

# ARAB PERCEPTIONS OF THE BALKANS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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The opening decade of the last century witnessed dynamic political developments in both the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire and the newly re-established independent Balkan states. The Arabs and their northern neighbours from the Balkans, once pals within the Ottoman Empire, have inherited quite comprehensive patterns of perceptions *vis-à-vis* each other. These long-standing stereotypes have been altered considerably in the course of the Balkan Wars 1912-1913, in particular with regards to the assessment of the events and attitudes adopted by the emerging Arab nationalists.

From its very outset Arab nationalism navigated between the *Scylla* of the growing scepticism about the Turkish domination in the Ottoman Empire and the *Charybdis* of the deepening mistrust of the encroaching European Powers. In some aspects the perceptions on the Balkans of the Arab nationalists became derivative from the general encounter of the Middle East with Europe. On the other hand they were a part of their overall attitudes towards the Ottoman Empire. The concern for the integrity of the Ottoman Empire with the nationalists could be compared in Edward Saïd's terms to the "Australian syndrome" (Saïd 1993:xv-xvii) where the rejection of the metropolitan centre was fused with quite sympathetic feelings for the "old country". The Balkans were therefore embedded in a very substantial way into the paradigm of Arab nationalism.

In previous times both the Arab provinces and the Balkan possessions of the Ottoman Empire triggered attempts at reform designed to transform the whole multinational state. The *Gulhane Hatt-i sherif* of 1839 came at a time when European support was indispensable for the Sublime Port against the victorious armies of Muḥammad ʿAlī of Egypt. The *Imperial Rescript* of 1856 was to great extent prompted by the Crimean War, when Western intervention in favour of Turkey prevented Russian advance on the Balkan. Once again in 1876 the looming Russo-Turkish War following the Bulgarian insurrection urged the Young Ottomans to act and the Ottoman governing elite to accept the Constitution, compiled by Midhat Pasha, the Governor of the Danube vilayet and later of the provinces alongside the Tigris and Euphrates. It would be erroneous simplification to suspect the constitutionalists of cynical "window dressing" objectives to please the West but a certain degree of opportunistic considerations was in the fore of their minds.

In modern times Arab attitudes towards the Balkans have very much in common with the shared experiences in modernisation. These date from attempted reform dur-

ing the Tulip period or *Lale Devri* (1718-30), the New Order or *Nizām-e Ğadīd* (from 1792), but mostly from the *Tanzīmāt Reform* period (1839-61). Since the European economic and political penetration differed in intensity and purpose "the modernisation experiment" – as some historians term it – "took place in so many distinct geographical and historical settings. Local provinces of the Ottoman Empire, despite many superficial similarities, were challenged by and reacted to the West in different ways" (Cannon 1988:4).

Of particular interest are the Arab reactions to the Berlin Congress following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, in which Egypt was a faithful ally to the Sublime Port. As it is well known, at the congress Bulgaria received a wide international guarantee of local administrative autonomy while secret understandings soon opened Egypt and other Arab countries for indirect European control. The editorials of the nationalistically minded Egyptian daily *al-Waṭan* are full of comparative comments of the two cited cases. Miḥā'il 'Abdassayyid, the opinion-maker of the liberals in Egypt was particularly bitter when he juxtaposed Egypt's plight to the arrangements for the Principality of Bulgaria, which through its National Assembly acquired autonomous institutions and began adjustments to the unfinished *Tanzīmāt* legislation with the consent of the European Powers. "Why", asked 'Abdassayyid, "can't they recognise similar autonomy for Egypt's civil (legislative) and administrative apparatus? Egypt is wealthier than Bulgaria.....has a better system of administration and....local courts.... If it is argued that treaties still exist between the Port and Europe (preventing this), we say that it is time to revise these, because of obviously changing conditions..." (*al-Waṭan* 12.04.1879).

Chronologically, yet another crucially important point happened during the first years of the twentieth century. After the long record of relentless resistance to the Ottoman rule, there came the insurrection of the Bulgarians in Macedonia. It failed to achieve tangible European intervention, apart from a hastily produced Russo-Austrian initiative for the *Mursteġ reform* program. Again Arab public opinion and parts of the Egyptian elite remained sensitive to the developing process. These sensitivities became even more evident when exposed at the area of diplomatic representation that is highly indicative of the degree of international emancipation.

The independent Balkan states as well as autonomous Bulgaria began sending their diplomatic agents to Egypt, whereas Egypt did not have the right to dispatch envoys. Furthermore, in order to receive foreign representatives Egypt needed formal consent from the Sublime Port in the form of *exequatur*s. In regard to the various practices of the Ottoman Government in executing its prerogatives, the official paper *Journal du Caire* published in January 1907 an article entitled "Diplomatic agents of the Balkan States in Egypt" (28.01.1907). It contains the observation: "The Port should not dare refuse to do for Egypt the concession which it had allowed for in Macedonia. In the latter country the consuls of the above-mentioned states have received *exequatur*s".

The 1908 revolution of the Young Turks turned to be a crucial moment for the Macedonian freedom fighters and for the emerging Arab nationalism alike. In its Annual Report of 1909 the British Consul-General in Cairo Sir Eldon Gorst observed: "The general movement against autocratic government in the neighbouring Mohammedan countries which has been the main political feature in the East during the last year, has not been without effect upon the state of public opinion in Egypt. ... Though the conditions of Turkey and Egypt are entirely different, and though no real analogy can be drawn between the two races, the fact that parliamentary Government has been peaceably established in the former country has given considerable encouragement to those here who hold the view that Egypt is ripe for a similar regime" (Lord Lloyd 1933:68).

The ideas proclaimed by the *Committee for Union and Progress* (CUP) were attractive for nationalists from both the Balkan and the Arab provinces of the Empire. Yet the Young Turks did not draw their members from all ethnic sections of the Ottoman society. There were practically no Greeks, Bulgarians or Arabs among them" (Zürcher 1984:22). With one notable exception – that of ‘Azīz ‘Alī al-Miṣrī who later founded the Arab nationalist organisation *al-‘Ahd* in 1914. The policies of the Young Turks, which ensued proved their utmost hostility *vis-à-vis* voluntary cessation of the territories inhabited by other than the Turkish ethnicity. Instead they opted for forced Ottomanization, which was diametrically opposite to the ideal of nationalists both on the Balkans and in some Arab countries, notably in Lebanon.

Arab nationalists and leaders of Balkan countries sought to encourage the CUP to implement faithfully the constitutional principles proclaimed in 1909. For example, Grigor Nachovich, a prominent Bulgarian politician and diplomatic representative to Constantinople believed that the Young Turks have to implement in real terms the provisions of the Constitution, and through the recognition of the rights and freedoms of the provinces should reconcile them with the centre of the Empire. Furthermore, in his opinion improvements in the administration were badly needed to change the situation where every state civil servant sent to the regions "behaves like a small Hamid". Once these conditions are in place, then Nachovich predicted that there could come into existence "an alliance between the Empire and the Christian nations of the Orient. Turkey has every reason to fear the European Powers, much stronger than itself", he wrote, "while Turkey has nothing to lose and much to gain from the Balkan nations, which are much weaker than the Empire and inclined to seek amicable relations with a modern and civilised Turkey"<sup>1</sup>. The Proclamation of Bulgaria's independence in September 1908 and its recognition by the Sublime Port eight months later was exemplary with regards to such a Grand De-

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<sup>1</sup> *Central State Historical Archives*, collection 176, list 2, unit 1072, p. 108-109.

sign. The event coincided with the annexation of Bosnia by the Habsburg Empire and was followed by the Italian campaign in Libya.

Once the Berlin Treaty of 1879 was irreversibly overturned, the Balkan Alliance came into existence. The increased tensions among the Great Powers and in particular between Russia and Austria-Hungary provided the Balkan States means to advance their national aspirations.

In some historical studies<sup>2</sup>, prevails the hypothesis for different kinds of motivations for the Balkan States to abandon temporarily their rivalries and to contemplate a major showdown with the Ottoman Empire. It arises from the assumption that the Young Turks were discovering their national identity along Western European patterns and chances were increasing for continuous European support to Turkey's transition. Therefore, the opportunity for Balkan States to pursue their national objectives at the expense of the Ottoman Empire was doomed to whither away.

There were many tense international situations in Arab lands in the first decade of the twentieth century, such as the Agadir crisis or the Italo-Turkish war over Tripolitania. In the eyes of the Arab nationalists, however, it was the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 which made a difference. For they indeed presented an unusual case when former provinces of the Ottoman Empire waged a successful military campaign against their ex-suzerain.

There are numerous examples of the coverage by the Arab nationalistic press of the events of the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913. A suitable source of reference in this regard is the New York based weekly *as-Sā'ih*, established by 'Abdalmasīh 'Abduh Haddād.

The paper's first main conclusion from the survey of the period pre-empting the wars was about the inconsistency of the Great Powers' policies on the Balkans. Austria-Hungary was described as the Empire which harboured considerable concerns over the Balkan Alliance. These attitudes were grounded in the fact that the Slavonic ingredients in that multinational state was very sensitive to developments in the neighbourhood and were exposed to influences (*as-Sā'ih*, 17.10.1912). Austria-Hungary was later perceived as the main geopolitical beneficiary from the outcome of the Wars, in particular from the exacerbated divide between the strongest country in the region which was at the time Bulgaria and the rest of its neighbours.

The Russian reactions to the emerging crises in the eyes of *as-Sā'ih* were quite ambiguous. Russia was setting the scene for potential extension of its own influence in the region. But the Russian Empire lacked self-confidence. The result is an imbroglio which allows the Balkan States freedom of initiative.

At the very week the Alliance declared war on the Ottoman Empire, *as-Sā'ih* published an extensive analysis which contained outspoken recognition for their bold and

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<sup>2</sup> See Hall 1996.

daring stances and the patriotic inspiration of the Montenegrins and the Bulgarians. The paper predicts quick victory of the Alliance, liberation of Macedonia from Turkish domination. The expectations of many Arab nationalists are eloquently stated in the conclusive statement: Now that the Ottoman Empire was expelled from the African continent after Tripoli fell in the hands of the Italians, in view of the fact of the astonishing initial success of the Balkan allies, Turkey would be ousted from Europe, the eyes turn towards Syria and its common action with Egypt. The autonomy of Lebanon should also develop into the country's independence under international supervision.

The aspirations of a substantial and vocal part of the Arab nationalistic opinion arouse the concerns of the ambassadors of the Great Powers in Istanbul and their consuls in major Arab cities. In his reports the Consul General of France in Beirut M. Coulondre distinguishes two major trends that developed in the local Arab society under the influence of the war in Rumelia<sup>3</sup>. Most of the Christians sought to increase the autonomous character of the Lebanese Highlands under French protection in a way that would lead to independence from the Ottoman Empire. The Muslims, however, were very much inclined to follow the path of reforms, and in particular the establishment of a Caliphate, headed by an Arab ruler and encompassing Syria, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Arabia. An obvious candidate for a new caliph would in this case be the Khedive ʿAbbās Hilmī II, deemed by the French diplomat to be a British protégé. Among the journalists who promoted the idea there were several well-known editors of Arab papers: Muḥammad and Aḥmad Kurd ʿAlī, owners of the Damascus based journal *al-Muqtabas*, ʿAbdalḡanī al-Urayssī, owner of the Beirut journal *al-Mufīd* (later *al-Fatā al-ʿarabī*), and also Rašīd Riḡā, who edited the Cairo based Muslim journal *al-Manār*.

The extent of the Turkish defeat became clear from the first days and weeks of the war, when in the West only the fortress of Scutari and Yanina remained in Turkish control while in the East the Bulgarians surrounded Odrin (Edirne) and drove back the Turkish defence to the Catalca-lines, forty miles west of the capital.

Following the unsuccessful Turkish counter offences at Bolayir and Sarkoy in February 1913, in March 1913 the Bulgarian third army entered Odrin. The fall of Edirne was reflected by *as-Sāʿih* through a large interview with Šukrī Pasha, the Commander of the defence (*as-Sāʿih*, 19.05.1913). One reason for the surrender was the sharp division and mistrust among the unionist officers ʿAzīz Pasha and Ibrāhīm Pasha on the one hand and the supporters of Nāzīm Pasha who challenged the active members of CUP. Still the Arab newspaper underlines another aspect of the victorious Bulgarian assault on the city, *i.e.* the patriotically motivated high spirit and the

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<sup>3</sup> *Documents* 1978, vol. XIX, doc. 30, p. 109.

astonishing courage displayed by the Bulgarian command and troops united like never before behind the national cause and interest.

The diplomatic records concur with that view, when describing the reaction of the Arab public opinion to the loss of Odrin. "The fall of the ancient capital of the Turks in Europe", writes Ottavi, the French Consul General in Lebanon, "has produced such a deep impression on the Muslims here, that to my mind, the eventual entry of the Bulgarian army into Constantinople, could not astonish them much more. The Christians rejoice very much at the defeat of Turkey." But the Governmental authorities according to Ottavi dare not appeal for solidarity to the Arab Muslims, out of fear that the move could be leading to the exactly opposite effect. Because of their indignation for the ruined prestige of Islam, the Arab Muslims felt inclined to rise against the Young Turks, rather than to stage support for them<sup>4</sup>.

The conclusions drawn from the experience of the Balkan War appeared in the editorial of *as-Sā'ih* on June 2, 1913 under the title: "The signing of the Peace Agreements". The event was characterised as the most important one since the Crimean War. The arguments through which such a statement has been backed include statistical data review. It proved for example that Bulgaria has managed to mobilise under the banner of a patriotic war 480 thousand troops – the highest percentage of the population of any party in an armed conflict to date. Not only the totality of involvement was surprising but also the tremendous numbers of the casualties sustained that exceeded for example the losses of Germany in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. At the same time more soldiers from the Turkish armies fell victims than for instance the casualties Russia had to give in the course of the Russo-Japanese conflict.

From the point of view of Arab Nationalism the most important conclusion from the war time has become the proven weakness of the Ottoman Empire, which after its defeat from the Balkan neighbours was doomed to seek further foreign financial and political support in order to be able to strengthen its grip on the remaining possessions of the Empire in Asia. In particular in Syria the calls for independence increased, which were echoed in Iraq. Armenia was to follow leaning on traditional Russian support. "Turkey", predicts *as-Sā'ih*, "will emerge from the war only to enter yet another this time 'internal war' facing all of its neighbours".

A second important lesson which became apparent in the prescriptions of the London Peace Treaty was the fate of the islands in the Aegean which Greece occupied in the course of the hostilities. Contrary to the Greek claims that the arrival of its fleet at the islands was liberation, the Arab public opinion considered the change to be mere substitution of foreign Turkish rule by an even worse form of Greek control, which chased away Palestinians, living on the islands. *as-Sā'ih* goes on to conclude that the London Peace Conference was in fact a repetition of the Vienna Con-

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<sup>4</sup> *Documents* vol. XIX, doc. 139, p. 392.

gress of 1815 through its acknowledgement of enforced inclusion of smaller entities into sovereignty of a State that lay claims on them. Furthermore, it made predictions that the interested European Powers will use their influence in the Balkan region to incite hostilities among the members of the Balkan Alliance. The other prediction – that a military engagement between Russia and Austria-Hungary might ensue from the Balkan War – proved to be wrong, and then, again, inaccurate only temporarily.

The second stage of the Balkan conflict received a very comprehensive coverage by *as-Sā'ih*. The very reasons for the Second Balkan War and its consequences have been analysed in an editorial dated September 1, 1913, under the title: "The Future of the Balkans". The text is important as it contains perspectives different from the ones that are abundant in historical writings both in the Western and in the Balkan parts of Europe. As Pierre Hasner suggests the former interpretations lay the stress on the lack of economic development and insufficient maturity of the societies in the Balkan States which regarded "territorial disputes as a vital issue calling their identity into question" (Hasner 1998:4). By contrast, the second interpretation, most favoured by the countries of the region themselves, attributes the peculiarities of the Balkans to the arbitrary divisions, corresponding to the sole interests of the Great Powers and their balances which led to the Post-Ottoman territorial arrangements.

The views expressed by *as-Sā'ih* in the name of Arab Nationalism have elements from both interpretations. It describes the injustices imposed on Bulgaria through the Bucharest Treaty as a source of future instability, but goes on to state that this might prove to be the smaller imperfection. The principal sin of the Bucharest arrangement was that the aspiration of the population of the former Ottoman provinces on the Balkans have been completely ignored in the setting, with one notable exception – the proclamation of the independence of Albania.

The attitudes of Arab Nationalism *vis-à-vis* the Balkan States evolved considerably in the years preceding the European Wars. Throughout the last stages of decay of the Ottoman Empire the Balkan nations and the Arab societies alike took part in the reform process imposed on Constantinople by the European Powers. One can suggest that at certain stages Arab self-determination passed through comparison with other parts of the Empire, and in particular its Balkan possessions. Thus for instance Arab Nationalists deemed it fair to claim that the encouragement Europe accorded to statehood and autonomy in the Balkan countries, largely exceeded the constitutionalism which they allowed to take place in Arab lands.

Furthermore, again with western consent Balkan states as they asserted and strengthened their independence, managed to do away with the system of the Capitulation, inherited from their Ottoman past. This objective remained in the focus of Arab attention for a much longer period of their gradual international emancipation. This fact was a source of deep frustration and dissatisfaction especially among those leaders of Arab public opinion who deemed the development of their homeland to be far superior when compared with other parts of the Ottoman Empire.

In the historical period under scrutiny and particularly during the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 Arab Nationalists developed a positive perception on the potential that the Independent Balkan States displayed so vibrantly and convincingly. Though conscious of the shortcomings of the process that unfolded before their eyes, Arab Nationalists remained supportive of the aspirations of the Balkan States, which acting in a concerted manner managed to challenge successfully both their former sovereign and the almighty European Powers of the time.

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