

The Hedjaz Railway: Pilgrim Route or Instrument of Occupation?

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The 1,300 kilometer long Hedjaz Railway was opened in 1908 at a time when the Ottoman

Empire was in decline, having since the Congress of Berlin in 1878 lost almost three quarters of its once extensive European territory. Not for nothing had Turkey acquired the somewhat

undesirable nickname of "The Sick Man Of Europe". Indeed by the outbreak of World War I it was hardly in Europe at all. A small piece of Eastern Bulgaria was all that remained.

Still in control of the Near East, as it used to be called, and Mesopotamia, the Sultan of Turkey used the railway to boost the standing of his ailing Empire by re-affirming his self-proclaimed status as Defender and Protector of Islam and its holiest places, Medina and Mecca in what is now Saudi Arabia. The railway enabled Moslems on the Haj to reach Medina from Damascus in three days instead of three weeks, with Mecca a comparatively short camel ride thereafter. It challenged the age-old means of transport, the camel, with technology new to Arabia, the steel wheel running along a smooth steel rail. It promised radical change and was eagerly embraced by devout Turkish Moslems who in return for reduced military service and other inducements were persuaded to make voluntary contributions to the construction cost of this major enterprise.

The Hedjaz Railway deserves a place in the *Guinness Book Of Records* as the only railway ever built that had no capital investment to repay and was in surplus before it ran its first train. There was even enough to brush aside the French owners of the existing line in Southern Syria who expected rent for the use of their track. Rather than waste time in negotiations the Turks simply built their own totally unnecessary parallel track for 130 kilometers from Damascus to Dera'a before continuing southwards. They requisitioned the French line on the outbreak of war, tearing up the rails for re-use on military extensions of the Haifa branch in Palestine. Investing in the Ottoman Empire was a risky business.

The Pilgrim's Railway was in reality a strategic line whose main purpose was to sustain the Turkish grasp over increasingly ungovernable Arab territory. Word of The Sick Man of Europe had penetrated deep into Arabia by the early 1900s and no Beduin tribe wanted to be subject to a weak ruler. But the Turks had an ace up their sleeve. They did not create this instant railway empire just by their own efforts. It was designed and built by engineers from Germany, reflecting the Kaiser's desire to boost his influence in the region and provide a support network for his Berlin to Baghdad Railway. Many Arabs were impressed by this partnership with powerful Germany, an

apparent reversal of the Turks' Sick Man image, which developed into a full scale military alliance when World War I broke out in 1914. As the war progressed, the Arabs were divided in their loyalties, the pro-Turkish factions gaining ground after news of British defeats both at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia, especially after the loss of Kut in 1916 kept Baghdad in Turkish hands. And the economic benefits brought about by the Hedjaz railway also weighed in the Turks' favour.

Nevertheless Arab resistance to the Ottomans in the south gathered strength. It was up to the Allied Powers, principally Great Britain, to channel this rebellion into a major campaign against Turkish forces, which would remove the threat to the Suez Canal and eventually lead to the capture of Jerusalem, Baghdad and Damascus, and the November 1918 Armistice.

The British officer who brought this about was former archaeologist Captain (later Colonel) T. E. Lawrence who used his excellent local knowledge, his fluent command of Arabic and his unique ability to treat with Arab leaders to lead their forces in disrupting the railway. The policy was to keep the railway just about serviceable but to harass it sufficiently to draw increasing numbers of Turkish troops away from the Palestine campaign into rail protection. The famous "tulip" charge and other original means of sabotage added to the colonel's reputation, creating the abiding legend of 'Lawrence Of Arabia'. We shall now take an informative trip along what is left of this famous railway in Jordan and Syria.

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