

Envisioning Turco-Arab Co-Existence between Empire and Nationalism

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Abstract

The idea of a continued Turco-Arab co-existence under the Ottoman Sultanate might appear counterfactual or marginal – if not nostalgic – from the sober vantage of knowing “the end of history”. The Ottoman Empire neither survived the Great War nor made way for a multinational co-existence of Turks and Arabs. For contemporaries, however, different models of federalism and multinationalism offered solutions to save the Ottoman Empire and safeguard Turco-Arab co-existence. While the federalist ideas of Ottoman Arabs are far better known in the academic literature, in regards to Ottoman Turks, the commonplace interpretations follow the teleology of the Turkish nation-state formation. In order to correct this misperception, I will illustrate the existence of corresponding Turkish voices and visions of federalism and multinationalism. Envisioning Turco-Arab co-existence was a serious feature of policy debates, especially in the years of crisis from the Balkan Wars to the settlement of post-Ottoman nation-states in the aftermath of the First World War.

Keywords

Arabism – Turkism – Ottomanism – Federalism – Decentralism – Young Turks

Introduction¹

“My friend, this country can only survive like the Austro-Hungarian Empire.”²

¹ This article was written independently from Adam Mestyan’s forthcoming article “Austria-Hungary in Ottoman Arabic Political Thought: Ottoman Dualism, Imperial Comparison, and Ancillary History, 1867-1914”. I am grateful for the chance to exchange our manuscripts in the later stage of revisions. Neither could I fully utilize the most

Pararabizm

160202

Türkenlik

DS40 131368



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150247

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100002

MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

01 Temmuz 2021

According to the memoirs of Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī, Cenab Şehabeddin, a prominent Ottoman-Turkish writer, uttered these words to his fellow Ottoman-Syrian journalist while they were participating in an Ottoman propaganda tour across the Arab provinces after the outbreak of the Arab Revolt of 1916. If we are to believe Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī’s recollection, their consensus was that a new model of imperial co-existence had to be adopted in order to save the empire. What they could not have known at that time was that not only the Ottoman Empire, whose doom was on everyone’s lips, but also the Habsburg Empire would not survive the end of the Great War.³ In a matter of a few years, multinational empires would be replaced by a multitude of post-imperial nation-states. But contemporaries like Şehabeddin and Kurd ‘Alī viewed alternative outcomes on the “horizon of expectation” as possible.⁴ They saw potential in ideas that would later fail or become irrelevant. They considered future paths that eventually no one would take or that went nowhere. The idea of a continued Turco-Arab co-existence under the Ottoman Sultanate might therefore appear counterfactual or marginal – if not nostalgic – from the sober vantage of knowing “the end of history”, in which the Ottoman Empire would neither survive the Great War nor make way for a multinational co-existence of Turks and Arabs. For contemporaries, however, the different models of federalism and multinationalism could still save the Ottoman Empire.

The Habsburg Empire was one of various models of federalism and multinationalism proposed by many contemporaries to solve the Ottoman dilemma

recent and comprehensive contribution by Ü. Gülsüm Polat, *Türk-Arap İlişkileri: Eski Eyaletler Yeni Komşulara Dönüşürken (1914-1923)* (Istanbul: Kronik Kitap, 2019), which was published during the last revisions of this paper. I would like to thank Mustafa Aksakal, Remzi Çağatay Çakırlar, Talha Çiçek, Süreyya Emre, Ramazan Erhan Güllü, M. Şükrü Hanioglu, Murat Kaya, Hasan Kayalı, Maryam al-Khasawneh, Jazaa Khodair, Ömer Koçyiğit, Nicholas Kontovas, Soumaya Louhichi-Güzel, Leyla von Mende, Ramazan H. Öztan, Alp Eren Topal, Kerem Uygun, and Florian Zemmin for helping me in various ways. Unless cited otherwise, I am responsible for all translations. In addition to the three anonymous reviewers, editor Rainer Brunner provided a detailed review that made the final manuscript decisively better. Despite all the help, I am alone responsible for the remaining errors and misjudgments.

- ² Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī, *al-Mudhakkirāt* (Damascus: Maṭba‘at al-Taraqqī, 1948-51), I, 145. See also Ali Bilgenoğlu, *Osmanlı Devleti’nde Arap Milliyetçi Cemiyetleri* (Antalya: Yeniden Anadolu ve Rumeli Müdafaa-i Hukuk Yayınları, 2007), 89-90, note 259.
- ³ The idea that the Habsburg Empire was “doomed to destruction” was not as popularized as the “sick man of Europe” cliché about the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, after the end of the Habsburg Empire, this teleology of collapse came to dominate the historiography of Austria-Hungary. John Deak, “The Great War and the Forgotten Realm: The Habsburg Monarchy and the First World War”, *The Journal of Modern History* 86:2 (2014), 336-80.
- ⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, “Erfahrungsraum’ und ‘Erwartungshorizont’ – zwei historische Kategorien”, in *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 349-75.