

Summary of the Causes of Stagnation

'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (Syria, 1854–1902) was one of the most influential Islamic reformist thinkers in the eastern Mediterranean at the end of the nineteenth century. Born into a well-established family of notables in Aleppo, al-Kawakibi received a thorough education in the Islamic sciences and in the major Islamic languages of the region: Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, and Persian. In the 1870s, he edited the official paper in Aleppo, *al-Furat (The Euphrates)*, and established two independent newspapers, both of which were short-lived. Despite holding a number of administrative and public posts in Ottoman Syria, al-Kawakibi experienced chronic persecution by the authorities, leading him ultimately to settle in Egypt in 1898. He died suddenly in Cairo in 1902, possibly poisoned by agents of the Ottoman sultan. Al-Kawakibi's thought was influenced by his contemporaries Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (chapter 11) and Muhammad 'Abduh (chapter 3), among others. His historical significance in the Islamic modernist trend of thought lay in his elaboration of an Arab pan-Islamism intended to reform the decaying Muslim world, privileging Arabs over non-Arabs and advocating the establishment of an Arab caliphate. In this process, al-Kawakibi decentered the primacy of the Ottoman Turks and transformed them into an internal, problematic other. The following selection is drawn from al-Kawakibi's famous account of a fictional series of meetings in Mecca, at which twenty-three representatives from around the Muslim world—including thirteen Arabs—assemble to discuss pan-Islamic resurgence and criticize Ottoman tyranny.¹

The Seventh Gathering, Wednesday,
24 Zi'l-Qa'da 1316 [April 5, 1899]

On the morning of this day, the association assembled, and the minutes of the preceding [meeting] were read, in keeping with the rules.

"Mr. President," [the fictional delegate from Mecca] said, addressing al-Sayyid al-Furati.² "In addition to your attention to organizing meetings and fulfilling editorial duties, the association expects also to benefit from your personal views concerning the cause of stagnation, which is the topic under discussion, after summarizing all of the opinions that the honorable brethren have mentioned, whenever they

have been expressed knowledgably and consistently in hearing, writing, reading, and reviewing—you are the most wide-ranging of us, intellectually.

"In addition, the association requests the eminent Damascene and the eloquent Alexandrian [fictional representatives from Damascus and Alexandria] to cooperate in writing down your speech, that is, to take turns listening to the spoken statements and writing them down, because, like the rest of the brethren, neither of them knows short-hand, which is used in such situations."

The eminent Damascene looked at his colleague [from Alexandria], who indicated his approval, then said: "We are willing to render this service."

¹'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, "Umm al-Qura" (The Mother of Towns [Mecca]), in *al-'amal al-kamila lil-Kawakibi (The Complete Works of Kawakibi)* (Beirut, Lebanon: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, 1995), pp. 358–367. First published in 1902. Translation from Arabic and introduction by Joseph G. Rahme.

1. Joseph G. Rahme, "'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi's Reformist Ideology, Arab Pan-Islamism, and the Internal Other," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, volume 10, number 2,

1999, pp. 159–177; Eliezer Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements* (London: Frank Cass, 1993), ch. 5; Khaldun S. al-Husry, *Three Reformers: A Study in Modern Arabic Political Thought* (Beirut, Lebanon: Khayats, 1966); 'Abbas M. al-'Aqqad, *al-Rahhala Kaf (The Traveler K)* (Cairo, Egypt: Matbu'at al-Majlis al-'A'la, 1958).

2. [Al-Sayyid al-Furati—probably the alter ego of the author—was the fictional representative of northern Syria, primarily Aleppo, and parts of northern Iraq.—Trans.]

Al-Sayyid al-Furati said: "[I shall comply] out of affection and obedience though I am really incapable, my speech is feeble, and I have little to offer." Then he turned away from the desk, and the eminent Damascene and eloquent Alexandrian took his place. [Al-Furati] did not linger and plunged into his speech. He said:

"It can be concluded from our blessed association's deliberations that this stagnation, as already discussed, stems from the totality of numerous causes, not from one or a few causes that can easily be resisted. Some of these causes are fundamental, and some are derived from fundamental [causes]. Yet all of them can be reduced to three categories: religious causes, political causes, and moral causes. I will read to you summaries from the index list that I extracted from the association's studies, distinguishing the fundamental [causes] with the letter F and the derivative [causes] with the letter D, as follows."

The First Kind: Religious Causes

1. Effect of the doctrine of predestination on the ideas of the *umma* [Muslim community]. (F)
2. Effect of asceticism on effort, work, and beauty of life. (D)
3. Effect of dissension [arising] from debates about religious beliefs. (F)
4. Giving oneself over to specious ideas and artificial distinctions in religion. (F)
5. The abandonment of religious tolerance and leniency in religious practice. (F)
6. Religious severity by later legists in contrast to the pious early Muslims. (F)
7. Confusion of the *umma's* beliefs due to the plethora of conflicting opinions in the derivative details of religious laws. (D)
8. Inability to relate statements to practices in religion due to adulteration and severity. (D)
9. Introduction of scriptural borrowings, fables, and harmful innovations into the religion by deceitful '*ulama* [religious scholars]. (F)
10. Belittling of religion by the exploiters of Sufism, treating it as entertainment and a game. (D)
11. Corruption of the religion by the obscurantism of the flatterers, through additions, omissions, and fanciful interpretations. (D)
12. Introduction of innumerable superstitions into the public sphere by deceivers and worshippers of the dead and their shrines. (F)
13. Alienation of Muslim minds [literally, "hearts"] through the threats of astrologers, geomancers, of magic and humbug. (D)

14. Deceit of liars and flatterers [who state] that in religion there are secret matters and that knowledge is a veil. (F)
15. Belief that the philosophical and rational sciences are incompatible with religion. (F)
16. Penetration of manifest or hidden polytheism into the beliefs of the laity. (D)
17. Failure of practicing '*ulama*' to affirm divine unity. (D)
18. The surrender to *taqlid* [imitation of previous scholars] and the abandonment of reflection and the quest for guidance. (D)
19. Undue allegiance to *madhhabs* [schools of law] and the opinions of recent writers, forsaking scriptures and the path of the pious early Muslims. (D)
20. Neglecting the wisdom of the community, of the Friday [prayer], and of the *hajj* [pilgrimage] assembly. (F)
21. Obstinacy in denouncing religious freedom in ignorance of its merits. (D)
22. Requiring what would not be required if one sought guidance from the Book [the Qur'an] and the *sunna* [practice of the Prophet]. (D)
23. Burdening Muslims with that which God has not demanded, and belittling of that which is commanded. (D)

The Second Kind: Political Causes

24. Policymaking is divorced from power and responsibility. (F)
25. Fragmentation of the *umma* into factions and political parties. (D)
26. Denial of the *umma's* freedom of speech and action, and loss of its security and aspirations. (D)
27. Loss of justice and equality of rights among the *umma's* [social] strata. (D)
28. The leaders' natural inclination toward deceitful '*ulama*' and ignorant Sufis. (D)
29. Denial of a livelihood and honor to practicing '*ulama*' and seekers of knowledge. (F)
30. Honoring knowledge by stipends through which rulers give preferment to the elite, while delegating service in religion to the ignorant. (F)
31. Reversal of the practice of taking property from the rich and giving it to the poor. (F)
32. Requiring leaders, judges, and religious officials [to implement] matters that destroy their religion. (D)
33. Banishing noble and liberal leaders, and associating with flatterers and the wicked. (F)
34. Coercion and mistreatment of high-minded, rightly-guided leaders. (D)

35. Loss of the power of public opinion through suppression and division. (D)
36. Foolishness of most leaders and their persistence in unwise policies. (D)
37. Stubborn and arrogant insistence of most leaders on despotism. (D)
38. Submersion of leaders in luxury and carnal appetites, and their avoidance of any kind of glory other than ostentation and wealth. (D)
39. Restriction of political concern to taxation and the military. (F)

The Third Kind: Moral Causes

40. Immersion in ignorance and acquiescence to it. (F)
41. Descent into alienation by those who are successful in religious and worldly affairs. (D)
42. Lingering in apathy as a way of comforting the self. (D)
43. Loss of mutual counseling and giving free rein to hatred of God. (F)
44. Dissolution of the bonds of religious responsibility. (F)
45. Corruption of teaching, sermonizing, orating, and giving spiritual guidance. (D)
46. Loss of religious and moral education. (F)
47. Loss of the strength of associations and the by-product of their continued existence. (F)
48. Loss of collective financial strength because of the neglect of *zakat* [alms tax]. (F)
49. Abandoning action because of low expectations. (D)
50. Neglecting the demand for general rights, due to cowardice and fear of disappointment. (D)
51. The dominance of flattery's fabrications, servility, and lowliness. (D)
52. Preference for earning a living in the military and in government service, rather than industry. (D)
53. Delusion that religious knowledge is found among turbans [that is, traditional religious scholars] and in everything that is recorded in the Book. (D)
54. Enmity toward the higher sciences because of the comfort of ignorance and abasement. (F)
55. Estrangement from engagement with and discussion of public affairs. (F)
56. Inattention to the avoidance of polytheism and its evil portents. (F)

Then al-Sayyid al-Furati said: "These summarize the causes of stagnation that the brethren of the as-

sociation have set forth, disregarding repetitions, as one would suppose. Inasmuch as the disorder that exists in the fundamental administration of Islamic governments has an important role in producing the general stagnation, I therefore add the following causes to the ones already discussed by my distinguished brethren, enumerating them by means of the headings of the problem only. Were I to give details and explain them, it would take too long and we would digress from the aim of our gathering.

"Moreover, the causes that I will mention are the fundamental origins of the disorder in the current policies and administration of the Ottoman empire, this most powerful state whose affairs concern all Muslims. It has experienced most of these disorders in the last 60 years, that is, after it rushed to reorganize its affairs [in the Tanzimat reforms of the mid-19th century]. In doing so, it damaged its ancient foundations and did not improve either *taqlid* nor its blameworthy *bida'* [innovations], so that its condition deteriorated, especially in the last 20 years, during which time two thirds of the kingdom was lost and the remaining third was destroyed. Among the factors determining the ruin of the state was the loss of men and the squandering of the sultan's power for the sake of preserving his noble self and persisting in his autocratic policies.

"As for the rest of the Islamic kingdoms and emirates, they too share some of these fundamental problems. Furthermore, they suffer from other, more harmful and bitter conditions whose exposition and thorough examination would take too long. The causes I wish to discuss in summary form are the following."

The Policy and Administration of the Ottomans

57. Standardization of administrative and penal laws despite differences in the characteristics of the empire's parts and differences in the inhabitants in terms of [their] races and customs. (F)
58. Heterogeneity of juridical laws, and the confusion of the judiciary in [dealing with] analogous cases. (F)
59. Adherence to the principle of centralized administration despite the distance of certain parts from the capital; administrative leadership should reside in those distant parts [so as to know] the situations and the particular features of their inhabitants. (D)

60. Adhering to the principle that administrative leadership and governors are never held accountable for their actions. (D)
61. Administrative confusion resulting from inattention to the integration of morals with procedures among ministers, governors, and commanders. The state must select them from among all the races and nationalities found in the kingdom in order to satisfy them. (D)
62. Adhering to [the practice of] racial inconsistencies in the hiring of [government] employees, with the aim of complicating understanding between the employees and the [local] inhabitants and rendering it impractical for them to intermix and secure the administration; this makes agreement upon administrative policy impossible. (D)
63. Adhering to a policy of customarily giving special authority to certain families—like the rulership of Mecca and the rulership of the large tribes of the Hijaz, Iraq, and the Euphrates—who are incapable of administering them; as a result, the governor enrages those whom he rules, and is detested by them; [all this] so that they will not ally with him against the state. (F)
64. Adhering to the practice of appointing to particular positions in certain professions, like the *Shaykh al-Islam* [chief religious official] or the Minister of Defense, people despised by their colleagues in the '*ulama*' or the army, so that the leader and the led will not agree on any important matter. (D)
65. Gross discrimination among various subject races regarding subsidies and penalties.
66. Carelessness in the selection of [government] employees and [civil] officials, needlessly employing too many of them with the purpose of sustaining cliques, favorites, and habitual flatterers.
67. Permissiveness in reward and reproof due to inattention to whether administrative matters are done well or badly, as if the empire had no master.
68. Inattention to fostering religious requirements, such as erecting rules that conflict with religious law, in the absence of some compelling policy concern, or when there is need, but with no attention to explaining to the *umma* and seeking their indulgence for it, through seeking to convince them and satisfy their concerns.
69. Loss of the sanctity of religious law and the force of [secular] laws, by not abiding by and executing [religious law], and insisting on administration being methodical in name but arbitrary in practice.
70. Failure to attend to the customs of the inhabitants, their morals, and their welfare, so as to gain their affection, not just outward obedience.
71. Obtuseness toward or willful neglect of the needs of the times, the challenge of events, and the progress of the inhabitants, due to a lack of concern for the future.
72. Suppression of awakened thought in an effort to forbid its growth, development, and [to suppress] inquiry into administrative activities, their merits and defects; though the suppression of natural growth is utterly futile, temptation and [corrupting] inducements are the result, as well as hatred toward the administration.
73. Preferential treatment of those base in descent, in morals, and in education, who hold sway over free persons and have authority over those who are their superiors; this neglect of matters by those who are responsible for them leads necessarily to the debasing of the administration.
74. Administration of the treasury in a loose manner, without any supervision; purchasing without budgeting; extravagance without reprimand; and damage without any accounting, until the empire became mortgaged to foreigners with heavy debts that are being paid with [the loss of] territory, sovereignty, blood, and rights.
75. Administration of important political and civilian interests without consultation of the subjects, and the [government's] refusal to discuss them—even though its damage in every act of omission and commission was well known.
76. Administration of property in a centralized manner, silencing experts who know of its defects, so as to prevent their divulging what they really know, lest the public learn the truth of the matter. If the public were to learn it would speak, and if it spoke, it would act, and then there would be a great uprising.
77. Administration of external affairs through bootlicking, appeasement, the compromise of rights, bribery, capitulations, and money; the administration expends all of that on its neighbors so that they will turn a blind eye to the [country's] destructive, painful sights, and they will put up with the rotten stink of their rule. Were it not for those sights and smells, the neighboring countries would have no means to exert pressure, despite the enmity and hatred that God planted among them till the Day of Resurrection.

Then al-Sayyid al-Furati said: "Some of these causes I have mentioned are old maladies inseparable from the administration of the Ottoman government

since its establishment, or for centuries, and some of them are temporary manifestations that will disappear with the disappearance of their producers. Perhaps one could be patient with them, were it not that the danger has come close—may God forbid it—to the heart, as was indicated by the president in his first remarks.”

Then he said: “Connected to these causes are a few miscellaneous causes that I shall examine after enumerating them in summary fashion, as follows.”

Miscellaneous Causes

78. Differences in the natures of the subjects and the shepherds.
79. Heedlessness or negligence in organizing the matters of daily life.
80. Heedlessness of the need to apportion labor and time.
81. Heedlessness of [the need to] yield to expertise.
82. Heedlessness of balancing [military] power and preparedness.
83. Abandoning attention to educating women.
84. Inattention to the fitness of wives [that is, the development of qualities that make them of suitable status to their husbands].
85. Weakness of character, that is, general apathy.
86. Withdrawal from life and apathy.

“As to the incongruence of morals between the shepherds and the subjects, it has a great significance. As is apparent to those who contemplate and scrutinize the histories of nations, the greatest and most successful kings and conquerors—such as Alexander [Macedonian king, 336–323 B.C.]; ‘Umar [ibn al-Khattab, second caliph, 634–644] and Salah al-Din [Ayyubid sultan, 1169–1193], may God be pleased with them; Genghis [Khan, Mongol ruler, 1206–1227], [Mehmed] the Conqueror [Ottoman sultan, 1451–1481], Charles V of Germany [Holy Roman Emperor, 1519–1558], Peter the Great [Russian tsar, 1696–1725], and [Napoléon] Bonaparte [French consul and emperor, 1799–1815]—did not accomplish their great feats except through sincere determination. They had a genuine and complete congruence with their subjects and armies in morals and instincts, so that they were truly heads to those bodies, not like a camel’s head on the body of a bull, or the reverse. It is only this congruence that makes the *umma* consider its leader to be its head, so that it gives itself

wholeheartedly, without resentment or [the need for] coercion. Success can not be had in any other way, as the wise al-Mutanabbi [classical Arab poet, 915–965] said: ‘The people exist only through kings; will Arabs succeed with ‘*ajam* [non-Arab] kings?’

“There is no disagreement about the fact that one of the most important maxims of governments is to adopt the characters of the subjects, and to unite with them in habits and tastes, even if the habits are not good in themselves. The least a foreign government should do is conform to the subjects’ characters, even if the commitment be temporary, at least until it succeeds in attracting them to its language, then to its morals, then to its nationality, as did the Umayyads [reigned 661–750], the ‘Abbasids [750–1258], and the Muwahhidun [Almohads, North African dynasty, 1130–1269], and as the European colonial states would like to do in the present era. Similarly, all of the non-Arabs who established states in the Islamic world, such as the Buyids [Turkish dynasty, 932–1062], Saljuqs [Turkish dynasty, 1038–1194], Ayyubids [Kurdish dynasty, 1169–1260], Ghurids [Afghan dynasty, circa 1149–1215], Circassians [probably the Mamluk dynasty in Egypt, 1250–1517], and the descendants of Muhammad ‘Ali [ruler of Egypt, 1805–1849, of Albanian-Turkish origin] acculturated, so that it was not long until they become Arabized and molded by the characteristics of the Arabs. They intermingled with them and became part of them, just as the Tatar Moghuls [that is, the Mongols] became Persians and Indians. The only exception in this regard was the Turkish Moghuls—that is, the Ottomans, who, on the contrary, take pride in preserving the otherness of their subjects, so that they do not seek their Turkification, nor do they agree to become Arabized; the contemporary ones are becoming Frenchified or Germanified. There is no rational cause for such [behavior] except their intense hatred toward the Arabs, as can be proved by the proverbs about Arabs that flow from their tongues:

—their use of the phrase ‘*dilenci Arab*,’ that is, ‘Arab beggar,’ for Arabs of the Hijaz.

—their use of the phrase ‘*kör fellah*,’ meaning ‘rude peasant,’ for Egyptians.

—‘*Arab Çingenesi*,’ that is, ‘Arab Gypsy’; ‘*Kıbtî Arab*,’ that is, ‘Egyptian Gypsy.’

—their saying about the Arabs of Syria: ‘*Ne Şam’ın şekerî ve ne Arab’ın yüzü*,’ that is, ‘It is worth putting up with the Arabs for the sweets of Damascus.’

[Literally: 'Neither the sweets of Damascus, nor the face of the Arab.']

—their use of the term '*Arab*' for slaves and black animals.

—their saying, '*pis Arab*,' that is, 'filthy Arab.'

—'*Arab akli*,' that is, 'Arab mind,' or small; '*Arab tabiati*,' that is, 'Arab taste,' or corrupt; '*Arab çenesi*,' that is, 'Arab jawbone,' or excessive babble.

—their saying, '*Bunu yaparsam Arab olayım*,' that is, 'If I do that, may I become an Arab.'

—their saying, '*Nerde Arab, nerde tambura*,' that is, 'Where there is an Arab, there is a lute.'

"To all that, the Arabs do not reciprocate, except with two expressions. The first is the Arab saying about them: 'Three were created for oppression and decay: lice, Turks, and the plague.' And the second expression: calling [Turks] 'Byzantines,' an indication of suspicion about their Islamic faith. The cause of this suspicion is that the Turks did not serve Islam, except for the establishment of a few mosques—and

if it were not for their rulers wanting to have their names mentioned from the pulpits, even these would not have been established.

"Moreover, they joined Islam in blind obedience to their grandees, in fear of astrological misfortune, and in respect for fire-pits, which added greatly to existing superstitions."

Then al-Sayyid al-Furati said:

"I beg pardon from al-Maula al-Rumi [the fictional Turkish delegate], because he knows that I do not exaggerate, and if it were not for the religious necessity, of which he is aware, I would not have spoken so clearly and openly. For [it is said that] the sincere counselor is the one who makes you weep, not the one who makes you laugh."

Mr. President said: "Our brother al-Sayyid al-Furati is a well-spoken orator and a worldly knight, and the research to which he pointed deserves much discussion. But today our time has drawn to a close, and therefore we adjourn till our appointment tomorrow, if the Exalted Master permits."