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*Beyond Dominant Paradigms in Ottoman  
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A Tribute to Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj

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Donald Quataert and Baki Tezcan

İSAM 

# Why did the Ottomans enter a European War in 1914? New sources, new views

*Mustafa Aksakal\**

On October 27, 1914, at dark, the Ottoman fleet and two German ships steamed out of the Straits and headed north towards the Russian Black Sea coast. They then opened fire on several port cities and towns, sank Russian vessels, and took some eighty crew, including officers, prisoners-of-war. Why had the Ottomans, whose empire was now largely confined to Asia, entered a European war? The customary explanation portrays the decision for war as the work of a tiny inner circle of the Committee of Union and Progress, a small group of three or four men, whose actions and policies have been ascribed to their “simple-minded” intellectuals.<sup>1</sup> A re-examination of the sources, however, questions this old picture. The assassination on June 28 in Sarajevo of Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Habsburg throne, plunged the European powers into a deep crisis, one that would lead to Austria-Hungary’s declaration of war on Serbia one month later. In Istanbul, meanwhile, military and political leaders succeeded in turning the July crisis to their advantage by persuading Berlin of the merits of an Ottoman alliance, signed on August 2, 1914. From the Ottoman perspective, a military alliance with a great power stood as a major diplomatic achievement. Isolated internationally for much of the

\* American University, Washington, D.C.

1 Yusuf Hikmet Bayur, *Türk İnkılâbı Tarihi*, vol. 2/3: *Paylaşmalar* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1951), 2, 5.

nineteenth century and down to 1914, the empire had suffered a series of military defeats and territorial losses, in the Balkans and North Africa, and on the Russian frontier. The alliance was seen as a new foundation for the Ottomans' international security and future industrialization once the war was over. This view was also expressed in books, journals, and newspapers appearing before the war, although a discussion of that material is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>2</sup> Thus while Berlin's leaders stipulated as a condition for their alliance that the Ottomans intervene immediately in the war, their Istanbul counterparts dragged their feet for three long months until it became clear, in late October 1914, that the alliance would not survive any more delay.

### **The “Escape” of the *Goeben***

Even before Franz Ferdinand's assassination it was rumored in the press that the German battlecruiser SMS *Goeben* would join the Ottoman navy in the case of a world war. When war came, the Grand Vezir Said Halim Pasha and Minister of War Enver Pasha asked that the *Goeben* as well as other German and Austro-Hungarian ships be sent to the eastern Mediterranean in support of the Ottoman navy. Cemil Bey, the Ottoman military attaché in Berlin, reported on the status of the request for the *Goeben*.

#### *Document 1:*

Previously this newspaper reported that the German admiral aboard the dreadnought cruiser *Goeben* will arrive in Istanbul on May 15, 1914, to pay his respects to the sultan. Today we are publishing a picture [of the ship] for our readers. The dreadnought *Goeben* is not an unfamiliar sight to the people of Istanbul. It was the first ship of its kind to call on our port. During the Balkan wars this marvel of a warship anchored for an extended period of time in Istanbul harbor. With a displacement of 23,000 tons, the dreadnought cruiser reaches a speed of 28.5 knots. This kind of power and speed in a vessel is unprecedented and only the German navy has been able to produce such a ship [*not true*, M.A.]. The *Goeben* has a sister ship, the

<sup>2</sup> See my *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1-41.

*Moltke*, and it has been rumored in the European press that the Ottoman government would purchase one of them. However, as we commented earlier, it is unlikely that the German government would consider selling these two ships. The battleship *Goeben* has remained in the Mediterranean ever since the Balkans wars and never returned home. Rumors in the naval circles of Europe claim that if war broke out between the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance, this moving fortress – possessing the speed of a torpedo and equipped with ten 28 centimeter guns – would assume the duties of our *Hamidiye* [an Ottoman ship]. And indeed, considering the naval balance in the Mediterranean, the *Goeben* could accomplish this task quite easily. An imperial decree has been issued for the *Goeben*'s passage through the Çanakkale straits for May 14, [1914].<sup>3</sup>

*Document 2:*

Extremely Confidential. August 3, 1914. I learned very confidentially from the [German] War Ministry that the emperor [Kaiser Wilhelm II] will possibly authorize the battleship *Goeben*'s action alongside [our] Imperial Navy in the Black Sea.<sup>4</sup>

### **Why Germany?**

Each of the great powers pursued interests in the Ottoman Near East. Britain had occupied Egypt, which formally remained under Ottoman suzerainty, and had established from there direct links to India through informal and formal control over the southern shores of Arabia and the Gulf, while the French increased their influence in Syria. Yet to the Ottomans no power appeared as threatening as Russia. In early August, the Russian ambassador at Istanbul wrote that the Ottomans, whose emissaries were putting out feelers for an alliance, should be strung along until Russia could seize the Straits – a cable intercepted and read by the Ottomans. With breathtaking clarity, the Russian ambassador in Paris reported that the French proposed responding to Ottoman overtures by making promises to the Ottomans that could simply be broken later.

3 *Tanin*, May 7, 1914, 1.

4 Archive of the Turkish General Staff, Ankara (ATASE hereafter), Birinci Dünya Harbi, Klasör 243, Yeni Dosya 1009, Fihrist 7-2, August 3, 1914.

*Document 3:*

*Urgent.* [...] I believe that the danger of a German defeat and the passionate desire to reap some tangible benefit from the current war is motivating Turkey and perhaps also Bulgaria to play footsie with us. Without believing their word for a second, I think that we should not reject them since that would push them into the arms of our enemies. The idea of the formation of a Balkan bloc that would include the Ottoman Empire is only useful to us until that moment when circumstances will allow us to enter the Straits ourselves. Thus if I may, I would suggest that it would be desirable to involve the Ottoman Empire in further negotiations about a possible alliance between us.<sup>5</sup>

*Document 4:*

[Prime Minister Gaston] Doumergue has confirmed the views [expressed to us previously]. The Ottoman Empire fears that we would use the current situation and possibly a military victory over Austria and Germany as an opportunity for seizing the Straits and Constantinople. [Henri] Ponsot<sup>6</sup> therefore thinks we should calm [the Ottomans'] nerves by, for example, offering to guarantee the integrity of Ottoman borders. According to Doumergue, doing so would not prevent us from resolving the Straits question according to our wishes after the war.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Ottoman view from Berlin**

The military attaché in Berlin, Cemil Bey, described the war's first operations in what are clearly cautious terms. In Istanbul, this report was a signal to the military leaders to delay any intervention as much as possible, but it also explained the great intensity and pressure that Berlin now applied on its Ottoman alliance partner to jump into the fray, urging it to

5 Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg, i.Br. (BA-MA), RM 40/457, sheet 254, Giers to Petersburg, August 6, 1914, no. 631. Also in *Internationalen Beziehungen im Zeitalter des Imperialismus* (IBZI hereafter), Series II, vol. 6/1, no. 9, Giers to Sazonov, August 5, 1914, 6-7.

6 Henri Ponsot became High Commissioner of Syria and Lebanon in 1926.

7 IBZI, Series II, vol.6/1, no. 65, Izvolskii to Sazonov, August 11, 1914, 44, and n. 2.

tie up Russian troops in the Caucasus and British forces in Egypt and to provide relief to Austria and Germany.

*Document 5:*

Cipher sent by Military Attaché Cemil Bey, Berlin, August 12, 1914.

To be opened by Minister of War Enver Pasha personally.

Very Confidential

Today the naval secretary asked for me and told me the following: the Ottomans have not yet made the courageous decision to fight shoulder to shoulder with us on the battlefield. At least let the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* go; they will hold the Black Sea on their own. If your government desires it can pretend to lodge a protest – it can even fire shots into the air. Just look away and let the *Goeben* go into the Black Sea and return [to Istanbul]. If you march then Bulgaria and Romania will follow, and the Muslim world will win.<sup>8</sup>

*Document 6:*

Cipher sent by Military Attaché Cemil Bey, Berlin, September 24, 1914.

To be opened by Minister of War Enver Pasha personally.

From conversations with important persons here at the foreign, war, and naval office over the last few days and from the general atmosphere, I am now of the following opinion. Since I am far from the battlefield and cannot judge the conditions of enemy armies first-hand, I cannot vouch for its absolute correctness. And while a decisive battle would probably change the situation drastically, I see the current situation as follows:

The French army has moved swiftly to the Verdun-Paris line. First the counterattack, and now the strong resistance that the French army has been able to put up, is evidence that initial German plans have partially failed.

<sup>8</sup> ATASE, Birinci Dünya Harbi, Klasör 243, Yeni Dosya 1009, Fihrist 7-4, August 12, 1914.

Observers are now of the following view. The army faces a very difficult objective in the west. It will not be possible to occupy France within a few weeks as had been thought. Unless a conclusive battle alters the situation it will be necessary to take territory piece by piece and this will take much longer than expected. The Allied powers are certain to gain an advantage from this as a result. Even if there is still faith that in the end the army in the west will succeed, it is clear now that the hopes based on the successful offensives launched before September 5 have now been entirely disappointed; the sheer magnitude of the task is now being fully felt. The latest news coming from Romania is no cause for joy. The leaders at the foreign office give the appearance that they still trust the Romanians but the deputy naval secretary declared yesterday that if the Austrian army is defeated Romania will join the Russians. Many of [Berlin's leaders] believe this as well. As a result they greatly desire that we declare war on Russia very soon. They say we should declare war on Britain and launch an offensive operation against them in Egypt. If we fear that such an operation would leave Istanbul and Thrace unprotected against the Greeks and others, they say we should position our mobile army at the Çatalca line and Istanbul environs; then we should seize naval control of the Black Sea with our fleet and bombard and occupy Hoca Bey (? illegible, M.A.) and other ports. They also urge us to invade the Caucasus with our forces at Erzurum. I have been told all this over and over at the foreign office.

Initially the Germans desired our intervention in order to gain an ally. Now they are confronted with new difficulties at every moment and they feel a strong need for our support. They have tied their hopes to us rather than to Romania or Bulgaria. They tried to overpower the French in one strike, and thus the first marches and offensives were extraordinarily long and strenuous. The troops are exhausted with fatigue and the units have suffered great casualties in men, officers, and commanders. A large amount of materiel and munitions have also been expended. In one brigade headquarters a single commanding officer is left. The German army has therefore lost some of its strength and the initial optimism has not survived unscathed. There are those who now say that operations should have been launched with greater caution. But while there were some instances of panic they were immediately quashed through the dedication of the officers and generals. The new army corps now being established are given both partial and full firearm training to make them as strong as possible; and so

they have not yet been put into the field. Because of the crucial role now played by artillery, all munitions factories are continuously in production. Therefore there is no hope for our munitions orders with Krupp for the near future. Despite all of these problems I still believe that the German army will be successful in the end. However, if the French army is not decisively defeated in battle and continues to retreat and then resist successfully, then the Allied powers in the end might marshal overwhelming forces. Then the strength of the German army might still achieve victory, but under these circumstances this victory will be a weak one.<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion

Had the Ottomans opted for neutrality and remained outside the war, there is no doubt that life in the eastern Mediterranean from Istanbul and Bagdad to Cairo would have run its course very differently in the twentieth century. But these sources demonstrate that the Ottoman road to war was not paved with a blind faith in German power or a love for German gold, as has been argued, but that it was filled with the fears of the empire's partition by Russia, Britain, and France after the war. Talat Bey's offer of an alliance to Russia in May 1914, and Enver's in August 1914, therefore, were simply different acts from the same political theater. As Kâzım Karabekir put it in 1937: "Like all societal events, our entering the war was not the work of a single individual, but the result of the coming together of a complicated set of factors and circumstances."<sup>10</sup>

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9 ATASE, Birinci Dünya Harbi, Klasör 243, Yeni Dosya 1009, Fihrist 24-1 to 24-5, September, 24, 1914.

10 Kâzım Karabekir, *Cihan Harbine Neden Girdik, Nasıl Girdik, Nasıl İdare Ettik*, vol. II: *Cihan Harbine Nasıl Girdik?* (Istanbul: Tecelli Basımevi, 1937).