

Arab Officers in the Ottoman Army

By [Michael Provence](#)

Summary

Perhaps 30 percent of the World War I Ottoman officer corps hailed from Arab regions. Such people had often been the recipients of fully subsidized, comprehensive state education. Ex-officers figured prominently in all states that emerged from the Ottoman defeat in 1918.

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Ottoman Reform

By 1914 the Ottoman army and professional officer corps had been the focus of a century of state modernization. As in [Germany](#), [France](#), and [Britain](#), army officers saw themselves as an elite national vanguard. Career officers were divided into two broad groups: a usually illiterate majority promoted through the ranks, called *alaylı*, and a smaller elite called *mektebli* who had experienced an intensive, decade-long, cadet education process. In outlook, culture, and [socialization](#), the two groups could scarcely have been more different. Tensions between these two groups played out on the streets and barracks of the capital in the period between 1908 and 1913 and were arguably central to late Ottoman internal conflict.

Late Ottoman Historiography

In the century since the war, historians have largely forgotten these divisions within the state elite and instead emphasized the ethnic and linguistic divisions among Ottoman officers and elites, justifying and setting the stage for the emergence of [ethnically defined nation states](#).

The operative cleavage is usually argued to have been between Arabs and Turks, overlooking that the Ottoman army included tens of thousands of loyal Ottoman soldiers who did not fit in either category. Ottoman military academy graduates formed a highly educated, multi-lingual, cosmopolitan corps who shared the abiding conviction that the future survival of the state properly lay in their hands. Their collective failure in late 1918 must have been unimaginably bitter.

State Education

Officer cadets were carefully nurtured in the state's finest institutions. Military middle and secondary schools existed in every province by the closing decades of the 19th century. Cadets spent nine years in state primary, middle, and secondary schooling. They were taught to read and to write in their mother tongues, perhaps Arabic, Kurdish, Greek, or Turkish, followed, where necessary, by instruction in spoken and written Ottoman Turkish. All students were taught the rudiments of Arabic grammar. They received Islamic religious instruction and learned basic math skills. They were also taught physical fitness drills and basic hygiene. As they progressed, the instruction became increasingly technical and scientific. Cadets would become fluent in French or German in addition to Ottoman and probably Arabic. Religious sciences were not taught. By 1900 there were scores of military middle and preparatory schools in operation, enrolling tens of thousands of students from Yemen to the Balkans. At the turn of the century, over 25 percent of the Ottoman officer corps of 18,000 had been educated and commissioned through the military educational system.

The Military Academy

Qualified graduates of such schools matriculated to the Ottoman military academy, or *Mekteb-i Ulûm-ı Harbiyye*, where they spent a further three years and were commissioned as second lieutenants (*mülâzım-ı sâni*). Detailed cadet books list every student, place of origin, father's name, curriculum, marks, and distinctions. No ethnic, religious, or linguistic distinctions were noted; and names and places of origin provide the only clues. Judging by geography, and the statistics present in the cadet registries, it is possible to estimate that no more than 50 percent of the Ottoman officer corps originated in regions eventually comprising the Turkish Republic.

Ottoman Arab Soldiers

Ottoman soldiers from Arab regions served with distinction in all ranks, from highest to lowest, on every front during the Great War. Among those graduate officers who survived the war, most became citizens, and eventual pensioners, of the Turkish Republic alongside their

linguistically Greek, Bulgar, Circassian, and Kurdish brother officers. The last pre-war Ottoman military academy class was an unusually small group of 295 cadets. Of these, 25 percent hailed from Arabic speaking regions and nearly half of these “Arab” officers (thirty-two officers) fought in the Turkish war of independence after the 1918 armistice and eventually served as officers in the army of the Turkish Republic. The half who did not fight in the Anatolian insurgency included all who perished in the war, all who deserted, and all who resigned their commissions at the end of the war. This means that the majority of the “Arab” Ottoman officers who survived the war from the class of 1914, fought in the Anatolian war and became citizens of the Turkish Republic. Certainly the same was true of older officers and those who hailed from Crete, [Bulgaria](#), or other parts of the Balkans. In their case however, the [Treaty of Lausanne](#), the [League of Nations](#), and the new national governments had already declared them “Turks” based on their religious identity. It seems likely that no more than a plurality of the Ottoman officer heroes of the War of Independence could have hailed from nominally “Turkish” regions of Anatolia. For those who did not or could not become Turkish citizens, exile in Hashemite Iraq or Transjordan was usually the best choice among limited options.

The Arab Revolt

The Arab Revolt of [Husayn ibn Ali, King of Hejaz \(-1931\)](#) and Sharif of Mecca, his sons, and the British army has been claimed as the pivotal experience of the Arab-Ottoman officers. [Faysal I, King of Iraq \(1885-1933\)](#) formed his short-lived government in Damascus with several high-ranking officers. But contrary to widespread nationalist myth, the two most prominent officer members of Faysal’s government, Syrian national martyr [Yusuf al-Azma \(1884-1920\)](#) and future Iraqi Prime Minister [Yasin al-Hashimi \(1882-1937\)](#), remained members of the Ottoman general staff on the Palestine front until after the Armistice. They never joined the Arab Revolt. Other famous, but far more junior “Sharifian” officers, like [Jaḡfar al-Aṣkarī \(1885-1936\)](#) and [Nūrī al-Saḡīd \(1888-1958\)](#) had been recruited from British [prisoner of war](#) camps in Cairo, as their memoirs document. None of the “Sharifian” officers seem to have freely deserted their Ottoman comrades during the war. A noted Jordanian historian has reproduced a letter sent from [Ahmed Cemal Pasha \(1872-1922\)](#) to Jaḡfar al-Aṣkarī begging him to rejoin the Ottoman army and pointing out the evidence of British deceit displayed in the leaked [Sykes-Picot accord](#).

Post-War Politics

By the early 1920s ex-Ottoman officers outside Anatolia accepted temporary defeat and made the best of the situation as the mandate states emerged. Yasin al-Hashimi was the most prominent among the stateless Arab officers and in March 1922 he made his way to

Baghdad looking for work. Yasin had criticized King Faysal's unwillingness to prepare for armed confrontation with [France](#) in Syria and had been bitterly vindicated with the defeat and the death of his friend, and fellow Ottoman general, Yusuf al-Aẓma. [Mustafa Kemal \(-1938\)](#), [İsmet İnönü \(1884-1973\)](#), al-Hashimi, and al-Aẓma had been classmates among the small group of fewer than 100 young officers at the Ottoman Staff College in 1905 and 1906. The Staff College was the elite within the elite and enrolled the most distinguished 10 percent of each graduating class for a further three years of study.

Conclusion

Some 30 percent or more of the wartime Ottoman military of 3 million was been made up of Arab conscripts. Arab units served with distinction on all fronts, including [Gallipoli](#) and [Russia](#). Percentages of Arabs among Ottoman officers were only slightly lower than among common soldiers. Most Ottoman soldiers were not literate in any language and most spoke the Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish, Slavic, or Greek dialect of their native region. It was natural that at the end of the war, or under conditions of [demobilization](#), they would return to their regions of origin. Many combatants on all fronts had already deserted and began the long walk back to distant villages and towns.

The Ottoman defeat placed professional officers in an impossible situation. The state they had been trained to serve had ceased to exist, they had no secure livelihoods, and the forces of the victorious enemy occupied their Ottoman homeland. Many officers made their way to Anatolia and fought for what would become the Turkish Republic. Among those who could not travel to Anatolia, the example of the successful post-Ottoman struggle there remained potent. Certainly the surviving Arab-Ottoman officers were the most wretched among them, as they lost their war, their homeland, their profession, and their state to the British and French [empires](#). Some became roving [revolutionaries](#), while others accepted jobs as policemen in the various colonial states. A few, mostly in Iraq, enjoyed successful careers as politicians and civil servants. It should be no wonder that few wished to remember the time of the war, defeat, and partition.

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External Links

- [Foster, Zachary J.: World War I and the Ottoman Empire. The Arab Provinces \(Ottoman History Podcast\) \(Audio\)](#)
- [Güçlü, Yücel: The Role of the Ottoman-Trained Officers in Independent Iraq, in: The Turkish Yearbook 26, 1996, pp. 123-138 \(Ankara Üniversitesi\) \(Article\)](#)
- [MacLean, Matthew: Jafar al-Askari. Modernization, Martial Discipline and Post-Ottoman Iraq \(Ottoman History Podcast\) \(Audio\)](#)
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