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Mustafa Kamel and Mohamed Farid: The Rise of Nationalism

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During the first quarter of the 19th century, Egypt had an Islamic identity due to its place in Islamic history and its relationship to the Ottoman Empire which was considered "Dar el Islam" or "The House of Islam." However, the birth of nationalism in Egypt, the feeling of belonging to a specific "nation," emerged during the middle of the 19th century. Many factors led to its development.

First: Never before had Egyptians (mostly farmers) been a part of the modern Egyptian army. The imposition of obligatory military service played a crucial role in developing the Egyptians' sense of belonging to a specific nation and their duty towards the Egyptian flag. Second: Following the French model, a new system of education was developed using Arabic as the predominant language. Another factor was the scholarly missions that were sent to Europe and to France, in particular. Third: The theory of nationalism was introduced in Egypt by Riffa el Tahtawy who used French liberal doctrines as a basis for his philosophy. His ideas influenced a large number of intellectuals who grew up purporting the philosophy of the 19th century. Fourth: Egypt's strategic position, both internationally and regionally, was another important factor. The 1841 and 1874 decrees which were approved by European powers gave Egypt its own identity and sovereignty within the Ottoman Empire. These decrees also gave Egypt a sense of independence that reinforced the Egyptians' patriotic feeling. Finally, the fact that Egypt was under British occupation at that time made the Egyptians more conscious of their national crisis and made them realize the importance of their national duty.

Mustafa Kamel (1874-1908) and Mohamed Farid (1868-1919) grew up during this era that saw the birth of Egyptian nationalism. They were both part of the intellectual elite which was the product of the modern system of education. They both studied law and they mastered the French language. This allowed

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them to study Western culture from an Egyptian perspective. They were famous orators, writers and journalists. One succeeded the other as president of "the nationalist party" which represented, at the beginning, the nationalist trend that was fighting against British occupation and formulating the political resistance that aimed for independence. It was only in 1907 that the movement became a political party under the leadership of Mustafa Kamel. Kamel died in 1908 and was then replaced by Mohamed Farid, the leader of the nationalist movement. Thus, it is important to follow the stages of development of nationalist thought at the beginning of the 20th century and how it reflected the influence of French liberal thought on these two Egyptian political leaders.

Under British occupation, Egyptian patriotism had an Islamic colouring. The Egyptians had rejected the "Arab" identity because it was encouraged by the British. With the continuation of the legal presence of the Ottomans, Egyptians chose to hold on to their ties with the Ottoman Empire; they considered this their safeguard against British imperialism. Mustafa Kamel was convinced of the necessity of the Ottoman presence; the dismantling of the empire would lead to a World War. He also believed that Muslims had to get closer to the Sultan. Whoever wanted to see an Egypt free from British occupation, had to make sure that Egypt would remain an independent Ottoman state. However, Mustafa Kamel would not accept the dismissal of the rights given to Egyptians in the previously mentioned decrees for he said: *"Some deceivers have declared that we want to get rid of the British and give away Egypt to Turkey so the Ottomans could do as they please and turn us into one of their regular states. In other words, we only want to change rulers and we are neither looking for independence nor sovereignty. This is an accusation - it also means that our knowledge of Western philosophies that were transmitted to us a century ago made us hold on ever more to our submission and humiliation. The fact that we learned about the rights of nations - has only prepared us to become "classy" slaves. This accusation is an insult to civilization and the civilized world; it is the destruction of the Arab nation to insinuate that Egypt will never progress and will never reach the level of development that other nations have attained."*²

This political trend that brought Egypt close to Turkey had religious implications in Mohamed Farid's view. He considered that being part of the Ottoman Empire, the nation of the Islamic Caliphate, meant being true to Islam. His reason was that the Ottomans had always defended Islam against other Christian European countries. He also considered the issue of Orientalism as a religious issue and believed the West conspired against Islam and the Muslim nations.

2 Abdel Rahman el Rafei : Mustafa Kamel p. 451

On the other hand, Mustafa Kamel saw "nationalism" as a feeling of belonging to a nation and having a responsibility towards it. It was a feeling that came neither from language nor religion, but rather a feeling of belonging to a specific piece of land. He also romanticized about Egypt and its great past: "*Egypt, paradise on earth, does not deserve to be humiliated or we, her dear children, become strangers in our own home.*"³ He believed that it should be impossible for religion or language or any legal status to affect "nationalism" which, in principle, included all Egyptians. He felt there was a psychological binding between compatriots. Whether Muslim or Copt, they had all lived for centuries in harmony. There was no sense of contradiction in belonging to a specific religion while supporting nationalism because true religion teaches true nationalism.

In contrast, we find that Mohamed Farid had excluded the Copts from the framework of the nationalist group. He considered the Egyptians as being a homogeneous nation or "umma" that shared the same language, the same customs and the same religion. Having said this, he pointed out the existence of an exception: "*a minority which is still enjoying all rights at all times.*" These words were aimed at the Copts of Egypt and they revealed Mohamed Farid's confusion between nationalism and his Muslim identity.

We could say that Mustafa Kamel had a deeper understanding of the concept of nationalism. He saw nationalism's secular origin and did not compare it, in any way, with religion or even considered religion as one of the components of nationalism. He looked at it from a purely realistic point of view when he said: "*Nationalism is a noble feeling that binds people, it is a strong feeling upon which countries are built and kingdoms flourish. European civilization is nothing hut a by-product of nationalism.* He adds: "*Patriotism is a feeling that grows in you; it gets to be extremely strong and overwhelming. The more problems a nation has, the more difficulties it faces, the stronger the feeling gets...An "umma," or nation, cannot survive without true nationalism and its survival would have no meaning without it.*"⁴

In his writings, Mohamed Farid focused on the Egyptian "umma" which was supposed to find its place among free nations: "*The nation that preceded all nations in being free and civilized has to be part of the civilized world, and no country would have the right to contest it.*" Mohamed Farid goes back in history to affirm the features of the Egyptian "umma." He said, *...The descendants of those who built the Pyramids and those royal cemeteries of the Valley of the Kings, those tombs that have fascinated the entire world for centuries, can,*

3 Abdel Rahman el Rafei : Mustafa Kamel p. 146-147

4 Abdel Rahman el Rafei : Mustafa Kamel p. 114

*through their actions, their love for science, their sense of freedom and their will-power reach, the level of development attained by their ancestors."*⁵

Where Mohamed Farid contradicts himself is when he measures the Egyptian national feeling by the degree of the Egyptians' belonging to the Ottoman state. He says that "*Egypt's contribution to the Ottoman struggle against Greece in May (1897) is proof of the Egyptians' increased sense of nationalism.*"⁶

On this issue, Mohamed Farid and Mustafa Kamel are not very different. However, Mohamed Farid does not miss an occasion to demonstrate his fidelity to Turkey. On one hand, he asked for Ottoman support to free Egypt from British occupation. However, he did not accept it as a vassal state; he believed that Egypt's being within the Ottoman Empire protected it from the desires of British imperialism. He also thought that Egypt should safeguard the special status given to it via international decrees.

The two political leaders were both admirers of France and its people. Mustafa Kamel particularly considered France the cradle of European culture and the mother of the Revolution. He went as far as seeking a petition from the president of the National Assembly in 1895 asking France, the state that enjoys "the declaration of Human Rights," to help him obtain Egypt's independence.

Mustafa Kamel used to quote French thinkers and writers and in his speeches, particularly those from the 'Century of Enlightenment.'

On various occasions, Mohamed Farid asked France for help even when it had turned its back on the Egyptian nationalist movement and would not assist its press campaign. Even when the French government had barred the congress of the National party from holding its meetings in Paris in 1910, Mohamed Farid made it a point to congratulate the French people and French culture for the role they played in propagating the idea of Freedom. He put the entire blame on the French government. Later on, when Mohamed Farid undertook the task of demanding a constitution, all his writings and discourses reflected the influence of French liberalism and the "Social Contract" which is the basis of every constitutional government.

Despite the fact that he was convinced of the existence of an Islamic 'Egyptian nation' tied to Turkey, he saw Egypt as being equal with Turkey because of its history and culture. He insisted on Egypt's right to have a constitutional regime similar to the ones in Turkey and Persia since Egypt was not in any way less civilized than either of those nations. Furthermore, Mohamed Farid revived the

5 Abdel Rahman el Rafei : Mohamed Farid p. 240

6 See preface of Mohamed Farid's memoirs by Raouf Abbas.

slogan "*Egypt for the Egyptians*," which was first mentioned during the Orabi revolution.

In 1916, he set conditions for Egypt's participation on behalf of Turkey in its attack against the Suez Canal: the respect of Egypt's independence and its right to have its own constitution.

However, the Islamic identity of Egypt and the intention to reinforce Egypt's ties with Turkey to prove the illegality of British occupation and request its retreat from the country scared a certain group of Egyptians who wanted to see the end of Turkish domination.

It was Lotfy el-Sayed, the pioneer of liberalism in Egypt, who was the first to employ the term "Egyptian nationalism" based on common interest and not on a common religion. This ideology saw the light of day at the outbreak of the 1919 revolution.

We discover that in the mind of intellectuals with occidental educations, "nationalism" was an amalgamation of ideas that embraced liberalism, the thinkers of the century of enlightenment (mostly French) and Islamic ideas. Egypt turned away from these ideas after World War I because it was necessary that "Egyptian nationalism" acquire a purely Egyptian identity removed from any religious condition. Thus, we see the contradictions that exist in Farid and Kamel's nationalist thought. They represent, however, an important step towards "Egyptian nationalism."

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