

# Turning Point for the Arab Caliphate Dr. Koelle Affair (1879–1880)

## Arap Halifeliğinin Dönüm Noktası: Dr. Koelle Meselesi (1879–1880)

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### *Abstract*

It is a short crisis of four months which started by the end of September 1879. Dr.Koelle, a German Evangelist priest working in Istanbul with the British Church Missionary Society, was cooperating with a Turkish ulema for the translation of his missionary propaganda texts for the conversion of Muslims. They were seized and the ulema condemned to death by the Religious Council. Although there was no investigation at all against Koelle, British Foreign Ministry reacted severely, threatened to stop diplomatic relations. Even the minister warned Turkish ambassador that the affair might end with the same way which concluded the reign of Sultan Abdulaziz. Sublime Porte being in need of British political support after the Russian defeat of 1877–78, Sultan Abdulhamid could not refuse it totally, but as the Caliph could not either accept a full interference of Christians in the internal affairs of Islam. He altered personally the death penalty to exile but refused any other intervention. The affair was closed but Britain, the biggest empire in the world with Muslim population, realizing Abdulhamid's determination on the subject, reacted by starting immediately the Arab Caliphate campaign, which received a new dimension with the invasion of Egypt.

**Keywords:** Arab Caliphate, Dr. Koelle

### *Özet*

1879 Eylülü sonlarında başlayan dört aylık kısa bir kriz yaşanmıştır. Alman Evangelist rahibi olan Dr.Koelle, bir Türk ulemasının da yardımını alarak İngiliz Kilisesi Misyonerlik Cemiyeti (British Church Missionary Society) ile birlikte Müslümanların din değiştirmelerini sağlamak üzere kendi misyonerlik metninin tercümesi için çalışmalarda bulunmuştur. Bu ikisi tutuklanmış, ulema Şer'i Mahkeme tarafından idama mahkum edilmiştir. Koelle'ye karşı hiçbir şekilde soruşturma başlatılmamasına rağmen, İngiliz Dışişleri Bakanlığı şiddetli tepki göstermiş, diplomatik ilişkilerini kesmekle tehdit etmiştir. Ayrıca Bakan, sorunun Abdülaziz döneminde olduğu gibi sonlandırılması için Türk Büyükelçisi'ni uyarmıştır. Bâb-ı Âlî 1877-78 Rus yenilgisinden sonra

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İngiliz siyasi desteğine ihtiyaç duyduğundan, Sultan Abdülhamit bunu tamamen reddedememiştir. Fakat bir halife olarak, Hıristiyanların İslam'ın iç meselelerine tamamen müdahale etmelerini de kabul edemezdi. Ölüm cezasını sürgün cezasına bizzat çevirmiş ve herhangi bir başka müdahaleyi de reddetmiştir. Mesele kapanmıştı; ancak Müslüman nüfusuyla dünyanın en büyük imparatorluğu olan İngiltere, Abdülhamid'in konu üzerindeki kararlılığını fark etmiş, buna Mısır'ın işgali ile yeni bir boyut kazanan Arap Halifeliği kampanyasını başlatarak karşılık vermiştir.

*Anabtar Kelimeler:* Arap Halifeliği, Dr. Koelle.

Fifteen months after the Berlin Treaty, which resolved the 1877–1878 Russian war, a tension that could end diplomatic relations between the British and the Ottoman governments occurred. What lay beneath the tension was the fact that a missionary named Dr. Koelle had penetrated into the staff of the Bab-ı Meshihat, the Office of Sheikulislam and started preparations for the publication of Christian propaganda. The ensuing discussions continued for five months and were brought to an end by the direct intervention of Sultan Abdulhamid II. The incident was important in that it would influence the future British policy of rejecting the Ottoman institution of the Caliphate. Before delving into the details, it is best to summarize the culmination of centuries of development leading to the event.

With the fark of Islam in the second half of the 7th century, contention with Christianity emerged. Having lost adherents to the new religion, the Church displayed its resentment by embarking on the Crusades. On the other hand, the fundamental rule of Islam was not to reject the monotheistic religions that existed earlier; but to prevent their attempt of spreading within Islam. The Ottoman State went even further and undertook the protection of the Orthodox Church against the Catholic Church, setting a rare exemple. This practice continued for centuries, and at the beginning of the 19th century it could no longer function due to the weakening of the Ottoman State in the areas of the military, culture and technology.

The first step towards disturbing the achieved balance had been the 1774 treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji, which prepared the path towards the loss of Crimea to the Russians. The treaty acknowledged the jurisdiction of the Ottoman Sultan/Caliph over the Crimean Khan and the religious scholars while granting the Tsar jurisdiction over Ottoman Orthodox.

In the mean time, Russia was moving in on Central Asia and proceeding with its attempts at colonizing the Muslims of the region. Russia was not alone in the effort: the French had settled in Algeria in 1830; the British, not satisfied with the Indian peninsula, had begun their advance towards Afghanistan; the Dutch had the region known as Indonesia under their control. Consequently, in the third quarter of the 19th century with the exception of the Ottoman ruled areas, the regions that made up 85% of the Muslim population were under the

control of Christian powers.

This huge transformation facilitated the Christian yearning for the proclamation of their faith freely within Islamic masses. The only structure they could not pervade was that of the Ottomans. The protectionist role of the Sublime Porte over the Orthodox Patriarchy definitely had an impact on this. When Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, he tried to eradicate the Ottomans from within by provoking the Greeks, he was met by the resistance of the Patriarchy. In his book titled *Didhaskalia Patriki* (Fatherly Sermons) prepared by Metropolitan Antimos of Jerusalem and printed in the Patriarchy print house, he states that the true faith in Christianity is the Orthodox faith and that God had sent the Ottoman State to protect it. Consequently, the Ottoman application was favoured over the Catholic and Protestant propaganda.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning of the 19th century, the Ottoman State was constantly losing battle with Europe but owed its existence to the chaos created by the Europeans who had disputes over the sharing of Ottoman lands. The European countries who suffered Napoleonic wars, were afraid this distribution might lead to a new widespread conflict and stuck to the decision taken at the 1815 Paris Treaty to protect the status quo of continental land as well as the Ottoman lands. Having endured the 1821 Greek revolt, the 1829 Russian defeat and the 1831–1839 Egyptian uprising, the Sublime Porte had realized that existence lay within the framework of the European States Concordance, then known as “Concert Européen”. Consequently began the modernization movement *Tanzimat*, based on the European example.<sup>2</sup>

Convergence with Europe also required new adjustments in Muslim-Christian relations. Moving from an environment that respected Islamic Law as

<sup>1</sup> Clogg, Richard, “The Dhidhaskalia Patriki (1798) An Orthodox Reaction to French Revolutionary Propaganda”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, V(2) May 1969, pp. 87–115, reported by Koloğlu, Orhan, *Basımevi ve Basımının Gecikme Sebepleri ve Sonuçları*, Gazeteciler Cem. Yay., İstanbul 1987, pp. 82–86

<sup>2</sup> Concerning the beginning of interventions in favour of Christians there exists documents in the British Archives which proves that gradually its content is extended. The first is dated 23.March. 1844 sent by the ambassador Lord Stratford to the Foreign Ministry stating “I obtained from his Majesty Abdul Medjid the declaration ‘that henceforward neither should Christianity be insulted in his dominions, nor should Christians be in any way persecuted for their religion.’” The affair is related with the execution of an Armenian who after becoming Muslim apostated in 1843 to return to Christianity. The second concerns an instruction on the 18<sup>th</sup> February 1856 – Just before the Berlin Congress for the Crimean War – by the Earl of Clarendon, to the British Minister of Foreign Affairs who directed his ambassador at İstanbul to represent strongly to the Porte that “it was quite impossible for the powers of Europe to acquiesce in the continuance in Turkey of a law and a practice (in regard to the punishment of Mahommedans embracing Christianity) which is a standing insult to every other nation in Europe.” (Source: see footnote 3)

supreme to another that considered all men equal, would inevitably abate religious bias. As a result, especially Protestant missionaries expanded their activities within the Ottoman lands. In 1853 the Russian attempt to dissolve the Ottoman Empire and to capture Jerusalem was prevented by the military efforts of the *Concert Européen*. With the termination of the battle known as the Crimean War, the imperative of “Ottoman territorial integrity” was made plain to the Europeans as well as the independence seeking nations within the Ottoman State. In return, it was required that the Ottoman social structure be changed in accordance with the European rules. In this context, the Westerners who had colonized most of the Islamic world, also gained the right to seek Ottoman support in cases of resistance that might occur in these areas. However, although the 1857 “Indian Mutiny” – against the British in India – was also a reaction to missionary activities, help was sought from the Ottoman Sultan. As an expression of gratitude for the British support in Crimea, the Ottoman State conceded. Thus, the process of utilizing the institution of the Caliphate in accordance with the Western policies began.

Until the Crimean War, it was commonly known that the missionaries had no influence over the Muslims and that they were only effective over a limited number of Christians. The post-war environment must have encouraged them to search for ways to influence the higher classes of the Ulema in İstanbul. It is in this context that the Koelle incident came up. The 1877–78 war ended in defeat against the Russians and the capital city İstanbul itself came under siege leading to a totally new era. In June 1878, the Berlin Conference enabled the Ottoman State to regain all lost territory in the Balkans with the help of Britain and her European allies. However, the Berlin Peace Treaty ascribed much stricter obligations than those of 1856. From now on, “Concert Européen” had a direct say in all domestic affairs of the Ottoman State. It cannot be denied that this provided a new dynamism for the missionaries. Thus, the Dr.Koelle incident occurred.

Dr.Koelle is a German Evangelist priest, who started his activities in İstanbul within the *British Church Missionary Society* in 1858, together with another German priest Karl Pfander.<sup>3</sup> They envisaged an open propaganda campaign in the Capital of the Muslim World. Already in 1864 they had been arrested by the Ottoman police for their distorted campaign and declarations and their propaganda material seized. Pfander aware of the impossibility of

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<sup>3</sup> For the Koelle affair our main source is the brochure entitled “Correspondence Respecting the Arrest of Dr. Koelle by the Turkish Police” (KA) presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty. Printed in London by Harrison and Sons. It contains 56 letters from the British Church Missionary Society’s and Foreign Ministry’s archives, dated between 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1879 and 27<sup>th</sup> January 1880. Also article by Azmi Özcan-Ş.Tufan Buzpınar, “Church Missionary Society İstanbul’da –Tanzimat, İslahat ve Misyonerlik 1858–1880”, *İstanbul Araştırmaları*, 1 (Spring 1997), pp. 63–79.

carrying out a direct campaign returned to England. He knew the Greek Orthodox Church had reacted to their activities by forbidding the distribution of the Protestant translated Bible.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand Koelle preferred to try the same tactic by publishing of propaganda books in Turkish.

He started by taking Turkish lessons, which would help him to become more intimate with Turkish Ulema – Muslim theologians -. In 1873 he get in touch with Ahmed Tevfik a teacher who had received a madrasah education and worked as a teacher in different institutions. He was not an ordinary khodja. When in 1878, following the Peace of Berlin which ended the war with Russia, a cordial message in the Sultan's palace was addressed to Sir Layard, the British ambassador, thanking him and the English government for their goodwill towards Ottoman State. Ahmed Tevfik was selected to communicate it verbally to his excellency, which proves that he was probably acquainted also with English.

On Tuesday the 23 September Koelle was engaged from early morning in the house of his ulema friend, in order to receive his help with the translation of his new tract titled *Christ the Word* (Siret'ül Mesih) into a more acceptable and elegant Turkish form. He left at 3 O'clock pm. in order to return home but immediately arrested and conducted to the police-station and ushered to the presence of Hassan Pasha.<sup>5</sup>

The Pasha at once asked him to open his bag and show the content. He refused to comply by claiming his immunity as a foreigner according capitulations. But the Pasha warned him that he had the right to sequester the documents by force if necessary. In the bag were the Turkish version of the *Book of Common Prayer* (Kelimetullah) and the English manuscript of his new tract on *Christ the Word* as well a portion of it in English. There was also a letter addressed to the town doctor of Antioch, with a post-office money order for papers Koelle had intrusted to his keeping.

In his report to the British Embassy, Koelle confirmed that he was interrogated politely and repeated his comments delivered in reply to the questions of the Pasha, as follows:

“I am here not as an enemy but a friend. The pious people in England who send me had no other object but render a service of love to the Turkish nation by giving them the opportunity of becoming acquainted with the nature of true Christianity. This work is no result of the Crimean War, when England made such great sacrifices for this country (Then) English believers thought it was not enough to send to Turkish friends merely temporal help but what is far better, namely, what is spiritual and divine. (...) I am a teacher sent here by the Church

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<sup>4</sup> *La Turquie*, 7 March 1867

<sup>5</sup> *Letter of Koelle dated 2 October 1879*

Missionary Society to instruct in Christianity all those Osmanlis who wish for it.”

This confession proves the change in the British mentality towards Islam, since their Empire had become the biggest Muslim State of the world, due to the increase in the number of their colonies. As we pointed out earlier, when it had problems with Indian Muslims immediately after the Crimean War, Britain had recourse to the intervention of the Otoman Sultan/Caliph; while, following the defeat of the Sublime Porte in 1877–78 Britain felt authorized, according article 62 of the Berlin Treaty which imposed full religious freedom in its most liberal application, to formulate a particular interpretation of Islam, as well as the right to propagate its own Christian conception freely.

Both Koelle and Ahmed Tevfik were sent to the Office of Hafiz Ahmed Pasha, Minister of Police. He questioned only A.Tevfik personally and then both were permitted to return to their houses. Koelle wanted to recover his papers, but he was informed that they will be returned after the completion of the inquiry. The next evening Ahmed Tevfik was summoned again and sent to the Sheikh-ul Islamite, the office of the highest Otoman religious official. Records of his interrogation there dated 27–29 September is transmitted to the Committee of Ulema (Encümen-i İlmiyye) for decision.<sup>6</sup>

Koelle had surely other contacts in the Otoman society as well as in the Muslim World. Ahmed Tevfik declares knowing nothing about other contacts of the German, but that an Indian named Maaver Efendi and accepted having written a Turkish letter for him adressed to Nazif Efendi, the official doctor of Antioch. On the other hand in his letter dated 10th October 1879 Koelle mention a Muslim youth from Jerusalem, who many years ago had stayed some months in his house as an inquirer and occupied himself by translating part of the “Food for Reflection” into Arabic, and adds:<sup>7</sup>

“About ten days ago he arrived here from Jerusalem, on his way to Vienna, where he will be professor of Arabic and Turkish and Director of the Muhammedan schools in Bosnia (...) He was invited by the Sheikh-ul Islam who told him the case of my friend, and that he was suspected of being similarly employed. He answered “True, many years ago, when I was mere youth, I for a while thought of those things; but this is a thing of the past.” He was then allowed to depart with caution.”

It seems to be an organized visit instigated by the Ottoman officials, rather than a fortuitous one, possibly for controlling the reactions of the British side, as Koelle with the intermediary of his embassy was struggling to take back its

<sup>6</sup> BOA Yıldız collections contains documents on the subject: *Y-A-Hus 163/14 (13.1.1297)*; *Y-A-Hus 163/37 (23.1.1297)*; *163/76 (18.2.1297)*

<sup>7</sup> *Letter of Koelle, 10 October 1879*

papers. The necessity of a deeper investigation – as they were even presented to the Sultan – which delayed their handing over, instigated a polemic in the local press. *Levant Herald*, the only English paper of İstanbul published on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1879 an article in favour of Ahmed Tevfik, condemning Muslim authorities while defending liberty of religious propaganda. This incited the Turkish press to counter-attack. *Es Selam* published confessions of Ahmed Tevfik that even included a dream:<sup>8</sup>

“The night of the day when I begin the translation I had a dream. Someone hit my fingers, I woke up, there was nothing unusual. The next day while leaving the house I fell down and my fingers were broken. I resigned first and restarted after four months when my fingers got better... Now I am in the prison which I deserve.”

*Terdjumanı Hakikat*, *Basiret* and other papers started a campaign for the defence of Islam and against Ahmed. In his letter dated October 20, Koelle claims that “all Turkish newspapers take the part of the persecutors and heap calumnies upon the poor man, calling him renegade, traitor, any bad name they can think of.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Ottoman press insisted on a heavy punishment, in defence of the decision of the Ulema’s Committee:<sup>10</sup>

“Those who stray from the right path for severing a society from the faith it has related to for centuries, are not only doing harm morally but also materially. Because, the abstract religious sect fights were not cases appearing suddenly, but events which starts in this way by minor and simple events (...) Religious freedom can be achieved through respect from all sides and by the avoidance of religious connoisseurs from attacking each other, whereas the missionary have endangered the religious harmony existing in Otoman lands.”

*Terdjumanı Hakikat*, the organ of the Sultan and a defensor of the modernization added:

“Although we like Europe for many aspects of their progress in civilization and we try to introduce them into our State, we must also express our disapproval of their efforts of straying our people from the right path by forwarding some missionaries to our lands.”

Suddenly, in a rather introverted society, the case became the main interest of the public opinion and more importantly acquired a political importance, as the newspapers were disclosing the judgement of the Committee of Ulema. In

<sup>8</sup> Stamboul 1.11.1879, excerpted from the *Es Selam Newspaper; Terdjumanı Hakikat 28 Şanval 1296 (14 October 1879)*

<sup>9</sup> *Letter of Koelle, 20 October 1879*

<sup>10</sup> *Terdjumanı Hakikat 30 Şanval 1296 (16 October 1879)*

the minutes of the investigation prepared at the Office of the Sheikh-ul Islam and presented to the Committee, there exist 14 questions directed to Ahmed Tevfik. He replies textually:<sup>11</sup>

“I knew this man (Koelle) as a person interested to learn Turkish. I later became aware that he was sent by the Protestant Church Society to write and publish books aiming to Christianize Muslims as he began to introduce the New Testament and prayer books and asked me to help him to learn Turkish; and recently he preferred to dictate treatise for the annulment of the Islamic tenets. Among them I wrote ‘Christ the Word’ and ‘Evidences’ (İstidlalat) as well as ‘Book of Common Prayer’ which was sequestered. Christ the Word contained the history of Christ’s life from his birth till his death. It compares Judaism, Christianity and Islam and proves the superiority of Christianity and proposes the elimination of the others.

I prepared the pamphlet called İstidlalat for to learn and refute the superstitious rules of Christianity. As he did not let its rough draft with me and as I could not find out its printed copy I was not able to write a text for its refusal. I made a mistake: by not informing the imperial government for the prevention of its publication and the elimination of bad effects; and later to write on the texts of ‘Christ the Word’ and ‘The Book of Common Prayer’. I am accepting the sentence to be decided by the sacred law. I intended to refute the Christ the Word and The Book of Common Prayer and my aim was to inform the government together with their refusal.”

The Committee of Ulemas decided the penalty of death for Ahmed with the following argument:

“Repentance of the persons who continuously attempt and risk the corruption by acting against Muhammed’s religion which distinguishes bad from good and activities of those who tries to honour superstitious treatise by reinforcing and enriching them for to renew their existence, cannot be acceptable; and their execution by torment according the orders of the ruling power, according canonical jurisprudence can serve as a lesson.”

Nearly a month after the police intervention, the Sultan changed his prime minister<sup>12</sup> and the government. In general it is claimed that the change was due to the appointment of Mahmud Nedim, an ex-grand vizier to the post of Ministry of Interior.<sup>13</sup> In our estimation it had to do more with the Koelle

<sup>11</sup> BOA Yıldız Y-A-Hus 163/37

<sup>12</sup> With this occasion the appellation “sadrazam = grand vizier” was exchanged with “bashvekil = prime minister”.

<sup>13</sup> Danişmend, İsmail Hami, *İzâhlı Osmanlı Tarihi Kronolojisi*, v.4, İstanbul, Türkiye

affair, as Mehmed Esad Safvet Pasha, a Muslim, was replaced by a Christian, Sawas (Sava) Pasha, in the post of Foreign Minister. Both the Minister of Police and the Sheikh-ul Islam maintained their posts.

Church Missionary Society pressed British government continuously to interfere. With the return of the Ambassador Layard to İstanbul, who was travelling through Syria, the British embassy became even more aggressive. The 21<sup>st</sup> December he send a letter to the Ottoman Minister, claiming: 1. The return of Koelle's papers, 2. The immediate release of Ahmed Tevfik, 3. The dismissal of the Minister of Police. It also contained an ultimatum:

“If these are not carried out in 24 hours I will submit my note and cut all my communications with the Sublime Porte while waiting the instructions of my government.”

Ottoman Minister replied immediately begging him not to haste. To decrease the tension, the Minister of Police, clearly in accordance with the Sultan, sent on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December a note to Layard, informing him about the punishment of Yussuf Agha, the police officer who arrested Koelle, for having acted without asking permission against a foreign citizen. The same day Ottoman Minister of Foreign Affairs met with the ambassador, who in his report to his ministry transmit in detail their discussion:<sup>14</sup>

“I received the most emphatic assurances from the Grand Vizier and the Minister of Foreign Affairs that no serious harm will befall the ulema, although they have begged me not to take any official step with regard to him, at any rate for the present, as the case has caused a good deal of excitement amongst a certain fanatical class of Muslims, which will probably soon pass away (...) The Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs begs me not to press for the dismissal of the Minister of Police. He has asked whether I would be satisfied if Ahmed Efendi were sent for the present to some island where there is an English consu to see that he was not ill-treated, urging that Muslim public opinion here is exasperated against him, and he would be exposed to danger. I think this proposal might be accepted.”

But the ambassador did not yield and remitted his official note, claiming British citizenship of Koelle. He also informed his ministry about this initiative. For the Ottoman government there was nothing else to do but to enter in contact directly with London, who was trying to give the case an international aspect. There was naturally a reaction to the defence of a German subject by the British diplomacy. Conscious of this controversy, while insisting on defending Koelle as a member of British Evangelist Church, the British Foreign

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Yayınevi, p. 316

<sup>14</sup> Letter dated 24 November 1879

Ministry invited other European States to support the initiative as signatories and inspectors of the Berlin Treaty. With its 62<sup>nd</sup> article the Sublime Porte had accepted the freedom of religion and its practice in the largest sense and the right to the signatories to interfere with the Ottoman practice.

Although a reaction came from Catholic circles - as an Italian diplomat remarked<sup>15</sup> that 'if a catholic priest were caught at Rome while translating a Protestant text he will be surely put in jail'- the tactic was successful. Germany, France, Austria, Italy confirmed their approval. The notes from the Sublime Porte to those States reminding the reactions of Balkan States to the missionary activities could not overcome their desire to profit from an earliest application of the treaty. In the note presented to the Austrian government it was indicated:<sup>16</sup>

“We remind what had happened last year at Volo to the American missionaries. And we remember how difficult had been to re-establish the order. Furthermore Koelle can not perform his activities in our neighbouring countries in Greece, Rumania, Serbia and Montenegro (...) You remember what had happened in Greece to, the Evangelist missionary, King. In Ottoman State the freedom of religion receives the most careful attention; this is only possible without denigrating the religion. It must be accepted that Turkey is the only country where there is the liberty of conscience.

The problem has nothing to do with the Berlin Treaty (...) If Ahmed Tevfik has changed his religion nobody would have the right to disturb him or to direct the slightest reproach. But he remains Muslim, he has a rank in the Muslim clergy, he carry the related costume, and in the same time he insults and contributes money to profane the religion.”

The telegraphic message of Sawas Pasha dated 28<sup>th</sup> December.1879 send to Musurus Pasha, Ottoman ambassador in London, also a Christian, for being transmitted to the British Foreign Ministry contained the main defence thesis of the Porte:

“Mr. Koelle was never put in prison, he was released before intervention by the British embassy (...) The police had the right to seize the corpus delicti (...) There never had been a violation of the treaty, nor excess of authority, attack to the dignity of the inculpated person, or damage caused illegally to his interest (...) There are nothing common between the liberty of cults, which is very extensively and sincerely applied in Turkey and the arrest of Ahmed who did not change religion but who insulted his own religion which is in the same time the religion

<sup>15</sup> FO 78/3072, Layard to Salisbury dated 24 November 1979

<sup>16</sup> Austrian Stadt und Hof Archiv PA XIV-256 Affaire Köhle Note of the Otoman ambassador Edhem Pasha; Layard to Salisbury 12 January 1880.

of the State, as he confessed during his interrogation. Ahmed is free to become a Protestant. He will never be molested neither sued for having detested the religion of his ancestors; but he is not free to insult the religion of others. On the other hand, if Ahmed was not arrested the public opinion, very overexcited against him could have exposed him to real dangers.”

After reminding many political disputes already resulting from the application of Berlin Treaty and in *the presence of unprecedented difficulties not ever witnessed in the history* the note deplores the useless tension created between the two nations, by such a secondary rate problem. Then continues:

“Our government is on the power only since two months (...) We have proved our good will and respect for the traditional Ottoman policy and for the British Alliance (...) In such conditions, we had vainly searched the explanation of the storm which exploded against us in a such inopportune way. To raise today in Turkey a religious question against Islam in the name of her Majesty the Queen of England, ruler of many millions of Muslims who acknowledge the Caliph as their spiritual chief, seems to us something so strange that our spirit refuses to admit.

I beg your excellency to submit all this to Lord Salisbury and to demand him, in the name of traditional amity which unites the two countries, in the name of the big interests which are played in the present moment in Orient, in the name of the conveniences of the Muslim peoples, to behave with such political wisdom that the unfortunate Koelle incident do not become the signal of new and grave difficulties and maybe the outburst of religious and political passions.”

The note proves Sublime Porte’s awareness of the British tactic but also of its own desire to prevent complications, with a tolerant policy. Of course Sultan/Caliph’s regime could not negate its responsibility as the leader of the Muslim World, while Britain -the biggest Muslim State of the world- had become even more concerned with its impact on the Muslim public opinion. This is why complete submission of the Ottomans to the British demands had an utmost importance for British policy. Marquis of Salisbury, the minister, receiving ambassador Musurus Pasha, refuted particularly what he defines as the *Ottoman distinction of the religious liberty and the liberty of proselytism*. He openly declares:<sup>17</sup>

“In the Koelle case the Turkish government had been guilty of an important violation of religious liberty and consequently of the Treaty of Berlin and of the Hatti-Humayoun by which religious liberty was guaranteed (...) My own impression is that the Sultan is yielding to dangerous advisors, and following the example set by his uncle Abdul

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<sup>17</sup> 30.December 1879

Aziz, a few years ago, with results which no Turkish statesman is likely to forget.”

To remind the dethronment and bloody death of his predecessor to a Sultan, who was only since three years at power and who experienced very recently an annihilating defeat, was an open threat. Indeed, he informs about it his ambassador at İstanbul:

“I pressed the - Otoman - ambassador very earnestly to convey, clearly and without disguise, to the Sultan our apprehensions of the danger that he was running by alienating English sympathy and courting other and more perilous support.”

He ends his comments by reminding that the only person with whom the Porte must solve the problem is the British ambassador in İstanbul. According this dictum Layard had the January 1, 1880, a prolonged discussion with the Sultan who confirmed once more that *an ulema or any other Muslim might turn Christian and no harm would come to him*. He also assured the return of the papers. Conscious of the excessiveness of his demands Layard give up partially his third condition and informed also his ministry: *Noting that the Sultan is responsible for Dr. Koelle's affair, I did not liked to insist upon the dismissal of the Minister of Police.*

The January 5, Koelle received his papers. Concerning Ahmed Tevfik, a report by the Ottoman Prime Minister to the Sultan, pointed out that the exigencies of the time demanded the commutation of the punishment to banishment. It is claimed that Mahmoud Nedim Pasha, the minister of Interior was already against the decision of the Committee of Ulemas, on the grounds that the fatwa was illegal.<sup>18</sup> The January 12, 1880, Ahmed Tevfik was released from confinement. According the Porte's proposal he is sent to the Island of Scio where a residence is found for him and where he will be under the protection of Governor-General Sadyk Pasha, as well as of the supervision of the British Vice-Consul. Layard adds in his report:

“The Sultan has promised me that, during the effendi's absence, his wife and children shall be properly cared for. This question may now be considered satisfactorily settled, and I have to-day renewed my communications with the Porte.”

In appearance, Layard's policy seemed successful by obliging The Porte to change the verdict of the highest Ottoman Muslim religious institution to a temporal one, particularly by the interference of a Christian. But the same can not be said about the tactic to infiltrate by financial power among the ulemas and to use them when necessary in the colonies. Layard's letter to his ministry

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<sup>18</sup> Özcan-Buzpınar, a.g.m., p.76; Letters of Layard dated 5 and 7 January 1880

dated January 7, 1880, proves that even he accepts this failure:

“I delivered the papers to Dr. Koelle. I took at the same time to impress upon him the necessity of abstaining from publishing and circulating or selling, books and tracts containing attacks upon the Mohammedan religion, or matter which was offensive to Mussulmans and might lead to public scandal and disorder. I warned him that if he did so I should very probably be unable to protect him against the consequences. I informed him that I had received from the Sultan the most solemn assurances of His Majesty’s intention to secure to all his subjects the fullest religious freedom.”

The Koelle affair which lasted only four months was never considered as a case influencing the course of history. In reality it was used as a test by the British policy for trying to place under full control the Ottoman religious authority, i.e. the Caliph’s power. Its success or failure would orient the policy towards Muslim World, of which the most populated parts were under British control. Since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain’s main concern was to prevent Russia’s descent towards South, from the Balkans, Caucasus and Central Asia, particularly towards India.

British Government’s efforts to render back to the Sublime Porte its Balkan provinces lost completely to Russians in the 1877–78 war, and also to limit their acquisitions in the Eastern Anatolia, was an outcome of this policy. While Russian armies were still occupying Ottoman Capital, Britain was in war with the King of Afghanistan, who was supported by Russia. The possibility of their cooperation with Indian opponents, particularly Muslims, worried London deeply.

Ottoman government was very much in need of British help for the solution of the pending very important international problems like State debts, fixation of State borders, war indemnities, migrants, etc... This is why London relied at the beginning to a repressive method for quick adhesion to this plan. Without being influenced by British Prime Minister’s threat Sultan Abdulhamid defended his cause with determination. In his report, Layard accepts that the Sultan “discussed the case with the tact, ability and determination of an experimented jurist, by displaying an example of perfect courtesy and self-control” and transmits the ruler’s views:<sup>19</sup>

“In no country whatsoever is there permission for to anybody to attack the State religion and to offend religious feelings of the people. Dr. Koelle’s tract with its content against Islamic faith, could create such an effect, this is why the police had the right to sequester and prevent its publication. By helping the traduction of such a text Ahmed Tevfik, as a

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 74- 75, FO 78/3072, dated 1 January 1880

religious educator in the State service, deserved the punishment according Islamic jurisprudence. He was not arrested because joining Christianity, in the contrary as a Muslim religious person who contributed to an anti-Islamic text. In our land anybody can choose the religion he prefers.”

The Sultan added that as the Caliph of the Muslims he would commit a sin against Allah and the Holy Prophet if he does not deliver the Koelle's papers without scratching the lines containing blasphemous content, written by Ahmed Tefvik.

Abdulhamid's determination to not permit any interference to his religious institutions, as well as the failure of missionaries to influence Muslims,<sup>20</sup> oriented British politicians to search a solution outside Ottoman mechanism. Beginning from 1878 Britain had closer contacts with the Amir of Mecca who had already proposed to the Porte, the removal of the post of Governor of Hedjaz out of Mecca. Also one of his relatives was proposed as King of Afghanistan by the British government. The campaign of an Arab Caliphate also started in the same time. There were two candidates the Amir of Mecca and the Khedive of Egypt. The first was killed in 1880 at Mecca by an Afghan pilgrim and immediately Abdulhamid named a loyal one. Also in 1878 the British agent Blunt started his activities at Egypt in favour of the Khedive. With the occupation of Egypt in 1882 this campaign reached its peak and Abdulhamid became the main target of the British anti-propaganda.

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<sup>20</sup> Isaac Taylor in his article entitled “The Great Missionary Failure” (Fortnightly Review, 1888, 2d semester pp.488–500 declares: “A few Eastern Christians may be perverted, but the mussionaries make no way among the Mahommedans (...) Moslems do not become Christians because they like their own religion best.” pp. 491 and 492.

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