

The Three Lives of Mehmet Lutfi Bey: Under Ottoman, Syrian, and Turkish States

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The Ottoman Empire left an abandoned cultural heritage, one which was not adopted by its successor nation-states. The founders of the post-Ottoman nation-states preferred to establish their national identity on the historical basis of denying the imperial legacy and opening a corridor in history for their nations as actors. The Kemalist political leaders and intellectuals in the Republic of Turkey interpreted the late history of the Ottoman Empire as progressing toward Kemalist secularism, which concluded with the collapse of the Ottoman imperial project by the “betrayal” of other nations, such as the Arabs and Albanians, and the rebirth of the Turkish nation from its ashes with the war of independence.¹ The Arab nationalist leaders, meanwhile, assessed the transition to nation-states as an “awakening” of the Arab nation to free itself from the “Ottoman yoke.”² These points of view

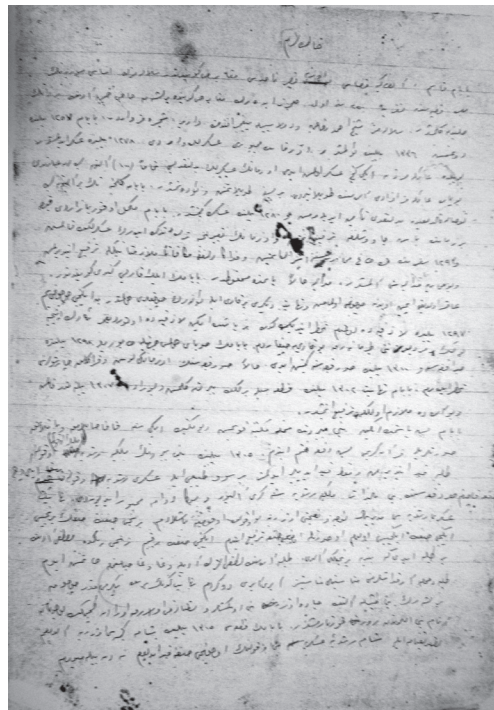
Front cover of *Hatıralarım*, the memoirs of Mehmet Lutfi Rifai (Yücel). All images reproduced in this article come from these memoirs.

prevented scholars from penetrating into the late Ottoman world and understanding the social and individual transformations that took place during the transition from empire to nation-states as well as the imperial heritage left by the Ottomans.

From the 1970s, however, these nationalist perspectives have been undermined by revisionist approaches to the history of the Middle East. New studies on the origins and development of Arab and Turkish nationalisms based on the contemporary sources demonstrated that the picture was quite different from what had been drawn by nationalist historians and conveyed by nationalist leaders. A main contribution of the new perspective has been to demonstrate the success of the Ottomanism project among the non-Turkish communities in creating a mutual Ottoman identity. Scholars of Arab nationalism have clarified that adherents of Arabist ideology did not follow a policy of “separatism” from the Ottoman Empire.³ Rather, they defended a decentralist version of Ottomanism during the Ottoman era. Recent studies on Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire point to similar trends during the transition from Ottoman to Mandate rules.⁴

Many of these studies focused on either the imperial experience or the transition to nation-states. The present study, however, examines the story of an Ottoman officer from Alexandretta, Muhammad Lutfi Bey al-Rifa’i (later Mehmet Lutfi Yücel), as a citizen of the Ottoman Empire, then Syria, and finally Turkey. It is mainly based on Lutfi Bey’s memoirs, written in 1956 when he was a citizen of Turkey. These memoirs were privately published in Turkish by his sons. They were left half-finished due to his death, and thus I have made use of some documents left by Lutfi Bey, as well as the testimony of his children regarding their father, to help illuminate the post-Ottoman period. It seems that being a citizen of Turkey influenced his memoirs, the text of which seem to indicate attempts to demonstrate his loyalty to Turkey in order to avoid condemnation by Turkish nationalists in Alexandretta. This may explain why he wrote his memoirs in Turkish, despite his children’s testimony that he used Arabic to communicate with family members.⁵ Though he spoke Arabic at home, Turkish was his “public language.”

Lutfi Bey’s experience allows us to better understand the construction and deconstruction of political identities in the Middle East during and after the Ottoman period. As an Arab who was aware of his Arabness, Lutfi’s story also helps to show the mutual Ottoman identity shared by the empire’s different nations in the late nineteenth



A page from the original manuscript of Lutfi Bey’s memoirs.



Lutfi Bey's father, Hajj Qasim Agha.

and early twentieth centuries. His case is uniquely interesting due to his having become a citizen of two post-Ottoman nation-states, Syria and Turkey, and having thus been exposed to the nation-building policies of both these states. In this regard, Lutfi's experience includes considerable details on these changes' influence on him, and differs from other Turkish and Arabic testimonies, which follow a more straightforward narrative defined by the processes of "nationalization" (that is, the transition from empire to a nation-state) in the 1920s and 1930s.

This article will first examine Lutfi Bey's early life and his education in Syria and Istanbul as an Ottoman officer. Following that, it will address his service in the Ottoman Army until the Great War, including his account of the Gallipoli front. Finally, it will touch upon the post-Ottoman period and Lutfi Bey's change of political attitude from Ottomanism to Arabism and finally to Kemalism under Turkish rule.



A medal given to Hajj Qasim Agha by Sultan 'Abd al-'Aziz for his military service in Croatia in 1863.

Growing Up an Ottoman

The first years of Lutfi Bey's life and education in the Syrian provinces and Istanbul reflect the cultural diversity imperial citizenship and contribute us to understand the late Ottoman world. Lutfi Bey was born in Latakia in 1881. His father, Hajj Qasim Agha, was a Sunni Arab from Alexandretta and a captain in the Ottoman Army in Syria. Qasim Agha was conscripted into the Ottoman army in 1864, and Lutfi Bey states in his memoirs that there were other members of the Rifa'i family who were recruited into military service. (Lutfi also mentions that conscripts could pay a fee [*Bedel-i Askeri*] to be

exempted from military service, noting that it was a custom among Syrians that all family members of a conscript would contribute to pay the conscription fee of one hundred gold liras.)⁶ After his term of mandatory military service had ended, Qasim Agha preferred to stay in the army [*terk-i tezkire*] and served as an Ottoman officer in the different regions of the empire, fighting in Montenegro in 1877.

As a result of Qasim Agha's various assignments in the Ottoman army, Lutfi spent his childhood in different cities of Syria, such as Tyre, Sidon, Beirut, Homs, and Damascus. In 1889, he enrolled in the civil secondary school (*Mülkiye Rüşdiye Mektebi*) in Beirut. However, due to his enthusiasm to be educated in the military secondary school (*Askeri Rüşdiye Mektebi*), his father transferred him to the military school in the same city. In his first year there, he was first in the class; the next year, a "negro" (*zenci*) named Mustafa would take first rank from Lutfi. In 1891, his father was assigned to Damascus and Lutfi Bey continued his education there. In 1897, he started at the Damascus Military High School (*Şam Askeri İdadisi*). There, Lutfi Bey recalled learning Turkish and French at an advanced level.⁷

After his graduation in 1900, Lutfi Bey was selected by the Damascus School to continue his education in the Royal Military Academy (*Harbiye Mektebi*) in Istanbul. He describes students at the academy from all over the Ottoman lands, including Monastir, Erzurum, Damascus, and Baghdad. He was a classmate of İsmet İnönü, the second president of Turkey, and a year after Lutfi's enrollment, Nuri al-Said Pasha, the former prime minister of Iraq, would start at the academy. Lutfi Bey states that, during his first year at the academy, Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) was "caught with a prohibited book called *Yıldız Esrarı* [The Mystery of Yıldız, the residential palace of Sultan Abdulhamid II] and banished to Beirut."⁸ It should be noted here that the memoirs describe the Royal Academy's climate of comradery, which seemed congruent with the empire's multi-ethnic and cultural diversity. A student from Iraq or Syria could establish good friendships with others from the Balkans or Anatolia.⁹

In 1906, following his graduation, Lutfi Bey was assigned to a division of the Third Ottoman Army in Agotça, in the *vilayet* of Salonica, mainly populated by Turks and Bulgarians. In the following years, he would be assigned to various cities and towns of the *vilayet* of Macedonia. Lutfi Bey provides remarkable details regarding relations between



Lutfi Bey wearing his medals. This photograph was taken in Antakya, likely in the 1930s, by the noted photographer Sardonian.

Bulgarians and Turks in the region, as well as the attitude of the two communities against the government. Lutfi describes the influence of the Bulgarian partisans over Bulgarians in the Macedonia *vilayet* as absolute. Bulgarians were disallowed by these groups from communicating with the government, and if anybody other than the village *mukhtar* had contacted with officials, he or she would be killed. Lutfi Bey recalls a Bulgarian youth from Agotça to whom he lends four *mejidies* and who was later killed by the partisans. The Turkish and Muslim villages, on the other hand, usually supported the government to provide public order in the region.¹⁰

Like Turkish officers who became influential leaders of the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP) and founders of the Turkish Republic, Lutfi's memoirs include many examples of his struggle, together with the other Ottoman officers, against the Bulgarian partisans in Agotça.¹¹ Once, he was assigned to capture the famous Bulgarian nationalist leader Jane Sandanski, though he did not succeed. Lutfi Bey learned Bulgarian during his service in Macedonia. According to Lutfi Bey, the Ottoman state failed to assert its authority in the region, the main cause being its willingness "to allow the Bulgarians to appoint their teachers from Bulgaria."¹² His interpretations regarding the Balkans, however, differ slightly from those of the Turkish officers. Whereas the Turkish officers harshly criticize the inefficiency of the Ottoman government in the region, and accuse the Balkan peoples of betraying the cause of Ottoman unity, Lutfi Bey is more comprehensive and calm, evaluating the problems of Ottoman society at that time without accusing one people or group. All of his remarks regarding the Ottoman rule begin with the word "our" – our state, our government, our soldiers, and so on – which seems to include all nationalities within the Ottoman Empire.¹³ He rarely uses the term "Turks," or "we, the Turks," differing in this from the Turkish memoirs penned during the Republican period. The Turks' emphasis on the Turkish is understandable, considering that many of the Turkish officers became the founders of Turkey and legitimated the new regime by criticizing the non-nationalist policies of the Ottoman past.¹⁴ They justified the Republican leader's abandonment of the Ottoman legacy by claiming that only the Turks struggled for the survival of the Ottoman Empire.

Shortly before the 1908 Revolution, Lutfi Bey joined the CUP in Kratova. After that he became politically active, propagating the ideas and aims of the CUP among his close friends in the army. Together with his Unionist friends, Lutfi proclaimed the restoration of the constitution (known as *hürriyet*, or "the freedom") in front of the sub-governorate (*kaymakamlık*) building of Kratova, despite the opposition of his battalion commander. He confesses, "after that [the 1908 Revolution] there has been no order, compliance, or discipline in the battalion." He was sent by the Committee to explain the Bulgarian partisans that "the constitution was proclaimed and the government guaranteed their lives and goods," and even returned an imprisoned partisan leader to Kratova to demonstrate the fraternity that came along with the freedom. Everybody in the city "sang pleasantly about freedom, equality, and fraternity." He "visited the surrounding villages with another captain and informed the villagers about the new situation and the aim of the CUP."¹⁵ In spite of his enthusiasm during the 1908 Revolution, there is no sign in his memoirs that he maintained his ties with the CUP or became active politically in the following years, once they had taken total control of the government.



Lutfi Bey (pictured on the left) during the defense of Janina.

From the 1908 Revolution to the Great War

In the first days of the revolution, Lutfi Bey was appointed to Prizren, a cosmopolitan Muslim-majority city in Kosovo. Prizren's inhabitants consisted of Turks, Muslim and Catholic Albanians, Christian and Muslim Serbs [Bosnian Muslims?], and Malisor Albanians. Lutfi stayed there more than two years and, according to his own remarks, his life in Prizren was quite comfortable. Unlike his previous assignments, Lutfi Bey was employed in the department of public works. The sub-governor, Agah Bey, commissioned him to build a road to Metzam, a town near Prizren. Afterwards, using local resources around Prizren, he built a military barrack sufficient for a regiment.¹⁶

This part of Lutfi Bey's memoirs include remarkable descriptions of the difficulties that the post-1908 Ottoman state faced as it endeavored to assert its authority over the people in the region. Lutfi describes the people of Prizren as "quite conservative and ignorant religiously." They possessed "a great number of weapons in their hands." The people frequently rebelled against the government, armed peasants surrounding the government building (*hükümet konağı*). According to Lutfi, the primary reason for the people's uprisings against the government was "the increase in taxes." In particular, "the peasants severely reacted against the Ottoman government's attempts to tax the agricultural production."¹⁷

Immediately prior to the Italian occupation of Tripoli, Lutfi Bey was assigned to the *vilayet* of Janina. He helped to craft a plan to defend the city of Vlorë, on the Ionian

Sea, against a possible Italian invasion and took preventive measures in the Italian neighborhoods, should the Italians have sought to open a second front in order to break the Ottoman-organized resistance in Tripoli. After the Italian threat dissipated, Lutfi Bey was sent to Resina in Albania and from there to Prishtina (in what is today Kosovo). Upon the rebellion of the Albanians in 1912, Lutfi's division was charged with protecting the railway station in Prishtina against the Albanian rebels. The government did not seek to suppress the revolt, but merely to prevent the rebels from invading crucial public buildings.¹⁸

With the outbreak of the Balkan wars, Lutfi Bey was appointed chief of staff to the troops defending Novi-Bazar on the Serbian front under the command of a certain Bahtiyar Pasha. These troops consisted of Anatolian and Balkan regular soldiers. Regarding Kosovar support for the Ottoman troops, Lutfi describes a scene quite different from Turkish and Albanian nationalist histories: the people, invited to take up arms on behalf of the Ottoman state, did just that. "The young people in the villages waited, armed, in their homes" to be organized by the army. The people were also instrumental in provisioning the Ottoman army. The soldiers under Lutfi Bey's command were fed by the villages that they visited. However, the government's inability keep transportation to the front open and recruits' lack of discipline were too much to overcome. Starvation prevailed and, as time went by, Lutfi Bey notes that the soldiers had reached the point that they could kill each other for a piece of bread. He adds that the same situation prevailed for nearly all Ottoman troops in the Balkans.¹⁹

As the war raged on and the Serbian troops advanced, Lutfi Bey withdrew the troops under his command and they merged with the Ottoman army corps, upon which he was dependent. During his retreat with the army corps, Lutfi faced the miseries of war, from starvation to lice infestation, and was on death's threshold several times. In one anecdote, he recalls recovering the body of Fethi Pasha, the commander of the Seventh Ottoman army corps, who died at a battle near Resina, implying that it was a dishonor for an army to leave the body of a high-ranking commander to the hands of the enemy.²⁰

Toward the end of the Balkan Wars, while defending Janina, Lutfi Bey was taken prisoner by Greek troops. The Ottoman troops under the command of Esat Pasha (Bülkat) had held out in the city despite all connections to the Ottoman borderland having been cut. Seventy percent of the soldiers defending the city died. Lutfi Bey claims that their resistance at Janina led to the replacement of Sabuncakis, the commander of the Greek troops, with Prince Konstantin, a commander from the Greek royal family. Finally, in March 1913, the resistance came to an end and the remaining Ottoman forces were captured by the Greeks and taken to the island of Spetses as prisoners of war.²¹ Following his release from Greece toward the end of 1913, Lutfi and eleven other officers were presented to Ahmed Izzet Pasha, the minister of war, as the heroes of Janina.²² Like many of the Ottoman war achievements, the defense of Janina has been narrated as a moment of "Turkish heroism" by nationalist historiography, and the contribution of soldiers like Lutfi Bey have been ignored. In a book prepared by the Turkish general staff and published by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, for example, the resistance in Janina is described as "an epic of honor made by the blood of a handful of noble and pure Turkish youth."²³

It is worth mentioning that Lutfi always describes the Ottoman troops as “our soldiers,” though he does not clarify what he means by the word “our.” Deeply invested in the Turkish nation-building process, Turkish officers frequently invoke “Turkishness” in their memoirs when they refer to Ottoman soldiers as “our soldiers.” However, as he strongly implies through the memoirs, by this term Lutfi Bey seems to intend the multi-cultural aspect of Ottomanness. In that sense, he diverges from the traditional Turkish national memory of the 1950s, when he wrote his memoirs as an Arab citizen of the Republic of Turkey. Being a citizen of Syria in the formative years of the construction of Turkish national identity (1923–1939) may have also made him (relatively-speaking) immune to the Turkish-nationalist discourse



Lutfi Bey (center) during the Gallipoli campaign.

of the government in this period. Had he been a citizen of Turkey from its establishment, Lutfi Bey’s discourse might be similar to other memoirs in Turkish.

After being freed from imprisonment in Greece, Lutfi Bey was appointed, at his own request, chief of staff in the Sixth Army in Aleppo. He describes an interesting event that took place before his move to Aleppo and centered around his Arab origins:

My friends from Damascus and Baghdad were in the corridors of the Ministry of War; some of them were also my classmates. I spoke to them. They whispered to each other, asking each other: “I wonder if there is ‘A’ mark on your personal record [*künye*]?” [I asked:] “What is this ‘A’ mark?” When I asked, they answered, “It means Arab and [it is] written on our personal records with red ink.” I wondered if it was found on my personal record, too. I wanted to see it. I came to understand surreptitiously that there was such a mark on my record. Oh! So I am an Arab! This situation had not come to my mind until then: I am an Arab, not a Turk. It means that there are the Arab officers and Turkish officers. I became concerned: What will happen to me? I concluded that the Turkish government would dismiss me and my friends. Now I am an Arab, I will be an Arab. I will be busy with the Arab politics. Maybe I will be an officer in the Arab army.²⁴

In spite of these remarks, it seems that becoming aware of his “Arab-ness” did not damage Lutfi Bey’s motivation to serve the Ottoman Empire. As will be seen below, he would continue to fight for the Ottoman army during the Great War. Lutfi did not stay

long in Aleppo. Immediately after the mobilization of the Ottoman armies for World War I, the Sixth Army Corps was transferred to Istanbul and put under the Ottoman Second Army's order. Soon after, his troops were assigned to defend the European side of the Dardanelles. He was assigned as the chief of staff the 19th Division under the command of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk).²⁵

From Gallipoli to Palestine

Salim Tamari notes in his introduction to Ihsan Turjman's diaries that the victories at the Gallipoli front were portrayed as Turkish victories, not Ottoman. He explains that Mustafa Kemal defeated the Allied attacks at Seddulbahir largely due to his Arab recruits, quoting Australian historian Bill Sellers: "Two-thirds of the troops who made up his 19th Division ... who faced the first wave of the Allied invasion were Syrian Arabs [soldiers from Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Palestine], comprising the 72nd and 77th regiments of the Ottoman army."²⁶

As mentioned earlier, Lutfi Bey was chief of staff of the 19th Division, and he describes his Arab soldiers' efforts at Gallipoli, offering a counter-narrative to the Turkish nationalist narrative that Arabs did not want to fight for the Ottoman Empire in the Great War. Lutfi describes tragic scenes of Arab soldiers assigned to risky deployments and how they went to them knowing well the high possibility that they would die there. Lutfi makes no reference to these soldiers being reluctant to fight for the Ottoman Empire.²⁷

In mid-April 1915, Lutfi Bey was replaced by Izzettin Bey (Çalışlar) and sent to Adrianople. A month later he was appointed chief of staff of a new force of Anatolian troops formed to fight at Gallipoli.²⁸ Lutfi Bey held the Germans responsible for the large numbers of Ottoman casualties, believe that they had sought to relieve their forces on the Western front by keeping Entente troops occupied at Gallipoli. He recalls the Turkish chief of staff of the First Division, Cafer Tayyar Bey (Eğilmez), refusing the order given to him by the Germans to take the offensive, as the Ottoman Empire was "losing its human resources recklessly, and, in a short while, the Ottoman army would not be able to find troops to maintain the war." This opposition, according to Lutfi Bey, brought about a change in strategy and ultimately reduced Ottoman casualties.²⁹

Following the Entente's failure in Arıburnu and Seddulbahir in late July, Entente troops landed in the Anafartalar area to break the resistance of the Ottoman troops. Lutfi Bey fought at Anafartalar under the command of Mustafa Kemal, and their troops defeated the Entente and caused their withdrawal. The main problem was to establish a link for the Ottoman troops between Arıburnu and Anafartalar. To that end, Lutfi's group made an offensive to Conk Bayırı under the command of Mustafa Kemal. Facing death head-on, they took back Conk Bayırı and reconnected the Ottoman troops in Gallipoli to each other. For his achievements during this offensive, Lutfi Bey was awarded a medal by Mustafa Kemal, and he later recalled that his efforts and bravery were appreciated by the founder of the Turkish Republic. After that, Lutfi Bey was assigned to Arıburnu under the command of Esat Pasha, his commander during the defense of Janina.³⁰

During his service on this front, Lutfi faced death several times. Once, he was almost shot by Entente artillery. Another time, four soldiers in front of him were killed by enemy howitzer fire; he was saved by having arrived two minutes late. In another case, Lutfi Bey escaped death by carefully watching the enemy fortifications and managing to get behind their soldiers. Both in the Balkan Wars and the Gallipoli Wars, he describes his survival as miraculous.³¹ But Lutfi provides more human moments as well. During ‘Eid al-Adha in 1915, British and Ottoman



A medal signed by Enver Pasha, awarded to Lutfi Bey for his service in 1916 and 1917.

soldiers ceased firing, and members of the Ottoman 57th Division communicated with British soldiers who spoke Turkish. The British wished the Ottomans a happy ‘eid, and the Ottomans thanked to the British for their kindness. Soldiers from both sides talk to each from a distance. The Ottoman soldiers presented cigarettes to the British while the latter offered marmalade. The commanding officers on each side, however, put an end to this, and the commander of the 57th Division and the other low-ranking officers under his command were punished.³²

With the conclusion of the battles on the Gallipoli front, Lutfi Bey was assigned as staff to a force of distinguished Ottoman troops being sent to Galicia, Hungary, to support the German and Hungarian troops there against Russian troops. Lutfi provides no details of his service in Hungary, only mentioning the preparations for transporting the troops by train.³³ Then, with the deterioration of the situation in the Palestine front, the Ottoman troops in Galicia were transferred to Syria. His division was deployed in Tal al-Shari‘a, to the east of Gaza, where they were to fight the British.

Here Lutfi Bey’s memoirs end due to his death. However, the writings of relatives and other documents enable us to trace the later periods of his life. In December 1917, according to his personal file in the Turkish general staff, he was appointed to the Jerusalem Commissariat. Following that, the *Yıldırım* Army Group sent him to the Amman Commissariat.³⁴ It seems that Lutfi Bey was not assigned to the front, and was instead employed in the rear service area. This could be due to Cemal Pasha’s distrust of Arab officers as a result of some of their nationalist feelings.³⁵ Though there is no evidence that Lutfi Bey’s Arab origins had any relationship with his assignment to rear service in Palestine, as seen previously, Lutfi Bey’s himself declared his sympathy toward Arabism in his memoirs. And indeed, he would support Amir Faysal’s state in Syria after the demise of the Ottoman Empire.



Lutfi Bey (standing, sixth from the left) between Mustafa Kemal and Ahmet Izzet Pasha in Syria.



Lutfi Bey (seated, third from left) in Gaza.

Becoming an Arab Nationalist

For many Ottoman-Arab intellectuals, politicians, and officers, the end of the Ottoman period forced a redefinition of political identities. Although Turkish and Arab political elites tried to keep the Turkish and Arab peoples politically together, the impossibility of this option became clearer beginning with the French invasion of Syria in 1920.³⁶ As Ottomanism fell off the agenda entirely, nationalism became the dominant paradigm for the reorganization of political groups. In this regard, many Arab officers stayed in Syria when the Ottoman army withdrew from Syria in the wake of its defeat by British troops. Afterward, most of them organized the political and military groups in Syria that sought to secure an independent state for the Syrians.³⁷



Lutfi Bey as a member of the Syrian Army.

Lutfi Bey's career was no different from other Ottoman-Arab officers. According to his personal file at the archives of the Turkish general staff, he did not withdraw with the Ottoman troops during their retreat toward Anatolia, preferring to stay in his country. Interestingly enough, he was not dismissed from the Ottoman Army immediately after the end of the Ottoman rule in Syria. Indeed, he remained an Ottoman officer for three years, receiving his official discharge from the Ottoman Army on 27 October 1921 (27 Tishrin al-Thani 1337).

On 2 July 1919, the first Syrian congress gathered in Damascus to secure the unity and independence of Syria under Amir Faysal's leadership. The delegates were encouraged to join the independence societies and motivate people for this mutual purpose. Lutfi Bey was elected as the delegate of Alexandretta together with Subhi Barakat.³⁸ His family also claims that Lutfi Bey fought against France at the battle of Maysalun, near Damascus.³⁹

Between 1921 and 1923, Lutfi Bey was assigned to the Syrian army. After that, he resigned from the army and began to live in Alexandretta. It seems that his ties with the Syrian national movement weakened after that time. Although neither he nor his family wrote anything about why he drifted away from the Arab nationalist movement, it may have been a personal choice or one imposed on him by circumstances.

He was employed in Antioch Sultani School as teacher and director from 1923 to 1929. He had to resign from his post due to his disagreement with the French inspector Pierre Bazanty. After that, from 1929 to 1933, he served as director of the Dayr al-Zur Boy's High School, as well as a teacher of mathematics. In 1933, he returned to Antioch



Lutfi Bey (seated, fourth from the left) as director of the Sultani School in Antioch.

and began to work in Antioch High School.⁴⁰

Despite his Arab origins and his collaboration with the Arab nationalist movement in the Faysali era, Lutfi Bey maintained good relations with the Turkish community of Alexandretta and supported their activities. In 1935 and 1936, he published articles in *Yenigün* newspaper, published by the pro-Turkey elite of Alexandretta. His son explains that Lutfi Bey actively supported the annexation of Alexandretta to Turkey. He visited the villages around the Kusheir district and gave public talks, encouraging the people to join Turkey.⁴¹ The reasons behind Lutfi Bey's support for Turkey as an Arab remain unclear, and he did not write anything on these matters. However, it is possible that his actions might be interpreted as the continuation of an Ottoman identity, one that could not be easily accommodated by nationalist categories.

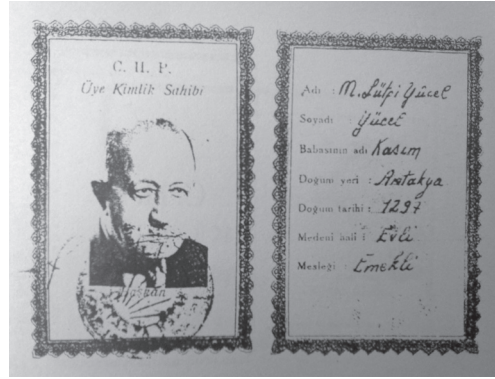
Muhammad to Mehmet, al-Rifa'i to Yücel

After Alexandretta's annexation to Turkey in 1939, and presumably due to the ultra-nationalist atmosphere of Alexandretta (and Turkey more generally) and the new republican regulation that required citizens to adopt Turkish last names, Lutfi Bey was compelled to Turkify both his name and surname. Muhammad was transmuted into its Turkish version, Mehmet, and al-Rifa'i transformed into the Turkish word of equivalent meaning, Yücel.⁴² In a step probably meant to affirm his loyalty to Turkey as an Arab, he also joined the ruling nationalist Republican People's party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, or CHP). Immediately after annexation, he registered with the party in Alexandretta, where he

lived in retirement until his death in 1956.⁴³

Lutfi Bey's story is a good example of the unstable character of the period. It was a period of transition, where the kinds of identities that people could adopt were still unsure and in flux. Lutfi was able to move from Ottoman to Syrian to Turkish in a way that he likely couldn't have done several decades later, after the Ottoman successor states became established and the identities connected to them more rigid.

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Lutfi Bey's membership card for the Republican People's Party, Turkey's ruling nationalist party from 1923 to 1950.

Endnotes

- 1 For an analysis of the “Arab betrayal” thesis, see M. Talha Çiçek, “The Impact of the Sharif Hussein’s Revolt on the Nation-Building Processes of Turks and Arabs,” *Journal of Academic Approaches* 3, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 98–111.
- 2 For such a study, see George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1945).
- 3 C. Ernest Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism: Essays on the Origins of the Arab Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973); Rashid Khalidi, Lisa Anderson, and Muhammad Muslih, eds., *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); M. Talha Çiçek, *War and State Formation in Syria: Cemal Pasha’s Governorate during World War I* (London: Routledge, 2014).
- 4 Abigail Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire: Jerusalem between Ottoman and British Rule* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011); Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Julia Philips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 5 The founders of the republic made a great effort to suppress other languages from the public sphere in 1930s. They organized campaigns called “Citizens! Speak Turkish” (Vatandaş!

Türkçe Konuş). For details on this, see Abraham Galanté, *Vatandaş Türkçe Konuş* (Istanbul: Hasan Tabiat Matbaası, 1928).

- 6 Mehmet Lütfi Rıfai (Yücel), *Hatıralarım* (Istanbul: n.p., 2006), pp. 25–26.
- 7 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, pp. 26–28.
- 8 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, pp. 30–31; Erik Jan Zürcher conveys this event in details in his book as follows: “Mustafa Kemal and his friends continued their political discussions in their rented apartment, but this time they were betrayed by one of the Sultan’s spies, a certain Fethi, to Zülüflü İsmail Pasha, the Inspector-general of the military schools. They were kept prisoner for a week and they feared they were going to be banished or at least dismissed from the army. Ali Fuat (Cebesoy) and Mustafa Kemal even considered fleeing to Europe. But in the end they were let off with only a reprimand and they got their postings. But because of their political activities they were not posted with the European armies, the Second Army in Edirne or the Third Army in Monastir (Bitola) for which they had applied, but with the Fourth Army in Erzurum or the Fifth in Damascus. This made any activity they would undertake far less dangerous because they would be far from their familiar surroundings and their friends (since the great majority of them came either from Rumelia, or from the capital). Mustafa Kemal was appointed staff captain with the Fifth Army on February 5, 1905. He travelled to Damascus in the company of his classmate Mufit (Ozdeş) (1874–1940) and they were posted to the 30th Cavalry Regiment

- for a year's cavalry training. In March and April they participated in a campaign against Druze insurgents in the Hauran region." Erik Jan Zürcher, *The Unionist Factor* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), p. 32.
- 9 For some examples, see Zürcher, *The Unionist Factor*, pp. 32–34.
- 10 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, pp. 35–42.
- 11 For some examples, see: Tahsin Uzer, *Makedonya Eşkîyalık Tarihi ve Son Osmanlı Yönetimi* (Ankara: TTK Yayınları, 1979); and Kazım Karabekir, *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (İstanbul: Yapı-Kredi Yayınları, 2011).
- 12 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 48.
- 13 In spite of totalizing and transformative nature of World War I years resulted from Cemal Pasha's tyranny in Syria, similar remarks can be found in the accounts left by Khalil al-Sakakini and Ihsan Turjman. For Turjman, see Salim Tamari, *Year of the Locust: A Soldier's Diary and the Erasure of Palestine's Ottoman Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 105, 106, 124; For Sakakini, see Adel Manna, "Between Jerusalem and Damascus: The End of the Ottoman Rule as Seen by a Palestinian Modernist," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 22–23 (Fall–Winter 2005): 117.
- 14 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, pp. 35–42; normally, it would be strange for Lutfi Bey to highlight the Turkish element. However, when he wrote the memoirs he was a citizen of the Republic of Turkey and was influenced by its nationalist atmosphere. Therefore, his rare references to Turkishness could be interpreted in light of the circumstances of the period in which he lived.
- 15 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 50.
- 16 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 52.
- 17 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, pp. 53–55.
- 18 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, pp. 58–60.
- 19 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 62.
- 20 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 73.
- 21 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 81.
- 22 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 89.
- 23 "Yanya Savunması ... bir avuç asil ve tertemiz Türk evladının tarihimize al kanlarıyla yazdıkları şan ve şeref destanıdır." Ramiz Ertem, "Önsöz," *Yanya Savunması ve Esat Paşa* (Ankara: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1984), p. iii.
- 24 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 90.
- 25 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 96; see also İsmet Görgülü, *On Yıllık Harbin Kadrosu, 1912–1922* (Ankara: TTK Yayını, 1993), p. 93.
- 26 Tamari, "The Erasure of the Ottoman Palestine," p. 13.
- 27 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 107.
- 28 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 100.
- 29 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 106.
- 30 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, pp. 111–16.
- 31 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 118.
- 32 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 120.
- 33 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 126; see, also: Görgülü, *On Yıllık Harbin Kadrosu*, p. 178.
- 34 "Askelik Safahat Belgesi," 12 May 2005, in Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, Appendices.
- 35 Cemal Pasha's Chief-of-Staff, Ali Fuad Erden explains in his memoirs that, due to their ties with the Arab nationalism, some 150 Arab officers were selected and sent to the Gallipoli with the consideration that they could organize a rebel of the Arab soldiers of the Fourth Army against the Ottoman Empire. However, he confesses that wholehearted efforts of some of them like Yasin al-Hashimi, who later assigned to fight against the British in Palestine, for the Ottoman victory demonstrated the groundlessness of this suspicion. For details, see: Ali Fuad Erden, *Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Suriye Hatıraları* (İstanbul: İş Bankası Yayınları, 2006), pp. 67–68; For a recent study on Cemal Pasha's governorate in Syria, see: M. Talha Çiçek, *War and State Formation in Syria: Cemal Pasha's Governorate during World War I* (London: Routledge, 2014).
- 36 For a study on the relations between the Turks and the Syrians in between 1918 and 1924, see: M. Talha Çiçek, "Osmanlıcılık İdeolojisi ve Osmanlı Hakimiyeti Sonrası Türk-Arap İlişkilerinde Değişim ve Süreklilik," *Divan* 17, no. 33 (2012): 173–192; For a study on "the liminal loyalties" of the Palestinians during the Turkish war of independence, see Awad Halabi, "Liminal Loyalties: Ottomanism and Palestinian Responses to the Turkish War of Independence, 1919–1922," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 19–37.
- 37 On this period, see James L. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
- 38 Yusuf al-Hakim writes his name as "Mustafa Lutfi al-Rifa'i": Yusuf al-Hakim, *Suriya wa-l-'ahd al-Faysali* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1986), p. 92; however, his family confirms in his memoirs that Lutfi Bey participated in this congress: Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 11.
- 39 In Maysalun battle, the French army fought against the Faysal's army to defend Syria against the French invasion. Faysal was defeated by the French and, after that, the French mandate was established in Syria. For information on this battle, see: Abu Khaldun Sati' al-Khusri, *The Day of Maysalun: A Page from the Modern History of the Arabs* (Washington: Middle East Institute, 1966).
- 40 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 12.
- 41 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 15.
- 42 Similar cases were experienced by the Arab citizens of Turkey. Salim Tamari mentions Mehmed Fasih, who had to Turkify his name as Mehmet Kayabalı. See, Tamari, "Erasure of the Ottoman Past," p. 15.
- 43 Yücel, *Hatıralarım*, p. 13.