Al-Qasemi Journal of Islamic Studies, **volume 6, issue 2 (2022), 1-28**

Syrianism instead of Islam: The Early Development of Syrian Identity and Its Repositioning of Islam and Islamic Identity

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Abstract:

In correspondence with the Ottoman millet system, the religious aspect of an individual's identity is regarded as the primary locus of identity in the pre-modern Levant. The proposed paper will sketch the first steps in formulating a Syrian identity and aim to show that a central aspect of these advances was an effort to sideline the Islamic identity of the Sunni majority. In order to do so, the paper will point to the origins of the Syrian idea, understood as arising from the thinking of Christian missionaries, and detail its development over the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

Keywords: Syrianism, nationalism, Phonemicist, Nahda, al-Bustani

Introduction

More than a decade has passed since unrest and civil war erupted in Syria, yet the Syrian state, the Syrian borders, and the Syrian nation live on. Syrian nationalism, once thought –rightly so – to be the imposition of western colonialists and political elites, has proved to be a resilient concept, and its survival lends renewed relevance and importance to the study of its origins, aspects, and manifestations.

Another framework of identity whose centrality –never in doubt – was reiterated, is that of Islamic identity in the Arab world, most obviously signified by the election of Muslim Brotherhood parties in Egypt and Tunisia. When given

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the choice in free elections, large sections of the public in those countries signified Islam as the heart of their identity. Thus, the decades-long prominence of Islamic movements, and the centrality of Islamic identity that it suggested, were reemphasized in a moment of democracy in the Arab world.

The perseverance of Syrian nationalism and the continued centrality of Islamic identity highlight the importance of the interaction between these two distinct but connected phenomena. Accordingly, the topic to be discussed in this essay stands at their confluence. The following pages will attempt to describe and explain the origins of Syrian nationalism and the treatment of Islam and Islamic identity within the critical decades of its conception.

To better understand the topic at hand, we will begin by presenting Bilad al-Sham, and especially, the prevalent foci of identification, on the eve of modernization's gradual entrance to the region. At the end of the 18th century, the society of Greater Syria, which was ruled by the Ottomans and by local leaders on their behalf, was rigidly divided on the basis of religion. The different minority religious groups, such as the Maronites, the Greek Orthodox community, and the Jews were afforded a degree of autonomy by the state, which allowed them to manage their internal affairs. This *de jure* division based on religious affiliation, in conjunction with other barriers between each faction and its neighbors, caused the individual's religious identity to enjoy a status of primacy and dominance. One's loyalty was given to one's religious sect and its interests; an identity based on wide territorial boundaries appears not to have been present at the time.[2]

[2] Philipp, Thomas. "Identities and Loyalties in Bilad al-Sham at the Beginning of the Early Modern Period", in From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon, edited by Thomas Phillip and Christoph Shumann, (Beirut: Orient Institut, 2004), 10-22; Masters, Bruce. Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of

Next, we shall turn to the wheels of change that brought about the rise of Syria as a concept. The idea of Greater Syria as an independent political entity first originated with the conquest of Muhammad Ali in 1831, after which the area was united administratively. Along with this, minorities were gradually given equal rights, a development that, together with the protection of Western powers, gave rise to a Christian middle class able to give thought to the economic and social situation of its community, as well as to that of the greater society. Consideration of their position within the Sunni majority gained special urgency after waves of Muslim violence broke out against minority communities in response to their rising stature. These tentative first steps towards local political thought found a suitable partner in concepts of nationalism and historical research on national history, to which local Christian intellectuals were exposed as the presence and influence of Western powers grew.[3]

Of particular influence in this regard were the American missionaries. Arriving in Bilad al-Sham in the first decades of the 19th century, the Americans brought with them a clear concept of a territory called "Syria," to which was

Sectarianism, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001, 39-66; Groiss, Arnon. "Communalism as a Factor in the Rise of the Syria Idea in the 1800s and the Early 1900s", in The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories, Pioneers and Identity, edited by Adel Beshara, (London: Routledge, 2011), 30-34.

[3] Philipp, Thomas. "Bilad al-Sam in the Modern Period: Integration into the Ottoman Empire and New Relations with Europe", Arabica, vol. 51, no. 4 (Oct., 2004), 416; Philipp, "Identities and Loyalties in Bilad al-Sham at the Beginning of the Early Modern Period", 17, 25; Beshara, Adel. Introduction to The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories Pioneers and Identity, edited by Adel Beshara, (London: Routledge, 2011), 2-3; Zachs, Fruma. "Towards a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria? Revisiting the American Presbyterian Missionaries in the Nineteenth-Century Levant", Die Welt Des Islams, New Series 41, Issue 2 (Jul., 2001), 149-151.

attached an image of a magnificent past and a corresponding vision for the future. It was under their tutelage that the idea of a Syrian nation and homeland first found expression. Importantly, it was within the American sphere that the position of Islam within Syrian history and national identity was first addressed and designated an outside element.[4]

Among the American missionaries' proteges was Butrus al-Bustani, one of the fathers of Syrian nationalism, whose vision for Bilad al-Sham will stand at the heart of the third chapter. A Protestant convert, al-Bustani's conception of Syrian identity constituted a step forward from that of his predecessors, some of whom believed in an exclusively Christian Syrianism. In contrast, al-Bustani offered a Syrian identity based solely on territorial boundaries. Al-Bustani sought to offer an identity which glorified in Syrian antiquity, prided itself on its Arab culture, and championed loyalty to Syria in its entirety, instead of sectarian solidarity.[5] Despite its growth in a Christian environment, al-Bustani's proposal offered to reembrace Islam as a part of Syrian identity; however, this came at the expense of its primacy.

Next, we shall turn to the Phoenician movement within the Syrian framework, a product of the efforts of French imperialists and local Christian intellectuals, in this case patronized by the French. The proponents of Phoenicism sought to mold a local national identity based on a national Phoenician heritage, which was the supposed basis of a Syro-Phoenician nation.

[4] Zachs, "Towards a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria? Revisiting the American Presbyterian Missionaries in the Nineteenth-Century Levant", 145-173.

[5] Ibid., 161-173; Abu-Manneh, Butrus. "The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism: The Ideas of Butrus Al-Bustani", International Journal of Middle East Studies, vol. 11, no. 3 (May, 1980), 287-300.

In so doing, they aspired to push Muslim and Arab elements outside the fold of Syrian identity and create a state deeply linked to Western states and culture.[6]

Bilad al-Sham on the Eve of a New Era: Geopolitics, Identity, and Winds of Change

At the beginning of the 19th century, under Ottoman rule, Bilad al-Sham was divided into three central administrative provinces: Damascus, Sidon, and Aleppo (it should be noted that the division of Greater Syria into provinces changed many times, but that holds no meaning for the topic at hand, and this division should suffice to explain the situation at the time). These provinces were ruled by governors acting on behalf of the Ottoman sultan and under his protection. It is important to note, however, that while the empire acted as a source of legitimacy for the governors, its actual power in the region was minimal.[7] Over the 18th century, local families of stature gradually solidified their position, as they transferred power from one generation to the next. Surrounding these families, an urban elite developed, which was given political and administrative roles.[8]

[6] Kaufman, Asher. Reviving Phoenicia: The Search for Identity in Lebanon, I. B. Tauris: London, 2004, 1-108; Kaufman, Asher. "The Phoenician Ideology in Syria: Roots and Birth Pangs", Hamizrah Hehadash, vol. 38 (Fall, 1997), pp. 65-82, (Hebrew).

[7] Philipp, "Identities and Loyalties in Bilad al-Sham at the Beginning of the Early Modern Period", 11.

[8] Hourani, Albert. A History of the Arab Peoples, MJF Books: New York, 1991, 249-256.

In this administratively divided state, it was religious affiliation that acted as an individual's central and dominant source of personal identity.[9] Divisions along factional lines were such that when, in 18th century Damascus, a Muslim chronicler and a Christian chronicler wrote of their city's history throughout the century, they treated other groups and their members almost entirely as if they did not exist.[10] A majority of the region's residents were Sunni Muslims, but many minority groups lived alongside them in significant numbers, containing many members who would go on to play key roles in the formation of Syrian identity in the 19th and 20th centuries. Two groups are particularly worthy of mention, both because of their size and their importance: the Druze and the Christians. The latter group was divided into several denominations, of which the most important to our topic were the Maronites, a christologically unique eastern church.[11]

Several key factors contributed to the centrality of religious identity in the region. First, the long-held Ottoman policy of allowing different groups a certain degree of autonomy led to a factional divide. At an early stage, the autonomy of the factions was limited and supervised by a Muslim *qadi*. Later, in the 18th and 19th centuries, it developed into the millet system, under which each religious group constituted a legally separate "nation," controlled by a religious leader who managed its internal affairs and ensured the constituents' loyalty to the sultan, as well as the fulfillment of their tax obligations.[12] A second

[9] Philipp, "Identities and Loyalties in Bilad al-Sham at the Beginning of the Early Modern Period", 21-22; Masters, Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World, 39-40.

[10] Philipp, "Identities and Loyalties in Bilad al-Sham at the Beginning of the Early Modern Period", 10.

[11] Masters, Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World, 43.

[12] Masters, Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World, 61-66.

contributing factor was that many of the factions tended to congregate in areas where they were a substantial minority. Moreover, some – such as the Maronites – concentrated in remote areas where they enjoyed almost total independence from the Ottoman empire, and where they could live according to their beliefs and traditions, largely disconnected from the Muslim-Ottoman world.[13] Third, the discrimination suffered by non-Muslims under the Ottoman empire played a part in creating mental segregation. The level of discrimination differed from place to place and from period to period, but broadly speaking, non-Muslims suffered from constant, noticeably harmful discrimination. To this, one can add violent outbursts by the Muslim majority against its neighboring minorities, which contributed to the sense of division as well.[14]

While one's religious identity was central, the question remains whether the area's residents had a territorially based sense of identity. Until the 19th century, it appears that the wider territorial context of the Middle East played no part in one's identity. Unlike those in Western societies, it seems that as a rule, individuals in the region felt no sense of belonging nor loyalty to the farther borders of their place of residence, such as a connection to one's *vilayet* or geographical region.[15] Naturally, this was true for the residents of Bilad al-Sham as well; in the Shami context, this was further emphasized by the fact that the region was rarely politically or administratively unified throughout its history.[16]

[13] Ibid., 42-60; Groiss, "Communalism as a Factor in the Rise of the Syria Idea in the 1800s and the Early 1900s", 33; Abu-Manneh, "The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism: The Ideas of Butrus Al-Bustani", 287-288.

[14] Groiss, "Communalism as a Factor in the Rise of the Syria Idea in the 1800s and the Early 1900s", 33-34.

[15] Ibid., 30.

[16] Ibid., 32.

At the same time, a narrowly focused territorial identity was present, manifested by a sense of connection to a village or city and its close environs. This element of identity received a certain amount of religious Islamic support from the famous hadith "Ḥubb al-Waṭan min al-Īmān," which was represented as supporting feelings of loyalty towards an individual's place of birth and residence.[17] This sense of connection likely benefited from the existence of regions that acted as relatively self-contained social and economic units. These regions, termed "locally integrated regions" by Philipp, maintained – at levels differing from one area to the next – relatively independent economic units, together with a regional social fabric which included a local elite.[18] The contribution of such an arrangement to the development and significance of local identities is clear. Nevertheless, two aspects of this phenomenon should be emphasized. First, at this point, this local sense of identity lacked a political stratum. Second, the sense of belonging to a particular locale did not extend to feelings of loyalty towards the region's residents as a collective.[19]

With these elements of identity and politics acting as a point of departure, a set of factors came together to drive change and lay the groundwork for the growth of a wider identity, based on belonging to the territorial unit of Greater Syria. Of revolutionary impact was the conquest of the region by Egypt's Muhammad Ali in the first half of the 19th century. Under the rule of Ali and his son, Ibrahim Pasha, Greater Syria (with the exclusion of Mount Lebanon) was unified administratively, and thus was planted the idea that its geographical

[17] Ibid., 30-32.

[18] For more information see: Philipp, "Identities and Loyalties in Bilad al-Sham at the Beginning of the Early Modern Period", 10-18.

[19] Groiss, "Communalism as a Factor in the Rise of the Syria Idea in the 1800s and the Early 1900s", 32.

boundaries could be relevant and successful as political borders. An added consequence of the Egyptian conquest was the drawing of Western attention to the Levant. Increased contact with Westerners, such as missionaries and traders, introduced to the psyche of the local population the Western concept of the region as "Syria," a land of antique glory. These agents of the Western worldview and its interests brought with them new technology and new ideas, a topic on which I will expound in the following chapters.[20]

The Egyptian regime implemented another change that proved influential: greater equality for religious minorities. Ibrahim Pasha, during his tenure as Greater Syria's ruler, advanced a policy of tolerance towards the land's minority groups, while also allowing Europeans and Americans greater freedom in the region.[21] Following in his footsteps, the Ottomans, after regaining control in 1840, began a two-decade long process of legal reforms, the Tanzimat, whose goal was to carry the empire into modernity. A central element of the reforms was the construction of a new Ottoman civic identity, to be shared by the empire's entire population, regardless of religious affiliation. This newly crafted citizenship carried with it both equal rights and duties for all members of society. In this manner, in less than half a century, Muslim Ottomans lost their privileged status, along with its attendant benefits, such as an exemption from the yearly tax. In tandem with this, the influence of Western powers within the empire grew,

[20] Philipp, "Identities and Loyalties in Bilad al-Sham at the Beginning of the Early Modern Period", 17, 25; Beshara, Introduction to The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories Pioneers and Identity, 2-3.

[21] Zachs, "Towards a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria? Revisiting the American Presbyterian Missionaries in the Nineteenth-Century Levant", 150-151.

and the Christian (and sometimes Jewish) communities under their wing enjoyed economic privileges and a measure of protection from the authorities.[22]

These legal changes gave rise to several relevant developments. A combination of relief from discrimination directed at minorities in the Ottoman empire, together with the privileges afforded to the Christian proteges of the European powers, who grew gradually more powerful throughout the empire, and the partnership between local and European Christians that long pre-dated the Tanzimat, all led to a substantial improvement in the position of many local Christians.[23] In the port cities, socially and economically influential Christian cliques arose, circles that would later be key to cultural developments in the region.[24] For the Muslim majority, these changes, which were made in defiance of Shari'a and the stipulations of the Pact of Umar, along with a notable increase in the presence and influence of the West and its representatives, were seen as spiritual and material threats to their way of life. In light of the relations between the Europeans and the local Christians, the latter were marked as collaborators with the foreigners at the expense of their Muslim neighbors, collaborators who might even prove to be allies of the West in the eventuality of a war against Islam. Chagrin on the part of Muslims was strengthened by the freedoms taken by the emancipated Christians, who displayed their newfound liberty by building new churches and performing religious rituals in the public sphere. Finally, Muslim rage erupted in a string of massacres, the deadliest of which took place

[22] Masters, Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World, 131-140.

[23] Ibid., 141-145.

[24] Zachs, "Towards a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria? Revisiting the American Presbyterian Missionaries in the Nineteenth-Century Levant", 149-150.

in Damascus in 1860, and ended with the deaths of hundreds, and possibly thousands, of local Christians.[25]

These developments naturally caused sectarian tensions, already on the rise since the first of half the century, to deepen.[26] For the first time, local Christians were perceived as "the other" by their Muslim neighbors.[27] The Christians, in turn, responded to the violence in several ways. Relevant to this discussion are the developments regarding identity and collective consciousness: within the framework of the awakening Syrian identity, two approaches were created. The first excluded Muslims from the Syrian collective, stating that the "true" Syrians were the region's Christian residents. This was part of an attempt to separate from the wider population, preserve their religious communal identity, and ensure their sectarian interests. A second approach chose what could be described as the opposite path and strove to lay a territorially centered Syrian identity as a shared basis that would allow Syrians to bridge the factional divisions. In effect, it pushed for a Syrian national identity.[28] Before expanding on these matters, we will first address in depth an additional essential element—the spread of Christian missionaries and their influence.

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[25] Groiss, "Communalism as a Factor in the Rise of the Syria Idea in the 1800s and the Early 1900s", 34-35; Masters, Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World, 156-165.

[26] For more on the rise of sectarian tension, see Francioch's detailed survey: Francioch, Gregory A. Nationalism in Ottoman Greater Syria 1840-1914: The Divisive Legacy of Sectarianism, Naval Postgraduate School: California, 2008.

[27] Zachs, The Making of a Syrian Identity, 7.

[28] Zisser, Eyal. "The Mediterranean Idea in Syria: Between Territorial Nationalism and Pan-Arabism", Mediterranean Historical Review, vol. 18, issue 1 (2003), 79-80; Groiss, "Communalism as a Factor in the Rise of the Syria Idea in the 1800s and the Early 1900s", 36-39.

American Missionaries and a Syria, Great Again

The first American missionaries arrived in Beirut in 1823. Their primary goal was to spread the gospel of "true" Protestant Christianity to the local community, including to the region's Christians, who belonged to the Eastern or Catholic churches. Unlike their British, French, and Russian counterparts, the Americans did not seek to further imperial ambitions in tandem with their religious aspirations. Nevertheless, it appears that a sense of cultural superiority, characteristic of many Westerners who came in contact with non-Western cultures, colored their attitude toward the local population. Accordingly, they sought to spread elements of American and Western culture, not only the "true" religion.[29]

Like many of the period's Occidentals, the American missionaries alighted on the Mediterranean's eastern coast with heads full of an imagined Levant constructed from several sources, which contributed to their expectations. As devout Christians, they took the Bible as their primary point of reference. In addition to the Holy Land, Syria is mentioned several times in the New Testament. These references were supplemented by the region's illustrious ancient history, as well as by travel journals that enjoyed great popularity in the West at the time. Altogether, these sources appear to have been behind their image of Greater Syria, and therefore, when they arrived, they expected to find a land worthy of its reputation. Not an eastern recreation of the West's leading modern and industrial regions, but rather a land of majesty, suitable to have served as a source of Christian civilization's central texts.[30]

[29] Zachs, The Making of a Syrian Identity, 128-130; Masters, Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World, 146-147.

[30] Zachs, "Towards a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria? Revisiting the American Presbyterian Missionaries in the Nineteenth-Century Levant", 151-153.

Their expectations ran high, and great was their despair when they met with 19th century Bilad al-Sham. The economic system in large parts of the land had yet to develop a market economy, and the transportation infrastructure left them with little more than dreams of old Roman roads. As to education, the majority of institutions were highly traditional and had no place for girls. Non-religious books were a rarity. This state of affairs shaped their path forward – it would not be enough to convert the locals to Protestantism, rather, "Historic Syria" would have to be revitalized. Hence, to meet this aspiration to create a new Syria, the missionaries drew from the land's ancient, pre-Islamic past. For some within this group, the Phoenician era was considered the region's heyday, culturally and economically, and the creation of a new Syria required restoring the land's lost glory and reconnecting it to its days of past splendor.[31]

Beyond the fact that this conception was a product of the missionaries' limited acquaintance with the region's past, it more importantly equipped them with a tool for crafting a vision of a Syria free of Islam. From their narrow historical perspective, it appeared that the region had prospered and advanced under the auspices of Christianity and had been doomed by Islam to stagnate into a traditionalist quagmire. Christianity and Western education were seen as a mirror image to Islam, which together promiseed progress and modernization. It was their belief that Christianity was responsible for the West's advancements, and so a deep connection tied the dominant religion in the West to progress. It is not surprising, therefore, that they believed it fell to local Christians to become the leaders of a revival movement.[32]

Their vision, then, was for a renewed Syria in constant dialogue with its splendid pre-Islamic past, one whose population had been Protestantized and

[31] Ibid., 153-155.

[32] Ibid., 154-157.

educated in Western values. What is no less important, in the early stages, the Arabic language became a central element in their vision, and the revival of the language was seen to be connected with the revival of the land. In their perception, Arabness wasn't connected to Islam and did not stand in contradiction to Syria's pre-Islamic past. The regional identity advanced by them among the local population included both the character of the land before the Arab conquest and the culture that developed after it, yet this constructed image was secularized as a step towards Christianization. They had a clear vision of the land's geographical boundaries and likewise of its designation as "Syria." It is important to note that although the American vision involved a shared past, shared culture, and shared territory, it did not qualify as a national image, but was instead an aspiration to create a community that would lead Greater Syria towards progress.[33]

The missionaries' activities were many and varied. A widespread educational enterprise grew rapidly over the decades, and by 1914, more than 34,000 students were enrolled in 675 schools operated by American missions. A college was founded, which later became the influential American University of Beirut. In these institutions, students were taught in Arabic as part of the emphasis on the language and its regeneration.[34]

[33] Zachs, "Towards a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria? Revisiting the American Presbyterian Missionaries in the Nineteenth-Century Levant", 154-172.

[34] Ibid., 156.

The American contribution to local education was strengthened, ironically, by motivating their rivals, the Catholic and Orthodox churches, to build competing schools. See the following by Tibawi, who argues convincingly that competition was a central reason for the founding of the Syrian Protestant College, which later become AUB:

In tandem with their educational efforts, the missionaries promoted a developing local cultural scene, which flourished as part of the Arab renaissance, the Nahda.[35] Their actions in this direction enabled them to extend their influence beyond the schoolchildren and students under their tutelage to a wider audience. In the cultural cliques that developed under their patronage one can trace the fermentation and ultimate ripening of a particularistic Syrian identity, and it is to this process we now turn.[36]

The Birth of Syria: Butrus al-Bustani and the Christian Intellectuals

Before moving forward, it would be of use at this point to explain briefly how the factors outlined above laid the foundation for the idea of a united Syria. The relevant developments can, for the sake of clarity, be divided into two paths of progression, often connected, but sometimes moving in parallel.

On one hand, the region's population, which was highly sectarian before the 19th century, became even more divided because of the rights granted to religious minorities. Growing rifts, transformed into discontent and tension, finally led to the eruption of murderous hate. Concurrently, the improvement in the legal status of the local Christians, Western patronage, and prosperity under Shihabi rule in Mount Lebanon led to the birth of a wealthy Christian clique that could analyze society around them and their position within it and look for a way

Tibawi, A. L. "The Genesis and Early History of the Syrian Protestant College", Middle East Journal, vol. 21, no. 1 (Winter, 1967), 1-15.

[35] Zachs, "Towards a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria? Revisiting the American Presbyterian Missionaries in the Nineteenth-Century Levant", 163-164.

[36] Ibid., 160-172.

forward.[37] On the other hand, the presence of Westerners and Western ideas in the Levant grew significantly. Among these ideas was that of a Syria as one, unified historic entity, as well as the concept of nationalism. These two trajectories of development came together in a community of Christian intellectuals that grew up around the American missions. The members of this group had foreknowledge of their land's ailments – multifaceted stagnation and sectarianism – and they discovered a possible means to cure them: the idea of Syria as a geographical and social unit, one that they would develop over decades.

It did not take long, once these elements were put in contact with each other, for seeds to sprout. Two intellectuals stand out as pioneers of Syrian identity, As'ad Khayyat and Gregory Wortabet. Both local Christians, the former Greek Orthodox and the latter Armenian, they were closely involved with the American mission from its first decade in the region. In their books, one can find evidence of their identification with Syria as a territorial unit and a source of identity. They call themselves Syrians and refer to the Phoenicians as their forefathers. Furthermore, Khayyat relates that he left his position with the British consulate to further the good of Syria. Thus, not only can a collective identity based on territory be found in their writings, but evidence for such ideals as patriotism, sacrifice for the sake of the homeland, and loyalty to one's homeland – all centered on Syria. In this earliest discourse, however, a distinctly Christian-centric rhetoric is employed, one which excludes local Muslims from the Syrian collective outright or does so through its attitude towards Islam.[38]

[37] For more information on the importance of developments under Shihabi rule, see: Zachs, The Making of a Syrian Identity, 28-34, 77-85, 11-38.

[38] Zachs, "Towards a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria? Revisiting the American Presbyterian Missionaries in the Nineteenth-Century Levant", 157-159; Groiss,

In his writings, Khayyat expands the Syrian umbrella to include his fellow Orthodox Christians, and possibly the members of other denominations. Muslims, however, are not part of the Syrian collective. Thus, Khayyat builds on a prevalent belief that an ethnic difference existed between Christians and Muslims living in Syria, and that of the two, it was the Christian communities that preserved an ethnic tie to the Syrians of old.[39] Wortabet, in his famous book *Syria and the Syrians*, frames a more inclusive definition of the Syrian collective, but his characterizations of Islam and its believers serves to exclude his Muslim neighbors. "Islamism is, and unless regenerated will ever remain, a dead standstill community," writes Wortabet.[40] Further on, he quotes approvingly another author, who claims that "it will be found impracticable to raise any people to a respectable, social and moral state under a Turkish, or Egyptian, or any other Mahomedan government."[41] At this stage, therefore, Muslims were either not seen as Syrians, or, as was put forth by the missionaries, constituted a force opposed to progress by the very nature of their belief. Islam, in effect, had no place in Syria's future.

It is to Butrus al-Bustani, the prominent Nahda intellectual, we turn now to detail what can be termed the second stage in the development of Syrianism and Syrian nationalism. Born in 1819, al-Bustani, a Maronite convert to Protestantism, belonged to the American sphere of influence, and was closely

"Communalism as a Factor in the Rise of the Syria Idea in the 1800s and the Early 1900s", 36-40.

[39]Groiss, "Communalism as a Factor in the Rise of the Syria Idea in the 1800s and the Early 1900s", 38-40.

[40] Wortabet, Gregory M. Syria and the Syrians, vol. 1 James Maddon: London, 1856, p. 33.

[41] Ibid., 81.

affiliated with a mission for over a decade after his immigration to Beirut.[42] He had a particularly close connection with Eli Smith, a central figure in an American mission and a notable advocate and activist for the revival of Arabic and Arabic culture.[43] In Beirut, Smith founded an Arabic printing press and the city's first Arabic newspaper.[44]

After his immigration to Beirut, al-Bustani became a central figure in its intellectual landscape, and his importance to the development of Syrian identity is of the highest degree. The Syrian identity which he pioneered with others was the first to be based solely on territorial affiliation. His concept of Syrianism was not only a step forward from the sectarianist proposition of his predecessors, but also an identity advanced for the very sake of rising above the sectarian divides ailing the region.

Even prior to the massacres of 1860, but especially after them, the sectarian divide and ways to overcome it were of primary importance in the activities of al-Bustani. A member of the intellectual Christian milieu of Beirut and influenced by the American Protestant missionaries, al-Bustani saw Syria as a region which shared a glorious history that should be unified into one unit. The Arabic language, he believed, was an appropriate basis on which to develop a common identity for the region's many groups. Accordingly, he dedicated much of his time to projects intended to advance the language's status, producing books

[42] Sheehi, Stephen. "Butrus al-Bustani: Syria's Ideologue of the Age", in The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories Pioneers and Identity, edited by Adel Beshara (London: Routledge, 2011), 57-58; Abu-Manneh, "The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism: The Ideas of Butrus Al-Bustani", 289.

[43] Zachs, "Towards a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria? Revisiting the American Presbyterian Missionaries in the Nineteenth-Century Levant", 161.

[44] Ibid., 163-164.

and journals and founding cultural clubs. His hope was that by doing this, he would help to create a unified and unifying Arab culture, in which all of the region's residents could share, including Muslims, and which would become one aspect of the new Syrian identity.[45] In this, al-Bustani was a student of Smith, who viewed Arabness as a cultural and ethnic identity in a positive light – as a link with Greek and Roman ancient wisdom – and who contributed to its preservation. In his eyes, connecting to Syria's Arab past and present nature did not contradict linking it with its pre-Islamic past, a position shared by the missionaries and intellectuals around him. Moreover, it is important to note that Smith emphasized the necessity of bridging the differences between Syria's different communities.[46]

The final building block of al-Bustani's Syrian identity was the cultivation of an Ottoman civic identity, in alignment with 19th century Ottomanism. Importantly, one of the reasons for this aspect of his vision appears to have been a belief that Ottomanism would serve as a first stage in the development of a secular identity, which would later lead to the development of a Syrian political identity. Although this was seemingly in contradiction to Ottomanism, al-Bustani's Syrian body politic was envisioned as part of a larger Ottoman empire, imagined perhaps more as a federation that would afford protection from external threats, such as European imperialism. At the same

[45] Abu-Manneh, "The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism: The Ideas of Butrus Al-Bustani", 290-295.

[46] Zachs, "Towards a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria? Revisiting the American Presbyterian Missionaries in the Nineteenth-Century Levant", 161-165.

time, he believed the empire would restrain the Muslim and Druze communities and thus act as a shield for his coreligionists.[47]

In sum, al-Bustani proposed a three-legged identity: culturally Arab, civically Ottoman, and nationally Syrian. It appears that in his view, the residents of Bilad al-*Sham* were already a nation, the Syrian people, sharing both language and land, albeit devoid of a political element. It was incumbent upon them to recognize this aspect of their identity and translate it into loyalty to their land and compatriots. In combination with an Arab cultural identity, the recognition of a need for solidarity based on a shared territorial affiliation, he believed, would lead to a supra-sectarian community that would march Syria into modernity.[48]

It should be clarified, however, that while al-Bustani's contribution to Syrianism is clear, it is difficult to categorize him as a Syrian nationalist because of the absence of Syrian political sovereignty in his vision. To draw an analogy from a different federative entity: while Texans may be proud residents of the state of Texas, they are ultimately American nationals. Therefore, I agree with Abu-Manneh that we would do better to see al-Bustani as primarily looking to address the troubles of his day by advancing the cause of unity.[49] It is important to note, however, that while his predecessors were looking to solve the problems of Christian Syrians, the Nahda intellectual sought to better the lives of all and considered it important to integrate the Muslim Syrians, from what appears to be a genuine sense of camaraderie with all Syrians. Given this, he can be called a father of Syrian identity.

[47] Abu-Manneh, "The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism: The Ideas of Butrus Al-Bustani", 293-300.

[48] Ibid., 296-297.

[49] Ibid., 287-300.

The French and the Phoenicians: An Alternative for Syrian Particularists

When constructing a national identity, a real or imagined shared history is of central importance. A shared past acts as a foundation upon which a shared identity can be built to unify a region's diverse groups. Of no less importance are periods of past greatness, often preserved in a people's history, the revival of which is set as a collective goal.[50] As mentioned above, during this period of change, Greater Syria saw a rise in awareness both of the region's ancient history and of its supposed importance to the local collective, largely due to the increased presence of Westerners. In this context, special emphasis was put on the Phoenician civilization of antiquity.[51]

The impact on local intellectuals was not long in appearing. Within the American sphere of influence, which in this context can be called the "American School," Khayyat and Wortabet, and al-Bustani and his circle, all referred to their Phoenician heritage and took pride in it. The Phoenicians enjoyed a continued presence in the writings of Al-Bustani's successors within the Nahda movement who, for example, repeated the claim that there was an ethnic connection between modern Syrians and the region's ancient peoples. Most of these later intellectuals were alumni of Protestant institutions, and some were Protestant converts, placing them within the sphere of the American missions, and indeed, in line with the missionaries' position, their writing does not include an anti-Arab element nor the idea of Christian separatism.[52]

Markedly different from the inclusive identity framework suggested by the "American School" was a parallel concept which developed under French

[50] Kaufman, "The Phoenician Ideology in Syria: Roots and Birth Pangs", 65.

[51] Zachs, "Towards a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria? Revisiting the American Presbyterian Missionaries in the Nineteenth-Century Levant", 154-155.

[52] Ibid., 158, 164-167; Kaufman, Reviving Phoenicia, 39-45.

auspices, which was shared by Christian separatists and by accounts of Syria's Phoenician heritage. This ideology, termed "Phoenicism," maintained that the residents of Syria, and especially those living in the Mount Lebanon region (where the Maronites were concentrated), were descendants of the Phoenicians, who arrived in Bilad al-Sham in the second millennium BC to build a mighty civilization, credited – along with other accomplishments – with inventing the alphabet. Using their excellent maritime skills, the Phoenicians became masters of trade and spread their culture around the Mediterranean. In fact, they claimed, this great culture should be credited with giving birth to Western civilization. To these fundamentals, some Christian separatists added that the Arab occupation of the Levant was the final act of dispossession perpetrated against the Phoenicians, forcing their ancestors to seek refuge in the mountains, where they preserved their genetic and cultural heritage. Some even went a step further and claimed that the Phoenicians were Indo-Europeans, and not Semites, and thus took a further step away from Arabness. On the basis of this theory, there arose both a Syrian separatist identity and a Lebanese identity that demanded independence for Greater Lebanon.[53]

The "French School" arose out of French Jesuit schools and institutions schools, including the Université Saint Joseph, which flourished in the region. It is of importance that, in addition to Catholic Christianity, the Jesuit institutions spread French culture and the French language. Serving as a tool of French imperialist ambitions, the missionaries' educational enterprise promulgated the French "association" approach to colonization. Instead of seeking complete integration of the region as a colony in the French state, the association approach sought to ally the local elites with France and then enlist their service as local

[53] Kaufman, "The Phoenician Ideology in Syria: Roots and Birth Pangs", 65-66; Kaufman, Reviving Phoenicia, 45-48, 68.

rulers, while the European country reaped its rewards from afar. An additional aspect of the French association policy was to choose one of the local ethnic groups and work to increase its sense of supremacy over its neighbors (this, among other consequences, would push the group's elite closer to the French), and thus "divide and conquer."[54]

In addition to generating francophone intellectuals, the French schools imbued their students with French cultural ideas prevalent at the time. At the height of their nationalist sentiment, the French, along with other Europeans, were obsessed with the civilizations of antiquity, certain that in exposing their cultures they would, in fact, be recovering their own roots and national heritage. Hence, when met with the populations in the Middle East, they believed that they would be able to uncover the direct descendants of ancient peoples, come to life from the pages of scripture.[55] This, together with a nationalist worldview and a belief in the importance of national history, was passed on to residents of the region, mainly to the Christian minority, laying the foundations for the development of Phoenicianism and its brand of Christian separatism.

Of unique importance within the French framework was Henri Lammens, a Jesuit professor at Université Saint Joseph, whose ideas and writings supported and nourished Syrian and Lebanese Phoenicism for decades. In his work, Lammens posited the existence of a Syrian nation with Phoenician roots, which was preserved in large part thanks to Mount Lebanon's role as a refuge for minorities from Arab and Muslim oppression, in effect laying down the theoretical basis of Phoenicism. Lammens supported the consolidation of a non-Arab Syrian national identity, but despite his outspoken loyalty to a Syrian identity, many of his ideas were used by Lebanese separatists. Aside from that,

[54] Kaufman, Reviving Phoenicia, 13-15, 28-32.

[55] Ibid., 21-26.

the Jesuit's great importance is not only due to his articulation of the Phoenicist ideology, but also because his writings served as the "academic" foundation for the proponents of Phoenicism, both in and after his time.[56]

The local Phoenicists, many of them Maronites, were primed by two preconditions to accept these ideas. First, al-Bustani and his generation made it easier for those who came after them to work to develop a collective identity by spreading their ideas as locals, and particularly, those who related to Bilad al-Sham's Phoenician heritage. Secondly, the Maronite church created within its flock a sense of ethnic and cultural uniqueness, which was helpful in acting as a basis for Lebanese or Syrian Phoenician separatism.[57]

Beyond the suitable circumstances detailed above, Shami intellectuals were pushed towards an ideology which promised change during a time of political stagnation, which settled on the Lebanon region around the turn of the century. The Western-influenced literati had had their fill of the dominance of the clergy and the traditional local elites, and an economic recession further emphasized the need for change. Many believed that the answer to their woes was to enlarge the autonomous province of Lebanon within a larger Syrian framework, but this required a basis for the demand which did not resort to sectarian rhetoric. A Phoenician identity, they thought, could serve as the foundation for a secularized political entity. Later, as pan-Arab nationalism grew in prominence, Christian intellectuals looked to Syrian Phoenicism as an alternative that would save them from drowning in a mostly Muslim Arab region. Using the Phoenician claim, they declared that Syria was a distinct nation and therefore ought to be its own state.[58]

[56] Kaufman, Reviving Phoenicia, 31-33.

[57] Ibid., 36-38.

[58] Ibid., 45-48, 67-70.

This brand of Syrian (and Lebanese) particularism was portrayed by its proponents in many cases as the basis for a supra-sectarian identity that would appeal to the locals of all religions. However, by its very nature, aiming as it did to build a bridge between modern-day Syria and its ancient inhabitants, one which intentionally ignored the land's Muslim past, it excluded Islam from its proposed Syrian identity, and by extension, many Muslims. It did not help that its intellectual core was supplied, as mentioned above, by Lammens, whose hostile and scornful attitude towards Islam and its prophet is well recognized.[59] Moreover, as pan-Arabism grew increasingly popular after World War I, Phoenicism in its later stages was associated with anti-Arabism.[60] Considering the hallowed position of the Arabic language, Islam's Arab prophet, and the Arab Quran, such sentiments likely drove Muslims in Bilad al-Sham away from the ideology. Lastly and importantly, the needs that Syrian Phoenicism sought to fulfill were the regional and sectarian interests of Christians (mostly Maronites), who wanted to establish an autonomous Lebanese region and ensure their separation from a giant pan-Arab state with a Muslim majority.

Conclusion

As we have seen, at the dawn of the modern era in the Levant, society in Bilad al-Sham was divided into religious groups that were the source of of individual identity. A national awareness was not evident at the time. It was in the first half of the 19th century that a series of occurrences, most notably the increased presence and influence of Western missionaries, laid the foundation for the

[59] Salameh, Franck. "A Man for Others: The Life and Times of Lebanese Jesuit Henri Lammens (1862–1937)", The Journal of the Middle East and Africa, vol. 9, no. 2 (Aug., 2018), 228-235.

[60] Kaufman, Reviving Phoenicia, 36.

development of national constructs in Greater Syria. Under Western patronage, and more specifically, American missionary tutelage, a group of local Christian intellectuals arose, who, over time, gave life to Syrian nationalism.

Influenced by the American missionaries' strong perception of "Syria" as an entity, Christian literati Wortabet and Khayyat were the first to refer to a Syrian identity in their writings. Notably, Khayyat not only self-identified as Syrian, but also displayed loyalty to his homeland and a willingness to sacrifice for its sake. At this earliest of stages, the Syrian collective was not a national body but a locale-based group identity. Importantly, Wortabet and Khayyat fell in line with the dominance of sectarianism in the region and excluded Muslims and Islam from the Syrian group.

Al-Bustani was another intellectual strongly influenced by the American missionaries. However, driven by bloody sectarian strife and hopes of seeing Bilad al-Sham propelled forward through unification, al-Bustani attempted to create a Syrian identity that would transcend religious divides. To do this, his tripartite proposal included an Arab cultural identity, a Syrian national identity, and an Ottoman civic identity, which he hoped would appeal to all his compatriots, including Bilad al-Sham's Muslim majority. Al-Bustani's Syrianism represented a step forward towards a pure, territorially based identity, and contrary to his predecessors, the Nahda intellectual appears to have transcended the sectarian worldview into which he was born to concern himself with the good of all Syrians, Maronite or Orthodox, Muslim or Christian.

While it was an advance in Syrian particularism, al-Bustani's call to remain within the Ottoman and Arab framework detracted from the nationalistic and particularistic character of his proposition. The Phoenicists, arising from a partnership of sorts between French missionaries and mostly Maronite intellectuals, espoused a staunchly particularistic Syrian identity. Placing Greater

Syria's Phoenician heritage at the heart of their case, Syrian Phoenicists argued the existence of a distinct Syro-Phoenician nation whose descendants resided in Bilad al-Sham, and especially in Mount Lebanon. By advancing this unique identity, the Phoenicists sought to create a secular Syrian identity, drawing exclusively from the region's pre-Arab and pre-Muslim era. On this basis, they hoped to found a secular Syrian state with its face directed westward. With its demand for political sovereignty, Phoenicism was the final step in the creation of local nationalism in Syria; however, it failed to rise above sectarianism by excluding Islam and the Muslim and Arab heritage of Bilad al-Sham from its bounds.

As a final note on early Syrian particularism and its treatment of Islam and the region's Muslim heritage, it should be said that, perhaps unsurprisingly, the process of constructing Syrian nationalism was all along encouraged and shaped by the needs of the hour. One can posit, albeit uncertainly, that Wortabet and Khayyat held on to the American Syrian concept to escape their minority status and official *dhimmi* designation in the Muslim context. Later, an understanding of the dangers of sectarianism and of the price paid by the region for the divided nature of its society drove al-Bustani and his supporters to seek an identity framework that would encompass all sectors of Shami society. While sharing this hope to unite society, the Phoenicists' efforts to create a distinct Syrian identity were also meant to ensure a divide between Greater Syria and the surrounding region, so that Syria and its people will not be absorbed by a large pan-Arab state.

The treatment of Islam, Muslim heritage, and Shami Muslims was naturally a product of these factors. The prominence of Christians in nationalist circles has been noted time and time again, and yet, it is worthwhile to once again direct the reader's attention to the undisputed Christian dominance of these movements at the time. Not only were they led by local Christians, they were

also, as we have seen, nourished by Western Christian missionaries, and their perceptions were shaped accordingly. In order to transcend sectarian loyalties, al-Bustani requested that Muslims set aside their Islamic identity, dethrone it, and replace it with Syrianism. This was true not only at the individual level, but at the societal level as well. The Phoenicists in following generations sought more than the secularization of the society and the state. As part of the new order, Muslims were to sideline their Muslim and Arab heritage for the sake of a Phoenician past that was to be the heart of their new Syro-Phoenician identity.