

THE WEST AND THE MUSLIM WORLD: DIPLOMACY OR INTRIGUE

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The relationship between the West and the Muslim world appeared mostly in the form of conflict and warfare though there are substantial evidences of peaceful relation existed during those years of rivalries. This paper would not escape from the theme and attempts were made to trace history of rivalries between the West and the Muslim world in order to find out how far diplomacy and intrigue have been used throughout those years.

The first rivalry between the Muslims and the West represented by the Eastern Roman Empire took place as early as the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The rivalry begins when the Prophet had sent his emissary al-Harith bin Umayr al-Azdi on a duty to carry a letter to the ruler of Busra. He was, however, intercepted by Shurahbil bin Amru al-Ghassani, the governor at Balqa, a close ally to Caesar, the Byzantine Emperor. Al-Harith was tied and beheaded by al-Ghassani. This intolerable incident was unacceptable to the Prophet and in retaliation to discipline the transgressors sent an army of 3000 men. The Roman Emperor allied with the Arab army of Ghassan numbered about 200, 000 men marched to face the Muslims at Mu'tah.

Though the mission was to protest and punish the transgressors, the Prophet, however, reminded them to strictly observe the principal of war in Islam. The enemy should first be invited to Islam and if they accepted it leave them free. Should they refuse then asked them to pay jizyah. The war was the last resort to be adopted if the enemy persisted to fight. Further the Prophet reminded the Muslims to "fight the disbelievers in the Name of Allah, neither breach a covenant nor entertain treachery, and under no circumstances a new-born, women, an ageing man or a hermit should be killed, moreover neither trees should be cut down nor homes demolished." (al-Mubarakpuri: 1995) This instruction had been firmly observed throughout those years of rivalries between Muslims and the Roman Empire.

Since the first battle of Mu'tah, a number of clashes occurred notably during the time of caliphate between the Romans and the Muslims in the Roman territory of the Middle East and mostly ended with the victory of Islam. The spread of Islam is therefore often synonym with the spread of Muslim land at the expense of Roman territory though the subjects were left free to practice their own religion which previously had been prohibited. From Islamic point of

view, the expansion of Islam into new land should be strictly interpreted as preaching and spreading the religion of Allah to the people. The Roman Empire representing the West believed otherwise. The expansion of Islam would certainly threaten their political supremacy, prestigious and influence of the West in the occupied territory in the Middle East notably in Palestine and Egypt. However by the end of the fifteen century the West began to recover their lost land when Spaniards emerged victorious.

During those years of rivalries, particularly in the classical era, the West diplomacy had seldom been used. Instead treacheries and intrigues became dominant notably before, during and after the war against Muslims. These can be seen in a number of occasions such as during crusades and in the episodes of Spanish history. The emergence of Portuguese as a new Western imperial power opened a new page in the history of relation between the West and the Muslim world. Their first incursions in the coast of Arabia at the end of the 15th century triggered a new setting of rivalries between the West and the Muslim world. A number of coastal strategic places towards the East did not escape from this competition and became a battle ground not only with the local masters but also with the imperial dynasty. The Mamluks who held responsibility over the Muslims as the guardian of the caliphate came down from Egypt to South Arabia in response to the presence of the Portuguese in the Red Sea. When the Ottomans expanded their territory and took Egypt in 1516, they too came down to South Arabia to defend the Muslim land from further Portuguese incursions. This is the beginning of a new rivalry in which the territory is in the Muslim lands and even closer to the heart of Muslim lands.

So far there was no evidence to show that diplomacy had been introduced during those years of rivalries between Portuguese and the Muslims. It was claimed that the presence of Portuguese in and around the Red Sea was to take part in the trade of spices. But in the course of their trading activities, a number of strategic places notably trading ports were seized. They appeared in the eyes of Muslim as enemies rather than trading partners. The scenario would turn worst if they knew that a proposal was put forward to the Portuguese authority to seize and capture the remains of the Prophet in exchange for the Christian Sculpture held in the Muslims land. (Bondarevsky: 1985)

Towards the 19th century and afterwards, the West began to develop a new strategy in their relation with the Muslims. Diplomacy and good relation has taken place over violence and aggression which were normally prevailed during those years of colonization. This can be seen during Napoleon's military campaign in Egypt in 1798. Short history of French occupation of Egypt was full of evidence confirming Western diplomacy in modern time. Napoleon obviously made full use of religious propaganda to withstand all kinds of Islamic appeal from the Muslims to avoid them being united and capable for facing the challenge of the invaders. He evidently quoted in an open letter to the Egyptians referring to the tenets of Islam commencing with "In the name of

Allah the Merciful, the Compassionate, there is no God but Allah, and has no son, no associate in His kingdom O Egyptians it was said to you that I came down to this place only for destroying your religion and this is a clear lie, don't believe it. Tell those who made this accusation that I came to liberate you from the unjust rulers and I am better than the Mamluks in worshipping God almighty, and I respect his messenger and the Holy Qur'an. O Scholars of Islam, judges, noble people and leaders tell your people that the French are also faithful Muslims and to prove it that they went to Rome and destroyed the seat of Pope who always urges the Christians to fight Islam... and the French for all the time are good friends of the Ottoman Sultan and enemy of his enemies”.

In another occasion when a call for jihad had reached the Egyptians, Napoleon refuted the call as lie claiming the officials who made the call were false. Napoleon appeared to exploit the scholars of Islam using them to convince the people to remain calm. A number of calls were made from the Egyptian scholars to remind the people about the danger of intrigues based on the hadith on fitnah. (Al-Jabarti, **‘Aja’ib al-Athar fi al-Tarajim wa al-akhbar**)

It was also a similar case of British diplomacy in the Muslim world. As early as 1799 British attempted to establish their foothold in South Arabia by occupying Perim Island commanding the entrance to the Red Sea. But this was soon abandoned apparently from the lack of water and food. But when Muhammad Ali of Egypt successfully established himself in the South Arabia in 1830s, British returned to the scene. Possibly fearing that Muhammad Ali might extend his influence to seize Aden or other town in South Arabia and therefore pose a serious threat to British Empire in India, British took Aden by force in January 1839 and it is no doubt that the action was taken for strategic purposes. The British, now apprehensive about the safety of their newly acquired possession of Aden, secured the co-operation of several European powers, Russia, Austria and Italy, who jointly pressured Muhammad Ali and the Ottomans to evacuate Muhammad Ali forces from Arabia. British also undertook to pressure Muhammad Ali to open his country with European product when the Ottomans were invited to sign the treaty of London in 1840 and this was also to include Egypt as it was under the jurisdiction of the Ottoman Empire. The treaty had finally ruined Muhammad Ali's economy which was based on monopoly when cheaper European products became available in the market. Later British attempted to consolidate their influence in Egypt during economic crisis through means of diplomacy and war. In order to safeguard their interest and shares in the Suez Canal project, British undertook to occupy Egypt in 1882. On the contrary the country remained as an Ottoman province and British therefore continued to have a good relation with the Ottomans though at the same time they occupied Egypt and controlled its economy. In this case there is no doubt that British used diplomacy to win over the Ottomans and at the same time achieved result as they planned.

When the Ottomans appeared in Yemen in 1872, Anglo-Ottoman rivalry began to take shape notably in winning over the hearts of the local people. British however maintained friendly relation with the Ottomans at the time they undertook to have friendly relation with the Arab tribes around Aden for its safety and security. This was later developed to form a new policy of intervention with the Arab notably in South West Arabia through means of Protectorate treaties. Under the agreement, British undertook to extend to the protected ruler “the gracious favour and protection of Her Majesty the Queen-Empress.” In return the protected ruler “agrees and promises... to refrain from entering into any correspondence, agreement or treaty, with any foreign or native power, except with the knowledge and sanction of the British Government; and further promises to give immediate notice to the Resident at Aden, or other British officer, of the attempt by any other power to interfere with the (protected ruler)”. Further the protected ruler was bound not to “cede, sell, mortgage, lease or hire or give, or otherwise dispose of, the (ruler’s) territory, or any part of the same, at any time, to any power other than the British government”. (Aitchison: 1895)

Anglo-Ottoman rivalries in South West Arabia continued into the twentieth century with a short break from 1906 to 1914. The effect of these rivalries on South West Arabia was considerable. They resulted, particularly since 1880’s in the division of Yemen into the Ottoman Yemen and the British Protectorate, strengthening further the existing tribal pattern and practice. During the war, the Ottoman Yemenis and the Arabs in the Protectorate were further divided and remained loyal either to the Ottomans, the British, the Zaydi Imam and other Arab chiefs.

Even before the Ottomans joined the First World War, British attempted to persuade the Ottomans to remain neutral or otherwise to face consequences. Sir Edward Grey, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs advised British Embassy in Istanbul to bring messages to the Ottomans that Great Britain urge them the advantage of neutrality; otherwise Britain would react by claiming Egypt, supporting Arabs against the Ottomans, forming another Muslim authority for Arabia and controlling the Muslim Holy Places (FO 371/2138, Grey to Mallet, 29/8/1914). The above measures remained the views of the British Government before the Ottomans officially entered into the war. On September 1st, while authorizing the Viceroy to make an announcement in relation to the Holy Places, Grey suggested giving every support and encouragement to the Arabs to “possess themselves of Arabia and the Holy place.” (L/P&S/10/558, Foreign Office to India Office, 1/9/1914). Therefore in relation to the Ottomans, British soon developed a policy regarding the Arabs how they could best be used and in particular how to use the Arabs against the Ottomans in one way or another. Hardinge further suggested that the project could be extended to include the Sharif of Makkah through the medium of Ibn Saud, (L/P&S/IO/558, Viceroy to Secretary of State for India, 4/9/1914). Meanwhile Aden Resident proposed to

honour two protected rulers, the Sultan of Lahej and Mukalla in order to demonstrate the British inclination towards the Arabs. (L/P&S/10/558, Aden to Bombay (Repeat to London & Simla), (11/9/1914).

When war was declared with the Ottoman Government, the policy of supporting the Arabs in Arabia in particular and the Middle East in general against the Ottomans was immediately put into action. The Arabs policy includes: first, uniting the Arabs against the Ottomans initially between the Imam of Yemen and the Idrisi; second, issuing declarations which denied any element of religious character in the war and promised the protection of the Holy Places together with the port of Jeddah, third concluding treaties with the Arabs chiefs such as in February, 1915 with the Mawiyah Shaykh, the Idrisi in April 1915 and followed by correspondence with Sharif Husayn.

Reasonably as a sultan and caliph of the Muslim, the Ottoman government called for jihad: On November 7th, the Shaykh al-Islam in Istanbul issued the first stage of the call to a jihad which was declared to be sacred duty to all Muslims in the world, including those living under the rule of Great Britain, France and Russia, to unite against those three enemies of Islam; to take up arms against them and their allies; and refuse under all circumstances, even when threatened with death penalty, to assist the Government of the Entente in their attack on Ottoman Empire and its German and Austro-Hungarian defenders. On November 8th, the Ottoman Sultan issued the second stage for the Liberation of enslaved Islam as well as in defense of the threatened Empire. And on November 23rd, the Ottoman Sultan issued the third and final call to a jihad in a manifesto to the Moslem world (Mansoor, 1972: November 1914.).

But the Government of India was quick to respond. A declaration was issued which denied any element of religious characters in the war and promised the protection of the Muslim Holy places for avoiding Muslim from accepting jihad. The announcement is as follows:

In the view of the outbreak of war between Great Britain and Türkiye, which to regret of Great Britain has been brought by the ill-advised, unprovoked and deliberate action of the Ottoman Government. His Excellency the Viceroy is authorized by his Majesty's Government to make the following public announcement in regard to the Holy Places of Arabia, including the holy shrines of Mesopotamia and the port of Jeddah in order that they may be no misunderstanding on the part of His Majesty's most loyal Moslem subjects as to the attitude of his Majesty's Government in this war in which no question of religious character is involved. These holy places and Jeddah will be immune from the attack or molestation by the British naval and military forces so long as there is no interference with pilgrims from India to the holy places and shrines in question. At the request of His Majesty's Government the governments of France and Russian have given them (the British Government) similar assurances. (L/P&S/10/558)

Jacob also suggested to include the Imam who had been apprehensive of the British designs on Islam and its territories. The India Office approved Jacob proposal and the following proclamation was issued:

The British Government do not entertain any desire to extend the frontiers of their territory, and feel confident that Arabs will not league themselves with the Turks, who are the real enemies of Arab progress and welfare, against English who are determined to maintain rights of Islam and respect holy places and who have invariably defended Arab interests. There must at the same time be no violation of British border. In the establishment of that peace and order which alone can further Arab prosperity and progress the British Government count on the cooperation of the Arabs chiefs. If any Arabs violate British territory and are so foolish as to join Turkish cause their hostility will be punished by force. (L/P&S/10/558)

After the war at the withdrawal of the Ottomans from Arabia, the most urgent question was the settlement between several chiefs namely the Idrisi, the Imam, the Sultan of Shihhr and Mukalla, Ibn Sa'ud and King Hussein. For the first time an overall plan for Arabia was put forward in a very diplomatic maneuver. The plan initiated by Grey, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, who cabled to Wingate, the British High Commissioner of Egypt for his view. A number of copies were also sent to Arbur, General Clayton, Colonel Wilson C. E. at Jeddah and Colonel Jacob as liaison officer at Cairo for the same purpose. Grey wrote:

A suggestion has been made to me that owing to the evacuation of the Turks from South West Arabia a reconsideration of our general policy towards the Idrisi and the Imam has become advisable. The main arguments advanced in favour of this are:—While it was to our advantage to encourage the Arabs to turn to us in preference to the Turks, there was no reason against our financing lesser sheikhs and generally following the Turkish example in order to minimize the power of titular overlords. The latter are now claiming independence which makes it questionable whether it is desirable for us to continue our old policy. The Imam for example is obviously anxious lest we should undermine his influence over many sheikhs whom he considers as his subjects, and has in consequence shown an inclination to look to other powers for recognition of his independence. The first essential in the realization of a united Arabia, whether under a single suzerainty or on the federal plan, is that the largest possible political units should be consolidated and encouraged. By this it is not suggested that our present commitments to smaller sheikhs should be repudiated, but it is considered that we could safeguard their interests just as sufficiently for the future through the intermediary of a titular overlord as at present, if they were given clearly to understand that any injustice on his part would be regarded as a legitimate reason for direct representations to us, This policy should be sufficient to prevent any titular overlord from looking elsewhere for support.

As regards King Hussein, it is suggested that, if and when the Idrisi and the Imam express a willingness to recognize his nominal suzerainty we should encourage him to follow our example by using them as intermediaries in all his dealings with their subjects, and that we should as far as possible discourage him from what seems to be his present policy, i. e. of suborning their underlings by dealing with them direct. These proposals are interdependent since we could not well discourage King Hussein from interfering unless we ourselves were recognized as the supporter of the Idrisi and the Imam. (FO 882/20 Foreign Office to High Commissioner 14/3/1919)

The proposal of the Foreign Office was vigorously accepted but with precaution not only by the officials in Egypt but also in Aden, Major Cornwallis, Director of the Arab Bureau stated that he agreed with the principle to consolidate as many units as possible under one head. He however doubted the outcome of the plan as the question of the nominal suzerainty of King Hussein over the Imam and the Idrisi seemed to be difficult one. The issue depended entirely on the willingness of the Imam and the Idrisi to recognize King Hussein as suzerain. He suggested that British best policy would be first to treat Arabia as a number of federated states, second, to make arrangements with the different princes such as Ibn Sa'ud, the Imam and the Idrisi but not with any lesser units or persons, and finally, to encourage and assist the pilgrimage in every way so as to enhance King Hussein's position as Grand Sharif of the Holy Places.

Stewart, the Resident at Aden too agreed with the overall plan for Arabia and the general policy towards the Idrisi and the Imam. But he also had his own plan. He suggested the first act should be to determine the spheres of the Idrisi in accordance with the promise given by Britain, than those of the Imam, King Hussein and Ibn Sa'ud. When this process of delimitation was completed he suggested cautiously encouraging the recognition of the nominal suzerainty of King Hussein by the Idrisi and the Imam.

Sir Reginald Wingate replied by stating that he concurred entirely with the Foreign Office's proposal, namely in regard to the Idrisi and the Imam. In relation to overall plan for Arabia, he commented that "if we get the mandate for Arabia, Hejaz, Asir, Nejd and Yemen should each be defined so as to include all arrears as its titular overlord could effectively control in any way.

On receiving counter proposal from Egypt, the Foreign Office agreed that it was now urgent and important to make a treaty with the Imam before the Peace Conference in Paris as the British position would be stronger if a treaty already existed. It should be observed that British mission to the Imam became a key factor in the opinion of the Foreign Office in adopting the overall plan for the post-war settlement in Arabia. The Foreign Office instructed the High Commissioner to open negotiations.

You should therefore without delay dispatch Colonel Jacob to open

preliminary discussions. He should explain to the Imam that His Majesty's Government do not intend to interfere in internal matters but are anxious to see the separation and discord in Arabia superseded by principles of cohesion and co-operation. They realise that this policy can be successful only if it has the goodwill of the autonomous rulers of Arabia through whom they propose alone to deal. Excluding the Aden Protectorate, the autonomous rulers in question are King Hussein, Imam himself, Ibn Saud, Sultan Shehr Mokalla and the Idrisi who has late earned for himself by his assistance during the war to the allied cause a position which His Majesty's Government propose to recognize.

With a view to establishing permanent friendly relations between these rulers His Majesty's Government have decided to invite them to conclude simultaneous treaties. By these they will all of them mutually recognize independent of the others and undertake to submit all questions of boundaries other cause of dispute to British arbitration in the first place.

As regards the relations between King Hussein and the other overlords Colonel Jacob should also sound the Imam making it clear that in no case will His Majesty's Government support any claim of one autonomous ruler except with the concurrence and at the desire of both parties. At present nothing should be said on the question of relations with other powers. Colonel Jacob, if it is raised, should take the line that is clearly desirable in the best interest of Arabs themselves that they should accept the same referee and that there is no question of any other power claiming the traditional position of His Majesty's Government as friend and protector of the Arab so far as he is aware.

After the establishment of his satisfactory relations on the above lines he may proceed to a guarded discussion of boundaries professing himself ready to do what he can to support the Imam claims but stating that he can make no definite pronouncement because he is not authorised to do so. (FO 882/20 Foreign Office to High Commissioner, 24/5/1919)

With the above message Jacob left for Sana'a but because of fear felt by the Quhrah tribe, that is was intended to hand over the whole southern Tihamah to the Imam, he was arrested at Bajil. This event left the question of Arab-British relations unsettled for a number of years to come.

It becomes evident that in modern times West realizes to use diplomacy together with their mighty military power in the episode of rivalries between the Muslims and the West. British diplomacy won the day as the Arabs joined them in the course of war against their fellow Muslims, the Ottomans. Through British promise and material assistance the Ottomans failed to win the hearts of the Arabs. Europeans, the West and their allies understand the strength of Islam and they move very careful not to arouse Muslim feeling by separating as much as possible any involvement of Islam in their conflict with the Muslims. They showed their inclination towards Muslims through diplomacy, moral and material assistance. They have done it in the past and there will be repeated

again. They too understand the real meaning and strength of jihad and endless efforts were made to avoid the usage of any Islamic strength. And at the same time they tied up Muslims with the concept of Islam as a religion of peace and they are friends of the Muslims. These measures provide them with a free hand to materialize their design in the Muslim world in modern times. This is a new phase of relation between the West and the Muslims.

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