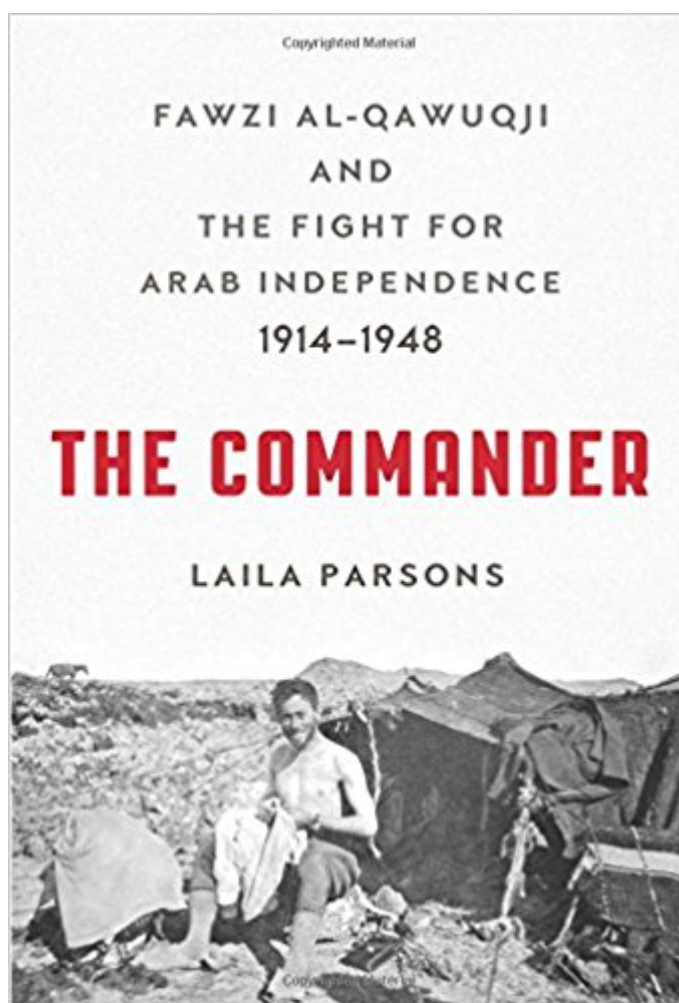


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# The Commander: Fawzi Al-Qawuqji And The Fight For Arab Independence 1914-1948



## Synopsis

The definitive biography of the military leader who stood at the center of Arab politics for four decades. Revered by some as the Arab Garibaldi, maligned by others as an intriguer and opportunist, Fawzi al-Qawuqji manned the ramparts of Arab history for four decades. As a young officer in the Ottoman Army, he fought the British in World War I and won an Iron Cross. In the 1920s, he mastered the art of insurgency and helped lead a massive uprising against the French authorities in Syria. A decade later, he reappeared in Palestine, where he helped direct the Arab Revolt of 1936. When an effort to overthrow the British rulers of Iraq failed, he moved to Germany, where he spent much of World War II battling his fellow exile, the Mufti of Jerusalem, who had accused him of being a British spy. In 1947, Qawuqji made a daring escape from Allied-occupied Berlin, and sought once again to shape his region's history. In his most famous role, he would command the Arab Liberation Army in the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. In this well-crafted, definitive biography, Laila Parsons tells Qawuqji's dramatic story and sets it in the full context of his turbulent times. Following Israel's decisive victory, Qawuqji was widely faulted as a poor leader with possibly dubious motives. The Commander shows us that the truth was more complex: although he doubtless made some strategic mistakes, he never gave up fighting for Arab independence and unity, even as those ideals were undermined by powers inside and outside the Arab world. In Qawuqji's life story we find the origins of today's turmoil in the Arab Middle East.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Winner of the Society for Military History's 2017 Distinguished Book Award" The Commander is an intriguing reassessment of the Arab nationalist and military strategist, and crafts astudiously even-handed history of the Arab anti-colonial movement through 1948 . . . the real strength of Parsons's book lies in the rich, textured picture she paints." Akin Ajayi, Haaretz

"With a subject so inspiring and provocative, The Commander never fails to interest. This is a fascinating biography . . . The Commander is a book as much for the lay reader as for the historian of Palestine. It can be read cover to cover as a well-told story of an adventurous life, with battles fought and visions formed and lost. But it is also an invaluable reference tool . . . Well-researched, presenting and analyzing many sources on this essential period of Arab history which were not previously available in English, The Commander is a lively read that is not short of depth nor contemporary importance." Selma Dabbagh, The Electronic Intifada

"Fascinating . . . His is a story of ambiguities, contradictions, oversized ambitions and false hopes in many regards a life perfectly suited to illustrate the Arab predicament in the first half of the 20th century." Michael Young, The National (Abu Dhabi)

"Parsons has penned an unbiased 'definitive biography' of a controversial figure . . . Parsons has presented not only evocative descriptions of al-Qawuqji's life and times, but also compelling arguments to dispel some prevailing myths . . . An informative account." Waheed Rabbani, The Historical Novels Review

"In this mesmerizing look at Arab military leader Fawzi al-Qawuqji, Parsons fashions an unconventional biography of a divisive figure in the early 20th-century struggle for Arab sovereignty . . . The narrative is taut and fluid. Gliding along seamlessly, with a whole world unfurling like a carpet, al-Qawuqji emerges from these pages as an enigmatic, complex figure worthy of sustained scholarly attention." Publishers Weekly (starred review)

"Parsons conveys the epic sweep of [al-Qawuqji's] life and his importance to Arab history . . . The effect . . . is to dismantle various myths and misinterpretations that have developed around the period . . . In addition to a much-needed biography of al-Qawuqji, the author provides a history of the heyday and collapse of Arab nationalism . . . [The Commander is] a remarkably evenhanded biography of an important player in Arab history that doubles as a crucial scholarly reinterpretation of the rise and fall of Arab nationalism." Kirkus Reviews

"Parsons captures Qawuqji as quixotic and charismatic, if at times desperate and reckless, and brings to the fore his relentless pursuit of a greater Arab state, despite sometimes insurmountable opposition from colonial powers, religious and ethnic groups, and other rebel leaders . . . In light of ongoing political upheaval in the Middle East, Parsons's coverage of this key figure and formative period is especially relevant."

Sarah Grant, Booklist

"An outstanding book that tells the history of the Middle East from

the First World War to the 1948 Palestine War through the life of one of the most influential Arabs of the twentieth century. Fawzi al-Qawuqji should be a household name for his role in the Arab world. . . .s failed struggles against European imperialism and Zionism. In this fascinating political biography, Laila Parsons restores Qawuqji to his rightful place and has produced one of the most important new works in modern Middle Eastern history." . . . Eugene Rogan, author of *The Arabs and The Fall of the Ottomans*"There has never been a better, more vivid retelling of the struggles, hopes, and bitter disappointments of the Arab East after the end of the Ottoman Empire than Laila Parsons. . . .s *The Commander*. After nearly a century, readers can finally see the post-Ottoman world through the eyes of those who fought mightily to shape it. The book is a triumph of the historian. . . .s craft." . . . Michael Provence, University of California, San Diego"The *Commander* vividly brings to life the historical landscape of the twentieth-century Arab world. Putting Arab perspectives front and center, Laila Parsons convincingly tells the story of the betrayal of the struggle for Arab independence between 1914 and 1948. This book is an important and long-overdue antidote to the orientalist fantasy of *Lawrence of Arabia*." . . . Ussama Makdisi, Rice University"With great skill and impressive scholarship, Laila Parsons uses the extraordinary career of Fawzi al-Qawuqji as a prism through which to understand the tumultuous history of the eastern Arab world in the first half of the twentieth century. In a well-paced and lucid account, she succeeds admirably in bringing to life the hopes, struggles, and disappointments not only of Qawuqji but of many of his contemporaries." . . . Charles Tripp, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London"Laila Parsons. . . .s excellent new book combines a rare command of published memoirs with a novel interpretive reading of private papers in mostly unused archives. It tells us the unique story of one individual, but also the story of a people and a region. *The Commander* gives an important place to narrative and storytelling without sacrificing depth of analysis and interpretation. It is also quite remarkable in conveying the views not only of powerful colonial overlords but of the Arab populations they ruled." . . . Leila Fawaz, Tufts University"The *Commander* brilliantly encapsulates the tragic, broken history of the modern Middle East in the extraordinary and little-told story of one man, Fawzi al-Qawuqji. His epic but ultimately doomed odyssey of Arab liberation weaves through the collapse of an empire and the creation of the contemporary status quo. Written in a fluent and compelling style, *The Commander* is essential reading for anyone wishing to understand both the tortuous history and the current tragedy of today. . . .s Middle East." . . . Carne Ross, author of *The Leaderless Revolution* and founder of Independent Diplomat"The many tales of Fawzi al-Qawuqji are a pure joy to read for specialists and a revelation for general readers. Most startling is how Qawuqji overturns everything

we thought we understood about World War I from T. E. Lawrence and the Arab Revolt. Laila Parsons is to be commended for capturing the marvel and immediacy of events in vivid, clear prose. This unforgettable portrait of Qawuqji rises to the pinnacle of a new biographical literature on the Middle East." —Elizabeth F. Thompson, University of Virginia "In *The Commander* we have, at long last, a thoroughly researched and well-written biography of Fawzi al-Qawuqji. As an Ottoman officer, an anticolonial rebel, and a commander, he left his mark on modern Arab history, which makes this definitive study of his life and times most welcome." —Zachary Lockman, New York University "An indispensable account of the career of a remarkable Arab military leader whose life involved participation in most of the Middle East's major twentieth-century battles." —Roger Owen, Harvard University

Laila Parsons is an associate professor of history and Islamic studies at McGill University. She is the author of *The Druze Between Palestine and Israel, 1947-49*.

A friend of mine recommended this book, and I bought it for my Kindle app, fully expecting it to languish in the Cloud for years, just as my Netflix DVDs of highly acclaimed Rumanian films fester next to my computer. But one afternoon I had finished binging on yet another mordant Nordic detective novel, and I checked the Cloud Library for the next brutal ice-bound murder. *The Commander* sat at the top of my list. Guilt compelled me to give it at least a half hour, so I poked it onto my iPhone. This book doesn't grab you immediately, but gradually the information Parsons delivers in her straightforward clear style begins to form a critical story. For many of us who are too lazy to actually learn why the Middle East has become such a nidus of tragedy, this book is a gift. By laying the track of Fawzi al-Qawuqji's military adventures and misadventures throughout that region over half of the twentieth century, Parson provides guidance for understanding how those early critical events are key to comprehending the present. I had already known that the blundering partition of the Arab nations by the British and French after the First World War had set this hellish ball rolling, but I hadn't realized the full craziness of their last attempts to regain colonial nirvana. The subsequent resistance by Qawuqji and his colleagues against the European presence was obstructed by their own changing alliances as they wrestled with the continual question of whether the outcome should be a unified Arab state or individual nations. Qawuqji's own alternating roles as major player, scapegoat, and victim reflected the chaotic shifts of loyalty within the perilous Arab power structure and to the Europeans as well. The establishment of the Israeli state and Qawuqji's failed attempt to lead a small ill-equipped army against it was the final step in destroying any

ambitions for an Arab state. The fractured nations that emerged from these conflicts still carry unhealed wounds. Of some interest, having the book on Kindle allowed me to search for the terms "Muslim", which had 35 mentions, and "Islam", which had only 34. The early fight against the European masters and Israel was nationalistic, not religious. The only ominous hint of this current terrible trend was a brief mention of Wahhabism, an austere and strict practice by Sunni Muslims in the Nejd region located in Saudi Arabia, which later fed the beliefs of those in Al Qaeda and ISIL. At the time it was a small rural cult that played no role at all in the mid 20th century struggles or in the thinking of those who were fighting for Arab autonomy during this period. I hope Parsons has another book in mind for tracking this particular tough story. In the meantime, I'm grateful for this book. I think it's important; it uses an interesting and compelling story of a flawed leader in a flawed situation to explain how the Middle East disaster evolved, who the original villains really were, and why our own intrusion into this part of the world was yet another iteration of the original awful blunder.

I have mixed feelings about this book. It is a great survey of the life of al Qawuqji. On the other hand, I felt more detail could have been provided. It fills in a lot of pieces of history in a very complicated period of Levant (Syrian) history. It also provides an alternative view to the propaganda put out by the likes of the Mufti of Jerusalem. The book balances history between those of us who feel Fawzi was our symbol of revolutionary fighter to those who feel he had a lesser impact and possibly a double-agent. Most importantly, it is a book about a man with a passion to rid al Sham of colonialist powers. It lays a good frame work to understand the Islamist movement of today. Finally, it is a nice study of the complexities of loyalties of the time. British, French, and Germans all claiming revolutionary leaders and harboring some during the war.

The subject of this biography lived through tumultuous times. In some ways he was an ambiguous figure: a self-proclaimed anti-colonialist, he began his career as an Ottoman officer and would fight for the French as well as others. Important in his own right, he also represents the complexity of the times and places he operated in. Arab unity was non-existent and accusations of treason were commonplace. The author does a remarkable job of producing an interesting and very readable work without ever over simplifying. She is also refreshingly even handed in writing about subjects colored by extreme partisanship. Anyone interested in the roots of the modern Middle East should read this book.

A deeply researched and highly readable account of the life of a significant figure in the history of Arab nationalism. Sure to be of interest to historians and non-experts alike. Highly recommended!

Having trouble understanding the conflict in the Middle East in general and the wars in Syria and Iraq in particular? French President Charles de Gaulle famously paraphrased, "Countries have no permanent friends and no permanent enemies, only permanent interests." This brilliantly written book goes a long way toward explaining and clarifying the permanent interests of the people in the Middle East.

Wonderful book that explains the history of the middle east in vivid prose. A truly engaging read.

An excellent look at the history leading to Middle East quagmire through the life of one patriot.

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