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Author(s): ZOUHAIR GHAZZAL

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# THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ARAB-TURKISH RELATIONS: A REASSESSMENT

ZOUHAIR GHAZZAL  
LOYALA UNIVERSITY-CHICAGO

Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu and Muhammad Safi al-Din Abu al-<sup>°</sup>Izz, eds., *Al-<sup>°</sup>Alaqaat al-<sup>°</sup>arabiyya al-turkiyya (Arap-Türk Münâsebetleri)*, Istanbul: Research Centre for Islamic History, Art, and Culture (IRCICA), 1991, 1993. Pp. vi + 367. \$50.00 paper.

Since the end of the First World War, which also brought an end to the Ottoman Empire, relations between Arabs and Turks have been neither hostile nor particularly warm. Four centuries of Ottoman rule over the majority of the Arab lands (with the notable exception of Morocco) have certainly contributed to the reticence and lack of admiration that exist on both sides, but it was mainly Turkey's ambitious secularization, aggressive westernization, and becoming part of NATO that finally led to the cultural and political drift in Arab-Turkish relations. Of course, the Arabs, for their part, have never shared a single coherent opinion regarding modern Turkey, but their general reticence toward and misunderstanding of secularization—a phenomenon that has not yet found its way in any of the Arab states or societies—has thus far very much contributed to their portrayal of Turkey as a suspicious entity, often described as pro-western and anti Islamic, if not anti-Arab. Thus, beginning with the Kemalist reforms in the 1920s that triggered secularization, each one of the major events that followed—the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Suez war and the rise of Nasserism, the Algerian revolution and its aftermath, and the so-called Gulf War in 1991, up to the Kurdish problem, not to mention the territorial issues still lingering with the Syrians over Iskandarun (Hatay to the Turks)—has played its part in the climate of suspicion that has ruled Arab-Turkish relations. Yet, with all the problems that have emerged in the modern nationalist era, how much can be attributed to the four centuries of Ottoman rule over the Arab lands? To frame the question a bit differently, would the nature of contemporary Arab-Turkish relations become more understandable if we dug into the past history of the Ottoman Empire and looked at all signs of “rebellion,” “autonomy,” “nationalisms,” and the like as early signs of Arab dissent from Turkish rule? To be sure, Ottoman control over the Arab lands, previously either under Mamluk domination or autonomous under “local” dynasties, was either total (as in the Syrian provinces and Egypt) or

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very partial (Iraq and the Arabian peninsula were such cases), but in either case, it would be improper to assume that every attempt to bypass Ottoman rule was either a sign of hostility toward the ruling Turkish elite or a manifest desire to be autonomous on purely “nationalistic” (or regional) grounds. For one, it is misleading to describe such pre-nineteenth-century rebellious movements as “nationalistic” or even anti-Turkish in their very essences. For another, rebellions and movements of autonomy could only be reactions to problems occurring at a regional level, hence unrelated to what might be described as an Arab-Turkish discord of any kind. In short, it is not an easy task, in the context of four centuries of Ottoman rule, to see what is pertinent to the topic of Arab-Turkish relations *per se*, and how the various movements of “autonomy” relate to that topic.

Contemporary Ottoman historiography does not render that task a particularly easy one. For one, that historiography has concentrated on what might be termed the “material civilization” of the empire (or the *civilisation matérielle*, as Fernand Braudel would say), with a focus on cities, trade, and land tenure. Thus, the *common* infrastructures shared by the various provinces, which sustained the empire’s economic life for centuries, have been the main concern for over two generations of researchers, at least all those who wanted to demarcate themselves from the early historiography that was politically focused. To be sure, such an intellectual adventure would not have been possible without all kinds of archival materials that have become more and more accessible to generations of researchers. But because historians have leveled the complex history of the empire to one of shared infrastructural spheres, the other, more disturbing legal, religious, cultural, and political phenomena have not yet received the treatment they all deserve. For another, the socio-economic infrastructural analysis, while primarily concerned with the common ground that maps the bulk of the empire’s societies, fails to see what was *uncommon* and unique at other levels. With the emphasis on the socio-economic as what determines “in the final analysis” “all the rest,” it is then a small step to assuming that the political, legal, and cultural are not worth looking at on their own and *for their own sake*, that is, as *autonomous* spheres whose activities were not necessarily dictated by the constraints of the socio-economic. The question could then be posed as to how regional elites (understood in their agglomeration of ulema, *ayân*, new intelligentsia and bureaucrats, merchants and traders, rentiers, tax-farmers, and money-lenders) all interacted with each other, and how, in turn, they related to the Turkish elites at the center. Moreover, if these societies were in their essence kin-based, where a territory was occupied by a group whose kin-ties were either real or fictitious, then the formulation of the status of such groups within the global policies of the empire

needs to be done accordingly, that is, in terms of their social imagination and the representations they created for themselves. During what might then be termed, for lack of a better terminology, the pre-nationalist or pre-modern era, the societies of the Ottoman Empire, while taking into account or ignoring the policies of the central bureaucracy, operated within a set of regionally-defined representations whose logic combined kinship with territory and *şeriat* law with local customs (or customary law), and nurtured a politically imagined community whose assumed “unity” was not always congruent with its defined purposes. The colonial, post-colonial, and nationalist eras would then seem, by comparison, to be driven by attempts to force such kin-based groups (kin as *ahl*) into a more cohesive whole, albeit in a coercive way, one that would meet the requirements of the modern national state—something that the Ottoman Turks never really attempted, even with the so-called Turkification movement of the Young Turks. Turks and Arabs in general have since then constructed their respective nationalisms on a set of different premises, and the various Arab nationalisms are, in turn, by no means identical or even similar. Thus, the Kemalist ruling elite, faced with a society composed of Sunnis, Alevis, and Kurds, has opted since the 1920s for a modern secular state, one that has not only separated state from religion but attempted to limit the role of religion in society, as well. As all the constitutions of the Arab states (with the notable exception of Lebanon) explicitly link the state with Islam, the gap with the Turkish secularist model could not be more serious.

The sixteen articles that comprise the two parts of *Arab Turkish Relations* are supposed to cover the subject from the perspectives of both Arab and Turkish historians and researchers (eight articles for each point of view). The single-volume book, which was originally prepared for publication in two parts in 1991 and 1993, proposes to cover the relationships between Arabs and Turks from their origins, that is, beginning with the role played by the Seljuk Turks in the middle and late ʿAbbasid periods. The studies then move to the Ottoman period, the Young Turk revolt and its aftermath, the First World War and the coming of the colonial era as a direct result of the Sykes-Picot agreement, and then, finally, what might be termed the post-colonial or nationalistic era. Each period, theme, or subject is equally treated from both sides, with the Arab viewpoint (mostly by Egyptian professors from the University of ʿAyn Shams) expounded first. Unfortunately, the overall result is quite disappointing. For one, nothing that emerges in these articles is either new or methodologically refreshing. For the most part, the research originates neither from freshly discovered primary sources nor from new perspectives based on already established research. For another, the papers repeat all kinds of well-known facts, events, and established historical trends but propose

hardly any fresh synthesis as a way to sort out the massive amount of data; and while the "Arab viewpoint," as expressed in the first set of eight articles, shyly points to problems here and there without ever pushing to a confrontational attitude, some of the Turkish responses are quite sharp when it comes to denying any wrongdoing on lingering issues such as the questions of Musil (north of Iraq) and Iskandarun (north of Syria), or the rapprochement between Turks and Israelis.

The main difficulty probably stems from understanding the meaning of the Ottoman period as a whole in terms of the various political and social movements that shaped it. What all articles fail to do is, first, to attempt to frame the diverse movements in a coherent problematic in order to see where they properly belong. Another common problem is generalization and the desire to comprehend the totality of Ottoman history in terms of "Arab" and "Turkish" relations. But what if it is impossible to speak in these terms? What if speaking globally in terms of "Arab" and "Turkish" identities is not that helpful within an Ottoman context? Both parts of the book have a chapter with an identical title on "The Arab departure from the Ottoman state" (*Al-Khuruj al-ʿarabi ʿan al-dawla al-ʿuthmaniyya*) and that chapter, on the Arab side, is covered by Jamal Zakariyya Qasim from ʿAyn Shams University. Qasim begins with the affirmation that "the Arabs are Ottomans even more so than being Arabs" (vol. 1, p. 151), and adds that "the word Arab in its traditional connotation is not used in the classical sources related to the Ottoman Empire" (vol. 1, p. 152). Moreover, "the dissenting movements (*al-harakat al-infisaliyya*) [in the "Arab" provinces] had no national content (*madmun watani*) in the sense commonly agreed upon (*bi'l-maʿna al mutaʿaraf ʿalayhi*)" (vol. 1, p. 153). Yet, despite all this vagueness and lack of mobilization of populations along "national" lines, "a struggle between the two Arab and Turkish nationalisms (s. *qawmiyya*)" (vol. 1, p. 159) begins to become manifest by the middle of the nineteenth century; this, however, according to Qasim, was not a phenomenon of the masses but something limited to the "Arab" elites and in particular the Christians among them, and still more specifically, those who had graduated from the Syrian Protestant College, founded in 1866 (vol. 1, p. 177). For his part, and in a chapter with an identical title, Mim Kemal Öke makes the surprising remark that between 1880 and 1908, the "hostility (*al-ʿadaʿ*)" that manifested itself among the Muslim Arabs was directed not against the Turks as such but rather against Christians. According to Öke, conservative Muslim thinkers such as Rashid Rida "were warning the Arabs to protect themselves against the aggressions of the West, but not to overthrow the Turkish regime" (vol. 2, p. 134). I don't find such language, which dominates the entire book in its two parts, helpful at all. To begin with, not only can populations throughout the Ottoman period hardly be per-

ceived along “national” lines; their description as “Arab,” “Turkish,” or “Arab-Ottoman” doesn’t help much, either. Such societies, which were neither based on individualistic notions nor grouped along imagined national boundaries, had many status groups competing with each other for political and/or religious legitimacy, or for the distribution of resources. These status groups typically consisted of the old ulema and *ayân* factions with which merchants, traders, money-lenders, bureaucrats, and tribal chieftains attempted to associate with varying degrees of success; their relationship to their “base” was complex and diffuse. One way to describe it is as a system of loyalties driven by competing networks of allegiances, based in turn on a combination of kin, territory, religion, and language—together forming the *nisha* of an individual or a group. Such relationships were not restricted to the urban areas but managed to spread to and control the surrounding countryside, as well. When it came to political legitimization, such kin-based groups created representations that were definitely not restricted to the Arab-Turkish dichotomy. In fact, they rarely were, even when a desire for “autonomy” began to manifest itself. Each group created a discourse that would bring it together and help it relate to other groups. Such discourses pulled their material from a variety of sources and were reshaped at each critical historical juncture.

The study of such discourses is still in its infancy, and the book under review does not contribute much in this direction. To give one example among many, and one that is frequently mentioned but without enough in-depth analysis, Damascus was like any other city in the empire, with the social stratification briefly described above. The discourses of its various *ayân* groups obviously drew much of their substance from the tremendous materials of the classical literature, be it legal, historical, or political, or from the various *belles-lettres* traditions. In addition, such discourses were tainted by local concerns and events, and by what the various groups meant to each other. The First World War and its aftermath brought to Damascus an unparalleled experience when Emir Faysal and his tribesmen, supported by the British, liberated the city from the Turks and established the first Arab Government, as it was called. What was unusual here was that “external” elements to the cultural composition of the city imposed themselves under the rubric of a diffuse “Arabism” and an “Arab” identity, and controlled the traditional stratification with all its groups and networks; and with the opening of the regional markets to more outside forces, all discourses, ideologies, political representations, and manners had to be reshaped simply to survive the new situation. Much has been written on this era as one that inaugurated so-called “Arab nationalism,” when in fact it was more confusing than ever due to the growing number of heterogeneous factors involved in it. The point here, to reiterate a point already emphasized in Benedict Anderson’s



*Imagined Communities* (Verso, 1983, 1991), is that “nationalistic” ideologies were created—or imagined—by elite groups who simply *assumed*, based on their limited understanding of western societies - and of their own societies, for that matter - that the social, economic, and political conditions for a nationalistic experience in their own societies were mature enough. In other words, the “imagined communities” were falsely assumed to be fully prepared for the independent “national” state. Anderson subsumes under “print capitalism” the various practices that made possible the rise of the imagined national communities in western societies, all of which began with the gradual use of vernacular languages in the late Middle Ages all over Europe, the dissemination of the printed cultures thanks to advances in science and technology, and the rise of the public sphere as a space for communication. Many of the Ottoman elites, whether Arab, Turkish, or of any other linguistic origin, were only a step away from assuming that all those prerequisites, which led to an imagined national community, had been met in their own societies. Obviously, the historical realities of those societies were indeed much more complex than what had been assumed—to the point that the histories of the modern Middle Eastern states and their various brands of nationalism are precisely about disappointments, miscalculations, false hopes, and, above all, fractured groups whose political and social representations have not yet matured into more coherent discourses.

The chapter on “Arab-Turkish Relations between the Two World Wars,” by Yunan Labib Rizq, is probably the only one in the entire book that describes how fractured these communities were and how each major historical event created more ideological and social divisions. Rizq begins by noting that “the national movement (*al haraka al-qawmiyya*)” in Iraq between the two World Wars had become so accustomed to dealing with a “decentralized” Ottoman state that it eventually suffered from the complete separation it incurred during the British Mandate. In fact, the Iraqi “national” movement, unlike its Syrian counterpart, did not manifest much hostility toward the Turkish authorities. That could be partly because the leaders of the movement had belonged to the Turkish army; their status thus gave them close ties to the last of the caliphal states (vol. 1, p. 213). As to the “Arab Revolt” in the Hijaz, al-Azhar’s ulema described it as “a British plot to weaken Islamic unity” and accordingly drafted a *fatwa* condemning “the traitors and renegades (*murtaddin*) who support the machinations of the British, such as King Husayn ibn ‘Ali” (vol. 1, p. 214). As to Kemalism, described by Rizq as an attempt to “purify Turkish nationalism from all its surrounding national roots, which were perceived by Atatürk more as weaknesses than a source of strength,” it either created still more dissenting and confusing opinions among Arabs whenever it was perceived as a threat, or was purely and

simply ignored and forgotten. Thus, with the abolition of the caliphate in 1924, al-Azhar, already confused by the Hashemite expansion towards the Syrian interior, declared the Kemalist action invalid because the caliph's legitimation was granted by the *bay'at* (swearing of allegiance) of all Muslims, only silently to withdraw from their position once they realized that the abolition of the caliphate was, overall, received with indifference. (ʿAli ʿAbdul Raziq has made the point in his *Al Islam wa-usul al-hukm [Islam and the Roots of Law]* of the unnecessary nature of the caliphate—an institution, he argues, that was not mandatory, as many had thought.) For his part, King Farouk of Egypt briefly flirted with the idea of declaring himself the future caliph, but the autocratic and military style that dominated Egyptian politics after the Free Officers' revolution in 1952, which deposed the king and sent him permanently into exile, was to become the norm throughout the Arab world. But for all the suspicion they nurtured toward Islam, the new ruling military elites (mostly of lower middle-class, rural origins) in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, neither went as far as the secular Kemalists in Turkey nor dropped the malicious link between religion and state. Thus, at each historical juncture, new forces emerged that reshaped, fragmented, and destabilized what were already an unstable social fabric and a set of contradictory political representations. By the 1960s and 1970s, while Turkey succeeded in securing a secular and quasi-democratic state in which the military had the last word, the Arab world plunged for the most part into a repressive style of policy-making.

In the meantime, borders were being redrawn, sovereignties over specific territories questioned, and populations displaced. More specifically, regarding Arabs and Turks, the question of Iskandarun/Hatay comes to mind. Thus, Rizq emphasizes the combination of class and ethnic differences that led to the French "giving away" the *liwāʿ* to the Turks in 1939; the Turks were mostly the big landowners while the "Arab majority" worked the land (vol. 1, p. 241). On the Turkish side, we are reminded in a chapter by İsmail Soysal that each census brought more confusion than clarity as to who should be considered "Arab" and for what reasons. Consider, for example, one of the last French censuses completed prior to 1937, which gives the population as 39.7% Turks, 28% Alevis, 11% Armenians, 10% Sunni Arabs, 8% Greek Orthodox and other Christian minorities, and finally 3.3% Kurds, Circassians, Jews, Ismailis, and Albanians. But Soysal is quick to dismiss these numbers on the grounds that "the parliamentary elections of August 1938 resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Turks, and according to the Turkish estimates, the Turks counted as many as 240,000 inhabitants out of a total of 300,000" (vol. 2, p. 174). Surely there must be something wrong with some, if not all, of these numbers. To begin with, supposing we knew



what “Turk” stood for in such a context; things were much less clear on the Arab side. Are the Alevis Turks or Arabs? At an estimated 28% of the population, they formed a strong ethnic and religious minority, but on which side were they? Alevis comprise an estimated 10% of Syria’s population today, and, in fact, since the early 1970s, they have become the ruling minority, so there does exist a brand of Arab Alevis. But Turkey also counts some one-third of its population as Alevi, with another one-third Sunni and the remaining one-third Kurdish. So Alevis could be Turks, also, and the problem is to determine their political and social allegiances. Unfortunately, Soysal’s chapter does not go in that direction and is much too comfortable with adopting the official Turkish view that legitimizes the “taking over” of the *liwā*<sup>2</sup>.

Adopting an official common-sense view is what most of the articles have in common. On the Arab (mostly Egyptian) side, we are told over and over again that “we cannot forgive the Ottomans for the *status quo* (*jumud*) that struck the Arab world” (Ahmad <sup>c</sup>Abdul-Rahim Mustafa, vol. 1, p. 136), and that “the Turks have found that making alliances with the democratic western states—even if they were colonialists—is more profitable” (<sup>c</sup>Abdul-<sup>c</sup>Aziz Sulayman Nawwar, vol. 1, p. 280), but neither the nature of this so-called *status quo* nor the “western” orientation of the Turkish state is comprehensively analyzed. On the Turkish side, the process of secularization of the Turkish state is so much taken for granted that its historical purposes are hardly even outlined. In general, it is unfortunate that such rich material is presented in the most conventional way, using traditional narrative techniques.