

## RELIGION & POLITICS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

This Strategic Research Initiative concentrates on the interaction between religion and politics that has always served as a crucial determinant in the evolution of state and society in Turkey and the Black Sea region across time. Political ways of mobilising for, maintaining and contesting leadership and authority have often been expressed and transmitted through the use of religion. This theme has at times also merged with discussions on tradition and modernity as well as change and continuity regarding the development of state and society. In the Turkish context, this has not just influenced the evolution of the domestic environment and political systems but also had an impact on Turkey's international standing and behaviour. Likewise, the balance between religion, state and society has also accompanied processes of state formation and nation building for other countries around the Black Sea, including during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

### **Understanding British-Ottoman relations at the twilight of the Ottoman empire, 1880–1922: Winston Churchill and the Ottoman empire**

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The British and Ottoman empires had developed a unique relationship by the latter half of the 19th century. Years of diplomatic relations which oscillated from reluctant alliances to outright hostility had left the relations between the two powers in a state of confusion and incoherence. In London, British diplomatic policy with regards to the Ottoman empire was caught in the political struggles between the Conservative and Liberal parties, the imperial tensions of London and its imperial holdings in Asia and Africa, the prejudices of orientalism and the powerful personalities of the political elite. In Constantinople, Ottoman policy concerning Britain was subject to the major debts of the empire, the tensions between the increasingly weak sultan and the rapidly westernising Turkish population, the spectre of pan-Islamism and that of increased nationalism in the Ottoman peripheral regions in the Middle East. Given the significant role that Britain played in the Middle East in the aftermath of the First World War, it is important to understand the relations between the two empires and how those relations eventually collapsed into war.

This research project, which is generously sponsored by the British Institute at Ankara, seeks to create a better and more nuanced understanding of British-Ottoman relations. It covers specific events in British-Ottoman relations at the twilight of the Ottoman empire, 1880–1922, and the major personalities who helped shape British policy concerning the Ottoman empire during this period. Additionally, it also seeks to create a research network of scholars with expertise in British diplomatic history, Ottoman diplomatic history

and Middle Eastern history. Making extensive use of the Ottoman archives in Ankara and Istanbul, our aim is to raise awareness of Turkish academic resources among British scholars while exploring the underutilised British diplomatic resources concerning the Ottoman empire.

A major and perhaps unexpected source of archival information has been the Churchill Papers, located in Churchill College, Cambridge. Winston Churchill played a role in shaping British-Ottoman relations prior to the First World War and, afterwards, he was integral to British diplomatic policy with Turkey and the restructuring of portions of the former Ottoman empire in the Middle East. Since Churchill remains one of the most studied personalities of the 20th century, it was surprising to find so much relatively unexamined archival evidence concerning his relationship with and attitude toward Turkey and the Ottoman empire. While the majority of research on this topic focuses on Churchill's role in the attempted naval conquest of the Dardanelles, the unsuccessful Gallipoli campaign and his wartime disdain for the Ottomans, a complete review of the documents and photographs tell something of a different story. The larger picture indicates that Churchill's views of the Ottoman empire were a unique blend of Victorian orientalism, geopolitical strategy and genuine respect and friendship. Moreover, the archives reveal that Churchill's anger towards and disregard for Turkey and the Ottoman empire was largely confined to the First World War.

It should be no surprise that Winston Churchill held a relatively positive view of the Ottoman empire. His father, Lord Randolph Churchill, was, like most Tories of his day, pro-Turk; he was a Conservative who typically shied away from the British government's more imperialist undertakings. Like many in the Conservative party, Lord Randolph held the view that the Ottoman empire was a useful ally against the Russian empire, which many conservatives feared was trying

to expand its frontiers into Central Asia, threatening the British connection to India. Lord Randolph's position on the Ottoman empire had a lasting effect on Winston Churchill's understanding of British-Ottoman relations. It was, however, by no means the only influence on Churchill's view of the Ottoman empire. After years of British imperial education at Harrow and from a personal relationship with its headmaster, Rev. J.E.C. Weldon, Churchill had developed a strong belief in the 'civilising mission' of the British empire and its Christian religion.

This goes some way in explaining a letter Churchill wrote to his mother on 6 April 1897 in which Churchill chastised the Salisbury government for not taking a more interventionist approach with regards to the policies of the Ottoman empire in Crete, which Churchill believed had led to the massacre of Christians on the island. Furthermore, Churchill argued that Salisbury's foreign policy in relation to the Ottomans was 'not only wrong it is foolish ... because it is unjustifiable to kill people who are not attacking you ... and because it is an abominable action which prolongs the servitude under the Turks of the Christians races'. However, perhaps owing to a combination of his struggle with his increasing atheism (which developed more fully the longer he was stationed in India), his diminishing faith in the tactics used on the British imperial frontier and an insatiable lust for glory, Churchill's position on the Ottoman empire changed dramatically.

Within 15 days he had completely reversed his position and, by 28 April, Churchill had decided to go and fight with the Ottomans *against* the Greeks. This led to an interesting confrontation between Churchill and Ian Hamilton (the future commander of the ill-fated Mediterranean Expeditionary Force) on a transfer boat because, while Hamilton had promised his service to Greece, Churchill had promised his to Turkey. While Churchill's peculiar allegiance to Turkey largely owes to his lust for glory, an additional explanation might be that he inherited a 'Turkophile' attitude from his father. Years later, in his autobiographical *My Early Life* (1930), Churchill recalled the incident, saying that Hamilton was a 'romantic' and was thus 'for the Greeks', while he 'having been brought up a Tory ... was for the Turks'. However, their formal confrontation was not to be, for by the time they reached their port of call at Port Said in Egypt, the war was over. Churchill lamented his lost adventure in a letter to his mother in late May 1897: 'I have reluctantly had to give up all hopes of Turkey as the war has fizzled out – like a damp firework'.

Having served on the Northwest Frontier in India and in Sudan, Churchill came to appreciate the intricacies of the Islamic world far better than many of his contemporaries. Often fighting Islamic jihadists with the aid of British Muslims, Churchill developed a unique respect for the Ottoman empire; he began to see it as a progressive force which could help pacify and civilise the fringe, fundamentalist sects of Islam. For Churchill, this altruistic notion was

accompanied by geostrategic considerations. The first of these was that Churchill believed the Ottoman empire and the British empire had a special bond, as the two 'greatest Mohammedan powers', and that their large numbers of Muslim subjects made the two powers natural allies. In fact, according to a 1910 census, there were approximately 20 million Muslims in Turkey. In British India there were approximately 62 million Muslims and 10 million Muslims in Egypt, making the British empire the largest Islamic power. This, of course, was not lost on Churchill who hoped an Anglo-Ottoman alliance would help pacify Muslims in India who followed the Caliph. The second consideration was far more basic; Churchill hoped to court the Ottomans for an alliance to help shore up the British empire against the Russians (much like his father had done) but also to help protect Britain from the aggressively expansionist German empire.

In July 1910 Churchill took a cruise on Baron de Forest's yacht, *Honour*, which took him to Constantinople where he met Djavid Bey Pasha, the Ottoman Minister of Finance, and the two became fast friends, sharing a correspondence until the First World War. Djavid Pasha introduced Churchill to the Sultan, the German Ambassador, Marschall von Bieberstein, several other leading members of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) movement and its



Djavid Bey Pasha, the Ottoman Minister of Finance, ca 1911



An official government portrait of Winston Churchill as the First Lord of the Admiralty, ca 1914

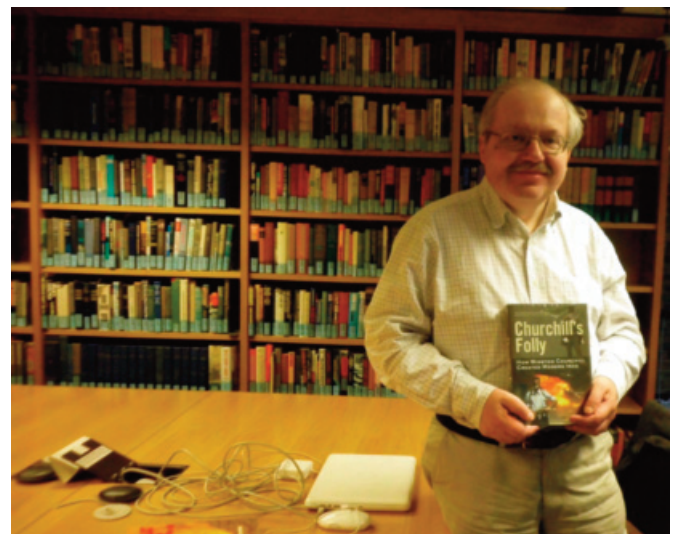
*de facto* leader Enver Bey Pasha, whom Churchill described as ‘a would-be Turkish Napoleon’ and whom he had met a year prior in Germany as a guest of the Kaiser to watch German military manoeuvres. It is remarkable that Enver Pasha and Churchill also struck up a friendship in which they occasionally corresponded even after the war, as late as 1919. While in such powerful company in Constantinople, Churchill suggested that the Ottomans should remain neutral in any European struggle that might arise, urging them to ‘remain the courted party rather than one which is engaged’.

Another opportunity for Churchill to argue the merits of an Anglo-Ottoman alliance came in 1911 during the Italo-Turkish War. Knowing of Churchill’s experience in Sudan, a war correspondent named H.C. Seppings Wright wrote to Churchill explaining that the Italians had committed ‘a wholesale massacre of helpless women, children and old people’ and also reporting on the bravery of the Ottoman soldiers fighting the Italians. This caused great concern for Churchill because just a couple of months earlier he had received a letter from Djavid Bey Pasha, who wrote to gauge Churchill’s position on a formal alliance with Turkey. Churchill at once reported this approach for an alliance to Lord Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, and argued in favour of it saying that ‘Turkey has much to offer us ... we must not forget that we are the greatest Mohammedan power in the world’ and that ‘we are the only power who can really

help and guide her’. Churchill then argued an Anglo-Ottoman alliance would be ‘a clear protest against the vile massacres of woman and little children which have dishonoured the Italian arms’. However, Lord Grey could not be swayed and the alliance never materialised, perhaps resulting in the Ottoman leadership only following Churchill’s earlier advice to remain ‘the courted party’ until November 1914, when Turkey finally joined the Central Powers.

Though Churchill tried to keep the Ottomans from joining the Central Powers, personally writing letters to Enver Pasha, Djavid Pasha and Talaat Pasha, he was unsuccessful, especially after he had personally authorised the sequestration of two dreadnaughts which the British had constructed for the Ottoman navy. Though Churchill’s fits of rage and depressions concerning the Gallipoli campaign are well documented, it is a testament to Churchill’s enduring relationship with Enver Pasha and others that in 1916 Churchill explained to his wife that ‘[a]fter the war I shall be friends with Enver and will make a great Turkish policy with him’. This, of course, never transpired. But Churchill did take up a relatively magnanimous position with Turkey after the war. He continually urged Lloyd George to alter his radically pro-Greek policies and even explained in the final volume of his history of the First World War, *The World Crisis* (1931), that ‘the whole attitude of the Peace Conference towards Turkey was so harsh that Right had now changed sides’.

Thus, while this research project is currently informing essays and monographs on British-Ottoman relations, and diplomatic history as a whole, and building research networks, it has also shed light on forgotten aspects of one of history’s most studied figures and his relationship with the Ottoman empire.



Christopher Catherwood posing at the Churchill archives with his book *Churchill's Folly*, which is about Churchill’s Middle Eastern Policy after the collapse of the Ottoman empire in the aftermath of the First World War