

Relocating the Arabs in Turkish Historiography: A Review of the Book Series *Arap Gözüyle Osmanlı*¹

M. Talha Çiçek

The first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed remarkable publications in Turkish intellectual life decoding and deconstructing the official interpretation of Turkey's history. Many books with a revisionist perspective have been published examining the different periods of Ottoman history. The last decade of the Ottoman period and early Republican history have naturally been the focus of the greatest proportion of historical works as they are the most disputed periods of the nationalist narrative and remain hotly debated among Turkish intellectuals with different worldviews and political tendencies. In this regard, many revisionist publications and challenging studies on the Turkish, Greek, Armenian, and Arab components of the Ottoman Empire have appeared in Turkish criticizing the established judgements of public memory. Another, mostly neglected, result of this intellectual atmosphere is the translation of the primary sources of late Ottoman history published in non-Turkish languages and presenting the perspectives of non-Turkish actors to Turkish readers.

The nationalist approaches least affected in this regard were those relating to the Arabs and their alleged share in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, partly because they were not found sufficiently meaningful for the arguments of critics of the official ideology. The book series *Arap Gözüyle Osmanlı* is a notable exception. It is a scholarly attempt to rebalance the "Turkish" perspective vis-à-vis the Arabs and deconstruct Kemalist approaches built upon the "Arab betrayal" thesis during the early Republican period. This approach claims that the Arabs, united under the leadership of Sharif Hussein, rebelled against the

¹ The books in the series have been published by Klasik Yayınları and their titles are as follows: Selim Ali Selam, *Beyrut Şehrinin Anıları (1908-1918)*; Şekib Arslan, *İttihatçı Bir Arap Aydınının Anıları*; Muhammed Kürd Ali, *Bir Osmanlı-Arap Gazetecinin Anıları*; Kral Abdullah, *Biz Osmanlıya Neden İsyan Ettik?*; Muhammed Mahzumi Paşa, *Cemaleddin Afgani'nin Hatıraları*; Muhammed Reşid Rıza, *İttihad-ı Osmani'den Arap İsyanı'na*; Muhammed Ferid, *Mısır Mısırlılarıdır*; Muhammed İzzet Derveze, *Osmanlı Filistin'inde Bir Posta Memuru*; Cafer el-Askeri, *İsyancı Arap Ordusunda Bir Harbiyeli*; İhsan et-Tercuman, *Çekirge Yılı*; Muhammed el-Bakır, Muhammed Kürd Ali, Hüseyin Habbal, and Abdülbasit el-Unsi, *Türklerle Omuz Omuz: Arap İlim Heyeti Darül-hilafe ve Çanakkale'de*.

Ottoman Empire during the Great War and stabbed the Turks in the back while they were struggling with Western Imperialism. The aim of the Republican founders was mainly to promote the nationalization project and legitimize political reforms such as the abolition of the Caliphate (on the grounds that it was already an outdated institution as the Caliph could not unite Muslims against the Westerners even at the most critical times, such as during the Great War). From the early Republican era onwards, the “betrayal” thesis has been publicized through school history textbooks and transformed into a popular belief. Given that the events of World War I constitute the dominant – and sometimes the only – theme in the memoirs and diaries in the series, their publication can be seen as a response to the “totalizing” perspective of official historiography.

The project has also made important Arabic sources for late Ottoman history available in Turkish. It contains translations of eleven memoirs and diaries mainly penned by prominent Arab political and intellectual figures (only Ihsan Turjman was an ordinary – but educated – soldier) of the late Ottoman era, such as Shakib Arslan, King Abdullah, Muhammad Kurd Ali, Jafar al-Askari, and Salim Ali Salam. They were the prominent representatives of different versions of Ottoman unity and Arabism. Suat Mertoğlu, the editor of the series, explains that the memoirs were translated as part of an effort to understand the recent past with a different, more balanced perspective.² On another occasion, he highlights that “the betrayal” could not be generalized to the whole Arab nation as he introduces the translation of the leader of the “Arab” Revolt, King Abdullah.³ In light of the strong relations between the authors and the Turkish bureaucrats in Istanbul and the Arab provinces, the memoirs have potential for historians who would like to dedicate their studies to discovering how the Ottoman project of modernization created “a well-connected world” of Turks and Arabs which could not be reduced to the “narrow corridor” of the Great War.

These academic and general purposes constitute the fundamental reasons for undertaking such a project. The time period covered by the memoirs and their content – roughly the Second Constitutional Period, the Great War, and its immediate aftermath – constitutes further evidence of these aims. The memoirs reveal Arab perspectives on the most frequently discussed issues of the late Ottoman era, such as the proclamation of the Second Constitution, the policies adopted by the CUP [Committee for Union and Progress], Cemal Pasha’s draconian rule in Bilad al-Sham, and Sharif Hussein’s Revolt and the Arab support for it. They also include valuable details regarding the practices of daily life and their transformation – “positively” and “negatively” – by political and infra-

² Suat Mertoğlu, “Takdim,” in *Beyrut Şehremininin Anıları*.

³ Suat Mertoğlu, “Takdim,” in *Biz Osmanlıya Neden İsyan Ettik?*

structural reforms.⁴ The books in the series demonstrate the diversity of Arab perspectives (from “fanatically” Ottomanist to “extremely” anti-CUP) and thus indicate how impossible it is to define the Arabs and their attitudes as a unified category. Shakib Arslan, for instance, represents the pro-CUP groups while King Abdullah was one of the leaders of the “Arab” Revolt. Their interpretations of developments during the war diverge significantly as they sided with different belligerent states. The translation of Yusuf al-Hakim, Wasif Jawhariyyah, Amin Sa’id, and Faiz al-Ghusayn’s memoirs into Turkish, which contain a great deal more information on the aspects summarized above, would be an excellent addition to the series.

The books in the series usually start with the educational careers of their authors, which demonstrate how the Arab generation of the early twentieth century was a product of the Ottoman Empire. Thereafter, the first noteworthy incident which occupies a major place in the memoirs and diaries is usually the declaration of the Second Constitution establishing Arab agency at this crucial moment in modern Ottoman times. The “Arab” attitude toward the Constitution as reflected in the books under analysis was overwhelmingly positive. The authors and others in their social environment regarded it as a new opportunity for the construction of ties of brotherhood between the various components of the empire and actively participated in the consolidation of the new regime.⁵ For example, Sharif Hussein of Mecca, the leader of the “Arab” Revolt, played a major role in the pacification of the Hijaz and Yemen following the constitutional revolution.⁶ Similarly, Rashid Rida travelled to Bilad al-Sham, his country of origin, to actively support the new regime and circulated his opinions by means of his newspaper, *al-Manar*. He generously praised the efforts made by Muslims and Christians in Syria to give life to the ideas of the new Constitutional regime.⁷ Shakib Arslan enthusiastically narrated how he struggled with the opponents of the Constitutional regime in Mount Lebanon.⁸ The only opponent of the new regime was, contradictorily, the king, whose arch-enemies, the CUP leaders, led the Revolution against his “ideal” ruler, Sultan Abdulhamid II. On the one hand, as explained above, the king narrated the efforts of his father to tighten Ottoman rule in Hijaz and Asir after the 1908 Revolution, which means that they enjoyed good relations with the new regime at least for a time. On the other, to legitimate the “Arab” Revolt, he retrospectively idealized the Hamid-

⁴ İzzet Darwazah and İhsan Turjman’s memoirs are particularly revealing in this regard.

⁵ See, for example, Kürd Ali, *Bir Osmanlı-Arap Gazeteci’nin Anıları*, 77–82.

⁶ King Abdullah explains the role played by his father in his memoirs: *Biz Osmanlı’ya Neden İsyan Ettik?* 48–57.

⁷ Rıza, *İttihad-ı Osmani*, 73–135.

⁸ Arslan, *İttihatçı Bir Arap Aydını*, 11–16.

ian era and accused the leaders of the new regime of being the source of all the evils the empire experienced in its aftermath.⁹

The dominant theme of the memoirs and diaries is evidently the Great War, and particularly Cemal Pasha's atrocities in Bilad al-Sham and Sharif Hussein's Revolt against the Caliph. The Pasha put into practice a brutal policy towards the Arabist opposition in Bilad al-Sham as he executed the prominent opposition leaders and exiled many others into Anatolia together with their families as part of his social engineering policies to redesign the state and society in Syria.¹⁰ Anxious about his own fate, Sharif Hussein, the Amir of Mecca, collaborated with the Entente and rebelled against the Caliph in June 1916, which seriously harmed the Ottoman jihad propaganda.¹¹ These are the most discussed topics of the books translated as part of the series. A balance between supporters and opponents can be observed when we look at the assessments of the authors. Some tried to legitimize the actions of Cemal Pasha while many others—including the vehement collaborators of the CUP regime – harshly criticized the executions and exiles for which he was responsible. A similar balance is achieved for the “Arab” Revolt as the opinions of both supporters and critics are fairly represented in the texts translated. This balance may also help readers and researchers get a feel for the atmosphere of the Great War in the Ottoman Arab provinces and approach its history with a more balanced perspective.

The overwhelming majority of the books criticize Cemal Pasha's draconian rule in the Syrian lands, and particularly the executions and exiles of the members and leaders of the Arab opposition parties. The books also indicate how Cemal's rule changed the feelings of the people and politicians and alienated them from the Ottoman Empire. Shakib Arslan, one of the most enthusiastic Arab supporters of the CUP, reserved a major place in his memoirs to criticize Cemal Pasha and to explain how he struggled in İstanbul against the absolute ruler of Bilad al-Sham.¹² Jafar Pasha al-Askeri states that the executions had a traumatic impact on educated Arabs and that his feelings of loyalty to the Ottoman Empire were seriously damaged when he heard that Cemal had executed

⁹ Kral Abdullah, *Biz Osmanlı'ya Neden İsyân Ettik?* 17–33.

¹⁰ For a study on Cemal Pasha's rule in Syria, see: M. Talha Çiçek, *War and State Formation in Syria: Cemal Pasha's Governorate during World War I*.

¹¹ For the “Arab” Revolt, see: Joshua Teitelbaum, *The Rise and Fall of the Hashemite Kingdom of Arabia*.

¹² Very likely due to accusations directed at Shakib by other Arab nationalists in 1920s and 1930s that he caused the execution and exile of the nationalists in collaboration with the Pasha. For an analysis of these polemics, see: Chloe Bordewich, “Diaries of an Ottoman Spy-master? Treason, Slander and Afterlife of Memoir in Empire's Long Shadow,” 113–34; see also, Polat Safi, “Takdim,” in *İstihbarat Savaşları*, 13–37.

the Arabists in Syria. Indeed, this was the point at which he decided to side with the Sharif.¹³ Ihsan Turjman, an ordinary soldier in the Ottoman army of Palestine, expresses in his diaries the sense of disappointment the draconian rule created among the people and in his own mind. Interestingly, contrary to Sharif Hussein's declarations, in which he grounded his revolt,¹⁴ the King does not use Cemal Pasha's policies to legitimize the Arab Revolt in his memoirs. Perhaps in late 1940, when he penned the memoirs, he believed that such a "reactive" legitimization would harm the authenticity of a "nationalist" revolt.

An exception, which praised Cemal Pasha and his activities in the reform movement in Syria, is the text penned during his governorate by Muhammad Kurd Ali, Husayn Habbal, Abd al-Basit al-Unsi, and Muhammad al-Bakir. The purpose of the book is exactly to explain – and praise – Cemal Pasha's policies in Syria.¹⁵ The book is important to demonstrate for the Turkish reader how Cemal Pasha and his supporters legitimized these atrocities. However, Kurd Ali harshly criticizes Cemal Pasha in his memoirs for his brutality toward the most talented people of the Arab nation.¹⁶

Another major theme widely discussed in the books is the "Arab" Revolt. The Revolt is crucially important for both Turkish and Arabic nationalist historiographies as it legitimizes the founding arguments of both ideologies. For Arab nationalism, it was "the Great Arab Revolt" [*Al-Thawratu al-Arabiyyati al-Kubra*] through which the Arabs manifested their willingness to practice "self-determination," and become an independent nation. Many studies in English have already demonstrated that the Sharif's revolt cannot be considered a nationalist movement representing the Arab nation.¹⁷ But it is difficult to claim that there is a similar understanding among the majority of scholars writing in Turkish. Their perception of the revolt is still closer to those framed by the early Arab nationalists. Locating the Sharif's revolt as a nationalist revolt aiming at Arab separation from the Ottoman Empire also legitimized the official Turkish historical approach which confirmed the argument of the "Arab betrayal." For the Turkish nationalists, it was this "Arab betrayal" [*Arap İhaneti*], one of the

¹³ El-Askeri, *İsyancı Arap Ordusunda Bir Harbiyeli*, 93–100.

¹⁴ Sharif Hussein states in his first propaganda pamphlet that the execution of the Arab leaders in Syria constituted a major reason for his rebellion: "Şerif Hüseyin'in Beyannamesi."

¹⁵ El-Bakır, Kürd Ali, Habbal, and el-Unsi, *Türklerle Omuz Omuz*; for an analysis of this book, see: Salim Tamari, "Muhammad Kürd Ali and the Syrian-Palestinian intelligentsia in the Ottoman campaign against Arab separatism," 37–60.

¹⁶ Kürd Ali, *Bir Osmanlı-Arap Gazeteci*, 178–85.

¹⁷ C. Ernst Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism: Essays on the Origins of the Arab Nationalism*; Hasan Kayalı, *Arabs and the Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1918*, Teitelbaum, *The Rise and Fall of the Hashimite Kingdom of Arabia*.

greatest proofs invalidating the Ottoman imperial and Islamist arguments, that justified the Kemalist nationalist project.¹⁸ We can regard this implicit solidarity of the nationalist movements as reciprocal consolidation through mutual negation of each other's positions.

It can easily be argued that a balance has been established between the supporters and opponents of this important incident. First of all, the only account left by the leaders of the revolt, the memoirs of King Abdullah, has been translated, as have the memoirs of Jafar Pasha al-Askeri, a prominent commander of the Sharifian troops. The ideas and opinions of independent intellectuals, such as Izzat Darwazah and Rashid Rida, are also presented to the Turkish reader. The reasoning of the different actors who supported the revolt from multiple viewpoints is explained in detail. The Turkish title of Abdullah's memoirs, "*Biz Osmanlı'ya Neden İsyan Ettik?*" [Why did we rebel against the Ottoman[s]?] is sufficiently "provocative" for the "Turkish mind" – but – reflects the perspectives of the Revolt's leaders. Al-Askeri explains in detail how he was converted from a convinced Ottomanist to a military commander in the army of the Sharif, another important testimony about the spontaneity of conversion from Ottomanism to Arab nationalism.¹⁹ In a similar way, Izzat Darwazah points out the impact of the revolt on the development of nationalist spirit while Rida bases his active backing for the Sharif on the atrocities of the CUP. The latter does not support the Sharif's caliphate and implicitly maintains his support for the Ottoman caliphate.²⁰

The series also includes memoirs written by those who struggled in solidarity with Ottoman Turkish bureaucrats and officers against the dissemination of the Revolt's impact, such as Shakib Arslan and Muhammad Kurd Ali. Even in 1930s and 1940s, when they penned their memoirs, they enthusiastically defended the positions they had adopted during the war era. Having been proved right by the European occupations of the Arab lands in the aftermath of the war, Kurd Ali argues that the collaboration with the Western imperialists against the Ottoman Empire was a big mistake and that Ottoman sovereignty over the Arab lands should have been defended under any conditions. Shakib Arslan takes a more "deconstructive" stance toward the arguments of the Arab nationalists and points out the high number of Arab soldiers who fought with Cemal Pasha against the British and the sharifian troops. He opposes the argu-

¹⁸ For a comparative analysis of the Turkish and Arab nationalist perspectives regarding Sharif Hussein's revolt, see: M. Talha Çiçek, "The Impact of Sharif Hussein's Revolt on the Nation-Building Processes of Turks and Arabs," 98–111.

¹⁹ El Askeri, *İsyancı Arap Ordusunda Bir Harbiyeli*, 93–100.

²⁰ Rıza, *İttihad-ı Osmani*, 329–34.

ment that it was a rebellion which could be attributed to the Arabs, the overwhelming majority of whom remained loyal to the Ottoman Empire until the very end of the war.²¹ Some authors, like Salim Ali Salam, do not even mention the Sharif's name in their accounts, proving that the rebellion had negligible importance for their political agendas.

The *Arap Gözüyle Osmanlı* is a crucial contribution to the Turkish literature on the Arabs and has the potential to transform the established judgments of the Turkish people and intellectuals. It is difficult, however, to claim that the series has made a powerful impact even on the perceptions of academics, although there are some revisionist studies based on these sources. The “stabbing in the back” argument is still dominant in the many studies conducted by historians as it also represents a political attitude.²²

REFERENCES

- Akyürek, Hüseyiz Aziz. *İstihbarat Savaşları*. İstanbul: Kronik Kitap, 2019.
- Arslan, Şekib. *İttihatçı Bir Arap Aydınının Anıları*. Translated by Halit Özkan, İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2005.
- Bordewich, Chloe. “Diaries of an Ottoman Spymaster? Treason, Slander and Afterlife of Memoir in Empire’s Long Shadow.” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 78 (2019): 112–34.
- Çiçek, M. Talha. *War and State Formation in Syria: Cemal Pasha’s Governorate during World War I*. London: Routledge, 2014.
- . “The Impact of Sharif Hussein’s Revolt on the Nation-Building Processes of Turks and Arabs.” *Journal of Academic Approaches* 3, no. 2 (2012): 98–111.
- Dawn, C. Ernst. *From Ottomanism to Arabism: Essays on the Origins of the Arab Nationalism*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973.
- Derveze, Muhammed İzzet. *Osmanlı Filistin’inde Bir Posta Memuru*. Translated by Ali Benli, İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2007.
- El-Askeri, Cafer. *İsyancı Arap Ordusunda Bir Harbiyeli*. Translated by Halit Özkan, İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2009.
- Et-Tercüman, İhsan. *Çekirge Yılı: Kudüs 1915–1916*. Translated by Ali Benli, noted by Selim Temari, İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2012.
- Kara İsmail. *Hilafet Risaleleri 4*. İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2004.
- Kayalı, Hasan. *Arabs and the Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1918*. Berkeley: UC Press, 1997.

²¹ Arslan, *İttihatçı Bir Arap Aydını*, 140.

²² Recent studies of the “Arab” Revolt which became bestsellers in Turkey still insistently claim that it was a rebellion of the “Arabs” against the Ottomans. Lacking even the basic information about Sharif Hussein and his rebellion, they strive to attribute this local rebellion to the so-called “Arab nation.” See, for example: İsmail Köse, *Arap İsyanı ; Şerif Hüseyin*, Many other articles and books published by local journals and presses could be cited.

- Köse, İsmail. *İngiliz Arşiv Belgelerinde Arap İsyanı*. İstanbul: Kronik Kitap, 2017.
- . *Büyük Oyunun Küçük Aktörü, Şerif Hüseyin*. İstanbul: Kronik Kitap, 2018.
- Kral Abdullah, *Biz Osmanlıya Neden İsyandır?* Translated by Halit Özkan, İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2006.
- Kürd Ali, Muhammed. *Bir Osmanlı-Arap Gazetecinin Anıları*. Translated by İbrahim Tüfekçi, İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2006.
- Kürd Ali, Muhammed. Habbal, Hüseyin. El-Unsi, Abdülbasit, El-Bakr, Muhammed. *Türklerle Omuz Omuz: Arap İlim Heyeti Darülhilafé ve Çanakkale’de*. Translated by Ali Benli, İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2017.
- Muhammed Ferid. *Mısır Mısırlıdır: İngiliz İşgaline Karşı Osmanlı Hilafeti*. Translated by Ali Benli, Macit Karagözoğlu, İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2007.
- Muhammed Mahzumi Paşa. *Cemaleddin Afgani’nin Hatıraları*. Translated by Adem Yerinde, İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2006.
- Reşid Rıza, Muhammed. *İttihad-i Osmani’den Arap İsyanı’na*. Translated by Özgür Kavak, İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2007.
- Selam, Selim Ali. *Beyrut Şehremininin Anıları (1908-1918)*. Translated by Halit Özkan, İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2005.
- Teitelbaum, Joshua. *The Rise and Fall of the Hashemite Kingdom of Arabia*. London: Hurst, 2001.