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AMEER ALI'S ADVOCACY OF THE TURKISH CAUSE AND THE REACTION OF THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT

In 1912, the All India Muslim League [henceforth AIML] invited Syed Ameer Ali, the president of the London Branch of All India Muslim League [henceforth LML] to preside over their annual session. But Ameer Ali declined the invitation in view of the attack on Turkey by the Powers of the Balkans League. He began organizing a medical mission for the relief of the Turkish sick and wounded. The Aga Khan and Ameer Ali advised AIML to postpone their session as a mark of national mourning for Turkish tragedy. AIML followed their advice. These developments were not lost on the Government of India which felt concerned at Ameer Ali's growing political influence among Indian Muslims. On 22 August 1912, Hardinge the Viceroy of India alerted Crewe, the Secretary of State, that Ameer Ali had been tipped to preside over AIML session and asked if it was compatible with his position as Judge of the Privy Council¹. Hardinge was not sure if Ameer Ali drew any salary or not. Though there was "no Indian law or rule" to debar him from participating in political associations. However the real question was that it was "entirely contrary to English etiquette" that a salaried judge "should take part in political meetings"². He suggested that if Crewe considered "Ameer Ali's action undesirable, the Lord Chancellor might give him a hint that he had better keep out of that kind of thing"³. Crewe believed that Ameer Ali was to be taken as "an English Judge". Hence it would be "advisable that he should have a friendly hint from Haldane [i.e. Lord Chancellor]. It should come from a legal, not a political authority, I agree,⁴" Crewe observed. It was evident that Hardinge was determined to insulate Indian Muslims from Ameer Ali's direct influence, but his worries were compounded by the mounting unrest among Muslims which he wanted to contain by minimising Ameer Ali's impact on them as champion of the Turkish cause.

Ameer Ali's advocacy of Turkish cause and his humanitarian mission did not go unnoticed by the British Government. His unreserved denunciation of Balkan Powers for their pogrom of Turkish population, ostensibly in the name of the Cross, touched the Christian sensibilities in India Office as well. Ameer Ali's activities in England and his impact on Muslim opinion in India were carefully monitored. Hardinge had been observing "the growing agitation amongst the Mahomedans" and claimed to possess "innumerable proofs"⁵ of their disaffection. Muslim opinion according to him had been "inflamed by the exaggerated accounts of atrocities on women and children by the Allies", and by the reports that Turkey was receiving an unfair treatment at the hands of Christian powers of Europe. He, however, squarely held Ameer Ali responsible for that

state of unrest and wrote to Crewe:

Much of this agitation is being stirred by Ameer Ali from London, and it seems to me all wrong that a man occupying an official position in England should be allowed to make things difficult out here. Could he not absolutely be forbidden to take part in political movement of this kind by the Lord Chancellor.⁶

Hardinge asked for drastic action against Ameer Ali. Concurring with Hardinge, Crewe commented that Ameer Ali had played "a mischievous part"⁷ in England and was keeping up his correspondence with Indian Muslims. Reports had reached Crewe that Ameer Ali's wife was also "somewhat active in the agitation". Would it not be advisable if Hardinge could throw him "a friendly hint that he might not be prominent in such affairs". Otherwise Crewe observed it would come "with the greatest possible force"⁸ from his chief, the Lord Chancellor.

Haldane, the Lord Chancellor saw Ameer Ali on 6 March 1913 and on the following day. Setting forth his position in writing Ameer Ali expressed "annoyance and.....sorrow" that his name should have been "associated in high quarters in India" with the prevalent Muslim feelings.⁹ He was pained that his life work was "so little appreciated or understood". For the last forty years, he said, he had been endeavouring to promote "mutual understanding between Christianity and Islam" and foster loyalty to the Crown. According to him Muslim welfare and progress were inseparable from British rule in India. Hence insinuations that he was backing up anti-British feelings in India were "both untrue and unjust". Since his departure from India in 1904, he said, the younger generation was being influenced by "new thoughts and feelings" and some of them even regarded his ideas "as antiquated". He affirmed that the British Red Crescent Society, was engaged in a humanitarian work and its reports were compiled by British staff. But still he exercised care and often deleted such passages as were likely to "create the least ill-feeling." He appended two specimens in which he had indicated deletion in red pencil. Setting forth the aims and objects of LML he gave a resume of its activities in England and as the president of the London branch of the All India Muslim League he took upon himself the duty of dissuading the the Indian students from "drifting into the Extremist Camp" and convincing them that Indian development was bound up with British rule. Referring to the Turco-Italian and Balkan Wars, he maintained that "writings of members of the Balkan Committee caused a good deal of bitterness both here and in India." but he tried to defuse Muslim excitement by canalizing it into constitutional channels and turning their minds from "thoughts of grievance to works of mercy." In this connection, he referred to his repeated representations to the India Office and the Foreign Office that Muslims were indignant over Balkan atrocities. He thought, "it was unwise to allow the people to nurse their grievances in secret. Open, straightforward expressions of opinion and feelings were considered the wisest course under the circumstances and this

course has been always observed by Committee."¹⁰

After his meeting with Ameer Ali, Haldane conveyed his views to Crewe, which in turn, were passed on to Hardinge by Crewe. Haldane reported that Ameer Ali "denied having taken at all a disloyal line over the War."¹¹ But, in Crewe's opinion this was not relevant as "the charge against him was exciting the Indian Moslems by exaggerated accounts of atrocities committed by the Christian troops ..." Regarding Ameer Ali's claim that he had done his utmost to soothe the feelings of the Indian Muslims, Crewe commented that this "may be or may not be true,"¹² and in order to find out the true facts he asked Arthur Hirtzel and Holderness to write privately to Ameer Ali. Better still, a talk with him would help to "clear the air."¹³

In the meantime, Hardinge deputed Hartcourt Butler, a member of his Executive Council, to look into Ameer Ali's connections and work in India.¹⁴ In turn Hartcourt Butler on 13 March 1913 asked for a report from Hughes Butler, the Director of Criminal Intelligence, on the subject.¹⁵ From the AIML Council proceedings of 21 April 1912, Hughes Butler discovered Ameer Ali's letter dated 28 March 1912 addressed to Mohammad Ali, editor of the *Comrade* urging AIML "to take action regarding the illegal arrest and prosecution of the Khan of Hoti Mardan." The U.P Criminal Intelligence Department observed in its report that "the accounts which the people heard of the Italian-Turkish War, and of the aggressive conduct of Russia in Persia, created a feeling of resentment against Government for not interfering on behalf of the Mahommedans, which (sic) was fostered by Mr. Ameer Ali and other Mahommedan leaders." *The Civil and Military Gazette* of what date published Ameer Ali's telegram of 7 March 1912 showing that Ameer Ali was "more or less responsible for the attempted rapprochement between Hindus and Mahommedans in an anti-British sense." Hughes Butler in his report also cited the Aga Khan and Ameer Ali's joint telegram of 14 December 1912, which read "Strongly urge postponement League sessions, taken (sic. i.e. token) mourning, grave peril Islam." Hughes Butler suspected that "the tone" of AIML's resolution of 27 November 1912 condemning the British Prime Minister's speech regarding territorial re-adjustment after the war, was "inspired." It is not difficult to infer who Hughes Butler meant to have inspired it. Nevertheless, a favourable report was also recorded wherein Zafar Ali Khan, editor of the *Zamindar* in his lecture at Amritsar on 5 October 1912 was said to have read out Ameer Ali's telegram saying, "the British Government was doing their best, to 'avert a new danger of a Graeco-Turkish War' and that Moslems should forward resolutions thanking the Government." However, Hughes Butler categorically stated, "All our information goes to show that he is in constant private communication with the Mahommedan leaders in the country."¹⁶ The investigation did not reveal any specific evidence for which Ameer Ali could be charged of anti-British activities and proceeded against. Nevertheless the general tenor of intelligence report was damaging enough to show Ameer Ali as a potentially dangerous person whose activities merited continued vigilance.

Crewe also consulted Morley, whose dislike for Ameer Ali was not new. Morley was already in correspondence with Hartcourt Butler about Ameer Ali's alleged complicity in an anti-British movement. Morley showed Hartcourt Butler's letter to Crewe, stating that "Some of the level-headed Moslems were annoyed with Ameer Ali's encouragement of the anti-Christian emotions excited by the War"¹⁷ Crewe asked Hardinge, "Can you send us specific instances of action, or advice given on his [Ameer Ali] part? Is there merely a general impression that he has provoked racial and religious excitement." Crewe also asked Holderness, to investigate the matter. Holderness met Ameer Ali on 27th March 1913 and found him "frank and friendly."¹⁸ Ameer Ali affirmed that he was endeavouring to keep Muslims to the path of loyalty to the Crown and adherence to constitutional methods. But his work had been rendered difficult due to the growing feelings of disaffection among younger Muslims in Bengal and the excitement created by the Balkan War. LML, he said, did not send out to India reports about the war or the hardships of Muslims in the Balkans. It was the British Red Crescent Society on the contrary, which, in order to raise funds for their humanitarian work in Macedonia and Thrace disseminated reports of the suffering and poverty of Turkish Muslims affected by War. It however, carefully excised "anything that reflects on Christianity." Holderness confronted Ameer Ali with the reports of AIML meeting in Lucknow in which the atrocities committed by the Bulgarians were denounced and the conduct of H.M.'s Government was condemned. He also brought to his notice Lord Kitchner's report about Mohammad Wali Khan wherein "the activity of El Sayyed Ali" was referred to". On Holderness' suggestion that Ameer Ali's action and that of his "London Societies might be misunderstood in India".¹⁹ Ameer Ali conceded its possibility but affirmed that "he was fully sensible of the responsibility attaching to his actions", and asked for an opportunity to "explain his views and principles" to the Secretary of State. "He was confident, that he could prove that his influence was good, and that if he was silent, his co-religionists would be led by less loyal and more fanatical persons". Holderness was finally convinced that Ameer Ali was "quite sincere in what he says as to his wish to keep India Muhammadans to the constitutional path".²⁰ Significantly, Ameer Ali projected his role as a moderate leader and emphasized 'constitutional path' in comparison with prevalent extremism. His argument was too cogent not to have appealed to Crewe who offered to see him, even though he still had his reservations. Crewe remarked that Ameer Ali like other persons involved with movements would be "tempted overmuch to suit his accusations (actions) to his company".²¹ Crewe saw Ameer Ali on 3 April 1913. In Crewe's words, Ameer Ali was "cut to the heart" at the allegations that he was being held responsible for fomenting Muslim excitement in India. On the contrary he professed to have cut out certain statements which he believed were facts".²² He observed that the *Comrade* mission (i.e. Dr. Ansari's mission) "regularly acted as reporters of atrocities", and regarded 'Mohammad Ali of that paper a dangerous person'. Re-

garding the atrocities he said that the Bulgarian army, generally "did their best to repress the violence of the 'bands' but that of other nations there was nothing to choose between the troops and irregulars".²³ In Ameer Ali's opinion according to Crewe, the younger Muslim elements in India and England were getting "much out of hand", and he would continue to exercise his sobering influence on them.

To a disinterested critic it would appear highly anomalous that Crewe and Hardinge should have overlooked Ameer Ali's hard-hitting letters to *The Times*, fervently denouncing the barbaric Crusade of Balkan Powers against Turkey. Did it imply that the Ameer Ali's real crime was not that he propagated such ideas in England but had ventured to propagate them among Indian Muslims. As a British national his freedom of action was subject to British law. If the Criminal Investigation Department had taken more pains they would have easily hit upon several telegrams and letters directly exhorting Indian Muslims to protest, hold meetings, and boycott Italian goods. Ameer Ali put a brave defence but his reference to Mohammad Ali does not appear to be entirely unobjectionable. However it must be reckoned, he held up Mohammad Ali as leader of the younger generation: It would never be ascertained, whether in describing Mohammad Ali as 'a dangerous person' Crewe employed Ameer Ali's phrase or put Ameer Ali's ideal into his own words. To interpret Ameer Ali's defence as a sell-out would be too harsh and unmerited a judgement. Ameer Ali took his stand as a moderate pitted against a rising tide of Muslim extremism. This view was largely valid and perhaps it was Ameer Ali's usefulness as a counterpoise to the younger elements that his questionable politics was condoned by Crewe and Hardinge. Hardinge was inclined to take a hardline. He insisted, that whatever Ameer Ali might have said in his defence, the former had it from several Muslims that Ameer Ali was fomenting trouble in order "to oust the Aga Khan from the leadership"²⁴ of AIML. "As the Aga Khan is now in full flight, and has practically deserted the ship, it will now be easier for Ameer Ali to restrict his actions within proper limits".²⁵ Hardinge apparently bought this rumour to use the words of Disraeli, from the 'coffee house babble', otherwise in LML records or the Muslim newspapers there is no evidence of any such jockeying for power on the part of Ameer Ali who had the best of personal relations with the Aga Khan even at this critical time. It would have been more plausible if Hardinge had foretold a tussle between Mohammad Ali Johar and the Aga Khan. Mohammad Ali's devastating criticism of the Aga Khan's statement of 14 February 1913, could not have missed the notice of Hardinge who was reportedly an avid reader of the *Comrade*. Without any visible signs of misapprehension or tension between the Aga Khan and Ameer Ali, Hardinge's insinuation seems to be a device to set the Aga Khan against Ameer Ali. Hardinge agreed with Crewe's observation about Mohammad Ali being the restive younger leader of elements, but insisted upon his opinion about Ameer Ali. He claimed to have heard "from all sides that Ameer Ali did at one time fan flames of Mahomedan discontent",

and to substantiate this he promised "to collect some proofs of this".²⁶ Hartcourt Butler reported to Hardinge that Ameer Ali "seems to have been frightened and to be urging saner views."²⁷ In his opinion, Ameer Ali who was accused of having misappropriated the Red Crescent funds, had lost his influence in India. He jibed, "This is pan-Islamism".²⁸ Hardinge confirmed that he had also heard that Ameer Ali was "urging saner views",²⁹ and his influence was considerably reduced due to the charges of embezzlement of British Red Crescent funds. Contradicting the latter, however, Hardinge wrote, "I daresay there is no foundation for such suggestions, but apparently no Mahomedan can collect public funds without this imputation".³⁰ The storm was over.

NOTES

1. Hardinge to Crewe, 22 August 1912, *Hardinge Papers*, India Office Library and Records.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Crewe to Hardinge, 12 September 1912, *ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Hardinge to Secretary of State, 28 February, 1913, telegram, *Hardinge Papers*.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Crewe to Hardinge, 3 March 1913, *Crewe Papers*, Cambridge University Library.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Ameer Ali to the Lord Chancellor, 7 March 1913, *Hardinge Papers*, Enclosure to Letter No.12, Vol. 119.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Crewe to Hardinge, 13 March 1913, *Hardinge Papers*, Vol. 119.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Crewe to Holderness, 14 March 1913, *Crewe Papers*.
14. Hartcourt Butler to Hardinge, 17 April 1913, *Hardinge Papers*, Vol. 85.
15. R.B. Hughes-Butler to Hartcourt Butler, 16 April 1913, *ibid.* The report does not read as a very sound document. Based on newspaper reports and contacts with AIML Office, Lucknow, the report was far from being satisfactory as was also admitted by the said director.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Crewe to Hardinge, 19 March 1913, *Hardinge Papers*.
18. T.W. Holderness, note to Crewe, 27 March 1913, *Crewe Papers*.
19. *Ibid.*, Wali Khan presumably was the name of Nawab of Hoti Mardan.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Remarks by Crewe dated 27 March 1913, note by Holderness, *ibid.*
22. Crewe to Hardinge, 3 April 1913, *Hardinge Papers*.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Hardinge to Crewe, 3 April, 1913, *Hardinge Papers*.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Hardinge to Crewe, 24 April 1913, *Hardinge Papers*.
27. Hartcourt Butler to Hardinge, 30 April 1913, *Hardinge Papers*.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Hardinge to Crewe, 13 May 1913, *Hardinge Papers*.
30. *Ibid.*