

Pre-war Military Planning (Ottoman Empire)

By [Odile Moreau](#)

Following its defeats during the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), the Ottoman Empire reconfigured its recruitment system with the adoption of a new conscription law on 12 May 1914. Several military vulnerabilities remained on the eve of World War I, including a recurrent lack of manpower and officers as well as logistical problems.

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Introduction

On the eve of World War I, the [Ottoman Empire](#) was exhausted from its involvement in the [Balkan Wars \(1912-1913\)](#) and unprepared to engage in a major war against European powers. It had lost 32.7 percent of its territory and 20 percent of its population. The defeat had devastated the army and the [Empire](#) found itself deep in debt. Consequently, the Ottoman Empire undertook a massive reorganization of its army and approach to military planning. Ottoman participation in the Great War thus can be placed in a wider context, which I call the “Ten-Year War” starting in 1911 with the Tripolitanian War, followed by the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) through to the National Struggle of 1919-1922.^[1]

To counter a lack of training, the reserves [*Redif*] were abolished and conscription was effectively instituted at the regional level. However, the *Muinsiz* exemption was kept in place and the recruitment problem was not entirely solved. There was also a lack of supervisory staff, caused by a purge of high-ranking officers. Mobilisation transformed not only the military but also the relationship between state and society in Anatolia. [Mehmet Besikçi](#) explains that while mobilisation pushed the Ottoman state to become more centralised, authoritarian, and [nationalist](#), its increasing dependence on human resources paradoxically also enlarged Ottoman subjects’ space of action vis-à-vis state authority: men’s response to the state ranged from volunteering to open resistance, including desertion.^[2]

Reforms after the Balkan Wars

Following the Balkan Wars, the Ottoman army faced many challenges. Recruitment had to be reorganized beyond simply abolishing exemption from military service to address a recurrent lack of manpower. In fact, due to the reorganization conventional and non-conventional forces, such as volunteers and Special Forces, would still coexist. Officers were in short supply and complex logistical problems persisted: lines of communication were extremely poor and the railroad system was notably weak thus, the Empire was unprepared to accommodate military mobilisation.

Recruitment

Following the territorial losses of the Balkan Wars, recruitment for the Ottoman army was reorganized. A new recruitment law was put into place and the *Redif* (Reserve of the Active Army) system was abolished.^[3] Terms of service in the active army (*Nizam*) remained unchanged at three, six or nine years while those of the *Mustahfiz*, the territorial guard, were expanded from two to seven years. As the *Redif* was no longer organized into independent divisions, conscription carried out at the local regional level.^[4] Anatolia was divided into regions corresponding to an army corps, each with district recruiting branches. Military service remained non-compulsory for some segments of the Ottoman population. Due to financial shortfalls, the exemption fee [*bedel*] persisted. Volunteers provided additional manpower for special services. The number of army corps (thirteen army corps and three independent divisions) was also drastically reduced due to a lack of officers and deputy

officers as well as financial problems.^[5]

Officer Shortage

On 3 January 1914, Ismail Enver Bey (1881-1922), promoted to Pasha, became *Erkan-ı Harbiye-i Umumiye Reisi* [Chief of the Ottoman Staff] and *Serasker* [war minister]. He purged numerous officers deemed to have performed incompetently during the Balkan Wars and promoted young officers familiar with the theoretical basis of **modern warfare**. In the purge, 800 high-ranking officers were dismissed, among them two field marshals, three lieutenant-generals, thirty major generals and thirty-five brigadier generals.^[6] However, mentoring in the Ottoman army was thus insufficient. Consequently, Enver Pasha appointed young and highly trained general staff officers to key positions, with the mission of achieving further military reforms from the period before the Balkan Wars.

Enver Pasha promoted strong reforms to restore discipline and order among the Ottoman army. As a part of the reforms, anti-Unionist officers were appointed to the provinces. Mahmud Muhtar Pasha (1867-1935) refused his appointment to Erzincan. Military trials were set up against officers suspected of anti-union sympathies. The banishment of skilled young officers was a major loss, due to the fact that the Ottoman army suffered from a lack of supervisory staff.

Ottoman Recruitment System: The Recruitment Law of May 1914, updated in August 1914

The Ottoman recruitment system was updated with the Temporary Law for Military Service [*Mükellefiyet-i Askeriye Kanûn-ı Muvakkatı*] on 12 May 1914. Its main purpose was to implement economic efficiency and to promote a younger army and an efficient recruitment process. Muslims and non-Muslims had been subject to conscription since 1909. The Temporary Law minimized exemptions and made conscription more inclusive, for non-Muslims particular and “to oblige everybody equally to defend the fatherland.” Nevertheless, military units could not be comprised of more than 10 percent non-Muslims. Ottomans not in active service would pay a tax according to their wealth.^[7] The law also abolished the so-called *Muinsiz* exemption for those who were the sole family breadwinners. Instead, women in need of support were offered an allowance of thirty piasters [*kuruş*]. The Ottoman state was ultimately unable to provide such compensation, generating many claims from women applying to the Ottoman State for funds.^[8]

	Army Infantry	Army Other classes	Navy
Active Army			
<i>Nizâm</i>	2 years	3 years	5 years

Reserve of the Active Army <i>ihdiyât</i>	18 years	17 years	7 years
Territorial Guard <i>mustahfaz</i>	5 years	5 years	5 years
Total	25 years	25 years	17 years

Table 1: Length of Compulsory Military Service in 1914^[9]

Lack of manpower and officers

The administration used various methods to fill empty officers posts. Officers who had risen through the ranks [*Alaylı*] and had been forced to retire or dismissed were recalled in the fall 1914. Military Academy [*Harbiye*] cadets were sent to their units with the rank of brevet-lieutenants [*Zabit Vekilî*]. The senior cadets in military secondary schools and students in civilian high schools were appointed as officer-candidates [*Zabit Namzetî*] after brief training of six to eight months. After an examination, the unit's commanders sent them with the rank of corporal. After 1915, the high command decided to enrol students and graduates from religious schools [*medrese*].^[10]

The 12 May law also created new sources of recruitment. All current or future refugees [*muhâcir*] were eligible for compulsory military service after six years of settlement in Ottoman territory. This period was reduced to three months in the event of war. A decree issued in August 1914 stipulated that all men who received Ottoman citizenship – including those from enemy countries – were subject to conscription. Refugees who did not receive Ottoman citizenship could volunteer in the regular or irregular army. Enrolling as a volunteer was a great opportunity for rapid integration and recognition, confirming refugees' right to receive land and housing as well as a social status.

Conscripts had to follow the general procedure of compulsory military service in the active army and then in the reserve army, serving twenty years in active service and an additional five years in the reserves. Men who served in the [artillery](#), gendarmerie, and band service were in active service for twenty years. Naval recruits had twelve years for active service and five years in the reserves.^[11] However, military active service was supposed to take two years for men serving in the [infantry](#) and transportation service and three years for those serving in the other land services, the gendarmerie and music bands, and five years for the navy. The length of service was frequently updated by decree issued by the minister of war. The first one year extension was proclaimed as early as August 1914 after the [secret alliance](#) with [Germany](#) was signed on 2 August 1914 and the call for the general mobilization was issued.^[12] In early summer 1914, the Ottoman forces were composed of about 150,000 men. Over the course of the war, about 2,873,000 men would be mobilized.^[13]

Various forms of recruitment coexisted in the Ottoman Empire. Although military reform since the 19th century had emphasized the Regular Nizami Army, volunteerism still existed. Only men who were exempt from conscription could serve as volunteers in the irregular army. In peripheral regions where compulsory military service was not established due to the tribal and nomadic life of the inhabitants, volunteerism was a substitute for recruitment. Most of the volunteers served in [Teşkilat-i](#)

Mahsusa, in armed bands [*çete*] to protect the home front and in guerrilla warfare. At its highest point, *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* had 30,000 members and a significant number of volunteers.^[14] At the beginning of the war, Arab notables formed volunteer units to express their loyalty to the central imperial state. For example, the Lebanese Druze emir Shakib Arslan (1869-1946). The Kurdish Tribal Light Cavalry Regiments [*Aşiret Hafif Süvari Alayları*] in addition to repressing domestic troubles were used during the war as auxiliary military forces in guerrilla warfare in the Third Army in the Caucasus against Russia and in Mesopotamia against Great Britain. In 1914, the number of volunteers in this irregular cavalry was estimated at 50,000 men.^[15]

Discrimination against non-Muslims

The Temporary Law tried to include non-Muslims in military service in order to mobilize all constituents of the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, the text of the law was not without ambiguity; article 34 divided military service into two categories, armed and unarmed service. It did not specify the criteria or who would be registered in which category. In practice, the unarmed service became “labour battalions” which existed during the Balkan Wars under the name of “service battalions” [*Hizmet taburları*]. Most of the time, non-Muslim soldiers, mainly Armenians and Greeks, were appointed to the unarmed service, even if they were physically fit for armed service. Initially, the old, young, and wounded were placed in the labour battalions.^[16] On the eve of the First World War, it was obvious that there was distrust of and perhaps a form of discrimination regarding non-Muslims. This continued during the war. On the first day of mobilisation, Enver Pasha issued an order that the labour battalions should consist of non-Muslims as much as possible.^[17]

Ottoman Assessments of Vulnerabilities and Territorial Security

The Ottoman army faced many shortcomings in the early 20th century, particularly regarding equipment. More than half of the heavy equipment and weapons had been lost during the Balkan Wars. Ammunition stocks were exhausted. Consequently, the Ottoman Empire needed to make mass purchases funded by loans.^[18]

Mobilisation Plan

The Primary Campaign Plan prepared in April 1914 addressed threats coming from a new Balkan coalition of Bulgaria, Greece, and Russia. After the events of July 1914, this plan was updated and officially changed on 6 September 1914. On 4 September, Friedrich Bronsart von Schellendorf (1864-1942) adapted the Primary Campaign Plan. In Syria, the Fourth Army was ordered to organize an attack on Egypt and the Third Army was ordered to plan offensive operations against Russia. However, there was an opposing point of view concerning overall Turkish strategy from the Second Assistant Chief of Staff Colonel Hafiz Hakkı Bey (1879-1915) to attack Russia in Tiflis, Batum, and Ardahan. The army forces remaining in Mesopotamia would guard Basra and threaten Afghanistan

and India. This proposal was shelved as the Ottoman General Staff assessed that it would take until late Spring 1915 to deploy the necessary forces for its implementation. On 4 October, Bey submitted a second plan to assist Romania and Bulgaria against Serbia. In addition, two offensives would be prepared: an attack on the Suez Canal and an offensive operation against Persia. This second plan was also not adopted. Both plans were considered far too ambitious given the weaknesses of the Ottoman army. According to the Turkish General Staff, these plans did not appropriately take account of resources and vulnerabilities and were predicated on Russian defeat at Tannenberg and the paralysis of Russia, France, and Great Britain by trench warfare on the Marne.

Mobilization progressed slowly because of the drastic changes within the recruitment system and problems with the recruitment districts. More than 1 million men had been mobilized with a combat force of circa 820,000. Despite the fact that it was much better than it had been during the Balkan Wars, the mobilization process was not geographically uniform. It was much easier in Western and Central Anatolia and not so effective in Eastern Anatolia and the Eastern provinces. Nevertheless, mobilisation was perhaps the least of the problem. A quarter of the men had to be sent home due to limitations in the supply of food, clothing, and equipment. Consequently, mobilization was not complete until early November 1914.

Logistical problems

Transportation was one of the more dire concerns in the Ottoman Empire, which provoked problems with supply and conveyance/dispatch. Relying on the sea for internal transportation, Ottoman maritime transport was impossible in Mediterranean Sea due to the British blockade and consequently only possible in the Marmara and Black seas. Despite its vast territory, the Ottoman Empire had only 5,759 km of single-rail lines. In addition, western and eastern Anatolia were not connected before the beginning of the war, especially the channels in the mountains Taurus and Amanos, which were completed only in September 1918. To reach the Caucasus front from Istanbul took about two months. The longest journey was perhaps to the Iraqi front. After a journey by train from Istanbul to Pozantı, the soldiers had to walk for two months before reaching their final destination.^[19] As for the road network, it was practically non-existent and the trucks sent from Germany and Austria-Hungary encountered several problems and sometimes broke down. There were also too few draft animals to transport material. All transportation between Germany and the Ottoman Empire was at the mercy of Romania and Bulgaria. Consequently, only a part of the help promised by Germany arrived.

Conclusion

The military reforms undertaken immediately after the Balkan Wars were realized and conscription was established at the local regional level. Enver Pasha promoted strong reforms to restore discipline and order among the Ottoman army and purged many officers. In May 1914, a new conscription law updated the Ottoman recruitment system. This reorganization minimized possible

exemptions from military service. All these changes had an impact on mobilization, which went on very slowly. Various forms of recruitment co-existed for regular as well as irregular forces. On the eve of the war, there were also many shortcomings in equipment and transportation logistics. Immediately after the beginning of the war, the Ottoman army began to suffer from a recurrent lack of manpower that became very problematic, especially given the high desertion rate after 1916.

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Notes

1. ↑ Moreau, Odile: *La Turquie dans la Grande Guerre. De l'Empire ottoman à la république de Turquie*, Paris 2016.
2. ↑ Beşikçi, Mehmet: *The Ottoman Mobilization of Manpower in the First World War. Between Voluntarism and Resistance*, Leiden 2012.
3. ↑ Uyar, Mesut/Erickson, Edward J.: *A Military History of the Ottomans*, Santa Barbara 2009, pp. 240-241.
4. ↑ S. H. A. T., 7N1638, Constantinople, report Nr 624, 3 August 1913.
5. ↑ S. H. A. T., 7N1638, Constantinople, report Nr 598, 26 March 1913.
6. ↑ Uyar/Erickson, *A Military History of the Ottomans* 2009.
7. ↑ S. H. A. T., 7N1638, Constantinople, report Nr 671, 12 January 1914.
8. ↑ van Os, Nicole A. N. M.: *Taking Care of the Soldiers' Families. the Ottoman State and the Muinisz aile maası*, in: Zürcher, Erik Jan (ed.): *Arming the State: Military Conscription in the Middle East and Central Asia, 1775-1925*, London 1999, pp. 95-110.
9. ↑ *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi [History of the Turkish Armed Forces]*, vol. 3, part 6 (1908-1920), book I, Ankara, Genelkurmay Basımevi, pp. 236-237.
10. ↑ Mesut/Erickson, *A Military History* 2009.
11. ↑ *Draftees who began their service before the age of twenty could enjoy a reduction. However this situation changed with a regulation issued on 29 April 1915. Cf. Shaw, Standford J.: The Ottoman Empire in World War I, vol. 1, Prelude to War, Ankara 2006, pp. 157-158.*
12. ↑ BBA-BEO 322709, Harbiye Tezkere [War Ministry, Official messages] 501/367; BBA-İrade 14373, July, 20 1330/ August 20, 1914. Cf. Shaw, *The Ottoman Empire* 2006, p. 158.
13. ↑ Beşikçi, *The Ottoman Mobilization* 2012, pp. 113-115.
14. ↑ Shaw, *The Ottoman Empire* 2006, p. 373.
15. ↑ Olson, Robert: *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925*, Austin 1989, p. 13.
16. ↑ Beşikçi, *The Ottoman Mobilization* 2012, pp. 128-130.
17. ↑ Özdemir, Zekeriya: *I. Dünya Savaşında Amele Taburları [The labour battalions during World War I]*, M.A. Thesis, Gazi Üniversitesi 1994, p. 31.

18. ↑ Uyar / Erickson, *A Military History* 2009, p. 243.
19. ↑ Sakaoğlu, Necdet: *Bir Osmanlı Neferin I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları* [Memoirs of an Ottoman soldier during World War I], in: *Tarih ve Toplum*, no. 11, November 1984, pp. 49-50.

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