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## Turks and Arabs and the idea of nationalism in the period of the decline of the Ottoman Empire (1908–1925)

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**Bartosz Wróblewski**

**TURKS AND ARABS AND THE IDEA  
OF NATIONALISM IN THE PERIOD OF THE  
DECLINE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE (1908–1925)**

The beginning of XX century spelt many changes for many societies in Asia. They were mostly caused by the need to react to ideological currents coming from Europe. During WW I when the idea of the nation – state was brought to Asia, the process accelerated. The Ottoman Empire constitutes a special example of the influence. The whole geo-political structure of the territory was thoroughly changed as a result of the events of 1914–1922.

Comparing the consequences of the WW I in Central Europe, Russia and the Middle East, one may notice that the transformation of the last mentioned territory was the deepest and most thorough. Both old borders and ideologies collapsed in the Middle East. Both territories and the foundations of the state had to be created as if from scratch.

The time framework adopted for the paper is delimited by the years 1908 and 1922. From the point of view of the described events, the dates are optimal. The events I am discussing were initiated by a *coup d'état* executed in Turkey in 1908 and then intensely developed in the period of 1914–1922. The final date – 1925 – allows us not to enter the rather complex Palestinian problem and the problems of the post-colonial era.

### **1. Imperial consciousness**

At the outbreak of WW I, the area of the Middle East was shaped in political terms quite differently than it is at present. From the point

of view of Muslim societies there were only two fully sovereign states there. One of them was the Osman Empire and the other the Empire of Persia<sup>1</sup>. The Osman Empire, apart from the lands belonging to contemporary Turkey, stretched also on the territories of contemporary Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and large parts of Saudi Arabia (Hedzaz) as well as Yemen. The Turkish sultan was not only secular head of the state but was also recognized by Sunni<sup>2</sup> Muslims as califf<sup>3</sup>, religious head of the whole community.

Therefore head of the state called in Europe the Turkish Empire or even Turkey, was in fact the heir to the religious state ideology which was developed in the beginnings of Islam. In light of the ideology, religious head of the community of believers was at the same time its political head. Obviously, this referred to califf, the successor of the Prophet.

The state ideology was well adapted to the multi-ethnic structure of the state. The leadership of the Istanbul authority could be recognized by Muslims both of Turkish and of Arab origin. As a matter of fact the ideology had indeed guaranteed the stability of the Osman Empire for a long time in the Muslim territory. It needs also to be added that within the state ideology a conflict between Istanbul and the Arab population was virtually inconceivable. In Islam, the Arab language is the only lawful language of religion<sup>4</sup>.

The ideology had both strengths and weaknesses. By necessity it degraded Catholic subjects to a secondary rank. When the Empire was weakened, it was easy for leaders of Balkan nations to mobilize them to fight for freedom against the rule of Muslims. What is worse, the atti-

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<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to render the titles of Muslim rulers exactly. The ruler of Persia (subsequently known as Iran) bore the title of Shakhinszakh (king of kings). In Europe it is often translated as „emperor”. The ruler of Turkey was called „sultan”, which is also sometimes translated as „emperor”. In the paper that follows I will tackle the area of the Osman Empire and not Persia.

<sup>2</sup> The Sunni Islam is the main current of Islam. It is supported by 89–90% of the believers. In terms of the doctrine, apart from the Qurran, the Sunni Muslims acknowledge the authority of the *sunna* (a tradition describing the words and deeds of Mohammed which are not covered by the Qurran).

<sup>3</sup> Califf or the successor to Mohammed. The title was used by rulers from two great Muslim dynasties the Omajad and the Abbasid. Since XIII century, the institution was in crisis. Since XVI century, Turkish sultans assumed califfs’ prerogatives as their own.

<sup>4</sup> The Qurran may be read in Arab only.

tude was premised on the principle of superiority of the sultan and the califf and the whole central government in relation to European states. The arrogant attitude became difficult to sustain already as early as XVIII century, while after numerous defeats by Europeans in XIX century it was altogether devoid of meaning<sup>5</sup>.

The religious ideology of the state made thus difficult to implement internal reforms. Any reform modelled on Europe (and there were no other options in XIX century) meant for the califf criticism by ulema for betrayal of some Islamic principles<sup>6</sup>.

Meanwhile the undisputed scientific-technological superiority of Europe forced changes. The Osman authorities had to reform the army, administration, and partially the legal system. Railways were built, the telegraph and the telephone established. However, reforms were most needed in education. All the reforms, implemented, albeit not consistently, during XIX century led to a significant intellectual agitation among the Empire's elites at the beginning of XX century.

In face of the new ideas flowing from the West, responses had to be formulated. The Istanbul authorities grafted the model of the centralized state based on collegial government and professional administration. Citizens of many denominations were to be equal before law. Law, in turn, was to be the same for all, meaning that it had to, at least partly, be removed from the Qurran principles. The changes did not entirely satisfy Christians (being frequently only declarative); simultaneously however they triggered unrest among the Muslim communities<sup>7</sup>.

Three basic social and political doctrines appeared as a response to the novel circumstances. The first of them, most traditional, was the pan – Islamic or neo-Islamic idea. It was reportedly created by a well known philosopher and writer active in many regions of the Muslim world, Jamal Din Al Afgani<sup>8</sup>.

In his essays, written in Arab or Persian, he urged for a renewal of the Islam world. On one hand, Islamic law was to be adapted to contemporary needs, incorporating achievements of European science,

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<sup>5</sup> J. P. Roux, *Historia Turków*, Gdańsk 2003, p. 247–248.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 248.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> *Arabowie. Słownik encyklopedyczny*, ed. M. Dziekan, Warszawa 2001, p. 20. The scholar lived from 1838 to 1897. His family came from Afganistan.

technology and organization. On the other hand, the superiority of Islam over the European civilisation was recognized. Referring to the state, the unity of the community of believers was emphasized. They were to constitute a single state. Since it was to be naturally headed by a sultan-califf, the idea of Muslim (pan-Islamic) reformism was in principle approved of by the authorities of the Osman Empire<sup>9</sup>.

Pan-Islamism became a kind of a state ideology within the Osman Empire during the reign of sultan Abdulhameed II (1876–1909)<sup>10</sup>. However, the processes taking place among the Muslim educated classes contributed to the erosion of the ideology. What is worse, the Empire needed rapid and radical Europeanizing reforms. Pan-Islamism approved of only moderate and gradual changes.

The rise of two ethnic doctrines – pan-Turkism and pan-Arabism – was particularly important from the point of view of the subsequent transformation. Both arose on the occasion of the attempts to introduce to the world of Islam the European idea of the nation state. The very idea was ridden with many difficulties. The nation, as understood in Western Europe, was a civic community of the state governing the state by means of representative institutions. In Central Europe and in Germany the nation in XIX century was defined primarily in terms of a community of language and culture; in Germany the community of blood (origin) was also frequently added.

In the world of Islam, both views were difficult to implement. Pan-Islamism tried to indicate that the whole Muslim community constituted a nation. Doubts appeared however instantaneously. How may a nation exist within which people speak three so different languages as Turkish, Arab and Kurd? The unity of culture and origin cannot be sustained. Representative institutions did not exist at all or were façade.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*. During his eventful life, Al Afgani stayed in Paris for a long time. He cooperated there with an Egyptian, M. Abduh. They published *Al-Urwa al-Wuska* („tight link”), which was well known in the Arab world. Al Afgani opposed European imperialism, mainly British imperialism (he was tolerated by the French). Turkish authorities supported his pan-Islamic and modernist, at the same time, idea in principle. Nevertheless, the Turkish sultan was suspected of having commanded to poison him.

<sup>10</sup> D. Kołodziejczyk, *Turcja*, Warszawa 2000, p. 29–31. The sultan was believed to be a bloody dictator in Europe. Young intellectuals, Turkish and Arab officers believed him to be an obstacle blocking modernization of the empire. With the benefit of hindsight, it may be seen however how difficult his job was. Moreover, his successors’s rule proved to be a disaster.

The rule of Abdulhameed was very unpopular at the beginning of XX century. In 1908 the rule was overthrown in a military *coup d'état* which brought so called Young Turks to power<sup>11</sup>. The group is associated with the idea of pan-Turkism although as a matter of fact they were internally divided in terms of political views.

Pan-Turkism is an interesting ideology. It was created as a reflection of ethnography. So far the elite of the ethnically Turkish lands saw no reason to stress its linguistic or ethnic identity. Turks from Anatolia were even supposed to be provincial. Suddenly European science drew attention to the existence of a great linguistic community of Turkish languages. By means of a curiosity, it might be mentioned that a Pole, Konstanty Borzęcki who, as many Poles, took part in the Hungarian uprising in 1848–1849, after the uprising failed, ran away to Turkey and became a Muslim. He wrote the first treatise on the origin and greatness of the Turkish ethnos which was dedicated to the Turkish elite<sup>12</sup>.

Anyway, owing to the establishment of European, non-Islamic schools in the Empire, there began to spread ideas of the Turkish nation as a distinct ethnos. During the revolution of „Young Turks” quite unequivocally a view spread that the distinct Turkish nation had the right to rule the whole empire. What is more, pan-Turkism involved also the postulate of uniting all of the Turkish peoples in a single state. It was indicative of the will to expand towards Middle Asia<sup>13</sup>.

Pan-Turkish views did not reinforce the empire, however, since a significant part of its subjects were Arab. It was easily foreseen that the intellectual agitation would give rise to nationalism among Arabs as well. Egypt and Lebanon were the two main sources from which the new ideas spread on to the Arab world. Social activists became convinced that all people speaking the Arab language constitute a nation<sup>14</sup>. The commonality of language denotes belonging to the nation. Within the Muslim community of the Osman Empire two nationalisms rose – pan-Arab and pan-Turkish.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39–40, 42 and 44. Ittihad re Terakki Cemiyeti (Committee of the unity and progress) was the name of the organization founded by emigree opponents of Abdulhameed II. However, they were called by the name of the paper edited in French as *La Jeune Turque* (Young Turkey). They were begun to be dubbed Young Turks.

<sup>12</sup> B. Lewis, *Muzułmański Bliski Wschód*, Gdańsk 2003, p. IX.

<sup>13</sup> D. Kołodziejczyk, *Turcja...*, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> A. Hourani, *Historia Arabów*, Gdańsk 2002, p. 308–309.

Representatives thereof disagreed on the issue which of the parts of the Muslim community was more worthy and who should rule it. The issue became relevant for a nation-state must have a single official language. Either Turkish or Arab then. Following the 1908 revolution, „Young Turks” tried to enforce Turkish as the official language. As a result, Arab counter-movements originated, e.g. Al Fatah in Syria<sup>15</sup>.

Pan-Arab activists started to prove that Islam in general was created by Arabs and the other nations, if made any impact on it, tainted it with evil and depravation. One of most important promulgators of the pan-Arab thought, Al Kawakibi from Syria, hated the rulers of the Empire so much that he wrote: „Lice, Turks and locusts are to be extinct”. He stressed that Turks altogether warped the spirit of Islam<sup>16</sup>.

## 2. The break-up of unity

During WW I the Osman Empire led by „Young Turks” proved to be extraordinarily resilient. The scale of the conflict exceeded however the potential of the state. In October 1918 the Osman Empire, defeated by the English, had to surrender<sup>17</sup>.

Initially, during the military action Great Britain, to her surprise, suffered several defeats (Galipoli, Al Kut), which made her military leaders enter into negotiations with the Sharif family<sup>18</sup> in Mecca and its head sharif Hussain<sup>19</sup>. During the negotiations (correspondence between Mac Mahon and Hussain), the English promised to support plans to create a great Arab kingdom in the territories taken away from Osman Turkey<sup>20</sup>. As a result, an Arab uprising broke out in 1916

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<sup>15</sup> T. E. Lawrence, *Siedem filarów mądrości*, Warszawa 1971, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> J. Danecki, *Arabowie...*, p. 368.

<sup>17</sup> D. Kołodziejczyk, *Turcja...*, p. 86–87. The armistice was signed 30 October 1918 on deck of a British ship at the port in Mudros on the Greek isle of Limnos.

<sup>18</sup> Sharif is a person whose family originates from Mohammed, the Prophet. In 1916, the focus was on the sharif family from Mecca.

<sup>19</sup> T. E. Lawrence, *Siedem...*, p. 44 i 56. Hussain informally ruled Mecca. He was also head of the sharif family (also known as hashimi or Mohammed’s successors). For this reason his influence on Arabs, especially Bedouins in Hidżaz was significant. Turks had to reckon with his influence.

<sup>20</sup> J. Marlow, *Arab nationalism and British imperialism. A study in power politics*, London 1961, p. 18–21.

covering mainly Hidzaz. It had a partisan character but kept large Turkish forces busy.

After the British victory, there happened even more significant changes. On one hand, the British and French armed forces began to control the Arab territory. On the other hand, Arab intelligentsia took an opportunity to initiate building statehood on its own account. Already in October 1918, government in Damascus was established as a starting point for creating an Arab state<sup>21</sup>. The British tried in turn to rule directly over the Iraq, however, the local population rebelled. In 1920 an uprising of the local population against the British broke out<sup>22</sup>.

Meanwhile in the territory to which the Osman Empire had been shrunk, that is in Anatolia, the great ideas seemed to have passed away and people acknowledged they had been defeated. The Sultan in occupied Istanbul was wholly dependent on the victors, mainly on the British<sup>23</sup>. The sultan and the cabinet were forced to sign a treaty in Sevres near Paris on 10 August 1920. The authorities of the Empire gave up the Arab lands. What was worse, many territories in Anatolia were to be taken away from Turkey and the remaining territories were to be controlled by the victors<sup>24</sup>.

However, in central Anatolia, the Turkish army refused to cooperate while the country was being partitioned and rejected the treaty. The army was headed by one of the most gifted generals of WW I – Kemal Pasha (later known as Atatürk)<sup>25</sup>

The Turkish army started to fight against the attempt to partition the state. The war lasted from 1920 until 1922. Greeks and Armenians were involved in the war; they were defeated by the Turks<sup>26</sup>.

As a result, Kemal became an absolute leader of Turks and a national hero. The British not only did not get involved in the fights but also, when Kemal defeated the Greeks, struck a deal with him and withdrew their garrison from Istanbul (1923)<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> D. Madeyska, *Liban*, Warszawa 2003, p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> *Historia krajów arabskich 1917–1966*, praca zbiorowa, Warszawa 1974, p. 167.

<sup>23</sup> D. Kołodziejczyk, *Turcja...*, p. 87 i 90.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 92.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 96 and 101.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 103 and 107–109.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112–113.



Pan-Turkism postulated establishing a state encompassing all Turkish-speaking peoples. Therefore such a state would cover large parts of Asia<sup>28</sup>. Kemal Pasha (Ataturk) rejected the idea. According to the ideology that was created under his leadership, the Turkish nation was constituted by Turks from Anatolia and only by them.

It was very important that Kemal Pasha tried to separate the new national awareness of Turks from Islam. This was the biggest historical change. No other politician in the Islamic world had the courage to do so either before or after Kemal<sup>29</sup>. The Turkish state was to be totally „de-Islamized”.

In practice it was done in the following way: on 1 November 1922, the National Assembly in Ankara, abolished the title of sultan, on 13 October 1923, monarchy was officially replaced with republic (the first such incident in the world of Islam). On 3 March 1924, the office of califf was abolished as well, while the last sultan-califf was expelled from the country<sup>30</sup>. This also meant that Turks were giving up the opportunity to influence other societies by means of the office of califf. Ataturk gave the opportunity up consciously<sup>31</sup>.

In 1925 men were prohibited to wear tarboosh (fez), while wearing hats and caps was recommended; Muslim religious associations were dissolved. In 1926 the Gregorian calendar was introduced in stead of the Muslim calendar and a secular legal code was adopted<sup>32</sup>. Finally, in 1928, in November, it was announced that the Latin alphabet was to replace the Arab alphabet. The reform was indeed implemented, which meant that adult people had to learn how to read and write anew<sup>33</sup>. In 1934, Turks were required to have family names as was the custom of people in Europe; voting rights, active and passive, were granted to women<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> One of the leading Young Turks, Enver Pasha, after he had left Turkey, fought against the bolsheviks in Middle Asia, part of the movement of the Basmachi. This was the last attempt to make pan-Turkish ideas come true. He lost his life during the struggle in 1922.

<sup>29</sup> Apart from the leader of Albania, Enver Hodia, that is.

<sup>30</sup> D. Kołodziejczyk, *Turcja...*, p. 290.

<sup>31</sup> B. Lewis, *Muzułmański...*, p. 326.

<sup>32</sup> D. Kołodziejczyk, *Turcja...*, p. 291.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135–137.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 291.

The death of the dictator in 1938 only ended the avalanche of novelties. All the changes have separated Turks from the Muslim community as much as it was possible.

Meanwhile, the changes in the Arab territory were developing in a slightly different, paradoxical direction. Although Arabs sustained the pan-Arab idea, the political reality was shaped entirely differently.

The peace conference in Paris did not acknowledge Arab demands. Later, at a conference in San Remo on 28 April 1920, England and France made a precise agreement concerning the division of the Arab territory between England and France. Syria and Lebanon were mandated to France, while the Iraq and Palestine to Great Britain<sup>35</sup>. In the meantime, in Damascus, Syria proclaimed its independence and monarchy. Feisal, a son of shariff Hussain of Mecca (who in reality headed the 1916–1918 uprising) was to become king<sup>36</sup>.

The French did not accept the fact. The British, although more prone to co-operate with the Arab politicians, rejected it as well. In July 1920, the French military forces from Lebanon attacked Syria, taking over Damascus while Feisal had to seek shelter with the British<sup>37</sup>. At the beginning of 1921, Feisal's brother, emir Abdullah claimed the Syrian throne. He was installed in Amman near the Jordan river<sup>38</sup>. The British, troubled by the Arab uprising in the Iraq and losing control over the situation in Turkey, decided to regulate the situation.

In March 1921, Winston Churchill organized a conference in Cairo. England decided to transform its Iraq protectorate into kingdom. Feisal was offered the throne in Bagdad<sup>39</sup>. In addition, the English divided Palestine. The smaller but richer part West of the Jordan river was left under their rule. Jewish immigrants were allowed to settle down in this part. The Eastern part, bigger but mostly a desert, was transformed into the emirate of Transjordan ruled by Abdullah<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> J. Skuratowicz, W. Skuratowicz, *Przemiany wewnętrzne i polityka zagraniczna Syrii*, Warszawa 1974, p. 30.

<sup>36</sup> F. G. Peake, *History and tribes of Jordan*, Miami, Florida 1958, p. 105.

<sup>37</sup> J. Skuratowicz, W. Skuratowicz, *Przemiany...*, p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> J. B. Glubb, *Britain and the Arabs. A study of fifty years 1908–1958*, London 1959, p. 165.

<sup>39</sup> M. M. Dziekan, *Historia Iraku*, Warszawa 2002, p. 143–144.

<sup>40</sup> A. Chojnowski, J. Tomaszewski, *Izrael*, Warszawa 2001, p. 14–15.

In the meantime, France tried to rule directly. The rule failed in Syria. In 1925 in many regions of the country anti-French uprisings broke out. Managing to suppress them only as late as 1927, France had to make a few concessions<sup>41</sup>. Local political parties were established, parliament elected.

The French wanted to set the various communities at variance. They tried to gain support of Christians and separate regions inhabited by the Druz and the Alawi<sup>42</sup>. However, in 1936 they were forced to formally announce that their mandate would expire in three years' time and Syria would gain independence then. The same was promised to Lebanon. The promises were not kept by 1939, but WW II soon undermined the role of France anyway<sup>43</sup>.

In the meantime, shariff Hussain attempted to reconcile pan-Islamism with the pan-Arab ideology in a curious way. He wanted to be proclaimed califf. At the beginning of 1924, Turkish authorities were getting ready to abolish the office of califf. Shariff Hussain took advantage of the situation. He came to Amman in February and later, at the Jordan river proclaimed himself the califf of Muslims<sup>44</sup>. It seemed to him that himself, being head of the family descending from the Prophet, ruler of the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina, had the prime right to the title.

However, the other Muslim rulers would not let that happen. The English were not interested in such a development either. The ruler of central Arabia, leader of the Wahabi sect, Ibn Saud sent his army against Mecca. In 1925 Hussain had to flee from Mecca. Thus he not only had not become califf but also lost his own kingdom Hidzaz and the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina<sup>45</sup>.

Ibn Saud, the king, joined central Arabia to Hidzaz and some other provinces to create a country called today Saudi Arabia. In addition, he started to bear the title of the Guardian of the Sacred Cities, which was prestigious although not as much as the title of califf. Thus his enemies were not provoked<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> *Historia krajów...*, p. 61–63.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 64.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

<sup>44</sup> F. G. Peake, *History...*, s. 107–108.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>46</sup> *Historia krajów...*, p. 214.

And so the attempt proved to be a failure politically while in terms of ideology it did not rouse any enthusiasm. The pan-Arab ideology still existed among the elites to a greater or lesser degree, however, its main idea was moved to the background. To fight colonial domination became the main aim for educated Arabs, while the issue of uniting the countries in a single state was pushed to the background. Many thought that since Arabs were a single nation it was enough to get rid of foreign domination to achieve the unification automatically<sup>47</sup>.

Meanwhile, unwittingly, people became accustomed to the new states. National unity premised on the commonality of language proved to be fiction, as a matter of fact.

### 3. Evaluation of the transformations

And so in 1926 the Middle East had a political structure that was completely different to the one from the beginning of 1914. Instead of the Osman Empire, which was both integrating and destroying local political activity, there existed now a couple of separate states and territories. Some (like Turkey) were independent, others (like Egypt, Iraq or Syria) enjoyed more or less restricted autonomy or (like Palestine) were entirely governed by colonial powers. Also, it is to be stressed that the major part of the region was controlled by European powers, England and France. In spiritual or ideological terms the changes were even deeper and more influential from the contemporary point of view if the situation in the region is taken into account.

As long as the Osman Empire existed, essentially the only rational solution for the authorities was to support the religious idea of the state. Al Afgani resuscitated the idea creating its new version – pan-Islamism, so that the Empire's authorities supported it in principle. On the other hand, ever stronger *hiatus* divided the court in Istanbul, which tried to rule in absolutist terms and Muslim elites who wanted to modernize in the European style, including abandoning the absolutist rule. What was worse, the elites, adopting European ideals, adopted the idea of the nation-state as well. Such a state had to be based on the unity of language and historical tradition, which was bound to provoke antagonism between Turks and Arabs.

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<sup>47</sup> J. Danecki, *Arabowie...*, p. 384.

Following the collapse of the Empire, a chance to develop an alternative idea of statehood disappeared from the Middle East. In Turkey, ruled ruthlessly but intelligently by Kemal Pasha Atatürk, pan-Turkism was transformed readily into Turkish nationalism. The idea was purged out of any Islamic references.

In the Arab world, theoretically triumphant, the pan-Arab idea in time became meaningless. State figures and ordinary people alike swore that Arabs constituted a single nation and their unification was necessary but reality proved otherwise. What moved masses was rather an idea how to get rid of colonial domination. Hopes, fruitless as it turned out, to make living standards better, were associated with the latter idea.