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**'Mesopotamia Administration Committee. Note by Sir James Meston, KCSI, on
the future system of government at Baghdad.'**

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About this record

In this note, Sir James Meston, the Lieutenant-Governor of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, contests the idea that Baghdad should be brought under British control in any way. Meston warns that trying to control the area, particularly any Holy Places, would likely offend the Muslim population and cause significant resentment towards the British.

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MESOPOTAMIA ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE.

Note by Sir James Meston, K.C.S.I., on the future system of government at Baghdad.

In the report of Lord Curzon's Committee which was accepted by the Imperial War Cabinet at one of its last meetings, there are references to the future of Mesopotamia "under British control," and to the desirability of "an Arab State or congeries of States under the protection of Great Britain." I do not know whether these expressions are intended to define with precision the future method of government in the Baghdad vilayat, and more especially over the Holy Places of Islam in that area—Kerbala, Najaf, &c. On the assumption, however, that the exact degree of British control is not yet finally decided, I suggest that it would be well to ascertain the feeling of our Mahomedan fellow-subjects on the point. This would, of course, be done through the administrations immediately concerned, particularly the Government of India. In this note I merely put forward my own reading of the Moslem mind of India on the subject.

My reason for writing is my belief that any protectorate by a Christian Power or group of Powers over the Moslem shrines in Arabia would acutely offend the deepest sentiments of our Mahomedan population. This is just as true of Mecca and Medina as it is of the shrines near Baghdad. But I understand that the British Government has defined its own relations with the Sharif of Mecca, now King of Hedjaz; and I therefore refrain from alluding to that side of the question, except where it is inextricably associated with Mesopotamian affairs.

All good Moslems are at one in reverencing Mecca, Medina, and the adjacent tract of country (the Hedjaz) in Central Arabia. The Shiah sect of Mahomedans reverence also, and with special devotion, the shrines at Kerbala, Najaf, &c., near Baghdad. The historical reasons for this are well known; what I wish to impress is that Shiah sentiment in the matter deserves special consideration. The Shiah sect, besides being dominant in Persia, forms a substantial element in our Indian Mahomedans, and has been conspicuously friendly and loyal. In India, when the Sharif of Mecca's assertion of independence was first made known, an attempt was begun to organize an agitation against him and his claims. The Shiah took no part in this outcry, although they disliked the Sharif's action for several of the reasons propounded by the Sunni agitators. The Shiah have all along been very unhappy about our campaign in Mesopotamia, and hate the idea of bloodshed in their holy land round Baghdad; but they have never raised a voice in protest. They have withstood all suggestions for a Jihad (or Holy War), and have justified their opposition on strong theological grounds. They have no feeling against the Caliphate passing away from the Sultan of Turkey. In a word, they have been perfectly staunch to the British Government, and have never listened to any temptation to embarrass us.

The strength of the feeling which was manifested in India against the Sharif—and which caused some astonishment outside India—was partly due to ignorance of the true position, but was also largely based on two objections deeply rooted in the Mahomedan mind. They loathed the possibility of war on the sacred soil of the Hedjaz, particularly if Christian forces should be involved; and they believed that the Sharif would be a puppet in the hands of the Christian Powers. The first sentiment is intelligible to us all; the second is based on an important tenet of Mahomedan faith, and the same

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tenet is applicable to the future of the shrines near Baghdad. It may briefly be thus explained.

The sanctity of the Holy Places is contingent on their being in the custody of a Mahomedan authority or Power competent to protect them against violation. Their guardian would in time become, I fancy, the *ex officio* Caliph; and if he is unable (whether as Caliph or otherwise) to defend them by the sword of Islam alone, his failure will *ipso facto* mean the appearance of the last Imam, chaos, forcible conversion of the whole earth to Mahomedanism—in brief, what we should call the end of the world. It is thus unthinkable to the Mahomedan mind that the impotence of Moslem guardianship should be confessed by the establishment of a Christian protectorate or suzerainty over either the Hedjaz or the Shiah shrines in Mesopotamia.

What would happen in practice if Great Britain and its Allies did decide on such a protectorate, I cannot pretend to prophecy. The end of the world probably would not come; but among our Moslem population an unrest and resentment would be engendered which no prudent Government would provoke except under very grave necessity. An extra-friendly Mahomedan here and there would be glad at heart to see the shrines under honest and capable supervision such as we could ensure; an acquaintance of mine actually dared to say so in a pamphlet which he wrote on the entrance of Turkey into the war; but he was met with a storm of obloquy, and it is clear that the Mahomedan world generally would not tolerate the suggestion. I have just happened upon a strong corroboration of this view in a quotation from an address by the late Lord Cromer. While expressing some delicacy in giving a definite opinion on a purely theological issue, he wrote:—

“It is held that the due exercise of the spiritual power cannot be ensured unless the Khalif is placed in a position of assured political independence. Hence, although possibly the substitution of some Khalif other than the Sultan of Turkey might be effected without any great shock to Moslem opinion and sentiment, the recognition of a Khalif who could directly or indirectly be brought under non-Moslem influences would be strongly resented.”

In a matter of this sort it is easier to be critical than suggestive. It is possible, however, that the King of the Hedjaz may provide a way out. The Crown of Arabia might be acknowledged in the treaties of peace as an independent Power, and given the ultimate sovereignty of Baghdad, subject to any terms on which the British Government and the Sharif may separately agree as to the actual form of administration. Many who know Arabia doubt whether the new kingdom will hold together for more than a few years, but it could be made to serve our purpose for the time, and the problems arising from its disintegration will come on us when we have more leisure to deal with them. For the moment, what I wish to suggest is that the assertion of any form of control, protection or suzerainty by Great Britain or her Allies over the Holy (Mahomedan) Places near Baghdad should be postponed until Moslem feeling is ascertained.

JAS. MESTON.

21st May 1917.