

BOOK REVIEWS

Sorby, K. ml. *Arabi, islám a výzvy modernej doby* [Sorby, K. Jr. *The Arabs, Islam and the challenges of modern times*]. Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 2007. 234 p. ISBN 978-80-8095-009-5.

The amount of the home scholarly production dealing with the Arabs and modern Islam is disproportionately small considering the local and global importance of the phenomenon. Sorby's monograph is a welcome contribution to fill this long-lasting gap.

In my review, I would like to focus attention on those aspects of the author's analysis which exceed the limits of the defined key notions, like patriotism, panarabism, panislamism, nationalism, to become part of the global dimension of Islam and its compatibility with the world beyond *dār al-islām*.

The book consists of the following parts:

Preface (pp. 1-5),

Introduction (pp. 7-12), and the seven chapters as follows:

1. Islam and the National State (pp. 13-38),

2. The Emergence of Arab National Awareness (pp. 39-66),

3. The Arab National Movement after the Young Turk Revolution (1908-1914) (pp. 67-93),

4. The Arab National Movement during World War I (pp. 95-122),

5. The Arab Kingdom in Syria and its End (pp. 123-152),

6. The Arab National Movement from the Disintegration of the Ottoman Empire until the Egyptian Revolution 1952 (pp. 153-192),

Conclusion (pp. 193-204),

Literature (pp. 205-218),

Maps and photographs (pp. 219-228) and

Index (pp. 229-234).

In the Preface (pp. 1-6), some of the basic notions are defined in relation to their place and function in the thematic structure of the monograph. The composite phenomenon of nationalism, as the fundamental political manifestation of social changes in the Near East, is certainly the most important of them. To facilitate the reading of the Arabic terms and proper names some phonetic hints accompany the list of transcription symbols (p. 6).

The main lines of thought underlying the subsequent analysis and the author's chief arguments are exposed in the Introduction. The relationship between panislamism and nationalism, possibly viewed as that between Islam and the secular world, is a relationship of immense importance which transgresses the territorial frame of the Near East as well as the chronological limits of the 19th and 20th centuries. The author hints at the confrontational relationship of these ideologies at this introductory stage to point out its universal dimension and its unpredictable political implications. The perspective of secular nationalism came into being together with the emergence of panislamism in the era of culminating colonial expansion and exercised considerable impact on the Arab reformers. They understood that the only way to face the progress of colonization was to free Islam from politics and world affairs, an aim that failed to be realized up to now. This crucial fact, analysed from various angles in the following paragraphs, is the centre of gravity of the monograph.

Apart from these anticipated remarks, the Introduction provides first-hand information of the sources used, mainly those of Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣṣī, the pioneer and chief theorist of traditional panislamism.

The first three chapters of the monograph (Islam and the National State, The Emergence of Arab National Awareness, The Arab National Movement after the Young Turk Revolution (1908-1914)), follow the rise and evolution of the Arab national movement and its position on the Near Eastern cultural and political scene up to the outbreak of World War I.

The idea of the national state came from the West and has no support in Islam and its religious and legal institutions. The only way to define the nation, in the realm of Arab cultural tradition, consists in stressing the cultural and religious legacy of the past. The separation of Islam from its political claims is an imperative challenge of modernity and the failure to meet this challenge is the major problem of the world of Islam that reappears over and over again in various contexts of Sorby's monograph.

Sorby, analysing the evolution of the institutional manifestations of nationalism in an ambience of conflict between the imported secularism and the dominant tradition, succeeded in identifying the major problem of modern Islam with far-reaching global implications: its persistent duality of religious and legal attributes. The author is neither the first nor the only to point out the problem, his merit lies in providing new evidence for it. This evidence is derived from his newly conceived analysis of the evolution of Arab statehood, modelled by the conflict between secular and traditional, on the historical scene of several expertly selected intervals.

The remaining three chapters focus on the state of the Arab national movement and its institutional manifestations. The gradual transition of cultural panarabism, the inseparable part of which is the whole complex of the Arab cultural legacy (*turāt taqāfi*) inclusive of Islam and its religious and legal institutions, into a secularly conceived national identity, provokes serious methodological problems. Answering at first sight trivial questions, like 'what is *'urūba?*', 'who may be called Arab?' is not altogether easy.

At present, adequate answers to similar questions do not exist at all, and they cannot be expected until the persisting cultural tradition loses its overwhelming dominance over the secular view of the world. In various paragraphs of his book,

Sorby points out the high political importance of defining the concept of nation since the latter had passed a very long way from the primitive Muslim community (*umma*) up to the modern concept of the nation as a fully autonomous secular entity.

The approaching onslaught of the imperialistic powers into the Near Eastern political scene is signalled by Chapter 4 (The Arab National Movement during World War I), nevertheless, the political intrigues accompanying the distribution of the former Arab vilayets which had developed to the full after WW I, are analysed in Chapter 5 (The Arab Kingdom in Syria and its End).

The dominant point of view guiding the analysis of serious conflicts between British and French imperialistic interests in the distribution of the Ottoman legacy, which did not cease even after the Sykes-Picot agreement, is that of Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī. Al-Ḥuṣrī definitely rejected this agreement as well as all ensuing acts of political violence because it did not take into account the legitimate national claims of the Arabs. He identified the immediate goal of the Arab national movement with the Arab state which came into being in Syria under Fayṣal ibn al-Ḥusayn's regime (March 2 - July 25 1920). As a minister in Fayṣal's government, Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī started an ambitious reform program, aiming at promoting the position of the Arabic language and modernizing public education.

In the years following the collapse of Ottoman Empire until the Egyptian revolution of 1952 the centre of panarabism moved to Iraq which was, by that time, best prepared for the task of propagating and implanting the idea of Arab unity. In this time, the Near Eastern political scene had to reckon with Zionism as a real ideological entity and the threat of massive immigration of Jewish settlers to Palestine had become imminent. In 1945 The Arab League came into existence, three years thereafter, the state of Israel. At that time, on the political scene a charismatic Arab leader appeared, Ḡamāl 'Abdannāṣir, with an entirely new definition of panarabism as a politics of non-alignment (*siyāsat 'adam al-inḥiyāz*). The battle between the Zionists and Palestinian Arabs further escalated and turned into a battle between panarabism and Zionism.

A brief summary of the main topics and arguments of the monograph shows that its proper subject is nationalism and its ideological varieties, marked by the dominant impact of cultural and religious tradition, which constitute the determining power of all social changes in the Near East. The rise of Arab nationalism is conceived as a multifactorial process motivated by the growth and progress of Turkish nationalism in the last stages of disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and by the Arab reaction to this process which took the shape of panarabism. The search for one's own identity in the dramatic cultural conflict between the tradition-minded Near East and more liberal and secular West, proved to be an equally efficient factor supporting the rise and progress of nationalism.

The book evaluates an extraordinarily vast collection of sources of both Arab and Western provenance. In the confusing overflow of opinions and frequently controversial interpretations of sensitive problems of Near Eastern policy, the author managed to clearly define his point of view and support it with reliable material evidence. The book will address not only Arabists and historians, offering answers to several disturbing problems of our time, it will no doubt attract the attention of a much wider audience.

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