

From “Stab in the Back” to “Good Riddance”: Recollections of *Ayyam al-Atrak*



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Selim Deringil's *The Ottoman Twilight in the Arab Lands: Turkish Memoirs and Testimonies of the Great War* is an account of five memoirs written after World War I by leading Ottoman military commanders and intellectuals who spent the war years in the Arab provinces. The memoirs include those of Falih Rifki Atay, Ahmad Cemal Pasha's deputy in the Fourth Army and head of intelligence in Damascus and Jerusalem; Hüseyin Kazım Kadri, a founder of the Young Turk movement and editor of *Tanin*; Naci Kaşif Kıcıman, the chief intelligence officer in Hijaz during the Great Revolt; Münevver Ayaşlı, the daughter of the Turkish head of the Ottoman tobacco monopoly who became an ardent Islamic feminist in the Republican period; and Ali Fuad Erden, the Fourth Army's chief of staff. Deringil's introduction, which references other works on the final days of Ottoman rule in Syria and Palestine, provides a critical framing of these narratives in the context of (some) Turkish claims that the Great Revolt constituted a “stab in the back” to the Ottoman war effort and a betrayal of the state. The memoirs contain vivid accounts of daily life in Beirut, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Medina during World War I.

EVER SINCE HIS PIONEERING WORK, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909* (1998), on the Hamidian elite and its search for legitimacy, Deringil has been preoccupied with Ottoman attitudes toward the predicament of the empire's non-Turkish citizens—the Europeans, Armenians, and Syrians (as most Mashriqi Arabs were referred to then) who were also Ottoman subjects. In *The Ottoman Twilight in the Arab Lands*, he has produced a riveting account of the ways in which five leading intellectuals and military commanders reflected on their lives in Syria and Palestine during the final years of Ottoman rule. Of the five memoir writers, only one—Kadri, a founder of the Young Turk movement (formally known as Committee of Union and Progress or CUP) and editor of its organ, *Tanin*—was able to distance himself from the rising tide of Turkish nationalism and its elitist attitude towards the Arab provinces. Kadri was also the only one to make a clear break with the authoritarian rule of Cemal Pasha, the de facto ruler of Syria and Palestine during World War I.

Deringil skillfully introduces these five memoirs and sets them off against the current reassessment of the Ottoman period. While prominent Arab nationalist memoirs, such as those of

Satı' al-Husari, Ja'far al-Askari, Fawzi al-Qawuqji, and Anbara Salam, have been translated into English, German, and French, very few have reached us from the Turkish side (Halide Edib, who originally wrote in English, is probably an exception). All five memoirists here were Ottoman loyalists to various degrees, and they viewed the Arab provinces as a core constituent of the Ottoman domain—not least because Jerusalem, Medina, and Mecca were the sacred lands of Islam that gave legitimacy to the caliphate's ideological claims in Istanbul. Such claims were made by both secular and religious Ottomanists, even after the fall of the Hamidian regime and the CUP's seizure of power.

The five *Ottoman Twilight* narratives are framed by an interpretive introduction and epilogue where Deringil examines the major themes of imperial decay, military defeat, rising ethnic tensions, and Arab betrayal. Those themes dominate the memoirs selected, whose authors wrote either during or about their final days in Beirut, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Medina. An important contribution of Deringil's is the plethora of marginal interjections in the footnotes illuminating events and references that might otherwise be obscure to the reader (in several instances, they would have served the book better if they had been relocated to the introduction). Deringil's selections from the five memoirs add up to an anthology that is lean but supremely entertaining. His translated renditions succeed in preserving the original voices and views—warts and all—of the narrators' preferences and prejudices.

The memoirs are refreshingly (some might say shockingly) lacking in what we would today term political correctness. They freely stereotype Arabs, Turks, and other major ethnic groups; exhibit racializing views of Bedouins; exoticize religious rituals; and openly exude bigotry—clearly evident in the distinctly Ottoman practice of distinguishing Syrians (urban, civilized) from Arabs (primitive, tribal, untamed). But there are also poignant episodes of heroism, betrayal, and martyrdom here. One is Erden's description of the execution of Ismail Canbulat and the Circassian leader's heroic fortitude.¹ Another is the evacuation of the last remnants of the Turkish community from Beirut in April 1919, and the salute they were given by indentured Egyptian sailors, movingly narrated by Kadri.²

Deringil's interpretive work adds significantly to our understanding of Arab-Turkish relations during the war period, and of the balkanization of the Middle East after World War I. In the main, it modifies, and sometimes challenges, a consensus that has evolved over recent decades among a new set of historians of the later Ottoman period. Successive commemorations of the so-called Great War have generated a good number of recent studies on the twilight of Ottoman rule in the Arab lands, most of which focus on the Arab experience of those waning years. Such studies include Melanie Tanielian's examination of the impact of the famine years on Mount Lebanon;³ Talha Çiçek's study of Cemal Pasha's administration of Syria;⁴ Michael Provence's excellent study on the Ottoman affinities of the Arab elites;⁵ and Eugene Rogan and Leila Fawaz's examination of the impact of World War I on the region.⁶ This reviewer has also contributed a study on the experience of the war as seen from the eyes of Arab soldiers in the ranks of the Ottoman armed forces.⁷

The great relevance of the present work by Deringil is that it addresses exclusively how the Turkish side experienced and dealt with the loss of the Arab provinces by suggesting that the nationalist identity that emerged in the republican period has its roots in an earlier time, going back to the foundation of the CUP at the turn of the century and before. Deringil highlights a

residual streak of Turanic hegemony (and attitudinal snobbery) that colored his subjects’ view of events, which, in a few crucial cases, they acted upon. Thus, incidents of nationalist chauvinism were always expressed in the rhetoric of a common Ottoman identity within the broader framework of a love-hate relationship toward Arab subjects. This is well illustrated in the touching farewell to Lebanon of Ayaşlı (who later subscribed to the “good riddance” syndrome):

How happy we were when we came here with great hopes, how much we had loved Aleppo, Beirut, Lebanon. Now we are returning to Istanbul, broken, crushed, desolate, and accepting our fate. . . . We have lost our homeland Rumeli for ever and returned to Istanbul. Now we abandon these lands that we have loved like our own country and go back to Istanbul. . . . [Is this] the price we must pay for our glorious past?⁸

The colonial ideology articulated here was also mitigated by deep concern over the future of Syria and Hijaz within the Ottoman domain. In the crucial decision by Cemal Pasha to execute the Arab nationalists after the Aley tribunals in 1916, we find all his Turkish associates, including the head of the military tribunal, pleading with him to spare the lives of their compatriots—to no avail.⁹ Many, like Erden, disagreed in writing but failed to intervene in person, fearing conflict with the “supreme commander.”¹⁰ There are also a few nuggets that shed new light on these last days of the empire. One concerns the positive impact of the Bolshevik Revolution on the Arab fronts as a result of which a large number of Ottoman troops fighting in Erzurum and the Dardanelles were freed up to fight in southern Iraq and Sinai-Beersheba.¹¹ The Treaties of Brest-Litovsk enabled the reemergence of remarkable resistance against the British, even after the fall of Jerusalem in December 1917, and following substantial military victories for the Ottoman side at Kut al-Amara and Gaza.

Another important revelation concerns the continued Ottoman loyalty and support of leading Arab officers and political leaders during periods of defeat and withdrawal—even when they were suspected of serving the enemy, so to speak. A notable example, certainly not the only one, is the case of Yasin al-Hashimi, a senior Iraqi general in the Fourth Army, who maintained his Ottoman sympathies even after the withdrawal of the Turkish military from Iraq and kept up contact with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk during the period of French rule over Syria. In many such instances, both allegiance to the newly revived Islamic character of the Ottoman state during the war and deep-rooted suspicion of British and French imperial designs contributed to this loyalty, although it did not stop Turkish commanders from casting a suspicious eye on those Arab officers and soldiers.¹²

A most intriguing feature of this book is Kıcıman’s vivid description of the last days of the Hijazi campaign and the desperate status of Medina under siege. Kıcıman was the chief intelligence officer in Hijaz during the Arab rebellion. Deringil presents his memoir as a quintessential example of what Deringil calls the “stab in the back syndrome.” Together with Atay’s examination of the Hijazi campaign, such memoirs shed a new light on the significance of Medina to the war effort. The defense of Medina was important because it underscored the role of the Hijaz in legitimizing Ottoman claims to the caliphate, even after Sultan Abdul Hamid had abdicated his role and the CUP abandoned such religious claims.

Except for Kadri’s memoirs, the theme that permeates the diaries is Arab treason, (or “stab in the back syndrome”) especially with reference to the Hijazi rebellion against the Ottomans while the Ottoman armies were still fighting the British in southern Iraq and on the Palestine front.

This issue of betrayal is articulated best by Erden, the chief of staff of the Fourth Army. In Deringel’s words, Erden says the “Arab officers were planning to poison Turks in their sleep,”¹³ although he then goes on to assure his readers that the revolt in Hijaz was not an Arab revolt, but one instigated by a minority. “The revolt of the Sharif of Mecca . . . and the Bedouin,” Erden writes, “ha[s] been bought by British spies, British gold, British wheat and rice. There were but a few officers from Baghdad and Damascus (such as the Prime Minister of Iraq, Nuri al-Said) at the headquarters of the rebels, they were the ones who tried to make it appear as a [general] Arab Revolt.”¹⁴ As the war progressed, the “stab in the back syndrome” evolved into the notion of “good riddance” that Atay expressed when discussing the weak hold of the Ottoman idea in Medina, Jerusalem, and Aleppo: “A handful of Turks held the whole region. We had filled the vast desert with buildings and gardens. We were too late. Neither Syria nor Palestine was any longer ours.”¹⁵ Ayaşlı, who became an intellectual of the Islamic Right during the Republican period, was the daughter of the director of the Régie Company (the Ottoman tobacco monopoly) in Beirut, and a girl of thirteen at the time. She too gives voice to the “stab in the back syndrome” in her own naive style, fusing the betrayal of Armenian nationalists with Arab slanders against the Turks. But, as the daughter of a bourgeois Turkish family in Beirut, she also expresses contempt for Cemal Pasha’s “cultural imperialism”¹⁶ and Atay’s uncouth manners. She reports how he “sat on his horse like a sack. . . . Faliş Rifki [Atay] was not *chic*; in fact, he never even wore his uniform properly, his *kalpak* was like a lemon peel on his head.” She reports that his peers “found him very *alaturca* [conservatively Turkish] and slouchy. . . . Who would say that this man, unwanted and shunned, would go on to become a star [who] would outshine them all?”¹⁷

Of the five essays analyzed here, Atay’s is arguably the most readable and provocative, though not necessarily the most profound. Serving as Cemal Pasha’s head of intelligence and aide-de-camp in Jerusalem and Damascus, he published two war memoirs of the Palestine campaign: *Ateş ve Güneş* (Fire and Sun, 1919) and *Zeytindağı* (Mount of Olives, 1932). The latter appears as a revised sequel of the first—although Deringil is not quite clear on the relationship between the two overlapping memoirs. Atay, who went on to become a leading journalist and Kemalist proponent—some would say apologist—comes out as the chief defender and interpreter of Cemal Pasha’s career during the war. But he is most imaginative when making ethnographic descriptions of pilgrimage and religious ceremonies in Jerusalem and Medina. His sardonic remarks about the commercialization of religious life in the holy places are meant, according to Deringil, to highlight Istanbul as the central city of Islam and the legitimizer of the caliphate, even though the author was a secular nationalist. Atay’s comments on Cemal Pasha’s ruthless attitude are often narrated tongue-in-cheek. In *Zeytindağı*, he gives a detailed, almost satirical account of Cemal Pasha’s speech at a Beirut banquet during the war when he announced the “good news” that the period of autonomy for Mount Lebanon and its Mutasariffiya was ending.

“Gentlemen! Until today Lebanon suffered from a great ill. Lebanon was in pain. I have come to cure this ill. I hereby announce to you that from this day forward Lebanon is as Ottoman as Konya. There is no longer any trace of foreign privileges in this beautiful land of yours.”¹⁸

Muslims and Christians, all those present began to intone prayers of praise to the Sultan to Enver Pasha and Cemal Pasha. Cemal Pasha had rescued them from their confusing (*mülevves*)

state of half-independence. Those sitting and those standing up were as though drunk with pleasure from the good tidings brought by the Commander and the cold water and *ayran* provided by the municipality [of Beirut].¹⁹

One cannot dispute Deringil’s selections in this volume, especially since few Turkish political figures stationed in Syria published or wrote about their war experiences. Nevertheless, two figures are missing here, and their views would have enriched the book. One is Halide Edib, the Ottoman feminist writer who was appointed as director of education in Syria during Cemal Pasha’s tenure in Damascus. Her position on bilingual education and her questionable role in dealing with Armenian and Kurdish war orphans gave rise to a great deal of controversy at the time, as did her rift with Kemal and exile after the war. Edib makes a cameo appearance in Atay’s memoirs, where she is said to have treated Cemal Pasha “as a sword she could draw at will. But [his] stubborn and stern head was not the sort of hilt that she could easily manipulate.”²⁰ But these entries hardly give a proper impression of her character or her views. The second figure missing here is Aziz Bey, the putative head of Ottoman intelligence in Damascus during the war.²¹ Both Edib and Aziz have written extensive memoirs about their work in Beirut and Syria, and the reader would have benefitted from an alternate perspective on Ottoman educational systems and spying networks in Syria.²²

Virtually all the memoirists in this volume approach the former Arab provinces from the perspective of the “stab in the back syndrome,” and several add the “good riddance” adage to it, as enunciated explicitly by Ayaşlı, and implicitly by Atay, Erden, and Kıcıman. Kadri, the popular governor of Aleppo, remains the exception. In his view, it was the Ottoman command that stabbed its Syrian subjects in the back and deserted them. He squarely blamed the loss of Syria and the Arab lands on the deeds of Ottoman Turkish officials and their alliances (at least in Lebanon) with feudal and oppressive local elites. He openly despised Cemal Pasha and his dictatorship, and later on the Turanism of Kemal.²³ Was Kadri an anomaly in the annals of Ottoman Turkish-Arab solidarity? That is the impression one gets reading Deringil’s book. But this could be in part due to the choices Kadri made, and the fact that the memoirs were written in the heat of rising ethnic and nationalist tensions during the war and its immediate aftermath. Deringil suggests that Arab commanders, as well as many soldiers in the field, took their Ottoman loyalties much more seriously than their Turkish commanders had faith in their reliability, even when they were suspected of being sympathetic to the Arab rebellion.

About the Author

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Selim Deringil, *The Ottoman Twilight in the Arab Lands: Turkish Memoirs and Testimonies of the Great War* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2019), p. 129.
- 2 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, pp. 90–92.

- 3 Melanie S. Tanielian, *The Charity of War: Famine, Humanitarian Aid, and World War I in the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).
- 4 M. Talha Çiçek, *War and State Formation in Syria: Cemal Pasha's Governorate During World War I, 1914–1917* (New York: Routledge, 2014). See also M. Talha Çiçek, ed., *Syria in World War I: Politics, Economy and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
- 5 Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 6 Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914–1920* (London: Penguin, 2015); and, Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- 7 Salim Tamari, *Year of the Locust: A Soldier's Diary and the Erasure of Palestine's Ottoman Past* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015).
- 8 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, p. 159.
- 9 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, pp. 44, 134–37.
- 10 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, p. 140.
- 11 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, pp. 131–33.
- 12 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, p. 104.
- 13 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, p. xv.
- 14 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, p. 106. Brackets in the original.
- 15 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, p. 11.
- 16 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, pp. 144–46, 149–50.
- 17 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, pp. 144–45. Italics and brackets in the original.
- 18 Cemal Pasha's speech, as recoded by Atay: Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, p. 14.
- 19 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, p. 14. Brackets in the original.
- 20 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, p. 35.
- 21 Eliezer Tauber, “From Young Turks to Modern Turkey: The Story of Hüseyin Aziz Akyürek (Aziz Bey), the Last Director of the Ottoman General Security Service,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 55, no. 1 (November 2018): pp. 33–43.
- 22 See Halide Edib, *House with Wisteria: Memoirs of Turkey Old and New* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017). For Aziz Bey, see Chloe Bordewich, “Diaries of an Ottoman Spymaster? Treason, Slander, and the Afterlife of Memoir in Empire's Long Shadow,” *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 78 (Summer 2019): pp. 112–34, https://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/Pages_from_JQ_78_-_Bordewich_1.pdf.
- 23 Deringil, *Ottoman Twilight*, pp. 81–83.