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# Arab Supporters of the Belligerent Countries

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**There were a number of Arab intellectuals who actively cooperated with the Entente and Central Powers during the Great War through their actions, writings and speeches. The entry focuses on the actions of Shakib Arslan, Muhammed Kurd Ali and the al-Khatib brothers.**

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## Ottomanist-Arabists during World War I

The Arabists' views on the Great War can be classified into two groups. The first group consists of those who cooperated with the Ottoman government. Shakib Arslan (1869-1946) and Muhammed Kurd Ali (1876-1953) were the most prominent intellectuals in this group; this entry focuses on their examples, since they were characteristic of the Arab public opinion in the Second Constitutional period (1908-1918). Similar to the Ententist-Arabists, both were prominent in shaping Syrian public opinion during that era. Their influence doubled during the Great War. Although they differed in their approaches to the modernisation of the [Ottoman Empire](#), Arslan and Kurd Ali strongly believed that the Arabs must be under Ottoman rule to be protected against the invasion of the imperialist powers. Because of this attitude, in spite of Ahmet Cemal Pasha's (1872-1922) despotic rule in Syria, they wholeheartedly supported Ottoman pan-Islamism during the First World War.

Shakib Arslan advocated strengthening Ottoman central control in the Arab provinces, and this may have prevented an increase in European influence in these lands. Although he viewed Ottoman centralisation negatively, Kurd Ali also insisted on the continuity of the Ottoman administration, mainly because of the [imperialist](#) threat of occupation. Both men were portrayed by the Arabists in

favour of the Entente Powers as "betrayers" of the Arab cause, since they supported Cemal Pasha's autocratic regime in Syria – which aimed to destroy Syria's Arab identity – during the war years.

Kurd Ali and Shakib Arslan responded to these accusations by arguing that the Ententists served the aims of the Entente states, which would eventually lead to the occupation of the Arab lands by these states.

Arslan and Kurd Ali were also the leading authors of the *al-Sharq* newspaper, which was established by Cemal Pasha to increase the Syrians' support and motivation for the Ottoman  jihad. The newspaper also struggled with the "separatist" Arabist movement, which supported the "independence" of the Arab lands from the empire, although it did not target the cultural Arab nationalism. Kurd Ali noted in his memoirs that he delayed his struggle for the rights of the Arabs in the Ottoman Empire until the end of the war because of the priority of "warding-off" the Entente threat of occupation. Moreover, Arslan contributed to the mobilisation of the people for the holy war in the Syrian lands with his propaganda speeches and created a voluntary military unit from the Druzes of Lebanon.

In spite of their support for Ottoman propaganda, Kurd Ali and Arslan did not hesitate to criticise the "atrocious" actions of Cemal Pasha in Syria. Shakib Arslan, as a deputy of the Ottoman parliament, used his connections in Istanbul to prevent Cemal's activities that would have led to the Syrians heavily suffering during the war. He also repeatedly requested that the Grand Vizier Mehmed Talat Pasha (1874-1921) stop Cemal Pasha from exiling the Arab elites to Anatolia.

It is difficult to say how the Syrian people viewed Shakib Arslan and Muhammed Kurd Ali, as contemporary documents do not include assessments about their reception by the people. The later memoirs written by the Arab intellectuals, political activists and soldiers seem to have been influenced by the nationalist narratives of the post-Ottoman period and are therefore often contradictory. However, it seems that the intellectual elites of Syria did not appreciate their actions, while the *ulema* and ordinary people remained either indifferent or supported the Ottoman propaganda.

## The Ententist-Arabists of the War Period

Similar to Muhammad Kurd Ali, those who cooperated with the Entente states were also members of the Arabist parties that defended the decentralisation of Ottoman rule in the Arab provinces. Fuad al-Khatib (1882-1957) and Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib (1866-1969) were among the most prominent of the Arabists who promoted decentralisation.

According to Fuad and Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib, every effort should be made to decentralise the empire, even if that meant utilising the support of foreign powers. The protection of Arab culture and language and the development of Arab lands could only be achieved with the decentralisation of the Ottoman administration. Otherwise, Ottoman centralisation would destroy the Arab identity. They were among the prominent members of the Arabist societies founded to defend a decentralised

Ottoman state. With the beginning of the First World War, they went to [Egypt](#) and allied with [Great Britain](#) to provide the autonomy – or independence – of the Arab people.

After [Hussein bin Ali, Sharif of Mecca \(1854-1931\)](#) proclamation of revolt against the Unionist rule in Mecca in June 1916, the al-Khatib brothers went to Mecca to publish the *al-Qiblah* newspaper to propagate the sharif's movement in the Arab and Muslim world as part of the Entente counter-propaganda of jihad. In this regard, they adopted an Islamist discourse and integrated their Arabist positions into it.

The al-Khatib brothers claimed in *al-Qiblah* that, after coming to power, the Unionists abolished the independence of the Ottoman caliph and gradually made the Ottoman Empire "un-Islamic".

Therefore, the Ottoman Empire could not lead to the unity of the Muslim peoples as a largely "un-Islamized" state. However, they did not openly target the caliph, but harshly criticized what the [Committee of Union and Progress \(CUP\)](#) did. In the same regard, they also criticised *al-Sharq's* publications from time to time.

It is also unknown how Arab public opinion viewed the al-Khatib brothers. However, given the overwhelmingly pro-Ottoman public opinion in Egypt during the war, it can be concluded that they did not have wide support in their centres, i.e. Egypt. Public support for the pro-Entente propaganda in Syria was small in spite of Cemal Pasha's rule of terror and the disastrous famine that caused the death of approximately 500,000 people. As a result of these factors, the Ottoman administration lost much of its support in Syria. However, it did not turn this lack of support into an active rebellion aimed at ending Ottoman rule. The only active support for pro-Entente propaganda came from Sharif Hussein.

To conclude, both the Ottomanist and the Ententist "collaborators", consisting of prominent Arab figures, aimed to protect and develop the Arab cultural consciousness. For the Ententists, the first priority was to develop Arab national consciousness by applying every means possible, since the Ottomanists viewed the anti-imperialist struggle as a prerequisite to save the Arab lands from the Western colonisation. However, the latter also opposed Cemal Pasha's rule of terror during the war period and its aftermath. They cooperated in the post-Ottoman era for the independence of the Arab nation under the French and British mandate.

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