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## **Shakib Arsalan the Prince of Eloquence and his Struggle against Colonialism as Reflected through his Activities and Writings: A Study**

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### **Abstract:**

*It is well appreciated that the world has begot numerous noble beings that illuminated the globe in many ways, including history, literature, arts, poetry, politics, science etc. The Arab World was by no means far behind in producing creditable deeds as to bring peace and fraternity among the world inhabitants no matter where they belong to. Needless to say, Shakib Arsalan was one of the foremost whose thinking and writings have profusely impressed commoners and dignitaries in many aspects of human life. As an awakened Muslim, Shakib was always marching forward to his cherished goal for driving the colonists away from the Arab lands. He was a profound scholar not only of Islamic history, culture and civilization, but was also versed in several oriental as well as occidental languages. He was an Arab writer, a great thinker, poet, historian, politician and skilled with varied experiences, he carried with him a heart full of love for Arabism and brotherhood and these qualities were evident in everything he wrote. He has travelled many of countries of the world and studied the conditions of the Muslims at proximity and published several valuable books. He was the editor of the journal "La Nation Arab" in French, which was dedicated to the cause of Muslims therein and was published from Geneva. In the following, a brief sketch of Shakib Arsalan's life has been penned as well as a glimpse of his several movements in regard to anti- colonialism activities through his pen and tongue has also been put down.*

**Keyword: The Ottoman Empire, Abdul Hamid II, Arab world, Colonialism, Lebanon, India.**

**Introduction:** Shakib Arsalan was one of the eminent scholars between the end of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth century, spread himself in the field of struggle, as well as in the field of writings throughout the Islamic and the Arab world. Arsalan's fame also extended to the Western world as he chose his exile in the city of Geneva, the headquarter of the League of Nations, and from there he published his magazine *La Nation*

*Arab* (The Arab Nation) in French language. He continued to confront the major powers of the world with law and logic in defense of his nation's issues, and travelled to the countries of Europe and America, confronting influential people and opinion-makers through his determined writings, lectures, and debates, revealing the injustices of colonialism in Arab countries amidst the oppressed people. Though Such actions in our days are carried out by intellectual and media institutions via Internet and modern media with ease. However, all this was in the first half of the twentieth century when there were very few persons like him in the field.

Among the mountains and songs of Lebanon, Prince Shakib Arsalan was born and grew up. He witnessed the decline of the Ottoman Empire before the influence of the colonial powers. To the East of the Islamic world, Britain was camped in India, while its West was occupied by France and Spain, and Tsarist Russia threatened its Northern seas. However, He started his education in his hometown before moving to Beirut to join other schools. In such an atmosphere, Prince Shakib Arsalan joined the Al-Hikmah School in Beirut, where he studied Arabic language under the guidance of Abdullah Al-Bustāni, one of the most famous Arab linguists in that time, and learned several foreign languages in addition to religious sciences. Consequently, He wrote poetry and prose, and became *Amīr al- Bayān* (the prince of eloquence). He rose through the ranks of the Ottoman Empire and then as a delegate to the Council of Envoys. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, he lived in exile in Europe as a political activist and a solid negotiator for the independence of the Arab countries, until he was described as a statesman without a state.

Shakib Arsalan recorded his biography and the details of his exciting trips that extended from Moscow to the shores of Morocco. Thousands of letters he wrote were distributed around the world and the archives of European intelligence. Charting the path of one of the most prominent Arab men in the twentieth century. A brief summary of his multi-dimensional activities in regard to anti- colonialism movement has been conducted in this article which is as follows.

**Shakib Arsalan between the Ottomans and the Europeans:** Shakib Arsalan left Lebanon in 1890, on a long journey during which he toured the capitals of the Islamic world and the capitals of Europe, and met with the great thinkers and writers of the time. During this period his relationship with Sheikh Muhammad Abdu (1849-1905) in Cairo, Aḥmed Showqī (1868-1932) in Paris, and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838-1897) in Istanbul was strengthened. Prince Shakib Arsalan was standing next to the elite of the Ottoman Empire, receiving the German Kaiser on his first visit to the Sultanate in 1898, marking the beginning of a long and controversial relationship between Prince Shakib and the political elite of Europe. Professor of Islamic Studies at Utrecht University in Netherland, Mehdi Sājid, says that Shakib Arsalan was an aristocratic man in his childhood and youth, as the family contributed to his political formation, because the purpose of his formation was to take control of political affairs in Lebanon, where the family was based.

Amr Ri'ād, professor of Islamic and Arab studies at the University of Louvain in Belgium, pointed out that Arsalan did not only create a network of relations between himself and Arabs or Muslims, but also Europeans, especially the Germans. It is noted that it was these relationships that formed his political alliances, and shaped the course of his movements during his life.

**Shakib Arsalan in the Libyan War:** In 1911, the Italian campaign to occupy Libya began. Shakib Arsalan saw this war as a warner of danger to the independence of the entire Ottoman Empire, so he wrote dozens of letters to Istanbul and Egypt requesting supplies and support for the fighters. Moreover, Arsalan traveled to Damascus to ask the Fifth Army command to send a number of soldiers disguised as Bedouins through Egypt to Libya, then he himself traveled with the volunteers to Egypt. Regarding this stage, Mehdi Sājid said that Arsalan went to the battle front to help the Libyans in their battle against Italian colonialism. He added: “During this period, Shakib got to know Ottoman leaders who would be very influential, including Tal’at Pāshā, Anver Pāshā, and Jamāl Pāshā, the trio, who led the Ottoman Empire during World War I. He also got to know Muṣṭafā Kamāl Atātürk, who was a soldier in the Ottoman army in Libya.”

Though Prince Arsalan was geographically distant from Lebanon at this stage, his strong relations with the Ottoman military leadership in Libya enabled him to influence the *Mutasarrifiyyah* (administration) of Lebanon. He said: “I received news while I was in Derna (a city in Libya) during the Tripolitan War, that the term of Yūsuf Pāshā Franco in the Lebanese *Mutasarrifiyyah* had ended, and that his term might be renewed for another five years. considering what I knew of the bad situation there, I urged Anwar Pāshā to telegraph to Istanbul not to renew Yūsuf Franco’s term, so he telegraphed strongly. Finally, they decided to dismiss him and replace him with a temporary representative.

**Arsalan's position on the Arab Revolution:** Meanwhile, the Arab nationalist movement was rising among the Ottoman Arab elite, but Shakib Arsalan had a completely different vision regarding it. After the First Arab Conference was held in Paris in 1913, Shakib Arsalan issued his book *A Statement to the Arab Nation*, in which he opposed the movements of the Decentralization Party, of which his friend Sheikh Rashīd Riḍā was one of its leaders. Arsalan considered that the nationalist movements would be a prelude to the occupation of Arab countries instead of establishing their independence. Amr Ri'yād explained that Shakib Arsalan wanted to preserve the Ottoman Empire, and he saw that the Ottoman officers were divided in discords, therefore his praise of the Ottoman Caliphate was not always praise for everything, but rather as a politician he was criticizing these matters, because he saw that the Ottoman Caliphate would destroy itself through this.

**Shakib Arsalan's War against Colonialism:** Arsalan said in his memoir that the separatists had always fanned the alarm of racial fanaticism and tried to incite the Arabs against the Ottoman state under the pretext that it was a Turkish state. No one could dispute that a coup like this in Arab countries could ever happen without a bloody internal war, unfortunately, this catastrophe made room to the colonial powers to penetrate with their

fleets into the Arab lands. The landing of British soldiers in Jaffa would be in the name of mere maintaining security in Palestine, and French soldiers would be in Beirut to maintain security in Syria and Lebanon as well. Shakib Arsalan's support for the Ottomans and his failure to participate in the Arab Revolt with Sharīf Hussein was so, because he saw that the English were playing a dirty role in this political game, and that what they wanted was to overthrow the idea of Arab-Islamic unity. Shakib's loyalty to the Ottoman leadership had followed him until the end of his life. All political and intellectual people in the Arab region will remember Arsalan as a person who helped and supported the Ottoman leadership against the Arab revolutions at the time. Shakib Arsalan's logic was the logic of helping the Ottomans get rid of the threat of European colonialism, and later on it was possible for him to enter into a dialogue to improve the conditions of the Arab countries.

**From the Defeat of the Ottomans to his Long Exile:** Meanwhile, Shakib Arsalan was an envoy from the Ottoman Empire to Berlin to discuss the Germans' recognition of Tajikistan's independence, when he received news of the defeat of the Ottomans and the Germans, and the end of World War I, as a result there had been a beginning of new phase in Shakib Arsalan's life, titled long exile. Many political figures had joined Shakib Arsalan in his exile. Among them was Tal'at Pāshā, who was in Berlin, and while he was in Berlin, Arsalan would take advantage of his strong relations with the German state to play a somewhat gradual political role in strengthening the Muslim community in German in the period.

But afterwards Arsalan had been convinced to end attempts to revive the Ottoman Empire, especially with the killing of the three generals, Tal'at, Jamāl, and Anver Pāshā, and the transfer of the leadership of the liberation movement in Turkey to Muṣṭafā Kamāl Atātürk, who was the arch opponent of Shakib Arsalan because of his secular tendencies, which the latter radically opposed.

**Arsalan's Support for the Syrian Revolution:** As a result, Shakib Arsalan moved to Switzerland to begin a long journey in seeking the independence of the Arab countries, as Geneva was the headquarters of the League of Nations. Perhaps the most important entitlement at this stage was the Syrian revolution. In 1925, confrontations broke out against the French which is known as the Great Syrian Revolution, and Arsalan sought to support the revolution by taking advantage of his old connections with European politicians. At that time, Shakib communicated with German officers and tried to buy German weapons to send to Syria. He also contacted Italian leader Mussolini to purchase Italian weapons and equipment as well. At the same time, he did not forget to demand the signing of an agreement between the Libyans and the Italians through which the Libyans would gain their independence.

With the French appointment of Henri de Jouvenel as a new High Commissioner in Syria, Arsalan was communicated by Henri de Jouvenel in search of solutions to calm the revolutionaries, which Prince Shakib referred to in his memoirs, where he wrote: "We acknowledge that France is capable of staggering us by force, but we are confident that our

national honor refuses except we raise our heads at every appropriate opportunity.” He added: “Therefore, we see that it is not difficult for the benefit of the two nations, to find a form of harmony and peace between France and Syria, which puts an end to the causes of the conflict between two nations while Syrians demand of their complete and accomplished independence.”

**Role of Shakib Arsalan in Supporting the Struggle in Morocco:** Shakib Arsalan's interest did not cease, rather it reached the Greater Arab Maghreb, whose countries were also subject to the colonization of three major European powers namely Spanish, French, and Italian. Shakib Arsalan had great relationships with politicians and parliamentarians of these three countries, and he used them all to serve the national movements and support their causes in Libya, Algeria and Morocco. Arsalan published the first issue of the magazine *The Arab Nation* in 1930 concerned with issues of Arabism and Islam, which was published in French, to address European public opinion and Arab students in Europe. Shakib Arsalan's movement in that period was what linked the East and the West, as they were one Islamic entity. Shakib Arsalan's presence on the political stage was specially to pit the East against Zahīr Barbarī appointed by France. Alāl Al-Fāsī, one of the founders of the Moroccan Independence Party, narrates the details of Shakib Arsalan's role in supporting the struggle against colonialism in Morocco, explaining the nature of the close relationship between them. He said in an article about Shakib Arsalan: “Our national movement had the merit of the first contact with Prince Shakib Arsalan, as he was one of our men and one of the most important mayors that we relied on to obtain the support of the Arabs and Muslims.”

As soon as the Marrakesh protest movement arose against Zahīr Berberī, Amīr moved to Tetouan, learned the meaning of Zahīr's politics and learned about its secrets as well. Then he returned to Switzerland, where he declared a ferocious war on the French colonialism. Amīr was expelled from Tangier and prevented from entering the zone of the French protection in Maghreb. He was also banned from visiting Algeria, Tunisia, and France itself, since he began speaking about Moroccans and defending their rights.

**Meeting with Ben-Gurion and his Position on Zionism:** When talking about Shakib Arsalan's long career, we must stop at his positions on Palestine and Zionism, and the relationship with Ben-Gurion (the first Prime Minister of Israel). The eyes of the Zionists were closely monitoring the activities of the Syrian-Palestinian Conference in Geneva, led by Shakib Arsalan and Iḥsān al-Jābrī, so Ben-Gurion sought to meet with them in 1934 to present to them a plan to settle millions of Jews in Palestine in exchange for financial assistance to the surrounding Arab countries. According to Shakib, we acknowledge that France is capable of subjugating Syrians by force, but we are confident that our national honor refuses to hold our heads down at every appropriate opportunity, Syrians find a solution in the form of harmony and peace between France and Syria that will put an end to the causes of conflict between the countries, and the Syrians' demand before Everything is their complete independence.

In the book, “*My Conversations with Arab Leaders*” written by Ben-Gurion, he recounts the details of this meeting, noting that Arsalan is very rigid in his positions and refuses to cooperate in any way with Zionism. It also reveals that Arsalan was convinced that Britain's policies in Palestine aimed to make the Jews the majority, and that once happened, it would mean the end of the Arabs. However, despite his patriotic stances, Shakib Arsalan was subjected to targeted campaigns and accusations of promoting fascist and Nazi propaganda by the British and the Arab leaders. As the political division between those, collaborating with the British and their opponents had reached its peak in the Arab world.

**Arab Unity and his Last Will:** What remains constant amidst all of this is that Arab unity was one of the basic principles of Shakib Arsalan, who used his close relationships with a number of Arab kings to call for an Arab alliance, especially his relationship with the King Abdul Azīz Āl- Sa’ūd. Since the House of Saūd hosted the Syrian revolutionaries led by Sultān Pāshā al-Atrash and the Prince Ādil Arsalan, Shakib’s real brother. The King Abdul Azīz became the most independent political figure who, from Shakib Arsalan’s point of view, rejected the dictates of French and British colonialism. As for the culmination of Shakib Arsalan’s political movements to face colonialism, it was recorded that British intelligence accused him of coordinating with the German government to incite a simultaneous uprising in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine by cooperating with Amīn al-Husseinī and others. The colonial powers were able to thwart these moves, as a result, Shakib Arsalan had to spend the last years of his life under strict surveillance, before his wish to return to Lebanon at the end of World War II, to finally meet his mother in his hometown. However, within a few months of his reaching home, Prince Shakib Arsalan closed his eyes, leaving his last words: “I recommend Palestine to you.”

**Conclusion:** Shakib Arsalan was an influential writer, a poet, historian, an intellectual and a great politician as well. He was a staunch supporter of the Ottoman Caliph Sultān Abdul Hamīd’s reformist policies, and would invoke people for political reforms in the face of Western imperialism. His sagacity and ease with language as well as his love for poetry and eloquence earned him in the Arab world the nickname *Amīr al- Bayān* (the prince of eloquence). However, this erudite scholar died on December 9, 1946. On the day of his death, Sheikh Mustafā al-Sibā’ī, a Syrian politician stood at his grave, reciting his famous poem which means, Peace be upon you, Oh, Abū Ghālib, the prince of struggle and the pen. With your opinion, I shook the veils of darkness and rose up in excellence when your speech becomes all over the places. Throughout his formative years, he was influenced to a large extent by the ideas of Jamāl al- Dīn Afghānī and his disciple Muhammad Abdu. He also held varied posts in the Ottoman Administrations (1902-1912). He was one of the great advocates of Arabism and Islam. He himself was a generation of achievements that history has tired of counting and recording of him. He was not like a mere human being, rather he was a nation of ideas and thoughts in a single body. Shakib Arsalan was true and sincere preacher of Arabism and Islam. Self- perfection and service to the nation were his ideals. He left the mark of his knowledge and discernment all over the pages he penned for the upcoming generations.

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