

# Nili: The Spy War in the Middle East

Necmettin Alkan,

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## نيلي: حرب التجسس في الشرق الأوسط

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The Nili espionage organization, which emerged during the years of World War I and has received limited scholarly attention in Türkiye, is examined in detail in Necmettin Alkan's *Nili: The Spy War in the Middle East*. Published by Kronik Yayınları in 2017, this work constitutes a qualified academic source for researchers in Türkiye working on the subject. The book analyzes the activities of the Nili espionage organization, founded in 1915 by Aaron Aaronsohn and several associates, and details its struggle with Ottoman intelligence, its operations in the Middle East, its relations with the British, and its activities within the context of developments on the Ottoman Empire's Palestine Front. Following the "Preface" and "Introduction," the work is divided into several chapters: "Historical Background: Anti-Semitism, Zionism, Jewish Migration, and the Ottoman Preference for Germany," "The 'Nili' Organization," "Conclusion," "Nili Chronology," "Bibliography," "Memoirs," and "Images." Each main heading is further divided into various subheadings, providing the reader with a comprehensive and detailed narrative.

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In the first section of the work, titled “Historical Context: Anti-Semitism, Zionism, Jewish Migration, and the Ottoman Empire’s Preference for Germany,” the author explains the concept of “anti-Semitism” and examines its effects across different historical periods and geographical contexts. He then defines Zionism and refers to the meeting between Theodor Herzl, a leading figure of the Zionist movement, and Sultan Abdülhamid II. In this context, the author emphasizes how plans for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine gradually began to take shape. The author subsequently discusses Jewish immigration as well as the Aaronsohn family and organization. Under this subheading, he provides important information on Alexander Aaronsohn, Aaron Aaronsohn, Sarah Aaronsohn, and Absalom Feinberg – figures among the leading members of the organization – and examines their positions within the organization and their activities in detail. In the final subheading of the chapter, Alkan addresses the Ottoman Empire’s entry into World War I alongside Germany and its stance against Britain, noting that this political alignment was among the factors that contributed to the establishment of the Nili organization.

In the second chapter, the author examines the process of the Nili organization’s establishment, detailing the dynamics that emerged during this period, as well as the organization’s plans and membership. The chapter places particular emphasis on the initial contacts and initiatives undertaken with the British, who were the dominant power in the region. By explaining in detail how the first contact was established in Egypt, the author also offers a comprehensive assessment of the British attitude toward this organization. Moreover, through an analysis of the second negotiation process conducted in London, the author demonstrates that the organization mobilized all its capabilities to sustain its presence in the region. Under another subheading in this chapter, “Espionage Activities: Multi-Faceted Propaganda and Intelligence at the Same Time,” the author discusses the methods employed by the organization in the field of intelligence, examining in detail its information-gathering activities, particularly regarding military and strategic matters.

It is particularly evident that propaganda activities and efforts to construct a perception of victimhood within such organizations can be highly effective in shaping public opinion and mobilizing support. Within this framework, the organization advanced various claims alleging that Jews were subjected to mistreatment and oppression by the Ottoman administration. In the final part of the chapter, the author addresses the process by which the Nili organization was dismantled and the stages that led to the capture of its

members, providing a detailed account of the developments during this period. Regarding the dissolution of the organization, the author notes that the Ottoman Empire lost nearly all its Middle Eastern territories, emerged defeated from World War I, and that the region ultimately came under British influence. He further emphasizes that the activities carried out by the Nili organization largely served British interests and that the British were extremely satisfied with this outcome.

Alkan emphasizes that the Nili organization represents one of the most striking examples in the history of intelligence. He notes that Nili did not conform to classical, state-centered espionage structures, arguing instead that the organization emerged entirely from the initiative of a group of young Jewish Ottoman citizens living in Palestine during World War I. According to Alkan, these individuals collected military and strategic intelligence in the region and transmitted it to Britain, an adversary of the Ottoman Empire during the war, in return for financial support and commitments toward the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine after the conflict.

The author states that the founding members of the organization largely came from families originating in several Jewish settlements centered in Zikron Ya'akov and supported by Baron de Rothschild. He emphasizes that the Aaronsohn and Feinberg families constituted the core of the organization and that nearly all members were well educated, committed to Zionist ideology, and connected through strong kinship or friendship ties. Describing Nili as having a homogeneous structure in this respect, Alkan argues that this characteristic clearly distinguished the organization from other intelligence networks.

Alkan observes that European scholarship on the origins of the organization tends to emphasize Jewish security concerns as the primary motive for its establishment. He critically assesses this interpretation and contends that the principal driving force was instead the Zionist objective of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. The author further maintains that claims linking the organization's formation to the 1915 Armenian deportations and the 1917 Jaffa-Gaza deportations constitute propaganda, noting that Nili's activities began prior to these events.

Alkan also highlights Alexander Aaronsohn's propaganda efforts aimed at shaping public opinion in the U.S. as indicative of the organization's pursuit of international support. Finally, he underscores that the weaknesses of the Ottoman civil and military administration played a decisive role in Nili's success. In particular, the author regards the failure of regional authorities,

especially Fourth Army Commander Cemal Pasha, to detect and prevent the organization's activities over a period of approximately two years as a significant shortcoming. He further emphasizes that Aaron Aaronsohn's appointment to combat the locust invasion granted the organization easy access to critical locations in the region, thereby facilitating its intelligence-gathering activities.

In conclusion, Alkan's *Nili: The Spy War in the Middle East* draws extensively on primary sources and examines the political, social, and military dimensions of the period from multiple perspectives, thereby constituting one of the fundamental reference works for scholars and history enthusiasts interested in the subject. The author adopts a clear yet analytical narrative style, supporting the main chapters with detailed subheadings and employing an approach that gradually engages the reader with the topic. In this respect, the work distinguishes itself from other studies in the same field.

The diversity of sources employed by Alkan further enhances the academic quality of the work. His use of materials such as the German Foreign Ministry Archive, significant memoirs containing contemporary testimonies, authoritative monographs, field-related scholarly articles, theses, as well as period newspapers and magazines demonstrates that the subject has been examined comprehensively from multiple perspectives. By drawing on this wide range of sources to analyze the Nili organization in both local and international contexts, Alkan's study occupies a privileged position within the existing literature on the topic.