

Islam and Competing Nationalisms in the Middle East, 1876–1926

IN *Islam and Competing Nationalisms*, Kamal Soleimani argues that, contrary to what he claims has until now been the conventional scholarly wisdom, the emphasis on Islam as a basis of communal identity in the Ottoman Empire during the middle part of the nineteenth century – whether by the Ottoman center or the Empire’s non-Turkish peoples – was not anti-nationalist in content; it was in fact rooted in the formulation of ethnically and linguistically based national identities. More specifically, Soleimani addresses the role of Islam in the formulation of Turkish and Kurdish national identities during the period in question. Soleimani’s characterization of the conventional scholarly view on this subject is perhaps debatable. For one thing, he seems to focus on such individuals as Bernard Lewis and Benedict Anderson (neither of whom currently constitute the ‘cutting edge’ of scholarship, whether on the Middle East or nationalism in general), and early Turkish Republican propaganda regarding the Ottoman Empire. Added to that, scholars have certainly long been familiar with the relationship between Islam and the formulation of a linguistically based Arab national identity, as promoted by such individuals as Muhammad Rashid Rida and ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi. That being said, the author does convincingly argue that well prior to the Hamidian period, political and intellectual elites in the Ottoman Empire – both in the imperial center and among peripheral ethnicities – had begun promoting linguistically based nationalist models that appropriated particularized understandings of Islam. Furthermore, the author’s focus on what might be deemed imperial Turkish and Kurdish peripheral nationalisms provides some

Judul Buku

Islam and competing nationalisms in the Middle East, 1876–1926

Penulis

Kamal Soleimani

Penerbit

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018

Jumlah Halaman

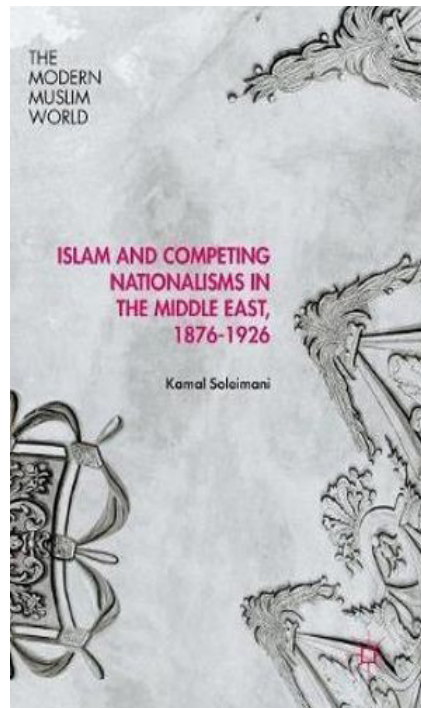
312

ISBN

9781137599407

Peresensi

Erik E. Freas



much needed context vis-à-vis the more well known Arab nationalist model noted above, which has been often presented in isolation of the broader intellectual trends dealt with here.

Particularly once moving past the more theoretical discussion of the first few chapters (concerning which more below), there is no question that Soleimani does an excellent job arguing his thesis. When elaborating on the relationship between language and religion in the context of the formulation of Ottoman Turkish and Kurdish national identities, the author’s argument is clear, structured and well supported. He begins by demonstrating that the pan-Islam promoted by Abdulhamid II (and to some extent the Young Ottomans who preceded him) was very particularistic, defining for the Ottoman Turks a civilizing role aimed at combatting the ‘tribalism’ of the non-Turkish elements of the Empire. The latter were to be civilized via their assimilation within the ‘correct Islam,’ that is, the one sanctioned by the state (138), as pointed out by the author in reference to Makdisi, a kind of ‘Ottoman Orientalism,’ wherein Istanbul was perceived as the carrier of modern civilization (4–5, 15). Within this context, Ottoman Turkish national identity’s formulation combined language (Ottoman Turkish, here, a civilizing agent) with the Islam of the imperial center (such as underpinned Ottoman Turkish civilization).

Correspondingly – and contrary to what has often been asserted, even in scholarly circles Abdulhamid II’s claim to the caliphate never signified a rejection of an Ottoman identity rooted in Turkish ethnicity and the Turkish language in favor of an Islamic identity inclusive of Muslims worldwide. Perhaps more to the point, and what becomes especially evident after considering the case of Kurdish nationalism (discussed below), pan-Islamism during the late-nineteenth century never constituted a monolithic

movement, but rather encompassed many local variants, most of which frequently found correspondence with ethnic-based, national identities.

Which brings us to the 1880 Kurdish uprising, led by Sheikh Ubeydullah of Nehri, and directed at both Ottoman authority and the Qajar rulers of Iran. Contrary to the conventional view that Kurdish nationalism did not really emerge until roughly the First World War, Soleimani credibly argues that the uprising, though ostensibly concerned with religious reform, in fact found strong correspondence with a (granted, yet emerging) Kurdish national identity rooted in Kurdish ethnicity and the Kurdish language. To the extent that it was about Islamic reform, it was one squarely focused on the Islam practiced by the Kurds, what Soleimani characterizes as a 'peripheral Islam,' in this case, represen-

tative of a non-quietest Sufi movement and greatly concerned with political issues pertaining specifically to the Kurdish people. It was an Islam featuring strong 'traces of ethnocentrism,' with Kurds inclined to compare 'their own religiosity with the forms prevalent among Sunni Turks and Shi'i Iranians' (166). Unlike the Islamic revivalism espoused by the proto-Arab nationalist Muhammad Rashid Rida, for Ubeydullah, Islamic reform was neither an end in itself, nor greatly concerned with the welfare of the worldwide Muslim community. It was a means to an end, the regeneration of the Kurdish people, a project moreover that Ubeydullah believed necessitated the creation of a Kurdish state to act the role of civilizing agent, to educate the Kurds in their own language about the proper practice of Islam. Needless to say, the Islam practiced by the Kurds – to

Ubeydullah's mind, only a generation ago entirely pristine – was distinguished from that of the Ottoman center, which he characterized as 'almost non-existent, pretentious, and not heartfelt,' and ultimately, the reason for the Empire's decline (181–185).

It was the inversion of the Ottoman perspective wherein those residing in the periphery (such as the Kurds) were barbaric and needed to be civilized via the imposition of the true Islam sanctioned by the imperial center. The rest of the book goes on to demonstrate that nationalism and religion would remain intertwined through the interwar years, even as both Turkish and Kurdish nationalities became more fully formed. This was especially evident in efforts at revitalizing the caliphate, which was almost always conceived within a nationalistic framework (245) (that is, as being a 'Turkish,' 'Kurdish' or, of course, 'Arab' caliphate).

That Soleimani is convincing reflects in no small measure the extensive research underpinning his argument, in large part derived of primary sources from the Ottoman Prime Ministry Archives, and Ottoman and Kurdish newspapers and journals. Especially noteworthy is the use he makes of Sheikh Ubeydullah's poetic work, the *Mesnewi*, a source that, even until now, has been inaccessible to most scholars, both due to the limited number of manuscripts available and the fact that it was written in Persian, a language in which scholars of the Kurds are often not adept (245). The *Mesnewi* sheds new light on the Sheikh's political and nationalist thought, and by extension, on the Kurdish nationalist discourse of that period. Soleimani does an exceptional job situating his sources within the existing historiography as well as vis-à-vis broader historical developments, not least, those reflective of the intellectual trends that shaped not only the more well known formulation of an Arab national identity linked with the project of Islamic reform, but also the Ottoman–Turkish and Kurdish national identities that form the subject of this book.

There are some ways in which the book could have been stronger: the opening chapters, for instance, where the author reviews the relevant secondary literature, while providing an over-

view of the till now prevailing theoretical perspective on the interrelationship between nationalism and religion, are somewhat problematic. As observed at the start of this review, I'm not entirely sure that the argument made here about the overlapping of nationalist and religious identities – both then and now – is an entirely new one. Additionally, discussion of the relevant secondary literature comes across somewhat esoteric at times; rather than focusing on delineating his argument in a clear and orderly manner, Soleimani seems at times more intent on impressing the reader with his erudition, whether via an occasionally overly academic language or the frequent referencing of relevant scholars. Fortunately, this particular problem does not carry over into the rest of the book, especially once the author begins discussing the more concrete historical developments pertinent to its subject. Perhaps the book's most important contribution to the scholarship on regional nationalism is that – in line with the Ottoman-Turkish and (Ottoman period) Kurdish nationalist case-studies examined here – the author provides a broader ideological context vis-à-vis the more familiar late-nineteenth/early twentieth century Arab nationalist model linking Arab national identity to a particularistic interpretation of Islam, wherein the Arabs are deemed as having a special mission to reform the Islamic world writ large. Reading Soleimani's book, I had a much better appreciation of the fact that individuals such as Muhammad 'Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida were part a broader intellectual trend, wherein Muslim intellectuals – whether Ottoman, Arab or Kurdish – sought to define respective ethno-nationalist identities in connection with their own distinctive practice of Islam.

(sumber: *Turkish Studies* Vol 19, 2018)

Penanggung Jawab: Prof Dr Dede Rosyada **Redaktur:** Nanang Syaikhu **Editor:** Muhammad Adam Hesa **Desain Grafis:** Arief Mahmudi **Fotografer:** Jayadi **Sekretariat:** Tony Kurniawan, Nurbaini Futuhat Wulansari, Mohammad Ainur Rofiq **Alamat Redaksi:** Gedung Sekolah Pascasarjana Lt 3 Jl. Kertamukti No. 5 Pisangan Barat, Cireundeu, Ciputat Timur 15419 Telp. (021) 7401472-74709260 ext. 308 Faks: (021) 74700919, **E-Mail Redaksi:** sps@uinjkt.ac.id **Penerbit:** Sekolah Pascasarjana UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta Terbit dua bulan sekali

