



A Holy War?

The Jihad Legacy of World War I

Known as a pious Muslim, Egyptian President Abd al-Fattah as-Sisi [said](#) in 2015 that it is most difficult to change religious rhetoric and how people use their faith. The outcomes will take many years: “Radical misconceptions [of Islam] were instilled 100 years ago. Now we can see the results.” He may have been referring to the German-Ottoman jihadization of Islamism in the early 20th century. So, what happened in World War I?

Historians deal often with European powers—particularly, the Triple Entente or Allies and their empires—but not many focus on the Central Powers, picture, and their joint effort in the Middle East. This essay discusses the background of the German-Ottoman axis, the change of the jihad doctrine, and a [call](#) for a “partial coalition jihad” to ignite war by revolts in the Allies’ Muslim-majority colonies.

Wilhelm II, Franz Joseph I, Mehmed V, Ferdinand I
Germany/Austria-Hungary/Ottoman/Bulgaria/Wiki Pic



From Berlin to Istanbul

As the German Reich emerged in [1871](#), its British, French, and Russian neighbors were growing their colonies into empires. Rivalry between the empires intensified, and Chancellor Otto von Bismarck led his primary policy toward building the German empire. To maintain the status quo in the Middle East, he followed a secondary policy without seeking colonies. The “German Mideast founding years” began in [1884](#): three decades of commercial, cultural, and peaceful expansion. But von Bismarck kept the question of which powers would get parts of the fading Ottoman Empire open in order to avoid hostile pacts forming by [neighbors](#) in Central Europe.

In 1890, the Kaiser retired the Chancellor. Wilhelm feared that Germany’s neighbors would import soldiers from abroad and use them in Europe against Germany. The monarch developed a new policy: align with the Ottomans, and, in case of an all-out war in Europe, turn Muslims against their colonial masters. In 1896, Max von Oppenheim—white suit in the center of the photo with the tribes—his diplomat in Cairo to [watch](#) Islam, pointed him to the prophet Sayyid al-Kailani of Baghdad’s al-Qadiriyya Brotherhood. He allegedly had “a huge sway in India” and could ignite an Islamist revolt. The Kaiser “need only to give the signal:” If London loses India, then its global might will end.

Photo Courtesy Max von Oppenheim Foundation



Before the Kaiser visited Istanbul's Sultan-Caliph Abd al-Hamid II in 1898, von Oppenheim's Report #48 (467 until 1909) told him about a pan-Islamic Afro-Asian movement with anti-Christian brotherhoods against colonialists. Should the Sultan turn defensive jihad to an offensive one, empires could crumble as the al-Mahdiyya Brotherhood had demonstrated in Sudan (Winston S. Churchill told it in his 1899 book *The River War*). Pan-Islamists wanted to end any Christian's rule, so the Sultan was a worthy ally for Germany. As a result of von Oppenheim's advice, the Kaiser vowed in Damascus to be the protector of the 300 million Muslims.



In 1900, a pan-Islamist movement was not only a matter for Germany with its 57 Orientalist lecturers at 21 universities. The Italian Iranist Italo Pizzi wrote on Islamism and jihad *L'islamismo e la guerra santa* and *Islamismo*. At Cambridge, scholars debated the Sultan's role. George P. Gooch argued since he did not descend from the prophet, he was no true caliph. Nevertheless, Muslims accepted his power to proclaim jihad against "infidels." His army had 750,000 men and "gained power by telegraph." In the 1890s, his men killed Armenians. Jews lived there as well. Edward G. Browne defined pan-Islamism as a union for a theocracy. He stressed Berlin's "intrusion" with the reform of the Ottoman military, railway building, and sympathetically leaning to Islamists.

A German-Ottoman Axis

After the Young Turks came to power in 1908, the Kaiser kept his idea of an axis between the Central Powers and the Ottomans. Wilhelm liked to end "meddling" by London or St. Petersburg in favor of Christians. Otherwise, Istanbul might revolutionize—a *furor islamiticus*. The Kaiser opined that if colonialists pressed for reforms, then the Sultan would unfold his flag, and "Allah" would be heard in all Afro-Asian corners. After "20 years of my Turkish policy," the Kaiser did not want the Young Turks to become pro-British. He believed that England would begin to crumble when Turkey mobilized in Egypt and revolts set India ablaze.

After the Kaiser's trip to the Ottoman Empire in 1898, Berlin pursued an "official Islam policy." The Kaiser's paradox was to avoid Islamist revolts in his own colonial areas of Middle Africa while inciting them in his neighbors' colonial territories. Germany did not have colonies in the Middle East, so his rivals would need to send colonial soldiers to put down any revolts overseas and cannot deploy them in Europe.

Joint Jihadization of Islamism

As World War I took shape, Berlin concluded with Istanbul a secret pact on August 2, 1914: If Russia goes to war, then Istanbul would do so too on the side of the Central Powers and Germans will take over some key military posts of the Ottomans. Clarification was needed due to this Christian-Muslim coalition—was it legal? Joint texts emerged on jihad, changing its dogma, and Islamist revolts backed by up to eight Muslim brotherhoods.

If one considers Berlin's switch from a secondary peacetime to a primary wartime Middle East policy against the Allies and their colonies, there was a "jihad made in Germany." The Kaiser and Caliph knew the risks of this coalition, especially for local non-Muslim minorities, but they opted for Islamism and jihad. Berlin wanted to keep the Ottoman Empire, develop it, and eventually have a larger Union of Islamic States under its control. An

economic goal was to exchange more German-made industrial products for raw materials from the Middle East. This was a pro-imperial Islam policy from above to keep the Ottoman Empire from decline. From below, it was a limited anti-imperial Islam policy to instigate Muslims in the colonies to revolt against their overlords.

A Weaponized Islamism

Von Oppenheim penned a [plan](#) for the Kaiser until early November 1914: *The Revolutionizing of Islamic Areas of Our Foes*. According to the text, the Sultan-Caliph would call for jihad against the Allies. Berlin would deliver money, experts, and guns. The Germans would seek to galvanize Muslims in British India, French North Africa, and Russian Asia, in addition to all Muslims in the enemies' armies. The call to jihad would go out in their languages. Berlin's Foreign Office would create an Oriental News Organization with up to 75 "reading halls" in the Ottoman Empire and beyond. The rebellion of Muslims in India and Egypt was the key to victory. Expeditions would be sent out to incite local jihad by [fatwas](#) that prepare for revolts from [Kabul](#) to India. An Indian scholar would call this a "directed jihad made in the West" in this war that started not as a religious one.

Jihad Call: Shaikh al-Islam Ürgüplü Mustafa Khairi



Thus, in Istanbul, the Shaikh of Islam issued for the Caliph a call to jihad on November 14, 1914: After the enemy of Islam attacked the Islamic world, the Caliph orders a jihad as a general mobilization and individual duty for all Muslims according to the Quran. Since Russia, England, and France were now hostile to the Islamic Caliphate, all Muslims ruled by them needed to answer the call for jihad. The protection of the Ottoman Empire depended on all Muslims participating. For Muslims of enemy countries, it was absolutely forbidden to fight against Islamic troops even if they were forced to do so. It was a great sin for Muslims under the rule of England, France, Russia, Serbia, Montenegro, and their allies to fight against Germany and Austria—allies of the Supreme Islamic Government.

An Enduring Legacy

Although the Central Powers lost in the end, nationalist and Islamist revolts in the Middle East mostly ensued after the conclusion of the war. The same happened after the next world war—and even in the millennium, though almost all colonies had long vanished.

The Kaiser had his reasons to worry about being squashed by his neighbors, as those empires received raw materials and soldiers from colonies used against Germany. The war was lost, and all of Germany's colonies with it. However, the impact of Islamism and jihad never ceased. Surely, there were [other](#) reasons for revolts than a key foreign sway.

About 100 years later, the legacy of the German-Ottoman alliance and call for Islamist revolts endures. But a process has started to stop this radicalization of faith. As countries like Egypt and some Gulf states returned to a moderate Islam, anti-Islamism shapes counter-ideologies after the crude lessons of ISIS in Iraq, Syria, and other lands. President as-Sisi hit a point about those instilled radical misconceptions of Islam in 1914. Indeed, they were instigated by joint German-Ottoman efforts.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

This [analysis](#) first appeared in the Middle East Program of the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

Updated, some links were added.