Distant Echoes: The Reflection of the War in the Middle East

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The social elites and the enlightenment groups in the Middle East perceived Russia and Japan as representatives of two different, opposing stereotypes, between whom the conflict was parallel to the battle between the Good and the Bad, the Right and the Corrupt, Progress and Reactionism. These groups perceived Russia as the representative of the European imperialist powers and as the enemy of Islam because of its aspiration to spread to the south and to get as close “as possible to Constantinople and India and to provoke continued wars, not only in Turkey but in Persia too,” as was written in a document published in 1755, and accepted in Russia as the political testament of Peter the Great.¹

The reputation of Russia in the Middle East was damaged because of its actions along these lines, including interference in the internal affairs of Iran in the course of almost 250 years, and involvement in the fighting in Navarino alongside Britain and France against the Ottoman forces at the time of the Greek independence war from the Ottoman Empire and in destroying their fleets; Japan, on the other hand was perceived in the Middle East as the antithesis of Russia. It was a rising Asian force; therefore, it represented an Eastern nationality facing European imperialism, and was perceived as a check to colonial rule and spread of European powers, similar to the national movements in the Middle East. The fact of Japan being the only Eastern nation with a constitution and its stand against Russia greatly encouraged the national and constitutional movements which began to flourish at that time in the Middle East, and its victory appeared to them as vindication of the righteousness of their cause.

In Iran, the war had the effect of encouraging the opposition movement. Iran underwent prolonged Russian presence and interference from
the days of the Muscovite principality in 1668; but the fact that an Asian force had succeeded in defeating a European force gave the Iranians the hope that this presence would not necessarily be permanent. The Iranians noticed the so-called, democratic aspects of the war: the winner was the only Asiatic force with a democratic constitution, whereas the loser was the only Western power without one. Therefore some saw the constitution as the secret of Western power; following the war, articles and studies began to appear in Iran explaining different constitutions and analyzing values.

Another significant event was the 1905 Russian revolution, which demonstrated the power of a mass uprising against a tyrannical monarchy, forcing the monarchy to embrace a constitution.2

In Iran, the concepts of Constitution, Parliament, and Democracy were not completely clear, as the Iranian intellectual Said Muhammad Taba’-Tabi’ admitted: “We had not experienced constitutional rule, but we were told, by those who had visited countries with this kind of rule, that it had brought them security and prosperity, and this is the reason for our striving for the establishment of a constitutional system.” But very soon the Iranians learned the methods of the Russian revolutionaries and in 1906 the markets went on strike. As a consequence, the Shah Musafir Al-Din Amr agreed on August 5, 1906, to establish a constitution and to assemble a parliament, which was democratic in a very limited way, declaring: “All the European kings rule with the assistance of the parliament, and they are much stronger than the Shah of Iran.”3

This declaration and others alike strengthened the apprehension that in Iran democracy and a constitutional system were perceived not as a goal in itself, but as a means to strengthen the country and the economy which had suffered from inflation as an indirect result of the war. The secular and the liberal circles believed that the West could be defeated only if some of its ways were imitated, but the revolutionaries called for the establishment of armies along the lines of those of the West, the implementation of constitutional reforms, the establishment of a well-organized government, and modern economical development.4

Japan had even more ongoing influence in the Ottoman Empire, due to the institutionalization of the political and economical relations between Japan and the Ottoman Empire in the 1860s.5 The Ottoman Empire perceived Japan as a country embraced by the Western countries, but remaining in its essence an “Asian country,” with all that that implies. In other words, Japan was a model for a country that had succeeded in adopting Western sciences, technology, and education without losing its national and religious identity, and thus succeeded in reaching the level of a European country in every field of life. After the Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, the general climate of opinion in Istanbul inclined towards the establishment of a constitution after the Japanese model as a way to becoming equal to the Western powers, to halting the continued foreign interference in the internal politics and