

Pan-Islamism (Ottoman Empire)

By [Alp Yenen](#)

Summary

Pan-Islamism was one of the major geopolitical and civilizational concepts of the First World War. The German-Ottoman alliance campaigned for Muslim solidarity against European colonialism both by anti-imperial and imperial means. Pan-Islamism altered the course of history by prolonging the duration and expanding the geographic spread of the First World War. The Entente's struggle against pan-Islamism shaped the modern Middle East.

Table of contents

[1 The Idea of Pan-Islam](#)

[2 Young Turks, Germans, and the Promise of Pan-Islamism at the Eve of the First World War](#)

[3 Between Geopolitics and Identity Politics: Pan-Islamism during the First World War](#)

[4 Pan-Islam after the End of the War](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

The Idea of Pan-Islam

Islamic belief advocates that all Muslims should constitute a united community, namely the *ummah*, which cuts across differences in status, tribe, and ancestry. However, the modern idea of a Muslim world is a social construct that emerged in multiple interrelated processes of colonial and cultural subjugation of Muslims by European powers and the resistance thereagainst.¹ This idea that all Muslims were bound to unite and act together was called in Orientalist phraseology “pan-Islam” or “pan-Islamism”. Both academic and colonial Orientalists developed a conspiracy theory, in which all Muslims were behaving and thinking in similar ways due to their zealous commitment to Islam.² While considered to be racially subordinate to Europeans, once geopolitically united across the world, forming a global sect as their divine scripts dictate, Muslims could constitute a serious menace against Western civilization. In reaction to European hegemony, Muslim revival and reform movements of the 19th century — whether religious or secular — campaigned for political ideas of supranational Muslim identity. In the age of steam engines, print, and [telegraphy](#), colonial and military encounters with the West created transnational Muslim solidarity and cross-border mobility among pan-Islamist thinkers and activists. Under the reign of [Abdülhamid II, Sultan of the](#)

[Turks \(1842-1918\)](#), which lasted from 1876 to 1909, pan-Islam became an [imperial](#) ideology to legitimize the [Ottoman Empire](#) as an [empire](#) among empires and the Sultan-Caliph as a spiritual sovereign of all Muslims in the world. Muslim political elites mostly rejected or avoided the term pan-Islamism due to its Orientalist and European origin, hence preferred the term “union of Islam” (Ottoman: *ittihâd-ı İslâm*; Arabic: *ittiḥād al-Islām*; Persian: *ettehād-e Eslām*).

Young Turks, Germans, and the Promise of Pan-Islamism at the Eve of the First World War

The study of pan-Islam in the era of the First World War is plagued by certain clichés that are still commonly repeated. In conventional narratives, pan-Islamism is commonly associated with the reign of Abdülhamid II, while the subsequent era of the Young Turks ([Committee of Union and Progress](#), CUP) is considered to be a period of secularization, Turkification, and pan-Turanism. This is not completely accurate. In identity politics, the Young Turks championed predominantly Ottoman-Muslim [nationalism](#).³ In foreign affairs, they actively campaigned for pan-Islam as a major feature of Ottoman Empire’s foreign policy. The [Ottoman-Italian war over Libya](#) manifested CUP’s revolutionary reinterpretation of pan-Islamism as a force against European colonialism.⁴ After the defeat in [the Balkan Wars](#), many Young Turk activists, commonly considered to be Turkish nationalists foremost, stressed the Ottoman-Muslim identity as the primary marker of the Ottoman state and its leading nation against its internal and external enemies.⁵ Even notorious pan-Turkist [Yusuf Akçura \(1876-1935\)](#) stated that “Islam is a supranational [*fevka’l-milel*] religion of morality and divinity; the development of nationalism in the Islamic world will result in Islamic internationalism’s [*beynelmileliyet-i İslamiye*] advent to power.”⁶ Instead of utilizing pan-Islamism out of a mere “political expediency”,⁷ Minister of War [Ismail Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#), and many others, were very much sincere in championing for Ottoman pan-Islamism and [holy war](#). Moreover, the reality of a German-Ottoman [alliance](#) during the war and [Germany’s](#) flamboyant “*Orientpolitik*” tends to magnify the role of Germany in pan-Islamism during the First World War.⁸ Yet, previous British endorsement of Hamidian imperial pan-Islamism must be noted as much as the CUP regime’s autonomous agency in propagating anti-imperial pan-Islamism.⁹ Eventually, the overall failure of the jihad of 1914-1918 in mobilizing successful [Muslim revolts](#) against the Entente retrospectively dismissed the potential of pan-Islamism at the end of the Ottoman Empire. The abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate by the Turkish Republic in 1924 constituted the endpoint of an assumed teleology of a conflict between secularism and Islam.¹⁰ Nevertheless, revisionist

studies illustrate that the Young Turks actually championed Muslim nationalism, pan-Islamism, and jihad, while German efforts have been largely exaggerated.¹¹

Between Geopolitics and Identity Politics: Pan-Islamism during the First World War

“A wide-spread Holy War might well mean the bankruptcy of Europe,” stated a warning about pan-Islamism at the eve of the First World War.¹² As pan-Islamism was universally considered a geopolitical force, the German-Ottoman alliance invested many resources in calling Muslims for solidarity with the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph and his Christian allies and to resist and rebel against the Entente governments that rule over Muslim lands. The German-Ottoman campaign for jihad against [Britain](#), [France](#), and [Russia](#) is the most famous manifestation of wartime pan-Islamism. Multiple [propaganda](#) activities were directed by the German “*Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient*” (“Intelligence Office for the East”) and the Ottoman [Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa](#) (Special Organization). Pamphlets and publications were translated into multiple Muslim languages and shipped to Entente-ruled Muslim lands or distributed among the Muslim [prisoners of war](#) captured from Entente armies. While secret agents and special forces were sent to [Northern Africa](#), [Iran](#), [Afghanistan](#), [India](#), and Turkestan to incite anti-imperialist insurgencies, Ottoman irredentist campaigns towards previously lost territories in [Egypt](#) and Transcaucasia in early 1915 illustrated pan-Islamism’s imperial facet. In Iran and in the Shi’ite dominated Ottoman provinces in Iraq, pan-Islamism was surprisingly successful in creating trans-sectarian solidarity for the Ottoman caliphate. Although mostly failed in starting significant armed uprisings and mass mutinies among the Entente’s Muslim subjects, the German-Ottoman campaign was successful in enhancing the fears of the Entente about pan-Islamism, hence altered the course of geopolitics by prolonging and spreading the war effort.

Pan-Islamist propaganda was directed both towards the global Muslim sphere and towards the home front, relying on motives of moral solidarity with the Muslim cause, political loyalty to the Sultan-Caliph, and religious duty to struggle and defend the abode of Islam. In public diplomacy, Ottoman-sponsored pan-Islamism enhanced humanitarian and solidarity networks across Muslim lands. The [Red Crescent Society](#) (*Hilal-ı Ahmer Cemiyeti*) and National Defense League (*Müdafaa-ı Milliye Cemiyeti*) mobilized financial and popular support for the war effort in the Muslim public sphere at home and abroad. In military affairs, pan-Islamism enhanced the otherwise troublesome mobilization of manpower. The Ottoman army consciously Islamized its discourse in recruitment, indoctrination, and deployment of its troops. Religious sects — both Sunni and Sufi — were encouraged to build up paramilitary units in Anatolia. This Islamic mobilization contributed to the radicalization of identity politics that culminated

in the persecutions and massacres of Ottoman non-Muslim minorities in Anatolia, who were brand-marked across-the-board as a threat to the Muslim empire and nation. Besides regular soldiers and gendarmes, most violence was conducted by Circassian, Albanian, Laz, and Kurdish irregular bands out of a Muslim solidarity with the Ottoman state and its Young Turk regime. Most tragically in the [Armenian Genocide](#), Islamic mobilization was more effective than Turkish nationalism in rallying mass violence and popular resentments against non-Muslims.

Across the frontiers of war, works of fiction and popular imagination were obsessed with pan-Islamism from [John Buchan's \(1875-1940\)](#) novel *Greenmantle* (1916) over a fabricated travelogue of journalist [Max Roloff \(1870\)](#) to Mecca to Young Turk ideologue [Ziya Gökalp's \(1876-1924\)](#) Muslim-nationalist war poems.

The test bench of pan-Islamism in the First World War was, however, the Arab provinces. Although Arab political elites remained predominantly loyal to the Ottoman Empire, they were cast both by Entente agents and Ottoman officials as potential traitors and rebels. The Arab Revolt of 1916 under the leadership of [Husayn ibn Ali, King of Hejaz \(-1931\)](#) and the support of British military intelligence was, on the one hand, part of an inter-imperial struggle in geopolitics of the war in the Middle East. On the other hand, the Arab Revolt resulted in an inter-Muslim struggle over Muslim sovereignty and solidarity. Both sides in their propaganda publications, such as [Ahmed Cemal Pasha's \(1872-1922\)](#) *Al-Sharq* in Damascus and *Husayn's Al-Qibla* in Mecca, stressed the cause of "Muslim unity" against each other. When Lord [George Curzon \(1859-1925\)](#) stated that "this war has applied a wonderful test-stone to the solidarity of Islam," it was readily assumed that the defeat of the Ottoman Empire was a result of a failure of pan-Islamism.¹³

Pan-Islam after the End of the War

To the surprise of many, the aftermath of the First World War became the actual setting of a global "pan-Islamic moment".¹⁴ British and French fears of new pan-Islamic revolts coincided with the crises of empire during the peace settlements. Meanwhile, the [Russian Revolution of 1917](#) liberated the Muslims of the Caucasus and Central Asia and created new opportunities for pan-Islamism.¹⁵ [Vladimir Lenin's \(1870-1924\)](#) and the third International's overtures to pan-Islamism included even collaboration with the former CUP leaders and calling a "holy war" against capitalism and colonialism at the Baku Congress of 1920.¹⁶ Muslim solidarity networks, most notably the Indian Muslim [Khilafat movement](#) but also many local committees, campaigned for Muslim solidarity and sovereignty, especially on behalf of saving the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷ Although many Muslim "Wilsonians" campaigned for the right of

national self-determination, their claims were in solidarity with the anti-colonial struggle of Muslims elsewhere. Pan-Islamist organizations and congresses mushroomed both in the Muslim world and in European exile calling for a unified Muslim front against Western colonialism. The main ideology of mobilization and legitimization of the War of Independence in Anatolia — and other post-Ottoman struggles — was Muslim nationalism and generated a great deal of pan-Islamic solidarity across the Muslim world.¹⁸ The wave of revolts and revolutions against the colonial settlement in the Arab Middle East were in many ways accompanied by calls for jihad, Muslim nationalism, and pan-Islamic solidarity.¹⁹ Eventually, Soviet Russia turned its back on pan-Islamism by signing treaties with newly established nation states of Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan and suppressing its own Muslim population. Whereas, Britain and France silenced pan-Islamism by brutally suppressing the insurgencies in North Africa and the Middle East and granting controlled independence — if not direct colonial rule — that co-opted local elites and rulers within newly created nation-states. After the Republic of Turkey abolished the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, pan-Islamism slowly faded away from political imaginations as a relic of the past that disappeared with the First World War.

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Notes

1. Aydın, Cemil: *The Idea of the Muslim world. A global intellectual history*, Cambridge 2017, p. 3. [↑](#)
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4. McCollum, Jonathan: *The anti-colonial empire. Ottoman mobilization and resistance in the Italo-Turkish War, 1911-1912*, Thesis, University of California Los Angeles, 2018. [↑](#)
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6. Akçura, Yusuf: Geçen yıl. 1329 senesinde Türk dünyası [Last year. The Turkic world in the year 1329], in: Türk Yurdu [Turkish Homeland] 3/65 (1330 [1914]), pp. 2166-2169, here p. 2168. [↑](#)
7. Landau, Jacob M.: The politics of pan-Islam. Ideology and organization, Oxford 1990, p. 88. [↑](#)
8. Hurgronje, Snouck Christiaan: The holy war “made in Germany”, New York 1915; Aksakal, Mustafa: “Holy war made in Germany”? Ottoman origins of the 1914 jihad, in: War in History 18/2 (2011), pp. 184-199. [↑](#)
9. See especially: Aydın, Cemil: The idea of the Muslim world. A global intellectual history, Cambridge 2017. [↑](#)
10. This is challenged in Ardıç, Nurullah: Islam and the politics of secularism. The Caliphate and Middle Eastern modernization in the early 20th Century, London 2012. [↑](#)
11. New approaches to pan-Islamism and jihad during the First World War are compiled and discussed in Zürcher, Erik Jan (ed.): Jihad and Islam in World War I. Studies on the Ottoman jihad at the centenary of Snouck Hurgronje’s “Holy war made in Germany”, Leiden 2015. [↑](#)
12. Edwards, Albert: The menace of pan-Islamism, in: The North American Review 197/690 (1913), pp. 645-657, here p. 657. [↑](#)
13. Curzon quoted in Ferris, John: “The internationalism of Islam.” The British perception of a Muslim menace, 1840-1951, in: Intelligence and National Security 24/1 (2009), pp. 57-77, here p. 64. [↑](#)
14. Aydın, Cemil: The idea of the Muslim world. A global intellectual history, Cambridge 2017, pp. 122-127. [↑](#)
15. Khalid, Adeb: Pan-Islamism in practice. The rhetoric of Muslim unity and its uses, in: Özdalga, Elisabeth (ed.): Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy, London 2005, pp. 201-224, here pp. 219-221. [↑](#)
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17. Özcan, Azmi: Pan-Islamism. Indian Muslims, the Ottomans and Britain (1877-1924), Leiden 1997. [↑](#)
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External Links

- [Bury, George Wyman: **Pan-Islam, London 1919 \(Library of Congress\) \(Primary Source\)**](#)

- [Donanma Mecmuası 69, - 23, Kasım, 1914 \(in Turkish\), 8 March 2014 \(Donanma Tarihi\) \(Article\)](#)
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- [Taylan, Işın \(Host\): Fighting Under the Same Banner. Ottoman History Podcast Ep. 451, with Yaşar Tolga Cora, Edhem Eldem, Nicole van Os, and Johann Strauss, February 2020 \(Ottoman History Podcast\) \(Audio\)](#)
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[Politics, law](#) > [Political ideologies](#) > [Political ideologies, other](#)

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