BRITISH INTERESTS IN PALESTINE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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THIS paper deals with certain aspects of a wider subject which the present writer has recently been investigating under the auspices of the University of London. The wider subject is the British cultural influence in the Near East in the nineteenth century. Palestine is dealt with here because British activities were mostly concentrated there. It is impossible to do justice even to this narrower subject in a short article. Without therefore attempting a general survey of the history of Palestine from Napoleon to Allenby, it is proposed to isolate certain British interests for closer study based on original documents. Nor is it necessary to go into the details of central and provincial Ottoman administration. It is essential, however, to understand both the internal autonomy granted to religious communities and the "capitulatory" rights of European powers in the Ottoman Empire.

The non-Muslim subjects of the Empire were organized, for administrative purposes, into religious communities, with subdivisions within each community (*millet*) according to the denominational divisions. The head of the community, patriarch or rabbi, was answerable to the Turkish governor, but had wide powers over the members of his community, not only in religious matters but also in secular affairs. This system, contrary to popular belief, did not originate with the Turks, nor was it developed, as might be supposed, during the period of their decline. The system was first adopted by the Arabs during the first century of Islam, following their conquest of territories previously dominated by Byzantium. It gradually assumed a definite form and became a recognized pattern of Muslim rule over peoples with a revealed book.

Following the same practice, but also in this case to foster trade, the Sultans of Turkey granted, at the height of their power and glory in the early sixteenth century, certain privileges first to Venice and then to France. These privileges included, within limited areas, exemption from customs-duties and local taxes, and judicial extraterritoriality which placed the subjects of these states under the jurisdiction of their consular courts. These privileges were enshrined in the famous Capitulations, a term which originally meant simply the chapters (*i.e.*, *capitula*) of the agreement containing these privileges, but later on assumed the meaning of extra-territorial rights of foreigners in Turkey.

As the power of the Sultans declined, the privileges they granted almost as acts of condescension became embarrassing and humiliating rights, which in the course of time had to be conceded, not always willingly, to other powers. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire was in decay, and the capitulatory powers were competing to

increase their influence over its internal and external policy. The original agreements were occasionally revised, almost always to the advantage of the European powers. As the Holy Land, Palestine has always been an object of interest to Christendom, but for a variety of reasons this interest has from the beginning of the nineteenth century been intensified. France, Russia and Great Britain were the three major powers directly interested in Palestine. France had acquired the right to protect the Latin communities, and likewise Russia to protect the Greek Orthodox communities. At first there was no indigenous Protestant community, but gradually, and largely through the efforts of the English missions, a small Protestant community was formed and recognized as such by the Ottoman authorities. Although Britain did not assume the formal rôle of protector of this community, she did in fact better by trying to balance the Russian and French influence.

British interests in Palestine during the century were more numerous than is commonly known. On assuming the mandate for Palestine after the First World War, Great Britain certainly did not come to a country in which British people and interests were not known already. That event was indeed only the culmination of a century of intensive activity, political, religious, educational and philanthropic. Of all this it is intended to deal only with the first three because their emergence and development were so closely interdependent.*

Such was the prestige of Great Britain in the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the century following the defeat of Napoleon before the walls of Acre, which was defended from the sea by Sir Sidney Smith, that both the Orthodox and the Latin communities were seeking her protection: the Latin because of the rupture of relations between Turkey and France, and the Orthodox apparently because of Sir Sidney's presence on the spot. "The public has been much occupied," wrote Lord Elgin, the British Ambassador in Constantinople, on January 11, 1800, "by an expedition which Sir Sidney Smith has made from the Grand Vizier's camp to Jerusalem." Sir Sidney set out from Jaffa escorted by his own marines and a hundred Turks. On arrival at Jerusalem he went to the convent of St. John, and later marched in procession to the Holy Sepulchre. After three days he returned to the camp. "The Patriarch of Jerusalem [*i.e.*, Orthodox Patriarch, whose seat was still in Constantinople] has this day applied to me," continued Lord Elgin, "for a letter of recommendation to Sir Sidney Smith to request that officer to extend his protection to the Greeks as well as to the Roman Catholics at Jerusalem. . . ."†

Meanwhile in England the shock of the French Revolution, the Evangelical Revival and other factors were contributing to a remarkable missionary movement. In 1799 the Church Missionary Society was formed, and just after Waterloo it sent a representative to open a Mediterranean mission in Malta. In 1809 the London Society for Promoting Christianity

* The following account is based mainly on the (British) Foreign Office diplomatic and consular papers preserved in the Public Record Office and on the records, both printed and manuscript, of the missionary societies concerned preserved at their headquarters in London.

† Foreign Office (Turkey), 78/28 in the Public Record Office, London.

amongst the Jews (known for short as the London Jews Society) was formed and soon started exploring possibilities in the Near East and Palestine. One of the main aims of the first Society was the conversion, through education and welfare, of the Muslims and the Eastern Christians to Protestantism, while the second Society aimed exclusively at the conversion of the Jews.

Missionary work did not, however, suit the Ottoman Government, who protested that, in the first place, it would undermine the state religion, and, in the second place, it would cause internal dissension and strife among their Christian and Jewish subjects. In reality the Ottoman Government feared that missionary activity was a mere cover for political and territorial penetration in the Empire. Under these conditions little more could be achieved than visits of exploration, contacts with local ecclesiastical heads and distribution of Bibles in the vernaculars, issuing chiefly from a press established for this purpose in Malta. But even this was rendered a risky endeavour by the simultaneous issue of a firman (imperial decree) by the Sultan and a Papal Bull in 1825 forbidding the distribution of these Bibles. "The Eastern Antichrist co-operates with the Western!"* declared Josiah Pratt, Secretary of the Church Missionary Society. This is clearly picturesque language, but it must be stated for the sake of historical truth that the efforts of Sultan and Pope were by no means concerted. The Roman Catholic objection was that these new versions "were corrupted and vitiated," circulated by missionaries described by the *Propaganda de Fide* in Rome as "banditori dell' errore e della corruzione."† On the other hand, the Sultan's order was a measure of administrative expediency, designed to maintain the *status quo* and to prevent sectarian argument, which often led to violence. His objections had nothing to do with religion.

This situation was radically changed in the thirties when the Viceroy of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, defied his suzerain and conquered Syria-Palestine. As in his own dominions, the Viceroy made it easier for Europeans to travel, live and work in Palestine. The missionaries were quick to seize the opportunity. Thus the representative of the London Jews Society, a Dane in Anglican orders, was the first to establish himself in Jerusalem in 1833.‡ Before and after this date missionaries and travellers, but more particularly the former, were agitating for the instalment of a British consular agent in Jerusalem, and for the recognition of the Protestants as a community under their own spiritual head. In 1826 the committee of the L.J.S. was urged by its delegate, after a visit to Palestine, to endeavour before sending missionaries there "to effect something with the view of obtaining a resident consul or protector, in behalf of the visitors and European settlers at Jerusalem. . . ." He goes on to say: "My last visit to the Holy City has convinced me more than ever of the duty of attempting to engage our friends to see this desirable object put into execution."§ Let us note that the recommendation is dated 1826.

* E. Stock, *History of the Church Missionary Society*, i, p. 231. London, 1899.
† London Jews Society, *Proceedings*, 1825, pp. 107-8, 100, 102.
‡ F.O. 78/874 (dispatch dated November 7, 1851, from Consul Finn to Canning).
§ L.J.S., *Proceedings*, 1826, p. 25.

Before that date consuls were employed solely by the Levant Company; after it they were appointed by the Government. The difficulty for the British Government was that consuls had hitherto resided only at seaports like Alexandria, or at important centres of land communication like Aleppo. Jerusalem was neither. Besides, it was a Muslim holy city, and hoisting foreign flags was likely to arouse trouble or at least protest.

But repeated representations, supported by influential people like the Earl of Shaftesbury, produced the desired effect. Palmerston took action. In 1833 he drafted a dispatch to the British consul in Alexandria instructing him to recommend to Muhammad Ali's favour British subjects "settled for commercial purposes in various parts of Syria." The consul replied that "His highness assured me with great earnestness that his anxious wish and desire was to give to British subjects every support, in order to cultivate his relations with us, and to show his respect to His Majesty's Government, and that every necessary order had been given by him in Syria to that effect."*

The way to further British interests was now smooth. Accordingly Muhammad Ali was approached to approve the opening of a British Consulate in Jerusalem. He agreed in principle, but refused to sanction the appointment of a consul without the prior issue of a firman by the Sultan, the legal sovereign. This was sought in the usual way. Palmerston's dispatch to Ponsonby, the Ambassador at Constantinople, dated November 11, 1837, states: "H.M.G. having deemed it expedient to appoint a British consul to reside at Jerusalem . . ." and goes on to instruct the Ambassador to say that "frequent complaints have been made to H.M.G. by English travellers who have been at Jerusalem that in a place which they felt so much interest in visiting there was no British consular agent to afford to them the ordinary assistance which British travellers expect to meet with in places of considerable note."† Jerusalem is no doubt always a place of considerable note, but it was then not less so in the eyes of the Ottoman Government. The request for a British Consulate was being pressed simultaneously with another for the erection of a Protestant church in that city, requests which the Pasha of Egypt was prepared to comply with only with the prior sanction of the Sultan. After repeated representations the Sultan yielded, and recognized William Young as British vice-consul in Jerusalem. The new diplomat took up his residence in that city in 1838.

Considerable pressure was brought to bear on the Porte with regard to the erection of a Protestant church. But meanwhile Muhammad Ali's revolt against his master became, for a variety of reasons, a subject of concern to the European powers, which ended in their intervention and the restoration of Syria-Palestine to the Sultan. The occasion was an ideal one for speculation as to the future of the Holy Land, and it was proposed to constitute Palestine and the Holy Places as a Christian enclave under international control, but this form of control was as difficult to achieve then as it has proved to be since.

The restoration of Palestine to his control, in which Great Britain

* F.O. 78/227 (Consul Campbell's dispatch dated July 20, 1833).
† F.O. 78/300.

played a major part, made the Sultan more amenable to British proposals. Within ten years three major concessions were wrung from him: approval of the erection of a Protestant church, acceptance of a Protestant bishop in Jerusalem and recognition of the Protestants as a new religious community. Writing to Ponsonby on February 8, 1841, Palmerston refers to the expediency of taking advantage of "the present state of affairs in the Levant to obtain from the Porte a formal assent" (*i.e.*, to the erection of the church), and concludes that this "is a matter in which H.M.G. take a deep interest, one in which they are extremely anxious to succeed." And succeed they did.

The major problem, however, was the Bishopric. The Church Missionary Society, which was still hovering round, but not yet operating in, Palestine, was thinking of Malta as a seat of a bishop of the Church of England for the Mediterranean. The Society had "earnestly promoted this important measure."* But King Frederick William IV of Prussia, who was deeply interested in the missions and church unity, proposed through a special envoy, both to the British Governnment and to the Archbishop of Canterbury, the establishment in Jerusalem of an Anglican Bishopric to which all Protestant missionaries and residents, British or Prussian, would be attached. The proposal aroused much discussion and controversy, both in church and state circles, but in the end it was adopted, and legislation was introduced in the House of Lords by the Archbishop of Canterbury to cover it. In a confidential dispatch dated September 27, 1841, Palmerston wrote to Ponsonby that "it had been decided that a Bishop of the Church of England should be sent out to Jerusalem, specially consecrated for the purpose of exercising his ecclesiastical functions in Palestine. . . ."†

Of all the demands made on them this was the most perplexing for the Ottoman Government. Legally, the Bishop of Jerusalem was the Greek Orthodox Patriarch. Numerically, resident Protestants were still a mere handful. Administratively, the Government had to cope with the violent opposition to Protestant missionaries offered not only by the Eastern Churches but also by the Jews. In the same confidential dispatch from Palmerston already quoted occurs a passage, obviously framed to allay Turkish fears, as regards missionary work among the Muslims. "This Bishop," it runs, "will, like any other British or Prussian subject, have a right to reside in any part of the Turkish dominions, and the spiritual functions which he will exercise will in no way whatever interfere with the Mahometan subjects of the Sultan. . . ." The difficulty of conflict of jurisdiction was also ironed out, in form at least. The new dignitary was to be called "Bishop *in* Jerusalem" and not "Bishop *of* Jerusalem." After considerable delay, and rather sharp diplomatic exchanges, the Ottoman Government agreed, and the new Bishop entered Jerusalem on January 21, 1842. Recognition of the Protestants as a community was the next logical step; this recognition was formally granted in 1850. According to its terms, members of other Christian communities who became Protestant automatically came under the jurisdiction of the head of their new community. Previous to this year such persons were in a very

* C.M.S., *Annual Report*, 1840-41, p. 47. † F.O. 78/429.

awkward position, not belonging legally to the community they left nor to the community they joined.

Thus were the foundations laid. By 1850 British interests included the Consulate, the Bishopric, and the new Protestant community. From now on British activities, centred on these, became increasingly intensified and diversified. Thus, for example, the Church Missionary Society entered the field with an ambitious scheme of missionary work, through teaching, preaching and welfare, among both the Muslims and the Eastern Christians, while the London Jews Society continued its efforts on similar lines among the Jews. Other missionary organizations followed, and still more organizations of various description and interests appeared on the scene. The second half of the century is indeed so crowded with significant and interesting British activities that it is impossible to cover more than a fraction of them. They may, however, be conveniently indicated by taking some characteristic problems and episodes.

One of the first problems that had to be faced was the question of the nationality of the converts to Protestantism, especially if they were ordained in the Church of England. Thus a priest, a converted Jew, applied to the British Consul-General in Beirut for a British passport and stated he was a British subject, but when pressed to name the place of his birth in Great Britain he said he was "a British subject by spirit." The first Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem, himself also a converted Jew, took up the case with the consul, and wrote: "A clergyman ordained in the Church of England may not be a *native* of Great Britain, but he must be a *subject* of the Crown, having in his ordination vow sworn allegiance to Her Majesty. . . . I have no doubt you acted on instructions, but there must be an alteration made in the law. I have written to the Archbishop on the subject. . . ."

But the Bishop was here against a versatile consul who later acquired fame in the Crimea and the Indian Mutiny and rose to be a field-marshal. Colonel Hugh Rose, as he then was, wrote in a dispatch to Aberdeen dated December 26, 1843,* that the proposed alteration in the law would mean in effect to empower a British ecclesiastical authority to "annul all the rights of sovereignty and nationality" of foreign powers whose subjects might be converted. Rose added very shrewdly that this would also "diminish the respect which is due to disinterested conversion."

British protection was of course a great attraction in a country where the unprotected practically had no rights. Despite propaganda by their priests that "England is Protestant and not Christian,"† some Eastern Christians were anxious to become Protestant out of conviction, but there were others who sought thereby advantages, like the Nazareth notable who wanted to pay off his debts and offered to become Protestant if he was paid a certain amount, or like the Jerusalem villager who claimed exemption from military service on the ground that he was brought up as a Protestant, or like the Muslim Āghā who fell from favour with the Turkish authorities and asked the missionaries to declare him a Protestant.

The Consulate, with its agencies, was a real force in the land, deriving

* F.O. 78/537.

† F.O. 78/444 (dispatch from Consul Young to Palmerston dated January 25, 1841)

its prestige from the immense influence which successive British ambassadors exercised in Constantinople. But it must not be supposed that the influence of the Consulate was restricted to politics. There is ample evidence to indicate that it took interest in practically every aspect of the life of the country. Thus one consul was interested in the promotion of a cotton plantation, and was also instrumental in establishing a society " for investigation and elucidation of all subjects of interest, ancient and modern, scientific and literary, belonging to the Holy Land," which may be considered as the precursor of the Palestine Exploration Fund, a learned body which is still flourishing and doing distinguished work.

The same consul opened a new tourist way to Petra via Jerusalem. Hitherto English travellers proceeding from Cairo to Jerusalem used to visit Petra on their way, and disputes with local chiefs and guides were frequent. Because of this state of affairs the consul himself undertook the journey " to prove to the people that British subjects are not forgotten even in Petra." His plan was to make Jerusalem, instead of Cairo, the starting-point of the trip to Petra, and for this purpose he concluded an agreement with an influential local chief who contracted to guarantee the safety of British travellers against payment of a fixed sum per head.

As evidence of the political influence of the Consulate suffice it here to refer to a few typical cases. Mention has already been made of the case of the Āghā who fell from the favour of the Ottoman Government; the same Āghā offered his obedience to the Government through the British consul as a guarantee of personal safety. On a notable occasion the consul exerted his influence to replace the Mufti of Nablus. The occasion was this: a Greek Orthodox mob attacked the new Protestant school in their town, instigated or connived at, according to the consul's dispatch dated November 18, 1853, addressed to Clarendon, by the Muslim majority. The consul concludes his dispatch giving details of this incident with this passage: " The fanatical Mufti of Nablus is not a learned man, and is considered a plebeian parvenu among the old Arab families of that town; at the same time a really learned man is living there whose ancestors for several generations have been muftis of Nablus, and he is a good friend of the Protestants. I intend to recommend him to that office instead of the present man."*

This same consul was a keen observer of what other consuls were doing. He took special interest, for example, in appearances which made for pomp in an oriental environment. He deplored, in many dispatches, that his residence was smaller, his servants and clerks less in number, and his entertainment allowances lower, than those of consuls of other major powers. Once he addressed a dispatch to Malmsbury dated June 21, 1852, in which he said that the Russians had added a new room to their consulate to serve as a prison, but he quickly added in comment, " a very desirable appendage to any consulate here."

The British consul in Jerusalem, whoever he may have been, must have felt himself in the position of an Ottoman minister, if not higher. " During my recent journey to Safad and Acre," runs one dispatch, " I was frequently visited at my various halting-places on the road

* F.O. (Turkey) 195/369.

by Moslem inhabitants of the neighbouring villages, who recounted to me their many grievances" (*i.e.*, against the Turkish administration).* Nor was this an isolated incident. Dispatches as late as the seventies and eighties of the last century occasionally contained such passages as "effendis recently called upon me to complain of the proceedings of Raouf Pasha," or "a memorial [was] addressed to me by the notables of Kerak." Even in 1901 the consul, this time acting on instructions from the Foreign Office, interfered to prevent the transfer on official business of a local lawyer because "his absence would cause delay prejudicial" to the case of a British subject for whom he was acting as counsel.

It remains to illustrate in the same way British educational activities. From the late thirties onwards, the London Jews Society was experimenting with the Christian education of Jewish converts, and the first Bishop established a short-lived Hebrew college. Serious work, however, began with the second Bishop in the late forties and in the early fifties of the century. Writing in 1849, the Bishop states: "The Diocesan Boarding School under an English lady was opened on 10th November, 1847, with 10 or 12 children of both sexes."† The school was reorganized in 1851-52, and was divided into two sections, one for boys and one for girls, in two separate houses. There were then some ninety pupils on the register: fifty Christians, forty Jews and two Muslims.

This school is the precursor of the institution which became famous as Bishop Gobat School in Jerusalem. But other schools in Nablus, Salt, Nazareth, etc., followed. From 1851 onwards the Church Missionary Society supplemented these Diocesan schools by opening new schools of its own. The character of all these schools, whether they were open for Arabic-speaking or Hebrew-speaking children, or for children speaking other tongues, is unmistakable. The sole purpose of education was religious, and on the evidence of the ecclesiastical or the missionary authorities of these schools the Bible was the main text-book and the Word of God formed the central core of the curriculum. Everything else was incidental, or intended simply to further this principal religious aim.

In his old age Gobat was fond of commenting, in his Annual Letters or public speeches, on his early pioneering in education. Thus in 1863 he said: "When I opened my first school in Jerusalem, seventeen years ago, there was not a single school in Palestine deserving the name, except among the Mohammedans; now we have eleven Protestant schools."‡ While both the Greek Orthodox and the Latin communities may dispute—as indeed they did dispute—the validity of this statement, it cannot be denied that the opening of Protestant schools was one cause for the Orthodox and Latin religious authorities to open more schools for their own communities. The process assumed the form of keen competition which, though beneficial on the whole, tended to make the local Christian inhabitants too

* F.O. 78/2494 (dispatch from Consul Moore to Ambassador Sir Henry Elliot dated February 17, 1876.)

† L.J.S., *Proceedings*, 1849, containing Bishop Gobat's Annual Letter dated October 28, 1848, p. 5.

‡ L.J.S., *Proceedings*, 1864, containing Gobat's Annual Letter dated November 14, 1863, p. 16.

dependent upon foreign assistance in their educational, medical or welfare activities.

But on the whole Christian educational activity was one of the factors which prompted the Ottoman Government to introduce an education law and to organize a new school system, modelled on the French secular one and parallel to the old Muslim religious system. As the Greek Orthodox and Latin children were gradually withdrawn, or lured away, from the Protestant schools to their own, so were the Muslim children called away, though not entirely, from all the foreign schools, Protestant or otherwise, to enrol in the new state foundations. A British diplomat interpreted the new Ottoman educational policy as an evidence of the movement of Muslim revival.* But the situation was further complicated by the interest which two major powers, France and Russia, took in the matter. Each of the two powers sponsored and financed a virtual educational system in Palestine, the one for the Latin and the other for the Orthodox community. The British establishments, however, remained private institutions supported entirely by voluntary contributions.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, therefore, there was in the educational field a keen competition to capture the mind and, if possible, the soul of the youth of the country of all races and faiths. The sharp contrast in the mentality and loyalty of many young men and women that was coming to the surface during the first decade of this century was due in no small measure to this educational chaos, which made no provision for a common orientation, except in the case of the majority of Arab Muslims who patronized the old religious schools or the new state schools or both.

But English schools continued, in spite of all difficulties, to be patronized by Arab children, both Christians and a small number of Muslims, and by Jewish children. The attitude of the Ottoman Government hardened, however, from the eighties onwards. The authorities, for example, insisted that foreign schools, the English included, must obey the new education law and its regulations or suffer closure. Following the closure of some schools in Syria-Palestine in consequence of putting this policy into action, representations were made on the subject to Salisbury, and labelled rather crudely as "religious intolerance in Turkey." But the British Ambassador at Constantinople had justly observed about the closure of the schools: "I believe this to be very much due to their [*i.e.*, Protestant school authorities] neglect to observe the rules and regulations laid down by the Ottoman Government . . . and their general failure to meet the wishes of the authorities as far as may be in their power."†

In 1886 the number of English schools within the consular district of Jerusalem was 57, with 96 teachers and 2,232 pupils (including 993 girls). The surprising fact that emerges from the dispute over the validity of the new Ottoman law is contained in a minute accompanying the Ambassador's dispatch of March 19, 1887, which reads, in part, as follows:

* F.O. 78/4172 (dispatch from Consul-General Dickson to Ambassador Sir William White dated Damascus, March 21, 1887).

† F.O. 78/4172 (dispatch dated June 5, 1886).

". . . it seems that the action of the authorities in closing the schools would be perfectly legal, more especially that none of the teachers hold diplomas or certificates, with the exception of one lady who holds an English certificate." The Foreign Office minute on this dispatch and minute, seen and initialled by Salisbury with his usual "S," states: "This is a most perplexing state of things. . . . . We can only let them go on their own risk. I daresay these 'unfortunate females' will succeed in braving the Turk in spite of Article 129" (*i.e.*, of the Ottoman Education Law).

No attempt at the evaluation or interpretation of the British interests has been made above, but the fact of their presence may be conveyed in the picture of Sir Sidney Smith's expedition to Jerusalem in 1800, followed by the missionary, consular and educational activity. There were to be several memorable and glorious entries by distinguished British personalities into Palestine and the Holy City, notably that of the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) and of Prince George (later George V), and last of all that of General Allenby in the First World War.

But when it came to the departure of the last British High Commissioner on the termination of the mandate, the exit was more memorable than glorious. Here is the picture as drawn by his Chief Justice: ". . . Of all the nations that had crossed the Palestinian scene the one that had come with the highest hopes was to last the shortest time. . . . In the early hours of the morning the mournful processions of what was left of the British Administration set out on its last journey. . . . There seemed nothing left to do but weep, but weep I could not, because I was too conscious of the rebuke of Boabdil, who with withering scorn told her husband, weeping over his lost Alhambra, to cease to regret like a woman what he could not defend like a man."*

* Sir William Fitzgerald, "The Holy Places of Palestine in History and in Politics," *International Affairs*, No. 1, January, 1950, pp. 9-10. Sir William's facts about Alhambra are correct, though he confuses the personalities. Boabdil is, of course, a corruption of the Arabic Abu 'Abdillah, the name of the last prince of Granada. The rebuke was administered to him by his mother, 'Aisha.