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### THE POLITICAL ROLE OF THE BRITISH AGENCY IN BASRA (1763-1779)

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#### **ABSTRACT:**

Britain was interested in the Arab Gulf region at the beginning of the seventeenth century with the aim of trade, and it did not have any political and strategic interest in the region, but its commercial activity quickly turned into political activity through the establishment of a number of commercial agencies in the Gulf region, most notably Basra, to which the agency was transferred from Port Abbas In Persian 1763, and from here begins the political history of Britain in the Persian Gulf region, in which Britain plays a prominent role in the internal and external events of Basra until 1779, when the activity of the British Agency in Basra ceased as a result of the political instability and the turmoil of the situation that resulted from the Persian occupation.

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Britain emerged on the scene of the Arabian Gulf for the purpose of trade, represented by the English East Indian Company and its agents.<sup>1</sup> It did not have any political and strategic interest to focus its attention primarily on trade in the region. Its commercial competitions began, especially with the Dutch,<sup>2</sup> who managed through establishing the company in 1602,<sup>3</sup> to obtain concessions to practice a trade and establish commercial bases. They were able to extract many commercial centers in the East India. Competing forces, represented by the French India Company, was founded in 1664. However, its commercial influence in the Gulf region is soon weakened, due to its complete dependence on government support, which was affected by

the political conditions of the French defeat in Europe. This gave the English an opportunity to consolidate their presence in the region. Britain began to expand its commercial activity through the establishment of a number of commercial agencies that are considered as commercial stations with intermediaries known as (commercial agents). These agencies quickly transformed from their commercial activity into a political one. Most of these agencies were concentrated on the western coast of the Arabian Gulf, such as Muscat and Basra, which will be the subject of this research. The choice of 1763 came as the beginning of the topic of research to transfer the agency from Bandar Abbas to Basra. From here, the political history of Britain in the Arabian Gulf, in which Britain played a prominent role in the events of the region until 1779, has begun. The activities of the British Agency in Basra ceased due to the political instability and turmoil caused by the Persian occupation.

### ***The starting point of Britain- Basra relationship:***

British representation in Iraq was restricted to Basra until the late eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Britain began its relationship with Basra after it was nominally subordinate to the Ottoman Empire through the governors who enjoyed the role of independence and power of influence. Their contact with the governor of Basra was distinguished by force in order to manage their interests in the region, since Basra is close to the Gulf.<sup>5</sup> There was no diplomatic representation except for Britain's contact with Afrasiab<sup>6</sup> as the powerful force in Basra, by sending goods on a sailing boat in 1635.<sup>7</sup> This affected the company's position in Basra, as it paved the way to appoint a British resident in 1639. From now and after, the political role that Britain will play in Basra became clear.<sup>8</sup>

The company started sending its employees to Basra to identify its conditions and markets. Britain obtained concessions to trade the company's goods. In 1640, It managed to conclude an agreement with the governor of Basra, Ali Pasha, in order to open a temporary British agency there.<sup>9</sup> However, the matter changed in 1645 as a result of the huge profits they had gained from the port of Basra. The situation worsened between the Persians and the Dutch, because Basra became a suitable port and an alternative to Bandar Abbas. So, it transferred the agency<sup>10</sup> from Bandar Abbas to Basra and made it a permanent agency after it was temporary.<sup>11</sup> However, Britain's activity weakened in 1653 to use force against them by the Netherlands and to prevent them from reaching the port of Basra. They attacked four British ships in the port and seized their cargo. The same thing was repeated in 1654, when a clash happened between the two parties represented by four Dutch ships and four British ships. The Netherlands managed to capture one of the ships and destroy the other. This led to the cessation of British activity in Basra in 1657.<sup>12</sup> Then, Britain's relationship with the Ottoman Empire was strengthened through an agreement in 1661. The agreement granted Britain many privileges for its commercial activity in Basra,<sup>13</sup> since Basra witnessed a kind of stability due to its fall under the rule of Afrasiab, who had a good relationship with foreign residents in Basra.<sup>14</sup>

In 1723, a permanent center was established in Basra, managed by a resident under the supervision of the agent in Bandar Abbas,<sup>15</sup> under the pretext of protecting British merchants and their Indian subjects.<sup>16</sup> It was ranked second in importance after Bandar Abbas in terms of British trade in the Persian Gulf region.<sup>17</sup> In 1724, Britain discussed trade conditions and obtained a customs reduction of 3% of the company's exports in Basra. The relationship between the British Resident and Basra remained limited only on the merchant side.<sup>18</sup> In 1760, relations between Britain and Basra became overwrought when Suleiman Pasha<sup>19</sup> issued a decision to raise the tax rate by 5%, after it was 3% according to the orders of the supreme authority in the Sublime Porte.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the Bombay presidency was not satisfied with the actions of the British Resident in Basra, William Show (1753-1761). Despite his commercial activities in Basra, which promised him negligence, he had cost the company many expenses for his visit to Baghdad. They found there was fraud in the accounts of the Resident in Basra, so he was removed from his duties as a resident.<sup>21</sup> William Andrew Brice was appointed instead of him, and before he went to Basra to exercise his duties, he went to Bushehr to see the possibility of opening a commercial agency there. However, he did not succeed in achieving a goal, so he transferred all the agency's property from Bandar Abbas to Basra, which became the third agency for the British company.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Transferring the agency from Bandar Abbas to Basra in 1763.***

Since 1624, the British had an agency in Bandar Abbas, which was called Jambrun,<sup>23</sup> after moving from Jask.<sup>24</sup> It continued to practice its activity in a limited way until 1651 to monopolize trade in the port by the Netherlands. It was rivaled strongly by winning over rulers and using money, the fact that forced Britain to reduce its staff in the agency. After that, the Dutch activity has been weakened paving the way for Britain to operate from its agency in Bandar Abbas until 1722. Persia was subjected to the Afghan invasion,<sup>25</sup> which led to the turmoil that affected the agency's activity in the region. Bandar Abbas is no longer important after it had a prominent role in commercial activity. At the same time, France had attacked the British agency. Britain was forced to close its agency in Bandar Abbas to open several agencies in Persia. However, it did not succeed due to the deteriorating internal conditions and the occurrence of political turmoil, which led to the deterioration of British commercial activity in the region. So, the Bombay government decided to liquidate all agencies in Persia with the exception of Isfahan,<sup>26</sup> which was permanently closed in 1750.<sup>27</sup> Britain tried to revitalize its agency during the reign of Nader Shah (1732-1747).<sup>28</sup> Relations between them improved in 1735 when Nader Shah granted a special concession to the British company, represented by reducing the customs duties that the company paid to Persia. This improvement came to Nader Shah's need for British expertise in order to build a Persian naval fleet. Yet, those relations did not continue to assassinate Nader Shah in 1747. This led to disorder in Persia that lasted until 1757.<sup>29</sup> The Agency was unable to practice its activities in an adequate

manner due to the absence of a central government and internal and civil struggles over power.<sup>30</sup>

Another reason for transferring the agency is the attack of the French naval forces on Bandar Abbas in 1759 and the destruction of the agency's buildings, which resulted in heavy losses. This is part of the maneuvers of the Seven Years War (1756-1763).<sup>31</sup> In addition to the revolution of Hormuz citizens against the "Mullah Ali Shah" in 1760, the ruler of Bandar Abbas who had been arrested and imprisoned in Hormuz, had managed to escape and launched an attack with the help of the Qawasim<sup>32</sup> on Jaafar Khan. Jaafar Khan supported the people of Hormuz, who handed him the castle. It caused disturbances that negatively affected the British Agency in Bandar Abbas.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, Britain took its decision to withdraw the agency from Bandar Abbas and to stop its commercial activity with Persia.

### ***The agency in Basra in 1763:***

In 1763, Britain transferred the resident of Basra into an Agency after the transfer from Bandar Abbas.<sup>34</sup> The government of Bombay chose William Andrew Brice to take over the position of the British agent in Basra. Brice arrived on May 13 of the same year and began building construction for the agency<sup>35</sup> on the west bank of the Al-Ashar area, near the Shatt al-Arab, and below the headquarters of the Basra recipient.<sup>36</sup> The British ambassador, Henry Neville, succeeded in Constantinople in 1764 after his efforts and obtaining a decree from the Ottoman Sultan Mustafa III (1757-1773) recognizing that Basra is a port subject to foreign privileges and raising the rank of the agent to a consulate.<sup>37</sup> Ruwert Gordon was appointed as the representative of the East India Company as consul. Under this decree, Britain enjoyed the privileges and immunity.<sup>38</sup> This reflected its impact on the agency's transformation from its purely commercial objectives to colonial political goals in the region through the political roles it exercised in the event of Basra, internally or externally.<sup>39</sup>

### ***The agency's attitude towards the Bani Kaab tribe:***

During the second half of the eighteenth century, the influence and power of the Bani Kaab<sup>40</sup> tribe had increased, and this led Ottoman Empire to cooperate with the British agent, William Andrew Brice, in order to subjugate it to the authority of the state. Particularly, British interests in Basra were in conflict with the increasing influence of Bani Kaab. They launched a joint campaign on land and sea against Salman bin Sultan (1737-1768), the sheikh of the Bani Kaab tribe in 1763,<sup>41</sup> when the Bani Kaab tribe captured Al Dawasir, which lies on the West Bank below the Shatt Al Arab. However, the campaign did not achieve its goal. Yet, they reconciled and withdrew,<sup>42</sup> and the Bani Kaab tribe continued to increase its influence and power.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, The problems were renewed again with Bani Kaab in 1765, because the British agent Peter Alwen Rnish possessed more skill in business than in politics.<sup>44</sup> Cooperation with the Basra recipient, Suleiman Agha (1765-1776), began to carry out a disciplinary campaign and

impose sanctions on the Bani Kaab tribe, after the Bani Kaab tribe seized three British ships in the Shatt al-Arab. A large naval campaign was prepared by the two parties.<sup>45</sup> Naval operations against Bani Kaab began from May 1766 until October of the same year. The naval operations had ceased following the demise of Karim Khan al-Zand, who considered the Bani Kaab tribe among his national.<sup>46</sup> However, the death of Sheikh Salman and the preoccupation of his successors, and the increasing British influence in Basra made Bani Kaab away from the harassment of Basra for a period of time. Thus, the British Agency was able to practice its activities without pressure and obstacles by the Bani Kaab tribe.<sup>47</sup> Then, frictions resumed between the Ottoman Empire and the British, and the Bani Kaab tribe had been continued till 1773, when the Bani Kaab boycotted the trade in Basra and closed the navigation in Shatt al-Arab through the parking of their three ships in it.<sup>48</sup>

***The agency's attitude towards the presence of the French consulate in Basra:***

After commissioning the government of Bombay and London, the British agent in Basra sought to establish good relations with France after the opening of the French consulate in Basra in 1765. The purpose of the agency was to collect information about France, and to send an envoy to Baghdad. They hunted to influence the governor and to convince him to expel the French from Basra to isolate their relations with France.<sup>49</sup>

***The Agency's attitude towards the Persian invasion of Basra in (1775-1779):***

The most important conditions that Basra exposed had to affect the British Agency and its activities in the region including the spread of the plague epidemic in 1773. This led the employees of the British company to withdraw from Basra.<sup>50</sup> The Persian occupation of it during the reign of Karim Khan Al-Zind (1757-1779)<sup>51</sup> occurred due to the preoccupation of the Ottoman states in their European wars, the political instability in Baghdad, and Karim Khan's desire to restore the prestige of Persia after his defeat in northern Iraq.<sup>52</sup>

Represented by the British agent, Henry Moore, the British agency was characterized by being not interfering and getting involved in local conflicts and keeping them on a policy of neutrality. The recipient of Basra was informed that their ships anchored in the port of Basra would not participate in the fight, and that he might admit the situation. He requested that the goods and property of the British agency not be loaded onto the British ships due to fear of a negative impact on the defenders and to avoid a military weakness. The agent committed to this on the condition that the Basra recipient bears the costs of the damage.<sup>53</sup> Yet, the situation developed to a change in the agency's position, especially because the British interests in the region were threatened to cause fear for its agency. When the agency heard about the arrival of the campaign, it decided to participate with the Ottoman forces,<sup>54</sup> and contributed to close the Shatt al-Arab in front of the Persian ships through a bridge of boats linking each other with a chain of 420 feet. The bridge was completed in just two days. The agency was not

limited to that, but it provided the Basra recipient when he asked it to supply the two Basra naval ships (the Tigris and the Euphrates) with British sailors. The participation of the two cruisers, Six Wickle, and the help of Britain helped the Basra Defensive Fleet, to force the Persian forces to retreat after they launched the attack on Basra.<sup>55</sup>

Basra was distinguished by a strong defensive position against the Persian attacks. This raised the morale of the people in Basra. The recipient of Basra told the British agent Henry Moore that he could protect Basra by land if it was protected from the river. However, the British agent was thinking about the losses that the agency would suffer when he remained in Basra<sup>56</sup> during the arrival of the Persian fleet and their strength.<sup>57</sup> Henry Moore was instructed by the Bombay government not to intervene,<sup>58</sup> and this led him to withdraw the agency's personnel from Basra, destroying the pledge he made with the Basra recipient. The British ships had left with the agent and agency employees and met the Bombay Government envoy at Bushehr. The British-Persian agreement was concluded on the establishment of an agency in Bushehr, and he succeeded in that. At the same time, he sent a letter to the recipient of Basra, Suleiman Agha, to apologize for providing assistance.<sup>59</sup> The British agent announced: "We are nothing but merchants, and we have no connection with the disputes and wars that break out among the countries of the region. With my best wishes to the government of Basra, I feel sorry that I cannot help you."<sup>60</sup> The Persian presence in Basra caused the decline of the British role in Basra. Britain decided to reduce its diplomatic representation to its residents,<sup>61</sup> because the agency cannot carry out its duties in Basra because the Persian occupation isolated it from the surrounding areas, despite the Persian-British coordination. The Persian occupation of Basra continued until the death of Karim Khan al-Zind in 1779. Chaos and unrest spread to Persia, which made it withdraw from Basra.<sup>62</sup> Thus, the political role of the British agency in Basra at that time has ended

## CONCLUSION

Basra formed an area to attract European competition due to the importance of its strategic location. This led Britain to establish an agency in it after its transfer from Bandar Abbas. The study reached the following conclusions:

- 1- The British Agency focused its work in Basra in a manner that primarily served its interests. It had no role in developing the general conditions in Basra in various fields.
- 2- The positive role of the agency is to stand against the internal rebellions represented by Bani Kaab tribe to maintain security, preserve its own interests and consolidate its influence in Basra.
- 3- The agency's presence contributed to interference in Basra's internal and external affairs through the stances mentioned previously.
- 4- The success of Britain in establishing a British agency in Basra indicates the success of its colonial expansion outside the Indian continent. The agency is one of the most important means used by the British to implement its colonial plans after its goals were commercial.

5- External factors had a clear impact on Basra- Britain relations, especially during the stage of the Persian invasion of Basra in 1775. On the one hand, it showed its determination and strength in facing the invasion, and on the other hand, the true face of British policy has emerged regarding the nature of the relationship between them.

6- The outline of the British policy is to strengthen its presence in the region and confront the Ottoman Empire and any other country to consolidate its privileges in Basra.

7- The British government was able to win the Persian side to serve its political interests with the intelligence it possessed by turning enemies into friends and their success in establishing an agency in Bushehr after its transformation from Basra.

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- 16- Ali Nasser Hussein, *Pages from the Modern and Contemporary History of Iraq (Documentary Research)*, Baghdad, 2019, p. 113.
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- 18 - Ali Abdullah Faris, the previous source, p. 135.
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