Chapter - II

CAPTAIN SHAKESPEAR

Throughout the 19th century the Arabian desert, not only being arid and barren, but also from strategic point of view, had been of little importance for the competing colonial powers of Europe. Of course the British had won, through bribes and treaties, the small Arab states of the Persian Gulf, to their side in order to safeguard their sea route to India. But the tribes living in the hinterland were left free to run their show as per their wishes.

However, with the beginning of the 20th century the British, mainly due to military reasons included in their area of interest the Kuwaiti hinterland as well as central Arabia. As a result numerous explorers were dispatched to gather military intelligence from the Bedouin Shaikhs or tribal chiefs, to discover, if possible, new routes in the desert and fill in blanks on the Arabian map. Among such travellers William Henry Irvine Shakespear (1876-1915) stands prominent mainly owing to his audacious journeys in the Arabian desert and military and political services that he rendered to the British Empire.

Shakespear began his career as a military officer in 1895. He served the British army in various capacities
before embarking upon a political career in 1904. While serving the British army and administration in India Shakespear learnt many oriental languages including Urdu, Arabic, Pushtu and Persian.

What persuaded Shakespear to abandon his military career and switch to a political one is not clear. He was a captain in the army and was all set for rapid promotion when he decided to apply for transfer to the Viceroy's political Department. His biographer, Winstone has tried to rationalize his decision saying that he was not given to the contemplation of such matters. His attitudes were instinctive rather than rational. He was intelligent but not intellectual, his skills and accomplishments were in the fields of travel and enterprise.(1)

Contact With Persia Shakespear was first posted to the Persian port of Bandar Abbas. He was to work as a consul and assistant to the Political Resicent in Bushire. Immediately after his arrival to Bandar Abbas he settled to his works. However the office routine and file works bored him. To escape the boredom he began to make frequent journeys and as a result visited many Iranian islands such as Hormuz, Larak and Henjam.

Before coming to Bandar Abbas Shakespear had acquainted himself with the political realities of Iran. The dominant position of Britain in the region was unquestionable. However, the Russians had also their stakes in Iran. Their most important need was to have access to the warm waters. Since militarily they were not strong enough to challenge Britain's dominant position they resorted to diplomatic offensive to secure concessions in order to safeguard their interests. They disputed Britain's exclusive claims on many important ports including Bandar Abbas and sent their men to the disputed areas without having secured Britain's prior permission. The Russian representative for Bandar Abbas came in 1906. He and Shakespear developed immediate dislike to each other. Sensing the undesirable development the British authorities promptly shifted Shakespear to Muscat, a well-established British protectorate. Within a year of Shakespear's departure Britain and Russia reached a compromise and signed an agreement which divided Iran into Anglo-Russian Spheres of influence. In principle Iran was a sovereign country but in the colonial bargain conducted by Britain and Russia she was not consulted.

Political Agent in Kuwait  In 1908 Shakespear became first assistant to Cox who was Britain's Resident in Iran. By the time Cox was thinking to appoint a new political Agent in Kuwait. Kuwait was then, as is today, a small Shaikhdom. However, politically and strategically it was of vital
importance for Britain. In fact it was a British post, not only to deal with the intricate ruler of Kuwait, Shaikh Mubarak, but also to spy on and gather intelligence about the tribal chiefs of the Kuwaiti hinterland and the two rulers of central Arabia, Ibn Saud and Ibn Rashid. Obviously in order to accomplish his duties Shakespeare had to familiarise himself with the history and politics of volatile Arabia, with the histories of ruling families, the desert princes, the rivalries and alliances of significant tribes and above all with the policies of his own country which were not free from contradictions. Shakespeare did take such lessons before taking up his office as political Agent in Kuwait in 1909. Besides working as a Political Agent he was also required to act as an agent of the Simla-based British Intelligence.\(^{1}\)

**Britain's Policy Towards Arabia** Kuwait was nominally a part of the Ottoman Empire. But in reality its rulers had always enjoyed a good deal of independence. Shaikh Mubarak al Sabah, the ruler of the Shaikhdom in Shakespeare's time was unwilling to accept even nominal Turkish suzerainty. He had snatched power by murdering his half brother in 1986. By

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\(^{1}\) See Ibid. P. 94.
that time Kuwait was in a state of chaos and disorder and vulnerable to raids and subsequent plunders by the Bedouins from neighbourhood. The Turks did not help the ruling family to improve the law and order conditions hoping that its collapse might open the door for imposing their direct rule on Kuwait.

Mubarak, unlike his predecessor, was bitterly hostile towards Turkey. He either imprisoned or exiled those Kuwaiti inhabitants who were known or even suspected for their sympathy or any kind of connection with the Turks. Such an anti-Turk ruler would not have pleased Britain a few years ago when their policy was to keep cordial relations with Constantinople at any cost. But in the last decade of the 19th century the political climate had changed. For the Germans had won confidence of the Turks through active and intelligent diplomacy and by promising financial and technical assistance for constructing the Berlin-Baghdad Railways. This virtually forced Britain to conclude a treaty of friendship with Kuwait in early 1899 so that they will be able to counter the German threat to British interests in the Persian Gulf which had become a British lake. Five years later, in 1904, Britain set up a political Agency in Kuwait to strengthen its position in the Gulf. But the British were an accomplished double dealer. Within two years of their treaty with Mubarak they signed in 1901 a secret pact with the Turks according to which Britain was required to follow a policy of neutrality.
as well as to prevent Mubarak from attacking the Turkish ally, Ibn Rashid of central Arabia. The same agreement (which they called Anglo-Turkish Accord) required Turkey to persuade Ibn Rashid to cease hostilities against Kuwait. It was this agreement that prompted Britain time and again to warn Mubarak whenever he decided to take hostile actions against the Turks. And it was the same Anglo-Turkish pact that led Britain to adopt a lukewarm attitude towards Ibn Saud who was very keen to win British friendship and assistance in his battles with the Turks and Ibn Rashid. Knox whom Shakespear succeeded as political Agent in 1909 had once replied to Ibn Saud in response to a plea made by the later:

You say that you are under the protection of the British Government. But it is as well for me to remind you, O my friend that the Great Government does not accord its protection rashly or without much forethought. It is not-praise be to God!-of those who promise much and do not perform. Hitherto no reply has been vouchsafed by the Great Government to your petition. (1)

Such were the political conditions of Kuwait and central Arabia and the British policy towards them which later on Shakespear was to oppose vehemently.

1. Quoted in Ibid. pp. 67-68.
Shakespeare's Works in Kuwait  Shakespeare's work at the Political Agency was to carefully watch over the Shaikh of Kuwait, Mubarak who was a man of implacable determination and of great strength of character, hence difficult to be manipulated or handled in day to day affairs. Shakespeare was thus rightly advised by his superiors to leave the Shaikh alone to run the Kuwaiti affairs and to avoid interference as much as possible. Mubarak, too, seems to have had little interest in the works of Political Agency. But inspite of such arrangements they were frequently at loggerheads with each other and in most cases they both were to be blamed for their tense relations.

But Shakespeare's foremost task was to explore the Kuwaiti hinterland in order to establish relations with the tribal chiefs, and know their rivalries, loyalties and alliances. He was also expected to gather intelligence about the Amir of Najd, Ibn Saud who by then had emerged as a force to be reckoned with in eastern and central Arabia. The Political Agency was thus covertly converted into an intelligence centre.

A Spy Traveller  As a British spy Shakespeare made several journeys in Kuwaiti hinterland, but by far the most adventurous journey he undertook was his crossing of Arabia from
Kuwait to Egypt. Douglas Carruthers aptly describes his achievement in the following words:

Shakespear's trans-Arabian journey covered about 1200 miles of unknown country. Only for one-third of the whole traverse between Kuwait on the Persian Gulf and Kontilla, the first Egyptian outpost on Sinai, was he on ground already covered by Europeans. For the whole distance, 1810 miles, Shakespear kept up a continuous route-traverse, checked at intervals by observations for latitude... routes which had hitherto been merely conjecture could now be drawn more or less correctly, many errors put right, and many a problem solved. (1)

Shakespear was not a gifted writer nor had he any literary ambition. It is therefore not surprising that he did not produce any travelogue and thus left no literary legacy. But in all his journeys he had made it a point to prepare intelligence report and take extensive notes which were vitally important from geographical and strategi point of view. The notes he had taken during his last and longest journey of 1914 were later handed over to the War Office whose experts used them to construct maps of the

1. Quoted in Ibid. pp. 183-84.
desert routes which were later to be proved of strategic significance for the British army's campaign in Arabia.

Unlike other British travellers Shakespear, while journeying among the Arabs, did not wear Arab dress nor did he pretend to be a Muslim. Instead he always put on the uniform of the Indian army. In fact he approached the desertmen in a direct and straightforward manner, without diffidence and disguise. Contrary to the common conception prevalent in England of his time he rarely encountered any hostility, rather he was accorded warm receptions by the Bedouins probably due to the fact that he had 'learnt and observed the strict etiquette of the desert, never imposing himself on them unless invited, and speaking to them about the things that were of importance to them - the weather, their flocks and herds, the gnazu or desert raids, their sport and their proof of manliness.'(1) Further, unlike many European travellers, he did not see the Bedouins as inferior, rather liked them because in his opinion 'they were men'.(2)

Friendship With the Desert King

Besides being an intrepid spy-traveller Shakespear is known for his friendship with and support for Ibn Saud. He met the Desert King in 1910

1. Ibid. P. 75.
2. Quoted in Ibid. P. 76.
in Kuwait where the later had come to pay a visit to his old patron, Shaikh Mubarak. Shakespeare's report to Cox reaveled that he was highly impressed by Ibn Saud. 'Abdul Aziz, now in his 31st year,' he wrote, 'is fair, handsome and considerably above average Arab height... He has a frank, open face, and after initial reserve, is of genial and courteous manner.' (1) Of Ibn Saud's character Shakespeare further wrote that he 'is a broadminded and straight man... His reputation is that of a noble and generous man who does not descend to mean actions.' (2) Apparently the two men did not discuss politics in their first meeting. However, Ibn Saud conveyed, though indirectly, his willingness to enter an alliance with Britain when he remarked that 'the English, as friends and brothers of Mubarak, were themselves his brothers and friends.' (3)

But the most important result of their meeting, as Holden and Johns put it, 'was a cordial meeting of minds. Henceforth Shakespeare never wavered in respect, affection and support for Ibn Saud, and his feelings seemed to be reciprocated.' (4) For he was most cordially invited to pay a visit to Riyadh, the capital city of the Wahhabee king.

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1. Ibid. p. 84.
2. Ibid. P. 85.
3. Ibid.
An ambitious traveller like Shakespear must have desired very much to travel in Najd and visit Riyadh. But the Foreign office whose declared policy at that time was to keep friendly relations with the Turks, stood as an obstacle on his way. Their fear was that any visit to Riyadh by an English official would invite strong protests from the Turks who, with full British connivance, were actively busy with plans to bring Ibn Saud to the heel and force him to accept at least nominal Turkish suzerainty.

But Shakespear had quite contrary views. He sent reports after reports to Cox and other high officials urging them to fully realize the Arab politics and review their policy towards Arabia. In his opinion Ibn Saud was the strongest ruler in Arabia hence Britain would be well-advised to establish an alliance with him rather than the Turks who were disliked by all. In a report that he sent to his superiors in April 1911 and that he had written after his fourth major desert journey during which he had a chance to see Ibn Saud, he penned the following alarming passage.

All reports (hailing from central Arabia) point to increasing unrest and hatred of Turkish pretensions. If a combination were to take place between the principal leaders in Arabia—and the fact of a serious discussion of a simultaneous revolt between men of such divergent religious
tenets as the Imam Yahya and the Wahhabi ruler make such a union at least possible — I am inclined to the opinion that a revolt is not only probable but would be welcome by every tribe throughout the peninsula. From all I can learn hatred of the Turk seems to be the one idea common to all the tribes and the only one for which they would sink their differences. The strength of the Turk has always been his ability to play off one tribe against another. Now this cardinal fact has begun to penetrate the unsophisticated brain of the Arab. (1)

As it appears Shakespeare had foreseen the Arab revolt, an idea which became a reality a few years later in the First World War. In a later report written in June 1914 after his longest journey from Kuwait to Egypt he even predicted the fall of the Turkish Empire:

I am convinced that present Turkish methods in Arabia, if persisted in, will end in disaster — Turkey has not the power to coerce Arabia and should matters... come to a head the probable result will be a combination of all Arab tribes, the expulsion of Turkish troops and officials... and the establishment of an independent Arabia with a loose form of confederation of which Ibn Saud will be the head... I can not avoid

1. Quoted in Winstone, Captain Shakespeare: A Portrait, op. cit. p. 106.
the conclusion that the Turkish Government is riding for a fall.\footnote{1}

But Shakespeare's vigorous arguments in favour of the Desert King as well as Ibn Saud's own zealous efforts bore no fruits. The British Government remained bound with its traditional policy of supporting the Turks.

However, a few months later Britain was at war with Germany and from all the reports coming from Constantinople it was evident that Turkey would ally herself with the Germans. Anticipating a Turko-German threat to Britain's sea route to India the Whitehall summoned Shakespeare in September 1914 who by then was in England in order to dispatch him to Ibn Saud. For many years Shakespeare had fought a lone battle, though without success, to change Britain's traditional policy of detente with Turkey in order to further his cherished scheme for a British alliance with the Desert King. His views were rejected as immature, but now the British Government had been forced to realize the wisdom of his scheme. He was sought by War, India and Foreign Offices for views and comments on Arabian affairs. He repeated his long-held opinion that Britain should recognize the independence of Ibn Saud under her suzerainty and give him sufficient

\footnote{1. Ibid. pp.190-91}
arms and money to deal effectively with Ibn Rashid who had allied himself with the Turks and had received generous military and financial assistance from them. Moreover, in the light of his personal knowledge of Ibn Saud's personality and approach to world affairs Shakespeare rightly pointed out that it would be hard to persuade him to pursue a pro-British policy unless he is offered a treaty of alliance. For such an alliance would give Ibn Saud a sense of security and encourage him to rise in rebellion against the Turks who, inspite of being widely despised in Arabia, were the keeper of the Caliphate and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

Despite Shakespeare's clear views Britain could not make her mind to introduce a radical change in her policy towards Arabia mainly because the newly appointed British ambassador to Constantinople, Sir Louis Mallet who was working hard to keep the Turks neutral in the war, had advised causion. Shakespeare was thus authorized to negotiate only a non-committal treaty of friendship with the Desert King and send the draft for approval by the Government.

Shakespeare arrived and met the Desert King on December, 31, 1914. Ibn Saud was not in a good mood and received his old friend with lukewarmth. Soon the cause of the King's anger was known to Shakespeare. That a few months ago the British Government through its political Agent in Kuwait,
Grey who had succeeded Shakespeare, had put immense pressure on Ibn Saud to accept Turkish suzerainty. In fact when Shakespeare was journeying in the desert to cross Arabia from Kuwait to Egypt, and thus away from the Political Agency in Kuwait, Ibn Saud received an urgent message from his old patron, Mubarak to reach Subaihiyah, a place near Kuwait. Ibn Saud expected to meet Mubarak and some British officials. But he was surprised to discover that instead of Mubarak and British officials Syed Talib, a Basra-based merchant and politician, was waiting for him with an entourage of Turkish officials. The Turks had brought a draft of treaty for cooperation and promised to give Ibn Saud an annual pension if he signed it there and then. The king refused to oblige until he had consulted Grey. The political Agent was informed of the King's request. Grey reluctantly arrived at Subaihiyah and told the Amir in a terse manner that he can expect no help from Britain if he refused to sign the treaty with the Turks. Ibn Saud then oblied. He was obviously to the point if he felt tricked and deserted both by Grey and Mubarak. And when Shakespeare arrived seeking his cooperation; he immediately sensed his growing importance and decided to capitalize on it. He demanded money and weapons as price of his cooperation with Britain.

Shakespeare was also greatly angered when he came to know what Grey had done in his absence. A few days after
his arrival on January the fourth, he wrote in a report to his superiors that Ibn Saud 'who is animated by an intense patriotism for his country, a profound veneration for his religion and a single minded desire to do his best for his people by obtaining for them lasting peace and security, was bitterly angry with Britain for forcing him to accept Turkish suzerainty. In the same report he further wrote that inspite of having been deserted by the British Ibn Saud 'trusted the British Government as no other' and 'as evidence of his desire to assist the British Government without hopelessly compromising himself he has kept Ibn Rashid to his ground and by his example and lead induced in the Arab world an attitude distinctly sympathetic towards Great Britain.'(1)

But Shakespeare was not deputed to Ibn Saud just to report that in what mood the Amir was? Rather he was on a special mission to persuade him to help Britain against the lurks. He did so successfully and prepared a draft treaty in which Ibn Saud was recognized as 'independent ruler' of 'Najd, alHasa, Katif and their surrounds and the ports appertaining to them on the Persian Gulf.'(2)

The draft of the treaty with a covering note from Shakespeare was sent early in January 1915 for the approval of the British Government. In his note Shakespeare had written

1. Ibid P. 201.
that Ibn Saud will not move a step further towards making matters either easier for us or more difficult for the Turks as far as the present war is concerned, until he obtains in that treaty some very solid guarantee of his position, with Great Britain practically as his Suzerain.' After securing such a guarantee, Shakespear further wrote that the Desert King will not only use all his resources and influence in Arabia on Britain's side during the war time but also in the post war period.

Shakespear, while waiting for an answer from his Government went on talking with Ibn Saud of Arab freedom and of the ambitions of the Amir who wanted to drive the Turks from central Arabia and restore the Kingdom of his forefathers which was once stretched over the whole of the Arabian peninsula. In such conversations Ibn Saud often spoke of the two hundred years old history of the House of Saud, the spread of its power and influence and the intervention of the Turks which brought about the fall of the Saudi dynasty in the nineteenth century. Shakespear reported all these secretly to his superiors along with the news about the preparations of the Saudi army which was getting ready to attack Ibn Rashid. The war eventually took place at a

1. Ibid.
place called *Jarab* on January 24, 1915 in which not only the Saudi army was defeated but Shakespeare was also killed.

Commenting on Shakespeare's death, St. John Philby has written that 'it was a great disaster to the Arab cause.' (1) Philby further opines that 'had he survived to continue a work for which he was so eminently fitted it is extremely doubtful whether the subsequent campaigns of Lawrence would ever have taken place.' (2)

Philby was prompted to make the above remark because of Ibn Saud's military prowess and superiority over his rivals. He further believed that had Ibn Saud received enough British support in the early phase of the war he would have eliminated Turkish ally Ibn Rashid and moved on to destroy the Hijaz Railway or to Syria to harass the Turks in order to relieve pressure on *Kut* in *Mesopotamia* where the British army was under siege.

Philby seems to undermine the importance of Britain's alliance with Sherif Husain of Mecca. But his was a wrong stand. Hao Philby access to Shakespeare's secret dispatches he would not have made such a remark. There is no

2. Ibid. P. 234. David Howarth in his *The Desert King* (London, 1964) has expressed more or less similar views. See P. 87.
denying the fact that Ibn Saud was militarily stronger than Husain, and if viewed in this perspective alone, one is thoroughly right to say that Britain had backed the wrong horse. But, as Antonius George has pointed out, Husain, both militarily and politically, was better placed than any other Arab leader of the time to render a great service to Great Britain. (1) Shakespear also appears to have been conscious of at least political and religious importance of the Sherif as is evident from some of his dispatches sent from Arabia to the British Government. In fact while Shakespear in early January 1915 was working hard to win Ibn Saud's support for Britain there came an emissary with a letter from Abdullah, the son of the Sherif of Mecca. Abdullah had sought Ibn Saud's opinion regarding Turkish pressure on his father to endore the call for Jihad or the holy war. Ibn Saud promptly consulted Shakespear who, having been fully conscious of the dangers of Jihad for Britain, expressed the following opinion:

Jihad, proclaimed by the Sherif, by the man believed by millions to be the descendant of the Prophet, would have the most terrible consequences. You, Abdul Aziz, must work for England's victory as the best way to secure Arab freedom. (2)

2. Quoted in Winstone, Captain Shakespear A Portrait of...
Shakespear further explained to Ibn Saud that Britain had no designs on the holy places of Islam and advised him to "tell Abdullah to bide his time, to promise as little as possible, until the wishes of the Great Government are made clear." Clearly Shakespear not only foresaw the dangers that might have resulted from the proclamation of Jihad but also tried to use Ibn Saud's influence to the benefit of Britain as is evident from a secret dispatch that he sent to the Political Resident in Persia.

Jihad... is a contingency of which the consequences are unforeseeable and incalculable. Such a proclamation would at least raise the whole Arab world and Bin Saud himself would be compelled by the circumstances of his faith, his prestige and position as an Arab leader to follow with all his tribes.... Fortunately through Bin Saud's commanding influence in Arabia... we are in a position so to limit the danger as to make it negligible. (2)

Shakespear, of course, succeeded to do so. For it is on the record that some of the Wannabe Ulema who were in favour of accepting the turkish call for Jihad and were

1. Ibid. P. 22.
2. Ibid.
openly preaching the holy war were put behind the bars by Ibn Saud, probably on the advice of Shakespear. There is a reason to believe that had Shakespear failed in his mission or had Ibn Saud participated in the holy war proclaimed by Turkey the British plan for the disintegration and subsequent dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire would have been foiled.

To sum up the discussion it can be said that although Shakespear died at an early age he did render great services to his country, not only through his extensive travels for spying on the tribes in eastern and central Arabia but most importantly by preventing Ibn Saud to join hands with the Turks. It is also clear that he was primarily and finally dedicated and loyal to the British Government and that his support for Arab national independence was nothing but a means for promoting his country’s interests in the Arab world. Moreover, he seems to have been influenced by the racist and imperialistic ideologies of the nineteenth century that were in currency in his time as well and regarded the Arabs as incapable of self-rule. It was only because of this that he envisaged an Arab independence conditioned by their acceptance of British suzerainty or protection.

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