



## British Miscalculations - Muslim Nationalism

### *After-shocks of the German-Ottoman Jihadization of Islam, 1918-25*

Isaiah Friedman (1920-2012) was professor emeritus of history at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Known for his first-rate books on the Great powers, the Palestinian question and the rise of Zionism and Israel, his volume on Germany, Turkey and Zionism, 1897-1918 (Oxford University Press 1977), is seen as a classic, with an edition at Transaction Publishers a decade later as well. Now, in his final book, Friedman tackles the British miscalculations and the rise of Muslim nationalism in the seven years after World War One. He illuminates the spread of [Islamism](#) as an ideology of jihad in the post-war era too.



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Winston S. [Churchill](#) at the end of WWI: War Minister in the era of post-war Mideastern revolts 1919-22  
Colonel Richard H. Meinertzhagen: Agent in Cairo in 1917; delegate at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference

Fourteen chapters focus on why and how the Ottomans allied themselves with Islamism and the Germans, their post-war expectations for a Global Muslim League – Berlin called this old idea "Der Islambund" – and Egypt's 1919 struggle for independence. Friedman illustrates that some leaders of the British Empire became not only the target of an Islamist, Turkish and Bolshevist assault, but soon rivals in an Anglo-Soviet-Nazi fight for sway in the region. Moreover, kinds of nationalism grew too on the edges in Afghanistan and Iran as well, while nationalists and Islamists kept ties to a defeated but still attractive Berlin.

The author stressed the main British miscalculation remained a hope of an end to all the hostilities after World War One. This was not meant to be. On the one hand, Switzerland became a focal point for Islamists like the Arslan brothers, Shakib and Adil (with close ties to Moscow as the Nazis later alleged). This happened not by chance. Berlin planned already before World War One to use neutrals such as America or towns as Geneva, Bern and Lausanne for safe havens of Islamists ridding them of too strict control in their homelands.

But not all plots came to fruition. At the end of [1915](#) the key instigator and fund raiser for Indian Islamists at the U.S. German Embassy in Washington D.C., Franz von Papen, was declared persona non grata and had to leave his post as a military attaché in the US and Mexico after his exposure as a central figure in what was then called the "Hindu-

German Conspiracy." He limited this disaster by serving since 1917 as an officer on the General Staff in Istanbul, where he prevented a young officer of a court martial, and as an officer attached to the Ottoman army in Palestine. Joachim von Ribbentrop returned this favor by making von Papen ambassador in Vienna, during the era of the "Anschluss," and then in Ankara until the war's end. However, to settle Islamists in democracies proved to be effective.

New players, on the other hand, rose by the [leftist](#) movements, which were either infected by Lenin's theory of imperialism or by the [1919](#) founding wave of Communist/Socialist parties in the British Empire. Originally, planners of the Kaiser's foreign policy wanted to incite Islamist revolts in the colonial hinterland to weaken rivals. But the shadowy "furor islamiticus" occurred only after the war's end, and just country-by-country. Mideasterners started to reject British overlords by revolts as the one in Mesopotamia in [1920](#). It was, the reader might conclude, as if most German-Ottoman ploys materialized only after the Great War.

As evidence Friedman cites texts by Richard Meinertzhagen of London's delegates to the 1919 Paris peace meeting (p. 30-31). On May 17, this officer criticized the "immoral principle" of giving to foreigners what was Turkish before. The partitioning of Asia Minor, he opined, "will sound the death knell of the British Islamic Empire." With Egypt in revolt, he explained, Afghanistan proclaiming jihad and trouble in Mesopotamia, the not at all unlikely vision of an Indian mutiny and a general upheaval will eclipse previous efforts to throw off the British yoke in [India](#), and "an almost certain prospect of an Arab-Jew clash in Palestine."

"We," the British visionary Meinertzhagen stressed, "are deliberately inciting Muslims all over the world to unite against the Christian, which is the British Empire, and do not let us deceive ourselves we are unable to meet it [...] if a Pan-Islamic rebellion broke out it would engulf also the Arab East, Egypt, Persia and the Indian continent and, when combined with recrudescence of Turkish military operations, the British position would become precarious." Friedman illustrates that the specter of "Islamist revolts" haunted the British actions, which turned into miscalculations, leading finally to the downfall of the Empire.

The [Islamist plot](#) became a steady blackmailing which contributed to missteps in London, especially in the [1920s](#), after Arabs in Berlin tied their fate with ex-comrades-in-arms on the German right wing like Franz von Papen and Erich Ludendorff. Whereas the former Ottoman officer supported the founding of the 1927 Islam Institute in Berlin by the Euro Islamist Abd an-Nafi' Shalabi, the ex-general promoted Shalabi's unique [1931](#) call to parallel boycott Jews in Jerusalem and Berlin, in his words the "whole Islam against the Jewry."

Aptly, Friedman describes how in the early 1920s Great Britain had to face not only a determined Turkish nationalism (when Mustafa Kemal still toyed with Islamism until he abolished the caliphate in 1924, see the 1923 British intelligence report at the following page), but also the "menacing Islamist rebellions" of Arab and other Islamic people. In that time the Allied coalition was falling apart; the cabinet in London was often split down right in the middle, and the country was hit by multiple crises: revolts or threats thereof in the Middle East; the budget, growing spread of Socialism, unemployment, and on top, Ireland.

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TURKEY.

TURKISH PAN-ISLAMIC POLICY.

From the recent announcement by the Ankara Government Information Bureau that the Ankara Department of Religious Affairs was replacing the Theological Institution by a Council of Ulama, (Heyet ilmiye) under Sheikh Abdul Aziz Shawish, to act as the supreme regulating body in Islamic affairs, to which was to be attached a Council for Judgment in regard to Recognitive questions, it appeared that Mustafa Kemal was placing Pan-Islamism in the forefront of his programme.

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That this is the case is confirmed by the following report, based on official communications from Ankara to the Turkish High Commissioner at Constantinople, and on confidential statements by a Kemalist official who recently arrived in Constantinople with dispatches from Ankara:-

Mustafa Kemal's political organisation, by concentrating on a programme of Islamic unity, hopes gradually to overcome the dissatisfaction created by the abolition of the temporal power of the Khalif, and to strengthen the position of Mustafa Kemal himself.

The avowed object of this policy is to endeavour to secure the complete liberation of all Moslem countries from European domination, to assist them to establish their independence, and to make the Khalifat the basis of a temporal as well as spiritual union amongst them. That is to say, each nation will be completely independent, but will be bound to other Moslem countries by offensive and defensive alliances. For the better co-ordination of Islamic policy, each Moslem country will accord a special representative to the Khalifat, and special Khalifat representatives will be sent to each country in return.

The real object of this policy is to make the Khalifat the recognised guarantor of the independence of every Moslem country, and the basis of union for mutual defence, with the final result

of Turkish hegemony over the whole Moslem world, and the fulfilment of the old Pan-Islamic ideal of both Old and Young Turks.

It is now becoming clear that the Ankara Government by abolishing the Sultanate, hoped to strengthen the religious appeal made to other Moslem countries in the name of the Khalifat, since it appeared that the appeal, if associated with the Sultanate, might arouse fears in these countries for their hard-won independence.

At the same time, according to an independent informant, a high Kemalist official who recently arrived in Constantinople from Ankara, the Kemalists consider that the Western powers would find it difficult to take action against Turkey on the ground of demands for independence on the part of other Moslem countries caused by appeals based on the Khalifat. In the event of complaint under this head, the Turkish Government could always reply that it is quite natural for Moslem countries to desire to be united under their Khalif, but the Turkish Government never interferes in the internal affairs of any other country, and has no desire for territorial acquisition of any kind.

This informant states that the Kemalist leaders, all of whom are filled with the idea of developing the union of Islam, have derived great encouragement from recent developments, especially in Egypt.

Copies to:- F.O. (Eastern Department).  
India Office.  
Colonial Office.

Source: Reports on the Eastern Unrest, 1919-29, Public Record Office, London, Foreign Office 371/9290, Foreign Office 371/7790 [Ankora = Ankara]; Archive of the India Office, Memo to the Prime Minister on the German Influence in Turkey, London, 01/05/1917.

A 1923 British intelligence report: Mustafa Kemal placed Abd al-Aziz Jawish (1876 – 1929 عبد العزيز جاویش) on the top of his Islamism campaign in the caliphate. This Egyptian swayed also Hasan al-Banna. A 1917 report had pointed at Jawish as the 1913 key man to set up Muslim brotherhoods in Arabia and India. Sent by Enver Pasha, he was to found a “pan-Islamic Arab-Indian newspaper in Delhi” with his compatriot Ali H. Wahba for *The Servants of al-Ka'aba* (خدماء الكعبة). There the Indian Mahbub Alam of Lahore cooperated too.

Here one cannot but wonder about two points. Firstly, whether or not there was a real sharp distinction between nationalists and Islamists. And secondly, on the examples that the Irish case set for the [Mideasterners](#). If we accept the notion of multiple identities in a person, it appears that being a Muslim was the overriding one, even if at times people said they are nationalists. As waves of becoming nation states ended in the two decades after World War Two, the faith grew again more prominent in the given set of identities. Incidentally, the 1970s became a decade in which Islamists again stepped to the fore: activist ideologues as in the 1920s. Identity moved flexibly as a [multi-layered form](#). Clear cut Western views of it were questionable as in Islamic regions emerged a stable unity of state and mosque. Thus, where authors often explained “nationalism,” Islamism worked already in the background.

Friedman's also solidly researched the revolt in Mesopotamia, the Greco-Turkish War, the clash in Smyrna [İzmir], and Arabs and Jews in Palestine. Dissolving an Empire was a losing proposition. Much went wrong except the Indian democracy. All the more important is Friedman's view on alternatives. A compelling book by the thoroughness in exploring aspects from conflicting sides; and a must read for those who research the [German-Ottoman jihadization of Islam](#) and its enduring Great War after-shocks. [Wolfgang G. Schwanitz](#)

**Isaiah Friedman:** *British Miscalculations. The Rise of Muslim Nationalism, 1918-1925.* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers 2012. ISBN 978-1-4128-4749-0; XVI, 378 S.