
III. The Afghan Theater

London's 19th-century afghansi

by Joseph Brewda

In June 1877, two months into the Russo-Turkish war, Turkish Sultan Abdul Hamid sent a mission to the Emir of Afghanistan seeking to enlist the Emir's support against Russia.

Between 1869 and 1876, Russia had been steadily encroaching on Central Asia, annexing or reducing to dependency Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand, and advancing toward Afghanistan, and British India. In 1876, London devised its counterstrategy. Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli appointed Lord Lytton viceroy of India, to inaugurate a "forward policy" of seizing southern Afghanistan. The same year, Disraeli sent Austen Henry Layard to Istanbul, to induce the Sultan to join with Britain against the Russian advance. Layard took credit for the Sultan's mission to Kabul, reporting to Disraeli that he had "induced the Sultan to send an envoy to Afghanistan to counteract the Russian policy of the Ameer and to promote that of England. . . . The Turkish Govt, is, no doubt, trying to get up a kind of Mohammedan league or confederation of states in defence of Islam and against Russia."

In a follow-up communiqué, Layard emphasized that "the Sultan still exercises a very great influence over the Mohammedan world and it is greatly to the interest of a government that has some 40 or 50 million of Mussulman subjects to be well with him. We should have no difficulty in making him understand that we have common interests in C. Asia and we have in him a very useful and valuable ally."

Although the Turkish mission failed to win concrete results, it was enough to cause concern in the Russian Foreign Ministry, which complained to the British Ambassador to St. Petersburg, Lord Loftus, that Britain seemed intent on organizing a religious crusade of the Muslim population of Central Asia against Russia. As one Russian strategist voiced his worry, "If, for instance it were possible for any individual to stand at the head of a Mahomedan confederation, such an individual is to be found in the person of the Sultan of Turkey alone, and the existing alliance and cordial agreement over which indissolubly bind Turkey and England, render a protectorate of these powers a serious menace to Russia."

In 1877, simultaneous with the Sultan's mission to Afghanistan, an Ottoman official received a letter from a Persian adventurer named Jamal ad-Deen al-Afghani proposing that he go to Central Asia to incite revolt against Russia.

Al-Afghani promised his Ottoman addressee that he would "emphasize Russia's aims and convey with an eloquent

tongue, that if, God forbid, a calamity befalls the Ottoman government, neither will permanence remain to Mecca, nor majesty to Medina, and not even the name of Islam or a rite of the faith will survive. . . . I will call them to revenge and incite the pride of their Turkish race and carry the banner of the Unity of Islam on my shoulder into those regions also and call to religious war, and as usual not overlook any strategem or ruse, and plant the seed of ardor and zeal within them, always working with the wisest ulama. I have no doubt that all the Muslims will attack the Russians enthusiastically."

Al-Afghani may have been taking dictation, however. At the time he sent this letter, he was living in Egypt, where he was on extremely close terms with the British vice-consul in Cairo, Raphael Borg, who inducted him into the Eastern Star lodge in Cairo, a branch of the United Grand Lodge of England. Only a year after his attempt to put himself at the services of the Ottoman Empire, Al-Afghani was made Grandmaster of the Eastern Star lodge. In 1883, Al-Afghani went on the personal payroll of Wilfred Scawen Blunt, a descendant of a founder of the Bank of England, a political crony of "forward strategist" Lord Lytton, Viceroy of India, and the first chief of the "Arab Bureau," created in 1882 for the purpose of dismantling the Ottoman Empire.

In 1885, Blunt dispatched al-Afghani on a six-month tour of Britain. The purpose of al-Afghani's tour, the Arab Bureau chief wrote, was "to organize an Islamic revolutionary alliance with the British Empire." Al-Afghani's first meeting was with Randolph Churchill, then secretary of state for India and father of the future Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Blunt reports in his diaries that al-Afghani proposed to the elder Churchill: "You must make an alliance with Islam, with the Afghans, the Persians, the Turks, the Egyptians, the Arabs; you must drive Russia back out of Merv to the Caspian sea. . . . You should attack them [Russians] not through Afghanistan but by the other side [i.e., Persia]; then the Mollahs would preach a jihad to join you against the Russians."

Churchill agreed, and al-Afghani was detailed to accompany Sir Henry Drummond Wolff on a special mission to Turkey "with a view," Blunt wrote, "to his exercising his influence with the Pan-Islamic entourage of [Sultan] Abdul Hamid in favour of a settlement which should include the evacuation of Egypt, and an English alliance against Russia with Turkey, Persia, and Afghanistan."