

# Reactions and Responses of the Muslim League Towards the Outbreak of the First World War

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## Abstract

This paper seeks how All India Muslim League's leadership changes during First World War from retired civil servants to young men, and how its objectives changes from just the protection of Muslim interests to both the protection of Muslim interests and the winning of suitable self-government for India. It deals with the study of these circumstances which helped to create an understanding with the Congress and paved the way to the Muslim League- Congress Lucknow Pact in 1916. In 1914 the First World War broke out which necessarily accelerated the march of political events and pace of freedom movement in India.

**Key Words:** Muslim League, Reactions, War, Turkey, Self- Government

## Introduction

With the outbreak of the War the Muslim League found itself in an awkward position as they had traditionally good feelings for their Muslim brethren in Turkey. The decision of Turkey greatly perturbed the Muslims of India, who decided to support the Central Powers in November 1914. Although they supported British Government whole heartedly in the War yet their sentiments were hurt when the British Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith gave his slogan to wipe out Turkey from the map of Europe. The Muslim Opinion became divided. Some wanted to remain loyal to the British Government while radicals were concerned with the future of their Caliph. The Government took a harsh and rigorous

measure under the Defense of India Act and Press Act in 1915. The War created a variety of response, each reflecting important cultural and social realities.

## Outbreak of the First World War-

The war drew in all the world's economic great powers, assembled in two opposing alliances: The Triple Entente of the Russia, France and Great Britain verses the Central Powers of Germany, Austria and Hungary. These alliances were recognized and expanded as more nations entered the War Japan and United States joined the Allies, while the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria joined the Central Powers. William Kaiser II became the emperor of Germany in 1888.

His policy regarding Turkey and other states was also responsible for the outbreak of War. Germany wanted to seek permission from Turkey to build the Berlin- Bagdad Railway. It was dangerous for both England and France. Owing to the above circumstances, the signs of disturbance and disorder were visible all over Europe. The assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand, nephew of the Emperor of Austria and heir of the throne, by Yugoslav nationalist Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914 played the role of that spark. Austria blamed Serbia for this assassination and delivered a dispatch to Serbia which had ten dictorial demands. At last, on July 28, 1914 Austria declared war on Serbia. Three days later, Russia declared war against Austria whereas Germany declared war against Russia. France also declared war against Austria and Germany. On August 5, England also declared war upon Germany. It can be said that the hostility among the European Countries, enmity between France and Germany, Russia and Austria and especially between Austria and Serbia.

### **Muslim League's Reactions and Responses Towards War-**

It is worth remembering that in this war India joined whole heartedly on the side of their masters. The outbreak of the war was received with mixed reaction by the Muslims. Mohammad Ali knew that in the event of war between Great Britain and Turkey, he and his followers would have to take sides that they would support Turkey. On August 31, 1914 he sent a wire to the Sultan of Turkey to the effect: Placing our faith and confidence which we the Indian Muslims have in the Khilafat, we

respectfully urge upon your majesty either to support Britain or to keep neutral in this war.

The Legislative Council of India in its resolution taken in the meeting held at Simla on September 8, 1914 assured its full support to England in the War, both military and financially. The resolution was supported by the Congress and the League representatives. The All-India Muslim League did not lag behind in expressing its loyalty to the Empire in its hour of need. Turkey's entrance into the War on 28 th October 1914 caused fresh panic: will the Indian Muslims continue to serve under British and fight their religious brethren? On 14th November 1914, in Constantinople, the Shaikh-ul-Islam declared a holy war against the Western Nations including Britain, France and Russia. Enver Pasha, the minister of war, was very close to the German military officers. Sultan of Turkey, who was also the Khalifa of the Muslims was under the influence of Kaiser William II, the Emperor of Germany. In these circumstances Turkey decided to support the Central Powers. The decision of the Turks greatly perturbed the Muslims of India. Their religious obligation had pressed them to join Turkey but their political limitations wanted them to support Britain in its fight against Germany.

Finding the Muslims in a fix the Viceroy in a statement said that the Holy Places of Islam in Arabia and Mesopotamia would be secure from the attack by the British naval and military forces. This had solved the above problem and both the young party of Muslims and the Muslim League assured their co-operation to the Government. But

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when the British Prime Minister gave the slogan to wipe out Turkey from the map of Europe, their sentiments were again hurt. The whole of the Muslim community was in firmament. Mohammad Ali, Shaukat Ali, Zafar Ali and many other radicals wrote anti British articles for instigating the masses. The intelligent Department informed the Government of many secret societies backed by the radicals to subvert the Government. In India prosecutions were launched against the anti- British elements. Besides Ali Brothers the name of Abul Kalam Azad, Mazhar- ul- Haq, M. A. Ansari and Ajmal Khan were also figured in it and the Government was advised to arrest them. Abul Kalam Azad's paper, Al-Hilal was stopped and the editor kept under restraint at Ranchi for the duration of War. Mohammad Ali who had published the article "The Choice of the Turk" in justification of the Turkey's action in joining Germany was ordered to suspend the publication of the Comrade and was interned in May 1915 along with his brother Shaukat Ali at Mehrauli, near Delhi after some time at Lansdown, later at Chindwara in Central Province.

The arrest of Ali brothers fanned anti-British feelings among the Muslims of India. A large meeting was convened by Mazharul Haq at Bankipur, Patna on May 25, 1915. Mazharul Haq moved a resolution requesting the Chief Commissioner of Delhi to consider his order regarding the internment of Ali Brothers. These Pan-Islamic activities and sentiments of the Indian Muslims convinced the Turks of the former's sympathy with the latter and consequently the prominent Muslim leaders

including Mazharul Haq were approached by the Red Crescent Society and asked for the same support that had earlier given during the Balkan wars.

The Government under the excuse of protecting India against German invasion took a harsh and rigorous measure by passing the Defense of India Act in 1915. As a result of the Government's anti- Turkish and repressive policy the Muslim League continued to drift towards the Congress. By the efforts of Mohammad Ali Jinnah the momentous session of the League and the Congress held simultaneously at Bombay at the end of December, 1915. This growing understanding between the League and the Congress reached its climax in 1916 when both held their annual session at Lucknow and concluded the Lucknow Pact by which the Congress agreed to separate electorate and the League accepted Self- Government to be the goal for India, and both the organizations jointly prepared a scheme of reforms known as the Congress League Scheme.

The heroic manner in which the Indian troops fought side by side with the British soldiers in many wars front had aroused many political hopes in many Indian minds. But within a few months of the war critical attitude began to develop when British praised India for her help but preferred to remain silent on India's political aspirations. This gave birth to an explosive nature. For the first time the Muslim League took up the challenging attitude and did not confine itself to passing resolution of mere loyalty. The League very much resented the Government action in depriving Maulana Mohammad Ali, Shaukat Ali and Zafar Ali

and some other Muslims of their liberty and interring them under the Defense of India Act. In spite of the fact that Muslims had remained peaceful all these years yet the Government adapted senseless policy of repression. The Muslim League naturally expected that as a result of India's participation in war and particularly of the Mussalmans who had to take an important decision in going to the side of Britain, against that of the Caliph.

Mr. Jinnah moved the resolution calling upon the All India Muslim League to appoint a committee with a view to authorize that committee to confer with other political organizations. It was made clear that in the formation of aforesaid scheme of reforms, due regard be paid to the needs and interests of the Mussalmans. The proposals which emanated after careful consideration by the All India Congress Committee were considered at a joint meeting of the All India Congress Committee and Council of Muslim League in October 1916, in Calcutta. At Lucknow in December 1916 both conjointly settled a detailed scheme of reforms as a definite step towards self- government. Recommendations of the joint conference of the Congress and the League were adopted in the form of Joint Scheme of Reforms, and were submitted to the Government.

The Muslim world regarded the Sultan of Turkey the Caliph of Islam, as the spiritual head of the Islamic Church. When during the First World War, Turkey joined the axis; the British occupied Cyprus, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Syria, and declared a protectorate over Egypt- all Turkish possessions. The British conspired the revolt

of the Sheriff of Mecca against Turkey and recognized him as the ruler of Hejaz; and inspired the Greeks to occupy a part of Anatolia. This break- up of the Turkish empire with the subsequent spread of British influence in the Middle East reduced Muslims to political nonentities in world politics. It created a strong sentimental reaction on spiritual grounds, for the Muslims regarded the region bounded by the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Euphrates, as the Jazirat-ul-Arab the Holi land. A wave of blazing indignation ran through the Indian Muslims and the British Premier, to allay Muslim fear and win them over allies' cause, declared on January 5, 1918, 'that the British Government would not pursue a vindictive policy and had no intention of depriving the Turks of Asia Minor and Thrace which were predominantly Turkish.' The main point had been won; the next task was to find formula for a government administered by an alien agency but partly responsible to the people of the country itself; in other words, to combine autocratic and irresponsible executive with self- governing institutions.

### **Conclusion**

During the First World War both the Congress and the League, in an expectation of achieving self- government and separate electorates fully supported in the war efforts of the Government. The only way before the Government to pacify them on the midst of mounting war pressure economic strains and political troubles, was to divert their attention towards the slow-going experiments of constitutional reforms. As a result of the Government repressive policy the Muslims League continued to drift

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towards the Congress. Both jointly formulated a scheme of reform. British praised India for her help but remained silent on India's political aspirations. This gave birth to the feelings and factors of explosive nature. Jinnah warned them to change their mentality and to forget their time-worn monopoly of political and bureaucratic authority. To Jinnah, the war was the most opportune time moment to press for the demand. Therefore, they demanded self-government during those tensed days of the war. When Edwin Montague declared in the parliament about the Britain's policy of increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration and the gradual development of the self-governing institutions in India as an integral part of British empire. The attitude of Muslim League towards the announcement was not favourable and cordial because of the military debacle which Turkey suffered in the war. In November 1917 a joint representation met the Viceroy and the Secretary of State demanding the immediate grant of complete self-government to India.

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