

## **British Encroachments in Seistan**

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### **Abstract**

Seistan was one of the important ancient urban centres in south eastern Persia. The ruins of the city show the prosperity and fertility of this city to the extent that a British civil officer considered it as the ancient London of Asia. This article attempts to describe the enormous latent wealth of this ancient city which made it important for strategic, political and commercial reasons. Due to strategic importance, it fell into the power struggle of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century especially between British and Russia. This power game was the main reason of the poverty of the peasant of Seistan. East India Company had extensively taken Seistan as the major point for its trade after its penetration in Afghanistan and likewise Russia's penetration in the Central Asia. Western penetration in Seistan had already started in 1809. When Samarqand was annexed in 1867, the British raised the question of establishing neutral zone between Britain and Russian in Central Asia. In 1872 thus, Seistan was divided between Afghanistan and Persia. Government of India had proposed building a new trade link between Quetta and Seistan, just to establish the supreme interest of Britain in those parts of Persia bordering Baluchistan. In the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the whole policy of the British government was to capture the strategic locations to further its economic interest, which are evident from the official and non-official records. With this evil intention and local power struggle, the richness and fertility of Seistan was destroyed and local peasantry faced dire straits.

**Keywords:** Seistan, Power Game, Strategic Importance, Encroachment, Trade Link.

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Seistan, a region comprising roughly 7,000 square miles in south-east Persia with alluvial soil and abundant water, had been “fertile in the extreme<sup>1</sup>”. In years past, Seistan had, in fact, been a very prosperous and civilized country, as the extensive ruins of cities and villages there prove. Savage-Landor, a civil officer in the British Indian Government, wrote that beyond Nasserabad, a village a few miles from Nosratabad (the capital of Seistan) they had come across a succession of ruined villages and towns, stretching in a line for some eight miles from north to south<sup>2</sup>. Major Evan Smith, who had been a member of the British Perso-Afghan mission of 1871, writes in his account that the ruins of Peshawaran were of great extent and strongly built, many of them being composed of alternate layers of sun-dried and baked brick. The great characteristic of these ruins, he remarked, was the number of accurately constructed arches which still remained, and which could be seen in almost every house, plus the remains of very strongly built windmills.

Dr. Bellew, the assistant of a General Pollock who had been sent to liaise with the Afghan Commissioner in Seistan as agent for the Governor-General, speaks of the city of Zahedan as:

Extending as far as the eye can reach to the north east, and said to be continuous with the ruins of Dashak about nine miles from the Hemund (sic). These ruins, with those of

Pulki, Nadali, and Peshawaran, are the most extensive in Seistan, and mark the site of populous cities, the like of which are not to be found at this present day in all this region between the Indus and the Tigris<sup>3</sup>.

After his visit in 1900, Savage-Landor himself described Zahedan as an uninterrupted row of houses extending for no less than eighty-six miles. “The fact must remain”, he emphasized, “that this ancient London of Asia marks a period of astounding prosperity in the history of Eastern Persia”<sup>4</sup>.

Major Evan Smith further remarked:

We were enabled too to gain some idea of the wonderful fertility of Seistan(sic) ... where water never fails. There was little doubt on our minds that under Persian rule the resources of Seistan had been wonderfully augmented, and that they were still capable owing to the system of irrigation, of immense development; and the quantity of grain that could be grown in the province must be simply enormous<sup>5</sup>.

Seistan’s extreme fertility and abundance of water were also confirmed by all the visiting experts in the area. In 1903, Colonel McMahon, who spent about two and a half years in Seistan led a large British mission, remarked that the

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1. Rawlinson Sir H.C. Notes on Seistan, *Journal of Royal Geographical Society*, Vol. 43, 1873, (pp. 272-95), p. 272.  
2. Savage-Landor, A.H. *Across Covetea Lands*, (London, McMillan and Co., 1902), Vol. II, p. 140.

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3. Cited by Henry Savage-Landor, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 222.

4. *ibid.*, p. 232.

5. Goldsmid, Major-General F.J. *Eastern Persia: An Account of the Journeys of the Persian Boundary Commission 1870/1/2*, 2 vols., (London: McMillan and Co., 1876) Vol. I, p. 271.

extraordinary fertility of the province's soil made it a country of enormous latent wealth. Its geographical position and natural resources-most notably apropos of cereals and livestock-could make it a place of great strategic, political and commercial importance<sup>1</sup>.

However, the strategic significance of Seistan made it a sphere of constant rivalry between the Western powers, especially Britain and Russia. Indeed, intervention by the two powers in the area was the chief reason behind the adverse poverty of the peasants, who endured a miserable existence on the golden soil of Seistan.

Western penetration had commenced in 1809, when Sir John Malcolm, on his third mission to Persia, deputed Captain Grant and – in the following year – Captains Christie and Palinger to eastern Persia in order to discover any overland routes that may exist from there to India and which might serve for the possible advance of French or Russian troops. Well-directed activity by British officers on surveying expeditions for the Indian Government had continued in the area, ever since. In 1861, Colonel Frederic Goldsmid was sent there, who represented British authority for ten years.

Meanwhile, Russia continued to expand in central Asia by absorbing Persian territory in the north. When Samarkand was annexed in 1867, the British again raised the question of establishing a 'neutral zone' between the territories of Britain and Russia in central Asia. At the same time, the British had acted swiftly and decisively to divide

Seistan, which was of vital importance to them. Full Russian possession would be conducive to their domination of Afghanistan, and an important preliminary to a comprehensive advance upon India.

Shir Ali, the Amir of Afghanistan (1863-79), who in 1869 was to obtain cordial assurances with regard to his power and position from Lord Mayo, the Viceroy of India,<sup>2\*</sup> raised the matter of the ownership of Seistan. Britain had the authority to arbitrate in the question under the terms laid down in Article 6 of the Treaty of Paris (4 March, 1857) whereby Persia had been compelled to relinquish her right of sovereignty over the city of Herat and certain parts of Afghanistan. To obtain such agreement, Britain had incited the Afghans to bring both Herat and Qandahar under their rule<sup>3</sup>. In December 1855, Doust Mohammad Khan, the Amir of Afghan (1834-63) took the first step by occupying Qandahar. In February 1856, Persian forces took the road to Herat. Soon the British were to occupy Khark, Bushehr, Mohammerah and Ahwaz, with the ultimate aim of separating Herat - the 'Key to India' - from Persia and thus establishing a buffer on the north-west frontier of India against Russian encroachment. With the conquest of Sind in 1843 and the annexation of the

1. McMahon, Colonel Sir Henry. Recent Survey and Exploration in Seistan, J. R.G.S. No. 3, September 1906, Vol. xxviii, (pp. 209-28 and 333-52) pp. 213-4.

2. Thorenton, A.P. British Policy in Persia, 1858-90, The English History Review, Vol. 69, 1954, (pp. 554-79) and Vol. 70, No. 274, 1955, (pp. 55-73) p. 560. this paper is based on British foreign office documentation.

\* Shir Ali was also in receipt of a yearly grant of 12 hundred thousand rupees and arms from India. (Goldsmid F.J. *Eastern Persia*, op. cit., Vol. I. p. XII).

3. Gillard, David. The Struggle for Asia 1828-1914: A Study In British and Russian Imperialism (London: Methuen and Co., 1977), pp. 96-98; Thorenton, A.P. op. cit., p. 555.

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Punjab, Afghanistan became contiguous with British India<sup>1</sup>.

Major-General Sir Frederic Goldsmid, now well acquainted with the area after a comprehensive survey, was appointed as arbitrator. Major-General Sir Richard Pollock, with the well-known Pushtu and scientific scholar Dr. Bellow as his assistant, sent as an agent of Governor General, to liaise with the Afghan commissioner. Duly, in 1872, Seistan was divided up into two parts, with 4159 square miles going to Afghanistan and 2847 square miles to Persia<sup>2</sup>.

During the 1880's, further Russian advance into central Asia had induced much fear in India that Khorassan, Seistan and Afghanistan might fall next. Soon, the zone in question was heavily penetrated by Russian and British agents, including some native agents working for the former or the latter or both. Rivalry heightened further when Russia appointed Zeidler as Vice-Consul to Seistan in 1898, a move which was followed by the transfer of Captain Percy M. Sykes, then British Consul at Kerman, to Seistan, principally to keep an eye on his Russian counterpart. Zeidler was succeeded by a much more able man, Miller, who reached Nosratabad in February 1900. Soon afterwards, Major George Frederick Chenevix-Trench was dispatched by the Viceroy of India. He arrived at Nosratabad on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April 1900,

accompanied by Major Robert Arthur Edward Benn.

The Persian Government, being in dire financial straits, offered the Crown lands in Seistan (i.e. virtually the whole of the province) to Heshmat'ol-Mulk, the Amir of Seistan, for £100,000 in 1901<sup>3</sup>. The Amir, during private negotiations with Major Chenevix-Trench, suggested to the latter that the British give him their assistance in the purchase of Seistan; in Chenevix-Trench's opinion, it was advisable that the British Government provide money for this aim. Sir Arthur Hardinge, British Minister at Tehran, agreed and as such suggested to Lord Henry Lansdowne, the British Foreign Secretary, that financial help be afforded Heshmat'ol-Mulk but that British subvention be carefully concealed from the Persian Government.<sup>4</sup>

In reply to Hardinge's proposal, Lord Lansdowne, The British Foreign Minister, pointed out the potentially hazardous nature of British financial assistance to Heshmat'ol-Mulk in his purchase of the Crown lands. He stated, furthermore, that any concealment attempt from the Persian Government of such assistance would bring considerable difficulties. Moreover, the British Government would not be in a position to protect Heshmat'ol-Mulk against the Persian Government, should the latter fall from favour. As the safer course, Lord Lansdowne advised that overtures should be made to the Persian Government to allow the financial help to be advanced against the security of

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1. For details of the importance of Herat for British India, and the British policy in regard to Herat in 1830-63, see G.J. Alder, *The Key to India: British and Herat Problem in 1830-1863*, Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 10, 1974, No. 2, pp. 186-209; No. 3, pp. 287-311; Norman Bentwich OBE, *Sir Ronald Thomson and British Policy toward Persia in 1879*, Journal of Royal Central Asian Society, Vol. 22, 1935, pp. 601-16.

2. See Goldsmid's own accounts upon which he justified the decision to divide Seistan in Eastern Persia and ..., op. cit., appendix A and B and introduction pp. ix-lxiii.

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3. Sir Arthur Hardinge to Lord Lansdowne, No. 28, Tehran, May 17, 1901; F.O. 416, 5.

4. Hardinge to Lansdowne, No. 156, confidential, Tehran, May 9, 1901; F.O. 416, 5.

Seistan or other revenues<sup>1</sup>. At the same time there were rumours circulating to the effect that Russia was to purchase Seistan from the Shah<sup>2</sup>.

In May 1901, the Government of India informed Hardinge of its endeavour to forge new trade links between Quetta and Seistan, and expressed its satisfaction at the volume of trade thus generated.\* Although the commercial advantages of this overland rail trade of the Government of India were of great importance to both India and Persia, it was to be understood that the principle objective in opening up the route to Quetta had been political and strategic. It had been the Government of India's desire thus to establish beyond doubt the superior interest of the United Kingdom in those parts of Persia which bordered Baluchistan. Government of India attached the paramount interest of Britain in Seistan and in south-eastern Persia as a whole. It felt, in particular, that in no circumstance should Seistan be allowed to slide under the control or even the preponderant influence of Russia. Instead, British prestige and influence in that quarter was to be constantly and actively maintained<sup>3</sup>.

The War Office in London corroborated same ideas, as that of New Delhi. In 1902, it urged that the area should not be allowed to fall into Russian hands, thereby giving her a strategical outpost for

operations against Qandahar and Baluchistan. The War Office also recommended the extension of the Indian Railway to Nushki and thence to Seistan.

In November 1902, in a joint conference between the London War Office and the Foreign Office, it was decided that if (a) war occurred between Persia and a Russia supported by France, or (b) disorders within Persia induced a Russian occupation of parts of the north, Britain should at least keep a standby force to occupy Seistan. It was also deemed necessary that Bandar Abbas, together with Qishm, Hangan and Hormuz be taken without delay<sup>4</sup>.

In the spring of that year, the Afghans had destroyed a dam in Seistan, diverted the water of the Hirmand, and stopped the mouth of the water-courses. They thereby reduced the local Persian peasantry to exceptionally dire straits. Considering that these events took place just prior to British intervention in Seistan, it does seem unlikely that the Afghans could have perpetrated such acts of destruction without British advice and support. Duly, the Persian Government, bound by the Treaty of Paris to refer all differences arising between Persia and Afghanistan to the British Government, asked the latter to take prompt action<sup>5</sup>. Lord George Hamilton, Secretary of State for India, proposed that British officers be allowed to visit the locality at once and investigate the alleged damages<sup>6</sup>. Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India from 1898 to 1905, suggested that Major Arthur Henry McMahon be

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1. Lansdowne to Hardinge, No. 175, Foreign Office, May 18, 1901; F.O. 416, 5.

2. Inclosure 1 in No. 5 of India Office to Foreign Office; F.O. 416,6.

\* Indian trade with Seistan was non-existent before the opening of the Quetta route in 1896. Trade amounted to some 64,000 rupees in 1896-7, jumped to 589,929 rupees the following year and by 1900-1 had reached 1,534,452 rupees. Savage-Landor, op. cit., Vol. ii, p. 147.

3. Government of India to Sir Arthur Hardinge, inclosure 2 in No. 12, Simla, May 29, 1901; F.O. 416,6.

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4. Greaves, Rose L. "Persia and the Defence of India, a Study in the Foreign Policy of the Third Marquis of Salisbury", (University of London: the Athone Press, 1959) pp. 289-90.

5. Mr. Des Gray to Lansdowne, No. 102, Gulhak, August 16, 1902; F.O. 416,10.

6. Lord George Hamilton to the Government of India, inclosure 2 in No. 126, India Office to Foreign Office, August 18, 1902; F.O. 416,10.

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accorded a Royal Commission to settle the dispute between the Persian and Afghan Governments regarding the Seistan boundary<sup>1</sup>.

The Russians immediately expressed their objection to the Royal Commission. **Novae Vremya**, a quasi-official Russian newspaper, wrote that Seistan – by virtue of its geographical position and intrinsic nature-deserved, even more than did Herat, to be termed the ‘Key to India’. “Were it in our hands, the advance to India would be made far easier. In English hands, all our operations were rendered considerably more difficult.” Were Major McMahon’s mission to play either the role of the representative of Afghan interests or that of a Court of Arbitration, continued **Novae Vremya**, the Russians could not sit as indifferent spectators to such a mission in Seistan. It would so delineate the Perso-Afghan possessions, when dividing the waters of the Hirmand between the disputants, that in the end the whole of the southern course of the river would be in British hands<sup>2</sup>. Mr. Vlassoff, the Russian Minister at Tehran, subsequently brought pressure on the Persian Government in order to prevent the British mission from as much as entering Persian territory<sup>3</sup>.

The Seistanis themselves were already persuaded that the United Kingdom enjoyed undue prerogatives over the territory they inhabited, and furthermore that she intended to acquire Seistan

simply by force of arms. So the notion that Britain was their new overlord was fast gaining ground among them. Even in the diary of Major Chenevix-Trench, which recalls his journey from Seistan to Mashhad in 1901, it reads:

Not only to the Amir Shaukat-ul-Mulk (sic) (the Governor of Qaen) did I openly enlarge on the coming influence of England in Persia, through the Seistan route, but at every place on the way from Seistan to Meshed (sic) did I address large crowds, and tell them that an ancient kingdom such as Persia was, did not so easily succumb through intrigue and pressure from Russia ...<sup>4</sup>.

Before the start of McMahon’s mission to Seistan, the Indian press had published the news that the commissioner, who was coming to deal with the Hirmand water question, was accompanied by 500 horsemen and several captains<sup>5</sup>, and that the news of his mission had been spread in Seistan.

The arrival of such a mission in Seistan made a very strong impression on the natives, who had never seen a regular army, and naturally various inferences were drawn. This was, in fact, exactly the reaction the British had wanted. In pursuance of this same objective, steps had been taken to

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1. India Office to Foreign Office, No. 7, India Office, January 1, 1903; F.O. 416,12.

2. Extract from **Novae Vremya**, dated January 2, 1903, inclosure in No. 14 of Sir C. Scott to the Marquess of Lansdowne, St. Petersburg, January 2, 1903; F.O. 416,12.

3. Hardinge to Lansdowne, No. 9, Tehran, January 3, 1903; F.O. 415,12.

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4. Diary of Major Chenevix-Trench’s journey from Seistan to Mashhad for the period from 15<sup>th</sup> March to 30<sup>th</sup> April. 1901, inclosure in No. 14; F.O. 416,6.

5. Translation of part of a telegraph from Atabak-e A’zam to the Persian Minister, inclosure in No. 25; F.O. 416,12.

upgrade Major McMahon to Colonel for the duration of his stay in Seistan<sup>1</sup>.

Being aware of Britain's intentions, and of her close relations with Heshmat'ol-Mulk, the Persian Government immediately instructed Ala'os-Sultaneh, Persian Minister at London, to ask the Marquis of Lansdowne to abandon the idea of sending commissioners to Seistan, especially since the Hirmand water situation had now improved with a consequent easing of public distress<sup>2</sup>. The Persian Prime Minister, Amin'os-Sultan, told Sir Arthur Hardinge that the Shah saw no immediate necessity for arbitration and that it should not take place. The Shah had been persuaded, he said, that the real object of Major McMahon's mission was to seize some point in Seistan and annex it to Indian territory. In the same interview, Amin'os-Sultan, who throughout his political career had always compromised with either the British or the Russians—depending on whichever of the two Powers was politically predominant at the time—at the expense of the Persian people, suggested to Sir Arthur that he write a letter to Nasrullah Mushir'od-Dowleh, the Persian Foreign Minister, to the effect that British arbitrators were already on their way to Seistan<sup>3</sup>. To counter the pro-British policies of the Prime Minister, Mushir'od-Dowleh sent a telegraph at London stating that in the opinion of the Persian Government, the rise of the water in Hirmand had put an end to the differences,

in view of which fact the departure of the commissioners should be stopped<sup>4</sup>.

In order to assure the Indian Government that the programme would be fulfilled, Lord Hamilton wrote to the Viceroy of India, saying that "His Majesty's Government is not prepared to abandon proposed arbitration or to cancel arrangements for Major McMahon's visit to Seistan. He should proceed to the frontier as originally intended"<sup>5</sup>. Meanwhile, Hardinge was instructed to respond to the Persian Government in much the same way<sup>6</sup>.

Russia was not, however, absent from the scene. In an interview with Amin'os-Sultan on December 29, Hardinge discovered that Vlassoff had, during a recent audience, acquired the Shah's consent for a Russian delegate to associate with the Persian commissioner<sup>7</sup>. The Russian Minister met Amin'os-Sultan again on January 2, 1903 and threatened that if McMahon was to enter Seistan, the Russians might send an equally strong force to escort their own consul<sup>8</sup>.

To inhibit Russia exercising her own right of intervention, Hardinge tried to persuade Amin'os-Sultan that British arbitration provided for under Article 6 of the Anglo-Persian Treaty of 1857: an arrangement which could be modified on the consent of both parties. However, intervention in

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1. India Office to Foreign Office, No. 7, January 1, 1903; F.O. 416,12.

2. Inclosure in no. 25, Foreign Office, January 7, 1903; F.O. 416,12.

3. Hardinge to Lansdowne, No. 97, Confidential, Tehran, December 29, 1902; F.O. 416,12.

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4. Mushir'od-Dowleh to Hardinge, Inclosure 2 in No. 104, January 6, 1903; F.O. 416,12.

5. Lord Hamilton to the Government of India, Inclosure in No. 40, India Office, January 13, 1903; F.O. 416,12.

6. Lansdowne to Hardinge, No. 48, Foreign Office, January 14, 1903; F.O. 416,12.

7. Hardinge to Lansdowne, No. 97, Confidential, Tehran, December 29, 1902; F.O. 416,12.

8. Hardinge to Lansdowne, No. 9, Tehran, January 3, 1903; F.O. 416,12.

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any form by any other government would require British assent<sup>1</sup>.

In January 1903, Colonel McMahon eventually entered Persia. McMahon himself says, “a large equipped mission, to proceed to Seistan, and arbitrate upon both the boundary and the water disputes”. A party of nearly 1,500 persons, McMahon continued, accompanied him that included Major C. Wanliss, Intelligence Officer; Captain Webb-Ware, C.I.E. Political Assistant; Major H.P. Walters, Commander of the escort; Mr. T.R.J. Ward, Irrigation Officer; a large staff of British and native subordinates (comprising survey, irrigation and other civil departments); and a force of 200 infantry<sup>2</sup>. In addition, a total of 1,308 camels had been loaded with supplies<sup>3</sup>.

Furthermore, the British enjoyed the active support of Heshmat’ol-Mulk, the Amir of Seistan. It was he, indeed, who had paved the way for their influence. He had been appointed Governor of Seistan in 1891, after the death of his father, and remained there undisturbed for over a decade. At the beginning of 1901, for instance, there were neither Persian Foreign Office agents, military officers, nor any other officials from the central government in Seistan. Accordingly, Heshmat’ol-Mulk was left free to exercise a very great deal of local leverage. G.P. Churchill, Oriental Secretary at the British Legation, wrote to the Foreign Office that Heshmat’ol-Mulk:

“Threw in his lot with us from the outset, and has done his utmost to remain loyal to our cause. He has never designedly put difficulties in our way; he has often secretly helped us, and there is no doubt that his political feelings are entirely on the side of the British”<sup>4</sup>.

Ever since the fall of Zill’os-Sultan, Lord Salisbury had opposed endeavors to extend British influence in Persia through the decoration of native personages who had rendered political services to the British Government. He did so on the grounds that such a mark of British favour ended as often as not with the disgrace of the recipient. Nevertheless in April 1901, Major Chenevix-Trench suggested that Heshmat’ol-Mulk should be decorated. He argued that the latter’s case was very different from that of any ordinary Persian Prince or politician. Trench believed, he himself had little either to hope or fear from Tehran; besides which, his cooperation with the British might prove of great assistance in developing the Nushki-Seistan route. “I would, therefore, respectfully suggest,” he continued, “that his case should be considered on its own merits as a special one without reference to the general principles governing the grant of decorations to Persian Chiefs”<sup>5</sup>.

Thus, in spite of the fact that Heshmat’ol-Mulk was, in Churchill’s words, “degenerate, corrupt, vicious, and addicted to opium smoking to such an extent that he was practically an imbecile,” the

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1. Hardinge to Lansdowne, No. 97, Confidential, Tehran, December 29, 1902; F.O. 416,12.

2. McMahon, Sir Henry, “Recent Survey and Exploration in Seistan,” op. cit., p. 333.

3. Diary of the Seistan Mission for the week ending January 18, 1903, inclosure in No. 370; F.O. 416,12.

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4. Inclosure 2 in No. 11864, March 28, 1907; F.O. 371,304.

5. Hardinge to Lansdowne, No. 190, Tehran, April 26, 1901; F.O. 416,5.



British made use of his hereditary power to extend their sphere of influence.

However, there were indications that Heshmat'ol-Mulk might be removed from the Governorship of Seistan because British moves apropos Seistan were viewed with grave suspicion by Mozaffar'od-din Shah, who began to doubt Heshmat'ol-Mulk's loyalty. The Indian Government wrote that the downfall of Heshmat'ol-Mulk would be "a serious blow to the plans which the Government of India have in view, since the substitution of a less friendly and accommodating Governor could hardly fail to affect the trade injuriously, and in his way to weaken our claim to regard Seistan as manifestly and exclusively within our sphere of influence ...".<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, by the end of 1903, the Shah did seem as though he was about to take steps to remove Heshmat'ol-Mulk from Seistan. Subsequently, Lord Lansdowne, instructed the British Charge d'Affairs at Tehran, Grant-Duff, that "no effort should be spared in seeing the retention of the Heshmat'ol-Mulk(sic) in office"<sup>2</sup>.

Yet in spite of intense British pressure, Heshmat'ol-Mulk was summoned to Tehran in 1904; it seems that the shah intended to keep him there indefinitely, without, however, formally stripping him of the hereditary Governorship of Seistan<sup>3</sup>.

In September 1904, Lord Curzon wrote to Hardinge that the Government of India was

prepared to take forcible steps-maybe including the occupation of Nosratabad - in order to support Heshmat'ol-Mulk.<sup>4</sup> In October, Lansdowne told the Persian Minister at London that," if Heshmat(sic) was dismissed, a situation would be created which might compel His Majesty's Government to fundamentally alter their policy as regards Seistan and the adjoining regions."<sup>5</sup> Duly, this matter was also resolved in accordance with British desire.

Although British influence was predominant in Seistan, British officials never ignored the possibility of Russian threats in the area. Mr. Miller, the Russian Consul-General at Seistan had ramified his connections with the leading men of the province; his influence there is reflected in Consul Dobb's report to the Government of India of June, 1903:

... the leading men are so afraid of Miller that they do not come near the British Consulate. Sardar Purdel Khan, the most influential man in Seistan, never latterly came to see Benn, and has sent a message to Webb-Ware (of whom he is fond) that he dare not come to see even him. Khan Jehan Khan, to whom presents of money were recently sanctioned by the Government of India, has never dared to come and see the British Consul to get his money or hear about it. Benn has sent him several messages ...<sup>6</sup>

1. Government of India to Sir Arthur Hardinge, inclosure 2 in No. 12, Simla, May 29, 1901; F.O. 416,15.

2. Lansdowne to Grant-Duff, No. 128, Foreign Office, November 9, 1903; F.O. 416,15.

3. Harding to Lansdowne, No. 82, Confidential, Gulhak, September 24, 1904; F.O. 416, 20.

4. Grant-Duff to Lansdowne, No. 94, Gulhak, September 29, 1904; F.O. 416,20.

5. Lansdowne to Grant-Duff, No. 160, Foreign Office, October 21, 1904; F.O. 416,20.

6. Consul Dobbs to the Government of India, inclosure in No. 198, Seistan, June 20, 1903; F.O. 416,14.

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The Russians never hesitated from inducing Persian officials to sell them Seistan Crown lands<sup>1</sup> or the Government share of Seistan's grain.<sup>2</sup> Neither did they cease to encourage the Seistanis to revolt against the British, or at least to boycott them.<sup>3</sup> However, there were other factors which made the British officials veto Lord Curzon's and Lord Kitchener's plans for the agricultural development of Seistan and work, instead, for the retention of the status quo, which was to continue at least until Seistan was completely recognized as a British sphere of influence in 1907. The considerations which prompted are quite clear, can be seen in a paper drawn up by Balfour, the British Prime Minister, for the newly-formed Committee of Imperial Defence. The Prime Minister wrote:

If no attempt is made to carry out the Seistan irrigation scheme, there can be no commercial necessity for us to build a railway to Seistan, and no great commercial motive for the Russians to build one. But if, on the other hand, we succeeded in so enriching the soil by irrigation that 2,000,000 persons will live where 80,000 live now, it is certain that we must build a railway from the east, and that Russia will reply by building one from the north.

At present Russia has put two main lines of attack on India - that by Kabul and that by Kandahar. Neither of these are provided

with a railway or with good roads, and, under Afghan rule, neither railways nor good roads are likely to be constructed.

In the state of things likely to be brought about by the Seistan irrigation scheme, on the other hand, there will be three main routes, not two, by which India can be invaded: and the third of these will be a railway in direct communication with the Indian system at one end and the Russian system at the other.

It seems incredible that the change will not be disadvantageous to the Power which has barely troops to defend two routes, and advantageous to the Power which is, at present, only prevented by difficulties of transport from overwhelming us by mere weight of numbers. Nor can we see any safety in the control over the fortunes of Seistan conferred on us by our possession of the sluices on the Helmund (sic). This power (as we have said) could never be used in time of peace, it might conceivably be used in time of war; though, even in time of war, men would hesitate by a single act to reduce nearly 2,000,000 souls to starvation. But, even if used, it would have no decisive effect. The railway communication would remain unaffected. The wastes of Beluchistan would still be passable. Quetta would be threatened. While if Russia were able to seize the sluices before the artificial drought, which we desired to create, had ruined the crops, the whole scheme of control would crumble to nothing.

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1. Colonel Yate to the Government of India, inclosure in No. 5, Quetta, April 6, 1901; F.O. 416,6.

2. Government of India to Lord Hamilton, inclosure in No. 323, September 27, 1903; F.O. 416,14.

3. Mr. Dobbs to the Government of India, inclosure in No. 193, confidential, Seistan, July 7, 1903; F.O. 416,14.

While, therefore, we are entirely at one with Lord Curzon and Lord Kitchener in desiring to exclude Russian influence from Seistan, we find it difficult to agree in their proposed scheme for attaining this end ...<sup>1</sup>.

What then would this 'partnership of adversaries', the Great Powers, mean for the people of the 'ancient London of Asia',<sup>2</sup> for the peasants who lived in a land which was 'fertile in the extreme'<sup>3</sup> and where 'water never fails'<sup>4</sup>, in a country of 'enormous latent wealth and vast possibilities'<sup>5</sup> – 'one of the richest districts in Persia'<sup>6</sup> It would, quite simply, mean a life wracked by disease, lived in a 'wretched state of poverty'<sup>7</sup>.

In fact, the state of Seistan faced continual deterioration ever since its division into two sections in 1872, as well as with the initiation of great power's rivalries. With the passes of time, its agricultural possibilities steadily wasted away.

At the time of the bipartition of Seistan, Major-General Goldsmid described the province as well watered by rivers and canals, with soil of proven fertility. Wheat or barley was staple grains, although peas, beans, oil seeds and cotton were also grown. Melons and water-melons were abundant, especially the latter<sup>2</sup>.

In 1894, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles E. Yate, Consul-General of Khorassan and Seistan, pointed

out that the Seistani peasants were heavily in debt (notably to the cattle-owners for the hire of bullocks, and to the kadkhodas who advanced them grain) and, in general, in a most wretched state of poverty. "I do not think," Yate emphasized, "I ever saw a more miserable looking lot"<sup>3</sup>.

After his visit of 1901, Major Percy M. Sykes recorded his observations as:

Sistan(sic) is governed by the family of the late Mir Alum Khan(sic), Amir of Kain(sic), and although it has been in their hands for thirty years, not the slightest effort has been made to improve what is naturally one of the richest districts in Persia, which is in as backward a condition as Beluchistan. As an instance of this, I may mention that no vegetables, not even onions or potatoes, are grown, while there are very few gardens, as the headmen of the villages enjoy but a yearly tenure, and consequently have no interest in improvements<sup>4</sup>.

From 1903 to 1906, the inhabitants suffered two severe famines, and twice revolted against their miserable condition, only to be silenced by torture or other means of suppression, as will be discussed further on.

In a letter to the Shah in April 1903, Heshmat'ol-Mulk's brother, Shauket'ol-Mulk, the Governor of Qaen, wrote that:

1. Quoted by Greaves, Rose Louise. *British Policy in Persia, 1892-1903*, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Vol. 28, 1965 (pp. 34-60 and 284-307), p. 292.

For notes 2, 4 and 5 see p. 2 footnotes 2, 3 and 4 respectively; for note 3 see p. 1 footnote 2; and for notes 6 and 7 see p. 6 footnotes 3 and 2 respectively.

2. Goldsmid, F.J., *Journey from Bandar Abbas to Mashhad by Seistan, with some of the last-named province*. J.R.G.S. Vol. 43, 1873 (pp. 65-83) p. 71.

3. Yate, C.E., *Khorassan and Seistan*, (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1900) p. 84.

4. Sykes, P.M., *A Fourth Journey in Persia, 1897-1901*, J.R.G.S. Vol. 19, January 1902, pp. 146-7.

### *British Encroachments in Seistan*

During these two or three years that no rain fell in Seistan wheat rose from 3 tumans a kharvar to 30 tumans – the English buy it at 10 tumans a kharvar and sell it to the rayats (peasants) at 30 tumans.

The Seistan rayats are indebted to the English already to the extent of about 50,000 tumans, and the majority of the rayats have dispersed on account of their extreme misfortunes ...<sup>1</sup>.

In late June 1903, grain prices rose causing people to rise up against the British; they believed that a large amount of grain had been purchased by the Arbitration Commission. Hindu traders were threatened with death if they bought more grain and consequently they took refuge in the British Consulate. In the presence of the Governor, a crowd of Seistanis demanded the removal of the Commission, stating that only the Consul and four servants should be allowed to remain in Seistan. Clamouring protesters attacked Consulate servants<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, Consul Dobbs paid a personal visit to Governor Heshmat'ol-Mulk to demand that arrangements be made for the protection of British subjects, and for the punishment of agitators. Furthermore, he assured him that "the British Government would not allow him to be dismissed as a punishment for offences committed against British subjects". Heshmat'ol-Mulk then proceeded to flog a number of the

agitators in public. Colonel McMohan later reported that the whole affair had been organized by Miller, and stressed the necessity of supporting Heshmat'ol-Mulk resolutely<sup>3</sup>.

When Heshmat'ol-Mulk found out that he might soon be removed from the Governorship of Seistan, he increased his pressure on the people in order to extort more money. Mr. Dobbs reported in November that, "the condition of Seistan and Kain (sic) is becoming very disturbed", adding that Heshmat'ol-Mulk was largely responsible. "He feels", Dobbs continued, "that his position is becoming more and more insecure, and in consequence he is disposed to make the most of his opportunities of making money while he can"<sup>4</sup>.

The situation of the people deteriorated dramatically in early 1906 when the famine-struck Seistanis fell prey to plague. Quarantine was set up on the orders of the Tehran authorities. The most important work attached to the quarantine, according to an account written by a Seistani in *Habl'ol-Matin*, a Persian newspaper, was the proper distribution of grain among the poor. This job was entrusted to the Customs Department, and was to ensure that locals did not visit other villages and hence spread infection. However, the grain, which was to be supplied by the Governor, never reached to the poor. Eventually, the hungry people, the account continues, were obliged to flee to other villages to procure a mouthful of bread or a

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1. Report sent by Shauket'ol-Mulk, Amir of Qaen, to his Agent in Tehran, for representation to the Shah and Grand Vizir, 18 Moharram, 1321 (April 17, 1903) Inclosure 3 in No. 55; F.O. 416,14.

2. Government of India to Lord Hamilton, inclosure in No. 19, July 4, 1903; F.O. 416,14.

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3. Government of India to Lord Hamilton, inclosure in No. 28, July 8, 1903, F.O. 416,14.

4. Monthly Summary of Events in Persia, Inclosure in No. 192, Tehran, November 11, 1903; F.O. 416,15.

handful of grain; as a result, infecting most of the village with plague<sup>1</sup>.

Subjected to both famine and plague, riotous crowds once again stormed the British Consulate. This, according to the same account, immediately followed the use of abusive language by certain Consular officials in their dealings with protesters. Yet a more fundamental background factor, this report continued, was the popular ill-feeling held against the provincial government; the people, however, were afraid to attack this directly for fear that Heshmat'ol-Mulk might, on his return, subject them to various tortures:

It is enough to say that the Heshmat'ol-Mulk(sic) is the chief cause of the ruin of Seistan. It is he who brought foreigners into

the country; he who has made our neighbours so influential and powerful in Seistan; and he who has killed the people by starving them ...

I say for certain that at this moment one-third of the inhabitants of Seistan are living on grass. Things have come to such a pass that if any cattle or sheep happen to go into any field to graze, the people drive them out with sticks and devour the grass themselves. The owners of the fields now do not allow anyone to take away any grass with them, but they do not object to the people eating it on the spot<sup>2</sup>.

The writer concluded that he could not find words adequate to express the distress from which the Seistani poor were suffering.

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1. Translation of an article in *Habl'ol-Matin*, No. 39, dated 8<sup>th</sup> June, 1908, No. 30314; F.O. 371,114. *Habl'ol-Mation* was a weekly newspaper published in Calcutta since 1893-4. It was a well-acclaimed publication among the learned, and especially in religious circles, where it held great weight and influence.

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2. *Ibid.*

## تجاوز بریتانیا در سیستان

رضا رئیس طوسی<sup>۱</sup>

سیستان یکی از مراکز مهم شهری در جنوب شرقی ایران بود. خرابه‌های شهر، رفاه و حاصلخیزی آن را نشان می‌دهد. تا آنجا که یکی از مأموران انگلیسی آن را لندن قدیم آسیا می‌خواند. این مقاله تلاش می‌کند ثروت نهفته عظیم این شهر قدیمی را - که آن را به دلایل تجاری، سیاسی و استراتژیک حائز اهمیت ساخته بود- توصیف کند.

سیستان در قرن نوزدهم و بیستم به دلیل اهمیت استراتژیکی، محل رقابت قدرتها - بخصوص رقابت بین بریتانیا و روسیه - شد. این رقابت قدرت، علت عمده فقر روستاییان شد. کمپانی هند شرقی به شدت سیستان را پس از نفوذ در افغانستان و نیز نفوذ روسها در آسیای مرکزی به صورت مرکز تبادلات تجاری خود درآورد. نفوذ غرب در سیستان از سال ۱۸۰۹ آغاز شده بود. وقتی سمرقند را روسها در سال ۱۸۶۷ به سرزمین خود ملحق ساختند، انگلیسی‌ها مسأله ایجاد منطقه بی‌طرفی را بین بریتانیا و روسیه در آسیای مرکزی مطرح ساختند. در نتیجه سیستان در سال ۱۸۷۲ بین افغانستان و ایران تقسیم شد. به دنبال آن، براساس پیشنهاد دولت هند بریتانیا ارتباط تجاری بین سیستان و کوئته برقرار شد، به این ترتیب بریتانیا منافع خود را به قسمتهای مرزی ایران و بلوچستان گسترش داد.

براساس اسناد رسمی و غیر رسمی، بریتانیا در اواخر نیمه دوم قرن نوزدهم در صدد بود به منظور گسترش منافع اقتصادی مناطقی را در آن ناحیه به قلمرو استعماری خود بیفزاید. این تصمیم استعماری همراه با کشمکشهای قدرتهای محلی، حاصلخیزی سیستان را به نابودی کشاند و روستاییان محلی را با فقر جانکاهی روبه‌رو ساخت.

واژگان کلیدی: سیستان، اهمیت استراتژیک، تجاوز، ارتباط تجاری، بازی قدرت.

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۱. دانشیار دانشگاه تهران