

Arabs and young Turks

Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918.

By Hasan Kayali (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1997)

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Book Review

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Introduction

Hasan Kayali is an associate professor of history at the University of California, San Diego. His main focus of research is the early twentieth century political history of the Middle East. In *Arabs and Young Turks*, Kayali challenges long-established views on the rise of Arab and Turkish nationalism during the decade before the end of the Great War.

The book starts out by presenting the current historiography on this topic, then stating that a distorted view of the prewar Ottoman era is dominant due to prejudice. Thus “this study seeks to move beyond established historiographical paradigms” (Kayali, p.12). One of Kayali’s convincing examples of this distorted view is the Western attribution of the term ‘Young Turks’ to the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), a political organization set up by Ottoman intellectuals from diverse ethnic and religious origin. According to the author, the elements within this movement that strived for a nation-state were not motivated by ethnic nationalism but by ‘Ottoman’ nationalism. Thus retaining the monarchy and the Empire was a main goal. Kayali further stresses that what is dubbed as Turkism and Arabism, did not materialize into political nationalism during the period under study. Kayali pursues “Ernest Dawn’s critique of the existing scholarship” (Kayali, p.11). Dawn’s arguments are that Arabism cannot be viewed as a reaction to the Turkish nationalism of the CUP, and that Arabism did not become a popular movement until the end of the Empire.

Summary

Arabs and Young Turks consists of six chapters that explore the topic chronologically. The first chapter gives an introduction to the political setting of the preceding years. It describes the *Tanzimat* period, the subsequent first constitutional period, the Hamidian Era and the Young Turk-Arab dynamics. The main point is that the nationalist sentiments that were imported from the west in one way or the other failed to gain appeal among the Turkish and Arab population of the Ottoman Empire. Chapter two deals with the second constitutional experiment in the wake of the 1908 revolution. Starting out with the reopening of parliament and an expanding freedom of press, the government quickly turned to stricter centralist rule and oppression of criticism after an unsuccessful counterrevolution by religiously informed decentralists. This policy of harsher rule and centralization in turn caused a stronger rift within the CUP between centralist and

decentralist factions. In the next chapter Kayali strongly and convincingly criticizes the widespread notion that the CUP adopted a policy of 'Turkification'. Rather, 'Turkification' was an ideological construct used by both internal and external opponents of the Ottoman government, and was also not motivated by Arab nationalism among the Arab opponents. This construct has subsequently been widely accepted as fact by scholars. Furthermore, ethnicity and political identity in the final decades of the Ottoman Empire are approached anachronistically by later historians. Chapter four describes the elections of 1912 and the CUP's violent coup in 1913. By that time the Ottoman Empire was reduced to a Turkish-Arab Empire, causing the CUP to accommodate decentralists in order to thwart autonomist tendencies. Additionally, Ottomanism was being reinterpreted in an Islamist fashion by the Young Turks. The fifth chapter illustrates Young Turk Ottoman rule in a peripheral Arab province by taking the Hijaz as an example. In order to bring centralization into effect, the Young Turk government found it more practical to negotiate with local power than destroying it, since forcing direct centralization in the Hijaz would be politically risky due to the religious baggage inherent to that region. The main point of this chapter is that there has been erroneous scholarship as regards to the importance of the Sharif of the Hijaz to the rise of Arab nationalism. According to Kayali, Sharif Husayn's dedication to Arab independence is highly exaggerated and his initial role as a puppet of the Ottoman government understated. The final chapter describes how the Ottoman government steadily lost control over its Arab territories during the Great War. Kayali argues that the Arab revolt, initiated by Sharif Husayn, was not motivated by nationalism but by personal ambition of Husayn and other Arab notables.

Conclusion

Kayali's main argument in *Arabs and Young Turks* is that contrary to both popular and scholarly belief, it was not Turkish nationalism that triggered Arab nationalism during the final decades of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, he casts doubt over whether there was indeed such a thing that could be characterized as Turkish or Arab nationalism during that period, at least until the final years of the First World War. The author concludes the book by recapping the main themes in support of the aforementioned argument, namely that the secular Ottomanism propagated after the Tanzimat in fact strengthened Turkish-Arab unity within the Empire and that the CUP remained loyal to multiethnic principles despite the fact that it consisted mainly of Turkish speakers.

After the dismemberment of most of the European parts of the Ottoman Empire secular Ottomanism was obsolete in the eyes of the Young Turks, both because it had failed to bind the Christian European subjects of the Empire and because after the partition of those parts the Empire consisted mainly of Muslim peoples. Consequently an Islamist Ottomanism was adopted, which defused any potential for Turkish or Arab nationalism. In short, Kayali argues that Turkish nationalism as such was non-existing as a political and public motive until the end of the First World War and Arab nationalism was an overly exaggerated elitist phenomenon, not adopted by the majority of the Arab people.

Kayali's *Arabs and Young Turks* is a dense historical monograph. It covers a wide historical period in a relatively short amount of pages. While Kayali's chronological set-up is well structured, his language is sometimes not. Sentences like

“Problems of practicability or considerations of *raison d'état* inherent in promoting a nationalist policy objective, which a few members of the CUP in Salonika or others more closely related to the state machinery in Istanbul may have harbored, were forbidding.” (Kayali, p. 90)

further increase the inaccessibility of the book, which is already rather inaccessible for an audience that does not possess a deep intertextual knowledge of the subject.

Kayali mainly utilizes primary governmental, diplomatic and press records, both Ottoman and non-Ottoman. While he is quite convincing in his deconstruction of established myths on Arab nationalism in the final years of the Ottoman Empire, he upholds myths, especially adhered to in modern Turkey, on Ottoman well-intentions. This manifests itself, for instance, in Kayali's description, or rather non-description of the Armenian genocide. While the Armenian genocide is not the subject of the book, Kayali does mention it and he does that in the same terms as the Turkish government, which still denies that such a genocide ever happened, does. Kayali employs the terms “relocations” and “resettlements” and never “genocide”, although he admits that the relocation of Arabs “(...) compared to that of Armenians, took place in relatively more humane circumstances” (Kayali, p. 194).

In conclusion, Kayali's book makes an interesting and refreshing read for an audience that is educated on the subject. However, a certain pro-Ottoman selectivity and bias is shimmering between his well-researched arguments.