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DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

Research Memorandum  
RNA-21, June 29, 1964

To : The Secretary  
Through: S/S  
From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes

*Thomas L. Hughes*

Subject: The Helmand Waters Dispute Between Iran and Afghanistan

The Iranian government recently proposed to the Afghan government that the long-standing dispute over usage rights to the waters of the Helmand river be formally considered in the near future; the Afghans accepted this initiative and preliminary discussions are now underway. At the request of the Bureau of Near East and South Asian Affairs we have reviewed the geographical, historical and diplomatic aspects of this problem.

ABSTRACT

The Helmand river question has agitated Afghan-Iranian relations periodically since 1872 in periods of drought or great flood. British arbitration established in 1905 that Iran was entitled to one-third of the Helmand's flow as it nears the Iranian border, but Iran has never accepted this award on the ground that it is insufficient to its needs. After a long lull, Iranian interest in the problem mounted as a result of Afghan plans to develop the upper Helmand Valley by constructing two water storage dams and extensive irrigation works.

The United States became involved because of American interest in settling the only serious obstacle to close Iranian-Afghan relations, and the fact that the Afghan government had hired an American company to build the dams and canals of the Helmand Valley development scheme. The American

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initiative resulted in a detailed study of the problem in 1949 and 1950 by neutral irrigation and hydrology experts. Although the findings were to be regarded only as the engineering basis for a future accord, Iran found the study unacceptable because by implication it set Iran's share at an amount similar to that awarded in the 1905 arbitration. Both countries have discussed the question periodically since 1950, but until recently no substantial progress had been made. Preliminary discussions are being held in Kabul, and because both sides have shown flexibility, there appears to be more reason now to hope for a settlement than there has been for many years.

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Introduction

Iran and Afghanistan have contended over usage rights to the waters of the Helmand river since 1872 when a British arbitrator placed the major portion of the river delta within Iran and the river proper in Afghanistan. He did not, however, rule on the question of apportionment, except to say that a "requisite" supply of water should be made available for Iran's purposes. In normal years no problems have arisen, but years of drought have usually been followed by Iranian complaints and renewed attempts to seek a fixed share for Iran. Interest in a settlement usually subsided when water again became plentiful. While this pattern has continued until the present, interest in solving this question permanently has increased since 1945 because of Iranian concern that Afghan construction of water storage dams and continuing development of irrigation facilities in the upper Helmand Valley would eventually deprive the Iranian delta area of needed water. In addition, there has been a growing desire in both countries to eliminate the only serious obstacle to closer relations.

In May 1963 the Shah's mediation of the Pakistan-Afghan dispute resulted in the re-establishment of diplomatic and trade relations between the two countries after an 18 months rupture. This success has led to a steady improvement in Irano-Afghan relations and increased the hope that the long-standing Helmand waters problem would be solved. The Iranians recently proposed that the issue be discussed anew and the Afghan reaction has been favorable. Although discussions of this subject have often moved in slow motion and delays are likely, it now appears that serious discussions will be held sometime during 1964.

Geographical and Technical Background

The Helmand river flows nearly its entire length of 300 miles in Afghanistan before it empties into a great depression which straddles the Iranian-Afghan border. Until it reaches this depression, which in fact constitutes a land locked delta, it flows in a generally southwesterly direction as it passes through the upper Helmand Valley. After it leaves the upper Helmand area it gradually bends in a more westerly direction until it is about 25 miles on a direct line from the Iranian border at which time it turns sharply northward. Near this turn is Bandar-i-Kamal Khan, a point about 35 miles from the Sistan river, the first, and for irrigation purposes, most important, branch of the main channel which flows into Iran. Bandar-i-Kamal Khan is significant because it is the place at which the division of water between Iran and Afghanistan has traditionally been

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made. <sup>1/</sup> About three-fourths of the delta land that is currently irrigable lies in Iran and accordingly approximately the same proportion of the total water utilized for irrigation has been used by the Iranians. In normal years the amount of water reaching the delta area is surplus to the irrigation needs of both countries. In such years it flows into basins in the northern and the lowest end of the delta making large, shallow saline lakes on both sides of the border. In years of extreme flood it overflows the lakes located in the north and spills over into a low lying area west of Zabol in Iran. In exceptionally severe flood years Zabol may be completely surrounded by water, and huge areas of arable land in both Iran and Afghanistan are inundated. These great saline lakes contract and expand according to the rate of inflow but despite a very rapid evaporation rate due to scorching heat and a searing three month hot wind they have apparently never dried up completely.

The Sistan basin, which receives only about two inches of rain each year, is entirely dependent on the Helmand and following very low precipitation in the mountains of Afghanistan, drought ensues. Severe drought has been quite infrequent, however, apparently averaging less than about once every 20 years since 1873. The last severe drought year was 1947, and although there have been years of low river flow since then, they do not appear to have caused real suffering in the delta area. Droughts have affected both countries more or less equally, but the canals furthest downstream, most of which are Afghan, are naturally the first to dry up. The local inhabitants have traditionally dreaded an excess of water more than drought, since the relatively frequent spring floods cause far greater damage to the delta farm lands than drought.

1/ The measurement and division of the water was made on the basis of ad hoc agreements. In August 1947 the Iranian members of the joint Irano-Afghan commission insisted that the measurement and division should actually take place at Band-i-Kamal Khan, a place they said was 35 miles further upstream. Subsequent investigations leave no doubt that Bandar-i-Kamal Khan and Band-i-Kamal Khan are one and the same place and in fact both spellings have been used on maps. British documents showed that the division point is about 35 miles upstream from where the Helmand first enters Iran. In 1947 the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided a map purporting to show a Band-i-Kamal Khan about 70 miles upstream from the Sistan river, but no maps issued prior to that date reveal any such place name at that location and the Embassy noted that the word "Band-i-Kamal Khan" had apparently been handwritten on the map. It is not known if Iran still disputes the location of the division point, but the question apparently has not entered the discussions in recent years. If this issue were revived by the Iranians in future negotiations it would almost certainly have an adverse effect; the Afghans regard it as an artless deception.

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The Helmand is normally low in late August and early September and rises gradually toward the end of the year. Abundant water is usually available from January to May, the planting-harvesting cycle.

The Afghan cultivators require relatively less water in the fall and spring and more in the early summer than the Iranians. The basic crops are winter cereals, wheat and barley, which are planted in the fall and harvested in the spring. The severe climatic conditions which prevail during the summer, especially the searing 120° day winds, probably will prevent any significant change in the fall to spring growing cycle on both sides of the border.

The available information on the water supply in the delta is not exhaustive but it has been judged by the neutral Helmand River Delta Commission to be sufficient to conclude that the lowest total runoff for the most severe drought year was considerably more than one million acre feet, or considerably more than is ever needed for actual irrigation in the Sistan basin. The problem therefore is essentially one of the better utilization of available water resources rather than a struggle for more water. The main problems are (1) the continued lowering of the river channel, which makes it progressively harder to make the required diversions from the main channel into the irrigation canals; (2) the movement of loose sand across the delta caused by the very strong winds in the area, especially during summer; and (3) the poor irrigation methods prevailing in the area coupled with the lack of cooperation between farmers on both sides of the border.

The waters of the Helmand have traditionally flowed substantially unimpeded from the upper river, through the southern desert of Afghanistan and thence into the Sistan delta-basin. The only interference with the stream flow until quite recently was the construction of temporary brush and mud dams by both sides to divert water into the irrigation canals and side channels running off the main channel into both countries.

The construction of permanent Afghan and Iranian water control works on the Helmand since the Second World War has altered this situation. By far the more important are the Afghan works. They include two major storage dams, one on the Helmand and the other on the Arghandab, a major tributary, and greatly expanded irrigation facilities in the upper Helmand valley. These projects, the key works in the ambitious American-assisted Helmand Valley development scheme, were brought into partial operation in 1952-53. The Iranians constructed two dams on the Sistan river primarily to divert flood water into Afghanistan. The Afghan dams, particularly the one on the Helmand, have resulted in a material reduction of the magnitude

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of the floods and the length of the flooding time in the Sistan basin and have appreciably increased the flow during the summer, the low water period. Despite this important advance, in times of exceptional flood they are of limited value because once the reservoirs are filled, the overflow pours through the overflow gates, ultimately inundating the Sistan delta. According to information from Italconsult, an Italian firm which has done extensive hydrological work for the Iranians in the Sistan basin, the Iranian dams have limited value to Iran because they can only divert water into Afghanistan during times of high flow, rather than storing it for future use. These dams have apparently had some success in diverting flood waters, however.

### Arbitration Efforts

#### Goldsmid Award:

The Goldsmid award of 1870-2 is the basis of the Helmand river dispute since it divided the Helmand basin area between Afghanistan and Iran. <sup>2/</sup> For about 125 years prior to the 1860's the entire Sistan delta had been under Afghan control, although during much of the 19th century this control had been only nominal. When an internecine struggle for the throne weakened Afghan military power in the early 1860's, Persian troops occupied most of the region. This challenge was not met until 1868 when Emir Sher Ali consolidated his power in Kabul and sent troops to oust the Persians. The Afghans won initial successes and the Persians appealed to the British; Goldsmid's mission was the British response. His demarcation of the border had virtually the force of a dictat because of British hegemony in the region.

There is no question but that the British border demarcation favored the Persians because, in effect, it legitimized the greater part of the Persian military occupation of the Sistan six years earlier. The British were motivated by the desire to use Persia as a bulwark against Czarist expansion and the award was intended to win Persian cooperation. Since Afghanistan was in no position to challenge British authority, the Goldsmid award was accepted. Afghanistan has never officially raised the question of the loss of Sistan in connection with the water dispute or in any other way, but memories of these events may contribute to Afghan resentment of Iranian claims that its water rights have been violated by the Afghan government.

In the final paragraph of the award Goldsmid specified that "no works are to be carried out on either side calculated to interfere with the requisite supply of water for irrigation on the banks of the Helmand." In 1873 the British Foreign Secretary, in an interpretation of the Goldsmid

<sup>2/</sup> British General Sir Frederic Goldsmid actually demarcated the border in 1870-2, but the award was not confirmed by the British Foreign Office until 1873.

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award given after consulting with General Goldsmid, ruled out that this clause did not apply to new works, provided that the requisite supply of water for irrigation was not diminished. Goldsmid did not spell out the amount of water that was "requisite" and this point remains the heart of the Helmand waters problem today.

McMahon Award:

For 30 years following the Goldsmid award disputes between Afghanistan and Iran over water use in the Helmand delta were apparently settled locally without the intervention of either central government. However, in 1902, two events combined to underline the lack of any agreement over the apportionment of the water reaching the delta area: because of a flood the river shifted its course altering the border, and subsequently a severe drought occurred. The Iranians requested British assistance in delimiting the border and determining the requisite water supply. After three years of work, most of it devoted to a study of hydrographic data on the scene, Colonel A. H. McMahon ruled in 1905 that Iranian requirements were one-third of the water reaching Bandar-i-Kamal Khan.

Both Afghanistan and Iran accepted the minor readjustment in the border and Afghanistan also acceded to the apportionment of the Helmand waters. However, Iran has never accepted McMahon's ruling on the division of the water. McMahon stressed two other points in making apportionment of the water: (1) floods cause "far more" damage to land and crops year after year, "than is caused by want of water"; (2) in the rare cases of deficiency of water in the Sistan, "Afghan Sistan has suffered equally with Persian Sistan."

1905 to the Post World War II Period

Between 1905 and the middle 1930's the question of the Helmand waters division was settled yearly by a joint commission appointed by the two countries to measure and apportion the flow at Bandar-i-Kamal Khan. <sup>3/</sup>

In 1933 King Nadir Shah of Afghanistan offered Iran a one-half share of the Helmand water reaching Bandar-i-Kamal Khan and negotiations began in that year. In 1936 a joint protocol incorporating the Afghan offer was signed and led to a temporary agreement in 1937. In December 1938 a permanent agreement was signed by the Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Iranian Ambassador. However, the Afghan National Assembly refused to accept an Iranian declaration annexed to the agreement that the Afghan government would not interfere with the "share of Iran from Bandar-i-Kamal Khan", arguing that it would be superfluous in view of the agreement itself

<sup>3/</sup> Since there were no severe drought years in this period the work of this joint commission appears to have been primarily academic.

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and therefore a reflection on Afghan sincerity. <sup>4/</sup> This is the closest the two countries have ever been to an overall settlement.

Between 1945 and 1947 the Afghan government submitted three counter-proposals to the Iranian annex. These proposals were rejected by the Iranians presumably because they added a stipulation reserving the Afghan right to use the Helmand waters in the upper Helmand valley for agricultural development. <sup>2/</sup> For their part, the Iranians demonstrated increased interest in the problem during the immediate post-war years because of Afghan initiation of upstream development projects and the coincidence of a low water year in 1946 and a serious drought in 1947. Although the development projects were just beginning to get underway at this time, the Iranians charged that the Afghans had willfully deprived them of water. Investigation on the scene by American officials verified that these charges were false and that the drought was felt throughout the entire Helmand basin. Nevertheless Iranian fears that upstream development would deprive them of needed water were genuine and it appeared at the time that these fears might have some basis in fact.

#### American Involvement and the Neutral Commission

In the context of continuing Iranian and Afghan willingness to discuss this problem despite several previous failures, the United States offered its good offices in October 1947 to expedite an agreement. American interest in the controversy was heightened by the fact that an American company, Morrison-Knudson, had been hired by the Afghan government to build the dams and canals of the Helmand Valley development scheme. Both sides accepted the American initiative in principle almost immediately but owing to technical differences and diminished interest with the onset of a good water flow, it was not until September 1950 that a preliminary accord was reached. At that time both countries accepted an American proposal calling for the formation of a neutral commission of internationally known hydrology and irrigation experts to study the technical aspects of the problem. It was mutually agreed that the commission's purpose would be fact finding only with a view to "establish an engineering basis" for mutual accord. Prior to the departure of the

<sup>4/</sup> Sections 2 and 8 of the 1938 agreement appear to substantiate the National Assembly's position. They stipulate that; (a) the Afghan Government agrees not to build any new canals downstream from Bandar-i-Kamal Khan to where the river branches into Iran; and (b) both parties will refrain from actions in this area which "may reduce the share of water of, or cause damage to, either party."

<sup>5/</sup> The development area is approximately 175 miles upstream from Bandar-i-Kamal Khan; this is the Helmand Valley authority (HVA) region of which the two large storage and diversion dams are the key element.

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commission, an American engineer was appointed as fact-finder to prepare a study of the Helmand problem on the spot in both Iran and Afghanistan.<sup>6/</sup> This study was completed in August 1950 and in October the neutral commission departed for Iran and Afghanistan.<sup>7/</sup>

The commission completed its work in December 1950 and published its report in February 1951. The report recommended that an interim accord be reached on the basis of the traditional water requirements of both countries, to run for a period of not less than five years, pending the collection by both countries of more complete hydrographic data. The Commission reiterated the McMahon award's position that the core problem in the delta was actually the proper use of available water, since even the "most severe drought year" provided about twice as much water as was needed for actual irrigation but that poorly constructed irrigation canals and unscientific diversion of available water caused tremendous wastage and resulted in the infrequent crop failures.

The Afghan government expressed satisfaction with the report almost immediately after its publication, but waited until 1952 before officially offering to negotiate a settlement on the basis of this report. Since the Commission's conclusions did not differ substantially from those of the McMahon award, Iran implicitly rejected the report by ignoring it officially until 1954. In November of that year Iran asked that negotiations be reopened, but only on the condition that the framework for future discussions be set by all available documents and data, rather than the commission report alone. After fruitless preliminary discussion the Afghans acceded to Iran's condition in the fall of 1955, but despite several exchanges no progress was made.

Iran's position on the report is not known in detail, but it seems clear that it objected primarily to the neutral commission's endorsement of an acreage figure for irrigated land in the Sistan similar to that used by McMahon in making his award. Much of the data which the Iranian government furnished to the neutral commission is contradictory and unconvincing. The most important Iranian report was compiled by the Independent Irrigation Administration of Iran in 1950 and entitled "Irrigation Water Required Annually in Sistan." The fact-finder found the Iranian report exaggerated, to say the least. He estimated that the report provided for the continual diversion of 2 cubic meters per second

<sup>6/</sup> The fact-finder was Mr. Malcolm Jones, who spent from March to August 1950 in the area studying the Helmand problem. His report supplied much of the data on which the neutral commission based its report.

<sup>7/</sup> The members of the commission were internationally known irrigation and hydrology experts; Christopher E. Webb of Canada, Robert L. Lowry of the United States and Francisco J. Dominguez of Chile.

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for human and livestock consumption totalling 45,630,000 gallons per day, an amount which would provide 100 gallons per day per individual in the area (200,000), and more than 25,000,000 gallons per day for livestock. The engineering report observed that "these rates are far in excess of any past or present consumption rates in the Sistan area."<sup>8/</sup> Data supplied by other official Iranian sources differ substantially from the data in the official report. The disparity can be seen most clearly in the acreage figures: The government's report gave annual acreage irrigated as 157,800 for the average dry year and 217,000 for the average rainfall year; representatives of the six administrative districts of Iranian Sistan informed the neutral commission in 1950 that the acreage figure is 150,700; and American officials who visited Sistan in 1955 and 1960 were given substantially different figures for the same years by different Iranian officials.<sup>9/</sup>

The distinction between "dry" and "average rainfall" years which appears to account, at least in part, for the larger figures in the official report does not appear in any other available estimates, including others provided by Iran. It seems probable that the Independent Irrigation Administration's report is a projection of the acreage Iran believes can be irrigated in the future rather than the amount actually under present cultivation. Information Italconsult provided to an American official in 1960 tends to support this conclusion. The Italconsult engineers said that the area currently irrigable is about 247,100 acres, of which one half or less is actually cultivated during any given year due to the fallow system.<sup>10/</sup> This figure is considerably in excess of other estimates probably because it was arrived at from studying aerial photographs of the Sistan basin. Therefore it is likely to be an estimate of the potential land in the Sistan which could be brought into production in the foreseeable future as part of a development program in the area.

<sup>8/</sup> Actual animal requirements per head; Sheep - about 1 gallon per day; cattle - about 10 gallons per day.

<sup>9/</sup> The Iranian Director of Agriculture and Irrigation for Sistan, Engineer Manavi, told an American official that about 185,325 acres were under cultivation for the 1959-60 season. The Governor of Sistan told the same official that the figure for the same period was 148,260 acres.

<sup>10/</sup> This figure should be compared with that of 150,700 acres under cultivation furnished in 1950 to the neutral commission by the Iranian officials representing each of the six administrative districts of Iranian Sistan. Available evidence does not point to any appreciable increase in the amount of cultivated acreage since 1950.

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The most important consequence of the neutral commission's report has been its effect on the frame of reference for apportionment. While Iran has refused to accept the commission's definition of the "traditional" annual use of Helmand waters as being 530,000 acre feet for Iranian Sistan and 160,000 for Afghan Sistan, both parties now use the acre feet method instead of a percentage of total flow in determining their position of the Helmand waters.<sup>11/</sup>

Specifically, they have both converted their estimates of needed acre feet of water based upon their estimates of agricultural lands in the delta to cubic meters per second (or most often "cusec" in hydrological shorthand). This means simply that, following the commission report, Iran and Afghanistan have measured their claim in terms of the amount of water that passes a given point (in this case Bandar-i-Kamal Khan) in one second. The cusec totals, using the figures arrived at by the commission report, are 20.73 for the Iranians and for the Afghans 6.26.<sup>12/</sup>

#### International Law and the Helmand Dispute

From the point of view of international law the Iranian position appears weak. As the upper riparian nation, Afghanistan is free to utilize the waters of the Helmand in any manner it deems fit so long as it assures Iran the share of the water to which it is entitled through previous agreement or arbitral award. This amount was set by the McMahon award to be one-third of the total reaching Bandar-i-Kamal Khan and there is no convincing evidence that Afghanistan has ever deprived Iran of the stipulated share. Iran's position has been that the one-third share is insufficient for its needs, but under international law it cannot unilaterally denounce the McMahon Award. Differences over this award should be worked out between both parties or be resubmitted to international arbitration.

The Afghan position, by contrast, appears strong. Afghanistan has officially recognized Iran's claims to an equitable share of the Helmand waters ever since the Goldsmid Award and it has cooperated with Iran since 1905 in the measurement of the division of the water. Moreover, consensus of engineering and other informed opinion has been that the upstream Afghan projects have benefited both countries. Finally, as

<sup>11/</sup> Based on the figure of 149,000 acres for Iranian Sistan and 41,000 acres for Afghan Sistan or, as it is sometimes referred to, Chakhansur.

<sup>12/</sup> Figures: Iran: 530,000 acre feet x 1,233.5 cubic meters (one acre foot) = 653,755,000 cubic meters, divided by 31,536,000 (seconds in a year) = 20.73. Afghanistan: 160,000 acre feet x 1,233.5 cubic meters = 197,360,000, divided by 31,536,000 = 6.26.

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recognized by McMahon and the neutral commission, lack of water in the delta area affects both the Iranian and Afghan cultivators and since most of the irrigable Afghan delta land is downstream from that of Iran, the Afghans suffer first.

The Iranians have contended that Afghanistan is obliged to consult with Iran or give it the opportunity to participate in any upstream development on the Helmand on the grounds that such development might interfere with Iran's prior water rights. This issue was a burning one in the late forties and early fifties when Afghanistan was developing the upper Helmand valley and Iran has apparently never abandoned this principle. The United States attitude on this question is apparent in a note of January 5, 1950 in which it informed Iran that:

"This Government is not aware of any condition under international law whereby a state undertaking development of water resources is legally obliged to consult with or give the opportunity to participate in such development to another state provided that in the development the upper state assures the lower state the quantity of water to which the later is entitled through previous agreement to arbitral award."

The Iranian government has also insisted that Iran is entitled to a share of any waters stored in dams along the Helmand and has cited the Mexican-American dispute over the Rio Grande in support of this thesis. The United States does not accept the Iranian interpretation because: (1) although Mexico was charged for some of the cost of the Imperial Dam because it used water stored there, it did not possess the right to the impounded water merely because it paid for some of the cost of the dam; (2) prior appropriation creates a right which, under the conditions prevailing during the treaty negotiations between the US and Mexico, would have led an arbitration board to allocate Mexico 1.8 million acre feet rather than the 1.5 million acre feet specified by the Treaty of 1944; (3) the treaty gave US protection against future Mexican claims to more water without regard to the subsequent construction of new storage dams in the US.

#### The Current Afghan and Iranian Positions

The exact details of the present Iranian position are not known, but the Iranian Foreign Minister has stated in confidence that Iran is prepared to accept 30 cusecs. Since Iran at one time wanted 57 cusecs, there is good reason to believe that the Iranian government has recognized the unrealistic nature of some of its contentions. The Afghan government reportedly has agreed to offer 27 cusecs, apparently bringing the two countries closer together than at any time since 1938.

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The official Afghan position since March 1959 has been 26 cusecs, a figure which is considered generous in Kabul because the data compiled by the neutral commission works out to 20.73 cusecs for Iran. So far there has been no information from Afghan sources that the Afghans are prepared to increase their offer, but Afghan-Iranian relations are now very good and the Afghans, mindful of their recent serious difficulties with Pakistan, appear most anxious to settle the Helmand problem.

The Iranian government has been very forthcoming toward Afghanistan's desires to maintain an active transit route through Iran as an alternative to that in Pakistan. Iran's constructive approach probably owes something to its desire to elicit a favorable settlement of the Helmand question. In the past the Iranian government has discussed with the Afghan authorities the possibility of offering a "package deal" in an effort to improve relations. During the 18 month period when the Afghan-Pakistan border was sealed, Iran suggested that it might help Afghanistan by: (1) facilitating Afghan trade through Meshed; (2) supplying increased amounts of petroleum products; (3) taking more Afghan exports; and (4) offering free access to the Iranian port of Chahbahar. This gesture was welcomed in Kabul during a difficult period and, in fact, the first two proposals have been partially implemented.

Past experience, especially the unsuccessful efforts of the neutral commission, suggests that even preliminary overall agreement on the Helmand dispute may be hard to achieve. The best results in the current negotiations are likely to be obtained if both sides put aside their dispute over the "correctness" of their respective positions and work towards a technical agreement in a quiet atmosphere.

One of the most thorny problems is likely to be the monthly apportionment of the water flow. This question would not necessarily be solved by any given cusec agreement since the normal yearly total flow into Iran is already well above the present Iranian position of 30 cusecs. The problem is in the dryer months - from July to November in normal years - or throughout the year in exceedingly low water years.

The Iranian Ambassador in Kabul recently stated that Sistan needs proportionately more water during June and July, a claim which is contradicted by all available figures, including those in the official Iranian report of 1950. As the Ambassador must have been aware of this situation, his statement probably was intended to suggest that beginning in June the amount of water available in the delta area diminishes to the point where extensive cropping is rendered difficult. This is certainly the case; there is never adequate water in the late summer for more than small areas on both sides of the border. If the Iranian Ambassador's concern points to the Iranian government's desire to increase summer cropping and Iran intends to insist on a guaranteed summer flow of about 30 cusecs then the discussions appear unlikely to succeed.

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The Afghans have been firmly opposed to any such guarantees on the ground that drought periods are infrequent and during such periods no one can guarantee the delta area a minimum flow. On the other hand, the Afghan government will probably be prepared to make a minimum guarantee for normal flow years. The definition of a "normal" flow could lead to an interminable dispute involving a mass of technical data much of which Iran has already implicitly rejected. The only alternative to this sterile approach likely to be acceptable to the Afghans and Iranians alike might be to tie a guaranteed flow during drought years to a sliding scale based on the inflow into the Kajkai and Arghandab dams. Because these two dams have already reduced the chances of a really severe drought year, the Iranian government might agree to this stipulation, particularly if the agreement were accompanied by plans to build jointly a multiple purpose dam in the lower Helmand just upstream from Bandar-i-Kamal Khan. Such a dam is desirable for the delta area as a whole and a joint project might serve to assuage deeply felt Iranian fears that the Afghans, if they build such a dam alone, might design it to divert water away from Iran.

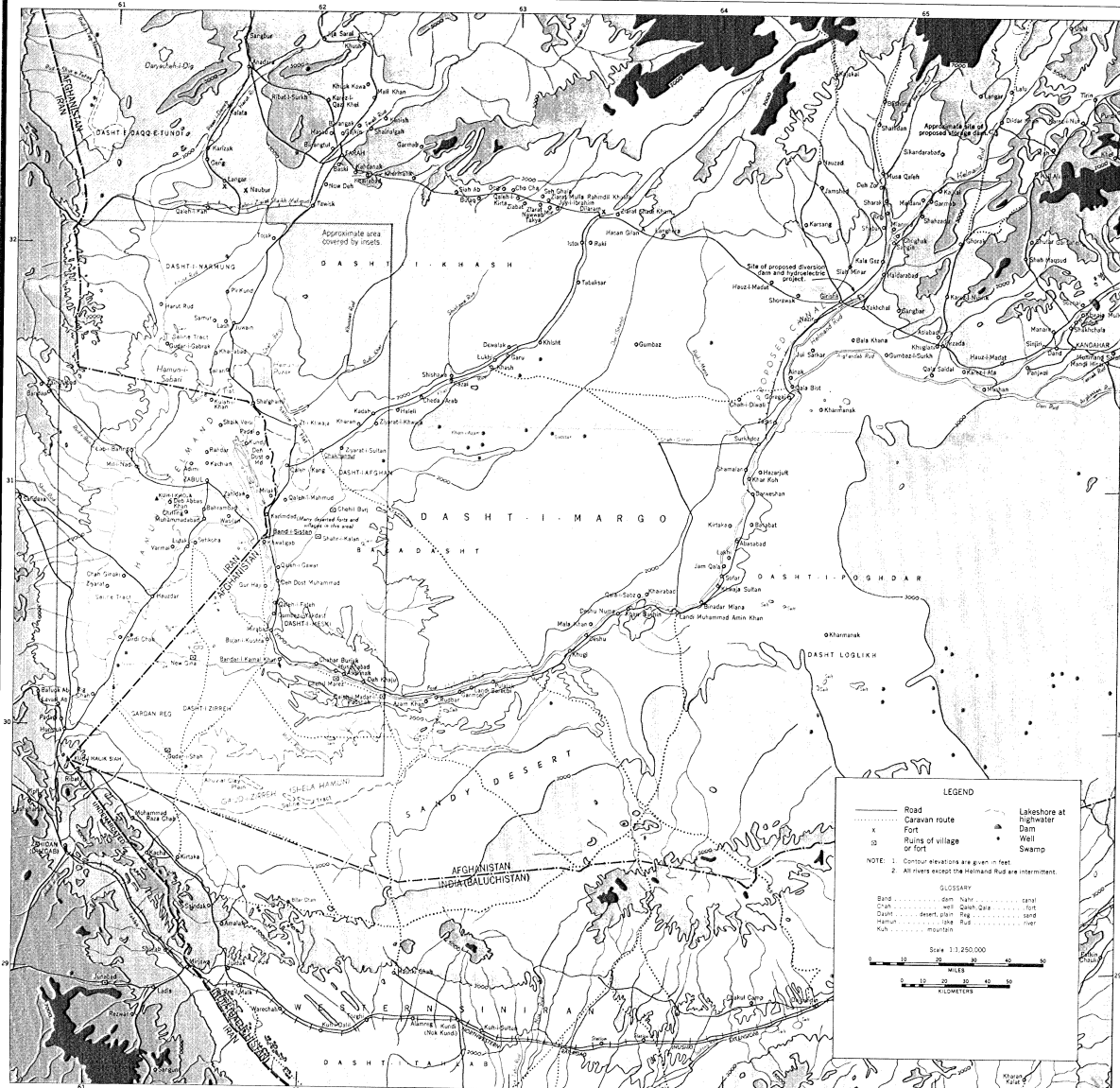
#### Conclusion

In the climate of improving Iranian-Afghan relations, a settlement of the Helmand waters dispute seems a distinct possibility. The advantages to both sides are important and obvious. Moreover, the technical problems involved are not very difficult, primarily because the Helmand almost always has enough water for both the Afghan and Iranian users. Like other similar disputes, however, matters of national honor and prestige have become involved, requiring face-saving as well as technically feasible solutions.

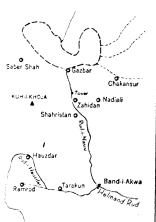
The Afghans, perhaps because of feelings of inferiority, have often given the impression that their duty lay in preventing the devious Iranians from outsmarting them. The Iranians on their part have sometimes behaved as if the Helmand river were a spigot which the Afghans delight in turning on and off just to spite Iran. Nevertheless, there now exists an atmosphere of confidence which augurs well for an eventual settlement of this thorny problem.

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# IRAN-AFGHANISTAN: HELMAND RIVER BASIN



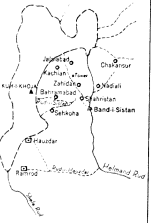
THE HELMAND DELTA—1362



THE HELMAND DELTA—after 1383



THE HELMAND DELTA—c. 1840



THE HELMAND DELTA—c. 1895



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