



# INDO-EUROPEAN TELEGRAPH DEPARTMENT

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**INDO-EUROPEAN TELEGRAPH DEPARTMENT (IETD)**, a branch of the British Government of India, based in London, which managed a series of telegraph lines in Iran. The Indo-European Telegraph Department was distinct from both the [Indo-European Telegraph Company](#) backed by the Siemens Company, which operated a telegraph line from Tehran to Tabriz and then across the Russian empire to Europe, and from the Iranian government's own system, founded by E'tezād-al-Saltāna and later managed by Mok̄ber-al-Dawla. While the IETD was an autonomous department for much of its existence, between February 1888 and April 1893, it was under direct auspices of the Director General of Indian Telegraphs. The IETD was dissolved in March 1931.

The impetus for the creation of the IETD was the 1857 India Mutiny, in which the British empire almost lost its prize colony before any official in London learned there was a problem. Simultaneously, within India, telegraphic communications proved crucial for the counterattack of British forces. The British decided to lay telegraph lines through Iran after early attempts to lay submarine cables under the Red Sea and Indian Ocean failed (British Parliamentary Papers, pp. 31-32).

Charles Wood, the Secretary of State for India, began negotiations with Iran's ambassador in London, Mirzā Ja'far Khan (later Mošir-al-Dawla), in early 1861 for a telegraph line to stretch from the Ottoman frontier near Khanaqin



through Iran to Bandar ‘Abbās (Wood to Mirzā Ja‘far Khan, 17 May 1861, IO L/PWD/2/196). On 17 December 1862, Edward Backhouse Eastwick, Britain’s chargé d’affaires in Tehran, after close consultations with Amin-al-Dawla, minister in presence and former Iranian ambassador to France, won agreement from Naşer-al-Din Shah. The resulting Anglo-Iranian telegraph engagement, signed by Queen Victoria on 6 February 1863, called on Iran to build a line stretching from Khanaqin (across the Ottoman frontier from the Iranian town of Qaşr-e Şirin) thru Tehran and onward to Buşehr, supervised by a British engineer, Patrick Stewart. The IETD established intermediate telegraph stations between Khanaqin and Tehran in Hamadān and Kermānşāh. Hampered by lack of railroads and carriage roads to transport material, construction did not begin until August 1863. Between Tehran and Buşehr, the IETD established intermediate stations in Qom, Kāşān, Isfahan, Ābāda, Morgāb, Dehbid, Sivand, Borāzjān, Shiraz, Dašt-e Arżan, Kāzarun, Konār Taḳta, and Dawlatābād. While the line became operational in 1864, disputes between IETD officials and the minister of science (wazir-e ‘olum) E‘tezād-al-Salṭana over control kept traffic off the lines through most of the following year. On 1 March 1865, the first uninterrupted messages between India and London traversed Iranian territory, though message traffic did not become regular until November, when the British and Iranian governments exchanged ratification on an Anglo-Iranian Convention of 1865. Under terms of this agreement, the British government acknowledged E‘tezād-al-Salṭana “as the head of all telegraphs” in Iran, but allowed 50 British officers to operate the Khanaqin-Tehran-Buşehr line; the British contingent would train their Iranian counterparts for a period not exceeding five years (Aitchinson, p. 86).

British telegraph workers remained in Iran considerably longer. After interim extensions, in December 1872, the Iranian government and IETD entered into a new arrangement, which committed the IETD to upgrade its equipment, provide a dedicated line for Iranian government use (two additional wires would carry international traffic), and pay the Iranian treasury a portion of the revenue. The Iranian government, in exchange, agreed to provide separate rooms in telegraph stations for IETD use, and it granted British telegraph workers extraterritorial privileges above and beyond those rights granted British citizens in Iran under the 1857 Treaty of Paris (Welāyati, p. 75). In 1887, the Iranian government extended the 1872 Anglo-Iran Convention to 1905.

Meanwhile, the IETD expanded its network further into Iran so as not to rely on the submarine cable between Karachi and Buşehr. In December 1867,



Walter Siemens visited Tehran to begin negotiations for what, in 1870, would become the Indo-European Telegraph Company. With a private company expanding the telegraph network in northern Iran, British diplomats sought to expand the network in southern Iran for the strategic reason that the greater the network, the more secure communications would be. Frederic Goldsmid, IETD director from 1865 to 1871, traveled from Tehran to Gwadar (in present-day Pakistan) and along the Makrān coast to Bandar ‘Abbās in order to chart a route to increase both communications security and the strategic reach of the British empire (Goldsmid, 1874, *passim*). On 2 April 1868, the British and Iranian governments signed a further Anglo-Iranian Telegraph Convention allowing the IETD to build a telegraph between Gwadar (which was already connected to Karachi in British India) and a point between Jāsk and Bandar ‘Abbās. The resulting IETD line maintained stations, from east to west, in Karachi, Sonmiani, Ormara, Pasni, and Gwadar in present-day Pakistan, and Čāh Bahār, and Jāsk in Iran. In 1887, Iranian Foreign Minister Mošir-al-Dawla and the British diplomat Arthur Nicholson extended the 1868 Convention to 1905. In 1892, the grand vizier ‘Ali Ašgār Khan Amin-al-Solṭān extended IETD control over the southern line to 1925 (Iranian Foreign Ministry Archives, 22/21/1609; J. H. Lane to . . . , IO L/PWD/7/759)

The IETD expansion was often based on consumption of pre-existing Iranian networks. In 1885, Iranian Telegraph Minister Mokḡber-al-Dawla rented Iran’s Tehran-Mašhad line to the IETD for just 2,000 pounds, allowing the British to add additional staff, not only to bolster communications to Afghanistan, but also to position officers deep in Iranian territory along the border with Russia. From east to west, the Mašhad-Tehran line linked the towns of Šarifābād, Qadamgāh, Nišāpur, Šurāb, Sabzavār, Mehr, Mazinān, ‘Abbāsābād, Miāndašt, Mayāmi, Šāhrud, Deh Mollāh, Dāmḡān, Quša, Āhovān, Semnān, Lāšgerd, Deh Namak, Qešlāq, Ayvān-e Kayf, and Kātunābād. In 1901, the IETD connected Jāsk with Muscat. In 1902, shortly after William Knox D’Arcy signed a 60-year concession to explore for oil in all but Iran’s five northern provinces, Mokḡber-al-Dawla brokered a deal to exchange Iranian investment in Kuzestān telegraph lines in exchange for IETD supervision at the Iranian station in Ahvāz; this control was consolidated eleven years later, when the IETD acquired the Kuzestān lines. In 1904, the British re-opened their long-dormant telegraph station on Hangām island off the coast of Bandar ‘Abbās. The following year, the IETD completed a Central Persian line connecting Kāšān to Kermān before continuing on to link to the Indian system at Kuh-e Malek Siāh, near the intersection of the Indian, Afghan, and Iranian borders. At the start of



World War I, the IETD linked Moḥammara to Fāv. In 1916, the Iranian government granted permission for the IETD to connect Kuh-e Malek Siāh with Sistān. In 1920, the Iranian government granted the IETD permission to connect Kermān, Bandar ‘Abbās, Lenga, and Jāsk. By 1907, the IETD operated 33 stations and maintained 2,285 miles of wires (Jamālzāda, pp. 180-83). The Mašhad line, operated but not owned by the IETD, added an additional ten stations and 568 miles. Between the IETD, the Indo-European Telegraph Company, and Iran’s own network, there were more than 120 telegraph stations in Iran open to international traffic at the end of 1911.

The first IETD employees to arrive in Iran had the daunting task to set up a network from scratch, for they sought to remain separate from the Iranian system. The IETD maintained two divisions in Iran; the Persian section was headquartered in Tehran, while the Persian Gulf section (covering the Makrān coast landline and its parallel submarine cable) was headquartered in Karachi. Both lines connected in Bušehr, creating a major office in Bušehr. A third IETD office in Istanbul served as a liaison with the Ottoman telegraphic administration. The vast majority of IETD Persian section staff were Europeans. Of the 45 employees in 1871, only three were Iranian. Iranians worked as clerks, guards, and manual labor. Each landline station in the Persian Gulf section employed between five and eight persons, with 21 IETD employees at Bušehr. Outside of Iran, there were 31 men stationed in the Musandum peninsula (in Oman), some of whom moved to Iranian territory following the transfer of the Musandum station to Hangām. While the British government originally hoped to create a service of “gentleman signalers,” the IETD failed to attract a cadre of upper class recruits. Life was isolated, and women initially scarce (there was significant intermarriage with Iranian Armenians). Pay was respectable, but was not incentive enough for sons of established families. Approximately one-third of signalers were military recruits, mostly from the Royal Engineers, rather than civilians (“Memorial to His Grace . . . ,” 3 June 1871, IO L/PWD/7/197 (D-1/38); John Underwood Bateman, 11 August 1891, IO L/PWD/7/744 (83/3)).

The role of top IETD officials went beyond the telegraph. The British government seconded many IETD employees to boundary commissions, especially as the laying of telegraph wires necessitated defining boundaries both to determine the proper authorities to receive royalties and to patrol the lines. Between 1870 and 1872, Goldsmid led a boundary commission which helped to establish Iran’s border with British India, ending a dispute in which



the Khan of Kalāt claimed sovereignty over the Makrān coast (Goldsmid, 1876). IETD employee Beresford Lovett delineated the border in Sistān. Henry Wells, director of the IETD Persian Section between 1885 and 1898, was seconded to the Afghanistan Boundary Commission along with several of his IETD subordinates (IO L/PWD/7/431 [E-5/12]). The work of the IETD also catalyzed further delineation of Iran's Ottoman frontier. The construction of the IETD line across the Iranian-Ottoman frontier necessitated the revision of the status quo over no-man's land set by the 1848 Treaty of Erzurum. After a failed attempt by Ḥosayn Khan, the shah's ambassador to the Porte, and Nāmeq Pasha, the wāli of Baghdad, to negotiate a division of no-man's land, the governor of Kermānšāh threatened to uproot all the Ottoman telegraphic poles and replace them with Iranian posts. IETD physicians won the British diplomatic good will. Joseph Scott, a telegraph doctor serving in Iran in the 1920s, noted that one telegraph officer served as vice-president of the sanitary council, acting physician at the British Legation, consulting doctor to Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah, attending physician at the American hospital, and participant in the 1904 cholera mission to Kermānšāh ("Administrative Report of the Indo-European Telegraph Department for 1892-1893," IO L/PWD/7/1002). The British government also benefited from the goodwill IETD doctors garnered among local governors and the populace. The British government even appointed some IETD workers like Isfahan-based John Richard Preece to be consul (Wright, p. 85; Hertslet, *passim*).

With extraterritoriality privileges, IETD employees became *de facto* political officers scattered throughout Iran. The reports of telegraph officers, whether British or Iranian, became essential political intelligence, especially in the turbulent years of the Tobacco Regie protests, the Constitutional Revolution, and the Great Game diplomatic competition. Telegraph houses also became *bastgāhs*, places of refuge (Hesām Mo'ezzi, p. 649; Maḥ-bubi, p. 230). While, prior to the IETD's establishment, only Iranians in a few large cities could have ready contact with foreigners, the rapid expansion of the IETD network meant that the majority of Iran's population was within several hours ride to an IETD station. (The Iranian government's own telegraph stations also became *bastgāh*.) Unlike other *bastgāh*, such as royal stables, palaces, mosques, and even consulates and foreign legations, here those seeking refuge could discuss their grievances with high-level government officials in other cities (see BAST). Telegraph stations accordingly diminished the power of provincial governors, who no longer had a monopoly over communications with the central government.



The strategic function of the IETD expanded beyond its initial focus of securing communications between Great Britain and India. Much as Moḵber-al-Dawla would compile reports from his *telegrāfčis* throughout Iran's provinces into a newspaper for the shah, the IETD began to compile Reuters telegrams into a newsheet for the shah's exclusive use, winning the IETD director significant influence in the shah's court.

The Indo-European telegraph quickly became an indispensable tool for tracking the Anglo-Russian rivalry, and for dispatching speedy intelligence back to the foreign policy apparatus in London. In the late 19th century, the IETD became the means to transfer news of the latest Russian advances into Central Asia. In 1885-86, the British Legation nearly tripled its budget for telegraph use because of the Panjdeh Incident and the Afghan border crisis. In the first decade of the twentieth century, there was significant tension within the IETD leadership between those who sought to govern the department on strictly financial grounds and those who emphasized the political importance of maintaining the maximum number of officers in face of the Russian challenge (Preece to Hardinge. 14 April 1903; Encl. 1 to No. 55, FO 60/665). In 1881, Russia and Iran signed an agreement allowing Russian telegraphists to be resident in Iran for an unspecified duration. The Russians subsequently established lines in northern Iran around the Caspian Sea, in Khorasan, and in Sistān (Hardinage to Lansdowne, FO 60/665; Curzon to St. John Brodrick, IO Mss. Eur. F. 111/174).

Disputes over Russian and British predominance in Iran's telegraphic network presaged the divisions implicit in the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention. In 1906, the Russian government pressured the Iranian government to give the Russian service as many privileges, wires, and staff in Iran as the IETD enjoyed. The Iranian telegraph minister Moḵber-al-Dawla warned the British that the shah was going to accede to the Russian government's demands and transfer control of the strategic Mašhad-Sistān line from IETD to Russian control. If the Russian pressure succeeded in removing IETD, Sir Arthur Nicholson, British ambassador to Russia, threatened to throw aside the Anglo-Russian truce both countries had observed since the Russo-Japanese War. However, Nicholson proposed that tension could be avoided if the Russian government would agree to divide Iran into telegraphic spheres of influence: The IETD would trade control over the Mašhad-Tehran line for undisputed IETD supremacy on the Mašhad-Sistān telegraph. Both the Russian and the British governments framed the transfer of telegraph lines in the context of the ongoing



negotiations for an all-encompassing Anglo-Russian Convention. Indeed, disputes about whether the IETD would retain control over the entire Mašhad-Sistān telegraph, or only those portions outside the Russian sphere of influence, delayed completion of the Anglo-Russian Convention (Churchill, p. 264). A confidential British document, readied in preparation for the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, listed the IETD as the chief British interest in Iran (Wright, p. 11). Nevertheless, new technologies had already begun to erode the IETD's importance. In the early 1880s, limited telephony mitigated the impact of total interruption of the IETD lines. The IETD hastened the deployment of wireless units into Iran during the Constitutional Revolution in order to overcome the system's vulnerability to vandalism. Wireless apparatuses in coastal stations like Jāsk also assisted British naval operations. In 1902, the Iranian government granted its first telephone concession for Tabriz. The radio came to Iran in 1927, when the German ambassador presented one to Reza Shah. In March 1931, the nearly seven-decade history of the IETD ended in Iran, when the IETD passed control of their stations and landlines to the Iranian government (for a map and list of telegraph lines at this time see Keyhān, pp. 475-85). At the same time, the IETD transferred the Persian Gulf cables and remaining assets to Imperial and International Communications, the forerunner of Cable and Wireless (Indo European Telegraph Department, 12/89/1).

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