

Middle East, Then and Now

For several years now we have all been subjected to daily reports from the Middle East about the endeavors of our armed forces to bring stability to that region by rooting out the Taliban and other extremists. The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is one of the most complex of any international border in the world. The British found this out in the nineteenth century, with much being written at the time about the physical and cultural difficulties encountered there. The province of Baluchistan is situated in the southwestern area of Pakistan and contains about 700 miles of shared border with Afghanistan; part of it is sand desert, part consists of rugged mountains with a few mountain passes at various locations. None of it is hospitable, particularly if you happen to be an outsider.

In a volume entitled “The Museum of Foreign Literature, Science and Art”, published in 1840, I came across the following:

“Miseries of the Beloochistan (sic) Desert”

“The following melancholy intelligence of the hardships sustained in the Beloochee territory has just reached us from Sukkur, 29th of April 1840. The hardships of the desert, where water proves deficient, - terrible to the natives themselves, occasion an amount of suffering which is frightful to contemplate to those accustomed to a cool and humid climate.

Yesterday an official arrived, stating that Lieuts. Clark and Varnon, with a party of horses, went in pursuit of some Beloochees, but arrived too late. In returning, they lost their way in the desert, and after wandering about all day in the intense heat, at last found the road. Lieut. Varnon was brought in delirious – 28 men dropped in the desert, and those that came in with great difficulty saved their lives. As soon as the horses smelt the water, which was only a small muddy pool, they became quite mad and rushed into it and both men and beasts eagerly drank mud. This was near Pullajee, where the heat is truly awful; it is almost death to be out.”

“The following is a report from the British army on the Bolan Pass [this is a 60 mile-long mountain pass having the highest elevation of 5,900 feet]:

Our spies from Bolan Pass report that the tribes which occupied it having quarreled and fought among themselves about the division of booty, no opponents are now to be seen. We therefore marched with the artillery brigade, escorted by His Majesty’s 17th foot, eleven and a half miles into the pass, along the bed of the Bolan River, the channel of which is the only road; a stream of clear water, from thirty to forty feet broad, and from one to three in depth, crossing the road six times. During the floods, the stream, which is in some places confined between perpendicular precipices, within a channel sixty or eighty feet wide would preclude the possibility of escape to an army caught in the torrent. The mountains on every side are the most abrupt, sterile, and inhospitable I ever beheld; not a blade of vegetation of any kind being found, save in the bed of the stream, where there is some coarse grass, on which horses and camels pick a scanty subsistence. The mountains are as repulsive in appearance as they are barren in reality, being everywhere of a dull and uniform brown color.”

“The column to which our officer was attached was only once molested by the Baloochees, who appeared in numbers on the scarped heights; but fifty, having ventured into the plain, were charged and cut up by our cavalry.

“On emerging from the pass, which is a continued ascent of about one foot in one hundred, for seventy-five miles, there was a decided and grateful alteration of climate. Many of the Kakurs (a wild tribe occupying the upper part of the pass) were seen on the heights; but they were unarmed and did not offer to molest the troops”.

“In the narrow defile, the stench arising from the countless putrefying camels was dreadful. Several bodies of murdered stragglers or couriers were met with.”

“In the further advance of the army, the sufferings for want of water were dreadful. Wells had been filled up by the enemy and even mountain streams used for irrigation had been cut off or diverted. Many of the camp followers were enticed by the natives to follow them, under pretence of showing them water and provisions, when they were murdered in cold blood. Numerous bodies were seen on the line of march; no less than one hundred were counted in a stage of five miles.

The report goes on to say that the tribes in the Kanduhar region had recently quarreled among themselves and their armies had withdrawn from the city.”

“Major Outram describes this celebrated city as a mile and a half long by one broad, composed of houses built of mud, the streets narrow and dirty and surrounded by a wall thirty feet high. Hasty preparations for defense had been made in paltry outworks around the walls; but the place could not have stood against our artillery for twenty-four hours.”

“The next circumstance of any importance noticed in Major Outram’s journal is the march from Kanduhar to Ghizni, in which the troops were harassed by the Ghiljees. The assault and capture of Ghizni is an event so recent and so well known that it is unnecessary to say more, other than to say that it does justice to the gallantry of the British troops and noting that the opposition of the Afghans was highly creditable.

The governor of the province was discovered concealed in a tower, with about twenty of his adherents who would not surrender until the life of their chief was guaranteed. A few desperate characters continued, after the surrender of the fortress, to defend isolated houses, wounding one officer, and killing and wounding several of the men. The leader of the party that continued firing upon our soldiers after the town had surrendered, and who twice renewed hostilities after having actually sued for quarter, was shot by order of the commander-in-chief.”

The British army was attempting to apprehend the leader of the insurrectionists, a man by the name of Dost Mohamed, and in so doing were obliged by political agreements to work subordinately under the Afghanistan army. As the Afghan – British force pursued Dost Mohamed, it became obvious that the Afghani commander had no intention to capture him and his followers, but blocked and hindered the British forces whenever they got too close. At one point they were only sixteen miles from their objective, but the obstructionist Afghan commander delayed troop movement until Dost Mohamed had obtained an asylum in the territories of an independent Uzbek chieftain, and further pursuit was not possible.

Later, the Afghan military commander was arrested by orders of the King of Afghanistan, and imprisoned in India, but the damage had been done; the chief insurrectionist had made his escape.

How eerily similar to the conditions the Allied forces are operating under in the exact location as the British were 166 years ago.