

The Lost Connection and Divergent Identities: The Case of Turks and Arabs

*By Mehmet Fatih Seyhanoglu
(Fatih University/ Turkey)*

The Westphalia Peace (1648) was the first step towards the birth of different nationalities. The French Revolution further strengthened it. The Islamic civilization experienced a state of affairs similar to Westphalia when the Ottoman Empire was defeated and subsequently new nation-states were created. These nation-states became a new target of Western intervention. Such states did not truly represent Islamic civilization due to the fact that they were not connected to it in any form or manner. Under these circumstances, each nation-state was compelled to create its own history. This development violated the integrity of the Islamic civilization, in addition to creating gaps in Arab-Turkish identity.

The international system generated a different code for identities. Arabs and Turks identified themselves by their own nation state. As a result, they stopped sharing common values and drifted away from the very sources of Islam that once united them. A new version of religion based on the construction of nation-states began to emerge. This state of affairs led to the construction of new religious systems in which contact with other nations was lost. As Dostoyevsky put it, each nation created a new God peculiar to herself only. Had these nation-states obeyed the same God, there would have been no need for the existence of nation-states.¹

It is important to bear in mind that capitalism works on the basis of nation-states. Although it is widely believed that globalization has put an end to the nation-state system, there is a strong desire for self-determination among those ethnic groups who aspire to live in their own nation-states. The emergence of new nation-states should not be seen as a coincidence. As Wallerstein argues, ethnic rebellions are developing on a regular basis because they work to the advantage of capitalism. Ethnic rebellion indeed leads to exploitation because the international system is drawing borderlines amongst societies by way of ethnic nationalism.

¹ *Dostoyevski, Cinler (çevr Ergin Altay), İletişim Yayınları,(2000), s.253.*

Muslims must come up with their own original solutions to their problems by formulating them on the basis of their own understandings. The construction of the state in Islamic terms is different from contemporary nation states in that they share nothing in common. Islamic construction of the state suggests that it is a reflection of divine will, while nation states would use it for accomplishing national aims that people—not God—have thought of. Nationalism as such is the antithesis of Islam, for this would force us to accept that the current system of states is unchangeable and that it has no room for Islamic construction.

The assertion that Islam created separate nationalities for Muslims is a fundamentally misguided claim made by European colonial powers. Today, nearly all Muslim countries rely on capital economy and are already integrated into the international capitalist system. British Historian, A.J.P. Taylor captures this point poignantly: "Western civilization won their victory only in the 20th century." This simply means that we are only some independent prisoners of Western civilization.

Muslims throughout the world must admit that nationalism has nothing to do with Islam; rather, modern nation-states are a result of some bitter experience that Muslims have had over a certain period.² One could possibly conclude that as long as we base our constructions on Western notions, we are bound to have false beliefs that would prevent the universal message of Islam to reach Muslims, regardless of where they live. It would be wrong to conceive of Islam within the context of the Western notion of politics.

The Separation of Arab–Turkish Identities

The Nationalist Young Turks, who were educated in the West in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire and had been alienated from their own culture, had a major role to play in differentiating between Arab and Turkish identities. The Young Turks rejected anything different. They opposed other systems, and not only destroyed the quality of the Ottoman Empire as a multicultural entity, but also accelerated the differentiation of identities.

Zeine Zeine believes that the reason behind the deterioration of Arab–Turkish relations stems from the political movement of the Union Advancement (İttihad and

² Kalim Siddiqi, " Evrensel İslam Çağrısı : Alternative bir Yaklaşım", Birleşim, Ankara Kasım 1986, P101.

Terakki movements), known as "Making Turkish", which also became the source for Arab nationalism.³ The Young Turks were the most influential group amongst the members of the Union Advancement. The nationalism of the Young Turks led to Arab nationalism. Subsequently, new Turkish nation-states were born and nationalist political sentiments and movements were further intensified. All this created a new secular Turkish identity. The Young Turks attempted to minimize their weaknesses in two ways: they embraced Western ideologies and they adopted viewpoints of those who mediated between people and theoreticians. (*The Young Turks took courses from French Tarde & Le Bon*)⁴

How Do Turks and Arabs View Each Other?

Nations that stopped having some connection to the Ottoman Empire had already begun to build their own identities. Naturally, once an attachment to one place disappears, it is replaced with new and different identities. The Turkish image of the Arabs changed entirely after World War I. During World War I only a few Arab leaders helped Westerners to defeat the Ottoman Empire. This caused a huge embarrassment to the entire Arab world and it also caused Turks to have different images of Arabs. For example, Arabic images were often connected with dogs, or some other pejorative cultural idioms about the Arabs. The Turks used belittling idioms to describe the Arabs as evil-doers.

The Arabs also had similar feelings towards the Turks. Arabs considered caravan robbers as heroes that rebelled against the Ottomans in their history books, whereas the Turks only saw robberies as the Arabs' betrayal of Turks. In the Arab' mind, when one behaves in a cruel way, one is often described as acting like a Turk, or making a decision like a Turk.

Both colonialism and post-colonialism reinforced the separation of identities, paving the way for Arab-Turkish identity differentiation. One needs to take a look at this process to understand problems relating to the Islamic world or the separation of identities. Comprehending this process is likely to lead us to the construction of new identities.

The nature of the international system plays a major role in differentiating between Arab-Turkish identity and the reason why Turks tend to regard themselves as distinct from Arabs.

³ Z. Zeine, *Arab-Turkish Relations and the Emergence of Arab Nationalism*, Beirut 1958

⁴ Serif Mardin, *Jön Türklerin siyasi fikirleri 1895-1908*, İletişim Yayınları, 1999 İstanbul

Let me now turn to a more concrete example in order to clarify the impact of the nation-state system on the Ottoman Empire. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Muslims and non-Muslims lost contact with each other, as they were forced to live within the boundaries that Westerners had drawn. A new era had begun which was to be described as "dialogue between boundaries." The basic reason behind the Arab-Turkish identity differentiation was the Peace of Westphalia.

German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche did a very good job in his work "Twilight of the God," describing the period following the Westphalia treaty. Nietzsche argued that there was no God and that everything that nation-states did in the name of their national interests was justified. Nietzsche tells a story about a mad person, who arrives in the middle of the bazaar at noon and shouts loudly at people: "I am searching for God. I am looking for Him. Where is He?" People began to laugh at his remarks and did not take notice of his question. The mad person continued shouting: "Is it not getting colder in here? Which way leads to the upper part of the country, which way to the lower part of the country? Where is He?" People began to feel uncomfortable. However, the mad person went on talking and the crowd began taking him seriously. "God is dead! God is dead!" he shouted, "we killed Him, you and me."

He went on questioning: "Are we not supposed to be God? So we can hope we are not wasting anything. What kind of water will wipe out the blood flowing away from our fingers?" The mad person threw his torch to the ground, breaking it into pieces. Then he said: "It is not yet the time for it." Astonished at what they saw, people were unable to comprehend the mad person's behaviour.

The rest of the story tells us that the mad person visited each church in the village, singing the song "The death of God." Each time that he turned away from the church and was asked to explain his remarks, he replied: "What are the churches but the gravestones of God?"

Islamic civilization experienced a similar process when the Ottoman Empire fell. A system that killed its own creator was bound to kill the creator of other civilizations as well. The end of the Ottoman Empire coincided with the end of World War I. The Ottoman Empire was the Middle Eastern Islamic state and faded away in 1918. Following its demise, victorious states established artificial states one after another. These were constructed according to the notion of nationality modelled

after European racism. Over time, this region took on an entirely new shape. Faced with new changes, these entities needed to have new techniques for adapting to the new environment. In the absence of such adjustments, the chances for survival were likely to diminish.

The end of the Ottoman Empire led to the import of some political movements from the West that regarded the latter as the only model of perfection. The Empire was divided into many parts, and due to this they didn't all share the same cultural values. These parts had an artificial background. If these boundaries were to disappear, the attachments would most likely be revived. These artificial regimes only reinforced the separation between the Turks and the Arabs. As Toynbee has asserted, the Ottoman Empire was not a civilization that faded away. Rather, it was a civilization that was hindered from moving forward.

Put differently, it was hampered by some powerful forces from the outside. This was done chiefly by force. The powerful states indeed shaped the international system and caused the differentiation of identities. It was this intervention that transformed the Arabs' and the Turks' mentality. It is therefore wrong to disregard the Western world's role in constructing different Arab and Turkish identities. Obviously, all identities are constructed.

The Ottoman Empire attributed its backwardness to its inability to keep up with new technological advancements. That is why the Empire tried to solve this problem by sending its young minds to Western countries to gain a better education. However, the Empire went on to send people to Western countries for a better education only to expedite its own demise. In fact, the Ottoman Empire undermined its own potential to develop technological, economic and political resources when it was really at its pinnacle.

Said Nursi, a renowned Turkish Islamic scholar, explains the circumstances in which the Ottoman Empire found itself: "Once I happened to hear a story: a man recognized that one of the columns within his house was loosened and weakened. The whole building collapsed because he did not insert a new column before removing the old one."⁵ The central message here is that one needs to prepare a good column and fix it in the house before removing the old one. Otherwise, the whole building would fall without him realizing the reason behind its collapse. This

⁵ Taken from the speech that Said Nursi made in Arabic in 1911, Damascus, and had a book published out of it.

analogy is very appropriate in that it demonstrates the state of affairs surrounding the Empire at that time. While trying to solve its problems by sending people abroad to become better educated the Empire in essence removed its old column before installing a new one.

There is an urgent need to return to the main sources of Islam and theorize a new political ideology that would ultimately stop differentiation between identities and restore the lost connections. Arabs and Turks need to take a long and hard look at their past in order to realize that they belonged to the same political culture. Arabs and Turks need to be aware of the radically changing environment in which they live and need to take a fresh but drastic approach. Otherwise, they will not be able to adapt to modern and changing times.

And finally, Western intervention in the Middle Eastern region has caused the Arabs and the Turks to have new identities, something which they accepted as a given. Arabs and Turks must avoid looking at past history with an understanding that they are capable of constructing their own new identities. They need to look for ways to establish a fresh identity by moving from meaning to construction, not the reverse. They need to construct a new identity by defining who a Muslim is, while returning to the innovative Islamic sources. Without such a move, Muslims will always remain an object within the existing international system.