

THE WEST AND THE MUSLIM WORLD: IMPERIALISM AND DIPLOMACY

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INTRODUCTION

his research attempts to link between the present political interference of the West in the Muslim world and their past history of imperialism and diplomacy. Initially, this effort seeks to reveal facts and figures of the past maneuvers of the West in the Muslim world based on testimonies and official records, and to conclude that these facts would be evaluated and analysed further in order to envisage the policy of the West in relation to the Muslims. It is hoped that this research will help to identify some of the hidden agenda of the West in the Muslim world and eventually leads to the understanding of the present situation and to make a better judgement for the future.

The spread of Islam seems to be the root of the bitter relationship between the West and the Muslim world. It is no wonder that the theory of ‘clash of civilizations’ has become a popular topic in addressing and scrutinizing the issue of Muslim-West relation. Not surprisingly, some western strategists, notably American strategists, believe and also endeavour to make others to believe that the Islamic world is

threatening the West. Therefore, they continuously stress on the threats, danger and assaults posed by Islam and accordingly implant the seeds of anger, hatred and animosity towards Muslims. In his campaign against al-Qaeda, US President, Bush extremely described the image of Muslims by stating: “Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber, a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedom, our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other. They want to overthrow existing governments in many Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. They want to drive Israel out of the Middle East. They want to drive Christians of the vast regions of Asia and Africa.”¹

A number of accounts on rivalry between Islam and the West are classical and historical one which took place as early as the time of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) notably when Islam began to gain a political victory in Arabia. The first rivalry between the Muslim world and the West represented by the Eastern Roman Empire began when the Prophet sent his emissary al-Harith bin Umayr al-Azdi on a mission to carry a letter to the ruler of Busra. He was, however, intercepted by Sharhabil bin ‘Amr al-Ghassani, the governor of

¹ Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People in <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/> September, 20, 2001.

al-Balqa', a close ally to Caesar, the Byzantine Emperor. Al-Harith was tied and beheaded by al-Ghassani. This intolerable incident was unacceptable to the Prophet and an army of 3000 men was mobilized in retaliation to discipline the transgressors. The Roman Emperor allied with the Arab army of Ghassan numbered about 200,000 men marched to face the Muslims at *Mu'tah*.

Though the mission was to protest and punish the transgressors, the Prophet (Peace be upon him), however, reminded the Muslim army to strictly observe the principal of war in Islam. The enemy should first be invited to Islam and if they accept it leave them free. Should they refuse then ask them to pay *jizyah* (poll-tax). The war was the last resort to be adopted if the enemy persisted to fight. Further, the Prophet reminded the Muslims to "fight the disbelievers in the Name of Allah, neither breach a covenant nor entertain treachery, and under no circumstances a new-born, women, an ageing man or a hermit should be killed, moreover neither trees should be cut down nor homes demolished."² This instruction had firmly been observed by the Muslims throughout those years of rivalries between them and the Eastern Roman Empire.

² Al-Mubarakpuri. Safi-ur-Rahman. 1995. *Ar-Raheeq al-Makhtum*. Saudi Arabia: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam. pp. 383-6.

Since the first battle of *Mu'tah*, a number of clashes occurred notably during the time of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (*al-Khulafa' al-Rashidun*) between the Romans and the Muslims in the Roman territory of the Middle East and mostly ended with victory of the Muslims. The spread of Islam is, therefore, often synonymous with the expansion of Islam at the expense of Roman territory. From Islamic point of view, the expansion of Islam into new land should be strictly interpreted as spreading and preaching the religion of Allah to the people. The Eastern Roman Empire representing the West believed otherwise. The expansion of Islam became a threat to their political supremacy, prestige and influence of the West in the occupied territory in the Middle East, notably in Syria, Palestine and Egypt. During their first battle of *Mu'tah* against Muslims, the Eastern Roman Christians allied themselves with the local Christians. This attitude was repeated throughout history. During the time of the Crusades, Europeans of different nationalities were again united under the banner of Christianity to liberate the Holy Land of Palestine.

The relationship between the West and the Muslim world even in this modern time appeared mostly in the form of conflicts and warfare though there are substantial evidences of peaceful relations and harmony prevailed during those years of rivalries. This research would not escape from the theme and, therefore, attempts would be made to

trace history of rivalries and diplomacy between the West and the Muslim world.

This research will therefore focus first and foremost on the misleading interpretation of the early episode of Islamic expansion at the expense of the Roman Empire. Secondly, the discourse will explore the underlying reason for the appearance of the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the French, the British and other Western Powers into the Muslim lands, and thirdly it will investigate the modern diplomatic efforts that had been used to cover up the Western motives of imperialism on which the related literature and sources are rather limited.

CHAPTER 1

THE PORTUGUESE IMPERIALISM IN THE RED SEA AND THE INDIAN OCEAN

Modern history of European imperialism into the Muslim lands including Arabia, the heart of Muslim land, can be traced to the fifteenth century. It was the Portuguese incursions into the coast of South Arabia towards the end of the fifteenth century representing European Christians that triggered the interest of other European powers, notably the Spanish, Dutch, French and British to encroach into the Muslim land. The Mamluks who ruled Egypt as guardians of Islamic caliphate of Abbasids and the Ottomans, respectively, came down to the Red Sea to protect the Muslim land from the threats of the Portuguese who were lingering around South Arabia and the Red Sea. Until 1516 the Mamluks successfully defended South Arabia from Portuguese incursions and in 1517, the Ottomans who took over Egypt from the Mamluks, likewise assumed responsibility for protecting the area from further Portuguese incursions. Failure to settle down in the Red Sea and around the coast of South Arabia as a result of constant pressure by the Mamluks and the Ottomans, led the Portuguese to move further downwards into the Indian Ocean from where they monitored

and dominated the Muslim trade routes, and finally succeeded in taking over the trade ports of Goa in India and Malacca in the Southeast of Asia. The Christian Portuguese and Spanish traders enjoyed their supremacy in the Indian Ocean as well as in the Malay Archipelago before the advent of other European powers, notably the Dutch and the British. Consequently, not only Christianity was introduced in the occupied territory but the European law and order was also put into practice.

In the succeeding episodes of *Reconquista*³, Muslim-West relations appeared to spread beyond the Iberian Peninsula to include the continent of Africa, Arabia and the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the islands and peninsula of Southeast Asia. It was the Portuguese expansion policy towards the Muslim world that a project of opening a sea route to the east was put into action. The task was not merely to open the way for trade to Western Europe but to fight the Muslim powers in and around the Indian Ocean. At the head of these powers stood the Ottomans whom according to the Western powers were their enemy.

³ The *Reconquista* ("Reconquest"; Arabic: الاسترداد trans. *al-Istirdād*, "the Recapturing") is a centuries-long period in the Middle Ages in which several Christian kingdoms succeeded in reconquering the Iberian Peninsula from the Islamic kingdoms collectively known as Al-Andalus.

At the time of the first Portuguese entry into the Indian Ocean, the Ottomans had not yet obtained possession of trading ports in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf but these fell into their hands only in the first half of the 16th century and the Portuguese since then had to face and struggle against the most powerful military empire existing in the world at that time. But after the failure of the Ottomans in their siege of Diu in 1538 the struggle was practically over.

After the discovery of the sea route to India in 1498, Portugal armadas were dispatched almost every year to the East and the drain of Portuguese resources in men and material was great and constant. As a result, Hurmuz, Diu, Goa and Malacca were seized for the purpose of commanding the sea route for securing unrestricted trade. By the middle of the 16th century the Portuguese were the paramount power controlling the sea trade route along the east coast of Africa to the Indian Ocean and the East. They firmly established their possession of the key points in India, Persia, Arabia and Southeast Asia which gave them control over the trade routes to Europe. In India, they had a strong centre at Goa and the island fort of Diu which the Ottomans had in vain attempted to take. In the Persian Gulf, the whole trade was concentrated in the fortified island of Hurmuz which they held, and Muscat gave them control over the adjoining coast of Arabia.

The Portuguese settlements in India were the most important part of the original scheme for obtaining control of the eastern trade. After Vasco da Gama's first successful journey to Calicut, a series of expeditions followed under Pedro Alvares Cabral (1500), João da Nova (1501-2), and Francisco and Alfonso d' Albuquerque (1503). These voyages were entirely concerned with the most southern part of the coast of western India, generally known as Malabar, then comprising the Hindu kingdom of Calicut, which maintained close relations with Muslim traders from East Africa and the subordinate kingdom of Cochin and Cananor.

All Muslim powers in the Indian Ocean looked for assistance from the powerful Mamluk sultans of Egypt who were in control of the Red Sea and its harbors, and who alone were able to muster a sea force capable of competing with that of Portugal. Behind Egypt, stood the vast power of the Ottomans under Sultan Selim I. But the Ottomans had not yet obtained a footing on the Indian Ocean. The newly organized power of Persia under the Shi'a sovereign, Ismail Shah, barred their way to the Persian Gulf as Egypt did that to the Red Sea. The entrance to the Red Sea was held by trading state of Hurmuz which controlled the straits and the adjoining coasts and islands of Persia and Arabia, while the Arabian coast between Oman and Straits of Bab al-Mandib including Aden was under its local chiefs.

The Mamluk of Egypt alone was free to act; and its ruler Qansuh al-Ghawri entered into alliance with the Sultan of Gujarat and fitted out a fleet in the Red Sea under Kurdish leader Mir Husain. This fleet appeared in Indian waters in 1507 supported by numerous small coasting craft belonging to Gujarat and Calicut. A considerable part of the Portuguese fleet under Lourenco d' Almeida was surprised in the harbor of Chāul and was nearly annihilated, the young commander losing his life. His father, the Viceroy revenged the loss in the beginning of 1509 by severely defeating the combined Egyptian and Gujarat fleet at Diu, and driving the remnants back into the Red Sea.

D'Albuquerque, successor of d'Almeida, had accompanied Tristão da Cunha in the expedition to Socotra and now proceeded to carry out the instructions of the King, which were to secure Portuguese power by taking possession of the strong central positions, especially Aden and Hurmuz. It was hoped that in this way to control the two great trade routes through the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Hurmuz was dealt with first, and in 1507-8 d'Albuquerque, starting from Socotra, attacked the Arabian ports which were under the control of the island state. Of these, the principal were Kalhāt, Sohār and Muscat, the last of which was soon after became a centre of Portuguese power. In 1510 d'Albuquerque seized Goa from the Ādilshāhī Sultan. After two months, however, the Ādilshāhī forces recovered the fort. In November,

d'Albuquerque again attacked and obtained possession of Goa. After settling a peace treaty with the Sultan, d'Albuquerque proceeded to Malacca, a place that was rendezvous of all the valuable trade of the Spice Islands and of China, and in 1511 Malacca was taken. During their presence in the Arabian coastal area, a proposal was put forward to the Portuguese authority to seize and capture the remains of the Prophet in exchange for the Christian Sculptures held in the Muslims land.

In 1513 d'Albuquerque decided to gain possession of Aden and the control of the Red Sea trade. A bold attempt to take Aden was made with insufficient force and failed; an expedition against Jeddah undertaken without knowledge of climate conditions never reached its objectives, and the crews were reduced by fever in the island of Kamaran before a change of wind allowed them to escape through the Straits of Bab al-Mandib into the Gulf of Aden. Hormuz, however, fell into d'Albuquerque's hands and he died later at the end of the year.

In spite of the failure to take Aden, the Portuguese position in the Indian Ocean was so strong that Sultan Selim I himself was unable to carry out his plans of further expansion in the East, although he struck a severe blow at Persia in 1514 and conquered Egypt in 1517. It was not until twenty years later that his successor Sultan Sulaiman was able to renew the attempt. The capture of Basra and Baghdad in 1535 brought

the Ottoman frontier down to the Persian Gulf and rendered it possible for the Ottomans to launch an armada into those waters. But the Portuguese hold over the Straits of Hurmuz was too strong, and Sulaiman was obliged to persist, under great difficulties, in the endeavours initiated by Sultan Selim I, to build a fleet at Suez.

Conflict between the Portuguese and the Ottomans continued particularly following a fresh quarrel between Portugal and Gujarat and an appeal was sent for help to Sultan Sulaiman at Istanbul. The Sultan sent a strong fleet to co-operate with Gujarat. Diu underwent a long siege but that ended in failure. Sultan Sulaiman, however, did not give up his effort of protecting Muslim lands in the East through the expulsion of the Portuguese fleets from the Indian Ocean. But all his attempts finally failed. No further attempts were made during the life of Sultan Sulaiman to contest the Portuguese maritime supremacy in the Indian Ocean. However, Portugal fell under the rule of Philip II of Spain in 1580 and she in turn followed the footsteps of Portugal in commanding the sea route to the East. But when Portugal recovered her independence in 1640 the mastery of the trade of the East had passed to British and Dutch.⁴

⁴ Foreign Office's handbook. Jan 1919. *The Formation of the Portuguese Colonial Empire*. pp. 1-22

CHAPTER 2

2.1 WESTERN IMPERIALISM IN THE MALAY WORLD

Background

During the 1500s and 1600s the Europeans were able to take control of the international trade of Asia, thereby diverting the profits from this trade to Europe. As a result, the Europeans became stronger while Asian empires and kingdoms became weaker. By the 1800s, the Europeans were in a position to establish their authority over much of Asia, particularly the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia.

Colonialism

Six countries: Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Great Britain, France, and the United States, had colonies in Southeast Asia.

Portugal

The Portuguese had the least impact on Southeast Asia. They captured Malacca in 1511, holding it until the Dutch seized it in 1641. Otherwise, they maintained only a small piece of territory on the island of Timor, southeast of Bali.

Spain

Spain ruled the Philippines from its conquest of Cebu in 1565 and Manila in 1571 until its defeat in the Spanish-American War in 1898.

The Netherlands

Dutch colonialism falls into two periods. The first, that of the V.O.C., or Dutch East India Company, lasted from 1605 to 1799. The V.O.C. had little interest in territorial administration; its primary concern was to maximize profits through trading monopolies. When the V.O.C. collapsed in 1799, the Dutch government took control of its assets in 1825, after the Napoleonic Wars, and began to bring the Indonesian archipelago under its administrative authority. This process was completed during the 1930s.

At the end of the Second World War, the Dutch had hoped to retain the Netherlands East Indies as a colony, but the Indonesians opposed the return of the Dutch, setting up a republic in 1945. In 1949, after four years of fighting, the Indonesians gained their independence with the assistance of the United Nations which served as a mediator between the Indonesians and the Dutch.

Great Britain

The British conquered Burma, fighting three Anglo-Burmese Wars in 1824-26, 1852, and 1885-86. Unlike other colonies which maintained their ethnic identity, Burma was a province of British India. The Burmese, therefore, had two sets of rulers, the British at the top with the Indians in the middle. In 1935 the British agreed to separate Burma from India, putting this agreement into effect in 1937. Burma was able to negotiate its independence from Great Britain in 1948.

Penang (acquired in 1786), Singapore (founded by Raffles in 1819), and Malacca (Melaka, acquired in 1824), were governed by Britain as the Straits Settlements. The Straits Settlements served as a base for British expansion into the Malay Peninsula between 1874 and 1914. When the Malay States entered into negotiations for their independence--achieved in 1957--Penang and Malacca became part of

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L/P&S Political and Secret Department, Government of India, British Library.

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