

## Iraq under the Ottomans and Early Nationalist Organisations

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**Abstract:** This article sketches briefly the Iraqi political activities in the Ottoman Empire from their early Nationalist organization Al-Qahtaniya, Al-Fatat, Al-Ahd, when Iraq became an independent Country. Historically, Iraq has passed through a long period of struggle against foreign rule. However, it is a very strong country in the Middle East. It has always been rich culturally, economically and educationally. In every period, it played a very vital role in the development of culture and civilization along with different branches of learning. From the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries the course of Iraqi history was affected by the continuing conflicts between the safavid in Iran and the Ottoman Turks. Ottoman Turks introduced its own constitution but Arab Nationalist became more active and wanted to establish self government in the Arab world by throwing the yoke of the ottoman rule. For the purpose they made Nationalist organization like al-Qahtaniya, al-Fatat and Al-Ahd. Al-Ahd, whose members were from the Iraqi Officers, working in the Ottoman army.

**Key words:**

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### INTRODUCTION

In the sixteenth century proved to be very important as for the control over Iraq is concerned. In this century two powerful rivals of the Muslim world viz. the Safavids of Iran and the Ottoman Turks of Anatolia fought against one another for their control over Iraq. These Safavids who were Shia Muslims, wanted to control the holy cities Najaf and Karbala. The Ottoman Turks, on the other hand, wanted to stop the spread of Shiism by installing a Sunni leader at Baghdad. The political rivalry between the two was linked with the religions sentiments so the rift between the Sunni Turks and Shia Safavids grew deeper. By 1634, the Ottomans had gained control over Iraq, although their rule was weak and often challenged by the Iraqi tribes. During the Ottoman period Sunni Islamic values was established and became dominant over Shiism. In this period the Shia community remained tolerant of Ottoman administrators.

In the early eighteenth century, the Mumluks started to assert their authority over the region during the rule of the Ottomans. They extended their rule first over the major city of Iraq. As compared to the Ottomans, the Mumluks were able to administrators as under them there was political stability in Iraq. At the time the economic revivalism was also made there by these Mumluks.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century Ottoman rule was firmly established in the major cities of Iraq from the Kurdish mountains to the Shatt al-Azad. The Ottomans gained their authority over Iraq when the reform-minded Midhat Pasha was appointed the governor of Baghdad. Just after his appointment Midhat Pasha immediately set out to modernize Iraq on the western model. The primary objectives of Midhat's reforms were to reorganize the army, to create criminal codes and commercial law, to secularize the school system and to improve provincial administration. He created provincial representative assemblies to assist the governor. At the same time, he set up elected municipal councils in the major cities of the country. In the Ottoman administrations, during the governorship of Midhat Pasha, the Iraqi Notables were employed in large number. Unfortunately these employees did not have much contact with the Iraqi masses. However, with working in the administration of the government these Iraqi's gained much experience in running the administration of the country [1].

By establishing government agencies the Ottoman administration attempted to settle the tribes of the country, because of the involvement of the notables and settlement of the tribes. The new land reform introduced by the government replaced feudal system of land holding. In this way the feudal system emerged in the

country that also affected the tax reforms and property rights of the common citizens. It was designed to induce tribal political order.

After the separation of Shia community only Sunnis Arab and Kurds, were favoured with public education. Moreover these Sunnis were given post in the army and other institutions of the administration, with this, the Sunnis started supposing themselves as the country's trustworthy leaders (The rural tribal groups outside the reach of urban advantages) and Shia was consequently excluded from participation in government.

In 1908, the young Turks took hold of power in Ottoman Turkey. The young Turks, who were more, educated who saw an outer world aimed to make the Ottoman Empire a unified nation-state based on western models. They stressed secular politics and patriotism over the Pan-Islamic ideology preached by Sultan Abd al-Hamid.

The young Turks reintroduced the 1876 constitution. This Ottoman constitution set forth the rights of both the ruling and the ruled classes. They held elections throughout the empire and reopened Parliament. Although the Iraqi delegates represented only parliamentary experience in Istanbul proved to be an important introduction to self-government. The young Turks encouraged the Revolution of 1908 so that the Iraqi nationalists became more active in the political affairs of the country. With this they wanted to establish their own rule in Iraq [2].

#### **Early Nationalist Organizations:**

- *Al-Fatat*
- *Al-Qahtaniya*
- *Al-Ahd*

During the Ottoman rule in Iraq especially during the young Turks period it has been witnessed that the young Turks aggressively adopted the Turkification policy. According to these Turkification policies, the young Turks attempted to centralize the empire by imposing the Turkish language and culture on the occupied areas including the province of Iraq. The young Turks also wanted to obtain the Arab world. Against the Turkish occupation and the Turkification policy the Arab intelligentsia formed several secret nationalist societies, this included al-Qahtaniya, Al-Ahd, Al-Fatat and others. The most important society among them was Al-Ahad, whose members were entirely from the Iraqi officers,

working in the Ottoman army. Because of its activeness and effectiveness the membership in Al-Ahd spread rapidly more particularly in Baghdad and in Mosul [3].

Z.N. Zeine gives a brief description about the societies were founded after the revolution of 1908. He writes:

- “As a result of young Turks’ Turkifying Programme, the Arab leader’s objectives of gaining full national independence received a great stimulus which consolidated it. As far as Arab political nationalism is concerned it can safely be asserted that it was the national and racial policies of the young Turks which fanned its flames. Nationalist sentiments are dangerous to play with in a Multi-national empire. A Nationalist revival is bound to generate so much rivalry and antagonism as to lead inevitably to break up of such an empire. Hence, when the young Turks made the nationalist ideal and their racial superiority the basis of a new Turkey, culturally and politically United and Strong, the Arab leader’s reaction was to think precisely in the same terms about the future of the Arab lands. As a result, a number of Arab societies and political parties were formed by enlightened and educated young Arabs to defend the Arab cause and protect the Arab rights, among which were the following, established after 1908 [4].

The societies came into existence when a fresh wave of the Arab movement broke against the Turkish resistance. This Arab nationalism began in Beirut first in the last days of 1912. This voice of Arab Nationalism was later carried to Paris by the Arab intellectuals where an Arab congress was held six months later. These important societies are al-Qahtaniya, Al-Ahd, Al-Fatat,

**Al-Qahtaniya:** Al-Qahtaniya was led by major Aziz al-Masri, who later served as the inspector general in the Egyptian army. He proved himself to be an important Egyptian nationalist. Its aim was to unite the Ottoman Arab provinces as a single Kingdom within the empire, which would than became a Turco-Arab dual monarchy as became the Austro Hungarian Empire.

**Regarding Al-qahtaniya, the Writer Remarkd:** “In February 1914, Anti-Turkish feeling among the Arabs burdened with the arrest and trail of the founder of al-Qahtaniya, major Aziz al-Masr. He had replaced almost entire army officers, with a preponderance of Iraqis who were the most numerous Arab elements in the Ottoman

army. When it came to be known that al-Masri had been secretly condemned to death on a trumped-up charge of having planned to sell Cyrenaica to the Italians, there was a public outcry, which was reinforced by a strong British protest. Eventually al-Masri was released and allowed to return to Egypt” [5].

Apart from these groups which functioned publicly, there were a number of secret groupings in Istanbul. A secret group composed of officers and university students was mainly from Syria, was formed that came to be known as “al-Jamiyya al-Qahtaniyya”. The function of this group was to encourage the feeling of Arab Nationalism. Amin Lutfi Hafiz and Salim al-Jazairi were two prominent members of this group who played a more important role for its cause [6].

**Al-Ahd:** This society was formed during the period between the Italian conquest of Tripoli and the outbreak of the First World War. This society was founded on 28 Oct. 1913 by Bindashi ‘Aziz al-Masri. Its members were army officers who included Salim al-Jazairi, Nuri al-Said, Yasin al-Hashmi and his brother Taha, Jamal al-Wadja, Tahsin Ali, al-Ayyubi and Abdullah al-Dalaymi. Its official programme was to promote autonomy for the Arabic speaking countries of the Ottoman Empire and to transform the empire into a dual monarchy on the lines of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. In fact it was a secret society composed of army officers, ready to take action in support of their political views. Many of its members deserted from the Ottoman army before and during the First World War. It was a very crucial time for the Ottoman army as Turkey had to fight against the allied forces earlier for its supremacy and later for its existence.

#### **As Regard to Al-ahd, Sidney N-fisher Writes:**

- “Partially in reply, an Arab, Major Aziz Ali al-Masri of the Ottoman general staff, initiated a new society called the covenant (Ahd). The covenant (Al-Ahd) was comprised exclusively of army officers and became for the military, what the young Arab society was for civilians. It had many members in Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad. Perhaps by the wind of action ‘Young Turks’ without warning arrested Aziz Ali in 1914. He had been a member of union and progress in Salonica before 1908 and had won however, during the march in Istanbul in 1909, during a military mission to Yemen in 1910 and during the war against Italy in Libya, charged with treason in Libya, Aziz Ali was tried, found guilty and

demanded to death. Public opinion became so indignant especially in Egypt, that the British protested the Porte.... [7].

The successor disavowed political activities, it passed as a meeting place, library and a club for Arabs, living at the capital and a centre for Arab travelers within a short time the membership of this society reached thousands in number. As a result its branches were established throughout Syria and Iraq. This clearly indicated that the Arab consciousness was growing. It was therefore, impossible to prevent the Arabs, sitting relaxed in the club house and discussing political philosophy that was, of course, relevant to the Arab situation.

**Al-Fatat:** The most famous of the Arab nationalist societies of late Ottoman days was Al-Jamiyyah al-Arabiyya al-Fatat that simply came to be known as al-Fatat. It was also another secret society, which was founded in 1911. No other society has played as determining a part in the history of the National movement as al-Fatat played. Its founders were pursuing their higher studies in Paris. It is significant that this society was entirely a Muslim Arab organization. The purpose of the society was political and to obtain Arab independence within the framework of a racial Ottoman Empire [8].

#### **George Antonio’s Discussing this Society, Describes:**

- “The influence of al-Fatat on the March of events will appear presently. Here, we are concerned with its development, which was cautious – yet rapid and which made it into the most effective of the Arab societies of the time, remarkable alike for its objects and methods as for the admirable discipline of the members... [9].

Al-Fatat, proved to be the most important of all these societies which aimed to complete independence for the Arab provinces.

### **CONCLUSION**

Muslim Arabs in the Fertile Crescent had shown little interest in disengaging themselves from the Ottoman Empire until the young Turks’ policies designed to transform the empire into a centralist, nationalist and secularist Turkish state in 1908. The Arab reaction manifested itself in the form of a series of societies

founded after 1908 to defend Arab interests. Eventually, an Arab congress was held in Paris in 1913 to demand the self government for the Arab provinces. Secret Societies like al-Qahtaniya, al-Fatat and al-Ahd were formed, mostly by the army officers after 1908 for the urban independence.

Throughout the Iraqi History, various groups were formed there for their political superiority and dominations. Iraq also experienced various foreign rules. They included the Mongols, the Ottoman Turks and the British. The British rule was established there under a mandate after World War I. The British placed King Faisal and than Hashemite monarch to rule Iraq, which was overthrown in 1958. With the end of the Hashemite rule, the military started ruling in Iraq

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