

Red Crescent (Hilal-i Ahmer)

By [Esther Möller](#)

Summary

The Red Crescent is one of two symbols of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the name of Red Crescent societies in countries with a majority Muslim population. During World War I, the Ottoman and Egyptian Red Crescent played an important role in the provision of humanitarian aid.

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Western and Christian Origins

The origins of the movement lay in a Western and Christian setting: in 1863, five notables of the city of Geneva founded the first committee to aid wounded soldiers, which would later become the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) (ICRC).

Inspired by [Henry Dunant's \(1828-1910\)](#) experiences at the Battle of Solferino, the committee sought both to improve the treatment of wounded soldiers independent of their nationality and to put the relationship between belligerent states on a more codified basis, through the development of [international humanitarian law](#), in particular the Geneva conventions. From the beginning, these ideas and norms claimed a universal scope, although they were deeply rooted in Christian values and resonated with the European colonial powers. Moreover, the conditions set up for acceptance as a [Red Cross](#) society clearly favoured Western societies and structures: the respective state had to be sovereign, had to have signed the Geneva conventions, and there should be only one Red Cross society per state. Yet, the movement very quickly expanded worldwide and found adherents far beyond

the West, for example in [Japan](#).

First Red Crescent Societies in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt

In the Muslim world, the first Red Cross Society was founded in the [Ottoman Empire](#) in 1869. Yet, this was not a national initiative, but one put forward by the Geneva committee. At a medical congress in Paris, they had been able to convince the Ottoman surgeon Dr. [Abdullah Bey \(1801-1974\)](#), of Austrian origin, to set up a Red Cross Society in Istanbul. Interestingly, the first Ottoman committee contained many Christians. It was barely active until the Tripoli War and the [Balkan Wars](#).

During the Crimean War, the name and symbol of the society were put into question because Ottoman soldiers refused to recognize the symbol of the Red Cross and pleaded for the use of the Red Crescent instead, which was indeed used from then on, although it was only recognized internationally much later.

With the rise of the Young Turks, the Turkish society was slowly taken under [government](#) patronage and used for [nationalist](#) demonstrations. Indeed, most members had state affiliations and many of its leading figures had graduated from the Military Medical School, one of the founding centres of the Young Turk Movement. For the surgeons who participated in medical missions, [humanitarian](#) and patriotic, rather than religious, motivations counted.

[Women](#) played a central role in this organisation, as it served their claims for emancipation and at the same time helped the government to demonstrate their engagement with women's rights.

The second Red Crescent Society was founded in [Egypt](#) in 1911. Although it was only officially recognized in 1923, after Egypt had gained (unilateral) independence from [Great Britain](#), the Egyptian Red Crescent developed its first organizational structures and provided relief in and outside Egypt.

World War I as a Moment of Acceleration

For both Red Crescent societies, the "Greater War" (1911-1923) was an important moment which accelerated their development and engagement. This war is understood here in a large sense following the ideas of [Robert Gerwarth](#) and [John Horne](#), and including the Tripoli War and the Balkan Wars as well.

The Tripoli War

While the Ottoman Red Crescent gained new dynamics during this war, the Egyptian Red Crescent was founded because of the [war](#) between the Italian and Ottoman armies in Libya in 1911. Its founder, Sheikh [Ali Yussif \(1863-1913\)](#), was the owner of the [newspaper](#) *al-Mu'ayyad* and very close to the Egyptian viceroy, [Khedive Abbas Hilmi II \(1874-1944\)](#). He held anti-colonial and [pan-Islamic](#) views which also influenced the Egyptian Red Crescent's foundation: the medical missions that were sent to Tripoli were supposed to support the Ottoman and Muslim brothers in their fight. The Ottoman Red Crescent's members also engaged for humanitarian and patriotic reasons. There had already been contact between the Ottoman Red Crescent and Egyptian volunteers, because the former had to cross Egypt in order to find the medical materials, which they lacked and needed for the wounded soldiers in Libya. One can imagine that the idea of founding a Red Crescent society in Egypt also grew out of this contact, because, in contrast to the Ottoman Red Crescent, the one in Cairo was solely based on an Egyptian initiative. Finally, a third Red Crescent society appeared on the Libyan scene: the British Red Crescent society, founded by Indian Muslims in Great Britain, sent money, materials and doctors to support their religious compatriots in [North Africa](#).

The Balkan Wars

The Balkan Wars in 1911 and 1912 also triggered the engagement of these Red Crescent societies. First, the Ottoman Red Crescent was very active in providing help for wounded soldiers. The Egyptian Red Crescent sent various medical missions to the Balkans to support the Ottomans. The Muslim population was also supported by the British Red Crescent, which provided medical and financial support, and, in a similar manner, Muslims in [India](#) sent money and even medical missions. Humanitarian engagement during this war also transgressed religious and national boundaries: the Ottoman Red Crescent was helped by some missions of the German Red Cross, while the Egyptian Red Crescent got support from the French Catholic female congregation "*Filles de la Charité*".

The Ottoman Red Crescent 1914-1918

From 1914 to 1918, the Ottoman Red Crescent continued its activities and deepened its experience through the conflict. Upper and middle-class women became very active and formed women's Red Crescent committees. While the organization stressed its emancipatory potential, women also remained bound to activities that corresponded to an idea of femininity, based on service and care. They provided social services, collected donations, [nursed](#) wounded soldiers, sent packages to [prisoners of war](#) and provided relief to [refugees](#). The latter were mainly Muslims, as the Ottoman Red Crescent's assistance to Armenians

remained marginal. From 1914 onwards, the organization was dominated by the state.

The Egyptian Red Crescent 1914-1918

In Egypt, where World War I took place and the British also gathered their troops for the whole region, the Egyptian Red Crescent fulfilled its humanitarian duties as well, nursing wounded soldiers in its [hospitals](#), collecting donations in money and kind not only for Muslim, but also for Christian people in need. Simultaneously, although still not officially recognized, the organisation became more institutionalized. It started to publish annual reports documenting activities, income and expenses, and it set up an administrative board. While members of the royal family served as presidents but only had representative functions, the work itself was done by a number of Egyptian and foreign members of the social and economic elite. Among the foreigners was Henri Naus (1875-1938), a Belgian Jew who owned the biggest sugar factory in Egypt. Thus, the Egyptian Red Crescent was an institution marked both by colonial and anticolonial elements. While the Red Crescent's members supported Egypt's independence from Great Britain, they were not part of the Wafd Party, but rather close to the Liberal Constitutionalists who represented the land-owning elite.

Development after 1918

After 1918, the Red Crescent societies became more institutionalized and even more incorporated by their respective governments. Especially in Turkey, the government considered the Red Crescent a suitable instrument to both exert state control throughout the country and link Turkey to the international political arena.

The Red Crescent, as one of the symbols of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, was only officially recognized in 1929, after long deliberations during which the European colonial powers expressed their reservations. While some celebrated the recognition of the Red Crescent next to the Red Cross as the opening and pluralisation of the movement, others, on the contrary, considered it to be the beginning of a focus on particularities which would not abolish, but rather enhance difference.

In the Middle East, most Red Crescent societies were only founded after their countries' independence in the 1930s (Iraq) or 1940s (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan). They would intensify debates around the universal claim and its particular practices within the movement.

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External Links

- [Fenton, Damien: Mehmetçik – The Turkish Soldier’s Experience, 2014 \(New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Geneva Convention 1864 \(The Avalon Project, Yale Law School\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Gratien, Chris / Yılmaz, Seçil / Akin, Yiğit: World War I and the Ottoman Home Front, 23 August 2013 \(Ottoman History Podcast\) \(Article\)](#)
- [The International Committee of the Red Cross in the First World War, 10 September 2014 \(ICRC\) \(Article\)](#)

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[Il](#); [Dunant, Henri](#); [Bey, Abdullah](#); [Yussif, Ali](#); [Naus, Henri](#); [nursed](#)

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