Chapter 17

Strange Fronts, Strange Wars: Germany’s Battle for “Islam” in the Middle East during the First World War, and British Reactions

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Introduction

In the early 20th century, albeit under very different circumstances, political Islam was as prominent in European and western thinking as it is today. It inspired suspicion, distrust, if not outright fear in European colonisers: as “Islam” was regarded as the most important influence on the political and social behaviour of Muslims, it was also regarded as the most prominent instigator of anti-colonial struggle and rebellion. As European control spread over ever more parts of the globe, leaving very few territories un-colonised by 1914, a new kind of fear arose: not fear of local Muslim revolts, but of a global “Pan-Islamic” rebellion, which would terminate European colonial rule. Probably the best (literary) expression of European (or rather British) fears of Pan-Islamism was John Buchan’s novel “Greenmantle”, which began with the following lines: “There is a dry wind blowing through the east, and the parched grasses wait the spark. And the wind is blowing towards the Indian frontier...I have reports from agents everywhere”.1

A precondition for such a rebellion was the existence of a Pan-Islamic movement. This movement and the question of its very existence and its importance, were hotly debated among European Orientalists. Leading German scholars, such as C.H. Becker,2 spoke out in opposition of the notion of a Pan-Islamic movement. At a conference in Paris in 1910 Becker argued accordingly:

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2 Carl Heinrich Becker: Carl Heinrich Becker (b. 12 April 1876 in Amsterdam, d. 10 February 1933 in Berlin) was a German Orientalist, one of the few who concentrated on the Modern Middle East and the contemporary Islamic World. After a distinguished university career, and having served in the Intelligence Office for the East during the First World War, he entered politics and twice (1921 and 1925–1930) served as Prussian minister of culture. He is also credited with remarkable reforms of university education during the Weimar period.
“If the unity of the black race is a phantom, the unity of the white race is a reality!” The outbreak of war in 1914 disproved his argument as to the “unity” of the “white race”. That left the question of how strongly developed the spirit of unity was on the side of the “black race”, of which we may assume Becker thought Muslims formed a part. There were numerous examples of Muslim solidarity during conflicts pitting Europeans against Muslim powers. Thus, for instance, Indian Muslims made generous donations to the Ottoman Red Crescent during the Balkan Wars of 1912/13, and Indian Muslim doctors and nurses served in the Ottoman armed forces. Furthermore, at least in theory, Muslims based their resistance to colonial encroachment not (yet) on a sense of nationalism, but fought on behalf of defending *Dar al-Islam* (literally “house of Islam”) against infidel occupation. Examples of this included the spirited defence of Algeria carried out by Amir ‘Abd al-Qadir (1830–1847), the phenomenon of the Mahdiyya in the Sudan (1881–1898) or the fight of the Sanusiyya against Italian colonialism in Libya (1911–1934).

It did not take long until Europeans were beginning to ask the question of whether the two phenomena might be combined; namely, if Pan-Islamic soli-