

## LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY. THE ROLE OF ARAB ORGANISATIONS IN RESISTING THE YOUNG TURKS TURKIFICATION

Aram Ashot GASPARYAN 

National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia

E-mail: aramashotgasparyan@gmail.com

**Abstract:** In the context of the Ottomanist ideology adopted by the Young Turks during their rule from 1908 to 1914, the article examines the status of Arabic as a crucial tool in the struggle for Arab autonomy. Arab nationalists, recognising the implications of Young Turk policies for the Arab regions within the Ottoman Empire, as well as the overtly nationalist (Turkish supremacy) stance of the "Ittihad ve Terakki" (Union and Progress) party, compelled newly formed Arab parties and organisations to reassess their positions and strategies. They began to advocate for their national interests, which were at odds with the Young Turks' policies and ideology. Arab national parties and organisations viewed Ottomanism as a barrier to the political and cultural autonomy of the Arab population. While Ottomanism was intended to promote unity and equality within the multiethnic Ottoman Empire, it ultimately established unity on the basis of the dominance of Turkish culture and language. Within this framework, protecting the Arabic language and addressing its status became not only a means of preserving cultural heritage but also a symbol of resistance against forced Turkification and assimilation, as well as a struggle for national identity and autonomy. Arab national parties and organisations emphasised the need to recognise Arabic as the official language in the empire's Arab regions in their programmes and messages. They considered the unrestricted use of Arabic in education, management, and administration as essential, viewing it as a critical step towards ensuring the political, administrative, and cultural autonomy of the Arab population within the empire.

**Keywords:** Linguistic Assimilation, Young Turks, Arab Nationalism, Ottoman Empire, Language Policy, Arabic Parties.

**Rezumat: Limbă și identitate: rolul organizațiilor arabe în rezistența la turcificarea impusă de către „Junii Turci”.** În contextul ideologiei otomaniste adoptate de „Junii Turci” în timpul guvernării lor (1908-1914), articolul examinează statutul limbii arabe ca instrument crucial în lupta pentru autonomia arabă. Naționaliștii arabi, recunoscând implicațiile politicilor Tinerilor Turci asupra regiunilor arabe din cadrul Imperiului Otoman, precum și direcția evident naționalistă (supremația turcească) a partidului „Ittihad ve Terakki” (Uniune și progres), au obligat partidele și organizațiile arabe nou formate să își revalueze pozițiile și strategiile. Acestea au început să pledeze pentru interesele lor naționale, care erau în contradicție cu politicile și ideologia Tinerilor Turci. Partidele și organizațiile arabe considerau otomanismul o barieră în calea autonomiei politice și culturale a populației arabe. Cu toate că otomanismul enunța unitatea și egalitatea în cadrul Imperiului Otoman multietnic, în fapt el fixa unitatea bazată pe dominația culturii și limbii turcești. Astfel, protejarea limbii arabe și abordarea statutului acestora au devenit nu doar un mijloc de conservare a patrimoniului cultural, ci și un simbol al rezistenței împotriva turcificării și asimilării forțate, precum și o formă de luptă pentru identitate națională și autonomie. Partidele și organizațiile naționale arabe au subliniat în programele și mesajele lor necesitatea recunoașterii limbii arabe ca limbă oficială în regiunile arabe ale imperiului. Acestea au considerat utilizarea nerestricționată a limbii arabe în educație, management și administrație ca fiind esențială, privind-o ca pe un pas esențial către asigurarea autonomiei politice, administrative și culturale a populației arabe în cadrul imperiului.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to highlight the significance of the Arabic language as a key element in the formation of Arab identity, the protection of Arab rights, and, more importantly, the struggle for national autonomy. The paper argues that, in the Ottoman Empire under Young Turk-led Ottomanism, the politicisation of the Arabic language was inevitable, particularly when the national issues of non-Turkish peoples (in this case, the Arabs) were neglected. The status of Arabic became a tool for opposing the central authorities and advancing national interests. The study sets out to show that, by 1909, in the new political reality established in the Ottoman Empire, the status of the Arabic language was crucial not only as a unifying and identifying factor for Arabs but also as a political instrument to counter the nationalist policies of the Ittihadists.

This research provides insight into why the issue of the Arabic language's status held such importance in the Arabs' struggle for autonomy and the protection of their rights. Additionally, the study will clarify the activities, demands, and goals of Arab nationalists from 1908 to 1914, shedding light on the formation and evolution of Arab nationalism during this period.

The study employs a combination of historical-analytical, comparative, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodologies. These approaches enable an examination of provisions on the status of Arabic in the programmes and statements of prominent Arab parties and organisations active during 1908–1914, taking into account their socio-political contexts (importance and agenda) and dominant discursive practices. This methodology clarifies the significance of Arabic within the broader struggle for the autonomy of Arab provinces and the national rights of Arabs, particularly in relation to the Ottomanist ideology promoted by the Ittihadists in the Ottoman Empire.

In 1908 July 23, the success of the Young Turk ("Ittihad ve Teraqqi" (Committee of Union and Progress) coup,<sup>1</sup> which garnered active support from various nationalities within the Ottoman Empire, including the Arabs, marked a significant turning point in the empire's history and altered its developmental trajectory. The Young Turks' initial actions, particularly the restoration of the Constitution, were highly encouraging, as they created genuine opportunities to address national issues. This optimism was a key factor in the initial trust and confidence that Arab nationalists, particularly the progressive segments of society, placed in the Young Turks.

However, this cooperation, which initially appeared promising for the Arabs, soon encountered significant challenges. These obstacles primarily arose from the defence of Arab rights, which not only exacerbated pre-existing conflicts but also created new ones. The primary source of these tensions was the Turks' overt desire to maintain their dominant position within the empire. This stance clearly indicated their reluctance to honour the promises and assurances they had initially made.

## THE ROLE OF ARABIC AND THE LANGUAGE POLICY OF ARAB NATIONALISTS

In 1908, the coup orchestrated by the "Ittihad ve Teraqqi" and executed raised significant hopes among the non-Turkish populations of the Ottoman Empire, including the Arabs. Inspired by the Young Turks' promises of equality for all

<sup>1</sup>The first committee, named "Ittihad ve Terakki" ("Union and Progress"), was established in 1889 by several students from the Constantinople Military Medical School. Its founding members included representatives from various Muslim nationalities within the empire. Later, in 1894, a new committee with the same name was formed, in which the Turks played a leading role. The members of this committee referred to themselves as Ittihadists or Young Turks. Their primary goal was to transform the empire into a liberal constitutional state, which they believed would help counter the real threat posed by the Western powers of breaking up and partitioning the empire. Anatoly Miller, *Kratkaja istorija Turcii* [A Brief History of Turkey], Moskva, Gospolitizdat, 1948, p. 116.

inhabitants of the empire, some Arabs believed that achieving national autonomy within the empire's borders was feasible. In the early months following the Young Turk revolution, the Ittihadists enjoyed such high regard among Arab national figures that these leaders did not initially press for specific national demands, confident that the newly reinstated Constitution would automatically guarantee equality for all the empire's nationalities. During this period, several Arab organisations were founded, motivated by the hope that their goals could be realised in cooperation with the Ittihadists. Following the coup, Arab progressive groups and individual figures, who viewed the constitutional government as a reliable guarantor of their national aspirations, prioritised supporting the new authorities and the "Ittihad ve Teraqqi" committee. Additionally, the restoration of the Constitution fostered a flourishing of public life throughout the empire, marked by the creation of numerous societies and groups and the emergence of new newspapers and periodicals. The extent of this cultural and intellectual revival is reflected in the significant increase in Arabic-language publications. Following the restoration of the Constitution, only in Beirut were 60 new newspapers launched, with an additional 40 in Baghdad.<sup>2</sup> By 1909, the number of Arabic-language periodicals published in Constantinople had reached seven, and 67 were published in the Damascus vilayet. In the same year, 12 periodicals in both Arabic and Turkish were published simultaneously in Constantinople, while 41 periodicals were produced in other Arab provinces, compared with just 14 before the revolution.<sup>3</sup> In a short time, numerous educational, cultural, charitable, and other organisations were established across the country, including in the Arab provinces, and actively contributed to the empire's political life.

Given these circumstances, several Arab organisations established during this period began cautiously addressing national issues, with particular emphasis on the status of Arabic. A prominent example of this is the formation of the first Arab national organisation, the "Arab-Ottoman Brotherhood", which was founded in Istanbul on September 2, 1908<sup>4</sup> (or, according to another source, on August 5).<sup>5</sup> The organisation's name, along with the content of its program, clearly reflected

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<sup>2</sup> Nikolay Hovhannisyan, *Arabakan erkrneri patmowt'yown* [History of Arab countries], vol. II, Yerevan, 2004, p. 467.

<sup>3</sup> Abdeljelil Temini, *Politique des Jeunes Turcs en Bilad es-Sham et révolte arabe en 1916: Nouvel essai d'interprétation*, "Revue d'histoire Maghrébine", N° 65-66, août 1992, p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> Youssef Choueiri, *Arab Nationalism. A History of Nation and State in the Arab World*, Oxford, 2000, p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Hajjar, *L'Europe et les destinées du Proche-Orient. Le nationalisme arabe syrien entre la Jeune Turquie et les puissances (1908-1914)*, Damas, 1996, p. 118.

its goals and the direction of its activities. The “Arab-Ottoman Brotherhood” openly demonstrated its sympathy and loyalty to the Young Turks, expressing a willingness to support them in upholding the provisions of the Constitution. Among its objectives, the organisation advanced pan-Ottoman goals, such as the unification of all the empire’s nations into “one Ottoman family” under the Sultan’s leadership. At the same time, it emphasised issues specific to Arabs and the Arab vilayets, advocating equitable treatment across all regions of the Ottoman Empire, implementing reforms in the Arab vilayets, promoting Arabic-language education, and restoring national customs.<sup>6</sup> As observed, even the “Arab-Ottoman Brotherhood” organisation, which did not advocate for modern national issues and focused primarily on social concerns, nonetheless emphasised the spread of education in Arabic, thereby seeking to elevate its role. This emphasis can be seen as an initial step toward protecting and preserving Arab rights and self-awareness. The organisation was convinced that the administrative issues concerning the Arab vilayets would be resolved in accordance with the Young Turks’ promises.

It is important to note that a significant portion of the Arab progressive society held a similar position. During the early period of Young Turks rule, this group placed unconditional trust in the Young Turks and believed that national issues could be resolved in collaboration with the “Ittihad ve Teraqqi” party.

However, subsequent events quickly revealed the true intentions and goals of the Ittihadists. On April 13, 1909, a counter-revolution attempted by forces loyal to Sultan Abd al-Hamid II had a profound impact on the activities of the “Ittihad ve Teraqqi” party.<sup>7</sup> The garnison of Constantinople played a decisive role in both the organisation and execution of the rebellion, alongside the “Society of Muhammad,” founded by Hafiz Dervish Vahdeti, a member of the Bektashi community.<sup>8</sup> Beginning in November 1908, Vahdeti started publishing the newspaper “Vulkan” (“Volcano”), through which he sharply criticised the Young Turks, accusing them of violating Sharia and promoting impiety. The Society of Muhammad demanded the removal of “Ittihad ve Teraqqi” from power, the abolition of all laws borrowed from Europeans, and the restoration of Sharia courts and laws.<sup>9</sup> After the failure of the anti-Young Turk

<sup>6</sup> Aykut Kansu, *The Revolution of 1908 in Turkey*, Leiden – New York – Koln, Brill, 1997, p. 183.

<sup>7</sup> Stanford J. Shaw, Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*. Vol. II, *Reform, Revolution and Republic. The Rise of Modern Turkey, 1808-1975*, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 280.

<sup>8</sup> David Commins, *Islamic Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 132.

<sup>9</sup> Archive of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of the

coup, the leaders of the “Ittihad ve Teraqqi” completely abandoned their earlier promises, causing widespread disappointment among the Ottoman Empire’s various nationalities, including the Arabs. This disillusionment further intensified and solidified the efforts of these groups, particularly the Arabs, to achieve their objectives.

Restoring their power, the Young Turks formed their own government this time, with the movement’s most prominent representatives serving in it. The Ittihadists also intended to amend the 1876 Constitution and enact laws to strengthen their rule. The Young Turks’ victory and their initial measures temporarily restored the confidence of the empire’s non-Turkish nationalities in them, directly contributing to the resumption of parliamentary work in 1909. The parliament passed some laws proposed by the Ittihadists, which were absolutely regressive in nature. Among them was, for example, the “Press Law”, which enabled the government to establish its complete control over all newspapers and periodicals published in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>10</sup> That law actually prohibited the printing and distribution of anti-government articles and materials.

Thus, despite the Constitution’s lack of explicit provisions on censorship, the Ittihadists effectively implemented a legal framework that enabled the suppression of undesirable publications. This measure significantly curtailed the ability to publish national newspapers.

Further restrictions on the rights of non-Turkish nationalities were imposed by the “Law of Association”, enacted by Parliament.<sup>11</sup> This law prohibited the activities of political organisations, groups, and associations whose programs addressed national issues or included oppositional elements.<sup>12</sup> In addition, a “vagrant law” was enacted, granting authorities broad discretionary powers to arrest individuals deemed undesirable.

Thus, upon assuming power for the second time, the Young Turk leaders

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Republic of Armenia, V. III, N. 291, *Kopija s donezenija konsula v Damaske kom. sov. kniazja Shakhovskogo na imja gospodina imperatorskogo posla v Konstantinopole ot 27-go marta 1909 g.* [Copy of the report from the Consul in Damascus, Collegiate Counselor Prince Shakhovskoy, to His Excellency the Imperial Ambassador in Constantinople, dated March 27, 1909.]

<sup>10</sup> Erol A. F. Baykal, *The Ottoman Press (1908-1923)*, Leiden – Boston, Brill, 2019, pp. 217-225.

<sup>11</sup> Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks. Ottomanism, Arabism and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London, University of California Press, 1997, p. 76.

<sup>12</sup> Vera Špil'kova, *Mladotureckaja revoljucija 1908-1909 gg.* [Young Turk Revolution 1908-1909], Moskva, Nauka, 1977, p. 246-247.

completely abandoned their previous promises of freedom and equality. They began to systematically curtail the political rights of the empire's non-Turkish peoples. The ideology of Ottomanism, which the Young Turks had initially espoused to ensure equality among all the empire's nationalities, increasingly shifted toward Turkism. This shift in national policy did not go unnoticed by Arab national figures.

It soon became apparent that the Young Turks planned to establish a pan-Turkish empire, characterised by the dominance of the Turkish language, a government composed entirely of Turks, and the exclusion of Arabs from the administrative apparatus.<sup>13</sup> In the context of the evolving political situation, a significant portion of the Arab progressive community reevaluated its stance towards the ruling party. Arab public figures and politicians, disillusioned by the Young Turks' failure to fulfil their promises, began to advocate new, more radical demands that directly addressed Arab national issues and the status of Arab regions, thereby initiating a struggle for autonomy.

Central to this struggle was the preservation and expansion of Arabic. This concern was prominently featured in the works of Arab intellectuals and reformers, reflecting its critical importance in the broader quest for Arab autonomy within the Ottoman Empire.<sup>14</sup> It is no coincidence that the issue of recognising Arabic within the empire, particularly its status in Arab-majority regions, was prominently featured in the programs of most Arab coalitions and organisations, as well as in the documents they adopted. Despite variations in phrasing, the core content of the Arabs' demands, including those related to the language, consistently reflected a unified stance. This is evidenced by the provisions concerning the status of Arabic found in the programs and announcements of Arab organisations and parties established after 1909.

In 1909, the first Arab secret organisation, "al-Kahtania" (named after the legendary Arab hero Kahtan), was established in Constantinople. Following the Young Turks' revolution of 1912, the organisation issued a statement addressing all Arabs, which was published in the newspaper al-Ahram.<sup>15</sup> This statement, made during the parliamentary election campaign, highlighted general demands for Arab autonomy and rights, with a specific call for the official recognition of

<sup>13</sup> Fridtjof Nansen, *Hayastanë ew Merjavor Arewelk'ë* [Armenia and the Middle East], Yerevan, 1993, p.141-142.

<sup>14</sup> Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism. A Critical Inquiry*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1981, pp. 47-62.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Hajjar, *L'Europe et les destinées du Proche-Orient...*, p. 477

Arabic as a language.<sup>16</sup>

In 1912, “The Ottoman Party of Administrative Decentralisation” was established by Arab nationalists who had emigrated from Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine and were based in Cairo.<sup>17</sup> While expressing loyalty to the idea of preserving the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire and seeking autonomy solely within its borders, the coalition also called for the concurrent use of Turkish and the local national language across all Ottoman vilayets. Additionally, the coalition advocated for primary education in the mother tongue within these regions (Articles 14 and 15).<sup>18</sup> It is evident that the party was particularly concerned about the status of Arabic in the Syrian provinces.

The issue of Arabic was a central element of the Beirut Reform Committee’s reform program, also known as the Beirut Reform Movement or Society, which was established in Beirut in January 1913. The society emphasised that the Arabs did not seek separatism but rather wished to remain part of the Ottoman Empire, aiming to support it in countering potential European ambitions. However, they argued that their loyalty required a system of decentralisation that approached extreme autonomy as compensation.

Among the principal demands of the society was the recognition of Arabic as the official language of the Arab provinces, relegating Turkish to a means of communication with Constantinople. Additionally, the program proposed that Arabic would be accepted in the Ottoman Parliament (Article 1) and that only Arabic-speaking officials would be appointed in Syria (Article 2).<sup>19</sup> The prominence of the issue of Arabic in the program’s first two points underscores its high priority.<sup>20</sup>

In the decision adopted by participants at the Arab Congress, which focused

<sup>16</sup> Tawfiq Berro, *al-‘rb wālṭrūk fī al-‘hd al-dstūrī al-‘tmānī 1908-1914* [Arabs and Turks in the Ottoman Constitutional Era, 1908-1914], Cairo, Institute of Arab Studies, 1960, p. 324.

<sup>17</sup> George Haddad, *Fifty Years of Modern Syria and Lebanon*, Beirut, Dar-al-Hayat, 1950, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> Zeine N. Zeine, *Arab-Turkish Relations and the Emergence of Arab Nationalism*, Beirut, Khayat's, 1958, p. 358-359.

<sup>19</sup> H. S. Sargsyan, A. H. Topalyan (Eds.), *Arabakan mi shark' p'astat'ght'er araba-t'urk'akan haraberut'yunneri veraberyal* [A series of Arab documents on Arab-Turkish relations], in “The Countries and Peoples of the Near and Middle East”, vol. VI, Yerevan, 1974, p. 220, Zeine N. Zeine, *Arab-Turkish Relations...*, p. 137-138.

<sup>20</sup> The Arab Congress was held in Paris from 18 to 23 June 1913. 24 delegates attended it, the majority of whom were from Syria, two from Iraq, and three representing the Arab diaspora in the United States. George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening. The Story of the Arab National Movement*, New York, 1946, p. 144-145.

on the need to decentralise the Arab vilayets within the Ottoman Empire, a specific provision addressed the issue of language. The Congress emphasised that the Ottoman Parliament should recognise Arabic as an official language in the empire's Arab regions (Article 5).<sup>21</sup> In an addendum attached to the draft, it was emphasised explicitly that if the resolutions passed by the Congress were not adequately implemented, the members of the Committee of Reformers of Syrian Arabs would abandon their duties in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>22</sup>

It is noteworthy that the resolutions adopted by the Congress were presented as the political program of the Ottoman Syrians and Arabs. The Congress also warned that no candidate would receive its support in the parliamentary elections unless they first committed to defending and implementing the aforementioned program.<sup>23</sup> However, as subsequent events demonstrated, the practical outcomes of the Congress were extremely modest due to various circumstances. The individuals responsible for implementing the Congress's decisions were unable to find effective means to do so. Additionally, the Turkish authorities persuaded them to compromise, resulting in the abandonment of many key principles articulated at the Congress, including those concerning language requirements. The contradictions among Arab nationalists, coupled with the stance of Arab supporters of the Young Turks party, who argued that it was "in the interest of the Arabs to retain Turkish as the official language in Arab territories"<sup>24</sup> further complicated the situation. These supporters attempted to convince others that any deviation from this position would only harm the Arabs themselves.

The issue of the status of Arabic was also underscored by Arab parties and organisations whose programs did not explicitly address language-related clauses. For instance, in 1913, Nouri Sayyid, one of the leaders of the secret society al-Ahd ("The Covenant"), established on October 28 with a distinctly anti-Ittihad stance,<sup>25</sup> articulated the society's objectives as being "limited to the transformation of the empire into a federal union." Sayyid further wrote, "None of us was considering secession from the Ottoman Empire. Our thoughts were focused on transferring local administrative authority to the Arabs, recognising

<sup>21</sup> *ūtā'iq al-mu'tmr al-'rbī al-'aūl 1913* [Documents of the First Arab Congress 1913], Beirut, 1980, p. 221.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Lev Kotlov, *Stanovlenie nacional'no-osvoboditel'nogo dviženija v arabskih stranah Azii 1908-1914 gg.* [Formation of the national liberation movement in the Arab countries of Asia, 1908-1914], Moskva, Nauka, p. 306.

<sup>25</sup> Tawfiq Berro, *al-'rb wālitrk fī al-'hd...*, p. 452.

Arabic as an official language, and applying the principle of Arab-Turkish union in the state's general policy".<sup>26</sup>

### LINGUISTIC ASSIMILATION POLICIES OF THE YOUNG TURKS: IMPACT ON ARAB IDENTITY

The Arabs' interest in preserving their language and their efforts in this direction were likely driven by several key factors. In particular, among Arabs, where the religious factor played a significant role in advancing the Young Turks' Ottomanist ideas, preserving their language became a crucial and prioritised means of maintaining their unity and identity. Moreover, in the prevailing circumstances, safeguarding their language provided them with an essential opportunity to assert their indisputable rights as a community, as a people, and as a nation.<sup>27</sup>

This approach was also a response to the policies of the Young Turks, who increasingly prioritised linguistic assimilation to counter decentralisation. The earlier period, when the Young Turks portrayed themselves as champions of equality among the empire's various nationalities and sought to win their trust, had come to an end. The open resistance of non-Turkish populations to the imposition of Ottomanist ideals, coupled with the real threat of the empire's fragmentation, compelled the Young Turks to abandon any pretence and adopt an overt policy of forced assimilation of the empire's non-Turkish nationalities. This policy can be seen as a continuation of the Turkification efforts initiated by previous Ottoman authorities.

The Young Turks' agenda was explicitly articulated at the October 1911 Congress of the "Ittihad ve Teraqqi" party in Thessaloniki. The Congress's resolutions unequivocally declared that the complete Turkification of all Ottoman subjects would be pursued, and that the empire's non-Turkish nationalities would be stripped of their right to organise. Decentralisation and autonomy were framed as acts of treason against the Turkish empire. The decision explicitly stated that while national minorities could preserve their religion, they would not be allowed to retain their language.<sup>28</sup> This stipulation underscores the significance the Young

<sup>26</sup> Hassan Saab, *The Arab Federalist of the Ottoman Empire*, Amsterdam, Djambatan, 1958, p. 79-80.

<sup>27</sup> Emil Tuma, *Nacional'no-osvoboditel'noe dviženie i problemy arabskogo edinstva* [The national liberation movement and the problems of Arab unity], Moskva, Nauka, 1977, p. 117.

<sup>28</sup> *The Salonika Congress. Young Turks and Their Programme*, "The Times", 1911, 3 October,

Turks attached to language as a tool of control. For them, linguistic oppression was considered a crucial prerequisite for establishing the supremacy of the Turkish language, which they firmly believed would be the most effective means of assimilating the empire's non-Turkish populations.

However, it is well documented that the Young Turks' policy not only failed to advance the Ottomanist concept but ultimately proved disastrous for their own party. As G. Antonius argues in his study on the Arab national awakening, the Young Turks' disregard for the empire's diverse national composition and their opposition to the decentralisation of its nationalities constituted a grave error. Antonius identifies the adoption of a centralisation policy as the most significant misstep of the Young Turks after they came to power and as the direct cause of their eventual downfall.<sup>29</sup>

In implementing their policy of Ottomanism towards the Arab population, the Young Turks increasingly focused on language assimilation as a primary tool. Initially, they showed some indifference toward the use of Arabic in the Arab vilayets. However, this stance evolved as their intentions became clearer. No longer feeling the need to disguise their true objectives, the Young Turks openly expressed their deep dissatisfaction with the continued use of Arabic. They perceived the Arabs' preference for their native language as both a sign of disrespect toward Turkish and a significant threat to their control. Consequently, they sought to exert extreme pressure on the Arab population, aiming to force them to abandon their language and adopt Turkish, the "master's language" as their own.<sup>30</sup> Jellal Nouri, a prominent representative of the Ittihadists, articulated the group's assimilationist ambitions by stating, "Arab countries, especially Yemen and Iraq, should be turned into Turkish colonies in order to spread the Turkish language... To guarantee our existence, it is necessary to make all Arab countries Turkish."<sup>31</sup> This statement underscores the Ittihadists' intent to transform Arab regions into instruments for the propagation of the Turkish language and culture, reflecting their broader agenda of Turkification across the Ottoman Empire.

The Young Turks' commitment to assimilating the non-Turkish population was prominently reflected in the Vilayets' Law (1913). Despite initial assurances

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London, p. 3, from <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/archive/article/1911-10-03/3/10.htm> (Accessed on 06.10.2024).

<sup>29</sup> George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening...*, p. 107.

<sup>30</sup> Zalman Levin, *Razvitiye osnovnykh techenij obšestvenno-političeskoy mysli v Sirii i Egipte* [National liberation movement and problems of Arab unity], Moskva, Nauka, 1972, p. 133.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

that public schools in sanjak centres would offer instruction in the local language, such as Arabic, within five years, these assurances were subject to several stipulations. The law mandated the continued compulsory teaching of Turkish in schools and specified that the primary subjects of history and geography be taught exclusively in Turkish. Furthermore, in secondary schools located in the centres of the vilayets, instruction was permitted only in Turkish. This legislation underscored the regime's determination to enforce linguistic assimilation and limit the use of local languages in educational settings.<sup>32</sup> The Law on Vilayets also allowed for the use of Arabic in state institutions; however, it notably circumvented the fundamental issue of recognising Arabic as a state language in the Arab vilayets. This omission reflected the Young Turks' broader strategy of promoting Turkish as the dominant language, while formally permitting some use of Arabic without granting it official status or ensuring its widespread application in administrative and educational contexts.<sup>33</sup>

The Young Turks' policy toward elementary education in the vilayets was explicitly designed to facilitate assimilation. In 1913, the establishment of the "unified elementary school" system under state control effectively curtailed the autonomy of first-level schools in the vilayets.<sup>34</sup> This restructuring, mandated by law, significantly reduced the schools' autonomy. Notably, the reforms required that, despite the initial use of native languages in these schools, the curriculum increasingly orient students toward the Turkish language from the outset.

The Young Turks' personnel policies further reinforced the imposition of Turkish. Despite persistent demands from Arab officials for Arabs to occupy significant positions in the Arab vilayets, appointments were deliberately made to individuals of non-local origin, often who were not fluent in Arabic. Consequently, even in regions where the majority of the population did not speak Turkish, the administration operated exclusively in Turkish, with interpreters used only intermittently. Additionally, it was officially decreed that applications, claims, and other official documents would no longer be accepted in languages other than Turkish.<sup>35</sup> This policy not only marginalised Arabic but also further entrenched Turkish dominance in administrative affairs.

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<sup>32</sup> Feroz Ahmad, *The Young Turks. The Committee of Union and Progress in Turkish Politics, 1908-1914*, Oxford, 1969, p. 134.

<sup>33</sup> Lev Kotlov, *Stanovlenie nacional'no-osvoboditel'nogo dviženija...*, pp. 289-290.

<sup>34</sup> Anatoli Želtjakov, Juri Petrosjan, *Istorija prosvešenija v Turcii: konec XVIII-načalo XX veka* [The history of education in Turkey: late 18th – early 20th century], Moskva, Nauka, 1965, p. 108-109.

<sup>35</sup> Lev Kotlov, *Stanovlenie nacional'no-osvoboditel'nogo dviženija...*, p. 40.

However, it is essential to note that the Young Turks were compelled to make concessions in their policy towards non-Turkish populations, particularly the Arabs. In late 1913, the Ministry of Enlightenment issued an order to introduce Arabic as the language of instruction in primary schools in the Arab provinces. This decision, though limited in scope, represented a partial acknowledgement of the demands for linguistic inclusion and reflected the need to balance their assimilationist policies with practical administrative considerations.<sup>36</sup> The texts of official documents and government announcements were purged of overtly assimilationist wording. Almost at the same time, in November 1913, Midhat Şükre, the general secretary of the Central Committee of the Young Turks Party, expressed alarm that the patience and trust of the Arabs should not be abused, and action must be taken without delay to avoid trouble.<sup>37</sup>

This seemingly unexpected position was a direct consequence of the Young Turks' evolving policies. At a certain point, a new, distorted tactic of concession emerged.<sup>38</sup> Under the guise of "preserving the unity of the Ottoman nation," this approach sought to obscure the Young Turks' true intent in their national policies. The apparent concessions were thus part of a broader strategy to mask their underlying objectives and manage the increasingly critical situation without fundamentally altering their assimilationist agenda.<sup>39</sup>

The outwardly "soft" policies of the Young Turks, particularly evident in the Arab provinces, were not accidental. One significant reason was that Arabs constituted a substantial share of the empire's population, with estimates indicating that they accounted for 50% on the eve of World War I<sup>40</sup>. A severe confrontation with such a large demographic could have dire consequences. Additionally, Arabic, being the language of Islam and the Koran, held significant cultural and religious importance, which the Young Turks could not ignore.

Thus, it is evident that the concessions made by the Young Turks were primarily tactical and aimed at managing immediate unrest rather than altering the

<sup>36</sup> Anatoli Želtjakov, Juri Petrosjan, *Istorija prosvešenija v Turcii...*, p. 108-109.

<sup>37</sup> Hoja Gabidullin, *Mladotureckaja revoljucija* [Young Turk Revolution], Moskva, 1936, p. 145.

<sup>38</sup> Ruben Safrastyan, *Osmanizmi doktrinan yeritt'urk'eri kusakts'akan p'astat'ght'erum (1908-1916 t't.)* [The Doctrine of Ottomanism in the Party Documents of the Young Turks (1908-1916)], in "The Countries and Peoples of the Near and Middle East", vol. XV, Yerevan, 1989, p. 244.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Mikhail Lazarev, *Krušenije tureckogo gospodstva na Arabskom Vostoke* [The collapse of Turkish rule in the Arab East], Moskva, Vostochnaya literatura, 1960, p. 13.

fundamental nature of their policies. Despite these superficial adjustments, the core objective of their policy remained unchanged: to enforce Ottoman ideology through the assimilation of the Arab population, employing various means, including linguistic pressure.

The linguistic assimilation policies pursued by the Young Turks had profound implications for the Arab population within the Ottoman Empire. Driven by a desire for centralised control and the promotion of Turkish dominance, these policies sought to suppress the Arabic language and culture, threatening the very identity of Arab communities. While initially met with resistance, the Young Turks eventually made concessions, albeit with tactical motives, recognising the potential danger of alienating the majority Arab population. However, these concessions did little to alter the fundamental nature of their assimilationist agenda. Through a combination of coercion and subtle manipulation, the Young Turks sought to assert their vision of a homogenised Ottoman nation at the expense of Arab linguistic and cultural heritage. In the face of such pressures, the preservation of the Arabic language and identity emerged as a crucial battleground for Arab resistance and resilience against Ottoman assimilationist policies.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Arab response to the 1908 Young Turk revolution and the subsequent actions of the “Ittihad ve Teraqqi” reflects a complex and evolving relationship between Arab national aspirations and the Ottoman Empire’s policies. Initially, the Arabs, alongside other non-Turkish populations, were hopeful that the restoration of the Constitution and the promises of equality would lead to greater autonomy and recognition of their cultural and political rights within the Ottoman framework. This optimism fostered the creation of several Arab organisations, such as the Arab-Ottoman Brotherhood, which expressed loyalty to the Young Turks while advancing specific Arab concerns, particularly the promotion of the Arabic language and educational reforms.

However, as the Young Turks consolidated power, their policies shifted towards a more centralist and Turkification agenda, alienating Arab leaders who had initially supported them. The introduction of regressive laws such as the “Press Law” and the “Law of Association” curtailed the freedom of expression and political activity of non-Turkish nationalities, signalling a departure from the ideals of Ottomanism. The growing focus on Turkish dominance within the empire led to increasing disenchantment among Arab intellectuals and reformers, who began to assert more radical demands for Arab autonomy and the recognition of

Arabic as a symbol of their national identity.

The importance of Arabic as a cornerstone of Arab nationalism became a recurring theme in the programs and demands of various Arab organisations and movements, including the secret society al-Kahtania, the Ottoman Party of Administrative Decentralisation, and the Beirut Reform Committee. The Arab Congress of 1913 further underscored the centrality of the language issue, linking it to broader demands for decentralisation and administrative reforms in the Arab vilayets. Despite these efforts, internal divisions among Arab nationalists and the influence of pro-Turkish Arab factions weakened the movement's ability to challenge the Young Turk regime effectively.

Ultimately, the Young Turks' failure to uphold their promises of equality, coupled with their shift towards Turkism, set the stage for a more pronounced Arab nationalist movement that would later seek greater independence from the Ottoman Empire. The early 20th century thus marks a critical period in the development of Arab political consciousness and the struggle for national rights within the context of a declining and increasingly centralised Ottoman state.

The analysis of the Young Turks' linguistic policies towards the Arab population reveals a complex interplay between national identity, linguistic assimilation, and political control within the Ottoman Empire. Central to the Young Turks' strategy was the Turkification of the empire's diverse populations, with language serving as a primary tool for achieving this objective. The Congress of the "Ittihad ve Teraqqi" party in 1911 marked a pivotal moment, as it laid bare the Young Turks' intention to eliminate the rights of non-Turkish communities to organise and communicate in their native languages, seeing this as a threat to the empire's unity and the supremacy of the Turkish state.

The emphasis on the forced adoption of the Turkish language, particularly in Arab regions, was part of a broader policy aimed at consolidating centralisation and undermining growing calls for decentralisation and autonomy among non-Turkish communities. Despite earlier efforts by the Young Turks to portray themselves as champions of equality, their policies towards the Arab vilayets increasingly focused on linguistic and cultural assimilation, neglecting the rights and identities of the Arab population. The imposition of Turkish in education, administration, and public life further marginalised Arabic, despite its deep-rooted cultural and religious significance in the region.

However, the Young Turks' rigid assimilationist policies not only alienated the Arab population but also contributed to the eventual collapse of their own movement. As Antonius points out, the Young Turks' failure to recognise the importance of the empire's multicultural fabric, combined with their efforts at

centralisation, proved to be a significant strategic error. The Arab population's resistance, along with the Young Turks' growing reliance on coercive measures, led to increasing instability within the empire.

Moreover, the concessions made by the Young Turks in 1913, such as the limited introduction of Arabic in primary schools, were largely tactical. Practical concerns, including the Arabs' significant demographic weight and the cultural importance of Arabic as the language of Islam, drove these adjustments. Nevertheless, these concessions did not signal a genuine shift in policy; they were a temporary measure to placate unrest while maintaining the broader goal of assimilation.

Thus, the Young Turks' linguistic policies towards the Arab population were driven by a combination of Ottomanist ideals and the desire to assert Turkish dominance. Their failure to balance these policies with the realities of the empire's diverse population led to widespread discontent and contributed to their eventual downfall. The Arab population's resistance to linguistic assimilation highlights the crucial role of language in preserving national identity and underscores the limitations of using language as a tool of political control.

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