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**“’The Firm Unbreaking Bond’: Al-Afghani and 'Abduh on Modernist Islam as Critique of Modernity”**

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**Abstract**

The colonialist political ban that silenced and oppressed *al’Urwah al-Wuthqah la infișām laḥa* in 1884 did not prevent its dissemination only to its target audience of contemporary Oriental and Muslim readers. Over the past 133 years, several studies continued this oppression for different reasons. Some, due to overemphasis on the personal life of one of the authors, did not consider it a valuable text and therefore gave up on documenting and interpreting it. Conversely, out of respect and admiration for both authors, other studies took the liberty of interpreting it in a manner that resulted in far-reaching changes to its original meaning. They impaired its form and structure, either due to the continued resonance of the colonialist political band or with the purpose of “ordering” it, so as to supposedly make it more comprehensible. In any case, the result was the same: a buffer between the text and subsequent generations, throughout the 20th century and to this day.

During those years, this regimenting hermeneutic violence could have easily been curtailed by taking simple actions never attempted – to the best of my knowledge – before this thesis: (1) underemphasize the author’s biography in favor of a refocusing on the text itself; and (2) reassemble the isolated and dispersed sections of each issue and reorganize them according to the original pattern and structure. These basic actions undertaken here now allow its sections to join together as a homogeneous unit. Reorganizing the sections according to the original structure exposes to the interpretive field the process in which various themes have been discussed in the text, both in the chronological context internal to the issue and in the context of its external environment that had influenced its design. Giving weight to those two chronological contexts, the internal and external, have allowed the present study to chart the course of development of the ideas and emotions arising from its 18 issues.

The aforementioned actions were only preparatory. Once an authentic copy of the journal’s issues was spread on the desk – in the original size, format an order – it became possible to reconstruct a critical historical moment in the shaping of Muslim-Arab thought offering a discourse of modern Islamic-Oriental citizenship.

First, the original title page was reconstructed, having been ignored by most subsequent printings. The definition that used to appear on that page, according to which the journal was a jarīdah siyasiyyah ādabiyyah, or “Cultural political journal”, turned out to be far from arbitrary. The relations of trust formed with the original text prevented its separation into its political and cultural aspects, and gave their interrelations the opportunity to outline its interpretation. Indeed, the reading of each section with a “political” character demonstrated how charged it was with “cultural” aspects, and vice versa. In turn, identifying the overlapping and reciprocal relations between the political and cultural aspects enabled identifying a methodical axis around which the themes discussed in the text were organized, and which probably troubled its authors, al-Afghani and 'Abduh, in their émigré years in Paris as they gazed anxiously eastwards. Three elements are integrated in this axis: selfhood/identity (*ḍāt*), belief, (*‘aqidah*), and sovereignty (*siyadah*). In each, the dual political-cultural perspective coincided.

These textual discoveries served the study as a model allowing a reexamination of interpretation offered in the literature regarding contemporary Arab-Muslim intellectual trends. They enabled several outcomes and conclusions that may be summarized as follows. First, that al-Afghani and 'Abduh’s conducted a lively and critical discussion of 19th-century European civilization and examined it not as a neutral and absolute paradigm, but rather one shaped by processes, contexts and particular historical needs. Second, mapping Oriental, political and cultural cohesions from that period and tracing their interrelations along the continuum stretched between conflict and consensus. And third, revealing a movement characterized, on the one hand, by culturalization and religization of the political sphere, and on the other, by politicization of the cultural and religious sphere.

Accordingly, two objectives were identified for the weekly. First, in the short term, a call for organizing an anti-colonial Muslim Oriental front for liberation from settler-colonialism. Second, in the long term, preparing the civilian groundwork for establishing a new Islamic Oriental civilization.

**1. Islamic Modernism as a Critique of Modernity**

Reading in *Al’Urwah* has shown that its authors, al-Afghani and 'Abduh, were informed by the medieval Muslim knowledge world, relying on rational philosophical perceptions and approaches to religion that were celebrated in the golden era and which developed and prospered under Islamic rule. This reliance was articulated by an approach to religion that was expressed in two main ways. The first was the liberty the authors took of using the discipline of history to examine the Islamic past through the twin lenses of humanism and theology. The individual was seen as a sentient creature with freedom of choice that made him responsible for his mundane life; at the same time, al-Afghani and 'Abduh believed in divine intervention in human life. Thus, history was seen as the interface of human choice and divine intervention.

At the same time, the authors took the liberty of temporarily avoiding the reliance on the Islamic knowledge structure grounded in religious tradition and heritage, and instead be informed by what they termed “primary elements” or “articles of faith” borrowed directly from the Quran. To them, while the Quran is a sacred, supertemporal and is open to modern interpretations, the existing interpretations documented in traditional texts were seen as human, particular and therefore ought to be open to reexamination. Due to the pressing colonial situation in the Oriental territories with a Muslim majority, al-Afghani and 'Abduh believed conditions were not ripe for making the changes required in the tradition, due to the supposed falsehoods and innovations that had infiltrated and played havoc in it. Suspending tradition and reopening the sacred text to modern interpretations was informed by an approach that considered both religion and the religious entitled to renewal in accordance to the context of their period. This move was considered revolutionary and was rejected by contemporary religious institutions.

While Al-Afghani and 'Abduh relied on the Islamic knowledge system as mentioned above, they lived in the 19th century, and as argued by several researchers, they were naturally familiar with and affected by ideas and disciplines which developed in Europe of their time. Conceived in the revolutionary city of Paris, the discourse in *Al’Urwah* included reference to such concepts as rights, duties, equality and sovereignty, most probably inspired by the French and American revolutions of the 18th century that shaped the spheres in which the authors operated in the 19th.

The conflict in *Al’Urwah* was not between an “Oriental” and an “Occidental” cultural entity, nor between individuals from the two worlds, nor between Islam and Christianity. Those who argue so fail to understand the modern Islamic project. According to the authors, both Christians and Muslims abandoned the path laid out by God through his prophets in the New Testament and the Quran. They argued that in the case of Christianity, this divergence led the Christians to erroneous imperialism diametrically opposed to the original values of their religion. Modern European civilization, as described in the text, failed to adhere to its own espoused values, such as universalism, freedom and equality, as it led its armies to conquer and its citizens to settle the Orient.

When sponsored by a colonial power rather than being the result of free choice by the colonized, the European concept of progress, represented by the building of railways in the Orient, turned into a land-grabbing tool and did not serve the local population. The European discourse of the Orient was identified by *Al’Urwah* as being historically hostile to Muslims and paternalistic and derisive of the Oriental identity in general – what we now call regimenting Orientalist discourse designed, among other things, to maintain a dichotomous distinction between “us” and “them”. Al-Afghani and 'Abduh argued that while many colonial officials were devout Christians, even to the point of fanaticism, they tried to secularize Oriental identities, especially the Islamic one. In other words, the authors saw modern European progress above all as contributing to the development of military power. They supported Oriental adoption of Occidental technologies or ideas only if these were suitable for them, and called upon them to reject others spread within their lands under the tutelage of the colonial bureaucracy. They argued, in effect, that Islamic civilization offers a more just alternative to what European enlightenment can offer in reality, rather than in its lofty pretensions.

**2. Political and Cultural Cohesions in the Islamic Orient**

This thesis analyzed objects of cohesion around collective identities that existed, according to *Al’Urwah*, in the last third of the 19th century: cohesion around religion *(dīn),* mostly with reference to Christians and Muslims; religious schools (*maḍaḥib)*; ethnicity *(Jinsiyyah)*; territory *(wațan)*; shared communal customs (*mashārib)*; and language (*lughah)*.

For al-Afghani and 'Abduh, two questions had to be answered in order to assess the weight to be given to each type of cohesion: its effectiveness with relation to the first cohesion, that of religion, and the issue of equal rights. A cohesion seen by the authors as effective for Islamic cohesion and as maintaining equal rights for those who do not belong to the ingroup was granted relative independence; otherwise, it was encompassed within religion and subjected to its supervision.

The first cohesion discussed in *Al’Urwah* – a choice that suggests the importance attached by the authors to discussing it – was ethnicity. After some time and due to natural traits such as lust for power and greed, ethnic cohesion turns into hostility towards other groups. According to al-Afghani and 'Abduh, such intergroup hostility threatens the ingroup’s continued existence since it becomes unjust. The text argues that religious cohesion can acculturate unjust tendencies by ethnic groups and educate their members to avoid using their power and to restrain their greed so that they do not attack others.

The second cohesion identified as important in the text (despite being largely ignored in the literature) has to do with religious schools. For example, the weekly held an emotionally charged discussion of the relations between Afghans and Iranians. Both groups were told that the debate around the schools that had raged between them for years and prevented unity was secondary, and that there was Islamic Law prohibited the continued split. According to the authors, this split served the imperialists as well as sidelined the religious contributions of non-Arabs, particularly the Iranians. Both groups were told that they shared an illustrious history, even before embracing Islam, and that they had to emphasize their similarities – in history and religion – in order to reunite. Note that in calling for such unity between Afghans and Iranians, the authors sought to create a new power in the Islamic Orient that would replace the crumbling Ottoman Empire.

A third cohesion discussed, which is mainly what the literature refers to as budding “Arab nationalism” in al-Afghani’s writings, is the territorial one, identified in the thesis in its Arabic name *watan*. Recall that the rationale for using the Arabic term is that *watan*, as defined in the al-Bustani’s contemporary dictionary, *Muhit al-Muhit*, is not necessarily “homeland”, but the territory where an individual chooses to live, even if not born there. The sense of belonging to a *wațan*, as to a religion, is considered in the weekly as natural. Belonging to a *wațan* – to a particular territory – has been characterized as historical and celebrated in modernity thanks to its encouragement in the 19th-century Arabic press. In *Al’Urwah*, believing in a certain religion dovetails with being a *wațani*; indeed, *Din* and *wațan* feature in many articles in the weekly as two major cohesions around which Orientals must unite. Nevertheless, here too, the effectiveness of *wațan* is evaluated with relation to religion. The authors recognize the particular histories of Oriental populations, such as the Pharaonic history of ‘Abde’s country of origin and the Persian roots of Afghans and Iranians, and saw how the cohesions around them serve the Islamic meta-cohesion – hence, they were considered effective, legitimized and supported.

In addition, the *wațan* category enabled the authors to refer to Oriental territories in general, without always referring specifically to Muslims. Nevertheless, the option of a separate struggle in the name of one *wațan* rather than in the name of all Oriental countries was rejected. The journal states specifically that there is hope for the success of the anticolonial struggle in Sudan only if it will mature into a revolution and spread to other Oriental countries. Failing that, they argued, any local struggle in the Orient is bound to fail.

The nationalism that developed in the first decades of the 20th century into a work plan for liberation and an anticolonial struggle was significant in particular countries after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Al-Afghani died in 1879 and 'Abduh in 1905, before this scenario materialized. In that sense*, Al’Urwah* is a wakeup call, anxiously alerting to the disaster of the demise of an Islamic state entity, and with it the assimilation of all Oriental identities into those of their particular colonizers. The foreboding sound rising from the text – from the very first issue to the last sentence of the 18th – conveys a powerful message to all Orientals: “we will abide together”, or more precisely, “only together will we abide”.

Instead of arguing like other studies that what charmed al-Afghani in Islam was its past political power, we have shown that this is exactly what charmed him in the model of European modernity. Two types of European nationalism were referred to by *Al’Urwah*: the German model and the model of the Irish national resistance movement. The former was seen as that of a European country that managed to unite thanks to clinging to its heritage, and thanks to its unity, became civilized. The conclusion was straightforward, in the spirit of “Look, Orientals, you too can do the same” – you do not have to give up your identities to be civilized like the Europeans. Irish nationalism served the authors as a model of armed modern struggle, claiming the right of a historical collective to determine its identity independently and sovereignly. In other words, both models of European nationalism were discussed in order to encourage Orientals in general to strengthen the relations between their present identities and those of their ancestors, and consolidate their sense of belonging, enabling them to unite and prioritize collective over particular interests.

In other words, the most important collective presented is that the Oriental collective, with a Muslim majority under the sovereignty of an Islamic state. Nevertheless, the authors have realized that enhancing religious cohesion depends on enhancing the other, particular cohesions, and they respected and did not reject any cohesion out of the five enumerated. They included all within the scope of religion, and legitimized the Orientals’ struggle against their colonizers for them and in their name.

**3. Acculturation of the Political; Politicization of the Cultural**

As rightly suggested in the literature, al-Afghani promoted political activism in the Islamic and Arab public spheres, and was therefore considered as having contributed to laying the groundwork for the secularization of these spheres. Nevertheless, we have shown that this contribution, which had probably been inspired by similar activism in Europe, relied on a modern interpretation of Islam motivated by the needs for acculturation and religization of the political sphere, and at the same time for politicization of the cultural and religious sphere.

In principle, the authors encouraged the Ottomans to come to terms with their rights and duties. Through their weekly, al-Afghani and 'Abduh tried to make their voice heard in the Sublime Porte as well, and promote the acculturation and religization of politics. The duties imposed on the Ottomans was to be assertive and persistent and end the ongoing nibbling of their strength by the European powers, and protect the countries under their rule from falling into foreign hands. Another message conveyed through *Al’Urwah* was that the Ottoman state had to understand that in order for it to become civilized, it needed not reproduce European modernization models as they had done throughout the 19th century, which only served to weaken them. Instead, they were advised to continue adopting reforms based on authentic Oriental ways. Otherwise, the authors warned, the Ottomans would continue failing and would be denied the privilege of continuing to lead the Islamic state. Seeing themselves as speaking for the rights of all Orientals, Al-Afghani and 'Abduh threatened the Ottomans that if they would not meet their demands, they would have to hand over their leadership to another Islamic body able to bear that burden.

Even the *‘*Alama were attacked for not upholding Islamic Law, neither from the political nor from the cultural aspect. *Al’Urwah* referred to the internal conflicts among the *‘*Alama, both in different countries and within the same country, and criticized them as the opposite of what they were supposed to represent – a living model of Islamic values, of moral virtues. The *‘*Alama were called upon to become activists. In the religious sphere, they were required to establish religious centers in every territory and remain united to protect the religion against external attacks. Politically, they were required to publicly state their support of the resistance movement in Sudan and encourage Muslims in their territories to join it.

The Muslim Oriental individual was also criticized, and the authors sought to remind him too of his rights and duties. Similar to political and religious leaders, the individual was chastised for having neglected his duties and for being unaware of his rights, carried away in a path other than God’s. The individual, argued the authors, turned his back on nature, and failed to learn from and create within it, as opposed to the qualities that God gave him in His grace when He created him as an inquisitive and productive creature. The individual was described as detached form nature, living under false illusions and in despair that had disconnected him from reality; now he had to abandon his illusions and take responsibility for being active in changing his life, if he wanted to continue existing. The scope of rights the individual was required to exercise included his right to change the regime governing him if, according to his judgment, it failed to protect such rights as the right to live in his country in security and peace and cultivate his talents. In other words, the authors tried to make the individual and the Oriental and Islamic communities understand the intimate relationship between the government and individual and collective self-realization. They were all told expressly: if the regimes governing you would not organize for an anticolonial struggle, you must take matters into your own hands and organize yourself to protect your rights. Thus, the authors tried to acculturate and religicize, as well as politicize the identity of both the individual and the community.

The authors argue that due to the extreme divergence of the Muslims from God’s way and their violation of the duties required by religious law, they became “enslaved”, “dormant” and “blinded”, suffering from “inferiority” and “paralysis”. In one article, they celebrated the faith in the Muslims’ souls and only argued for a disconnection between thought and action among them. Elsewhere, they argued against the Muslims that their very faith did not meet the criteria of proper faith, as they followed irrational and erroneous interpretations and it was hard to educate them to follow the righteous path. The difficulty of reforming them applied also to leaders who were concerned only with retaining power, failed to understand the religious aspect of government and rejected religiously informed political reforms. Even the *‘*Alama were found wanting, in refusing any innovation in the corpus of religious knowledge and preventing religion from reforming according to the contemporary context.

Al-Afghani and 'Abduh bemoaned the fact that voices such as theirs were doomed to be considered eccentric among all classes, and that nobody listened to them, let alone took the seriously. The main term they used in *Al’Urwah* to refer to their motivation to make their voice heard nonetheless was *yaqẓah* – revival or renaissance – the need to awaken the Orientals and the Muslims in particular to all the reasons preventing them from understanding the urgency and extent of the changes required among them.

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To conclude, the text before us exposes a series of tensions and rifts in al-Afghani and 'Abduh’s worldviews: between a modern narrative of an alternative Islamic civilization that is more effective than the one suggested by Europe and a reality in which Muslims were seen as far from truly Muslim in their eyes; between a celebration of popular piety and a denial of the very possibility of faith among the masses, as it is not grounded in an rational approach to religion; between legitimizing the Ottoman state and calling upon the Muslims to disobey and replace it with an alternative political entity; between rejecting the reliance on tradition until after the liberation and highlighting a certain historical chapter of that tradition, that of the medieval Muslim philosophers, whose approach echoed their own.

Throughout the thesis, we have argued that these tensions and rifts in the authors’ thought do not suggest conflicts and contradictions. Rather, they suggest an essential complexity that involves emotions and passions under the shadow of the contemporary colonial situation that has shaped the path followed by the text.

More than a hundred years have passed since Jamal a-*Dīn* al-Afghani and Sheikh Muhammad 'Abduh jointly published the text examined here. However the needs, urges and themes identified within it have remained relevant to this day: the need to formulate a religion in terms of citizenship and granting legally enshrined equal rights to the various cohesions; the need to examine the heritage of Islam historically and reconstruct it in keeping with life and times of its believers; the need for awakening, for shaking off the sense of despair through a transformation of the Oriental psyche and charge it with confidence in its capacity to renew itself; the need to reattach present-day Muslim Oriental identity to the wheels of history by highlighting the Islamic-Arab knowledge corpus and its contribution to the development of European civilization; the need to identify the colonial context where Islamic identity faces the danger of assimilation and expose the symbiotic relations between cultural and political sovereignty; and the need to rebuild the relations between Oriental and Occidental populations on a human foundation of shared and mutual interests.

*Al’Urwah* is exemplary of Oriental Arab-Muslim writing at a time and space in relation to which it felt no longer sovereign, and within which it demanded the right for continued independent existence, to be seen and be involved. Political exile necessarily gives birth, in addition to the usual unease typical of foreignness in general, to anxiety, hypervigilance, lack of confidence, and recurring thoughts. Such are the emotions that set the tone for the ideas presented in the weekly. Despite or perhaps because of those emotions, the language of Al-Afghani and 'Abduh’s articles provides a unique, powerful and prophetic experience.