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Alī, Muḥammad Kurd

By [Samir Seikaly](#)

Kurd Ali, *Muhammad*

Journalist, Owner and Editor of "al-Muqtabas", a leading intellectual and political activist.

Born 01 January 1876 in Sulaimaniya, Iraq

Died 01 January 1953 in Damascus, Syria

In 1914 Muhammad Kurd ‘Ali was Damascus’ most prominent journalist, owner and editor of the *al-Muqtabas* publications, leading Francophone intellectual and prolific author. Adhering to the teachings of the city’s two foremost reformist ‘ulama and political activists, he called for the introduction of social and administrative reforms and a more influential Arab role in the political affairs of the Ottoman Empire.

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Reaction to the Outbreak of the Young Turk Revolution

Muhammad Kurd ‘Ali’s (1876-1953) daily periodical *al-Muqtabas* concerned itself with literary and cultural matters, though it also purported to monitor social and economic conditions in Syria. In reality it was fundamentally political, tracking political developments as they unfolded on a daily basis in the Syrian provinces and in the capital of the empire, thereby expanding and politicizing the local public sphere and becoming the principal forum for discussing increasingly divisive issues affecting the center and its Syrian peripheries. In line with many other journalists, but also out of conviction, Muhammad Kurd ‘Ali welcomed the outbreak of the Young Turk revolt in July 1908, the restoration of

the constitution and the subsequent deposition of Abdulhamid II, Sultan of the Turks (1842-1918) in 1909 after his failed attempt to restore the status quo by means of a counter uprising in Istanbul led by the city's conservative forces. For Kurd 'Ali the defeat of the insurgency was doubly satisfactory: first, it was a damaging blow to Damascus' religious and conservative forces that attempted to mobilize in favor of the uprising against what they regarded as an apostate new regime; second, it allowed him to brag about the fact that the salvation of the Young Turks in Istanbul was facilitated by the decisive intervention of the Third Ottoman Army commanded by Mahmud Shawkat Pasha (1856-1913), himself a man of Arab stock.

From Supporter to Opponent

In the years leading up to the outbreak of war in 1914, Kurd 'Ali's attitude and that of other likeminded Arab intellectuals shifted from almost compulsive support for the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) to one of distrust, disillusionment and bitter confrontation. For them, as journalists, intellectuals or practicing politicians (those generally known as Arabists), there existed a growing disparity between the declared ideals of the CUP and its actual practices. Instead of observing the constitution, the CUP, when in power, was accused of overriding its terms; freedom of the press was selective, granted to loyalist publications but withheld from those in opposition, as was the case with the daily *al-Muqtabas* on more than one occasion; the right to vote was restricted, at times rigged to reflect the wishes of the government in office rather than the will of the electors, as happened in the 1912 election when pro-Arabist candidates in the Syrian provinces lost their seats because of voter intimidation or result manipulation. But for Kurd 'Ali and for the faction for which his paper spoke, the most damaging policy was the CUP's perceived attempt at Turkification (for which a new Arabic noun was coined, *al-Tatrik*), a trend which, in his view, disadvantaged the Arabs in education, government employment, parliamentary proceedings and ultimately threatened to undermine the existence of a distinct Arab cultural identity.

The Arabic press agitation on behalf of what they described as Arab rights generated a war of words with their pro-CUP Turkish counterparts both locally and in Istanbul. The CUP itself either ignored them altogether or dismissed them as being the reflection of petty personal grudges. In such a noxious atmosphere a protest Arab Congress was convened in Paris in June of 1913. Kurd 'Ali published the call for the Congress, endorsed it publicly in an open letter sent to the organizers, but did not attend. He did, however, cover its proceedings and supported its resolutions. These were hardly revolutionary in nature but galling for the CUP because they were the product of a meeting held in the capital of a country that nursed historic imperialist ambitions in Syria. Nevertheless an agreement of sorts was hammered out between a CUP delegate and Congress representatives, conceding a number of Arab demands relating to the use of Arabic language in official schools and to enhanced Arab employment in government. Decentralization, at the heart of Arab demands, and openly advocated by Muhammad Kurd 'Ali, was simply brushed aside. Nevertheless, a number of Arabist, explicitly in the case of Abd al-Hamid al-Zahravi (1855-1916), Shukri al-'Asali (1868-1916) and Abd al-Wahhab al-Ingiliz (1878-1916), and implicitly by Muhammad Kurd 'Ali and other

journalists, chose, gullibly, to regard these concessions as a positive change in CUP policy, auguring a new start between themselves, as loyal subjects, and an embattled CUP straining to uphold a crumbling empire.

Wartime

Upon the outbreak of war, Jamal Pasha (1872-1922) was dispatched to Syria as its governor and as commander of the Fourth Ottoman Army headquartered in Damascus. In pursuit of the CUP's goal of building up a "monolithic" state, brooking no internal opposition to supreme central authority, as represented by what has been described as the Arabist "barrier," Jamal quickly unleashed a brutal reign of terror which, in the course of the two years 1915 and 1916, saw the virtual liquidation of the majority of Arab Syrians who had once agitated for some form of cultural autonomy and greater Arab representation in local and central governing institutions. Muhammad Kurd 'Ali was spared, despite having earlier publicly opposed the CUP and, even, having established, in line with his profession, contacts with foreign consular representatives. He most likely survived because he retained a residue of credibility as a journalist who could be cowed into defending the CUP's opportunist shift towards an Islamist policy, which was expected to evoke a positive popular response necessary for the pursuit of the war. Kurd 'Ali, who claims as much in his memoirs, was confronted with a Hobson's choice: comply or die. He complied, and did very well indeed. For part of the war, he edited the newspaper *al-Sharq*, a propaganda sheet which chronicled the passing military achievements of the Central Powers. He also published two books, one celebrating the Turkish victory at Gallipoli, the other commemorating Anwar Pasha's visit to the Arab provinces in 1916. Kurd Ali' was careful, however, not to forget to praise Jamal Pasha, his ruthless friend and blackmailer. The two books must have pleased his putative patron exceedingly. In fact, they were shabby, hypocritical and servile. They do not do much credit to the reputation of the author or to the controversial role which he played in the dying days of the empire.

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