

## The Amir, Neutrality and Rumour During the First World War

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The following paper will examine the relationship between the Amir of Afghanistan and the British Raj during the First World War. Furthermore, the way in which the war affected Delhi's attitude towards Afghanistan and how this shifted over the course of the hostilities will be explored. For the British in India this was a time of great anxiety, as much of their military resources were needed in Europe and the Mesopotamian campaign. Not only were there anxieties over the potential threats from Germany and then Turkey, the British authorities in India also worried about how their neighbours, Afghanistan, would act throughout the hostilities. Complicating matters is the role that rumour played in influencing North-West Frontier relations.

The neutrality of the Afghan Amir, Habibullah Khan, was strategically important for Britain during the First World War. With the North-West Frontier of India acting as a global crossroads where both physical and psychological influences were at play, British authorities looked at ways to safeguard the region as hostilities commenced in 1914. This was not the first time that an Amir's conduct was put under scrutiny. During the 1897 'Frontier Uprising' Habibullah Khan's father, Abdur Rahman Khan's, conduct and actions towards the frontier and British India were scrutinised by British Officials in India. Keith Surridge explains that the hostilities surprised the British authorities, especially in their scale. Many British officials, in trying to understand its origins, looked towards Amir Abdur Rahman Khan and his alleged involvement. Surridge argues that the Amir was a duplicitous enemy of Britain.<sup>1</sup> Lord Lansdowne, in 1889, described the Amir as 'a cantankerous and suspicious old savage'.<sup>2</sup> However, all in authority did not share these views. Lord Curzon commented that 'in spite of his uncertain temper and insolent language, [he was] a consistent friend of the British alliance'.<sup>3</sup>

The frontier between Afghanistan and India historically was used as a gateway to enter India. During the nineteenth century European powers looked to gain a foothold in India. With British influence in India expanding as the century began, one eye was kept on Afghanistan to see whether any external power was trying to influence the country. France, under Napoleon Bonaparte, showed intentions towards India. To make matters worse, in 1807 the French signed a treaty of alliance with Russia in Tilsit. So it was decided in 1808 that a diplomatic mission, led by Mountstuart Elphinstone, was to be sent to the court of Amir Shah Shuja to gain influence in Kabul.<sup>4</sup> It was hoped that a friendly alliance with Afghanistan against the threat of a French invasion of India would be secured between the two countries. However, the perceived French threat was short lived, being replaced in the 1820s by Russian designs in Central Asia and played out during

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<sup>1</sup> K. Surridge, 'The Ambiguous Amir: Britain, Afghanistan and the 1897 North-West Frontier Uprising', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36 (2008), p. 417

<sup>2</sup> T. Newton, *Lord Lansdowne: A biography* (London, 1929), p. 106

<sup>3</sup> G. Curzon, *Tales of Travel* (London, 1923), p. 54

<sup>4</sup> The mission was also sent to Sindh, Iran and Jodhpur

the rest of the century in Afghanistan with India as the key stake. As the twentieth century approached, a new player in the so-called 'great game' entered the arena: Germany. This was to impact on neutrality between Britain and Afghanistan as the First World War played out.

The policy of neutrality between Britain and Afghanistan originated in the reign of Abdul Rahman Khan (1880-1901). It was born out of British success in the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-80). By winning the war, and forcing the Afghans to sign the Treaty of Gandamak in 1879, the British created a series of buffer zones on the Afghan-Indian border. However, the policy was a very informal agreement based on the special relationship between the Amir, rather than the state, with the Government of India. It was founded on letters exchanged in June and July 1880 between Abdul Rahman and Sir Lepel Griffin, the chief British political officer in Afghanistan. These established British control of the Amir's foreign relations, gave him the promise of British protection against unprovoked aggression and recognized him as the Amir of Kabul. Britain was to refrain from intervention in his country's internal affairs and the Amir was to receive a regular subsidy, which was increased, in 1893, to 1,850,000 rupees (18.5 lakhs of rupees).<sup>5</sup>

When Habibullah Khan took the throne in 1901 he was well aware that the agreement between his father and the British had been a personal one. The new Amir wanted the relationship to continue, but this time on a more formal basis between states rather than persons. The Amir wanted some form of protection from the Russian Empire, which had expanded greatly over the nineteenth century. The British preferred to keep the arrangements renewable with each change of ruler as this gave them scope to amend as they saw appropriate. Louis Dane, Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, arrived in Kabul on 12 December 1904 with instructions to amend the old terms and negotiate a binding personal treaty with the Amir. After three months of negotiations Dane was authorized to accept Habibullah Khan's terms, which reaffirmed the old agreements but turned them into a treaty between nations.<sup>6</sup> The annual subsidy granted to his late father was renewed, after initially being halted, and he was also permitted to collect arrears from the period it was suspended. Since he was recognized not as Amir of Kabul, nor even as Amir of Afghanistan, but as the independent king of Afghanistan and its dependencies, his country's territorial integrity was implicitly guaranteed. In return, he allowed Britain to retain control over his foreign relations.<sup>7</sup> Despite the resulting agreement not being to the satisfaction of the officials in India, the British Government was satisfied that the 1905 settlement would forestall any future frontier complications. However, with the frontier acting as a global crossroads and geopolitical events affecting the region, rumours concerning Afghan neutrality continued to circulate.

## **Rumours**

India during the nineteenth century was seen by the British authorities as an information and rumour rich-society, which they could not control.<sup>8</sup> This continued in the early years of the twentieth century and Martin Sokenfeld argues that British policy towards the Northern Frontier of India was entangled in these rumours instead of (unavailable) reliable information.<sup>9</sup> It would be useful to define what a rumour is. The psychologist

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<sup>5</sup> L. W. Adamec, *Afghanistan 1900-1923: A Diplomatic History*, (Berkeley, 1967), pp. 172-75

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-64

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-64, 178

<sup>8</sup> C. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge, 1996)

<sup>9</sup> M. Sokefeld, 'Rumour and Politics on the Northern Frontier: The British, Pakhtun Wali and Yaghestan', *Modern Asian Studies*, 36 (2002), pp. 299, 311

Robert Knapp, in 1944, defined rumour as 'a proposition for belief of topical reference disseminated without official verification'.<sup>10</sup> It is this kernel of truth, of topical reference, that was the biggest problem for the British authorities. With rumours containing something believable, this had the potential to threaten the fragility on the Frontier and unite certain peoples against the authorities. Furthermore, Ben Hopkins argues that the 'rumour's power lay in its ability to erode British prestige'.<sup>11</sup> It is this that made rumour important on the Frontier and offers a way of thinking about the nature and limits of colonial power. The British authority's sources of information were deficient; they did not trust the local population, resulting in anxiety among officials.

### **The Balkan Wars**

During the Balkan Wars of 1911-13, the authorities reported that many Afghans undertook their duty 'to show sympathy for the Ottomans' and to 'offer their services as volunteers, or to subscribe for the wounded'.<sup>12</sup> Abdul Qaiyum reported on this subject to the Chief Commissioner of the North-West Frontier Province, George Roos-Keppel, writing that:

There are distinct signs of very strong feelings among the educated classes in this province ... and I shall not be at all telling the truth if I say that the Afghans of this province do not feel for what is going on in the Muslim world – Tripoli ... There is no use attempting to cast doubts on the truth that the war in Tripoli has stirred up feelings of Muslims ... All these stages of the war are being most closely followed by even the most ignorant tribesmen on the frontier and people have freely subscribed toward the "Red Crescent Societies" ... [and] they have a special regard for the Sultan of Turkey.<sup>13</sup>

With the excitement on either side of border, Britain maintained a strict policy of neutrality during this conflict. However, this did not stop the rumours spreading that Britain was assisting Italy. The British Agent at Kabul recorded that 'the impression that the British Government was at the bottom of the Italian attack has not been removed, and it is said in Court circles that the appointment of Lord Kitchener in Egypt was intended to prevent the Egyptian Government from siding with Turkey'.<sup>14</sup> Not only were the British viewed as assisting Italy, they were also lamented with actively preventing Egypt, a fellow Islamic territory within their Empire, from lending its support to their co-religionists. Even though the Amir of Afghanistan sent financial assistance to Turkey, militarily he remained resolute.<sup>15</sup> The British Agent at Kabul illustrated this point in a diary entry in 1913:

Padshah Sahib ... spoke about the Turco-Balkan war. He said that it was a religious war in which all the European powers were helping the Balkan States in their struggle against the Turks, that

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<sup>10</sup> R. Knapp, 'A Psychology of Rumour', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 8 (1944), p. 22

<sup>11</sup> B. Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Basingstoke, 2008), p. 42

<sup>12</sup> British Library, Indian Office Records Library, L/P&S/10/200, *Memo of Information*, North-West Frontier of India, week ending 6th January 1912

<sup>13</sup> BL, IORL, MSS EurD613/1, *Sir George Roos-Keppel Papers*, Abdul Qaiyum to Roos-Keppel, 25 August 1912

<sup>14</sup> BL, IORL, L/P&S/10/200, *Diary British of the Agent at Kabul*, No. 55, week ending 3rd December 1911

<sup>15</sup> BL, IORL, L/P&S/10/200, *Memorandum of information received during the month of May 1912 - North-West Frontier of India and NWF Provincial Diary*, No. 46, week ending 16th November 1912

the British Government, who had armed the Arabs and had caused their revolt against the Sultan in Arabia, and had been at the bottom of the Italian attack on Tripoli, was also chiefly responsible for this struggle, that if the King of Islam (the Amir) were simply to allow ... a few ... Mullahs, to proclaim a *jihad* against the said Government, the Afridis, Mohmands and other Frontier tribes would in a short time teach them a lesson and liberate the Sultan. The Amir ... overheard ...[and] rated the Saiyid very severely ... and that if he heard any one else indulging in such talk he would have his tongue cut off.<sup>16</sup>

Again, the talk is of the British assisting the Italians with their attack on Tripoli despite the supposed neutrality of Britain. What is interesting is the harshness of the Amir's response to any further idle gossip of a *jihad* against the British in India via the frontier tribes. For the Amir, any such *jihad* against Britain would break his policy of neutrality and financially weaken his position, as the British authorities in India would immediately halt his annual subsidy. Furthermore, an expedition into Afghanistan would probably follow and his replacement by a new 'British friendly' Amir on the throne would no doubt ensue.

### **The First World War**

As the First World War broke out and Turkey allied with Germany, the pressure on the Amir to defer from the policy of neutrality and join the *jihad* was relentless. One argument levelled at Habibullah as to why the policy of neutrality was followed came from within Kabul. Many who believed he had embraced western ways chastised him. Mullas were heard to say that 'His Majesty the Amir has secretly sold Afghanistan to the British Government' and '*Pashton Wali lar*' (old Afghanism is gone).<sup>17</sup> As mentioned earlier, the British paid the Amir an annual subsidy to keep him on the path of neutrality. I would suggest that for the anti-British element within Kabul a distinction could be made between the Amir's alleged western ways, subsidy and neutrality juxtaposed to supporting their fellow co-religionists. It would have seemed that money and the support of Britain outweighed joining the *jihad*. The talk of the Amir's westernising ways originated from his successful visit to England in 1907. During the visit, Habibullah was treated and greeted as a King. This was further reinforced with a telegram from King Edward VII, in which he addressed Habibullah as His Majesty.<sup>18</sup>

The pressure for *jihad* came, not only from the Mullahs and clerics, but also from within the Amir's family. A rumour circulating Kabul in early 1916 alluded to the difference of opinion between the Amir and two of his sons. It was reported that 'Nasrullah Khan and Inayatullah Khan have openly said that the Amir may be bound by treaties and promises to the English but that they are not and will join the *jihad* in the spring'.<sup>19</sup> With the intense pressure placed upon the Amir, especially from within his close circle, a rumour that, 'the Amir is thinking of abdicating in favour of his son Inayatullah Khan', propagating Kabul does not seem too fanciful.<sup>20</sup> If this rumour was true and the Amir did harbour these deliberations, I would suggest that this was a natural thought process. Habibullah faced a difficult challenge in continuing neutrality as he was confronted by many among his own subjects so to give it all up was one option available to him. In the following diary entry it was recorded that, 'rumours are prevalent in Khost that the Amir will shortly issue a

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<sup>16</sup> BL, IORL, L/P&S/10/200, *Diary of the British Agent at Kabul*, No. 110, week ending 15th February 1913

<sup>17</sup> BL, IORL, L/P&S/10/201, *Diary of the British Agent at Kabul*, week ending 8th February 1914

<sup>18</sup> P. Sykes, *History of Afghanistan II*, (London, 1940), p. 226

<sup>19</sup> BL, IORL, L/P&S/10/202, *North-West Frontier Diary*, No. 2, week ending 8th January 1916

<sup>20</sup> BL, IORL, L/P&S/10/202, *North-West Frontier Provincial Diary*, No. 10, week ending 4th March 1916

proclamation for *jihad* to commence immediately after the Nauroz'.<sup>21</sup> Khost is a city on the Afghan-Indian (now Pakistani) border. As with the previous rumour, for the Amir to declare a *jihad* would be the second of three options available to him. The third option available to the Amir was to continue the policy of neutrality.

Continuing the sequence of diary entries, it was reported that:

The wildest rumours are current in Khost regarding the political situation at Kabul. One says that a force of 22,000 Turks and Germans ... has arrived at Kabul, another that the Amir has been dethroned and Nasrullah Khan set up in his place, and a third that the pay of an Afghan sepoy has been raised ... All rumours agree that a holy war is shortly to be proclaimed ... It is said that the Amir was recently asked by the Turkish and German officers in Kabul to make a definite pronouncement of policy, and that he replied that he would throw in his lot with the Germans after they had conquered Egypt but not before. The foreign officers then told him that he would get no share of India if he continued to hold aloof from the war.<sup>22</sup>

Over this three-week period, conflicting rumours and stories of the Amir, either abdicating in favour of his sons or declaring *jihad*, found their way back to the North-West Frontier Provincial diarist. An interesting way of interpreting the importance of these rumours is through the letters and reaction of Roos-Keppel and the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge, regarding the position of the Amir. On the 13 March, Roos-Keppel wrote that he thought the Amir was 'playing rather a dangerous game'.<sup>23</sup> This was due to the Amir summoning to Kabul many of the Mullahs in order to discuss with them the future policy of Afghanistan. Roos-Keppel believed that 'a good many people here think that it is on the cards that the Amir will find himself face to face with so universal a demand for war that he will give in and may abdicate in favour of his son or, if he declines to do this, that his disposition is not altogether improbable'.<sup>24</sup> Worryingly for the authorities, it was recorded in Peshawar that 'the belief is universal that we shall find ourselves at war with the Amir during the course of this summer ... If the Afghans come in we shall have very large questions to tackle after the close of the war'.<sup>25</sup>

What can be observed from this report is how important Roos-Keppel viewed the rumours, as he deemed them significant enough to include in his correspondence to the Viceroy. Roos-Keppel does not commit to whether he believed that they were true, but does offer an opinion that if Afghanistan were to enter the war against Britain it would cause serious challenges on the frontier. The crux of the correspondence is that Roos-Keppel believed that the Amir was conducting a dangerous game. The game in question was the Amir's dealing with the Turco-German mission that reached Kabul in October 1915.<sup>26</sup> It was hoped that the mission would encourage Afghanistan to declare full independence from the British Empire, enter the First World on the side of the Central Powers and attack India.<sup>27</sup> Or in other words, to change the

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<sup>21</sup> BL, IORL, L/P&S/10/202, *North-West Frontier Provincial Diary*, No. 11, week ending 11th March 1916

<sup>22</sup> BL, IORL, L/P&S/10/202, *North-West Frontier Provincial Diary*, No. 12, week ending 18th March 1916

<sup>23</sup> BL, IORL, MSS EurD613/3, *Sir George Roos-Keppel Papers*, George Roos-Keppel to Lord Hardinge, 13th March 1916

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>26</sup> Also known as The Niedermayer-Hentig Expedition

<sup>27</sup> For further reading on this subject see P. Hopkirk, *On Secret Service East of Constantinople*, which contains a number of chapters on the Niedermayer-Hentig mission

policy of his neutrality followed by the Amir. Roos-Keppel understood this game was to be won by the highest bidder.

The Viceroy replied by stating that, 'I quite realise that the Amir is playing a dangerous game, but – I still believe that he will remain staunch and in his power to do so'.<sup>28</sup> Hardinge, it seemed, had more confidence in the Amir and the policy of neutrality. Maybe he showed less confidence in the reliability of what was being recorded by the North-West Frontier diarist and more conviction in the power of the connections between Afghanistan and England. Subsequently, Lord Chelmsford replaced Lord Hardinge, in April 1916, as Viceroy and Roos-Keppel, in welcoming the new Viceroy, wrote a survey of the position on the frontier over the previous 18 months. Within this survey, Roos-Keppel reported that:

Habibullah Khan is determined to maintain his attitude of neutrality as long as it is possible for him to do so ... I cannot share in the admiration sometimes expressed of his loyalty, as it seems to me inconsistent with his obligations as our ally that he should receive in Cabul a German Mission ... at the same time one must recognise that he has an extremely difficult game to play. I do not think that he has any particular affection for us, probably the reverse, but he is a clever opportunist and will doubtless use his utmost endeavours to remain on the fence until he becomes certain which is to be the winning side.<sup>29</sup>

This is an interesting appraisal of the Amir by Roos-Keppel to the new Viceroy. It can be interpreted as an honest, but hardly complementary, assessment of Habibullah's attitude towards Britain. By Roos-Keppel calling the Amir a 'clever opportunist', it illustrated in his eyes the fragility of the friendship between the two countries. If Britain were to suffer a catastrophic military defeat against Germany, Roos-Keppel was under no illusions that the Amir would forgo the policy of neutrality and join the *jihad*.

Regarding the policy of Afghan neutrality, A. H. Grant, Foreign Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, commented on the options available for the British concerning this policy in 1915:

The disadvantages of mere neutrality are –

- (1) that it leaves the door open to a subsequent breakdown and that, with a neutral neighbour, we can never feel absolutely certain that he may not at any moment become a hostile neighbour;
- (2) that the continuance of the Amir's mere neutrality would not have any real effect on Moslem opinion in India, which would doubtless be greatly excited by the addition of a second Muhammadan Power to the Turco-German camp;
- (3) that with the Amir neutral, Afghanistan would still remain open to Turco-German intrigue, and would afford an asylum to Turco-German parties fleeing from Persia.

On the other hand, the disadvantages of securing the Amir's active co-operation, should this be possible, are –

- (1) that it might cause a revolution in Afghanistan itself
- (2) that it would entitle the Amir to make exorbitant claims for compensation at the end of the war
- (3) that there is danger in drawing the Afghan sword

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<sup>28</sup> BL, IORL, MSS EurD613/3, *Sir George Roos-Keppel Papers*, Lord Hardinge to George Roos-Keppel, 18th March 1916

<sup>29</sup> BL, IORL, MSS EurD613/3, *Sir George Roos-Keppel Papers*, George Roos-Keppel to Lord Chelmsford, 13th April 1916

- (4) that by letting loose the Afghan forces on the more or less defenceless adjoining provinces of Persia, we should be causing unnecessary hardship to the civil population.<sup>30</sup>

Grant then considered the two arguments and concluded that, 'I think that we should be wise to attempt merely to secure the Amir's continued neutrality'. It seemed that Grant advocated the continuation of the policy of neutrality as he was worried that if the British pressed for the Amir's active support, the consequences in Afghanistan would have out-weighed the support. He believed it would have put Afghanistan in a state of revolution because the Amir would be openly supporting the British against their co-religionists. Also the worry would be that Afghanistan would turn on the British despite the British encouraging their active support. This would have put the Turco-German Mission on a course for the invasion of India or at least assist their 'stirring up' of the frontier people against the British. So, neutrality was the best policy in 1915. Grant then commented on the Amir's policy of neutrality in 1916 after a year of intrigue. This time Grant looked at the options the Amir had at hand: 'A blank refusal to the Amir ... would give dire offence and precipitate trouble: a complete acquiescence is obviously impossible. A half-way course is therefore indicated'.<sup>31</sup>

However, it was the events on the battlefield that could have swayed the Amir to change his policy. Roos-Keppel was well aware of how a decision or action in Europe or Central Asia played out on the frontier. He commented to Chelmsford that, 'It is possible that he [the Amir] may turn against us should the Islamic situation change to our detriment and if we have to acknowledge failure in the Dardanelles and to withdraw ... the pride of Islam would receive such a fillip that Musulmans in general and the exceptionally ignorant Afghans in particular might lose their heads and the Amir be carried with the tide'.<sup>32</sup> With the British also fighting against Turkey, events were being closely watched on the Frontier and in Kabul. India and Turkey were closely linked and, since 1876, the Turkish sultan also held the title of 'Supreme Caliph', with the task of protecting the Muslim religion.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, some in British authority had previously questioned this dual loyalty. Antony MacDonnell, commenting in 1897, worried that the Sunni Muslims held a double allegiance, on the one hand to Britain, and on the other to their Khalifa. Moreover, MacDonnell believed that they were interested in the fate of Turkish and Afghan arms for his own peace of mind.<sup>34</sup> With this close relationship, news was monitored closely when it concerned the sultan and his Turkish forces.

Rumours circulated the bazaars that Afghanistan was ready to join Turkey in hostilities against the British. Roos-Keppel hoped to hear of a British victory to quell these rumours as he feared a defeat would exacerbate the situation in Kabul and make it harder for the Amir to continue his policy of neutrality.<sup>35</sup> However, at the Battle of Ctesiphon (22-26 November 1915) the British forces were defeated, with more than half of the 8,500 British and Indian troops who fought killed or wounded. The survivors then endured a

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<sup>30</sup> BL, IORL, MSS Eur E265/55, Foreign and Political Department, Frontier Branch, Confidential A, Proceedings of 1917, Nos 54 – 131

<sup>31</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(b), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Endorsement to the Army Dept, No. 62 F-C, 25<sup>th</sup> May 1916 – AH Grant

<sup>32</sup> BL, IORL, MSS EurD613/3, *Sir George Roos-Keppel Papers*, George Roos-Keppel to Lord Chelmsford, 19th April 1916

<sup>33</sup> Article 4, "The Ottoman Constitution, Promulgated the 7<sup>th</sup> Zilbridje, 1293 (11/23 December, 1876)" (1908) 2(4) *The American Journal of International Law*, Supplement: Official Documents (October 1908), p. 367

<sup>34</sup> BL, IORL, MSS EUR F84/71, *Earl of Elgin Papers*, MacDonnell to Elgin, 16 July and 22 August 1897. Antony MacDonnell held numerous roles in the administration of India between 1881 and 1902.

<sup>35</sup> BL, IORL, MSS EurD613/2, *Sir George Roos-Keppel Papers*, George Roos-Keppel to Lord Hardinge, 22nd September 1915

dangerous and exhausting retreat to Kut-al-Amara without decent medical or transport facilities. Bolstered by 30,000 reinforcements, Turkish troops besieged General Charles Townshend's forces in Kut-al-Amara before the Allied troops could act on the British War Cabinet's advice to withdraw further down the Tigris. The siege of Kut-al-Amara lasted 147 days before the 11,800 British and Indian troops inside the garrison town finally surrendered on 29 April 1916.<sup>36</sup> With this humiliating defeat, British authorities became anxious of how this news would be met by the frontier tribes. Roos-Keppel reported to Grant that 'letters received from Kabul from Sharif Khan describing great rejoicings at news of Turco-German victory ... Notices alleging victory of Islam and conversion of German thereto were posted in the city'.<sup>37</sup>

The policy of neutrality was under serious pressure from Turco-German intrigue. Two days later, more news emerged from Kabul that, as a consequence of the British losses at Kut-al-Amara, 'belief has been strengthened that an early date when the Turkish and German forces will now be enabled to reach Afghanistan'.<sup>38</sup> The report also mentioned that rumours and wild stories were also circulating Kabul exaggerating the British losses. This was an attempt to antagonise the anti-British sentiment in Kabul to bring Afghanistan into the *jihad*. Interestingly, the British Agent in Kabul reported that the 'news of the fall of Kut had been received calmly', while Grant accepted Roos-Keppel's picture of Kabul, which he described as 'rejoicing' over the British defeat.<sup>39</sup> The Viceroy then waded into the discussion over the consequence of the defeat at Ku-al-Amara and the rumours surrounding it. He wrote to Austen Chamberlain, the Secretary of State for India, that the:

Information regarding situation in Kabul which has been furnished by Indian Mission is a naturally biased and unworthy of serious consideration. Following appears to be actual situation in Kabul. Fall of Kut seems to have reinforced pro-Turk enthusiasm and to have been hailed as Islamic victory. In the Amir's policy of neutrality, however, no change is indicated.<sup>40</sup>

As Viceroy, Chelmsford had to tread diplomatically over these troubled waters and somewhat calm British anxieties on the Frontier. Thankfully, in June, Roos-Keppel had two pieces of good news to report. Firstly, he had been informed the 'German Mission has left Cabul and I hope that this may be true'. Secondly, and more importantly, Roos-Keppel reported to the Viceroy that 'it is now safe to say that the fall of Kut has had little or no effect upon public feeling'.<sup>41</sup>

An interview with the Amir conducted by the British Agent at the end of May 1916 highlighted the pressure that he came under during this period. In the interview, the Amir is reported to have said that 'the intervention of Turkey in to the war has caused my position to become indescribable; I am between the devil and the deep sea ... Lord Hardinge had rightly admitted the nature of the difficulties I was in on account of the Turkish concern in the war'.<sup>42</sup> After reading the report the Viceroy commented to the Secretary of State for India that the Amir thought 'there was no further case for anxiety now as he had been able to set things

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/battles/mesopotamia.htm>

<sup>37</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(b), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Roos-Keppel to Sec to the GoI F&P Dept, 17<sup>th</sup> May 1916

<sup>38</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(b), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Major Finlay to General Staff, Simla, 19<sup>th</sup> May 1916

<sup>39</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(b), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, AH Grant, Sec to the GoI F&P Dept, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1916

<sup>40</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(b), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Chelmsford to Chamberlain, 24<sup>th</sup> May 1916

<sup>41</sup> BL, IORL, MSS EurD613/3, *Sir George Roos-Keppel Papers*, George Roos-Keppel to Lord Chelmsford, 4<sup>th</sup> June 1916

<sup>42</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(b), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Extract from the diary of the British Agent at Kabul for the week ending 31<sup>st</sup> May 1916 (interview with the Amir on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1916)



right - presumably by dismissing German Mission from Kabul and squaring tribal representatives'.<sup>43</sup> However, over the next few months, rumours continued to circulate that either the Amir had joined Germany or that another Mission had reached Kabul. Many British officials still were not convinced that the Amir was able to resist German advances. Conversely, the Amir was getting annoyed by this attitude towards him and answered these accusations in an interview in December. It was reported that 'resentment was displayed by him at passage in Viceroy's message emphasising desirability of Amir's issuing stringent orders to prevent Afghanistan becoming a base for alien intrigue'.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, it was noted that the 'Amir holds he deserves thanks unqualified by any well-reasoned admonition for the immense service he has done to British Government in keeping Afghanistan neutral'.<sup>45</sup> Denys Bray, Deputy Secretary of the Foreign Department, commented on the Amir's comments: 'In short his attitude is this; he has given his word, he has acted up to his word, he has put us under an immense obligation; and yet he is "misunderstood"'.<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, the Viceroy commented that 'the Amir's reply to it is characteristically Oriental'.<sup>47</sup>

The British authorities in India viewed the Amir through an 'orientalist' lens and this is observed in some of the language used by the officials, especially Roos-Keppel who labeled him a 'clever opportunist' who was waiting to see to which side he should align Afghanistan. Furthermore, the British feared another Muslim uprising similar to 1857, and the prospect of the Amir leading the Frontier populous against them was a factor in persuading Afghanistan to remain neutral.<sup>48</sup> Not only were the authorities worried about the 'tribesmen', the Indian Army had a large Muslim contingent. In 1909 the number of Frontier 'tribesmen' in the army totaled approximately 10,500.<sup>49</sup> With the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, and the entry of Turkey, there was the possibility that Muslim troops might have to face each other in battle. Furthermore, the Sultan and Ottoman Government issued five *fatwas* in which they called upon all Muslims to wage jihad on the Allies.<sup>50</sup> For the Muslims of the Indian Army the consequence of taking up this call would mean desertion from their positions. It has been recorded that by the middle of 1915 some ten per cent of the Afridis in the Indian Army had deserted. Roos-Keppel commented that the constant desertion of Pathans from regiments is an unsatisfactory feature.<sup>51</sup> He also observed that the Afridis desertion was so contagious that '[he] fear[ed] the deserters will become a serious menace to our present good relations with the Afridis'.<sup>52</sup>

During 1916 the news of the desertions had reached Kabul, and the British Agent reported that one such story referred to a number of Indian troops who had mutinously and disloyally deserted ... and joined with the enemy's forces, and great praises and tributes are being paid to the religious sense of the

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<sup>43</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(b), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Chelmsford to Chamberlain, 8<sup>th</sup> June 1916

<sup>44</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(c), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Secretary of the Government of India Foreign and Political Department to Private Secretary to the Viceroy, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1916 [Regarding an interview between the Amir and British Agent, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1916]

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>46</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(c), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Memo dated 16<sup>th</sup> December 1916 by Denys Bray

<sup>47</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(c), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, 25<sup>th</sup> December 1916 by Lord Chelmsford

<sup>48</sup> For more on the potential of a repeat of 1857 see K. Wagner, 'Treading Upon Fires: The Mutiny-Motif and Colonial Anxieties in British India', *Past & Present*, 218 (2013)

<sup>49</sup> D. Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army 1860-1940 (Studies in Military and Strategic History, 1998)* (London, 1998), p. 20

<sup>50</sup> Richard Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: British Intelligence and the Defence of the Indian Empire 1904-1924* (London, 1995), p. 179

<sup>51</sup> BL, IORL, D613, *Roos-Keppel Papers*, Volume 1, Roos-Keppel to Hardinge, 10<sup>th</sup> March 1915

<sup>52</sup> BL, IORL, D613, *Roos-Keppel Papers*, Volume 2, Roos-Keppel to Hardinge, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1915

deserters.<sup>53</sup> News of these desertions would have been welcomed by the anti-British element in the Kabul court and would have inspired greater efforts. Later in 1916 this subject was again being discussed in Kabul. This time the Afridis were singled out and the report mentioned the large numbers deserting their regiments.<sup>54</sup> The combination of rumour and desertions created an environment where the neutrality of the Amir was believed to be crucial to the administration of the Frontier.

During 1917 nothing changed, rumours and reports still continued that the Amir was being pressured to change his position. Interestingly, the Afghan Envoy to the Government of India was reported to be exaggerating the news from the frontline in order to turn the Amir to see the virtues of joining the side of Germany. In June 1917 the British Agent recorded that 'the Afghan Envoy with the Government of India is reported to be active in supplying ... the Amir garbled and exaggerated news regarding the effect of the war on India, in which he pictures the supremacy of Germany, and the approaching and imminent overthrow of the British Government ... In short, Germany is better than the Allies in the field'.<sup>55</sup> Later that month, another rumour on British weakness and pressure on the Amir circulated the frontier.<sup>56</sup> However, it was the reports emanating from Afghanistan in the second half of 1917 which put pressure on the policy of neutrality. These concerned a plot to either depose or assassinate the Amir. In August it was reported that a criminal society had been set up in Kabul with the objective to secure the deposition of the Amir.<sup>57</sup> It was then rumoured that the Amir had been taken prisoner and his brother and son were now in charge.<sup>58</sup> If this report was true and the anti-British group took power in Kabul then the policy of neutrality would have ended and put the frontier under severe pressure as the War continued.

In early 1918 again the reports from the frontier were full of rumours that the Amir had been deposed.<sup>59</sup> Thankfully, for the British authorities the Amir was still in power as the summer came. It was at this point when a special meeting of the Afghan Royal family met to discuss a letter received from the Sultan of Turkey asking the Amir to join the Central Powers. The War was discussed and, again, relief for the British that the Amir is reported 'to have expressed his intention of continuing, at any rate for the present, the policy of neutrality which he has adopted'.<sup>60</sup> This was what the Viceroy and the British Government back in London wanted to hear. However, it was still only an intention and not a concrete guarantee. But, this news did not go down to well in Kabul. In July it was reported that the Amir had been shot at while driving through

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<sup>53</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(b), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Hafiz Saifullah Khan to Captain NNE Bray, Kabul, 12th April 1916

<sup>54</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(c), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Hafiz Saifullah Khan to Captain NNE Bray, Kabul, 1st November 1916

<sup>55</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(c), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Extract from the Diary of the British Agent at Kabul for the week ending 15<sup>th</sup> June 1917

<sup>56</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(c), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Extract from the Diary of the British Agent at Kabul for the week ending 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1917

<sup>57</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(c), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Secret Memo - Meshed, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1917 - EAF Redl, Lieutenant-Colonel, GSO

<sup>58</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(c), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Extract from an Intelligence Summary No.34 for the week ending 25<sup>th</sup> August 1917

<sup>59</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(d), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Agent to the Governor-General in Baluchistan, Quetta to Secretary to the Government of India Foreign and Political Department, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1918 and Secretary to the Government of India Foreign and Political Department to Chief Commissioner and Agent to Governor-General NWFP, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1918

<sup>60</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(d), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Extract from the weekly diary of events No.27 - Major RF Finlay, Intelligence Officer, NWF

Kabul.<sup>61</sup> If true, the motive behind this attempt on his life can be linked to the Amir's comment to remain neutral. Furthermore, it was suggested that his son, Amanullah Khan, was behind the assassination attempt.<sup>62</sup> The result was that more rumours circulated pertaining to the potential of war breaking out between Afghanistan and Britain.<sup>63</sup>

Despite all the rumours that circulated during the War years and the intrigue of Germany, Turkey and the anti-British party in Kabul, the Amir kept to his policy of neutrality with the British. He resolutely ignored the clamour for him to join the *jihad* against Britain and for the Central Powers to use Kabul as a launch pad to India. However, despite the continuation of the policy of neutrality, the Amir was not allowed to participate in the talks after the ending of the hostilities. Back in 1916 the Amir approached the Government of India with a request for the representation of Afghanistan at the Peace Conference at the end of the war.<sup>64</sup> The Viceroy thought that this demand was 'preposterous' and that Britain could not justify the representation of a neutral state.<sup>65</sup> The Amir was thus informed on 31 July 1916 that, since the Peace Conference would be attended by the representatives of the belligerent powers, only to deal with the matters concerning the countries belonging to those powers; the question affecting Afghanistan would not come within the purview of such a conference. Should any question affecting the interests of Afghanistan arise as a sequel to the Peace Conference, nothing would be decided without consulting the Amir.<sup>66</sup> This rebuttal upset the finely balanced friendship between the Government of India and the Amir but not enough to end the policy of neutrality.

After the War had finished, the Amir, in February 1919, wrote to the Viceroy demanding 'written recognition by the Peace Conference, of Afghanistan's absolute liberty, freedom of action and perpetual independence'.<sup>67</sup> However, the Amir was not to get his reply as events were to transpire out of his control. On the 20 February 1919 it was reported that the Amir had been shot dead at Laghman.<sup>68</sup> It was confirmed a few days later that this was not a rumour and Habibullah had been murdered. The decision to follow the policy of neutrality and not join the *jihad* had ultimately cost his life.

## Conclusion

As mentioned above, the intelligence available to the British authorities on the Frontier was deficient as there was not much investment. Furthermore, they did not trust the local population, which resulted in anxiety among many of the officials. With this deficiency, the officials relied upon rumour that circulated the Frontier. With the hostilities playing out and the potential threat to India, the men on the ground took rumours more seriously for two important reasons. The first reason being that the risk of ignoring them became greater for the authorities on the Frontier who during these years of hostilities had less military

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<sup>61</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(d), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Major Finlay, Peshawar to Chief of General Staff, Simla – 15<sup>th</sup> July 1918 and AH Grant, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1918

<sup>62</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(d), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, Viceroy to Secretary of State for India, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1918

<sup>63</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(d), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, General Mallerson, Meshed to Chief of General Staff, Simla, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1918

<sup>64</sup> A. Sareen, *India and Afghanistan: British Imperialism vs. Afghan Nationalism 1907-1921* (Delhi, 1981), p. 96

<sup>65</sup> Foreign Department, Frontier Confidential A, 1917, Nos. 54-131, Prog. No. 117

<sup>66</sup> Foreign Department, Confidential A, 1917, Nos. 54-131, Prog. No. 125

<sup>67</sup> Foreign Department, Secret Frontier, October 1920, Prog. 705

<sup>68</sup> BL, IORL, E264/55(d), *Lord Chelmsford Papers*, British Agent, Kabul to Foreign Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1919

strength to call upon. The second reason, that Roos-Keppel believed, was that rumour had the potential to aggravate the situation in Kabul and make it harder for the Amir to continue his policy of neutrality.

The issue of a potential Muslim uprising, greater than the events of 1897 but similar to 1857, also played on the mind of the authorities in India. The rumoured desertion from the Indian Army and the perceived potential of these soldiers joining the *jihad* meant that the attitude of the Amir was crucial to whether this 'second Mutiny' would commence. This was a contributing factor as to why the attitude of the British authorities shifted over the War years. As events and influences surrounding the geopolitical Frontier had the potential to pull the Amir away from neutrality, the British authorities' attitudes shifted. But once the Turco-German had been perceived as not influencing the Amir's decision then the British authorities' attitude again shifted. However, one feature that complicated matters throughout this period was that of rumour.

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