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# Askerî Bey, Süleymân

By [Benjamin C. Fortna](#)

Askerî, *Süleymân* (Süleyman Zeynelâbidin)

Late Ottoman military and special operations officer and activist

Born 01 January 1884 in Prizren, Ottoman Empire

Died 14 April 1915 in Bercasiye/Barjasiya, Ottoman Empire

**After service in the Balkans and in Libya, Süleyman Askerî was chosen by Enver Pasha to lead the “Special Organization” before World War I. Sent to Iraq to organize the defense against the British Mesopotamian campaign, he was seriously wounded and took his own life in the spring of 1915.**

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## Early Life and Education

Süleyman Akserî (1884-1915) was born in Prizren in the [Ottoman](#) province of Kosova to Halil Vehbi Pasha and Güzide Hanım in 1884. He and his three brothers followed their father into the Ottoman military; all four would die in World War I. Süleyman attended the military preparatory (*idadî*) school in Edirne before moving to Istanbul to enter first the Military Academy and then the General Staff College from which he graduated in 1905.

## Service in the Balkans

Like most officers of that period, he first saw action in [Macedonia](#). Assigned to Manastır (Bitola), he was among the earliest members of the [Committee of Union and Progress](#) (CUP). He soon gained a reputation as both a counter-insurgency specialist, as the Ottoman military sought ways to counter the array of irridentist groups fighting against Ottoman rule, and as one of the most committed of the “self-sacrificing officers.” His close friend [Eşref Kuşçubaşı \(1883-1964\)](#) ranked him among the inner core of this notoriously committed group.

Reassigned to Edirne in 1906, he subsequently played a role in key events of the Constitutional or “Young Turk” [Revolution](#) of 1908, including hiding the assassin of the high-ranking officer sent by the Sultan to suppress the CUP-led opposition and the march of the “Action Army” on Istanbul to put down the counter-revolution of 1909. He was then promoted, assigned to Baghdad and placed in charge of reorganizing the Gendarmerie regiment there. It was thus from distant Baghdad that Askerî volunteered to fight against the [Italian invasion of Libya](#) in 1911. Struggling against distance and reluctant officialdom, Askerî succeeded in leading a group from Iraq to Libya.

Despite initial success, the Ottoman military was forced to abandon the fight when the [First Balkan War](#) broke out in 1912, threatening the very existence of the [empire](#). Süleyman Askerî was among the officers withdrawn from Libya and sent to the Balkans once again, now assigned to [Ismail Enver Pasha's \(1881-1922\)](#) Tenth Army Corps. After the recapture of Edirne, a select group of officers continued westward into Western Thrace, which had recently been lost to [Bulgaria](#). Askerî was a key figure in the Provisional Government of Western Thrace, a short-lived attempt to re-establish Muslim rule. As Chief of the General Staff, Askerî was the ranking officer and worked closely with Eşref and his brother [Selim “Hacı” Sami \(1887-1927\)](#) to establish a mini-state in defiance of both the international community and, eventually, Istanbul.

## The Special Organization and World War I

Soon Askerî was appointed head of the [Special Organization](#), the intelligence-cum-special operations unit formed by Enver that was involved in a wide range of activities in the period before and during the Great War both in Ottoman territory and beyond as Istanbul attempted to rally support for the war effort. Based in Istanbul, Askerî oversaw Special Organization operations on several fronts, including the ultimately failed attempt to cross the Suez Canal.

## The Iraq Mission

In December 1914 Enver sent Askerî back to Iraq to reorganize Ottoman forces in order to counter the [British Mesopotamian campaign](#), launched the previous month, and to attempt to retake Basra. As General Commander for Iraq and its region, and subsequently also appointed Governor of Basra province, Askerî attempted to recruit additional volunteer forces from the tribal population to supplement the limited number of regular Ottoman army forces available in Iraq. Facing the superior

numbers and experience of the British forces, Askerî's task was extremely ambitious. As in other Special Organization operations, Askerî attempted to deploy religious zeal to compensate for the lack of men and materiel at the Ottomans' disposal.

Despite the odds and numerous difficulties, Askerî was able to recruit a force that allowed the Ottomans to launch an attempt to recapture lower Iraq. Perhaps as large as 17,000 men (although roughly three-quarters of them composed of tribal irregulars), Askerî's force advanced on al-Qurnah to the northwest of Basra. Askerî was wounded in the leg while conducting [reconnaissance](#), an injury that would later hospitalize him. Meanwhile, Askerî's forces engaged in skirmishes with the British and also ventured into [Iranian territory](#) to destroy sections of the pipeline serving the Abadan oil refinery. But when the fighting began in earnest, it did not go well for Askerî or his forces. An attack launched near Shu'aybah in mid-April ended in failure, with many of the irregular forces bolting in search of safety. Approximately 3,000 suffered casualties while another 800 were taken [prisoner](#). With what was left of his army beginning their retreat, Askerî, dejected, wounded, and facing up to the failure of his mission, committed suicide.

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