CHAPTER FOUR

THE SYRIAN UNIVERSITY AND THE FRENCH MANDATE (1920–1946)

Abdul-Karim Rafeq

Introduction

The nucleus of the Syrian University was the Ottoman school of medicine established in Damascus in 1901 by Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909). Geographical Syria (Bilad al-Sham) already had two foreign universities established by Christian missionaries in Beirut: the Syrian Protestant College (SPC), established by American Presbyterians in 1866, and the French St. Joseph University, established by Jesuits in 1875. The SPC opened a school of medicine in 1867, which taught in Arabic, and St. Joseph University opened a school of medicine in 1883, which taught in French.

In 1882 Edwin Lewis, professor of chemistry at the school, gave the commencement speech in Arabic about the Darwinian theory of the origin of human beings. The speech angered the Presbyterian missionaries as well as the local religious communities, both Christian and Muslim. Lewis had to resign. In solidarity with him and in support of free speech, a number of American medical professors, who taught medicine in Arabic, submitted their resignations. A younger generation of American medical professors who did not know Arabic replaced those who resigned. The language of instruction in the school of medicine then shifted from Arabic to English.¹

Credit goes to the SPC in Beirut for being the first institution in modern Syria to teach medicine in Arabic. Muhammad ʿAli Pasha of Egypt had established a school of medicine in Cairo in 1827 which taught in Arabic. But the language of instruction in this school shifted to English after the British occupation of Egypt in 1882. What made it easy for the American medical school in Beirut to teach in Arabic was the presence of several American Presbyterian missionaries who were medical doctors and had learned Arabic to preach in it.² The introduction of an Arabic printing-press by the Presbyterians in 1837 for publishing the Bible and other religious literature in Arabic benefited the medical school in that its textbooks were published by this press in Arabic. The irony of this is that the Ottoman school of medicine in Damascus taught medicine in Turkish until the end of Ottoman rule in Syria in 1918. Under the Arab government in Damascus (1918–20), the language of instruction in the schools of medicine and law shifted to Arabic and continued so under the French Mandate and during independence.

Several factors prompted Sultan Abdülhamid II to establish a school of medicine in Damascus. Pressure by influential Syrians who occupied high positions in Istanbul, persistent requests from Muslims in Syria who were reluctant to send their children to Christian schools in Beirut, and the sultan’s need to rally Muslim public opinion behind him in his capacity as caliph and advocate of pan-Islamism caused him to establish the school of medicine in Damascus. Sultan Abdülhamid also had a special personal connection to Damascus. He belonged to the Sufi Shadhiliyya ṣīra, and was a murīd (disciple) of the master of the order, Shaykh Mahmud Abu al-Shamat, who resided in Damascus and with whom he kept up a correspondence. Other factors that helped the establishment of the school of medicine in Damascus were the increased presence of the Ottoman army in Syria and the simultaneous spread of cholera, which required additional medical care.³

Sultan Abdülhamid’s decision to establish a school of medicine in Damascus in 1901 coincided with the beginning of the building of the Hijaz railway, which connected Damascus to Medina. The sultan


² For information about the American professors who taught medicine in Arabic at the SPC, see Stephen Penrose, Jr., That They May Have Life: Story of the American University of Beirut, 1855–1841, Beirut: American University of Beirut Press 1970, 32–43.