The Ottoman Air Force Flight From Istanbul to Cairo in 1914

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In 1910 the War Minister Mahmud Şevket Paşa requested reports from the military attachés of the War Ministry on the activities of European armies, including information on military organisations and aviation. To this end Enver Bey, who was to become War Minister and one of the Committee of Union and Progress triumvirate in charge of the empire at the beginning of the First World War, was sent to Germany, and Ali Fethi (Okyar), later to be the Turkish Republic’s ambassador in Paris, was sent to France. Having observed military manoeuvres in France, Fethi Bey prepared a report stressing the importance of aviation and the pressing need for an air force organisation within the Ottoman army.1 Following this report, General Chief of Staff engineer officer Lieutenant Colonel Süreyya Bey from the Second Division of the General Chief of Staff was appointed in June 1911 to head aviation operations.2 In order to gather more information about aviation, Süreyya Bey then requested that the military attachés in Berlin, Paris and Vienna obtain published books and documents on the subject.3

In the same period as the Ottomans were taking the first steps towards the creation of an air force, an event occurred which was to give a considerable impetus to this new endeavour. On 29 September 1911, Italy declared war on the Ottoman empire. Troops were despatched to Tripoli and Bengazi, then under Ottoman sovereignty, and the Italian fleet was sent to the Dardanelles. Despite the fact that the Ottomans performed very well on land, successfully engaging the Italians at Tripoli, it was the Italians who triumphed in the war,

2 Kansu et al., Havacılık, p. 117.
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a victory which was due to the Italian air bombardment. This defeat prompted the General Chief of Staff’s decision to expand and strengthen its aviation operations.

In July 1911 cavalryman Captain Fesa and engineer Lieutenant Yusuf Kenan, who had passed the exams for the selection of potential pilots, were sent to flying school in France, which was less expensive than elsewhere. Having completed his training, Fesa Bey was to become the first man to hold a pilot’s licence in the history of Turkish aviation. Having completed their education at the flying school in Paris, these two students returned home to the Ottoman empire at the beginning of 1912.4

During flying training Yusuf Kenan Bey’s many accidents had resulted in a much greater expense for training than had been planned for. As a result of subsequent investigations, Süreyya Bey prepared a report which proposed the establishment of a flying school and aviation centre in Istanbul and, following this report, a request for financial support was presented by the War Ministry to the Prime Minister’s Office. Approved by the cabinet at its meeting on 17 March 1912, it was decided that 40,000 lira would be paid by the Finance Ministry.5

Although Süreyya Bey had been placed in charge of aviation operations, his work at the General Chief of Staff Headquarters meant that he was unable to devote a great deal of time to this activity, and it was therefore deemed necessary to give official recognition to aviation. For this reason, and as a result of Süreyya Bey’s report of 18 March 1912, an Aviation Commission was established under the Kitaat-i Fenniye ve Mevaksı-i Mustakeme Müfettişliği. This four-man commission, which was the first official organ of Turkish military aviation, was headed by Lieutenant Colonel Süreyya Bey, its other members being engineer officer Colonel Refik, engineer Major Mehmed Ali and engineer Major Ahmed Zeki. As its first job, the Aviation Commission investigated the buying of planes from France and the establishment of a flying school in Istanbul and prepared projects for an aviation organisation. Having found a suitable location for a flying school near Ayastefanos (Yeşilköy), work was begun in the spring of 1912 on the construction of two plane hangars.6

Apart from the establishment of the commission, the War Minister Mahmud Şevket Paşa also took the decision to increase the size of the air organisation. However, such efforts were hampered by the fact that there was

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4 Kansu et al., Havacılık, p. 117.
5 Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, İstanbul [hereafter BOA], MV . 162/83 (27 Rebiülevvel 1330 / Monday, 17 March 1912).
6 Keyüşk and Tanman, Türk Havacılık Tarihi, pp. 22-33.