



Ataturk and My Grandfather: The Battles for the Dardanelles and the Wadi Foukeen Fighters

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Mustafa Kamal as a field commander—location and period unknown. *Source: Yeldiz Collection, Istanbul.*

Where the young Palestinian Ismail Hroub (after being conscripted by the Ottomans in the first quarter of the twentieth century) was killed and buried remains unknown. His brother, Khalil Hroub, my paternal grandfather, lived all his life saddened by the early loss of his brother, and had refused any money from the Turkish administration, then based in Hebron, as compensation for this loss. My grandfather, in line with many Palestinian families who lost young men in the Great War, considered it an indignity to accept compensation, despite their dire poverty and need. Such a position was not affected by the fact that Ismail and dozens of the “fittest” young men from our village, Wadi Foukeen, and the villages lying southwest of Bethlehem were in fact forcibly impressed into military service by the brutal Turks who ruled most of the eastern Mediterranean region until the collapse

of the Ottoman empire in the early 1920s and the coming of British and French colonialism. Ismail was a wonderful, good-looking man, tall and strong; the best in the village – or so my grandfather used to say! His story, with its tragic early death, evolved in the collective memory of our family colored by pride, and clothed in myth and mystery. The following generations of the family believed him to be our greatest contribution to that desperate war and the destiny that was awaiting the doomed Ottoman Empire.

My childhood memories are filled with the stories my paternal grandfather Khalil continued to tell about his brother Ismail's heroic fighting in the Great War. Up until his dying days in Amman in the late 1980s, Khalil would be unable to hide his tears when talking with pride about the greatness of his venerated brother that matched the greatness of the waning empire that he imagined he was defending. The stories were never-ending. Every time Khalil re-told a story about Ismail, new details would be added, blending fiction, reality and anticipation – filling many gaps in the ever-expanding story, and sometimes creating new ones. As Khalil aged, these gaps grew in number and size, becoming harder to fill. No longer children who would accept all grandfather's talk as unquestionable, we, his young male and female offspring, would exchange covert, knowing winks, before bestowing ever more loving hugs on this, our ailing, emotional and best-loved grandfather.

The only never-changing part of the story that Khalil told about the heroism of his brother Ismail was the latter's magnificent fighting in the ten-month long Dardanelles battle against the British that began in February 1915. Since my earliest years that musical name "*Dar-da-neelz*" would resonate in my mind because of the many times it was repeated around me by my grandfather. Neither I nor any of my many siblings and cousins knew what the "Dardanelles" was, or whether it was a person's name, a country or even a fruit. Over time we came to know that it is the name of a very important place in Turkey that the Allied armies endlessly attempted to occupy yet continuously failed. They failed because it was their bad luck to be confronted there by our grandfather's brother Ismail who, according to Khalil's story, bestrode a terrifying and annihilating gun called a "*miter ell louz*." Using that all-devouring gun Ismail managed to destroy the armies of the Allied countries, one battalion after another, keeping the Dardanelles free of any foreign troops and consequently keeping Istanbul and Turkey from falling into the hands of the invaders. During high school, my friends who had also heard all the same stories from Khalil all their lives, grew increasingly skeptical of my grandfather's claims and invented a nickname for him: "The Defender of Turkey," *Hami Turkiyya*. Thus they would mockingly describe my paternal grandfather Khalil and his brother Ismail, deliberately confusing the two with each other.

Later over the years, I read random short accounts of the siege and battle of the Dardanelles; a battle that brought its then low-ranking military leader, Mustapha Kamal (Ataturk, as he became known later on), still in his early thirties, to the very gates of glory. The battle stretched over several months, and is better known by its more famous name, the Battle of Gallipoli. The Gallipoli siege and battle was an

impressive example of military genius at its best, later to be taught at war colleges across the divide as a demonstration of steadfastness, sacrifice, clever maneuvers, and ruthless, determined leadership. All together, these enabled the Turks to resist the massive military might of the Allied navies and launch a counterattack, despite inferior weapons and fewer numbers. Almost all the credit goes to Mustapha Kamal's bravery and astonishing early military skills that defeated Churchill's plans to encircle Turkey from the west. The plan undertaken by the Commonwealth countries was to exert enormous military pressure, through heavy naval firepower, on the soft narrow straits of the Dardanelles. The fall of the Dardanelles would enable the Allied navy to break into the Marmara Sea thus forcing the waters wide open to expose all Turkish coastal defenses on the west. If that had happened Istanbul would have become the next Allied prize, leaving the Sultan no option but to surrender.

Recently, I learnt more details about that battle and that period of time from reading Austin Bey's fascinating and enjoyable book *Ataturk: Lessons in Leadership from the Greatest General of the Ottoman Empire* (2011). Reading this lucid text brought back to me all the stories of my "great" great-uncle who "defended Turkey" with his "miter ell louz" gun. Detailing the battle of Gallipoli, Bey mentions that along with Mustapha Kamal there was an Arab battalion that fought with the utmost courage for many weeks on the steep hills of that peninsula in the harshest wintery weather conditions. It was there that most of those Arabs were killed, but there is no trace of where they were buried. Thus, Ismail, my grandfather, the representative of the (Al)-Hroub family, had defended the Ottoman empire, and had most likely fought there with many other Palestinian comrades who, most likely again, came from the same villages neighboring Bethlehem.

Long before his dispatch to the Dardanelles and his assuming leadership in the famous battle, Mustapha Kamal (Ataturk) had impressed his superiors from the start: in military high school and all the way through war college. In Gallipoli he had to confront a vast Allied naval fleet which surrounded the small peninsula along the Dardanelles and continually bombarded the small Turkish force charged with defending the coastal territory. At one crucial moment in those long, cold, rainy and bitter weeks the Allied troops launched a massive attack on the peninsula, intending to maintain the offensive until full occupation and control over the peninsula was achieved. As an immediate result of this charge many soldiers in the Turkish force abandoned their coastal defense lines and retreated deeper inland on the mountainous peninsula to avoid the continuous shelling. Bey details how this Turkish retreat from the massive attack indicated that the long steadfast defense of the peninsula had finally started to collapse. At that very crucial moment the frightened and fatigued Ottoman soldiers who were running up the hillsides of the peninsula were stopped by Ataturk who, standing in their way, screamed into their faces his most famous military order: "I don't expect you to attack, but order you to die....."

This bone-chilling and historic screaming command to retreating soldiers best explains, I like to believe, a part of my grandfather's story which had baffled me for many years. As often told by his brother Khalil, Ismail, "The Defender of Turkey," was

seriously injured during the Dardanelles battle. Because of his injury he was offered to be returned back home to his village in Palestine, but he refused. He asked to be treated in the rear lines, then to be brought back to the front as soon as he was able. In fact, according to our grandfather, Ismail insisted that he wanted to go back to the very same trench where he was injured. What made this illiterate young village man so deeply inspired and determined to fight in a battle that he knew very little about? What was it in that heroic speech of Ataturk ordering my great-uncle and his fellow men to die with dignity and honor that inspired the high morale and fighting spirit in their hearts? Ataturk himself was no less high-spirited and determined. Bey mentions that the great leader was also injured by shrapnel in his chest during the Gallipoli battle but he concealed that from his soldiers to keep their spirit and morale high.

I leave my grandfather and great-uncle in peace for a bit and turn to Ataturk for a closer look. It is so interesting to observe the sharp contrast between the backwardness of most aspects of the then declining Ottoman empire and the progressive and professional nature of the military circles where Ataturk was trained and educated. In the last few decades of the empire when decline was seen as imminent Istanbul desperately attempted to avert that hopeless destiny. The most famous effort was the introduction of what used to be known as Tanzimat, which is a wide-ranging process of modernization and adoption of Western models in public administration, politics and education. Generally speaking, this attempt failed to heal the deeply-rooted decadence of the empire. The only exception, however, seems to have been a relative success in the military sector, particularly in establishing military schools and war colleges along European models. These military institutions had created a generation of young, very well trained and educated Turks, among whom was Ataturk himself.

Ataturk's educational and military modernization had in fact made of him a unique leader, in war and politics alike. He fought astonishingly at successive and concurrent fronts, against the Allied troops in the west, against the Greeks who surrounded Izmir and against the Russians in the east. At the same time he clearly realized that "his" war was against Western imperialism and not against Western modernity. He believed in modern Western models in polity, science and education and wanted to adopt those and integrate them into Turkish society; these for him were indispensable prerequisites for attaining a powerful and truly independent Turkey. While he fought wars that took him along the falling boundaries of the other Ottoman territories, weak Sultans in Istanbul were busy making humiliating concession after concession to the Western powers resulting in the actual dismemberment of the Ottoman territory. If these concessions started with the Murzsteg Reform Programme of 1903, whereby the Turkish police force in Macedonia was supervised by international monitors, they didn't end with the Sèvres Treaty of 1920 which effectively compelled the Sultan in Istanbul to endorse the formal tearing apart of his own empire. The most important relevant point here is that the deep and sophisticated education that Ataturk had been lucky to acquire enabled him to assume the role that he played in future years. Starting from high school then through the military colleges, Ataturk read philosophy, politics and literature. He read Rousseau, Voltaire and Comte. Also, he learnt and spoke

French. All this gave Ataturk wide knowledge and vision through which he could perceive a place for modern Turkey along with the means that it should adopt in order to maintain territorial integrity and a bright future in the post-empire, and post-war, era. It was Ataturk's farsighted vision that led Turkey to emerge from those turbulent times intact and modern. If matters were left to the outdated and traditional thinking of the ruling elite in Istanbul with their infighting and lust for power at any cost there would have been no Turkey as we know it now.

I turn back now to my grandfather, Khalil. In Ataturk's time he and his naïve peers in our village and other parts of Palestine were living a completely primitive life that had nothing to do with modern sophistication. They were thus oblivious to the dangers increasingly looming over their own homeland. They proudly thought of their brothers as soldiers in the service of the Sultan in Istanbul and his Islamic caliphate. It was completely alien to their simplistic thinking to imagine that the Sultan was in fact allying himself with the British and other European powers against Ataturk who was leading the war for independence. The dichotomy of modernity/tradition that Turkey had been witnessing was also manifested in Palestine in a more vicious fashion. In Turkey the battle was ultimately fought between native Turkish contending forces; the case in Palestine however was a replica of modern and advanced foreign colonials overrunning traditional and backward communities and structures. The European Jewish immigrants flooding Palestine and their immediately set-up organizations, under the protection of the British Mandate of Palestine, enjoyed the best modern knowledge and training. Not only did this knowledge give them a huge advantage over the Palestinians in terms of pure science and education, but it served them even more usefully in comprehending international affairs. The war for Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century therefore could be seen as a battle between the brutal side of rising modernity and naïve side of declining tradition.

My grandfather and his generation lost Palestine. The only consolation for him, perhaps, was that his brother, Ismail, served under the leadership of Ataturk in defending the Dardanelles straits at the famous battle of Gallipoli. Turkey was preserved, united and integral. One disheartening perception that evolved with the generations that followed my grandfather's is that the deep and bitter lesson offered by the Ottomans versus Ataturk conflict was not learnt. All that insightful, fascinating and enriching experience of Ataturk would be reduced, in a public discourse shaped and advocated by "modern" Islamists, to nothing more than an imperial conspiracy to end the caliphate: a caliphate that was already crumbling and had not needed someone like Ataturk to end it, nor someone like Ismail to defend it.

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