the trade during the remaining years of the European War.

(b) 1919-1928.

11. The Naval authorities in the Persian Gulf reported in December 1920 that the present situation of the arms traffic indicated that, failing effective action to suppress the trade, a recrudescence of what took place before the war was probable. The chief centre of the traffic was reported to be Koweit, El Katr and the Trucial Sheikdom of Dabai being minor centres; the chief markets were southern Persia and Mesopotamia, with a continuous but small infiltration of arms into Persian Baluchistan; and the line followed by the traffic was principally across the Gulf to the south Persian coast near Lingah.

12. His Majesty's Government took a serious view of the danger of any revival of the trade, and as a result a conference of the interested authorities was held in Karachi in August 1921. The conclusions reached by the conference were that, while available figures showed no immediate marked increase in the traffic, traders were watching their opportunity; that the large collection of arms now in Arabia was a source of future potential danger; and that it was thanks solely to the activity of His Majesty's ships, which were closely watching the traffic and periodically searching dhows, that there had not been any material increase in the traffic.

C. in C., E. Indies,
to Adm., Jan. 25
1921, P. 1412.

H.C. Iraq to C.O.,
Aug. 28 1921,
P. 4604.
Tel. from Viceroy
to S. of S. for I.,
Oct. 27 1921,
P. 4812.

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13. To deal with the matter the Conference recommended the maintenance of the existing naval forces in the Gulf; the application of pressure to the local Sheikhs; the grant of authority immediately to establish a motor boat coastal patrol should an increase of the traffic take place; the establishment of a wireless installation at Koweit; and the making of efforts to persuade the Sheikh of Koweit to establish registration of arms on the lines accepted in Muscat in 1912.

Naval C. in C.,
E. Indies, to Adm.,
Mar 21 1921, P. 1795.

14. The death in March 1921 of Sheikh Salim of Koweit had removed the principal figure in the arms traffic, and the succession of Sheikh Ahmad-el-Jabir afforded an opportunity to apply pressure to the Principality in the matter (cp. para. 3 of Koweit Memorandum on p. 2). In view of this, and of the finding of the Conference that the trade in arms was relatively insignificant, the Government of India and His Majesty's Government decided that the problem was not sufficiently serious to justify special expenditure on wireless or special coastal motor boats, and that existing arrangements were probably adequate to meet it.

Tel. from Pol. Res.
to S. of S. for I.,
May 1 1925, P. 1345.

15. That decision has been justified by events. The new Sheikh of Koweit has actively co-operated with His Majesty's Government in the suppression of the arms traffic since his accession in 1921; by 1925 the Political Resident was able to report (in connection with the deliberations of the Arms Traffic Conference at Geneva) that the trade, whether to Makran or to the littoral between the Shatt-al-Arab and Lingah, was relatively unimportant; in April 1926 it was decided that the maintenance of the telephone and patrol establishment, instituted on the Makran coast in 1907 in connection with the abolition of the arms traffic was no longer necessary; and while in the same year the efforts of the Persian Government to disarm their subjects on the south Persian coast led to a temporary increase of smuggling from that coast to Trucial Oman (in connection with the suppression of which His Majesty's Government agreed that, provided they reported their captures, the Trucial Chiefs might be authorised to retain, for the use of their own military forces, such arms and ammunition as were seized by them), the reports of the local authorities have otherwise shown year by year a consistent decrease in the trade, to which the exhaustion of the supply of arms on the Arab coast has doubtless contributed.

Pol. Res. to G. of I.,
May 16 1925,
P. 1909.

Pol. Res. to G. of I.,
March 18 1926,
P. 1418.

I.O. to G. of I.,
Sept. 23 1926,
P. 3106.

Summary.

16. While a continual vigilance is necessary, the problem at the present day is one of inconsiderable dimensions, and the engagements existing between His Majesty's Government and the rulers of the Arab littoral and Persia, coupled with the presence of His Majesty's ships, are adequate, if strictly interpreted, to keep it within bounds. On the Persian littoral it is, moreover, definitely to the interest of the Persian Government that it should be reduced to the lowest possible level, but Persia is only slowly establishing her authority in Persian Baluchistan; she is for practical purposes impotent by sea; and so far as she is concerned the trade is kept under thanks to the efforts of His Majesty's Government. An international undertaking on the lines of the Arms Traffic Convention of 1925, if ratified and put into force, would afford a valuable additional obstacle to any recrudescence of the trade. But even in the absence of such an undertaking, the fact that the Convention of 1919 was signed, if not ratified, by the principal arms exporting countries other than the United States of America, has the advantage of reducing substantially the danger of obstructive action such as that taken by France in the early years of the period now under consideration in connection with the arms traffic in Muscat.

INDIA OFFICE,
8th October 1928.

J. G. L.