

Mirage in the Sands:

The Ottoman Special Organization on the Sinai-Palestine Front

Polat Safi

This study focuses on the role of the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*, the Ottoman Special Organization (SO), in the Sinai-Palestine front during the First World War. The SO was defined by its use of various tactics of unconventional warfare, namely intelligence-gathering, espionage, guerilla warfare, and propaganda. Along the Sinai-Palestine front, the operational goal to which these tactics were put to use was to bring about an uprising in British-occupied Egypt.¹ The SO hoped to secure the support of the tribal and Bedouin populations of Sinai-Palestine front and the people of Egypt and encourage them to rise up against the British rule.²

The SO's involvement on the Sinai-Palestine front was part of a broader effort developed between Germany and the Ottoman State for the purposes of encircling Egypt. An examination of the SO's work in Palestine will illuminate the nature of the peripheral strategy the Germans and Ottomans employed outside of Europe during World War I and how it was applied in practice. As part of this broader strategy, in Palestine the SO engaged in a volunteer recruitment campaign, worked to foment rebellion behind enemy lines, engaged in guerilla warfare, and carried out intelligence duties. By examining the nature and contours of the SO's operations there, this study aims to provide both new insights into the regional aspects of a crucial organization and also valuable information which will offer a firmer ground for future comparative studies on the different operational bases of the SO. Additionally, this study argues that by interpreting the SO's tactical activities as a separate project outside the wider political context not only misreads the organization, but actually hinders an

accurate appreciation for the intelligence roles played by a number of other organizations active in the region. Without accounting for the work of these other organizations, a proper understanding of intelligence and surveillance activities during the war is impossible.

The exact extent of the operations of the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*, the Ottoman Special Organization (SO), on the Sinai-Palestine front during World War I remains unknown. This lack of knowledge is also reflected in discussions of the SO's operations more generally, and is the result of a deeper inconsistency and ambiguity in how the organization is understood. A definitive account of the SO has yet to be written, and the academic literature on the subject remains poor. Historians tend to treat the SO as an organization with special, almost superhuman powers, whose duties encompassed all spheres having to do with intelligence and related operations.³ But the SO itself was not an intelligence organization. Neither was it a sort of guerilla unit. Nor was it a propaganda machine. These inaccurate depictions of the SO are the result of inattention to language on the part of experts. *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* was the name used to refer to a certain form of unconventional warfare – which denoted engaging in a form of warfare in order to have a control over a relevant population – as well as the name of the distinct entity that was established to carry it out by the use of intelligence-gathering, espionage, guerilla warfare, and propaganda as tactical tools.⁴ One of the distinguishing features of the organization that came to embody the phrase (the SO) was that it used a combination of all of these tactics. Each of these individual tactical fields, however, overlapped with the purview of another organization for which it was a primary sphere of action. Scholars have tended to misinterpret the SO as the primary actor in each of these individual fields, which both misunderstands the SO, but also and perhaps equally importantly erases from history the various groups whose primary duties involved carrying out the individual aspects of SO activities.

The effort to encircle Egypt constituted a key part of the broader German-Ottoman peripheral strategy during the war. By utilizing local sources to encourage uprisings in the colonies of the Allied powers, it was hoped that Allies would be kept busy in their colonies, and thus distracted from their war efforts on the fronts in Europe. The Muslim subjects of the Allied Powers were expected to play an important role in this strategy and the effective use of Islam as a propaganda tool was seen as crucial to its success. Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm II sought to use Islam as a mobilizing instrument in an effort to counter the British Empire. Early in the war, Max von Oppenheim had articulated a plan whereby Islam was to be used to foment rebellion in Allied colonies and resistance to the Allies elsewhere. The Ottomans, facing of the prospect of losing more territory to the expansionist European powers, embraced the use of religion to similar effect. Indeed, the Young Turks had long viewed Islam as more of a political trump card at their disposal than as a source of divine guidance.⁵ As early as 1912, even before the SO was formally made part of the strategy at the start of the First World War, traces of a strategy to encourage the Muslim world to rise up can be seen in the de facto core of the organization.⁶ Without trivializing the importance of Oppenheim's memorandums, it is important to note that the Ottomans were not passive partners in the plan to foment rebellion in the Muslim world, but rather active participants.⁷

Egypt's Strategic and Sinai-Palestine's Operational Importance

The strategic benefits of a successful operation in Egypt were manifold. It had the potential to cut the Allies off from the Suez Canal, thereby separating Britain from its colonies in India and Asia, which would in turn give the Germans and Ottomans a leg up in their future operations among Muslim populations in those regions. It also offered potential strategic benefits elsewhere, especially in North Africa where the Allies would have been forced to divert resources to protecting British interests in the rest of Egypt and Sudan and French interests in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.

Neither the Germans nor the Ottomans viewed the Egypt operation as a full-fledged invasion of the territory. Given the breadth of the operation and the way it was carried out, this appears rather to have been a piece of propaganda designed to inspire the locals and spur them to action. The Eighth Corps of the Ottoman Fourth Army were to attack the Suez Canal, serving as the catalyst for an anti-British Islamic revolution in Egypt. Coordinated assaults by the Sanussis from Libya and 'Ali Dinar from Sudan were to accompany these efforts. If successful, the British would be driven out of Egypt. If not, they would be effectively tied down there, forced to divert serious resources toward maintaining themselves and reestablishing control in the region. Either scenario would serve the German-Ottoman alliance.⁸

During the First World War, the SO was brought in to carry out operations in all of the aforementioned regions. The Sinai-Palestine front, however, was to be the organization's most important base through the end of the First Canal Operation. There are a number of reasons for this. The Sanussis in Libya were dependent on the British for trade and securing foodstuffs, ties that the British actively fostered to ensure their neutrality.⁹ The Sanussis were also poorly equipped.¹⁰ Conducting the operation from Libya would thus have entailed securing Sanussi support prior to any further mobilization; equipping Libya and sending men and materiel there from Ottoman ports on the Aegean, Mediterranean, and Syrian coasts; and, finally, having the assault force then make the difficult overland journey into Egypt. Instead, it was decided to make the mutasarrifate of Jerusalem the main base to supply the local resistance forces within Egypt.

Moreover, at the start of the war, the Germans tried and failed to block the Suez Canal by running a vessel aground at its narrowest point. This raised British suspicions and made future covert action on the part of the Germans and Ottomans more difficult, especially as they could not afford to draw attention to their plans until the Ottoman Fourth Army had completed its preparations for the invasion.¹¹ Additionally, the British had cut the telegraph line between Istanbul and Egypt in October, before the start of the war, meaning that SO operatives in Egypt were not able to communicate easily with the outside world.¹² Furthermore, the plan to secure an additional line of assault from the south fell through, with 'Ali Dinar's forces in Sudan not brought to bear against the British in Egypt until mid-1915. All of this, coupled with British countermeasures in the region, meant that the SO faced great difficulties in carrying out its activities. The Sinai-Palestine front, close to Egypt and under Ottoman control, was a location where such activities could be carried out with the greatest ease and least risk of alerting Allied

forces and thus became one of the most important centers for German-Ottoman efforts to achieve a pan-Islamic uprising.¹³

Recruiting for the Special Organization

The SO's first duty when it arrived at the Sinai-Palestine front was the organization of fighting units for the First Canal Operation. These units were intended to help raise the Fourth Army's numbers to something more on par with those of the British forces on the western side of the Suez Canal. The SO simultaneously worked to keep the British occupied by stirring up unrest in Egypt – especially in the vicinity of the western side of the Suez Canal – through the use of guerrilla teams armed, manned, and supplied by the SO. The recruitment of a significant number of Syrians for both the Fourth Army and the SO would also have served as a meaningful message to the British, who were working to instigate an Arab uprising against the Ottomans. At the same time, the incorporation of the Bedouins – whose recruitment into the regular army had been forbidden by Cemal Pasha, minister of the navy and commander of the Fourth Army – into the SO guerilla teams would serve as a means of securing their political support against the Allies and preventing them from rebelling against Ottoman authority.¹⁴

With this goal in mind, the SO had to make contact with the Arab tribes in the region and organize them under a central authority. Major Mümtaz Bey, an aide-de-camp of Enver Pasha, minister of war, was sent to the region. Mümtaz had been appointed head of the Bedouin Command on 9 September 1914, shortly after the establishment of the Fourth Army.¹⁵ Mümtaz brought several of his own men to the region to assist him, including Captain İhsan (Mudanyalı), Captain Hacı Emin, and Gendarme Second Lieutenant Saib.¹⁶ In addition, a number of other military and civilian officials, most of whom had been appointed to the inspectorship body of the ruling Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), were sent to the region as well. These included infantry officer Sapançalı Hakkı, Çorumlu Aziz, Çerkez Ziya, Abdurrahman Pasha, and Eşref Bey (Kuşçubaşı). A number of people who served in the headquarters of the Fourth Army – including As'ad Shuqayri, who was responsible for Arab and Bedouin affairs, and Fu'ad Salim Bey, Dr. Ahmad Fu'ad Bey, and Abdulhamid Bey, who were responsible for Egyptian affairs – also employed by the SO.¹⁷

The Arab tribes whose support the Ottoman State hoped to obtain were located on either side of the Syria-Hijaz Railway and in certain parts of Latakia and Mount Lebanon. While the majority of these tribes were Muslim, some were also Christian. The breakdown of their total forces is as follows: around 4,000 cavalry on horse and camel as well as 5,000 infantry under Shaykh Nuri Sha'lan of the Ruwalla tribe; the Bedouin tribe of 'Aniza between Hums and Aleppo; the Hums Bedouin confederation to the west of Hama (4,000 fighters); the Bedouin tribe of Bani Sakhr to the southeast of the oasis of Damascus, around Dar'a and Basr al-Harir (1,100 cavalry on horse and camel alongside 1,000 infantry); the Bedouin tribe of 'Ajlun, again under Shaykh Nuri Sha'lan (5,000 fighters); the Bedouin tribe of Huleh between Huleh and Safad (500 fighters); Bedouin tribes from the Nablus



“Ottoman Heroes Heading towards Egypt on Camels,” in *Müdafaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti, Album de la Guerre Generale (Harb-i Umumi Panoraması)* (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Ahmed İhsan ve Şürekası, 1914), 3.

area (3,000 fighters); the Bedouin tribe and Circassians of Bani Sakhr and Huwaytat in the regions of Amman, al-Salt, al-Qatrana, and Karak (5,000 fighters); the Bedouin tribe of Bani ‘Atiyya between Karak and ‘Aqaba (2,000 cavalry on camel and 200 infantry); Bedouin tribes from Beersheba and Hebron and points southwest (7,000 fighters); the Druzes of Sidon and Beirut, Rashiyya-Nasbiyya, and Jabal al-Shaykh; and finally, the Maronites of Mount Lebanon and the Alawites around Latakia.¹⁸

The tribes from ‘Ajlun, Nablus, and Beersheba immediately responded to the Ottoman call to arm, and attempts were made to incorporate these forces into the

regular army. Outside of this, the SO had broad recruitment authority. It could draw on people who had not been mobilized as part of the general war effort, namely individuals younger than 20 and older than 40 years of age, as well as those who were of service age but who had not responded, those whose discharge or dispatch papers were postponed, and deserters who wished to rejoin the army. While it recruited both those who had previous military experience and those who had little or none, it especially sought out those who were well versed in carrying out guerilla activity. The SO’s recruitment authority did, however, have limitations. SO recruitment from regular units was limited to officers, who were expected to be highly trained (though most were not) in order to command and coordinate unconventional warfare operations. Despite scores of applications from the regular units, especially from the labor battalions (*amele taburları*), for enrollment in SO bands or volunteer detachments (*çetes* or *gönüllü müfrezes*), those registered to regular detachments were not put at the disposal of the SO except in cases of absolute necessity.¹⁹

A total of 1,000 volunteers were brought together under Mümtaz’s command, and another 600 under the command of Eşref Bey. Mümtaz Bey organized the volunteers he and his inspectors had recruited as guerilla units in Damascus. Some of these units would remain in Syria in case of an enemy attack, while others were sent to aid in keeping the Ottoman advance line against Egypt secure.²⁰ Alongside these forces, the SO formed the following volunteer units: the Caucasian Cavalry Regiment recruited from Syria with a total of 270 men;²¹ the Kurdish Cavalry Company with 100 men, formed by Abdurrahman Pasha and commanded by a deputy of Said Halim Pasha, Colonel Hilmi Musallimi;²² the Tripoli Volunteer Detachment with 200 men, established in Syria after the Italian-Ottoman War (1911–1912); the Druze Volunteer Detachment under the command of Shakib Arslan with 110 men, recruited primarily from Mount Lebanon;²³ and the Muslim-Bulgarian Detachment under the command of Nureddin Bey (later deputy of Maraş) with 270 men.²⁴ Of these, the Tripoli Volunteer Detachment was included in the brigade under the command of Eşref Bey, while the detachments of Hilmi Musallimi, Shakib Arslan, and

Nureddin Bey were attached to the Hijaz Campaign Force.²⁵ Apart from these, the SO also recruited 137 volunteers to dig wells, 30 to adjust pumps, and 90 to cook bread.²⁶ If the approximately 1,500 Bedouin volunteers in the main campaign force are added to this number, the total number of the fighters recruited by the SO in the region amounted to almost 4,000.

Drawing Plans for Battle

The units under the command of Mümtaz and Eşref would prove especially important in the planned assault on the Suez Canal. These were to form the vanguard force of the assault, which was to be carried out by the Eighth Corps under the dual command of Lieutenant Colonel Kress von Kressenstein, the chief of staff, and Mersinli Cemal Pasha, attached to the Fourth Army. The campaign was to begin with the SO units' guerilla-style attack, taking hold of the key points on the advance line of the army and drawing attention away from the direction of the main force. To this end, one unit would advance in the direction of Gaza, al-Arish, and al-Qantara, and the other in the direction of Aqaba, Qal'at al-Nakhl, and Suez. Following this, the main force of the regular army would advance from Damascus to Beersheba, then on to Isma'iliyya on the Suez Canal. Finally, the campaign force was to launch a surprise attack and establish a bridge across the Canal.

SO activities in the region were not limited to preparing for the assault on the Suez Canal. An SO cell was established in Jaffa during the second half of September 1914, under the command of Major Hasan Effendi. Hasan Effendi appointed Bahaeddin (Manastırlı) Bey and one other man to staff the headquarters at Jaffa.²⁷ Bahaeddin Bey was responsible for liaising between the nationalists in Cairo and the CUP and had been under surveillance by the British from as early as 1910.²⁸ The main duty of this unit was to contribute to bringing about an Egyptian revolution from within. This was to be accomplished by forming guerilla bands to incite the populace against the British authorities, rather than directly supporting the campaign force. Like the SO cells in other regions, the operations of the cell in Jaffa were run from an established headquarters which took orders directly from the SO Supervisory Council, although they were also in communication with Mümtaz Bey.²⁹

Since SO activities in Egypt were to be carried out according to the directions relayed by Bahaeddin Bey from Süleyman Askeri, the head of the SO, Hasan Effendi focused on finding reliable men who could infiltrate Egypt and form revolutionary bands there. These bands were initially to be formed elsewhere, then sent into Egypt as complete units. After these first units had begun their operations, the SO was to use the local population of Egypt to form additional revolutionary bands. This focus on building up native groups owed much to the general staff's belief that the more Egyptians were employed in the bands, the greater the likelihood of their successfully carrying out a revolution.³⁰

Jaffa was to serve as both a suitable point for smuggling military ordnance,³¹ and a location through which to covertly bring agents into Egypt. For example, Ahmet Rifat

Effendi and his friend Ibrahim Effendi, who were expected both to provide intelligence from Egypt and to form revolutionary bands among the local populace, were sent to Jaffa on 27 September 1914.³² After infiltrating Egypt, in early November Ahmet Rifat sent back intelligence detailing the location and condition of British forces and fortifications in Egypt and on the western side of the Suez Canal. He also requested weapons, ammunition, and officers for his bands.³³

As part of the advance force, and with its experience working with the local populations and especially the Sinai Bedouins, the SO offered great value in terms of scouting and reconnaissance. At the same time, the organization would likely have been used to smuggle personnel across the Suez Canal from points outside of Jaffa and to forge ties with tribal groups there, thus involving it, to a degree, in espionage activities. Defense in the Sinai and counter-espionage activities also likely relied to some extent on the organization. From all of this, it can be said that there was a desire to use the SO as an advance reconnaissance force, as an intelligence source, and as an actor in the espionage and counter-espionage struggle. These multiple layers and multiple roles were the hallmark of the SO on the Sinai-Palestine front as in other areas where the organization operated.

An order sent from the Eighth Corps to Mümtaz Bey on 7 October 1914 reveals the contours of just how the SO was used as a reconnaissance force. According to the order, reconnaissance patrols were sent to Port Said, to the al-Qantara–al-Fardan–Isma‘iliyya (Serapyum)–Shulufa station lines, and to the line from there to Suez. Mümtaz Bey, with a regular detachment and reinforcements as well as a volunteer detachment, began his reconnaissance activities on the Rafah–al-Arish–al-Qantara line, while at the same time Eşref Bey was to commence similar efforts along the Aqaba–Qal‘at al-Nakhl–Suez line as soon as he had received orders to that effect.³⁴ They were expected to gather information on the location, number, and condition of the British forces and fortifications on either side of the Suez Canal, as well as the type and number of machine-gun and artillery positions. They were also to note impediments such as barbed wire fences and trenches and the number of British and French warships in the canal. In addition, they were expected to inspect the surrounding desert in preparation for the impending assault, surveying the condition of possible transportation routes; determining whether such routes were suitable for the passage of artillery and vehicles and whether certain locations were in need of repair; and identifying the location of wells and their water supply and the quality and quantity of fuel and aliment resources available in the desert.

The First Canal Operation

On 1 November 1914, while the SO was busy with the preparations outlined above and four days before Britain would make its official declaration of war, Britain bombarded Aqaba. This incident led to the invalidation of the order dated 7 October, and a new one was issued by the Eighth Corps command to Mümtaz Bey, then in Beersheba, on 2 November.³⁵ The reconnaissance patrols were expected, as before, to acquire information on the location and condition of the British forces on the canal. The new order also



“Heroic Attack of Arab Mujahids against the British around Suez Canal,” in *Müdafaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti, Album de la Guerre Generale* (Harb-i Umumi Panoraması) (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Ahmed İhsan ve Şürekası, 1914), 5.

emphasized the vital importance of establishing relations with the tribes to the west of the canal. Mümtaz Bey was to employ spies and informers connected to British forces, either by stressing their duty to support the interests of Islam or, failing that, simply by bribing them. These spies and informers were to both collect and transmit news from Egypt, and to foster antagonism and hostility toward the British among the Arab tribes by any and all means. Mümtaz Bey also received instructions detailing the means and methods spies might employ, which underlined the importance of communicating instructions and information orally to the spies for memorization, and stated that never under any circumstances should these be distributed in writing.³⁶

The SO was tasked with acquiring intelligence pertaining to enemy forces in Egypt, the focus of the operation.³⁷ It used various sources to obtain intelligence, including soldiers, Bedouins, refugees, tourists, defectors, detainees, and informers in Egypt and Libya. The SO faced was also engaged in counter-espionage, and any Bedouins, Britons, or other foreigners seen in the Sinai were to be apprehended to prevent the leak of information about the whereabouts or movements of Ottoman detachments in the desert.³⁸ Mümtaz Bey was specifically ordered to monitor certain parts of the shores of the Suez Canal with an eye toward ultimately cutting off British communication by sea.

The SO used the information it obtained first and foremost to aid its own operations. At the same time, the tactical and operational intelligence it gathered would serve as an important source for the Ottoman general staff and its subordinate intelligence department, the deuxième bureau, to improve its capacity to verify information from



“An Ottoman Military Convoy Crossing Jerusalem to Egypt,” in *Müdafaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti, Album de la Guerre Generale* (Harb-i Umumi Panoraması) (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Ahmed İhsan ve Şürekası, 1914), 11.

other sources. In this way, Ottoman intelligence for the region did not have to rely on unauthenticated reports. These reports from various informants helped to expose and neutralize exaggerations or fabrications on the part of agents or informers in the field, thus enhancing the overall credibility of the intelligence. In this context, it seems that the deuxième bureau benefited greatly from the reports of the Ottoman embassy in Athens, the embassy in Rome, the governorate of Beirut, the mutasarrifate of Jerusalem, the police directorate, and finally the SO.³⁹

The First Canal Operation began with the advance of the SO vanguard forces into the Sinai Peninsula. By the end of October, almost 1,600 volunteers under the command of the SO had completed their passage into the Sinai and seized key points along the route by which the main force would advance. One thousand men under the command of Mümtaz Bey began to raid the al-Arish line on 7 November and seized the town itself by surprise attack on 8 November. Likewise, roughly 600 volunteers under the command of Captain Eşref Bey (Kuşçubası) took hold of the town of Qal‘at al-Nakhl on 18 November.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, a regular infantry detachment reinforced by volunteers was dispatched to Aqaba to defend it against a possible British attack, which could have threatened the southern flank of the Ottoman forces headed for the Suez Canal.⁴¹

This was followed by an advance across the desert, as part of which the towns of Qal‘at al-Nakhl and al-Arish were transformed into the headquarters of the communication and supply organizations established by Lieutenant Colonel Behçet Bey, commander of the 23rd Division. With the gradual advance in the Sinai Peninsula in mid-January 1915,

Cemal Pasha ordered Mümtaz Bey to cross the canal secretly with a few bands of men, reconnoiter the Port Said line, and demolish its railroad. Following this, the major part of the bands would make their way into Egypt by the Salihyya–Zagazig line and, having demolished not only the railroad but all British possessions, they would declare the Turkish army near the canal to be the savior of the Muslims, thereby stirring the locals to arms. Mümtaz Bey was also ordered to use the majority of his troops to launch feint attacks against Qantara, lie in ambush and open fire against the British vessels, demolish the lantern and signal positions along the canal, and detain as many British forces as possible en route to Qantara. Eşref Bey, on the other hand, was charged to destroy the enemy positions deployed along the Great Bitter Lake to the south of Isma‘iliyya, to hinder the navigation of vessels from Suez to Isma‘iliyya, and to cut off the telegraph and telephone lines. Upon successful crossing of the canal, he was also to demolish the Isma‘iliyya–Zagazig rail line and incite the population to rebel against the British.⁴²

Finally, the attack on the canal itself began on the night of 2–3 February 1915. The assault’s prospects of success hinged on two things: the Ottoman force’s ability to catch the British forces deployed at Isma‘iliyya unawares and in a state of confusion; and their ability to cross the canal and establish a fortified bridgehead on the other side, which was to be protected until the bulk of the Ottoman forces had managed to reach Isma‘iliyya. In the event, however, things did not go as planned. The Ottoman attempt to cross the canal was detected and most of the pontoons were destroyed. Although a few soldiers managed to make their way across the canal to the west bank, their numbers proved insufficient and they were forced to retreat the following day. These early setbacks were compounded when the local Muslim populations on the other side of the canal failed to rise up in revolt against the British forces. When the Sanussi forces in Libya failed to attack the British from the western border as expected, it became clear that the operation was doomed.

The Special Organization’s Failure

The reason for the SO’s failure on the Sinai-Palestine front, and for its lack of success in its other operations more generally, lay in the fact that the means at its disposal were ultimately incommensurate with its goals. This was compounded by the fact that the SO was the subject of power struggles that neutralized the effectiveness of even these limited means.

The SO forces on the Sinai-Palestine front were not able to utilize enemy supply lines to compensate for their own lack of resources, and proved overly dependent on and confident in the support they expected to receive from friendly forces and supply lines in the area.⁴³ The SO had been founded on the principle of self-sufficiency, both as a result of the desire to secure victory without significant expense and the more practical necessity for an organization of its type of being able to operate effectively behind enemy lines without outside support. Thus, a combination of the expectations placed on the SO and the conditions obtaining in the region it was to carry out its activities greatly limited its operational capacity in the field.

Additionally, the propaganda machine of the Ottoman State was far from systematic in its operations, and exactly what the SO's position was within the convoluted system was far from clear. The SO's propaganda activities in the run up to the First Canal Operation suffered from significant flaws. For one thing, the message that was being conveyed was doctrinally problematic. On the one hand, it called for Muslims to unite behind the caliphate and fight against the infidel. On the other, it did its best to ignore Germany, Austria, and Italy, which was neutral until May 1915. This inconsistency severely weakened the effectiveness of the message. While in the later period of the Office of Eastern Affairs propaganda efforts were made a subject of some priority, the efforts carried out by the SO in Palestine through such individuals as 'Abd al-'Aziz Shawish and Shakib Arslan was less than effective,⁴⁴ as the groups that the SO was involved with were generally illiterate and by and large more motivated by practical concerns than by ideology.⁴⁵ The propaganda value of military honors, medals, medallions, and other presents of the Sultan-Caliph paled in comparison to concrete support in the form of weapons, ammunition, and money. While there was enough of the former to go around, the paucity of the latter severely hindered the SO's operations. Hasan Effendi, Mümtaz Bey, Eşref Bey, and Ahmet Rifat Effendi, the last of whom did manage to enter Egypt and form guerilla bands, all complained fiercely on this point.⁴⁶

The lack of discipline among Bedouin tribal forces also played an important role in the failure of the SO. The Ottomans encountered a similar problem with the guerilla bands on the Caucuses front and the Sanussi units in Libya. These groups had never received proper military training, and the SO officers lacked the means, men, and ability to effectively manage them. All of this took a toll on overall discipline and morale, which in turn led to desertion. The story of Mümtaz Bey's detachment of 1,000 volunteers is a case in point. While they more or less succeeded in cutting off an enemy squadron during the course of the assault on the canal, after accounting for desertion the detachment was left with only 400 men.⁴⁷ The fact was that the SO had very little with which to pay its forces. The Arab tribal forces lived in their own tents, received no training, and were offered very little in the way of rations, provisions, or other compensation.⁴⁸ This goes a long way toward explaining why the Bedouin Command and indeed the virtual entirety of the SO forces were disbanded following the canal operation.

The tension between the SO and its recruits was mirrored in the tensions within the German-Ottoman command. Prior to the canal operation, Kressenstein expressed a lack of confidence in Mümtaz Bey, whom he felt to be unqualified for such an important position.⁴⁹ Mümtaz Bey, on the other hand appears also to have had problems with other members of the SO in the region.⁵⁰ But perhaps the most important factor behind the failure of the operation lay in the divergent agendas of the various actors involved in staging the uprising. The only thing that unified the Germans, Ottomans, and Egyptian nationalists was their mutual desire to see the British driven out of Egypt.⁵¹ But unity was precisely the prerequisite for the sort of uprising they all hoped for, and the operation's success in turn hinged on the staging of a successful uprising.

The single greatest conflict of interest between the Germans and the Ottomans was their respective policies regarding North Africa. The Germans generally tried to secure

the support of Egyptian nationalists with promises of independence, but this lay at odds with Ottoman interests in the region.⁵² Because of this, German-Ottoman cooperation in terms of propaganda activities, intelligence-gathering and sharing, and the carrying out of covert operations was limited at best. Over time, their failure to secure operational objectives in even these limited ventures led to a growing tension between the two powers. This tension would manifest itself most clearly in the case of the German agent Dr. Otto Mannesmann's work among the Sanussis and the tribes of western Libya, where he tried to convince Sayyid Ahmad Sharif al-Sanussi to attack Egypt.

The orders Kressenstein had given Mannesmann on Egypt's western border at the beginning of the war were similar in nature to those given to Mümtaz Bey.⁵³ Added to this were the promises Pröbster, Germany's consul to Morocco, made to Sayyid Ahmad in December 1915 to the effect that the Germans would offer him whatever assistance they could.⁵⁴ Displeased at the prospect of an independent Sanussi state and increasing German influence, Enver Pasha ordered Nuri Pasha, the commander of Ottoman forces in North Africa, to cut off all communication between the Germans and the Sanussis.⁵⁵ Enver Pasha also placed the German and Austrian officers in the region under the direct command of Nuri Pasha, who was given the power to expel officers who did not act in accordance with his orders.⁵⁶ The discomfort on the Ottoman side was so great that German chief of staff Eric von Falkenheim, against the wishes of Ambassador Hohenlohe,⁵⁷ informed the Ottoman chief of staff on 11 November 1915 that they had no political intentions in Libya and that Mannesmann would no longer be allowed anywhere near Sayyid Ahmad.⁵⁸

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to clarify the exact nature of the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* operations on the Sinai-Palestine front during the First World War. The SO worked to foment a religiously based rebellion on the part of Muslim populations in British-occupied territory, especially in Egypt. It also engaged in intelligence gathering and tactical-level espionage activities. These efforts, however, were carried out within the limited purview offered by the SO's main aim, namely to create an uprising in Egypt against the existing political power there. These operations offer important insights into Egypt's and the SO's exact place within the German-Ottoman peripheral strategy during the war, and offer a framework through which to better understand the SO's methods and structure, as well as the nature of Ottoman engagement in similar operations further afield.⁵⁹

Ottoman intelligence efforts were not necessarily or even principally limited to the SO. The deuxième bureau, the intelligence wings of the Fourth Army, the police directorate, and the secret police of Cemal Pasha (about which we know very little), as well as the offices of the local governors and embassies, all had important intelligence roles.⁶⁰ The precise nature of these roles, the extent of their intelligence activities, the nature of their functional differentiation, the degree of their mutual cooperation, and the relationship between them and foreign intelligence organizations, allied or enemy, are all potentially fruitful avenues of inquiry.

Those who argue for a broader intelligence role on the part of the SO usually draw attention to allegations of SO espionage operations against the French consulates in Damascus and Beirut, carried out in the fall of 1914. Experts frequently mention these operations, which produced a number of documents purporting to contain lists of those involved in the Arab nationalist movement operating under French support. These documents were claimed to have passed along to Hulusi Bey, the governor of Syria, who then passed them along to Cemal Pasha, who in turn used them as the basis for punishing members of the movement.⁶¹ While the operation's main goal was to secure domestic order, at least at first, this goal closely aligned with SO efforts to secure the loyalty of the Arabs. Thus, if the SO did in fact carry out this operation, this by no means constituted a deviation from its primary goal. But the question of whether or not the SO was behind the operation is still open.⁶²

The SO may also have been engaged in anti-Zionist activities in Jaffa. A case to this effect has been made by historian Talha Çiçek, who argues that Cemal Pasha appointed Bahaeddin Bey, mayor (*qa'imaqam*) of Jaffa, "as the Attaché of the 4th Army for the information service" as part of the struggle against Zionism. Bahaeddin Bey exceeded his mandate, and rather than limiting his activities to countering Zionist influences instead took action against the entire local Jewish population. This raised the ire of the German and American ambassadors, as the result of whose lobbying efforts Bahaeddin was recalled to Istanbul in February 1915.⁶³

The "Bahaeddin" Çiçek mentions is most likely the same Bahaeddin Bey who was one of the key figures in the SO cell established in Jaffa in September 1914. The SO had sent Bahaeddin Bey to work alongside Major Hasan Effendi in Jaffa as a "representative of the mayor." The fact that the date of Bahaeddin's return to Istanbul coincides with the end of SO operations in the region lends credibility to this possibility.⁶⁴ If this is truly the same Bahaeddin as the one who served in the SO, then the SO can be said to have been used in Jaffa as part of the struggle against Zionism. This would not be surprising, since its successor organization the Office of Eastern Affairs is known to have paid close attention to the question of Zionism.⁶⁵ The SO's activities in the region also shed light on the rationale behind its eventual demise. The most important factor behind the closure of the organization in the spring of 1915 and the establishment of the Office of Eastern Affairs in its place were the SO's failures on the Sinai-Palestine and Caucasus fronts, areas where it was expected to support the Central Powers by tying down British and Russian forces far from the European theater. In this context, it is interesting that the disbanding of the Bedouin Command and the SO guerilla forces, which was an important reason for the ultimate closure of the SO, took place on the same day.⁶⁶ Though any direct link between the two can only be speculative at best, the possibility is intriguing in that by February 1915, the Ottoman administrative elite had lost faith in the SO's volunteer units and decided to merge them into the regular army.⁶⁷ It is at this point that the SO was replaced by the Office of Eastern Affairs, which focused more on intelligence and propaganda activities than on guerilla warfare.

The Office of Eastern Affairs was to abandon this form of irregular warfare on the Sinai-Palestine front and instead focus on operations in Libya and Sudan. After the First

Canal Operation, the forces of Mümtaz Bey, Eşref Bey, and Hasan Effendi were never to be seen in the region again. The few members of the SO who remained behind did not stay long, and were mainly engaged in carrying out low-level special forces operations and minor, specialized operations against the canal,⁶⁸ thus spelling an end to the operations of the Ottoman Special Organization on the Sinai-Palestine front in the First World War.

Polat Safi is a historian of the late Ottoman Empire, with a particular focus on Ottoman intelligence and unconventional warfare structures. He serves as a member of Buyukharf Publishing in Ankara, Turkey, and has co-directed two television documentaries – one on Turkish-Armenian relations and the other on the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa – to be broadcast in 2016. His current book project, based on his PhD dissertation, explores the unconventional warfare structures of the late Ottoman Empire through analyzing the administrative and operational features of the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa.

Endnotes

- 1 The Archive of Turkish General Staff Directorate of Military History and Strategic Studies (ATASE), First World War Collection (FWW); file (F): 1836 – dossier (D): 35 – index (I): 2/1.
- 2 ATASE, FWW; F:1836, D:35, I:2.
- 3 In this respect, see Philip H. Stoddard, “The Ottoman Government and the Arabs, 1911 to 1918: A Preliminary Study of the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1963). Stoddard’s foundational work represents the first button done up wrong: according to him, the SO was Enver’s “special force,” but also carried a connotation of special forces. At the same time, it was Enver’s personal intelligence organization, but also represented the broad range of functions of an intelligence organization. Just as Stoddard lacks a clear answer on the nature of the organization, he has no sound opinion concerning the nature of the institutions upon which he claims the organization was, describing the Yıldız Hafıye Teşkilatı of Abdulhamid II at one point as a “personal spy system” and as a “personal intelligence system” at another. Stoddard, “Ottoman Government and the Arabs,” 1–2.
- 4 Polat Safi, “Fiilden İsim: Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa,” *Toplumsal Tarih* 243 (Mar. 2014): 74–79. For detailed information, see also: Polat Safi, “The Ottoman Special Organization – Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa: An Inquiry into its Operational and Administrative Characteristics” (PhD diss., Bilkent University, 2012).
- 5 Fritz Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1967), 120–155; Cemil Aydın, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 93–111.
- 6 İstanbul Şehir University Library, Taha Toros Archive; Letter from Eşref Kuşçubaşı to Asaf (Tugay) Bey, Söke, 17 September, 1962.
- 7 Kadir Kon, “Almanya’nın İslam Stratejisi Mimarlarından Max von Oppenheim ve Bu Konudaki Üç Memorandumu,” *Tarih Dergisi* 53 (2011): 226–242; Mustafa Aksakal, “Holy War Made in Germany? Ottoman Origins of the 1914 Jihad,” *War in History* 18, no. 2 (2011): 184–199.
- 8 ATASE, FWW; F:248, D:103, I:1/87; F:1863, D:153, I:3/3; F:1843, D:68, I:1/72.
- 9 ATASE, FWW; F:1863, D:153, I:6.
- 10 ATASE, FWW; F:248, D:1031, I:2/51.
- 11 Tilman Lüdke, *Jihad Made in Germany: Ottoman and German Propaganda and Intelligence Operations in the First World War* (Berlin and London: LIT Verlag, 2005), 97.
- 12 ATASE, FWW; F:248, D:1031, I:2/22.
- 13 For more on the SO operations against Egypt from Palestine, Libya, and Sudan, please see; Polat Safi, “The Ottoman Special Organization – Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa: A Historical Assessment with Particular Reference to its Operations against British Occupied Egypt (1914–1916)” (MA thesis, Bilkent University, 2006).
- 14 For more on the cooperation of the Bedouins, see: Talha Çiçek, *War and State Formation in Syria: Cemal Paşa’s Governorate During World War I, 1914–1917* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 213–232.
- 15 ATASE, FWW; F:126, D:590, I:21/2. ATASE, FWW; F:126, D:590, I:23/22. Feridun Dukakinzade, *Filistin Cephesi* (İstanbul: Askeri Akademiler Kumandanlığı Matbaası, 1927), 27–28.
- 16 ATASE, FWW; F:126, D:590, I:21/2 and I:21/3.
- 17 Ömer Osman Umar, *Osmanlı Yönetimi ve Fransız Manda İdaresi Altında Suriye (1908–1938)* (Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, 2004), 211;

- Ali Fuad Erden, *Birinci Dünya Harbi'nde Suriye Hatıraları*, ed. Alpay Kabacalı (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Yayınları, 2003), 165.
- 18 *Birinci Dünya Harbinde Türk Harbi, Sina-Filistin Cephesi – Harbin Başlangıcından İkinci Gazze Muharebeleri Sonuna Kadar*, vol. 4, pt. 1 (Ankara: Genelkurmay Askeri Tarih ve Stratejik Etüt Başkanlığı Askeri Tarih Yayınları, 1979), 77–78.
- 19 ATASE, FWW; F:1828, D:4, I:1/15, I:1/56, I:1/39.
- 20 *Sina-Filistin Cephesi*, 74; Stoddard, “Ottoman Government and the Arabs,” 102–3.
- 21 Behçet, *Büyük Harpte Mısır Seferi* (İstanbul: Askeri Matbaa, 1930), 8.
- 22 Erden maintains that Kurdish Cavalry Company was composed of 200 volunteers. Ali Fuad Erden, *Paris'ten Tih Sahrasına* (Ankara: Ulus Basımevi, 1949), 56.
- 23 According to Emir Şekip Arslan, his detachment was composed of 120 volunteers despite the fact that he was able to gather 500 of them; Emir Şekip Aslan, *Bir Arap Aydının Gözüyle Osmanlı Tarihi ve I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları* (İstanbul: Çatı Kitapları, 2005), 337; Erol Cihangir, *Emir Şekip Aslan ve Şehid-i Muhterem Enver Paşa* (İstanbul: Doğu Kütüphanesi, 2006), 37–38.
- 24 Ziya Şakir, *Cihan Harbini Nasıl İdare Ettik? 1914–1918* (İstanbul: Muallim Fuat Gücüyener Anadolu Türk Kitap Deposu, 1944), 201; Cemil Çelik, “Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Sina Filistin Cephesinde Birinci Kanal Seferi” (MA thesis, Afyon Kocatepe Üniversitesi, 1999), 76–77; Stoddard, “The Ottoman Government and the Arabs,” 101.
- 25 Muzaffer, “Büyük Harpte Mısır Seferi Çerçevesi İçinde Birinci Kanal Akını,” *Askeri Mecmua* 92 (1934): 14; Behçet, *Mısır Seferi*, 8.
- 26 Erden, *Tih Sahrasına*, 56; Stoddard, “The Ottoman Government and the Arabs,” 105.
- 27 ATASE, FWW; F:1836, D:35, I:2/1.
- 28 Ü. Gülşüm Polat, *Osmanlı Devleti ve İngiltere ekseninde I. Dünya Savaşı Yıllarında Mısır* (Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, 2015), 81–82.
- 29 ATASE, FWW; F:1836, D:35, I:2.
- 30 ATASE, FWW; F:1836, D:35, I:2.
- 31 For the SO plans to that effect, see: ATASE, FWW; F:1836, D:35, I:10, I:6/4.
- 32 ATASE, FWW; F:1836, D:35, I:5, I:5/3. For the exchange of information among Ahmet Rıfat Effendi, Hasan Effendi, and the SO headquarters in İstanbul, also see: ATASE, FWW; F:1836, D:35, I:12, I:6/4.
- 33 ATASE, FWW; F:1836, D:35, I:6, I:5, I:6/4, I:5/3.
- 34 *Sina-Filistin Cephesi*, 123–25.
- 35 ATASE, FWW; F:4130, D:H1, I:70, I:71. Also see; Muzaffer, “Büyük Harpte Mısır Seferi,” 8, 19.
- 36 ATASE, FWW; F:4130, D:H1, I:71A.
- 37 ATASE, FWW; F:1868, D:174, I:1/2, I:1/3.
- 38 *Sina-Filistin Cephesi*, 123–24.
- 39 For examples, see: ATASE, FWW; F:248, D:1031, I:2/3, I:2/12, I:2/44, I:2/49, I:2/50, I:2/51, I:2/58, I:2/66, I:2/71, I:2/72, I:2/73, I:2/93.
- 40 Sir George Macmunn and Cyril Falls, eds., *History of the Great War: Military Operations Egypt and Palestine from the Outbreak of War with Germany to June 1917* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1928), 22; Cemal Paşa, *Hatırat*, 156; Ali İhsan Sabis, *Harp Hatıralarım: Birinci Dünya Harbi*, vol. 1 (İstanbul: Nehir Yayınları, 1992), 217–18; Çelik, “Birinci Kanal Seferi,” 61; Umar, *Fransız Manda İdaresi*, 215; Şükrü Mahmut Nedim, *Filistin Savaşı, 1914–1918* (Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1995), 11.
- 41 Stoddard, “Ottoman Government,” 104.
- 42 ATASE, FWW; F:3221, D:H4, I:1/5; *Sina-Filistin Cephesi*, 125–26; Stoddard, “The Ottoman Government and the Arabs,” 105–6.
- 43 For an example, see: ATASE, FWW; F:1836, D:35, I:8/1.
- 44 Çiçek, *War and State Formation*, 57–58. For more on the Pan-Islamist propaganda against the Arabist movement, also see his; “Visions of Islamic Unity: A Comparison of Djemal Pasha's al-Sharif and Sharif Husayn's al-Qibla Periodicals,” *Welt des Islams* 54 (2014):460–482.
- 45 Lüdke, *Jihad made in Germany*, 13, 91.
- 46 ATASE, FWW; F:1836, D:35, I:2/2, I:2/3, I:2/4, I:5, I:5/3, I:6, I:6/4, I:12.
- 47 Behçet, *Mısır Seferi*, 26.
- 48 Polat, *I. Dünya Savaşı Yıllarında Mısır*, 100–1.
- 49 Kress von Kressenstein, *Türklerle Beraber Süveyş Kanalına* (İstanbul: Askeri Matbaa, 1943), 34.
- 50 See for his tensioning relation with a man named Abu al-Faridun, ATASE, FWW; F:1836, D:35, I:17.
- 51 For more on the conflicting interests on Egypt, see: Lüdke, *Jihad Made in Germany*, 92–101.
- 52 Hew Strachan, *The First World War: To Arms*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 730.
- 53 Lüdke, *Jihad Made in Germany*, 101.
- 54 ATASE, FWW; F:1849, D:103, I:1/39.
- 55 ATASE, FWW; F:1849, D:103, I:1/37. Also see: ATASE, FWW; F:1863, D:153, I:41.
- 56 ATASE, FWW; F:1863, D:153, I:28.
- 57 Lüdke, *Jihad Made in Germany*, 168.
- 58 ATASE, FWW; F:1863, D:153, I:27. For more on Mannesmann, see: ATASE, FWW; F:1863, D:153, I:39-39/8.
- 59 The SO was also active in a host of other regions beyond Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula, including Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, the Sudan, Iran, Baluchistan, India, Afghanistan, Bukhara, Khiva, the southern and northern Caucuses, the Crimea, Azerbaijan, Thrace, and Macedonia.

- 60 For examples, see: ATASE, FWW; F:248, D:1031, I:2/1, I:2/3, I:2/5, I:2/6, I:2/11, I:2/12, I:2/25, I:2/44, I:2/49, I:2/50, I:6, I:6/7, I:11, I:13.
- 61 Stoddard, "Ottoman Government," 148, 171, 222. It is confusing that in a telegraph to Talat Pasha, dated 6 July 1915, Cemal Pasha indicates that before he saw the documents seized from the French Consulate in Damascus, the governor of Syria had sent them to either Talat or Enver Pasha. General Directorate of State Archives of the Prime Ministry of the Republic of Turkey – Ottoman Archive (BOA), DH. ŞFR. 479/4. Also see, Cemal Paşa, *Hatırat* (Istanbul: Arma, 1996), 210.
- 62 The information Eşref Kuşçubaşı gave to Philip H. Stoddard concerning the operation in Damascus and Beirut raises more questions than it answers, and resting on the memoirs Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbak, it is maintained that the operation in Beirut was carried out not by the SO unit of Eşref Kuşçubaşı but by Beirut governor Bekir Sami Bey, in concert with the American consul after French consul Picot had left the region. Ahmet Efe, *Efsaneden Gerçeğe Kuşçubaşı Eşref* (Istanbul: Bengi, 2007), 106–8. Azmi Bey, the governor of Beirut, shared with the Ministry of the Interior the findings of an investigation he carried on the documents obtained from the French Consulate in Beirut in early 1916. BOA, DH. ŞFR. 508/101 and 510/88.
- 63 Çiçek, *War and State Formation*, 82.
- 64 In a telegraph to Cemal Pasha in December 1914, Talat Pasha mentioned Bahaeddin's affinity for the use of force and describes how he had expressed this affinity against Jews who were German nationals, which could result in German demands that he be removed from his post. In the telegraph, Talat requested that Cemal take Bahaeddin into his own employ, thereby preventing possible German demands while allowing Bahaeddin to continue to serve. One week later Bahaeddin was appointed to the Eighth District of the Police Directorate and remained in the region for some time afterward. BOA, DH. ŞFR. 47/468, 48/59.
- 65 ATASE, FWW; F:1844, D:72, I:10.
- 66 ATASE, FWW; F:1857, D:132, I:1/13.
- 67 *Takvim-i Vekayi*, No. 3543, 29 – Supplement; Divan-ı Harb-i Örfi Muhakematı Zabıt Ceridesi, Second Session (4 May 1919).
- 68 Safi, "Historical Assessment," 74–82.

