

Photographic Memories:

The Field Hospital of Hafir-el-Auja and US-Ottoman Relations¹

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At the outset of World War I, an American Red Cross mission set up a field hospital in Hafir-el-Auja, an oasis just on the Palestinian side of the border with Egypt. Its purpose was to care for casualties suffered by the Turkish military during their first assault on British troops entrenched across the Suez Canal. Initial planning and preparations for the hospital originated in Beirut, but as the medical team travelled south towards the Sinai, Jerusalem, and in particular the American Colony, served as the staging ground for the hospital. In this paper I describe the background and activities of this rather unique American “wartime expedition” and clarify its motivation. I demonstrate that this isolated historical episode presents a complex view of US-Ottoman relations in the early twentieth century. In particular, I draw attention to the central role that American missionaries and the American Red Cross played in this relationship.

Introduction

My interest in the expedition begins with an old photograph of a medical team dressed in surgical garb, standing in front of a tent marked with both the Red Cross and the Red Crescent emblems. The photo used to hang in West Hall, the student center at the American University of Beirut (AUB), when I first saw it in 1942. My father, Dr. Vahan Kalbian (1887-1968), an Armenian born in Diyarbakir, Turkey, appears in that photo as part of the team. He had graduated from the medical school of the Syrian Protestant College (SPC, now the American University of Beirut) in 1914 and was appointed surgical resident at the adjoining American Hospital. Dr. Edwin St. John Ward (1880-1951), Professor of Surgery at the medical school, led the mission.

My father was always reluctant to talk about the photo, for reasons unknown to me, and I had forgotten it until recently, when it resurfaced among the American Colony photographic collections at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. I also found an original copy in a box of old photos recently salvaged from my family's pre-1948 Talbiyeh home in West Jerusalem. Initially, my goal in pursuing research was to learn more about Dr. Ward's mission so that I could better understand my father's life and career. As my research progressed, however, I realized that this photograph, which held some personal meaning for me, might actually provide historians with important insights into US-Ottoman relations in the early years of World War I. Thus, I set out to learn more about why the American Red Cross (ARC) set up a field hospital in Palestine to take care of Turkish soldiers at a time when the Turks were fighting against the British, a US ally.

I was able to find several archival sources that helped me recreate the expedition and the establishment of this field hospital. Dr. Ward, a graduate of Amherst College, donated his letters and papers to his alma mater, among which were two unpublished reports by Reverend George G. Doolittle, an American Presbyterian missionary based in Sidon who served as Assistant Director of this expedition. Rev. Doolittle had also published an article titled "With the Turkish Army in the Desert" about the hospital.² I also located other photos of the expedition that were part of the American Colony collection at the Library of Congress. Of further help were the papers of John Whiting (1882-1951) of the American Colony in Jerusalem that included his description of setting up the tent hospital at Hafir-el-Auja.³

Background

In order to understand the significance of this photo, it is necessary to set the stage by briefly sketching the key features of US relations with the Ottoman Empire in the two centuries prior to the outbreak of World War I. The primary features of that relationship were trade, missionary activity, and humanitarian relief. Although these areas appear to fall outside the realm of official state diplomacy, it is clear that they played important roles in defining US-Ottoman relations, and thus must be taken seriously. Indeed, the field hospital came about as a collaborative effort by missionary and humanitarian relief groups, and most certainly played a role in diplomatic relations between the US and the Ottoman Empire.

The history of this relationship changed over time as different interests took precedence. For instance, starting in the eighteenth century the focal point of the relationship was trade.⁴ This was important to the US as it was attempting to assert its independence from Britain, since it could no longer count on the British Navy to protect important trade routes with the East. Pirates were based in Algeria and Tunisia, provinces of the Ottoman Empire. In its infancy, the US government was successful at developing an amicable relation with the Ottomans to ensure that the brisk trade between the two nations could go on unimpeded. By 1914 America accounted for 23 percent of all Turkish exports. In 1831, the first American envoy set foot in Istanbul to establish an official diplomatic

presence, with David Porter as the first chargé d'affaires. Since then the US presence in Turkey has been almost uninterrupted.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, as these early concerns about maintaining safe and open trade routes dissipated, the burgeoning Protestant evangelical movement in the US took an increasing interest in missionizing the people of the Near East. The missionaries soon discovered that the Muslim and Jewish inhabitants of “the holy lands” were not eager postulants, so they turned their attention to the Christian minorities, mainly the Armenian communities scattered in eastern Turkey. Under the umbrella of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), established in 1812 out of Williams College and inspired by the Great Awakening movement, they opened schools for boys and girls, vocational institutions and churches. Despite initial Ottoman resentment and the antagonism of the Armenian Orthodox clerics, the missionaries were highly successful in their undertaking and the ensuing conversions led to the founding of the Armenian Protestant Church.⁵ Most importantly, with the help of ABCFM, missionaries established the Robert College in Istanbul and the Syrian Protestant College (SPC) in Beirut. Graduates of these institutions would eventually play pivotal roles in molding the political future of the entire Middle East. Hospitals staffed with American physicians and nurses were opened to treat Armenians in locations that had a substantial Armenian presence, like Van and Aintab in eastern Turkey. The Ottoman regime, far from begrudging these incursions, welcomed their efforts and became fully supportive.⁶ It also became an impetus for the Ottomans to start their own institutions.⁷

While initially focusing on evangelization and education, the missionaries found themselves in the unexpected role of tending to the thousands of homeless and displaced Armenian refugees who were fleeing the 1895 pogroms initiated by Sultan Abdul Hamid II in response to provocations by Armenian revolutionaries. As further persecution and displacement of Armenians continued into the early twentieth century, the missionaries intensified their commitment. Their relief work was widely publicized in the US, and served to expose the Turkish atrocities and the plight of the Armenians. Soon the phrase “the starving Armenians” became an ever-present part of the American idiom.

Coincidentally, the missionaries came to play a key role in shaping US foreign policy, on occasion substituting as an arm of the State Department. In fact in 1897, a Congregationalist missionary, Reverend James B. Angell, was appointed to the post of US envoy and minister plenipotentiary to Istanbul.⁸ Historians agree that by this point, the missionary presence in the Ottoman territories had become a major US concern that played a pivotal role in the total lack of US response to the Turkish atrocities of 1915, despite US Ambassador Morgenthau’s unrelenting and well publicized detailed reporting of the carnage. The American press led by the *New York Times* printed a total of 145 articles on the topic and was persistent in its photographic reporting of the atrocities. Yet there was no official condemnation from Washington. Moreover the strident public uproar expressed by a substantial group of lawmakers and concerned US citizenry, including President Theodore Roosevelt, failed to induce either the State Department or President Wilson to take any punitive measures against Turkey while the genocide continued unabated. Wilson had been president of Princeton University, a “school with

strong Presbyterian ties.”⁹ Both his father and grandfather were Presbyterian ministers, and he kept a lifelong strong connection with the church. Peter Balakian argues that the reason the White House yielded to the missionaries and ignored punitive action was that any response by the US administration might have jeopardized the missions in Turkey.¹⁰ In 1913 there were 209 missionaries operating 120 different missions.¹¹ There is a need for much more historical research and analysis in order to understand why the Armenian massacres did not provoke a strong reaction or even a condemnation from the US administration at that time. One wonders what the precise effect of such a condemnation and action might have been on future genocides, especially in light of Hitler’s well-known remark in a speech on August 22, 1939, when he asked “Who, after all, speaks to-day of the annihilation of the Armenians?”¹²

Whereas trade relations and missionary activity characterized US-Ottoman relations in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a new feature of this relationship that emerged in the last decade of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the increased presence of humanitarian groups in Ottoman territories, mainly the American Red Cross (ARC). The ARC was established in the US in 1882. It undertook its very first overseas expedition in 1897 to Turkey to tend to the victims of the Turkish massacres of the Armenians. Clara Barton, founder of the ARC, travelled to Istanbul to obtain the approval of the Supreme Porte for her agenda of humanitarian relief.¹³ Turkey was a member of the International Red Cross (which had been founded in Geneva, Switzerland in 1863) through its own Red Crescent Society, founded in 1868 as the *Hilal al-Ahmar*, but was unwilling to allow the ARC to operate in Ottoman territory as they resented the cross as an emblem. Barton, however, was able to convince Istanbul and received official approval for the ARC mission. Often working in tandem with the American missionaries, ARC’s presence in Turkey grew and gained a quasi-permanent status with chartered chapters in cities like Adana in 1909 and Beirut in 1910. By 1915 the Istanbul chapter of ARC was operating fifteen hospitals. Their hosts welcomed them openly; and this warm relationship continued during WWI, despite strong German protest, even after the US joined the Allies in April of 1917 by declaring war against Germany but not against its ally, Turkey. Despite congressional pressure President Wilson refused to declare war on Turkey.¹⁴ This enabled US citizens to move about freely as they pursued their mission work in Ottoman territories for the duration of the war.

In the US, the ARC had grown in size and influence. An indication of its stature was evidenced when in 1909 a former president of the ARC, William Taft, was elected to the White House. Consequently solid ties were cemented with the State Department so that of the twelve appointees on the board of the ARC, eleven were current or retired State Department functionaries. This led to it ostensibly acquiring a “quasi-governmental” status so that ARC activities appeared to be a component of US diplomacy.¹⁵

The Armenian genocide was clearly the starting point of what has now become routine American participation in global humanitarian relief. As we have seen, both the missionaries and the ARC interacted in significant ways with the Armenian communities throughout the Ottoman territories. The missionaries, motivated by their desire to protect their interests in the region, influenced the official US response to the Turkish

atrocities. The ARC's humanitarian relief efforts were often the only hope offered to the few Armenians who survived the genocide. This fact provides an important context for understanding the photograph that is the subject of this essay. For, as we shall see in what follows, the ARC and the missionaries at SPC worked together in numerous contexts including the establishment of the field hospital at Hafir-el-Auja.

The Syrian Protestant College and Jamal Pasha

American missionaries led by Daniel Bliss (Amherst College, Class of 1852) had established the SPC in Beirut, then part of Syria, in 1866. It soon became the most successful institution of higher learning in the Near East. Bliss, a staunch missionary, had no preferred church affiliation: "He described himself as born a Baptist, brought up a Methodist, ordained a Congregationalist, and laboring (in 1881) among Presbyterians."¹⁶ The SPC was well received and supported by the Ras Beirut community and maintained an amicable relationship with the Turkish authorities through the years.

Lebanon in early 1915 was in the throes of a famine as a result of the British naval blockade of Lebanese waters and a disastrous crop failure. It has been estimated that half the population died of starvation and disease.¹⁷ The SPC, in synergy with the Beirut Chapter of ARC (American National Red Cross, Beirut, Syria Chapter), and the YMCA, (both housed close to the College) stepped in and played a crucial role in the humanitarian wartime relief and food distribution in Lebanon. The Ottomans, led by Jamal Pasha (who later, together with Enver Pasha and Talaat Pasha, was chiefly responsible for executing the Armenian Genocide), one of the leaders of the Young Turks and Commander-in-Chief of the 4th Army out of Damascus, appreciated the American efforts to ease the starvation. This resulted in a lasting friendship between the SPC and the Ottomans that lasted through the war. This friendly relationship between the SPC and the Ottomans is one clue to understanding why the hospital at Hafir-el-Auja was established. Jamal Pasha's key contacts at the SPC were with President Howard Bliss (the son of Daniel Bliss who succeeded his father as president of the SPC in 1903), and his soon-to-be son-in-law, Bayard Dodge, the son of Cleveland Dodge, a financier and philanthropist, adviser and close friend of US President Woodrow Wilson. Joseph Grabill describes this friendship as follows: "During the Woodrow Wilson presidency, Cleveland Dodge had more influence than any individual upon American diplomacy toward the Near East."¹⁸

The nature of Jamal Pasha's relationship with the SPC was significant. As Behmardi notes, he "was reputed to have taken the College under his wing, and to have considered himself its 'Patron.' In fact, Jamal Pasha visited the College on numerous occasions, and repeatedly addressed the student and faculty body, stressing his high regard for the College's academics, civic values, and its talented faculty . . ."¹⁹ During one visit to the College, Jamal Pasha said, "The College represents an honorable Commission sent from America . . . and as the majority of the students of this American University are Ottomans, this institution is an Ottoman University . . . I am ready to give any help, which is in my power The Ottoman nation expects a great deal from you . . ."²⁰

Even after the departure of Jamal Pasha from Syria and the end of the war in 1918, Howard Bliss stayed in touch with him, and the two exchanged some correspondence.²¹ Although his warm relationship with Jamal Pasha was unpopular with many Americans in the Lebanese and Beirut community, Tylor Brand claims that it provided him with political capital which he used to protect members of the foreign community on a number of occasions. Brand also argues that Bliss's relationship with Jamal allowed him to mitigate any political fallout from the United States' entry into the war in April 1917. In spite of the occasional tension, Bliss's relationship with Jamal was apparently not all for show. For example, Brand notes that on 11 January 1917, Bliss wrote to thank Jamal for provisioning the college with flour, to which Jamal responded by stating that it was his duty to help those who were helping his country. As further evidence of the warm relationship between the two men, Brand notes that upon learning of the Ottoman decision to retreat from the region, Bliss decided to send a warm letter expressing his gratitude for Jamal's assistance during the war and his regret at his departure.²²

The Beirut food relief effort and the ensuing warm relationship between the Americans and the Ottoman leadership can help to explain why the ARC medical expedition to the Sinai desert captured in the photograph was allowed to proceed. This relationship between Jamal Pasha and Bliss could be considered a prelude to an era of amicable relationship between the US and the Ottomans throughout the war and indeed to the present.

Jamal Pasha's Plan to Attack the Suez Canal

In November of 1914, a month after France and Britain declared war on Turkey, as Jamal Pasha was leaving Istanbul for Damascus, leading officials and dignitaries hailed him as the "Savior of Egypt."²³ He had been charged by war minister Enver Pasha, to seize the Suez Canal, a crucial lifeline of the British Empire, with the hope that their incursion would engage a large force of the British Army stationed in Egypt, away from attacking mainland Turkey in the Dardanelles. Jamal knew that he needed to augment the Turkish Army medical services, which lacked qualified manpower. Thus, he promptly mobilized all military age Turkish citizens in the provinces under his command who were in the medical profession – doctors, dentists and pharmacists. This included the staff of the American Hospital in Beirut, associated with the SPC, a significant number of whom were Armenians (by 1918 a total of 134 Armenians had graduated from the medical school).²⁴ At the request of Dr. Ward, the indispensable cadre of doctors at the AH were initially exempted from the draft and stayed at their posts in Beirut.²⁵ By the end of the war, 32 SPC graduate doctors had died while serving in the Turkish army.²⁶ Jamal needed the AH both as a vital public health asset to help control disease and famine in the region but also as a source of medical personnel as would-be draftees. In 1915 typhus was epidemic while typhoid fever and cholera were rampant in Beirut, thus the college and the hospital were by necessity kept open and running throughout the war years. Seemingly Jamal had reached a quid pro quo with the college to exempt the medical staff and in return the college of necessity would acquiesce to his requests. He reinforced this goodwill by

assuring that the college received hard-to-get, scarce food supplies such as wheat, directly from the Turkish military and at reduced cost (standard military prices).²⁷ Jamal's grand plan to attack the Suez Canal was widely anticipated with an urgency to take advantage of the cooler winter desert climate and after the much-needed rains had replenished the oasis wells. The concept of having a crack battlefield hospital in the desert was eventually conceived. The question is, by whom?

The Origins of the Medical Mission at Hafir-el-Auja

There are conflicting accounts about the origins of this mission. Indeed, we can identify at least three different versions about who was responsible for initiating the field hospital. The historian Brand claims that it was Howard Bliss who came up with the idea. Brand writes, "Upon the outset of the war, Bliss decided to continue the SPC's longstanding policy of accommodation with local authorities and political neutrality. The college used its ties to the Beirut chapter of the American Red Cross to court local authorities by sending a medical mission to the Ottoman front lines during the Suez campaign."²⁸ This account portrays Bliss as a tactful operator who was trying to maintain a favorable relationship with Jamal Pasha.

In contrast to Brand's account, Ward states that it was the ARC that initiated the idea of a medical expedition to the Sinai and had approached Jamal with as yet another expression of US-Turkish friendship and cooperation in time of war. Ward wrote:

Although for several years the ARC society had a chapter in Beirut, there was no opportunity for it to help wounded soldiers in the Turkish army until Turkey entered the great war. Then it was learned that the Ottoman army was expected to march into Egyptian territory from Jerusalem south to the Suez Canal. An audience was sought with His Excellency Jamal Pasha, Commander of the IVth Army and the help of the ARC Society was offered. He gladly accepted the offer and asked that in one month's time an expedition should be equipped and ready for service in the desert south of Beersheba. This would have been impossible but for the fact that the SPC eagerly took this opportunity of showing that its medical department was ready to serve the country to the best of its ability in such a time of need.²⁹

His inference was that the ARC was offering this service within its stated wartime obligation of helping wounded soldiers. The ARC in Washington, the US consul in Beirut and the SPC were all involved in the final decision and fund raising for this hospital. The question of whether the State Department conceived the project or was implicitly involved remains unanswered, nor is there any mention in the written records I have consulted of its approval.

John Whiting of the Jerusalem American Colony provides us with a third alternative explanation for the hospital's establishment.³⁰ He implies that it was Jamal Pasha who had

requested the SPC to man and equip the field hospital as his 4th Army lacked battlefield-ready medical support.³¹ While there is some overlap between all three accounts, it is clear that American personnel at the SPC and the ARC were more than willing to accommodate Jamal, despite what would appear to be a delicate diplomatic situation of providing assistance to forces who were attacking the British.

Preparing for the Expedition

A committee under the chairmanship of President Bliss was charged with collecting and packing the equipment provided by the SPC, ARC and the American and German hospitals in Beirut. The Rev. Doolittle was asked to come to Beirut from Sidon on 7 January 1915 to “take business and evangelical management of the expedition to minister to the sick and wounded soldiers.” He would become the associate director of the project but the SPC faculty remained in charge of the expedition. Ward describes the preparations as follows: “Tents for all the staff with necessary furnishings were bought or made: general food supplies and a well-stocked pharmacy were fortunately secured in Beirut: while the surgical instruments and outfit were loaned by the college faculty and friends. Sheets, clothes for the patients, towels were made by the poor women of Beirut under the direction of the American ladies.”³²

Even more interesting than the collection of needed supplies was the selection of medical personnel to staff the field hospital. Dr. Ward (second from right) led the medical team. He was a graduate of Amherst College (1900), and Columbia Medical School (1904) and had volunteered as a medical missionary with the ABCFM from 1907-1911, where he was stationed at the American Hospital in Diyarbakir.³³ He then moved to Beirut to head the Surgical Department at the AH and stayed as professor of surgery and eventually became dean of the medical school. He was also a member of the ARC and later for the duration of the war, served in Palestine, Turkey, and France in that capacity. He had an impeccable reputation both as a humanitarian and a surgeon. The team he put together was exclusively surgical, geared solely for battlefield casualties. It included the following doctors: Dr. Vahan Kalbian (first on the right) first surgical assistant, an Armenian, who later went on to practice in Jerusalem until his retirement from the Augusta Victoria Hospital in 1962; Dr. Joseph Attiyeh, (far left) second surgical assistant, a Lebanese Jew who later practiced urology in Beirut. His office was located across from the St. Charles



Fig.1 - The doctors at Hafir-el-Auja. From left to right: Dr. Joseph Attiyeh, Dr. Neme Nuch, Dr. Ward, Dr. Vahan Kalbian, the author's father. From the author's private collection.



Fig.2 - American Red Cross staff. My father is standing in center of third row behind seated Dr. Ward (in dark suit). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Borrome Hospital, Dr. Nemeh Nucho, (third from right without surgical cap) an internist and Adjunct Professor of Medicine who later became the leading tuberculosis specialist in the Middle East and taught at the AUB medical school, working out of the Hamlin Sanatorium in Hammana, Lebanon. According to Schwake, Dr. Tewfic Canaan of Jerusalem, joined the expedition in Hafir-el- Auja as director of the laboratory.³⁴ Dr. Canaan apparently stayed on after the ARC expedition disbanded and worked in the Turkish Red Crescent tent hospital as well as the German Hospital housed in a two-storied building in Hafir.

The nursing team consisted of four German deaconesses: Sophie, Louisa, Hannah and Lena. They were from the Prussian Kaiserwerth Hospital of the Knights of the Order of St John (a 60-bed hospital in Beirut that had recently affiliated with the medical school as its German doctors had been recalled home). Dr. Ward had taken over the surgical department at that hospital and had become used to working with its nursing staff. So he requested the German surgical nursing team to join the Sinai expedition. The Germans in return insisted that the field hospital should be established as a unit of the German Kaiserwerth hospital.³⁵ Dr. Ward objected to the German request and insisted that it should be known as the American Red Cross hospital. The dispute was resolved by Jamal who sided with Dr Ward.³⁶ The Red Crescent flag flew next to the Red Cross flag as a mere symbolic gesture, since there is no indication of significant material support from the Turkish Red Crescent. However, Reverend Doolittle did indicate in his communications with the ARC that “the American Red Cross worked harmoniously with the Turkish Red Crescent branch of the army service.”³⁷

Sixteen volunteer graduating class medical students, including two from the pharmacy school and one from the dental school were also on the team – a total of twenty-five, not counting the cooks and servants, included in Fig. 3. It is noteworthy that there were only two Americans in the group – Dr. Ward and Reverend Doolittle!

A mere three weeks after Doolittle was called to Beirut, the team had packed and was ready to go. A public event to recognize the expedition held on the college athletic field was attended by the Turkish officials, by foreign and local friends, as well as by the captain of the American armored cruiser the *USS North Carolina*, which was on a prolonged visit to Beirut to deliver food and money to the missionaries, anchored offshore within view of the campus and indeed all of Beirut. Team members of the medical mission were recognizable by their Red Cross armbands. After several speeches the rally ended with hurrahs and the entire student body singing the college anthem. The next day, Friday, 22 January, with much cheering, ceremony and flag-waving, the supplies and equipment were loaded and the expedition boarded a train for the 50-mile climb to

Damascus where the US consul and Turkish dignitaries welcomed them at the station. Dr. Ward and the German sisters stayed at the consulate while the rest slept on the train. On Saturday, after a lavish reception for all at the US consulate, with the attendance of the Turkish governor, commander of the army, and other dignitaries, the train took off for Palestine with flying banners and cheering bystanders. The fanfare surrounding the launch of this mission served to bolster the image of America as a humanitarian nation. Indeed, it is hard to ignore the political and propaganda value accrued to the USA by the lead-up to the mission. The involvement of US State Department personnel in welcoming the mission team in Damascus can be seen as evidence of its support for this mission. Thus, although it was non-governmental entities (the SPC and the ARC) that were the active forces in establishing this hospital, the US government both supported and benefitted from this expedition.

The six-car train travelled south to Muzeirib, just west of Der‘a and on to ‘Affuleh in Palestine. The Reverend Doolittle complained about the fact that they were travelling on a Sunday, but he adds “we realized fully that we were living in war conditions.” The railroad in early 1915 extended south as far as Nablus, their final destination, but they had to disembark at Sileh, several miles to the north. The staff was moved by carriage but the freight was loaded onto camels to Nablus. From there most of the staff took carriages for the 30-mile ride to Jerusalem, but the equipment took several days to reach Jerusalem.³⁸

The Central Role of the American Colony

On entering the city from the north on a cold January day, the convoy would have had no difficulty spotting the American Colony as it sits on the Nablus Road down from the Nashashibi quarter. This has been the only road into the city from the north since Roman times. It is still a familiar landmark next to the mosque named for Shaykh Jarrah, said to be Saladin’s physician who also treated King Richard the Lion Heart. Incidentally, the American Colony was also on the carriage route of Jamal Pasha as he was driven from his residence at Augusta Victoria Stiftung to the city on the very same road.³⁹ He was particularly keen on the Colony photographic department as he had a penchant to be photographed and would often stop by to be photographed by Lewis Larson and Eric Matson.⁴⁰

The American Colony Mission in Jerusalem was founded in 1881 inside the Old City. It moved to its current location in 1894 and started receiving guests after 1902. In 1915 it became the staging site for the deployment of the Sinai ARC hospital where the members of the Beirut contingent were warmly welcomed as free guests of the Colony for a week of rest and relaxation. The day after their arrival the whole group led by the genial Dr. Ward, who was fluent in Turkish, French, and German, walked down to the Old City, through Damascus Gate in a semi-triumphal march reminding him of the Crusaders. Writing in 1918, he says:

One is constantly reminded in Palestine of that great movement of the Middle Ages called Crusades. Though the impulse was a lofty one, to



Fig.3 - Turkish soldiers marching past the American Colony on Nablus Road, with the Shaykh Jarrah mosque in the background. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

conquer by the sword, to pillage and plunder was so false to Christ's teachings that the Christian Church is not very proud of that chapter of history. Much of the distress, hate and distrust of the Moslems for the Christians even to this day is the result. In December 1914 the green flag of Mohamed was again paraded through the streets of Jerusalem and the bold proclamation of the Holy War made all the Christian world shudder. Would there be a reputation of the same bitter, heartless strife? The answer came when a small band of young men marched through the Damascus Gate and up the Via Dolorosa bearing aloft the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, the Stars and Stripes and the Turkish crescent. On they went under the Ecce Homo arch to the Pool of Bethesda to attend the opening exercises of the Moslem University.⁴¹

The seized Muslim *madrassa* was just inside the Lions Gate.⁴²

In the meantime, at the Colony, the all-important "giant" tents, which had been commandeered by Jamal from Thomas Cook and Sons, were being washed and cleaned.⁴³ These would become the "hospital wards" for the casualties. They were plush, oversized tents that were strictly reserved for royalty and for celebrity visitors to the Holy Land.⁴⁴ Whiting describes them as follows: "These were interior decorated canvas tents that had an outer umbrella in white which served as an air space in-between making them livable."⁴⁵ Every available tent in the country had already been commandeered to house the Turkish troops that had been amassed in Sinai. Throughout the expedition the American Colony remained the source of supplies as needed with urgent requests sent by letters from Rev. Doolittle to John Whiting in Jerusalem.⁴⁶ As no official postal services existed, such correspondence must have been through couriers.

John Whiting was the skilled, knowledgeable and urbane co-manager of the American Colony. He was the first child to be born to the "congregation" in 1882 in Jerusalem. He had married Grace Spafford in 1909, younger daughter of the founders of the Colony, and in partnership with his German brother in law, Frederick Vester, who had married Bertha Spafford, (the celebrated Mrs. Vester) operated the Vester & Co. American Colony Store inside the Jaffa Gate. Whiting was fluent in Arabic and Turkish and had been asked



Fig.4 - View of the American Colony. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

in advance to take over the project so the colony became the center of operations of the ARC mission. Since 1908 he had also carried the diplomatic office of deputy US consul in Jerusalem. Here again we see the nature of the collaboration between missionaries, humanitarian relief agencies, and governmental entities. He organized the next phase of the operation and accompanied the expedition to Hafir-el-Auja to set up the hospital and became the contact in Jerusalem for resupplies. For weeks the grounds of the Colony had been turned into a warehouse for the tents. The additional freight arriving from Nablus was being dumped into the yard. It reminded him of more glorious days when they would prepare the trips of more celebrated visitors.⁴⁷ He mourned that these tents would be lost forever in the hands of the Turks. He writes, “The conquering Turks had come to the Holy Land in tents: it is fitting that they should go out in tents thanks to Thos. Cook & Son.”⁴⁸

What role did Whiting play in the Mission in addition to organizing the movement of supplies from Jerusalem to the field hospital? He wrote that it was Jamal Pasha who had requested the SPC to man and equip the field hospital as his 4th Army lacked battlefield-ready medical support.⁴⁹ Jamal had asked headquarters in Istanbul for help and trained battlefield medics were on their way.⁵⁰ From Whiting’s papers, we can see that not only was he skeptical about the success of an attack on Suez, but he also was cynical about the practicality of the whole expedition, noting that the hospital was 120 miles behind the battlefield. Whiting informed the US consul in Jerusalem, Dr. Otis Glazebrook, a onetime spiritual advisor to President Wilson, that “his team might be left stranded and that the consulate should prepare a rescue.”⁵¹ He scoffed at the fact that camels were going to be used to transport the wounded over that distance in the desert and he predicted



Fig.5 - John Whiting. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

the wholesale breakdown of the animal transport with the starving camels carrying crude stretchers slung on either side of the hump of the animal. He observed the total disarray of the camel caravans unloading the wounded and noted that the soldiers' thirst was so severe that they were willing to pay a high price for a drink. The date of Jamal's ill-fated attack was kept a secret but Whiting had an informant – "one of the interns." He recounts that he gave the informant a postcard to mail back, along with the necessary postage stamp, which was to be stuck upside down in case of a Turkish defeat. After the attack on Suez, Turkish HQ proudly announced a great victory as expected, but a few days later the card arrived as agreed upon but with the stamp stuck upside down, indicating that the Ottomans had indeed been defeated.⁵²

There had been victory celebrations in Jerusalem on 9 February based on false Turkish government claims of a triumph.⁵³ Whiting relinquished his post as US consul after the war but promptly joined British intelligence. He was a long-time friend and a patient of my father's. He suffered of chronic bronchial asthma and died in 1951 from a heart attack.

Destination and Set-Up of Hospital

The oasis of Hafir-el-Auja, situated on the border between Egypt and Palestine, was an important historic stopover on the ancient caravan route into Egypt from Beersheba. Though it was 120 miles east of the planned Suez Canal front, it had a dependable and sizable source of underground water. Over 2000 years ago the Nabateans had a settlement there, called Nitzana, which is the current designation of an Israeli town near the site. Prior to 1914 it had been a desolate and distant Turkish army outpost, but by 1915, as plans were made to attack the Suez Canal, it had become a "major forward base for the Ottoman army" with a water tower, housing, and administrative buildings, as well as a two-story hospital.⁵⁴

By the time the Turks withdrew from it in 1917, the site had grown extensively with several more buildings, including a railway station for the rail extension from Beersheba. This was to be the "home" of the expedition.

The caravan of carriages left the American Colony on 4 February, heading south to Bethlehem, then via Hebron to their gathering point in Beersheba, a distance of 60 miles. The first group travelled on to Hafir on mules and camels for the next two days, but the



Fig.8- Jerusalem women with Red Crescent armbands. The author's mother is seated second from left. From the author's private collection.

my mother, Satenig Torossian of Jerusalem, seated second from left.⁵⁷ My father did not know her at the time, but later while stationed in Jerusalem in 1916-1917, they met and were married in 1919.

The presence of two Armenian women in the group reflects the vital role the small Armenian community played at the time. My grandfather, Artin Torossian, was the Austrian vice-consul and postmaster of the Austrian post office inside Jaffa gate, facing the Jerusalem Citadel (Tower of David).

The attack on the Suez Canal occurred on 3 February and lasted two days until it was repulsed by the British. The Turkish Army then withdrew back to Sinai. The first casualties arrived at the field hospital on 9 February after several days of arduous journeying from the front on makeshift stretchers mounted on camels. Most of the 220 casualties were Muslim Arabs from Palestine or Syria.⁵⁸ Ironically, the very first patient to be operated on was a soldier who had developed an incarcerated hernia! Of the several hundred surgical procedures there were only two fatalities, one from gangrene and one from sepsis. The hospital had ample gasoline lights and water carried from the reservoir. Despite violent sandstorms that would blow the sand inside the tents, they managed to remain fully operational. Jamal Pasha visited the expedition with a retinue of twelve who all spent a night there. He was impressed by the high professional standards and efficiency of the mission. He cabled Istanbul to officially thank the American people through the US ambassador. My father started a cordial relationship with Jamal Pasha that flourished later on during the war when Jamal appointed him director of the Russian Hospital in Jerusalem with the rank of colonel.⁵⁹ The desert hospital became a popular “watering” stop for many VIP



Fig.9 - The Turkish Red Crescent Hospital at Hafir-el-Auja after the American Red Cross departed. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

guests, including high-ranking German officers, and gained the moniker of the “American Hotel.”⁶⁰ Writing in 1918, Dr. Ward describes the strenuous work and concludes that “The soldiers were very grateful. They forgot their hatred of the ‘Cross,’ their suspicion of the ‘dog of a Christian’ melted before the sun of human kindness and after a few days they, in a truly oriental fashion, showered blessing on the heads of the nurses and the doctors. All the fatigue, discomfort, the danger, the fierce heat of the desert and the driving sandstorms were forgotten. The battle was won. ‘Which one of these- was neighbor to him who fell among thieves? The old Crusader or the modern Crusader?’”⁶¹

The expedition lasted five and a half weeks and was deemed a success by all parties. The remaining patients were transported to the Russian Hospital in Jerusalem. From what I am able to discern from the written accounts, a Red Crescent hospital staffed by Arab nursing nuns from the Sisters of Rosary in Jerusalem was established at the site of the ARC hospital utilizing the existing tents. Dr. Canaan apparently stayed on and worked in that hospital as well as the German Hospital housed in an adjacent two-storied building.⁶²

The return of the ARC team to Beirut via Jerusalem, with all their weighty surgical equipment, was relatively uneventful, although Doolittle notes that the stretch from the camp to Jerusalem was arduous. They had to utilize camels until they reached Bersheeba, where they were able to procure carriages. Once in Jerusalem, they turned over the remaining patients to the Russian Hospital. After a brief rest at the American Colony they then retraced their route back by train via Damascus, reaching Beirut on in two groups on the 20 and 27 March, 1915.

Conclusion

I have described the shared influence of the vibrant US missionaries and the ARC on the US-Turkish relationship through the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, above and beyond standard State Department diplomacy. I believe that such a role came about inadvertently as a result of the plight of the Armenians in Turkey. As I noted earlier, the Armenians were central in helping define both the missionaries' and the ARC's roles in the region. A personal photograph depicting my Armenian father inspired this research. The 1915 ARC/SPC expedition to Sinai to aid the Turkish army was a colorful example of the authority that the missionary and humanitarian players in the region commanded. Although in fact it may have been an altruistic mission, it certainly was a diplomatic "tour de force."

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Endnotes

- 1 I am grateful to George Hintlian in Jerusalem who encouraged me to write this essay and was a valuable source of information.
- 2 George C. Doolittle, "With the Turkish Army in the Desert: An American Red Cross Relief Caravan Journeys Across Syria Towards Egypt," *American Red Cross Magazine* 10 (1915): 315-319.
- 3 John D. Whiting, Papers, 1890-1970 (bulk 1904-64), box 6, John Whiting Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Many of Whiting's papers are not paginated, so in what follows, I often simply refer to the box number.
- 4 The historical account in this section is taken from Michael Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2007).
- 5 For more on the American Missionary interventions in Eastern Anatolia, see Devrim Ümit, "The American Protestant Missionary Network," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 4 (2014): 16-51.
- 6 Çağrı Erhan, "Ottoman Official Attitudes Towards American Missionaries," *The United States and the Middle East: Cultural Encounters* (2000): 315-341.
- 7 Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014): 18.
- 8 Ümit "The American Protestant Missionary Network," 16.
- 9 Eleanor Tejirian and Reeva Spector Simon, *Conflict, Conquest, and Conversion: Two Thousand Years of Christian Missions in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 178.
- 10 This description of the US reaction to the Armenian Genocide is drawn primarily from Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response*, (New York: Harper & Collins, 2003).
- 11 Balakian, 10. See also Erhan, "Ottoman Official Attitudes," 317.
- 12 Louis P. Lochner, *What About Germany?* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1942).
- 13 Mabel T. Boardman, *Under The Red Cross Flag* (Philadelphia: J B Lippincott Co., 1915).
- 14 David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2009), 250.
- 15 Marian Moser Jones, *The American Red Cross: from Clara Barton to the New Deal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), xi.
- 16 David M. Stowe, "Bliss, Daniel," in *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1998), 69.
- 17 Whiting, box 6, 306.
- 18 Joseph L. Grabill, "Cleveland H. Dodge, Woodrow Wilson, and the Near East," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 48 (1970): 249-264.
- 19 Vahid Behmardi, "Djamal Pasha and the Syrian Protestant College," *Al Abhath* (2002-2003): 135-159. Accessed July 17, 2015. <http://www.aub.edu.lb/Abhath/2002-2003/135-159.html>

- edu.lb/ulibraries/asc/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/wwi/1918/spc-pulls-through/relations-with-jemal-pasha
- 20 “Translation of Jamal Pasha Address to SPC Students, 1917,” AUB Libraries Online Exhibits, accessed July 17, 2015, <http://www.aub.edu.lb/ulibraries/asc/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/wwi/item/324>.
- 21 Behmardi, 135-159.
- 22 Tylor Brand, Tylor, “Bliss, Howard S.,” in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War s.v. “Bliss, Howard S.,” in: 1914-1918-online., ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014.
- 23 He boasted “I shall not return to Constantinople until I have conquered Egypt.” Quoted in Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story 1918* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 171.
- 24 Hratch Kestebian, “In Memory of AUB Medical Alumni in WWI,” *The Armenian Mirror Spectator*; December 22, 2012: 4.
- 25 My father was among them and in September 1914 he had to report to Damascus headquarters for his captain’s commission in the Turkish Army but was allowed to return to Beirut as assistant to Dr. Ward.
- 26 Kestebian, “In Memory of Medical Alumni,” 4.
- 27 Brand.
- 28 Brand.
- 29 Edwin St. John Ward, “Report of the American Red Cross Mission to the Turkish Army in Palestine, January 22 to March 27th, 1915.” Amherst College Archives and Special Collections Edwin St. John Ward (AC 1900) Papers, Box 1, Folder 3
- 30 The American Colony was established by a group of Chicago millennialist evangelists in 1888. See Jane Fletcher Geniese, *American Priestess: The Extraordinary Story of Anna Spafford and the American Colony in Jerusalem* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).
- 31 Whiting, box 6, 304
- 32 Edwin St. John Ward, “The Modern Crusader in Palestine,” *Amherst Graduates’ Quarterly* 5 (1916): 169.
- 33 Dr Ward and my father had the Diyarbakir link and became lifelong friends.
- 34 Norbert Schwake, “The Great War in Palestine,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 56 & 57 (2014): 140-156.
- 35 Frederick L. Rushton, “Medical Mercy for the Near East During the Last War,” *Worcester Sunday Telegram*, March 16, 1941, 8, section 5.
- 36 Rushton, 8, section 5.
- 37 Doolittle, 316.
- 38 The preceding account of the expedition’s departure from Beirut and travels toward Jerusalem is taken from George Doolittle, “New Work for a Sidon Missionary,” Amherst College Archives and Special Collections Edwin St. John Ward (AC 1900) Papers, Box 1, Folder 3.
- 39 Whiting, box 6.
- 40 Whiting, box 6.
- 41 Ward, “The Modern Crusader in Palestine,” 169.
- 42 The site of St Anne’s Convent.
- 43 Dimitri Salameh, an Arab-Greek Orthodox notable, was Thos. Cook & Son’s manager.
- 44 Both Doolittle and Whiting ponder the fact that these tents had sheltered royalty and celebrities from the Prince of Wales to Mark Twain.
- 45 Whiting, box 6, 303.
- 46 American Colony in Jerusalem Collection, Library of Congress. Part I, Box 3, Folder 16.
- 47 Whiting, box 6, 303.
- 48 Whiting, box 6, 303.
- 49 Whiting writes, “because of the helplessness with respect to medical services, Jamal was impressed by Dr. Ward’s assignment.” Whiting, box 6, 302.
- 50 Geniese, 248.
- 51 “The US consuls were now on intimate terms with the Colony.” Whiting, box 6, p. 287
- 52 The preceding account is taken from Whiting’s papers in the Library of Congress, box 6.
- 53 Conde de Ballobar, *Jerusalem in World War I: The Palestine Diary of a European Diplomat* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2011), 50.
- 54 Michael Talbot, “Life and Death in an Ottoman Desert Hospital in World War I”. Accessed 17 July 2015. <http://www.stambouline.com/2013/11/life-and-death-in-ottoman-desert.html>
- 55 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_3_Sinai_detail_Keogh_p.26.jpeg#/media/File:Map_3_Sinai_detail_Keogh_p.26.jpeg. Accessed 17 July 2015.
- 56 Geniese, 248.
- 57 Seated third from the right is Miss Araxi Kevorkian (Tabourian) of Jerusalem.
- 58 Dr. Ward commented on the fact that Muslims were being cared for by Christians. Ward, “The Modern Crusader in Palestine,” 171.
- 59 This was an exceptional appointment of an Armenian to oversee a staff of Turkish doctors.
- 60 Ward, “Report”.
- 61 Ward, “The Modern Crusader,” 171.
- 62 Schwake, “The Great War in Palestine,” 148-153.