

# Army of Islam

By [Yalçın Murgul](#)

## Summary

The Army of Islam, which was created by the order of Enver Pasha dated 5 April 1918, was a military force that performed operations in the summer of 1918 which resulted in the expansion of Ottoman military and political power in the Caucasus. Commanded by Enver's brother Nuri Pasha, this army was supported by the Azerbaijani national forces and newly founded Azerbaijani government in Ganja. The most important achievement of this military unit was the capture of Baku on 15 September 1918.

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## Creation of the Army of Islam

In early 1918, several reports drafted by Ottoman agents, officials and Russian Muslims sent to Istanbul stressed that the political and military conditions in the [Caucasus](#) favored an Ottoman military initiative.<sup>1</sup> This information inspired [Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#) and in February 1918 he shared his new plans with [Talat Pasha \(1874-1921\)](#). According to Enver Pasha, the establishment of a department, which would include a Baku-centered bureau in the South Caucasus and other bureaus in [Turkestan](#), [Afghanistan](#) and the North Caucasus, was a necessity. The talented officers who could serve in these bureaus would be sent to these regions together with their teams.<sup>2</sup>

With an imperial edict, Sultan [Mehmed Reşad \(1844-1918\)](#) appointed Enver's brother [Nuri Pasha \(1890-1949\)](#) as the commander of the Caucasus-Islam Army.<sup>3</sup> Based on its size, the Army of Islam was not large enough to qualify as an army. Since Enver Pasha's expansionism was in conflict with [Germany's](#) interests in the Caucasus<sup>4</sup> he tried to generate an image that the army in the Caucasus would be formed by the Azerbaijanis. Because of this, the name "Caucasus-Islam Army" was given to this military force, which was mainly formed by

Ottoman units.

According to a directive dated 5 April 1918 and signed by Enver Pasha, the purpose of the Caucasus Army was to create the foundation for an army formed of Caucasians, expand its base, train Caucasian soldiers, establish the interests of Islam in the Caucasus, and strengthen political and military ties with the Ottoman state.<sup>5</sup>

The Ottoman ally in this new phase of the Caucasus Campaign was the [People's Republic of Azerbaijan](#). Ottoman Minister of Justice [Halil Menteşe \(1874-1947\)](#), Commander of the Caucasus Armies [Vehib Pasha \(1877-1940\)](#), Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister [Mehmed H. Hacinski \(1875-1931\)](#) and President of the National Parliament [Mehmed Emin Resulzade \(1884-1955\)](#) from the Azerbaijani side signed an [agreement in Batum](#) on 4 June 1918 covering issues of military, finance and trade. The fourth article of this agreement was highly critical. According to this article, Azerbaijan would have the right to request Ottoman military support in order to guarantee her safety and order.<sup>6</sup> After signing this treaty, Azerbaijan requested help from the Ottomans to force the Bolsheviks out of Baku, arguing that Bolshevik bands had acted cruelly towards the Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of May 1918, Nuri Pasha and his team of officers arrived at Ganja and established the Army of Islam's headquarters there. In June, the 5<sup>th</sup> Caucasus division, commanded by [Mürsel Pasha \(1881-1945\)](#), also arrived at Ganja; it formed the core of the Caucasus-Islam Army and supported General [Aliğa Şihlinski \(1865-1943\)](#) Azerbaijani forces.<sup>8</sup> According to the Ottomans, the manpower problem regarding the Baku expedition would be solved by including the local Muslim population in the Ottoman Army. However, towards the end of June 1918, the Azerbaijani corps was composed of only 500 to 600 men.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, on 11 July 1918, the Turkish command announced conscription of those who were born in the years 1894-1899 to military service.

## Caucasus Campaign

On the other side, the Baku Sovnarkom, headed by the Bolsheviks and supported militarily by the Dashnaks, planned a military operation to gain control in Caucasus. For that purpose, by mid-June 1918 the Baku Soviet Army was able to form twenty-five battalions. These battalions were scattered from Astarā to Derbent. The total number of soldiers in the army corps was 18,000 but most of the soldiers did not have adequate military training.<sup>10</sup> The soldiers also did not have a strong ideological bond with the Sovnarkom. Despite its claim to be a multi-national army, 70 percent of the soldiers were Armenians. The Dashnaks had a

strong influence among the soldiers. The Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) frequently engaged in political controversies and created disagreements within the army.<sup>11</sup>

The Army of Islam repelled the Red Army offensive in the battles that took place in Goychay and Salyan between 16 June and 2 July 1918, and then initiated their own advance, planning to launch an offensive to capture Baku in early August 1918.

Although the Baku Soviet force was first reinforced by Colonel [Lazar Bicherakov \(1882-1952\)](#) forces and then by Colonel [Grigory Konstantinovich Petrov \(1892-1918\)](#) forces in July 1918, this did not radically alter the situation. By late July 1918, the Army of Islam was near Baku.

In light of the remarkable advance of the Ottoman forces, the SRs, the Mensheviks and Dashnaks submitted a proposal during the 16 July 1918 meeting of the Baku Soviet in order to invite the British to Baku.<sup>12</sup>

The proposal was approved during the extraordinary meeting of the Baku Soviet on 25 July 1918, with 259 votes to 236. During the voting only the left SRs and the left Dashnaks lent support to [Stepan Shaumian \(1878-1918\)](#), who rejected British support.<sup>13</sup> The right SRs, Mensheviks and most Dashnaks took advantage of this critical situation to stage a coup d'état, establishing the Centro-Caspian Dictatorship and inviting the British force, known as [Dunsterforce](#), to Baku.

Before the arrival of General [Lionel Dunsterville \(1865-1946\)](#) to Baku, the Army of Islam launched an attack to capture Baku on 30 July 1918. But the Ottoman attack was repulsed on 5 August 1918. Dunsterville arrived in Baku on 17 August 1918; the Armenians were disappointed with the size of the unit, expecting a larger force. Although Dunsterforce performed well during the clashes near Baku from 26 to 31 August 1918, Dunsterville and his officers were not in coordination and agreement with the leaders of the Centro-Caspian Dictatorship and Dashnak officers.

Since the Army of Islam suffered considerable losses on 5 August 1918, it was reinforced by the 15<sup>th</sup> division, commanded by [Süleyman İzzet Bey \(1881-1944\)](#). The Army of Islam, consisting of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> divisions, had a total of 11,564 soldiers and 448 officers.<sup>14</sup> The Army of Islam launched the final [attack on Baku](#) and captured the city on 15 September 1918. After this, the Ottomans captured Dagestan on 20 September 1918, Derbent on 5 October 1918, and Petrovsk on 8 November 1918.<sup>15</sup>

The Army of Islam's presence in the Caucasus did not last long. After the signing of the

[Mudros Armistice](#), the Ottoman troops began to evacuate the region.

## Conclusion

The [Ottoman Empire](#) obtained no important gains but lost financial resources and manpower as a result of the Army of Islam's operation. However, historical actions may create both intended consequences and unintended ones. As a result of the Ottoman Army's Caucasus operation, Baku became the capital city of the Republic of Azerbaijan after September 1918. In that sense, the operation can be considered an important part of the historical process that stabilized the frontiers in highly-multiethnic Transcaucasia. Dashnak military units suffered considerably during the operation, and in the long-term, the weakening of anti-Ottoman forces in the Caucasus made the situation of Turkish forces on the [Eastern Front](#) slightly more advantageous during the Turkish War of Independence.

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## Notes

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## External Links

- [Bati, Alum: Azerbaijan at War 1, 2015 \(Visions of Azerbaijan\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Bati, Alum: Azerbaijan at War 2, 2015 \(Visions of Azerbaijan\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Comtois, Pierre: World War I. Battle for Baku, 6 December 2006 \(HistoryNet\) \(Article\)](#)

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