

‘Rival Jihads: Islam and the Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1918’

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Abstract: The Ottoman Empire, under pressure from its ally Germany, declared a jihad shortly after entering the First World War. The move was calculated to rouse Muslims in the British, French and Russian empires to rebellion. Dismissed at the time and since as a ‘jihad made in Germany,’ the Ottoman attempt to turn the Great War into a holy war failed to provoke mass revolt in any part of the Muslim world. Yet, as German Orientalists predicted, the mere threat of such a rebellion, particularly in British India, was enough to force Britain and its allies to divert scarce manpower and materiel away from the main theatre of operations in the western front to the Ottoman front. The deepening of Britain’s engagement in the Middle Eastern theatre of war across the four years of WWI can be attributed in large part to combating the threat of Jihad.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Islam, jihad, Great War, WWI, Middle East, caliph.

The Ottoman entry into the First World War should have provoked little or no concern in European capitals. For decades, the West had dismissed the Ottoman Empire as Europe’s sick man.¹ Since the late 1870s, the European powers had carved out whole swathes of Ottoman territory for their empires with impunity. The Russians annexed the Caucasian provinces of Kars, Ardahan and Batum in 1878. The French added Tunisia to their North African possessions in 1881, and the British annexed Cyprus in 1878 and occupied Egypt in 1882. Nor had the depredations ended there. Italy occupied Libya in 1911 and the Balkan

¹ Yapp (1987: 92-96).

states seized the last Ottoman territories in Europe in 1912 and 1913. With the outbreak of the Great War, the Entente Powers confidently anticipated Turkey's imminent demise.

Yet there was one lingering doubt that troubled Allied confidence following the Ottoman declaration of war in November 1914. Under pressure from his German allies, Sultan Mehmet V Reşad, acting in his role as caliph, or spiritual leader of the Islamic world, reinforced the Ottoman declaration of war with a call to jihad, or religiously-sanctioned war against the enemies of Islam. The global Muslim population in 1914 numbered some 270 million souls. Over half the world's Muslims lived in the British (100 million), French (20 million) and Russian (20 million) Empires.² What if, as one European author posited, "the Mohammedan nations under European rule" were to be "so charmed by the call to arms issued in the name of Sultan Mehmed Reshâd" that they might rise up in rebellion to "attack their masters"?³

In European minds, the Ottoman Front came to be defined by this idea: that the sultan-caliph's call to jihad might stir religious fanaticism among colonial Muslims in Asia and Africa and turn Europe's conflict into a world war. The Germans applied endless pressure on their Ottoman allies to provoke global jihad, while the British and French sought by all means to discredit the sultan-caliph and undermine his religious authority in their imperial possessions. In the process, the Allies were drawn ever deeper into the Great War in the Middle East, as much to contain the perceived threat of Islam to their colonies as to defeat the Ottoman Empire as one of the Central Powers.

Islampolitik

² Strachan (2003: 703).

³ Hugo Grothe paraphrased by Snouk Hurgronje (1915: 43-44).

Germany knew full well that the Ottomans were militarily exhausted even before the outbreak of the Great War. A Prussian general, Liman von Sanders, had been sent at the head of a German military mission to rebuild the Ottoman army at the end of 1913. The Ottoman army had been gravely weakened in the course of the Libya War with Italy in 1911, and in the First and Second Balkan Wars of 1912-1913. Liman and the German ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Baron Hans von Wangenheim, both agreed in July 1914 that the Ottoman Empire was ‘without any question still worthless as an ally. She would only be a burden to her associates, without being able to offer them the slightest advantage,’ they concluded.⁴

Yet Kaiser Wilhelm II, advised by a group of German Orientalists, believed the sultan-caliph’s call to jihad could make a decisive contribution to breaking the deadlock on the western front.⁵ A religious war that turned colonial Muslims against the Entente Powers could force Britain, France and Russia to divert essential forces from the western front to restore order in their colonies. Their enemies’ ranks depleted, the Germans could achieve the elusive breakthrough on the western front that would force the capitulation of Britain and France, and allow the Central Powers to turn their full attention to defeating Russia. The kaiser believed the Ottomans thus held the key to ultimate victory in the Great War. Ironically, given how far-fetched the strategy seems today, this was a threat that played on the fears of the British and French as well.

The European fascination with the latent power of Islamic fanaticism was captured in John Buchan’s popular novel *Greenmantle*, first published at the height of the Great War in 1916. ‘Islam is a fighting creed, and the mullah still stands in the pulpit with the Koran in one hand and a drawn sword in the other,’ Sir Walter Bullivant, the spymaster in Buchan’s novel

⁴ Cited in Aksakal (2008: 96).

⁵ McMeekin (2010: 85-99).

asserted. ‘Supposing there is some Ark of the Covenant which will madden the remotest Moslem peasant with dreams of Paradise?’⁶ Variants of this fictive conversation, which Buchan set in the Foreign Office at the end of 1915, had been taking place for real in government offices in Berlin, led by an adviser to the kaiser named Max von Oppenheim. He called it *Islampolitik* and many Germans believed that the Ottoman Empire’s greatest contribution to the war effort would come through ‘Islam policy.’⁷

When war broke out in August 1914, Oppenheim established a jihad bureau in Berlin to produce pan-Islamic propaganda to instigate revolts in French North Africa, Russian Central Asia and the ultimate prize, British India with its 80 million Muslims. Oppenheim assured the German chancellor that, even if the rebellions failed to materialize, the mere threat of a Muslim uprising in India would ‘force England to [agree] to peace terms favourable to us.’⁸

Though frequently dismissed as a ‘jihad made in Germany,’ many overtly secular Young Turks also believed that religious fanaticism could be deployed against the Entente.⁹ Enver Pasha, the Minister of War, came to appreciate the power of Islam when fighting in Libya in 1911. Before setting out to Libya, he called for a guerrilla war against the Italians. Once on the ground, he increasingly viewed the conflict in terms of a jihad. In his letters, Enver described the Libyan volunteers as ‘fanatical Muslims who see death before the enemy as a gift from God,’ and frequently noted their devotion to him as the son-in-law of the caliph (Enver had married the sultan’s niece). His colleague Cemal Pasha, Minister of Marine (responsible for the Ottoman Navy), also saw Islam as a bond between Arabs and Turks, and

⁶ Buchan (1916: 7).

⁷ Lüdke (2005: 33-34).

⁸ McMeekin (2010: 91).

⁹ The expression was coined by Snouk Hurgronje (1915).

believed that a religious war could strengthen those ties. Cemal argued that ‘the majority of Arabs would not hesitate to make any sacrifice in this great war for the liberation of the Mussulman Khalifate.’¹⁰ Influential members of the Unionist leadership were thus convinced that jihad, a powerful weapon in the early period of Islam, could be revived to serve as a source of strength in the impending conflict with the European Great Powers.¹¹

If the Germans and Young Turks were enthusiastic about the mobilizing power of Islam, the sultan and his circle of religious scholars had reservations about the practical details of the call for jihad. It was not as straightforward a matter as many European Orientalists assumed. Instead of declaring religious war on non-Muslims generally, this was a targeted jihad that declared Britain, France and Russia the enemy, while excluding Germany and Austria from the wrath of would-be Islamic zealots. A group of 29 Turkish legal scholars met and deliberated for two weeks before drafting five fatwas, or legal opinions, to sanction the jihad. The chief of the Ottoman fatwa bureau, Ali Haydar Efendi, read the five rulings from the main steps of the mosque of Mehmet the Conqueror on 14 November 1914, to validate jihad under Islamic law.¹²

The first three fatwas, each expressed as a question for which the clerics provided an answer grounded in Islamic law, made clear that the caliph’s call for jihad applied to all Muslims around the world, and not just to Ottoman Muslims:

If several enemies unite against Islam, if the countries of Islam are sacked, if the Moslem populations are massacred or made captive; and if in this case the Padishah

¹⁰ Hanioglu (1989: 198); Djemal Pasha (n.d.: 144).

¹¹ Stoddard (1963: 23-26).

¹² Aksakal (2011). The fatwas and the sultan’s declaration are reproduced in translation in Horne (1923: 401).

[i.e. sultan] in conformity with the sacred words of the Koran proclaims the Holy War, is participation in this war a duty for all Muslims? Answer: Yes.

The second fatwa explicitly extended the duty of jihad to Muslims living under Russian, French and English rule. And the third fatwa made clear that Muslims who failed to respond to the call for jihad would be subject to God's punishment.

The last two fatwas explicitly forbade Muslims living under Russian, French and English rule from taking up arms against the Ottoman Empire, as the 'government of Islam', and from fighting against the Ottomans' allies, Germany and Austria as this would do 'harm and damage to the Caliphate and to Islam.' Muslim soldiers who fought against the Ottomans or their allies would be 'punished by the wrath of God.'

Once the theological basis for a targeted jihad had been established, Sultan Mehmed V saw fit to make his own exhortation. It was not the Quran-thumping, sword waving declaration of jihad that the kaiser and his Orientalists had hoped for. The sultan's declaration stressed national over theological concerns in rallying the Ottoman people behind the war. Yet he did work a brief reference to the jihad into his speech:

Russia, England, and France never for a moment ceased harbouring ill-will against our Caliphate, to which millions of Moslems, suffering under the tyranny of foreign dominations, are religiously and whole-heartedly devoted... Throw yourselves against the enemy as lions, bearing in mind that the very existence of our empire, and of 300 million Moslems whom I have summoned by sacred Fetva to a supreme struggle, depend on your victory.¹³

And with that, the sultan discharged his duty to raise Muslims in the Ottoman Empire and the world at large in holy war against the Entente Powers.

¹³ Horne (1923:398-400).

The Orientalists' Jihad

The first to respond to the sultan's declaration of jihad, ironically, were the Entente powers. Revolt in their imperial possessions had often been ascribed to religious fanaticism. Some of the most influential Entente war planners had themselves been caught up in suppressing colonial jihads. This made them particularly receptive to the threat of Turkish-inspired religious revolts.

Volatile Algeria had frequently revolted against French rule in the name of Islam in the decades following the 1830 invasion. In the immediate aftermath of defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the French faced a massive uprising in Algeria in 1871. The tribes around the eastern city of Constantine joined forces with the powerful Rahmaniyya Sufi brotherhood to declare a jihad against the French in April, 1871. The leader of the revolt, Muhammad al-Hajj al-Muqrani, rallied over 150,000 men to his cause, as revolt spread from the outskirts of Algiers to the eastern and southern frontiers of Algeria. The resistance persisted until June 1872, resulting in nearly 3,000 European fatalities and countless Algerian deaths.¹⁴

The outbreak of the Great War immediately destabilized Algeria. German warships bombarded Algerian ports in the opening hours of the war to deter transport ships carrying soldiers of the colonial Army of Africa from sailing to France. Algerian volunteers suffered terrible casualties in the opening battles in the Franco-Belgian frontier zones. As news of their losses reached North Africa, rural Algerians began to protest against conscription and to disrupt the work of recruitment teams in 1914. These developments left French colonial officials on high alert following on the sultan-caliph's declaration of jihad.

The British were no less experienced in the threat of colonial jihad. The 1880s uprising in the Sudan led by Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abdullah, better known as the Mahdi, had entered

¹⁴ Ruedy (2005: 76-79).

into popular culture through accounts of the death of General Gordon at the hands of a “fanatical Islamic mob” in the siege of Khartoum (March 1884-Jan 1885). The British lost full control of Sudan until the defeat of Sudanese forces at the Battle of Omdurman in 1898, under the command of General Sir Herbert Kitchener. Subsequently ennobled, Lord Kitchener of Khartoum was Secretary of State for War in 1914 and took the threat of jihad in British Muslim possessions very seriously indeed.¹⁵

Throughout the First World War, the British and French concerted efforts to neutralize the threat posed by the Ottoman sultan-caliph’s declaration of jihad. Their first concern was to undermine the fatwas that declared jihad a universal duty of all Muslims, and Muslims in French, British and Russian colonies in particular.

In British India, the sultan-caliph’s proclamation did cause anxiety in the Muslim community. Officials of the Raj responded by pledging to exclude the Ottoman province of the Hijaz from the theatre of operations in the British campaign against the Ottoman Empire. No Christian soldiers would profane the sacred soil of Mecca and Medina. And the British mobilized sympathetic Muslim princes, communal leaders and Islamic associations to provide ringing endorsements for the British war effort and condemnations of the Ottoman declaration of war, all given extensive coverage in the Indian press.

‘With deep sorrow,’ the Aga Khan, head of the Ismaili Muslim community proclaimed, ‘I find that the Turkish Government having joined hands with Germany acting under German orders, is madly attempting to wage a most unprovoked war against such mighty sovereigns as the [British] King-Emperor and the Tsar of Russia. This is not the true and free will of the Sultan, but of German officers.... Now that Turkey has so disastrously shown herself a tool in the German hands she has not only ruined herself but has lost her position of Trustee of

¹⁵ Daly (1997: 21-27, 99-108).

Islam and evil will overtake her.’¹⁶ In this way the Aga Khan discredited the Ottoman entry into the war as a German rather than a Turkish initiative, thereby undermining the legitimacy of the jihad.

The Nawab Bahadur of Dacca reinforced the Aga Khan’s criticisms of jihad in a pamphlet. ‘This is not a religious war that it will merit our sympathy. All over India at public meetings the Mussalmans have declared this act of Sultan as extremely silly, and all the leaders have so exhorted their Mussalman brethren that their loyalty may stand unshaken.’¹⁷

The Council of the All India Muslim League adopted resolutions in support of the British war effort. ‘The council of [the] Muslim League gives expression ... to the deep-rooted loyalty and sincere devotion of the Mussalmans of India to the British Crown and assures His Excellency [i.e. the viceroy] that the participation of Turkey in the present war does not and cannot affect that loyalty and devotion in the least degree,’ they resolved.¹⁸

The French followed a similar policy in North Africa, to rally Muslim notables in condemnation of jihad and support of the Entente war effort against Germany. The *Revue du Monde Musulman*, published by French Orientalists in Morocco, devoted an entire issue in December 1914 to testimonials and declarations of loyalty from colonial Muslims in Western Africa, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco.

The reigning bey of Tunis regretted the Ottoman caliph succumbing to German intrigues, expressed gratitude to the French and their British ally for the pledge to protect the holy cities of the Hijaz from military operations, and called on all Tunisians to be steadfast in their

¹⁶ Pati (1996: 15-16).

¹⁷ Pati (1996: 17).

¹⁸ Pati (1996: 18).

loyalty to France.¹⁹ The municipal council of Fez in Morocco sent a telegram dated 20 November in which they declared ‘that the entry of Turkey in the current conflict in no way changes the sentiments of the people of Fez with respect to the motherland [France], for Turkey in entering this war defends no Islamic cause and serves only to assist the barbarity and savagery of Germany...’²⁰

In Algeria, two muftis made explicit reference to statements issued by Muslims in Egypt, India and the Russian Caucasus, noting their declarations of loyalty to Britain and Russia, and went on to claim that these colonial Muslims ‘know well that the Caliph’s first duty is to defend and guide the Muslims in both material and spiritual affairs, in conformity with the Quran. Should he abandon one of these principles, he is no longer worthy of the Caliphate, but is a tyrant and a traitor.’²¹

The language used in these declarations of loyalty adheres so seamlessly to the positions of the imperial powers that it is difficult to believe they are entirely spontaneous. Published under conditions of British wartime press censorship and by French Orientalists in one of their established scholarly journals, it is reasonable to assume that colonial officials played a part in soliciting these testimonials of support and in editing their contents. There is a distinct symmetry between the efforts of German Orientalists to promote jihad, and of French and British Orientalists to counter their efforts. As Snouk Hurgronje reflected in 1915, such jihad politics were but ‘one more of those ridiculous misconceptions of things Mohamedan of which so many have become current in Europe.’²²

¹⁹ Proclamation by the Bey of Tunis, *Revue du Monde Musulman* 29 (Dec. 1914) 268-72.

²⁰ *Revue du Monde Musulman* 29 (Dec. 1914) 309.

²¹ *Revue du Monde Musulman* 29 (Dec. 1914) 174-79.

²² Snouk Hurgronje (1915: 32).

Jihad Jitters

Most modern scholars are dismissive of Ottoman jihad efforts on the grounds that they failed to incite a single major uprising among colonial Muslims.²³ Yet this analysis overlooks the many instances of localized rebellion and isolated mutiny that kept the Allies alert to the threat of jihad for the duration of the war. The fact that colonial Muslims responded to the sultan's appeal in such distant places as the Australian outback and Singapore served only to convince British and French war planners of the potential for a broad-based jihad to erupt in any of their territories with large Muslim populations.

Jihad came to Australia, a dominion with a very small Muslim population, on New Year's Day 1915.²⁴ The attack occurred in the isolated mining town of Broken Hill deep in the Australian outback, targeting a train full of townspeople setting off for their traditional New Year's picnic. Both attackers, Badsha Mehmed Gül, 30, and Molla Abdullah, 60, originally came to Australia from India's northwest frontier lands as cameleers. They justified their attack on different grounds. Molla Abdullah accused town councillors of discrimination after he received repeated fines for slaughtering sheep in conformity to Islamic religious practice but in violation of local ordinances. Gül was responding directly to the sultan's declaration of jihad. He claimed somewhat improbably to have visited Turkey four times and even to have joined the Ottoman Army before coming to Australia. Gül openly recruited Molla Abdullah to a suicide mission in response to the Ottoman jihad declaration. As Molla Abdullah wrote

²³ Ludke (2005); McMeekin (2010).

²⁴ Payton (2015: 24-25).

in a note found after his death, 'I rejoiced and gladly fell in with [Gül's] plans and asked God that I might die an easy death for my faith.'²⁵

Dressed in red jackets and white turbans, and armed with rifles, the two men took up position along the railway line beneath a home-made Ottoman flag. They planned to kill the train drivers, in the hope that the unmanned train would careen out of control, taking the 1,200 passengers packed into 40 open-top cars to their deaths. As the train sped by, the gunmen missed the drivers but continued to fire on the hapless passengers who, unaware they were under attack, shouted New Year greetings at their assailants. When four of the passengers fell dead of gunshot wounds, the picnic was abandoned and a posse assembled. They tracked Gül and Molla Abdullah to a rocky outcrop where the two men were gunned down. Their stories only survived in the letters they left behind, Gül's in his native Dari, Molla Abdullah's in broken English.

The incident in Broken Hill received little attention in the British papers, but was the subject of disinformation in the German press. One paper in Freiberg reported 'the success of our arms at Broken Hill, a seaport town on the west coast of Australia. A party of troops fired on Australian troops being transported to the front by rail. The enemy lost 40 killed and 70 injured. The total loss of Turks was two dead. The capture of Broken Hill leads the way to Canberra, the strongly fortified capital of Australia.'²⁶ The many distortions in this account (not least geographical errors -- Broken Hill is hundreds of miles from the sea) reflect the importance the Germans attached to the Ottoman jihad effort, and their hopes that Islamic fanaticism might threaten the British Empire from within.

²⁵ Nicholas Shakespeare, 'The bloody ballad of Broken Hill: How jihad came to the Australian outback in 1915,' *Independent* 28 February 2015.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

German hopes were realized six weeks later when Indian Muslim soldiers rose in rebellion against the British in Singapore. Unlike the lone wolf attack in Australia, the Singapore Mutiny involved some 500 sepoys and took a full week to suppress. The leaders of the mutiny were equally influenced by the indigenous Ghadar independence movement, calling for armed rebellion against British rule, and the Ottoman jihad declaration. On 15 February 1915, four companies of the all-Muslim 5th Light Infantry Regiment of the Indian Army rose in rebellion. Catching their commanders by complete surprise, the rebel soldiers killed two British officers and fourteen soldiers. The mutineers stormed a barracks in which captured seamen from the German cruiser *Emden* had been interned in a vain attempt to encourage the Germans to join their revolt. They laid siege to their commanding officer's residence, and killed a number of civilians in the harbour districts.

Without loyal troops of their own to contain the rebellion, the British were forced to request relief from their allies. French, Russian and Japanese warships responded to the British alarm, and deployed their marines to engage the rebels. Five days after the outbreak of the mutiny, a territorial battalion from Burma reached Singapore and rounded up the surviving rebel soldiers. Over 200 sepoys were put on trial for the mutiny, which had resulted in the death of 47 officers, soldiers and civilians. Perhaps coincidentally, 47 sepoys were sentenced to death and executed by firing squad for their part in the mutiny. The Singapore Mutiny sent shock waves through the British military and left many commanders in doubt of the loyalties of Muslim soldiers in the Indian Army.²⁷

British doubts were compounded by regular, low-level mutinies and desertions among Indian Muslim troops posted to the Middle Eastern fronts. In December 1914, H. V. Gell, a young lieutenant serving as regimental signalling officer of the 69th Punjabis, reported a number of Muslim desertions in the Suez Canal zone. 'Four Pathans deserted...and were

²⁷ Harper (1984); Sareen (1995).

caught by cavalry yesterday going in enemy's direction. Some have gone from 128th Pioneers at Ismailiyya too. Somebody is getting at them... Hope these fellows are shot as an example.' Indeed, he later reported three of the deserters executed on 2 January 1915, and the fourth sentenced to penal servitude for life.²⁸

The Indian contingent to Gallipoli was relatively small. Shortly after landing in the Dardanelles, British commanders redeployed Muslim troops of the 69th and 89th Punjabis away from Gallipoli – though only after they had suffered heavy casualties. The Indian Muslim soldiers were sent to serve on the western front instead out of concerns their loyalties would be strained in a battle to seize the sultan-caliph's capital city, Istanbul.²⁹

In the Mesopotamian battlefield of Salman Pak, a British captain recorded in his diary in October 1915 that four Muslim soldiers on picket watch close to Turkish lines cut the throat of their commander and fired on British positions before crossing over to Ottoman lines. After that incident, the 20th Punjabis were dispatched for service in Aden 'owing to desertions.'³⁰

As Lt. Gell suspected in the Suez Canal Zone ('Somebody is getting at them...'), some of these desertions were in direct response to Ottoman propaganda efforts. During the siege of Kut, the British discovered thousands of propaganda leaflets in abandoned Turkish trenches. Printed at a government press in Baghdad in a range of Indian languages, the flyers exhorted 'native troops to kill their (English) officers, mutiny and come over to the Turks and be under

²⁸ Imperial War Museum (hereafter IWM), H.V. Gell diary, 27 December 1914 and 2 January 1915.

²⁹ Hamilton (1920); Kant (2014).

³⁰ IWM, R.L. Lecky diary, 29 October 1915.

the protection of Allah, telling them they would be far better treated and have more pay,’ according to British chaplain at the siege, the Reverend Harold Spooner.³¹

The propaganda leaflets provoked a number of desertions among Indian troops suffering the effects of the long siege of Kut (the siege lasted 145 days before the British surrender on 29 April 1916). Slowly starving as their food resources were depleted, and forced to eat rations that were forbidden by Islamic dietary practices, Indian Muslim soldiers must have questioned where their loyalties lay – with the British imperial occupier, who was in the process of losing the battle, or on the winning side with their fellow-Muslims in the Ottoman army.

At the end of December 1915, the British commander in Kut General Charles Townshend was reporting ‘certain unsatisfactory incidents’ among his Indian troops. Other soldiers were more explicit. ‘Several times during the siege I heard of Indians (Mohammedans) who had left our trenches and deserted to the Turks,’ an artilleryman recounted, ‘but some who were caught in attempting to escape from our lines were shot before their regiments.’³² By the end of March 1916 Reverend Spooner recorded that a company of the 24th Punjabis had been ‘disarmed for disaffection’ and that ‘many Mohammedans have deserted to the enemy.’ The official history suggests that only a small fraction of Indian troops crossed lines – no more than 72 men were listed as ‘missing’ by the end of the siege.³³ Yet it is clear that the sultan-caliph’s appeal exercised the minds of both Muslim troops and their British commanders, ever fearful of a mass response to the Ottoman jihad appeal.

³¹ IWM, H. Spooner diary, 30 March 1916; On the Ottoman printing of propaganda leaflets in

Baghdad see Wardi (1974: PP?).

³² IWM, diary of W.D. Lee.

³³ Moberly (1924: 200).

North African soldiers in the French Army were also subject to jihad propaganda – in the first instance by the German authorities. The Germans recruited North African independence activists known to be hostile to the French to assist in their efforts. Shaykh Salih al-Sharif al-Tunisi was an Islamic scholar who left Tunisia in opposition to French rule. He moved first to the Ottoman Empire and served under Enver Pasha in the 1911 Libya War (it was Salih al-Sharif who persuaded Enver to declare jihad in the Libyan war) before going to Berlin to join the German jihad bureau, formally known as the Intelligence Office for the East. The Tunisian activist visited the western front to appeal directly to Muslim soldiers fighting for Britain and France across the trenches. He drafted a number of pamphlets, published in both Arabic and Berber, which were dropped over enemy lines in areas held by North African soldiers, along with news of the sultan's declaration of jihad. A number of North African soldiers deserted from French lines in response to this overtly Islamic appeal.³⁴

As the Germans began to take Muslim prisoners on the western front – some 800 by the end of 1914 – they created a special facility called the 'Crescent Moon Camp' (*Halbmondlager*) at Wünsdorf-Zossen, near Berlin. The camp's German commanders spoke Arabic with the prisoners. Camp food was compliant with Islamic dietary requirements. The camp even had an ornate mosque, paid for by Wilhelm II himself, to provide for the spiritual needs of Muslim POWs.

One veteran's experiences demonstrate how effective the camp was in recruiting Muslim soldiers. Ahmed bin Hussein was a farmer from Marrakech, one of a group of eight Moroccan soldiers who surrendered to German forces in Belgium. From the moment the men declared they were Muslims, their German captors 'showed us due respect. Everybody was patting our shoulders and giving us food and drink.' He was sent to the Zossen camp,

³⁴ McDougall (2006: 36-43); Heine (1982).

which he described in glowing terms. ‘They gave us good meat, pilaf, chickpeas etc. They gave three blankets, underwear, and a new pair of shoes to each of us. They took us to the baths once in every three days and cut our hair.’³⁵

A parade of Muslim activists passed through the Zossen camp to promote jihad propaganda. The Tunisian Salih al-Sharif was a frequent visitor, along with other North African activists. These guest speakers reinforced the Ottoman fatwas, explaining why fighting with the Allies was an act against religion and joining the jihad a religious duty. Hundreds of POWs volunteered for the Ottoman army – among them the Moroccan farmer, Ahmed bin Hussein. As he later recounted, after spending six months in the Zossen camp, a German soldier arrived, accompanied by an Ottoman officer. ‘Whoever wants to go to Istanbul,’ they instructed, ‘raise [your] hand.’ Twelve Moroccan and Algerian soldiers volunteered on the spot. ‘Others were afraid,’ Ahmed bin Hussein added. They were given civilian clothes and passports and sent on to Istanbul to join the Ottoman war effort.

It is impossible to say how many Muslim POWs volunteered for Ottoman service in this way. American consular officials reported that as many as 3,000 North African former prisoners had been posted to Baghdad with Ottoman forces to serve on the Persian and Mesopotamian fronts. The Moroccan farmer, Ahmed bin Hussein, was in a unit dispatched to al-‘Ula in the Hijaz where he fought with Ottoman forces against the British-supported Arab Revolt led by Sharif Husayn of Mecca and his sons.

Mounting Jihad Anxiety

At the start of the war, the Ottomans launched campaigns in the Caucasus and the Suez Canal zone in the hope of provoking popular Muslim uprisings in Russian Central Asia and British-occupied Egypt. Both Enver’s Sarıkamış campaign (December 1914-January 1915) and Cemal’s first assault on the Suez Canal (February 1915) proved catastrophic defeats that did

³⁵ Tetik, Serdar and Serdar (2009: 93-94).

nothing to inspire support for the Ottoman jihad. Moreover, Ottoman defeats in the Caucasus and the canal zone emboldened Britain and its allies to launch an attack on the Dardanelles in a bid to force the straits and seize the Ottoman capital. The result was the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign.

The Allies fought for nine months without breaking through Turkish lines at Gallipoli. Nearly 500,000 men were deployed against determined Ottoman defenders, with both sides suffering terrible casualties. By the end of 1915, British war planners decided to evacuate their positions, dealing the Ottomans their first major victory of the war. One of the Allies' overriding concerns was to prevent the Ottomans from capitalizing on their victory at Gallipoli by reviving their call for jihad. In this way, the retreat from Gallipoli paradoxically drew the British ever deeper into the sideshow of the Ottoman front. For with each setback they experienced, the British redoubled their efforts to secure a decisive defeat over the Turks that would put to rest the threat of jihad once and for all.

Already before the evacuation of Gallipoli, the British had faced a number of crises on the Ottoman front, each heightening their jihad anxieties. In Yemen, when Ottoman troops allied with Imam Yahya, the ruler of Sana`a, laid siege to the British colony of Aden in July 1915, British officials feared the loss of prestige would encourage the proponents of jihad in the Arabian Peninsula.³⁶ When Sayyid Ahmad, leader of the Sanussi mystical religious order in Eastern Libya, invaded the Western Desert of Egypt and drove British forces to retreat to Marsa Matruh in November and December, 1915, the British feared the movement, led by Ottoman officers, might inspire Egyptians to rise in response to the jihad.³⁷

These setbacks, combined with defeat in Gallipoli, placed ever more pressure on British forces in Mesopotamia to secure the victory over the Ottomans that had eluded the British in

³⁶ Bidwell (1982); Jacob (1923: 180).

³⁷ McMunn and Falls (1928: 122-34); Askari (2003: 85-93).

the first year of the war. In October 1915, General Townshend's forces crowned a series of victories in southern Mesopotamia, achieved with relatively light casualties, with the conquest of Kut al-Amara. From Kut, British forces were within striking distance of Baghdad. The British Cabinet, fearing their failure in the Dardanelles had dealt their enemies a propaganda victory for their jihad politics, began to press for the occupation of Baghdad to compensate for the evacuation of Gallipoli. The Baghdad option had powerful advocates in Whitehall: the Foreign Secretary Lord Grey, Arthur Balfour and Winston Churchill all called for the occupation of Baghdad. The politicians saw in Baghdad an opportunity 'for a great success such as we had not yet achieved in any quarter and the political (and even military) advantages which would follow from it throughout the East could not easily be overrated,' the British official historian of the Mesopotamia campaign noted.³⁸

The result was a catastrophic British failure. Townshend's forces, depleted by months of campaigning and over-extended, faced recently-reinforced and strongly entrenched Ottoman troops blocking the road to Baghdad. The retreat of Townshend's army back to the secure position of Kut al-Amara marked but the start of Britain's worst defeat on the Ottoman front. Cut off from their supply lines, Townshend's men were forced to endure a 145-day siege while awaiting relief from British reinforcements dispatched from Basra. The relief column never managed to break through Turkish lines, and in April 1916 Townshend and all of his men – over 13,000 British and Indian officers and soldiers – were forced into an unconditional surrender. British war planners were genuinely concerned that it risked provoking an uprising among Muslims in India – not least because over three quarters of the men who surrendered at Kut were Indians.

³⁸ Moberly (1924: 15).

The Ottomans were quick to capitalize on the propaganda victory proffered by the British surrender at Kut. In August 1916, the local press in Iraq noted that the sultan had received a group of seventy Indian Muslim officers taken prisoner at Kut. Claiming that the officers were unwilling warriors in ‘the campaign against the Empire of the Caliph,’ the sultan returned their swords as a mark of his personal respect. ‘This imperial favour so affected them,’ the newspaper reported, ‘that they all expressed their wish to serve the Empire.’ If this story was true, it meant that the Ottomans had succeeded in recruiting nearly all Indian Muslim officers taken prisoner at Kut for the Ottoman jihad effort.³⁹

It is against the background of the Ottoman threat of jihad, and the string of British defeats on the Ottoman front, that we should view the ultimate rival jihad: the British wartime alliance with Sharif Husayn of Mecca.

Counter Jihad: The Arab Revolt

When Sharif Husayn’s son Abdullah made his first overtures to strike an alliance with British officials in Egypt in the pre-war months of 1914, Lord Kitchener (then Consul General in Egypt) and his Oriental Secretary Ronald Storrs were intrigued but refused any engagements to side with the Hashemites against the Ottomans, who were then a friendly nation. Upon the Ottomans entry into the war later that year, Storrs recalled their conversations with Amir Abdullah and wrote his superiors to suggest ‘that by timely consultation with Mecca we might secure not only the neutrality but the alliance of Arabia’.⁴⁰ Kitchener immediately authorized Storrs to re-establish contact with the Hashemites.

While the Young Turks pressed Sharif Husayn to support the Ottoman jihad, the British were determined to ‘rob the call to Holy War of its principal thunderbolt’ by striking an

³⁹ The article from the *Sada-i Islam* newspaper dated 29 Temmuz 1332 (11 August 1916) is preserved in the United States National Archive, College Park Maryland, Record Group 84, Baghdad vol. 25; also Moberly (1924: 466).

⁴⁰ Storrs (1938: 155-56).

agreement with the Amir of Mecca.⁴¹ In November 1914, Storrs wrote to Sharif Abdullah in Kitchener's name to secure a tacit alliance: If the Sharif and the Arab peoples would give their support to the British war effort, Kitchener pledged Britain's guarantee of Arab independence and protection from external aggression. Sharif Husayn instructed his son to respond that the Hashemites would adopt no policies hostile to Great Britain, but that he was constrained by his position not to break with the Ottomans for the moment.⁴²

Communication between the Hashemites and British resumed in July 1915, while Britain was still hopeful of victory in the Dardanelles and well before the catastrophe of Kut. At that stage, the Hashemites were in more of a hurry to conclude a deal than the British. When Sharif Husayn set out the boundaries of the territory of the Arab Kingdom he wished to establish under British protection, the High Commissioner Sir Henry McMahon responded on 30 August 1915, confirming British support for Arab 'independence' and the establishment of 'the Arab Khalifate' but insisting it was 'premature to consume our time in discussing such details' as boundaries 'in the heat of war.'⁴³ Note McMahon's reference to 'the Arab Khalifate': What better solution for British concerns about jihad than to strip the Ottoman sultan of that dignity and endow an allied Arab prince with the title instead?

Sharif Husayn was indignant at McMahon's reply and demanded a firm commitment from the British on boundaries before he would consider launching an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire. But it was only after the British government had taken the decision to evacuate Gallipoli that McMahon gave formal agreement to most of the territory demanded by Sharif Husayn, in his famous letter of 24 October 1915.

⁴¹ Antonius (1938: 140).

⁴² Dawn (1973: 26).

⁴³ Hurewitz (1979: 46-56).

In subsequent correspondence exchanged between 5 November 1915, and 10 March 1916, Sir Henry McMahon concluded a wartime alliance with Sharif Husayn of Mecca. The weeks that passed between their letters were punctuated by British defeats in both the Dardanelles and in Mesopotamia. McMahon's letter of 14 December followed the beginning of the siege of Kut al-Amara (8 December). The High Commissioner's letter of 25 January 1916, followed the final evacuation of Gallipoli (9 January). Unsurprisingly, McMahon's final letter, dated 10 March, noted British victories over the Senussi tribesmen in Egypt, and of Russian victories in Erzurum without mentioning the impending surrender at Kut. He must have felt his hand weakened by this string of British defeats.

On the eve of the Arab Revolt, the Anglo-Hashemite alliance offered far less than both sides originally believed they were securing when they first entered into negotiations. The British were not the invincible power that they had appeared in early 1915, when first setting off to conquer Constantinople. The Germans had inflicted terrible casualties on the British on the western front, and even the Ottomans had dealt them humiliating defeats. Sharif Husayn and his sons had every reason to question their choice of ally.

Yet the Hashemites were in no position to bargain. All through their correspondence with the high commissioner in Egypt, Sharif Husayn and his sons had presented themselves as leaders of a pan-Arab movement. By May 1916, after Cemal Pasha's clampdown on Arab activists, it was apparent that there would be no broader revolt in Syria and Iraq. The most the sharifs could do was to challenge Ottoman rule in the Hijaz. Success depended on their ability to mobilize the notoriously undisciplined Bedouin for their cause.

Arguably, the alliance survived because the Hashemites and the British needed each other more in the summer of 1916 than ever. Sharif Husayn had strained relations with the Young Turks to the breaking point; he knew they would seize the first opportunity to dismiss – even murder – him and his sons. The British needed the sharif's religious authority to undermine

the Ottoman jihad, which officials in Cairo and Whitehall feared had been strengthened by recent Turkish victories. Whatever the results of a Hashemite-led revolt, the movement would at very least weaken the Ottoman war effort and force the Turks to divert troops and resources to restore order in the Hijaz, and possibly in other Arab provinces. For their own reasons, both the British and the Hashemites were in a hurry to launch the revolt.

To be precise, not all British officials were in a hurry to launch a revolt in the Hijaz. Officials in British India were very alarmed by the prospect of British involvement in hostilities in the Hijaz. It was the British promise to protect Mecca and Medina and to exclude the Hijaz from the theatre of military operations that had encouraged Indian Muslims to support their emperor-king over the sultan-caliph. Sharif Husayn's declaration of revolt risked provoking religious conflict in India.

As predicted, the outbreak of the Arab Revolt provoked a violent rejection in India. The Indian press denounced the sharif for leading the Arabs in rebellion against their caliph. Mosques in the volatile North-West Frontier of India echoed with imams' curses against Sharif Husayn and his sons. On 27 June, the All-India Muslim League passed a resolution condemning the Hashemite revolt in the strongest terms, suggesting Sharif Husayn's actions had given real cause for jihad. British officials in India, who had consistently opposed McMahon's negotiations with Sharif Husayn, now argued the revolt had backfired: Indian Muslims appeared more inclined to support the Ottomans as a result. The viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, urged that no British assistance be offered to the Hashemites, lest Indian Muslims be driven to jihad by outrage over Christian soldiers setting foot on the sacred land of the Hijaz.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Barr (2008: 41-42).

The Arab Revolt brought to light grave contradictions in British counter-jihad efforts. They had hoped to neutralize the influence of the Ottoman sultan over world Islam by entering into alliance with the highest-ranking Muslim authority in the Arab world, the sharif of Mecca. The sharif's irregular forces were no match for the regular Ottoman army. If the British failed to support the sharif, he would be defeated by the Ottomans which would inject new vigour into the jihad threat. Yet open British support for the Arab Revolt risked provoking Indian Muslims. The British were themselves deeply divided over their policy priorities, with officials in India contemptuous of their British colleagues in the Arab Bureau in Cairo. And the War Cabinet in London was divided between the need to concentrate their energies on the western front, and the imperative of securing a victory in the Ottoman front with the least expenditure of men and materiel.

In December 1916, the Hijaz conflict reached a crisis when Ottoman forces succeeded in driving the Hashemite army to a last stand in the Red Sea port of Yanbu'. The Royal Navy assisted the Hashemites by assembling five warships off the small port to deter the Ottoman army from advancing onto the town. Over-extended and wearied from weeks of campaigning in the parched landscape of the Hijaz, the Ottoman commanders dared not brave the naval guns in a final attack on the Arab army, and withdrew to their fortified position in Medina. The British had found the solution to the contradictions in their jihad policies: they would provide technical support – naval guns, aircraft, armoured cars, and of course explosives expertise to destroy lengths of the Hijaz Railway – but leave the actual fighting to Muslim soldiers.

The Arab Revolt did serve to neutralize jihad politics on the Ottoman front. In retrospect, the Hashemites seldom played on their religious credentials, preferring to cast their movement in national terms – an Arab revolt against Ottoman rule rather than an Islamic revolt against a discredited caliph. Yet the religious authority of the sharif of Mecca was

indisputable, and he justified the Arab Revolt in terms that put into question the Ottoman sultan's legitimacy as a spiritual leader of the global Muslim community. And, crucially, 1917 saw a major reversal of British fortunes in the Middle East. In March 1917, General Maude led a British campaign force to victory over the Ottomans in Iraq and occupied Baghdad. General Allenby took over the faltering Palestine campaign, where the Ottomans had twice defeated British forces at the gates of Gaza, to deliver on Prime Minister David Lloyd George's request to occupy Jerusalem as a Christmas gift to the war-weary British public. And in October 1918, the occupation of Damascus heralded the fall of the Ottomans, by which point neither side made reference to a jihad rendered irrelevant in defeat.

Conclusion

The Great War in the Middle East had been fought under the shadow of jihad. Though it had failed to produce the global Islamic uprising that some of the German advocates of *Islampolitik* might have hoped for, the Ottoman jihad had succeeded in diverting over one and a half million soldiers from the western front to sustain the campaigns in the Middle East: 500,000 Allied troops in the Gallipoli campaign alone, nearly 800,000 Indian soldiers on all Mid Eastern fronts, and thousands more in the Palestine and Syrian campaigns. Had the weight of these forces been deployed in France instead, it would have altered the balance of power on the western front.

Furthermore, jihad politics played a major role in prolonging the First World War. Indeed, one of the great surprises of the Great War was the tenacity of the Ottoman Empire. While Russia – the Power most responsible for drawing the Ottomans into the war in the first place – concluded an armistice as early as December 1917, the Ottomans forced the Allies to fight until 30 October 1918 – just days before Germany concluded its own armistice with the Entente on 11 November. We cannot rule out the influence of jihad propaganda in motivating Ottoman Muslims to fight so tenaciously for four long years. It is certainly the

case that *Islampolitik* drew the Allies ever deeper into the war in the Middle East, and in this way played a key role in lengthening the Great War. Indeed, it is one of the great ironies of the Great War in the Middle East that the British proved more responsive to the Ottoman call to jihad than the global Muslim community.

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