

Martyrs/Separatists, Syrian and Lebanese

By [M. Talha Çiçek](#)

Summary

The terms "martyrs" and "separatists" refer to the decentralist Arabists of Syria who were executed by Cemal Pasha during World War I as a result of their alleged plot to separate the Syrian land from the Ottoman Empire.

Table of contents

[1 Introduction](#)

[2 Historical Reasons behind Their Execution](#)

[3 The Outbreak of World War I and the Appointment of Cemal Pasha to Syria](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Introduction

The martyrs – or separatists, depending on the point of view – executed by [Ahmed Cemal Pasha \(1872-1922\)](#) in 1915 and 1916 in Syria were members of Arabist societies. When the [Ottoman Empire](#) declared war against the Entente states, the Ottoman police carried out a search in the French and British consulates in Damascus and Beirut. Taking the documents captured in the French consulates as proof, Cemal Pasha tried the Arabist notables of Syria and, as a result of these controversial trials, executed or exiled a large number of them.

Historical Reasons behind Their Execution

Following the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, some twenty Arabist societies of opposition were founded within and beyond the Ottoman lands. Many, if not all, of these organisations fought for a more decentralist organisation of the empire's administration rather than for the Arab peoples' independence from the [empire](#). They strongly opposed the centralisation policies implemented by the [Committee for Union and Progress](#) (CUP) on the grounds that these policies would cause the destruction of Arab culture and language and pave the way for the Turkification of the empire.

The members of the Arabist parties were mainly the [urban](#) notables of the Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Very few pursued a Pan-Arab ideology, while some adhered to

Lebanism, which pushed for the maintenance of Mount Lebanon's special status. A considerable number of the Arabists defended Syrianism. The most prominent societies were *Al-Fatat*, *al-'Ahd* and *al-Lamarkaziyya*.

Shortly after the proclamation of the constitution in 1908, the Arabist opposition gained an important role in Ottoman politics. In June 1913, they organized the First Arab Congress in Paris. The organisers aimed to publicise the problems of the Arab provinces in Europe and thus to pressure the Ottoman government to initiate decentralist reforms in the Arab provinces that would guarantee more prominence for Arab culture and language.

Fearful of the Great Powers' intervention, the CUP-led [Ottoman government](#) sent a representative to Paris to negotiate with the congress organisers. The government accepted their demands and invited them to Istanbul to further discuss the details of the reforms, which would be initiated in the Arab provinces. The CUP agreed to the Arabists' demand to introduce reforms, which would give Arab culture a larger role in the administration of the Arab provinces, including the use of Arabic. The government officials in the Arab provinces would be selected from those who spoke Arabic fluently. Education in the state schools would mainly be done in Arabic. The government took significant steps to implement these reforms. A 'Commission for Arabic Education' (*Arabca Tedrisat Komisyonu*) was established within the University of Istanbul (*Darülfünun*). The commission's main task was to prepare schoolbooks in Arabic for Ottoman Arabs. Similarly, government officials who could not speak Arabic were recalled.

The Outbreak of World War I and the Appointment of Cemal Pasha to Syria

While the CUP agreed to the Arabists demands for reform in the Arab provinces, it pursued a policy that sought to decrease the influence of the Arabists in these provinces and to make them wholeheartedly adhere to the ideal of "Ottoman unity". From their viewpoint, the Arabists were preventing the consolidation of Ottoman rule in the Syrian provinces. For a proper establishment of the state authority there, these intermediaries had to be eliminated. In this sense, the outbreak of the Great War offered a golden opportunity for the CUP to end the Arabist opposition.

In order to implement this plan, Cemal Pasha, one of the most important leaders of the CUP, was appointed governor general of geographical Syria and commander of the Ottoman Fourth Army positioned in the Syrian provinces. According to his statements, Cemal would "prepare (and carry through) the attack on the Canal, and also maintain peace and internal order in Syria."¹ As part of his mission to "maintain peace in Syria", the Pasha started to

persecute the members of the Arabist movements under the pretext that they were separatists trying to obtain independence for the Arab provinces. Although few of them had contacts with Entente Powers to organise a rebellion in Syria, the majority of the Arabists had severed their connections with the Arabist parties in [Egypt](#), who were allied with the British after the Ottoman declaration of war against the Entente states. Many Arabists in Syria announced their support of the Ottoman government in its [jihad](#) against the “infidels”.

Cemal’s main objective in Syria was to ensure direct control of the Ottoman state over its Syrian citizens. His only means to achieve this goal was to destroy the local intermediaries. As the most important group influencing “the conduct” of the Syrians, the Arabist opposition was his first target. He arrested many Arabist notables in Syria and brought some others, like [Abd al-Hamid al-Zahrawi \(1855-1916\)](#) and [Abd al-Wahhab al-Inglizi \(1878-1916\)](#), from Istanbul and other Anatolian provinces. The first group of the Arabists to be executed consisted of eleven people who were hanged on 21 August 1915 in Beirut. After that the scope of the investigation was widened to all who had at one time been members of any Arabist organisation. Subsequently, in May 1916, the second group of twenty-one people was executed in Damascus and Beirut. Among the executed were deputies, ex-deputies, mayors, scholars and writers.

The campaign against the decentralist opposition was not limited to these individuals. Some 2,000 families of the Arabists and their relatives were exiled to Anatolia in the context of the same policy. In this way, the social structure of Syria would be made more amenable to direct state authority.

Cemal Pasha did not aim to create an autonomous or independent rule in Syria. He planned to be the grand vizier in the post-war era following a “successful” governorate in Syria, which would result in the consolidation of the Ottoman state there. Although he could not oppose Cemal’s rule of terror, [Mehmed Talat Pasha \(1874-1921\)](#) was different from Cemal regarding the Arab policy. He and several other figures in the central government preferred a more moderate approach against the Arabists. However, they did not influence the Ottoman politics in the Syrian lands during the war. The execution of the Syrian Arabists is significant as an illustration of Ottoman policies during the Great War and as a central theme in the Arab struggle for independence from the Ottomans.

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Notes

1. Pasha, Djemal: *Memories of A Turkish Statesman, 1913-1919*, New York 1922, p. 138;

Paşa, Cemal: Hatırat 1913-1922, Dersaadet 1922, p. 112. ↑

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- [British Imperial Connexions to the Arab National Movement \(First World War Digital Archive\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Foster, Zachary J.: World War I and the Ottoman Empire. The Arab Provinces \(Ottoman History Podcast\) \(Audio\)](#)
- [Hasan Kayalı: Arabs and Young Turks Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918, 1997 \(UC Press\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Kayalı, Hasan: The War Years, 1914-1918: Syria under Cemal Pasha's Governorship, in: idem.: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918, Berkeley 1997 \(University of California Press\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Pasha, Djemal: Memories of A Turkish Statesman, 1913-1919, New York 1922 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [The Sykes-Picot Agreement, 1916 \(The Avalon Project\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Turkey in the First World War \(Turkey in the First World War\) \(Institutional Website\)](#)

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[Power](#)

Subjects

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[Politics, law](#) > [Law and legislation](#) > [Trials](#)

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