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Research Article

Nationalism and the Ottoman-Arab Dynamic: From Cultural Renaissance to Political Revolt

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Abstract. This paper delves into the intricate relationship between the Ottoman Empire and its Arab Muslim subjects amidst the backdrop of rising nationalist sentiments during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It traces the historical evolution of Arab nationalism, examining its cultural origins and political dimensions, while also dissecting the Ottoman administration's response to nationalist aspirations. Through an analysis of historical documents, scholarly works, and contemporary accounts, the study illuminates how nationalist movements reshaped the political, social, and cultural dynamics within the empire, leading to increased tensions between the central government and Arab nationalists. The paper highlights key events such as the Tanzimat reforms and the Young Turk Revolution, which exacerbated these tensions, culminating in the Arab Revolt of 1916 supported by the British. It also explores the impact of World War I on Ottoman-Arab relations and the subsequent

dissolution of the empire, as reflected in treaties like the Treaty of Sèvres and the Treaty of Lausanne, which paved the way for the establishment of modern Arab states under European mandates. Through a comprehensive examination of historical sources and scholarly literature, the paper elucidates the multifaceted nature of nationalism's influence on the Ottoman Empire's relationship with its Arab Muslim subjects, underscoring its profound and enduring significance in shaping the modern Middle East.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Nationalism, Arab Muslims, Arab nationalism, Ottoman policies, colonial domination.

INTRODUCTION

The Ottoman Empire, established at the end of the 13th century, evolved into one of history's most extensive and enduring empires, encompassing a diverse array of ethnicities, languages, and religions. At its zenith in the 16th and 17th centuries, the empire's dominion stretched from Southeast Europe across the Middle East and North Africa, forging a complex tapestry of cultures under its rule. Integral to the Ottoman administration, economy, and cultural milieu were its Arab Muslim subjects, inhabiting key provinces such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula.

The Ottoman system of governance, characterized by a combination of centralized authority and local autonomy, managed to maintain a semblance of cohesion and stability across these vast territories for several centuries. This balance was achieved through a sophisticated administrative structure and a pragmatic approach to local customs and traditions, ensuring that diverse populations, including Arab Muslims, could coexist under a unified imperial framework. However, the 19th century heralded a period of profound transformation for the Ottoman Empire. The empire faced internal and external pressures, including military defeats, territorial losses, and economic challenges, which eroded its power and prestige. Concurrently, the ideological currents of the enlightenment and the political upheavals of the French Revolution began to penetrate the Ottoman domains, introducing new concepts of nationalism, self-determination, and modern statehood. These ideas gradually took root among various ethnic and religious groups within the empire, leading to the emergence of nationalist movements.

Arab nationalism developed as both a cultural renaissance and a political force. Initially manifested through a revival of Arab literature, language, and historical consciousness, it progressively evolved into a movement seeking greater autonomy and, eventually, independence from Ottoman rule. Prominent Arab intellectuals and leaders began to articulate a vision of Arab identity and unity, challenging the hegemony of the Ottoman state and its centralizing policies. The relationship between the Ottoman Empire and its Arab Muslim subjects became

increasingly strained as nationalist sentiments grew. The Ottoman government's attempts to modernize and centralize its administration, particularly through the *Tanzimat* reforms (1839-1876) and later policies under the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), often clashed with the aspirations of Arab nationalists. The imposition of Turkish as the administrative language and efforts to homogenize the empire culturally and politically were perceived as direct threats to Arab identity and autonomy.

World War I marked a critical juncture in this evolving dynamic. The war exacerbated existing tensions and provided an opportunity for Arab leaders to pursue their nationalist goals more vigorously. The Arab Revolt of 1916, led by Sharif Hussein of Mecca and supported by the British, epitomized the culmination of these nationalist aspirations. It signaled a decisive break from Ottoman rule and paved the way for the post-war restructuring of the Middle East. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following its defeat in World War I and the subsequent treaties, particularly the Treaty of *Sèvres* (1920) and the Treaty of *Lausanne* (1923), resulted in the creation of new political entities in the Arab world under European mandates. This period marked the end of Ottoman suzerainty over Arab lands and the realization of nationalist ambitions, albeit under new forms of colonial domination.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the paper involves a comprehensive analysis of historical documents, scholarly works, and contemporary accounts to explore the impact of nationalism on the Ottoman Empire's relationship with Arab Muslims. This includes:

- Literature Review: Conducting a thorough review of existing literature on Ottoman history, Arab nationalism, and relevant primary sources to gather background information and insights into the topic.
- ➤ **Historical Analysis:** Examining historical events and developments to contextualize the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Arab Muslims, tracing the evolution of Arab nationalism, and analyzing Ottoman policies towards Arab provinces.
- ➤ **Primary Source Analysis:** Consulting primary sources such as archival documents, historical records, and writings of key figures involved in nationalist movements to provide firsthand accounts and perspectives on the subject.
- Thematic Exploration: Identifying key themes such as Ottoman reforms, Arab nationalist ideologies, and external influences (e.g., World War I) to organize and analyze the data, offering insights into how nationalist sentiments reshaped political, social, and cultural dynamics.
- > **Synthesis and Interpretation:** Synthesizing findings from the literature review, historical analysis, primary sources, and thematic exploration to develop a coherent narrative that elucidates the complex interplay between nationalism

and Ottoman-Arab relations, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Ottoman Empire and Its Arab Provinces

The Ottoman Empire, established at the end of the 13th century by Osman I, rapidly expanded its territories through a combination of military conquests, strategic marriages, and alliances. By the early 16th century, the empire had grown into a formidable power, dominating much of Southeast Europe, Western Asia, and North Africa. A significant milestone in this expansion was the conquest of the Mamluk Sultanate in 1517, which brought vast Arab lands under Ottoman control.

Conquest of Arab Lands

The defeat of the Mamluk Sultanate was a pivotal event that integrated the rich and culturally significant regions of Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and the Arabian Peninsula into the Ottoman Empire. This expansion not only bolstered the empire's economic and military strength but also its religious and cultural authority, as it now controlled the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The incorporation of these territories was achieved under the leadership of Sultan Selim I, who launched successful military campaigns to secure Ottoman dominance over the Mamluks.

Governance and Administration

The Ottoman administration of Arab provinces was characterized by a unique blend of central authority and local autonomy, a system designed to maintain stability and ensure the efficient governance of its diverse and sprawling empire. This governance strategy involved several key elements:

- Provincial Administration: The Ottomans divided their empire into provinces (Vilayets) and districts (Sanjaks), each overseen by appointed governors (Walis) and district governors (Sanjakbeys). In Arab lands, these officials were often selected from among the local elite, ensuring that governance was conducted by individuals familiar with local customs and traditions.
- **Local Autonomy**: While the Ottoman central government maintained overall control, it allowed a significant degree of local autonomy. This was particularly evident in the appointment of local notables (A'yans) and tribal leaders to administrative positions. These local leaders were responsible for collecting taxes, maintaining order, and overseeing local affairs, functioning as intermediaries between the central government and the local population.
- Religious and Cultural Integration: The Ottomans employed a pragmatic approach to religion and culture, which was crucial in governing their diverse empire. They respected the religious traditions of their Arab Muslim subjects and incorporated Islamic law (Sharia) alongside Ottoman legal codes. The

- appointment of local religious leaders (*Ulema*) to positions of authority helped to legitimize Ottoman rule and maintain social cohesion.
- Economic Policies: The integration of Arab provinces significantly enhanced the Ottoman economy. These regions were rich in agricultural products, trade routes, and strategic ports. The Ottomans invested in infrastructure, such as roads and caravanserais, to facilitate trade and economic activity. Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad became important centers of commerce and culture under Ottoman rule.
- Military Presence: To ensure loyalty and prevent rebellion, the Ottomans maintained a strong military presence in their Arab provinces. Garrisons and forts were established in key locations, and local militias were often integrated into the Ottoman military system. This military integration was critical in maintaining the empire's stability and deterring external threats.

Cultural and Intellectual Flourishing

The Arab provinces under Ottoman rule experienced a period of cultural and intellectual flourishing. Major cities such as Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad continued to be centers of learning and culture. The Ottomans promoted arts, architecture, and scholarship, leading to significant contributions in various fields, including literature, science, and theology.

Challenges and Adaptations

Despite the successes, the governance of Arab provinces was not without challenges. Periodic rebellions, tribal conflicts, and external threats required constant vigilance and adaptation. The Ottomans adeptly navigated these challenges through a combination of diplomacy, military force, and strategic marriages to consolidate their power.

Decline and Reform

By the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire faced increasing internal and external pressures. The empire's administrative efficiency began to wane, and local rulers in Arab provinces started to assert more autonomy. In response, the Ottoman government initiated a series of reforms known as the *Tanzimat* (1839-1876), aimed at modernizing the empire and centralizing its administration. These reforms sought to standardize legal and administrative practices, improve infrastructure, and strengthen the military. However, they also disrupted the traditional balance of power and fueled nationalist sentiments among various ethnic and religious groups within the empire, including the Arab Muslims.

The integration of Arab provinces into the Ottoman Empire was a complex and multifaceted process that significantly shaped the political, social, and cultural landscape of the region. Through a combination of central authority and local autonomy, the Ottomans managed to govern these diverse territories effectively for several centuries. However, the rise of nationalism and the challenges of the 19th century ultimately strained the relationship between the Ottoman state and its Arab subjects, setting the stage for the transformative events of the early 20th century.

EMERGENCE OF NATIONALISM

Nationalism in Europe

Nationalism, as a powerful political and social ideology, gained momentum in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. The Enlightenment era, with its emphasis on reason, individual rights, and the sovereignty of the people, laid the groundwork for nationalist thought. Thinkers like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant proposed ideas about the rights of individuals and the legitimacy of governments being derived from the consent of the governed. These ideas were revolutionary, challenging the existing monarchical and imperial structures.

The French Revolution of 1789 further propelled nationalist sentiments. It demonstrated that the people could overthrow a long-standing monarchy and establish a republic based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The subsequent Napoleonic Wars spread these revolutionary ideas across Europe, contributing to the rise of nationalist movements that sought to unify fragmented states or liberate oppressed nationalities from foreign domination.

Penetration of Nationalist Ideas into the Ottoman Empire

By the mid-19th century, the nationalist ideas that had transformed Europe began to penetrate the Ottoman Empire. The empire was a mosaic of ethnic and religious groups, each with its own identity and aspirations. Various factors facilitated the spread of nationalist ideas within the Ottoman domains:

- Communication and Education: Improved communication networks and the establishment of modern educational institutions exposed Ottoman subjects to European political ideologies.
- **European Influence**: Ottoman elites and intellectuals who traveled to or studied in Europe were influenced by nationalist ideas and brought them back to their home countries.
- **Internal Reforms**: The Ottoman state itself undertook reforms aimed at modernization, which often included the adoption of European administrative and legal models. These reforms sometimes unintentionally fostered nationalist sentiments by highlighting ethnic and religious distinctions.

ARAB NATIONALISM: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT Early Arab Nationalism

Arab nationalism initially emerged as a cultural and intellectual movement. Arab scholars and intellectuals sought to revive and promote Arab culture, language,

and history. They emphasized the distinctiveness of Arab identity within the broader Islamic world, arguing for a rejuvenation of Arab cultural and intellectual life.

Cultural Renaissance

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a cultural renaissance in the Arab world. Intellectuals and scholars established literary societies, newspapers, and educational institutions that promoted the Arabic language and Arab heritage. This period was marked by a renewed interest in Arab history, literature, and identity. Notable figures like Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq and Butrus al-Bustani contributed significantly to this cultural revival through their writings and advocacy.

Political Dimensions of Arab Nationalism

By the early 20th century, Arab nationalism began to acquire a more political dimension. The Ottoman Empire's decline, marked by military defeats and internal strife, created a sense of urgency among Arab nationalists who sought greater political autonomy or independence.

Young Turk Revolution of 1908

The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 was a significant turning point. The revolution, led by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), aimed to restore the 1876 constitution and parliament and to modernize and centralize the Ottoman administration. Initially, many Arab leaders welcomed the revolution, hoping it would lead to political reforms and increased representation.

However, the policies implemented by the CUP soon alienated many Arab nationalists. The CUP's efforts to centralize administration and promote Turkish nationalism were perceived as threats to Arab identity and autonomy. The imposition of Turkish as the language of administration and education, along with other centralizing measures, intensified Arab discontent.

Heightened Tensions

The CUP's policies led to increased tensions between the Ottoman central government and Arab nationalists. Secret societies and political organizations, such as al-Fatat and al-Ahd, emerged to advocate for Arab rights and greater autonomy within the empire. These groups sought to preserve Arab culture and identity in the face of the CUP's centralizing and Turkification efforts.

IMPACT ON OTTOMAN-ARAB RELATIONS Administrative Reforms and Centralization

In response to rising nationalist sentiments, the Ottoman authorities implemented various administrative reforms aimed at centralizing control and modernizing the state. The *Tanzimat* reforms (1839-1876) were a series of

governmental measures designed to modernize the empire along European lines. These included legal reforms, the establishment of new administrative districts, and efforts to standardize the tax system and military conscription.

While these reforms were intended to strengthen the empire, they often conflicted with local Arab interests. The imposition of Turkish language and culture in administration and education further alienated Arab populations. The subsequent administrative centralization under the CUP exacerbated these tensions, as local elites and traditional power structures were undermined.

World War I and the Arab Revolt The Outbreak of World War I and Its Impact

The onset of World War I in 1914 marked a significant turning point in Ottoman-Arab relations. The Ottoman Empire's decision to align itself with the Central Powers—Germany and Austria-Hungary—had profound consequences. This alliance drew the empire into a global conflict that severely strained its already weakened economy and military resources. The war exacerbated existing tensions within the empire, as many Arab provinces experienced increased hardships, including food shortages, military conscription, and harsh administrative measures.

The Ottoman war effort required the mobilization of vast resources and manpower, leading to the conscription of Arab men into the Ottoman army. This conscription, coupled with requisitioning of food and supplies, caused significant suffering and resentment in Arab regions. The hardships of war, including famine and disease, particularly affected the civilian population, intensifying anti-Ottoman sentiments. The Ottoman response to perceived disloyalty, which included arrests, executions, and harsh reprisals, further alienated the Arab populace.

The Arab Revolt of 1916

Against this backdrop of discontent and hardship, the Arab Revolt of 1916 emerged as a pivotal event. The revolt was spearheaded by Sharif Hussein bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca, a prominent Arab leader who sought to capitalize on the widespread dissatisfaction to pursue Arab independence. Hussein's ambitions were bolstered by his strategic alliance with the British, who saw an opportunity to weaken the Ottoman Empire from within. The British, aiming to disrupt the Ottoman war effort, promised Hussein support for Arab independence in exchange for his leadership of the revolt. This promise was formalized in a series of letters between Hussein and Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, known as the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence. The British commitment to support Arab independence, although later complicated by conflicting promises made in the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration, was a crucial factor in gaining Arab support for the revolt.

The Arab Revolt was characterized by a series of military campaigns led by Hussein's sons, Faisal and Abdullah, with significant assistance from the British, including the famous involvement of T.E. Lawrence, known as Lawrence of Arabia. The revolt began in the Hejaz region of the Arabian Peninsula and quickly spread to other parts of the Arab world. Key successes of the Arab forces included the capture of strategic locations such as Aqaba and Damascus, which undermined Ottoman control and bolstered the Arab nationalist cause.

Significance and Consequences

The Arab Revolt, while not universally supported by all Arabs, symbolized the culmination of long-standing nationalist aspirations and a decisive break from Ottoman rule. It highlighted the desire for self-determination and an independent Arab state. The revolt's success, coupled with the eventual defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, paved the way for the reconfiguration of the Middle Eastern political landscape. However, the post-war reality was far more complex than the promises made during the conflict. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, a secret arrangement between Britain and France, divided much of the Arab lands into spheres of influence, undermining the prospects of a unified independent Arab state. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 further complicated the situation by supporting the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. These conflicting agreements sowed seeds of future conflicts in the region.

Despite these challenges, the Arab Revolt remains a significant chapter in the history of the Middle East. It marked the beginning of the end of Ottoman rule in the Arab world and laid the groundwork for the emergence of modern Arab states. The revolt also left a lasting legacy in Arab nationalist movements, symbolizing the struggle for independence and self-determination against foreign domination.

CONCLUSION

The examination of the impact of nationalism on the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and its Arab Muslim subjects reveals a complex interplay of political, social, and cultural dynamics that shaped the course of Middle Eastern history. From the emergence of Arab nationalism as a cultural renaissance to its evolution into a potent political force, the interaction between nationalist sentiments and Ottoman policies had far-reaching consequences for the region. The decline of the Ottoman Empire coincided with the rise of nationalist movements within its territories, challenging the traditional imperial order and advocating for greater autonomy or independence. Arab nationalism sought to assert Arab identity and sovereignty, leading to tensions with the Ottoman central government. The Ottoman government's attempts to modernize and centralize its administration, epitomized by the *Tanzimat* reforms and later policies under the Committee of Union and Progress, often clashed with the aspirations of Arab nationalists. The

imposition of Turkish language and culture, along with efforts to homogenize the empire politically and culturally, exacerbated Arab discontent and fueled nationalist sentiments.

World War I marked a turning point, deepening Arab resentment against Ottoman rule and providing an opportunity for nationalist movements to assert themselves more forcefully. The Arab Revolt of 1916, supported by the British, symbolized the culmination of these aspirations and signaled a decisive break from Ottoman suzerainty. The post-war settlements, particularly the Treaty of *Sèvres* and the Treaty of *Lausanne*, redrew the map of the Middle East, leading to the establishment of modern Arab states under European mandates. While these developments marked the end of Ottoman rule in the region, they also introduced new forms of colonial domination and delayed true independence for many Arab nations. The impact of nationalism on the Ottoman Empire's relationship with Arab Muslims was profound and multifaceted. It reshaped political alliances, fueled social upheaval, and ultimately contributed to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of modern nation-states in the Middle East. The legacy of this period continues to shape the political and cultural landscape of the region, underscoring the enduring significance of nationalism in the modern Middle East.

LIMITATIONS:

- Availability of Historical Documents: The accessibility and completeness of historical documents may pose limitations to the depth of the analysis, as some primary sources may be incomplete or unavailable.
- ➤ Interpretation Bias: The interpretation of historical events and sources may be influenced by the perspective of the researcher, leading to potential biases in the analysis.
- ➤ Language Barriers: Language barriers may restrict access to primary sources and scholarly literature, particularly those not available in widely spoken languages such as English or Arabic.
- Scope and Depth: Due to the vast scope of the topic and the limitations of time and resources, the paper may not cover every aspect of the relationship between nationalism and the Ottoman Empire's Arab Muslim subjects comprehensively.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH:

- Archival Research: Future research could focus on conducting more extensive archival research to uncover additional primary sources and gain deeper insights into specific historical events and individuals.
- Comparative Analysis: Comparative studies with other nationalist movements or colonial contexts could provide valuable insights into the unique dynamics of Ottoman-Arab relations and nationalism.

- ➤ **Multilingual Approach:** Researchers could employ a multilingual approach to access a wider range of primary sources and scholarly literature, thereby overcoming language barriers.
- ➤ Case Studies: Conducting in-depth case studies of specific regions or periods within the Ottoman Empire could provide a more nuanced understanding of the impact of nationalism on local dynamics and identities.
- ➤ **Interdisciplinary Perspectives:** Incorporating perspectives from disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and political science could enrich the analysis and offer alternative interpretations of historical events and processes.

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