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Medina, Siege of

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During the Arab Revolt in 1916 forces loyal to Sharif Husayn surrounded Medina and restricted its communications. Ottoman troops led by Fahreddin Pasha defended the town beyond the Armistice of Mudros in a last-ditch effort to maintain Ottoman presence in the Hejaz. Medina surrendered in January 1919.

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The Ottomans and Medina

Following the Hashemite [Husayn ibn Ali, King of Hejaz's \(c.1853-1931\)](#) revolt in Mecca in June 1916, the main towns of the [Ottoman Empire's](#) Hejaz province quickly surrendered to the predominantly Bedouin forces led by his sons and supported by their British and French allies. The Ottoman troops succeeded in defending only Medina from the summer of 1916 to January 1919 under the command of [Ömer Fahreddin Pasha \(1868-1948\)](#), who ensconced his forces in the town's Great Mosque, the burial site of Prophet Muhammad. The Ottoman government had transformed Medina into a fortified military outpost after the 1908 completion of the Hejaz Railway extending from Damascus and detached it administratively from the province of the Hejaz as an independent sub-district and a forward military base to facilitate the projection of the central government's authority further into the Hejaz and the rest of the Arabian Peninsula. Istanbul had dispatched Fahreddin, an officer educated in the modern Imperial Military Academy, to Medina in command of the Hejaz Expeditionary Force just before the uprising.

Husayn's sons, [Ali ibn Husayn \(1879-1935\)](#), [Abdullah, King of Jordan \(1882-1951\)](#), and in the early stages [Faysal I, King of Iraq \(1885-1933\)](#), pressured Medina from different points in the town's vicinity. As Faysal and his men began to move north, they were able to sabotage the railway and disrupt Medina's supply routes. The effective blockade and military skirmishes beleaguered the civilian population of Medina, estimated to be around 75,000. Shortages, a locust infestation, and [disease](#) took a further toll, as Fahreddin prioritized the logistical needs of his roughly 3,000 men. Many of the town's inhabitants left, and others were forced to evacuate within one year.

Defense of Medina

As the tide of the battles in Palestine and Syria turned against the Ottomans in the summer of 1918, [Britain](#) and [France](#) called for the surrender of Medina. Fahreddin resisted with a deep conviction that the Prophet's town would have to be defended in the name of the sultan-caliph until the end. His zeal commanded the loyalty of his men in spite of the siege's dire hardships. Even as the [Mudros Armistice Agreement](#) (30 October 1918) stipulated the surrender of all Ottoman units in the Hejaz, Fahreddin refused to comply with the directives of Allied officers as well as the orders of the defeated Ottoman government. His intransigence undermined Ottoman denunciation of British armies' continued [occupation of northern Syria and Iraq](#) in violation of the ceasefire agreement. Fahreddin insisted on personal orders from [Mehmed VI, Sultan of the Turks \(1861-1926\)](#). When Ottoman emissaries delivered the sultan's ruling, he continued to prevaricate until officers under his command defied him in January 1919. Fahreddin managed to spirit away holy relics preserved in the Prophet's Mosque to Istanbul. Refusing to surrender to the Hashemite family, Fahreddin was persuaded to leave Medina on 10 January 1919 in British custody. He was taken first to Cairo and subsequently to Malta as a prisoner of war.

Legacy

The defense of the holy city of Medina symbolized a last-ditch effort to preserve the patrimony and Islamic legitimacy of the Ottoman dynasty in the Middle East, but the memory of the siege and the defense was largely overlooked amidst the birth pangs of the successor states. In Turkey, in the post-1960 era, which afforded greater political and cultural pluralism and an opening for the reclamation of the Islamic past, Fahreddin's former associates in the defense of Medina published popular accounts that resuscitated the memory of the siege. They lionized Fahreddin, who before his death in 1948 had taken the last name Turkkan ("Turkish blood"), as a Turkish-Muslim hero. The legacy of the siege of Medina has become a site of contestation for nation-centric memories of World War I in Turkey and the Arab countries. Turkey's siding with Qatar in the December 2017 dispute between Qatar and its Gulf neighbors elicited United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed al Nahyan's retweet of a message chastising Turkey's president Tayyip Erdogan as the progeny of Fahreddin, whom al Nahyan accused of oppressing the people of Medina and stealing their property. Ankara retaliated by ceremoniously re-naming the street in Ankara where the Emirates' embassy is located as "Fahreddin Pasha Road."

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