ARTICLES

ARAB NATIONALISM
AFTER THE YOUNG TURK REVOLUTION
(1908 - 1914)

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The rise of the Young Turks brought a false sense of hope amongst the reformers in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire which was soon to be dashed by the Turkification policy of the Young Turks. As a result of the policies of the Young Turks the emphasis in the question of reform changed from one of reform within the Empire to one of Arab autonomy. The emerging semi-secret Arab societies pressed for a truly representative central government in which all peoples would have equal status and for a large measure of autonomy for the Arab provinces. Any hopes that the Arabs had were destroyed by the pursuance of a policy of Turkish nationalism with its pro-Muslim aspects and the aim of imposing the Turkish language on the whole Empire.

The First World War was a watershed in the history of the Middle East in general and the Fertile Crescent in particular. For four centuries most of these regions were ruled by the Ottoman Empire, though several countries of the Middle East were loosened from its grip before the war. The attempts of the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent to gain some measure of independence began well before the war. The earliest ideas for Syrian independence emerged during the 1870s. But it was the period of 1908–1914, the years of Young Turk rule, that proto-nationalist activity noticeably increased in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, the main cause being the deterioration of relations between Turks and Arabs.

On the 24th of July 1908, in a panic caused by the sudden outbreak of discontent in the army which turned into a full-scale mutiny, Sultan ʿAbdülhamīd II granted his subjects a constitution. On the following day, he abolished censorship, released all political prisoners and disbanded his army of 30,000 spies. The revolution was
the work of the Young Turk party, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), a secret association with the object of overthrowing the Sultan’s despotism. Although a few Arabs, most of them army officers, had joined the party and worked with its leaders, they had done so as Ottoman rather than as Arab nationalists. If in 1908 there were scarcely any Arabs who thought of separation from the Turkish heart of the empire which remained the sole protector of Sunni Islam, there were undoubtedly many who hoped for decentralization, autonomy for the Arab provinces and the acceptance of Turco-Arab equality. Down to that time there had been no evidence of widespread support for the doctrines of ʻAbdarraḥmān al-Kawākibī and Najīb ʻAzūrī. There was, indeed a very influential group of Arabs in the inner circle of the sultan’s retinue, while the physical links between the Arab provinces and the heart of the empire were strengthened by the construction of the Hijāz railway, which ran from Damascus to Medina, and was completed in 1908.

“The Young Turk revolution of 1908,” wrote Uriel Heyd “promised equality to all Ottoman subjects without distinction of religion and race. These promises, however, were never carried out.” Like the Turks, the Arabs were divided into supporters and opponents of Sultan ʻAbdallāhīm II and his regime. The CUP was a medley of races and creeds, in which Turks predominated and Jews came second, with Ottoman nationals of other races in tow, and political refugees and exiles abroad in the background. And while it is true that the motives which prompted the party were as mixed as its composition, its first object was to put an end to ʻAbdallāhīm’s autocratic rule and secure good government for the empire on the basis of racial fusion as envisaged in the 1876 Constitution.

Among the leading opponents of the Ħamīdīan despotism there were two contrasting ideologies: Turkish nationalism and Ottoman liberalism. The former, which was naturally adopted only by the Turks, stood for the continuation and strengthening of the dominance of the Turkish race, language and culture. The latter, which was held by the non-Turks and some liberal Turks, implied the principle of equality for all the Turkish and non-Turkish, Muslim and non-Muslim elements within the empire. Ottoman liberalism had been rejected because the great majority of Christian subjects of the empire rejected the attempts to Ottomanize them, which could only be carried out by force. But the Arab Muslims of the empire were soon made to realize that pan-Islamism, if adopted by the CUP for tactical reasons, did not mean equality between Turks and Arabs.

There is no evidence that the Young Turks came to power with the avowed intention of ignoring Islam and the non-Turkish elements in the Ottoman Empire and of embarking on a policy of Turkification. The primary aim of the CUP was to

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maintain the integrity of the empire, especially in Europe, and in this they agreed with all previous rulers of Turkey. They only differed as to the means: they held that Turkey's best safeguard was internal strength, and the best source of strength, political liberty. Their ideas of liberty were drawn from the French Revolution in the hope that all inhabitants of the empire would rally to the state as free Ottoman citizens and the question of nationality would solve itself.5

The Young Turk movement was at first supported by Arabs as well as Turks, and served to channel off Arab opposition to Ottoman rule. The Young Turk revolution of 1908 was a turning-point in the history of Arab as well as of Turkish nationalism. The news that the 1876 Constitution had been restored was greeted with enormous enthusiasm in the Arab provinces. There was rejoicing all over the empire, in which Turks fraternized deliriously with Arabs, and Muslims with Christians, in the genuine belief that the Constitution would meet everybody's wants. Its incompatibility with cultural aspirations had passed unperceived.6 During the first six weeks after the proclamation of the Constitution in 1908, men of all creeds and races embraced each other in the streets. But then they drew apart again and considered how they might turn the new regime to their own advantage.

Immediately after the revolution of 1908, the Arabs in Istanbul founded a society called the Society of Arab-Ottoman Brotherhood (Jam‘iyyat al-ıkhā’ al-arabi al-‘utmānī), with great fanfare at a big meeting of the Arab community in Constantinopile attended by the CUP leaders, devoted to the maintenance of the constitution, the promotion of loyalty to the sultan and the welfare of the Arab provinces.7 This society was actually established by functionaries of the deposed Hamīdīan regime. Now worried about their status, their purpose was to defend it by presenting themselves as the protectors of Arab interests in the empire. The society was headed by an administrative committee, and it was decided that any Arab could join the society, provided that he had not been convicted of a criminal offence and not deprived of his rights as a citizen. An Arab was defined as one who had been born in the Arab countries and considered them his fatherland (waqan) – there was no reference here to ethnic origin. On 21 January 1909 Shafiq al-Mu‘ayyad began publishing the Arabic newspaper al-ıkhā’ al-ıutmānī (The Ottoman Brotherhood) in Istanbul.8

In late 1908 the Comité Syrien (al-Jam‘iyya as-stūriya) was founded in Paris by the Mutrān brothers, Rashid, Nakhla and Nadra, Greek Catholics from Ba‘lībak, with the former the self-appointed president. On 25 December 1908 the society published a manifesto which declared that all Syrians within and outside the empire stood behind it. In a proclamation that was attached to this manifesto the society called upon the Ottoman parliament to grant Syria self-government. The manifesto reached Damascus in the second half of January 1909, and was greeted with general

ridicule and criticism. Telegrams signed by hundreds of the city’s notables were sent to the Grand Vizier and to the parliament, condemning the proposals of the society and pledging loyalty to the empire and its unity.\(^9\)

The Balkan nationalities rejected the offer of a liberal Turkey altogether, and determined to take the first opportunity of completing their own unity and independence at Turkey’s expense. Others, like the Arabs, recognized that secession was impossible, but took measures to defend their own national individuality within the Ottoman state. The CUP found that the Turks were the only element in the empire that was not opposed to centralization and had no political ideal incompatible with the Ottoman State idea. They, therefore fell back upon their Turkish nationality, and came to think of Turkification (tātrīk) as the natural means of achieving their ends.\(^10\)

The Young Turks, who took the Turkish domination for granted, turned both to a specifically Turkish nationalism within Anatolia and also to a wider pan-Turanian movement which called for the union of all Turkic-speaking people, including those of Central Asia where the Turks had originated. This movement was also anti-Islamic, in that it called for a return to an era before the Turks adopted Islam. The dominant outlook in the CUP was therefore secular and nationalist, rather than pan-Islamic. Most of its leaders were Freemasons, and they were closely associated with the Jews of Salonika, who played an important role in the Young Turk movement. But this did not mean that they were either able or willing to abandon the empire’s role of leadership of the Islamic world which, after four centuries, was still acknowledged by both its Christian and its Muslim subjects.\(^11\)

Husayn ibn ʿAlī was living quietly in Constantinople as the sultan’s guest. His captivity had restrained him but not deadened his spirit. In public life – the sultan had appointed him to be a member of the Council of State – he was a conspicuous and venerated figure, as a descendant of the Prophet could scarcely escape being in the capital of Islam. In addition to his descent, his piety, his exquisite manners and the irreproachable pattern of his life had earned him the reverence of a large circle of admirers.\(^12\) Because the CUP knew him to be unbeloved of the sultan, they decided to end his nearly sixteen years’ exile and send him to Arabia to take up the post of Grand Sharīf of Mecca which had just fallen vacant. Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd II opposed the appointment, urging with canny foresight that Husayn ibn ʿAlī in an office of that importance would be no mere tool, but a force and possibly a danger. The CUP disregarded the advice, and Husayn ibn ʿAlī, a man of 53 at that time, returned with his family to al-Hijāz.\(^13\)

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\(^10\) Handbooks, No. 96 c & d, pp. 21–22. Taken over from: Zeine, The Emergence of Arab Nationalism, p. 86.


\(^12\) Antonius, The Arab Awakening. The Story of the Arab National Movement, p. 103.

The parliamentary elections held under the 1876 constitution and the programme of the Young Turks published in autumn of 1908, meant the end of illusions of the Arab politicians. Of 275 members, 142 were Turks, and only 60 Arabs. Of the remaining mandates were 25 Albanians, 24 Greeks, 12 Armenians, 5 Jews, 4 Bulgarians and 3 Serbs. When it is considered that out of a total population of the Ottoman Empire (excluding Egypt) of about 22 million some 10.5 million were Arabs and 7.5 million Turks, it is clear that even the liberal constitution did not provide for racial equality.\textsuperscript{14} In the Chamber of deputies the Turks outnumbered the Arabs in a ratio of three to two and in the Senate which numbered forty members appointed by the sultan, there were only three Arabs.\textsuperscript{15} Arab politicians resented the fact that their provinces were under-represented and this time their misgivings met with a ready hearing. The Arabs formed the main opposition in the new Ottoman parliament, which met on 17 December 1908 after an intermission of thirty years.\textsuperscript{16}

But Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd II, almost from the very first day, set about to get rid of the Young Turks, the Constitution and the new parliament. On 13 April 1909 incited by agents of the sultan, the troops forming the Constantinople garrison broke into mutiny against the CUP in an attempted counter-revolution. The troops rushed the Parliament buildings and killed, besides several of their own officers, the Minister of Justice and an Arab deputy.\textsuperscript{17} The army corps stationed in Salonica, under the command of Maḥmūd Shawkat Pasha, was ready. It marched on the capital and laid siege to the sultan’s palace, Yıldız. After an initial success the revolt was suppressed and the parliament and the senate met and voted the deposition of ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd II in favour of his brother Muḥammad Rashshād, as Muḥammad V.\textsuperscript{18} The new sultan was sixty-four years of age and had none of the ambition of his predecessors and was willing to let others rule him as well as rule in his name. With his accession, the CUP found themselves in absolute mastery, and the five years which elapsed before the outbreak of the World War, they held office with but few breaks and established a tyranny which was detested by the Arabs.

After the Young Turks had successfully resisted the Hamīdīan counter-coup in 1909, with the active assistance of the Arab officers, and had taken over the power, they revealed their own nationalist ideology, that of Turanianism.\textsuperscript{19} Utilizing this ideology they tried to resist the claims of the various peoples of the Ottoman Empire who were now aspiring to emancipation. The consequence was to make the CUP increasingly authoritarian in its attitudes. The Arabs soon came to feel

\textsuperscript{15} Al-Ḥuṣrī, Sāṭī: Al-bilād al-ʿarabīya wa ad-dawla al-ʿūṭmānīya. (The Arab Countries and the Ottoman State). Beirut 1965, p. 110.
\textsuperscript{17} Antonius, The Arab Awakening. The Story of the Arab National Movement, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{18} Al-Ḥuṣrī, Sāṭī: Al-bilād al-ʿarabīya wa ad-dawla al-ʿūṭmānīya, p. 112.
that they were in a more weakened position in the empire than they had been under 'Abdulhamid II. It did not count that Mahmud Shawkat Pasha, who commanded the troops which crushed the counter-revolution of 1909 and was subsequently Grand Vizier, came from an Iraqi family. Under external stress, the force of Turkish nationalism soon dominated the weaker strain of liberalism among the new rulers in Constantinople.

After suppressing the attempted counter-revolution by the supporters of the ancien régime, several of the leaders of the CUP began to put into effect the nationalist ideology that motivated them. They aspired to bring about the assimilation of all the nationalities of the empire because in their view the Ottoman Empire was a Turkish empire, and all its other peoples should become Turkish, willingly or not. For this purpose they began a process of Turkification of the empire, and the Arabs saw themselves as its principal casualties.

Arab intellectuals - be they Muslims or Christians - envisaged a conceptual framework and an operational mechanism for Arab nationalism, their Weltanschauung bound them to reconcile it with Islam. Ethno-nationalism was encroaching upon faith; therefore, disregarding religion would have discredited Arab nationalism in the public view. In addition, the intellectuals themselves were the product of a culture heavily influenced by Islam. It is worthwhile to restate that Arab nationalism prior to World War I acquired a following as a symbol of resistance to the pan-Turanian movement, not to the Islamic tenets or way of life. “The beginnings of the formation of the content of modern Arab nationalism saw no contradiction between Arabism and Islamism, neither at the level of discourse nor consciousness... It was not conflict with Islam as a religion and culture that determined the rise of Arab nationalism, but the ... despotic Turkish ruler.”

At first it seemed that liberal and moderate ideas were indeed about to prevail. But whatever the intentions of the Young Turks, they were almost at once subjected to a series of blows, from inside and outside Europe, that threw them into a mood of anger, bitterness, and frustration. It must be said in fairness to the Young Turks that the legacy they inherited from the Hamidian régime was not only damnable in itself: they had come into it at a particularly inauspicious moment. It is difficult to judge how sincere the Young Turks may have been in their promises and proclamations of freedom and equality; it is, however, undeniable that the immediate response of Europe and the Balkan Christians to the heart-lifting events of July 1908 was what, in Turkish eyes, could only be described as aggression and betrayal.

The separatist forces at work in the Balkan provinces were in the ascendant, the covetousness of two European Powers lurked menacingly behind a thin diplomatic veil, and a series of disasters occurred before the Young Turks had time to prove their worth: Austria-Hungary seized the opportunity to proclaim the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in October 1908, Bulgaria declared her independence; Crete announced her union with Greece. The precedents had been
set which were to be followed by Italy, in her attack on Ottoman Tripolitania in September 1911, and by the Balkan States, in their combined attack on Turkey in October 1912. In those few years, the Ottoman Empire lost all its provinces in Europe (except eastern Thrace); that part of Libya which comprised the provinces of Tripoli and Benghazi; Crete and the islands of the Dodecanese. In addition to the territorial losses, a burden of military expenditure had to be incurred which made serious inroads on Turkey's budgetary resources.

But in other ways, the Young Turks had only themselves to blame for their failure. In accomplishing their revolution, they had undoubtedly been moved by patriotic and liberal ideals, and been sincere in their professions of equality for all under the Constitution. The first mistake they made was that they failed to perceive the serious flaw in Midhat's Constitution in its relation to the racial problem. Later on they made another and, this time, fatal mistake. They threw the principle of equality overboard and used their power to promote the Turkish interest to the detriment of their fellow-Ottomans, and to rule the empire on the basis of racial supremacy for the Turkish element.

It seems that between 1909 and 1912, the leaders of the Young Turks had reached the conclusion that their Constitution could not do away with pan-Islamism. They realized that the binding force of this ideology was much stronger than they had anticipated and it seems almost certain that by 1911, the CUP had definitely adopted the pan-Islamic programme, in their foreign policy, at any rate. By 1911, two political trends had emerged in the new constitutional era of the Ottoman Empire: assimilationist and decentralist. The assimilationist trend was represented by the CUP which envisaged an integrated society sculpted out of its disparate ethnic communities and marshalled to embody a single Ottoman identity. The decentralist trend was on the whole an opposition movement which included former elements of the Hamidian era, representatives of ethnic communities. Moreover, it was a trend which sought the salvation of the empire in a decentralized system of government in which all ethnic and religious communities would be represented on an equal footing.

The desire to exalt the Turkish above the other races was only natural in an empire which had been created by the Turks. However, it sprang from other motives than mere egotism. A movement of purely Turkish nationalism was beginning to assert itself. It had its roots in a new assertion of the Turanian origin of the Turkish people, which had given birth to the creed that the path to the regeneration of the Turkish race lay towards reunion with the kindred populations of Turanian descent, of whom the majority were under Russian rule. The CUP, without adopting the

24 Zeine, The Emergence of Arab Nationalism, p. 87.
pan-Turanian doctrine in all its irredentist implications, were powerfully influenced by its teaching. However, this doctrine with its ideal of exalting the Turkish nationality and stressing the affinity of the Turks in the Ottoman Empire with their racial brothers in Central Asia, was the negation of the doctrine of Ottomanism which aimed at uniting the different races of the empire into one nation on a basis of equality for all.  

The CUP failed to see the incompatibility of the two doctrines; or, if they perceived it, adopted the hopeless course of trying to reconcile them. In that attempt, they only succeeded in alarming the other races, and more particularly the Arabs, into a belief that the Ottomanism which they were asked loyalty to accept was a sham and it could only mean that they would have to abandon their Arab cultural aspirations and allow themselves to be Turkified for the sake of unity. A worse mistake still was the CUP’s adoption of a policy of centralization. It was borrowed from the tenets of the French Revolution, but without regard to a fundamental difference between the France of 1789 and the Ottoman Empire of 1908. The centralization in Paris of the republican administration was the continuation of a historical process and was in harmony with the forces which, for centuries, had made Paris a cultural and economic centre and driven France towards political and administrative unity in that centre.

In the Ottoman Empire, the position was the very opposite. The forces generated by the national awakening were at work in directions pointing away from the centre; differences of language, customs and culture were still the mainsprings of those forces; and Constantinople, melting-pot though it was, was in no sense a centre of cultural unity. The diversity of races within the empire called for a decentralized form of government, which should have given the Arabs and other non-Turkish provinces a large measure of home rule and the freedom to pursue their political and cultural development as autonomous members of the empire. The policy followed by the CUP was the very opposite. They adopted the centralized form of government which they found in existence when they came into power, and proceeded to tighten instead of relaxing the hold of the central bureaucracy. In that alone, their attempts at strengthening the unity of the empire were doomed to fail; and the clumsy and vexatious steps which they took in pursuance of that policy made its failure more conspicuous and intensified the bitterness it engendered.

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Thus the harmonious relationship after the revolution did not last long. The Young Turks sought to coerce its heterogeneous peoples into political unity by the imposition of Turkish culture. The Arabs, who outnumbered the Turks in the ratio of three to two, found this policy odious. One of the first acts of the CUP after

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they had overcome the counter-revolution in April 1909 was to ban the societies founded by the non-Turkish racial groups, amongst them the Society of Arab-Ottoman Brotherhood which, barely eight months before, had been inaugurated with vows of everlasting fidelity at a meeting of Arabs and Turks.

The Societies Law passed in July 1909, provided for the registration of all associations and stipulated: It is forbidden to set up societies which are founded on an illicit basis and which are opposed to the prescriptions of the law and the public morality, or which aim to bring about political dissension between the various elements of the empire (Art. 3). It is forbidden to set up political societies on the basis of nationalism or incorporating the names of races (Art. 4). The establishment of secret societies is absolutely forbidden (Art. 5).

The suppression of the Society of Arab-Ottoman Brotherhood by the government marked the opening of a breach between the Young Turk régime and the Arab nationalists. The result of this was a proliferation of nationalist societies in the Fertile Crescent and Istanbul, as well as in Cairo and Paris—the principal refugees of Arab exiles. When the Society was closed by the authorities a young activist, a Shi'ite student from Lebanon, ɛAbdalkarim Qāsim al-Khalīl undertook to establish a new society to fill the void, which would be run by people more suited that their predecessors to dealing with the problems of the Arabs. He was member of the secret society al-Qahṭānīya, but he believed that a new open group was also needed, so that the Arab students living in Istanbul could meet and discuss their culture and their heritage. In 1909 he wrote a constitution for such an association and presented it for consideration to Rashīd Riḍā, at that time in Istanbul, who not only approved the idea but suggested its presentation to Khalīl Ḥamāda Pasha, Minister of Waqfs. The Minister greeted the idea, made a number of changes in the constitution and even suggested that the club be called the Literary Club (al-Muntadā al-adabi). He moreover allocated 500 Turkish liras per year for running the club from the Waqfs budget.

The opening ceremony for the club called the Literary Club (al-Muntadā al-adabi) was held on 8 February 1910. Most of the Arab students who studied at the various institutions of higher education in Istanbul came to the club. It not only attracted students, but also members of parliament and in a short while the club had over 280 members, and another 500 occasional visitors of all regions and communities. It served as a meeting place for Arab visitors and residents in the capital. Its club-house was equipped with a library and a hostel, and it became a busy and useful centre. The CUP tolerated it since its objects were not avowedly political. In actual fact, the club exerted a good deal of political influence and contributed to the Arab movement. It had an enormous membership running into thousands of whom the majority were students, and it established branches in various towns of Syria and Iraq. It provided centres in which Arabs from all parts

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32 Tauber, The Emergence of the Arab Movements, p. 103.
of the empire felt at home and talked freely in an atmosphere in which minds
relaxed and the traffic of ideas could move.33

In June 1911 ʿAbdallāḥīr Qāṣīm al-Khalīl presented a programme of awakening
of Arab countries based on two pillars: 1. strengthening the bonds of fraternity
between Arabs irrespective of their nationality, religion, race or sect so that
everybody can feel his genuine Arabness; 2. unification of educational system in
the Arab countries in order that the souls can be taught in one way and for one
purpose. The programme was not only approved by Arab members of parliament
but also accepted with great satisfaction in Arab countries especially in Egypt.34
The Literary Club lasted until 1915, when Jamāl Pasha had hanged its chairman
after he was sentenced to death by an extraordinary higher military court.

In the same time a secret society had come into being not long before the
Literary Club. During and after the Young Turk revolution, many Arab officers
joined the CUP in the hope that a new era was beginning in the empire. Some of
them discovered that certain members of the CUP had deposited a large sum of
money in Salonika, with the intention of using this money to help to establish a
centralized government which would impose itself by force over the other
nationalities of the empire. These officers, in cooperation with a number of civilians,
established towards the end of 1909 in Istanbul the al-Qaḥṭānīya society.35 The
most prominent of the society’s founders were two civilians, Khalīl Ḥamāda Pasha,
a Muslim from Beirut who held in 1909 the position of Minister of waqūfs in the
Ottoman government, and ʿAbdallāḥīrād az-Zahrāwī from Ḥumṣ and an officer,
Ṣalīm al-Jazāʿīrī, born in Damascus, who was of Algerian origin. Its leader was
the only Egyptian who played a leading part in the politics of early Arab nationalism
– ʿAzīz ʿAlī al-Miṣrī, himself an Ottoman officer.

The goals of the society, to which every member had to swear, were to raise the
cultural, social and economic level of the Arabs, and to induce them to act through
solidarity and to demand equal rights in the Empire. The society had a password
and a signal for identification, and branches were established in five centres besides
Constantinople. It made the first known attempt to win the Arab officers serving
in the Turkish army over to active co-operation in the national movement.36 The
society demanded equal rights for Arabs and Turks within the framework of the
empire. The Arab provinces were to form a single kingdom with its own parliament
and local government, and with Arabic as the official language. The scheme which
appealed to some nationalists was a dual monarchy of the sultan over Turks and
Arabs, on the contemporary model of Austria-Hungary.37 Thus unity could be
reached through separation, and the destinies of Turks and Arabs linked together
on a more lasting, because more realistic, base. The society was very active in the

35 Named after Qaḥṭān one of two legendary forefathers of the Arabs.
37 Holt, Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, 1516–1922, p. 260; Birrü, Al-ʿArab wa at-Turk fī al-
first year of its existence, until the founders were given cause to fear a betrayal. Despite the care with which the candidates were chosen, one member was found to have betrayed confidences; therefore the leaders of the society found it impossible to continue the activities.

On 14 November 1909 a society under the name Society of those speaking Arabic (Jamʿīyat nātiqīn bi-d-dād) was founded in Paris by a group of students who were the pursuing their higher studies, most active among whom was Tawfiq an-Nāṭūr. Then, in 1911 other secret group was established by Arab students in Paris which continued the activities of the former group, called the Young Arab Society (al-Jamʿīya al-ʿarabīya al-fatāt), and became the most important of all societies. The leading personalities were at first أمجد قادري, محسن عبد الحافظ and محمد رستم حيدر and later joined them رفيق التميمي, محمد مهدي الشافي, عبد الغاني الورد, and جميل مردم. Finally, out of fear that a name which included the word “Arab” would attract the attention of the CUP, it was decided to shorten the society’s name to “al-Fatāt”.

The society was headed by an Administrative Committee (al-hay’a al-idānīya) of six, which was elected by those members of the society who had undergone a trial period of six months. Membership was made subject to a long period of probation. In order to be accepted into the society a new member had to believe in Arab nationalism. Each recruit was introduced by one of the sworn members but was kept in ignorance of the identity of all the other members until he had been tried and proved, when he would be invited to take an oath to serve the ends of society, to the point of forfeiting his life, if need be, in its service. After the Administrative Committee had finally decided to accept a candidate, the recommending member and another member would adjure him “to obey the decisions of the society, to preserve absolute secrecy and to sacrifice life and property for aggrandizing the glory of the Arab nation and placing it in the ranks of living nations”.

The purpose of the society was to work for the independence of the Arab countries and their liberation from Turkish or any other alien domination – a significant advance on those programmes which aimed at autonomy within the empire, and an unconscious return to the ideals of the Beirut Society of 1875. The influence of the Young Arab Society on the march of events was cautious yet rapid. This made it into the most effective of the Arab societies of the time, remarkable alike for its objects and methods as for the admirable discipline of its members. For the first two years, its centre was Paris, and its membership remained

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41 Tauber, The Emergence of the Arab Movements, p. 92.
small. Then, as its members graduated and returned to their homes, it was shifted to Beirut in 1913 and in the following year to Damascus. Its membership rose to over 200, all of whom were Muslims, with but a few Christians.

The society maintained an especially high standard of secrecy; it accepted new members only after a complicated vetting procedure. Its most important action in the period before the war was its organization of the Paris Congress in which representatives of most of the different Arab societies existing at the time participated. After that Congress the centre of the society moved to Beirut. The secret of its existence was guarded to the end. During the war, when the Turkish were prosecuting Arab nationalists for treason, Shukri al-Qiwati attempted suicide and Abdalqani al-Uraysh went to the gallows rather than betray the society’s secret. In spite of diversity of their membership and methods, these and numerous other political societies had broadly the same object: to resist the centralization and Turkification imposed by the Ottoman government and to obtain a measure of autonomy for the Arab provinces.

By late 1912 the Ottoman Empire had signed an agreement ceding Libya to Italy and was losing the Balkan war. The Syrian community in Cairo was of the unanimous opinion that the empire would lose additional territories and that Syria would be taken over by a European power. As to the question of which power was preferable, the Muslims tended towards Britain, while the Christians favoured France. Damascene notables of al-Azm family, Rafiq, Ummayn and Hagg, stressed that they preferred the empire, but if circumstances forced them to choose between British and French occupation, they would opt for the former. Rafiq al-Azm claimed that “the Syrians are primarily attached to the Ottoman Empire, and secondarily to the Syrian nation. Therefore France had nothing to look for in Syria”.

One of the foremost of the believers in a bright future for Arab-Turkish relations in the empire, after the Young Turk revolution, was the Muslim thinker Rashid Riḍā. His disappointment was as great as his earlier hopes when the Young Turks began to implement their Turkification policy, and this disappointment turned into blazing hatred for the men of the CUP. In 1911 he established in Cairo the Society of the Arab Association (Jamīyat al-jamī’a al-ʿarabīya). Its primary goals were to bring about unity among the independent Arab rulers of the Arabian Peninsula and cooperation among the various Arab societies in Syria, Iraq and Istanbul, in the struggle against the CUP and for the future of the Arab provinces. In order to realize these ideas Rashid Riḍā sent emissaries to most of the rulers of the Arabian Peninsula in an attempt to unite them in the common cause, but without success.

The speech of the French Premier Raymond Poincaré on 21 December 1912, in which he said that “In the Lebanon and in Syria we have traditional interests and we intend to have them respected” was to the Syrians the decisive proof of

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44 Tauber, The Emergence of the Arab Movements, p. 121.
45 Tauber, The Emergence of the Arab Movements, p. 114.
France’s ambitions in the Levant. That is why another important society was established by Syrian émigrés in Cairo towards the end of 1912, with the name of the Ottoman Party of Administrative Decentralization (Hizb al-lāmarkazīya al-idārīya al-ṣūtūmānī).46 Raftū al-ṣaṣm was elected president of the Supreme Committee of the party and among its twenty members there were also Shiblī Shumayyil and Rashīd Riḍā.

The objectives of the party were twofold: to impress upon the rulers of the empire the need for decentralizing the administration of the empire and to mobilize Arab opinion in support of decentralization. Journalists prominent in the press of Syria and Istanbul wrote in the Cairo press and often spent long periods in that city, as did many Arab politicians during periods of repression by the CUP. Egypt was the home of a number of highly influential publications founded by Syrians—for example, al-Manār, al-Muqattam, al-Ahrām, al-Hilāl and al-Muqtataf, all of which contributed significantly to the development of Arabic-language journalism and of Arabism.47

The party published a statement explaining the advantages of decentralization in a multi-national and multi-racial empire such as the Ottoman Empire and gave for the purpose of its founding, the safeguarding of the empire from external pressure and internal conflicts and the rallying of its peoples round the Ottoman throne. This explanation was followed by the programme of the party containing sixteen articles.48 The party control was vested in the powerful committee in Cairo and party branches were established in every town in Syria. Close contact was maintained between the branches and other Arab political associations in Syria and Iraq, and of course with the Literary Club in Constantinople.

The Empire’s defeats, in Libya in 1911 and in the Balkans in 1912–1913, led to a radicalization of the ideas of some of the societies, to the formation of new societies, and to a number of revolutionary ventures. A fresh wave of the Arab movement broke out in Beirut in the last days of 1912. The Beirut reformers formed during January 1913 a society which was called the General Reform Society (al-Jamī’ya al-ṣumūmīya al-islāhīya) known also under the name Beirut Reform Society

48 The following convey a clear idea of its aims: Article 1. “The Ottoman State is a constitutional state with a representative parliamentary government. Every one of its vilayets (wilāya) is an inseparable part of the Sultanate which is itself indivisible under all circumstances. But the local administration of every vilayet will be on the basis of decentralization, it being understood that the sultan will appoint the wāli and the chief judge.” Article 2. “The purpose of establishing this party is to explain the virtues of a decentralized administration in the Ottoman Empire to the Ottoman Nation, which is composed of various races, languages, religions and customs, and to demand by all means a government based on the principles of administrative decentralization in all the vilayets of the Ottoman Empire.” In: Birrü, Al-ṣarab wa at-Turk fī al-ṣarhd ad-dustūr al-ṣūtūmānī, 1908–1914, p. 436.
The Society composed of eighty-six members of all creeds and elected by all the Millet Council representing every religious denomination in that town. The assembled delegates elected first an Executive Committee of 24 members and then drew up a programme of reforms composed fifteen articles. In its preamble, the Ottoman Government was defined as “a constitutional representative government”.

The programme fitted into the framework of existing administrative divisions and fully recognized Turkish domination. But it drew a distinction between questions of an imperial character, such as foreign affairs, defence, customs, postal and telegraph, national finances and communications, and questions of regional character, such as provincial administration and revenues and local services in the province. The latter were to be placed under a general council of the vilayet. This council would have the authority to depose the wālī by a two-thirds majority vote. According to Article 14, the Arabic language was to be recognized as the official language of the vilayet and as the official language, like Turkish.

The motives prompting the members of the Society were those which had led to the foundation in Cairo of the Decentralization Party with whom they acted in close contact, and their programme was no more than the practical expression of the principles advocated by the seekers of autonomy on the basis of decentralization. The programme was greeted with demonstrations of popular favour not only in the Syrian provinces, but also in Iraq. Public meetings were held in many towns and telegrams acclaiming the programme as being the expression of the universal desire in the Arab provinces poured into Constantinople. The answer of CUP was to issue at the end of March an order declaring the Society illegal and closing its club. The Decentralization Party in Cairo supported the Beirut Society and sent two strongly worded telegrams of protest, first to the Grand Vizier and the second to the wālī of Beirut himself.

Adopting a strong line the authorities arrested the principal leaders and suspended newspapers. There was general dismay and anger; the agitation increased and evoked demonstrations of solidarity in other parts of Syria. The government compromised: it released the arrested leaders and announced that reforms in the sense desired would be introduced. On 5 May a new Law of the Vilayets was promulgated, giving increased powers to the representative bodies in the provinces, but falling so far short of the Society’s programme that it came to be looked upon as a veiled step towards further centralization, tightening the grip of Constantinople on the Arabs and its stranglehold on liberty.

From the first, the Young Turks in power were divided between the two tendencies: the liberals, in favour of some measure of decentralization and some...
autonomous rights for the religious and national minorities, and the nationalists, coming out more and more clearly for central authority and Turkish domination. On 23 January 1913, when the cabinet was wrongly believed to be considering a proposal to cede Edirne to the Bulgarians, Enver Bey forced the Grand Vizier Kâmil Pasha to resign and the CUP secured full power. The CUP in power, hostile to the thought of decentralization, took measures to repress the agitation.

However, the Arab leaders did not cease to assert their demands. The most successful publicity operation staged by the nationalists was the holding of an Arab Congress from 18 to 23 June 1913 in Paris, in the Hall of the Geographic Society at Boulevard St. Germain. The Young Arab Society was the initiator of the project, which was supported by the Party of Administrative Decentralization, and by the Beirut Reform Society. The two most important items on the agenda for discussion were: the rights of the Arabs in the Ottoman Empire and the necessity for reforms on the basis of decentralization.

The Congress was attended by twenty-four delegates, two of whom were Iraqis, the rest of Syrian provenance or origin. The membership was almost exactly divided between Muslims and Christians, and the delegates were preponderantly Syrian. The purpose of the Congress was to publicize the current aims of the nationalists - the autonomy of the Arab provinces, Arab participation in the central administration, and the recognition of Arabic, along with Turkish, as an official language of the Ottoman Empire. Although the Ottoman government sent a delegate to the Congress to confer with nationalist leaders, only limited concessions were made to their demands. The proceedings were marked by frankness and a conciliatory tone, and the resolutions showed a desire for moderation.

The delegates were stressing the general desire to maintain the integrity of the empire provided the rights of the Arabs as partners were recognized and their cultural aspirations given free scope in a decentralized form of government. The sittings were attended by some 200 Arab listeners, and on the last day the doors of the congress were thrown open to all visitors without restriction and the deliberations were held in French. One speaker, reviewing the causes of dissension, touched the core of the problem when he exposed the fallacy in the CUP’s doctrine of centralization, and demonstrated why it would be suicidal for the Arabs to accept it. The Congress failed to coerce the government, and behind the façade of nationalist unity a serious rift existed between at least some of the Beirutis, whose objective was a Christian Lebanon, possibly under French protection, and the other delegates.

The Ottoman government did not remain passive in the face of the congress, which surely did not bring it good publicity. The Ambassador in Paris was ordered to try to get the congress cancelled, but his request to the French government was denied. The CUP, having failed to prevent the meeting of the Arab Congress in

54 Zeine, The Emergence of Arab Nationalism, p. 104.
Paris, sent their party secretary, Midhat Shukri to the French capital to negotiate with the members of the Congress and reach some agreement with them on the proposed reforms in the Arab provinces. An agreement on principles was arrived at, which the Arab leaders felt they could accept as a basis for further negotiation. The agreement reached in Paris was outwardly a victory for the Arabs. It granted them their points about regional military service, the use of Arabic as the official language of the Arab provinces. Education in primary and secondary schools was to be in Arabic.56

It is not known whether, in concluding such an agreement, Midhat Shukri had acted on instructions or had sought to conciliate the Arabs by a piece of self-contrived trickery. He may have been doing both. For, subsequently, when the terms of the agreement were whittled down to a negligible level, it was realized that the CUP leaders had never intended to ratify it. During the summer, there were several outward expressions of warm friendship and fraternity between the Arab leaders who came from Paris and the highest authorities of the Ottoman government. There were sumptuous banquets given by both sides at which eloquent and polished speeches were made on Arab-Turkish unity and brotherhood: it was a verbose repetition of the facile fraternization of 1908.57

On 18 August 1913, an imperial decree was issued, purporting to enact the provisions of the Paris agreement. The concessions had been scaled down considerably, and most of what was left was hedged with reservations and ambiguity. The decree did rule that Arabic was henceforth to be the medium in primary and secondary schools, but it added that secondary schools in provincial capitals—and all secondary schools were in those capitals—would continue to teach in Turkish. No mention was made of the adoption of Arabic as the official language. The appearance of the imperial decree caused dismay which presently turned to despair. For it gradually dawned upon the watchful Arabs that it, too, was only a blind, and that the CUP’s game was to sidetrack the issue. Perfunctory instructions were sent to the governors (waal) in certain Arab provinces to “pave the way for the eventual enforcement of the imperial decree”. The national agitation and the Paris congress had both failed in their main objectives, and the wave of feeling that had borne them along receded in a backwash of bitterness and despair. “No further attempt was made to come to an agreement with the CUP and, to make matters worse, the latter, having won the hand by a piece of chicanery, went on to press their advantage by a singularly ill-devised piece of severity.”58

Arab nationalism brewed as a negative movement because antagonism, rather than a doctrine of belief in shared values, shaped its course from the very beginning. The Syrian Arab Congress which convened in Paris in 1913 did not consider the

elements of Arab nationalism, not to mention defining them. Anti-Turkism constituted the sole ingredient of the unwrapped package of Arab nationalism. The delegates made no reference whatsoever to the idea of merging the Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire in a unitary state. Surprisingly, they accepted the Ottoman administrative divisions of Arab lands as unalterable entities.\(^\text{59}\)

In this early phase of the development of nationalist ideology and organizations, a leading part was played by men from the western Fertile Crescent; it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Arab nationalism began as the ideological response of the Syrian intelligentsia to late Ottoman rule. The Iraqi provinces had, however, a contribution to make. Officers of Iraqi origin formed an important element in the Ottoman army. They had taken part in al-Qahtānīya, but this society was allowed to lapse by its members, who suspected a spy in their midst.\(^\text{60}\) The failure of the moderate nationalists in the 1913 Congress was the opportunity of the extremists. The Arab officers in the Ottoman army were not the last to enter into the politics of Arab-Turkish relations and the question of the future of the Arabs in the Ottoman Empire.

The founding of al-Qahtānīya at the end of 1909 represented a landmark in the entry of Arab officers into political involvement. While the society was not limited to officers, a considerable number were involved. Among the founders was Salim al-Jazā'īrí of Damascus with the somewhat hesitant assistance of ʾAzīz ʿAlī al-Miṣrī. The latter was sent in 1910 to the Yemen as chief of staff for ʾIzzat Pasha. Because he helped in negotiations with the Imam, which ended on 9 October 1911 with an agreement, his prestige rose considerably. In late September 1911 Italy declared war on the Ottoman Empire and invaded Libya. In November a number of Ottoman officers were sent to Libya to organize the Sanūsī resistance movement against the Italians, among them Enver Bey and Muṣṭafā Kamāl Bey.\(^\text{61}\)

At the end of the year, ʾAzīz ʿAlī al-Miṣrī Bey volunteered to Libya where he covered himself with glory, leading the Arab resistance to Italian aggression. Several of his military achievements in battle against the Italians prevented them from advancing into the hinterland and won him great prestige in the Arab world. However, during his Libyan service he ran into conflict with Enver Bey. In the summer of 1913 he left Libya via Egypt returned to Constantinople, only to witness the slow extinction of Arab hopes in the months that followed the Paris congress. At the Ministry of War, he found disorder and corruption and a disposition to order the wholesale transfer of Arab officers stationed in the capital – including himself – to outlying provincial garrisons. He resigned his commission in disgust.\(^\text{62}\)

On 28 October 1913, and following the failure of the Paris congress to convince the Ottoman authorities to implement its programme of reform, Lieutenant Colonel ʾAzīz ʿAlī al-Miṣrī organized in Istanbul a new secret society of some fifty Arab officers in the Ottoman army, called the Covenant (al-ʾAhd), on the lines of al-

\(^{59}\) Khashan, Arabs at the Crossroads. Political Identity and Nationalism, p. 34.

\(^{60}\) Holt, Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, 1516–1922, p. 260.

\(^{61}\) Tauber, The Emergence of the Arab Movements, p. 217.

Qahtānīya. They decided to work for a “federal state”, based on the autonomous equality of all its ethnic communities and absolute religious tolerance, and considered Austria-Hungary a model for the empire. ʿAzīz ʿAlī al-Miṣrī dictated the society’s programme to Ṭāhā al-Ḥāshimī, the society’s secretary, and then printed it and gave a copy to Nūrī as-Ṣāʿīd, who took upon himself the task of recruiting additional Arab officers to the society.63

Only two civilians were admitted, and one of them was the amīr ʿĀdil Arslān. The Iraqi element, being the most numerous in the Ottoman army, was particularly strong in the councils of al-ʿAhd. ʿAzīz ʿAlī al-Miṣrī was on 9 February 1914 arrested, tried in camera at the end of March, and sentenced to death. This aroused protests mainly in Egypt and Lord Kitchener moved the Foreign Office to act. The sentence was not carried out, and on 21 April it was announced that ʿAzīz ʿAlī was pardoned and set free; he immediately returned to Egypt, where he was enthusiastically received.64 The Covenant society meanwhile grew and flourished. Branches were formed in Baghdad and Mosul, and the Covenant became in effect a military counterpart to the civilian Young Arab Society, although the two did not join forces until 1915.65

In al-Ḥijāz, the Sultan’s authority was – thanks to the completion of the railway line to Medina – more secure than elsewhere in Arabia. But sharīf Husayn ibn ʿAlī succeeded in restoring the hegemony of the sharifate over the tribes of al-Ḥijāz. At the outbreak of the First World War there was much discontent in the Arab provinces with the Young Turk régime. The anti-Arab and anti-Muslim spirit of Turkish nationalism expressed itself openly and violently on the eve of the war.66 This discontent was mainly felt and expressed by the élite of army officers and Western-educated civilians. It did not in itself constitute a serious threat to the Ottoman Empire: the nationalists did not overtly propose secession from the empire, and their forces were divided among a handful of ineffective conspiratorial groups. Four years later, Ottoman rule over the Arab provinces had ended, and the nationalists were in expectation of immediate independence.

The activists of all the trends numbered in all only a few hundred, a drop in the sea of Arab inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, the influence of the various societies on the Arab population was quite limited. Despite the small number of members, the societies constituted a turning point in the history of the Arab Middle East: the activists and the ideologues of the various trends went from words to deeds as they attempted to realize the ideologies in which they believed. In the framework of these societies, whether of the general Arab movement or of the local ones the national movements of the modern Arab Middle East began to take form. Besides their being the foundry of the national movements in this region these societies were also the forge that produced the Arab leadership after the First World War.67