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HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL LOCALIZATION OF THE ARAB-EUROPEAN RELATIONS

DEVELOPMENT EFFECTS: IMPULSES AND BURDENS

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The first contacts

The Arab-European relations are deeply rooted in history. Since the emergence of Islam in the seventh century, and the rise of the Arabs as a political and cultural power in the East, Europe has been their counterpart and, almost, rival.

For the medieval Arabs, the world was divided into two great zones, the *house of Islam* and the *house of war*, with a perpetual state of war, or at the best, truce between them. Europe was the northern and north western house of war which had to face Arab attacks. Her reactions to the Arab challenge made the background of the historical and cultural relations between the two rivals in medieval times.

Mainly two European powers were involved in that type of relations: the Byzantium and the Franks of Western Europe. While the Byzantium could sustain the shocks of Arab attacks, the Franks of Western Europe counter-attacked from Spain to Palestine, from the resistance of Arab existence in Spain to the Crusades directed to the heart of the house of Islam.

The superiority complex

Throughout this phase of hostility, the superiority complex of the Arabs dominated their relations with Europe. Although Arabs respected deeply Christianity as origin of true faith and as an earlier link in the chain of faith, the Christian civilization founded upon it was dismissed as something incomplete, superseded and debased. This view is certainly more tolerant than that of contemporary Christian Europe, which regards Islam as something wholly false

and evil, and it is reflected in the far greater tolerance accorded to the followers of Judaism and Christianity in the Arab countries.

While the Arabs could find something to learn from the Greek ancient civilization, the wild, fierce tribes of darkest Europe were thought to have no such redeeming features. It is noteworthy that while many works were translated into Arabic from Greek, Syriac, old Persian, only one book was translated from Latin and none from any other European languages throughout the Middle Ages.

It was the time when the Arab cultural impact was dominating the relations with Europe, students from western Europe went on pilgrimage to the Arab educational centres in Spain, Sicily, Egypt and Levant, to learn science, philosophy and mathematics. Through the Arabs Europe acquired knowledge, many things were introduced to Europe in their Arabic terms, Algebra for instance, even some Arabic vocabulary was introduced to European languages. It is noteworthy that the Arabic figures are now commonly used in Europe at the expense of Latin figures.

Hence, the superiority complex of the Arabs which dominated their relations with Europe has been justified in the Dark Ages, when Frankish Europe was really backward and inferior. But that superiority complex of the Arabs has been gradually faded through a long historical process of change, and has given the way to an inferiority complex towards Europe and the West in general.

Turn of the tide

From the end of the fifteenth century, the people of Europe embarked on a vast movement of expansion - commercial, political, cultural and demographic - which by the twentieth century had brought almost the whole world into the orbit of European civilization, while the Arabs suffered a severe and drastic cultural decline under the Ottoman Turkish rule which dominated their countries for more than four centuries of isolationism and backwardness.

It was the European imperialism that marked the final disappearance of the superiority complex which dominated the Arabs relations with Europe for more than ten centuries, and deepened an inferiority complex instead. Although the European imperialism in the Arab countries was late, brief, and for the most part indirect, the impact of Europe was, however, profound and overwhelming.

Arab inferiority complex

The invasion of Egypt by a French expeditionary force under General Bonaparte in 1798 opened a new phase in the historical and cultural relations between the Arabs and Europe. To the Arabs, Bonaparte demonstrated how easily a modern European army could invade, conquer and govern one of the

heartlands of the Arabs. The feeling of weakness and decline by military defeat made the Arabs try to discover Europe in order to know the reason behind that tremendous change in their counterpart. They discovered that Europe has become no longer inferior; it was them who became backward and inferior to Europe, and the main issue was how to catch up. Actually the French expedition brought the problems of impact and response, in an acute form, to the Arab lands and sharpened an inferiority complex towards Europe.

In the Arab lands, the interference and influence of Europe passed through several stages. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the European interest was chiefly in trade and transit. True, there was some territorial encroachment, as in the Arabian Gulf and in southern Arabia, where the British seized Aden in 1839, but these advances were limited to the far periphery, and concerned primarily with the security of the sea-lanes. The interest of Britain, by now the most active European power in the Arab lands, were served by the famous policy of 'maintaining the integrity and independence of the Ottoman Empire'. It seemed reasonable to assume that the Turks, as the dominant and established power in the area, would align themselves with those whose interests were purely economic and strategic, against a potential enemy whose aims were expansionist and disruptive. This British policy was abandoned only with extreme reluctance, and with many nostalgic hankerings.

The second half of the nineteenth century brought important changes to the European influence in the Arab lands. The rapid modernization of the transit routes, the growth of direct European economic and financial interest in the area, and, from the 1880's onward, the extension of German influence in Turkey, led to a realignment of British policy. The occupation of Egypt, undertaken in 1882 for a limited purpose and limited time, became permanent, and was extended to the Sudan. In 1918 the Ottoman Empire, which for four centuries had held the Arab lands was defeated and destroyed, and a series of new unfamiliar political structures was assembled from the debris.

Between 1918 and 1945 Britain and France, in fitful association and rivalry, were dominant powers in the Arab lands. Algeria, Tunis, Aden, Palestine and the Sudan were ruled directly through regimes of colonial type, elsewhere European control was indirect. It was maintained through local governments, some of them under mandate, others nominally independent, with a variable and uncertain degree of responsibility for their own affairs. These arrangements ended in the years following immediately the second war, when, with the exception of the French existence in northern Africa and the last footholds in Arabia, all the countries of the Arabs acquired full political independence.

Europe as a model

During this phase of European interference and influence in the Arab lands, the Arabs' view of Europe was captured by their endeavours to strengthen their front by adopting the European secret of power, modern military force and political institutions. By doing so, they believed, they can face the European interference or, at least, sustain the confrontation. They thought that by adopting the European model of development, they would be able to convince the Europeans of their right to survive and could lessen the pressure of European imperialism.

The beginning was purely military, the simple desire for survival in a world dominated by an expanding and advancing Europe. This required armies in the European style, a matter of training and equipment, to be solved by borrowing a few instructors and indenting for the appropriate supplies. Yet the task of running the new style armies led to the building of an educational system and the reform of education, to reform the government machinery, to the creation and administration by State of services and factories to supply them, and to reform the economy.

But one cannot import European technology without importing European ideas, which were to prove equally disruptive of traditional, social and political order. During the nineteenth century educational missions from Egypt and some other Arab countries were sent to Rome, Paris, Vienna, Berlin and London. Being back home, the European educated élite brought new ideas and concepts. They started the task of translating books in many fields of knowledge into Arabic to provide solid basis for a new type of learning. The European and American missionary schools in the Levant contributed, as well, to the translation movement. Hence, the works of Rousseau and Voltaire, and books on European institutions were translated. Some intellectuals wrote their recollections about European society, mainly French, based on their own experience.

The first impulse to the new translation movement seems to have come from the French, since the French expedition to Egypt and the French oriented education system of Egypt gained the main influence in the area.

Another European cultural innovation was imported to the Arab lands; it was the new media of communication, printing in the eighteenth, journalism in the nineteenth, wireless and television in the twentieth century, all of which played a great role in the dissemination of European ideas.

Thus, much of the European contribution to the Arab political modernization came in the form of ideas and institutions, concepts and models, which the Arabs could make their own by adoption and adaptation. Beyond the fairly mechanical aspect of administration, Europe supplied concepts of far-reaching

significance. One of them was the concept of secular state. The realization of this concept involved a shift in the legal basis for individual rights and personal status to adopt the European legal and judicial system. The old intermediate limiting powers of religious ethics were enfeebled.

In the 1860's and 1870's, constitutionalism in the Arab lands seemed to be taking important steps forward. In 1861, a constitution has been proclaimed in Tunis, and in Egypt the Khedive Isma'il created a Consultative Assembly of Delegates in 1866. The Egyptian constitution of 1923 based on the liberal Belgian constitution was taken as a model by some other Arab countries.

The appearance of patriotic and nationalistic ideas in the Arab lands was, to a large extent, a European impact. First patriotism on the French revolution style appeared in the nineteenth century, then followed in the twentieth by nationalism, either Egyptian, Lebanese or Arab nationalism, inspired by the Italian and German models. During the last century and a half liberalism, fascism, socialism and communism were introduced, adapted and transformed by Arab disciples with various degrees of success and failure.

The bitter harvest

The adoption and adaptation of European ideas, concepts and institutions, caused by the inferiority complex which the Arabs suffered from, for almost two centuries, was influenced by their view of Europe as a model. They thought that dressing on European style, adopting European institutions and applying European concepts and ideas to their society may bridge the cultural gap between them and Europe. But this adoption and adaptation of the European model partly changed the superstructure of the Arab society without changing the infrastructure by the same degree, which caused a severe crisis of identity.

The 1920's and 1930's witnessed in the Arab lands a movement of rejection of the European cultural model. Traditionalism deeply rooted in religious ethics stood against modernization on the European lines, but without being able to introduce a substitute.

However the traditionalists hold the European model responsible for all the resulted social disorder, and looked back to the past trying to find means for rebuilding the Arab society on authentic fundamental basis, through opposing secular elements of social modernization. Along with this traditionalist movement came the fundamentalist approach of the Islamic groups trying, without success, to find a remedy for the Arab inferiority complex towards Europe.

These aspirations, like so many others, have been frustrated by an inability to confront the realities of the modern world, to examine its problems on the level

of modern thought, and to devise solutions within the range of possible accomplishment .

Nevertheless, of all great movements that have shaken the Arab lands during the last century and a half, the Islamic movements alone are authentically Middle Eastern in inspiration. Liberalism and fascism, patriotism and nationalism, socialism and communism, are all European in origin, however much adapted and transformed by Arab disciples. The Islamic movements alone spring from the native soil and express the passions of the masses of population.

Though they have all, so far, been defeated, they have not yet spoken their last word.

Suggested Readings / Littérature Recommandée

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RESUME

La Localisation Historique et Culturelle des Relations Arab-Européennes - effets de Développement: Impulsions et Charges.

Cet article trace les différentes phases dans l'histoire des relations Euro-Arabes. Il discute les raisons derrière complexe de supériorité des Arabes qui avaient dominé leurs relations avec l'Europe jusqu'au 15ème siècle, lorsque l'impérialisme européen a marqué le point tournant dans ces relations. Depuis, les pays arabes étaient devenus un cible pour l'invasion et l'intervention européennes, pendant que les Arabes souffraient d'un complexe d'infériorité à l'égard de l'Europe. Ils essayaient de renforcer leur front en adoptant les idées, modèles et institutions européens. Cela a conduit à la cassure de l'ordre social et politique traditionnel, et a causé une sévère crise d'identité qui a trouvé son expression dans un mouvement de rejet du modèle culturel européen sans être pour autant capable d'introduire une pièce de rechange.

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