

# **Articles In English**

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**Nationalism and Patriotism  
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Writings**

By

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### **Nationalism and patriotism in Rifaa - Al Tahtawi's early writings**

The end of the 18th century in Egypt has witnessed the approach of the European civilization which affected the Egyptian society at that time. The cultural impact of the French expedition on Egypt ranged between extreme and shallow. It had a great impact on the Egyptian elite (e.g. Aljabarti) who described precisely the deeds of the French scientists.

He, nevertheless, could not absorb the modern European civilization; he saw what he described as puzzling (If some Muslims visited them, they provide him with printed books furnished with pictures, the stories of the nations, the stories of the prophets, all of which cause confusion). He missed, due to the age he lived in, the comprehensive view of the incidents.

Sheikh Hasan al-Attar and (Mualem Jacob) were highly impressed by the modern European civilization, and accordingly they sided with the French.

Sheikh al-Attar was a distinguished man of knowledge in his age, who loved modern sciences. He contacted the French scientists and made use of their knowledge in return for teaching them Arabic. Consequently and due to the interaction with this civilized newcomer, he gained a good knowledge of the modern European civilization which enabled him to bring up a generation which took over the task of remodeling (e.g. Tahtawi).

In 1817 young Rifaa Al-Tahtawi joined (Al-Azhar) which was passing a period of set back. He did not like the reading methods there, and he joined Al-Attar's lessons. Through his close contacts

with Al-Attar, he received lessons in history, geography, literature and maths.

In 1822, he was recommended by his tutor, al-Attar to serve as (Imam) in an army battalion, then in 1826, he was recommend to serve in the same capacity with the Egyptian educational mission in Paris.

I am focusing on the years which preceded his journey to Paris, when he joined his professor Al-Attar. This was the first indirect contact with the west, taking into consideration al Attar's affection towards the European civilization. Accordingly, I put his experience in France as second to al-Attar. Nevertheless, the French experience which lasted five years (1826 - 1831) was the most important period in his life.

In France (al-Tahtawi) studied French language, translation, ancient history, Greek philosophy, geography, maths and logic. He read the works of the 18th century thinkers like Voltaire, Kondiac, Rousso, and Montsqieu.

Since he was one of the first Arabs who visited Europe in the 19th century, he was entrusted with introducing the European society to the Arab world. In his masterpiece (Takhlees Al-Ibreez) Al-Tahtawi introduced the new elements of the European society, women status, their role in the society, the different social classes, the religious conditions, and the traditions and customs prevailing in the French modern society.

Perhaps the description of Watan = home in (Manahig Al-Albab) can give the answer to our question (How did Tahtawi understand patriotism and nationalism in his time). Tahtawi used the term (Na-

tionalism) frequently in his above mentioned work. He introduces the work by saying that he has written the book as a service to his country (Watan). He did not dedicate the work to Muhammad Ali but rather to Egypt (in remembrance of this nation and what men of intelligence have said about her advanced civilization). He then invokes the prophetic tradition to the effect that love of one's country is the essence of faith (Hubb Al-Watan min Al-iman). At one point he refers to Egypt as (Umm Al-Dunya), as a reference to the distinction of Egypt from Syria or Iraq.

It is not a sort of exaggeration to claim that Tahtawi was an early Nationalist. Nationalism may have undergone certain ideological refinements in later times, but this does not alter the basic impulse behind such feelings. (Nationalism) was, in (Tahtawi's) perspective an impetus to historical writing, as well as a basic determination of the approach he would take to the subject.

In his work (Muqaddima Wataniya Misriya = An Egyptian National Preface), al-Tahtawi discussed the term (Watan-home) at length. He stated that home is the nest of the man where he grew up. But he included Tahta, his birth place in his writing about home, and considered it as his private home, while Egypt was his public one.

Nevertheless, Tahtawi has mixed - in his description of home - loving the home and making effort to modernize it (The will for modernity does not come unless home is loved by the people of intelligence). In my opinion, Tahtawi has defined the idea rather loosely, perhaps to include those who were working for a private Egypt which fulfils their personal interests (e.g. Muhammad Ali).

Anyway, I cannot state that Tahtawi was completely successful in describing (Nationality & Patriotism) in the true sense of the words under discussion. In broad terms, a nation is a group of people bound together by language, culture, or some other common heritage, and usually recognized as a political entity. Often the term nation is used synonymously with country or state, as in united nations; however, nation implies more than the existence of boundaries or political institutions. Modern European nation-States came into being with the decline of the feudal era, as people began to give loyalty to kings rather than local lords and at the same time to cease identifying themselves in terms of the universalism of the church and Holy Roman Empire. The American and French revolutions identified nationhood with the people themselves rather than the sovereign. In the 19th century nationalism became a strong political force as people everywhere sought independence and self-determination.

In the time of Tahtawi, the only link existing in the Arab world - including Egypt, was (Millet = Faith) which meant "the link of religion." (National link) as it is understood in the time being did not exist. The appearance of such feeling meant at that time the appearance of a new trend which can be understood as (Separation) from the spirit of unity which prevailed in the Islamic society as a whole.

I believe that Tahtawi was aware of the risk of being accused of separating the nation, if he interpreted (nationalism) as we understand. This explains why his description of the terms (Nationalism & Patriotism) is vague. The 19th century was the century of (enlightenment), but Egypt at the same time was under a ruler, though a reformer and ambitious, he was a despot who did not allow opposition to his rule.

Tahtawi was an employee in the Egyptian administration. The Egyptian cultural movement during the first half of the nineteenth century was determined largely by the personal wishes of its ruler, whose interest could not long be sustained in an enterprise to which he could see non-military applications. His outlook on life was unlikely to further significantly the development of historical studies.

In this sense, it was difficult for a 19th century author like Tahtawi to write about the (absolute rule) of Muhammad Ali. No body can argue the fact that Muhammad Ali suppressed any sort of opposition, and so did his successors. I recall Abbas (1848 - 1854) and his exile of Tahtawi to the Sudan. It goes without saying that Tahtawi was aware of the ruler's anger - especially Muhammad Ali - while writing, that is why he filled his works with writings which made him biased to the ruler. He avoided touching any topic which angered the ruler, and preferred to confine his efforts for the most part to technical fields such as mathematics, natural and applied science, and law.

Now, it is logical to ask about the sources of knowledge which influenced al-Tahtawi's thought, especially his national trend which he could not interpret clearly as mentioned before. One can say that his feeling of homesickness during his mission made him feel much love to his country, adding to the west consideration of himself and his colleagues as commissioned to renew their country.

But the most influential factor in this respect was his contact with the European civilization in a time when Europe was occupied with a national uprising. Perhaps this was the reason for his desire to fetch a unique status for his country, a status which elevates it to a great country.

Unfortunately, Tahtawi's efforts were confined in their impact to the country, only to the government. His efforts in translation and his writings were dedicated to the ruler's wishes. That is why we find most of his writings include copious flattery of Mohammad Ali's achievement in industry, war, agriculture and education, while he avoided talking about the absolute rule the man was applying in the country.

It took the Egyptians many years after Tahtawi to absorb his thoughts which they could not make use of during his life time.

One of the major defects of Tahtawi was the impact of his (Azharite) background on the new and modern ideas he found in Europe. In fact, he tried to find a compromise between Egypt as a home (watan) and the Islamic nation, when he stated that Egypt is a part of this nation, but he added that Egypt has its unique features since ancient times. Thus, he failed to include the secular concept of the nation. This was due, I believe - to his Azharite culture, and the circumstances of the historical period.

In his writings he contradicted more than once his concept about (Nationalism) and (Colonization). In his collection of poetry titled (Wataniyat = home land), he kept praising the ruling family of Mohammad Ali, showing pride of ancient Egypt, and the new Egyptian army. He recommended Egypt's expansionist policies especially in the Sudan, considering it a sign of prestige among the European civilized nations. He showed himself as a colonialist when he justified the Egyptian expansion in the Sudan by stating that the Sudan's people live on an area which is enough to sustain 10 million people, while

the population there is 1 million only. His adoption of this saying has made of him a colonialist.

Another contradiction in Tahtawi's thoughts about nationality, was his inability to be aware of the European expansion in the Arab world. He considered Europe the sole source of knowledge and civilized innovations, not a source of aggression, and showed tolerance towards the Europeans who poured into Egypt, and considered them as partners of the Egyptians in rights and duties. He did not approach the foreign investments which controlled the Egyptian economy in the second half of the 19th century; he also ignored the foreign capitulations and many other aspects of foreign penetration in Egypt, which led ultimately to the British occupation.

It seems to me that Tahtawi's close ties with the power in the reigns of Muhammad Ali and Ismail and his insistence to justify their expansionist policies, have dragged him to this trap to justify the colonial expansion as a whole.

Tahtawi-in my opinion was not able to write about nationalism and patriotism freely, since he was - as others were - enjoying the ruler's bestowals.

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