Lebanese and Syrians in Egypt

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The land which lies to the east of Egypt, across the Sinai Peninsula, was known to previous generations of European travellers and writers as 'Syria', and to Egyptians as Barr al-Sham. When those who had been born there emigrated, they usually referred to themselves as 'Syrians'. This chapter will deal with all of them, whether or not they came from the land which is now the Lebanese Republic, and whether they called themselves Syrians or Lebanese.

Syria (in this broader sense) and Egypt lie so close to each other that the movement of people between them has been continuous, although for the most part it has gone from Syria to Egypt rather than in the opposite direction. It has been unlike the movements which are the subject of other chapters in this book, in that it has been, at least for the last millennium or so, a movement within the same world of language, belief and culture. Merchants carried the products of Syria by land across the Sinai peninsula or by sea from the Syrian ports to the Mediterranean ports of Egypt, and students went to study at the great centre of Islamic learning, the Azhar mosque in Cairo.

The movement must have increased when the two countries were incorporated in the same empire and therefore the same trading area, as they were during the period of Ayyubid and Mamluk rule from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, and later during that of the Ottomans. Many of those who went from Syria to Egypt remained there. In the Mamluk period, the historian el-Maqrizi tells us in his survey of Cairo that Syrian merchants brought their wares to some of the great *khans* in the centre of the city: olive oil, sesame oil, soap, pistachios, almonds, and other goods of the kind. At the Azhar, Syrians were important in the student body, and teachers of Syrian origin played da significant part in the life of scholarship.

Syrian Muslim merchants and scholars could be absorbed easily and quickly into the life of the Egyptian cities, but in the eighteenth century there was formed a community which was sufficiently different from the inhabitants of Egypt to remain separate from them, in spite of long residence. In the middle years of the century families of Syrian Christians began to settle in some of the Egyptian cites. There appear to have been two reasons for this movement. On the one hand, there were certain changes in the trade of the eastern Mediterranean. Trade in silk grew: not only the silk brought from Iran by the long land route of which one branch led to Aleppo and the Syrian ports, but that which was being produced in the mountain villages of Lebanon. At the same time, trade with western Europe increased: European cloth was imported into the Ottoman countries, and also the colonial goods produced in the east and west Indies – spices and, towards the end of the century, the coffee of the Antilles, which began to compete successfully with the Yemeni coffee that was exported through Egypt.

On the other hand, new Christian communities were emerging which were in a position to profit from the new trade. From the beginning of the seventeenth century the Ottoman Empire, and in particular its Syrian provinces with their large Christian population, had been open to European Catholic missions; among the Eastern Churches, the Maronite Church had been in communion with the Roman Catholic Church since the

time of the Crusades, but now there began to appear divisions in the other churches between those who accepted the supremacy of the pope and those who did not. Those united with Rome, the 'Uniates', organized themselves as separate churches under their own hierarchies, and in Syria the most important, apart from the Maronites, were the Greek Catholics of Melkites, the Uniate branch of the Eastern Orthodox Church. From 1724 they had their own Patriarch, although they were not to be given formal recognition by the Ottoman government as a separate community until more than a century later, in 1848. Some members of the community acquired a knowledge of European languages through the mission schools, and some of them had relations with the European merchants of Aleppo and Saida. They were exposed to some pressure from the Church from which they had separated themselves, and also from the Ottoman government, and they tended therefore to seek the protection of local rulers who enjoyed some independence of action, and who could make use of their education and skills. Some took service with the princes of Lebanon or the governors of Saida, and others sought new fields of enterprise and greater freedom in Egypt under the Mamluk beys.

Side by side with the Syrian Muslim merchants, therefore, there grew up communities of Chrirstian merchants in the ports of the Egyptian coast – Damietta, Rosetta and Alexandria – as well as in Cairo. The most prominent among them were families which were to continue to be well known in Egypt for two centuries: Zananiri, Kahil, Debbane, Sakakini, 'Ayrut. For the most part they were merchants engaged either in trade with the Syrian coast, or else in the European trade by way of the port of Livorno. They were more concerned with trade in cloth than with that in the other staples of Egyptian commerce, coffee and spices; they exported local cloth to Europe, and imported French cloth. They seem to have been in competition with local Jewish merchants. Until 1769 Jewish merchants acted as administrators of the custom houses, under the authority of the Mamluk beys who held the farm of the customs, but in that year their position was given to a Syrian, Mikha'il Fakhr, who appointed other Syrians as administrators of customs for particular ports. Syrian Christians were to remain in control of the customs until 1798. One of them, Antun Fir'awn (Pharaon), was given the title of 'count' by the Habsburg Emperor; in 1784, thinking himself under pressure from the beys, he moved to Livorno, from where his descendants were to spread over the eastern Mediterranean ports and establish themselves in Beirut.

Muslim and Christian Syrians were an important element in the life of Cairo. According to the *Description de l'Egypte*, the great survey produced by scholars and scientists who went to Egypt with the French expedition of 1798, there were some 5,000 Christians and a larger number of Muslims, but church records studied by Thomas Philipp indicate that the number of Christians may have been rather smaller. The Muslim merchants worked in the Gamaliyya and Ghuriyya districts, and up to a certain date in the Khan Hamzawi. They did not have a special quarter of residence, but tended to live near their places of work, after the fashion of prosperous Egyptian merchants. In the later part of the century Christian merchants replaced Muslims in the Khan Hamzawi. They lived for the most part near the European quarter (Harat al-Afranj) and one of the Coptic quarters. Their place of residence is significant. Because of differences of belief and practice they could not be absorbed into the indigenous Christian community of Egypt, that of the Copts, in the way in which Syrian Muslims could be absorbed into the Egyptian Muslim society; they wished to be near Catholic churches. In Damietta they had

their own church, a Maronite church served by the Lebanese Order of Monks, but used also by Greek Catholics. In Old Cairo (Misr al-'Atiqa) a Greek Catholic church was built, but in Cairo itself they had no churches of their own, and Maronite and Greek Catholic priests officiated in the Latin churches of Harat al-Afranj.

By the middle of the century some members of the community could read and write French and Italian, and by the end of the century there is evidence of some stirring of intellectual life among them. Mikha'il Mishaqa, a member of one of the Greek Catholic families, writing his memoirs half a century later, recalls that he learned about European astronomy and natural science from books translated from French into Arabic by a Syrian merchant of Damietta. He himself spent time in Damieeta in the early nineteenth century, and tells us that while there, 'mythoughts about matters of religion were troubled… especially when I saw that many of the people of Damietta, both Muslims and Christians, were more troubled than I was.'[2]

Some of the Syrian Christians were prepared for the change which came in 1798, when a French army led by Napoleon Bonaparte landed at Alexandria and rapidly occupied the country. Even before arriving in Egypt, Bonaparte had sought help from Syrian Christian priests living in Rome to draw up his proclamations to the Egyptian people. Once in Cairo, he made use of others who knew French or Italian as interpreters and intermediaries; one of them was his main interpreter, Rufa'il Antun Zahkur, known to the French as 'Don Raphael', a scholar of some distinction. Of the members of the Diwan set up to help in administering the affairs of Cairo, two were Syrians and members of well-known families, Yusuf Farhat and Mikha'il Kahil. In general the Syrian Christians seem to have been at ease with the French occupation, and they incurred some criticism for this, as al-Jabarti's chronicle of the occupation shows. At the same time, however, they must have suffered from the disruption of Mediterranean trade on account of the war between Britain and France, and also from the abolition of the system of tax farms, and therefore of their control of the customs houses. Syrian Muslims seem to have shared the general opposition to the foreign occupying army; the assassination of Bonaparte's successor as commander of the army of Egypt, Kléber, was planned in the Syrian *riwaq* of the Azhar, and all four accused of it were Syrians.

The French left Egypt in 1801, and after a period of confusion power in the country was taken in 1805 by Muhammad 'Ali, who was confirmed as governor of Egypt by the Ottoman sultan. The half-century or so of his rule was one of closer economic and cultural contacts with western Europe. Syrian Christians profited from them, but only to a limited extent. Few new immigrants seem to have come from Syria; estimates from the 1830s give figures for Syrians very similar to those in ithe *Description de l'Egypte.* Of the long-established Syrian families, a few were among those who received grants of land from Muhammad 'Ali; the Kahil family were given land in the region of Damietta. The port of Damietta was in decline, but some Syrians had a share in the growing trade of Alexandria, the centre for the export of cotton and import of European manufactured goods. It was not a very large share, however, for European and Greek merchants who settle there had advantages over them. A report on the condition of Egypt by John Bowring, published in 1840, gives the names of six or seven Syrians among the 72 important commercial houses of Alexandria. In Cairo, however, they were more important; Bowring tells us that ten out of the 55 largest merchants there were Syrians.

Some Syrians, however, could do something of which Europeans and Greeks were incapable. Through their knowledge of Arabic and European languages, they were able to work for the ruler as interpreters and translators. Muhammad 'Ali needed French books translated into Arabic for his new professional schools, and in the earlier years of his rule Syrian translators were the only ones available; once more we find the name of Rufa'il Zakhur. Later in the reign, however, Egyptians took the place of Syrians when they came back from their studies in Europe. One family played a part of special importance, the Bahris, Greek Catholics who had worked as secretaries in the service of a local Ottoman governor, and moved to Cairo in 1810; one of them, Hanna Bahri, returned to Syria when it was conquered by Muhammad 'Ali's son Ibrahim in the 1830s, and played an important part in the financial and administrative service during the years of Egyptian rule (1831-40).

From the middle of the nineteenth century until the first world war the numbers of Syrians in Egypt increased, and their activities became more varied, and in some ways more important. The improvement in communications with the coming of steamships, the growth in the trade of Egypt, and the emergence of a Syrian educated class seeking outlets for its talents all drew Syrians to Egypt in increasing numbers. The census of 1907 gave the number of 'Syrian Ottomans' as approximately 34,000; that of 1917 gave a figure of the same order of magnitude. According to the 1907 census, roughly half the Syrians lived in Cairo, one-third in Alexandria, most of the others in the smaller towns of the Delta and the Canal zone, but very few in Upper Egypt.

While some of the older families continued to flourish, new ones of a different kind came in. Some of the important merchant families of Beirut established branches in Egypt – Sursuq, Bustrus, Trad – but many of those who came belonged to poorer families from Lebanese villages; they had acquired a modern education and a knowledge of English or French in the Protestant and Catholic schools, and were in search of a field of activity.

Most of them were engaged in commerce of one kind or another. Small Syrian traders and money lenders were known in the villages of the Nile valley, although they were not so ubiquitous as the Greeks. Some went into retail trade; the most famous and successful of these was the Sidnawi family who created a number of large stores, breaking with the tradition of the small shop in the *suq.* A large numbers were involved in the expanding cotton trade, as ginners, exporters of raw cotton, and importers of European textiles and machinery. Their profits were invested to some extent in urban real estate; one of the old-established families, Sakakini, received a grant of land outside Cairo and used it to develop a new quarter of the city, which was named after them. A few bought agricultural land, mainly from the Da'ira Saniya, the Khedivial estates which had been pledged as security for loans and ultimately sold to private individuals or companies: the Sidnawi, Shadid, Sa'b families had large holdings in the Delta, and the Lutfallahs in the province of Minya in Upper Egypt.

Europeans and Greeks were more important in large-scale trade, but the Syrians had one advantage over them: they had a mastery of Arabic, and combined it with a good knowledge of one or more of the main languages of Europe. Two fields of work were therefore open to them. One was that of service in the government. During the reign of the Khedive Isma'il (1863-79) Syrians were appointed to government positions which needed special qualifications, and their number increased after the British occupation of

1882. British officials who, whatever their formal position, controlled most government departments needed subordinates who knew Arabic, English and French, the language in which they often communicated to their Egyptian colleagues and subordinates; in particular, they need trained financial officials, and it was of some advantage if they were foreign to Egyptian society and so relatively immune from the pressure of local interests. Some rose high in the service, but most held intermediate positions in which they could serve their foreign masters but were unable to challenge them. In his *Modern Egypt*, Lord Cromer, who had virtually ruled Egypt as British Consul-General and Agent for a quarter of a century, paid them a slightly condescending tribute which Syrians were proud to quote:

> whether from a moral, social, or intellectual point of view, the Syrian stands on a distinctively high level… A high-class Syrian is an accomplished gentleman, whose manners and behaviour admit of his being treated on a footing of perfect social equality by high-class Europeans… It may be said with truth that he really is civilized.

At the same time, however, some British officials were afraid that their Syrian subordinates might be acquiring too much influence, and Egyptians resented their taking positions which would otherwise have been given to local Muslims or Copts.

There were Syrians and Lebanese too in the new Egyptian army which was being created by the British, and particularly in the medical service. When the Sudan was conquered from the government of the Khalifa, the successor of the Mahdi, in 1898-9, and became an Anglo-Egyptian condominium, Syrians educated in the American mission schools were appointed to many positions in the new administration, in the absence of Egyptian or Sudanese officials with the necessary qualifications. Some of them, such as Sir Said Shoucair Pasha, rose to high positions.

The foreign consulates also made use of Syrians and Lebanese as dragomans and officials, and some of the countries represented in Egypt, but only having limited interests there, appointed members of Syrian or Lebanese merchant families were able to acquire foreign nationality or protection, so as to profit from the legal and fiscal privileges enjoyed by foreigners under the regime of the Capitulations, and a few of them were given titles by the emperor of Austria-Hungary, the king of Italy, the emperor of Brazil or the pope.

The other field which lay open to the Syrians and Lebanese more than to other communities of foreign origin was that of literature. For those who wrote in Arabic at that time, Egypt offered attractions beyond those of other Arab countries: under direct Ottoman rule, and the patronage of rulers and their ministers. Some of the creative writers of the Arabic renaissance, the *nahda,* lived and worked there: the poet Khalil Mutran, the pioneer among women writers May Ziadeh. Some important works were published there: for example, the last volumes of the first Arabic encyclopaedia, *Da'irat al-ma'arif,* founded in Beirut by Butrus al-Bustani, and the Arabic translation of Homer's *Iliad,* made by Sulayman al-Bustani. This introduced a new tradition, that of Greek poetry, to the Arabic literary consciousness. When it was published in Cairo in 1904, it was celebrated at a meeting which brought together leading Syrian and Lebanese writers, the foremost poets of Egypt, and reformist Muslim intellectuals.

In this conncection, it is important to note the role of Syrians in introducing a new literary genre, the drama. The first important dramatic company was that founded by a Lebanese Maronite, Salim Naqqash; he was followed by George Abyad, whose company performed translations of European plays, and later still an actor and playwright of Syrian origin, Najib Rihani, wrote comedies of Egyptian bourgeois life.

Syrians and Lebanese had the greatest impact on the life of Egypt, and of other Arab countries, as journalists. For a time they acted as intermediaries between the two worlds of culture which they knew; those of them who were Christians were less deeply rooted than Muslims in the culture traditionally associated with the Arabic language, and more receptive to certain ideas coming from Europe and America. The great cities of Egypt, Cairo and Alexandria, with their large European communities and good communications with the outside world, were more open to influences coming from outside than were most cities of the Middle East at that time, and the position of Cairo in the Arab world made it a centre for the distribution of newspapers and periodicals.

During the period from the 1860s when Arabic journalism virtually began, until the outbreak of the first world war, a large proportion of the newspapers and periodicals of Egypt were owned and edited by Syrians and Lebanese. Among the newspapers, two were of special importance: *al-Ahram,* founded by Salim Taqla in 1876, and *al-Muqattam,* founded by Faris Nimr and Ya'qub Sarruf in 1889. Nimr and Sarruf also had a periodical, *al-Muqtataf,* founded in Beirut in 1876 but later moved to Cairo, which was devoted to the exposition of modern science and social thought, and largely written by Lebanese. Another famous periodical, *al-Hilal*, started by Jirji Zaydan in 1892, gave its main attention to history and literature; Zaydan's books on Arabic literature and his novels did much to form the historical consciousness of a generation.

In many of these periodicals there was at least an implicit secularism, the idea of a society with a certain distinction between the norms by which its life was regulated and the teachings of a revealed religion, and to which adherents of different religions could equally belong. Among the writers of the time, Farah Antun wrote critically of Islam, and Shibli Shumayyil expounded the ideas of Darwinism.

Standing in another tradition of thought, however, was a periodical which was to have the widest influence of all, *al-Manar,* founded in 1898 by Muhammad Rashid Rida, a Muslim from northern Lebanon. Until Rida's death in 1936, this was to be the main organ of the *salafiyya* tendency in modern Muslim thought, which combined an emphasis on the validity of the basic teachings of Islam, if properly understood, with an acceptance of the need to define its social ethics anew in the light of the changing needs of the modern world.

The wealthier and better situated of the Lebanese and Syrians belonged to the cosmopolitan society of Cairo or Alexandria and tended to live in the new, fashionable quarters, such as Garden City on the bank of the Nile in Cairo. Others, however, congregated in the districts which were being built to the north and east of the rapidly expanding city: Faggala, Zahir, 'Abbasiyya, Shubra, and later Heliopolis. The Christian communities had their own organizations, and here, as elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire of which Egypt was nominally part, there were struggles for control between the clergy and the wealthy laymen, as well as other tensions. In 1905 the Maronites ceased to be under the jurisdiction of the Aleppine Monks, when a bishop was appointed; the Orthodox of Syrian origin drew apart from the larger community of Greek origin.

Most Syrians and Lebanese acquired Egyptian nationality; the nationality law of 1892 defined Egyptians as being those Ottoman subjects who had been born in Egypt or had lived there for at least 15 years. Some of them were actively involved in the public life of the country. *Al-Muqattam* was generally regarded as being the spokesman of the British authorities; *al-Ahram,* on the other hand, was closer to the French, and therefore in sympathy with Egyptian nationalism at the time when it was being encouraged by France. The offices of *al-Muqattam* were attacked during the first nationalist demonstrations against British control in 1892.

After the revolution of 1908 in the Ottoman Empire, Syrians and Lebanese were drawn more towards the public life of the countries from which they had come. In 1909 the Lebanese Union (al-Ittihad al-Lubnani) was founded with the purpose of preserving the separate existence of the district (*mutasarrifiyya)* of Mount Lebanon against the danger of being reabsorbed into the Ottoman Empire. The president, Iskandar ‘Ammun, bore a name well known in the public life of Lebanon. A few years later, the Decentralization Party (Hizb al-Lamarkaziyya) was created, in opposition to the centralizing policy of the party when in power in Istanbul, the Committee of Union and Progress. Its members were all Syrians and Lebanese; they included some of the Lebanese Christian journalists as well as some Muslims who had sought refuge in Cairo during the last years of the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid, such as Muhammad Kurd’Ali and Rafiq al-‘Azm.

During the first world war the number of those involved in political activities was increased by the coming of refugees from Lebanon and Syria. Some of them were involved in negotiations with the British and French authorities about the future of their countries, and one of the important statements of British policy about the future of the Arab countries was communicated by the Foreign Office to seven Syrians living in Cairo.

From 1918 until the Egyptian revolution of 1952, the position of the Lebanese and Syrians in Egypt continued to be good. Their numbers were stable: the census of 1937 gives a figure of some 37,000, of whom the majority had Egyptian nationality. For the most part they still had a favoured economic position, but it was rather different from what it had been. The individual merchants and family companies of an earlier period were being replaced by join-stock companies, with boards of directors drawn from the whole range of the possessing classes of the country; Syrians formed perhaps 10 per cent of all directors, and the proportion may have been increasing, since the laws which encouraged the appointment of Egyptian directors did not work against the Syrians, most of whom held Egyptian nationality. They were particularly important in import-export trade and in the manufacture of textiles, where a number of new immigrants from Syria created large companies.

There were fewer government officials, once British control was relaxed and educated Egyptians were appointed, but more members of the free professions, doctors, lawyers and engineers; a new generation of Egyptian-born Lebanese and Syrians, educated in the foreign schools of Cairo and Alexandria and trained in Europe or America, formed a highly qualified trilingual élite.

The great age of the Lebanese Egyptian newspapers was coming to an end. With the decline of British power the influence of *al-Muqattam* decreased; that of *al-Ahram* remained, under its editor Antun Jumayyil, but it was gradually becoming an Egyptian newspaper, and indeed the most important newspaper of the Arab world. In the same

way, while *al-Muqtataf* ceased to exist in 1952, the Zaydan family which owned *al-Hilal* created a publishing company, Dar al-Hilal, which was to become central to the cultural life of Egypt.

While the position of the Lebanese and Syrian bourgeoisie in Egypt may have seemed stable and assured, in fact the development of Egyptian society, and of those of Syria and Lebanon, was making it more marginal and therefore precarious. Ease of travel encouraged those of Lebanese or Syrian origin to spend their summers in the Lebanese mountain resorts; the creation of separate Lebanese and Syrian states, first under French mandate and then independent, encouraged a new kind of patriotic feelings; as the educated class of Egyptians grew, there was less of a need for those of foreign origin who had previously filled certain positions in society.

It was a sign of the growing alienation of the Lebanese and Syrian Egyptians from the country whose nationality they held, that their cultural life now tended to be expressed more in French and English than in Arabic. The most original manifestation of the culture of the Greek Catholic community was the creation of a centre of studies, Dar al-Salam, at a former Anglican church in Garden City, renovated and adapted under the care of Mary Kahil, a member of one of the long-established families of the community Two important writers on political subjects, George Antonius and Edward Atiyah, both educated at Victoria College, the English school in Alexandria, wrote in English for a British and American audience, and were concerned less with Egypt than with the politics of the Arab countries lying to the east of it.

The progressive alienation from Egyptian society made it easier for Lebanese and Syrian Egyptians to move away when the situation changed after 1952, with the nationalization of large enterprises (including *al-Ahram* and Dar al-Hilal), the limitation of land ownership, the sequestration of some large fortunes, the entry of educated Egyptians into the professions, and the disturbances of political life in the period of the domination of President Nasser. Some went back to their country of origin, others moved to Europe, the United States and the French-speaking parts of Canada. Within a generation the community had lost its distinctive place in the life of Egypt.