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World at War: Final Research Paper

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Elise Nelson
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World War I is often overlooked in the shadow of World War II. Because World War II was much more recent, there is more general knowledge about it than about the Great War. This being said, even within the general knowledge of the latter, there does not seem to be much on the war that occurred in the Middle East during this time, especially the factors contributing to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the redrawing of the borders of distinct nation-states in the Middle East. However, the impact of the fall of the Ottoman Empire was not only important in the area of the war itself, but also with the subject of imperialism from Western European nations. The Ottoman Empire reigned for over five centuries throughout today's Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Southern Europe, starting around 1299. However, after World War I, it completely disbanded, creating several nation-states. What led to the fall of this massive Empire? There seem to be several factors including actions of World War I. Both the Allies and the Entente fought in the Middle East, each side supporting different groups within the Ottoman Empire. During the World War I period, the Young Turks, those in government in the Ottoman Empire, desired to create a "Turanian nationality."¹ This included a "Turkification" of the non-Turkish areas of the Empire.² The Germans supported this effort, while Britain and France

¹ Eliezer Tauber, *Arab Movements in World War I* (New York: Routledge, 2013), file:///C:/Users/EN/Downloads/9781135199784_googlepreview.pdf.

² Ibid.

supported the Arab nationalist revolt against the Young Turks.³ Were the actions of Western European nations in the Ottoman Empire part of the cause of the fall of the entire Empire? In this research paper, I will examine the relationship between Germany and the Young Turks, as well as the relationship between Britain and France and the Arab nationals. I will attempt to determine the intent of these relationships, as well as whether or not European actions in the Middle East were one of the causes of the fall of the Empire. I will also discuss the causes of the fall outside of the impact of European nations.

What are the factors that led to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and what part did World War I play in it? One of the key factors is the fact that the Ottoman Empire was composed of many different people groups with very diverse identities and ideologies. Although most people in the Ottoman Empire considered themselves to be Muslims, not all of them considered themselves, or liked to consider themselves, Ottoman, much less Turkish. Multi-ethnic identities naturally divided thought in the Empire. Even so, Islam played an important part of the Ottoman Empire, as the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire considered himself to be the Caliph. Many people refused to give him this honor, which created tension throughout the Empire. However, Islam also created a sense of unity in the Empire, in a way, when the rule of the Empire was considered Islamic, not Turkish. In this perspective, the Ottoman Empire was more of a “domination of Muslims over non-Muslims” instead of Turks over non-Turks.⁴ The goal of the Islamic Empire

³ Donald M. McKale, *Germany and the Arab Question Before World War I*, (Wiley, 1997), https://www.jstor.org/stable/24449971?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=arab&searchText=world&searchText=war&searchText=1&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Darab%2Bworld%2Bwar%2B1&refreqid=search%3A6ee23555b278ed6b7e3de08dc45e885e&seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents.

⁴ Bernard Lewis, *The Ottoman Empire and Its Aftermath*, (Sage Publications, 1980), <https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2443/stable/260456?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=Ottoman&searchText=Empire&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoAdvancedSearch%3Facc%3Don%26amp%3Bsd%3D%26amp%3Bc5%3DAND%26amp%3Bq0%3DOttoman%2BEmpire%26amp%3Bed%3D%26amp%3Bf6%3Dall%26amp%3Bgroup%3Dnone%26amp%3Bf2%3Dall%26amp%3Bf0%3Dall%26amp%3Bf5%3Dall%26amp%3Bc3%3DAND%26amp%3Bpage%3D2%26amp%3Bf3%3Dall%26amp%3Bc4%3DAND%26amp%3Bc2%3DAND%26amp%3BsearchType%3D>

was to “uphold and enforce the law of Islam” and carry the message of the Prophet to all peoples.⁵ The people who converted to Islam apparently had full equality with their Muslim counterparts in the Empire, though practicing an alternate religion was allowed. Even so, many in the Ottoman Empire saw the war as fighting against non-Muslims, not necessarily against foreigners in general. In 1924, the Turkish Parliament decided to do away with Islamic law and replace it with more modernized laws, thus abolishing the Caliphate and secularizing the Empire.⁶ The economic state of the Islamic law was not stable enough for the Ottomans to build capital or to invest in corporations, or even form joint-stock companies like the Europeans were capable of doing.⁷ As if the Empire was not divided enough already, this act produced distrust and disunity among many of its citizens, as an Islamic State, or Caliphate so to say, no longer held them together. After this period of disunity, a sense of nationalism among the different ethnic groups in the Empire arose, including a Turkish nationalism.⁸ As Turkey, or more specifically the Ottoman government, pursued a “Turkification” of the Empire, rather than Islamification, the Arabs began to see themselves as casualties in this move.⁹ The Ottoman army began to discriminate against their Arab officers, and Turkish became “the only language

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⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Alan Mikhail and Christine M. Philliou, *The Ottoman Empire and the Imperial Turn*, (Cambridge University Press, 2012), [⁸ Lewis.](https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2443/stable/23274549?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=Fall&searchText=of&searchText=the&searchText=Ottoman&searchText=Empire&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3Facc%3Don%26amp%3Bfc%3Doff%26amp%3Bgroup%3Dnone%26amp%3Bwc%3Don%26amp%3BQuery%3DFall%2Bof%2Bthe%2BOttoman%2BEmpire&refreqid=search%3A5ed190b563a5c566197e19edab6879d9&seq=9#metadata_info_tab_contents.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

⁹ Tauber.

permitted in courts and government offices” even in the Arab provinces.¹⁰ Long in the making was an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire, which I will cover in more detail later on.

Along with the disestablishment of Islam as central power in the Ottoman Empire, European Imperialism also played a role disintegration of the Empire both before and after its fall. In 1882, Great Britain occupied Egypt, though the British had been expanding their influence in Egypt prior to this date. Egypt technically remained a member-state of the Ottoman Empire until 1914. The British had established a successful imperialism through their modern artillery and advanced technology that the Ottomans had a difficult time competing with. In addition to this, even prior to British occupation of Egypt, Egyptians were considering themselves less Ottoman and more “‘Egyptian’ in speech.”¹¹ Territorial loss of Egypt, as well as of Libya and Algeria, aided in the fall of the Ottoman Empire. In 1830, Algeria met French troops that were campaigning to imperialize the nation. The conclusion of the campaign was the total French annexation of the country of Algeria. Until this point, Algeria was considered part of the Ottoman Empire, though they had enjoyed diplomatic relations with several other countries outside of the rule of the Ottomans. However, the French ruled over Algeria in the mid-19th

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Maurus Reinkowski, *Uncommunicative Communication: Competing Egyptian, Ottoman and British Imperial Ventures in 19th-Century Egypt*, (Brill, 2014), https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2443/stable/24268895?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=Egypt&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DEgypt%26amp%3Bprq%3DBritish%2Bimperialism%26amp%3Bwc%3Doff%26amp%3Bfc%3Doff%26amp%3Bso%3Drel%26amp%3Bswp%3Don%26amp%3Bhp%3D25&refreqid=search%3A8df825ef9db45ada516e6dce918c91fd&seq=8#metadata_info_tab_contents.

century, not the Ottomans.¹² Because of Egypt and Algeria, the Ottoman Sultan resolved to “reestablish direct Ottoman rule” in Libya in 1835.¹³

We have established that both the de-Islamification of the Ottoman Empire and the growing presence of European Imperialism contributed to the lead-up of the fall of the Ottoman Empire. I will now transition into the specifics of the relationship between the Ottomans and the Alliance and the Arabs and the Entente, and how these relationships during World War I impacted the Ottomans. On August 2, 1914, representatives of the German and Ottoman Empires signed an alliance treaty to join forces in World War I. Up to this point, as mentioned previously, the Ottoman Empire had already begun to fall apart, from moves towards independence from places such as Serbia, Romania, Greece, and Bulgaria to European Imperialism in territories of North Africa. The latter issue was more of a concern for the Empire, so they attempted to find a protector against these powers. For Germany, who was located in Central Europe, finding an ally closer to the Russian Empire and the Eastern front was of high importance. Another factor of extreme importance and potential use to the Germans was Islam. They believed that, as the majority of the Ottoman Empire was Islamic, they could use this fact to recruit and mobilize troops within the Empire to fight against the Entente. If uniting to fight

¹² Hussein Ait Ahmad, *Algeria's Struggle for Independence*, (Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, 1955), https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2443/stable/41392627?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=Ottoman&searchText=Empire&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3Fswp%3Don%26amp%3BQuery%3DOttoman%2BEmpire%26amp%3Bprq%3D%2528Imperialism%2529%2BAND%2B%2528Algeria%2529%26amp%3Bfc%3Doff%26amp%3Bwc%3Doff%26amp%3Bhp%3D%25%26amp%3Bso%3Drel&refreqid=search%3Ae26bac8bb4a8e2b5ebda9ed24ddafa27&seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents.

¹³ Carole Collins, *Imperialism and Revolution in Libya*, (Middle East Research and Information Project, Inc., 1974), https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2443/stable/3011335?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=Imperialism&searchText=in&searchText=Libya&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DImperialism%2Bin%2BLibya&refreqid=search%3A9078224ea315306f531d5ef101597a92&seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents.

against colonialism was a potential likelihood for these people, as the Germans believed it to be, then they would fight against the British and French colonies as well, which would aid Germany in their war efforts. Germany was also interesting in the Caliph in the Ottoman Empire and thought they could benefit from uniting with him. If Germany aligned itself with the caliph, and the caliph declared jihad, or Holy War against the infidel, they would see Muslims running the Entente powers out.¹⁴ The Germans seemed to put a lot of faith into this effort, as shown in the photo of the German admiral Guido von Usedom wearing an Ottoman uniform at Gallipoli.¹⁵ However, after pursuing a pan-Islamic movement among the Ottoman world, the Germans turned out to be “attributing to much importance to Muslims’ identity as Muslims, disregarding the great differences between the Muslim societies.”¹⁶ Although Jihad was indeed declared in Istanbul, German officers spoke of the reaction of the Muslim peoples as indifference. The people were uninterested in joining together to fight largely because they disagreed in many aspects with each other about Islamic ideology. Along with this, at the time of World War I, they were more interested in the independence and development of their own nations rather than a united Islamic state. This rise in nationalism, although in a way aligned with German ideals, ended up backfiring on Germany. A contributing factor to this lack of unity and lack of desire or action for jihad was the fact, mentioned previously, that the Ottoman Empire had already de-Islamified, the sultan being much less of an Islamic leader than a political leader. Thus, the German and Ottoman Empires had different goals and initiatives; this strongly played a part in

¹⁴ Erik-Jan Zürcher, *Jihad and Islam in World War I*, (Leiden University Press, 2016), <http://oapen.org/viewer/web/viewer.html?file=http://oapen.org/document/605452>.

¹⁵ See photo, <https://orientxxi.info/l-orient-dans-la-guerre-1914-1918/germany-s-failed-pan-islamic-propaganda-campaign-of-1914-1918,0996>.

¹⁶ Zürcher.

the eventual failure of the German propaganda campaign and of the German-Ottoman alliance in general.¹⁷ The alliance with Germany, although bringing failure for the Germans, also brought failure for the Ottomans, as the Alliance was not on the winning side of World War I. With the victory of the Entente powers brought British and French influences in the Middle East.

How did Great Britain and France get involved in the Middle East in the first place? As Germany made the alliance with the Ottoman Empire, the Entente powers supported the Arab nationals that were revolting against the Empire in order to counterattack. I cannot seem to find much information about the reasoning behind the Entente powers joining with the Arab nationalists; however, as they were in a war with the Alliance, it can be assumed the reasoning that they supported the ones fighting those aligned with their enemy. In a succession of ten letters during 1915 and 1916, British High Commissioner Henry McMahon attempted to reach Arab support in a fight against the Ottomans. He sent these letters to Ali ibn Husain, Sharif of Mecca during World War I, in order to promise British support of an independent Arab nation-state. One of the letters, written October 24, 1915, declares the assurance of the government of Great Britain, “without detriment to the interests of her ally, France,” to “recognize and support the independence of the Arabs in all the regions”.¹⁸ Great Britain was going to honor and protect the Arab “Holy Places,” as well as give advice and assistance when needed.¹⁹ McMahon also states that the understanding of Great Britain is that if they align with the Arabs, the Arabs will not align with other powers, nor receive advice from other powers. He even, towards the end of the letter, states Great Britain’s “sympathy” towards Arab aspirations that will “result in a firm

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Henry McMahon, *Letter to Ali ibn Husain*, 1915, quoted in Internet Modern History Sourcebook, (Fordham University, 1998), <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1915mcmahon.asp>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

and lasting alliance.”²⁰ This alliance includes the immediate removal of Turks from their countries, thus “freeing of the Arab peoples from the Turkish yoke.”²¹ Also included in these letters is the promise of the Palestinian lands and the idea that Sharif Hussain himself would become the leader of these territories. However loyal the British may seem to be to this declaration, they completely betrayed the Arabs, as French powers secretly entered into an agreement with them in 1916, distributing areas of the Middle East to different nations. Some of the territory went under British influence and other parts under French influence, including today’s still contested territory of Israel-Palestine. This agreement, the Sykes-Picot agreement, was executed after the victory over the Ottoman Empire and the Alliance in August of 1920.²² A newspaper article from The Times in 1920 states British loyalty to Jews and the Zionist movement, saying that “the Jews have always desired to be under British trusteeship.”²³ This article also states that Great Britain would work with the Jews in establishing a homeland for their people, although Great Britain had already promised this land to the Arabs.²⁴ So, although the British government successfully convinced the Arabs to align with them in order to fight the Alliance, they betrayed them after the war was won in order to continue to seek their own best

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Samee-el-Hasan, *The Great War of 1914-1919 and the Middle East*, (Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, 2010), https://www.jstor.org/stable/24711030?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=World&searchText=War&searchText=I&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DWorld%2BWar%2BI%26amp%3Bhp%3D25%26amp%3Bswp%3Don%26amp%3Bso%3Drel%26amp%3Bprq%3D%2528Britain%2Band%2Bthe%2BOttomans%2529%2BAND%2B%2528Middle%2BEast%2529%26amp%3Bwc%3Doff%26amp%3Bfc%3Doff&refreqid=search%3Acfaffa25bfaa0342efb82172efbb912&seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents.

²³ “Zionist Rejoicings. British Mandate for Palestine Welcomed,” (The Times:1920), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Rem_o_conference#/media/File:Zionist_Rejoicings._British_Mandate_For_Palestine_Welcomed,_The_Times,_Monday,_Apr_26,_1920.png.

²⁴ Ibid.

interests, although it means breaking a promise and agreement with another group of people. In fact, the British, through people like T. E. Lawrence, with Sharif Husain, led the “Great Arab Revolt,” which led to Ottoman loss of territory.²⁵ However, when later on the Sharif needed British aid in establishing his kingdom, the British did not help; Sharif had “served [his] purpose, namely to weaken the Ottoman power.”²⁶ Victory was the top priority of everyone in the war, including the British, even if it meant betrayal.

In conclusion, there were many factors that led to the fall of the Ottoman Empire; an empire that had ruled for over 500 years. Though once a multi-ethnic empire, prior to 1924, the Ottomans gradually became more Islam-centered. After 1924, however, the Islamic laws that had once governed and connected the many different lands in the Empire were done away with and replaced with modern laws. This de-Islamification led to a decreasing unity among the peoples of the Ottoman Empire. Not only did these individual nations begin seeking after independence from the Turkey-centered Ottoman government, but also European Imperialism had been taking over many of Ottoman lands. Both of these factors added to the fall of the once largely impactful empire. Another huge factor, again, is the fact that the Ottomans joined forces with Germany and the other Allied powers in World War I. Because they did this, and because the British and the Entente supported the Arab nationals fighting against the Ottomans, the Ottoman state was greatly weakened. Not only did the Allied powers lose the war and take the Ottomans down with them, but the lasting influence of the British and French did damage to the remains of the Empire as well. The relationships between the Germans and the Ottomans and the British and the Arabs were, one can assume, formed by the European nations for selfish, self-seeking reasons. Both of

²⁵ Samee-el-Hasan.

²⁶ Ibid.

the sides used their Middle-Eastern allies for their own advance, though this did not work out well in the end for those in these nations. The decision to join the Germans was disastrous for the Ottomans, though it was equally as horrible for the Arabs that sided with the British. There was no way for the Arabs to ensure that the British would keep their promises, nor was there a way for them to enforce it. The result was the drawing of the borders between modern-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, ruled by the British and French for over 30 years after World War I.²⁷ Getting involved in World War I directly was detrimental for the Ottoman Empire; they had no chance of surviving.

²⁷ Ibid.

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