

# Imperial Concerns at the Heart of the British-Ottoman Rupture, 1914

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How does “historic friendship” turn sour?<sup>1</sup> How does a former protector become a “cruel enemy”?<sup>2</sup> This was the situation in which the British Empire found itself during World War I as they fought against the Ottoman Empire, a power with which they had enjoyed almost uninterrupted friendship since the sixteenth century. During that time, Britain had been the Ottoman Empire’s principal defender against foreign incursions that threatened their territorial integrity, as seen in conflicts such as the Crimean War and the Second Egyptian-Ottoman War (1839-41). In 1914, when relations between the two empires seemed to be stronger than they had been in decades, the Ottoman Empire forsook their friendship with Great Britain and entered the Great War on the side of the Central Powers.<sup>3</sup> Yet this did not occur at the outset of the conflict; the British declaration of war on the Ottoman Empire occurred on November 5th, three months after the ratification of the German-Ottoman Alliance and the outbreak of the war in Europe. These three months saw the failure of the British Foreign Office to maintain Ottoman neutrality despite repeated efforts to do so. This resulted in the declaration of war (along with the rest of the Triple Entente) on the Ottoman Empire following their naval attack on Russia.

The fact that the Ottoman Black Sea attacks compelled Britain to declare war has often been taken for granted, part of the classic mindset that holds World War I as the “unintended consequence of treaty systems,” rather than what it actually was: a war of empires, where

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<sup>1</sup> Mallet to Grey, 2.10.14, tel. no. 141, in: *Correspondence Respecting Events Leading to the Rupture of Relations with Turkey* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1914). See enclosure, Mallet to Grand Vizier.

<sup>2</sup> Banu Turnaoğlu, *The Formation of Turkish Republicanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 171.

<sup>3</sup> On how the relations were the strongest they had been in some time, see Feroz Ahmad, “Great Britain’s Relations with the Young Turks 1908-1914,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 2, no. 4 (July 1966): 324.

belligerent powers aimed “to reallocate populations and resources, in Europe and overseas, from another empire into their own.”<sup>4</sup> With the imperial character of the war in mind, it is worth reconsidering the pivotal three months in which the British Empire, on the surface, attempted to keep the Ottoman Empire out of the conflict, only to find its hand forced by an Ottoman attack on their ally.

Through such reexamination, it becomes apparent that, contrary to conventional scholarship, British policy towards the Ottoman Empire in the months between August and November of 1914 was not characterized by deference to Great Power alliance systems, where Ottoman neutrality was necessary to prevent greater conflagrations on the Eastern Front, but rather by imperial concerns.<sup>5</sup> So long as territories held by the British Empire were left unthreatened, the Foreign Office was content to engage in the farcical neutrality debate with the Ottoman government. This is evident in the Foreign Office exchanges regarding Egypt and India, which reveal a British Empire ready to declare war *before* the Black Sea attacks, once the security of those territories came into question. Through these exchanges, it becomes clear that the integrity of their empire was of the utmost concern to the British, and not the alliance system of the Triple Entente. Building on scholarly work that reveals the British were well aware of the impossibility of Ottoman neutrality and using this lens to reevaluate Foreign Office exchanges from August to November of 1914, this essay will reveal that concerns of empire guided British policy towards the Ottoman Empire, as opposed to concerns of alliance. In these critical months leading up to the Ottoman war entry, imperial interests determined the British course of action.

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<sup>4</sup> Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 370-71.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Heller, *British Policy Towards the Ottoman Empire 1908-1914* (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1983), 134.

In August 1914, the Ottoman Empire was in a precarious situation. War had broken out in Europe, a war which could allow the Ottomans to reassert themselves on the international stage following the losses incurred during the Balkan Wars.<sup>6</sup> The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) Government, spearheaded by the triumvirate of Cemal Pasha (Minister of the Navy), Enver Pasha (Minister of War), and Talaat Pasha (Minister of the Interior), along with the Ottoman public, saw involvement in the war as a necessity.<sup>7</sup> These men believed that militarism was the path to modernization.<sup>8</sup> After overtures to the Entente powers proved fruitless, the Ottoman government settled for a German alliance, secretly concluding a treaty on August 2nd.<sup>9</sup>

The British Empire was not aware of this alliance until late October, by which point they had already been convinced of Ottoman collusion with Germany.<sup>10</sup> This conviction stemmed from the Ottoman allowance of two German cruisers, the *Goeben* and the *Breslau*, through the Dardanelles on August 10th. This was seen as a violation of neutrality, and the Ottoman government was immediately ordered to either send the ships away or to intern them and repatriate their German crews.<sup>11</sup> They did neither, instead arranging a fictitious purchase of the two ships while keeping the German crews, a scheme of which Britain was well aware.<sup>12</sup> This was, in part, retaliation for the British requisition of two warships - the *Sultan Osman* and the *Reşadiye* - meant for (and paid for by) the Ottomans at the outbreak of war.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mustafa Aksakal, "War as the Savior? Hopes for War and Peace in Ottoman Politics before 1914," in *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914*, ed. Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 287-90.

<sup>7</sup> The CUP triumvirate is commonly known by the name "the Three Pashas."

<sup>8</sup> Mustafa Aksakal, "The Limits of Diplomacy: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7, no. 2 (April 2011): 197-98.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmad, "Great Britain's Relations with the Young Turks," 325.

<sup>10</sup> Mallet to Grey, 23.10.14, tel. no. 164, *Correspondence*.

<sup>11</sup> Grey to Beaumont, 11.8.14, tel. no. 6, *ibid*.

<sup>12</sup> Mallet to Grey, 27.8.14, tel. no. 41, *ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 109.

For three months following the warship affair, multiple British warnings were sent for German crews to be sent home and for the ships to not be allowed into the Black Sea, warnings which were all ignored. Even after the discovery of the German-Ottoman agreement, the Foreign Office remained obsessed with neutrality, promising the CUP government “disastrous consequences” should they act against the Entente.<sup>14</sup> Despite all signs pointing towards imminent Ottoman involvement in the war (with Britain knowing full well that they were simply stalling for time), the Foreign Office pursued a relatively hands-off strategy, providing hollow warnings until their hands were finally forced by Russia, who first declared war on the Ottoman Empire following the Black Sea attacks.<sup>15</sup>

The historiography surrounding these three months has focused heavily on the personalities of Sir Edward Grey, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and Sir Louis Mallet, British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire.<sup>16</sup> Grey, ever concerned with preserving the delicate European balance of power, had long treated the Young Turk government with a degree of indifference, supporting them so long as they pursued some form of constitutionalism and reform and helped to preserve a geographic status quo.<sup>17</sup> At the outbreak of war, Grey had no illusions as to the intentions of the Ottomans and was simply waiting for the inevitable, having given Mallet the choice to leave Istanbul as early as August 16th.<sup>18</sup> Mallet, a figure widely criticized for his failure to rein in the Ottoman government, spent most of the critical three months meeting with

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<sup>14</sup> Mallet to Grey, 24.9.14, tel. no. 90, *Correspondence*.

<sup>15</sup> For British knowledge of the stalling tactic, see Mallet to Grey, 27.10.14, tel. no. 170, *ibid*. Russia declared war against the Ottomans on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, joined three days later by Britain and France.

<sup>16</sup> For examples, see Geoffrey Miller, *Straits: British Policy Towards the Ottoman Empire and the Origins of the Dardanelles Campaign* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1997) and Heller, *British Policy Towards the Ottoman Empire*.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmad, “Great Britain’s Relations with the Young Turks,” 314-15. “Reform” typically referred to constitutionalism, financial reform (in the form of more responsible spending and taking out loans from Entente-sponsored banks), and reform in the treatment of Christian subjects, particularly in the Balkans. All of this is covered in Heller, *British Policy Towards the Ottoman Empire*.

<sup>18</sup> Heller, *British Policy Towards the Ottoman Empire*, 138 & 140.

the CUP triumvirate, Grand Vizier, and even the Sultan, constantly insisting on neutrality.<sup>19</sup> Older scholarship has criticized Mallet for his ignorance of the German-Ottoman agreement and for the “misinformation” he relayed back to Grey concerning the strength of the anti-German, anti-war faction within the CUP.<sup>20</sup> Since the 1970s, scholarship has tended to portray Grey as tied up by the Foreign Office’s hands off position, leaving it to Germany and the triumvirate to take up the initiative and bring the Ottoman Empire into the war.<sup>21</sup>

The Foreign Office’s patient neutrality in the matter of the Ottoman war entry, simply bracing for the inevitable, coupled with Mallet’s restricted range of actions, essentially made the months of August through November a waiting game, a game which finally ended on November 5th. It is practically unchallenged that Britain was waiting for the Ottomans to provoke a declaration by the Entente and that all attention was on the navy and the Black Sea.<sup>22</sup> It is taken for granted that Britain would not have taken the initiative to declare war without the wider Entente having already been drawn in, as they had been given ample opportunity to since August but only did after Russia had made the first declaration.<sup>23</sup>

This is an incomplete understanding of the months August through November, one which subscribed to the antiquated idea that World War I was little more than a war of alliances. The war was a war of empires; this cannot be forgotten or overlooked. When viewing the Foreign Office correspondence from those three months with this in mind, a new discovery is made. Britain was concerned chiefly with its empire and with maintaining its holdings. These imperial interests could have driven Britain to preemptively declare war, but it just so happened

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<sup>19</sup> For a summary of these criticisms, see *Ibid*, 133.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Heller, “Sir Louis Mallet and the Ottoman Empire: The Road to War,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 12, no. 1 (January 1976): 36-38.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, *Straits*, 332-35.

<sup>23</sup> Inari and Efraim Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East, 1789-1923* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 122-23.

that the Ottomans attacked Russia first. Rather than waiting for the alliance system to pit them against their old Ottoman friend, they actively worried about potential attacks on Egypt and the possibility of increasing unrest in India. It has been argued that this was a folly on Britain's part, that they ignored the Black Sea developments, instead focusing on an Ottoman "distraction" meant to lure their attention away.<sup>24</sup> I argue that not only were the British completely aware of the Black Sea designs, but that it was of secondary interest to them. The British were primarily concerned with their imperial holdings and would have pursued war against the Ottoman Empire without an Entente-related *casus belli* if provoked. While this may seem obvious, it challenges the traditional, hands-off portrayal of the British at this time. They were *not* hands-off, but instead actively engaged in the defense of their imperial holdings, concerned chiefly with their own self-interest. Additionally, when it came to issues of their empire, the Foreign Office pushed for genuine action by the CUP government, rather than issuing slap-on-the-wrist warnings as they did in the case of the Black Sea plans.

What follows will be an analysis of the British Foreign Office exchanges from August 3rd to November 4th, collected in the *Correspondence Respecting Events Leading to the Rupture of Relations with Turkey*, a series of diplomatic exchanges presented to Parliament in November of 1914. In the first half of the analysis, I will examine the exchanges related specifically to the *Goeben* and *Breslau* and the Black Sea threat, highlighting British passivity in line with the scholarly understanding that the Foreign Office knew that the Ottomans were planning on entering the war on the side of the Central Powers. Here, the British demonstrated a genuinely hands-off approach, indicating the secondary importance given to the Black Sea affairs which threatened Russia. In the second half of the analysis, I will examine the exchanges related to Ottoman designs on Egypt, India, and the Middle East, and show the heightened attention given

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 135-36.

to these developments. Here, it will become apparent that the British Empire was *not* a hands-off spectator, but that they were actively considering taking the initiative to make war on the Ottoman Empire to protect their holdings.

The Foreign Office was first made aware of the August 10<sup>th</sup> entrance of the *Goeben* and *Breslau* the day after.<sup>25</sup> That day, Grey commanded Henry Beaumont (the stand-in for Mallet, who was on leave until August 16<sup>th</sup>) to direct the Ottoman government to either release the ships back into the Mediterranean or to disarm and intern them, imploring him to “point out to the Turkish Government that these are the duties entailed upon them by their neutrality, and that His Majesty’s Government expect that they will act up to their obligations.”<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting that, despite his politeness and stated expectation that the Ottomans would uphold their neutrality, Grey was already convinced that the die had been cast, and that Ottoman entry on the side of the Triple Alliance was inevitable.<sup>27</sup> Preparations were already being made for the evacuation of British ships from Ottoman ports, seen as an urgent matter following the temporary detainment of British merchant vessels in the Dardanelles, and Grey was even considering enlisting the United States to take over British interests in the Empire once hostilities inevitably broke out.<sup>28</sup> On the very day that Mallet returned to Istanbul, he was given the authority to leave whenever he saw fit.<sup>29</sup>

Mallet, however, was not as fatalistic as Grey, trapped, in the words of historian Geoffrey Miller, “by the belief that his good offices still carried weight at the Porte.”<sup>30</sup> Given his recent absence and the good relations enjoyed with the Ottoman government before the July Crisis, this

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<sup>25</sup> Beaumont to Grey, 11.8.14, tel. no. 7, *Correspondence*.

<sup>26</sup> Grey to Beaumont, 11.8.14, tel. no. 8, *ibid*.

<sup>27</sup> Heller, “Sir Louis Mallet and the Ottoman Empire,” 8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*; Beaumont to Grey, 11.8.14, tel. no. 10, *Correspondence*; Heller, *British Policy Towards the Ottoman Empire*, 140. The US would have been in the best position to maintain British interests since they were expected to be a neutral power in the war.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, *Straits*, 281.

belief may not have been entirely unfounded.<sup>31</sup> Mallet was able to talk Grey down from evacuating British ships, following his resolution of their detainment, arguing that such an action would be perceived by the Ottomans as a sign that Britain was preparing for a war declaration.<sup>32</sup> Though Grey acquiesced to Mallet's plea, it was indeed true that Britain was making war preparations. Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, had on August 17th proposed sending a British torpedo flotilla through the Dardanelles, only to be talked down by other Cabinet members who favored patience, letting the Ottomans strike first as to not upset Britain's Muslim subjects (who would not respond well if Britain made the first move, attacking the empire of the Caliph).<sup>33</sup> Thus, patience became the *modus operandi* of the British Empire. Convinced of an inevitable war entry by the Ottomans, Britain simply bode their time, bracing for the inevitable. This left Mallet to, for lack of a better phrase, dither around in Istanbul, pursuing the official line of neutrality while knowing full well that neutrality was all but impossible.<sup>34</sup>

This explains Mallet's seemingly contradictory correspondence regarding the prospects of Ottoman neutrality. Despite accurately predicting the CUP's plan to use the fictitiously-purchased *Goeben* and *Breslau* to attack Russia on the Black Sea as early as August 27<sup>th</sup> and constantly reporting on the influx of German militants into the Empire, Mallet stuck to the official line and spent most of his time through November meeting with Ottoman officials and imploring them to remain neutral.<sup>35</sup> These meetings usually amounted to little more than wrist-slapping the Grand Vizier, who Mallet explicitly recognized as holding very little power

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<sup>31</sup> Heller, "Sir Louis Mallet and the Ottoman Empire," 4-5.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, *Straits*, 281-82.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 282.

<sup>34</sup> Heller, *British Policy Towards the Ottoman Empire*, 141.

<sup>35</sup> For the prediction of the attack, see Mallet to Grey, 27.8.14, tel. no. 41, *Correspondence*; For the earliest instance of the reporting on the militant influx, see Mallet to Grey, 23.8.14, tel. no. 31, *ibid*.

within the Empire, which was entirely concentrated in the hands of the triumvirate.<sup>36</sup> When Mallet reported back to Grey on the strength of the anti-war and pro-neutrality faction within the Young Turks, something which he has faced immense criticism for in the older historiography, he was merely parroting the words of the Grand Vizier, someone whose influence and control over the situation he doubted completely.<sup>37</sup>

That Grand Vizier Said Halim Pasha was attempting to deceive Mallet, in fact being in cahoots with the rest of the triumvirate and actively preparing for a war entrance on the side of the Central Powers, is largely irrelevant here.<sup>38</sup> So too is the fact that the Grand Vizier would have had little actual influence within the government of the CUP, something Mallet has similarly been criticized for not understanding.<sup>39</sup> Regardless of the Grand Vizier's deception, Mallet did not trust him, and despite his frequent telegraphs to Grey regarding the strong possibility of Ottoman neutrality, Mallet knew fully just how vacuous those promises of neutrality (usually made by Halim) were.<sup>40</sup> Mallet's apparent aloofness was in fact a calculated play to prolong a tenuous neutrality for as long as possible, with the Foreign Office knowing full well it would not last. Mallet realized that his office no longer carried any weight and he engaged in a farcical pursuit of neutrality to, on the one hand, delay an Ottoman war entry so the British could focus on the western front, and on the other hand, make it clear that, when the war entry happened, it was the Ottomans who struck first.<sup>41</sup>

With patience as the name of the game, the Foreign Office fell into a familiar pattern: Mallet would report on troubling developments regarding a potential Ottoman war entry on the

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<sup>36</sup> For the earliest instance of this recognition, see Mallet to Grey, 27.8.14, tel. no. 42, *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Heller, "Sir Louis Mallet and the Ottoman Empire," 12. Heller's paper contains an overview of this historiography.

<sup>38</sup> For more on Said Halim's role with the treaty, see Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War*, 152. Said Halim had in fact been the one to sign the treaty with Germany.

<sup>39</sup> Heller, "Sir Louis Mallet and the Ottoman Empire," 37.

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, Mallet to Grey, 20.9.14, tel. no. 83, *Correspondence*.

<sup>41</sup> On the delaying tactic, see Heller, "Sir Louis Mallet and the Ottoman Empire," 37.

Black Sea and Grey would write back urging Mallet to implore the Grand Vizier to remain neutral. Mallet would do just that and receive an empty promise, which would be relayed back to Grey.<sup>42</sup> The cycle would then repeat, even once the Turkish fleet entered the Black Sea on October 12th and the secret German alliance was discovered on October 23rd.<sup>43</sup> Even then, Grey's response would be the same: remind the Ottomans about their duty to stay neutral.

The traditional historiography has focused entirely on this pattern, lambasting Mallet for misinforming the Foreign Office about the strength of the pro-neutrality faction within the CUP and criticizing Grey for doing nothing to preempt the Black Sea attacks.<sup>44</sup> Yet, Mallet and Grey were simply playing their parts knowing full well that neutrality would never be maintained. They were simply stalling until the Ottomans made the first move, for both practical and image-related reasons. Contrary to the established historiography, the Black Sea situation was not mishandled, but rather was handled exactly as intended by the British. Missing entirely from the historiography is the fact that the Black Sea developments were of secondary concern to the British, with their conclusion seen as an inevitability. Ignored is Britain's primary concern: the developments in the Middle East as they pertain to the holdings of the British Empire.

After the Cabinet meeting on August 17th in which Churchill was rebuked and the decision was made to let the Ottomans attack first, Prime Minister H. H. Asquith wrote to British socialite Venetia Stanley. In his letter, he stated that the Ottoman Empire "threatens vaguely enterprises against Egypt, and seems disposed to play a double game about the *Goeben* & the *Breslau*."<sup>45</sup> Important is the fact that Egypt, as early as August 17th and before the first correspondence from Mallet informing Grey as to Ottoman designs on the territory, was the

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<sup>42</sup> For an example of this chain, see telegraphs 84, 88, and 94 (20.9.14, 23.9.14, and 25.9.14) in *Correspondence*.

<sup>43</sup> Mallet to Grey, 12.23.14, tel. no. 164, *ibid*.

<sup>44</sup> As detailed in Heller, "Sir Louis Mallet and the Ottoman Empire."

<sup>45</sup> Mallet to Grey, 12.10.14, tel. no. 119, *ibid*; Miller, *Straits*, 282.

Prime Minister's chief concern, listed *before* the Black Sea intrigues.<sup>46</sup> This interest was shared by the Foreign Office, as correspondence reveals, becoming their primary concern in regard to a potential Ottoman war entry. This interest has been overlooked and taken for granted in the traditional historiography, despite the fact that telegraphs regarding imperial threats in the Middle East make up over one-third of the August-November correspondence.<sup>47</sup>

On August 25th, Mallet informed Grey about the seizure of camels from Egyptians in Gaza, laden with food and supplies. Mallet believed that Ottoman officials, acting on the wishes of the Germans, were preparing for an attack on Egypt and were attempting to stir up unrest. Mallet brought his concerns to the Grand Vizier, who insisted that the British had nothing to worry about, and that the Ottoman Empire would not pursue any action that would lead to war.<sup>48</sup> Mallet reported back to Grey that he was convinced of Said Halim's sincerity, but just two days later he wrote that he was no longer confident that the Grand Vizier had any power, stating that he "was not the master of his own house."<sup>49</sup> If British imperial interests were to be defended, they would need to take it upon themselves to push for action. The Grand Vizier could no longer be relied on.

Indeed, Mallet did go above Said Halim when Egypt continued to be threatened. On September 24th, Mallet wrote to Grey that he had just met with three CUP officials, among them triumvirate-member Talaat Pasha, in which he warned them of "disastrous consequences" should they continue in preparing for an Egyptian attack.<sup>50</sup> While this may seem like more wrist-slapping, akin to the Black Sea warnings, it is noteworthy that Mallet went above the

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<sup>46</sup> The first correspondence concerning Ottoman designs for Egypt occurred on August 25th; see Mallet to Grey, 25.8.14, tel. no. 35, *Correspondence*.

<sup>47</sup> 65 of the 184 letters/telegraphs included in the *Correspondence*.

<sup>48</sup> Mallet to Grey, 25.8.14, tel. no. 36, *ibid*.

<sup>49</sup> Mallet to Grey, 27.8.14, tel. no. 42, *ibid*.

<sup>50</sup> Mallet to Grey, 24.9.14, tel. no. 90, *ibid*.

Grand Vizier and spoke directly with one of the Three Pashas, as he never did this in regard to the looming Black Sea attack.

On October 6th, Mallet reported to Grey regarding an interview with Enver Pasha, the Minister of War who the British saw as the leader of the pro-war movement within the CUP.<sup>51</sup> The interview notably failed to mention the *Goeben* and *Breslau* and the Black Sea designs; it was entirely about Egypt, with Enver being pressed to explain Ottoman actions and cease Bedouin mobilization.<sup>52</sup> That such an interview would occur without the British bringing up the Black Sea situation is striking, and it reveals Britain's true concern: their empire. The security of the Triple Entente is *not* what mattered here.

These imperial concerns were reflected elsewhere as well. On September 29th, Grey sent Mallet a telegraph in which he spoke of the "imminence of war," relating it not to a Black Sea attack, but to the arming of Arabs, the dispatch of men to call for jihad in India, and the ammunition shipments dispatched to Basra on the Persian Gulf.<sup>53</sup> Recalling the Cabinet's position on preventing Muslim unrest, the Foreign Office would undoubtedly be incredibly averse to any unrest in India, and thus would take a keen interest in a potential call for jihad. Mallet shared Grey's worry, having one month earlier highlighted a call for jihad in Egypt and India as his chief concern regarding Ottoman war preparations, and not the *Goeben* and *Breslau* "purchase."<sup>54</sup>

Regarding Basra, the Shatt al-Arab (the river which runs alongside the province, constituting the Iraq-Iran border and emptying into the Persian Gulf) proved to be another focal point of imperial concerns. On September 18th, Mallet reported to Grey that the British

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<sup>51</sup> Mallet to Grey, 20.9.14, tel. no. 83, *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Mallet to Grey, 6.9.14, tel. no. 109, *ibid.* The Bedouins are a desert-dwelling nomadic Arabic people. The Ottomans would have been able to mobilize them informally, avoiding the suspicion that would have followed a mobilization of official Ottoman troops.

<sup>53</sup> Grey to Mallet, 29.9.14, tel. no. 100, *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Mallet to Grey, 30.8.14, tel. no. 48, *ibid.*

man-of-war H.M.S *Odin* had been ordered to leave the river, after sealing “wireless apparatus.”<sup>55</sup> Grey, understanding the importance of Basra (the city was a de-facto British protectorate after 1899 and was a hub for economic and maritime activities in the Gulf and on the Shatt), refused to accept this and successfully pressured the Ottoman government into backing down, allowing the *Odin* to remain on the river.<sup>56</sup> Rather than meekly warning the CUP about neutrality and letting things play out, Grey and Mallet took decisive action, forcing the government to stand down. When the Ottoman government again tried to close the Shatt to foreign ships at the start of October, Grey maintained his position, refusing to evacuate. Again, the Ottomans were pressured into standing down.<sup>57</sup> When the Ottomans began to mine the Shatt in late October, Grey dispatched a telegraph to Mallet ordering him to deliver an ultimatum to the CUP government: stand down or prepare for retaliation.<sup>58</sup> When the ultimatum was ignored, Grey telegraphed on October 23rd that the Ottoman Empire was acting “in open hostility and provocation to this country [Britain],” and threatened that Britain would be “taking their own measures” to reopen the river.<sup>59</sup> Short of a formal declaration, war was all but guaranteed. Six days later, the Black Sea attacks occurred, after which Britain joined Russia in declaring war on the Ottoman Empire. Had those attacks not happened, it is possible that war would have broken out elsewhere, such as the Shatt al-Arab, where Britain was bracing for the possibility that she would have to defend her imperial interests.

Returning to the topic of Egypt, we see what could have well been the flashpoint that would instigate war in the absence of the Black Sea attacks. After a month of reporting on Bedouin mobilization in preparation for an attack on the Suez Canal, British High Commissioner

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<sup>55</sup> Mallet to Grey, 18.9.14, tel. no. 80, *ibid.* “Wireless apparatus” refers to communications gear.

<sup>56</sup> Grey to Mallet, 29.9.14, tel. no. 101, *Correspondence*. For more on the importance of Basra, see Heller, *British Policy Towards the Ottoman Empire*, 146-47.

<sup>57</sup> Mallet to Grey, 7.10.14, tel. no. 113, *Correspondence*.

<sup>58</sup> Grey to Mallet, 17.10.14, tel. no. 137, *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Grey to Mallet, 23.10.14, tel. no. 159, *ibid.*

of Egypt Milne Cheetham sent a copy of an interrogation to Grey. The interrogated subject was Lieutenant Robert Mors, a German in the service of the Alexandria City Police, who had been arrested after returning from Istanbul. Mors had been caught smuggling explosives and initially acted aloof, pretending to have accidentally gotten mixed up in something he did not understand.<sup>60</sup> When interrogated again, Mors confessed to aiding the Ottoman government, in particular Enver Pasha and his retinue, in smuggling explosives into Egypt, after which he would aid in the training of Bedouins for an attack on the Suez Canal.<sup>61</sup> This information was dispatched on October 20th but Grey did not receive it until November 2nd, after the Black Sea attacks and the Russian declaration of war, which had already sealed British involvement in a fight against the Ottoman Empire.

Even without the full knowledge of Mors' activities and the Ottoman plan for Egypt, Grey was still ready to actively defend the province. Following months of troubling reports, Grey ordered Mallet on October 24th to inform the CUP that if preparations for an Egyptian raid continued, war would be declared on the Ottoman Empire.<sup>62</sup> The telegraph in which he did this is especially noteworthy, as it is the only telegraph dispatched prior to the Black Sea attacks that specifically uses the word "war" in regard to British retaliation against Ottoman actions; previous exchanges warned of "consequences" and "measures" to be taken. The severity of Grey's warning cannot be understated. Had Grey been made aware of the full Mors conspiracy at this time, it seems almost certain that a formal declaration of war would have been made, but alas he was not, and the Black Sea attacks just five days later overrode the Egyptian *casus belli* and provided a less self-oriented, pro-Entente justification for war.

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<sup>60</sup> Cheetham to Grey, 30.9.14, tel. no. 125, *ibid.* See all three enclosures.

<sup>61</sup> Cheetham to Grey, 20.10.14, tel. no. 181, *ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Grey to Mallet, 24.10.14, tel. no. 166, *ibid.*

In the cases of both Egypt and the Shatt al-Arab, we see Britain acting very differently when compared to their response to the looming Black Sea catastrophe. Rather than remaining passive and wrist-slapping while bracing for an inevitable conflict, Britain actively engaged in the defense of their imperial interests, pressuring the Ottoman Empire into standing down in the case of the Shatt, something they never truly tried to do in regard to the Black Sea, and overtly threatening the Empire with war over Egypt. Had the events of October 29th happened later, it is highly likely that Britain would have unilaterally declared war on the Empire over the mining of the Shatt or the Suez Canal plan. The fact that the Black Sea attacks happened first is merely a coincidence, but one that has cast a long shadow over the three months of correspondence covered in this paper. As such, historians have tended to read the correspondence with only the Black Sea events in mind, ignoring the very real possibilities of war in the Middle East, war ignited not by the solidarity of the Triple Entente but by the imperial interests of Britain alone.

In conclusion, British-Ottoman diplomatic correspondence from August through November of 1914 was characterized not by passivity and a deference to the Triple Entente, but by imperial concerns. The developments in the Black Sea were of secondary interest to the Foreign Office, with their conclusion seen as inevitable. The British were chiefly concerned with their own imperial holdings and interests, particularly in Egypt, India, and on the Shatt al-Arab, and there is evidence that Britain would have declared unilateral war on the Ottoman Empire over these imperial concerns had the naval attack on Russia happened later. That the Black Sea attacks occurred first was incidental, yet it has led historians to examine this period with only the Black Sea in mind. Examining the correspondence through the lens of imperial interests reveals a very different Britain than what is presented in the traditional historiography, one far more self-interested and proactive.

It is important to appreciate this new characterization of Britain for what it reveals about World War I as a whole. As mentioned earlier, the war was a war of empires, where imperial concerns reigned supreme. That these concerns have taken a backseat in the traditional analysis of these three critical months is unfortunate, and it contributes to the fallacious idea that the war was nothing but the “unintended consequence of treaty systems.”<sup>63</sup> Britain, in many ways seen as *the* model empire, would surely have been guided by imperial interests in World War I.<sup>64</sup> We must remember this for the lesson it teaches us about both empire and war. Where empires exist, they will strive to maintain themselves and their holdings. When war breaks out among empires, it is undoubtedly a war of reallocation, where the lines between them are redrawn. In an age of empires, imperial interests reign supreme over all else.

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<sup>63</sup> Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 370.

<sup>64</sup> By “model empire,” I am not assessing the quality of the British Empire, but rather referencing its ubiquity and the fact that it is often perceived as the most important modern empire; see Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

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