THE FIRST WORLD WAR ACCORDING TO THE MEMORIES OF ‘COMMONERS’ IN THE BILĀD AL-SHĀM

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Introduction

In Syrian collective memory, among those generations who have consciously lived through it, the First World War is remembered as Safar Barlik or al-tajammu’. Al-tajammu’, “the collection” in Arabic, refers to the collection or “rounding up” of recruits before their departure. The Ottoman term Safar Barlik referred to mobilisation in Turkish; the Persian seferber means “being ready for war”. In its Arabic usage, safar barlik is understood as “the journey over land”.1 Since the end of the 19th century (the Yemen war) and the Balkan Wars of 1912 / 1913, this term became a popular synonym for the march of the recruits from the Bilād al-Shām (historical greater Syria, i.e. post-war Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan) who had been drafted into the Ottoman army, to the Ottoman theatres of war. Among the generation who had lived through the war, the term Safar Barlik was used constantly. It became a referent to measure time. One said: “That happened before Safar Barlik”, or “at the time of Safar Barlik...”, or after it. In the minds of Syrians today, the term Safar Barlik has been kept alive by numerous artistic representations, novels, TV-films and dramatic productions.2

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1 See also the discussion in Najwa al-Qattan, “Safarbarlik: Ottoman Syria and the Great War,” in From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon, eds. Thomas Philipp and Christoph Schumann (Beiruter Texte und Studien) 96 (Beirut and Würzburg, 2004), pp. 163–173, here pp. 164–165.

2 Examples include the 1966 film Safar Barlik by Hinrī Barakāt, with the enormously popular singer Fairūz in the leading role; the play Safar Barlik by Mamdūh ʿAdwān which had its debut performance in Damascus in 1994; and four TV dramas that were broadcast in the 1990s: Al-Farārī [The Deserter], directed by Ghassān Jābīrī; Ath-Thurāya [The Pleiades], directed by Ḥaitham Ḥaqīqī; Layālī as-Sāliḥiya [Ṣāliḥiya Nights], directed by Bassām al-Mallā; and Ikhwat at-Turāth [Siblings of Heritage], written by Ḥassan al-Yūssuf and directed by Najdat al-Anwar.
As a synonym for the First World War, this term incorporates the memory of suppression by the Ottomans, of hunger, destitution, distress, violence, anxiety, fear, and helpless anger.

Professional historians have only recently begun systematically discussing the importance of the First World War for the Bilād al-Shām. But the perspective of the “common people” is missing in these discussions, partly because it is rarely reflected in the available sources—archival material and published memoirs. This chapter aims at closing this gap by presenting oral narratives and memories of the First World War as those who lived through the war told them in Syria. The article is based on 303 interviews with peasants of more than 70 years of age, from 245 villages in the various parts of Syria. I conducted these interviews between July 1984 and the end of September 1985 in the course of my research on the history of Syrian peasants and the historical problems of agriculture in Syria which I undertook commissioned and supported by the Syrian Peasants’ Union. Thus, the sources for this chapter are mainly oral narratives (oral history), but also letters and unpublished memoirs kept by families, and older publications.

Conscription in Bilād al-Shām in Historical Perspective

The considerable effects of recruitment and taxation policies on the population in Bilād al-Shām is not a phenomenon of the 20th century, but must be viewed in the historical context of Ottoman reform efforts during the 19th century. In order to understand the experiences of the First World War, a brief review of these historical contexts is necessary.

After Sultan Salim’s first attempts to reform the Ottoman state and, notably, the Ottoman army, had failed in 1807, new efforts at political reform were made in 1826. The artillery troops in favour of the reorganisation dissolved all Janissary corps and massacred great num-

3 For instance in the collected volume The First World War as Remembered in the Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, eds. Olaf Farschid, Manfred Kropp and Stephan Dähne (Beirut, 2006); also al-Qattan, “Safarbarlik”.