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TRANSFORMATION OF ARAB THOUGHT IN THE XIX-XX CENTURIES

Abstract

When hearing “Arab world”, one thinks of the Koran, Islam, a relatively isolated society, their traditions, terrorism, heated conflicts, and several important issues. Today, the Middle East is viewed in a negative light and is even feared. However, many do not know their culture, traditions, politics, and economy. They develop their attitude only based on popular opinions. It is for this reason that the very long and eventful history of changing Arab attitudes is interesting.

The mentioned work focuses on several important issues, among which a large place is related to domestic and foreign policy based on nationalist principles. Pan-Arabism, which especially strengthened in the 19th century, has become a characteristic feature of the entire Arab world to this day. If we look at the history of the Arabs, their attitude towards the homeland and national values will be clearly seen. After the Prophet Muhammad brought the Qur’an as the main guide, the people automatically wanted to follow it because the holy book contained rules, traditions, and obligations to be fulfilled on the path of a dignified life. The narrations of the Prophet himself, the records of his life and work, surahs and verses, good geographical location, and the challenges they had historically – all became the reasons for the formation of the Arabs as a whole. Thus, the rich cultural and historical background became the basis for the formation of the nationalist spirit in each of them. All this was especially strengthened during the period under the influence of the Ottoman Empire because, according to the Arabs, the people chosen by God could not have another master.

At the same time, the West became active in the XIX century, in which large-scale events had a great impact on the regions of the rest of the world. Of course, the Middle East was not an exception. In the case of the Arab world, the conflict between Arab and European thought during the last two centuries led to a certain impasse and the aggravation of various problematic issues. In this regard, the theory of acculturation¹ is interesting, which refers to the processes of mutual influence of cultures. It seems to be developing and spreading along with globalization. So, it corresponds exactly to the historical resistance of the Arabs to the West.

Keywords: Arab world, Qur’an, nationalism, West, acculturation theory.

The acculturation theory explains well the historical roots of Arab nationalism at the beginning of the 19th century. Obviously, Arab nationalism and nationalist movements developed mainly under the influence of Europe, although such an approach, by itself, cannot really explain the phenomenon. Walter Brown rightly says that Arab nationalism arose from European influence and dates back to Basra. However, the impact of a foreign force can only work when the conditions for its acceptance and transformation based on it exist (Tibi 1997, 75-76).

The weaker the Ottoman Empire became, the stronger it was under pressure from other states to carry out appropriate reforms in the administration of the empire (Kurun 2017, 12-13). The whole series of reforms, which were actively carried out under the names of “Tanzimat-i Hayriye”² and “Islahat”³, took a big leap in the 19th century (Robby 2020, 3; Kurun 2017, 13). The changes introduced many

¹ One of the forms of interaction between cultures used to denote both the process and its results (Institute of Cultural Studies 2016).

² Tanzimat-i-Hayriye – useful reforms, pleasant reorganization. A series of government reforms between 1839 and 1876 aimed at centralizing and rationalizing the Ottoman government and generating more revenue for the defense of the empire.

³ Islahat – changes, reforms.

Western elements and values of various aspects, especially the ideas of the nation-state, civil liberties, secularism, and democracy, which were first expressed in the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” during the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century. Western values were introduced into the Ottoman social and political environment by Western bureaucrats, industrialists, and Christian missionaries (Robby 2020, 3). It was they who founded schools, and universities, published magazines and newspapers, and engaged in translation activities in the regions of the Ottoman Empire, especially in Anatolia, the Levant, and North Africa. Missionaries gave a great role in women’s education. For this purpose, they opened several schools for women. In the Ottoman Empire, such a school was first opened in 1830 in Beirut (Kutelia 2009, 17). The existence of educational institutions proved successful in promoting Western philosophy and political values among students of Arab and Turkish origin. Their graduates were soon influenced by Middle Eastern history with Western influences, worldviews, and political perspectives. In addition to educational institutions, Western values penetrated the bureaucratic institutions of the Ottoman Empire (Robby 2020, 3-4).

The second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century is known as “Nahda”, or revival in the history of Arab countries. It was the period of the revitalization of the entire cultural life, formation of new Arabic literature, educational movement and Muslim reformation, development of the idea of anti-feudal and national liberation struggle, and preparation of the theoretical basis for it.

Arab Enlightenment was closely related to religion. They considered Islam presented in a reformed form as a means of spreading their ideas. Outwardly, the reformists opposed the official religion, but in reality, they expressed bourgeois ideology, introduced European socio-political ideas on Muslim soil, and tried to explain new scientific achievements with the help of Islam. That is why the educator Al-Kawaqib⁴ saw the path of progress only in Islam purified from “foreign impurities” (Kutelia 2009, 16-18-20).

Among the first and most influential intellectuals of the Ottoman Empire, who is considered the author of the concept of Arab nationalism, is Rifa’a al-Tahtawi⁵ from Egypt, who developed the concept of “Watania”. For him, “Watania” is the first attempt to introduce Islamic-Arabic values into the discourse of nationalism.

Later, nationalism or “Watania” discourse grew significantly in the Middle East, particularly in the Levant region, in several Christian-Arab movements in the last decade of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, which would help the rise of the Arab nation.

In the 70s of the 19th century, alongside the educators, the Muslim reformation arose just like that. His followers were mainly Egyptians, including Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abdu. Modernism, which started with the slogan to return Islam to its original purity, actually aimed to renew the religion, free it from dogmas, combine it with the demands of rational thinking, and connect it with the political and social tasks of the day (Kutelia 2009, 21).

In the Arab world, time is defined by space and space by time. Two very important elements are interdependent. I think that the mentioned situation explains well the beginnings of the strengthening of Arab nationalism in the 19th century. The fact that time and environment do not matter to Arabs has been clearly seen in their history. They always tried their best to live by their own principles and follow the rules of the Qur’an. Thus, the moment and the place seemed to be spoiled by the interests of their own society.

In the 20s of the 20th century, socialism took a firm foothold in the Arab society. After the creation of the Soviet Union, which presented itself as an anti-imperialist force and was ready to help the oppressed people, socialism became a kind of formula for overcoming the underdevelopment of the Arab world. The ideas of imperialism and capitalism spread rapidly in the Arab world, causing admiration and a decline in the pursuit of the Western liberal model (Corm 2020, 138).

Throughout their history, Arabs have considered themselves a distinct ethnocultural group. The basis for this was two factors: the Arabic language, which had special importance in national culture and psychology, and the belief in the common origin of Arabs (Sanikidze, Alasania, and Gelovani 2011, 564-565). That those who speak Arabic constitute a “nation” and that this nation must be independent and united is a belief that has only become articulated and gained political force in the present century. But if we look at history, we will see that the Arabs have always been particularly proud of their own language, which in the pre-Islamic period united tribes and families speaking this language (Hourani, 2013, 260).

⁴ Abd al-Rahman al-Kawaqib (1849-1902) – Arab writer, publicist, and public figure.

⁵ Rifa’a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) – Egyptian scientist

The formation of nationalist sentiments among the Arabs began with the adaptation of the European concept of patriotism to the conditions of the Middle East (Khalidi et al. 1991, 4). The topic of patriotism was raised by Rifa'a al-Tahtawi in his writings in the middle of the 19th century. In his work "مناهج الألباب المصرية في مباحج الأداب العصرية"⁶ dedicated to the history and geography of Egypt, he first used the word "Watan" in the meaning of homeland and the phrase "Hubb al-Watan" (Arabic: love of the homeland, patriotism) and the duties of Egyptians towards their homeland.

Syrian-Christian educators made a great contribution to the formation of Arab national ideas (Sanikidze, Alasania, and Gelovani 2011, 565).

Over the years, the most common explanation for the origins of Arab nationalism has undoubtedly been that contact with the West revived Arab nationhood that had long been suppressed by Islam or the Turks. In this sense, the genesis of Arab nationalism was part of the Arab Awakening by which the Arabs moved into the modern world of Western science and secularism (Khalidi et al. 1991, 3-4, 9-10).

The arrival of "Young Turks" in power changed the situation seriously. The course they took on Turkization undermined the rights of the Arabs and pushed a certain part of them to fight for the equal rights of the Turks. The nationalist policy of the "Young Turks" caused the dissatisfaction of a certain part of the Arab elite, and a counter-thesis emerged: since the Turks constituted a special national unity, then the Arabs are also like this (Sanikidze, Alasania, and Gelovani 2011, 567). Arab nationalists attacked the "Young Turks" government with specific accusations. One charge was that the "Young Turks" supported the Zionists, and the other charge was about the Turkization policy they initiated (Khalidi et al. 1991, 14, 16, 17, 21).

Thus, the "small Arab revolt" started in the Ottoman Empire yielded results – people gained independence, and national values were protected. The new nationalist ideology was able to unite the entire Arab world. A society with common interests, under the leadership of strong leaders, fiercely confronted foreign forces and their influences. Officers with new ideas for the population after the monarchy, including Gamal Abdel An-Nasir, Anwar As-Sadat, Muammar Gaddafi, and others. It was an important achievement. Therefore, each of the latter's decisions, which would be based on nationalist principles, would eliminate the influence of foreign power in the countries and emphasize the distinctiveness of the Arabs, was welcome.

The biggest blow to the nationalist policy, but at the same time, a big challenge was the creation of the state of Israel, which changed the foreign policy of almost all Arab countries and shifted their attention to the Eastern Mediterranean. They knew exactly that the rise of the Jews would be a great threat to the future of all neighboring states, as it would limit their economic, industrial and trade success and would greatly affect their wealth and state independence (Dawisha 2016, 79). The mentioned event turned out to be a battlefield for leaders with a strong national idea, among which the 6-day wars of 1967 and the Yom-Kifur wars of 1973 are noteworthy. It was thought that in the era of world wars, a conflict of several days was not surprising and caused by necessity. Some were defeated, and some were able to stand up, but nothing could be done in front of a progressive-minded nation. It may be said that a relatively different understanding of nationalism led to the existence of all those stages, which today are perceived as acute events in the history of the Arab world. It is the different understanding of Pan-Arabism that became the basis for the creation of modern radical movements.

While Rome's influence in Europe was slowly waning and the region was embarking on a dangerous but necessary path to freedom, the Arab world was isolated from almost all outside influences. The process of isolation continued unceasingly until it suddenly was ended by Napoleon with the expedition of 1798. It was indeed the first major external stimulus that the entire Arab and Muslim world received after the Ottoman Empire conquered the region.

The invasion of a foreign power was painful, but it was a "blessing in disguise" because it awakened the Arabs. The subjugation of the people, the use of wealth, and the emergence of threats made Muslims feel the need to protect their lands from the invasions of Western imperialism and the faith from the aggression of Christian missionaries.

Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani⁷, who was a great thinker, religious reformer, and political leader for the entire Muslim world, is considered the first leader of the Arab Awakening. Muhammad Abdu describes him as a man of heart and strong will whose actions require the greatest courage and generosity. "This

⁶ "Manahij al-Albab al-Misriya fi Mabahij al-Adab al-'Asriya" – "Egyptian Spirits Curriculum in Modern Literary Joy".

⁷ Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) – political activist and ideologue. According to the popular version, he is originally from Afghanistan.

genius wild man”, as the British art critic Blunt called him, always gave up money and honor in order to preserve his freedom and serve better (Amin 2015, 39-41).

In addition to al-Afghani, Muhammad Abdu, Rashid Rida, Hasan al-Banna, and Said Qutb are successful examples of Arab nationalist thought. Since al-Afghani seems to have pioneered the reevaluation of values, each thinker after him chronologically contributed to the Arab “enlightenment”. Of course, each other’s student-teachers shared the thoughts of their predecessors, although they always added something new. In the 19th century, the views of Hassan al-Banna and Said Qutb on the West, nationalism, and Islam seemed to coincide (Abu-Rabi’ 2004, 198). The Islamic understanding of al-Banna's concepts is innovative. He presents Islam not as a religion or a system, but as a universal faith imbued with a sense of ideological mission. According to him, Islam is not only the cause of reforms, but also a solid foundation for radical changes (Abu-Rabi’ 1996, 82). Today, Islamist political and social movements have been created on the basis of their ideology, which are among the world’s most famous terrorist organizations. The mentioned thinkers made their names by being forgotten, intentionally smothered, and by putting forward new ideas.

The thinkers argued that the invasion of foreign culture would be equivalent to the death of the local one, and they still cited the Qur’an as the basis of development, although they agreed with the Western vision on several issues and welcomed the introduction of new practices in the region. It was thought that small detail of a foreign culture would not greatly affect the interests of states, but the more time passed, the more new information about the innovation appeared. Thus, with a chain reaction, the population of almost all Arab states gradually got to know and liked the taste of a completely new fruit for them.

Even in the 19th century, they did not know anything about globalization. They did not know that this was an unstoppable phenomenon and a way to bring cultures closer together. Therefore, any action of the Arabs, which was based on nationalistic principles, could not stand up to the news.

All negative influences on Arab societies were attributed to the West; they rejected the concepts that meant rapprochement with Europe; they used the Qur’an as a means of correcting the situation. They thought that even a small mistake meant deviating from the path of Allah. The events taking place in the rest of the world seemed to be the basis for the transformation of Arab thinking, but the society was so closed that it was difficult for innovations to penetrate their borders. Of course, the opposition existed and worked hard to deal with economic, political, and social pressures by opening borders and mutual cooperation, but nationalism developed so strongly that resistance, especially in the middle of the 20th century, was pointless. Although the Arabs strictly adhere to the instructions of the Qur’an and, therefore, their rich culture, the younger generation still gravitates towards the West because this region offers more opportunities. Even at the beginning of the 19th century, everyone understood that reforms were necessary because the future of isolated and underdeveloped states was in danger.

Modernity, modernization, and globalization have had their positive and negative effects on the Arab world. Arab thinkers are committed to the progress of their societies as a whole. Most agree that the Arab world has long been in crisis. Some are working on building a new civil society. Others think that the economic way of development is the only solution. Many agree that the Arab political elite is facing escalating problems and that the march of globalization has only strengthened the structures of authoritarianism in the Arab world. “What must be done?” The question is asked every day (Abu-Rabi’ 2004, 198-199).

In the 1970s, when nationalism lost its popularity, Muslim fundamentalists came to the fore. Islamic fundamentalism is a complex phenomenon that cannot be equated with terrorism, fanaticism, or religious extremism. It is based on the idea of returning to the original Islam of the time of Muhammad and the four orthodox caliphs. Based on the idealization of the Muslim community of this period, the rest of history is rejected as a deviation of society from the true divine path (Sanikidze, Alasania, and Gelovani 2011, 585-588).

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