British Influence on the Decline of the Ottoman Empire in the Late Nineteenth Century

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The nineteenth century is seen as the high point of western imperialism.[1] The empires of the so-called 'Great Powers' vied with one another for global dominance, sometimes acting in concert and sometimes in opposition. In many parts of the globe great imperial powers rubbed up against one another or collided like tectonic plates. Along their friable border zones, they grated alongside one another, every so often sending grumbling tremors or clamorous shockwaves through the local regions and occasionally beyond. Sometimes these liminal zones would become flashpoints, either politically or militarily, and, as with plate tectonics, so too one empire might find a part of its periphery unavoidably impelled into a subduction zone; wherein its boundaries began to fragment and disintegrate whilst another imperial power, by force of weight, prevailed and thereby saw its own borders and its areas of influence expanding. Imperial borders were mutable and mobile areas, as much of temporal as of territorial demarcation. Maps and borderlines would have to be re-drawn in accordance with new treaties, new accords, new conventions, and congresses. What happened in one area between two such empires may well have wider political or economic consequences affecting the other great powers as well; and so, these treaties and accords would often have to take into account or accommodate interests and concerns of other powers as well. Such geopolitical shifts and realignments had far-reaching consequences for the populations of contested regions, the repercussions of which are still widely apparent in the regional politics of today's postcolonial era – perhaps none moreso than in the case of

[1] Jane Burbank & Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), Chapter 11

the old Ottoman domains which preoccupied the European powers in the last half of the nineteenth century.[2]

The Ottoman Empire, bridged the eastern European and the western Asian landmasses. It was an old empire established several centuries before the period which will be examined in this essay. Founded sometime around 1300, it had been ruled by an unbroken line of hereditary rulers, the sultans, who were also the caliphs or temporal heirs of the prophet Muhammad and therefore the nominal leaders of the faith of the wider Islamic world. The Ottoman domains incorporated a mixed population of different faiths and ethnicities, and at its height the empire covered extensive regions in three continents – Europe, Asia, and Africa.[3] The British first established official political and economic relations with the Ottoman sultans in 1581 through the Levant Company, and remarkably the Company continued to act in this role until 1804. In its final years, the Levant Company still funded the expenses of the British ambassador residing at Istanbul and a network of consuls stationed throughout the Ottoman realm.[4] By the mid-to-late nineteenth century the British Government had established and managed to exert considerable influence within the Ottoman territories. Indeed, the British were not alone in this, as Caroline Finkel summarises: 'The economic crises of the nineteenth century, coupled with aggressive exploitation and tutelage on the part of industrializing European states, had forced a semi-colonial status on the Ottoman Empire.'[5] In many ways, the Ottoman realm became a nexus

[2] Michael Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 46; Şükrü Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 67-69; Donald Quataert, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire, 1881-1908: Reactions to European Economic Penetration* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), pp. 1-6

[3] Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1923* (London: John Murray, 2005)

[4] Christine Laidlaw, *The British in the Levant: Trade and Perceptions of the Ottoman Empire in the Eighteenth Century* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2010), p. 1

[5] Finkel, *Osman's Dream,* p. 526

which helped to shape diplomatic relations amongst the emerging European powers[6] – but what was to become of the Ottoman Empire itself?

This situation, which came to be known as 'the Eastern Question,' will be the broad subject of this essay, focusing in particular on the changing relationship between the British and Ottoman Empires. I will look at how the Ottoman Empire was perceived by the British (and other European powers); and how the Ottoman's perceived themselves, in terms of a rapidly shifting world order of contesting imperial modernities.

International relations in the Middle East during the nineteenth century were characterised by profound uncertainties regarding the future viability of the Ottoman Empire. As Barbara Jelavich states:

> The so-called Eastern Question, which concerned the fate of this state and its widespread territories, was the single major theme in great power diplomacy in this period. The control of the Ottoman possessions and the central government was constantly the object of discussion, negotiation, controversy, and open warfare between the four major powers, Austria, Britain, France, and Russia, who, after 1871, were joined by Italy and Germany. The dangerous international position of the Ottoman state was a reflection of even more unfortunate internal conditions. From the eighteenth century onward the history of the empire was characterized by lost battles, financial disasters, and administrative chaos, a situation which was to give the great powers further opportunities for interference in and domination over the affairs of the state.[7]

The semi-colonial status of the Ottoman domains was derived from a series of dispensations, commonly known as the 'capitulations,' which were first granted in the late-sixteenth

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[6] A.L. MacFie, *The Eastern Question, 1774-1923* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 1

[7] Barbara Jelavich, *The Ottoman Empire, the Great Powers, and the Straits Question, 1870-1887* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 3

century. The sultans hoped these gracious accords would help to facilitate and encourage foreign trade by granting various nations special privileges, exemptions, and certain rights of 'extraterritoriality' within the sovereign bounds of the Ottoman Empire.[8] Yet over time these privileges came to be seen by the rapidly expanding foreign nations as *rights* which could not be denied to them. Consequently, they became increasingly predatory towards certain diplomatic and economic issues, and, not least, whenever the now much weaker Ottoman Government sought to affirm and assert its own sovereignty. A clear example of this attitude can be witnessed in the official reaction of the United States' Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire when he was informed of the Porte's announcement that the capitulations were to be abolished in 1914:

> … the capitulatory regime, as it exists in Turkey, is not an autonomous institution of the Empire, but the result of international treaties, of diplomatic agreements and of contractual acts of various sorts. The regime, consequently, cannot be modified in any of its parts and still less suppressed in its entirety by the Ottoman Government except in consequence of an understanding with the contracting Powers.[9]

The Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century was essentially seen as an ailing 'pre-modern' empire struggling to contend with, and therefore placed at a disadvantage to, its rapidly modernising industrial neighbours.[10] This meant that the Ottoman government was constantly forced to adopt 'a defensive position [to] guard against the moves of its

[8] Jelavich, *The Ottoman Empire,* p. 5; Reşat Kasaba, 'Treaties and Friendships: British Imperialism, the Ottoman Empire, and China in the Nineteenth Century,' *Journal of World History,* Vol. 4, No. 2 (Fall, 1993), pp. 215-241

[9] Quoted in, Feroz Ahmad, 'The Late Ottoman Empire,' in Marian Kent (ed.), *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp. 21-22

[10] John P. Spagnolo, 'Portents of Empire in Britain's Ottoman Extraterritorial Jurisdiction,' *Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol. 27, No. 2 (April, 1991), p. 268; Ahmad, 'The Late Ottoman Empire,' p. 20

ostensible friends as well as its obvious enemies.'[11] Jelavich has identified four main threats posed to the Ottoman Empire by the great powers as follows:

> First, it had to defend itself against the powers who wished to conquer and annex definite parts of its lands as, for example, France had previously taken Algeria and Russia Bessarabia. Second, it had to guard against a power or a group of powers exploiting the discontent of a subject people to gain control over Ottoman territory. […] Third, it had to prevent other powers, principally Britain and Russia, from actually dominating the central government itself. Fourth, the national movements, particularly those originating in the Balkan peninsula, but also those in the Asian and African territories, had to be either suppressed or appeased to prevent the empire from simply disintegrating into its national parts.[12]

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottomans had already lost Greece which established its independence in 1832.[13] Other territories within the empire's bounds would begin pushing towards autonomy with varying levels of support and inducement from certain outside powers.[14] Some territories became nominal protectorates under the administration of various 'friendly' powers, supposedly operating benevolently on the Ottoman's behalf; examples being the British occupation of Cyprus in 1878 at the end of the Russo-Turkish War, and the take over of Egypt in 1882.[15] Indeed, prior to and during their alliance in the Crimean War (1853-1856), Britain was seen as the principal champion of the Ottoman state, yet this support began to wane during the last half of the nineteenth century. This was partly

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[11] Jelavich, *The Ottoman Empire,* p. 4
[12] Jelavich, *The Ottoman Empire,* pp. 4-5
[13] Finkel, *Osman's Dream,* p. 439; Ömer Kürkçüoğlu, 'The Adoption and Use of Permanent Diplomacy' in A. Nuri Yurdusev, (ed.) *Ottoman Diplomacy: Conventional or Unconventional?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 140-141
[14] See, MacFie, *The Eastern Question,* Chapter 8
[15] Geoffrey Miller, *Straits: British Policy Towards the Ottoman Empire and the Origins of the Dardanelles Campaign* (Kingston-upon-Hull: University of Hull Press, 1997), pp. 5-6; Finkel, *Osman's Dream,* p. 494

due to a shift in political sympathies on both sides of the British Parliament, both the Conservative and Liberal Parties prioritising issues at home; plus, there was a pronounced change in public attitudes towards the Ottoman Empire which meant that the British became markedly less supportive of Ottoman interests.[16] The main reason for Britain's earlier sympathies and its desire to maintain the *status quo* with regard to the Eastern Question was undoubtedly its adversarial relationship with Russia.[17] Britain's foremost preoccupation in the last part of the nineteenth century was very much focussed upon the protection of its imperial interests in British India, and in particular its northern borders where 'the Russian menace' was always most feared. This stand-off, commonly known at the time as the 'Great Game,' and now perhaps most famously remembered as the backdrop to Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim* (1901), was perhaps the defining episode of this 'imperial century.'

In this sense, the Ottoman Empire was very much seen as a buffer zone between the two imperial giants.[18] This was a distinctly precarious and unhappy position for the Ottomans. The sultan and his viziers continually resorted to playing one power off against another, and the clearest example of this centred on the 'Straits Question.' In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, Britain's primary concern in the Near & Middle Eastern arenas was the safe maintenance of its lines of communication to its dependencies in India. In this context, Britain's naval domination of the Mediterranean and the Arabian Gulf was of paramount importance, yet the British perceived two main points of weakness. Initially, the greatest threat was perceived as being that posed by the Russian fleet, and in particular its access to the Mediterranean from the Black Sea, via the Straits of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Later on, the Suez Canal and also the Arabian Gulf would assume similar

[16] Jelavich, *The Ottoman Empire*, p. 7; Cunningham, Allan, *Eastern Questions in the Nineteenth-Century* (London: Frank Cass, 1993), pp. 227-228

[17] Jelavich, *The Ottoman Empire,* p. 14; Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, p. 78

[18] Richard Millman, *Britain and the Eastern Question, 1875-1878* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 1-2

strategic significance.[19] In the case of the Straits though, their importance to the rival powers worked both ways. Geographically the Straits were important, both economically as well as strategically. As Jelavich explains:

> For Russia the Straits were 'the key to her house.' Not only was this the commercial outlet for the grain of the Ukraine, but it was also a point of weakness from a military standpoint. As was demonstrated during the Crimean War, free access through the Straits would allow naval powers to attack Russian southern shores. For Britain a similar danger existed in the reverse sense.[20]

Consequently, in order to maintain a balance, it was deemed to be of the greatest importance that the Ottomans should retain sovereignty over the Straits. A series of treaties and agreements, therefore, regulated the free passage of merchant ships and variously closed or placed limitations on the passage of warships.[21] The foremost of these agreements was that decided upon at the Paris Congress in 1856, whereby the powers agreed to maintain the integrity of the Ottoman Empire and not to meddle in her internal affairs.[22] Yet this ultimately proved to be an impossible situation given the constant jockeying between the aggressively acquisitive ambitions of the various European powers. The threat of dismemberment seemed to hang perpetually over the Ottoman Empire, and, with the convening of the Congress of Berlin in 1878, this growing concern began to move towards becoming a reality.[23] The sultan, Abdulhamid II, himself acknowledged the implications of this rapidly changing world order:

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[19] See, Jelavich, *The Ottoman Empire,* pp. 13-24; Spagnolo, 'Portents of Empire in Britain's Ottoman Extraterritorial Jurisdiction', pp. 256-282; Cunningham, *Eastern Questions,* pp. 232 & 244
[20] Jelavich, *The Ottoman Empire,* p. 14
[21] Jelavich, The Ottoman Empire, pp. 17-24; John Burman, *Britain's Relations with the Ottoman Empire During the Embassy of Sir Nicholas O'Conor to the Porte, 1898-1908* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2010), p. 14
[22] Ahmad, 'The Late Ottoman Empire,' p. 3
[23] Ahmad, 'The Late Ottoman Empire,' p. 5

> I could plainly see that Europe's great powers had resolved to divide the world amongst themselves. This division amongst the states included the Ottoman territories. I could not withstand these powers alone. We were not strong enough.[24]

Yet there were more complex forces at work than simply the direct territorial encroachments of outside powers alone. As the Congress of Berlin had demonstrated, other political influences were coming into play, and these influences arose both from within as well as from outside Ottoman borders.[25] The first of these was perhaps the growing precedence of the 'national idea.'[26] According to Reynolds:

> By recognizing the independence of Montenegro, Serbia, and Romania, and creating Bulgaria, the congress acknowledged ethnicity as an attribute of human identity carrying distinct political claims. The fulfilment of the national idea was not the goal of the great powers, whose diplomats were woefully ignorant of even basic ethnography. Rather, the national idea emerged as a principle around which the powers organized their competition.[27]

Arguably the rise of nationalism, as a fundamentally European idea, would in many cases – perhaps somewhat ironically – later prove to be the eventual undoing of the Western imperial project in various different parts of the colonial world.[28] The second of these influences, though, was the push to reform Ottoman society from within and thereby meet

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[24] Quoted in Burman, *Britain's Relations with the Ottoman Empire,* p. 15
[25] Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, pp. 14-18
[26] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire,* pp. 51-53; see also, Virginia H. Aksan, 'Ottoman to Turk: Continuity and Change,' *International Journal,* Vol. 61, No. 1, Turkey: Myths and Realities (Winter, 2005/2006), pp. 19-38
[27] Reynolds, *Shattering Empires,* p. 14
[28] Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 59-66 & 96-97

the external challenge towards modernisation.[29] Arguably, the British played a major hand in the concurrent rise of both of these particular social and political influences.

The period examined in this essay is neatly bookended by two eras of genuine and concerted reform initiated from within the Ottoman Empire itself. The first was begun in 1839, and is referred to as the *Tanzimat* era ('Tanzimat' meaning 'Re-ordering' or Re-organisation'), and the second was ushered in when the 'Young Turk' movement swept to the fore in the early years of the twentieth century. Both were radical programmes of reform, but, whereas Caroline Finkel describes the Tanzimat as being 'a crisis of identity,' the 'Young Turks' instigated and carried through what was essentially a root and branch revolution which utterly and irreversibly transformed the Ottoman establishment.[30] However, whilst they were distinctly different, both movements shared a common core aim, which was to propagate the Ottoman state system as a viable political, and a functioning economic entity, playing its part on the global stage.[31]

The Tanzimat reforms began with the issuing of the 'Rose Chamber Edict' on 3 November 1839. Its principal architect was Mustafa Reşid Pasha, who was well-known as a proponent of Ottoman accession to the European Concert of nations.[32] And, as such, the edict was not so much a piece of actual legislation, it was perhaps more of an important statement largely directed at a European audience. Indeed, several foreign ambassadors, diplomats and noblemen had been invited and were actually present at the edict's official

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[29] See, Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire, 1914-1921* (London: Manselll, 1987), Chapter 1; Baki Tezcan, 'The New Order and the Fate of the Old – The Historiographical Construction of an Ottoman Ancien Régime in the Nineteenth Century,' in Peter Fibiger Bang & C.A. Bayly (eds.), *Tributary Empires in Global History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 74-95; Findley, C., *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism and Modernity* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), Chapter 2 – The Tanzimat

[30] See, Finkel, *Osman's Dream,* Chapter 14 – A Crisis of Identity; Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire,* Chapter 6 – From Revolution to Imperial Collapse: The Longest Decade of the Late Ottoman Empire

[31] Kürkçüoğlu, 'The Adoption and Use of Permanent Diplomacy,' p. 139; Hasan Ünal, 'Britain and Ottoman Domestic Politics: From the Young Turk Revolution to the Counter-Revolution, 1908-9,' *Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol. 37, No. 2 (April, 2001), pp. 1-22; see also, Aksan, 'Ottoman to Turk,' pp. 19-38

[32] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire,* p. 73

proclamation.[33] Şükrü Hanioğlu has observed that: 'The role of the Ottoman bureaucracy in drafting, codifying, and implementing the administrative reform was unprecedented, and it signalled a decisive shift in the internal balance of power within the empire.'[34] The edict ushered in a range of new laws which essentially guaranteed the equality of Ottoman subjects, and was in many senses a first step towards the increasing secularisation of the Ottoman state. This was no easy task: 'The reconciliation of this new, nondenominational ideological basis of the state within Islam's traditional centrality in the legitimizing framework of the empire remained the most delicate and challenging issue for the administration until the end of the Ottoman era.'[35]

As the boundaries between religion and ethnicity became ever more blurred, so too such reforms became an increasingly knife-edge act. Again, as Hanioğlu has pointed out: 'The leaders of the Tanzimat feared, with good reason, that their polyethnic, multi-faith empire would not survive the introduction of a truly representative system of government.'[36] Consequently, the Tanzimat reforms sought to institute social change without exacerbating the potential conflicting loyalties of the established Muslim elite and a largely non-Muslim commercial class.[37] The promotion of such equality was done for two central reasons: first, in the hope of promoting 'the cohesiveness of a fractious multinational empire,' and, second, perhaps most importantly, to placate European public opinion.[38]

At the time of the Tanzimat*,* Britain was probably the foremost of the European nations with which the Ottomans sought to ally themselves. The Ottomans correctly believed that the British could help them counter the Russian threat, as was proved by the joint military venture which met the Crimean crisis in 1856. However, the British perception of, and their level of commitment to this relationship was somewhat different. Lord

[33] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire,* p. 72-73
[34] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire,* p. 73
[35] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire,* p. 74
[36] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire,* p. 76
[37] Aksan, 'Ottoman to Turk,' p. 21
[38] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire,* p. 77

Palmerston, commenting on the Crimean War, said that the British aim was 'to curb the aggressive ambition of Russia. We went to war not so much to keep the Sultan and his Musselmans in Turkey as to keep the Russians out of Turkey.'[39]

Whilst the relative weakness of the Ottoman Empire was clearly advantageous to the British (as well as to other European powers too), there was also a generally shared desire to see the empire reform in order to better align itself to the modern geopolitical trend. The implementation of the foreign run Public Debt Administration was a notable tool which impinged on Ottoman sovereignty and gave the European powers considerable leverage.[40] To this end, the British were very much supportive of such moves whereby the Ottoman Empire could be seen as apprenticing herself to Europe, yet there were doubts as to whether or not this might actually prove feasible.[41] In this sense, the British claimed to see it as *their duty* to ensure that such reforms were carried through properly; primarily in order to safeguard Britain's own interests, of course.[42] This attitude was neatly summed up in the words of the Duke of Argyll, reflecting in 1896: 'The whole tone we adopted towards the Porte was the tone of a great civilised Power towards an inferior and semi-barbarous Government, for whose very existence we had a heavy responsibility, and with whose action towards its own people we had a corresponding right and duty to interfere.'[43]

Such a condescending attitude towards the Ottoman Government arguably did not play out well in the longer term. The Tanzimat era was succeeded by a much more autocratic period under the rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1842-1918, reigned 1876-1909). Consequently, the latter part of the nineteenth century witnessed a marked cooling of relations between the two imperial powers. Indeed, Abdulhamid was much more wary of the British and came to see them as backsliding and duplicitous in their diplomatic

[39] Quoted in Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire,* p. 78
[40] Quataert, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire*, pp. 9-10
[41] Kedourie, *England and the Middle East,* pp. 13 & 16
[42] Kedourie, *England and the Middle East,* p. 18
[43] Quoted in Kedourie, *England and the Middle East,* p. 20

dealings.[44] Yet these suspicions proved to be mutually held, as can be heard, with similar condescension, in the words of Lord Dufferin, who was Ambassador to the Ottoman Porte from 1881 to 1884, describing his personal impressions of Abdulhamid:

> In considering any act or word which emanates from His Majesty we have to take into account the complicated and even contradictory elements of his character. As I have already described to your Lordship Abdul-Hamid is a man of great intelligence, astuteness and finesse. If he had merely to deal with Orientals and with men and questions with which he was familiar and forces which he had an opportunity of measuring he would probably be regarded as a ruler of great force of character and ability. Unfortunately the defects of his early education, his ignorance of the world and of the machinery … of modern European politics introduce into many of his combinations a certain strain of childishness and folly. The suspiciousness of his nature is almost maniacal, he has no respect for the truth and his duplicity is unbounded …[45]

Racial prejudices formed a mainstay of European Imperial expansion during the nineteenth century. The memoirs and official correspondence of British parliamentary and diplomatic establishment figures are not the only sources which bear out this fact. Indeed, the British popular Press commonly showed a characteristic tendency to lump together the Ottoman, the Chinese, and, the Indian empires as backward and pernicious 'oriental despotisms.'[46] Much of the colonial expansion during this period was promulgated under the ostensibly rationalised justification, often known by its French sobriquet as the *'mission civilisatrice.'* A recent survey of the Victorian Periodical Press over a short period from 1876 to 1885 has

[44] Gökhan Çetinsaya, 'The Ottoman View of the British Presence in Iraq and the Gulf: The Era of Abdulhamid II,' *Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol. 39, No. 2 (April, 2003), pp. 194-195
[45] Quoted in Selim Deringil, 'The Ottoman Response to the Egyptian Crisis of 1881-82,' *Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol. 24, No. 1 (January, 1988), p. 7
[46] Kasaba, 'Treaties and Friendships', pp. 238-241; A. Nuri Yurdusev (ed.), *Ottoman Diplomacy: Conventional or Unconventional?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 29-30

demonstrated the principal concerns in contemporary British Newspaper reportage of Middle Eastern affairs as favouring, naturally enough, British strategic interests, whilst firmly grounding these concerns in an assumed basis of racial superiority.[47] But matters of religious ideology, as well as ethnicity, fed into prejudices centred around diplomatic interactions with the Ottoman Government. The Ottoman Empire was the only non-Christian Imperial power in Europe, and within Ottoman domains there were significantly large Christian populations. This fact was highly troubling to the European powers, particularly when they heard reports of the ill treatment of these populations.[48] As Peter Marsh describes:

> In 1876, and again from 1894 to 1896, thousands of Christians in Bulgaria and Armenia, then provinces of the Ottoman Empire, were massacred by Turkish troops, local irregulars known with romantic barbarity as bashi-bazouks, and Moslem tribesmen. The victims were raped or mutilated, many were burned alive. Weeks later streets were littered with corpses. The Armenians, even in the best of times, were subjected to an almost systematic starvation: Moslem tribesmen were permitted to take the crops of Armenian farms when times were peaceful, and to burn them in periods of violence. Naturally such treatment provoked insurrections, which renewed the cycle of repression.[49]

These massacres inflamed the British press and prompted the moral indignation of the general public as well as leading figures on the both sides of the British Parliament. As Roy Douglas has described it: ‘A thrill of horror ran through the land without distinction of party

[47] Paul Auchterlonie, ‘From the Eastern Question to the Death of General Gordon: Representations of the Middle East in the Victorian Periodical Press, 1876-1885,’ *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol. 28, No. 1 (May, 2001), pp. 5-24; see also, Özcan, Azmi, ‘The Press and Anglo-Ottoman Relations, 1876-1909,’ *Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol. 29, No. 1, (January, 1993), pp. 111-117

[48] See, Turgut Şubasi, ‘The Apostasy Question in the Context of Anglo-Ottoman Relations, 1843-44,’ *Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol. 38, No. 2 (April, 2002), pp. 1-34

[49] Peter Marsh, ‘Lord Salisbury and the Ottoman Massacres,’ *Journal of British Studies,* Vol. 11, No. 2 (May, 1972), p. 63; see also, John Birkbeck, *The Eastern Question: An Appeal to the British Nation! (1878)* Bristol Selected Pamphlets, University of Bristol; Denton, William, *Fallacies of the Eastern Question (1877),* Foreign and Commonwealth Collection, University of Manchester, The John Rylands University Library

or social class.'[50] Consequently, there was a great clamour for Britain to exert the full moral strength of its diplomatic influence. The Ottoman Porte responded by proposing to instigate its own commission of inquiry to investigate what it described, in rather loaded terms, as the activities of 'the Armenian brigands.'[51] Insisting on an impartial investigation, however, the British invited France and Russia to join together in mounting an inquiry.

The eventual outcome of such ostensibly united diplomatic pressure was, however, a thornier issue than it would seem. There were fears within the three powers that pressing for an independent Armenian state as a solution would in fact further destabilise the already precarious Ottoman Empire – possibly providing the spark for separatism to flare in other regions, such as Syria and the Arabian Gulf; all of which would necessarily only further embroil the European powers in mutually conflicting and undesirably complex ways. There was a suggestion to place Armenia under Russian protection, but neither the Russians nor the Armenians seemed inclined towards this idea. According to Douglas:

> A much less drastic solution to the Armenian difficulties would be to persuade Turkey to introduce major reforms in the area of Eastern Anatolia. On 11 May 1895 the dragomans of the ambassadors of the United Kingdom, Russia and France presented the Porte with a 'Project of Reforms for the Eastern Provinces of Asia Minor, as approved by the three Governments'. This included such proposals as the eventual reduction of the number of vilayets; appointments of Valis to require approval by the Powers; amnesty; the right of refugees to return to Armenia; improvements to the system of trials and the conditions of the prisons; the protection of Armenians in other parts of the Empire; compensation for the victims

[50] Roy Douglas, 'Britain and the Armenian Question, 1894-7,' *The Historical Journal,* Vol. 19, No. 1 (March, 1976), p. 117
[51] Douglas, 'Britain and the Armenian Question,' p. 117

of the atrocities; the establishment of a High Commissioner to supervise the application of the reforms; and a permanent Commission of Control.[52]

Abdulhamid's initial response to these ultimatums was an attempt to moderate the required actions by appealing to the German emperor to intervene, but this was unsuccessful, and so, remarkably, he decided to test the resolution of the three Powers instead. He did this by very simply refusing all of the proposals. In calling the bluff of the three powers, he put their collective cohesion to the test. It was perhaps a calculated gamble, given Britain and Russia's deepening differences over the Sino-Japanese War were already at work in undermining any possible accord which might be jointly exerted by the two nations. [53]

Meanwhile, the persecution of the Armenians continued unabated. And despite increasing agitation in Britain, the powers simply could not come together to push their reforms on the Ottomans.[54] The 'Armenian Question' was never truly resolved and similar atrocities continued to occur right up to the time of the First World War, during which the most concerted attempt yet at an Armenian genocide was witnessed.[55]

It is clear that during the late nineteenth century the Western powers approached the Ottomans with a complex mixture of heavily codified socio-political perceptions which informed, shaped, or, (perhaps retrospectively) justified the manner of their diplomatic interactions.[56] This kaleidoscope of perceptions mixed assumed racial superiority with social condescension; patronising paternalism with calculated distrust; ruthless exploitation with

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[52] Douglas, 'Britain and the Armenian Question,' p. 119-120; see also, Margaret M. Jefferson, 'Lord Salisbury and the Eastern Question, 1890-1898,' *The Slavonic and East European Review,* Vol. 39, No. 92 (December, 1960), pp. 44-60

[53] Douglas, 'Britain and the Armenian Question,' p. 120-121

[54] Douglas, 'Britain and the Armenian Question,' p. 128-131; see also, Jeremy Salt, 'Britain, the Armenian Question and the Cause of Ottoman Reform: 1894-96,' *Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol. 26, No. 3 (July, 1990), pp. 308-328; Liberal Party, *The "integrity" of the Ottoman Empire: (declarations by Liberal leaders at Norwich, March 17th 1897)* Bristol Selected Pamphlets, University of Bristol Library Liberal Party, *Lord Salisbury's "Weak Diplomacy" (1897)* Bristol Selected Pamphlets, University of Bristol

[55] Douglas, 'Britain and the Armenian Question,' p. 132-133

[56] See, Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003 [first published 1978])

haughty disdain; and, voyeuristic exoticisation with outright moral indignation and righteous horror. But how did the Ottoman's perceive themselves at this time, and how did this affect their ideas and their approaches to diplomatic relations with the 'Great Powers'?

Studies of what is now commonly termed today as 'orientalism' have tended to focus on a logical 'occidental' counterbalance to this phenomenon – West versus East; Christianity versus Islam; civilisation versus barbarism; exoticisation versus demonisation, etc. However, it is perhaps becoming more apparent that contemporary historical reactions to the Western categorisation of the oriental 'other' during the nineteenth century in fact took on various different forms. In the case of the Ottomans, it has recently been argued that they themselves engaged with this 'orientalising' dynamic, in some senses creating their own 'Ottoman Orientalism.'[57] The motivation for this, as has been argued by Selim Deringil, was:

> … that a 'legitimacy crisis' took place in the Ottoman empire in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was a crisis that had both external and internal dimensions. The external dimension was the uphill struggle to secure the acceptance of the Ottoman state as a legitimate polity in the international system. The internal dimension was the struggle to overcome the 'legitimation deficit' that accrued as the state permeated society physically and ideologically to an unprecedented extent.[58]

This 'legitimation deficit' may have arisen from the contemporary crisis of its dealings with the West, but the roots of the problem probably can be traced much deeper within the very fabric of Ottoman society itself.

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[57] See, Ussama Makdisi, 'Ottoman Orientalism,' *The American Historical Review,* Vol. 107, No. 3, (June, 2002), pp. 768-796

[58] Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909* (London & New York: I.B. Taurus, 1998), p. 166

As stated at the start of this essay, the Ottoman Empire was fundamentally a 'pre-modern' empire, it was also an empire founded upon religious tenets which defined and delimited its social structure, as well as setting the tone for its dealings with the peoples beyond its borders. In this sense then:

> … the Ottoman Empire was an Islamic or *Shari'a* state that conducted its external affairs on the basis of a conception of *Dâr al-Islam* (the abode of Islam) versus *Dâr al-Harb* (the abode of the infidels) which involved a permanent state of war. The Empire consequently, so it is argued, conducted its external policies with a view to constant expansion. Given that it was an expansionist polity that could conceive of nothing but a permanent state of war with other polities, little room remained for normal peaceful interactions. Therefore the logical conclusion is that there was actually no such thing as Ottoman diplomacy.[59]

Yet, during the nineteenth century this simply is not true. Historically, whilst the Ottoman sultans, much like the Chinese emperors, may have perceived all of the civilised world as being within their legitimate possession, and therefore approached their diplomatic dealings with outsiders as merely the reception of tributary polities – polities which might well one day join their own territories – by the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire was weak enough for the sultan and his advisers to perceive a significant shift in the world order. It was a change of seismic proportions. Consequently, they began to look towards the European system much more favourably, hoping that they might be able to use it to their advantage. This is what drew them to adopt the Western diplomacy system, as well as seeking admittance to the European Concert.[60] As Yurdusev says: 'What we know historically is that the Ottomans were quite pragmatic and observed the rules of expediency or, to use

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[59] Yurdusev, (ed.) *Ottoman Diplomacy*, p. 2

[60] See, J.C. Hurewitz, 'Ottoman Diplomacy and the European State System,' *Middle East Journal,* Vol. 15, No. 2, (Spring, 1961), pp. 141-152; Yurdusev, (ed.) *Ottoman Diplomacy*, Chapter 1

the present day terminology of the students of international relations, the requirements of Realpolitik.'[61]

This brings us back to the matter of the Ottoman reforms which were instigated from *within* the empire itself. These then, as I have previously claimed, were attempts to bolster the Ottoman cause and thereby maintain its viability in the eyes of those hungry-outsider onlookers. And as such, this 'identity crisis' pushed the Ottomans to confront what it actually meant *to be* an Ottoman subject. In order to modernise the Ottomans soon realised that they would have to redefine what 'Ottomanism' essentially was.[62] Part and parcel of these reforms then, was an obsession with the Ottoman self-image. Consequently, they took steps to counter the 'exotic' oriental designation. To give but one very small example, Deringil tells us how the Sultan Abdulhamid arranged for two albums of photographs to be presented 'as gifts to the Library of Congress in 1893 and the British Museum in 1894.'[63] The photographs accentuated the civilised aspects of the Ottoman world, depicting modern buildings; monuments; antiquities; military and industrial scenes; schools (even school girls with uncovered heads proudly holding their diplomas); the horses of the Imperial Stables; and, of course, the Sultan Abdulhamid's luxurious yet modern Royal Yacht.[64] The point here being to 'minimise the exotic.'[65] Clearly, if you are not in a position to beat your adversaries, you can even less afford to ignore them, so why not appeal to them by meeting them on their own terms instead? 'What was being undertaken by the Ottoman state,' Deringil believes, 'was nothing less than a symbolic statement of its right to exist in a world which was constantly trying to relegate it to history.'[66]

[61] Yurdusev, (ed.) *Ottoman Diplomacy*, p. 16
[62] See, Bernard Lewis, 'The Ottoman Empire and its Aftermath,' *Journal of Contemporary History,* Vol. 15, No. 1, Imperial Hangovers (January, 1980), pp. 27-36
[63] Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*, p. 151
[64] Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*, p. 152
[65] Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains,* p. 153
[66] Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*, p. 165

The truth is, though, there were no consistent accords. International diplomacy, to return to the kaleidoscope analogy, is a constantly shifting image. The imperial power-play of the late nineteenth century was much like a jigsaw puzzle which was forever being broken up and rearranged once it had seemingly been completed. John Burman sums up British and Ottoman diplomatic interactions well when he says that:

> … the Ottomans did not view themselves as victims of either the international system or British activities within that system. There was no special deference to the power the British wielded, merely a desire to operate as effectively as possible within the parameters the British had such a key role in establishing. Where possible the Ottomans took the initiative and such actions became sources of pride. The entirety of the diplomatic effort to manage Britain and the other great powers during the period 1898-1908 can be said to have contributed to the maintenance of the Ottoman empire in existence, a feat in itself given the circumstances, but diplomacy was only ever going to be one factor amongst many in solving the empire's problems. Abdulhamid expended great personal energy throughout his reign in dealing with the ambassadors (although more so towards the beginning than the end), but ultimately knew that what mattered more was the direct relations between a small number of these foreign states, relations which he knew he had limited power to influence.[67]

The British influence upon the slow demise of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century was perhaps no greater than the influence of any of the other great European powers; nor were British diplomatic actions perhaps any greater a help or hindrance than the Ottoman Empire's own actions in its attempts to stabilise itself through its own reforms, as well as its efforts in re-styling its own house in the eyes of its multi-ethnic and multi-religious subjects

[67] Burman, *Britain's Relations with the Ottoman Empire,* p. 223

as much as in the eyes of those imperial polities of dubious and unforgiving intent waiting and watching avariciously from abroad.