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Intellectual Discourse
Vol. 28, No. 1, 2020

Contents

Editorial

Ishtiaq Hossain 1

Pathways of Becoming Political Party Activists:
The Experiences From Malay-Muslim Grassroots Party Activists
*Wan Rohila A. Ganti Bt. Wan Abdul Ghapar &
Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid* 5

Mediation and Interreligious Discourse: Prospects and
Challenges in Resolving Interreligious Skirmishes in Malaysia
Haslina Ibrahim & Ainul Jaria bt. Maidin 35

Examining the Role of ‘Ulama in the
Islamization Process of the Malay World
Mohd Noh Abdul Jalil & Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor 61

Role of Judaism, Christianity and Islam
in Promoting Human Values in the Strife-Torn World
Israr Ahmad Khan 77

Mathematics Anxiety and Performance among College Students:
Effectiveness of Systematic Desensitization Treatment
Najihah Akeb-urai, Nor Ba’ Yah Abdul Kadir & Rohany Nasir 99

Faith and Practice: Islamic Perspectives on Robert Browning
Rehnuma Bint Anis & Md. Mahmudul Hasan 129

Syariah Criminal Law Enforcement in
Hisbah Framework: Practice In Malaysia
*Alias Azhar, Muhammad Hafiz Badarulzaman,
Fidlizan Muhammad & Siti Zamarina Mat Zaib* 149

Imperialism, Colonialism and their Contribution to the Formation of Malay and Chinese Ethnicity: An Historical Analysis <i>Khauthar Ismail</i>	171
Removal of Despotic Political Regime: The Abū Dharr's Legacy and Its Legitimacy <i>Mohd. Shah Jani & Raudlotul Firdaus binti Fatah Yasin</i>	195
Nigeria's Foreign Policy Goals in Peacekeeping Operations in Africa <i>Sani Safiyanu, Roy Anthony Rogers, Wan Sharina Ramlah Wan Ahmad & Amin Jaffri</i>	215
Ecological Modernization in Malaysia: A Review of Pakatan Harapan's Manifesto During the 14th General Election Within the Context of Ecological Modernization Framework <i>Noor Asyhikin Binti Abd Razak & Nor Azlin Binti Tajuddin</i>	241
Education for the Production and Re-Production of Docile Civic Bodies: The Problems of Civic Education in Thailand <i>Siwach Sripokangkul</i>	261
Revisiting Southeast Asian Civil Islam: Moderate Muslims and Indonesia's Democracy Paradox <i>M. Khusna Amal</i>	295
Conceptualizing Islamic Ethics for Contemporary Muslim Societies <i>Fethi B. Jomaa Ahmed</i>	319
<i>Book Reviews</i> States of Separation. Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East. By Laura Robson. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2017, pp. 247. ISBN 9785229215427 Reviewer: <i>Kaoutar Guediri</i>	345

Our Constitution. By Shad Saleem Faruqi. Subang Jaya,
Malaysia: Sweet & Maxwell, 2019, pp. 425.
ISBN 9789672187059 (paperback).
Reviewer: *Ramizah Wan Muhammad*

349

Metodologi Penyelidikan Dalam Pendidikan:
Amalan dan Analisis Kajian. By Ghazali Darusalam &
Sufean Hussin. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 2019,
pp. 630. ISBN: 978-967-488-009-5.
Reviewer: *Khairil Husaini Bin Jamil*

353

Book Review

States of Separation. Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East. By Laura Robson. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2017, pp. 247. ISBN 9785229215427

Reviewer: Kaoutar Guediri, Assistant Professor, Department of History and Civilization, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. E-mail: kawtharguediri@iium.edu.my

In the aftermath of World War I, a series of so-called Peace conferences (Versailles, San Remo led by the Allied powers and the newly established League of Nations) designed new geographical and demographic frontiers which cut through the former Ottoman Empire. Thus, the Balkans were dismantled into a series of states as were the Arab territories of the former Ottoman Empire. Populations were separated and displaced by war as well as by the colonial powers so as to create homogeneous nation-states along ethno-religious lines; colonial powers had seen this as the “best mode of political sovereignty”. The last few decades have seen a proliferation of works on the dynamics of population transfer and partition, and less about separation or the impact of Zionist settler colonialism on the region. However, while these studies place emphasis on colonial origins of these borders and their artificiality, they still use them as the framework with focus’ on particular country-cases.

In *States of Separation*, Laura Robson offers her understanding on how the region moved from a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multicultural space to a series of nation-states. The author does this through a comprehensive study which examines how the colonial powers and the League of Nations used war refugees, population transfer and partition on a trans-regional level to deepen their presence and control over the region and eventually completely transform it. She analyses the origins, process and consequences of the “demographic engineering” that took place. In the book, Robson focuses her analysis on three

cases: the Assyrians, the Armenians and the Zionists. The author herself notes that the latter – the Zionists - were not a local community but a settler one. This is one of the strengths of her work which is reflected in the organisation of her book into thematical chapters – Origins, The Refugee Regime, The Transfer Solution, The Partition Solution, Diasporas and Homelands – rather than on each community separately or following a chronological scheme.

Although the concept of ethnic separation had been around since the 19th Century, physical separation as a *solution* to the difficulties in creating homogeneous nation-states rose at the international level after WWI. Indeed, “race science” gained prominence in Europe at a time of Imperial expansion when ethnicity and citizenship were to be fixated in a way that intermingled both.

The colonial powers used this “science”, as well as the “alienation” of the Jews in Europe (the internal Other), to develop a “racialization of religious difference” and of political rights. These premises combined with what Robson identifies as the three precedents - ethno-religious violence in the Ottoman-Balkans which led to the rise of ethnic separatism (encouraged by the colonial powers); France and Britain’s communalisation policies, and the Zionist movement that played a determining role in emphasizing ethnic nationhood, would participate in shaping the colonial policies and the future of the region (Introduction).

Robson highlights these precedents and the role played by the imperial powers and the League of Nations by introducing the concept of minority/majority “to describe ethnonational communities within states” (p.25). This concept provided a tool that would serve as a basis for defining national aspirations through the prism of religion and ethnicity (Chapter One). This concept of minority combined with “colonial ethnography” was then applied to the colonies as a continuity of British and French “approaches to controlling territory and peoples within and outside their empires to the postwar nation-state system” (p.28). However, not every non-majority community was considered and granted protection and political rights as a minority. In the Middle East, this applied to non-Muslim populations that had ties with European powers (this is particularly clear in the colonial correspondences), such as clearly the case of the Armenians and the Assyrians. The territorial and demographic manipulations of the Pre and Post war periods, as well

as the establishment of mandates under the League of Nations, would consecrate the ethnoreligious bases of nationality and citizenship as well as the legitimisation of ethnonationalism.

During the war, the Ottoman Empire suffered massive losses in population not only through warfare and genocide, but mass displacement as well. In addition, during the war, Armenians and Assyrians, two “Christian communities” or minorities seen as being in need of external protection, had benefited from aid provided by French, British and American relief organisations that saw these two communities as intrinsically “unassimilable” within a Muslim Ottoman Empire or any Muslim nation (Chapter One). By the end of WWI, Assyrians and Armenians were placed in refugee camps in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon by the British and other Allied powers. Far from being a humanitarian solution, the refugee camps were designed to provide and maintain an Allied presence in the region, exhibit a “moral high ground”, and to dispose of dependent populations deployable to will to serve the colonial state against recalcitrant colonised populations. Indeed, both “minorities”, whose existence in the refugee camps depended on the colonial powers, were moved around and used to counter the populations’ resistance to colonialism. Thus, while encouraging Armenian ethnic nationalism, France was using them to fight anti-imperialist Arab nationalism as well as the rise of communism among Armenians (Chapter Two).

All these refugees and the resettlement projects allowed France, Britain and the League to continue exercising colonial control over a region home to strong opposition of the colonial powers. This strong opposition saw the rise of Arab nationalism despite the reluctance of the minorities in question. Using these minorities – which were often reluctant towards the aims of the colonial powers – in their fight against local anti-colonial resistance, notably by mobilising them for their military efforts, France and Britain made them easy targets for violent retaliation. The inevitable retaliation by the anti-colonial resistance on these minorities gave colonial powers the opportunity to defend and promote more radical visions of resettlement: transfer (Chapter Three). Robson reminds us that these transfer schemes were highly influenced by the territorialist model developed by the Zionist movement. Before the Balfour Declaration confirmed Britain’s support for a Jewish national home in Palestine, the Zionist movement, in a

plan to nationalise Jewish identity, pursued a number of other territorial options such as Argentina and Uganda. Britain regarded Zionism as part of its strategy considering “settler colonialism as a form of territorial control, the use of “protectorates” over ethnoreligious minorities to legitimize imperial intervention, and a discourse of racial superiority” (p.71) (Chapter Three). However, Zionism was not only supported by Britain, it was in fact also supported by the League itself and its organ, the Permanent Mandates Commission. Zionism was seen as offering both a solution to the “Jewish problem” in Europe and a way to have a sympathetic and grateful European outpost in the Middle East. The principle and practice of transfer was also pursued between Bulgaria and Greece, as well as Turkey and Greece – in the form of population exchanges – with the idea of creating ethnically homogeneous nation-states in view of establishing “long-term stability”.

For a while, France envisaged, and tried to negotiate, the creation of an Armenian state in southern Anatolia. As for the Assyrians, the colonial powers and the League started looking across the globe for a space to resettle them with British Guinea and Brazil being the two favourites. None of these options came to reality. It is interesting that although the “minorities” themselves were not very supportive of these transfer solutions, their diasporas in Europe and the United States, inspired by the Zionist movement’s territorialist ideology, supported these schemes and were very vocal towards the League. Indeed, the *Diasporas* (Armenian, Assyrian and Zionist Jews) would provide support to the League and some kind of legitimacy to its ethnonational nation-state building schemes (Chapter Five).

When faced with difficulty in implementing transfer and settler colonialism, the concept of partition emerged as another solution. Partition was nothing new, after all, the breaking of Arab territories belonging to the former Ottoman Empire was a series of partitions. However, a major part of the new partitionist narrative was the idea of the irreconcilability of claims, which would, until recently, serve as a basis for each partition scheme supported or brought forward by the League and the United Nations. Once again, the Zionist experience and discourse proved to be prominent in the development of partition as a solution. Zionism, as a form of settler colonialism, enabled the extraction of Jewish populations and their resettlement in Palestine, developed a narrative of ethnonationalism with exclusion mechanisms,

and shown its willingness for a people to move from a status of minority to majority. The latter was imperative in the partition of Palestine; once the League considered the Zionist settlers as a minority, it could conclude protecting them would require total separation from the majority, overlooking the settler colonial nature of Zionism. However, the principle and politics of ethnic separation did not end there; in her Epilogue, the author highlights how partition continued to be the go-to solution in the aftermath of World War Two (WWII), notably in Europe.

Laura Robson's book is a valuable contribution on many levels. First, it synthesises the state of the current trends and knowledge on the Middle East. Second, it shows how central the concepts and practice of separation, transfer, and partition have affected the making of the modern Middle East and the World. And third, it highlights how important these concepts are as a framework in the understanding and analysis of the political history of the Middle East and of the nation-state system. The narrative style of Robson makes the book easy to read whilst the clarity and density of the argumentation and the articulation of the ideas makes it a necessary reading for students and researchers of the Middle East.

Our Constitution. By Shad Saleem Faruqi. Subang Jaya, Malaysia: Sweet & Maxwell, 2019, pp. 425. ISBN 9789672187059 (paperback).

Reviewer: Ramizah Wan Muhammad, Associate Professor, Department of Islamic Law, Ahmad Ibrahim Kulliyah of Laws, International Islamic University Malaysia. Email: ramizah@iium.edu.my

A Constitution is not only the supreme law of the land, it creates the various branches and institutions of the state, describes the powers and functions of these institutions, and prescribes rules about the relationship of the various branches and institutions with each other and with the citizenry. It confers some basic rights to all citizens and imposes limits on state power that restrict these rights. Finally, it describes the political, religious, moral, cultural and economic values on which society is founded. The book under review, written by an acknowledged constitutional law expert, Shad Saleem Faruqi, provides a good and clear understanding of the Malaysian Federal Constitution.

In This Issue

Editorial

Articles

Wan Rohila A. Ganti Bt. Wan Abdul Ghapar & Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid

Pathways of Becoming Political Party Activists: The Experiences From Malay-Muslim Grassroots Party Activists

Haslina Ibrahim & Ainul Jaria bt. Maidin

Mediation and Interreligious Discourse: Prospects and Challenges in Resolving Interreligious Skirmishes in Malaysia

Mohd Noh Abdul Jalil & Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor

Examining the Role of 'Ulama in the Islamization Process of the Malay World

Israr Ahmad Khan

Role of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Promoting Human Values in the Strife-Torn World

Najihah Akeb-urai, Nor Ba' Yah Abdul Kadir & Rohany Nasir

Mathematics Anxiety and Performance among College Students: Effectiveness of Systematic Desensitization Treatment

Rehnuma Bint Anis & Md. Mahmudul Hasan

Faith and Practice: Islamic Perspectives on Robert Browning

Alias Azhar, Muhammad Hafiz Badarulzaman, Fidlizan Muhammad & Siti Zamarina Mat Zaib

Syariah Criminal Law Enforcement in Hisbah Framework: Practice In Malaysia

Khauthar Ismail

Imperialism, Colonialism and their Contribution to the Formation of Malay and Chinese Ethnicity: An Historical Analysis

Mohd. Shah Jani & Raudlotul Firdaus binti Fatah Yasin

Removal of Despotic Political Regime: The Abū Dharr's Legacy and Its Legitimacy

Sani Safiyanu, Roy Anthony Rogers & Wan Sharina Ramlah Wan Ahmad Amin Jaffri

Nigeria's Foreign Policy Goals in Peacekeeping Operations in Africa

Noor Asyhikin Binti Abd Razak & Nor Azlin Binti Tajuddin

Ecological Modernization in Malaysia: A Review of Pakatan Harapan's Manifesto During the 14th General Election Within the Context of Ecological Modernization Framework

Siwach Sripokangkul

Education for the Production and Re-Production of Docile Civic Bodies: The Problems of Civic Education in Thailand

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