



GORDON, THOMAS EDWARD

GORDON, General Sir THOMAS EDWARD (1832–1914), British intelligence officer, director of the Imperial Bank of Persia (Bānk-e šāhi-e Irān; see [BANKING](#)) from 1893 to 1914, author, and apparently the first person to use the term Middle East, which meant particularly Persia and Afghanistan. Entering the army at age seventeen, Gordon campaigned on the British/Indian northwest frontier, served during the Mutiny, was second in command of the mission to Kāšġar in Chinese Turkestan (1873-74), and fought in the Second Afghan War (q.v.) in 1879. He became Oriental and military secretary at the British Legation in Tehran in 1889 and, in 1891, military attaché. He retired from active duty in 1893 but continued until shortly before his death in 1914 to be involved in Persian affairs as one of the directors of the Imperial Bank of Persia and one of three directors of the Persian Transport Company, as an analyst of the Constitutional Revolution (q.v.) in Persia from 1905 to 1907, and as an opponent of the Russian plan to connect their trans-Caspian railway with a port in southern Persia, preferably Čāh-bahār (q.v.) on the Sea of Oman.

The naval historian, Alfred T. Mahan, is usually given credit for having coined the term Middle East in an article in 1902 (p. 39). The fact, however, is that Gordon had already used this term in 1900 in his article “The Problem of the Middle East,” where he had analyzed problems involving the defense of India in connection with Persia and Afghanistan. Gordon may well have been the first person to recognize and articulate coherently the strategic importance of the Middle East in its Russo-Indian context.

Alarmed by the Russian advance on Marv in 1884 and Panjdeh (southeast of



Marv) in 1885, Britain began building a railway to Quetta. Further Russian intrigues prompted some to advocate extending the railroad as far as Sistān and then on into Persia. Gordon saw this as a “valuable adjunct” to the defense of India (FO 60/528). Because of his intimate knowledge of the terrain, his reports were often printed for the cabinet; he had personal interviews with the viceroy in India; and numerous consultations at the Foreign Office in London. He coordinated the London-Calcutta deliberations over Sistān and Indian frontier policy in general. His range of Persian acquaintances, which included Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, made him a valuable asset to the British and Indian governments and to the Imperial Bank, on whose behalf he made three special trips to Tehran after his official retirement. He died in 1914.

Gordon belonged to that little known but influential group of scholarly explorers and intelligence officers who traversed the Indian borderlands. By 1890 he played a key role in devising a policy to prevent Persia from being absorbed by Russia as the Central Asian khanates had been (see Gordon’s memoranda and Wolff’s correspondence in FO 60/528; see also FO 60/509, 517 and FO 65/1377, 1379, 1392, and 1394). His recommendations in 1893 foreshadowed Sir Mortimer Durand’s (q.v.) extensive analysis of 1895 and 1896 and differed from the division of the spheres of influence that was actually formulated in the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 (q.v.). Gordon also showed a persistent interest in Persian oil. In a special report on the prospects for development in southwest Persia, he observed “many places smelling strongly of petroleum” with “great patches of oil-smooth water floating down the Karun” and “oil spreads from the petroleum springs near Shustar” (“Report on a Journey. . .”). He firmly supported the early 20th century exploration efforts of the Burmah Oil Company and its successors in Persia (see [ANGLO-PERSIAN OIL COMPANY](#)).

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WO 106/16. See also: A. T. Mahan, “The Persian Gulf and International Relations,” *National Review* 40, 1902, pp. 27-45; Henry William Carless Davis and John Reginald Homer Weaver, eds., *Dictionary of National Biography 1912-1921*, London, pp. 217-18; Geoffrey Jones, *The History of the British Bank of the Middle East I: Banking and Empire in Iran*, Cambridge, 1986; C. Koppes, “Captain Mahan, General Gordon, and the Origins of the Term ‘Middle East’,” *Middle East Studies*, January, 1976, pp. 95-98; *The Times*, Obituary, 24 March 1914.