

## “On the Rise of States and Their Downfall”: Muhammad ‘Abduh’s Discourse on Civilization in His Early Journalistic Works (1876-1882)

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### **Abstract**

This article examines Muhammad ‘Abduh’s early journalistic writings (1876–1882) on the rise and decline of states through the lens of *tamaddun* (civilization) and social progress. Drawing on essays in al-‘Urwah al-Wuthqā, it explores how ‘Abduh engaged Islamic rationalist thought, classical sources such as Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Miskawayh, and European models, notably François Guizot, to explain social evolution, governance, and moral development. Using a qualitative historical-philosophical approach, it combines close reading of primary sources with contemporary scholarship on Islamic reformism and constitutional thought. ‘Abduh reinterpreted the Ibn Khaldunian dichotomy between nomadic and urban societies within an evolutionary framework aligned with nineteenth-century notions of civilization and rational morality. Unlike earlier reformist readings, he emphasized society’s moral and intellectual preparation as a prerequisite for socio-political reform, privileging an educated elite’s guidance while cautiously acknowledging the limits of popular agency. His writings blend utilitarian, ethical, and proto-nationalist arguments, seeking to harmonize Islamic intellectual heritage with emerging European notions of social progress, legal rationality, and statecraft. The study contributes to scholarship on Islamic modernism by illuminating the formation of the modern public intellectual, and lays groundwork for comparative studies of Rashid Rida and contemporary debates on reform, governance, and civic participation in Muslim societies.

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*Artikel ini mengkaji tulisan-tulisan jurnalistik awal Muhammad ‘Abduh (1876–1882) tentang kebangkitan dan kemunduran negara melalui lensa tamaddun (peradaban) dan kemajuan sosial. Bertumpu pada esai-esai dalam al-‘Urwah al-Wuthqā, kajian ini menelusuri bagaimana ‘Abduh berinteraksi dengan pemikiran rasionalis Islam, sumber-sumber klasik seperti Ibn Khaldun dan Ibn Miskawayh, serta model-model intelektual Eropa, khususnya François Guizot, untuk menjelaskan evolusi sosial, tata kelola pemerintahan, dan perkembangan moral. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif historis-filosofis, penelitian ini memadukan pembacaan mendalam atas sumber primer dengan kajian kontemporer tentang reformisme Islam dan pemikiran konstitusional. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa ‘Abduh menafsirkan ulang dikotomi Khaldunian antara masyarakat nomaden dan urban dalam kerangka evolusioner yang selaras dengan gagasan abad ke-19 tentang peradaban dan moralitas rasional. Berbeda dari pembacaan reformis sebelumnya, ‘Abduh menekankan persiapan moral dan intelektual masyarakat sebagai prasyarat reformasi sosial-politik, dengan mengedepankan bimbingan elite terdidik seraya berhati-hati mengakui keterbatasan agensi rakyat. Tulisan-tulisannya memadukan argumen utilitarian, etis, dan proto-nasionalis dalam upaya mengharmonikan warisan intelektual Islam dengan gagasan Eropa yang tengah berkembang tentang kemajuan sosial, rasionalitas hukum, dan ketatanegaraan. Kajian ini berkontribusi pada studi modernisme Islam dengan menyoroti pembentukan peran intelektual publik modern, serta menjadi landasan bagi studi komparatif atas Rashid Rida dan perdebatan kontemporer tentang reformasi, tata kelola, dan partisipasi kewargaan dalam masyarakat Muslim.*

**Keywords:** Muhammad ‘Abduh; civilization; tamaddun; reformism; political philosophy; early journalism; Islamic modernism

## Introduction

Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905) is a pivotal figure in the development of modern Islamic thought. He is often associated with a reform movement, known as "modernist Salafism" (Lauzière, 2016), which includes, among other figures, his mentor, Jamāl al-Din al-Afghānī (1838–1897), and his disciple, Muḥammad Rashid Riḍā (1865–1935). The designation of the movement derives from the claim to restore pristine Islam as it was practiced by the “pious ancestors” (*as-salaf aṣ-ṣāliḥ*) (Jomier, 1954; ‘Abduh, 2002).<sup>1</sup> This designation, however, is misleading as it overlooks ‘Abduh’s extensive

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<sup>1</sup> The term is usually used in reference to the first three generations of Muslims who lived after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. However, for ‘Abduh, it includes the scholars of the first four centuries of the formative period of Islam.

engagement with diverse intellectual traditions within Islam, including mystical and rationalist strands of Islamic philosophy and theology, which he sought to revive in response to the intellectual backwardness of Muslim societies (Scharbrodt, 2022). The political and military weakness of the Muslim world and its experience of European colonial intrusion could only be overcome if Islam recuperated its former strength by rationalizing Islamic beliefs and practices and countering the blind adherence to the scholarly traditions of the past. ‘Abduh advocated for a new direct engagement with Islam's primary sources to retrieve their essential theological and moral teachings, referring to this activity as *ijtihād* (independent reasoning), which stands in contrast to the blind imitation of past scholarly opinions (*taqlīd*).

In order to illustrate ‘Abduh's broader engagement with a diversity of Islamic intellectual traditions, this article discusses his political philosophy and its roots when he started engaging in the nascent Egyptian press from the mid-1870s onwards. When ‘Abduh embarked on a traditional Islamic education in Tanta and later at al-Azhar in Cairo, he experienced frustration with the intellectual traditionalism of both institutions. It was his encounter with al-Afghānī in 1871 that would give his intellectual endeavors a decisive turn, as he introduced ‘Abduh into the classical works of Islamic philosophy, in particular Ibn Khaldun and the genre of Islamic philosophy, particularly concerned with ethics, known as *akhlāq*. Afghani encouraged ‘Abduh to engage with modern ideas and reformist thought that began to be circulated in the Middle East at that time, and also affected intellectual debates and public discourses in Egypt. The first step was to immerse them in the rationalist and philosophical traditions of Islamic thought, in order to equip them with the ability to formulate Islamic responses to these debates and to avoid imitating European ideas, habits, and mannerisms that characterized the new modern elites that emerged in the Middle East at that time. Afghani encouraged ‘Abduh to engage with modern ideas and reformist thought that were circulating in the Middle East at the time — debates that profoundly influenced public discourse in Egypt. His pedagogical method emphasized immersing his younger disciples in the rationalist and philosophical traditions

of Islam, so that they might formulate authentically Islamic responses, rather than simply mimicking European habits and mannerisms.

Recent scholarship has considerably enriched our understanding of this intellectual formation. Oliver Scharbrodt offers a comprehensive intellectual biography, demonstrating that ‘Abduh’s thought cannot be reduced to a single, coherent doctrine but instead reflects a plurality of engagements across theology, politics, and pedagogy (Scharbrodt, 2022). Meanwhile, in the legal domain, Amir & Abdul Rahman (2025) analyze ‘Abduh’s rational hermeneutics and argue that his reinterpretation of the Qur’an provided a foundation for legal reform grounded in ethics, public welfare, and *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*. Other scholars have focused on his epistemology of reform, such as his influence on Rashid Rida, showing how ‘Abduh’s early ideas informed later reformist trajectories. Furthermore, studies of his conception of science by Amir et al. (2025) highlight how he integrated modern rationality and Islamic *maqāṣid* to propose a worldview in which reason (*‘aql*) and revelation are mutually reinforcing. Another important thread in the literature is the comparison of ‘Abduh’s modernism with that of later thinkers. Hidayah & Maghribi (2022) discuss his religio-political context alongside Fazlur Rahman, demonstrating how ‘Abduh’s reform project foreshadowed neo-modernist debates. Together, this body of scholarship reveals that ‘Abduh’s intellectual role, shaped by Afghani’s tutelage, was not merely derivative of European modernism but deeply rooted in Islamic rational and philosophical traditions. He emerges as a thinker who navigated the tension between tradition and modernity with nuance — a legacy that remains central to contemporary debates in Islamic reform and governance. This article discusses ‘Abduh’s views on civilization and their inspiration from Ibn Khaldun and his early political philosophy, which was articulated in his journalistic writings from 1876 until 1882 in the context of a growing nationalist, constitutionalist, and anti-colonialist mobilization in Egypt and the broader Middle East. The continuous fiscal dependency of Egypt on Britain and France led to the formation of a nationalist movement in which al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh were involved. In 1296/1879, al-Afghānī was expelled from Egypt, and ‘Abduh was

temporarily exiled to his hometown before he was appointed editor of the official journal *al-Waqā’i’ al-Miṣriyya* (The Egyptian Events) (Riḍā, 1905). The revolt of army officers led by Aḥmad ‘Urābī (1257-1329/1841-1911) against Franco-British dependency in 1298/1881 resulted in the British occupation of the country in 1299/1882, in the course of which ‘Abduh was exiled. Hence, the article discussed provides an important glimpse into ‘Abduh’s own maturation as a religious and political thinker when he became a public intellectual in his early years. The revolt of army officers led by Aḥmad ‘Urābī (1257-1329/1841-1911) against Franco-British dependency in 1298/1881 resulted in the British occupation of Egypt in 1299/1882, during which ‘Abduh was exiled. Hence, the article provides an important glimpse into ‘Abduh’s own maturation as a religious and political thinker when he emerged as a public intellectual in his early years.

## Methods

This study employs a qualitative, historical-philosophical methodology. Primary sources include ‘Abduh’s early journalistic writings from 1876 to 1882, especially essays published in *al-‘Urwah al-Wuthqā*, alongside letters and recorded speeches. These texts are analyzed through close reading and contextual interpretation to trace his evolving views on civilization, governance, and reform. Secondary sources comprise recent scholarship on ‘Abduh’s thought, modern Islamic reformism, and nineteenth-century Middle Eastern intellectual history. By combining textual analysis with historical contextualization, the study aims to reconstruct how ‘Abduh negotiated Islamic tradition and modern reformist ideas in response to political and social challenges.

## Discussion

## 'Abduh on Civilization

Muhammad 'Abduh moved to Cairo in 1866 during the reign of Khedive Isma'il (1830-1895) and observed the rapid modernization and transformation of Egyptian society. He completed his traditional religious education at al-Azhar and passed the final examination in 1877 (Hamada, 1945, p. 53). Despite often being at odds with the conservative religious establishment at Al-Azhar, he also began teaching there, instructing students in logic and Sunni-Ash'ari theology (Riḍā, 1931, p. 133). In 1878, 'Abduh became involved in the new secular state school system, teaching Arabic language at the Dar Al-Lisan Al-Khadawiyya (Khedivial School of Languages) and history at the Dar al-'Ulum, a teachers' training college (Riḍā, 1931, pp. 135–137). He was thereby able to witness the educational bifurcation within Egypt between religious and secular educational institutions, resulting in the emergence of a new intellectual and cultural elite that was European in its orientation and disinterested in Islamic intellectual traditions. On the other side stood an al-Azhar-trained religious establishment that failed to engage with modern ideas. Afghani's tutelage enabled 'Abduh to critique the scholastic traditionalism of the religious class while initiating the formulation of an indigenous response to the tropes of reform, development, and modernisation. Teaching rationalistic and mystical philosophy, Afghani encouraged 'Abduh to recuperate elements of the Islamic intellectual heritage that had been forgotten and to identify resonances with modern European thought, to which he introduced 'Abduh and his other Egyptian students as well. At the same time, Afghani was aware of the entrapments of European imperialism, whose *modus operandi*, under the British, he had directly experienced in India and whose first inklings were observable in Egypt.

'Abduh, in one of his first journalistic pieces of 1877, connects his own engagement with the rationalistic streams of Islamic thought, whether in philosophy or theology, with the need to acquire modern sciences. Expertise in rationalist Islamic thought is needed to acquire the intellectual skills to base knowledge claims on “proofs (*barāhin*)” and “clear rational evidences (*al-adilla al-'aqliyya al-qat'iyya*)” ('Abduh, 1993c, p. 15). In addition, reviving

these Islamic rationalist traditions paves the way for adopting "the useful new sciences" ('Abduh, 1993c, p. 18), that have come from Europe, rather than defending any sense of religious, cultural, or intellectual authenticity against European influences, 'Abduh argues that the cultural and intellectual exchange between Egypt and Europe needs to intensify for the development and modernization of the country. Acquiring such sciences is essential for "the protection of our nation (*millatinā*), our state (*dawlatinā*) and our religion (*dīninā*)" ('Abduh, 1993c, p. 20). The very "integrity of Islam (*bayḍat al-islām*)" ('Abduh, 1993c, p. 21) is at stake, appealing in particular to the conservative religious establishment of Al-Azhar that refuses to engage with modern thought. Yet, unlike many of his European-educated Egyptian contemporaries who had lost interest in the Islamic intellectual heritage, 'Abduh seeks to embed the engagement with modern European sciences with an equally important foundation in rationalist Islamic thought.

This conflation of modern thought with antecedents in the Islamic tradition is also visible in his reception of European discourses around civilizational progress. While teaching at Dar Al-'Ulum, 'Abduh used the *Muqaddima* by the prominent North African historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) as a textbook for his history lessons (Amīn, 1948, p. 292).<sup>2</sup> Ibn Khaldun's historiography seeks to explain historical developments and the environmental, political, social, cultural, and economic factors that cause "the differences between peoples (*umam*), places and eras regarding their conduct, manners, customs, creeds, doctrines and other conditions (*aḥwāl*)" (Khaldūn, 2003, p. 115). A particular interest of his lies in the rise and fall of a dynasty (*dawla*). Like human beings, dynasties have a lifespan that rises, reaches its peak, and eventually declines to be replaced by another dynasty. An important element deciding the political success of a ruling dynasty is, for Ibn Khaldun, the concept of *ʿaṣabiyya*. Originating from a sense of tribal solidarity

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<sup>2</sup> Based on these lessons, 'Abduh penned a book on the science of society and civilisation (*ʿilm al-ijtimāʿ wa-l-ʿumrān*), which, however, has been lost.

among nomads (*badū*), Ibn Khaldun uses this term to designate any form of social solidarity or cohesion that binds people together into a community, which can be based on kinship, locality, or religion. Strong social bonds within a community are central to achieving and sustaining power (*mulk*), and their weakening results in losing one's grip on power and in the disintegration of a dynasty to be replaced by another one with a stronger sense of *ʿaṣabiyya* (Khaldūn, 2003, pp. 254–273). Ibn Khaldun's "theory of history is neither cyclical nor evolutionary, but wave-like: the rise and decline of dynasties repeats itself again and again, driven by the same basic forces" (Black, 2011, p. 182).

*ʿAṣabiyya* is the driving force behind obtaining power (*mulk*) and forming dynastic rule (*dawla*) in a process that occurs within two basic social modes of human civilisation (*ʿumrān*): rural-pastoral society (*badāwa*) and urban-sedentary society (*ḥaḍāra*). While social mores in cities are more refined, sophisticated, complex, and, in this sense, more civilised, Ibn Khaldun attributes a stronger sense of *ʿaṣabiyya* to tribal nomads who dwell outside of cities. Urban centres are the natural seats of power, but the more refined urban lifestyle with its distractions and luxuries undermines *ʿaṣabiyya* and initiates the decline of a ruling dynasty. Pastoral nomads are unruly, and their strong tribal solidarity propels them to seek power and replace a declining dynasty, which dwells in the city, by forming their own dynasty. The dichotomy between *badāwa* and *ḥaḍāra* helps to explain the rise of the Arab-Muslim empire, when Islam gave Arab tribes a new sense of *ʿaṣabiyya* that allowed them to conquer their neighbouring empires, or the Mongol conquest of the Middle East, whose aftermath Ibn Khaldun directly witnessed (Lawrence, 2015). It equally reflects his immediate geographical origin in North Africa, where nomadic tribes conquered cities and established themselves as rulers, forming various dynasties that followed one after another.

Ibn Khaldun's discourse "on the rise of states (*duwwal*) and their downfall, on matters of civilisation (*ʿumrān*) and on its principles within its nation (*ummatiḥī*)" (Riḍā, 1931, p. 136), informed by 'Abduh's views but gained a

particular evolutionary reading. Civilisation (*tamaddun* or *madaniyya*) became one of the key terms shaping government policies under Khedive Isma'il, influencing broader reformist discourses and intellectual debates in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire at that time (Zachs, 2005). Civilization was considered to have originated in Europe. It was associated with modernizing reforms, progress, and Enlightenment thought by government officials who undertook educational missions to Europe or graduated from the newly established state schools (Haddad, 2003, pp. 169–170). 'Abduh, in his early journalistic writings, also uses civilization (*tamaddun*) in this sense ('Abduh, 1993e, pp. 38–41). He praises the Khedive Isma'il for his efforts to expand modern education across the country, extending invitations to foreigners to teach in newly-established educational institutions and his support of publishing literature and newspapers following the example of European rulers in the past, "who had risen in the dissemination of civilisation (*nashr al-tamaddun*) in their domains" ('Abduh, 1993a, p. 19). Furthermore, the successful implementation of such reform initiatives requires increasing relations between Egypt and "the civilized nations (*al-umam al-mutamadduna*)" ('Abduh, 1993a, p. 18), namely European countries.

Ibn Khaldun introduces the distinction between nomadic Bedouins (*badū*) and sedentary city-dwellers (*madanī*, derived from *madīna*, meaning "city"), and uses the term *tamaddun* to denote the urbanization of nomadic tribes – the process of their sedentarization in urban settlements, which occurs when they achieve power and form more complex socio-political structures (Khaldūn, 2003, p. 85). Before Ibn Khaldun, Persianate Islamic philosophers, such as Nasir al-Din Tusi (1201–1274), similarly linked *tamaddun* to urbanization, but emphasized that it denotes a particular social organization (*jam'iyatī*) among city dwellers. It reflects the idea that human beings are civic (*madanī*) by nature, possessing the need to form a social organization called civilization (*tamaddun*) (Ahmed, 2015, pp. 463–464; al-Dīn Tūsī, 1356, pp. 251–252). 'Abduh and his contemporaries adopted the term *tamaddun* or developed the neologism *madaniyya* from *madanī*, meaning urbanized or civic, reading them in evolutionary terms that echoed nineteenth-century

notions of civilizational progress and development. They interpreted Ibn Khaldun's dichotomy between nomadic and urban culture as different stages in civilizational progress and engaged with European thinkers such as the French liberal statesman François Guizot. One of Guizot's books, which offered an evolutionary account of European history, became available in Arabic translation in 1878 and was included in Afghani's private instructions in history and politics (Guizot, 1899). Afghani also encouraged 'Abduh to write a positive review of the book ('Abduh, 1993b, pp. 23–24).

For Guizot, European civilization emerged through the combined effects of the social structure and municipal order of the Roman Empire, as well as the moral vision of Christianity, which tamed the unruly urges of Europe's "barbarians" prior to the Middle Ages (Guizot, 1899, p. 29). The politico-legal legacy of the Roman Empire and Christianity civilized their barbaric habits and attitudes, laying the groundwork for the development of European civilization (Guizot, 1899, pp. 21–36; Kohn, 2009, pp. 412–413). In 'Abduh's reading, Guizot's distinction between unruly barbaric Europe and the political and moral order of Rome and Christianity resonates with Ibn Khaldun's distinction between *badāwa* and *ḥaḍāra* – but only to a certain extent. While for Ibn Khaldun both social modes stand in perpetual tension with one another leading to the rise and fall of dynasties throughout history, 'Abduh places these social modes in an evolutionary sequence: from more primitive social formations around tribes (*qabā'il*) to more complex societies around nations (*umam*) and peoples (*shu'ūb*) which require more sophisticated structures of authority and leadership to transcend the anarchic structure of tribal societies determined by sheer force ('Abduh, 1993b, pp. 308–309). Politics emerged based on law (*qānūn*) and order (*niẓām*) ('Abduh, 1993b, p. 309) which provide security and stability and a socio-political environment that brings "the advantages of civilisation (*maḥāsīn al-ḥaḍāra*)" (Ahmed, 2015, pp. 464–467; 'Abduh, 1993b, p. 310). In 'Abduh's combined reading of Guizot and Ibn Khaldun, *tamaddun* shifts from merely denoting sedentism to representing civilizational progress. What is particularly innovative in 'Abduh's appropriation of Ibn Khaldun is his evolutionary reinterpretation of

the *badāwa*–*ḥaḍāra* distinction: unlike earlier reformist readings, which often emphasized moral or religious renewal alone, ‘Abduh situates social evolution within a structured historical sequence that moves from tribal societies to more complex nations and peoples, linking political authority and social order to civilizational development. While Guizot highlights the civilizing role of Christianity in early medieval Europe, ‘Abduh adapts the conceptual tools of pre-modern Islamic practical philosophy—rooted in Aristotelian notions of politics—to frame a systematic understanding of how societies form, maintain law and order, and progress, without relying directly on Islamic scriptural sources. This approach allowed him to bridge classical Islamic thought, historical analysis, and modern notions of social evolution, making his reading distinct among nineteenth-century reformers.

### **‘Abduh’s Early Political Philosophy and Its Roots**

In 1879, ‘Abduh became editor of the official journal *al-Waḳā’i’ al-Miṣriyya* (*The Egyptian Events*), which was established in 1828 to publish governmental policies. The Egyptian prime minister, Riyad Pasha (1836-1911), intended to change the nature of this journal from merely announcing decrees of the khedive and governmental departments to a forum in which political, social, cultural, and religious ideas are discussed and the modernisation policies of the government are communicated to the educated elite of the country. After having read ‘Abduh’s articles in *Al-Ahram* and following the recommendation of some fellow young Azharis, Riyad invited him to become co-editor and later editor-in-chief of the journal (Hamada, 1945, p. 65; Riḍā, 1931, pp. 175–181). Riyad was sceptical towards radical changes and sought a gradual implementation of reforms (Amīn, 1948, p. 296), a top-down approach as adopted by bureaucrats in their modernisation efforts in the Ottoman Empire.

As editor of the official journal, ‘Abduh was allowed some editorial freedom and had his own journalistic space to comment on educational, social, economic, and political issues outside of the official announcements from various state departments that the journal published. For instance, he

condemned certain popular Sufi rituals ('Abduh, 1993l, pp. 51–57). and engaged in one article with the question of polygamy and its social harm, advocating a preference for monogamous marriages as implicitly encouraged by the Qur'an ('Abduh, 1993g, pp. 76–81). He also penned a number of articles on various political issues, which give insights into the development of his political ideas on the eve and during the 'Urabi Revolution. These articles constitute 'Abduh's earliest political writings, which reflect and resonate with ideas discussed by Afghani and other intellectuals a few years earlier and are therefore the best avenue to understand his political ideas at this stage of his life and the manner in which he articulated these ideas within the restored autocracy of the new Khedive Tawfiq, who became ruler of Egypt in 1879.

In his first year as editor of the official journal, 'Abduh supported the top-down modernising reforms and provided journalistic justification for the approach that Riyad embodied. In line with this commitment, several of his articles emphasize the respect and implementation of "the rule of law (*ḥukm al-qānūn*)" ('Abduh, 1993h, p. 304), as a central source for a country's prosperity:

The law (*al-qānūn*) is the secret of life and the pillar of the happiness of nations (*sa'ādat al-umam*). Power does not yield any real fruits unless it is supported by following the revelation (*al-shar'*) and the general law (*al-qānūn*), which intellectuals have established as a necessity ('Abduh, 1993d, p. 311).

'Abduh rebukes "the mistake of intellectuals" ('Abduh, 1993k, p. 323), who seek to adopt European socio-political models of state and governance without Egyptian society being ready for them. These intellectuals treat Egypt like a European country and seek to impose principles and laws that lack the necessary social basis to be effectively implemented. Abduh cites the democratic governance of the US as a positive example, with fundamental freedoms guaranteed by law and regular elections held to ensure the peaceful transfer of power. However, such a political system would not work in a country like Afghanistan, which has not reached the degree of civilisational development that would make the US political system feasible. Bringing a country like Afghanistan to the level of development of the US would take

centuries (*qurūn*) ('Abduh, 1993k, p. 326). Using Afghanistan as a comparative example is a veiled reference to Egypt, which is not yet ready for democratic political systems as they exist in Europe and North America, in 'Abduh's view (Radler, 2010, pp. 109–110).

'Abduh's rejection of premature socio-political reforms provides intellectual support to the reformist agenda of Prime Minister Riyad, who was skeptical of radical changes and preferred a gradual approach to the modernization of the Egyptian state and society, ultimately led by the khedive and his government. Equally, for 'Abduh, different legal systems and the socio-political orders they establish are ultimately rooted "in the difference within the conditions of nations (*bi-ikhtilāf aḥwāl al-umam*)" ('Abduh, 1993i, p. 337). Here, he adopts Ibn Khaldun's terminology but provides it with an evolutionary reading: Egyptian society as a whole does not yet possess the moral and intellectual capacity (*isti'dād*) to implement successfully the democratic reforms certain intellectuals had demanded (Kerr, 1966, p. 135; 'Abduh, 1993j, p. 329). Law, as the source of socio-political order, reflects the moral and intellectual capacity of a particular society, which equally informs the legislative process: "The laws of every nation emerge in relation to its degree of cognition (*'irfān*), and the laws differ based on how nations differ in ignorance (*jahāla*) and knowledge (*'ilm*)" ('Abduh, 1993i, p. 338). It is clear from these expositions that 'Abduh accepts European-style socio-political reforms because of inherent cultural differences. On the contrary, he finds the achievements of European and North American political culture worthy of emulation. However, he suggests that Egyptian society is not yet prepared to implement such a political culture, its legal basis, and institutional manifestations (Hourani, 1983, p. 137). Establishing such a political culture, grounded in the rule of law and commitment to the common good, must therefore proceed gradually, through raising educational levels, encouraging social activism, and developing political consciousness ('Abduh, 1993k, p. 335). Notably, some scholars have questioned whether 'Abduh's gradualism reflected a genuine intellectual judgment or a strategic compromise under political constraints, such as censorship and his position within state-affiliated

journals. While his writings emphasize the evolutionary capacities of society, the cautious tone and avoidance of confrontation with authorities suggest that pragmatic considerations may have shaped how boldly he could advocate reform publicly. Thus, his gradualism can be read both as a theoretically grounded approach to societal development and as a politically circumscribed strategy.

In these articles, 'Abduh assumes the role of a modern public intellectual, using the printing press as a vehicle to disseminate his ideas. At the same time, this modern public role is informed by the traditional mandate of an Islamic philosopher, who imparts moral guidance to society or at least seeks to direct attention to proper moral conduct. The intellectual elitism of classical Islamic philosophy is also visible in his writings: 'Abduh assigns to the country's elite—using the Qur'anic designation "those firm in knowledge (*al-rāsikhūn fī l-ilm*)" ('Abduh, 1993k) – —the particular mandate to guide society towards civilization (*tamaddun*) and to develop solutions for its economic, social, and political problems ('Abduh, 1993f, p. 319). —the particular mandate to guide society towards civilization (*tamaddun*) and to develop solutions for its economic, social, and political problems ('Abduh, 1993j, p. 332) In Europe, there remain role models with which Egypt should seek rapprochement, as their laws derive from the same universal principles that Islamic philosophers appeal to. These shared roots in universal rationality facilitate cultural cross-fertilization between Europe and the Arab-Muslim world. Universal reason, in 'Abduh's view, underpins "the real unity of humanity," whereas abandoning rationally anchored morality has undermined this unity: "Its [humanity's] original innate disposition (*fiṭratuhū al-salīma*) has turned to manners that do not have any relation to its sacred and honourable essence" ('Abduh, 1993d, p. 309). However, in emphasizing the moral and intellectual leadership of an educated elite, 'Abduh largely neglects popular agency. The transformative role of ordinary citizens or collective social movements receives little attention; societal progress is framed as dependent on the guidance of those "firm in knowledge." While this approach reflects a belief in the universal applicability of reason, it also limits the scope of public participation. It

reduces the capacity of non-elite actors to influence socio-political and moral reforms. In effect, the vision of civilizational advancement in these articles remains top-down, mediated through intellectual elites rather than broadly shared civic engagement.

This emphasis on the primacy of ethical development and its rational foundation resonates more with an approach to ethics espoused by the genre of ethical literature during the 'Abbasid period. This literature engages with ethics and manners, known as *ādāb*, and focuses on the development of individual morality. Ethicists like Ibn Miskawayh (923-1020) sought to balance the needs of the soul with those of the body to achieve moral perfection, connecting individual welfare and the acquisition of virtues to make society as a whole more virtuous and prosperous (Fakhry, 1998; Haddad, 2003, pp. 129–130; Miskawayh, 1802, pp. 65–71; Rosenthal, 2007, pp. 288–289). Ibn Miskawayh articulates how his views are informed by Aristotle – although he disagrees with the Greek philosopher in every respect when it comes to establishing the conditions for human happiness. 'Abduh was well aware of his works, such as *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* (Refinement of Manners), which he taught in *Dar al-'Ulum*. It is necessary for society and its individual members to seek self-improvement in intellectual and moral terms to advance society and achieve civilizational progress, which, as presented as part of the unchangeable laws of history, is evident if one studies the rise and fall of different nations and communities ('Abduh, 1993f, pp. 315; 320). Echoing Ibn Khaldun again, but reading him in light of the social evolutionary thought of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the political decline of a state is preceded by the intellectual and moral decay within society. To regain political power, social cohesion needs to be strengthened, a renewed sense of *'aṣabiyya*. The primary means to achieve this is through the proper implementation of the law, the collective internalization of its spirit, and the creation of a virtuous society. Such a society overcomes differences and conflict and establishes "unity and concord" (Miskawayh, 1802, p. 111; 'Abduh, 1993d, p. 311).

As a political commentator, 'Abduh is not concerned with ensuring that Islam governs all aspects of individual and social life but is more interested in

raising the ethical consciousness of individuals to direct their efforts to the general welfare of society (Haddad, 2003, pp. 141–147). The discourse in these articles is utilitarian and lacks any significant engagement with Islamic sources of authority and theories of governance. The primary concern is the implementation of state law (*qānūn*), with little attention paid to the relevance of Islamic law (*sharīʿa*) and its role in shaping an Islamic socio-political order. The Arabic term *qanun* denotes the discretionary legal authority of the ruler and was used in relation to "laws primarily based on reason and custom" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 460), made by the ruler. In 'Abduh's reading, it includes the legislative authority of the khedive and his government, which is the legal foundation of "the civil order for a nation (*al-niẓām al-madanī li-umma*)" ('Abduh, 1993i, p. 342). *Qanun* is distinct from Islamic law (*sharīʿa*), which is formulated by the legal scholars (*fuqahā*). Both types of law (*qānūn* and *shar*) complement each other and are necessary for the state and society to function, as 'Abduh alludes to as well (Ahmed, 2015, pp. 456–461; 'Abduh, 1993d, p. 311). However, his primary concern is the development of a legal order that advances Egypt's civilizational progress – a task given to and exercised by the Egyptian ruler and his government.

The existence of laws alone is not sufficient: to be effective, the spirit behind them needs to be internalised by increasing the moral and intellectual capacity of members of society through an expansion of education. It needs to instil within society a concern for common welfare, and prosperity is also articulated on proto-nationalist terms in two articles that Abduh wrote about patriotism (*waṭaniyya*). His interest in this term also resonated with contemporaneous intellectual discourses in Syria that equated being civilized (*mutamaddin*) with love for one's homeland (*waṭan*) (Zachs, 2006, pp. 72–73). Members of society with the appropriate intellectual insights and moral constitution will seek prosperity for the entire country (*waṭan*) rather than pursuing the limited interests of their own social group, community or class: "Patriotism (*al-waṭaniyya*) is nothing else but pure love for one's country (*al-maḥabba li-l-waṭan*) which raises the effort with complete exertion to embrace what brings progress and salvation" ('Abduh, 1993f, p. 318).

In these articles, during the first year of his tenure as editor of the official journal *al-Waqā'i' al-Miṣriyya*, 'Abduh seems to endorse the autocratic leadership reasserted by the new Khedive Tawfiq and enforced by his prime minister Riyad. The law, as issued by the ruling authority, needs to be implemented and followed. The focus of government policies needs to be on developing education to prepare society for further socio-political reforms. 'Abduh criticises Europeanised intellectuals for their superficial emulation of European culture and their unrealistic demands for radical change – in contrast to the more measured approach of Riyad. Nevertheless, a closer reading of these articles suggests various instances of semantic ambiguity that allow for different readings without challenging the existing political order under which he had to operate as a public intellectual writing for an official state journal. Abduh does not consider the degree of development and civilisation Europe represents to be unattainable or foreign to Arab-Muslim societies. On the contrary, these achievements that distinguish Europe are rooted in the same intellectual forces that are central to Islamic intellectual history, as represented by figures like Ibn Khaldun or Ibn Miskawayh, which have been forgotten and need to be retrieved. 'Abduh defends the political authority of the khedive and his government, but equally criticises forms of despotism that have marked Egypt's more recent history. Perhaps in reference to the despotic and ruthless leadership style of Muhammad Ali and his excessive use of forced state labour (*corvée*) for development projects during his reign, 'Abduh points to the antipathy people developed towards their rulers who exploited them and exercised their authority based on their whims and fancies. This experience had a detrimental effect on the political consciousness of the people, as their political oppression undermined their intellectual freedom: "With such outer and inner enslavement (*al-istirqāq al-zāhirī wa-l-bāṭinī*) will power was annihilated, freedom of choice died, and the light of thought was entirely blown out" ('Abduh, 1993k, p. 331).

The law whose virtues and benefits 'Abduh extolls repeatedly equally delimit the power of the ruler for his own benefit and for that of his subjects. By overcoming his own inclination to cling to absolute power, the ruler needs

to implement the law for the sake of his subjects' prosperity ('Abduh, 1993d, p. 312). The legislative process of "setting laws (*waḍ' al-qawānīn*)" ('Abduh, 1993i, p. 338) involves different actors and must follow specific conditions. This approach resonates with scholarship on Islamic constitutionalism, which emphasizes the interplay between law, morality, and governance. Works by scholars such as Abou El Fadl, (2004) and An-Na'im (2008) highlight that in Islamic political thought, the legitimacy of rulers is conditional upon adherence to law and the welfare of the community (*maslaha*), while law is shaped through consultation (*shūrā*) and ethical deliberation. 'Abduh's insistence on a deliberative legislative process and the involvement of both scholars and political actors aligns with these principles, reflecting an early modern articulation of a constitutionalist ethos within an Islamic framework, where legality, morality, and societal readiness are inseparable components of governance.

It also involves religious scholars (*ulamā'*) and political leaders (*siyāsiyūn*) who need to consider the customs and traditions of their society and the intellectual and moral development of its people to ensure that laws are understood, followed, and reap the benefits they seek to achieve:

The conditions of the nations themselves are the true legislator (*al-mushri' al-ḥaqīqī*) and the wise and competent guide. The ruling power follows the power of its subjects, as the former does not take any steps unless the latter can follow them ('Abduh, 1993i, p. 341).

'Abduh describes the dynamics of the legislative process in carefully crafted wording. It is not the ruler who actually possesses legislative sovereignty, but the conditions of society that determine the laws and policies a ruler can effectively implement. While 'Abduh affirms in the following sentence the rightful legislative authority of the ruler, his phrasing implicitly subverts the power dynamics by making the success of legislation dependent on the social conditions among his subjects. It can be read as a veiled reference to more constitutional forms of government. Ottoman and Egyptian reformers have advocated for legislative authority to be bestowed on representatives of the people, as they are aware of the social conditions,

knowledge of which is necessary for effective legislation. Such a conclusion is justified by the example 'Abduh cites afterwards: he describes the transition of France "from absolute to constitutional (*muqayyida*) monarchy and then to free republic (*al-jumhūriyya al-ḥurra*)" ('Abduh, 1993i, p. 342)." The transformation was not solely achieved by measures implemented by the ruling elite at the political level. However, it was made possible because of the intellectual and social transformation of French society as a whole. With statements such as these, 'Abduh does not openly challenge the existing political order but reminds us of its initial promises and of the need to aspire to a change of a political culture that restricts the absolute authority of the ruler and includes elements of political participation for the benefit of the country.

## Conclusion

This article demonstrates how Muhammad 'Abduh's early journalistic writings represent an innovative synthesis of Islamic intellectual traditions and modern reformist discourse. Unlike previous studies that frame his work primarily as an adaptation of European ideas, this study shows that 'Abduh actively reinterpreted classical sources—such as Ibn Miskawayh and Ibn Khaldun—within an evolutionary framework that aligned with nineteenth-century notions of civilization, social development, and rational morality. The novelty of this paper lies in highlighting how 'Abduh's journalistic activism served not merely to convey reformist ideals but to create a conceptual bridge between Islamic practical philosophy and emerging modern political and social thought, producing a new vocabulary for civilizational progress, statecraft, and national consciousness.

The findings have significant implications for Islamic modernist studies. They challenge the assumption that early reformers relied exclusively on European models, instead demonstrating a sophisticated engagement with indigenous intellectual traditions to frame political, legal, and moral reform. By situating *tamaddun*, *madaniyya*, *dawla*, and *ʿaṣabiyya* within an evolutionary and rationalist discourse, the study illuminates how Islamic

modernists articulated concepts of civic duty, governance, and patriotism that resonate with both historical and contemporary concerns about the moral foundations of the state.

Future research could extend this approach in several directions. Comparative studies with Rashid Rida, for instance, could reveal continuities and divergences in the conceptualization of state, society, and legal reform among different Islamic reformists. Similarly, examining how 'Abduh's framework engages with contemporary debates on political legitimacy, gradualism, and civic participation could offer insights into the enduring relevance of Islamic modernist thought in governance, constitutionalism, and public ethics. By emphasizing the active appropriation of classical Islamic sources to address modern challenges, this paper lays a foundation for understanding both the historical development of Islamic political thought and its potential applications in contemporary reform discourses.

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