TOWARD A PROTO-NATIONALIST CONCEPT OF SYRIA?
REVISITING THE AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN MISSIONARIES IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY LEVANT*

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Introduction

An outstanding feature of the works of the many historians intrigued by the ways in which the Arab Middle East reacted to, or held out against, the impact of the West is their foremost concern with ideas and ideologies, or cultural and intellectual forces and developments, rather than with the linear assumptions of diplomatic history. As Hisham Sharabi wrote in his Arab Intellectuals and the West:

The Arab Awakening, the term Arab intellectuals have used to describe the process of "modernization," ... involved a new sort of awareness. It brought about both new perceptions of the traditional heritage and attempts at adaptation to new conditions. In many ways it was a rending experience. On the social level it led to transformation and change involving loss of social cohesion; psychologically it reflected both widening self-consciousness and alienation.1

In this article I wish to look at one particular instance of Western influence that may well have helped accelerate such a process

* Author's note: I owe a special debt of gratitude to Prof. Butrus Abu-Manneh who kindled my interest in nineteenth-century Bilad al-Shām and supervised my doctoral thesis (“From Communal to Territorial Identity: The Emergence of A Concept of ‘Syria,’ 1831-1881,” University of Haifa, 1998 [Hebrew]). I would also like to thank Dr. Ilan Pappé, who at a crucial point reminded me that ironically I seemed less aware of writing toward the end of the millennium than the missionaries I deal with. Dick Bruggeman, finally, kindly helped me out on questions of style and the New Testament.


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of local transformation. I hope to show that since about the mid-nineteenth century certain American Presbyterian missionaries living and working in Beirut and other parts of the region traditionally called *Bilad al-Sham* significantly helped define and promote a concept of “Syria” in which Arab Christian intellectuals then grounded their aspirations and ideals of Syrian patriotism (*wataniyya*). Given the new light their preoccupation with “Syria” can help throw on the emergence of a Syrian identity among these intellectuals, it comes as somewhat of a surprise that this aspect of the American missionaries’ activities has so far received little or no attention. This Syrian identity was a cultural one, Syrian patriotism a territorial one. As C. Ernest Dawn put it:

Many, perhaps all, of the early Western-influenced intellectuals of the Ottoman territories and Egypt held overlapping self-views without any sense of contradiction. ... All talked about fatherland and patriotism, *watan* and *wataniyya*, but one person could have more than one *watan* and more than one nation (*umma*). Among some, the smaller *watan* sometimes seemed to be the most important center of loyalty. Tahtawi’s Egyptianism has long been the subject of scholarly attention. Just as important was Bustani’s Syrian patriotism. But ... they did not subordinate the broader identities to the narrower.3

That is, nationalism—that other corollary of modernity—is as yet barely on the horizon. But if we accept that national identity and national consciousness, and thus nations themselves, are constructs, the force that shapes them, even when it invents them, must find something to shape or invent, or even “obliterate.” This

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2 Following Sharabi (*Arab Intellectuals*, p. 53), I use the term Christian “in a broad sense to signify social and psychological traits rather than religious affiliation.” As he elaborates: “Christian intellectualism as a mental outlook was the product of a social and psychological process peculiar to the experience of certain Christian social strata in Syria (including Lebanon and Palestine). It was in large part the result of the transformation of Christian education in the nineteenth century and of economic and social change which the Christians pioneered.”