As a prolonged and multi-front conflict in the age of industrialized warfare, the Great War wrought incredible destruction on the male populations of the belligerent countries, including the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, because of the poor infrastructure of the Ottoman state, universal conscription could not be uniformly applied throughout the Empire. The mechanism of manpower mobilization worked at a reasonable level in the Anatolian provinces where the foundations of “the citizen-mobilizing state” had partially taken root after the Tanzimat reforms. However, the state had difficulty conscripting recruits in the regions where those foundations were weak, especially in areas populated by Kurdish and Arab tribal groups.

Except for a brief period at the outset of the mobilization, when the number of enlisted men sufficed to fill in the ranks of the armed forces, the Ottoman armed forces were constantly in need of men to reinforce their ranks. Such requirements for reinforcements stemmed not only from combat losses, but also from inefficiencies in the formal conscription system. A common and highly widespread solution to this problem was to make use of volunteers in the armed forces. In fact, use of volunteers under the generic name of “irregulars” (başıbozuk) in various branches of the armed forces was not a novel practice for the Ottoman military. Irregular units had been formed during several previous wars of the modern era, including the Crimean War of 1853–56, the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78.

1 Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi, vol. 3, part 6, p. 239.
3 See James J. Reid, Crisis of the Ottoman Empire: Prelude of Collapse, 1839–1878 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2000).

During the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78, the Ottoman state also encouraged non-Muslim volunteers to join voluntary armed units called the Asâkir-i Muâvine (auxiliary troops). As many as 3,000 non-Muslim volunteers joined these forces in the Balkan territories of the empire during the war. The state used their participation to show the European powers that Ottoman Muslims and non-Muslims could unite under the same banner in the event of war. See Gülsoy, Osmanlı Gayrimüslimlerinin Askerlik Serüveni, pp. 115–117.
and the Balkan War of 1912–13. Legal regulations concerning volunteers in the armed forces had become an integrated part of Ottoman laws on military service since 1846. But the practice became significantly more organized and complex during the Great War.

It should also be noted here that the co-existence of different (old and new) forms of military recruitment was not unique to the Ottoman case. It remained to be a widespread tendency in various army structures across the world in the age of conscription. In particular, the resort to volunteers seems to be a common method used by various armies for various reasons from the Napoleonic Wars and the American Civil War to the Great War.

Ottoman military authorities tried to identify legal criteria for defining volunteers. In this respect, they asserted that only those men who were exempt from conscription could apply to volunteer for service in irregular units. Moreover, any application for an irregular unit was required to be submitted to recruiting offices. But the reality of Ottoman military volunteerism was more complex than these legal measures would indicate. First of all, potential volunteers who were not already obliged to enlist were quite numerous and diverse, and the state’s relationship with these individuals was shaped by certain preferences and expectations. Second, since the Ottoman state’s poor infrastructure prevented it from recruiting everyone who was already obliged to enlist especially in peripheral regions, volunteerism served to compensate for the deficiencies of the state’s conscription system. In this sense, volunteerism represented the restoration of military obligations. Third, the use of volunteers provided the state with a flexible manpower pool which would be used to undertake “informal” military missions such as guerilla attacks into enemy

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7 On the use of volunteers in various armies in the modern era, see Christine G. Krüger and Sonja Levsen (eds.), War Volunteering in Modern Times: From the French Revolution to the Second World War (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).