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Balance of Power or Balance of Threat: Revisiting Ottoman Alliance Politics before the Great War

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Abstract: The Ottoman alliance politics before the Great War has not been explored for theorizing alliance politics though it presents a unique example of alliance formation under external threat. Thus, in this article, a neo-realist balance of threat theory is utilized to examine the Ottoman decision to align with Germany in the Great War. Unlike a historical account as to why the Ottomans sided with the German-Austrian alliance, this article develops a theoretical approach that takes insights from ‘alliance theories’ to explain the Ottomans’ fateful alignment. Such an alliance theory approach underlines the dilemmas of the Ottoman decision makers and demonstrates ‘rational’ elements of their strategy of balancing the main source of the threat. By bringing alliance theories and Ottoman historiography together it is argued that the Ottomans, in their search for an alliance before the Great War, sought a “balance of threat” politics rather than a “balance of power” politics.

Keywords: Alliance theories; Ottoman diplomacy; Great War; Ottoman-German alliance; Balance of power; Balance of threat.

1 Introduction

Resembling the traditional disagreements over the origins of WWI the Ottoman alliance with Germany and its entry into the war have remained controversial. For many, the Ottoman entry into the Great War does not appear to have been a rational choice. It is hard to understand that the Ottomans, then known as the ‘sick man of Europe,’ expected to win a major European war. How can one then explain the empire entering into a major European war by aligning itself with Germany, one of its main protagonists,

while the war and the warring alliances had not initially involved the Ottoman territories?

The Ottoman entry into the war and its alignment with Germany has long divided opinions into two crude camps in which the main disagreement stems from whether the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP) was motivated to join the war by their rather untested idealistic views to save the empire or by a realistic calculation of power politics to get the empire out of its international isolation. Proponents of the former thesis maintain that the inexperience of the ruling elite, the desire to regain the recently lost territories, naivety and an overestimation of German military might dragged the Turks into an irrational war. Those who oppose this argument claim that the CUP leaders were neither gamblers nor pawns of a Great Power, but rather rational actors trying to get the most out of the crisis, prevent the allied threat of partitioning the Empire, provide the urgent need for economic assistance, and the demand for the abolition of capitulations.¹

Apart from these historical accounts as to why the Ottomans sided with the German-Austrian alliance and entered the war, there is a more theoretical approach that takes insights from ‘alliance theories’ to explain the Ottomans’ fateful alignment with Germany and its subsequent entry into the war. Though it was an example par excellence of alliance formation under external threat, it has neither been explored by Ottomanist scholars nor by the students of alliance studies. Although the Central Powers and Triple Entente have been utilized by various alliance theories, the Ottoman participation in the former has not been explored for theorizing alliance politics.² Yet

1 M. Aksakal, *Ottoman Road to War* (Cambridge, MA 2008); M. Aksakal, ‘The Limits of Diplomacy’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 7, 2 (2011), 197.

2 P. A. Weitsman, ‘Alliance Cohesion and Coalition Warfare: the Central and Triple Entente’, *Security Studies*, 12, 3 (2003), 79–113; G. H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY 1997); B. Healy and A. Stein, ‘The Balance of Power in International History’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 17, 1 (1973), 33–61; J. A. C. Conybeare, ‘A Portfolio Diversification Model of Alliances: The Triple Alliance and Triple Entente, 1879–1914’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 36, 1 (1990), 53–85.

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the unorthodox case of Ottoman alliance politics of 1914 does have the potential to shed some new light on alliance theories as do alliance theories on the Ottoman search for alignment in 1914.

According to Snyder, alliances are products of system structure. Systemic anarchy and more importantly structural polarity – how military power and potential are distributed among major states – have important effects on the nature of alliance politics.³ Though the international system matters, structural theories of alliance fall short of explaining the alliance behavior of the Ottomans in 1914 for whom the most critical issue to assess was the objectives and strategies of individual actors of each alliance grouping. Pressing questions for the Ottoman rulers were which state in Europe posed the greatest threat to the Empire, and what kind of alliance would be the most effective way to lessen or eliminate the most dangerous and imminent threat?

Hence, toward the beginning of the Great War the Ottomans, in their search for an alliance, sought a balance of threat politics rather than a balance of power politics. Building on this hypothesis, this article argues that Stephen Walt's theory of 'balance of threat' can explain Ottoman alliance politics just before the outbreak of the Great War. Thus, the goal of this article is to bring in the neo-realist balance of threat theory in order to shed new light on the Ottoman decision to align with Germany.

2 Alliance Theories and Balance of Threat

An alliance is a 'formal or informal cooperative agreement between two or more states intended to further the national security of the participating states.'⁴ Once states realize that they cannot materialize national security on their own they form alliances in an attempt to add to their capabilities and those of their allies.⁵ Averting the source of external threat is therefore the key aim of states in an anarchical international order. This implies that states seek alliances when they are under threat, and in need of security. If alliances are formed to respond to threats,

then, as Liska puts it 'alliances are against, and only derivatively for, someone or something.'⁶

In this context Walt goes further suggesting that 'states ally to balance against threats rather than against power alone,'⁷ thus, not balance of power, as claimed by classical realists, but balance of threat better explains alliance formations. Although he regards the distribution of power as an 'extremely important factor,' he maintains that the level of threat is affected by factors that influence states' decisions to form alliances.⁸

Walt's central question is how do states choose their friends?⁹ In other words, when will states form alliances, and what determines their choice of allies? His answer is that 'states form alliances primarily to balance against threats.'¹⁰ After identifying two course of actions in the face of a significant external threat, balancing and bandwagoning, Walt raises a corollary question of "when states balance and when they bandwagon."¹¹

Walt points to four factors affecting a state's attribution to a threatening situation. These are aggregate power of a state, its geographical proximity, offensive power and aggressive intentions.¹² Aggregate power is an important component of the threat a state poses, and perceived as such by other states. 'All else being equal, the greater a state's total resources (population, industrial and military capacity, and technological prowess), the greater a potential threat it can pose to others.'¹³ Walt identifies geographical proximity as another factor affecting threat perception 'because the ability to project power declines with distance, states that are nearby pose a greater threat than those that are far away.'¹⁴ Weak states are particularly sensitive to proximate power. Another element of threat for Walt is offensive power, which refers to the 'ability to threaten sovereignty or territorial integrity of another state at an acceptable cost.'¹⁵ States with large offensive capabilities that appear threatening are likely to provoke alliance building efforts in their environs. Finally, Walt underlines the importance of aggressive intentions: 'states that are viewed as aggressive are likely to provoke others to balance against them.' Walt adds that 'perception

3 G. H. Snyder, 'Alliance theory: A Neorealist First Cut', *Journal of International Affairs*, 44, 1 (1990), 107.

4 P. A. Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War* (Stanford, CA 2004), 34.

5 K. N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass. 1979), 126.

6 G. Liska, *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence* (Baltimore, MD 1962), 12.

7 S. M. Walt, *Origins of Alliance* (Ithaca, NY and London 1987), p. 5.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 1

10 Ibid., vi

11 Ibid., 28.

12 Ibid., 21-26

13 Ibid., 22.

14 Ibid., 23.

15 Ibid., 24.

of intent are likely to play an especially crucial role' in balancing decisions.¹⁶ For Walt the immediate threat with offensive power may 'create strong incentive for others to balance.'¹⁷

Facing proximate threats, states may opt for either bandwagoning or balancing. Walt views bandwagoning as 'alignment with the source of danger.'¹⁸ Motives for bandwagoning may vary: the defensive reason is to appease the dominant power, while the offensive reason is to benefit from the victory of the dominant power, or a combination of both. In general, 'the weaker the state, the more likely it is to bandwagon rather than balance.'¹⁹ Weak states are prone to bandwagon as they encounter a threat from a great power. Moreover, 'small and weak neighbors of strong states may be more inclined to bandwagon' as they would be the first victims of expansion.²⁰ Walt argues that if 'a state is believed to be unalterably aggressive, other states are unlikely to bandwagon' because a vulnerable state is likely to be a victim even if it allied as 'balancing with others may be the only way to avoid this fate.'²¹

However, defining balancing as 'an act of alignment with others against the source of prevailing threat,' Walt suggests that we should expect 'balancing behavior to be more common than bandwagoning.'²² While states mostly go for balancing under threat,²³ he asserts that 'the weaker the state, the more likely it is to bandwagon rather than balance'²⁴ since bandwagoning is the choice of a weak and isolated state.²⁵ Otherwise, the threatened state seeks a balancing act by forming an alliance with a state which is less likely to pose a threat and more likely to go against the source of threat, or common enemy.²⁶

How did the Ottomans behave at the dawn of the July crisis? In what ways is Walt's balance of threat theory capable of explaining the Ottoman alliance politics before the Great War?

3 The Context of Ottoman Alliance Politics

The Ottoman alliance with Germany and its entry into the war was not simply a short term foreign policy choice of the ruling CUP leadership that, as a political actor, claimed to serve Ottoman imperial interests. To understand why the CUP decided to align with Germany and join the war requires examining the historical context of the Ottoman decline, and the place of the Ottomans within an international order that had changed at the expense of the interest and strategies Istanbul formulated in a bid to preserve the Empire as long as possible.

Conventional wisdom holds that the Ottomans enjoyed an unrivalled power in Europe from the late 15th century to mid-17th century. However, the failed siege of Vienna in 1683 followed by the Austro-Ottoman War of 1683-1697 which was settled by the Treaty of Karlowitz of 1699 resulted in an undisputed Ottoman defeat, ending Ottoman supremacy in Europe. Yet, the new *status quo* was not immediately acknowledged by the Ottoman ruling elite who still regarded themselves above the Christian Empires in Europe. It was the 1798 French campaign in Egypt and Syria led by Napoleon Bonaparte that forced the Ottomans to come to terms with the new international order. The degree of Ottoman weakness was obvious as the Ottoman military of several hundred thousand men had been defeated numerous times by 25,000 Frenchmen.²⁷ This particular event completely changed the Ottoman foreign policy. The strategy of isolation from Europe in pursuit of more land gains through battles against usually united Christian powers was abandoned and replaced by a will to engage in bilateral diplomacy and search for alliances within Europe. This was later known to be the "policy of balance"²⁸ in which the Ottomans tried to exploit the conflicts of European powers for its own gain, to turn European powers against each other and to formulate ad-hoc alliances against common enemies. This policy was first utilized against the French just after the humiliating defeats of 1798 as the Ottomans asked for assistance from the British and the Russians who were also concerned by French aspirations as well as the rapid change in the European balance of power.

The first decades of the 19th century were marked with surging social and political troubles as well as the continuation of Ottoman territorial diminution. The

¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹⁹ Ibid., 29.

²⁰ Ibid., 31.

²¹ Ibid., 26.

²² Ibid., 28, 89.

²³ Ibid., 148.

²⁴ Ibid., 29.

²⁵ Ibid., 29-30.

²⁶ Ibid., 22-26.

²⁷ S. J. Shaw and E. K. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA 1977), 9-13.

²⁸ O. Kırkcıoğlu, 'An Evaluation of the Ottoman Empire's Entry into the World War', *SBF Dergisi*, 38, 1 (2015), 228.

independence of mainland Greece in 1829 and the loss of Algeria in 1830 were clear signs of this trend. However, it wasn't until the defeat of the central government against its own Governor of Egypt, Mehmet Ali Pasha in 1833 that the Eastern Question became one of the key foreign policy issues for the European Powers.²⁹ This was mainly due to all European Powers being sceptical of each other's gains at the expense of the Ottomans as none wanted their counterparts to be overwhelmingly in control of strategic Ottoman territories. The Ottomans were now viewed as the sick man of Europe³⁰ which led to constant conflict over sharing the inheritance of this dying empire. It is of no coincidence that the Ottoman rulers used this dilemma to further its policy of finding European alliances out of a shared interest of containing the power which threatens its lands or influence. The best example of this was the 1856 Crimean War against the Russian Empire where the Ottomans were aided by the British and French who had concerns over an increasingly powerful Russia. The war resulted in a rare Ottoman victory for the era, and the Treaty of Paris that followed contained two crucial articles that the Ottomans had struggled for since their inferiority against the Europeans became apparent to them: being recognized as a European Power and European Powers protecting the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire.³¹ This, however, proved itself to be a temporary success for the Ottoman side as the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878 shifted the status quo again. The heavy Ottoman defeat resulted in the independence of Serbia and Montenegro as well as the loss of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Cyprus. Yet this humiliation was of no match with the real problem the Ottomans found themselves in; rapid and inevitable international isolation as it was apparent that the British and French stayed indifferent to the constant Ottoman retreat.³² The loss of Egypt, Tunisia and Libya in early 1880s and the independence of Bulgaria in 1908 was in line with the decline of the Ottomans but the decisive defeat of the Empire suffered in the 1912 Balkan War against a weak coalition of small newly independent states that completely chased the Ottomans out of Europe was not foreseen. Even though Ottomans reclaimed Adrianople, the second capital of the Empire during the 1913 Balkan

War, the European Powers were convinced that the total collapse of Ottomans was only a matter of time.³³

4 The Road to the Turco-German Alliance

Since the beginning of the Ottoman retreat in the late 17th century, imminent problems facing the Sublime Porte gradually shifted. First, it was the loss of supremacy in Europe, then it was a complete withdrawal from Europe, and finally with the decisive defeat in the Balkan Wars the main concern was the total collapse of the Empire. The post-Balkan Wars assessment of the Ottoman situation, even to the most optimistic eyes, was a crumbling economy, military backwardness and an increasing social unrest, especially among Armenians. Hence in 1913, the short term Ottoman resolution was to join a stable alliance in Europe which was divided between the Central and Entente Powers, gain economic independence, reform the military, foster a new Turkish ethnic identity and avoid a new war.³⁴ However, as the continent was slowly drifting into war with the assassination of Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914 none of these tasks had been fulfilled and the news from Sarajevo created an atmosphere of panic in Istanbul as it was believed that the very existence of the Empire was in danger with no proper alliance to support it.³⁵

4.1 The British Twist

The first preference of alliance for the Ottomans was overwhelmingly with the British side, not only due to its overall strength but also due to the centuries old Turco-British friendship. Numerous attempts on the highest level from 1908 to 1913 were made by the Ottoman leadership to secure British support. The Ottoman government was determined to resolve some outstanding questions with British as it had agreed to satisfy British demands on petroleum concessions in Iraq and the areas of Gulf of Basra, the railway construction to Basra, shipping routes on the Euphrates and Tigris.³⁶ Besides, the CUP tried all

29 M. S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question (1774-1923): A Study in International Relations* (London 1966).

30 H. Temperley, *England and the Near East* (London 1936), 272.

31 R. Pearce, 'The Results of the Crimean War', *History Review* 70 (September 2011), 27-33.

32 K. Karpas, 'Entry of the Ottoman Empire into World War I', *Bulleten* 48, 253 (2004), 4.

33 E. C. Helmreich, *The Diplomacy of the Balkan Wars: 1912-1913* (Cambridge, MA 1938).

34 Karpas, 'Entry of the Ottoman Empire', 6-7.

35 Ibid., p.8.

36 Djemal Pasa, *Memories of a Turkish Statesman, 1913-1919* (New York, NY 1922), 100.

means possible for a formal alliance including the attempt of a diplomatic mission headed by Kamil Pasha, the Grand Vizier of the time, but its efforts came to nothing as Britain's reply was always a negative one softened by a careful diplomatic tone.³⁷ However, a possible alliance with Britain was not completely ruled out until Lord Kitchener told the Ottoman ambassador to London, Ahmet Tevfik Pasha, in a private meeting during the July Crisis of 1914 that the Entente was not willing to see the Turks on their side in case of a general war.³⁸

When examined in this context, the British decision of gradually terminating its traditional alliance with the Ottomans seems almost inevitable for a variety of reasons. In both public and government opinion there was a negative shift regarding the Ottomans. The British viewed the Christian minorities in the Balkans as subject to a cruel Islamic oppression and blamed the Ottomans for the massacre of 60,000 Bulgarians during the revolts of 1876.³⁹ The British leadership changed from a pro-Turkish Conservative, Disraeli, to an anti-Turkish liberal, Gladstone, who had accused his predecessor (a converted Jew) for hating Christian liberty.⁴⁰ Also, the construction of the Suez Canal (1869) and the annexation of Egypt (1882) decreased the strategic importance of the alliance with Ottomans. Furthermore, the 1877-1878 Russo-Ottoman War, which resulted in total Ottoman defeat was instrumental in changing the traditional yet pragmatic British policy of guarding Ottoman territorial integrity. Anticipating the possibility of total Ottoman collapse in the hands of the Russians, London was now interested in reaching a deal with the other European Powers about the future partitioning of the soon to be deceased 'sick man of Europe.'⁴¹

Besides this, the authoritarian ruling style of Abdulhamit II (1878-1908) was yet another obstacle for a healthy relationship with the British, as he was profoundly unpopular in London's liberal circles. Not only the Sultan was unpopular, he was also considered a danger since

he was open in using his status as Caliph of the ummah to provoke Muslim subjects within the British colonies. Hence, it is of no surprise that when the Young Turks (the core of CUP) ended the Abdulhamit era and reinstalled the Constitutional Rule, bilateral relations with Istanbul were strengthened. Nevertheless, the hopeful atmosphere did not last long as the Young Turks too turned authoritarian after consolidating their power. The British political elite eventually found no difference between the Young Turks and the Old Turks, and the mutual relations continued to decline until the Great War.⁴²

4.2 The French Connection

From an Ottoman perspective, the second most desired target for alliance building, especially when Britain could not be persuaded, was France. However, similar to the British case, the pan-Islamic policies of Abdulhamit II had constrained bilateral relations since the French regarded this as a clear threat for the stability of their Islamic majority colonies. This barrier for a stronger relationship continued with the CUP in power as they did not convince Paris that the status of the Caliph would not be a foreign policy weapon anymore.

The most serious attempt to enlist the French support was during the heated days of the July Crisis as Cemal Pasha, the Minister of Navy and a known Francophile, arrived in Paris seeking a military deal. His conviction was that if the empire were to be safe from Russia it had to win the sympathy of France and England.⁴³ He told his counterparts the following: "Take us [Turks] into your Entente, at the same time protect us from terrible Russian threats and we will encircle the Central Powers like an iron ring."⁴⁴ While promising 'serious reforms' at home the Ottomans were asking their 'protection against a Russian attack.'⁴⁵ His offer was turned down by the French who insisted that such an agreement would need their allies' (Britain and Russia) approval, which was not possible. Hence, Cemal Pasha left Paris in a sheer disappointment with French friendship and a Legion d'honneur.⁴⁶

³⁷ Kürkcüoğlu, 'An Evaluation', 233.

³⁸ Karpat, 'Entry of the Ottoman Empire', 8.

³⁹ W. E. Gladstone, *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* (New York, NY 1876).

⁴⁰ Karpat, 'Entry of the Ottoman Empire', 4.

⁴¹ Kürkcüoğlu, 'An Evaluation', 228. This attitude could be observed from the British PM Lord Salisbury's letter to the Ottoman Grand Vizier Said Pasha in June 1895, twelve years before the Anglo-Russian Entente: "General feeling [in Britain] is increasingly to the effect that the Ottoman Empire will not continue to exist. What contributes to the existence of the Ottoman Empire is the fact that Britain is not allied with Russia. If an alliance comes out, the Ottoman Empire will perish." in E. Z. Karal, *Birinci Meşrutiyet ve İstibdad Devirleri*, Vol. 8, (Istanbul 1962), 139.

⁴² F. Ahmad, *1908-1914 Yılları Arasında Büyük Britanya'nın Jön Türklerle Münasebetleri* (İstanbul 1971), 153-180.

⁴³ Ibid., p.99.

⁴⁴ Djemal Pasa, *Memories of a Turkish Statesman*, 105-106.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 99.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 107.

4.3 The Russian Roulette

It was no secret that the biggest threat to Ottoman territorial integrity and even to its survival was Russian expansion since the early 19th century. For Cemal Pasha ‘Russia’s greatest desire is the possession of Constantinople,’⁴⁷ a perception that prevailed in the Ottoman leadership as well as the public.

The Ottomans and the Russian Empire had virtually no common interests to unite them and they were regarded to be natural adversaries. The Ottoman retreat from the Balkans was the result of the Russian victory in 1877-1878 and the traditional pan-Slavic policies it pursued. The two empires had been fighting for naval supremacy in the Black Sea for centuries, the Russians were open about their ambitions on the Straits, they confronted each other in the Caucasus, and Russia annexed a significant portion of Asia Minor in 1878. Also, the two empires had been actively aiding each other’s religious and ethnic separatist movements since the early 20th century.⁴⁸ For Cemal Pasha ‘the most important domestic problem was the Armenian question’ for the empire, and ‘whenever an Armenian question cropped up in Turkey there was always a Russian question behind it.’⁴⁹ The Russians were seeking a buffer zone through an independent Armenia in Eastern Anatolia while the Ottomans were pushing for an Islamic rebellion in Transcaucasia. Talat Pasha, the Minister of the Interior, was convinced that Russia was planning to use Bulgaria and an independent Armenia to encircle the Turks and to cut off the land connection between the Ottomans and the Caucasian Muslims which would be followed by the occupation of the Straits.⁵⁰ Russia’s call for revising the status of the Straits and its proposal to unite the six Armenian majority East Anatolian cities under a single administrative unit in 1914 justified this theory and implied that Russia was conspiring for a full-fledged war against the Ottomans.

Even though they knew it would come to nothing, the Ottomans still tried their luck to form an alliance (almost asking for a miracle) during the July Crisis, sending a delegation headed by Talat Pasha to Russia that returned empty handed not even meeting the Tsar in an attempt at bandwagoning, as a weak state would do according to Walt by joining into the source of threat in order to avert it.⁵¹

47 Ibid., 111.

48 Aksakal, *Ottoman Road to War*, 88-89.

49 Djemal Pasa, *Memories of a Turkish Statesman*, 98.

50 A. Kabacalı, *Talat Paşa’nın Anıları* (İstanbul 1994).

51 Karpat, ‘Entry of the Ottoman Empire’, 8.

4.4 The German Alliance

Unlike the decline of British and French multilateral relationships with Istanbul after 1878, Germans had been gradually building stronger ties with the Turks. This was demonstrated with the German Fountain built in the heart of Istanbul in 1901, the agreement to construct a Berlin-Baghdad railway in 1903, the rapid rise in German financial investment and the German military advisors sent to the Ottoman side. Internally, the pro-Turkish attitudes of Kaiser Wilhelm II coupled with the strong admiration of the CUP leaders such as Enver Pasha, the War Minister, for the German Empire, and externally the common threat posed by Russia increased the possibility for a Turco-German rapprochement. Hence it was not surprising that Germany appeared as the only European Power that was not interested in disintegrating the Ottomans and taking a share of the spoils.⁵² In Cemal Pasha’s words “Germany was the *only* power which desired to see Turkey strong.”⁵³ However, it was still believed that the Germans were not altogether disinterested in the empire, but “wanted to exploit the Ottomans economically.”⁵⁴ This aim of Germany, however, did not seem as grave as Russian claims over its land and its very existence. By then various economic benefits had been given to European powers and as such some economic privileges to be extended to Germany in addition to capitulations that had already been accorded to other European powers would not put the very existence of the state at risk any further.

However, the Germans did not initially appear eager to form an alliance with the Ottoman state. Quite the contrary, the vast majority of the German leadership since the day it was first discussed in 1910⁵⁵ regarded an Ottoman alliance as a dangerous diplomatic, economic and military liability given that the Turks had little to offer in any of these terms.⁵⁶ However, during the July crisis following the assassination of the Austrian prince Ferdinand in June 1914 negotiations for an alliance were renewed. Still on the 22 of July, much to his disappointment, Enver Pasha was

52 While the Turks and Germans had a lot of foreign policy interests in common, it was far from a total harmony. The letter dated July 28, 1913 from Jagow, the State Secretary of the Foreign Office to Wangenheim, the ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, summarizes the German calculations in the Near East: “We have only a single interest in Turkey, that it will survive in Asia long enough until we will have consolidated ourselves there in our areas of activity [*Arbeitszonen*] and have become prepared for annexation.” For a more detailed account, see: Aksakal, *Ottoman Road to War*, 66-68

53 Djemal Pasa, *Memories of a Turkish Statesman*, 113.

54 Ibid., 99.

55 Ibid., 69

56 Ibid., 94.

informed by the German ambassador in Istanbul about the unlikelihood of such an alliance. Nevertheless, this did not stop the Ottoman push for an agreement. First, hoping to allay German concerns, Enver Pasha affirmed that the bleak situation of his country made it impossible for the Ottomans to be a full member of the alliance and expressed his wish to form a “secondary alliance” with a smaller set of responsibility.⁵⁷ Furthermore, he made it clear that without the German support the Ottomans would be in grave danger of becoming the “vassals of Russia” and continued to bluff that if a Turco-German alliance was not realised, then, his government would have no choice but to join the Entente Powers.⁵⁸ After ten straight days of negotiation with the German representatives in Istanbul and Berlin both sides reached an agreement, forming a secret treaty on the 2nd of August 1914, just a day after the official start of the Great War.

There was no doubt on the part of the Ottoman rulers about the wisdom of aligning with Germany as the alliance was regarded by the Ottoman leadership as a relief and a significant diplomatic success against all odds. After refusal of the British and the French of an alliance with the empire Cemal Pasha, responding to a question of Talat Pasa on German alliance, said; “I should not hesitate to accept any alliance which rescued Turkey from her present position of isolation.”⁵⁹ Isolation meant being on its own vis-a-vis the Russians without any European power to balance the threat posed by the Tsar. As a European war was looming on horizon the Ottomans were desperate to forge an alliance with any European power to guard against the Russians.

5 Balance of Threat and the Ottoman-German Alliance of 1914

By 1914 the Ottoman rulers’ threat perception was high, imminent and continuous. The central concern for the Ottomans was to stop the gradual disintegration of the Empire along ethnic lines, prevent partition of their land among the colonial powers of Europe, and most importantly halt an ever ambitious Russia. The question the Ottomans were searching for an answer as Europe was drifting into war in July 1914 was which alliance was

the least threatening for Ottoman territorial integrity. Thus, the balance of threat perceived by the ruling elite lay at the heart of Ottoman decision making process as they assessed the level of threats posed by each major European power.

The Ottomans did not have any other option but to choose between the Central Alliance and Triple Entente.⁶⁰ Germany, the leading power within the Central Alliance, did not have colonial ambitions on the Middle Eastern territories of the empire nor on the straits or the Caucasus. Moreover, it was building main railroads spanning throughout the empire and helping the Ottomans reform their army. As such, public opinion and the opinion of the elite sided with the Germans.

The Entente, on the other hand, appeared as a great source of threat. The British and French were steadily and aggressively colonizing the Ottoman territories in the Middle East and North Africa. As seen by Cemal Pasha; ‘England had got Egypt completely in her power, and would undoubtedly strive to possess Mesopotamia, possibly Palestine also, and secure her exclusive influence over the whole of the Arabian Peninsula.’⁶¹ France, on the other hand, was involved with Syria and Lebanon in addition to North African territories of the Empire. Additionally, Britain and France had made loans to Ottomans, and they were constantly intervening in order to protect their interests. Among the Entente Powers the Russians were believed to have ambitions to take over the very heart of the empire, Istanbul, and thereby control the straits. Only a few decades earlier at the end of 1877-1878 war the Russian troops had reached a few miles outside Istanbul. In Cemal Pasa’s words, “Russians regarded themselves as natural heirs to Constantinople.”⁶² Thus, by 1914 the main motivation of the empire was to end its diplomatic isolation by forging an alliance in Europe in order, primarily, to balance the Russian threat. Thus, the Ottomans could join in the group of states that threatened the empire the most as an attempt at bandwagoning, or form an alliance with the other side, Germany and Austrian-Hungarian Empire in an act of balancing.

If alliances are against someone⁶³ then this was particularly the case for the Ottoman-German alliance of 1914 which was clearly against the Russians who posed proximate and imminent threat to the empire. According

⁵⁷ While Ottomans were not a “satellite” of Germany, they were not the “diplomatic equals” either. See also, U. Trumpener, *Germany and the Ottoman Empire: 1914-1918* (New Jersey, 1968), 20-21.

⁵⁸ Aksakal, *Ottoman Road to War*, 97-102.

⁵⁹ Djemal Pasa, *Memories of a Turkish Statesman*, 108.

⁶⁰ P. Schroeder, ‘Alliances, 1815-1945: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management’ in K. Knorr (ed.) *Historical Dimensions of National Security Problems* (Lawrence, MA 1976), 227-262.

⁶¹ Djemal Pasa, *Memories of a Turkish Statesman*, 113.

⁶² Ibid., 69.

⁶³ Liska, *Nations in Alliance*, 12.

to Walt's balance of threat theory geographic proximity of states matters: 'States that are nearby pose greater threat than those that are far away.'⁶⁴ This was one of the bases of Ottomans' threat assessment as in public and official circles the 'proximate threat' appeared to be the Russians who were expanding at the expense of the Ottomans as Eastern provinces of Ardahan, Kars and Batum had been annexed by Russia at the end of the 1887-1888 war. Russia was not only a pressing neighbor in the East and in the Black Sea but also in the Balkans, where the Russians had occupied Adrianople in 1887, and established a zone of influence among the newly independent Balkan states as their protector. As Walt asserts, "weak states are ... likely to be especially sensitive to proximate power,"⁶⁵ the Ottoman Empire as a crumbling power was extremely concerned about Russia, a powerful and threatening neighboring state. It appeared to the Ottomans that their empire was being encircled by an ambitious Russia.

As to "offensive powers," which refers to the "ability to threaten sovereignty or territorial integrity of another state at an acceptable cost,"⁶⁶ again Russia stood out as unrivaled creating a strong need and incentive to balance with others. There was no question about the ability of Russia to threaten sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Ottoman state. Besides, the aggressive intentions of Russia to control the straits and occupy Istanbul were no secret. The Russian advances into Anatolia from the East had long started. The influence of Russia on the disenchanted Armenians was at its peak as the Russians were supporting their 'national cause,' and an Armenian revolt was expected to be imminent. So Russia among all others proved to be the most imminent threat to its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

From a balance of threat perspective, the Ottoman search for 'balancing' against the Russians seemed overwhelming. The Ottoman dilemma was that two major European powers, Britain and France, which used to balance Russian encroachment over its territory also were in alignment with its main adversary. The question for the Ottomans was, thus, whether the attempt to avert the threat of Russia would take the form of bandwagoning or balancing. The Ottomans, initially, sought to bandwagon as the Germans had been reluctant to ally with the Empire before the July crisis in line with Walt's assertion that states will be tempted to bandwagon when allies to balance are unavailable."⁶⁷

Bandwagoning is usually conceptualized with references to 'small states' that bandwagon threatening state/s to ensure survival. While the Ottoman Empire in 1914 could not be regarded as a 'small state,' it could certainly be described as a 'weak state.' Bandwagoning, taken as 'alignment with the source of danger,' was what the Ottomans seriously considered, even sought in the early stages of their search for an alliance. The source of danger, then, was the Entente Powers all of which had territorial and economic designs over the Ottoman state, yet among them Russia emerged the primary and vital source of threat.

Thus the Ottomans sought to bandwagoning as the British, and later the French, were approached for joining the Entente in an attempt to align with the 'source of the threat.' Yet, given the grave threat perception especially toward one of the states in the Entente, namely Russia, the Ottomans wanted to try a third way: balancing through bandwagoning, that is by joining in the Entente, the source of threat, the Ottomans were expecting to balance Russia with Britain and France from within. So the Ottoman aim was to check the threat of one state within the alliance with the ambitions of others, i.e. British and French, somehow similar to the policies of these states against Russia in the Crimean war of 1853-1856. As such, when the Ottomans initially sought an alliance with the French and the British they were not only 'bandwagoning' into an alliance that threatened the empire but also seeking an act of 'balancing' within the alliance against the most threatening one. Cemal Pasha, one of the Unionist trio in charge, in his talks with the French, underlined that they wanted to be part of their alliance and sought protection against the Russians. In his memoirs he says; 'we were determined to cultivate the best relations, primarily with the French, but also with the English.'⁶⁸ Negotiating for a possible alliance with the French in Paris, Cemal Pasha was blunt; 'Take us into your Entente, at the same time protect us from terrible Russian threats and we will encircle the Central Powers like an iron ring.'⁶⁹

Such a policy indicates that the Ottomans entertained the idea of the possibility of 'balancing' within the alliance that included the greatest source of threat, that is bandwagoning as an act of balancing in a multi-state alliance, a point missing in Walt's theory of balance of threat.

Yet the Entente powers, the source of greater and lesser threat to the Ottoman Empire, rejected the Ottoman quest to join. The Ottomans faced rejection for their willingness

⁶⁴ Walt, *Origins of Alliance*, 23.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁸ Djemal Pasa, *Memoirs of a Turkish Statesman*, 99.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

to bandwagon with the sources of threats in a way to balance the Russian threat within moved on forging an alliance with the Central Powers. Such a move was rather inevitable as the threatened state seeks a balancing act by forming an alliance with a state which is less likely to pose a threat and more likely to go against the source of threat or common enemy.⁷⁰ This is what happened at the end as the Ottoman government decided to align itself with Central Powers vis-à-vis the Triple Entente that included the most threatening Russia and lesser threatening states of Britain and France.

6 Conclusion

The objective of this study has been to bring in the alliance theory of balance of threat to assess Ottoman diplomacy before the Great War. It was suggested that an alliance theory perspective contributes to understanding the motives and objectives of Ottoman rulers as to why they made an alliance and entered the war alongside Germany. Such an alliance theory approach underlines the dilemmas of the Ottoman decision makers and demonstrates 'rational' elements of their strategy of balancing the main source of threat. It shows that the alliance choice of the Ottomans was not naïve and romantic, but rather one that made sense from an alliance theory point of view. The logic of alliance formation under threat suggests that the Ottoman decision makers acted rationally within the realm of their choices.

In their search for allies in the run up to the Great War the Ottomans assessed the level and imminence of external threats they encountered from the European powers. The British, the French, and particularly the Russians appeared to have posed an imminent threat to the Ottomans whereas the Germans not only remained disinterested in acquiring Ottoman territories they were also the only European power that shared common foreign policy interests with the Ottomans.

Yet the Ottomans, first, sought bandwagoning into the source of threat, the Entente powers. While considering such an option their strategy was to balance Russia as the main source of threat, with Britain and France from within the Entente. Such a novel approach to alliance politics, that is bandwagoning as an act of balancing, would never be put into practice since the Entente Powers rejected the Ottoman request.

In the end, the Ottoman state, threatened mainly and vitally by Russia, did a balancing act by forming an alliance with the Central Powers which was less likely to pose a threat and more likely to go against the source of threat and the common enemy, Russia. This is to say that the balance of threat dictated the Ottomans to form an alliance with the Central Powers especially after the British and French rejected to balance the Russians vis-à-vis the Ottomans. Germany, thus, appeared as a 'safe ally' and a balancing actor.

In conclusion, it can be asserted that the decision to enter the war with the Central Powers was neither a German conspiracy nor a Turkish error but to a great extent an outcome of alliance politics. While subjective perceptions of reality and biases certainly played a role, especially concerning the conduct of Enver Pasha, overall they remain insignificant. Even though the country was not ready for a general war after the embarrassing defeats in the Balkan Wars, the Ottomans as a declining Empire that was not only internationally isolated but also facing a serious threat of partition in the hands of the Entente, and particularly of Russia, acted in a way to balance the source of greatest threat by allying itself with the Central Powers.

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⁷⁰ Walt, *Origins of Alliance*, 22-26.

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