Conclusion: Fitrat and Istanbul

Fitrat’s activities, in particular his contributions to debates on educational, publishing, and more generally, publicistic matters had a significant impact on the history of Bukharan and Turkestani Jadidism. Despite the importance of his contribution, the data about his early career as a public intellectual is scant. Young Fitrat was absorbed with the ideas of Islamism and believed that only true religion, sincere faith, true Islam could bring happiness and prosperity to the Muslims. In the same breath, he argued that the only way to be rescued from ignorance and backwardness lay in the mastering by Muslims of the modern “European” sciences. Fitrat initially rejected Jadidism but soon emerged as one of its leading figures in Bukhara and Russian Turkestan. The Munazara, the masterpiece among Fitrat’s texts authored during his Istanbul period, was to become a manifesto of the Jadid reformist movement in Central Asia.²⁴⁷

Fitrat was fascinated with the idea of Muslim unity – which implied the creation of a single Islamic state encompassing all Muslim lands – that could lead the Muslim nation to progress, long before his visit to Istanbul. It was the Persian-language newspaper Habulmamin that first attracted Fitrat to the milieu where these ideas were common currency, and shaped his position as a staunch supporter of a caliphate led by the Ottoman sultan, a position which solidified during his time in Istanbul due to manifold encounters with prominent Ottoman thinkers who shared this ideal.

Despite the wealthy background of his merchant father Fitrat spent most of his youth in penury. As a true Muslim, he always acted relying on divine providence. He went to Istanbul without a penny to his name and hoping for his good fortune, which is a testament to his sincere faith in God and explains the way he perceived reality and shaped his outlook on the world. Regardless of all difficulties he faced at the beginning, his stay in Istanbul not only broadened his outlook on scholarly work and political activism, but can be considered an early climax in his formation and something like a first turning point in his intellectual development.

In Istanbul, Fitrat probably volunteered to assist the Bukharan Society organization, continued to work and to study, and re-wrote earlier drafts of his written pieces. Perhaps he also attended Sufi gatherings and even took part in their ceremonies. The knowledge of Sufism he acquired in those years helped him in his later research on this subject. Subsequently, he considered himself an expert on Sufi literature and related matters.

²⁴⁷ Komatsu, Hisao. Muslim Intellectuals and Japan, p. 279.
The years spent in Istanbul benefited him in many ways. Despite his financial privations, Fitrat got access to the new and high-ranking Medrese al-Wa‘izin where he attained a profound knowledge of the history of Oriental literature, the humanities at large, and the natural sciences. This comprehensive learning imparted the gifts of clairvoyance and foreboding, gifts which allowed Fitrat to freely express his attitudes to reality and religion. By the mid-1910s he had already been shaped as a mature writer and philosopher, a truly free-thinking person.

A glance at Fitrat’s early publications in the Ottoman press reveals his eagerness, even as a newcomer to the Ottoman intellectual milieu, to share his views on the state of affairs in the Muslim world and the Bukharan Emirate in particular. During his first year in the Ottoman capital city, he came under the influence of the journal *Hikmet* run by Ahmet Hilmi, who was the most zealous proponent of Muslim political unity. Fitrat’s articles published in *Hikmet* consistently argue for reform in education to advance Muslim solidarity and union. The ‘ulama were supposed to lead the community to this goal.

*Hablulmatin, Strat-ı Müstaqim, Hikmet* and their respective editorial boards had a significant role in shaping Fitrat’s worldview and the content of his publications. Thanks to his cooperation with these newspapers and journals Fitrat became acquainted with Muhammad ‘Abduh’s intellectual legacy and the ideas of other influential contemporary Muslim scholars and thinkers. Participants of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and Russian Muslim émigrés in Istanbul also had a certain impact on his ideological stance. By moving to Istanbul Fitrat had placed himself in an intellectual milieu that was rife with various reformist ideas. This milieu was crucial in shaping him intellectually.

There are, however, some intellectual and socio-political trends of that vibrant Istanbul milieu which Fitrat did not unequivocally align himself with. While Turkism and Panturkism flourished all around him, Fitrat did not fall into line with those who advocated identity-formation on the basis of ethnicist self-attribution based on the European romanticist notion of a single mothertongue. Fitrat was—in terms of fashionable trends of his day—not decided in defining his identity or ethnic background: While reflecting on the glorious past of his ancestors he considered himself a bairn of Turkestan. However, when discussing current Muslim affairs he was counting himself among a new generation of Iranian, Persian-speaking intellectuals. The overarching identity for Fitrat was his association with Bukhara as his homeland. This loyalty superseded all his other identifications. Bukhara’s independence and territorial integrity were of paramount importance for Fitrat.

He wished to see Bukhara as an epitome of Muslim unity. Against all odds, the Bukharan people were supposed to unite, withstand their external foes, and struggle for survival. Fitrat’s ideal was the unity and consolidation of all Mus-
lims. Fitrat, while collaborating with Hikmet, shared many of its common values and directions. But at the same time he did not fully follow the stance of Hikmet on the unity of Shi'ites and Sunnis and had his own ideas concerning the future of Bukhara, which played no role in the journal.

Fitrat, like many other prominent reformists, regarded ignorance as the main affliction of the Muslims. He firmly believed that it was due to ignorance and disregard for the modern sciences that the Muslim world had fallen prey to the infidels and remained under their yoke. Common sense and sound judgement should have urged all Muslims to unite in the struggle to gain freedom. The ‘ulama were expected to guide the Muslim masses onto the right path, while the community should break free from the noxious influence of the purportedly ignorant and backward-oriented representatives of a defiled local religion, the ishans. This inconsistency within his own “unifying” claims is surprising, given the otherwise solid logics of his thinking. The ‘ulama should have propagated New-Method schools and the Muslim press, and advocated for the leadership of the Ottoman sultan over a united Muslim world. Fitrat regarded three factors to be decisive in consolidating the Muslim community and Islam: The New-Method schools were tasked with teaching a new generation of Muslims capable to withstand the assaults of the infidels. The Muslim press, through discussions of the shared problems of Muslims around the world, should prepare Muslims for confrontation and struggle against internal and external enemies. Patriotism, love for the motherland, and the political will to rise up against violence and ignorance, was the ultimate goal of all efforts. Muslims, who were hitherto divided into different sects, had to join forces to preserve the future of Islam. This was Fitrat’s vision for the future of a united Muslim world, which he pursued with his own most powerful weapon: the pen.