

PANEL

I

THE IDEAS OF BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI IN THE THIRTIETH YEAR SINCE HIS DEATH AND THEIR PLACE IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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human advancement and that he presented these ideas to us. And once again I want to say here that when Cemil Meriç represented Bediuzzaman's ideas to me as a totality which were new both from the social and human point of view, original to himself, and absolutely had to be studied in their entirety, he was not wrong, also to state once again my debt to him.

* * *

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SAID NURSI AND BRITAIN'S PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE AGAINST OTTOMAN TURKEY, 1909-22

- I -

Particularly in the period Said Nursi was born and grew up, international relations were the stage of a strenuous struggle for power between the Great Powers. Besides military and economic methods, one of the means employed by the actors on the stage of this rivalry - the chief ones at that time being Europe's industrialized countries, Britain, France, and Germany - for the achievement of their foreign policy aims, was 'psychological warfare.'

What we mean when we say psychological warfare is an intense terrorist brain-washing woven from the propaganda and operations which the states in question carried out in the countries in which their aims and interests lay. The purpose of this activity directed towards the civil population or the man in the street was to destroy their loyalty towards those governing the country by influencing their ideas, and even to make them into activists suiting the purposes of their own expansionist ambitions or hopes to occupy the country.

It may be observed that Britain in particular among the Great Powers carried out this activity on the Ottoman State in systematic fashion throughout the last century of the Empire. As is

known, the Ottomans were a Near and Middle Eastern state one wing of which was still in Rumelia in the twentieth century. The reason for Ottoman Turkey's being the stage for the United Kingdom's interest and influence, which was following an imperialist policy in international relations, was the Middle East's economic, political, and strategic importance. Up to the third quarter of the nineteenth century, London supported the Ottoman State against Czarist Russia's expansionist manoeuvres as the price of controlling the lines of communication to the colony of India, but subsequent to this date it began to connive at the division of the Ottoman Empire, called the "Sick Man" for the sake of drawing closer to Petersburg in international relations. Further to this, it believed that the way to secure its dominance in the Middle East was the formation of small states under its own protection made up of the non-Muslim and non-Turk communities broken off from the structure of the Ottoman's multinational empire. Thus, following this policy, in the time of Abdulhamid II it both nurtured and supported the separatist movements against the Ottomans.

The Young Turks bringing back the Constitution in 1908 and parliamentary government again being set into operation in the Ottoman Empire was an unpleasant surprise for London at a time they supposed they had achieved their aims. What if the Ottomans defeated them with this attack? What if the minorities' separatist ambitions were eroded in the free atmosphere of Constitutionalism? And worse than this, what if the Turks were successful with this experiment and the Muslim subjects in their own colonies attempted to import the same model, what would they do then? How would they be able to maintain their dominance?

Thus, the period from 1908 to 1923 was one during which Britain carried on an intense psychological operation against Ottoman Turkey. As we stressed in more detailed manner in

another work, London was behind every sort of destructive activity during this period, from its propaganda efforts among the minorities to coup attempts and separatist uprisings aimed at overthrowing the Committee of Union and Progress [CUP].¹

In this paper, we shall touch on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's endeavours to counter this imperialist aggression.

- II -

Said Nursi underlined his pleasure at the proclamation of the Constitution in a speech which he gave impromptu in Salonica. What lay behind this attitude of his in regard to political thought was his opposition to despotism. He dealt with despotism in categorical terms defining it as: "oppression," "arbitrary treatment," and "compulsion." According to Said Nursi, despotism was "the foundation of tyranny."² Whereas constitutionalism was Islamic: "The spirit of constitutionalism is from the Shari'a. And its life is from it. But under force of circumstance it may be that some details fall temporarily contrary to it."³ We shall not go into details here, only as Safa Mürsel states, "Constitutionalism, which was founded on such bases as freedom, justice, consultation and the free will of the individual, and national sovereignty, was according to him the source of every sort of prosperity and happiness and the means of securing and establishing national sovereignty."⁴

The proclamation of the Constitution could possibly have been the cause of mental confusion in South-Eastern Anatolia. British propaganda with its divisive character could have spread there. And so in this setting, Said Nursi answered as follows questions put to him by the tribes in the East. Those not in favour of freedom and constitutionalism, he described as:

"A group from the nation of mankind which, under the leadership of Ignorance Ağa, Obstinacy Efendi, Enmity Bey, Vengeance Pasha, the Reverend Shaykh Blind

Imitation, and Monsieur Chatterbox, injures the consultation which is the source of our happiness."⁵

Describing the aim of the new government as, "through the mystery of the brotherhood of belief, to make three hundred million into one body and strengthen the luminous chain of Islam," he related to them the good news that the CUP would follow a Pan-Islamic policy. He stated that he shared the tribes' doubts concerning the fact that among the Young Turks who were to carry out this mission were those who did not practise Islam, only he could not restrain himself from adding: "Patriotism is one thing, and one's occupation another." And on the tribes stating that there were Freemasons among the Young Turks, Said Nursi immediately drew their attention to this difference among the CUP:

"Despotism has put this about in order to perpetuate itself. And there is some laxity which gives strength to this anxiety. But you should be certain that the aims of the section of them that has not entered Freemasonry is not harm to religion, it is rather to secure the nation's health. However, some of them have touched excessively on the cold bigotry which is not worthy of religion. That means you are calling Young Turks those who either preceeded them in serving freedom and constitutionalism, or those who support them. Thus, some of these sacrifice themselves for Islam, and some sacrifice themselves for the sake of the nation. Those that form their life-source, the majority of whom are not Masons, are members of the CUP. And there are Ulema and shaykhs are numerous as these tribes as yours among the Young Turks. It's true there are many ill-mannered very dissolute Masons among them also, but these form only ten per cent. Ninety per cent are believing Muslims like yourselves."⁶

It is necessary to note the following in connection with this,

that what Said Nursi is defining as "despotism" in the above quotes is either universal, imperialist despotism, or it is Britain. In the light of the above discussion, we see here Said Nursi warning against not supporting the divisive activities of British propaganda in the country which had the theme of "Young Turk-Mason-Zionist co-operation."⁷ Just as in the future during the War years, carrying out this propaganda both in the Arab Middle East, which was tied to the Ottomans, and in its colonies in South Asia, the British wanted to destroy the support in the Islamic world for the Ottomans, who had proclaimed *jihad*. It should be recalled that this theme was made the banner by the Emir of Mecca, Sharif Husayn, who revolted against the Turks in 1916 at the instigation and with the encouragement of the British. And when it was asked anxiously that the non-Muslims might try to exploit Freedom, Said Nursi replied that basic freedom would make the Muslims "the dominant nation," or in other words, it would create a situation whereby the voice of the Muslim population, which formed the majority under the Ottoman constitutional regime, would be better heard, and whereby they would have say over their own destiny. He even stated that freedom such as that would gain dimensions outside the country for the Muslims:

"And again we Muslims do not cause harm. For just as the Armenians among us are not three million, the non-Muslims are not ten million. Whereas while our nation and eternal brothers are more than three hundred million, they are bound with three dreadful fetters of despotism, and are being crushed, captive under the Europeans' tyranny. Thus, the non-Muslims' freedom, which is one branch of our freedom, is the bribe for the freedom of all our nation. It is the repeller of that despotism, and the key to those fetters. It is the raiser of the dreadful tyranny the Europeans have made descend on us. Yes, the Ottomans' freedom is the discloser of mighty Asia's good fortune. It is the key to

Islam's prosperity. It is the foundation of the ramparts of Islamic Unity."⁸

- III -

Said Nursi was noticeable for his efforts to pacify the lively situation during the 31st March Incident in 1909,⁹ and in 1910 went to Van, and the following year to Damascus. It was a period during which the British were carrying out an intensive propaganda campaign against the Turks in the Arab Provinces of the Ottoman Empire. With rumours that the Jenghis Khan-like idol-worshipping positivist CUP which was bent on Turkifying and splitting off the country from its Islamic structure had come to power, the fire of nationalism reached a level leading to serious eruptions among the people of the region, who anyway had been scorched during Abdulhamid II's reign. In this setting, Said Nursi delivered a sermon in the Umayyad Mosque to a diverse and large gathering of Ulema, and tried to enlighten them.

In his sermon, Said Nursi described the "sicknesses" which had arrested the development of the Islamic world, and recalled to the Arabs that one of these was "not knowing the luminous bonds binding the believers to one another."¹⁰ Continuing, he stressed that these dire sicknesses could be cured with lessons taken from "the pharmacy of the Qur'an." Muslims had lost "hope," whereas, "the future shall be Islam's, and Islam's alone. And its ruler shall be the truths of the Qur'an and belief." For Said Nursi testified that Islam "possessed a perfect ability and capacity to progress both materially and in moral and spiritual matters."¹¹ Basically, the sermon invites the Muslim Arabs to striving, reconciliation, prosperity and progress, in short to serve the Ottoman future which had gained new life with constitutionalism. While European thinkers even, which he called "its intelligent arable fields," saw the future victory of Islam, how could the Muslims' pessimism be explained. It was

necessary not to fall into despair:

“God willing, the Arabs will leave off their despair, and standing once again in true solidarity and unity with the Turks, the heroic army of Islam, they will raise the standard of the Qur'an in every part of the world.”¹²

That is to say, Said Nursi is stating openly: “.. political propaganda has sometimes given greater currency to lies.”¹³ What he means by saying this is probably the destructive British psychological operation. The following is a message along the same lines:

“And in so far as they have carried the standard of the Ottoman Caliphate and Turkish Army in the name of that nationhood, the two true bothers of Arab and Turk, who are like the shell and citadel of the nationhood of Islam, are the sentries of that sacred citadel.”¹⁴

According to Said Nursi, the Arabs' outcry that “Constitutionalism was the import of Western institutions. The Ottomans were going to damage the structure of Islam” meant being taken in by the imperialist ambitions of the British. For as we noted above, from Said Nursi's point of view, “the key to the happiness of the Muslims' Islamic social life is consultation in accordance with the Shari'a.”¹⁵ This system of consultation “will loosen and remove the fetters and chains of the various forms of despotism fastened to the feet of Islam.”¹⁶ It can be clearly understood here which despotism his anti-imperialist thought intends to shatter.

At a time the West had vowed to drape its chain of captivity round the Ottomans' neck, this game could have been spoilt through the solidarity of the Turk and Arabs. What had to be preserved was this; and Islam had the structure to secure this togetherness:

“Religious zeal and Islamic nationhood have completely

fused in the Turks and Arabs, and may not now be separated. Islamic zeal is a luminous chain which is most strong and secure and is not born of this world. It is a support that is most firm and certain, and will not fail. It is an unassailable fortress that cannot be razed.”¹⁷

We learn from Necmeddin Şahiner's biography that this sermon achieved its aim.¹⁸

- IV -

The first years following the proclamation of the Constitution were particularly difficult for the Ottomans in Rumelia. On the one hand Bulgar-Greek-Serbian separatism, and on the other Slav and Teuton expansionism, were endeavouring to send the Turks packing to Anatolia. And Britain closed its eyes to these efforts, and even covertly supported them in so far as they did not upset the international balance overmuch. At this time we see Said Nursi taking part in Sultan Reşad's journey to pacify his subjects. Only, his mind was in the East. He convinced the Sultan that the foreign-instigated divisiveness could be countered with a '*Medresetü'z-Zehra*' in South-East Anatolia, in which the religious and modern sciences would be taught side by side. However, the foundations of this project were not to be laid; the First World War broke out and British propaganda was realized.

The year was 1915. In August of the same year Said Nursi was in Eastern Anatolia for the defence of the country. As is known, with the War, the Armenian revolutionaries fomented revolt in the East and became the vanguard of the Russian occupation. And here we see Said Nursi in the defence of Bitlis as a militia commander more than a *hoca*. The 'Felt Hats' fought valiantly against the occupation, but were unable to save Eastern Anatolia from the enemy invasion. A wounded Bediuzzaman was sent to Siberia as the prisoner of the Russians. A year later he escaped and returned to Turkey. On reaching it, he was

appointed as a member of the Islamic academy, the *Darü'l-Hikmeti'l-İslamiye*. Although we see Said Nursi during the Armistice Years among the members of the Kurdistan Society for the Propagation of Education, we can suppose relying on his own statements that his aim was not separatism like some Kurdish societies in this period, but on the contrary, that with the collapse of central government, resistance to the enemy invasion at a local base was the sole way of salvation, and in this way he believed that educational activities among the local population would play a key role. And so too these words of his have been recorded: "It isn't setting up Kurdistan that must be done, let's restore to life the Ottoman Empire."¹⁹ We can offer further evidence of this with these words:

"God Almighty says in the Holy Qur'an: God shall produce a people whom He will love as they will love Him. I pondered over this Divine declaration and I understood that this people is the Turkish nation, which for a thousand years acted as the standard-bearer of the Islamic world. I shall not follow a few brainless racialsists rather than serving this heroic nation, in place of four hundred and fifty million true Muslim brothers."²⁰

- V -

On studying the Armistice years in the light of international developments, it may be observed that in the face of the British policy to dismember the Ottoman Empire in pitiless fashion, a revolt had reached a peak among the Muslims of South Asia, a British colony. This revolt, which went under the name of the 'Caliphate Movement,' aimed to secure better peace conditions for the Turks.²¹ This was an open statement of Islamic solidarity against imperialism, in which Said Nursi played a part with two works. In *The Six Steps*, he opposes the British occupation in the harshest terms and calls to the Islamic world. See how he rails at the British:

"Your mighty power which persists mostly through the strength of deception and intrigue does not cast us into despair. **Firstly**, deception and intrigue are effective only so long as they are covert. They become bankrupt on coming out into the open and lose their strength. The veil is so rent now that your lies, trickery, and intrigue have been transformed into raving and buffoonery and are without avail. Like against Anatolia now...

"**Secondly**, ninety-nine per cent of that empty power of yours does not accept accord against you. A hostile current condemns it to inactivity. If you think that with the power that remains to you it is possible to hold the Islamic world, whose troubles and their remedies are shared, under your despotism at a degree that will silence it and not allow it to stir, you are an ass as well as being Satan!

"Hey, you dogs who are more basely and utterly dog-like than any dog!

"**Thirdly**, since you are killing us, there are two ways of dying.

"*The first way* is to fall under your feet, and for you to kill our spirit and conscience with our own hands by us surrendering to you; as though making you kill our body too to avenge our spirit.

"*The second way* is for our spirit and heart to remain alive by spitting in your face and hitting you in the eye. The body becomes a martyr again, but our belief and virtue are not insulted. Due to Islamic honour, they are not mocked.

"**In short**, love of Islam necessitates being inimical to you. Gabriel and Satan cannot be reconciled."²²

The writer of the lines quoted above joined the Anatolian operation with the start of the National Struggle. As is known, on 11 April 1920, the Shayhku'l-Islam, Dürriyade Abdullah

Efendi, issued five *fetvas* against the Nationalist Forces and War of Independence. In response to this, 76 Müftis, 36 religious scholars, and 11 Deputies issued counter-*fetvas* which rendered them ineffective. Bediuzzaman also opposed the *fetvas*. He said:

“A *fetva* issued by a government and Shaykhu'l-Islam's Office in a country under enemy occupation and under the command and constraint of the British, is defective and should not be heeded. Those operating against the enemy invasion are not rebels. The *fetva* must be rescinded.”²³

In 1922 Said Nursi was in Ankara. He was met at the station, and given a welcome. He congratulated the ghazis of Anatolia from the platform of the Assembly, and offered prayers for their success. A short while later, addressing the Deputies in a manifesto, he stressed the Islamic dimensions of the National Struggle. When he moved on to Van from Ankara, he had received the promise of money to found the Eastern University, the ambition of his life. Since Said Nursi's life subsequent to this is the phase of the New Said and is beyond this paper, we conclude here.

- VI -

To sum up; in the period of - in his own words - the Old Said, Said Nursi greeted with pleasure the transition of the country's government into the hands of CUP in 1908 in the belief that constitutionalism and freedom were the indispensable requirements of Islam. His hope was that many from the Ulema would, like him, consider it appropriate, and even that with the handing over of Sultan Hamid's administration, which they thought was unable to protect the country properly in the face of gradually increasing Western imperialism, to a young and patriotic administration which supported freedom, the lively potential of Islam would become operative and in that way the Islamic prescription for the Ottoman decline would

cure the 'Sick Man' and raise him to his feet. Acting out of this belief, Said Nursi dedicated himself on the one hand to enlightening the people, and on the other to making ineffective hostile British propaganda. When he felt it necessitated it, he joined the ranks of the Special Organization and fought actively on the Caucasian Front. In the hopeless impasse of the Armistice period during which the flames of Kurdish separatism were fanned, he continued resolutely this '*jihad* and guidance' among the tribes of South-East Anatolia and the Arab tribes of the Middle East. At that time when the national identity had still not taken root thoroughly in Anatolia, in the face of the games of imperialism and its tactics of 'divide and rule,' he sought help from the unifying factor of Islam, and more than this, its ability to mobilize the masses against the enemy, and embraced it.

Furthermore, it is not true to say that the co-operation of the ruling party and the CUP in this violent period was not subject to any objection. In reply to those who asked: "Why do you think well as far as is possible of the Constitutional Government and the Young Turks who aren't irreligious?," he said: "Because you think badly of them as far as is possible...If they are like that, that's good, and if they are not, let them be like that, I'm showing them the way." And he qualified his support in this way: "Together with appreciating their value, I oppose the violence in their politics."²⁴ For he supposed and hoped that both in its internal and external policies, the CUP would translate the Islamist movement into practice from its ideological base. Furthermore, at a time when the external enemies had determined to destroy the Ottoman Empire, which formed the only independent Muslim state, he remarked on the sensitivity of the situation saying: "I won't aim my blow at Said Halim together with Antranik. In my view, those who do so are base."²⁵

The Ottoman Empire under CUP rule was broken up at the end of the First World War by the Entente Powers among which were the British. However, the National Struggle was successful and the Turkish Republic was founded. Finally, I want to stress this: if, in spite of the intense British propaganda (or psychological warfare), the Arab Revolt in the Ottoman Empire remained restricted to Sharif Husayn and his family, and the tribes of South-East Anatolia supported the Nationalist Forces in the National Struggle, and the pressure of the South Asia Muslims on the enemy Britain and their threat of rebellion in the same period afforded some results favourable to Ankara in London's Turkish policy, it will doubtless be in keeping with the dictates of scholarship and the conscience to remember Said Nursi among the architects who contributed to this process.

Footnotes:

1. Öke, Mim Kemal, *Kutsal Topraklarda Siyonistler and Masonlar* (Zionists and Masons in the Holy Land); Istanbul 1990.
2. Mürsel, Safâ, *Siyasi Düşünce Tarihi Işığında Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Bediuzzaman Said Nursi in the Light of the History of Political Thought); Istanbul 1989, 120-1.
3. *Ibid.*, 22.
4. *Ibid.*, 47.
5. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Münazarat* (The Debates); new edition, Istanbul 1977, 10.
6. *Ibid.*, 33-4.
7. This subject is studied in detail in my work, *Kutsal Topraklarda*.
8. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Münazarat*, 20-1.
9. See, Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *İki Mekteb-i Musibetin Şehadetnamesi veya Divan-ı Harb-i Örfî* (The Testimony of Two Schools of Misfortune or The Military Court); new edition, Istanbul 1978.
10. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Hutbe-i Şamiye* (The Damascus Sermon); new edition, Istanbul, n.d., 16-17.
11. *Ibid.*, 18.
12. *Ibid.*, 39.

13. *Ibid.*, 43.
14. *Ibid.*, 47.
15. *Ibid.*, 52.
16. *Ibid.*, 53.
17. *Ibid.*, 57.
18. Şahiner, Necmeddin, *Bilinmeyen Taraflarıyla Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Bediuzzaman Said Nursi Together With His Unknown Aspects); 8th edition, Istanbul 1990, 153.
19. *Ibid.*, 228.
20. *Ibid.*, 229.
21. For further information, see my *Hilafet Hareketleri* (Caliphate Movements); Ankara 1991.
22. Şahiner, 231.
23. *Ibid.*, 250.
24. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Münazarat*, 79.
25. Şahiner, 116.

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