

PREFACE

Very few Americans have an adequate idea of the historical role America has played [sic]...The penetration of American missionaries in the Balkans during the early part of the nineteenth century will some day be considered the brightest pages in the annals of the peninsula...The significance of their activities in the Near East...is much greater than it seems to many...

—*American Influences in Bulgaria*, Prof. Constantine Stephanov¹

On September 5, 1810, a coalition of churches, ministers, and parishioners in Farmington, Connecticut, formed the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). The formation of the organization was spurred by the ideas and religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening, a spiritual revival in the USA which called upon Christians to not only work toward their own salvation, but also the salvation of others.² In line with millennial religious ideas about the impending return of Jesus Christ, bringing peace on earth, the ABCFM believed there was an immediate need to return people to Christianity, ensuring their salvation. Eight years after forming, the ABCFM decided to send missionaries to the Ottoman Empire to restore the Jews to Palestine.³ Pliny Fisk and Levi Parsons volunteered to be the first missionaries to travel to the Ottoman Empire, arriving in Smyrna (Izmir) in 1819. For the first year or so, they were instructed to travel throughout the Empire, gathering information about the people and the environment and to learn languages before beginning any specific mission work.⁴

Upon arriving in Smyrna, the first task for Fisk and Parsons was to ascertain what was most needed in the region. “Our time has been occupied thus far, and will principally occupied for months, perhaps years, in studying languages, and in collecting information about the country, and in distributing Bibles and Tracts.”⁵ Both Fisk and Parsons learned Greek, Italian, Arabic, French, and Turkish within the first few years of living in the Empire. They wrote to family and friends about the people they encountered, conversations with locals, the food, how people dressed, customs, and the government. Reports were also sent to the ABCFM corresponding secretary. These reports were then published in the ABCFM monthly publication *The Missionary Herald*. Missionaries helped to provide knowledge of countries and people overseas. Pamphlets, newsletters, and public talks about missionaries’ encounters with different cultures overseas expanded the USA’s understanding of people overseas.⁶

Shortly after commencing their explorations of the Empire, Fisk and Parsons received word from ABCFM that they were sending a printing press along with two more missionaries, Reverends Daniel Temple and Jonas King. The arrival of the first print press heralded one of the more significant contributions American missionaries made to the region, an impact which reverberates through the present day. Though the missionaries saw the press as a tool to print religious materials, not all of the publications were religious. As one American touring a Turkish school noted, “[it] was gratifying to perceive that to America this and almost every other great school in Turkey and Greece is indebted for its elementary books of instruction.”⁷ The missionaries took American textbooks, translated them into Greek, Turkish, Armenian, and Arabic to use with students. By 1850, the missionaries used their presses to print periodicals in five languages, dictionaries, volumes of history and literature, and one magazine, which was credited as having the largest circulation in the Ottoman Empire.⁸

Beyond just providing texts in local languages, the American missionaries in some instances helped to establish print versions of local languages.⁹ US missionaries ensured languages, which the Turks, Greeks, or Russians were trying to eliminate, thrived. Not only was a standard removable Arabic type created, but the missionary press at Malta revived Armenian and Bulgarian languages. When missionary Cyrus Hamlin opened Bebek Seminary in 1840, he

...found a great many Turkish words mixed in, I resolved not to use them, but so far as possible speak a pure Armenian. Bebek Seminary had no small influence in the introduction of a purer style of speaking and writing the modern Armenian...Our mission saw clearly that, as the language of the Armenian race, we must adopt it and make the best of it. The idea of translating the Bible into such a language was ridiculed...The history of missions proves, by many examples, that no language is so degraded that the simple truths of salvation cannot be expressed in it...The modern Armenian is now wholly transformed; it has become a beautiful and cultivated language.¹⁰

The Bulgarian language also faced eradication under Greek authorities. "The Greek church, with the sanction of the Turkish government, had introduced the Greek liturgy into all the Bulgarian churches...To throw off the Greek language and the Greek bishops, was the vow of every Bulgarian heart. To have schools, newspapers, a literature of their own, were among their strongest aspirations."¹¹ Through the work of another ABCFM missionary, Elias Riggs, the Bulgarians soon had texts in their own language.

US missionaries were also responsible for setting up hundreds of schools throughout the Ottoman Empire, many of which still exist today. Between 1820 and 1860, American missionaries established thirty-three schools. In establishing schools throughout the region, American missionaries unwittingly shared American ideas and culture, despite efforts on the part of the missionaries limit their cultural influence.¹² Unlike European missionary schools in the region, the ABCFM missionaries insisted on ensuring the curriculum was in local languages and as much as possible taught by natives.¹³ Two schools were established around 1860: Robert College in Constantinople and the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut. Both colleges remain today. Robert College was a scheme devised by another missionary and Christopher Robert of New York who happened to be visiting Constantinople following the Crimean War. The Christian college in Constantinople was to be an experiment.

The probabilities of failure consisted in the division of Eastern populations. Religion has divided them...The spirit of race was also strong...These it was said will never unite in one institution of learning. To suppose it possible is absurd. But, on the other hand, it was urged, the East has made great progress in enlightenment...A Christian college, that shall offer the best intellectual training, as broad a culture as our best New England colleges, will meet the wants of this class, of whatever race or faith.¹⁴

The Syrian Protestant College, now the American University of Beirut, was also created with the same mentality. Of the first sixteen students to enroll at the Syrian Protestant College, only five were in the graduating class of 1870. One of them returned to teach Arabic at the College and also founded an Arabic newspaper and a journal, *Al Mukattam* and *Al Muktataf*. *Al Muktataf* became a leading scientific magazine in the region until 1909. Three more students went on to medical school.¹⁵

The missionaries' role in the region circa 1820–1830 is significant to the story and origins of American public diplomacy. Not only were those initial efforts by the missionaries to engage with the Greeks, Syrians, Bulgarians, Armenians, Arabs, Palestinians, and Turks the same methods that other private organizations would employ to engage the people of the Middle East and Eastern Europe later in the century, but they are also the same methods used by the US government during World War I (WWI) and World War II (WWII) and later throughout the Cold War. “American education in the Near East not only instructed residents there but anticipated the United States government’s Fulbright program and the work of the United States Information Agency (USIA). These formal efforts by the American government were part of its new cultural diplomacy after the Second World War.”¹⁶ The Fulbright program would create partnerships with both Robert College and the American University of Beirut as well as the American University of Cairo, another former American missionary school.

While US missionaries were not very successful converting the Ottomans to Protestantism, they were exceedingly successful in sharing American culture and ideas. Even more importantly, they shared the culture of the people they ministered to with Americans at home through speaking tours, missionary publications, and the many memoirs written by missionaries about their experiences among the Greeks, Arabs, Turks, Bulgarians, and Armenians. Though they were concerned and cautious about usurping local cultures, the American missionaries did not understand that the individualism, piety, and optimism of the Second Great Awakening influenced Protestantism and threatened the political status quo in the region. “The original wise advice from Board leaders not to offend local mores was almost impossible for the missionaries to follow. Puritanism, by its eager commitment to a *city built on a hill* for all to see, required conflict with competing ideas.”¹⁷ Furthermore, as those who have studied American missionaries’ work in the Ottoman Empire throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the missionaries had

more influence in the Ottoman Empire and Persia than American public officials; and with the help of philanthropists obtained “mandates” over most of Turkey, something many European nations never obtained except through force and occupation.¹⁸

Following the success of the American Revolution, the people of the US and their leaders desired to shrink away from Old World entanglements and to enjoy independence. Yet this was a luxury the US could not afford. For at least the next forty years, the USA’s relationship with the rest of the world would be of utmost importance to the nation’s survival. Beset by pirate attacks emanating from the North African Barbary States¹⁹ since declaring independence and surrounded by European powers: Britain, France, and Spain; the US could not isolate itself from the world. Despite these dangers, America’s foreign ministry, the Department of State (DoS), remained a tiny government institution with very few ministers or consular officers posted overseas. Thus, much of America’s interactions overseas were not initiated or maintained by the US government, but rather by private citizens, primarily merchants and missionaries up until the late nineteenth century.²⁰

For at least a century, the US unwittingly conducted public diplomacy throughout the Ottoman Empire. Missionaries, private citizens, and merchants set up libraries, schools, translated books, and arranged for students to study in the US, sometimes at great personal risk. The first Americans entered into the region as the Empire became known as the “sick man of Europe.” As the Bulgarian professor, Constantine Stephanove, would later note in 1930, few Americans are aware of the historical role their nation played in the region or the world. This is especially true about America’s experience with public diplomacy.

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NOTES

1. Attached to Despatch No. 1616, Sofia, March 16, 1930, Record Group (RG) 59, Central Decimal File (CDF) 1930–1939, Box 5065, 811.42774/1.
2. James Morone, 2003. *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (Yale University Press: New Haven); Michael B. Oren, 2007. *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776, to the Present* (W.W. Norton & Co.: New York, NY).

3. Hans-Lucas Kieser, 2010. *Nearest East: American Millennialism and Mission to the Middle East* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, PA); Oren 2007.
4. Joseph L. Grabill, 1971. Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East: Missionary Influence on American Policy, 1810–1927 (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, Minnesota).
5. Fisk in Alvan Bond, 1828. Memoir of the Rev. Pliny Fisk, A.M., Late Missionary to Palestine (Crocker & Brewster: Boston), p. 117.
6. Grabill 1971, p. 4.
7. An American. 1833. *Sketches of Turkey in 1831 and 1832* (J & J Harper: New York, NY), p. 286.
8. Grabill 1971; One newspaper, “Rays of Light,” carried a full-text translation of the Emancipation Proclamation in Arabic. The newsprint is among Abraham Lincoln Papers held by the Library of Congress (May 13, 1863, Library of Congress (LoC): Abraham Lincoln Papers (ALP), Series 1. General Correspondence. 1833–1916).
9. In 1820, there was no movable type in Arabic, but in the 1830s, two missionary printers created movable type to produce “American Arabic,” which earned the approval of Arab scholars (Daniel, Robert L. 1964. “American Influences in the Near East before 1861,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 16: 72–84; Grabill 1971). “Arab classical literature, long in decline, was revived as the mission schools created an expanding audience for it and through the press, the means of reaching a still greater group. Two native collaborators with [Eli] Smith and [Cornelius] Van Dyck became prime movers in kindling the Arab literary renaissance, compiling the Arabic-English dictionary and beginning an Arabic Encyclopedia” (Daniel 1964, p. 81).
10. Cyrus Hamlin, 1893. *My Life and Times* (Congregational Sunday School and Publishing Society: Boston), p. 210–211.
11. Cyrus Hamlin, 1877. *Among the Turks* (American Tract Society: New York), p. 268.
12. Daniel 1964, p. 78–79.
13. Bliss (ed.). 1920. *The Reminiscences of Daniel Bliss, edited and supplemented by his eldest son* (Revell: New York); Stephen B.L. Penrose, Jr. 1941. *That They May Have Life: The Story of the American University of Beirut, 1866–1941* (Trustees of the American University of Beirut: New York).
14. Hamlin 1877, p. 285.
15. Penrose 1941.
16. Grabill 1971, p. 299.
17. Grabill 1971, p. 7, emphasis added.

18. Robert L. Daniel, 1970. *American Philanthropy in the Near East, 1820–1960* (Ohio University Press: Athens, OH); Grabill 1971.
19. The Barbary States were vassal states under the Ottomans and included what is present-day Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Libya. The Americans referred to them as the Barbary States due to their barbaric behavior as reported by sailors, merchants, and former hostages (Oren 2007).
20. Daniel 1964.

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