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Abdul Hamid II and Orabi: Islamic Internationalism and Nationalism

Some people may believe that this is a controversial title; as how do we compare Orabi to Abdul Hamid II, while the first was just a military commander in an army of a state, or Khadiouiya, of Egypt that belong to the Ottoman State, whose sultan was Abdul Hamid II?!!

In fact; however, this comparison or confrontation here is required and necessary. As it is a comparison between the concept of nationalism, which is represented here by Orabi, who is considered one of the most important symbols of Egyptian patriotism; and the concept of Islamic internationalism, which is represented here by Abdul Hamid II and his project that he called the "Islamic League" that means the unity of the Islamic world. Even countries that are not under the Ottoman power.

Initially, Orabi was a soldier in the Egyptian Army, which was established by Muhammad Ali according to modern European systems. When he applied the rule of forced conscription to the Egyptians. Afterwards, Orabi was promoted to the ranks of officers during the eras of Saeed and Ismail. Here it is necessary to mention a historical story that was narrated about Muhammad Ali. When the commander of the army, Ibrahim Pasha that is at the same time the son of Muhammad Ali, asked his father to allow the Egyptian soldiers to be promoted to the ranks of officers. Yet, Muhammad Ali refused that and said to his son, Ibrahim Pasha: "The first Egyptian that to be promoted to the ranks of officers would attempt to coup against us or our family thereafter". In fact, Muhammad Ali was referring to the role of the soldiering in raising the national spirit.

Indeed, as soon as the Egyptians were allowed to be promoted to the ranks of officers, the national awareness began to raise among them. Where the sense of discrepancy among them and the senior officers of the Turks and Circassians spread. Moreover, the blood that was shed from the Egyptian soldiers during the various battles helped to raise that sense of themselves; and that this land on which they live is their land and not the Turks. So the slogan of the Orabi revolution would appear as "Egypt is for the Egyptians". When the military wing, represented by Orabi and his companions of the Egyptian officers, began to union with the Egyptian civil wing. This led to the facts of the Orabi's revolution, which is known to all. The revolution issued the first constitution of Egypt to regulate the nature of political relations within the country. Even there were voices that called for dismissing Khedive Tewfik himself. It became as if Egypt was on its way towards the dawn of the Egyptian nationalism.

Therefore, the European countries considered this as a threat to their interests in Egypt, particularly the Suez Canal. So the European navies began to move towards Alexandria. Consequently, Orabi asked Sultan Abdul Hamid II to send reinforcements of the Ottoman army to support the Egyptian army in its standing in the face of the English navy. But Abdul Hamid II refused that, as he saw that Orabi's revolution as a nationalist revolution contradicts the concept of the Islamic League that was being promoted by him. Further, that Orabi's victory would raise the enthusiasm of other nationalities within the Ottoman states. On the other hand, Abdul Hamid did not want to disturb Britain.

In addition, Britain asked Abdul Hamid, in his capacity as the Ottoman Sultan and Caliph of the Muslims, to declare that Orabi was disobedient, so that the legitimacy would be withdrawn from him. So, Abdul Hamid did not hesitate to do so in the pretext that Orabi did not adhere to his advice to calm down and surrender his weapons.

Based on that, Orabi was defeated and the British entered Egypt in 1882 AD. Where the occupation continued until the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty was concluded in 1954 AD.

In essence, the story of Orabi and Abdul Hamid II is the story of the conflict between nationalism and the Islamic International during the second half of the 19th century.