

Cemal Paşa, Ahmed

By [Hasan Kayali](#)

Cemal, *Ahmed* (Cemal Paşa)
Ottoman statesman and general
Born 06 May 1872 in Mytilene Island, Ottoman Empire
Died 21 July 1922 in Tbilisi, Georgia

Cemal Paşa belonged to the top leadership of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), which ruled the Ottoman Empire during World War I. He served as wartime minister of the navy and autocratic governor general and commander of the Fourth Army in Greater Syria and led two unsuccessful campaigns against the British-held Suez Canal.

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Early Life and Career

Cemal Paşa (1872-1922) held high-level administrative and military positions across the breadth of the [Ottoman Empire](#) at critical junctures in the last two decades of its existence. His memoirs, which focus exclusively on World War I, were published in the early 1920s in Ottoman Turkish, English and German, garnering him and his role in the war greater visibility compared with other Ottoman wartime leaders.

The son of a military pharmacist, Cemal attended a military high school academy (*Harbiye Mektebi*), and staff officer school in Istanbul, where he also received his first career posting in 1895. His military appointments in the next several years were in the European provinces, starting as superintendent of construction work in the Edirne province; they included the oversight of transport and railroads in Salonika. This region was rife with communal conflict and conspiratorial opposition to [Abdülhamid II, Sultan of the Turks \(1842-1918\)](#). Cemal joined the then secret [Committee of Union and Progress \(CUP\)](#) and emerged as a trusted Unionist at the time of the July 1908 restoration of the constitution (Young Turk Revolution). He took part in the Action Army (*Hareket Ordusu*), which the CUP mobilized against the counterrevolutionary uprising that broke out in April 1909 (*31 Mart Vakası*).

Cemal was serving in Istanbul as district governor of Üsküdar, an appointment he received on his thirty-seventh birthday in 1909 and held for three months, when he was dispatched to Adana as governor in order to bring the intercommunal melee under control after the massacre of the local Armenian population. He was subsequently transferred to the governorship of Baghdad (1911-1912). During the [Balkan War \(1912-1913\)](#), Cemal commanded reserve troops in Thrace as colonel. He contracted

cholera, which removed him from the disastrous battles at the front. He participated in the successful CUP coup in January 1913 against the opposition (*Hürriyet ve İtilaf* or Liberal Entente) government. The new grand vizier Mahmud Şevket Pasha (1856-1913) appointed Cemal military governor (*muhafız*) of Istanbul.

By sending many prominent leaders of the Liberal opposition to the gallows, Cemal rehearsed the draconian measures which he would implement in Syria during World War I and which would win him the sobriquet *as-saffah* (butcher). Subsequently, he became minister of public works and, in February 1914, minister of the navy. In its search for an alliance with the Great Powers, the CUP government sent Cemal, known for his pro-French proclivities and French language proficiency, to Paris in the summer of 1914. His contacts that lasted into the “[July crisis](#)” in Europe did not elicit a Franco-Ottoman agreement.

Wartime Governor of Syria

Soon after the Ottoman state entered the war in November 1914, Cemal Paşa accepted the posts of military commander and governor in Greater Syria while maintaining the portfolio of the ministry of the navy. This appointment invested him with extraordinary powers and latitude for stern and arbitrary actions. He produced from the ransacked French consulate in Beirut evidence of conspiratorial contacts between [France](#) and influential detractors of the CUP government, presumed Arab [nationalists](#). Thirty-two prominent politicians, intellectuals, and community leaders were publically executed in August 1915 in Beirut and in May 1916 in Beirut and Damascus, instilling widespread fear and revulsion in the region.

Cemal's military responsibility consisted of defending Greater Syria from attacks by the Triple Entente and challenging the British hold over [Egypt](#), declared as a British protectorate upon Ottoman entry into the war. He commanded with the assistance of a large contingent of German officers and technicians. Friedrich Kress von Kressenstein (1870-1948) acted as his chief of staff.

Suez Campaigns

The Suez expedition was motivated by the expectation that Mehmet V, Sultan of the Turks' (1844-1918) appeal for [jihad](#) would inspire popular uprisings in Egypt. Both this expectation and the military campaign in January 1915 failed. Instead, in June 1916 the Ottomans confronted Husayn ibn Ali, King of Hejaz (c.1853-1931) and Sharif of Mecca's rebellion in Mecca, instigated by a secret agreement between the Sharif and British authorities in Cairo. With the Hejaz Expeditionary Force also under his jurisdiction, Cemal strived to contain the revolt. At the end of July 1916, following large-scale infrastructural reinforcements in the Sinai, which included the construction of extensive railroads in the desert by the chief engineer of the Hejaz Railroad Heinrich August Meißner (1862-1940), known as Meißner Paşa, Kress led a second expedition against the Suez, but was repulsed. After the second Suez campaign, the Ottoman army was on the defensive and in retreat, as the British forces advanced into the Sinai and Gaza.

Iron Rule

Cemal's repressive policies, coupled with the exigencies of losses on the battlefields, took a heavy toll on the Syrian population. The army recruited thousands of Syrians for the campaigns in the Suez and Palestine; many became casualties. It commandeered resources ranging from vital foodstuffs to timber for military use. Draconian measures against dissidence, resistance, and alleged treasonable activity exasperated the population. Cemal deported influential Syrians and their families to Anatolia in order to undermine their local power. He took similar measures against groups of Armenians, even as he opposed indiscriminate violence against the Armenian population and frequently took issue with Grand Vizier Mehmed Talat Pasha (1874-1921). Government requisitioning, but also an Entente blockade of the ports, merchant speculation, and a devastating locust invasion, led to a severe famine in Syria that decimated hundreds of thousands.

[Mobilization](#) (*seferberlik* in Turkish), which was heralded by Ottoman entry into the war and Cemal's arrival in Syria in December, became synonymous with large-scale civilian and military devastation. Notions of Arab independence articulated by Arab nationalists and now by Sharif Husayn found receptive ears. Subsequently mythologized as Turkish infliction of deliberate suffering upon the Arab nation and a period of Arab fortitude in the face of deprivation, *seferberlik* became a central trope in Arab nationalist discourse, as evidenced by its continued resonance in historical memory, popular culture and school textbooks.

Civic Policies

Cemal Paşa's multifaceted rule during his three-year tenure in Syria included projects that served not only military goals but also further integration of the region, such as the construction of roads and railroads, which strengthened communications within Greater Syria and also with Anatolia and the southern provinces. Cemal sought to reinforce government authority and legitimacy by undertaking a host of ambitious urban projects at odds with the prevailing suffering and military defeats. He opened new [schools](#), including a higher academy, al-Kulliyya as-Salahiyya, in Jerusalem; started newspapers; commissioned monuments and monumental official structures; cleared and expanded urban arteries in Damascus and Jaffa; and sponsored historical preservation programs and cultural and scientific publications. These efforts led to the speculation that he envisaged a Syrian dominion separate from Istanbul.

Departure from Syria, Exile and Death

Military defeats discredited Cemal Paşa's rule. Tensions with German officers reached a climax after the establishment of a new army based in Aleppo, the *Yıldırım* (Thunderbolt) with General [Erich von Falkenhayn \(1861-1922\)](#), former chief of staff of the German army, at its head. In September 1917, the [German high command](#) requested the stymied Cemal Paşa to visit Germany for consultations. He returned to Syria a month later. During the turbulent weeks in the fall of 1917, marked by the revelation of the terms of the [Sykes-Picot Treaty](#) by the post-revolutionary government in [Russia](#) and the issuance of the [Balfour Declaration](#), Cemal established contact with Sharif Husayn in a futile effort at reconciliation. In December 1917, he asked for a leave of absence and went to Istanbul just as Jerusalem fell to General [Edmund Allenby's \(1861-1936\)](#) forces, never to return to Syria. [Mustafa Kemal \(1881-1934\)](#), commander of the Seventh Army, shared similar grievances about German predominance as Cemal, and the two forged a personal relationship in Syria.

On 1 November 1918, the day after a new cabinet in Istanbul signed the [Mudros Armistice](#), Cemal and other top leaders of the CUP fled the Ottoman capital at night on a German ship for Odessa. He was later tried together with other ministers of wartime governments and CUP leaders and sentenced to death in absentia. After furtive stays in Berlin, Munich, and [Switzerland](#), Cemal Paşa went to Moscow and, invited by the Afghan king to assist in the reform of the Afghan army, briefly to Kabul. He offered assistance to Mustafa Kemal from [Georgia](#) during the Anatolian struggle for independence, before he was assassinated in 1922 in Tbilisi by Armenian militants. His body was brought to Turkey and buried in Erzurum.

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