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### 'The Persian Situation'

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#### About this record

This file consists of a report which discusses ways in which Britain might protect its interests in Persia. The report, written by John Evelyn Shuckburgh, Secretary to the Political Department, India Office, begins by stressing the importance of Britain taking an active interest in affairs in Persia, since events there may have an impact on Britain's position in India.

Shuckburgh opines that Persia, as a body politic, is in the last stages of decay and decomposition, and he describes how the country has been used as a base for anti-British agitation in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Whilst noting that the British occupation of Baghdad in March 1917 appeared to redress the balance of power in the East in Britain's favour, Shuckburgh argues that the Russian revolution has upset all calculations; he remarks that Russia has ceased to be an effective ally against German and Turkish threats to Britain's presence in Persia and may in fact become a potential enemy.

Shuckburgh suggests that Britain requests that the Persian Government takes steps to protect the North-West frontier of Persia (with an offer of British military assistance), whilst making it clear that if prompt and effective action does not appear to be forthcoming then Britain will take certain measures in accordance with its own interests in the East.

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### THE PERSIAN SITUATION

1. The Indian aspect of the Persian question can be very briefly stated. Persia lies across the most vulnerable flank of our Indian position, and the defence of India must always be the governing consideration in our Persian policy. So long as we hold India, we cannot afford to disinterest ourselves in the affairs of her western neighbour. If Persia were a well-organised State under a stable administration, we might be content to take a merely passive interest in her affairs. Unfortunately, the reverse is the case. Persia, as a body politic, is in the last stages of decay and decomposition. The Government at Tehran is hopelessly weak and inefficient. Cabinets succeed one another in rapid succession, but little serious attempt is ever made to remedy the confusion in public affairs. The Shah's writ scarcely runs beyond the capital itself, and even there the Government has little real authority over the faction of irresponsible "democrats," who control what passes for public opinion, and resort, when necessary, to assassination as a means of achieving their purpose. It was only by foreign assistance that even a semblance of tranquillity was maintained in the interior before the war. No practical means existed of protecting the external frontiers of the country against hostile attack.

2. The presence of such a neighbour, inconvenient at all times, has since the outbreak of war constituted a grave menace to our interests. Of the nature of German designs against India it is unnecessary to speak in detail. Their general character and wide ramifications are matters, not of surmise, but of ascertained fact. With headquarters at Berlin, where well-known Indian seditionists were pressed into the service, the organisation extended to the United States, Mexico, China, Japan, and the Dutch East Indies. Persia, from her geographical position, offered a promising field for enemy activities, and has in fact figured prominently in the campaign. We have detailed information, derived from captured diaries, &c., of the various enemy parties that have used the country as a base for anti-British agitation in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Some of these parties, as is well known, succeeded in reaching Kabul, where, during a prolonged stay, they pressed the Amir with all the arts of persuasion to take his stand as a "King of Islam" and join in the Holy War against the infidel. Turkish agents even penetrated into the independent tribal country on the North-West Frontier of India. Fortunately for us the Amir, despite strong pressure from influential sections of his own people, refused to be drawn from the path of neutrality. As time went on, the situation in Persia improved. The routes leading into Afghanistan were blocked by British and Russian troops; and the Germans at Kabul, finding themselves isolated and discredited, and realising the failure of their mission, were reduced to seeking means of escape. The British occupation of Baghdad in March 1917 appeared to have finally redressed the balance in the East in our favour.

3. But the Russian revolution has upset all calculations. Russia, on whom we relied to control the situation in North and North-West Persia in our joint interests, has not only ceased to be an effective ally, but has become a potential enemy of a particularly dangerous kind. Not only have her troops melted away, leaving north Persia open to the enemy, but she herself has developed internal disorders that may well prove more dangerous to us, if the contagion is allowed to spread, than the most active propaganda of the Germans and Turks. There can be no illusions about the policy of the Russian Bolshevists in relation to India. The British Chargé d'Affaires at Petrograd has recently warned us that they mean mischief there; and we have further direct evidence in the proclamation, issued at Petrograd some weeks ago, which called upon the people of India to eject the British as a necessary preliminary to "self-determination" on Bolshevist lines.

Germany may be trusted to avail herself of this new weapon for striking at British interests; and Persia, with her northern frontiers open, again

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offers a favourable line of attack. The confusion raging in the adjoining Russian districts cannot but aid the enemy in his designs. We know that German and Austrian agents are already at work in the Caucasus, while Turkish (and perhaps German) officers have arrived at Resht and are co-operating with the rebel Jangali tribesmen in the Persian province of Gilan. General Dumsterville's recent experiences show how desperate the conditions in North-West Persia have become.

4. The dangers of the situation will be readily appreciated. It may be quite true, as is understood to be the opinion of the General Staff, that no organised military attack is to be apprehended. But, so long as the frontier remains open, there is nothing to prevent the influx into Persia of hostile emissaries of every description—Pan-Turanian agents, missionaries of *Jihad*, apostles of Bolshevism, or enemy prisoners of war (of whom there must be large numbers, under very inadequate restraint, in Asiatic Russia) prepared to organise bands of local brigands and to throw the whole of Northern Persia into a ferment which cannot fail to react upon the situation in Afghanistan and beyond. One consequence of these activities, if they are allowed to proceed unchecked, may be that our Legation will be compelled to withdraw from Tehran just as our Consulates had to withdraw from Central Persia (Kerman, Ispahan and Shiraz) in 1915. Such an event would be a severe blow to our prestige throughout the East, and its effect at Kabul might well be disastrous. Hostile influences, never more than dormant in Afghanistan, would be revived and strengthened, and the Amir, with such an object lesson of our impotence before his eyes, might find his present position no longer tenable and definitely throw in his lot with the enemy.

5. For all these reasons it appears to the India Office that our military cordon along the Eastern borders of Persia will not prove sufficient to safeguard the interests of India; and that, despite the difficulties involved, some attempt should be made to close the door in the North-West, which the defection of Russia has left open. It is not pretended that, even if this object were achieved, our defensive system would be complete. The Trans-Caspian provinces of Russia would still afford the enemy access to the northern frontiers of Persia and Afghanistan by routes which no British cordon, whether in Eastern or North-Western Persia, could control. But by barring the main avenue of approach, and restricting hostile intrusion to difficult and circuitous bye-paths, we shall have gone far towards rendering our position secure.

6. If the conditions of Persia corresponded in fact to her position in international theory, our course would be a simple one. We should call upon the Persian Government to vindicate the neutrality of the Shah and to take measures to prevent Persian territory from being utilised as a base for belligerent intrigue. But, conditions being what they are, representations to the Tehran Cabinet are likely to be of little avail. Persia, even if she had the will, has not the means of complying with our demands. Nevertheless, though effective action can only come from ourselves, it appears essential that any measures upon which we may decide should, if possible, be taken through, and in the name of, the Persian Government. It is most desirable, on every ground, that we should not lay ourselves open to the charge of high-handed invasion of the sovereign rights of Persia, or of conspiring to deprive an autonomous Muhammadan State of the last vestiges of its independence. The line of action suggested is that, in the first instance, we should request the Persian Government, in their own interests, to take steps to protect the North-Western frontier of Persia; but that the request should be coupled with a very distinct intimation that, unless we are satisfied that prompt and effective action will be forthcoming, it is our intention to take such measures on our own account as our vast interests in the maintenance of tranquillity in the East render imperatively necessary.

7. It could be explained to the Persian Government at the same time that we appreciate the difficulties of their position, and realise that some external assistance may be needed to enable them to take effective action.



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If so, we are ready to place at their disposal a number of armoured motor-cars, with British personnel, which could, in our opinion, be usefully employed in patrolling the Kermanshah-Hamadan-Enzeli road. In return for their acceptance of our assistance, and for the establishment of an effective cordon between the Caspian and the right flank of our position in Mesopotamia, we should be ready to withdraw all our regular troops (other than Consular guards) from the interior of Persia. The question of attaching British officers to the Persian Cossack Brigade might be raised in the same connection. Sir C. Marling, it is true, has stated that such a proposal would never be entertained by the Persian Government. But until it has actually been put to them, it seems premature to abandon the suggestion in advance, or to assume that there is no hope of its acceptance if urged tactfully upon the Persian Government as part of a scheme of tranquillisation framed in a large measure in the interests of Persia itself. If further inducements are needed they might take the familiar form of increased financial assistance.

8. In conclusion, it should be clearly understood that the measures in contemplation do not include anything in the nature of elaborate military operations in North-West Persia. Apart altogether from political objections, it is recognised that the troops required for such a purpose are not available. What is suggested is that a fleet of armoured motor-cars, under the charge of British officers and non-commissioned officers of General Dansterville's party, should be established at the southern end of the Kasr-i-Shirin-Kermanshah-Hamadan road, and should gradually extend its operations northwards in the direction of the Caspian as circumstances permit. The British officers in charge would have authority to organise local levies, &c., as opportunity offered, or to take over existing organisations (e.g., the Cossack Brigade) to assist them in their work. It is believed that, given the right quality of officer and the necessary financial support, the objects in view could be achieved without further assistance from regular troops. The General Officer Commanding, Mesopotamia, would not be required to do more than extend his right flank up to the Eastern end of the passes leading from Irak into Persia. These passes, it may be observed, will be clear of snow and open to traffic in about a month's time.

POLITICAL DEPARTMENT, INDIA OFFICE,  
24th February 1918.

J. E. S.

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