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'Bunder Abbas – Kerman Railway'

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About this record

This memorandum, written by Lord Curzon [George Nathaniel Curzon, Marquess Curzon of Kedleston], discusses a proposed Bunder Abbas–Kerman railway line. Curzon considers the possible diplomatic, commercial and strategic motives for constructing the railway line.

Curzon argues that if the line has been suggested merely as a diplomatic rejoinder – that is to say, as a response to a Russian concession from Baku to Teheran [Tehran] – then the proposal is of little merit.

He suggests that if the line is being proposed for its commercial value then this should be demonstrated by the figures of trade. Moreover, Curzon argues that the line's commercial effect on any future extension of the Nushki railway beyond Dalbandin should also be considered, since both lines would then be competing for the trade of East Persia and Khorasan.

Curzon suggests that one strategic advantage of constructing a line from Bunder Abbas to Kerman would be the prospect of diverting a future Teheran–Yezd–Kerman Russian railway line away from the direction of India.

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SECRET.

BUNDER ABBAS—KERMAN RAILWAY.

Memorandum by Lord Curzon.

1. I have purposely kept back these papers for a little, because, just as I was beginning to note, there came along a file with a Nushki-Seistan Railway scheme, and it seemed desirable to place the two projects in relation to each other, though each can fairly be considered on its own merits.

2. The war seems likely to have two results in the Middle East:—(1) the supersession of the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907 by some new arrangement, more in consonance with British interests and with the needs of the time; (2) the enlargement of the British sphere, as hitherto defined, by the inclusion in it, whether formal or informal, of much of the present neutral zone. Any such rearrangement will amount to partition in a veiled form, and, whatever we do, it will be interpreted by Russia as giving her a right to consolidate her influence in the Russian sphere in a manner that will fall little short of a Protectorate. One of the instruments of this policy will be the construction of a number of railways in the North, designed in the political, commercial, and strategical interest of Russia, and intended to rivet her hold upon the Northern Provinces. (a) I believe that a Russian railway has already been opened to Tabriz; (b) a line from Baku *via* Resht to Teheran will follow, and has already been applied for; (c) railway connection will be established (from Askabad or elsewhere) with Meshed. Of these schemes the second is the most important. We cannot stop it, though I hope we shall not find any part of the money or treat it as part of a Trans-Persian scheme—a project to which I trust that we shall give less countenance than we did before the war.

3. Railway communication between Europe and India is likely in the long run to come. But what will be, or ought to be, the geographical line adopted is still uncertain. It may be *via* Persia, it may ultimately be through Afghanistan; whichever it be, we ought not, in my opinion, to go out of our way to encourage the connection. It can add nothing to the advantages, and may add a great deal to the risk of our position in India. The Trans-Persian scheme, with which the late Government coquetted, and to which they went perilously near to committing His Majesty's Government, is for the time being in abeyance. I trust that nothing may be done from this end to revive it. When the Russians have consolidated their political and military position in Northern Persia, they will want to push railways from Teheran to Ispahan, and from Teheran to Yezd or even Kerman. But that will not be for many years, and in the meantime we should, in my judgment, abstain from compromising ourselves on these larger and speculative issues.

4. The question of applying for a Bunder Abbas-Kerman railway falls into a different category and is recommended in these papers as a form of reply to a proposed Russian concession in the North. It should be looked at from several points of view.

5. I am unable to gather from the papers what has happened to the Mohamera-Khoremabad project, which has hitherto held the field as the British reply in the South to any Russian railroad advance in the North, but I infer that the surveys are held in abeyance because of the disturbed state of the country since the outbreak of war. I have never been very enthusiastic about this railway, because (a) the physical difficulties when it enters the mountains will be great, (b) it seems to me to enter Persia from the wrong direction, (c) it can only be effective or successful if it forms a part of a scheme for bringing South-West Persia under British influence, a scheme which seems to me to have become much more difficult from the moment when Ispahan was most unhappily included in the Russian sphere.

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6. On the other hand, if, as the result of the present war, we are to push on to and to hold Baghdad, and to consolidate our position in South-West Persia—in connection with the oil wells or for other reasons—then such a railway, or at any rate the earlier sections of it, may become inevitable, and it should not be dropped.

7. These remarks are pertinent, because I see from Mr. Greenway's letter that it is the same syndicate which has hitherto held the Mohammera concession that is now interested in the Bunder Abbas-Kerman project, and that one of the conditions of proceeding with the latter is that the syndicate should be reimbursed the 100,000*l.* which they have already spent on surveys for the former.

8. This seems to me a very unsatisfactory position; for (1) it indicates a lack of policy which is hardly to be admired; (2) it implies that we can only get one railway by dropping the other. Why should this be the case? And if it be the case, surely there ought to be a careful balance of the merits of the two before a decision in favour of one or the other is arrived at. I can find no trace of such a discussion in these papers.

9. Passing to the Bunder Abbas-Kerman project on its own merits, I am not clear whether it is now advocated merely as a diplomatic rejoinder to a Russian concession from Baku to Teheran, or as a commercial proposition, or as a strategic move, intended in the last resort to bar the completion of a Turco-Persian line, either in the direction of Nushki or to some Gulf port to the east of Bunder Abbas, such as Chahbar.

10. If it is put forward merely as a diplomatic rejoinder not intended to materialise at the present time, it is obviously only a piece of make-believe, with no value except the latent rights of revival which might be inherent in it, and which might have a positive value one day in the future.

11. If, on the other hand, the line possesses a commercial value such as will justify its construction as a business proposition, this ought to be demonstrated by the figures of trade. I cannot recall having seen it done. Moreover, its commercial effect has to be considered upon a possible future extension of the Nushki Railway beyond Dalbandin, for both lines would then be competing for the trade of East Persia and Khorasan, with a probable decided advantage (owing to the existence of a maritime base at Bunder Abbas) to the Kerman line.

12. If, thirdly, the line is to be viewed strategically, it possesses the unquestionable advantage of diverting the Russian spearhead (*i.e.*, the Teheran-Yezd-Kerman railway of the future) at a spot where it would be pointed straight towards India, and twisting it round in a direction where the prolongation would be under British control, and in the last resort, at Bunder Abbas, under the guns of the British Fleet. From this point of view it might be an advantage to Great Britain to anticipate the future by the construction of such a line.

13. There is the secondary strategical advantage, assuming the entire east of Persia to fall ultimately, as seems inevitable, under British protection, that we should be able to reinforce our position at Kerman by direct maritime connection with India.

14. These arguments may be held on the whole to justify a pursuance of the present proposal, though the prospect should not be lost sight of that when the Russian Government has carried, if it ever does carry, its trans-Persian line *via* Yezd to Kerman, resentment may be expressed at a maritime outlet so unconcerned with Russian ambitions or interests as Bunder Abbas, and pressure may be put upon the British Government of the day to agree to a more easterly prolongation from Kerman. This, however, relates to a future still remote, and belongs to the region of speculation.

15. I have said nothing about the financial aspect of the case, which is not even alluded to in these papers. How or with what resources, or subject to what guarantees, the railway would be constructed, if it is really proposed to construct it at all, has not been indicated.

24th August 1916.

CURZON.