

The Ottoman Red Crescent in War and Aid: Archival Insights from the Italo-Ottoman Conflict

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Abstract:

This study examines the significant contributions of the Ottoman Red Crescent Society during the Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912), a pivotal period in the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Using archival documents, the study reveals how, despite significant political, military, and logistical challenges, including financial difficulties, a shortage of medical personnel, the Society was able to deliver vital humanitarian aid to both military personnel and civilians. In addition to its work as a relief organization, it served as a tactical extension of the Empire, providing a covert means of bolstering its military presence under the guise of humanitarian aid. By establishing hospitals and securing global support.

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Introduction

The Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912), which erupted following the Italian invasion of Libya, marked major shifts in the trajectory of humanitarian and relief efforts throughout the Islamic world. One of the most important achievements was the formation of the Ottoman Red Crescent Society, an organized force dedicated to providing medical and humanitarian aid to soldiers and civilians harmed by the war, both on the battlefields and in field hospitals, as well as in organizing support campaigns from the Islamic world.

Medical delegations from other Islamic nations, including Egypt and India, also assisted under The Ottoman Red Crescent Society's auspices, giving these humanitarian endeavors a more comprehensive Islamic and solidarity component. This war was the first authentic test of the Ottoman Red Crescent's abilities, not only in terms of organization and medical care but also in terms of moral support and international backing. In the face of severe health and environmental conditions, this activity was most prevalent in Tripoli and Barqa, where the conflict was at its worst. By this experience, The Ottoman Red Crescent Society solidified its role as a leading humanitarian organization and cleared the path for the establishment of Red Crescent organizations throughout the Islamic world. Consequently, the objective of this research is to explore also to answer the following research questions: how did the Ottoman Red Crescent Society help to alleviate the effects of war on civilians and soldiers during the conflict? What kind of support did The Ottoman Red Crescent Society receive from other Islamic countries during this war? What does this signify on a political and religious level? What challenges did the Red Crescent face in Libya? Moreover, how did it address them on the ground? What impact did this organization have on the Ottoman Empire?

1. The Ottoman Red Crescent Society's Early Involvement in the Tripoli War:

Among the developments that affected the balance of power in Europe in the 19th century was the political unification of Italy in 1870. Until then, Italians had lived in city-states, but then they came together in a single centralized state, becoming a new power in Europe. The Italians believed that for their unified state to be a great power, it must possess colonies, so they chose Tripoli and Cyrenaica, which belonged to the Ottoman Empire, as their colonial territories. In agreement with the major European powers (Kurtcephe & Beden, 2015, pp. 66).

Beginning in 1907, the Italian government pursued a deliberate policy of 'peaceful penetration' of the economic and social structures of Ottoman Libya. Having ascertained that the other European powers would not stop them (Harris, 2022, p.5)

After reaching an agreement with the major European powers, Italy sent two notes to the Ottoman Empire on September 23 and 28, 1911. In the first note, it accused the Ottoman government of inciting the inhabitants of Tripoli and Cyrenaica against the Italians and stated that the necessary measures had not been taken to prevent this. The second note claimed that Tripoli and Cyrenaica were suffering from chaos and neglect, that their inhabitants were living in ignorance, and that their proximity to the Italian coast made their "civilization" vital to Italy. (Kurtcephe & Beden, 2015, pp. 66).

San Giuliano delivered the ultimatum he had drafted to the Ottoman authority. In essence, the ultimatum asked Turkey to allow Italian forces to occupy Libya without triggering any armed confrontation. If the Ottoman administration agreed to this amicably and allowed a peaceful transfer of power to Italy, it would not be required to formally relinquish its sovereignty over Libya (Ferraioli, 2023, p.21)

The Ottoman Empire responded swiftly and diplomatically to the ultimatum from Italy. All hostility to Italian interests since the advent of the Young Turk regime was denied. There was no threat to Italians and other foreigners in Tripoli. Only one transport had been sent, and no soldiers were on board. The Ottoman Empire asked what guarantees Italy desired. All demands would be granted if they did not affect the territorial integrity of the provinces. Italy refused to accept the Turkish reply and declared war on Turkey at 2:30 p.m. on September 29."(Askew, 1942, p.63).

To participate in the war against the Italians and confront the occupation, many Turkish volunteer officers began heading to western Tripoli via Egypt and Tunisia, even though these two countries were under British and French occupation, respectively, and had declared official neutrality at the time (BOA, BEO, 3994/299520). Nevertheless, these circumstances did not deter them from reaching the battlefields.

Among them, the Orient Express train departed on November 15, 1911, from Sirkeci Station, carrying Captain Hilal, Lieutenant Nuri, and their comrades on its maiden voyage, arriving in Paris on the 18th of the same month. After settling into the Hotel de l'Alger, they headed straight to the embassy, where Lieutenant Colonel Fata Bek, the military attaché, had left long before them for Africa, and from there to the territory of Tripoli, to be the harbinger of this patriotic endeavor. (Sürmeli, 2016, p. 143)

The War became a turning point in the global political history, both in terms of the transformation in warfare techniques aircraft were used for the first time and in terms of the change in the concept of international cooperation in treating wounded soldiers behind the lines. As the battlefield entered the skies, the International Red Crescent and Red Cross Societies began to express a new understanding of their duties, quickly making efforts to reduce the devastation caused by war to soldiers and civilians in bombarded areas, without discrimination based on religion or ethnicity. (Muttalip, 2011, p.327)

Therefore, in an attempt by the Ottoman side to assist the people of Tripoli, just days after the outbreak of this sudden war, a delegation from the Ottoman Red Crescent Society was dispatched to the region. The Ottoman Red Crescent Society had temporarily ceased its operations after the Ottoman-Greek War, but soon resumed operations after the declaration of the Second Constitution, becoming a pivotal player in the wars (K. A, No: 24/1). A mobile field hospital, along with the necessary medical equipment and tools, was attached to this mission (BOA, BEO, 3981/298533) .

The Ottoman Empire, in its tireless efforts to assist its province, which was under Italian occupation, requested aid at a time when the Ottoman Red Crescent Society was still

in the process of being established and renewed. It had not yet completed its first year. Moreover, was unable to even establish a warehouse or prepare the necessary medical tools and equipment. The Ottoman Red Crescent Society's capital did not exceed 15,000 liras, and it did not possess any necessary materials. Meanwhile, the Ottoman health mission in Tripoli was forced to withdraw from the coastal cities towards the interior, leaving behind medicines and medical supplies. Italian forces captured some of the military doctors who remained in these cities. Leaving the Anti-colonial fighters in urgent need of medical assistance. (İzgöer & Tuğ, 2013, p.75)

According to an official document from the Ottoman military and health authorities, the Ottoman Empire sought diplomatic efforts to secure the passage of The Ottoman Red Crescent Society's teams to Tripoli during the Italo-Ottoman War. This was achieved by appealing to France through an initiative made by the latter's ambassador in Rome to the commander of the Italian army, which aimed to allow the Red Crescent Society to pass through Tripoli and the Italian military lines. However, the Italian government did not respond to this effort. The Tunisian government, therefore, expressed its readiness to facilitate the passage of the aforementioned Society. To pass freely via Tunis to perform its charitable service. (K. A, No: 24/1)

It is noteworthy that the first delegation from The Ottoman Red Crescent Society was sent to Tobruk via Egypt, with the aim of providing assistance to the sick and wounded in the war zone (K. A, No:24/1). After this Team proved its efficiency and achieved tangible successes in the field of humanitarian service, a second Group was sent to Benghazi. Shortly after, a third health team was sent to the city of Khoms, well equipped and reputable hospitals were set up (İzgöer & Tuğ, 2013, p75)

On the other hand, since The Ottoman Red Crescent Society was a member of the International Committee of the Red Cross/Red Crescent, established by the Geneva Convention (1864), it also sent a request for assistance to the Red Cross societies in some European countries. Germany and England responded positively to this request for assistance (BOA, BEO, 1992/149370)

After informing the governments of England, France, and Italy, the British Red Cross began its relief efforts, and a medical team from the British Red Cross was able to arrive in Tripoli months after the war began. The German Red Cross Society responded immediately and positively to the call for assistance and began preparations swiftly. The Ottoman Club in Berlin expressed its satisfaction with this decision by hosting a banquet on January 5 for the German medical team going to Tripoli, attended by the Ambassador to Berlin, Osman Nizami Pasha, and the former Minister of the Navy, Mahmut Muhtar Pasha. (Muttalip. 2011, p. 328).

2. The Ottoman Red Crescent Society's Early Involvement in the Tripoli War

2.1. The political and economic crisis in the Ottoman Empire

Intra-elite conflicts in the Ottoman Empire, coupled with financial and logistical constraints, posed significant challenges to the Red Crescent Society. The period between

1908 and 1914, a mere six years in the life of the Ottoman Empire, witnessed a radical transformation, such that the Sultanate as it was in 1908 was almost alien to what it had become by 1914. Moreover, the most consequential development during this period was the Ottoman Empire's loss of substantial portions of its territory at the hands of various powers. These losses began with Bulgaria's declaration of independence and Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to fears that the new Ottoman government would seek to regain control over these regions. However, the most severe blow came with the war against Italy in 1911. (Feroz, 1969, p.152)

2.2.Lack of financial resources

It is worth bearing in mind that the Ottoman Red Crescent Society was a relatively new institution during the Tripoli War. It was founded in 1868 under the name "Association for the Assistance and Relief of Wounded and Needy Military Personnel," but it was not officially recognized until April 14, 1877, under the name "Ottoman Red Crescent Society. (Bugnion,1977,285)

The society saw its first involvement in war during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, but its activity declined somewhat after the war ended. (Macar, 2017, p. 951) Thus, we saw that perhaps one of the most significant obstacles facing The Ottoman Red Crescent Society during the war in Tripoli was the government's need to bear the costs of the war in addition to its regular expenses. Including the deployment of troops, ammunition, and logistical supplies to the front lines, as well as caring for wounded and sick soldiers on the battlefield, and addressing the health problems of the local population.

The Ottoman Red Crescent Society, which did not yet possess sufficient financial reserves, lacked the capacity to finance war-related expenses or deliver essential aid to those affected. Its capital was approximately 15,000 liras, and its hospitals were not yet well organized, and it did not even have a warehouse; it did not possess medical equipment. (Akgün & Uluğtekin, 2020, p.108), in addition the state's depleted treasury and chronic lack of funding exacerbated this shortage. The state was seeking indirect financial support to cover its deficit. The presidency of the Red Crescent Society was informed of this decision on December 18 by the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Finance, on behalf of the Grand Vizier, in an official letter stating :

"All donations and aid sent in the name of the Red Crescent Society, whether under the name of donations or for the treatment of the wounded and war victims, etc., are requested to be sent directly to the state treasury. Where, they are deposited and recorded in a special account, then held at the Ottoman Empire's Bank, and the necessary amounts are disbursed from them whenever necessary, by order of the Ministry of Finance. This measure was adopted as a general policy by a decision of the Council of Minister"(Akgün & Uluğtekin, 2020, p.54-55).

These aids contributed to the dispatch of medical teams to the war zone. Three medical missions were sent to North Africa, the first to Tripoli, followed by two missions to Khoms and Benghazi. (Akgün & Uluğtekin, 2020, p.54-55).

2.3. Logistical difficulties in transporting supplies

The Italian naval blockade, compounded by British control over land routes prevented supplies and aid from reaching the front lines (Aksakal, 2008, p.97-101), The first mission of the Ottoman Red Crescent Society was sent to Tripoli. However, it was unable to reach its operational site directly. It took thirty-five days. Even after its arrival, its presence remained limited to the city of Zuwara during this period, without it carrying out its duties. This delay drew considerable attention and concern. (K. A, No: 44/2)

Moreover, Italian forces intercepted the French ship Manoba, which was en route to Tunisia and was carrying the Ottoman Red Crescent Society mission. The Ottoman Empire demanded that it be returned to France, considering that verifying the identities of the mission members was the sole responsibility of the French authorities. They insisted on its release. However, the Italian authorities claimed that a number of the group members belonged to specific military units and that their battalion numbers were known which amounted to a formal allegation that they were military officers. This placed the French Foreign Ministry in a very difficult position if the French investigation committee could not prove the purely civilian or humanitarian nature of the team members. (BOA, BEO, 3994/299520)

2.4. Lack of medical personnel

The number of doctors was also an obstacle, as there were fewer than twelve doctors in army units. Therefore, military health services during the fighting were assigned to a sub-health body within the regiment, in addition to the Ottoman Red Crescent Society and some foreign health committees affiliated with the Red Cross. Medical professionals and volunteers, both domestic and international also contributed to providing health care, assuming their duties in various locations (Macar, 2017, p. 948). Although there were Red Crescent hospitals on the battlefield, due to the huge number of wounded and sick people that exceeded the capacity of local hospitals to accommodate and treat, Istanbul was also requested additional support in the form of a medical ship (K. A, No: 25/2). Moreover, after the outbreak of the Tripoli War, the Ottoman Empire issued an appeal to the Western Red Cross societies through the Ottoman Red Crescent Society for assistance during this situation. Therefore, the General Assembly of the Das Deutsche Rote Kreuz (DRK), meaning the German Red Cross Society, held a meeting on December 4, 1911, and decided to send medical personnel and supplies to Tripoli. In fact, during the meeting, a decision was made to provide assistance to both the Ottoman Empire and the Italy, however, rejected the DRK's offer of assistance, while the Ottoman Empire accepted it (Muttalip. 2011, p. 330).

2.5. Lack of international support

European alliances against the Ottomans led to political isolation, negatively affecting the Red Crescent's ability to provide aid (Trumpener, 1996, pp.134-137). This prompted some nationalists from Egypt and Tunisia to volunteer in Tripoli to help, despite these two countries' declarations of neutrality. However, Italy quickly filed official protests with Britain and France, demanding an immediate end to this support. This issue led to particular diplomatic tension with France, as Italy accused Tunisia then under French protection of violating the principle of neutrality by allowing the passage of weapons and equipment to Tripoli. France responded to these accusations by reminding Italy that it had itself purchased aircraft from France for use in the war and had used Tunisian territory to transport supplies and provisions, including the use of camels, confirming that the international position was not, in fact, neutral, but rather supportive of Italy. (BOA, BEO, 3994/299520)

2.6. The harsh climate

The harsh desert weather posed a formidable challenge, with Tripoli's unforgiving terrain and climate proving difficult even for the seasoned German Red Cross team that volunteered to help during the war (Şimşek, Muttalip. 2011, p. 330).

2.6. The language barrier

the Ottoman Red Crescent Society attempted to address the lack of a common language with the people of Tripoli, a problem emphasized by Anwar Pasha, by individuals with diverse skill sets not only medical professionals, but also those fluent in Arabic or the languages of the local population to provide services that are more effective. Arabic-speaking doctors were specifically assigned to work in outpatient clinics. One example of these was Dr. Mohieddin Bey, who worked as a surgeon at the Egyptian Red Crescent Hospital in Benghazi. (Macar, 2017, p. 969)

3. The importance of the activities of the Ottoman Red Crescent during the Italo-Turkish War

The health services provided by the Ottoman Red Crescent Society during the Tripoli War were not limited to military personnel only, but extended to civilians as well. Through mobile clinics established inside or adjacent to hospitals, the Ottoman Red Crescent Society was able to provide effective health services to the civilian population. These services were not only important from a medical perspective, but also had a significant social impact in strengthening the image of the Ottoman Empire and its influence in the region. To clarify this, we must first consider the reality of the Ottoman presence in Tripoli and the activities undertaken by Italy to strengthen its influence in that region. From this, we find that, from an Ottoman perspective, the battle for Tripoli posed significant challenges, not only because of the quality and quantity of forces involved, but also because of the weakness of the Ottoman presence and the peculiarities of social disparities in the region. This is especially true since Tripoli was a largely neglected province during the last century of Ottoman rule. Due to the difficult economic and political conditions the state was experiencing, it did not invest sufficiently in the region, nor did it provide the social services needed to strengthen

the Ottoman presence. This led to a significant weakening of this presence, which made it difficult to confront the Italians. (Macar, 2017, p. 965).

Thus, we find that the Ottoman Red Crescent Society (OHAC) quickly played an effective and important role in the conflict zone during the Tripoli War, which lasted between 1911 and 1912 (Anameriç, 2010). Therefore, it is appropriate to point out that the Society's successes and sincere efforts during the War are attributed to the government's support for the Society and to the spirit of cooperation and integration that developed between the Sublime Porte and the Society.

The support provided by the government was of great importance, whether through direct financial contributions provided by most members of the Council of Ministers, or through the state's keenness to protect the Society's name and funds, and to ensure that donations reach the competent authorities immediately, as well as through providing technical support to the Ottoman Red Crescent Society through the Ministry of War, in order to ensure the readiness and use of available medical equipment (Akgün & Uluğtekin, 2020, p.101). Such as that, which Albert Danon Efendi, a medical supplies merchant in Izmir, presented as donations to the Ottoman Red Crescent Society branch in October 1911. He stated that this assistance was provided for "Our wounded soldier brothers who were injured during their heroic defense." "For our homeland against the Italians." (Macar, 2017, p. 948).

The Egyptian Red Crescent Society also worked with the Ottoman Empire and its association, purchasing excellent supplies that initially accommodated forty beds, with the possibility of increasing them if needed in Benghazi. (K. A, No: 148/22)

Aid also arrived from outside the Ottoman Empire, such as China, Austria, and India. Mr. Muhammad Jawad al-Ghaffar Effendi, a member of the Red Crescent Society formed in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad collected 300 British pounds to donate to the orphans of martyrs in the conflict (BOA, BEO, 4006/300383). This demonstrates that the Red Crescent was not merely a humanitarian organization within the borders of the state, but had also become a reliable source for receiving aid from abroad. (K. A, No: 19-135)

In addition to Tunisia's contribution to the entry of these missions, which provided surgical instruments, medicines, tents, stretchers, kitchen utensils, and necessary canned goods, an example of which is the mission of Dr. Karim Sabati Bey, to whom the members of the association present in Paris presented (İzgöer & Tuğ, 2013, p.76)

The Egyptian Red Crescent also provided very important medical services. A medical mission it organized headed to Tripoli on October 27, 1911, with the support of the mother of Khedive Abbas Hilmi II. This mission included four doctors and thirty nurses, and brought with it twenty tents and large quantities of medical tools and equipment. During the continuation of the war, the Egyptian Prince Omar Tosun Pasha sent a box of medicines from Alexandria, and these medicines were used in the Ottoman Red Crescent Society Hospital located in Derna (Macar, 2017, p. 986).

However, the general health situation began to deteriorate with the onset of winter. Influenza spread, and those most affected were Turks and foreigners. Then typhoid fever

appeared, which took on an epidemic character, and its impact was particularly severe in the Gharyan region, where the Ottoman Red Crescent Society, German Red Crescent, and English Red Cross missions fought heroic battles against this epidemic. Two doctors from the German mission and two nurses from the Ottoman Red Crescent died as a result while performing their sacred humanitarian duty (İzgöer & Tuğ, 2013, p.78)

With the outbreak of cholera in Tripoli, according to a coded telegram dated December 11, 1327 (December 13, 1911) from the Tripoli West Command to the Third Department of the General Staff, the situation was exacerbated by the fact that the regiment's numbers were already small, and the number of patients and deaths increased. Although the medical personnel and equipment sent by the Ottoman Red Crescent Society were described as sufficient, they later proved insufficient (K. A, No: 21/1).

This necessitated sending a group to combat this disease, at the request of Dr. Karim Sebati Bey to the Khoms region, to take the necessary measures in this regard. This had become a necessity (K. A, no: 21/1.1), given the fact the Ottoman Red Crescent Society hospitals in Tripoli West provided treatment not only to wounded and sick soldiers, but also to the local population (K. A, No:148/48.5). A new team was formed, headed by Dr. Amin Bey, and sent to the region. Karim Sebati Bey returned to Istanbul, and the leadership of the medical mission was transferred to Amin Bey. (İzgöer & Tuğ, 2013, p.76)

This was the policy of the Ottoman Red Crescent Society in their hospital. In outpatient clinics, patients were not only diagnosed and treated, but also provided food. For example, during the four-month mission of the first Ottoman Red Crescent Society delegation, 200 wounded and 550 typhoid fever patients were treated. In addition, treatment, medicine, and food were provided to more than 1,000 tribesmen in outpatient clinics. Furthermore, these clinics provided preventive health services such as vaccinations and even circumcisions for children. Forty schoolchildren were vaccinated in Derna, Shahat, and many other areas. Schoolchildren, members of the Zawiya, and tribesmen were vaccinated. A large number of residents of the surrounding areas were examined and treated at the outpatient clinic of the Ottoman Red Crescent Society Hospital in Gharyan, and 400 children were circumcised there. In Benghazi Hospital, more than 250 local children were circumcised to celebrate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) (Dağlar.O. Macar, 2017, p. 969). Which contributed to strengthening the Ottoman Red Crescent Society's relationship with the local community (İzgöer & Tuğ, 2013, pp.77-83).

The Ottoman Red Crescent Society also played a crucial role in mobilizing local populations for rescue operations during the war. The Tripoli War marked a turning point, as it was the Ottoman Red Crescent Society's first significant experience in training medical personnel. Throughout the conflict, dozens of stretcher-bearers and nurses were trained, laying the foundation for future medical and humanitarian operations. (Macar, 2017, p. 958).

For example, due to the increase in the number of wounded at Aziziye Hospital, there arose an urgent need for stretcher-bearers. As a result, several were trained, and they served throughout the war under the title "Stretcher Teams". The Red Crescent selected 96 Arabs,

provided them with courses, and formed three stretcher teams. Each team consisted of eight stretchers, thirty-two stretcher-bearers, one doctor, and one nurse. (Macar, 2017, p. 958).

Their equipment was of very good quality. Thanks to these units, wounded soldiers were quickly transported from the battlefield to treatment centers. All stretcher-bearers were male and received wages for their work. Due to the success of these units, a fourth team was later established. In addition to stretcher-bearers, nurses were also trained during the war. The first initiative in this regard took place at Garian Hospital, where typhoid fever and dysentery spread rapidly, resulting in the death or incapacitation of nearly the entire hospital staff. (İzgöer & Tuğ, 2013, pp.83).

When no one was left from the Ottoman Red Crescent Society delegation at the hospital except Dr. Mehmet Emin Bey, local residents were trained as nurses. Dr. Emin Bey selected young men and attendants from among the people of Garian, taught them the basics of nursing, and thus attempted to partially meet the urgent need for medical staff (Macar, 2017, p. 958).

CONCLUSION

The Ottoman Red Crescent Society was a proactive humanitarian organization that extended beyond providing direct medical assistance during the Italo-Ottoman War, one of the most notable periods of conflict between the Ottoman Empire and European imperialism. The Society not only treated wounded soldiers and civilians but also helped to restore Ottoman power in a region that had lost official focus in previous decades.

The operations of the Society illustrated the extent to which humanitarian institutions may play strategic roles in the context of conflicts by alleviating the effects of war, building trust with local populations, and enhancing the state's reputation across the globe. The occasion also demonstrated the importance of cooperation between state and charitable organizations as well as the effectiveness of regional and international solidarity in dealing with medical and humanitarian crises, despite the difficulties and obstacles encountered.

Thus, the services provided by the Ottoman Red Crescent during the Italo-Ottoman War were not merely an emergency response, but constituted an early model of organized relief work and established the association's position as a leading humanitarian institution in the Islamic world at a time when war, epidemic and occupation combined to weigh heavily on the people.

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