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# BIASES IN STUDYING OTTOMAN HISTORY*

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In studying how Arab scholarship assessed the history of the Ottoman Empire[1], three periods are distinguished: the period up to 1918, from 1918 to 1950, and from 1950 to the present.

In the first period up to 1918, Arab scholarship is characterized by a positive attitude toward the Ottoman State as upholder of the Islamic caliphate. It is toward the end of the period that a shift in Arab attitude and scholarly production appeared, calling for the total independence of Arabs from the Ottoman caliphate. Although Young Turks are blamed for the final dissociation of the Ottoman-Islamic identity we have to admit that the rise of Arab nationalism itself was already a fact since the last decades of the century. The Syrian Muslim press, for example, began to express separatist tendencies toward the end of the century and the Christian Arab press in Beirut preceded it in claiming independence in a more decided fashion.

After the First World War a completely new orientation dominated the Arabs who were now divided and came under the control of various colonial states; in this period the Arab elite attempted to find and assert its national identity in regionalism. Colonial regimes sponsored this move and local cadres were created to implement this policy. As Abou el-Haj observes: "In condemning the Ottoman regime and all things Turkish, the scholarship helped this group gloss over its role as part of the Ottoman elite..."[2]

* Paper delivered at the 4th International Conference on Turkish-Arab Relations held in Istanbul, Sept. 7-9, 1987

[1] Rifaat Ali Abou El-Haj, "The Social Uses of the Past: Recent Arab Historiography of Ottoman Rule", in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, No 14, pp 185-201 (1982).

The third period in Arab scholarship, dating from 1950, was dominated by Arab nationalism and concentration was on the 19th and 20th centuries in an effort to find roots of national identity in a nation-state; focus was now on the unity of Arab history. Abou el-Haj, an Arab historian of the Ottoman period, points out that none of the Arab historians of this last stage realized that "the inspiration for the idea of the common identity of the Arab peoples and their common heritage is rooted in the preceding four centuries of Ottoman rule"[3]. This period in Arab history was even regarded as "not worthy of serious historical consideration". The central interest being Arabdom and Arab national identity, the Ottoman period is treated as a period of alien domination. Only very recently, a trend equating Arab with Islamic history, thus recognizing a positive role for the Ottoman caliphate, re-appeared in Arab scholarship

In Turkey, the emphasis is, of course, placed on the common Islamic historical experience rather than on Arab-Islamic unity. But in general, Arab nationalism is today the permeating, dominant trend with Arab historians and the emphasis is placed, as Abou el-Haj asserts, "not on Islam as a religion so much as on the fact that it is an Arab phenomenon". In brief, today for Arab historians or sociologists, the principal goal is to uphold the nation-state. The Ottoman period is viewed, interpreted or used only for this purpose.

Abou el-Haj contrasts what he calls *qutri* or provincial-regional Arab nationalism which had arisen in the inter-war period with the new ideology of the unity of an Arab historical identity, and the anticipation of eventual unification. Regional Arab nationalism is interpreted by him as a heritage of colonialism. On the other hand, adhering to a rather doctrinal approach to Ottoman history, he himself interpreted Ottoman rule over the Arab lands as the exploitation of a ruling elite.

"As heirs to the Muslim caliphate", he said,[4] "the Ottoman dynasty and ruling elites were able to justify through Islam their conquests, control, and exploitation of the lands of the Near East and North Africa, in Anatolia and South-East Europe." This summary reflects more or less the main trends and their ideological context in interpreting Ottoman history.

In a recent article Prof. E. İhsanoğlu[5] examines Egyptian high school textbooks to determine what kind of image was given to Egyptian youth on the Ottoman empire and Turkish-Arab relations. He found that the main source of these books is the history written by European authors, so

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Prof. Dr. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, "A Review of the School History Books in Egypt between 1912-1918 on Relations of the Ottoman State with the Arab World", in



that European biases are repeated in them. Like Abou el-Haj, İhsanoğlu too distinguishes in Arab scholarship the period 1912-1952 and the period after the revolution of 1952. In the first period, he says, Egyptian historians agree that the Ottoman caliphate played a positive protective role and emphasis is given on the common Islamic identity. After the revolution, however, emphasis shifted to a populist-nationalist interpretation, with at times a strong denunciation of, and a negative judgement on, the impact of the Ottoman-Turkish role. Thus, it is argued that the Ottoman regime represented a colonial, imperial exploitation of Egypt, and that the Turkish elite ruled the country as a dominant class alienated from the Egyptian people. The second theme was that Ottoman rule isolated the country from the West and was responsible for its backwardness.

Moderate writers, however, recognized the Ottoman role in protecting the country against the Portuguese menace and in upholding the Sunni doctrine. Also, they admit that Egyptian economic and cultural stagnation had crept in before the Ottoman period. As a whole, under Ottoman protection, Egypt was able to preserve its religious and cultural identity and was able to be resurrected in the twentieth century as an Arab nation-state.

Arab historians also point to the oppressive acts and malpractices of the Ottoman administrators, which, they say, caused anti-Ottoman feelings and turned Egyptian nationalists against the Turks. In contrast, in some Egyptian history books, it was admitted that European hostility and intrigues played an important role in the dismemberment and fall of the Empire, and that the emergence of the idea of Islamic unity was a reaction against the world-wide European colonialism. Thus, Ottomans are seen in a favorable light as upholding common Islamic goals. On the other hand, after the revolution, an officially sponsored view described the Ottoman-Turkish period as a type of colonial exploitation under the cover of Islam. But at the same time, as a contradiction to this, the common historical destiny and Islamic brotherhood of Egypt and Turkey is emphasized.

Now let us summarize our observations:

1. We have to admit that the national and social philosophy of a people, government or individual at a given time of its existence determines or influences the interpretation of its historical experience. No external factor can replace it. And an intensive publicity even results in intensifying the resistance. The Ottoman Empire should not be identified with the modern nation-state of Turkey.

2. The Ottoman Empire is a by-gone empire which had all the characteristics of a medieval empire. Here in Turkey, serious scholarship describes it as such, without attempting to glorify anachronistically its patrimonial, monarchic, military and religious state-system and policies. It

would not be logical to ask from the nation-states which, like modern Turkey, emerged from its ruins, to glorify the Ottoman past.

3. However, it would be equally unfair to ascribe all the short-comings of an empire to the Turkish nation and do it especially to create and direct a continuous hostility against the Turkish people. This is particularly unintelligible when it is tolerated by a friendly government.

4. On the other hand, in order to make a constructive approach to the four centuries of our common historical existence, we historians should focus more on economic, social and cultural ties, and instead of repeating superficial generalizations or purposely distorting historical facts and situations for the sake of national fallacies, we should dig into the immense Ottoman archives to establish the realities which made possible this long coexistence and cooperation. The most recent studies in this direction disclose, for example, that after the first years of decline in population and economy of the Ottoman conquest, Syrian and Palestinian cities and rural areas showed substantial improvement overshadowing previous conditions under the Mamluks. It is most gratifying to see that Arab historians on the Ottoman period have recently been organized in a league and have embarked upon investigations into the archival materials with a view to a positive approach to their Ottoman past. On our own part, we should see to it that more and more Arab researchers come and study their Ottoman past in the Turkish archives.

We should keep in mind that the Ottoman Empire was a kind of commonwealth in which nations under the Ottoman *Padishah* enjoyed, though always within medieval restrictions and control, the economic opportunities of the vast empire. Our *Mukhallafat* or customs registers establish the fact that Baghdadî, Shamî, and Misrî textiles were taken to the remotest Anatolian and Balkan towns and became the subject of an extensive trade. Bursa was the meeting place of Arab merchants. Also it is established that the Mâgrebi trade in woollens, in the eastern part of the Empire was quite important.

Ottoman, or as is often put, Turkish exploitation theory will be seen under a different light when we realize that in return for a yearly half a million gold ducat tribute from Egypt, Egypt benefited not only economically but also politically. Replacing the last incapable Mamluks, Ottoman military control and protection spared Egypt for three centuries from Crusaders' attacks or endemic internal disorders.

At any rate, when we study our common historical past in a spirit of cooperation and good will the so-called Dark Age of Arab history shall be enlightened. In any case, historians do not and must not go beyond this immediate goal.

## FOUNDATION FOR STUDIES ON TURKISH-ARAB RELATIONS

The "Foundation for Studies on Turkish-Arab Relations" was set up on the initiative of H. Exc. Mr. Vahit Halefoğlu, then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey.

The present Minister of Foreign Affairs H. Exc. Mesut Yılmaz is the ex officio honorary president. As the Article 4 of the Act of the Foundation states: "The aims of the Foundation are to foster friendship and brotherhood and promote cultural relations between Turkey and the Arab countries and, in conformity with foreign policy, to help promote closer cooperation in all fields between Turkey and the Arab countries". It promotes the studies which may contribute to the development of the present economic, cultural and social relations between Turkey and the Arab states. In the fulfilment of these aims, the Foundation will collaborate in Turkey and abroad with research institutions concerned.

The 34 founding members are all Turkish nationals. Six of them carreer or retired Ambassadors, 21 intellectuals and the rest high government officials or head of national institutions. Political representatives of Arab countries in Turkey are honorary members of the Foundation.

The Foundation was established in Istanbul on December 8, 1984. As of January 1, 1985 it has effectively begun to organize meetings, research and studies on the common history of Turks and Arabs, their cultural relations and their socio-economic problems.

Istanbul, the city embracing most of the Turkish-Islamic monuments, the archives, manuscripts and other documents on Turkish-Arab relations, also being the site for many universities and libraries is purposefully chosen as the venue of the Foundation. The provisional headquarters are located in Salacak, on the Asian coast of the city facing Topkapı Palace.

As the Ottoman Archives are of primary importance for both Turkey and Arab countries, the Foundation has organized a symposium in May, 1985 in Istanbul to assist the Turkish Government to find ways and means for opening these archives to the use of Turkish and foreign researchers. H. Exc. Turgut Özal, Turkish Prime Minister, inaugurated the meeting.

In November 1985, the Foundation brought Turkish and Arab intellectuals together in Istanbul in order to consult Arab collegues on future activities. On the other hand, the Foundation has taken the initiative of examining the school history books in Turkey and Arab countries with the intention of eliminating distorted or erroneous passages about their respective histories.

The Fourth Conference on Turkish-Arab Relations has been organised jointly by the Foundation, the Faculty of Letters of Hacettepe University and the Bosphorus University, in Istanbul, 7-9 September 1987.

In the meantime, the Foundation has set up in its center a computer system for its future works.

Board of Governors: Chairman, Ambassador İsmail Soysal; Vice-Chairman, Ambassador Hamit Batu, Lecturer at Boğaziçi University ; Permanent Member, Ambassador Pulat Acar, Director Gen. of Cultural Affairs, Foreign Ministry; Members, Prof. Dr. Sabahattin Zaim, Istanbul Univ.; Prof Dr. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, Director of Islamic Center (IRCICA), Istanbul, Mehmet Önder, Cultural Counsellor of Türkiye İşbankası, Ankara; Seyfi Taşhan, Director of the Foreign Policy Institute, Ankara.

Publications:

- *Osmanlı Arşivleri ve Osmanlı Araştırmaları Sempozyumu* (Symposium on Ottoman Archives and Ottoman Researches). Istanbul, 1985, pp. 272 (in Turkish)
- *Türk-Arap İlişkileri İncelemeleri Danışma Toplantısı* (Consultative Meeting on Turkish-Arab Relations Studies), Istanbul, 1985. p. 192. (in English, Turkish. Arabic and French)
- *Annual* 1986. Istanbul, pp. 411 (in English with some contributions in Arabic. Turkish and French).