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'British Policy in Persia. Minute by Sir A. C. Lyall'

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About this record

The file consists of the Viceroy's Minute by Alfred Comyn Lyall, member of the Council of Secretary of State for India, pertaining to a letter from the Government of India dated 21 September 1899 (IOR/L/PS/7/116: 927/99) regarding British policy in Persia.

It comments on the Government of India's views on: the lack of a clearly defined line of policy, the strategic and commercial interests of Great Britain and India in Persia, measures for strengthening the British position, and relations with Russia.

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1899.

British Policy in Persia.

MINUTE by Sir A. C. Lyall.

(Secret Letter from India, No. 175, 21st September 1899.—Pol. 927/99).

The Government of India, in their letter dated 21st September 1899, begin by stating that they have not been able to discover "in their records" any clear definition of the principles upon which our policy toward the Persian Kingdom is based. Accordingly they concur with Sir M. Durand in his belief that the time has come for laying down a definite line of policy. They proceed to describe the strategical and commercial interests of Great Britain and India in Persia, and to draw a picture of the present condition of those interests.

I do not think that this description of the existing state of affairs contains anything of importance that has not been already recognised and well understood by those who have studied the question. Russian influence is preponderant in North Persia; British influence has the advantage in the South, from the proximity of the sea coast; but their respective spheres are undefined. In paragraphs 15-19 of their letter the Government of India propose certain measures for strengthening our position and guarding our interests at certain places; and to these we might agree, subject to settlement of financial details.

Paragraphs 20, 22, and 28 discuss the importance of certain territorial points or regions,—Seistan, Khorassan, the Persian Gulf,—whose situation more directly affects India. All these points are said to be more or less immediately threatened by Russia; and undoubtedly we must resist any encroachments upon our position and influence in those quarters. The Government of India declare (paragraph 47) that, in the area (which includes these important points) of British influence, that influence is directly and increasingly challenged by other nations; and they proceed (paragraph 50) to consider what steps should be taken for the protection of the common interests in those parts of Great Britain and India.

They begin by a reference to the assurances interchanged between Russia and England concerning the maintenance of the integrity and independence of Persia. Presuming these pledges or engagements to be still in existence, the Government of India place no reliance upon their effect in checking Russian encroachments, and are of opinion that such engagements may tend to become nominal and fictitious.

They also believe that the policy of joint action by England and Russia to impose reforms upon Persia is impracticable; but they raise the question whether a distinct understanding between the two European Powers for the separate patronage and development of Persia in distinct and clearly definite departments (paragraph 55) might not be possible. Upon this question, I think that the difficulties and drawbacks so forcibly enumerated in paragraphs 58-61 of the letter are decisive against attempting any such demarcations of separate spheres of interest. In my opinion Russia will certainly refuse to entertain the proposition, and would merely use it to impress further upon the Persian Government a conviction that we are contemplating a partition of the kingdom. Moreover, the proposition is in essence inconsistent with our own engagement to maintain the independence and integrity of Persia, and if Russia accepted it she would probably treat it afterwards as a pretext for maintaining that by our own act we had released her from her previous assurances. Nor do I understand why the Government of India, having already pronounced existing pledges to be quite untrustworthy, should immediately afterwards suggest entering into a new and much more dangerous contract with Russia. The mere suggestion might lay the British Government open to

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the same imputation that in this letter the Indian Government brings against Russia, of a disposition to treat engagements as mainly nominal, whenever it becomes expedient to break them.

If, however, the notion of defining separate spheres of influence is rejected, as I hope it may be, the Government of India are inclined to fall back on the alternative policy recommended by Sir M. Durand, of intimating plainly to Persia that aggressive action by Russia in the North would immediately result in decided action by us in the South. In the 11th paragraph of his letter to the Foreign Office, dated 6th March 1896, the Secretary of State has distinctly given his opinion that such a communication would be impolitic; and I should strenuously advise adherence to this opinion. There are grounds for suspecting that Persia has already heard something of this recommendation, and that this knowledge is not unconnected with a diminution of the personal influence of the British Minister at Tehran. My own view is that such an intimation would only play into Russian hands, and would necessarily weaken any trust in our own sincere desire to maintain Persian independence and integrity.

In short, as regards general principles of policy, I find nothing in these papers that need induce us to alter the conclusions stated in the letter of 2nd March 1896 from the India Office to the Foreign Office. In writing to the Foreign Office we should again recommend endeavouring to obtain from Russia a fresh and explicit assurance that the understanding for the maintenance of Persia's integrity and independence is still recognised.

Paragraphs 63-88 of the letter from the Government of India deal with the details of measures proposed for safeguarding our interests by the increase of Consular and other establishments in Persia. I leave these for examination in Committees.

The main political question discussed in the Viceroy's Minute is whether a railway from Quetta to Seistan would or would not stimulate Russia into taking immediate steps to forestall us at that point. I myself believe that this result *would* follow, or else that Russia would use it as a strategic reason for pushing forward elsewhere, seeing that Russian Ministers have openly warned us that every advance on our side would be answered by a corresponding advance on their side. Moreover, it is certain that at present Persia could not allow us to bring a railway into Persian territory, having just renewed for five years the agreement to grant no railway concessions in Persian territory. But the Viceroy's Minute notices this difficulty among others, and his conclusions on the railway question are somewhat indeterminate. In the meantime, there are, in my opinion, no political objections against connecting Quetta by railway with Nushki.

A. C. LYALL.

3rd November 1899.