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Policing and Security in Occupied Istanbul

Claire Le Bras

Taking Charge of Security in Occupied Istanbul

At the end of 1918, the city of Istanbul, with a population of more than one million, found itself in a particularly complex and challenging situation concerning public order and safety. The prevailing insecurity was denounced in the press: “The number of crimes [...] increases in truly frightening proportions. As soon as night falls, it becomes imprudent to leave one’s home and to cross even the Grand’rue de Péra. Not to mention most of the side streets; they have been turned into cut-throats.”¹ The memoirs of contemporary actors also echo the deterioration of security in the city and its outskirts: “Our daily life was affected by increasing lawlessness in the neighbourhood of Constantinople and insufficient patrolling of the roads, which made it inadvisable to drive or ride without arms or an escort.”²

Various reasons were invoked to explain this situation ranging from the lack of equipment and means provided to the security forces to the incompetence and corruption among the Ottoman police and gendarmerie, and the daily misery they suffered due to the lack of sufficient and regular remuneration. In this context, a wave of resignations spread throughout the ranks of the Ottoman security forces. Moreover, the occupation authorities recognized their troops’ responsibility, whose increasing numbers destabilized the Ottoman capital’s social and economic life. To address the recruitment difficulties, the new prefect of police, Colonel Halil Bey, sought to significantly reduce the number of policemen in the capital to improve the officers’ treatment on the ground. These attempts, however, were deemed insufficient by the Allied forces, who took it upon themselves to restore public order (fig. 1).

After a few months of hesitation about whether to reorganize the Ottoman police or re-

Figure 1: Turkish soldier “selling bread,” according to the caption by the photographer, on the Galata Bridge. Photograph: Pierre Machard, October 16, 1918. ECPAD/Défense. metadata-442-000014.tkl



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1 “L’insécurité publique,” *Stamboul*, December 10, 1918. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.
 2 Robert Graves, *Storm Centres of the Near East. Personal Memories 1879-1929* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1933), 333.

136 place them with Allied soldiers, the occupying authorities decided to subordinate the Ottoman police to an inter-Allied regulatory body in January 1919. This initiative was taken by the British military authorities who “assumed control of the Turkish police [...], admitting French and Italians, so that the controls might take on a proper inter-allied complexion.”³ Thus, on January 10, 1919, the commander-in-chief of the British troops, General Henry Wilson, created the Inter-Allied Police Control in Istanbul. One month later, on February 10, 1919, the city was divided into three sectors, each under the responsibility of an Allied officer:

- 1) Scutari (Üsküdar) and the districts of the Asian zone were placed under the surveillance of the Italian captain Ceresole.
- 2) The area comprising Pera and Galata was entrusted to the British commander, Colonel Villiers.
- 3) The control of the Stambul (Istanbul proper) area was given to French captain Ceccaldi.

Within each sector, two officers belonging to the other two nationalities were appointed as subordinates, so the Allied nationals would feel that their interests were defended by officers of the same nationality as them. The members of inter-Allied police were drawn from the troops of each country, so one could “[see], passing by on the sidewalk, two French gendarmes, two Italian carabinieri, and two British police officers.”⁴

An Inter-Allied Police with a Wide Variety of Missions

The public order mission assumed by the inter-Allied police mainly consisted of guiding the daily actions of the Ottoman Police, that is, monitoring and controlling them and, when deemed necessary, assisting or replacing them. To this end, the Allied governments’ personnel supplies remained relatively low; in 1920, 61 British, 126 French, and 124 Italian soldiers were attached to the inter-Allied police.⁵

Despite reaching a compromise to create an inter-Allied body, the collaboration between the three European forces often proved difficult, particularly at the level of command and distribution of competencies and jurisdiction. In the words of a British diplomat, “the presence of so many authorities was all the more confusing, as their position in relation to each other and the Turkish Government had still to be defined.”⁶ In effect, frustrated by the British primacy in supervising the inter-Allied police, the French command decided to take charge of the reorganization of the Ottoman gendarmerie. The British and the Italians declined the French proposal to participate in this parallel control body. And so, this mission was entrusted to French General Foulon and deployed mainly in the Ottoman provinces of Thrace and Anatolia.

In the months and years following the creation of the inter-Allied police, the latter’s scope of action expanded with new missions entrusted to it. Assisting other inter-Allied commissions, the police force took part in border surveillance through the Customs Commission and Passport Control (fig. 2).

The inter-Allied police also assumed a sanitary role in their part in the fight against the spread of venereal diseases by establishing strict control over prostitution in Istanbul. To do so, “a survey was conducted of all the brothels, then of the cafés, bars and various establishments employing female personnel, engaged, or suspected of being engaged in prostitution. [...] The inter-Allied police also dealt with sanitizing the streets: they hunted down streetwalkers mercilessly.”⁷

3 *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919–1939*, ser. 1, vol. 4 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1952), 870–871.

4 Maurice Pernot, “La question turque – 1 – Constantinople sous le contrôle interalliés,” *La revue des deux-mondes*, January 1922, 279.

5 Daniel-Joseph Macarthur-Seal, *Britain’s Levantine Empire, 1914–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 217.

6 Andrew Ryan, *The Last of the Dragomans* (London: G. Bles, 1951), 123–124.

7 Albert Dejouany and Léopold Belbèze, *Les Alliés à Constantinople. Le service de santé du Corps d’Occupation français*.

Figure 2: A British Marine sentry at the entrance of the Arsenal at Istanbul, examining a Turk's bag. Note Turkish sentry at far side of the gate. Photograph: W. J. Brunell, 1919. Imperial War Museum, Q 14270.



Additionally, the inter-Allied police participated in the judicial system set up by the occupation authorities to reinstitute the capitular regime that the Ottoman government had abolished in 1914.⁸ Thus, “it was thanks to the inter-Allied police that the Allied consulates were able, for three years, to investigate and settle a large number of disputes of a criminal, commercial, rental or other nature arising between their nationals and Ottoman subjects.”⁹ As recognized by the British High Commissioner, the legal ambiguities of the inter-Allied occupation were such that “the heads of the inter-Allied police [had] found themselves forced into the position of being a kind of court of summary jurisdiction, and to give decisions which only by the most elastic interpretation [could] be brought under the denomination of military necessity.”¹⁰

Given that the inter-Allied police’s missions often focused on protecting the interests of their troops and nationals, its political role was evident. By and large, it was busy with thwarting sabotage attempts and plots fomented by the resistance movements. Similarly, it was involved in the anti-Bolshevik struggle in Istanbul and against the socialist movements that manifested notably during the tramway strike at the beginning of 1922.¹¹

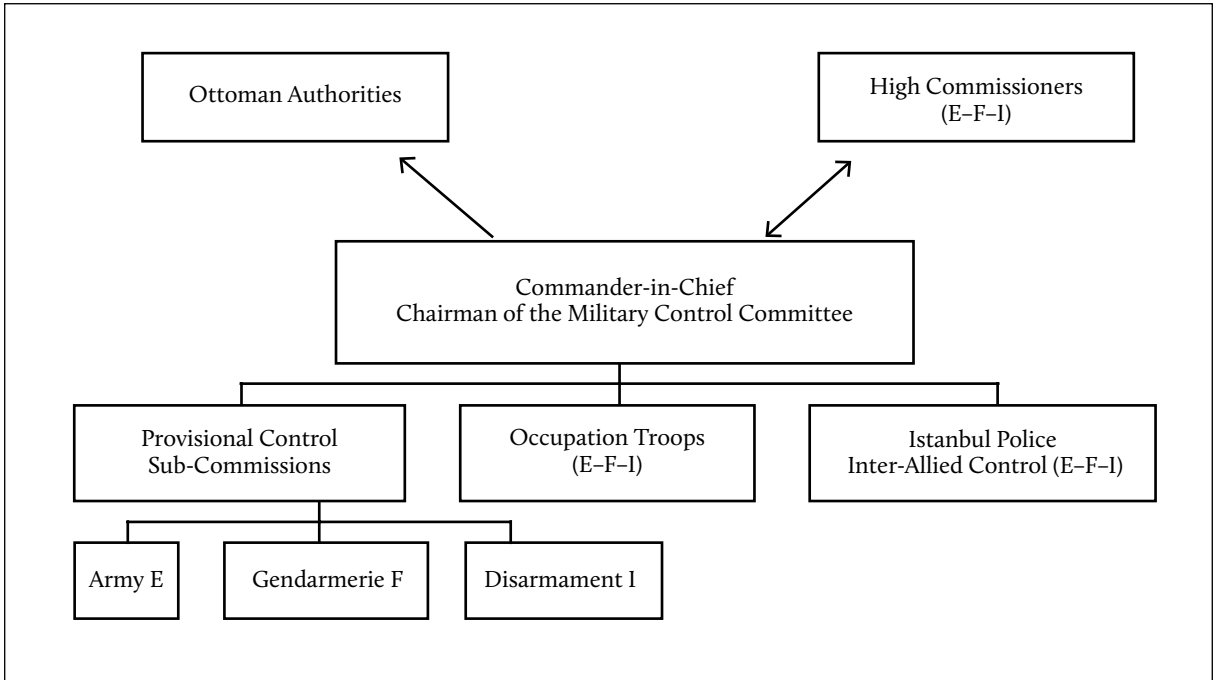
Son œuvre militaire, médicale et sociale (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1925), 154.

⁸ Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes, 285PO/B/213, Commission juridique interalliée, “Exécution par la police interalliée des décisions des consulats alliés,” November 30, 1920.

⁹ Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères (AMAE), 51CPCOM40, French High Commissioner (Constantinople) to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Paris), March 14, 1923.

¹⁰ *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, 870-871.

¹¹ See Erol Ülker, “A Social Democratic Party in Istanbul during the Armistice Period,” *YILLIK: Annual of Istanbul Studies* 4 (2022): XX-YY.



Functioning of the Gendarmerie's Sub-Commission of Control

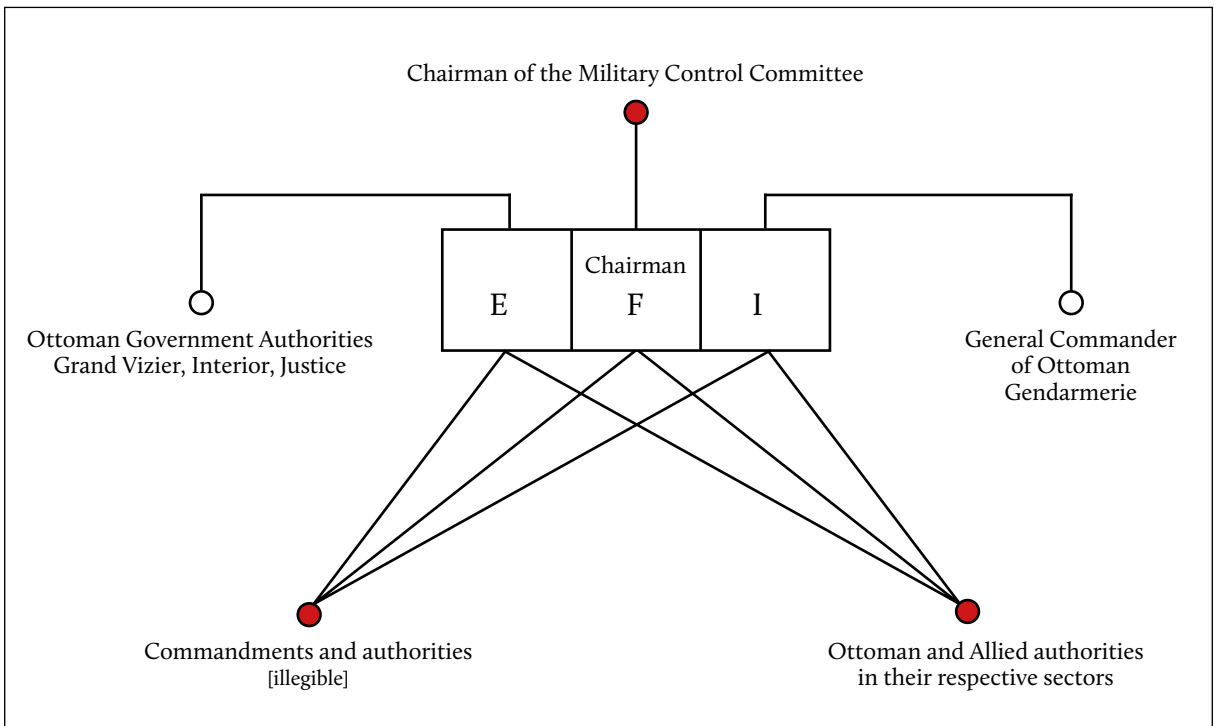


Figure 3a-3b: French organization charts describing the functioning of the Military Control Committee and the Gendarmerie Sub-Commission (1921-1922). E: English, F: French, I: Italian. Transcribed and translated from Service Historique de la Défense, 20N1108.

Besides being omnipresent throughout the city, the inter-Allied police underwent significant structural changes after the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres. Signed on August 10, 1920 between the Allies and the Imperial Government of Istanbul, the treaty provided for the creation of the Inter-Allied Military Commission of Control and Organization aimed at reforming the Ottoman armed forces and defining the conditions of their employment (Article 200). Anticipating the treaty's ratification, negotiations between the Allied governments led, in July 1921, to reorganizing the occupation structures in charge of public security and a new distribution of responsibilities among the Allies. Consequently, the inter-Allied police were maintained but placed under the hierarchical direction of the president of the Military Control Committee. This body met for the first time on September 6, 1921.¹²

Additionally, three sub-commissions were formed and started to operate at the end of 1921. The Disarmament Sub-Commission, headed by an Italian officer, administered the Ottoman supply depots that had come into the Allied governments' possession. The Gendarmerie Sub-Commission, under the responsibility of a Frenchman, oversaw the organization of the Ottoman gendarmerie units who were mobilized to maintain order in the occupied territories. Lastly, what was known as the "Special Elements" Sub-Commission, headed by a British officer, was assigned to control Ottoman armed forces that could be used as reinforcements in occupied areas prone to disorder (fig. 3a–3b).

Due to its highly bureaucratic nature, the inter-Allied police generated a significant amount of documentary material. Minutes of inter-Allied meetings, intelligence reports, and event registers became more and more formalized with time. These documents bear witness to the day-to-day living conditions of the inhabitants of Istanbul, to the various events that shook the occupied capital, and how the Allies dealt with the cohabitation of heterogeneous populations (table 1).

On October 19, 1922, the Government Representative of the Grand National Assembly, Refet Paşa, entered Istanbul with his troops, ushering in a new period marked by the difficult cohabitation between the Ankara administration and the Allied occupiers. On November 11, 1922, a temporary separation of powers was decided: the inter-Allied police would limit its activities to the control of European citizens, while the Ottoman gendarmerie would have exclusive jurisdiction over the Turkish population.¹³ After the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne on July 24, 1923, the functions of the inter-Allied police were confined to military police missions only. It continued to operate within these reduced dimensions until it was dissolved on September 4, 1923, by the Allied commanders. One month later, the last European detachments left Istanbul, putting a definitive end to Allied control over the city.

Conclusion

The maintenance of the inter-Allied order in Istanbul between 1918 and 1923 was primarily inspired by the armistice and the circumstances of the end of World War I. To ensure the protection of their nationals and troops, the Allied powers granted themselves the right to intervene to preserve public order. However, the use of European officers to supervise Ottoman recruits, the adaptation of their reform plans to local realities, and the pervasiveness of international competition are all characteristics connecting the Istanbul experience to international reorganization missions previously carried out in various regions of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, multiple attempts to reform the Ottoman police and gendarmerie forces were made by European powers to curb the inter-communal violence raging in Mount Lebanon (1860), Eastern Rumelia (1878),

12 AMAE, 51CPCOM41, "Résumé des questions discutées par les généraux alliés au Comité de direction et des décisions prises par eux du 13 septembre au 25 octobre [1921] inclus," 1.

13 AMAE, 51CPCOM42, "Résumé des questions discutées par les généraux alliés au Comité de direction et des décisions prises par eux du 1^{er} août au 31 décembre 1922," 28.

Nature of crimes or offences	NATIONALITY & RELIGION		Arrests made	Sectors in which the events occurred	Observations
	of victims	of culprits			
Assassinations or Murders	Greek, Armenian Turkish woman	English Policeman Turks 2	2	Galata Chichli	Injuries by mistake Blows
Blows and Injuries	Public girls 2 Turk Turk Greek woman Turks 2 Greek Greek Turks 2	Turks 2 Turk Turks 3 Greek Turk Greek Turk	2 1 3 1 1 1 1	Galata Galata Galata Galata Chichli Pera Pera Chichli	Blows Blows Blows Blows Injuries Injuries Injuries Blows
Aggravated Thefts	Turk Greek Turks 5 Greek Greek	Turk Turk Turks 5 Greek Turks 2	1 1 5 1 1	Galata Galata Galata Pera Stamboul II	Theft of belongings Theft of a goat Theft of belongings Theft of various items Theft of belongings
Simple Thefts	Russians Armenian Turk Armenian	? Turk Jew Turk, Greek	1 1 2	Galata Galata Galata Pera	Theft Pickpocketing Pickpocketing Misselling
Disturbance of Public Peace	Turk Turk Italian Turk Greek woman Armenian Greek woman	Turks 2 Jew (English) Russian Turk Greek Greek Armenian ?	2 1 1 1	Galata Galata Galata Chichli Chichli Pera Chichli Chichli	Damage Contempt of Police Setting fire Threats with a weapon Home invasion and damage Home invasion and blows Threats Attack, injury, and theft
Infringements of the Military Authority's orders		Greeks 2 Turk	2 1	Scutari Stamboul II	Carrying prohibited weapons and firing a gun Carrying prohibited weapon
Fires					
Other	Greek Turk Jewish woman Turk, English Greek	 Yugoslavian Greek	1 1	Galata Galata Galata Chichli Scutari	Accidental injuries Accidental injuries Injuries by a car n°3/945 Hit and injured by a Yugoslav car Damage by a car n° 7/17

Table 1: Summary of Incidents Concerning Public Safety from October 29–31, 1921. Transcribed and translated from Service Historique de la Défense, 20N1108.

Crete (1896), Macedonia (1903) and Albania (1913).¹⁴ During the 1918–1923 occupation, the former actors and practices from earlier missions were partly remobilized. However, this reorganization model emerged in an international system dominated by the European concert and balance of power. The Istanbul experience is one of its latest manifestations. World War I gave birth to a new diplomatic horizon and subsequent policing missions were based on renewed international law and the prevalence of international organizations such as the League of Nations.

¹⁴ Jean-Marie Delaroche, “Droit d’ingérence et concurrence militaire internationale en Méditerranée orientale: les puissances européennes et le maintien de l’ordre dans les Balkans, du traité de Berlin (1878) à la Première Guerre mondiale” (PhD diss., Lille III, Université Charles de Gaulle, 2016).