

The British Empire in the Muslim World during the Nineteenth Century

The first major step towards British Empire in the Muslim world came in 1765 when the East India Company received from the Mughal emperor the right to raise revenue and administer justice in the rich province of Bengal. Subsequent major steps were the final defeat of Tipu Sultan, the last significant Muslim power in India, at Seringapatam in 1799, and the defeat of the French at Acre in the same year, which secured British command of the eastern Mediterranean. From these first steps British power expanded through the Muslim world, the process gaining great pace between the 1880s and the end of the First World War, when it reached from West Africa through the central Islamic lands to South-East Asia. In every area the strategic and sometimes the economic needs of empire combined with local forces to carve the shapes of modern Muslim states, and modern states in which Muslims live, out of former Muslim empires, caliphates, sultanates, and sheikhdoms.

West Africa

In West Africa, British rule, along with that of the French, transformed the situation of Muslim peoples. Up to the end of the nineteenth century the savannah region to the south of the Sahara had been host to a series of Muslim empires and states which were expanding to the south and the west. They had participated in the long-distance trade across the desert in slaves, salt, and gold and some had been noted both for their wealth and their learning. British rule transferred the focus of economic effort towards the coast where Africans became involved in the production of cash crops - palm oil, cocoa, rubber - for export. Muslim peoples occupied the backlands of the new British colonies of Sierra Leone (1891), Gold Coast (1896), and Nigeria (1900). In the last mentioned, which was by far the largest and most important, the Hausa Muslims of the north, who had peopled the Fulani caliphate of Sokoto, were thrust together from 1914 in one colony with people from the central and southern regions whose religions and traditions were different.

In the Nile valley British economic interests, stemming from the development of Egypt's cotton production under the Khedival regime, and her strategic interests, stemming from Egypt's control of the Suez canal, led to the occupation of the country in 1882. Officially declared a protectorate soon after the outbreak of war in 1914 mass opposition to British rule from 1919 had led to a qualified independence in 1922 in which Egyptians regained control of their internal affairs but Britain retained control of foreign policy, the army, and the canal. The security of Egypt, however, was closely bound up with the control of the upper Nile valley, the Sudan, where in 1881 the Sufi shaykh, Muhammad Ahmad, had led a rising against Egyptian rule and established the Mahdist state. This had been conquered by an Anglo-Egyptian army in 1898 leading to the formation of an Anglo Egyptian condominium in 1899. From the early 1920s the condominium became no more than fiction as the British, with Sudanese support, took the administration entirely into their hands. In the nineteenth century both the Egyptians and the Mahdists had had difficulty in imposing their authority over the non-Muslims who lived south of the tenth parallel. British power now held the southern peoples firmly within a Sudanese framework.

East Africa

In East Africa security had led to the British presence in Somalia which was divided up with the Italians and the French in the late nineteenth century. Little had been done for the tribes of the region apart from resisting Muhammad `Abd Allah who from 1899 to 1920 waged a jihad against the British. Muslim communities were established in all the British colonies of the region. Notable was the sultanate of Zanzibar which became a protectorate in 1870, while in Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika there were Muslim communities formed initially from the Swahili speaking peoples who during the nineteenth century had been pressing inland from the coast. Through East Africa from Uganda to the Dominion of South Africa there were also Muslims of Indian origin, not least among them the Nizari Isma`ili followers of the Aga Khan, whose migration the British had encouraged to assist in developing the resources of the region. In West Asia,

protecting British routes to the East, managing the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire, and trying to honour the conflicting understandings reached with Arabs, Zionists and the French during the First World War led to the formation of three new states, all of which were held in trust for the League of Nations. There was Iraq whose boundaries to the west and south had no rationale in nature. To the north the British had insisted in adding the province Mosul from the French sphere of influence - a mixed blessing bringing on the one hand a mountainous barrier and eventually oil, but on the other hand a large population of discontented Kurds. Indeed, Iraq was a patchwork of possible identities with Kurds and Turks as well as Arabs, with Jews and Christians as well as Shia and Sunni Muslims, plus a host of tribal groupings. In 1921 the Hashemite prince, Faysal, was established as King to compensate for the loss of his Arab state based on Damascus to the French. There was Palestine, which was carved out of three separate Ottoman districts and which for nearly two thousand years had been little more than a geographical expression. Here the British had agreed to provide the framework within which Zionists could establish for themselves a 'national home', an ambition which was likely to mean some cost to the eighty per cent of the population which was Muslim and the ten per cent which was Christian. The third new state was Transjordan which had even less basis than the other two, as it embraced no administrative region, specific people or historical memory. Originally intended as part of Palestine, it became a separate state when in 1921 the British permitted 'Abd Allah the brother of Faysal to establish a government there in part to satisfy his ambition and in part to settle the region. In the Arabian peninsula Britain's interests were primarily strategic involving control of the coastline and the routes to India. In the Aden protectorates the British policed the region from Aden itself while curbing the ambitions of the Zaydi Imams who wished to reimpose the authority of the North Yemen over the sultanates to the south. Further along the southern Arabian shore the Bu Sa`idi sultans of Muscat and Oman ruled with the help of British advisers. In the Gulf the sheikhdoms of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Trucial Oman had all concluded treaties with the British in the nineteenth century and existed underneath the umbrella of British power. In each city state government was a family business, their revenues were slight, and the British intervened only when necessary. Their boundaries, moreover, in the desert world where men exercised authority over men and not land, remained ill-defined.

Turkey

In the case of Turkey it was primarily British power which had driven the Ottoman armies back through Syria to the Taurus mountains where the 1918 armistice line formed the boundary of the new state. Elsewhere British attempts, along with French and American support, to fight Turkish nationalism by supporting Greek ambitions in western Anatolia, had come to grief when Ataturk's armies drove the Greeks into the sea. The Treaty of Lausanne recognised Turkey's frontiers as they were at the 1918 armistice.

Central Arabia

In central Arabia the British had initially thought of using the father of the Hashemite princes 'Abd Allah and Faysal, Sharif Husayn of Mecca, as their agent of control. But then they stepped back and wisely allowed the local leaders to fight for supremacy. The victor was 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Sa`ud the founder of the twentieth-century incarnation of the Sa`udi state. British power settled the ultimate boundaries of this state, as it established the frontiers of Transjordan, Iraq, and Kuwait in the 1920s: resisted Saudi attempts to incorporate the Yemen in the 1930s: and their ambitions in the Buraimi Oasis in the 1950s.

British policies in the Muslim dependencies shaped their political development. These were in part dependent on cost, and given the limited resources of many territories this had to be low, in part dependent on those nostrums which found favour with officialdom, and in part dependent on British attitudes to the Muslim world. To these attitudes we now turn.

The British came to the Muslim world with attitudes formed by the rhetoric of Europe's long encounter with Islam. There was the Christian polemic against Islam with its accusations that Muhammad was an impostor, that his faith was spread by violence, that it endorsed sexual freedom on earth and promised sensual bliss in heaven. These accusations were sustained by nineteenth century missionaries who added to them issues such

as the position of women and the existence of slavery. There was memory of the crusades which influenced many a British speech regarding the Ottoman empire down to 1920 and doubtless the odd decision such as Lloyd George's determination in that year to join France and the USA in letting the Greeks loose in Asia Minor. There was a religious romanticism which gave a special meaning, for some at least, to events such as the capture of Jerusalem in 1917 and the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine.

Closely connected to the fear of Muslim 'fanaticism' was the fear of Pan-Islamism, of united Muslim action against the British Empire. The British were right not to dismiss the threat. In principle, though to no great extent in fact, Muslims could regard themselves as one community and the Ottoman caliph as the successor of Muhammad as a leader of that community. There had always been networks of scholars and mystics across the Islamic world. Such connections were reinforced in the nineteenth century by the increasing numbers of Muslims performing the pilgrimage to Mecca and travelling in general. From the late nineteenth century knowledge of other Muslim societies was greatly increased by the growth of the press notably in India and Egypt. Moreover, there was an influential Islamic thinker, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d.1897) who was arguing for a pan-Islamic response to the incursion of the West into the Muslim world. On top of this there was the policy of the Ottoman empire under 'Abd al-Hamid II to foster connections with Muslims in British territories, whether they be in Cape Town, Zanzibar, or Bombay. The government of India, furthermore, was left in no doubt about the pan-Islamic feelings of its Muslims as they protested with increasing vigour at the Western takeover of the central Islamic lands. Their protests reached a peak in the Khilafat movement of 1919-24, which was the greatest movement of protest against British rule since the Mutiny rebellion. From 1920 the government of India urged London to take into account Indian opinion in negotiating Turkish peace terms. Curzon and Lloyd George refused to be influenced; in 1922 the Secretary of State for India, Montagu, was forced to resign on the issue. The eventual decline of the Khilafat movement proved Curzon and Lloyd George right. Pan-Islamism, as Harcourt Butler often told his Indian colleagues, was 'more a feeling than a force'.

Outcomes and Results

No form of indirect rule had such a momentous outcome for the peoples of the region as that conducted in Palestine. Arguably the transformation of the Jewish Agency of 1920 into the Israeli state by May 1948 was from the beginning a possible outcome of the terms of the Palestine mandate. Britain had undertaken, although against the grave reservations of the Foreign Office and her military administration in Palestine, to create 'such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish national home', and this is what emerged, albeit in nation-state form. But Britain's declared policy to the bitter end, with the one deviation of the Peel Commission recommendations, was to establish a bi-national state. The administration of the mandate, however, and the outcome, were disasters. Admittedly, few could have predicted when the first High Commissioner, Herbert Samuel, took up his post in 1920 the events which so complicated Britain's rule: the levels of Jewish immigration resulting from persecution in Europe, the levels of Arab intransigence resulting from justifiable anger and poor leadership, the impact of the Second World War, the holocaust, the rise of American influence, and the decline of British influence. By the mid-1930s the Palestinian Arabs were radical, politicized, organized and using strikes and violence. From 1937-39 there was open rebellion in particular against the recommendation of the Peel Commission that Palestine be partitioned and in general against the British presence. The Palestinian plight attracted popular concern as well as that of intellectuals and students in Egypt, Iraq and other Arab countries. The cause was also adopted by Islamic movements; Arab governments discovered they could win support by taking up the Palestinian issue. Nor was concern restricted to Arab lands. Palestine remained a continuing issue for Indian Muslims and featured regularly, for instance, in emotional speeches and resolutions of the All-India Muslim League. By 1947 Palestine was an economic and strategic liability for the British. There seemed, moreover, to be no solution agreeable to Zionists and Americans on the one hand and the Arabs on the other. In February 1947 the British referred the problem to the United Nations, refused to implement a UN partition plan of November 1947, and surrendered the mandate on 1 May 1948. The consequence of this imbroglio was a serious loss of goodwill from the Arab world towards Britain at a time when her position in that world

depended on that very commodity. There was also the establishment of the Palestinian grievance which was to be a focus of relations between regional powers and super powers in the region for decades. At the same time, Israel, which was seen as a stake of Western provenance thrust into the heartland of Islam, was throughout the Islamic world a focus of resentment against the West.

Muslim's Attitudes towards the British Imperial Rule

Muslim attitudes to the British varied according to their particular Islamic understandings and to their particular experience of British rule. They were subject, too, to change through time; the kind of person who was a cultural collaborator in the late nineteenth century was more than likely to be a dedicated nationalist opponent well before the mid-twentieth century. There were, nevertheless, some distinctive aspects to Muslim attitudes. The British were often seen primarily as Christians. Certainly they were people of the book, people who shared the same prophetic tradition, but by the same token they were people whose scriptures had been corrupted and whose beliefs were misguided. Early contacts could involve set-piece debates with Christian missionaries like those which were held at Agra (India) in 1854, one of whose Muslim protagonists became a pensioner of the Ottoman sultan and the formulator of the most influential modern Muslim critique of Christianity. At their most extreme religious strategies for dealing with the Christian presence might involve attacking Christian revelation at its heart, as did the Punjabi Muslim, Ghulam Ahmad (d.1908), who founded the Ahmadiyya missionary sect. He claimed that he was the messiah of the Jewish and Muslim traditions; the figure known as Jesus of Nazareth had not died on the cross but survived to die in Kashmir. But equally the problem of Christian power could be confronted with humour, as did the Indian satirist Akbar Allahabadi (d. 1921) *The Englishman can slander whom he will And fill your head with anything he pleases He wields sharp weapons, Akbar. Best stand clear! He cuts God himself into three pieces.* A second set of attitudes focused on the extent to which the manners and customs of the British could be followed and their material culture adopted. Thus, the Sultan of Pahang, `Abd alSamad (d.1898) declared that he never `fired an English gun in his life nor wished to fire one, that he preferred walking to driving and eating with his fingers, according to Malay custom, to the use of forks; that wine was forbidden by the Koran and that he did not know how to play the piano.' For most of British rule Muslims debated what they could and could not accept from the culture of their ruler. Wine and pork were for believing Muslims distinctive cultural markers; the freedom of women was a greatly contested issue. Tables and chairs, knives and forks, trousers and ties, however, came widely to be adopted, although ties went out of fashion in the late twentieth century when it came to be thought that they represented the sign of the cross. A third set of attitudes embraces responses to British power. The context is crucial. Muhammad `Abd Allah of Somaliland waged jihad for twenty-one years against the British. He celebrated the death of a British officer who had tried to cut off his defeat in 1913 thus: *O Corfield, you are a traveller who Will not stay long here below You will follow the path where there is no rest You are among the Denizens of Hell You will journey to the Next World.*

There are, however, some lines of Muslim response which require more detailed examination. The first is that of jihad. For all the fear of Muslim fanaticism displayed by the British, once they had conquered a territory and consolidated their rule, jihad, although often a worry, was rarely a serious issue. One reason was that in British territories which experienced forms of indirect rule Islamic law continued to operate. Even in directlyruled British India Muslim personal law, the most cherished element of the shari`a, continued to be imposed in its bastard Anglo-Muhammadan form. It had long been the position of Sunni `ulama that, if the law was upheld, rebellion could not be justified. A second reason was that legitimately to conduct a jihad there had to be a reasonable chance of success. After Muslims had tasted the fruits of the Gatling gun and had come to appreciate the full weight of British power, they knew that they had little chance. Once this was understood, the alternative was hijra or flight from the `land of war', as practised by the Caliph of Sokoto after the annexation of his territories, or the 30,000 Indian Muslims who in 1920 fled to the Northwest Frontier, many to their deaths, as part of the Khilafat protest. Considerations such as these help to explain the failure of Muslims in Africa and elsewhere to respond to the Ottoman call for jihad against the British Empire on the outbreak of the First World War.