

Modern Expectations: Demands for Reform by the Arabs in the Late Ottoman Empire

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Abstract

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Arabs of the Ottoman Empire established many societies to demand reforms within the empire. While the demands took a great variety of forms, the content and how they were voiced were results of the impact of modernity. The Arabs used modern ideas like representation and participation, and modern techniques to create public opinion and make themselves heard. Thus the Arabs were shaped by modernization and in turn they wanted to shape and participate in modernization in the Empire. However, there was a great diversity of opinion among Arabs, and this undermined their attempts to create unified front against the government. The Ottoman government recognized some of the demands and implemented limited reforms, while taking advantage of the divisions between the Arabs. The dynamics of the reform demands were shaped by contemporary developments internal and external to the empire, and these dynamics also coloured the content and intensity of the demands.

Key Words: Modernization, nationalism, Arab societies, Arab Congress of 1913, Young Turks, Abdülhamid II, the Committee of Union and Progress.

1. Introduction

The nineteenth and early twentieth century were times of great change for the world and for the Ottoman Empire. This period witnessed the introduction of many new ideas, and also the creation of new identities, and the new national ideas and identities were of course prominent among these innovations. However, national ideas and identities were not the only ones which competed on the late-Ottoman political stage. Liberal and modern demands, such as the establishment of constitutional and representative governments, extensions of freedom of speech, resistance to traditional sources of authority, anxiety at European encirclement and a call for social justice, were among the demands shared by many of the political currents of the age.

During the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire had been through a series of modernizing reforms which changed its political, administrative and social structure. Some of these reforms were initiated by

the state like the *Tanzimat* (reorganization) reforms (1839-1876) and the reforms of the Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909) and others were imposed on the state by new groups such as the Young Turks. The Young Turks were a group composed not only of Turks, as the name suggests, but included members from many other communities in the empire, such as Arabs, Armenians and Albanians. Equipped with the modern ideas of constitutionalism, equality, liberty and fraternity, they sought to change the empire and make it a truly modern state, following in the footsteps of the French Revolution. On the other hand, the French and later British “presence” in Egypt, along with modernization program of Muhammad Ali (1768-1849), provided a model for development, while allowing new ideas of reform to gestate in Egypt. It would be wrong, however, to assume that all of the people who wanted to change the empire, including the Arabs, had similar ideas about what this change was to be, how their conditions in the empire were to be improved or how this change was to be realized. Moreover, many people changed their minds along the way.

Yet even though the ideas and identities of the period were very fluid and permeable, this fact is generally ignored when looking at the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. For decades, Ottoman Arab politics in this period were studied with lenses that depicted nationalism as the one and only paradigm to explain the developments that occurred. Thus the literature on the Arabs of this period generally focused on the origins and development of Arab nationalism. This trend can be said to have started with George Antonious’ *Arab Awakening*. However, his views on the development of Arab political consciousness have been challenged by a variety of revisionist historians, including, but not limited to, Zeine Zeine, Albert Hourani, Abdul Latif Tibawi and Ernest Dawn. More recently, historians like Hasan Kayali and Ilham Khuri-Makdisi have challenged the generally accepted narratives of the formation and development of ideas among the Ottoman Arabs, and of their relationship with the Ottoman state¹. Taking these new views into account, I will try to avoid presenting the reform demands expressed by the Arabs in a teleological perspective, with a fully fledged revolutionary nationalism as its result, and offer instead an account of modern expectations, uncertainty and multiplicity. What I would like to attempt in this article is to avoid *ex post facto* perceptions of nationalism, and therefore also to avoid its myths of unity and unidirectionality. What I suggest is taking a broader view of the reform demands of the Ottoman Arabs, placing them in the context of the broader advent of modernity. This context encompasses the impact of modernity as well as how modernity is produced by its participants.

That said, the following account does not include modern Islamic reform movements or the societies formed by Arabs in Europe, the Americas or other places to which Arabs emigrated. While the impact of the latter remains to be studied, the literature on the former is very rich. In this study,

the focus is on the liberal demands made by the Arabs of the Ottoman Empire who were transformed by their contact with modernity, and who wanted in turn to transform the state.

All the peoples of the empire were shaped by modernization, and they in turn shaped modernization in the empire as well. These Ottoman communities used modern ideas and techniques to create public opinion and make themselves heard. Arabs were among the groups who were changed and wanted change. Again, it would be wrong to assume that Arabs were a homogeneous “national” group composed of members who wanted the same thing. They were, like the many other communities of the empire, divided among themselves on religious, regional, social, economic and ideological grounds, and also how in the extent to which they were touched by modernity. The emphasis here will be on those who voiced their demands *vis-à-vis* the Ottoman state, especially to the Committee of Union and Progress (the most radical wing of the Young Turks, hereafter the CUP), and who moreover voiced them through secret and open societies, political parties and a foreign congress, and thus in the shape of modern institutions, using modern methods.

2. Organized Arab Reform Demands in the Ottoman Empire

The modernization of the empire inaugurated by the *Tanzimat* and pursued by the Young Turks necessitated the expansion of the state apparatus and its domain. The modern state required loyal citizens who were able to operate in a unified modern realm. In order to accomplish this aim, the state implemented new methods; it unified the legal system, gave equal status to all of its citizens, and introduced centralized education. A closer relationship with Western powers, whether in the shape of merchants and missionaries working on the Ottoman lands or in the shape of students who went to the West for education, also furthered the modern ideas. Meanwhile, new ideologies were being formed such as Ottomanism, Islamism and Turkism, and these contributed to the introduction and establishment of new identities in the empire, including among the Arabs. At the same time, the loss of the Balkans in 1878 had accentuated the Muslim character of the empire. Moreover, with the gradual imposition of the Turkish languages on the provinces throughout the nineteenth century, the language became an increasingly pressing issue. In this new atmosphere, Arabs equipped with modern ideas started to underline their position in the empire, and they demanded reforms. They wanted the state to formally recognize the qualities that made them Arab, especially the Arabic language, and they wanted their voices to be heard. Recognition of Arabic as a legitimate language in the state institutions in the Arab provinces was a very important issue for Arab

reformers, and others still demanded recognition of Arabic as a second official language.

Initially, the greater social equality that the *Tanzimat* defined was not welcomed by all of the Muslims of the empire, since they perceived that their privileged position in regard to non-Muslims was to be compromised. The Christians of the empire were sceptical as well, for they did not want to lose certain rights, like exemption from military service. However, later in the century, some of the Muslim and Christian Arabs embraced the idea of equality, and they actively demanded it in the shape of representation and participation. Yet they resented the centralization which went hand in hand with modernization reforms because it did not allow them to be active participants and it curbed their freedom. Sultan Abdülhamid II used a variety of methods in order to consolidate his power and implement his modernizing policies. These same methods were also used by the members of the CUP during the Second Constitutional Period (1908-1918).

The first organized demands made by Arabs pre-date the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II and the CUP, since the impact of modernizing reforms of the *Tanzimat* started to be felt around the mid-century. One of the most influential books of the literature on Arab nationalism, George Antonius' *The Arab Awakening*, regards a *Syrian Scientific Society* (al-Jam'iyah al-'Ilmiyah al-Suriyah) found in the year 1857 in Syria² as the root of all Arab nationalist movements. This society underlined the achievement of the Arabs, the glories of Arabic literature and the future inspired by this past, while inviting Syrians to shake off the Turkish yoke³. Eliezer Tauber⁴ and Zeine N. Zeine⁵ underline that the nationalistic character of this society is questionable. What is undeniable is the new establishment of societies and the broad nature of the demands that they put forward. The *Syrian Scientific Society* was not the only one; other similar societies were active in Syria as well as in several European countries. This shows that there were movements in the late nineteenth century reacting to the oppression imposed by the government and asserting Arab identity in the shape of demands for the usage of Arabic and more administrative decentralization. On the other hand, during this period the need for reforms was recognized by the Ottoman state; officials who were sent to the Arab provinces like Midhat Paşa (who was governor of Syria from 1878 to 1880) started to implement some tentative reforms.

The demands voiced in the Arab provinces were far from homogenous, however. The people who put forward the demands tended to be the elites of the society, since in order to participate in modern methods of making demands, they needed to have been touched by modernization. Modernization in the empire affected foremost the urban elites, both in the capital and in the provinces. Nevertheless, the elites were not composed of any single group. There were ideological, social and economic differences as well as regional and religious differences. Their positions in the system were

varied, and thus they demanded different things from the state. The Arabs had already put forward their demands for reform before the arrival of the Young Turks and CUP rule. However, the intensity of the demands can be said to have increased during the Second Constitutional Period of CUP rule, between 1909 and 1918: firstly, as a result of expectations of a new and more egalitarian rule; secondly, because of the failure of this expectation; and finally, as a result of external factors.

With the reinstatement of the constitution in 1908 and the introduction of liberties that were restricted under autocratic rule of Abdülhamid II, the reform demands could be put forward publicly in the capital city. A new and public Arab society called *al-Ikha' al-'Arabi al-'Uthmani* (The Ottoman Arab Fraternity) was founded in 1908 at the initiation of Arabs living in Istanbul, and with the attendance of some members of the CUP.⁶ Its goals were to protect the Constitution, to unite all races in loyalty to the Sultan, to promote the welfare of the Arab provinces on a footing of real equality with the other races of the empire, to spread education in the Arabic tongue and to foster the observance of Arab customs.⁷ These voiced aims, which underlined unity and loyalty, were enough to make the CUP sympathetic to the society, though some Arabs had reservations about the intentions of its founders.⁸ Some argued that the members were only looking to keep their privileged status after the political change that took place in the capital city. In addition, the fraternity lacked substantial organization in the Arab provinces, and it needed to rely on local notables, and hence did not constitute a uniform group. Such tensions point out the divisions within the Arab elites. However, the initial atmosphere of unity within the empire created by the re-declaration of the constitution proved short-lived.

The call for Arab independence was present in the early Second Constitutional Period, but it came predominantly from Arabs outside⁹ the empire. Arab deputies in the parliament openly condemned calls for independence for their provincialism. Meanwhile the deputies of the Arab provinces tried to establish an Arab group within the parliament, through which they demanded more proportional representation in the parliament and more local authority. However, this attempt was enough to make the CUP suspicious of Arab demands. Eventually, the March 31st incident (April 13th, 1909) brought an end to the *al-Ikha' al-'Arabi al-'Uthmani*. This happened on two levels: the first one was the rumours about the society having a close relationship with the *İttihad-ı Muhammedi Fırkası* (Muhammadan Union Society) which was considered to be the force behind the March 31st incident; the second was the ban on societies with ethnic bases which was introduced by the CUP.

Arab elites sought to find other ways to express their ideas and demands, and they thus conducted their activities both in the open and in

secret. Between 1909 and 1910 the *Mutedil Hürriyetperveren Fırkası* (Moderate Liberal Party) and *Ahali Fırkası* (People's Party) were established, and included many Arab deputies. Even though the former was an opposition party, its program condemned decentralization as a source of Ottoman disintegration¹⁰ and advocated an Islamic path to modernization. Nonetheless, the program included articles about protecting local languages. On the other hand, even though the Arab deputies were participating in political parties and were active in the parliament, the low number of Arab deputies vis-à-vis Turkish ones was a major issue of discontent and dispute, and was to remain so for years to come.¹¹

The Arabs' activities outside the parliament manifested themselves in the shape of public and secret societies. *Al-Muntada al-Adabi* (the Literary Club) was founded in Istanbul in the summer of 1909 by some Arab elites¹² with the aim of providing a meeting place for visiting Arabs and Arab youth studying in the capital. The plan of the society was presented to the minister for the *Evqaf*, Khalil Himadeh Paşa, who supported its establishment.¹³ Even though the Ottoman Arab Fraternity was banned, its assets were transferred to a new society.¹⁴ The same year, another new Arab society was established, but this time it was a secret nationalist society. *Al-Qahtaniyya*'s aim was to turn the Ottoman Empire into a dual monarchy, similar to the Austro-Hungarian structure, composed of Arabs and Turks, where Arabs would have their own parliament, local government and institutions using the Arabic language. However due to difference of opinion among members, the society disintegrated and gave way to new societies like *al-Ahd* (The Covenant). However *al-Qahtaniyya* was not the first secret society in the second constitutional era: the *Jamiyat al-Arabiya al-Fatat*¹⁵ (The Young Arab Society) was founded in Paris in November 14, 1909 by a group of Muslim Arab students.¹⁶ They demanded equal status for Arabs within the framework of the Ottoman Empire. After the wars in North Africa and the Balkans in 1913, the society began to support Arab independence. *Jamiyat al-Arabiya al-Fatat*, which is considered the most influential Arab society, grew steadily, and its headquarters shifted to Beirut in 1913, and later to Damascus,¹⁷ where they had more opportunity to meet and work with other similar societies like *Hizb al-Lamarkaziyya al-Idariyya al-'Uthmani* (The Ottoman Administrative Decentralization Party).

Hizb al-Lamarkaziyya al-Idariyya al-'Uthmani was a public society founded in Cairo towards the end of 1912 by Syrian Arabs who took refuge in Egypt. This society was well-organized and had branches in the Arab provinces. The aims of the society were to pressure the rulers to accept the necessity of the decentralization in administrations and to mobilize Arab public opinion to support decentralization.¹⁸ The first article of its program recognized the Ottoman Empire as a unified entity with a constitutional regime. The following articles included the demands that the local language

be the official language of the administration and of education in the provinces. Local military service, a more egalitarian composition of the Ottoman Parliament and the usage of local taxes in the provinces were also in the program. The program stressed the need for and a plan of decentralization.¹⁹

The issue of decentralization as a means to save the integrity of the empire was on the agenda of many Ottoman citizens. These endeavours found their manifestations in party formations such as *Ahrar Fırkası* and *Hürriyet ve Ahrar Fırkası*. As mentioned, these parties were supported by many Arabs. There was a close relationship between *Hürriyet ve Ahrar Fırkası* and *Hizb al-Lamarkaziyya al-Idariyya al-'Uthmani*.²⁰ *Hizb al-Lamarkaziyya al-Idariyya al-'Uthmani* managed to spread its ideas via Rashid Riza's *al-Manar*, who regarded decentralization as a solution to the empire's troubles, but not as a step on the road to separation. On the other hand, some Arabs voiced objections to the idea of decentralization. Abdülaziz Çaviş, who is known as an Ottomanist, argued that decentralization would make the empire more open to foreign intervention, and therefore it was a means of separation for those who wanted independence.²¹

There are also certain external events and factors that contributed to the rise of the opposition, and the estrangement between the Arabs and the CUP. To name a few, the economic concessions given to European powers, Zionist settlement debates, uprisings within the empire and the Italo-Ottoman War in Tripolitania (1911-1912) all made their mark on Arab-CUP relations. These issues heightened Arab fears about their physical and economic security. For example, the CUP, attempting to improve the finances of the state, agreed with the British Lynch company to grant some concessions in Iraq. This in turn caused the Arab representatives in the parliament to react violently against the decision as a united front. The issue ended with a change of *Sadrizam*, who reversed the decision. Nonetheless, the issue empowered those who supported the decentralization of the empire, as well as planting the seeds of Arab distrust of the CUP as agents who were ready to dismiss the needs and demands of the Arab provinces. The Jewish settlement question, which underlined the issue of inequality and lack of participation in the decision-making process of the empire, had a similar result. However, Arab deputies were also divided on the issue.

The third issue, and the one that perhaps made the greatest impact, was the quasi-war with Italy in 1911 which led to the loss of Tripolitania. This loss created discontent and anxiety among the Arabs, who feared foreign intervention. It also showed that the centralization policies of the government were not effective and/or meaningful in ensuring the territorial integrity of the empire. All these factors contributed to the unification of the opposition under the *Hürriyet ve İtilaf Fırkası* in 1911. The founders of the party

included prominent Arabs such as Abd al-Hamid al-Zahrawi²². In the 1912 elections many Arabs seem to have supported the *Hürriyet ve İtilaf Fırkası*. However none of the deputies who cooperated with the party managed to get elected due to the activities of the CUP, and only fifteen deputies were re-elected. The percentage of Turks elected from the Arab provinces increased substantially.²³ This election, which is known as the “*Sopalı Seçimler*” (the big-stick election) might help one to understand the pressure that the CUP applied to the political sphere. However, the victory gained at the polls was not translated into victory in government, and the CUP was pushed away from power. While the elections exacerbated the tension, a more pressing issue, namely the war in the Balkans (1912-1913), took the central stage.

The losses in the Balkans created more panic, and this did not go unnoticed by Ottoman officials in the Arab provinces. The governor of Beirut, Edhem Bey, appealed to *Sadrazam* Kamil Paşa for reforms to maintain the integrity of the Arab provinces.²⁴ Upon receiving a positive response, he gathered a committee composed of two Christians and two Muslims to prepare a plan to be presented to the provincial public council. This committee was turned into *Cemiyet-i Islahiye* (Society of Reform) in 1912, in order to transform it into a body which represented the whole of the public. This manifestation of apparent unity was appreciated by the capital. The society completed the plan in January. The first article asserted that the external affairs of the province of Syria– the army, customs, post and telegraph, legislation and taxes– were to be in the hands of the central administration, while the internal affairs were to be placed under a General Council of the Province. This council would also have the authority to depose the governor by a two-thirds majority vote. The fourteenth article stated that the Arabic language was to be recognized as the official language of the province, and, as an official language like Turkish, in the chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The fifteenth shortened military service, and it was to be performed within the *vilayet*.²⁵ However, in 1913 the “*Bab-ı Ali Baskını*” raid of the Sublime Porte restored the CUP to power and changed the cabinet and deprived the society of the support of *Sadrazam* Kemal Paşa and the governor Edhem Bey, who was replaced by Ebubekir Hazım Bey, known to be a supporter of the CUP.²⁶ Nevertheless, the reform plan was presented to the new governor, but received no warm welcome. While this created disillusionment among the members of *Cemiyet-i Islahiye*, the real blow came with the news informing the committee that the government had decreed their dissolution.²⁷ The press and the public reacted very seriously: in Beirut all shops were closed and the newspapers appeared framed in borders with black, announcing only the order of dissolution. As the principal leaders were arrested, agitation increased. Mahmut Şevket Paşa sent a telegraph saying that if the protestors had demands, they needed to send their representatives to the parliament to make their voices heard. He also

announced the finalization of the new *Vilayet Kanunu*²⁸ (Provincial Law). This provincial law gave increased powers to representative bodies in the provinces, but fell far short of responding to all of the Arabs' demands. However, in the face of reactions from the Arab provinces, certain conciliatory steps were taken after April 1913, such as allowing the use of Arabic language in courts and schools.

Meanwhile Arab societies continued to be established. Early in 1913 Aziz Ali established a new society called *al-Ahd* in Istanbul which was composed of mainly military officers and only two civilians.²⁹ The society accused the CUP of implementing Turkification policies and demanded greater autonomy, even though the society had members who demanded full independence as well. The Iraqis were strong in this organization, and they founded branches in Baghdad and Mosul. With the arrest of General Aziz Ali al-Misri in 1913, the Iraqis established *Al Jamiat al-Thawriyye* (Arab Revolutionary Society),³⁰ which was to play an active role in the Arab revolt to come. After Aziz Ali was imprisoned and then pardoned by the government, he went to Egypt to found a new society: *Cemiyet'üs Suriyet'ül Arabiyye* (Syrian Revolutionary Society), which can be viewed as the continuation of *al-Ahd*. However the society differed from *al-Ahd* in the sense that it demanded independence rather than autonomy, and took quite a hard stance against Turkish rule. Nonetheless, there were other attempts on the part of the Arabs of the Ottoman Empire to voice their demands within the constitutional framework and make the government put them in action. To this end, the Arabs decided to hold a congress in Paris, just as had been done previously by the Young Turks.

3. The Arab Congress of 18th-24th June, 1913

According to Ali Bilgenoğlu, there were several reasons for calling an Arab congress.³¹ The first was the desire to take the Ottoman Arabs' problems and demands into the international arena, and the other was to bring all the societies together to communicate the demands to the government in one voice. Others argue that the idea was primarily born out of the realization that the societies were not going to be able to achieve their goals by themselves. An Arab Congress was a good way to put pressure on the Ottoman government to accept the Arab demands for reform. The organizers of the committee were *Jamiyat al-Arabiya al-Fatat* and *Hizb al-Lamarkaziyya al-Idariyya al-'Uthmani*. Among the prime instigators and chief movers of the congress were Syrians living in Paris, such as Shukri Ghanim. The founders of *al-Fatat* invited *Hizb ak-Lamarkaziyya al-Idariyya al-'Uthmani* from Cairo and many others from Syria to attend the congress in Paris. This congress was to be on issues of national life, the struggle against foreign

occupation, Arab rights in the Ottoman lands, the need for reform based on decentralization and migration to and from Syria.³²

Antonius argues that the enthusiasm of the organizers was so great that they rushed the preparations and that therefore only scant notice was given to the outlying Arab provinces. Thereby, he suggests, the limited participation was related to their alacrity. However it is now known that there was no unanimous approval of the congress among the Arab elites, which probably affected the level of participation. Among the delegation selected to be representatives of the Reform Society of Beirut were Salim Ali Salam, Sheikh Tabbara and Albert Sursuq, who hesitated to attend. Salam was hesitant due to the fact that the congress was held in a Christian state, and that, to a certain extent, it was against the Ottoman authorities. Salam and Tabbara participated in the end but Sursuq did not.³³ On the other hand, Arabs who were in close contact with the government and benefited from it denounced the congress. Among them were Muhammad Fawzi Paşa al-Azam, Sharif Ali Haydar, Aziz Ali al-Misri, Amir Shakib Arslan and Sharif Husayn of Mecca.³⁴ Their objections varied, but it seems that the focus was on the congress being a tool for foreign interests (the fact that the congress was held in the French capital aggravated the situation) and it being an act of treason towards the Ottoman lands. The personal ambitions of the organizers were also mentioned.

With simultaneous protests and support all over the Ottoman Empire, the congress met on the 18th of June in Paris. Half of the participants were Muslims, the other half were Christians and there was one Jewish delegate. Most of the participants were from Syria and there were Syrians from the New World diaspora (three from New York and one from Mexico) and there were also two delegates from Iraq. There were around two hundred Arab listeners, and on the last day the doors were opened to the public, and the deliberations were made in French. The speeches delivered during the congress dealt with a variety of issues.³⁵ For example, Al-Zahrawi underlined the obligation to work together with Turks, but that this cooperation should be on the basis of decentralization. He also asserted that "Europe is not the devil, but rather the devil is bad administration and corrupt politics." Others underlined the issue of decentralization and accused the regime of placing power in the hands of a few individuals, namely the CUP, and they voiced resentments of the unfair position of Arabs *vis-à-vis* Turks in the empire. On the other hand, a distinct Arab identity was asserted, and solidarity between Christian and Muslim Arabs was underlined. Reform nationalism, and migration were among the other subjects voiced by the participants. While loudly rejecting the accusations of any desire to secede, ultimatums were nonetheless given during the talks. The resolutions put forward at the end of the conference were along the same lines as the talks, and reflected many of the demands put forward earlier by the different societies. The most

important of these were about reforms and their immediate implementation. They demanded guarantees of their political rights and thus their active participation in the the central administration of the empire. This participation demanded the state's recognition of their distinct culture, as can be seen from their demand for the recognition of the Arabic language in the Ottoman parliament, as well as its recognition as the official language of the Arab provinces. They also demanded the decentralization of powers to the Arab provinces in order to ensure participation in governance as well as in the implementation of reforms, both according to the needs and customs of the Arab provinces. Decentralization was demanded not only as a means to ensure recognition of Arab language and customs, but also to ensure the financial and physical security of the Arab provinces. Articles demanding the appointment of foreign advisers to the province of Beirut (which had represented its demands in a special list on 31st January 1913), improvement of the financial situation in the *mutasarrifiyya* of Lebanon and that military service be done locally within provinces, all underline these financial and physical concerns.³⁶

While there were no articles mentioning demands for independence, there were plenty of implicit ultimatums. While the resolutions were to be sent to the Ottoman government, very much like the Young Ottoman Congresses held in 1902 and 1907, thus acknowledging the legitimacy of the Ottoman government, they also declared that the resolutions would be sent to governments friendly to the Ottoman Empire. This was an attempt to internationalize their demands, and was thus a means to put pressure on the Ottoman government. The resolutions also included an article that thanked the French government for its hospitality. The congress issued an article that expressed its sympathy with the demands of the Ottoman Armenians for decentralization. They therefore demanded that all the elements of the empire join the administration, and at the same time they demanded that the inhabitants of the provinces administer their own affairs. On the other hand, there were open ultimatums in the appendixes to the resolutions. These informed the government that the members of the Arab reform societies would avoid accepting any formal positions whatsoever in the Ottoman government.

This last statement was a result of many discussions within the congress. Some argued that no one should accept government positions until the demanded reforms were implemented, while others went one step further and asked all Arabs to resign their posts immediately. Another controversy was on the matter of receiving the help of foreigners, with some regarding this as meaning foreign intervention. In fact, some of the resolutions and articles in the appendix were slightly changed when transmitted to the European powers to differentiate Syrian from other Arab provinces as separate entities. This, along with the initial debates on the composition and

aim of the congress, underlines the regional differences within the Arab participants. Therefore this congress, again much like the Young Turk congresses in Paris in 1902 and 1907, was organized to reconcile such differences and determine a unified course of action against the government. This was made clear in the appendix, where the resolutions were declared to be the political program of the Ottoman Arabs. This included an internal ultimatum as well; it was declared that no candidate for election to the parliament would be assisted unless they committed themselves to this program and its implementation.

The reaction of the CUP to the congress was negotiation. Just like Sultan Abdülhamid II sent envoys to Europe to contact and lure the CUP participants with carrots and sticks, the CUP sent party secretary Mithat Şükrü (Bleda) to Paris with instructions to enter into negotiations with the leaders of the congress. However before Mithat Şükrü went to Paris, preparatory steps were taken in Istanbul with the prominent Arabs in the capital. The CUP approached Abd al-Karim al-Khalil, the president of the Literary Club. Al-Khalil was the secretary of Ali Haydar, a supporter of the CUP. Talat Paşa, one of the leaders of the CUP, and al-Khalil reached an agreement on reforms.³⁷ While Talat Paşa signed the document on behalf of the CUP, al-Khalil signed the documents in the name of the Arabs. Al-Khalil was also sent to Paris along with Bleda.³⁸ The arrival of the CUP representative exacerbated tensions among the Arabs; the Christian Arabs of the congress declined to enter into negotiations, whereas the Muslim Arabs were suspicious of the Christian Muslims and were willing to open negotiations. In the end a new agreement was signed between Mithat Şükrü and the members of the congress. This agreement not only recognized the demands put forward by the Congress of 1913, but also took concrete steps towards the fuller participation of Arabs in the government and the administration. The use of the Arabic language in the administration and in education was one of the most important concerns of all these above-mentioned societies. The agreement, while not recognizing Arabic as an official language with equal footing to the Ottoman language, agreed to its use in elementary and secondary school education and even in the higher education, provided it was the language of the majority in a particular province. Moreover, it accepted that all official activities in the Arab provinces were to be conducted in Arabic, and all leading officials except the governor were to know Arabic. The decentralization demands were met by asserting that the officials were to be appointed by the province and that the power of the local councils would be expanded. The agreement also recognized the appointment of foreign expert supervisors in provinces which required them. On the issue of Arab participation in the central government and administration, there were detailed articles. Three Arabs in the government, at least five Arab governors, and ten *Mutasarrifs* would be

appointed, and Arabs would be appointed to the senate at a rate of two for every province. Last but not least, the recurrent demand that soldiers stay in their provinces was at least partly met by asserting that they would serve in nearby countries.

It was decided to keep the agreement secret until it was approved by the CUP, but it was soon leaked to the press. The Unionists pursued a strategy of complete denial.³⁹ The government announced that it would implement the reforms that were proclaimed on August 2nd, which were much more limited than those agreed in Paris. Even though the *Sadrizam* expressed his pleasure that “The misunderstandings between Arabs and the Turks had finally been eliminated,”⁴⁰ and though Talat Paşa later denied the existence of any misunderstanding whatsoever, the program greatly disappointed the Arab community. The Sultan’s decree, published on 23 August, deepened the disappointment further since the government’s program was whittled down to a negligible level. Meanwhile, al-Khalid did not give up and continued trying to convince the Arabs of the goodwill of the government. He asked the members of the congress to come and supervise the implementation of the reforms, and some congress participants arrived, being met with great welcome by some Arabs and several members of the CUP. This excitement was not shared by all, though. Opponents of the congress reiterated that the congress did not represent all Arabs. This gave the CUP an opportunity to create further divisions among the Arabs.

The warm welcome did not mean immediate implementation of the reforms. Gradually, as the delay increased the feeling of distrust towards the government, new waves of protest appeared. In October the Decentralization Party in Cairo made it known that even though they were loyal to the throne, their patience had limits. They repeated their demands for freedom of representation, freedom of education in the Arabic language, freedom in matters of public work and economic affairs and the issue of Arabic becoming recognized as the official language in the Arab provinces. Meanwhile, al-Zahrawi, who had chosen to stay in Paris, was also invited by the CUP to come to the capital.⁴¹ Perhaps fearing what might happen to him in Istanbul, he declined at first. He eventually accepted after assurances of his safety were given and on his appointment to the senate. He was, like other congress members before him, greeted with a warm welcome and began negotiations with the CUP. Nonetheless, he soon felt that the CUP was using delaying tactics, and in an interview he argued that the CUP was divided on the issue of reforms.⁴² He was probably right since there were some improvements in the implementation of some of the reforms, such as the setting up of Arabic language schools in Damascus and Beirut, the changing of the Provincial Law by adding clauses that made knowledge of the local language a requirement for the officials who served in the provinces, and the required use of local languages in courts and in published announcements.

The CUP also appointed many Arabs to various government positions – not to meet their demands but rather to quiet dissent or win the support of some Arab leaders by offering them positions in the government. Arab notables, including congress members such as Al-Zahrawi,⁴³ received positions in the senate. These appointments were not celebrated by all, however. First of all, there were the resolutions of the Arab Congress on not accepting government positions. Since many Arabs considered the reforms insufficient, they treated those who accepted positions as traitors. The article of the Arab Congress clearly stated that consultation with the organizations before accepting positions was necessary, and they had failed to comply. Some Arabs therefore reacted very aggressively. One example of a very serious reaction was that of Aziz Ali al-Misri and Jamil toward al-Zahrawi when they told him they would kill him if he was to support the CUP. Al-Zahrawi defended himself by arguing that the CUP recognized their past mistakes and was not willing to repeat them; it would be more efficient to struggle from within. He went on to criticize the Arabs as being dissatisfied with everything, and he further criticized those like Misri who were bitter towards the government since they were not able to obtain positions for themselves.⁴⁴

It can be concluded that the Arab Congress, while managing to get the government's attention, also paved the way for further differentiation and division among the Arabs. Even though the congress seems to have defined the reforms demanded by the Arabs and how to act in order to push the government to implement them, some of the participants of the Congress acted against these resolutions and the pathway that it drew to reach them. One last point should be made on the question of foreign advisers. While it is fairly easy to understand this demand, it should be mentioned that there was no consensus on foreign involvement either. The hesitation and suspicion that the chosen location of the congress created had already underlined this. On top of this, those who feared foreign involvement did not approve of relying on foreign advisers, even if they did want improvements in the provinces. This situation was aggravated with the increased British influence in the Arab provinces in the same year. The foreign threat, in the shape of economic expropriation, found its way to the fifth CUP congress, where the capitulations were openly condemned. Even though decentralising articles were in the political program, such as granting the right to conduct education in local languages and granting administrative rights and responsibilities to local administrators, the coming months were to witness more pressure on the provinces. Moreover, even though the popularity of the Islamist ideology, steadily on the rise after the Balkan Wars, reached a new peak with the beginning of the Great War, mutual disillusionment among the groups within the society did not allow this ideology to create the necessary bond to keep the empire united—something once desired by many Muslim Arabs.

4. Conclusion

Nationalism is a modern phenomenon. It includes the assertion of the importance of a national language, national culture and the distinctness of a certain society from others. However, it should not be the only paradigm by which to make sense of people's collective demands. Even though some of the participants of open and secret Arab societies acted with nationalistic beliefs, it was not the only phenomenon in play. The fluidity of ideas should be taken into consideration, and *ex post facto* values should not be assigned to events. What the Arabs of the Ottoman Empire demanded were tenets of modernity, and that modernity was not limited to a single ideology. Moreover, Arabs made these demands in modern ways, using modern forms and methods. This explains why there are so many similarities between Arab, Young Turk and many other groups' demands and actions. All organized societies⁴⁵, open and secret, to have their agendas recognized and implemented. They wanted to participate in the government of the empire, and they used both parliamentary and non-parliamentary methods. Almost all of the groups in the empire made efforts to internationalize their cause and mobilize public opinion to get more leverage and support. They used journals and newspapers to spread their ideas. They organized or supported riots and protests.

The relationship between the CUP and Arab demands was a complicated one. Some of the Arabs who participated in the organized reform movement of the Arabs were also a part of the CUP and the Young Turk movement, and they were therefore familiar with its ideas and tactics. Some of the tactics that were used by the CUP had also been used by Sultan Abdülhamid II. There are several reasons for this: first of all, the government was in possession of means of persuasion, in the shape of both carrots and sticks. On the other hand, since the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire had experienced a series of modernization movements. These changes shaped both the society and the government, creating institutions and people who were willing to work with these institutions. The CUP also worked within this framework. Simultaneously, the relationship between the Arabs of the empire and the rulers changed in this period due to external and internal developments; the loss of territories and the penetration of European imperialism changed the physical constitution of the empire and made Arabs one of the most important groups in the society. Arabs were aware of their altered position of relative influence, and this went hand in hand with their emerging reform demands. More importantly, these demands were a reflection of an expanding modernity in the Arab provinces, as well as in the rest of the empire. Participation in the government and proportional representation thus became issues that were raised *vis-à-vis* the government. Thus, as Haddad suggests, it was "increased centralization and Turkification

without incorporation” that triggered the Arab-Turkish crisis.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to understand the CUP as a monolithic group composed of people who were uniformly distrustful towards the Arabs or entirely against any kind of reforms in the provinces; genuine attempts were made to meet the Arabs' demands.

Arabs wanted to be included in the decision-making processes of the empire on an equal footing with the ruling elite, while retaining their own language and customs, and they recognized the similar and parallel demands of the other groups in Ottoman society. They wanted the Ottoman state to recognize and deliver these demands, which they put forward consistently throughout this period. In the turbulent late nineteenth and early twentieth century, they wanted to be able to live in physical and economic security. Demands for freedom, for the decentralization of the administration and for the ability to do so while retaining their Arab identity were the result of these forces. Arab nationalism was also shaped by these forces. However, as has been shown on the previous pages, one cannot talk about Arabs as a single entity with unified ideas. Socio-economic, religious, regional and ideological differences separated Arabs, even though there were some large issues like decentralization that united many of them. Nonetheless, even when Arabs tried to bridge their differences by gathering many active Arabs in a congress that amalgamated pre-existing demands voiced previously by both the secret and public Arab societies established within and outside the empire, there were many differences in their stance and opinions. As if the members were not divided enough, there were those in Istanbul who claimed to speak on behalf of all of Arabs. The CUP tried to use these differences in the movement, just like Abdülhamid II had done before them, and in a way succeeded in not implementing the reform demands of the Arabs, or at least not in the way that Arabs wanted. This however contributed to Arab disillusionment with the government, and to further divisions between the Arabs. These divisions were to be more and more visible with the coming of the War, and what it brought in its wake.

Notes

¹ Hasan Kayalı, *Jön Türkler ve Araplar: Osmanlılık, Erken Arap Milliyetçiliği ve İslamcılık (1908-1918)*. Translated by Türkan Yöney. (İstanbul. Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları), 1998 and Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press), 2010.

² George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (Beirut: Khayat's, 1938), 83.

³ Ibid, 54.

⁴ Eliezer Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements* (London, Portland, Or.: F. Cass, 1993), 337.

⁵ Zeine N. Zeine, *Arab-Turkish Relations and the Emergence of Arab Nationalism* (Paris: Greenwood Press, 1981).

⁶ Ali Bilgenoğlu, *Osmanlı Devleti'nde Arap Milliyetçi Cemiyetleri* (Antalya: Yeniden Anadolu ve Rumeli Müdafaa-i Hukuk Yayınları, 2007), 117.

⁷ Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, 102.

⁸ Ali Bilgenoğlu argues that Matran and el-Müeyyed's close relationship to Abdülhamid II caused suspicions about the society. The founders were also accused of using the society to gain favours and get higher posts in the administration. Bilgenoğlu, *Osmanlı Devleti'nde Arap Milliyetçi Cemiyetleri*, 118. Kayalı argues that the goal of the society was twofold: one being the goal of keeping their pre-1908 status as the self-proclaimed protectors of Arab's rights. Kayalı, *Jön Türkler ve Araplar*, 77. When the purges of officials who worked closely with Abdülhamid's regime by the CUP are taken into consideration, the anxiety of Arabs can be seen to be valid.

⁹ There were Arab societies in Europe such as the Syrian Central Committee and *La Ligue de la Patrie Arabe* which produced such declarations and calls. According to Eliezer Tauber, Najib Azuri, who was the leader of the *Ligue*, was the first to publicly advocate Arab secession from the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of a new pan-Arab empire. Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements*, 33.

¹⁰ Kayalı, *Jön Türkler ve Araplar*, 108.

¹¹ There seems to be no consensus on the exact number of deputies. According to Fevzi Demir, the total number of Arab deputies was 68. See, Fevzi Demir, *Osmanlı Devleti'nde II. Meşrutiyet Dönemi Meclis-i Mebusan Seçimleri 1908-1914* (Ankara: İmge Yayınevi, 2007), 122. For Mumtaz A. Fargo, the number was 50. Mumtaz A. Fargo "Arab- Turkish Relations from the Emergence of Arab Nationalism to the Arab Revolt 1848-1916" Ph.D. diss., (University of Utah, 1969), 205. According to Kayalı, it was around 60. Kayalı, *Jön Türkler ve Araplar*, 94. The number of Turkish deputies was 152 according to Fargo and was between 142-147 according to Kayalı. This issue has other ramifications as well. The Arab, Turkish and general population of the empire is also debated. Moreover, the short-comings of the *millet* system, which categorized people according to religion, are also among the factors that further complicate this issue.

¹² George Antonius provides a list in his book. See, Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*. However, his list has additional names than Zekeriya Kursun's, *Yol Ayrımında Türk- Arap İlişkileri* (İstanbul: İrfan Yayıncılık, 1992), 94.

¹³ Tauber mentions that he also promised 500 liras from the budget of the ministry for the society. Khalil Hamadeh Paşa was an Arab who also

supported *al-Qahtanniya*. Another prominent Arab from the Ottoman administration, Arap İzzet Paşa, also made a donation to the Literary Society (as well as to the *Hizb al-Lamarkaziyah al-Idariyah al-'Uthmani*). Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements*, 101.

¹⁴ *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Ayrılıkçı Arap Örgütleri, Aliye Divan-ı Harbi Örfisinde Rüyet Olunan Mesele-i Siyasiye Hakkında Bazı İzahat*. Prepared by Ayşe Aydın (İstanbul: Arba Yayınları, 1993), 18.

¹⁵ At first, the name of the society was *Cemiyet'ül Natikin ül-Dad* (The Society of Dad Speakers), which reflects a much more nationalistic tone.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Ernest C. Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism: Essays on the Origins of Arab Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973).

¹⁷ See Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, 112.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁹ Tauber, 123-124.

²⁰ *Divanı Harbi Örfi*, 61 and 66.

²¹ Kursun, *Yol Ayrımında Türk- Arap İlişkileri*, 104.

²² Al- Zahrawi was an *alim* who was active in Syria. He was going to be the president of the Arab Congress of 1913. For more on Zahrawi, see Ahmet Tarabein, "Abd al-Hamid al-Zahrawi: The Career and Thought of an Arab Nationalist" in *Origins of Arab Nationalism*, ed. Kalidi., 97-119.

²³ There are different opinions about the number of Arab deputies elected to the parliament in the 1912 elections. Fevzi Demir argues that the percentage decreased. See, Fevzi Demir, *Osmanlı Devleti'nde II. Meşrutiyet Dönemi Meclis-i Mebusan Seçimleri 1908-1914* (Ankara: İmge Yayınevi, 2007), 235. Kayalı argues that the percentage of Arabs increased. While Demir states the impossibility of determining the political inclination of the deputies, Kayalı, again quoting from Prator, argues that the number of CUP supporters increased.

²⁴ Selim Ali Selam, *Beyrut Şehremininin Anıları (1908- 1918)* Prepared by Hassan Ali Hallak. Translated by Halit Özkan. (İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2005), 95.

²⁵ Bilgenoğlu, 161-5, Tauber, 138-9.

²⁶ Both supporters of the CUP and the members of the reform society sent telegraphs to Hazım Bey, though with quite different contents; the former claiming that the public did not demand any reforms, and the latter claiming the opposite. Bilgenoğlu, *Osmanlı Devleti'nde Arap Milliyetçi Cemiyetleri*, 167-168.

²⁷ According to Peter Mansfield, the CUP decided this due to the fact that they were suspicious about the society's relations with *lamerkeziya* and the

influence they had on Iraq and Syria. See, Peter Mansfield, *The Ottoman Empire and its Successors* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 35.

²⁸ Bilgenoğlu, *Osmanlı Devleti'nde Arap Milliyetçi Cemiyetleri*, 173-174.

²⁹ Ibid, 84. See, also, Muhammed Kürd Ali, *Bir Osmanlı- Arap Gazetecinin Anıları*. Translated by İbrahim Tüfekçi (İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2006), 181.

³⁰ Ömer Kürkcüoğlu, *Osmanlı Devleti'ne Karşı Arap Bağımsızlık Hareketleri* (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi, 1982), 22.

³¹ The name of the congress was initially to be the Syrian Congress; however, *al-Fatat* intervened to re-name it the Arab congress to give it a pan-Arab outlook. Nonetheless, the organizers used the name Arab-Syrian congress for official purposes. For details, see Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements*, 178. The organizers, as well as some members of the Reform Society of Beirut such as Zayniyya, saw the congress as a platform to raise the idea of autonomy, or even a French protectorate, whereas the Decentralization Party viewed it as a platform to raise the idea of administrative decentralization (ibid., 179). This is one of many points which shows the heterogeneity of ideas held by the participants of the congress.

³² Kursun, *Yol Ayrımında Türk- Arap İlişkileri*, 133. See also Fargo, 228-233.

³³ Tauber, 181-2.

³⁴ See Kayalı, 156, Selam, 126-140 and Emir Şekip Arslan, *İttihaç Bir Arap Aydınının Anıları* (İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2005), 64-64.

³⁵ See Tauber, 187-197.

³⁶ Zeine, 92 and Antonious, 114-117.

³⁷ Cemal Paşa in his memoirs recalls that he met with al- Khalil in a reception prepared in Abd al-Aziz Çaviş's house to work towards a ground of understanding with the Arabs. Cemal Paşa, *Hatırat: 1913- 1922*. Prepared by Ahmet Zeki İzgöer (İstanbul: Nehir Yayınları, 2006), 64-65. An agreement was reached that included articles on the administration of schools, education in the Arabic language in primary and middle schools, attachment of Arabic copies to legal documents and the appointment of certain prominent Arab leaders to high government positions. Cemal Paşa argues that the article in which al-Khalil emphasized the most was the appointment of certain people to important positions in Istanbul. Cemal Paşa wrote that he regretfully decided that what the Arabs meant by reforms was the satisfaction of the wants of a few people who were only after status and positions.

³⁸ Strangely, Bleda does not mention anything about the Arab Congress in his memoirs.

³⁹ Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements*, 200.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 201.

⁴¹ One cannot but realize the similarity of Abdülhamid's response to the Young Turk congresses and other opposition activities, whereby he invited those who were in the opposition abroad to the capital to observe and help the reforms and give them governmental positions. Many opposition leaders made deals with the sultan and returned to the empire, some to be further disappointed. The issue of nepotism and the "love of the seat," as it is called in Turkish, has a lot to do with the power structure of the empire, in which the only source of power was the state, and of which everyone was therefore willing to be a part.

⁴² Tauber, 207.

⁴³ It is important to note that the appointment of al-Zahrawi was not unanimously agreed. Cemal Paşa, in his memoirs, recalls that Talat Bey was not in favor of his appointment, and he also expresses his own doubts in between the lines as well: "Talat Bey did not want the appointment of Abdülhamid ez-Zahravi Efendi to the Senate, whose treacherous nature was reported by many Arabs. Abdülkerim el-Halil came to me many times in order to ask me to do something to change Talat Bey's mind. Finally this came true. However, since Abdülhamid Efendi's only desire is to get the position of Meşihat (Sheikh ul-Islam), being appointed to the Senate did not satisfy him." Cemal Paşa, *Hatırat: 1913- 1922*, 65.

⁴⁴ Tauber, 209.

⁴⁵ There are many others societies like *al-Alam al-Akhdar* (The Green Flag), *Jamiyat Basra al-Islamiyah* (The Reform Society of Basra) and *al-Nadi al-Watani al-ilmi* (The National Literary Club) and so on.

⁴⁶ Mahmoud Haddad, "The Rise of Arab Nationalism Reconsidered," *International Journal of Middle East*, 26, no.2 (1994), 204.

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