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**Copy of a Letter from Captain John Malcolm, Representative of the  
Government of India to Persia, to Earl of Elgin, British Ambassador  
Extraordinary to the Ottoman Porte**

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**About this record**

A copy of a letter from Captain John Malcolm, Envoy of the Supreme Government of India to Persia [Iran], to the Earl of Elgin (Thomas Bruce), Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, sent from a camp on the Tygris [Tigris] and dated 23 March 1801. The letter assesses the Russian threat to British-held territories in India. This item is a duplicate of IOR/L/PS/9/67/37.

Copy of a Letter from Captain John Malcolm, Representative of the Government of  
India to Persia, to Earl of Elgin, British Ambassador Extraordinary to the  
Ottoman Porte [1r] (1/16)

L/P3/9/67/38

copy

993  
①

To His Excellency the Earl of Elgin  
His Britannic Majesty's Ambassador Extraordinary

& ————— & ————— &

at the Ottoman Porte

My Lord

I have the honor to acknowledge  
the receipt of Your Lordship's letter of the 27<sup>th</sup> of January,  
which reached me on the march to Baghdad, and I hope  
Your Lordship will pardon my delaying to answer it  
till I arrived at that city.

2  
A rupture with Russia would  
from Your Lordship's letter appear inevitable and as every  
intelligence relative to the possible attempts of that power  
to affect the English possessions in India will, on such  
event occurring have an importance. I am encouraged  
by Your Lordship's condescension to offer my sentiments  
upon that subject, which the incorrect may perhaps add  
in a trifling degree to the information already in Your  
Lordship's



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Lordsheps paperion.

3 Any successful attempt of Russia  
to affect the British Interests in India through the means  
of intermediate Powers appears to me attended with so  
many difficulties that I should doubt the possibility  
of its immediate execution even should that powerful  
Nation make the utmost exertions for its accomplish-  
ment. By immediate I mean a period of three four or  
five Years. For that that vast Empire if it continues  
united and is governed by a succession of able Monarchs  
will extend its influence and power over this part of  
Asia I have not a doubt, but such must from its na-  
-ture be a Work of time, and any hasty stride impetu-  
-ously taken to effect an immediate purpose will be  
more likely to retard than facilitate its ultimate ex-  
-ecution.

4 Any influence Russia could establish  
with an Eastern Power unless she afforded such the  
means of attacking the English Territories by furnishing  
ample supplies of men and artillery would I consider be  
of little consequence, all Asiatic Monarchs are sufficiently  
disposed to extend their Dominions, and when they  
remain at Peace their conduct almost invariably  
Proceeds



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proceeds from a Want of Courage or Ability to attack  
their Neighbours. ② 995

5 Russia can distantly threaten  
the British Possessions in India in many quarters  
establishing a Settlement on the Banks of the Euxine  
or Northern Shores of the Persian Gulph would be per-  
haps the most likely mode of doing this with a proba-  
bility of success; the difficulty of accomplishing ei-  
ther of these objects may be conjectured when it is  
considered that to affect them either the whole Eastern  
part of Turkey or the Western Provinces of Persia  
must be subdued and settled, and even, after such  
conquest what period it would require to form a force  
in the Gulph equal to any enterprise against British  
India.

6 There are only two Routes by which  
it is possible for Russia either by herself, or in coopera-  
tion with any other power to make an immediate  
attack on the British Possessions in India. The one from  
the Eastern Coast of the Caspian to the Banks of the  
Indus, or thro' Sactary from the Post of Orenburg to  
Bokhara, from whence they might either proceed  
against the Province of Oude by the Punjab, or  
through



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through that of Moultan, or along the banks of the  
Indus against Bombay.

7 For Dupin to attempt either of  
these projects by himself is out of the question, such  
would require the conquest and settlement of the  
intermediate Nations, a task that would from its  
nature supposing it possible, occupy a period much  
beyond the probable duration of any War. It is then  
to consider how far any cooperation of intermediate  
Nations is to be expected & how likely such would  
be to meet with success.

8 The Persian, Afghan and Usbe  
Governments are the only ones that could act with  
Dupin against India. It remains to show how far  
any of these have either the inclination or ability  
to aid in the execution of such a scheme.

9 The Persian Government has  
an easy and direct communication with Dupin  
and all supplies required could be sent by the latter  
to Iszelle a Port on the Caspian, and from thence trans-  
ported in a few days to Seheran the Capital of the  
Persian Empire, and under present Circumstances  
if the King of Persia could overcome his fear and  
prejudice



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③ 997

Prejudices and take full advantage of the theft and  
courage of a body of Russian Auxiliaries, he would not  
only soon subdue that part of the Province of Khors-  
savn governed by independent Chiefs, but the Afghan  
Empire and he might then threaten India with a  
serious invasion.

10 The following existing causes seem  
however to preclude every idea of a connection so dan-  
gerous taking place.

1<sup>st</sup> The jealousy that the Russians entertain of  
the progress of the Persians, which has been of late so  
much heightened by the circumstance of the Empress  
Catherine sending an Army into that Kingdom in the  
year 1796

2<sup>d</sup> The conduct of the present Emperor Paul to  
the King of Persia to whom he wrote proposing to send  
an Ambassador for the purpose of cementing the friend-  
ship between the two States on the condition of the Per-  
sian Monarch's consenting to give up all claims on  
the Province of Georgia, to which an answer was re-  
turned by the King of Persia that he would never part  
with his inheritance, and that if circumstances <sup>presented</sup>



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presented his reducing to subjection a Province of  
the Russian Empire at the present moment he  
trusted at some future time to do it.

3rdly The intimate Alliance into  
which the King of Persia has entered with the En-  
-lish Government all the benefits of which he must  
at once enjoy should he dream of connecting himself  
with the Russian State for any purpose hostile to  
that Nation, and both inclination and interest are  
likely to secure his keeping his engagements with  
the English who have been the means of raising his  
reputation, and who can, he must be sensible, do  
him either (as Policy dictates) the most serious ser-  
-vice or injury.

11 I confess the above considera-  
-tions have so much weight with me that I don't  
think any intimate alliance between the present  
Government of Persia and that of Russia is likely  
to be effected; on the contrary I think a rupture  
between these two States is a much more probable  
event.

12

The present King of the Afghans  
Shah



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999 (4)

Shah Tumaun, I consider as an Enemy of the English Power in India, and one whose enmity no influence from a foreign Quarter can increase. He will invade Hindoostan if ever he has the means. His intentions have been hitherto defeated by a Variety of events and it appears to me they cannot be renewed for a period of four or two Years, nor indeed for a much longer if the Present Government of Persia is enabled to perform its recent Engagements with the English Nation

13

Though Pride Jealousy and Prejudice is more likely to prevent the Affghan Government than any other Asiatic Power whatever cooperating with a Body of Russians or any other European Nation in an invasion of India; and tho' if it consented to do so, the difference of manners and Habits would destroy every hope of cordiality and defeat the purpose of such an unnatural Union yet I shall for a Moment conceive the contrary that I may examine how likely such Alliance would be to answer the end intended.

14

There are three Routes by which



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a force of men or a supply of stores from Russia could reach the Afghan Territories. One from the Port of Astrabad on the Caspian to Meshed, and from that to Kerat. The second from a more Northern Port in the Caspian to Orunge and from that to Kandahar by the Cities of Khawrizm and Bokhara, and the third from the Port of Orunge to Kandahar by the way of Bokhara. The two first of these Roads are well known being constantly travelled by Caravans, the latter is little frequented, as Tribes of Tartars who are esteemed by even the Mahbys as Savages possess the intermediate Country.

15 The shortest of these Roads is a distance of upwards of four hundred English Miles. The nature of the intervening Country would render the march by any of these impracticable for a small body of men; and I shall proceed to state the causes that would combine to impede the progress of a large Force.

16 If they took the first mentioned Route Astrabad which is the Native City of the present Family on the Throne of Persia and the place where



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1801 (5)

when they deposit most of their Wealth, must be reduced as well as the adjoining Country, as it never can be imagined the King of Persia could give his consent to an Auxiliary Force marching through his Dominions to assist his Rival and Enemy, and after this was effected which it only could be by defeating all the Force of Persia. The Russians would also have to conciliate or combat the Tribes of Turkomans and the various independent Chiefs of Khorasan through whose Territories they must pass which they could only hope successfully to accomplish by the advance of an Afghan Army to near Astorabad. After their junction with which when they marched Eastward, all communication with the Russian Dominions would be entirely cut off unless the provinces of Mazinderaan and Khorasan were previously subdued and settled, or in other words the Persian Government overthrown.

17 By the Route of Orizunge, Kharizm and Bokhara still more difficulties would attend. The Hordes of Turkomans and the Independent  
Chiefs



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 Ottoman Porte [5v] (10/16)

Chiefs of the Western parts of the Provinces of Khane  
 seem jealous of their independence and alarmed  
 at an event that has a tendency to increase the  
 power of their Neighbours would at least oppose  
 in some degree the advance of such a Force while  
 the King of the Kheys Shaah Moorad would  
 though in close alliance with Shaah Lumaun  
 be little inclined to admit a body of Auxiliaries  
 to pass through his Capital and Territories that  
 would add so much to the strength of the Affghan  
 Nation of which he already stands greatly in dread.  
 A Russian Force advancing by this Route implies  
 nothing short of the conquest and settlement of the  
 intermediate Countries, and if that was not thoroughly  
 effected all Communications with the Port on the  
 Caspian at which they had disembarked would  
 soon be cut off.

10 With the Country through  
 which a Russian Force must pass that takes the last  
 mentioned Route from the Pass of Ackenberg, I am  
 little acquainted, but this attempt I conceive of all  
 others



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1003 (6)

thru the most difficult. The distance exceeds six hundred Miles, and through a Country that is little cultivated and badly supplied with Water. By this route the Territories of the King of the Mughals must also be passed, and the same opposition from the Independent Chiefs to the Northward of Bokhara and from Shah Moorad is to be expected, as they would be actuated by the Motives I have before stated to oppose the progress of any European Force.

19 It appears from what has been said that if the Afghan Monarch was disposed to accept the aid of the Russians (which is a very improbable case) that effecting the junction of any force they might send and keeping open their communication with their own Territories would in all likelihood lead into a series of operations quite foreign to the original intent of the Alliance.

20 The Russian Government forming a connection for the purpose of invading India with Shah Moorad or Beggy Jaur (as he is more generally termed) is still more unlikely than with either the



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The Persians or Afghans. The Moslems are both  
~~so~~ more ignorant and more prejudiced ~~than~~ than  
 either, and their present Ruler (who has confined  
 his Sovereign the Descendant of Genghis) preserves  
 his authority entirely by wearing the mask of a  
 Devotee. He assumes both the manner and fact  
 of a Saviour and has so imposed upon his Moslem  
 subjects that they view him with an enthusiasm  
 bordering upon adoration.

It is evident that a Ruler  
 whose conduct is regulated upon such principles  
 would be little inclined to risk the loss of the  
 power he has obtained by acting in direct opposi-  
 tion to his professions, and connecting himself  
 with a Nation whom Religious duty (for he is  
 the Priest as well as the Sovereign of his People)  
 obliges him every day to denounce as Infidels.  
 Supposing, however, the desire of increasing his  
 power led him to waive his scruples, let us examine  
 what difficulties remain to be encountered. The only  
 routes to Bokhara are those before mentioned  
 from



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1005 (7)

from the Caspian Sea by Ormuz and Kharuj  
and from the east of Bombay. The difficulties that  
would oppose the progress of a force on either of these  
roads have been already stated. It remains to add  
that after all these had been overcome, the Affghans  
must either be brought over to the league or sudden  
and means must be taken to keep the powerful  
Khauns that border on the Usbegs Territories in  
order while the force of Shah Murad was employ-  
ed in the distant conquest of India.

22

Though the present King of the  
Usbegs and Shah Zuman are friends and of the  
same sect in Religion, their both uniting with  
a Russian Force for the purpose of making a con-  
quest of India is an event that I may almost  
pronounce impossible, and if they did, the differ-  
ent habits and interests of the Parties would to a  
certainty defeat any project that they might  
originally propose by their combined efforts to ac-  
-complish.

23

From what I have said, the  
difficulty



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difficulty and I might almost say impossibility,  
of any attempt made by Russia to affect either by  
her influence or power British India may be con-  
sidered. I shall only add my conviction of the  
fallacy of an opinion that has been often enter-  
tained that a hatred and jealousy of the power of  
the English in India would incline any Neighbour-  
ing Nation to cooperate for the purpose of attack-  
ing them. The fact is most Asiatic Nations,  
but particularly those that I have alluded to, have  
but a very confused idea of the different powers  
of Europe they blend them all under the name  
of Fringes, a term signifying European, and are  
equally alarmed at giving any of them a footing  
in their Dominions, as they dread their art and cou-  
rage and the great strides which the English have  
made <sup>in India</sup> has made this alarm rise to a height, that will, or  
I am mistaken, prevent any of these Nations ever  
admitting into their Territories a European force  
of any consequence.

L<sup>th</sup>

I have been led by the  
subject



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subject to a length much beyond what I originally intended: I am however confident of your Lordship's indulgence.

I have the honor to be

Yours &c.

signed John Malcolm  
Ensay

Camp on the  
Banks of the  
Tigris  
2 miles from Bagdad.

23<sup>rd</sup> March 1801.

A true copy.

W. Hammett  
Secy

W. Patterson  
Age



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