Decentralization, Imperialism, and Ottoman Sovereignty in the Arab Lands before 1914: Shakīb Arslān’s Polemic against the Decentralization Party

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Abstract

Before the First World War, Shakīb Arslān’s political views and polemic against the Ottoman Administrative Decentralization Party was primarily based on his and his family’s experiences in the politics of Mount Lebanon since 1861. His contacts with Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ‘Abduh did not inspire him to adopt a pan-Islamist or reformist stance. When he became involved in politics at the Ottoman imperial level after 1911, he called for strengthening Ottoman central control in the Arab lands. He interpreted the demands of decentralization and autonomy as the desire to establish a political system along the lines of the special administration in Mount Lebanon, which he viewed as an invitation to increase of European influence. He therefore accused those who promoted decentralization of dishonesty and treason. His essential motive at this time was to preserve and justify the strength and control of the Ottoman center. His view of Islam as a political unifier did not have a reformist edge, but was designed as a counterpoise to the idea of Arab exclusivity.

Keywords
Shakīb Arslān, Decentralization, Imperialism, Islamism, Ottomanism, Arabism

The 1908 constitutional revolution in the Ottoman Empire unleashed the political and intellectual energies of various ethnic and religious groups that had been kept at bay under Sultan Abdülḥamīd II’s (r.1876–1909) autocratic rule. In the ensuing period of freedom, Arabs, one of the empire’s largest ethnic groups, tried to promote their political views

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and influence public opinion by publishing journals and newspapers, founding associations, and organizing conferences and congresses. Recent scholarship has established that most Arabs, including the educated and politically active ones, remained committed to the empire’s continuation and did not develop an ideology that could justify separation and independence.\(^1\) The main point of contention for the Arab political public was whether a centralist or decentralist administration should be adopted in order to sustain the empire’s integrity. The views on the administrative system, in most cases, kept up with ideas on the relative importance of ethnic and religious identities. Those who supported a centralist administration usually stressed Islamic religious identity and its unifying force for Arabs and Turks, whereas the proponents of a decentralist administration emphasized the Arabs’ ethnic distinctiveness.

Towards the end of 1912, some Arab proponents of a decentralist administration established the Ottoman Administrative Decentralization Party (\(\textit{Ḥizb al-Lāmarkaziyya al-Idāriyya al-ʿUthmānī}\)) in Cairo. Critical of the centralization policy of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the ruling party for most of the constitutional period, they demanded a decentralized administration and recognition of Arab autonomy. After the convention of the Arab Congress in Paris in June 1913, Shakīb Arslān became the mouthpiece of the centralist position and sought to undermine the credibility of Arab supporters of decentralization by presenting them as secessionists and, either intentionally or unintentionally serving the purposes of European powers. He promoted the idea of Islamic unity, which, according to him, would justify the dedication of Arabs and Turks to maintaining the Ottoman Empire.

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Shakīb Arslān’s biographers have attached great importance to the influence of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and Muhammad ʿAbduh (1905) on the formation of his political ideas. William L. Cleveland states: “He adopted the pan-Islamic concepts of al-Afghani and the reformist commitment conveyed to him by ʿAbduh; these were deeply held beliefs, and he courageously acted on them.” In this essay, I will contend that Shakīb Arslān’s position and ideas in the political arena before the First World War were primarily informed by his family’s experiences under the special regime of Mount Lebanon, which had been in place since 1861. His aversion to a decentralized administration and his association of it with the increase of foreign influence reveal his preoccupation with the political regime of Mount Lebanon as the epitome of this type of administration on Ottoman soil. In the prewar period, his version of Islamic unity did not include a pan-Islamist or reformist content; rather, it justified Ottoman sovereignty and undermined the validity of the Arabists’ demand for decentralization on the basis that Arabs constituted a distinct ethnic group.

Shakīb Arslān was born to one of the oldest aristocratic Druze families in the Shūf region of Mount Lebanon in 1869. Under the Ottomans, like other paramount families, the Arslāns gained prestige by being involved in tax-farming and administration. Although they continued to sit at the top of the aristocratic hierarchy with the right of

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using the title *amîr* (only two other families could use this title), their actual power waned after 1711 when the faction they supported lost in an inter-Druze struggle for leadership in the region.\(^4\) However, the other Druze families controlled most of the tax-farms and ensured Druze superiority in the region through the 18\(^{th}\) century.

The commercialization of the economy and the growing importance of maritime trade connected the Ottoman lands, including Mount Lebanon, with the outside world and made them susceptible to external influences in the 19\(^{th}\) century.\(^5\) Muḥammad ‘Alî (d. 1849), the powerful governor of Egypt, interfered in Mount Lebanon’s affairs and invaded it (and the rest of Syria) in 1832. This intervention eroded Druze power and extended the influence of the Maronite Christians, the region’s largest confessional group.\(^6\) In addition, internal economic developments, the rise of new trade centers, and the intensification of commercial relations within the region worked against the authority of Druze tax-farmers.\(^7\) The Druze struggled with Ibrâhîm Pasha, Muḥammad ‘Alî’s son, in the hope that the end of Egyptian control and the restitution of Ottoman rule would bring back their lost privileges.\(^8\) When Egyptian rule ended in 1840, the Druze leaders, who had left their country or had been exiled, returned and attempted to reestablish their rights as tax-farmers. However, the changed economic opportunities (viz., the development of international and internal markets) enabled the Maronite Christians to avoid subjugation and refuse to pay taxes.\(^9\) The struggle between taxpayers and their lords gradually assumed a sectarian color and led the Druze and Maronite Christian communities


\(^{8}\) Fawaz, *An Occasion for War*, 20f.

to confront each other. The administrative arrangements of 1845 and 1850 could not prevent the events of 1860, when the Druze attacked and massacred the Maronite Christians. As a consequence, France landed a force in Beirut to protect the rights of the Maronite community.

The Ottoman government punished the officials and Druze leaders for failing to prevent these shameful events. However, Britain, France, Russia, Austria, and Prussia pushed for reform and participated in the discussion of policies that should be undertaken in the region. Finally, in 1861, these states and the Ottoman government agreed to establish a special regime in Mount Lebanon that would recognize the region’s autonomy under Ottoman sovereignty. The agreement dictated that Mount Lebanon be governed by a Christian Ottoman subject who did not come from the region. The administrative council, which had important taxation-related powers, included twelve members: four Maronite Christians, three Druze, two Greek Orthodox Christians, one Greek Catholic Christian, one Shiite Muslim, and one Sunni Muslim. The governor had the prerogative of appointing officials to the administrative and judicial positions.  

The European powers, especially Britain and France, had commercial relations with the eastern Mediterranean region and wanted to increase their influence there for strategic purposes from the 17th century onward. The Ottoman Empire’s relative weakness in the 19th century led European states to increase their efforts to gain influence. Their consuls established relationships with the confessional communities and mediated their problems with the Ottoman government. France helped the Maronites, while Britain supported the Jews and sometimes the Druze. The autonomous administration in Mount Lebanon minimized the Ottomans’ regional influence and made European consuls the regular (perhaps the most significant) actors in politics and administration. They pressured the governor or the Ottoman central government to act in accordance with their interests. Thus, it became almost impossible for the people of Mount Lebanon to carry out business with the govern-

\[10\] Ibid., 82-101.

ment without the consent of European consuls. Shakīb Arslān described this state of affairs by saying that people became slaves of the consuls in Beirut.¹²

The Maronite community, the majority population in Mount Lebanon (67.5 percent), had an institutionalized church structure and benefited from the political support of the French consul in Beirut. They could pressure the governor and receive most of what they wanted. The Druze, which had held the upper hand in the past, lost most of their power. They had to exert significant efforts and endure the competition of the various Druze families for minor gains. Since the new autonomous administration had cancelled the tax-farming system, those who wanted to have any influence within the community had to acquire government positions. The Arslān family, which sought to control the district governorship (the office of qāʾīm-maqām) of the Shūf region, competed with the Junbulāṭs for this position. In a later period, different factions of the Arslān family vied for it.¹³ The governor of Mount Lebanon had the authority to make appointments to this position at his own discretion. However, pressure from the European consuls or the Ottoman central government could influence his decision. Unlike the Maronite community, the Druze were the minor partner in the administration and did not have consistent foreign backing. They were occasionally supported by the British, but this support was neither universal nor completely reliable. It seems that the Druze, especially the Arslān family, considered it important to cultivate relationships with the Ottoman imperial center and to receive its support to strengthen their position in local politics.¹⁴ Thus, unlike their Maronite compatriots, the children of notable Druze families, especially the Arslāns, received their political education with the view that they would participate in and communicate with the Ottoman administration and society.

After studying in an American and a Maronite school, Shakīb Arslān enrolled in an Ottoman government school in Beirut. During his school


¹³ Cleveland, Islam against the West, 14. See also Shakīb Arslān, Sīra dhātiyya (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalīʿa, 1969), 33f. and 52.

years he learned French and Turkish, developed the skill of writing Arabic prose and poetry, and published his first articles and poems in local newspapers. In 1887, he published his first poetry book: Bākūra. In his memoirs, Shakīb Arslān mentioned that he was greatly influenced by Muḥammad ʿAbduh’s courses at the Ottoman government school. Shakīb Arslān’s father, Amīr Ḥammūd, also met ʿAbduh and several times hosted him at their home in Shuwayfāt. Later, in 1890, when Shakīb Arslān stopped in Cairo on his way to Istanbul, ʿAbduh helped him meet important Egyptians, such as Khedive Tawfīq (d. 1892), Saʿd Zaghlūl (d. 1927), and Aḥmad Zakī (d. 1934), and to publish his articles in Egyptian newspapers. He then left for Istanbul, where he spent two years looking after his family’s interests. In 1892, he went to Europe for medical treatment. Returning to Istanbul the same year, he had the chance to meet Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī briefly. When he found out that Wāṣā Pasha, Mount Lebanon’s governor, had died, he immediately set out for the region to work for his uncle’s, Muṣṭafā Arslān, appointment to the district governorship of Shūf. Wāṣā Pasha had dismissed him from this position and replaced him with Nasīb Junbulāt. The Arslāns convinced the new governor Naʿūm Pasha to appoint Muṣṭafā Arslān in his stead. In 1902, Muṣṭafā Arslān resigned and was replaced by Shakīb Arslān. However, after a few months Muẓaffar Pasha became the governor of Mount Lebanon and replaced Shakīb Arslān with Nasīb Junbulāt. The Arslāns continued to struggle and succeeded in having Sāmī Arslān appointed in 1904. However, Muẓaffar Pasha eventually replaced him with another family member: Tawfīq Majīd Arslān. Shakīb Arslān and his group were not happy with this development, but they could do nothing about it until the 1908 constitutional revolution.15

The facts of Shakīb Arslān’s biography and the chronology of his intellectual output suggest that, before the constitutional revolution, his primary political concern was to ensure his family’s superiority in the Shūf region. He went to Istanbul to lobby and struggled with the governors by publishing critiques of their policies to keep the district gov-

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15 Arslān, Sīra dhātiyya, 23-34. Lothrop Stoddard and Shakīb Arslān, Ḥādir al-ʿālam al-islāmī, 2 vols. (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Salafiyya, 1924), 1: 202-205. See also Cleveland, Islam Against the West, 5-14.
ernorship of Shūf within the family. In addition, he continued his literary and journalistic activities by editing literary and historical manuscripts of such medieval Arab writers as Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. 756) and Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābī (d. 994), translating a novel by Chateaubriand, and contributing articles to various journals. According to his later testimony, at the time his poetry gained him a certain privilege and his acquaintance with al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh was well-known and coveted.

However, it seems that he wrote only “to secure fame and recognition” in literary circles. Unlike the other disciples of al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh, he did not adopt and promote the ideal of pan-Islamic unity or Islamic reform and revivalism.

It is not clear if Shakīb Arslān established a relationship with the CUP before the constitutional revolution. In his memoirs, he recounts how he led demonstrations that called for applying the Ottoman constitution in Mount Lebanon and integrating its administration with that of the other parts of the empire. These demonstrations proved futile, because the administrative council of Mount Lebanon rejected the proposal to extend the constitution’s authority to the autonomous region. Shakīb Arslān, who was disappointed because he wanted to be elected as a deputy of the region to the Ottoman Parliament, was appeased by being appointed to the district governorship of Shūf in 1908. After a while, Governor Yūsuf Pasha became irritated with Shakīb Arslān’s tenure, because the former had had to appoint the latter under pressure. With

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17) For example, he published an article about his travels in Mount Lebanon in *al-Ahrām* in 1897. For this, see Shakīb Arslān, *al-Sayyid Rashīd Riḍā aw ikhā’ arba’în sana* (Cairo: Dār al-Fādila, 2006), 115. Later, in 1900 and 1901, he contributed two articles, entitled “Islam in China” and “The Future of China” to the journal *al-Muqtaṭaf*. For this, see Cleveland, *Islam Against the West*, 172n.
the British consul’s encouragement, Yūsuf Pasha dismissed Shakīb Arslān from the position two years later.22 Shakīb Arslān’s first attempt to leave Mount Lebanon to participate in politics at the imperial level came in 1909, when he prepared to replace his cousin Muḥammad Arslān, who had represented Latakia in the Ottoman Parliament and was murdered during a demonstration in Istanbul. However, the head of the family, Muṣṭafā Arslān, did not allow him to run for this position.23 He had another chance to represent the region when Italy invaded Libya in 1911. This unprovoked violence, which aroused the patriotic feelings of Arabs and Turks alike, created a sentiment of concern and urgency and lead to the government’s organizing and dispatching military and humanitarian aid to al-Sanūsī’s tribal army, which constituted the backbone of resistance. Shakīb Arslān went to Libya to help fellow Arabs and Muslims fight colonialism. He published a number of articles in newspapers about the Italian invasion and called upon all Ottomans to unite in order to defend the country against European encroachment.24 In Libya, he met several CUP leaders, including Enver Pasha (d. 1922), Ali Fethi (d. 1943), and Mustafa Kemal (d. 1938). He established a close friendship with Enver Pasha, which helped him approach the center of power in the coming years.25

Until his participation in the Libyan resistance, Shakīb Arslān had a delicate relationship with the CUP, if any at all. In his memoirs, he stated that he participated in the war not to contribute to the CUP cause, but to dispel the danger of the empire’s dissolution. He made it clear that he had ended all of his relations with the CUP before the war with Italy and that his relationship with Enver Pasha was of a personal nature.26 However, his unconditional dedication to the empire’s continuation and access to prominent CUP members gradually increased his political weight in Istanbul and the Arab lands. When the Arab Congress met in Paris, Shakib Arslān was in Syria and instigated the Arab notables, scholars, and clergymen to send telegrams to the central

22) Ibid., 39-42.
23) Ibid., 77.
24) Cleveland, Islam Against the West, 19ff.
25) Arslān, Sīra Dhātīyya, 72-82.
26) Ibid., 105-108.
government, stating that they did not recognize the Congress as their representative. In return, the CUP government invited him and many other Arab notables to Istanbul to hear their views about reform in the Arab lands.\textsuperscript{27} Shakīb Arslān reiterated his opposition to the Arab Congress in Istanbul. Since his priorities coincided with those of the ruling CUP at the time, he agreed to work with them. Before he returned home, he was commissioned to go to Madina and start building a university, which was one of the Arab notables’ demands.\textsuperscript{28}

Shakīb Arslān published several articles in \textit{al-Ra’\textasciitilde y al-\textasciitilde Āmm} against the demands of the Arab Congress.\textsuperscript{29} In addition, on his way to Madina he composed the book \textit{Ilā l-\textasciitilde arab} and sent it for publication in Istanbul. In this book, he puts his full weight behind the idea of Arab-Turkish unity under the empire and passionately criticized and demonized the idea of a decentralized administration.

His primary concern was to maintain the integrity and strength of Ottoman administration in the Arab lands. For him, the empire was the last stronghold before the advance of European imperialism and colonialism, and thus had to be protected at any cost. Decentralization would weaken state authority and enable the extension of European influence. It is clear that he had in mind European, especially French, interference in the affairs of Mount Lebanon and the transformation of power relations after the establishment of the autonomous regime in 1861.\textsuperscript{30} He interpreted decentralized administration and autonomy as a European imperial conspiracy and their proponents as agents of imperialism.

Many Arabs supported the Young Turk movement in the hope that the constitutional regime would provide better conditions for the free development of ethnic culture and identity. The 1908 revolution caused joy in many Arab cities; opponents of Abdūlhamīd II’s autocratic rule celebrated this as a victory. In the revolution’s early days, many Arabs greeted the removal of representatives of the old regime from govern-

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 110ff. For Shakīb Arslān’s letter to Talat Pasha about this university project, see Halil Sahilli\textasciitilde o\textasciitilde lu, “Risāla min Shakīb Arslān ilā Tal‘at Bāshā”, in his \textit{Min tārīkh al-aqīār al-arabīyya fī l-\textasciitilde ahd al-\textasciitilde uthmānī} (Istanbul: IRCICA, 2000), 381-87.

\textsuperscript{28} Arslān, \textit{Sīra dhātiyya}, 112f.

\textsuperscript{29} Cleveland, \textit{Islam Against the West}, 24f.

\textsuperscript{30} Shakīb Arslān, \textit{Ilā l-\textasciitilde arab}, 540.
ment positions with satisfaction.\textsuperscript{31} However, the CUP gradually increased its influence and took measures to strengthen and extend the centralized administration. Some Arabs who cooperated with the CUP in order to be elected to the Ottoman Parliament broke with its leadership, especially because its leaders had a semi-secret Turkist tendency and excluded non-Turks from the essential decision-making process.\textsuperscript{32} From 1911 onward, the Arab intellectuals of the time, joined by disgruntled groups, sustained a very effective campaign against CUP policies that they labeled “Turkification”. They established organizations to campaign for a decentralized administration in the Arab lands. The most significant Arab organization of this sort, the Ottoman Administrative Decentralization Party established in Cairo toward the end of 1912, featured Rafiq al-‘Azm, Rashid Riḍā (d. 1935), ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Zahrāwī (d. 1916), and Iskandar ʿAmmūn among its leading members. Several other public or secret organizations cooperated with the Decentralization Party, such as the Beirut Reform Society and al-Fatāt. In June 1913, with the initiative of al-Fatāt, the Arab Congress met in Paris and declared its resolutions, which “amounted to a restatement of the principles” and proposals of the Decentralization Party and Beirut Reform Society.\textsuperscript{33}

It seems that Shakib Arslān’s polemic against the proponents of decentralization sought to discredit them by all means possible. He usually lumped all supporters of this idea under such general phrases as “they”,\textsuperscript{34} “this group”,\textsuperscript{35} and “decentralists”.\textsuperscript{36} He accepted differences in their motives and purposes, but implicated the whole group for the

\textsuperscript{31} Hasan Kayal, \textit{Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1918} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 38-50. See also David Commins, “Religious Reformers and Arabists in Damascus, 1885–1914”, \textit{IJMES} 18/4 (1986): 413.


\textsuperscript{33} George Antonius, \textit{The Arab Awakening} (Beirut: Librairie Du Liban, 1969), 107-16. For minutes of the congress, see \textit{al-Mu’tamar al-‘arabi al-awwal} (Cairo: Maṭba‘a al-Busfūr, 1913).

\textsuperscript{34} Shakib Arslān, \textit{Ila l-‘arab}, 583, 585, 601, 614f., 629, and 633.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 662.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 587 and 593.
faults of particular members. For example, he pointed out that some decentralists received financial support from foreign governments: “[...] the essential reason [for decentralist groupings] is the ambition of foreigners against our country, continuous secret stirrings and money that go from the treasuries of foreign ministries into the pockets of journalists and reporters [...]”. He then discussed decentralization as if collaborating with Europeans was a given for everyone who supported this system.

The Decentralization Party’s leaders were intent on declaring their commitment to the empire’s continuity. They believed that the reforms they demanded, if implemented, would bring prosperity to Arabs and strengthen the empire. In an interview with *Le Temps*, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Zahrāwī declared that

it would be suitable for the Ottoman government to feel offended if we demanded separation [...] However, we want the contrary. Our demands will conduce to the improvement of the condition of the state and the Arab element together [...] We believe that it is a duty for us to undertake this now, because it is the only way to be able to protect [...] the state from collapsing [...]

Those who spoke at the Arab Congress were careful to express their desire to maintain the empire’s unity and not to encourage separation. When the CUP offered negotiations, they readily accepted it and came to an agreement. They immediately published the minutes of the congress and details of their agreement with the CUP.

Shakīb Arslān did not believe in the participants’ assertions and claimed that their acts proved their opposition to the empire’s unity. He took issue with the time and location of the Arab Congress. The empire went to war over Libya with Italy in 1911. In the summer of 1912, the

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37) Ibid., 541.
38) For example, see ibid., 596f. and 650.
40) Kayal, *Arabs and Young Turks*, 137f. See also Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, 115.
41) *Al-Mu'tamar al-arabi al-awwal*. 
Balkan states (viz., Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, and Bulgaria) formed an alliance and attacked the empire. The Italian blockade of the Dardanelles threatened the war effort against the allied Balkan states and forced Istanbul to make peace with Italy in October 1912. A few months later the Albanians, who had been in revolt for a long time, declared their independence. The war with the Balkan states, which dragged on until September 1913, caused the Ottomans to lose several provinces, such as Edirne to Bulgaria (they later recaptured it). In Shakib Arslan’s view, organizing the congress at such a critical time to demand reforms undermined Ottoman strength and showed that the decentralists were not concerned about the empire’s integrity. Its location and association with France were further evidence of their evil intent.42

Another of Shakib Arslan’s strategies to discredit members of the Decentralization Party was to associate them with those who openly worked against Ottoman interests. For example, he likened such people to Sharif Pasha, a former Ottoman ambassador to Sweden who had later requested Britain and France to use their naval fleets to overthrow a CUP government; or to the Albanian Ismail Kemal Bey, who collaborated with Greece and led the Albanian national movement. In Shakib Arslan’s view, the decentralists’ attempt to justify the Albanian revolt by pointing to CUP oppression revealed that they had no patriotism and did not care about the empire’s territorial integrity. Further evidence of their disloyalty, Shakib Arslan claimed, was that they were pleased by the Ottoman loss of Edirne.43 In this context, he said, “for many children of this miserable country, the enmity against the party [CUP] turns into enmity against the state itself; the hatred for Turks transforms into hatred for the caliphate and Islam.”44

The decentralists’ demands relied on the Arabist idea that the Arabs constituted a viable distinct ethnic community, one that had the right to develop its own culture and identity. This idea can be traced back to the second half of the 19th century, when the spread of military and civil government schools, as well as European missionary schools, increased the level of education and introduced the children of Arab elites

42 Shakib Arslan, Ilā l-ʿarab, 585 and 600f.
43 Ibid., 542f. and 662f.
44 Ibid., 544.
and commoners to modern political and social ideas. Such European concepts as nationalism, unity, national culture, and national language became part of the educated public’s vocabulary and influenced their political and social vision. In addition, the Salafis, a group of religious reformers, looked at the failure of Muslims in the contemporary world and blamed the misinterpretation and distortion of the religious sources for this. They called for the study of the Qur’ān and of their interpretation by the first generations of the Muslim community. This brought the first Muslims, who were led by Arabs, into focus as the carriers of the “true faith”. This religious reformism gradually translated into a political program that demanded an Arab caliphate and endorsed the Arabist idea of ethnic distinctiveness. Many Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs began to pay closer attention to the historical phases of Arab glory as well as to the beauty of the Arabic language. They also emphasized the Arabs’ unique role in Islamic history and the present.

Shakīb Arslān rejected ethnic solidarity (al-‘āṣabiyya al-jinsiyya) on two grounds. First, it was against the religious law. The Qur’ānic verse that “the believers indeed are brothers” (49:10) and the prophetic tradition that “the believers, in their mutual mercy, love and compassion, are like a (single) body; if one part of it feels pain, the rest of the body will join it in staying awake and suffering fever” (al-Bukhārī, no. 5665) illustrated that only the bond of religion was legitimate. Second, he equated ethnic solidarity with pre-Islamic tribalism and claimed that without the bond of Islam Arabs could not unite. If Islam had not been revealed and accepted by Arabs, they would have remained astray and suffering under Persian and Roman rule. Similarly, if Arabs did not obey the empire and unite around it on the basis of religion, they would be divided into groups and be prone to colonial invasion, since tribal

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47) Hourani, Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 271f., and Kayali, Arabs and Young Turks, 36ff.
48) Shakīb Arslān, Ilā l-‘arab, 525.
49) Ibid., 528f.
honor would keep Arab princes from submitting to “their neighbors’ command” and recognizing “their peers’ sovereignty”.

On the other hand, Shakīb Arslān challenged the sincerity of the decentralists in supporting the Arabist idea, protecting Arab rights, and promoting Arab culture and identity. He claimed that while Libyan Arabs continued to fight Italy under al-Sanūsī’s leadership, some leading members of the Decentralization Party tried to convince the Libyans to accept Italian sovereignty. If they really supported Arab rights and glory, such advice would have been a contradiction. In addition, he took issue with the Arab Congress’ opposition to immigrants to Syria, for he held that immigrants would contribute to the country’s economic development by tilling the fallow land and thus would not appropriate anything from the economic share of current residents. He said that the decentralists were against the immigration of even North African Arabs. Concluding that the decentralists did not care about the Arabs’ prosperity, he branded the Decentralization Party as the party of “subjugating Muslims to Europeans”.

The implementation of modernizing Tanzimat policies resulted in extensive administrative and social change and restructuring of the elite. Most of the families that had traditionally functioned as political intermediaries between the policies of the center and local concerns adjusted themselves and received positions in the expanding modern bureaucracy. They supported the empire’s continuation and dissociated themselves from decentralization demands. While relatively inactive in journalism and publication, they controlled and represented the views of the majority of the population. They declared that the Arab Congress in Paris did not represent them. On the other hand, Tanzimat policies engendered the formation of a competing elite class, whose prestige was based on their modern education and their technical skills, and whose power stemmed from the use and manipulation of the modern publica-

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50) Ibid., 563f. and 648.
51) Ibid., 650.
52) Ibid., 633.
53) Ibid., 650.
54) Khoury, Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism, 46-52 and 72.
Although the members of this new class were a minority, they could attract attention to their projects and ideas by promoting them in books, newspapers, and journals, as well as by organizing high-profile events. They had representatives in every major Arab city, but their stronghold was Beirut. The initiators of the Decentralization Party and the Arab Congress were mostly drawn from the members of the new class.

For Shakīb Arslān, the leaders of Arabs were the notable families. The telegrams against the Arab Congress, sent to the central government by the notables of Damascus and the leaders of Aleppo, Jerusalem, Beirut, Nablus, Gaza, Jaffa, Acre, and Sidon, proved that the Congress was self-appointed. Shakīb Arslān had no respect for the graduates of modern schools, for he said that they were involved in journalism, propagated their views in newspapers, and posed as significant people. Yet they had very little influence in real life. Their failure to implement a strike in Beirut to protest the banning of the Beirut Reform Society illustrated their insignificance. He was exasperated that the congress in Paris was called the Arab Congress:

They were not commissioned by the Arab nation (al-umma al-ʿarabiyya). They did not have the right to speak on its behalf. They were not commissioned by the peoples of Damascus, Aleppo, or Jerusalem, neither by any other city in Syria. They were not even commissioned by the whole of Beirut. However, it did not suffice for them to speak in the name of the whole of Beirut so that they also spoke on behalf of [...] the Arabian Peninsula, Syria and Iraq.

Shakīb Arslān questioned the correspondence between the congress’ claims and the Arabs’s actual support for it. He presented the par-

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57) Shakīb Arslān, Ilā l-ʿarab, 599.
58) Ibid., 577.
59) Ibid., 573f.
60) Ibid., 598.
participants as usurpers of the right of representation, which did not belong to them.

As has been mentioned, Shakīb Arslān was profoundly convinced of the necessity of maintaining Ottoman sovereignty in Arab lands. A significant reduction in central control and the establishment of a decentralized administration in the region was an invitation to European domination and invasion. The developments in autonomous Mount Lebanon demonstrated that any decrease in central control was accompanied by the increased influence of European consuls. His ideas about ethnicity, religion, history, economic development, and representation were either based on, or designed to substantiate, this conviction.

I have discussed his harsh criticism of supporters of decentralization. Now, I will turn to how he defended and justified Ottoman superiority and central control.

Shakīb Arslān called on Arabs to obey the Ottoman Empire because it represented the Islamic caliphate (al-khilāfa al-islāmiyya) and the unity of Muslims at the time. When Selīm I (r. 1512–20) captured Egypt, Syria, and Arabia, the Abbasid caliph resigned from his position in Selīm’s favor. All Muslims supported this decision because this “heavy duty” of the caliphate required the Ottoman strength. In the early 20th century, the Ottomans were still the only group that could shoulder the requirements of the caliphate. Shakīb Arslān recounted the Ottomans’ services to Islam and the holy places in Makka and Madina. He related a vision of Sayyid Muḥammad al-Sanūsī, the charismatic mystical leader from North Africa, according to which the Prophet Muḥammad warned against disobeying the Ottomans. In Arslān’s view, “none of the Arab kings, except the rightly-guided caliphs [the first four caliphs after the death of the Prophet], superseded them” in following and spreading Islam’s message. Thus, “the Ottoman state

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61 For the creation of this 18th-century myth of the transfer of the caliphate from the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 1543) to the Ottoman sultan Selīm I, see Halil İnalcık, “The Rise of the Ottoman Empire”, in The Cambridge History of Islam, eds. P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton, and Bernard Lewis, 2 vols., 1: 320 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
62 Shakīb Arslān, Ilā l-ʿarab, 532.
63 Ibid., 532.
and the Islamic religion are two things that cannot be separated; it is impossible to respect one and not the other.”

According to Shakīb Arslān, Islam was the only authentic and viable source of political unity. He tried to respond to the critique that religion could not play a constructive role in modern politics. He defined religion as the only source of political cohesion and unity, arguing that even Europeans continued to unite on the basis of religious bond. French support and protection of the Maronites and the continuous Christian alliance against the Ottomans illustrated the importance of religion as the essence of political organization. Europeans continued to rely on Christianity for their political unity. Their fighting each other was not a result of their division, but rather a conflict within the family. Thus, for him, one could not associate religious unity with fanaticism and ethnic unity with progress if one was to claim that Europe represented modernity and civilization.

To strengthen his point and authenticate religion as the basis of political unity, Shakīb Arslān turned to history. He cited the Arabs’ dishonorable situation, based on tribal solidarity and inter-tribal conflict before the rise of Islam, as being the result of their failure to unite and subsequent domination by external rulers. The Ethiopians ruled Yemen and subjected Arabs to ignoble treatment. The Persians saw them as “the vilest of all people”, and the Byzantines could subjugate them easily. However, Islam enabled the Arabs to unite and rule over the very people who had formerly dominated them. Shakīb Arslān stressed that although the Prophet was an Arab and the Qur’ān was in Arabic, it forbade ethnic arrogance. If it allowed “the tiniest vestige of racial selfishness”, it could not unite even the Arabs. Islam’s universal message appealed to both Arabs and non-Arabs. In the first centuries of Islam, Arabs ruled over non-Arab Muslims. When their religious zeal flagged and the pre-Islamic Arab tribalism re-emerged, other Muslim groups (e.g., the Turks,

64) Ibid., 644.
65) Ibid., 531, 536, and 636.
66) Ibid., 553f.
67) Ibid., 559f.
68) Ibid., 527.
69) Ibid., 525-28.
Circassians and Persians) gained power and supplanted the Arabs as rulers.\textsuperscript{70}

Shakīb Arslān elaborated on the importance attached to the religious bond by Arabs in history. Arabs always obeyed non-Arab rulers as long as they followed Islam’s strictures, even to the rule of Mongols who had, before converting, destroyed most of the Islamic world. They did not question the authority of “the Mamluks, who were manumitted slaves”, and that of “Ikhsīd, who was a black eunuch”.\textsuperscript{71} Arslān stated that religious unity and obedience to the non-Arab Muslim rulers were indispensable for the honorable existence of Arabs and other Muslims. If Arabs had rebelled against the rule of Seljukids, Ayyubids and others, the Christians would have invaded the Muslim world.\textsuperscript{72} This view of Islamic and Arab history perfectly squared with Shakīb Arslān’s agenda at the time of writing, which sought to promote Ottoman rule and discredit the opposition. Just as the Arabs had obeyed non-Arabs out of religious consideration in the past, it was their duty to obey the empire before the First World War.

Shakīb Arslān felt compelled to tackle the backwardness of Ottoman lands and the empire’s weakness when compared to their European counterparts. At the time, this topic fascinated Orientalists, Salafīs, and Arabists. The Orientalist view was that, similar to all other religions, Islam was inherently contradictory to science and progress, because one could not examine nature scientifically and develop new knowledge while holding fast to religious dogma. Europeans progressed because they overcame the restrictions of dogma and relied exclusively on reason. For example, when Ernest Renan expressed this view in his “L’Islamisme et la science” lecture,\textsuperscript{73} Muslim intellectuals tried to respond by repeating the adage “Islam does not prevent progress” in books, journals, and

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 529.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 530\textsuperscript{f}.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 529\textsuperscript{f}.
\textsuperscript{73} For an exposition and analysis of Ernest Renan and other French Orientalists’ ideas on this issue, see A. Holly Shissler, \textit{Between Two Empires: Ahmet Ağaoğlu and the New Turkey} (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 88-92.
\textsuperscript{74} The Ottoman intellectual Namık Kemal and the famous activist and thinker Jamāl al-Din al-Afghānī wrote separate works specifically to answer Ernest Renan’s ideas about the relationship of Islam and progress. See Namık Kemal, \textit{Renan Mudafa'anamesi} (Ankara:
newspaper articles; referring to the medieval period when Muslims excelled and superseded their contemporaries in philosophy, science, and technology; and emphasizing the possibility of repeating the same success.

Reformers suggested that Muslims receive western science and technology while preserving Islamic culture and morality in order to regain their past glory. The Salafis affirmed the validity of Islamic dogma and blamed the Islamic world’s backwardness on its faulty interpretation and distortion at the hands of oppressive rulers. This attitude became a foil for Arab Salafis to criticize Ottoman sovereignty. For example, Muḥammad ʿAbduh associated the rise of imitation (taqlīd), which for him meant intellectual stagnation, with Turkish domination of the Islamic world. In his view, Turkish rulers supported obscurantism to suppress people easily and to continue their domination. Thus, Arab control in the early Islamic centuries brought glory, whereas Turkish domination resulted in backwardness and weakness. Finally, some Arabists seem to have accused the Ottomans of being incompetent administrators of Arab lands. For them, the underdevelopment of Syria compared to Egypt illustrated that the British were better rulers.

Shakīb Arslān’s view of the Islamic world’s backwardness and weakness in general, and of the Ottoman Empire in particular, during the prewar period reveals his difference from al-Afghānī, ʿAbduh, and other reformist intellectuals. He did not consider religious and cultural explanation relevant, or a substantial intellectual reform necessary. In his opinion, the existing backwardness could be understood within the framework of the “thirteen-century-long struggle of the cross with the crescent”.

References:


75 Tarık Zafer Tunaya, İslamiyet Akımı (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2003), 15f., and İsmail Kara, İslamiçların Siyasi Görüşleri (İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 1994), 17-20.


77 Arslān, İlā l-ʿarab, 618.

78 Ibid., 616.
Christianity and conquered a significant portion of territories of Eastern Roman Empire and Europe. Afterwards, the Arab Islamic state weakened and Christians began to recapture what they had lost. The Ayyubids, the Seljukids, and the Mamluks stopped this trend, and the Ottomans initiated Islam’s expansion once again by recapturing all of the lost lands (except for Spain) and advancing into the Byzantine territories. Europe organized crusades and fought against the Ottomans together. The Ottomans alone represented the crescent, while many Christian states, equipped with the benefits of modern scientific innovations, attacked them. In addition, Christian subjects of the empire in Anatolia and the Balkans caused a great deal of trouble. As such, the Ottomans allocated all funds to defense and thus could not compete with Europe in science and industry. If they had had peace for a couple of years, they would have developed. On the other hand, if any of the developed European states had had the problems and opposition that the Ottomans had, it would have collapsed immediately.79 Egypt’s economic superiority over Syria was not due to the good government of the British or the bad rule of the Ottomans, but due to the difference in natural resources. Throughout its long history, Egypt has always been a rich country. Thus, for Shakib Arslan, her current wealth and development could not be adduced as evidence of Ottoman incompetence in Syria.80

The CUP’s insistence on a centralized administration and the use of Turkish in government increased Arab fears that Turkish cultural influence would be extended and that the development of Arab culture would be hindered. The supporters of decentralized administration accused the CUP of trying to Turkify Arabs and objected to Turkish being the sole official language. In their opinion, Arabs were underrepresented in the Ottoman Parliament and public offices, and the revenue coming from Arab lands was being used to develop Anatolia. They called for reform and the rectification of inequalities in the administration and suggested a decentralized administration as the panacea for Turkification.81 In Shakib Arslan’s view, Ottoman policies could not be construed

79) Ibid., 616ff. and 668.
80) Ibid., 618-27.
81) Kayalı, Arabs and Young Turks, 82-88.
as Turkification. He contended that Arab lands were more developed than Anatolia and that the claim of transfer of funds was therefore unfounded. He accepted that most government employees were Turks, but tried to explain this away on the following grounds: 1) Turks were reluctant to deal with trade and crafts due to their penchant for government positions and 2) their proximity to the center of government. Turks in Anatolian towns could not receive as many government positions as the ones in Istanbul. For example, the number of government employees from Izmir, Adana, or Sivas did not exceed the number of those from Damascus, Baghdad, and Aleppo. As for representation in the Parliament, his defense of the Ottoman practice was based on the assumption that citizens’ right of representation was based on the amount of taxes they paid and the number of soldiers they supplied. He divided the 12 to 15 million Arabs under Ottoman rule into three groups: 1) More than one-third were Bedouins who paid no land taxes and provided no soldiers. The taxes on their animals did not equal the gifts and salaries paid to their leaders; 2) About 4 million Arabs lived in the Arabian Peninsula. The revenues from their lands did not cover the Ottoman expenses devoted to regional defense and security; and 3) The Arabs of Syria, Iraq, and Mesopotamia paid land taxes and furnished soldiers just as other parts of the empire did. However, as they numbered only about 3 million, the claim that Arabs “are more than half of the country is correct in terms of number but wrong in terms of taxes”.

To summarize, before the First World War Shakīb Arslān’s political vision was based primarily on his and his family’s experience in the politics of Mount Lebanon, which had been autonomous since 1861. His contacts with al-Afghānī and ʿAbduh did not inspire him to adopt a pan-Islamist or reformist angle. When he became involved in the politics at the imperial level after 1911, he called for strengthening Ottoman central control in the Arab lands. He interpreted demands for decentralization and autonomy as the desire to establish a political system along the lines of Moun Lebanon’s special administration and

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82) Arslān, Ilā l-ʿarab, 547.
83) Ibid., 548f.
84) Ibid., 549f.
tended to accuse decentralization proponents of dishonesty and treason. His essential motive at this time was to preserve and justify the strength and control of the Ottoman center. His view of Islam as a political unifier did not have a reformist edge, but was designed as a counterpoise to the idea of Arab exclusivity.

In 1914, Shakib Arslan became the deputy of the Syrian province of Hawrân in the Ottoman Parliament. When the First World War started, he went to Syria as an advisor to Cemal Pasha (d. 1922), the commander-general of the Fourth Army. During the war, Cemal Pasha had absolute power and ordered that the French and British consulates be investigated. The confiscated documents implicated some participants of the Arab Congress in Paris as collaborators. Cemal Pasha exiled and executed many of them in 1916. This turn of events tarnished Shakib Arslan’s reputation. Considering that he had written a furious critique of these disgraced people and accused them of being collaborators before the war, and that he was close to Cemal Pasha during the war, many held him responsible for these sentences.

When the empire collapsed, Shakib Arslan and the other prominent CUP members went abroad and sought to revive it. After some unsuccessful attempts, however, Arslan directed his attention to the Arab world. In the Syrian-Palestinian Congress in Geneva in 1921, he was elected secretary of the Congress and was delegated to represent the Congress before the League of Nations. He continued to be active in Europe as a representative of the Congress until his death in Beirut in 1946. It seems that he had to make some adjustments to his image, ideas, and relationships in order to survive and be influential in the Arab world after the First World War. In an attempt to exonerate himself, Shakib Arslan devoted a substantial portion of his memoirs to the war years and detailed his efforts to prevent Cemal Pasha from executing and exiling his compatriots. He mended his strained relationships with his

87) Cleveland, Islam Against the West, 40-44.
88) Ibid., 49f.
89) For an analysis of Shakib Arslan’s attempt to exonerate himself from war-time crimes in his memoirs, see Havemann, “The Impact of the First World War on Lebanon’s History and Memory”, 216ff.
friends who had supported the Decentralization Party,90 and increasingly emphasized his acquaintance with al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh and incorporated their ideas in his writings.91


91) For example, see Arslān, al-Sayyid Rashīd Riḍa, 115, and Lothrop Stoddard and Shakīb Arslān, Ḥāḍir al-ʿālam al-islāmī, 1: 52f. and 199-209. Compare his view of the pre-war Islamic world’s backwardness, described in this essay, with his discussion of the same problem in 1930. See Shakīb Arslān, Li-mādhāt taʿakbhara al-muslimūn wa-li-mādhā taqaddama ghayru-hum (Beirut: Dār Maktaba al-Ḥayā, 1965).