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The late 19th and 20th centuries saw a number of colonial and national schemes, including boundary commisions and large scale irrigation projects, that aimed to demarcate the Iran-Afghan borderlands. Describing the economic outlook of the region, George P. Tate, surveyor to the Sistān Mission of 1903-05, remarked that “the inhabitants of Seistan [Sistān] are content to live from hand to mouth, laying under tribute as much land as they can easily manage, and when it is exhausted taking up some other plot” (p. 136). Temporary dams (*band*) were built at the head of some of the river deltas in the fall, only to be carried away by the winter floods (Tate, p. 114; Oberlander, p. 273). Tate also noted the prevalence of pastoralism in Sistān: “after heavy rain shepherds will pasture their flocks for a very short time on the banks.” The reed beds on the edge of the Hāmun were Baluch pasturelands, and cattle could be seen “grazing up to their backs in water” (Tate, pp. 247-48). Neither the Afghan nor the Persian government could effectively collect revenues on this frontier; when the tax collector arrived to levy a grazing tax in the country, the cattle “were hidden away in the reeds” (Yate, p. 119).

During the drought years of 1871 and 1902, two British-led boundary commissions set out to fix the modern boundaries of Sistān and to settle this portion of the Perso-Afghanistan border. In 1870, Major General Frederic Goldsmid, who had earlier established the Makrān boundary, was sent at the head of a surveying mission with the task of defining the territory of Sistān, an ancient region with vague boundaries. Goldsmid differentiated between what he termed “Seistan Proper,” or the left bank of the Helmand, and “Outer Seistan,” the right bank. He further stated that while the first was wholly in the possession of Persia, the second belonged to independent Baluch chiefs whose allegiance remained in question.

Goldsmid estimated that “Seistan Proper” had a fixed population of 35,000 and a nomadic population of 10,000. “Outer Seistan” consisted of the Baluch and Afghans, although the mission had insufficient data regarding the population there (F.O. 983/9, Goldsmid, “Report on the Province of Seistan,” 22 May 1872, pp. xv-xvii). Local suspicion of authority, which prevailed in Sistān, made reconnaissance and information-gathering a difficult task. The movements of the Goldsmid Mission were hampered by refusal of admission to numerous villages. Moreover, the mission’s map of Sistān and the boundary line was neither authoritative nor accurate but rather “merely a sketch map” with various points on the line never having been visited at all (F.O. 60/728, A. H. McMahon to the Secretary of the Government of India, Seistan, 21 February 1905, pp. 1-2).

Qajar officials appealed to the Goldsmid Mission and staked their claim to Sistān on the grounds of ancient and folkloric rights. Local traditions and popular histories from the *Šāh-nāma*, recalling the exploits of Sām, Zāl, and Rostam in their homeland of Sistān, known in legend as Zābolestān, were presented by Persia as proof of their claim. The Afghan commissioners took their stand from a less remote period in history, claiming that on the death of Nāder Shah Afšār in 1747, Sistān had passed into the dominion of Aḥmad Shah Dorrāni. Since the death of Aḥmad Shah in 1772, however, Persia had been gradually reclaiming Sistān. Goldsmid concluded that “the allegiance of Seistan was of a feudal nature,” and the loyalty of its tribes to either Persia or Afghanistan was fleeting. Moreover, much of the land belonged to Baluch nomads who were subjects of neither country (F.O. 983/9, “Complete Statement of General Goldsmid’s Arbitral Opinion,” p. xxii).

In 1872, during what became known as the second Goldsmid Arbitration, Sistān was awarded to Persia and the lands on the right bank of the Helmand

went to Afghanistan. In the arbitral award, Goldsmid also stated that “no works are to be carried out on either side calculated to interfere with the requisite supply of water for irrigation on both banks of the Helmand” (F.O. 983/9, “Complete Statement of General Goldsmid’s Arbitral Opinion,” p. xxiii). Thus the permanent border of Sistān was set at the bed of an unpredictable river. And, though neither the Qajars nor the Afghans were satisfied with the award, it was ratified in the spring of 1873 (ibid.).

The mapping of Sistān became the primary source of subsequent disputes concerning boundaries between Afghanistan and Persia. As one British officer would later write, “the boundary between Persia and Afghanistan had indeed been fixed by an imaginary line drawn haphazard on paper. The line had never been marked out on the ground, and neither Persia nor Afghanistan had the least idea where it lay” (Yate, p. 92). Despite his efforts, Goldsmid had also admitted that the two sides of the river had “much the same character” (F.O. 983/9, Goldsmid, “Memorandum on Seistan”). The making of modern borders in the region was a task undertaken with great uncertainty and reservation.

No disputes over water appear on record in the years immediately following the Goldsmid arbitration. This changed, however, when the Helmand altered its course, casting doubt over the location and authority of the Goldsmid line. As the river increasingly found outlets to the west, it exposed alluvial lands, which were brought under cultivation. Numerous villages appeared in the early 1880s and water disputes were soon reported. In the spring of 1883, the Qajar Foreign Minister complained that the Afghans had diverted the Helmand into Afghanistan by the construction of the Šamširi dam, and urged that “an officer with deputed authority survey and examine the country and determine the position of the Goldsmid line.” After some further correspondence, the matter was dropped. In 1885, the Helmand became unusually flooded and abandoned its main channel, although the old bed of the Siḵ-sar channel continued to be regarded as the “boundary stream” or Šēla-ye Sim (F.O. 60/728, McMahon, “Seistan Water Question,” p. 3).

In 1896, heavy floods burst through the embankment on the left bank near Šāhgol and cut out a new channel that flowed through the Aškin lands and subsequently came to be known as Rud-e Pariān. In response, the Afghans and Persians decided to cooperate and jointly build a canal across the Pariān in order to maintain the water supply in the Nād ʿAli channel. In 1898, however, the Afghans began work on another cut above Band-e Pariān, raising objections that this work was being carried out on Persian territory and

forcing the removal of workers back to Afghanistan, where they were employed constructing other canals. The Persians planned to build a dam at Pariān but did not complete it until 1904 (F.O. 60/728, McMahon, "Seistan Water Question," p. 4).

The next set of major disputes arose in 1901 and coincided with a long-lasting drought that had lowered the volume of water in the Helmand. The scarcity of water and strained relations "led to irrigation works being carried out on both sides to injure each other" (F.O. 60/728, McMahon, "Seistan Water Question," p. 4). In August 1902, the water level fell so low that the river dried up beyond the Rudbār Dam, the wind banked up sand hills on the dry river-bed, and the Hāmun Lake became completely dry. This lasted until late September, when a flood reached the Sistān Dam and was diverted by the sand hills into the Sistān River and the Nād ʿAli channel, temporarily cutting off the supply in the Pariān River.

This change in the river's course immediately led to a new round of disputes as the Afghans demanded that the Sistān Dam should not be allowed to drain more than half the volume of the Helmand into the Sistān River. The Persians refused to agree to this and argued that the Šāhgol Dam should only divert half of its waters to the Nād ʿAli channel, a claim that the Afghans rejected. Soon both countries began a series of rival irrigation works. The Afghans opened an old cut from the Helmand, known as Nahr-e Solṭāni, in order to bring water to their Jaroki canal; and the Persians equipped "a gang of armed laborers," to excavate hastily a new channel named Nowbar-e Puza Jang Jah, in order to divert water into the Pariān River. These new canals were constructed in nearly a month each, but, before they could be used, an early winter flood came down the Helmand and destroyed them both (F.O. 60/728, McMahon, "Seistān Water Question," p. 5).

It became clear that the Goldsmid Mission had raised apprehensions on both sides regarding the boundaries of Sistān and the waters of the Helmand, but he had left the issues unresolved. The Qajars doubted that they had "ever seen a copy" of the Goldsmid map, while the Afghans claimed that "all papers connected with the Goldsmid Mission appeared to have been lost in the chaos which ensued the death of Amir Šir-ʿAli" (F.O. 60/728, McMahon to the Secretary General of India, 21 February 1905). The Afghans claimed that the new bed formed the frontier, while the Persians insisted upon a strict interpretation of the 1872 agreement. In 1902, the British government appointed Major A. H. McMahon, who had already determined the 800 mile

southern border of Afghanistan, to settle the Sistān boundary line and arbitrate on the question of the Helmand's waters. The McMahon Mission, based in Quetta, "consisted of 11 British officers, numerous survey and irrigation experts, an escort of 200 native infantry, 60 cavalry, with a large supply of transport, including the Baluchistan Camel Corps—in all a total of 1500 men, 200 horses and 2200 camels" (Hamilton, p. 215).

The mission faced a number of difficulties while attempting to complete their task. The area was a desert with very severe weather; and, at times, high winds shook the surveying instruments, rendering accuracy impossible. The mission also faced obstacles of a political nature. On reaching Sistān, McMahon and his entourage were met by an Afghan commissioner and two Persian commissioners, each with a large escort. At first, the mission was refused entry into Persian Sistān and had to travel along the Afghan side of the Helmand to gather information. In 1904, the McMahon arbitration retained the old location of the bed of the Helmand as the Perso-Afghanistan border, regardless of future changes in the river's course. Boundary pillars were left to mark the line in accordance with the award (F.O. 60/728, McMahon, "Final Arbitral Statement on the Seistan Boundary," November 1903).

The partition of the waters of the Helmand, however, was a harder question to settle. The McMahon mission ruled that Persia was entitled to a third of the water entering Sistān at Bandar-e Kamāl. Using the Punjab region as the land to water standard, the mission claimed that "Seistan suffered more from excess of water than deficiency," and calculated that Persia was taking more than its required share of the Helmand and wasting it (F.O. 60/728, McMahon, "Seistan Water Question." The mission also permitted the construction of new canals on either side of the river, while noting that "signs are not wanting that the Afghans, who understand the advantage which their geographical position gives them, will someday try to score off the Persians by interfering with their water supply" (F.O. 60/728, McMahon, "Seistan Water Question"). *The Russian Trans-Caspian Gazette* reported that "Persian Sistān was in danger of becoming a desert," because the Qajars had conceded two-thirds of their water supply to a British-backed Afghanistan (Hamilton, p. 219). A crowd demonstrated outside the British Consulate in Sistān, calling for the removal of the consul and the withdrawal of the mission. Amir Ḥabib-Allāh Khan of Afghanistan (q.v.) was satisfied with the award, but Moẓaffer-al-Din Shah sent a telegram from Europe to reject it, claiming that the people of Sistān were discontented with its terms.

In subsequent years, the Afghans became involved in numerous attempts to control the Helmand upstream and make its desert valleys bloom. Afghanistan constructed its first permanent canals between 1910 and 1914. In 1945, Morrison-Knudsen Afghanistan Inc., with headquarters in San Francisco, began a project to build two dams and an extensive canal system in the Helmand valley at a cost of 63.7 million dollars. The scheme became nationalized (1946-53)with the formation of the Helmand Valley Authority, modeled on the Tennessee Valley Authority (Dupree, pp. 482-85).

The Helmand Valley Project marked the development of “capital-intensive agriculture” in the region (Scott, p. 224). In the mid-1950s, the Afghan Ministry of Interior created new villages near Nād-e ʿAli, where the Government sought to settle Pashtun, Uzbek, and Baluch nomads. But the soil in the area proved unsuitable for farming. By 1960, the villages were largely abandoned (Dupree, pp. 503-4). On the lower Helmand, Sistān which was once famous as a wheat-exporting region, did not adequately fed its own population during much of the 20th century (Fisher, p. 81). The increasing diversion of the Helmand headwaters by Afghanistan, with the backing of the Great Powers, often through costly and ineffective irrigation schemes, has dried up one of the region’s rare river deltas. Indeed, the Helmand water dispute is a problem with colonial roots. Persia has repeatedly objected to the development of Afghan irrigation projects on the upper Helmand, claiming that Afghanistan takes unilateral action on an international river and threatens the interest of another riparian state. Numerous rounds of negotiations between Persia and Afghanistan have occurred, resulting in several agreements, but these failed to create a resolution. During the drought that began in the late 1990s, the Taliban dammed the Helmand in central Afghanistan, completely drying the Hāmun Lake and causing the abandonment of villages in Sistan (MacFarquahar).

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