British Diplomacy

and the Armenian Question,

from the 1830s to 1914

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Preface

The fate of Western Armenia—commonly referred to as "The Armenian Question"—is a key issue in the modern history of the Armenian people. It emerged as a factor in international politics in the wake of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78. As an integral part of the Eastern Question, the Armenian Question became a subject of bilateral and multilateral discussions between the Great European Powers—Great Britain, Russia, Germany, France, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. For the European countries, especially Britain, the issue was viewed through the prism of their interests in the Near East and as a tool to assert influence over the decaying Ottoman Empire, as well as to stake a claim over its dominions. In the years that followed, the term "Armenian Question" would signify the historical challenges to Armenia and as such, come to have a broader ideological meaning and scope. Political Armenology uses the term "Armenian Question" to signify the implementation of reforms in Western Armenia, the establishment of autonomy, liberation of Armenia from foreign domination, unification of two parts of Armenia, reestablishment of an independent Armenian state on the Armenian Plateau, as well as the Armenian national liberation movement, and international efforts to achieve recognition and condemnation of the Armenian Genocide.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire—at the time the largest sovereign state in the Near East—became an object of competition between the major European powers. Guided by their national interests, each of the powers strove for political and economic domination of the empire while defending the principle of its territorial integrity. The preservation of the status quo in Turkey eventually metamorphosed into a senseless, irrelevant principle obscuring the long-term processes of ethnic and religious divisions and administrative decay in the Ottoman Empire.

Britain, as the major power of the nineteenth century, assumed a major role in the international politics of the Near East. From the 1830s until the years before the First World War, the British priorities were consistent and predict-

able: asserting Britain's economic and political influence over Turkey while protecting its territorial integrity from encroachment by other powers, most notably Russia. While Russia asserted, with equal consistency, its right to protect the Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire, British policy was to press for internal reforms in Turkey that could strengthen it economically and militarily, achieve equality between, and prosperity for, the Christian and Muslim communities, and suppress the national yearnings of non-Turkish peoples.

The British policy of pressing for reforms from above did not improve the lot of the non-Turkish groups, including the Armenian people, and in fact, the situation in Ottoman provinces populated by the Armenians deteriorated steadily. To remove the threat of potential European intervention that the Armenian Question posed, Abdulhamid II's government in 1894–96 took the radical step of carrying out persecution and large-scale massacres of the Armenian population. Twenty years later, the successors to Abdulhamid, the Young Turks, organized and implemented a policy of genocide that in the process of expelling the native people from its ancestral land exterminated one and a half million Armenians.

The author will attempt to present the development and evolution of British foreign policy making as it impacted on the Ottoman Empire and its Armenian population and other ethnic elements, and he will delineate British diplomatic activities and the British government's role at various stages of the Armenian Question from the 1830s to 1914. British foreign policy is analyzed in the context of international and regional dynamics, against the backdrop of Britain's political system and public opinion, the internal and foreign policy of the Ottoman Government, the state of affairs in Western Armenia, and the Armenian national movement.

This book complements and serves as a prequel to prominent Armenian-Cypriot historian Akaby Nassibian's *Britain and the Armenian Question: 1915–1923* (London, 1984) in documenting the domestic and international policies of the British government related to the Armenian Question in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and makes extensive use of British Foreign Office archival and published materials, and other relevant literature and documents.

The author began his research on the subject in the late 1970s, publishing a monograph in Russian, *Great Britain and the Armenian Question: 1890s* (Yere-

van, 1990), and has used the research materials for articles he has contributed to *Encyclopedia of the Armenian Question* (Yerevan, 1992, 1996) and other monographs and academic publications. The first edition of this book was published in Armenian by the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia in 1999.

The author has made extensive use of national libraries and archives in Yerevan, Moscow, London, Athens, and Washington, D.C., and has collected, researched, and analyzed nearly all British diplomatic correspondence from the period covered in the book. The breadth, scope, and straightforward prose of the British Foreign Office documents, telegrams, and dispatches make them an extremely valuable resource for gaining insight into the making of foreign policy in Britain, the rest of Europe, and the Ottoman Empire, and into the process of reforms in the Armenian-populated provinces, the conditions of Western Armenia's population, and the Armenian national movement. Most of these documents appear here as source material for the first time. The author also draws upon memoirs, academic papers, British Foreign Office Blue Books, and contemporary media publications in Britain and the United States.

The book consists of five chapters, a conclusion, notes, a bibliography, and an index. The endnotes refer to archival or other material to allow the reader to ascertain the origin of the information, and include brief biographic data on the most prominent public figures featured in the book.

Chapter 1. British Policies toward the Ottoman Empire and its Christian Minorities, 1830s–1870s

1. The Formation of Great Britain's Near Eastern Policy

At the turn of the eighteenth century, England had become one of the world's leading industrial and trading nations. England's position vis-à-vis other Powers only improved with the demise of Napoleon's France, in the wake of the Congress of Vienna. Great Britain had also become a major colonial Power, and her colonial designs only intensified in India, China, Afghanistan, New Zealand and Australia by mid-century. England sought to solidify and guard its commercial advantage, and it already possessed an advanced economy that none of its Continental rivals could compete with. These developments led to increased tension in its relations with other European Powers, notably France. The latter, though weaker as a Power, was still a viable commercial and colonial competitor of England, which sought to check French expansionism with the help of Prussia and Austria, while simultaneously keeping both out of Russia's reach. Pursuing active balance-of-power politics, England viewed with distrust other Powers' colonial expansion plans. The aim of the balance-of-power system was to prevent the emergence of a strong power that could single-handedly undermine the international system.[1] England would prevent any European nation from accruing too much power and would alternatively ally with or challenge any player in this system to maintain the overall balance.[2]

The relative importance of the Near East and the Balkans in European diplomacy gradually started to increase in the 1830s, parallel to increasing tensions among the European Powers over their attempt to exercise political and economic domination over various parts of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire was at the crossroads of major strategic and trade routes, and controlling them was, potentially, the key to an overall domination by any

power. These geopolitical developments turned the Ottoman Empire into one of the key elements in the European balance-of-power system.[3]

It is possible to identify two somewhat irreconcilable trends in the Near East policies of the European Powers. On the one hand, the Ottoman Empire's territorial integrity was to be preserved while it was being turned into an economic appendage of the European Powers, that is, a peripheral entity separating Europe from its African and Asian colonies. On the other hand, the European nations would attempt to impose or carve out spheres of influence in the various parts of the Ottoman Empire to prevent their permanent secession as a result of national liberation movements. No matter how conflicting, these two main policies, the second one especially required complete cooperation among all the main players in the European balance-of-powers system, with the commitment to uphold it.[4]

After the end of the Napoleonic wars, Great Britain concentrated on Russia as the greater peril to the European balance of powers. Russian territorial expansion in the wake of the Russo-Turkish wars of the eighteenth century was of serious concern to the British Government, which viewed the newcomer to the European Powers' club with deep suspicion. Although their joint efforts and cooperation in the struggle against Napoleon's France helped mitigate the Russian-British disagreements, the Russian successes in the 1826–28 Russo-Persian War and especially the 1828–29 Russo-Turkish war rekindled the old British mistrust of Russian intentions. The increase in Russia's relative power in the south and its territorial expansion there was viewed as potentially dangerous to the British domination of India.[5] The suppression of the Polish Rebellion in 1830 only galvanized the anti-Russian feelings, but a key turning point was the Egyptian-Turkish disagreement of 1831–33 and the Russian-Ottoman treaty of Unkiar-Skelessi, which was viewed as a major victory for Russian diplomacy, since it was achieved implicitly, as a result of the Russian mediation of the Turkish-Egyptian dispute, rather than on the battlefield. The treaty provided for permanent mutual consultations to ensure "serenity and security" of the contracting parties, as well as for assistance against third party interference. A secret clause in the treaty would require the Turkish authorities to close the Straits to all foreign navy ships should the Russian Government request it to do so.[6]

Russian-Ottoman relations between 1790 and 1850, including the few wars

and direct negotiations between the two Powers, achieved a measure of relative equilibrium in the Near East, Southeast Europe, Asia Minor and South Caucasus, with continued commercial and economic ties, and understanding on a number of issues, such as the Balkan insurrections and the status of the Holy Land.

Russian-Turkish relations, nevertheless, were only one element in the mosaic of international relations and competing interests in the region. The quest of the European Powers to gain a foothold in the region and their attempts to impose a degree of control and influence there indirectly contributed to the deterioration in Russian-Turkish relations. The latest Turkish-Russian treaty, consequently, was a cause of major concern among European Powers and British statesmen.

In the eighteenth century, England was virtually indifferent toward the Ottoman Empire. In fact, England supported Russia during its war against Turkey in 1768–74, if only to uphold the English-Russian commercial ties. The new British policy toward the Ottoman Empire was crafted during what became known as the Palmerston era. During his long tenure as Foreign Secretary and then Prime Minister, Lord Henry John Palmerston[7] was a defining figure in the formulation of British foreign policy. It was best described by him in his famous statement that England "has no eternal allies and no permanent enemies. Our interests are eternal, and those interests it is our duty to follow."[8]

The Near Eastern direction of that foreign policy was a major priority for Lord Palmerston. The scope and content of the policy changed frequently in the decades that followed, yet one key factor remained at its core. Since the early 1830s, the British Government had upheld the principle of the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire and had opposed any program to divide it. In July 1833, immediately after the Russian-Turkish treaty was signed, Palmerston said that formation of new territorial and national entities out of the Ottoman provinces was an issue of great interest to England. He argued that it did not matter whether the Empire was Christian or Muslim, but that the political considerations, namely, preservation of stability, freedom and balance of power in Europe, required that the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire remain intact.[9]

From 1833 to 1839, Palmerston's Turkish policy pursued the following

objectives: (a) check Russian interference in Turkish affairs and remove the Russian protectorate over the Empire; b) increase British political and economic influence in the Empire and make it dependent on British support; (c) promote military, economic and legal reforms and improve the position of the Christian minorities of the Empire.

As a proponent of a constitutional system, Lord Palmerston suggested that the Ottoman Empire should be reformed from above—by Sultan's decree. He hoped that the implementation of the reforms would reinvigorate the Ottoman Empire, and help it become a vital and able element in the European balance-of-power system. Palmerston's advocacy of an independent and integral Ottoman Empire was flexible and credible enough to survive intact until 1914.[10]

To neutralize the effects of the 1833 Russo-Turkish Convention, England now pushed for a commercial treaty with the Ottoman Empire that would also promote—under British control—the reforms in the Ottoman government. Acting on Palmerston's instructions, the British Ambassador in Constantinople, Lord Ponsonby, told the Sublime Porte that the British Government and His Majesty the King support the reform process in the Ottoman Empire. The Ambassador pledged to provide new weapons and English instructors to a regular Ottoman Army, invite Turkish cadets to the British academies, and strengthen the Bosphorus defenses. Palmerston worked directly with the Turkish Embassy in London, and, after1836, with the Sultan's Ambassador, Mustafa Reshid Pasha.[11]

The British diplomatic efforts paid off, as the Turkish statesmen and the Sultan accepted the British proposals, viewing alliance with the strongest Power in the world and implementation of the reforms as a necessary first step to secure the survival, preservation and 'Europeanization' of the Empire. The Sublime Porte was also suspicious of the Russian advances toward France, which supported Egyptian Pasha Mohammad Ali.

Upon expiration of the 1820 English-Turkish commercial treaty in 1834, the Sultan's government petitioned London to review the import lists to allow for greater exports of Ottoman products to Great Britain. Accepting Turkish demands, Palmerston, nevertheless, made it conditional on political demands of his own, such as opening the Straits to British military ships, the exclusive

right to supply weapons to Turkey, inviting British military instructors to drill the Ottoman Army, and so on.[12]

The three-year tenure of Mustafa Reshid Pasha in Europe and his role as the Ambassador in London left a mark on his political views and his position on the necessity for reforms in the Ottoman Empire. In his report to Sultan Mahmud II, he not only outlined Palmerston's proposals for the main directions of the reforms, but also presented a detailed program for economic and industrial revival of the Empire. To implement this program, he suggested it was necessary to draw on the experience of the leading European nations, and pull British specialists into the Sultan's service.[13]

The British-Turkish commercial treaty of August 1838 was a turning point for British diplomacy, as well as for the Turkish reforms. The treaty provided for free trade and customs-free maritime navigation through Turkish territorial waters and the Black Sea Straits, as well as an end to monopoly and the forced procurement system. Great Britain was the first European nation that won the right to export agricultural products and natural resources.[14]

While France was the main trading partner of the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the eighteenth century, beginning in the 1820s, Britain became a leading trade partner and source of imports.[15] In 1856, British exports to the Ottoman Empire were 141.3 million francs, and imports 80 million francs (the French exports were 91.9 million and exports, 131.5 million francs).[16] Between 1820 and the 1840s, British trade accounted for 31 percent of the total foreign trade turnover in Turkey, while British exports to the Ottoman empire exceeded those of France by 1.5 times, Austria by 1.9 times, and Russia by nearly 6 times.[17]

Palmerston could not prevent the second Turkish-Egyptian clash, which began in 1840, but he succeeded in having it resolved in favor of the Sultan's government, which eliminated the danger of an exclusive Russian influence over the Ottoman Empire. British diplomacy also resulted in an agreement among the five relevant Powers—and the conclusion of a convention in July 1840—on the use of the Black Sea Straits by Great Britain, Austria, Prussia and Russia, and the Ottoman Empire, followed by another Quintuple Convention in 1841, with France added as another signatory. According to the latter Convention, the Straits were closed to traffic by the military vessels of any country during a non-belligerent period. Thus, the use of the Black Sea

Straits was to be regulated by multilateral treaties, rather than by a mutual understanding between the two concerned parties, Russia and Turkey. Russia was only one of the signatories of the international treaties, with a status equal to others, and consequently lost its right of sole protectorate over the Ottoman Empire.[18]

The Melbourne-Palmerston Whig Ministry was replaced by the Tories' Robert Peel[19] in 1841–46, and George Aberdeen[20] was the new Foreign Secretary. The Russian and Ottoman policies of Great Britain were greatly changed, as Peel was considered a Russophile and Lord Aberdeen was viewed as a sworn enemy of Turkey. Both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary were unhappy with Palmerston's conduct of relations with Russia and Turkey and were anxious to improve British-Russian relations.[21]

As a result, Czar Nicholas I visited England in May 1844. The main issue during negotiations with Peel and Aberdeen was clarification of the two countries' positions on the Ottoman Empire. The parties agreed to have a common position should the Ottoman Empire collapse or be attacked by a third country. They also agreed that Great Britain and Russia would protect the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. Upon returning to Russia, Foreign Minister Karl Nesselrode presented a memorandum to the British government on partition of the Ottoman Empire. The British Government, however, did not accept the Russian Czar's plan, as it did not want to have specific commitments.[22]

In 1846, Peel's government was replaced by the Whig Party's John Russel[23] and Lord Palmerston was once again at the helm of the Foreign Office. His Ottoman policies met serious opposition on a scale far greater than in the 1820s to 1840s. In the decade leading to the Crimean War (1853–56), when Palmerston thought he had secured Liberal support for his foreign policy, an alternative foreign policy-thinking developed in England, which was associated with the ideas and positions of Richard Cobden. Cobden, in an 1835 treatise entitled England, Ireland, and America, had suggested that defense of the Ottoman Empire against the Russians was not in the interests of Great Britain. Another treatise, entitled Russia, published in 1836, criticized the balance-of-power policies of Palmerston, basing his arguments on changing international situation, growing influence of the United States and its policies, collapse of the colonial regime, and the prevalence of the free trade regime.[24]

During the parliamentary debates, he challenged the Foreign Office position on the Ottoman Empire's territorial integrity, calling the Turks an "alien race" unworthy of living next door to European civilization. He called for greater British involvement with the fate of the Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire, and greater correlation between British foreign policy and the interests of the Christian minorities. Cobden argued that civilization would only gain should Constantinople fall into Russia's hands. The official British objectives were to gain influence in the Ottoman Empire and new markets there, and to promote the reforms. In turn, Cobden and his supporters called for greater emphasis on access to markets in Continental Europe and Russia.[25]

Despite growing opposition in Great Britain, Palmerston's position on the Ottoman Empire continued to dominate in the 1830s and 1840s, and in the decades to come.

The occupation of the Danubian Principalities in 1848 and the Balta-Liman Convention signed by the Ottoman Empire and Russia in April 1849, contributed to a further deterioration of Russian-British relations. The Convention that allowed the Sultan to name the rulers of Principalities, after prior consultations with the Emperor of Russia, was viewed by the European Powers as an extension of the 1833 Russian-Ottoman treaty. The British Government was concerned about the Russian troops' presence in the Ottoman Empire, the Russian interference in the internal affairs of the Sublime Porte, and was mistrustful of Russia's support for the Balkan Slav and Greek nationalists. Lord Palmerston was ready to take measures to prevent an undesirable turn of events, and the opportunity presented itself when Czar Nicholas I demanded extradition of the Polish and Hungarian revolutionaries who had taken refuge in the Ottoman Empire. In an official statement, Lord Palmerston said that extradition of political émigrés would be tantamount to a complete Russian subjugation of Turkey. To prevent this from happening, and in a move calculated at undermining Russian influence and credibility, Great Britain and France staged military maneuvers in the Straits, which was explicitly forbidden by the 1841 London Convention.[26] In his note of October 1, 1849, to Lord Palmerston, the Ottoman Chargé in London, Keberesle Mehmed Pasha expressed hope that Great Britain, as a friendly nation, would be supportive of the Sublime Porte as far as its honor and dignity as an independent state were concerned.[27]