

# Wasp or Mosquito? The Arab Revolt in Turkish Military History

EDWARD J. ERICKSON

*Clark Center for Global Engagement, State University of New York at Cortland*

*Email: [ederickson100@gmail.com](mailto:ederickson100@gmail.com)*

## ABSTRACT

*This article presents the idea that the official Turkish military histories of the First World War are underutilized by western historians in assessing the Arab Revolt of 1916-1918. In popular culture much of what many people believe to be true about the Arab Revolt comes from the work of Colonel T.E. Lawrence (famously known as Lawrence of Arabia). However, for historians, a larger issue arises from the fact the English language historiography of the Arab Revolt is derived almost entirely from non-Turkish and non-Arabic sources. *Wasp or Mosquito? The Arab Revolt in Turkish Military History* corrects that by examining the modern Turkish official histories. This article notes that the Ottoman and Turkish narrative asserts the Arab Revolt had a very limited effect on the war in the Middle East and that the Ottoman centre of gravity lay in the retention of Medina rather than in defeating the northern Arab armies associated with Lawrence. This article also identifies and compares the extant published Turkish official military histories with their British counterparts and informs the reader about some of the kinds of valuable and hitherto unknown information which may be found in the Turkish works.*

*T.E. Lawrence and Arab forces used guerrilla tactics to overcome the Ottoman Turks during the Arab Revolt.<sup>1</sup>*

*Counterinsurgency, US Army Field Manual 3-24*

## Introduction

The irregular operations of T.E. Lawrence and others, during the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans in 1916-1918, have achieved almost mythic status in the literature of

---

<sup>1</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency, Field Manual 3-24*, (GPO: December 2006), pp. 1-3.

both the First World War and in the study of counterinsurgency.<sup>2</sup> In many quarters, the success and effectiveness of Arab operations in attriting Ottoman strength and diverting resources from the main theatres of war are accepted almost without dispute.<sup>3</sup> This theme in the historiography and received wisdom has gone unchallenged for almost a century without inquiry into the Ottoman record. In fact, the Ottomans waged a very successful counterinsurgency campaign against the Arabs, Lawrence and others. This article examines the Turkish military histories of the Palestine and Hejaz campaigns to establish the affect the Arab Revolt had on Ottoman army operations in those theatres.<sup>4</sup>

The term Arab Revolt in the context of the war in the Middle East in the First World War has come to mean the rebellion of the Hashemite leader, Sharif Hussein ibn Ali and his struggle against Ottoman rule in the Hejaz. In the military sense, the term has come to mean the military operations of the Arab armies of Hussein's sons Abdullah ibn Hussein, Ali ibn Hussein and Feisal ibn Hussein. The Arab Revolt broke out on 10 June 1916 when Ali fired a single rifle shot from his window in Mecca and it ended with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in late October 1918. In terms of the western context of the First World War, the term Arab Revolt became nearly synonymous with the guerrilla operations waged by Thomas Edward (T.E.) Lawrence (well-known as Lawrence of Arabia). These overlapping narratives obscure the larger theme and scope of the Ottoman struggle for control of the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant.

The English language historiography of the Arab Revolt presents the idea that Arab armies, composed small regular components and large bodies of irregular tribal

---

<sup>2</sup> This is a vast and growing field of popular history. For recent examples see N. Faulkner, *Lawrence of Arabia's War*, S Anderson, *Lawrence in Arabia* (2013); J. Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire* (2009); M. Korda, *Hero: The Life and legend of Lawrence of Arabia* (2012); J. Schneider, *Guerrilla Leader, T.E Lawrence and the Arab Revolt* (2011). Earlier examples include M. Asher, *Lawrence, The Uncrowned King of Arabia* (1999); B. Liddell Hart, *T.E. Lawrence in Arabia and After* (1934); L. James, *The Golden Warrior: The Life and legend of Lawrence of Arabia* (1995), J. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorised Biography of T.E. Lawrence* (1989). This is a partial listing of the extant literature.

<sup>3</sup> As noted in the epigraph. The United States military has seized on the idea of Lawrence's operations as being excellent examples of creative and innovative problem solving. See also, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-3, *Tactics*, (GPO: 1997), p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> This article presents the official Turkish view of these military operations. It is not an assessment of the academic validity of this history, nor is it an assessment of Ottoman operations and strategy. Finally, it is not assessment of the periodization of the Arab Revolt nor is it an explanation of why the official Turkish military histories focus on military operations at the expense of cultural, social, and demographic factors.

## THE ARAB REVOLT IN TURKISH MILITARY HISTORY

warriors, reinforced and coached by a tiny number of British and French advisors, achieved dramatic successes wildly out of proportion to the resources expended. This narrative suggests that, at the strategic level, low levels of allied military assistance to the Arabs forced the Ottomans to expend a larger share of defensive resources, an equation that favoured the resource-rich allies. The narrative suggests, at the operational level, that the Arab armies tied up large numbers of Ottoman soldiers and forced the Ottomans to divert forces from the front lines in Palestine to militarily insignificant locations such as Medina. At the tactical level, the English language narrative suggests that T.E. Lawrence invented a new form of irregular or guerrilla warfare, which itself became a template for such operations in the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Conspicuously absent from all of these themes is a counter-balancing narrative from the Ottoman side as well as information from Arab primary sources as well.<sup>6</sup> The modern Turkish narrative presents a much reduced portrait of the Arab Revolt, which deflates its importance relative to the Ottoman effort in the First World War. In metaphorical terms, the English language narrative presents the Arab Revolt as a dangerous wasp, while the Turkish histories present the Arab Revolt as more of an annoying mosquito.

In fact, the Ottoman historical narrative comprises a much wider and larger view of the events known as the Arab Revolt and is inclusive of the military operations in Asir, operations against the British in Yemen and the irregular war waged by Senussi tribesmen against the allies in Libya. This article will limit itself to expanding the English language narrative of the Ottoman war against the forces of Sharif Hussein ibn Ali and the armies commanded by his sons.

### **The military characteristics of the Arab Revolt in the English language**

An understanding of the principal elements of English-language narrative of the military aspects of Arab Revolt, the Arab armies, and their military campaigns is necessary to proceed with this analysis.<sup>7</sup> There were three Arab armies operational in the Arab Revolt, only two of which (Feisal and Abdullah's) figure prominently in the English-

---

<sup>5</sup> Boot, Max, *Invisible Armies, An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., 2013), pp. 274-287.

<sup>6</sup> Elizer Tauber's *The Arab Movements in World War I*, (London: Frank Cass, 1993) is a very useful exception to this trend.

<sup>7</sup> The best single book on the military aspects of the Arab Revolt is David Murphy's *The Arab Revolt, 1916-18*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd, 2008), which contains a valuable order of battle, good maps and a readable narrative in a chronological order. Murphy's book is a popular history uncluttered by citations, which lessens its value for the specialist; however, it is the place to start for readers newly interested in the broad sweep of the Arab Revolt.

language historiography. This is largely due to the structure of the British official histories, the writings of T.E. Lawrence and the near 100 percent reliance on western archives and records by subsequent historians over the last century. The major elements of the English-language military historiography of the Arab Revolt may be broadly arranged in three parts. These are: first, the securing of the Red Sea coast and attempts to isolate and capture Medina; second, the railway campaigns and the seizure of Aqaba; and third, the formation of the Arab regular army and operations on the flank of the British Egyptian Expeditionary force (EEF).

Arab forces under Emir Abdullah seized the towns of Mecca and Taif between 10 June and 22 September 1916. Reinforced by Emir Feisal, Abdullah's force became known as the Arab Eastern Army later in the year. Arab armies captured the coastal towns of Jiddah, Rabegh and Yanbu between September 1916 and January 1917. Abdullah's tribesmen then moved northward in December 1916 and captured Wejh on 25 January 1917. These battles secured the central Red Sea coast west of Medina and Mecca.

The most well-known of the Arab operations is called as the Railway Campaign, which began on 6 March 1917 and lasted until 17 August 1918. This campaign was largely conducted by Feisal and his Arab Northern Army. The object of this campaign was to isolate the Ottoman forces in Medina and prevent them from moving north to oppose, or flank, the impending offensive of the British General Sir Archibald Murray's EEF advance on Gaza. This set up one of the most famous incidents in the Arab revolt involving Lawrence and Feisal's seizure of Aqaba on 6 July 1917. The most well-known aspect today of the Aqaba narrative is Lawrence's circuitous and dangerous two-month trek deep in to the Arabian Peninsula's interior from Wejh to Aqaba. This battle secured not only the Red Sea coastline but the operational right flank of the EEF as well.

These Arab successes led to the creation of a small Arab regular army supported by Britain and France. This regular force became a component of Feisal's Northern Army, which then had a small regular army of about 2,000 men and an irregular tribal element of around 6,000 men. Feisal's Arab regular army seized the town of Tafilah on 25 Jan 1918. This encouraged Feisal but his next attack over-extended his army and they were defeated at Maan, 13-17 April 1918. The absence British offensive activity in the mid-spring and summer of 1918 led to inactivity on the Arab's part. However, as General Sir Edmund Allenby began his final campaigns in Palestine, Feisal and Lawrence operated on the flanks of the British advance on Damascus & Aleppo from 16 September-28 October 1918.

## **The English language historiography of the Arab Revolt**

## THE ARAB REVOLT IN TURKISH MILITARY HISTORY

It is from the British official histories and from the study of T.E. Lawrence that almost all of our contemporary English language understandings of what is known as the Arab Revolt emerge. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, published privately in 1922, was Lawrence's autobiographical account of his adventures fighting with the Arabs against the Turks in the First World War. Lawrence published a cleaned-up abridgement called *Revolt in the Desert* in 1927, which became the entry point for British understandings about what had happened with the Arabs in Arabia and Palestine. Lawrence's accounts were personalized and did not contain a wide-angle view of either the Arab Revolt or the Ottoman response. The official two-volume British military histories of the Egyptian and Palestine campaigns followed in 1928 and 1930. These histories included previously unavailable material about the Arab Revolt as it affected the British conduct of the First World War in the Middle East, thus supplementing the writings of Lawrence.

His Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO) published the first volume of the Middle East official histories, written by George MacMunn and Cyril Falls, in 1928 as the *History of the Great War, based on Official Documents: Military Operations Egypt and Palestine, From the Outbreak of War with Germany to June 1917*.<sup>8</sup> The volume contained two chapters about the Arabs, 'The Arab Revolt against Turkey' and 'The Arab Campaign against Turkey' (36 pages). The book also contains two chapters on the Senussi in Libya, 'The Continuation of the Operations against the Senussi' and 'The Western Oases and the Sudan' (34 pages). George MacMunn was an artillery officer who served from 1888-1925, made general, and who had fought against the Turks at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia. MacMunn was, therefore, well qualified and, moreover, was already a prolific author. Cyril Fall was a captain in the First World War who had yet to become a well-known historian.

In 1930, the HMSO published the second volume of the official history, written by Cyril Falls and A. F. Becke, as the *History of the Great War, based on Official Documents: Military Operations Egypt and Palestine, From June 1917 to the End of the War*.<sup>9</sup> Major A.F. Becke was a serving officer working in the historical section of the Imperial General Staff, who wrote the monumental four-volume official Order of Battle series as well as number of narrative battle histories. When MacMunn left the project, Major Becke picked up the effort to see it through to completion with Falls. There is little about

---

<sup>8</sup> MacMunn, George and Cyril Falls. *History of the Great War, based on Official Documents: Military Operations Egypt and Palestine, From the Outbreak of War with Germany to June 1917*, (London: HMSO, 1928).

<sup>9</sup> Falls, Cyril and A. F. Becke. *History of the Great War, based on Official Documents: Military Operations Egypt and Palestine, From June 1917 to the End of the War*, (London: HMSO, 1930).

the Arabs in this volume, a chapter titled 'The Arab Campaign' (16 pages) and a portion of Chapter XXVI titled 'The Arab Northern Army' (4 pages).

Altogether the official British military histories use a total 56 pages to describe the Arab Revolt. However, a plethora of books about T.E. Lawrence by well-qualified historians supplement these resources, but as a group, this body of work relies almost entirely on British archival materials. In addition to this body of work, there are a number of excellent studies of the Arab movements in the First World War, the activities of the British Arab Bureau in Cairo, and the complicated diplomacy and machinations of the British and the French in their quest to create post-war spheres of influence in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> Little of this material sheds much light on the Ottoman side of the war in the Middle East and how the Ottomans organized and fought its counterinsurgency campaigns against the Arabs.

### **The official Turkish military histories<sup>11</sup>**

The Turkish official histories of the Ottoman wars are produced by the Chief of Military History and Strategic Studies (Askeri Tarih ve Stratejik Etüt or ATASE) Directorate of the Turkish General Staff in Ankara, Turkey. The principal volume this article examines is Şükrü Erkal's *Birinci Dünya Harbinde Türk Harbi Vıncı, Hicaz, Asir, Yemen Cepheleri ve Libya Harekâtı 1914-1918*. [The Turkish War in the Hicaz, Asir and Yemen Front and Libyan Operations 1914-1918 in the First World War] published in 1978.<sup>12</sup> This is a large 835-page volume and it is extensively documented with 27 archival documents, 87 maps, 14 organizational charts and 12 photos. The first 145 pages contain an overview of the geography, demographics and Ottoman mobilization in 1914. The revolt in the Hejaz comprises 267 pages; the revolt in Asir (including British cooperation) comprises 19 pages; Yemen (including operations against the British and the Imam ibn Idris rebellion) comprise 213 pages; Libyan operations comprise 109 pages; and logistics comprise 99 pages.

---

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Westrate, Bruce, *The Arab Bureau, British Policy in the Middle East, 1916-1920*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> For a complete review of these works refer to Erickson, Edward J. "The Turkish Official Military Histories of the First World War, A Bibliographic Essay" in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 39, Number 3, July 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Erkal, Şükrü. *Birinci Dünya Harbinde Türk Harbi Vıncı, Hicaz, Asir, Yemen Cepheleri ve Libya Harekâtı 1914-1918* [First World War, Turkish War, Hicaz, Asir and Yemen Front and Libya Operations], (Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1978).

## THE ARAB REVOLT IN TURKISH MILITARY HISTORY

Other volumes also address various aspects of the Arab Revolt. ATASE republished *Birinci Dünya Harbinde Türk Harbi IVnü Cilt, Inci Kısım, Sina-Filistin Cephesi, Harbin Başlangıcından İkinci Gazze Muharebeleri Sonuna Kadar* [The Turkish War on the Sinai-Palestine Front, From the Beginning of the War to the Second Gaza Battles, in the First World War], written by Yahya Okçu and Hilmi Üstünsoy in 1979.<sup>13</sup> This is a 711 page book with six documents and five charts, 49 maps, 10 organizational diagrams, and 24 photographs. Portions of the book relevant to the Arab Revolt appear chronologically as follows: Hejaz and the situation with the Sherif (10 pages), Yemen-Asir Front (2 pages), Arab Revolt in Syria (3 pages), and the Hejaz question (10 pages).

In 1986, ATASE republished *Birinci Dünya Harbinde Türk Harbi IVnü Cilt, 2nci Kısım, Sina-Filistin Cephesi, İkinci Gazze Muharebesi Sonundan Mütarekesi'ne Kadar Yapılan Harekât (21 Nisan 1917-30 Ekim 1918.* [The Turkish War on the Sinai-Palestine Front, Operations from the Second Gaza Battle to the Mondros Armistice, 21 April 1917-30 October 1918, in the First World War] written by Merhum Kâmil Onalp, Hilmi Üstünsoy, Kâmuran Dengiz and Şükrü Erkal.<sup>14</sup> This is a 772-page book with 4 documents, 66 maps, 4 organizational diagrams, and 23 photographs. Portions of the book relevant to the Arab Revolt appear chronologically as follows: Syria and west Arabia (2 pages) and after the Battle of Megiddo (19 September 1918) Arab armies are mentioned briefly in portions of various pages (20 pages).

While not strictly an official history ATASE published in 1965-1967 a five-volume series written by a retired Turkish general named Fahri Belen, who had served as an Ottoman staff officer during the First World War. These books sequentially cover each year of the war. Belen's books supplement the official histories and were based on official records. Unfortunately, Belen only covered the major campaigns and battles leaving them somewhat incomplete. Each of these volumes comprises about 210 pages and the text is richly complemented with about 45 maps and a dozen organizational charts. An example of these five books is Belen, Fahri, *Birinci Cihan Harbinde Türk Harbi 1917*

---

<sup>13</sup> Okçu, Yahya and Hilmi Üstünsoy. *Birinci Dünya Harbinde Türk Harbi IVnü Cilt, Inci Kısım, Sina-Filistin Cephesi, Harbin Başlangıcından İkinci Gazze Muharebeleri Sonuna Kadar* [The Turkish War on the Sinai-Palestine Front, From the Beginning of the War to the Second Gaza Battles, in the First World War], (Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1979).

<sup>14</sup> Onalp, Merhum Kâmil, Hilmi Üstünsoy, Kâmuran Dengiz and Şükrü Erkal. *Birinci Dünya Harbinde Türk Harbi IVnü Cilt, 2nci Kısım, Sina-Filistin Cephesi, İkinci Gazze Muharebesi Sonundan Mütarekesi'ne Kadar Yapılan Harekât (21 Nisan 1917-30 Ekim 1918* [The Turkish War on the Sinai-Palestine Front, Operations from the Second Gaza Battle to the Mondros Armistice, 21 April 1917-30 October 1918, in the First World War], (Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1986).

*Yılı Hareketleri, IVncü Cilt* [The Turkish Front in the First World War, 1917], (Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1966),

### **Expanding the narrative of the Revolt of Sharif Hussein ibn Ali**

The author acknowledges that the modern Turkish official military histories produced by ATASE are the subject of criticism from some contemporary Turkish historians.<sup>15</sup> Similarly to their British counterparts the official Turkish military histories of the First World War were designed to assist in educating officers at staff colleges and, indeed, they are not inclusive of cultural, economic, and ethnic factors in a comprehensive way. With that in mind, I would like to point out the obvious... like their British counterparts, they contain huge amounts of information and significant historical analysis which are unavailable anywhere else. This information makes them an indispensable and critical resource for any historian seeking to discover a balanced perspective of the wars fought by the Ottoman Empire. Importantly, the Turkish official military histories are based on archival sources and military records. The narrative contained in the Turkish official military histories concerning the revolt of Sharif Hussein ibn Ali and his sons is simply too large to be compressed into an article of this length. Therefore, this article focuses on a few parts of the Turkish narrative that are additive and complementary to the English language historiography of these events. In effect, this article is something of a 'teaser' and it is written to arouse an interest in the Turkish side of the story and to encourage other historians to use the Turkish official military histories.

The overwhelming weight of the Turkish military narrative of the Arab revolt deals with Fahreddin Pasha's campaign to control the Hejaz and Asir.<sup>16</sup> From the Ottoman perspective, the centre of gravity of the campaign to control the Hejaz was the town of Medina, which also had significance as a religious and cultural objective as well. However, in the larger strategic sense, Medina (and the Hejaz itself) had almost no military value except that its retention directly affected the prestige of the Ottoman sultanate. Although today one might think that the possession of Mecca might serve

---

<sup>15</sup> For a recent example see Beşikçi, Mehmet, *The Ottoman Mobilization of Manpower in the First World War, Between Volunteerism and Resistance*, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012), who is very critical of the lack of emphasis in the official histories on social, cultural and economic factors.

<sup>16</sup> Fahreddin is sometimes referred to in the Turkish histories as Fahri Paşa or Fahrettin Paşş, and in the British histories always as Fakhri Pasha. Readers may also want to refer to Bilgin, İsmail, *Medine Müdafası, Çol Kaplan Fahrettin Paşa* [The Defense of Medina, Fahrettin Pasha, Desert Tiger], (Istanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2009) for a Turkish viewpoint.

## THE ARAB REVOLT IN TURKISH MILITARY HISTORY

Ottoman interests more than Medina, it was always the retention of Medina that occupied the Ottoman military in the First World War. In my previous work, I have argued that the retention of the Hejaz, Asir and Yemen were strategic liabilities for the Ottoman Empire in the First World War because stationing forces there diverted resources which would have been better employed elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Siege of Taif**

The siege of Taif is an example of the substantial information contained in the Turkish narrative, which adds significantly to our understanding of these events. The town of Taif, south-east of Mecca, was the summer home of the governor-general of the Hejaz and was besieged by Abdullah on 10 June and falling on 22 September 1916, with the loss of 5,000 prisoners. This much is known from the British official history.<sup>18</sup> A little more information may be gleaned from Murphy and Barr such as the fact that the governor-general, Galip Pasha himself, was in the town.<sup>19</sup> However, Şükrü Erkal devoted 23 pages to the siege of Taif.<sup>20</sup>

By reading the Turkish narrative, we learn that Taif was the headquarters of the Hejaz General Force, commanded by Galip, a major-general later known as Galip Paşinler).<sup>21</sup> The principal component of the force was the 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, under the command of Colonel Ahmet. At the time the town was isolated, its garrison composed the 1st and 3rd Battalions, 129<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment and the 22nd Artillery Battalion, as well as gendarmes, signals troops and engineers. According to Erkal, Ahmet had 54 officers, 39 NCOs, 932 trained men with rifles and 918 unarmed men, for a total of less than 3,000 Ottoman soldiers.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, they were short artillery shells and rifle ammunition. Galip was initially confident that he could successfully hold the town. The defences of the town were partitioned into three sectors with the 3/129 Infantry, commanded by Captain İsmail Hakkı, holding the northern perimeter and two companies from the 1/129 Infantry holding the southeast and southwest sectors respectively, with the remaining two companies of the 1/29 held in reserve near the town's central citadel. The garrison made a number of offensive sorties, on 18/19,

---

<sup>17</sup> Erickson, Edward J, *Ordered to Die, A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001), pp. 175-6.

<sup>18</sup> MacMunn and Falls, *Military Operations Egypt and Palestine, From the Outbreak of War with Germany to June 1917*, pp. 226-227.

<sup>19</sup> Murphy, *The Arab Revolt, 1916-18*, 34 and also Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>20</sup> Erkal, *Hicaz, Asir, Yemen Cepheleeri ve Libya Harekâtı*, pp. 230-253.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 231.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

19/20, and 27 June to disrupt the occupation of hills overlooking the town by Abdullah's encircling forces.

By mid-July it was evident to Galip that he was in serious trouble and he sent messages to Mecca for a relief column to launch toward Taif. The Mecca garrison was itself weak and composed of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 128<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 130<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments, with an irregular cavalry detachment and a few howitzers. It was itself under siege and lacked the strength to assist Galip. Other potential Ottoman reinforcements were penned in Jiddah and unavailable as well. By mid-July Galip's men were running low on artillery shells and the Sherif brought in howitzers, supplied by the British, to shell the town. The situation for the Ottoman defenders grew increasingly desperate in August when extremely hot weather set in. Colonel Ahmet's divisional orders on 25 August 1916, notified his men that the defence of the town now rested on his riflemen due to the shortage of artillery shells.<sup>23</sup> Unable to break out, starving and ridden with sickness, Galip surrendered the Hejaz General Force on 22 September.<sup>24</sup> Ottoman records recorded 138 officers and men killed, 238 wounded, 62 deserted and 16 missing and state that the Arab losses were known to be significantly greater.<sup>25</sup> When combined with surrenders at Mecca and Jiddah, the Ottoman army lost over six battalions of infantry in this period.

Erkal pointed out that Galip's forces held out for three and a half months before being forced to surrender. He also identified that the splitting up of Ottoman forces in easily isolated garrisons led to the loss of Jiddah, Mecca and Taif. He attributed Arab success to their use of siege craft involving *sessizce saldırı* (or quiet or meek attacks, which I interpret as attacks that were small and not deigned to be decisive but which kept the defenders alerted and depleted their ammunition).<sup>26</sup> Finally, Erkal noted that British military assistance in the way of artillery pieces, machine guns, shells and ammunition, combined with reciprocally low Ottoman on-hand supplies of shells and ammunition, were the critical factors in the success of Abdullah's irregular army. This brief

---

<sup>23</sup> Headquarters 22nd Division, Order 112, 25 August 1916, ATASE Archive 588, File 107/108. reproduced in Erkal, *Hicaz, Asir, Yemen Cepheleri ve Libya Harekâtı*, pp. 248-149.

<sup>24</sup> Headquarters Hejaz General Force, Hejaz Commander to Commander, 22nd Division, Order 330, 22 September 1916, ATASE Archive 588, File 136-139 reproduced as Document 8, Erkal, *Hicaz, Asir, Yemen Cepheleri ve Libya Harekâtı*, pp. 839-840.

<sup>25</sup> Erkal, *Hicaz, Asir, Yemen Cepheleri ve Libya Harekâtı*, p. 251.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 252-253.

## THE ARAB REVOLT IN TURKISH MILITARY HISTORY

exposition showcases the kind of detailed information provided by Şükrü Erkal and there is much more to the story than I have conveyed here.<sup>27</sup>

### **Ottoman reinforcements for the Hejaz**

As to the question of how much of the Ottoman force structure was drawn to and involved in the campaigns against the Arab Revolt, Erkal's *Hicaz, Asir, Yemen Cepheleleri ve Libya Harekâtı* contains detailed information about reinforcements. For example, as a result of the revolt, Minister of War Enver Pasha and Fourth Army Commander Jemal Pasha decided to reinforce Fahreddin Pasha's Hejaz Force. On 30 June 1916, Enver ordered the 55<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment from the 14<sup>th</sup> Division to the Hejaz.<sup>28</sup> This regiment then formed part of the new 58<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division organizing in Medina 25-28 June 1916 to replace the lost 22<sup>nd</sup> Division.<sup>29</sup> The now-orphaned 42<sup>nd</sup> and 130<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiments were also assigned to the new division along with machinegun companies and artillery batteries.

The Ottoman high command dispatched additional reinforcements from Anatolia, including the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 138<sup>th</sup> Regiment, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 79<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment and two artillery batteries from the 6<sup>th</sup> Artillery Regiment to the Arabian theatre.<sup>30</sup> Later that summer, Jemal Pasha dispatched the 161<sup>st</sup> and the 162<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiments from Aleppo to Medina. The Ottoman high command selected Lieutenant Colonel Necip to command the new 58<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, who began to organize the slowly arriving units on 14 November 1916. Necip and some units of the division saw action against Abdullah's army in mid-December but the 58<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was not fully combat capable until 13 February 1917.<sup>31</sup> This illustrates the perennial strategic problem with time and space the Ottoman military had to overcome when deploying forces to distant theatres of operation such as Arabia, Mesopotamia and the eastern Caucasus.

### **The Anglo-Arab Railway Campaign**

One of the most stunning parts of the Turkish official history of is the large amount of information about the railway campaign contained in Erkal's *Hicaz, Asir, Yemen Cepheleleri ve Libya Harekâtı*. There are four multi-page fold-outs titled Ek 6-9 (Ek is a Turkish word meaning to summarize bits and pieces of information) consolidated from the ATASE archives, which outline the Arab attacks on the Medina railway in great detail.

---

<sup>27</sup> See also, Tanvir Wasti S, "The Defence of Medina," *Middle East Studies* 27, no 4 (October 1991).

<sup>28</sup> Erkal, *Hicaz, Asir, Yemen Cepheleleri ve Libya Harekâtı*, p. 184.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 203-211.

Ek 6 presents 46 attacks from 6 March-5/6 July 1917, Ek 7 presents 23 attacks from 6 July-4 August 1917, Ek 8 presents 46 attacks from 5 August-18 November 1917, and Ek 9 presents 50 attacks from 10 January-17 August 1918. These summarize the Ottoman force attacked, the time of day, the pinpointed location of the attack (i.e.: kilometre 541), the attacking force, how the attack was conducted, damage to the railway and Ottoman casualties, and an analysis of the attack.

For example, Attack number 2 as described in Ek 9 contains the following information about one particularly hard fought battle.<sup>32</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Provisional Force was attacked on the night of 3/4 January 1918 by a force of 700 men, 800 horses, artillery, machineguns, and 9 automobiles at Curuf Station (north of Amman). The station was destroyed as was the nearby bridge and 68 rails were torn up. The Ottomans lost 25 dead and 15 wounded while the Arabs lost 60 killed and many wounded. The Ottomans retook the station when reinforcements came up from Maan. There are four associated maps, which give the reader a sense of the spatial characteristics of these attacks as well.

### **Securing the Medina railway**

The Ottoman response to the Arab Railway Campaign is, likewise, an unknown part of the English language historiography of the Arab Revolt. We might begin the story when the Ottoman high command reorganized its forces in the Hejaz by activating the Hejaz Expeditionary Force under the command of Fahreddin Pasha on 30 June 1916.<sup>33</sup> With Galip surrounded in Taif, Fahreddin took command of the defence of Medina and, after Galip's surrender and the loss of Mecca and Jiddah, became the single overall Ottoman commander in the Hejaz in the fall of 1916. Fahreddin Pasha was an extremely able and aggressive officer and decided to secure Medina by conducting punishing attacks on Ali's Southern Arab Army, which threatened the town from the south. With the arrival of Necip's 58th Infantry Division, Fahreddin had an offensive instrument at his disposal. At the Battle of Bir i Derviş, 17-19 March 1917, Fahreddin's men defeated the Arabs and he then sent the 42nd Infantry Regiment south to Bir i Maşi to inflict another defeat on them in a battle 1-4 April.<sup>34</sup> By conducting these limited tactical offensive operations Fahreddin solidified Medina's vulnerable southern flank on 18 April. These small but important victories enabled Fahreddin to redeploy forces northward in reaction to the growing problem of railway interdiction caused by the Arab's increasing attacks. The fall of Aqaba compounded this problem by creating a direct threat to Maan, which was the northern terminus of the Medina railway.

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., Ek 9.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.179.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., Maps 32-34.

## THE ARAB REVOLT IN TURKISH MILITARY HISTORY

There were additional problems with supporting the Hejaz Expeditionary Force dealing with logistics. Fahreddin's force composed about 20,000 men, of which about 8,500 were infantrymen capable of bring the war to the enemy.<sup>35</sup> There was only enough food to sustain this number of men for one year and Enver Pasha had already directed that some of them be pushed to locations north of Medina where they could be more easily supplied. Fahreddin's staff began working on this and accidentally, as the situation changed, Enver's decision proved fortuitous.

Because of the difficulty of command and control over the long length of the railway, Fahreddin activated a new headquarters south of Maan called the 1st Provisional Force, which took control of the forces north of Tebuk.<sup>36</sup> Supporting this force, Fahreddin deployed the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions of Necip's 55<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment north along the railway. However, the headquarters of the 58<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division remained in Medina and focused on its defence against the increasingly powerful Arab armies of Abdullah and Ali. On 15 March 1917, the 1<sup>st</sup> Provisional Force commanded the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions, 162<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment, the Maan Field Jandarma Battalion and a number of independent artillery and cavalry detachments.<sup>37</sup> The loss of Aqaba to Lawrence and the Arabs on 6 July 1917 seriously damaged the Ottoman operational posture in the Arabian Peninsula by creating a direct threat to Maan. Combined with the increasing number of Arab attacks on the Medina railway (50 separate attacks between August and December 1917 in which the Ottomans lost several hundred men killed, wounded and prisoner and had 15 bridges, 3,254 rail ties, and 152 telegraph poles destroyed),<sup>38</sup> Jemal Pasha and Fahreddin Pasha decided to revise the Ottoman command architecture in lower Palestine.

Between 28 August and the end of September 1917, Jemal's VIII Army Corps took up positions in Maan with 5,000 soldiers. This enabled Fahreddin to shift forces south from Maan and north from Medina to increase his strength along the railway.<sup>39</sup> As a result, Fahreddin moved the 1st Provisional Force south to El Alâ and activated the 2<sup>nd</sup> Provisional Force at Tebuk. On 31 October 1917, Allenby drove Jemal's Fourth Army out of the Gaza-Beersheba line, causing the withdrawal of the VII Corps forces at Maan. This imposed yet another restructuring of his army on Fahreddin. By November 1917, Fahreddin resumed responsibility for Maan and sent a greatly reinforced 1st Provisional

---

<sup>35</sup> Belen, Fahri, *Birinci Cihan Harbinde Türk Harbi 1917 Yili Hareketleri, IVncü Cilt* [The Turkish Front in the First World War, 1917], (Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1966), p. 163.

<sup>36</sup> Erkal, *Hicaz, Asir, Yemen Cepheleeri ve Libya Harekâtı*, p. 342.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 344-345.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Map 37.

Force there (composed of the 146<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, a cavalry regiment and numbers of independent detachments) to hold the town and to block an allied advance from Aqaba. He then expanded the 58<sup>th</sup> Division's area of responsibility north to cover the area formerly occupied by the 1<sup>st</sup> Provisional Force.<sup>40</sup> By the spring of 1918, Fahreddin deployed a reinforced regiment in Maan (the 1<sup>st</sup> Provisional Force), a reinforced regiment in the centre of the Medina railway (the 2<sup>nd</sup> Provisional force), and the 58<sup>th</sup> Division now composed only of a reinforced regiment and a cavalry regiment north of Medina. Forming these provisional forces, which were brigade-sized units, depleted Fahreddin's combat strength. He accomplished it through economy of force measures by leaving a small holding force facing Ali and Abdullah in the south.

### **The final campaign in Syria**

Arab attacks on the Medina railway drew to an end in August 1918 as Feisal's Northern Army positioned itself to assist Allenby's EEF in the final breaking of the Ottoman army in Palestine. In *Sina-Filistin Cephesi, İkinci Gazze Muharebesi Sonundan Mütarekesi'ne Kadar Yapılan Harekât (21 Nisan 1917-30 Ekim 1918)* Onalp, Üstünsoy, Dengiz and Erkal open the story after the Battle of Megiddo noting that, on 25 September 1918, Arab forces were conducting raiding, acts of revenge and sabotage.<sup>41</sup> Arab irregulars were again in action on 27 September near Dera and on 29 September south of Damascus. The Turkish official history does not give many details about specific actions by Feisal's men but notes that they were helpful to the British in the capture of Damascus on 30 September 1918. On the same day near Rayak, the Ottoman 43<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division encountered difficulty in keeping its Arab soldiers from deserting their posts and joining the Arab army.<sup>42</sup> This forced Mustafa Kemal's Seventh Army to send reinforcements there to hold the position. The next day, Feisal's men took the bridge near Tell es Şerif, cutting off the Ottoman force in Rayak.

As the retreating Ottomans withdrew to Aleppo, two groups of irregular cavalry harassed their flanks. On 10 October 1918, Feisal declared his authority over the city, although it had not yet been taken. On 17 October, the 'always industrious Feisal' approached Hama with 1,200 infantry and 300 cavalry.<sup>43</sup> This action again forced Mustafa Kemal to reinforce his flanks to avoid encirclement. By 23 October, Feisal delayed his attack on Aleppo until the British 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Division pushed to a position north of the city. Feisal's Arabs took Aleppo on 25 October as the Ottoman Seventh

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Onalp, Üstünsoy, Dengiz and Erkal, *Sina-Filistin Cephesi, İkinci Gazze Muharebesi Sonundan Mütarekesi'ne Kadar Yapılan Harekât*, p. 685.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 705.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 715.

## THE ARAB REVOLT IN TURKISH MILITARY HISTORY

Army withdrew its forces. The campaign came to an end on 27 October when the British and Feisal's Arab Northern Army closed the pincers and encircling the few remaining Ottoman forces withdrawing from Aleppo.<sup>44</sup>

### Conclusion

What does this new information tell us about the Ottoman campaigns in the Hejaz and how might we integrate it into the extant historiography?<sup>45</sup> First, according to the Turkish narrative, the Ottoman army was tactically unready in its dispersed positions to meet the demands of the Arab Revolt in June 1916. Its widely scattered forces were isolated and leading to the capture of the governor-general and the destruction of an infantry division. Moreover, Mecca and Jiddah were lost, which opened up a vulnerable front south of Medina. Second, the campaign drew in additional Ottoman forces equivalent to two infantry divisions in 1917, which amounted to about 5 percent of the Ottoman force pool in 1917.<sup>46</sup> Third, in a remarkable display of defensive-offensive tactics, Fahreddin Pasha was able to shift from the defence of Medina in order to mass forces sufficient to defend the Medina railway. Fourth, a major element in the English language historiography is the idea that the Arab Revolt forced the Ottomans to defend the Hejaz at the strategic expense of defending Palestine.<sup>47</sup> We might speculate about this but the Turkish narrative suggests that this was never true and that more men in Palestine would not have improved the Ottoman operational or tactical posture in that theatre.<sup>48</sup>

The modern official Turkish official histories relate the theme that the Arab Revolt had small effect on the Ottoman operational posture in Palestine and the Arabian Peninsula. Ottoman forces in the Hejaz, Asir and Yemen were largely self-sufficient logistically and it a fact that Fahreddin did not surrender Medina until 9 January 1918 (72 days

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 726.

<sup>45</sup> For a recent comprehensive overview of the Ottoman campaigns in the Palestine Theatre see Edward J. Erickson, *Palestine, The Ottoman Campaigns of 1914-1918*, (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword Books, 2016).

<sup>46</sup> See Erickson, Edward J., *Ottoman Army Effectiveness in World War I, A Comparative Study*, (Abingdon, OX: Routledge, 2007), 97-126 and Erickson, *Ordered to Die*, pp. 172-176 for an summary of Ottoman forces in Palestine and Arabia in 1917.

<sup>47</sup> For the most comprehensive listing of Ottoman infantry divisions and their locations in the First World War, see Belen, Fahri, *Birinci Cihan Harbinde Türk Harbi 1918 Yili Hareketleri, Vnci Cilt* [The Turkish Front in the First World War, 1918], (Ankara: Genelkurmay Basimevi, 1967), EK following page 250 (Türk Tümenlerini).

<sup>48</sup> For the Ottomans the problem in Palestine was never the amount of men, rather it was inadequate logistics that failed to supply them with weapons, ammunition, food and fodder. See Erickson, *Ottoman Army Effectiveness in World War I*, pp. 127-154.

after the Mudros Armistice that ended the Ottoman war). While the Ottoman forces in these regions did not tie up significant allied forces their presence was a distraction for the British staff in Cairo. Moreover, the calculus of adding perhaps 20,000 Ottoman soldiers to another front would not have significantly affected the Ottoman Empire's strategic or operational posture. Although this article has not focused on the operations of Feisal's Northern Army (and, by association, T.E Lawrence) in Allenby's Palestine Campaign, it is sufficient to remark that the Turkish histories assert that these too had a minor effect on the war.

So what of the Arab Revolt relative to the Ottoman Empire's military struggle in the First World War - wasp or mosquito? Although the Arab Revolt is covered in far greater detail in the Turkish official histories of the war than in the British official histories, it is clear that the Turkish official historians thought the Arabs had little influence on the decision makers who exercised strategic direction for the Ottoman war effort. The Arab armies were able to seize the coastal strips but were never able to take the key city of Medina, which remained an Ottoman stronghold until well after the armistice. Neither were the Arab armies able to take cities and towns in the interior. It may be said that the Railway Campaign did force the redeployment of most of Fahreddin's field forces, which might have retaken Mecca. Finally, the Turkish clearly advances the idea that Feisal's Northern Arab Army failed to exercise its full potential in support of Allenby's final offensive. In the end, much like a man swatting a mosquito, the Arab Revolt was a localized problem that the Ottoman army dealt with using the forces at hand.