

Khuzistan Irrigation Program and the British Policy 1870-1910

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Abstract

During late nineteenth century, Khuzistan was considered to be the most fertile land of Persia which at one time had yielded \$ 50 million if calculated on 1962 price index. Many British officials presented in Iran and India office have recorded the abundance of water through a network of five rivers and canals, making Khuzistan a fertile ground for major staple and cash crops. At the time when the general populace was affected by the famine, Khuzistan stood unaffected. But thoroughly and gradually Khuzistan had faced deplorable condition owing to the British policy and power struggle. With the opening of the Karun River, the British influence had reached to the extent that they started interfering in the appointment of governors and granting of Khuzistan developmental projects to French, Dutch or Germans. The present article highlights the increasing influence of British in the political and economic affairs of Iran especially Khuzistan which was considered to be the 'second Egypt' next to Seistan. They had even assisted by the principle Arabs and Bakhtiaris tribes of Khuzistan as well as the influential trading and commercial figures to sabotage the irrigation project which could hamper the water flow to Karun River, a back bone for their commercial interest. In the first quarter of 20th century the British policy in Khuzistan proved detrimental to their vested interest.

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Being located in the south-west of Persia, Khuzistan was potentially believed to be a "second Egypt" of the country next to Seistan. It had been in early times a center of urban civilization.¹ Exceptional grain yields have been reported from the ancient city of Susa in Khuzistan.² In the late Sassanian period, tax receipts in Khuzistan had reached 50 million derhams- equivalent to more than 50,000,000 dollars at 1962 price levels- and something in the region of 12 times more than the annual tribute exacted by the Achaemenian kings a thousand years earlier. Receipts never again reached this figure, and fell in the first three centuries or so after the Arab conquest, to less than 40 per cent. Four centuries later, receipts had declined further to an equivalent of about 5 percent of the Sassanian figure. In the midnineteenth century, collections remained at approximately the same level.³

Khuzistan alluvial soil, Lord Curzon observed in the last decade of the nineteenth century, was amazingly fertile. With five rivers and a network of canals, Curzon continued, Khuzistan was more abundantly watered than any other region, and its natural richness was enormous. It was capable of producing an immense variety of cereals and other crops.⁴ Likewise, Khuzistan's abundance was described by Sir Henry Drummond Wolff, British Minister at Tehran (1888-91) as follows:

Tobacco, rice, dates, grain, especially barley, cotton, indigo, and opium could all be grown there. Sugar had, at one time, been very abundant. Tent-cloths and coarse woolens were extensively manufactured. White naphtha and bitumen were also

produced, and there are signs of old irrigation works. Khuzistan (sic) with little care could be made a second Egypt.⁵

Lord Curzon writes that, while traversing Khuzistan by river or on horseback, he had passed through thousands of acres of splendid soil, capable of producing wheat, barley, cotton, rice, maize etc., and with every facility for abundant irrigation, but "lying naked and desolate, or else encumbered with tangled undergrowth and marshy pools." Further north, vines and fruit of every description could be grown with ease, as could medicinal plants of considerable value. There were also to be found pastures for large flocks of sheep and goats, producing wool that fetched a high price.

The population of Persia had woefully diminished, Curzon continued, as a result of the neglect and breakdown of the water- system. Yet in Khuzistan, nature had not stinted in its generous provision; and the plains over which a traveller might then have roamed for hours without encountering a single soul, might in different circumstances teem with life and industry.⁶

Stating that with proper care Khuzistan might become one vast grain field, pouring much needed wealth into a depleted treasury, Lord Curzon attributed the cause of the deplorable situation in Khuzistan only to tribal warfare and government oppression by remarking that these two factors "have turned it into a desert over which the eyes may roam unarrested for miles."⁷

It should, however, be remembered that the principle tribes of the area, both Arabs and Bakhtiariis, were, during the nineteenth century, co-operating closely with the British Government and were practically under their control. Moreover, the chiefs of the Arab ka'b tribes,

including Sheikh Khaz'al whose actual jurisdiction ended a short way above Band-e-Ghir, also enjoyed a good deal of influence over the Arab tribes east of the Dez river, and maintained a close relationship with the British.

With the opening of the Karun River to British ships in 1888, British political and commercial influence in the south increased even further; they even intervened in the appointment of Governors to the southern provinces. In 1890, Lord Curzon wrote:

As it is, the import trade of the whole of southern Persia is almost exclusively in British hands. Steamers of two British or Indian Companies run weekly from Bombay to Busrah (sic) and there is also a direct though irregular between Busrah and London. The cities of southern and central Persia, as far north as Ispahan (sic) already derive the bulk of their luxuries, and almost the whole of their clothing, from Manchester or Bombay; and each fresh town, we may even say each new village, that is brought into communication with the Persian Gulf, will thereby be drawn into the mesh of the Lancashire cotton spinner or the Hindu artisan.⁸

In his memorandum on the situation in Persia in 1899, Sir Mortimer Durand, British Minister at Tehran, wrote thus about the British ascendancy in the south:

They see that our frontier, that is the frontier of Kalat and the sea, not to speak of Afghanistan, marches with theirs for fifteen hundred miles. They know very well that the Russians cannot help them in the South and South-East; and that in the

Gulf provinces such show of authority as they still exercise depends upon our forbearance, if not upon support. For example, the port of Lingah (sic) is now in possession of a revolted Arab Shaik (sic) whom the Persians have recognized as Governor. They have no power to coerce him, and begged me to send a gunboat to do so. He would most gladly hoist our flag tomorrow. On the Karun also the Arabs are in possession, and ready at a word from us to throw off the semblance of Persian supremacy. The Gulf ports, Mohammerah, Bushre (sic), Lingah, Bunder Abbas (sic), are at the mercy of our ships. So great is the respect of the Persians for our power that even in the extreme North of our zone, among the fanatical townbred people of Ispahan, any demonstration on our part has immediate effect.⁹

The backwardness of Khuzistan, which despite its surpassing richness, revealed a picture no better than that of Seistan, was surely due, in the main, to its location within the British sphere of influence. After all, they reserved the right to object to whatever plans for change they might have considered likely to affect their policies or trade, or otherwise prove detrimental to their interests.

So it was the British Government that put pressure on Nasser'od-din Shah (1849-1896) to reject the granting of a concession to a French company for the general development of Khuzistan in July 1876. They did so again in 1878, even though the concession had then been approved by the Persian Council of State. The concession would have authorised the reconstruction of the Ahwaz dam by the company, together with the

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reclamation and irrigation of large tracts of fertile country.¹⁰

A survey was carried out in 1903-04 by Herr Graadt Van Roggen, a Dutch engineer who had been engaged by the Persian Government in 1902 for building bridges and other public works on the Karun, and also to study the best means of repairing the Ahwaz dam.

The idea was to reconstruct the dams and the waterworks at Shushtar, for irrigating the tract of country which lies between the Ab-i-Gargar and the Ab-i-Shateit;¹¹ and to reconstruct the dams of Ahwaz and Dezful for the purpose of supply produce. It was believed that if the dams were properly reconstructed, irrigation of the whole district would be easy on account of the dried-up riverbeds and canals still in existence.¹² Van Roggen assured Sir Arthur Hardinge, the British Minister at Tehran, during a conversation held in the British Legation, that the companies holding the concession for the reconstruction of the Ahwaz dam (or the Government, should it undertake the task itself) would recoup the outlays by renting to Arab cultivators the lands which would be fertilized by the irrigation works, and which Van Roggen was convinced would, in a few years, yield so splendid a crop as become the granary for the Persian Gulf and maybe, too, more distant locations.¹³

Again, regarding the importance of the reconstruction, a Belgian newspaper, **L'Etoile Belge**, commented that the Persian Government was engaged in two projects of the highest importance: the transformation of a Caspian port, and the development of the valley in South Persia on the banks of the Karun. The newspaper continued "there are immense tracts of land which in olden times were irrigated by a system of canals, traces of which are found in the present time. These lands will regain their lost fertility ..."¹⁴ The prospect of the dam was such that a Dutch syndicate offered a large advance to the Persian Government on the security of the income which they

hoped to derive from the proceeds of their work when being completed.¹⁵

Van Roggen presented his report to Mozafar'od-din Shah (1896-1907) on June 7, 1904; where the cost of the project was estimated at £400,000 and three alternatives were proposed: (i) construction by the Persian Government, (ii) by a Persian company, or (iii) by a foreign company. Sir Arthur Hardinge, wrote to the Foreign Office that Monsieur Naus, a Belgian who had joined the Persian public service and was, at that time, Minister of Customs, had informed him that the Shah, though attracted by the scheme, was strongly opposed to granting any concession to foreigners. However, he was ready to give the go-ahead to the Persian Government to complete the work over a period of ten years. Furthermore, an annual sum of £40,000 would be provided by the Government for the job, and the Shah too would devote to it some of his personal income.¹⁶ Naus believed, continued Hardinge, that Persian merchants would subscribe the required amount.¹⁶ Questioned as to how the Shah proposed to find the money, and what had been the amount of this personal income, Naus answered that:

Now that the deficit had been filled up under the more economic regime of the Ain-ed-Dowleh (sic), it might not be beyond that Minister's ability to find a sum of £40,000 a year for public works; and to the second that the Shah's private treasure, which he believed to have been at his accession over £1,000,000, ... did not probably amount in cash, excluding a mass of pearls and jewels, at £50,000 which would be thus absorbed, if devoted to the scheme, in about a year.

Ain'od-Dowleh had come to power as President of the

Council of Ministers when Amin'os-Sultan was dismissed from the office in September 1903. He was made Grand Vizier on June 25, 1904. As regards his foreign Policy, Hardinge reported that Ain'od-Dowleh was suspicious of foreigners and sought to curb their influence. His main aim seemed to be the elimination of all foreign interference in the internal affairs of the monarchy, especially in such matters as the appointment of Persian Governors and officials, and to resist the demands from whatever quarter for commercial concessions, roads, telegraphs etc. His policy might be summed up, Hardinge continued, as the exclusion, as far as possible, of any form of European influence, subject only to a certain preference for the English over the Russians as the lesser of two evils.¹⁹

As the first step to stop foreign influence, Ain'od-Dowleh seriously studied the financial question. M.Naus informed Hardinge that Ain'od-Dowleh had realised the danger of any further foreign loans, and that there was good reason to hope that he would grapple with the need for tax reform.²⁰

In the same month Ain'od-Dowleh came to power, Hardinge gave his view about him to the Foreign office:

... Ain-ed-Dowleh's (sic) general ideas, so far as I have been able to gather, are to govern by primitive Eastern methods, to discourage all imitation of Europe or employment of Europeans in the administration ... to fill the treasury, not by foreign loans, but by wringing money on the old approved lines from the Persian Governors and people, and to curb any discontent and protest by strong measures unsparingly applied.²¹

In 1904, three circulars were addressed to the foreign representatives in Tehran; duly, Hardinge warned the

Foreign Office that, if the Persian Government enforced their provisions, they would adversely affect foreign enterprise in Persia. The respective provisions were:

- i. No Persian subject holding a concession in Persia may enter into any transaction for the sale, transfer, or grant of that concession to a foreign subject. Any infraction of this decree will lead to the concession being annulled.
- ii. No Muslim woman may in future work in silk (cocoon) factories belonging to non-Muslim persons.
- iii. No foreign subject may in future open a factory in Persia without obtaining permission from the Persian Government.

With such ideas in mind, Ain'od-Dowleh himself served on a committee which sought to improve the agricultural situation of Khuzistan through the reconstruction of dams and canals in the area. However, Britain had enough power to prevent an irrigation programme (which could change the face of the south) being carried out purely by the Persians, a prospect with adverse implications for her own position. She had great influence at court, within the Government and among other notables of the south. She also had a good diplomatic pretext to insist the project be stopped-either by herself or through Sheikh Khaz'al-unless placed under her own control.

In a telegram to the India Office, Mr. E. Gorst expressed Lord Lansdowne's desire for any observations or suggestions Mr. Brodrick, the Secretary of State for India, might like to make on the Khuzistan irrigation scheme. Gorst referred to Sir Arthur Hardinge's report that a scheme had already been drawn up and submitted to the Shah by a Dutch engineer; and that the idea had

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proved so attractive to the Shah that he was considering the possibility of financing the scheme out of his own private purse. "It would, therefore, appear probable," Gorst continued, "that the project will, sooner or later, be carried out, if possible by the Persian Government, or, should their resources prove unequal to the task, under foreign auspices." Gorst pointed out that irrigation works on so extensive a scale might seriously diminish the flow of water in the Karun River and thus impede navigation, which was in British hands. It was possible however, that this need not be the case of competent engineers were employed. If the Persian Government attempted to carry out the scheme itself, it would be obliged to apply for a foreign loan. The customs of Fars could not, however, be mortgaged to any power other than Great Britain. Yet the shah's Government would certainly oppose any proposal to mortgage the land revenues of that province to foreigners, just as it had opposed the proposal to mortgage the grain revenue of Seistan. Britain could also, if necessary, object to the project altogether, Gorst continued, on the grounds of the injury it would inflict on British shipping. "Persia would, therefore, be obliged either to borrow from His Majesty's Government on the security which they chose to accept under the conditions which they laid down, or to entrust to British agency the whole execution of the scheme."²³

Lord Lansdowne, the British Foreign Minister, instructed Sir Arthur Hardinge in August 1904:

If such a scheme as that referred to in your dispatch... respecting the Karun irrigation, to be carried out, it is obviously important that we should retain control and management. If inquiry proves satisfactory, Shah should be encouraged to pursue the project under British auspices.²⁴

In a telegram to William Broderick, the Government of India emphasized that it believed itself fully justified in claiming that the irrigation schemes should be worked on lines approved by itself. A further concession which might well be demanded, it added, was that it should be entitled to a full voice in any further schemes for the development of Khuzistan by irrigation from the other rivers of the province besides the Karun, such as the Kerkheh, Shour, Dez, or Jerrahi Rivers, and that it should be necessary to obtain financial assistance from non-Persian sources, the British Government, or British firms-who would have first refusal.²⁵

Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, opposed the project unless the British had adequate control over it. He stated that any such scheme, if successfully carried out, would practically destroy the Karun as a navigable river, and would therefore damage British commerce. It was obvious, he continued, that if Messrs. Lynch were pushed out and their place taken by Belgian officials and Dutch engineers or concessionaires working a big irrigation project in purely selfish or in anti-British interests, the British would be very greatly the losers by the change. He then proposed that:

On the other hand, if we had a substantial or preponderating voice in the control we might be able to replace one form of commercial activity by another; and might open up another route for navigation to the plains of Arabistan (Khuzistan) by utilizing the khor Musa, or one of the adjoining inlets which we have recently explored, and by making new roads from thence into the interior.

What I have said emphasizes the supreme importance of British participation and joint control in any Karun irrigation

scheme. If it is to be started, but conversely also the striking danger to British interest that would result if we were left out of sight in any such enterprise.²⁶

That the irrigation scheme would damage navigation on the river and therefore injure British trade seems to have been used as an excuse. In a conversation with Lord Lansdowne in July 1904, Herr Van Roggen rejected the idea that the water supply in the river would be affected by his irrigation scheme. He assured Lord Lansdowne that "this would be carried out entirely with overflow water, which was very abundant at certain times of the year."²⁷ Again when the same question was raised by Sir Arthur Hardinge during negotiations with the Grand Vizier in December, the latter said that "what was proposed was to store the water in certain reservoirs, and then let them out into the irrigation canals only when the karun was high in the spring, and he expressed himself as confident that the total normal volume of water in the river would not be diminished in such a way as to hinder navigation."²⁸

However, other approaches were considered by the British in order to take the irrigation scheme under their own control. Thus in the event of the failure of Ain'od-Dowleh's plan, which was met by extra fiscal impositions (including a tax on Government salaries and increase in grain dues from the villages, plus a reduction of court expenses) he would have to ask for foreign loans to sustain the Persian economy and develop the south.

The best idea for the British, perhaps, was to encourage Mozaffar'od-Din Shah's courtiers to persuade the ailing sovereign to visit Europe for a medical check-up and a rest. For while resisting the Shah over this would endanger the position of Ain'od-Dowleh, responding to His Majesty's desire to the tune of £800,000-would most likely necessitate a foreign loan.

In due course, the Shah was encouraged to take a trip to Europe, preferably during the last quarter of 1904. According to Abbas Quli Khan, the Indian-born Acting Oriental Secretary at the British Legation, the courtiers had been telling the Shah that Paris was much gayer and more lively in late autumn and winter than in summer.²⁹ Meanwhile, John R. Preece, the British Consul at Isfahan, was informed through a member of the Persian Government that the Shah, who was eager for a change and new amusements, had been pressing Ain'od-Dowleh to set aside a fund of some £140,000 to enable him to pay a visit to Europe that autumn or next spring.³⁰

In August, Dr. C. Schneider, the Shah's British doctor, informed Sir Arthur Hardinge that the Shah:

Has agreed to the tour in principle, but wishes in order to diminish its unpopularity that it should be preceded by a visit to Meshed (sic), which is the duty of every Shah once in his reign to dust, as ex officio chief of Imam Reza's sanctuary ...³¹

What the above statement implies is that the proposed journey was not in accord with Shah's own inclination.

Reporting this to the Foreign Office, the British Minister noted that:

It may be regarded as almost certain that the Shah, if he lives through the winter, will visit on a European tour in the spring, and that the Ain-ed-Dowleh (sic) will have to choose between finding the money required for this purpose or resigning.³²

Ain'od-Dowleh, while secretly resisting the journey, contacted Hardinge on May 19 in order to find out whether he could count on the British should any sudden emergency oblige him to raise the sum of £160,000. At the same time, however, the Prime

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Minister emphasized—as Hardinge reported to London that “he was not in any pressing need of money; that he had always been opposed to his predecessor’s system of meeting any temporary deficit by foreign loans, that he had kept clear of them while in office, and hoped to continue to do so.” Indeed, Ain’od-Downleh had trusted so fervently that he might avoid any borrowing that he had asked Hardinge not to report the question to the Foreign Office.³³

In July 1904, Sir Arthur Hardinge was given to understand by M. Naus (who regularly supplied the British Legation with secret information about the Persian Government) that, thanks to the Russo-Japanese war and a cholera epidemic in Persia itself, the customs receipts would decline considerably that year. Accordingly, M. Naus anticipated that the time had come for the Persian Government to apply for the completion of advance of £300,000.

In another conversation a few days later, Naus told Hardinge that Ain’od-Dowleh was proposing to apply for £100,000 to meet the probable shortfall in the customs, plus £200,000 for the purposes of irrigation works. Naus himself proposed that:

The revenues accruing from the works, as well as the domains fertilized by them, might be pledged as a subsidiary security for the additional advance, and that his (the Prime Minister’s) pledge might be coupled with an understanding that restriction on the export of grain from the Karun valley should be henceforth abolished... He admitted... that he might have a good deal of difficulty in bringing the Shah to accept an agreement on these terms, but he did not altogether despair of doing so ...³⁴

So Sir Arthur Hardinge suggested to Lord Lansdown to encourage Ain’od-dowleh into thinking that His Majesty’s Government was prepared to assist financially, thereby acquiring a stake in the Karun irrigation project. Harding added that he felt sure that, provided they played the game judiciously and with patience, they might still be able to turn the financial needs of Persia to their own advantage as much as their Russian rivals had done in the past.³⁵

In the monthly summary of events in Persia (issued monthly and annually by the British Embassy) of April 3, 1905, we read that Ain’od-Downleh had long resisted covertly the European journey, resorting to his usual delaying tactics in order to put it off. Then, when these had failed, he had begun to oppose it openly, adducing the disturbed state of Russia, the unrest in Persia, and the unsettled financial and military situation. His opposition had continued until the Shah made a public declaration that “he would regard anyone who, no matter on what ground, opposed his European tour as a personal enemy to himself.”

Only then had Ain’od-Dowleh ended his opposition and resistance.³⁶ He did however still try to keep the entourage, which was to accompany the Shah (at public expense) as small as possible. Likewise, he sought to keep the Shah’s other outlays on the tour within a limit of £60,000: two-thirds of which was to come from the Shah’s private purse, and only the remaining £20,000 from ordinary revenues.³⁷

Meanwhile, various influential persons, themselves with great interests in the south, were seeking either to stop the irrigation scheme altogether or to have it placed under British control. Among them was Hossein Quli khan Nezam’os-Sultaneh. Who was born in 1836, of Kurdish extraction, and had been bening in out Government of Shiraz, Bushehr, khuzistan, etc. As the Government of Khuzistan, he had been unfriendly to the British and so had been precluded at Lord Salisbury’s

insistence—from the Governor-Generalships of important provinces or similarly high posts for five years. At the Shah's urgent request, Lord Salisbury waived the two-and-a-half years proscription still due, when it proved necessary to send a strong man to rule over Azarbaijan in April 1899. As Chief Vizier of Azarbaijan (1899-1900) he adopted a policy of friendship towards the British Government.

Then again, Cecil G. Wood, British Consul-General at Tabriz, concluded from the insights he had gained since their appearance in the city in April 1899, that Nezam'os-Sultaneh and his nephew Mujir'os-Sultaneh (the army commander in Azarbaijan) were thoroughly convinced of the reality of British power and of their influence for the general good in the south of Persia. Thus both men had on all occasions earnestly protested their sincere attachment to the British Government, and had frankly averred that their best interests would be, and were even then being, served by their willing acceptance of British paramountcy in the south. They had assured Wood that they and their resources were entirely at the disposal of Her Majesty's Government, and that they were only anxious to have their sentiments put to the proof. "So far they have given me information" Wood continued, "which I could not have obtained from any other source".³⁸ Moreover, their vast wealth and possessions in the southern provinces gave them influence not only among the populace at large but also amongst the religious communities.

In July 90, the British Charge d'Affaires, Cecil Spring Rice, wrote that Nezam'os-Sultaneh seemed to have done excellent service at Azarbaijan, and was evidently most anxious to be on good terms with Her Majesty's Government. He was considered to be among an 'English party' which enjoyed British patronage.³⁹

Nezam'os-Sultaneh was a candidate for the premiership in 1900; Minister of Justice and Commerce (1900) under the Premiership of Amin'os-sultan and Minister of

Justice in the Ain'od-Dowleh cabinet (1903-4). In September 1904, he offered the Shah £40,000 to farm the Ministry of Customs. A large tract of land on the west bank of the Karun was, in fact, his property.

In June 1904, he informed Hardinge that he had been asked by Ain'od-Dowleh to give his opinion, as a former Government-General of Khuzistan, on the scheme proposed by Van Roggen, and to state at the same time whether he might be willing to undertake the supervision of the project on behalf of the Persian Government.⁴⁰

Being entrusted by Ain'od-Dowleh with all the relevant document, he actually had Van Roggen's report in his possession while he was intriguing both against the scheme and the Prime Minister himself. In his resistance to the scheme he had enjoyed the support of Hajji Moin'ot-Tujjar, a well-to-do southern merchant, who had put half of his savings into landed property on the Karun. Both men opposed the reconstruction on the grounds that a change in the state of affairs was not at all necessary and, indeed, that any increase in the water supply of their lands would ruin their crops, which were ample as it was.⁴¹ He also became very active with another courtier, Motemad'ol-Khaghan, against the Grand Vizier. However, their intrigues were eventually revealed by Eghbal'od-Dowleh, himself a courtier who was appointed Minister of the Crown Domains as a reward for this service. And just under two weeks before the official announcement of the Shah's European tour (March 1905), Nezam'os-Sultaneh and Motemad'od-Khaghan were severely bastinadoed, this in the presence of the Shah, Ain'od-Dowleh and a large circle of courtiers and palace servants. Both were then expelled from Tehran.⁴²

British document does not reveal what form the intrigue of Nezam'os-Sultaneh took. Yet surely it embraced a wider compass, with British connection that may have helped to ensure that, in the final analysis, he

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was punished by pain, humiliation and expulsion rather than death. At all events, after the overthrow of Ain'od-Dowleh by the Constitutional Revolution, Nezam'os-Sultaneh staged a political come-back, becoming both Prime Minister and Minister of Finance under Mohammad Ali Shah (1907).

The next influential to be encouraged to take the irrigation scheme of Khuzistan under his control or else insist it be in British hands was Sheikh Khaz'al, the powerful chief of the Arab ka'b tribes and the Governor of Mohammerah. For in February 1904, Major Burton, who had recently been dispatched to Khuzistan by the Government of India in the capacity of political observer, suggested to that administration that Skeikh Khaz'al "could also oppose the running on the Karun of steamers other than English ones, and seriously hamper such schemes as the irrigation projects of the Dutch engineer now deputed from Tehran to the Karun."⁴³

Soon afterwards, Mr. David L. R. Lorimer, the British Vice-Consul at Mohammerah, who had been in touch with Sheikh Khaza'al, reported that the Sheikh would hardly admit his responsibility for the construction of irrigation works. He had treated it, Lorimer continued, as a 'castle in the air.' However, the Sheikh had proposed the scheme be undertaken on two conditions: financial assistance, and a guarantee of support from the British Government. The Sheikh said that "the scheme is a very big and difficult one, but it would turn a large part of Arabistan (Khuzistan) into a permanent garden."⁴⁴

That November, the Government of India expressed the view to Mr. Brodrick that the Sheikh of Mohammerah "is entitled to full consideration in connection with the scheme, which could not be executed without his consent—a consent which there would doubtless be no difficulty in persuading him to with-hold should there be any doubt as to the advantage to himself or to us ..."⁴⁵

Khaz'al's interests coincided with those of the British in the south; and he was already committed to act in

accordance with the advice of the British.⁴⁶ With this in mind, there seemed hardly any need for the British Government to go further at that stage than those preliminary talks with the Sheikh.

Meanwhile Ain'od-Dowleh, who had some sense of patriotism and of the need for reforms, was terribly handicapped by the political weakness of the Government and had been aggravated by the previous Prime Minister, the courtiers, the Governor-General and by the Shah who was a great threat to all possible progress. Consequently, the Prime Minister had no option but to ask formally for the advance of £200,000 from British for the purpose of the Karun irrigation scheme, since its construction was seen by the Prime Minister to be "an absolute necessity for Persia."⁴⁷

At the end of 1905, with the financial situation of the country more critical than ever before and with there being, in consequence, a serious risk of urban uprising, Ain'od-Dowleh pressed, through his Minister in London, for a loan of £200,000.

The Government of India expressed its willingness to advance the loan provided that, should the Karun project eventually be carried out, the said undertaking would be entrusted only to an agency approved by His Majesty's Government.⁴⁸

An agreement to that effect appeared imminent, but Ain'od-Dowleh had since increased his demands. The situation of the country then appeared to be serious, unless assistance could be obtained from outside. Ain'od-Dowleh was negotiating with both the British and the Russians, playing one off against the other in his attempt to secure a loan.

The Government of India advocated securing of four significant concessions, among them the irrigation scheme of Karun, before any loan could be granted. In the meantime, the British and Russian Governments agreed to assume an attitude of reciprocity towards Persia.

During the first six months of 1906, little was heard of the Karun irrigation scheme. However, in July the Dutch Minister at Tehran, Monsieur de Sturler, represented the Persian Government as willing to obtain the concession of the Karun irrigation scheme for a Dutch syndicate. The outline of the Dutch proposal for the concession was briefly as follows. The concession was to be for eighty years. The company would have a capital of £1,400,000, of which 20 per cent was to be held in Holland and 40 per cent in Persia. The headquarters were to be situated in Holland with a mainly Dutch management.⁴⁹

In December, Sir Cecil Spring Rice, Sir Arthur Harding's successor as British Minister at Tehran, reported to Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Minister, that the Dutch minister had impressed on him the advantages of the Dutch scheme, and had told him that Persian Government favoured it, and that it would preclude the concession he said the Germans were pressing for.⁵⁰

Duly, the Government, of India expressed itself in favour of a British loan for the purpose of excluding undesirable foreign enterprise from the Karun district. In addition, they suggested that the Sheikh of Mohammerah might be assisted to carry out the project.⁵¹

Likewise, the Dutch Minister in London strongly urged Sir Edward Grey to countenance the Dutch project to which, he said, the French and Russian Government had no objections. However, his representations met with a cold reception.⁵² Then, early in January 1907, Sir Edward informed him that, in view of the unsettled political situation in Persia, Karun irrigation concession could not be entertained at that moment.⁵³

In February 1907, M. de Sturler again approached Sir Cecil Spring Rice. He had certain information that the German Legation was secretly working to obtain the concession for a purely German group intimately

connected with the Baghdad Railway enterprise; and he felt that the only method of thwarting German designs was for His Majesty's Government to give its support to the Dutch project. The Russian Legation, he said, concurred in that view.

In February, Spring Rice informed Sir Edward Grey that the plans of the Ahwaz concession were then held by the Dresden Bank. Consequently the National Bank of Persia, in exchange for this concession, had to obtain the necessary capital from the German Bank, an agent of the latter having arrived that week. His Dutch colleague and he, Spring Rice continued, were of the opinion that the best way to prevent the German scheme would be to form immediately a syndicate that was international in character, and to dispatch a financial agent to Tehran and Ahwaz.⁵⁴ Sir Edward Grey and Mr. Morley, the Secretary of State for India approved Spring Rice's proposal. At the same time, Sheikh Khaz'al was again considered as the next alternative.

In March 1907, the Government of India pointed out that it would have preferred to have supported Sheikh Khaz'al's attempts to obtain a concession. However, if an international syndicate was to be granted the concession, it trusted that measures to ensure full representation of British capital would be taken; and that British irrigation engineers would mainly be employed to carry out the work. Political considerations apart, the employment of British engineers would be justified by their experience in such matters.⁵⁵

A week later, Spring Rice was to report from Tehran that he had been assured by the Sheikh's agent that the irrigation works would be undertaken by the Sheikh himself, and that expert advice would be the only form of foreign participation that he would allow.⁵⁶

Major Percy Cox, the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, reported to Delhi that, in a course of conversations between him and the Sheikh, the latter had said that he personally would prefer that conditions in his territory

should remain as they had been, except for the amount of irrigation he might be able to carry out the river by means of machine pumps, with which he had been experimenting. However, if a comprehensive irrigation scheme was inevitable, he would wish to manage it himself under British guidance and with their co-operation. Accordingly, he would oppose the acquisition of a concession by any foreign or Persian syndicate. The Sheikh then requested Major Cox continued, that he be kept posted on what was transpiring and how the attitude of the British Government was evolving.⁵⁷

In view of the attitude of the National Assembly of Persia, Spring Rice gave his opinion to Grey that any early development of the Dutch international scheme seemed highly improbable. Sheikh would probably be in a position to dictate his own terms, unless he was interfered with from Tehran; and in that case, the British Legation would presumably be authorized to intercede on his behalf.⁵⁸

Major Morton, who had been sent along with some aides to Ahwaz by the Government of India to investigate and report upon the scheme proposed by Van Roggen, was still carrying out his reconnaissance operation in early 1907. The Government of India maintained that the scheme was one of great commercial and political importance; and, although they noted that His Majesty's Government was not prepared to take measures for securing the concession, it did consider it desirable to obtain the fullest information on the subject. This was lest some change in the situation rendered it desirable that the execution of any scheme be in British hands.⁵⁹

The situation in Persia was unstable; Germany was active in the Gulf; and there was a need for the introduction of cultivators from elsewhere to the area as the population was insufficient to cultivate fully when irrigate. This, above all, would erode the demographic dominance of an Arab population under strict control of Sheikh Khaz'al. These several facts induced the British

to wait for favourable change and, in the meantime, take no measures through the Sheikh for the securing of the concession and oppose the granting of the concession to others. Thus, as with Seistan, economic development was dependent on the interests of the British Government.

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