

The Impact of Sharif Hussein's Revolt on the Nation-Building Processes of Turks and Arabs

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study will be to present an explanation for that question. As I will argue, the main motive for this exaggeration could be detected in the utilization of this event as a triggering factor during the nation-building processes of both the Turks and the Arabs. The Turks generally used the reflections of this revolt during the early Republican period in order to create a Western-modern Turkish identity. The Arabs, on the other hand, used it to defend the rights of the Arabs in line with the Wilsonian self-determination principle, and also to reach the aim of creating a "United Arab State" inspired by the Arab nationalist ideology. Therefore, as for the implications of this event on both sides, we can argue that the revolt has served as a legitimizing factor, both sociologically and politically in the building of the national identities of both Turks and Arabs. In order to find out how it had been used in these processes I will concentrate on the elements, which belongs to national identities of both nations. As the empirical basis of the article, high school textbooks in Turkey, Syria and Jordan will be used. As a simple example of how both sides are portrayed in these books, we can mention that the Ottomans have been described as occupiers in Arabic books, while the Arabs have been portrayed as *betrayers* in the Turkish ones. Comparison of the textbooks will show us how the nation-building processes of Turks and Arabs affected each other.

Key Words: Identity, nation, state and nation state

Şerif Hüseyin Hareketinin Türk ve Arap Ulus-İnşa Sürecine Etkileri

Özet

Türkler tarafından "Arap ihaneti", bir çok Arap tarafından da "Büyük Arap İsyanı" olarak bilinen Şerif Hüseyin İsyanı'nın ne "ihanet" ne de "Arap isyanı" olmadığı bugün konu üzerine yapılan akademik çalışmalarla ortaya konmuş durumdadır. Geçtiğimiz on yıllarda kaleme alınan birçok çalışma her iki iddianın da bu isyan özelinde geçersiz olduğunu ispatlamış durumdadır. Türkiye, Suriye ve Ürdün ders kitaplarından yola çıkarak bu olayın nasıl "Büyük Arap İsyanı" ve "Arap ihaneti" olarak kurgulandığını inceleyen bu çalışma, bu şekilde mevzubahis isyanın Türk ve Arap ulus kimliklerinin inşasına nasıl katkı yaptığını incelemektedir. Başka bir deyişle, "hain Arap" imajının Türk uluslaşmasına yaptığı katkı ile "isyancı Arap" imajının Arap ulus inşası sürecine yaptığı katkılar makalenin temel sorunsalıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kimlik, ulus, devlet ve ulus devlet

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1. Introduction

It is today well-known that Sharif Hussein's revolt was not a 'great revolt' and that the majority of the Arabs living in the Ottoman Empire did not play a major role in this revolt. Yet, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Sharifian Revolt was reinterpreted, both by the Turks and the Arabs, as a great revolt in which all the Arabs in the Ottoman Empire had taken a part. Although the character of the revolt was more or less analyzed in the existing literature, curiously, however, until very recently, why the Sharifian Revolt has been so exaggerated was not studied enough (see: Teitelbaum, 2001; Dawn, 1973; Khalidi et al, 1991; Dawisha, 2003).

The main purpose of this study will be to present an explanation for that question. As I will argue, the main motive for this exaggeration could be detected in the utilization of this event as a triggering factor during the nation-building processes of both the Turks and the Arabs. The Turks generally used the reflections of this revolt during the early Republican period in order to create a Western-modern Turkish identity. The Arabs, on the other hand, used it to defend the rights of the Arabs in line with the Wilsonian self-determination principle, and also to reach the aim of creating a "United Arab State" inspired by the Arab nationalist ideology. Therefore, as for the implications of this event on both sides, we can argue that the revolt has served as a legitimizing factor, both sociologically and politically in the building of the national identities of both Turks and Arabs. In order to find out how had it been used in these processes I will concentrate on the elements, which belongs to national identities of both nations. As the empirical basis of the article, high school textbooks in Turkey, Syria and Jordan will be used. As a simple example of how both sides are portrayed in these books, we can mention that the Ottomans have been described as occupiers in Arabic books, while the Arabs have been portrayed as *betrayers* in the Turkish ones. Comparison of the textbooks will show us how the nation-building processes of Turks and Arabs affected each other.

The retreat of the Ottoman Empire over against the west, undoubtedly, had affected the relations between the central authority and the subjects of the Empire consisted of different nationalities. Particularly, Turco-Arab relations in the last one and a half century had been affected profoundly by the modernization of the Ottoman state organ. The

policies pursued by the central authority to enhance its authority in the provinces, beginning with the Tanzimat period, had prompted the demands for decentralization in the Arab provinces. The CUP's accession to power and its adoption of strict policies of centralization with a tune interpreted by Arabs as Turkification stimulated some nationalist movements among the Arab notables centered mainly in the geographical Syria.

However, except a small minority, these movements did not evolve into separatist nationalist character till the end of the Ottoman rule in the Arab provinces. Even after 1918, both Turks and Arabs had pursued a plan to create a confederation around the Caliph. But, adopting the Westernization as a state policy in Turkish Republic and the increase of the nationalization process among the Arabs withdrew this choice from the circulation. All in all, today's perceptions of Arab and Turk by both sides had been created through the nation-building processes. The following sections will demonstrate us how the process went on in the post-Ottoman Turkish and Arab states.

2. Arabs as 'The Betrayers' in the Turkish National Historiography

The abolition of the Caliphate and adoption of westernization as a nation-building policy created a turning point in the development of Turco-Arab relations. Since the aim of the westernization was to affiliate Turks an equal member for western society, Turkey has slowly turned its face from the east to the west and abandoned the Caliphal claims. In order to create a westerner nation, the republican elites made lots of reforms in the direction of reducing the impact of Islam in the political and social life (Çalış, 2001:7).

The nation-state ideology, which is espoused with the establishment of the republic of Turkey could have only been effectuated by the abandonment of Caliphate centered claims in the Arab provinces. The institution of the Caliphate depicted as a 'worthless' institution. The "worthlessness" of the Caliphate has depicted with these remarks in the history schoolbooks of high schools of Turkey (1930-41) written by the Association for Studying Turkish History [*Türk Tarihi Tetkik Cemiyeti*]:

"In the First World War, the holy war [*Mukaddes Cihad*] that was enunciated by the Caliphate has revealed the worthlessness and nothingness of this institution, and this enunciation also proved the illusionist character of the policies that was ascribed to the Caliphate. In the all fronts of the fatherland of the Turks, especially at the doors of

Istanbul that was allegedly the house of the Caliphate, there were Muslim mercenary troops fighting against the Caliph's army.² A much more grievous fact than these were *Sharif Hussein*' rebellion, the descendant of the Prophet, against the Caliph. Giving the British goldens and the Kingship under the protection of Britain preference over the Islamic dignity and the sharifate under the rule of the Caliph, he revolted against the Caliphate with his sons, descendants and all the kith and kin; he competed for non-Muslim enemies to kill Turks who saved Islam from atrocity and slavery, and make him feel proud by letting his clean blood with his urban and Bedouin Arabs. The Caliph's Holy Flag (Sancak-ı Şerif) that was opened to recruit the Muslims for the Caliph's army could not have found any soldiers all but Turkish soldiers." (Tarih IV, 1931:158).

This apprehension could be seen at Falih Rifki Atay's assessments -who was of the prominent westernists- about the Arab provinces of Ottoman Empire: "we, Turks, live in lodgings in Quds, the thing that is not known as from Aleppo is not only the paper of Turks but Turkish language and Turks themselves. The less Florence was foreinger to us, the Quds was the same amount."(Atay, 1964:47).

In the mentioned schoolbooks, the futility of the efforts to create an Ottoman nation was summarized with the following words:

"In the period of the Second Constitution, the discussions among the nations have flooded over parliament and as a consequence of these, the Albanian, Armenian, Arab and even Kurd Questions have occurred. It is obvious that, although all the subjects of the Empire has been guaranteed wide liberties with the proclamation of the constitution, different nations could not succeed to create an Ottoman nation, Moreover, the problems among the nations of the Empire have been increased and the nations who did not claim anything pertaining to the nationalism have begun to cherish a nationalistic idea (1912)" (Tarih III, 1941:303).

Again in the same book *the Arab Betrayal* has been described with these remarks:

"... Even the Muslim subjects of the Ottomans, particularly Arabs, have changed their sides by betraying the Caliph in the World War I. The most prominent of these was *Sharif Hussein* and his sons, the descendant of the prophet. These events have obviously proven that the idea of the Caliphate among all Muslims has no longer any value and importance. Consequently, as a harmful and worthless weapon, this institution must be abandoned as soon as possible."(Tarih III, 1941: 309)

² The author means the Indian Muslims fighting for the British in Dardanelles.

This interpretations on the Arabs of the Ottoman Empire justified the westernist ideology of newly established Turkish Republic by otherizing the Arabs as “betrayers”. According to this view, after the treason of the Arabs, Ottomanism became an impossible idea to pursue to keep the Ottomans together. According to Niyazi Berkes, one of the leading westernist writers of Turkey, Arab nationalism developed by Arabs, who had been affected by West, caused a strong desire in the direction of independence before the World War One. For that reason, they rebelled against the Ottoman Empire to establish their independent state (Berkes, 1975:14-17).

The westernist-Turkist ideology saw the Arab nationalism as a primordial identity prevailed among the Arabs for centuries. As to be written by İlhan Arsel, Arabs had been under the rule of the Ottoman Empire for approximately 400 years. In spite of this, however, they did not forget their Arabness and maintained their racial conceit with their national feelings. In this period of time, they neither adopted the language and culture of Turks nor other characteristics of them. “By virtue of that nationalistic sentiments they saved themselves from the ‘yoke’ of the foreigners [that is Ottomans]” (Arsel, 1977:12).

We could find the similar remarks in Falih Rifkî Atay’s books, one of the leading Kemalist Writers and who served in the Arab lands during the Great War: “...Even Ottoman bureaucracy either semi- Arab or fully Arab. I never saw an Arab who had been turkified and similarly there were very few Turks who had been Arabized... In the Arab lands, the Ottoman Empire was a cost-free keeper for fields and streets.” (Atay, 1964:48). Those Turkish nationalists interpreted all the background of Turco-Arab relations within the nationalist perspective based on the treason thesis.

In the viewpoint of the nationalist-westernist perspective, in spite of maintaining nationalist sentiments among the Arabs, the absence of such feelings among Turks was

“the reason for underdevelopedness and unhappiness of Turks, the negative evaluations in comparison to modern nations, eventually the lack of the self-national conscious led to all the decreases of Turks. Arabs, even if it is not in the modern sense, has always a national conscious, however Turks do not have such a kind of identity”(Arsel, 1977:14).

It was necessary for Turks to espouse such a national identity to be saved from underdevelopment. But, the intimate relations with Arabs made Turks caused to forget

their national identities (Arsel, 1977:11). Accordingly, avoiding from Arabs was necessary to construct a national identity.

The reason for the Turkish abandonment from the Turkish nationalism was the title of the Caliphate, which necessitated to replace religion with nation. In this regard, the Caliph was depicted as “worthless” in the schoolbooks mentioned above:

“...If Yavuz Selim had not taken over the Caliphate as a tool for the politics of the Empire, the problem of the Caliphate would be solved then, and that institution that has been hindered the Ottoman Empire to evolve himself in the direction of the necessities of the modern ages would not waste the Turk’s time by carrying this worthless appellation and would not experience lots of losses.” (Tarih IV, 1941:157).

It will not be a pointed assessment to assume these descriptions as an historical object. To the contrary, the Arabs has been depicted as the ‘*betrayers*’ in history schoolbooks in Turkey until very recently. In a widely thought schoolbook published in 1995, the attitude of the Arabs was explained as follows :

“... Meanwhile, the Great Britain encouraged the Arabs in Yemen, Hijaz and Paletine to rebel against the Turks. The Amir of Mecca, Şerif Hüseyin [sic.] was pulling together with Britain. The Turkish troops, as a consequence of the collaboration of Arabs with Britain, withdrew toward the North.” (Kara, 1995:31).

The otherization of Arabs has affected Turco-Arab relations from politics to Culture. In this context, Turkey’s turning toward the West has caused a discontinuity in the relations with Arabs. The late Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, İsmail Cem describes this impact with the following words:

“...as a consequence of awry perception of history, we learned at history schoolbooks that Arabs had betrayed us rebelling against the Ottoman Empire. They fought against us in all fronts during World War I. They [the Westernists] narrated this stories and then excluded the Middle East and its nations from the interest of Turkish foreign policy.” (Cem, 2004:16).

As we supposed throughout this study ‘the Arab betrayal’ thesis has played a crucial role to justify these policies. As a result, Turkey has always adopted an uncompanionable attitude towards the Arab world from the beginning of its establishment. This attitude prevented Turkey of playing a more influential role in the region for decades. The situation of the Arab states, which adopted a nationalist state

ideology, was not different from that of Turkey. In this context, the history schoolbooks of Syria and Jordan will be examined to show how the processes of both sides were similar.

3. Turks as ‘Colonizers’ and The Contribution Sharif Hussein’s Revolt to The Otherization of The Ottoman Rule: History Schoolbooks of Syria and Jordan

As we noted above, although the ideological and practical aspirations of Sharif Hussein’s revolt have been clarified by studies supported by the archival sources from the British archives, to the contrary of what these studies has demonstrated many of the Arabic books that have been written on the Sharif’s rebellion alleged that there were two main reasons for the revolt: one was to achieve the Arab unity, and the second was to emancipate the ‘Arab nation’ from the Ottoman ‘yoke’. They assert that Arabs had lived from the end of the Abbasid era to the time of the revolt under the domination of foreign states. The Ottomans were the last of these rulers, and that the revolt aimed to unite Arabs into one nation like the Abbasids and Umayyads had achieved (see: Musa, 1988:11-15; Kalaci, 1993:220-241; Al-Khusri, 1982; Al-Najjar, 1986:141-152; Antonius, 1955). However, the failure to realize the desired ends of the revolt precipitated the revival of tribalism among the Arabs (see: Al-Bizaz, 2001:267). The most renowned Arab nationalist Sati al-Husri depicts the ‘Arab Revolt’ with these remarks:

“The revolt which erupted in Mecca at the end of the second year of the war, i.e. on June 10,1916, was not a Hejazi but an Arab Revolt in every sense of the term. It aimed at the independence of all Arab territory and the formation of a new Arab government that would prepare the nation for a genuine revival and restore its former glory. The flag devised by the leaders clearly symbolized this lofty purpose in that each of its four colors was emblematic of the successive eras of the Arab Empire during its past supremacy. Men from the various parts of the Arab World –syria, Iraq, Palestine and the Hejaz-Christian and Muslim alike, participated in the Revolt and performed the tasks assigned to them.”(Al-Khusri, 1966:46).

The problem in this assessment is strictly related to the periodization of the development of nationalist ideas. As is known to all the academics studying about Arab nationalism, the publicization of nationalism among Arabs started with the end the Ottoman rule that was the Mandate period (see: Khoury, 1997). Presumably to gain the right of self-determination announced to be given to the nations by Wilson principles in

1919, as in the case of al-Khusri quoted above, the Arab political and intellectual leaders had to declare that the Arabs of the Ottoman Empire were a nation pursuing their independence for a long time. In the period beginning with the end of the Ottoman rule, the history of Arab peoples has re-interpreted with a nationalist viewpoint. This re-interpretation emphasized the Arab's will to independence and unity. In this context, the Sharif Hussein's revolt has been mythically presented as a movement performed by all Arabs against the Ottoman Empire to be saved from the Ottoman "yoke".

3.1. Ottoman Rule in History Schoolbooks of Syria

In order to grasp this ideological transformation and to exemplify how the revolt has been narrated in the Arab nationalist discourse, we should examine history schoolbook, which has taught in the Arab countries. Especially Syrian, Jordanian and Iraqi schoolbooks ascribed a revolutionist role to the Sharif Hussein's movement. In this section, I will use some quotations from the history schoolbooks of the Arab Republic of Syria to suggest the use of the Sharifian revolt in the construction of an Arab national identity. From the beginning of the French mandate, the Syrian mandate government and later independent Syria has adopted an Arab nationalist discourse in order to create a national identity for the Syrians, which continues to be influential even today. Therefore, the present article will use the Syrian schoolbooks published in 2005 for high schools.

At the history book prepared by the Ministry of Education for 9 classes of the high schools in Syria, the Ottoman rule in Syria has been depicted in the chapter titled as "the Ottoman occupation in the Arab lands" [*al-Ihtilalu al-Utmani li al-Watani al-Arabi*]. The sections expressing the Ottoman conquests in Arab lands have been titled as *the occupation of Iraq, the occupation of Syria, the occupation of Palestine and Egypt* (Tarikhu al-Arabi al-Hadis wa al-Muasır, 2005:10-15). The following words describing the problems of the Ottoman rule are worth of attention: at the period of the Ottoman occupation "the Arab world underdeveloped in agriculture, commerce and industry". Moreover, "the intellectual life in Arab world has been weakened and Arabic was regretted.", "due to the lack of doctor and hospital, the health services were not enough.", and finally "the Unionist Turks have endeavored to turkify the Arabs" (Tarikhu al-Arabi al-Hadis wa al-Muasır, 2005:14). Consequently, the nationalist government in Syria

emerged after the demise of the Ottoman Empire applied to otherization of the Ottoman past of the Arabs to justify their existence and establishment.

The Sharif Hussein's revolt against the Ottoman Empire was supposed as a movement performed by their leaders, i.e. Sharif Hussein, to save the Arabs from the Ottoman "yoke" and "underdevelopment". Quite the reverse of the existing literature on the Sharif Hussein's rebellion, in the Syrian schoolbooks the revolt is taught under the title of "the Awakening of the Arabs: the Great Arab Revolt" [*yakazatu al-Arab: Al-Thawrat al-Arabiyyati al-Qubra*]. In the book, the reasons paving the way for the revolt are expressed as follows:

"1. The Indirect Factors

- a. The desires of Arabs for emancipation from the Ottoman 'yoke' and to establish an independent state.
- b. Maturation of the consciousness of Arabism by the way of societies, intellectuals and literary class.
- c. The Turkification policies implemented by the Unionists.

2. Direct Factors

- a. The frustration caused by the death penalties by Djemal Pasha 'es-Seffah'
- b. The problems between Sharif Hussein and The Ottoman Turks."(Tarikhu al-Arabi al-Hadis wa al-Muasır, 2005:70)

To the contrary of what the book claims, both nationalist and other Arabs did not plan to be independent from the Ottoman rule (see: Kayalı, 1997; Dawn, 1973). On the other hand, it is obvious today that the executions in Syria did not play an essential role in the Sharif's rebellion (Çiçek, 2012).

Furthermore, it is a common knowledge that the Ottoman rule in the Arab countries came to an end with the defeat of the Ottoman army by the British and the role of the Sharif's army in this success is negligible. However, the Syrian schoolbooks remarkably increased the role of the Sharif's troops in this event:

"After the execution of the foremost leaders of Arab cause in Syria to the death penalties by Djemal Pasha, the nationalist societies have requested Sharif Hussein to lead the Arab Revolt... after a compromise between Sharif Hussein and these societies the revolt has erupted in Mecca on 10th of June 1916. firstly, the armies of the revolt has captured the Hejaz. The troops under the commandership

of Amir Faisal [the junior son of the Sharif] has conquered Akabe and Maan in the north. Afterwards, these troops have captured Palestine and Syria joining to the General Allenby's Army moving from Egypt. Finally, the armies of the revolt have saved Damascus and Other provinces of Syria. Some of these troops has been sent to Lebanon to emancipate it from the Ottoman rule." (Tarikhu al-Arabi al-Hadis wa al-Muasır, 2005:74).

3.2. The Case of Jordan

Since the state of Jordan has been established by Abdullah, the son of the Sharif Hussein, the revolt has an exceptional place in the history of Jordan (see: Anderson, 2005; Alon, 2007; Wilson, 1987). History schoolbooks of Jordan are different from the Syrian Case. They do not characterizes the Ottoman period as an 'occupation'. The titles depicting the Ottoman rule are more objective in proportion to the Syrian Schoolbooks. They are as follows: "Beginning of the Ottoman Rule in the Arab lands", "the Ottoman Rule in Iraq, Jordan, Syria", "the reasons for decline of the Ottoman Empire" (Farh, 2005; al-Tarbiyya al-Ictimaiyye wa al-Wataniyya- al-Cuz al-Thani- li al-Saff al-Thalith, 2005; at-Tarikh al-Urdun al-Hadith wa al-Muasır, 2005; al-Tarikh al-Arab wa al-Alam al-Muasır, al-Saff al-Thani wa al-Thaniyyi al-Adabi, 2005).

However, similar to the Syrian schoolbooks, the Jordan's history books show the Ottoman era as a period of 'sluggishness'. In relation to this, the books assess the Sharifian Revolt as the most important step to achieve the 'awakening of the Arab nation'. All the history schoolbooks of Jordan include a chapter entitled 'the Arab Awakening' [*al-Yakhaza al-Arabiyya*], and these chapters express the occurrence of the 'Arab Revolt' of Sharif Hussein. The following quotation from one of these books will show us how the books placed the Sharif's revolt in the history of the Arabs and Jordanians to contribute to the creation of a modern national identity:

"The Arab world, particularly the Eastern Arab World, has lived since mid-nineteenth century an experience for political consciousness in the sense of nationalization that was occurred politically, militarily, sociologically, economically and culturally. This experience is called in our history as 'the Arab Awakening'...and the Sharif Hussein's revolt is the conclusion of this process."(Abd al-Lat, 2005:21).

The reasons behind the 'awakening' are expressed in the books so different from the real situation. In this viewpoint, the Revolt had firstly taken place due to

'turkification' policies of the CUP. Secondly, the economical and political conditions in the Arab provinces have been deteriorating day by day through the mid-nineteenth century. Thirdly, Djemal Pasha's atrocities in Syria frustrated the Arabs against the Ottoman Rule (Abd al-Lat, 2005:43-55). Finally, Sharif Hussein had aimed at uniting Arabs into one state. The aims of revolt was as such: "the liberty of the Arabs", "the unity of the Arabs", "the promotion of the life conditions of the Arabs", "to achieve cultural unity among Arabs" (Iyad, 2005:2-33).

The approach of Jordan's history schoolbooks was not essentially different from those of Syria. Although the books did not accuse the Ottomans of being invaders, they saw the Ottoman period as responsible from underdevelopment of the Arabs. The Sharif's aim was an intervention to this situation.

4. Conclusion

Although it was a local movement broke out in Mecca, the Sharifian revolt made a major impact on the nation-building processes of both Turkey and nationalist Arab states such as Syria, Jordan and Iraq. As demonstrated through the sections of this article, westernist- nationalist rulers of the modern Turkey used the Sharif's rebellion as a tool to legitimize their paradigm shift to the westernization. Since they abandoned the Caliphal claims of the Ottoman Empire and abolished this institution and implemented many radical reforms to westernize the Turkish society, the rebellion presented a golden opportunity from the recent history to prove the rightfulness of the abolition of the Caliphate and futility of the project of the Muslim solidarity. To that end, they pretended to libel all the Arabs as "betrayers" attributing the Sharif's revolt to the entire Arab nation.

On the other hand, the Arab nationalist leaders, who were influential in the eastern Arab countries such as Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Jordan following the Ottoman rule, hammered away wholeheartedly at making a show of the Meccan revolt as a "Great Arab Revolt" supported by all Arabs under the Ottoman rule. By this way, they justified the establishment of the nation-states established instead of the Ottoman rule in the Arab countries and maintained the Arab unity ideal. Furthermore, the Ottoman Empire would be disenchanted with eyes of the Arabs as an ideal.

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