

CIÉPO
XIV. SEMPOZYUMU
BİLDİRİLERİ

18-22 Eylül 2000, ÇEŞME

TÜRK TARİH KURUMU



AN ARAB INTELLECTUAL'S 1908 VISION OF THE FUTURE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

JACOB M. LANDAU

1. Introduction

The reactions of the non-Turk groups in the Ottoman Empire to the 1908 Revolution have been studied, in part, by various historians. They suggest a mixture of hopes and fears, based on conditions and patterns of behaviour of individuals and groups. The expression of such aspirations and apprehensions is sometimes explicit, at others implicit. I have chosen to focus briefly on what was written on the matter at that time by an influential Syro-Lebanese Christian literary figure, Sulaymān al-Bustānī.

2. Sulaymān al-Bustānī

Sulaymān al-Bustānī came from a notable family of Christian men-of-letters. Butrus al-Bustānī (1818-1883) was a writer, journalist, philologist and teacher in Beirut, who compiled an important Arabic-Arabic dictionary and started editing an Arabic encyclopaedia, in which undertaking his son Salim (died 1884) and others assisted him. The subject of our discussion (Sulayman (1856-1925), was a relative of these two and worked with Butrus al-Bustānī in the publication of several Arabic newspapers in Beirut. With a good knowledge of Turkish, French and English, in addition to Arabic, he was a widely travelled intellectual, visiting and spending some time in Basra, Baghdad, the Arabian Peninsula, Istanbul, Egypt, India, Iran and the United States. During those years he engaged in a somewhat bewildering array of occupations: journalist, writer, teacher, translator of the *Iliad* into Arabic (published in 1904, apparently from the Greek), merchant of dates, manager of a shipping company, judge in a court of commerce in Iraq, manager of the Ottoman pavilion at the Chicago International Exhibition in 1893, and responsible for water projects in Iraq.

After the 1908 Revolution, Sulaymān al-Bustānī (who had close associations with the Committee of Union and Progress) became

increasingly involved in the politics of the empire, no doubt putting his previous visits to its provinces and elsewhere to good use. He was active in local Beirut politics from 1908; then he was elected from the *vilayet* of Beirut to the *Meclis-i Mebusan*; in early 1911 he was appointed to the *Meclis-i Ayan*, and served as member or chairman of various parliamentary committees, consistently supporting the Unionists. He was especially active in encouraging the economic activities of Beirut and its vicinity as well as of other Arab-populated areas; in promoting the study of Arabic at school and its use in the courts of the Arab areas; and in fostering better relations between Turks and Arabs. In 1913 he was nominated to Prince Said Halim Pasha's Cabinet as Minister of Commerce, Agriculture, Forests and Mines. In this capacity, he strove to appoint experts and other competent officials to all jobs; he also set up an agricultural bank and a school of forestry.

Opposing the Cabinet's foreign policies which were leading the empire into the First World War, Sulaymān al-Bustānī resigned his ministerial post as soon as the Ottoman Empire entered the war. He moved to Switzerland for the duration of the war, leaving it only in 1919 for Egypt. In 1924 he travelled for medical reasons to New York, where he died a year later.

3. Al-Bustānī's Book on the Ottoman Empire

In October 1908, a few weeks after the Revolution, Sulaymān al-Bustānī published an important work in Arabic on the empire, entitled '*Ibra wa-dhikrā aw al-Dawla al-'Uthmāniya qabla al-dustūr wa-ba'dahu* (A Lesson and Remembrance: the Ottoman State Before the Constitution and Following It) (Cairo: Dār al-Akhbār). This was reprinted much later in Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī'a, 1978, edited by Khālid Ziyāda. The book was obviously written at great speed and was based on its author's knowledge and experience rather than on written sources. It is dedicated to his Ottoman compatriots and its chapters focus on such topics as the old constitution and tyranny, the new one and liberty; the freedoms – of individuals, the press, education, publishing and reading, postal communications, and association; the constitution and the bureaucracy, fanaticism, religious functionaries, emigration, state finances; natural resources, agriculture, mines, industry, commerce, public works, and tourism. The final chapter

attempts a general survey, ending in predictions of changes, characterizing the state twenty five years later. Thus, the *dhikrā* or remembrance is of the recent Ottoman past, while the *'ibra* or lesson derived from it is for the future.

While the second half of the year 1908 witnessed a spate of political books, pamphlets and papers in several languages, often criticizing the pre-Revolution empire and suggesting much-needed reforms, Sulaymān al-Bustānī's essay is probably distinguished by a thorough familiarity with what its author was writing about, at least partly based on his own expertise. We are particularly concerned here with his vision of the Empire, which is connected with many of the criticisms expressed in the earlier chapters concerning the inadequacy of prior reforms, the absence of individual freedoms (particularly of the press), the lack of expertise in exploiting natural resources, and the prevalence of personally motivated intrigues. The vision itself is spelled out clearly and succinctly, with a high degree of optimism, characteristic of those months following the Revolution.

Sulaymān al-Bustānī's prediction for the next twenty five years of the Ottoman Empire is worked out both descriptively and analytically by someone combining the qualities of an historian and a statesman. In other words, he draws up the empire's future lines of development as a continuation of its past history and within the framework of given conditions for change. Praising the spirit of self-sacrifice leading to the Revolution, he warns patriots against the danger of the servants of tyranny who are only awaiting their opportunity for a comeback.

He writes that he has decided to consider the next twenty five years, a brief span of time in the lifetime of an *ummah* (probably referring to the Ottoman community), and equivalent to a few months in an individual's life. Significantly, he pinpoints the moral revolution, expressed in a comprehensive consensus, as the most important feature of 1908; he tries to imagine a quarter century ahead, based on the premise of this consensus. All compatriots would then grasp the meaning of complete liberty and strengthen the bonds of brotherhood and equality, within the common endeavour.

He foresees the progress of knowledge within a new generation imbued with a new spirit; a press truly representing public opinion, led by real intellectuals, writers and poets who would encourage reading

and study; scientific and economic periodicals devoted to the public good. The twenty five years would produce new organizations of schoolchildren and the elderly, politicians and scholars, dedicated to study, literature and research, advancing towards the discovery of natural resources and their exploitation, in a spirit of invention.

Al-Bustānī ascribes a special place to the advancement of the Ottoman woman during those years, as she makes up half of society and is mainly responsible for promoting the social virtues. Having had a share in recent progress, Ottoman women would foster advance in the next years, no less than their menfolk, in the separate domains of war and the defense of the motherland.

A new generation of educated young people would take up public jobs in administration, the courts, politics and the military. Having a meritocratic civil service well-aware that promotion depended on merit and loyalty would ensure public security, the rule of law, and a just collection of taxes.

The way to eliminate discord among the communities, al-Bustānī assures us, is to uproot misunderstandings largely due to the plurality of languages. He believes that twenty five years should suffice to instil one common language throughout the empire, the official one, by which he seems to imply – but does not say definitively – Turkish. He may, however, have been referring to Arabic, which was very dear to him.

The numerous manifestations of fraternity among the heads of the various religions immediately after the Revolution should lead, in the next twenty five years, to yet deeper sentiments of brotherhood and cooperation in religion.

As for natural wealth, it was immense, and the twenty five years would bring about new achievements – in agriculture, industry, new factories, developments in commerce, setting up shipping and export companies, exploitation of minerals, and widening of communications. The lands between the Persian Gulf and the Bosphorus would turn into fertile gardens, while irrigating the whole of Iraq would bring prosperity to town dwellers and farmers and transform the Bedouin into peaceful citizens. The same would occur throughout Syria, Anatolia, Rumelia and North Africa. Emigrants would return home and visitors arrive. The army and the navy, made

up of all religious groups, would grow and develop, using the money saved from paying internal spies and informers.

Al-Bustānī ends by reminding his readers that, if states like Bulgaria could reach their current flourishing situation some thirty years after independence, so can the richer, larger Ottoman Empire. What could now only be seen in fantasy would be achieved in twenty five years: by then, tyranny would be a mere memory, knowledge would have spread everywhere, the farmer would enjoy his produce, all people would communicate without the need for an interpreter, soldiers of different religions would serve together, the wealthy would invest in their own country, the Ottoman navy would unfurl its flag everywhere, communication by land and sea would be available and comfortable – in short, a day when the Ottomans would proudly compete with all other nations.

4. Conclusions

Al-Bustānī's comprehensive, multi-dimensional vision is, of course, first and foremost an indictment of perceived former Ottoman evils as well as an indication of what he and his peers really wished to see the 1908 Revolution bring about in many domains. At first reading, its main weakness seems to be the lack of detail. On second thought, however, the focus on wider perspectives seems to have enabled al-Bustānī to concentrate better on the wider issues deserving reform and improvement. His own experience and individual knowledge enabled him to present his views on a wide range of domestic topics in politics, economics, military affairs, education, commerce, industry, agriculture, irrigation, and others.

Contrary to most other visionaries of his day, al-Bustānī also had an opportunity to attempt to carry out his plans, in part as a member of parliament, and even more so as a Minister in Said Halim Pasha's Cabinet, in such important economic affairs as commerce, agriculture, forests and mines. The complexity of the problems he had to deal with, within the framework of a somewhat antiquated system, based on traditional bureaucracy, hampered his activities. Although he left the Cabinet out of opposition to the empire's foreign policies and exiled himself to Switzerland, Egypt, and the United States, it is conceivable that difficulties in effectively implementing his economic programmes had a share in his decision to retire from government service. No

doubt, he must have been disappointed that his vision remained on paper. Near the end of his life, he was quoted as saying that, had his objections to the Ottoman Empire's joining the war been listened to, the empire would still be in existence. Whether we agree with his hypothesis or not, his career as a loyal Ottoman citizen and a believer in Turkish-Arab cooperation (it was no accident that he wrote this book in Arabic) seems to merit some brief evaluation.