The Requests of Syrians in America to End the Enduring Indifference of the Ottoman Authorities: An Article Dated 1908*

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Abstract

The migration of Syrians to America in the 19th and 20th centuries is a major issue which has been widely covered in both fictional and non-fictional literature. Over the same period, many Arab magazines were founded both in North and South America, or “migrated” to those countries. An example is *al-Jāmi‘a*, which was relocated from Alexandria, Egypt, to New York in 1906, where its founder, the renowned intellectual Farah Anṭūn, was able to undertake a profound study of Western society. Not only did this give him a better insight into that society, but also helped him to better understand the critical issues in his native milieu and the tensions between Turks and Arabs, which often came to the fore, especially when the latter expected the former to help them through important phases of their social, civil, and economic life even in the land they migrated to.

This paper analyses an article in *al-Jāmi‘a* by Nāṣif Shibli Damūs, previously published in the eponymous newspaper, in which Syrian migrants in the United States, with Anṭūn supporting them, lament the indifference of the Ottoman authorities toward them and put forward a number of specific requests, using the magazine as a means of making themselves heard by the entire Arab and Ottoman community throughout the world.

Key words: Syrians, Arabs, United States, Migration, Ottoman Empire, *al-Jāmi‘a*

Introduction

In our present world which is characterized by a mutual sense of mistrust and an overwhelming lack of self-confidence at every level, it is certainly of great use to look back to history and study the experience of our ancestors, who freely believed, or who were inspired by circumstances to believe, in the possibility of physical, mental and cultural

* This article is a revised edition of “Syrians in America: Arabs or Ottomans?”, paper submitted on the occasion of the Colloque International “Image de soi – image de l’autre”, 7–9 février 2019, Maison de l’Homme d’Aquitaine (Salle Jean Borde) et Université Bordeaux Montaigne (Amphi B200).

integration with the “Other”. For an analysis of at least some of the outstanding features of this kind of integration, the situation of Syrians in the United States at the turn of the 20th century makes for a very interesting case study. By Syrians, in this context we mean members of the communities populating Greater Syria (namely Arabs from the territories of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and, in part, Iraq), and in most cases those from present-day Syria and Lebanon. These people ventured towards the Americas, spurred on by the difficult conditions in their native countries.¹ The phenomenon involved an enormous number of people whose homes were in regions of the Arab world still under the direct and harsh rule of the Ottomans—a situation that was exceedingly difficult to endure for all Arabs living there, especially for those who devoted, or intended to devote, themselves to writing, given that writing was seen as a more or less conscious act of rebellion against the Ottoman regime. This makes us ponder on the kind of links that existed between Syrian migrants and the population of Greater Syria on the one hand, and the non-Arab Ottoman world, its central institutions, the land of adoption, its people and institutions, on the other. All this is of paramount importance if we consider what the United States actually meant to so many of the people who left their homeland in search of a decent standard of life, virtually impossible to achieve in the Ottoman Empire.

The warm, welcoming attitude that America was gradually developing, was clearly perceived by migrants from the four corners of the earth, and Arabs were no exception, even before reaching Ellis Island in New York.² However, what would happen after their arrival? In the US, would migrants find a real solution to their problems? Moreover, what kind of relationship would they have with original homeland?

In this paper I investigate some facets of this critical issue, through an analysis of a decisive incident that occurred in the first decade of the 20th century. In historical perspective, one might say that the Syrian migration to the New World proved to be successful. At least some of its early commentators considered it as such (HITTI 1924; JACOBS 2015; VIVIANI 2004a). Thus, we could safely argue that despite some collapses and failures, the experience of Syrians on American soil resulted, metaphorically speaking, in a particular kind of “comedy” (i.e. dramatic confrontation and conflict with a happy ending) the protagonists being: Syrians living in the United States, all the other people in the United States, the US government and the Ottoman authorities. Interestingly enough, even though there were some tensions among the first two or three of these agents, the opposition or competition among them is not depicted as problematic, painful or as disruptive as the conflict between the Arabs and the institutions back home (the Ottoman regime). Indeed, if we consider Syrians and Syrian Americans (CADINOT 2013: 3) as the “heroes” of this peculiar “comedy”, the “antagonists” were the Ottoman government and institutions, frequently accused of ignoring the legitimate expectations of their Arab subjects.

This scenario emerges from a number of papers published in the magazine *al-Jāmi‘a* (The League, 1899-1910) during its American period, 1906-1909.

1 A useful list of references on Arabs in America can be found at <<https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38580>>.

2 See, for instance, the testimony provided by Farah Anṭūn in a very touching article of 1906. See section Sources, below.

This paper therefore aims to offer a response to the following questions: Once the 19th and 20th century Syrians had settled in their land of adoption—the United States, which would and actually *did* become a second home for many of them—how did their homeland government and institutions consider them? Specifically, did Syrians in the United States always feel understood and supported by the Sublime Porte in every step they had to take on their path towards integration into American society? Did they end up considering themselves Arabs, Syrians, Ottomans, and Americans as well, or, on the contrary, did they leave behind some of their “national” characteristics—in particular and above all, the Ottoman ones—because they felt they had been ill-treated or even abandoned by their Ottoman rulers? It often happened that ambassadors, sent abroad to serve their government and fellow citizens regardless of their ethnicity, did not do their best to fulfil their obligations towards non-Turkish Ottomans. Such practice was lamented in a paper that has fortunately been passed on to us, entitled “Aḥad āthār *al-Jāmi‘a* fī Amīrikā: Maṭālib al-sūriyyīn al-muhājirīn min al-sifāra” (One of the imprints *al-Jāmi‘a* left in America: The Requests of Syrian Migrants to the Embassy) by Nāṣif Shiblī Damūs, which offers a significant testimony of the sad situation within the Syrian community established in the United States (DAMŪS 1908a).³ Nāṣif Shiblī Damūs was a celebrated journalist who had already written a great deal on Syrians in the United States (VIVIANI 2004a) and who, in this specific case, served as their spokesman. As the title of this document makes clear, Damūs was a member of the team of contributors to the previously cited magazine *al-Jāmi‘a*, founded by the Syro-Lebanese Farāḥ Anṭūn (born 1874 in ‘Askalah, province of Tripoli / Lebanon, died 1922 in Cairo), one of the most distinguished and pioneering figures Arabic cultural life has ever had (REID 1975; VIVIANI 2004b). He was born into a Greek-Orthodox family and, in his formative years, developed a profoundly lay, liberal and open-minded outlook, which made him many enemies and caused him frequent troubles. Nonetheless, he never stopped fighting for his ideals, in principle for all Arabs, but first and foremost for the Syrian migrant communities scattered around the world.⁴

With regard to *al-Jāmi‘a*, it is worth noting that from the very outset this magazine ranked among the most relevant and influential Arabic publications ever founded, whether on Arab soil or abroad. It was established in Alexandria, Egypt, on March 1st 1899 as *al-Jāmi‘a al-‘Uthmāniyya* (The Ottoman League/Pan-Ottomanism, 1899), and was re-named *al-Jāmi‘a* in September 1899. It was then published in New York (1906-1909) and, finally, in Cairo (1910), where it was eventually suppressed. While in the United States, the monthly magazine was supplemented by a weekly publication, *al-Jāmi‘a al-Uṣbū‘iyya*, as well as a daily one, *al-Jāmi‘a al-Yawmiyya* (VIVIANI 2004a). It was in the daily publication that the paper “Aḥad āthār *al-Jāmi‘a* fī Amīrikā” first appeared, to be republished two months later in the monthly magazine.

3 The text is available online at <<http://archive.alsharekh.org/Articles/114/5134/126009/22>>.

4 His influence on the socio-political/cultural Arabic milieu has always been very strongly felt, and since the 1970s his wide-ranging literary activity has been increasingly studied for its intrinsic value, reaffirmed by academics many times over the decades (VIVIANI 2004b, 2015).

Syrians in the United States and *al-Jāmi'a*: a brief contextualization

Before delving into the main topic of this paper, it is worth mentioning a number of elements to better contextualize the events and the players involved.

Firstly, it is well known that America as a whole today hosts a substantial Arab community with origins from all over the Arab world, and from very different backgrounds. Just like all other migrants, most Arabs migrated to the New World for a variety of reasons. Primarily, they decided to go there so they could earn a living for themselves and their families, or for socio-political motives, in search of freedom, one of the fundamental rights frequently denied them at home. The New World was seen as a place of fabulous riches, capable of fulfilling all kinds of promises, and as a place of freedom: this was the image that had been moulding the minds of people throughout the 19th century, and which also fascinated the Arabs, who reached out to America in the hope of finding material, psychological, or even spiritual well-being. It is a way of leaving behind a bleak and oppressive society. Indeed, many of them managed to reach America, spurred on by a strong certainty: that they would find wondrous new possibilities for a better life. And indeed, the United States became a safe haven for those Arabs, a place in which to nurture their hopes, far from the fear and anguish of an existence without freedom, full of socio-political upheaval, social, religious divisions and poor wages. If their life at home was not safe, they expected it would be in this new social reality. They were—and have long been—totally convinced of that. This was the concept that must have led many Arab intellectuals between the 19th and 20th centuries to form their own image of society in the Americas, especially that of the United States. An idea and an image which clearly come to the fore when reading a good number of texts, produced by both male and female intellectuals of that period and frequently published in the press, irrespective of genre (articles, essays, novels, and so on).

A good number of these intellectuals migrated to the Americas for the same reasons, many of them Syrians.

Among them, Farah Antūn deserves particular attention. He is considered “the father of the new intellectual *Nahḍa* ⁵ in the Mashriq”, as another leading Syro-Lebanese thinker, Marūn ‘Abbūd, called him in 1947 (VIVIANI 2004b: 17). For this reason, and for his entire cultural, literary, journalistic and socio-political career, Antūn’s works are seen as paradigmatic in different contexts, especially in an analysis of the conditions of Syrians in the United States during the *Nahḍa* era (mid-19th to the fourth decade of the 20th century), and precisely in the years 1906-1909. He spent this rather long period there gaining deep insight into the reality of life in the United States as such and as experienced by Syrians, observing and noting a good number of the events taking place around him. More importantly, not only did Farah Antūn have the opportunity to observe and scrutinize that society closely, directly and in-depth, but he did so intentionally with one basic goal in mind: to study the situation of his Syrian “brothers” in their American land of migration: How exactly was their economic, social and spiritual existence there? He felt he *had* to pursue that goal out

⁵ For a very recent discussion and survey concerning the meaning of this term as well as the concept behind it, cf. ALLEN 2019.

of respect and gratitude towards all Syrians who had supported him from America during the hard times he had experienced in Egypt following his debate with the mufti, *shaykh* Muḥammad ‘Abduh (ANṬŪN 1903a), about the philosophy of Averroes and the need to separate spiritual and temporal power. In his opinion, this separation could not be postponed any longer, if a truly modern and advanced Oriental society and civilization was to assert itself in the Ottoman East the way it had in the Western hemisphere of the earth. This obviously led to a scandal within the Muslim community. He was obliged to leave Egypt and decided to travel to New York, for him the city of freedom and wealth *par excellence*. First, it represented the official gates to a much sought-after heaven on earth; second, it best symbolized Western and, obviously, American civilization at the time, which was considered the most highly developed in the world, the civilization that truly expressed modernity, opulence and respect for human rights.

Faraḥ Anṭūn was eager to fully understand the essence of that city, the secret of its greatness. Above all, he wanted to understand how it was that New York, along with other US cities, had made of his Syrian fellow citizens people both materially and spiritually rich: America had made them strong, to the point they could support him against their own institutions, the Ottoman regime. It could very well be that the majority of those supporting the lay intellectual Faraḥ Anṭūn in his difficult controversy with the Islamic establishment were Christians, not Muslims. However, they were Ottomans nevertheless. This meant that they could fear reprisals from the Sublime Porte and, what is more, could create significant problems for their families back home. This in itself bears witness to the fact that family bonds never ceased to exist between Greater Syria and America, despite the distance separating them.

Syrians in America appreciated intellectuals who were well known and highly esteemed for their socio-cultural activities. By supporting them economically and spiritually, they felt they were supporting men and women fighting for a better future of Greater Syria and its national identity. In fact, they felt as if they themselves were fighting alongside those courageous activists who risked their lives daily. This is a clear sign of the celebrity status acquired by those intellectuals and their literary and journalistic production, among all Syrians (and all Arabs) both within and without the Arab world.

Faraḥ Anṭūn and his team moved to the United States with great expectations, which were not disappointed. This inspired him and all his colleagues to turn *al-Jāmi‘a* into an increasingly useful tool for Syrians, whether within Greater Syria or outside of it—particularly in the United States.

Thus, while the paper “*Aḥad āthār al-Jāmi‘a fī Amīrikā*” was not written by Faraḥ Anṭūn—except perhaps for a very short introduction—it can nonetheless be said to represent and reflect the personal views of Faraḥ Anṭūn himself. After all, there are indications in the very title of the text that point in this direction.

Firstly, the title is divided into two parts, corresponding to the two separate axes around which the document is constructed. The first, metaphorical, axis can be found in the phrase “*Aḥad āthār al-Jāmi‘a*”, whereas the second is represented by the hint at the concreteness of the requests put forward by the migrants. In my opinion, the phrase “*Aḥad āthār al-Jāmi‘a*” was placed where it is in order to confirm an indisputable truth: *al-Jāmi‘a* is a creature with a life of its own, and being the objectification of Faraḥ and his sister Rūzā’s (VIVIANI 2010; 2014) ideals and efforts, it also influenced Damūs, what he wrote and the way he wrote it.

Again, the word *āthār* is of paramount importance here. Morphologically, it is the plural of *athar*. It therefore means: imprints, signs, influences, impressions, effects, etc., and also (literary) works, the latter pertaining solely to this plural form and not to the singular. Thus, the requests and suggestions to be submitted—and which were in effect submitted—to the Ottoman Embassy in Washington by all Syrians through the daily and monthly magazines founded by Farah Anṭūn may be seen as one of the several effects, results and consequences of the *al-Jāmi‘a*’s cultural project itself. Not only was Damūs’s paper published in *al-Jāmi‘a*, but it also narrated the world to which *al-Jāmi‘a* was accustomed.

As mentioned above, Farah Anṭūn published several papers in *al-Jāmi‘a* regarding his time in the United States, his country of choice after leaving Alexandria and for him the only chance, at the time, to make a living for himself and his loved ones, thus literally escaping from troubled circumstances in Egypt, the first land of migration he had reached in 1897 from Lebanon. He personally wrote on the experience of Syrian migrants living in the United States, but also asked for and received the support of other important figures, such as his own sister Rūzā, her husband Niqūlā (al-)Ḥaddād (MIRSHĀQ SALĪM 2013; MOOSA 1997: 241ff.; VIVIANI 2004a, 2004b, 2011), also a leading Syro-Lebanese intellectual, and others, who effectively made an impressive contribution to the project carried out by Anṭūn. They all wrote a good number of articles analysing American society, civilization and attitudes, often stressing the enormous difference with proper Arab society, civilization and attitudes. All these observers were thus able to pinpoint the positive and negative aspects of both societies, basing their opinion on what they *saw*, and not on rumours or prejudices, as Anṭūn once commented. Already in 1899 and 1903, he published two novels, *al-Ḥubb ḥattā al-mawt* (Love until Death) and *al-Waḥsh al-Waḥsh al-Waḥsh aw Siyāḥah fī arz Lubnān* (The Beast, the Beast, the Beast, or A Journey to the Cedars of Lebanon), respectively. These are two little-studied works that offer an in-depth analysis of the positive and negative influences of Western civilization on Arabs in general and Greater Syria’s sons and daughters in particular (MOOSA 1997: 226ff.; al-MUNĀSIRA 1994). Anṭūn’s novels did not draw on any personal experiences within American society: he had to visit it. And he did so, for strictly personal and, one may even say, *scientific* reasons.

Syrians in the United States vs the Ottoman Government

The editorial staff of *al-Jāmi‘a* in America was of course headed by Farah Anṭūn, with great support from his sister Rūzā and her husband Niqūlā (al-)Ḥaddād, as previously mentioned. Among the other members of this highly qualified and motivated research team, as one might label it, there was Nāṣif Shiblī Damūs himself, whose paper “Aḥad āthār *al-Jāmi‘a* fī Amīrikā” first appeared on January 1st 1908 in *al-Jāmi‘a al-Yawmiyya*, informing Syrians all over the world of what their brothers in America had set out to do: they would address a long list of requests to the newly appointed Ottoman ambassador in Washington, because they were tired of feeling abandoned by their own institutions in Constantinople.

The reason why they decided to take this important step was of fundamental significance: for the first time in history the Ottoman ambassador to the United States was a Syrian like them, Muḥammad ‘Alī Bey ‘Izzat al-‘Ābid (1867-1939), the scion of one of the richest and most influential families of Damascus. His father Aḥmad had served in the

Constantinople as part of the entourage of Sultan-Caliph 'Abd al-Ḥamīd. Muḥammad 'Alī Bey's mission to Washington did not last long. After just six months he had to join his family, which had been compelled to leave the territories of the Ottoman Empire following the Young Turk Revolution. Muḥammad 'Alī Bey would later become the first President of Syria, after the country gained independence from France in 1931.

Obviously, at the beginning of 1908 nobody could have imagined what was to happen in just a few months. Syrians in America therefore decided to do all they could and everything they considered appropriate to attract the attention of Muḥammad 'Alī Bey 'Izzat al-ʿĀbid to their condition, imagining, either for his origins or proximity to the centre of Ottoman power, that he was the right person to listen to their claims. In him they saw the best mediator they could ever dream of.

In the foreword to "*Aḥad āthār al-Jāmi'a fī Amīrikā*," Nāṣīf Shiblī Damūs clearly and courageously discusses the motivation for writing the document. First and foremost, he overtly points a finger at the indifference shown by all previous Ottoman ambassadors in Washington towards the Syrians living in the country; at the same time he states that all Syrians in the United States had favourably hailed Muḥammad 'Alī Bey's appointment, not only because of his Damascene origins, but also and mainly because they saw in his appointment the Ottoman Government's willingness to finally take care of all Ottoman migrants, among them the Syrians. According to Damūs, the time for "good mutual understanding" (*ḥusn al-tafāhum*) had finally come, thus putting an end to "past misunderstandings" (*sū' al-tafāhum*), but only if "Syrians could truly see proof [*āthār*] that their government really was interested in them, as well as seeing some advantages of immediate impact resulting from such interest" (DAMŪS 1908a: 27-28).

The foreword is followed by twenty sections, each of them devoted to a specific request. The title of each paragraph epitomizes the content introduced by it. The titles of most of these paragraphs indeed speak for themselves, and allow the reader to grasp immediately the core message conveyed as a whole and by every single part of it. These titles are cited here (in *italics*) in the precise order the reader finds them, to respect the sequence chosen by Damūs himself, assuming that the ranking on the list reflects the order of priority he had in mind and on his agenda, which, in turn, was, with all probability, also the agenda conceived and shared by the Syrian community in America as a whole:

- (1) *You take the first step, because he who is the Great has to begin.*⁶

Here Damūs invites the ambassador to get in touch with the vast Syrian community in New York by paying them a visit, to show them how much he cares for them.

- (2) *We are not willing to go in and out like thieves. That would be a shame to us and to the Ottoman Government as well.*⁷
- (3) *Protection and monitoring for migrants to feel that their Government takes care of them.*⁸

6 ان تخطو انت اولاً فالكبير يبدأ .

7 لا نريد ان نخرج وندخل كاللصوص فان هذا عار علينا وعلى الحكومة العثمانية .

- (4) *If you support so much our staying in New York, why are visas available only to Marseilles?*⁹

Requests nos. 2, 3 and 4 offer a brief but thorough, and moving, account of the countless difficulties Ottomans had to cope with once they decided to migrate. As Damūs explains, Ottoman institutions did not provide them with any substantial support at the legal or bureaucratic level, thus pushing them, much too often, straight, for instance, into the hands of unscrupulous mediators, veritable scoundrels who would cheat them in so many different ways.

The ensuing requests discuss taxation, commerce, and industry, as well as agricultural and cultural programmes. We learn, for instance, interesting facts regarding the Ottoman policy of:

- (5) *Oppressing those living in Syria to obtain taxes that should have been paid by migrants.*¹⁰

According to it, in some cases, even neighbours of Syrians living in America were obliged to pay for them. Damūs agrees with the practice of having migrants' parents or their sons and daughters pay taxes for their relatives living in the New World. In contrast, Damūs laments, it is absolutely wrong that other members of their families or even people who are not part of their families pay for them. Ottoman laws are, in this case, completely inappropriate and unjustified.

- (6) *Syrian Americans*¹¹ *in Syria.*¹²

Under this heading, Damūs highlights how appalling it is to see that Syrians who have obtained US nationality are treated as enemies when visiting Greater Syria, their homeland. This situation is unbearable: institutions should change their attitude towards these Syrians whose only fault lies in the fact that they have been compelled to apply for US nationality: indeed, application was mandatory in order to acquire rights and live peacefully in their land of migration.

- (7) *Who knows the future? Some of our factories and workshops may have been transferred from America to Greater Syria. We request to be consulted when the commercial agreement is signed.*¹³

8 حماية ورقابة ليرى المهاجرين ان حكومتهم تعتني بهم .

9 ان تساعدونا في نيويورك على هذا التسهيل لماذا تُعطى تذاكر السفر الى مرسيليا فقط.

10 الضغط على المقيمين في سوريا لتحصيل الضرائب التي على المهاجرين منها .

11 This is a literal translation. See, however, p. 114.

12 السوريون الاميريكيون في سوريا .

13 من يعلم المستقبل؟ فرما نُقلت بعض معاملنا ومتاجرنا من اميركا الى سوريا - نطلب ان يُطلب رأينا حين عقد المعاهدة التجارية .

The seventh request concerns the possibility of drafting a commercial treaty between the United States and the Ottoman Empire, to create a specific area for Syrian merchants and businessmen. And Syrians in America requested to be part of this eventual future process.

- (8) *Encourage him who intends to travel to Syria, by [providing] a job [opportunity for him] and support him!*¹⁴

This eighth request unequivocally shows the Syrians' lack of confidence in Ottoman institutions. In fact, their mistrust of their own Government at home was unfortunately too deep for them not to solicit Constantinople's reassurance on the fact that should Syrians in America decide to go back to Greater Syria, Ottoman authorities would support them. There was a great need to develop a national industry and Syrians in America had all the necessary know-how to do so, to their own advantage and that of their fellow citizens, as well as Constantinople's.

At the same time, they requested:

- (9) *Effective support of Syrian commerce in the United States.*¹⁵

Then, almost suddenly, Damūs turns his attention to the field of education, petitioning the Ottoman authorities via Ambassador Muḥammad 'Alī Bey 'Izzat al-Ābid to make arrangements with the US Government to establish an

- (10) *Agreement concerning the activation of programmes for teacher exchange.*¹⁶

Syrians in America sought the activation of programmes just like those existing between the United States and European countries. These programmes could even involve some Syrians already on American soil, and could lead to enormous advantages for the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, Ottoman teachers could help Americans learn and understand the history, culture and characteristics of all the people who were subjects of the Empire, and commercial activities between the two Nations could be significantly enhanced.

- (11) *Do not be led to confuse the general with the private.*¹⁷

Immediately following request no. 10, a completely different issue is addressed, namely the need for the ambassador not to be misinformed and deceived by some Ottomans, among them, as Damūs writes, "Muslims in Syria and Egypt" (DAMŪS 1908: 39). Some of them indeed stated that Syrians in America—mainly Christians—were enemies of Constantinople. That is not true: Damūs underlines that they migrated to the New World in order to get along and to live in freedom, not to focus on politics or other similar crucial issues. This claim is somewhat ambiguous and questionable, considering the personal and intellectual history of so many Arabs in their land of migration, both in the Arab countries and beyond, especially so in the case in question, i.e., that of the editorial staff and contributors to *al-*

14 نشطوا كل من يريد منا السفر الى سوريا بصناعة وساعدوه .

15 مساعدة تجارية السورية في الولايات المتحدة مساعدة فعلية.

16 اتفاق (تبادل الاساتذة) .

17 لا تستدلوا على الكلي بالجزئي .

Jāmi'a, among them Damūs himself. Again, such claims are not surprising: they were constantly repeated by Syrians those days, even when it was indeed patently clear that their works *did* have a political imprint, whatever the topic discussed.

Request no. 11 is closely linked to the one that follows it:

(12) *Do not listen to any slanders against anyone of us.*¹⁸

The next request focuses mainly on the cultural field, within which Syrians in America propose the possible mutual recognition of

(13) *Ottoman certificates in America and American certificates in Turkey.*¹⁹

(14) *He who swindles our merchants and flees to Syria.*²⁰

With request no. 14 Damūs's argument turns again to a very concrete situation that must have been a veritable scourge, since it is included in the Syrians' letter to the Ottoman ambassador: indeed, we find that Constantinople used to grant the same rights to both the Syrians cheated in the United States and the scoundrels who cheated them.

(15) *Exemption of American machinery from customs duties.*²¹

This request regards every kind of equipment used in agricultural or industrial production. This measure would certainly support the Syrian and Ottoman economies.

This is followed by an unequivocal invitation to Muḥammad 'Alī Bey to make all the appropriate and necessary efforts to achieve a significant goal, namely:

(16) *To support al-Jāmi'a's call to agriculture,*²²

given the fact that agriculture could prove a valid alternative to commerce for Syrians in America. Moreover, it increases wealth and improves morality.

(17) *Restoring order among Syrians. The General Assembly.*²³

This request is of utmost importance because it patently demonstrates both the difficult ties existing between Syrians and Turks, and the mistrust undermining collaboration and brotherhood among Christian Syrians themselves wherever they may live. This was indeed a clear testimony of the confessional division between Syrians, not only in their original home—where confessionalism among Christian churches was an absolutely virulent sore plaguing all kinds of relationships between the members not only in the same social community, but also in their land of migration. As Damūs laments, it was detrimental to the reputation of both Syrians and Ottomans. So he invited the Embassy in Washington to act

18 لا تسمعوا وشاية باحد منا .

19 الشهادات العثمانية في اميركا والشهادات الاميركية في تركيا .

20 الذي ينصب على تجارنا ويسافر الى سوريا .

21 (اعفاء الآلات النافعة الاميركية من الجمرک) . - . Parentheses in requests nos. 15-18 are original .

22 (تشجيع (دعوة الجامعة الى الزراعة) . Sic .

23 (ارجاع المياه الى مجاريها بين السوريين : الجمعية العمومية).

differently from the way it had in the past, when it was happy to show the whole world that Syrians were incapable of self-control and of preserving unity among themselves, once freed of Constantinople's yoke.

(18) *Representative on the immigration island.*²⁴

Syrians requested the presence of a governmental representative who would have the task of taking care of migrants from the moment they arrived at Ellis Island.

Damūs also wrote that:

(19) *It is mandatory to find a place to meet and become acquainted with each other: A club and a library.*²⁵

Syrians and all other Ottoman citizens in the United States needed to meet and build contacts that ultimately would enable them to create an atmosphere of friendship and affection among them. The Embassy had the possibility of doing that, and was therefore warmly invited to take up this challenge.

As we have seen, in requests 11 and 12 Damūs comments on the basic faithfulness and loyalty of the Syrians. This is repeated in the

(20) *Conclusion.*²⁶

where he again explains that the above requests did not come from political concerns, since—ironically enough, I would add—“bright Syrians stand afar from politics” (DAMŪS 1908: 44). Suddenly, however, and just like an ancient Greek *ὑποκριτής*, he takes off the mask he has been wearing up to then and addresses the Ottoman ambassador more directly and frankly than he had done so far. Consequently, he clearly shows the gap between a careful and tactful Damūs who, serving his fellow Syrians, is profoundly deferential to Ottoman authorities, and the Damūs saying words with overt political significance. He thus reveals that, out of respect for the ambassador himself and because of the sensitive nature of the issue discussed, he chose not to put down on paper what he had decided to write, limiting himself to the wish—though in a rather long passage of highly poetic quality—that real unity and fraternity among all Syrians be soon granted by God (DAMŪS 1908: 45).

“Aḥad āthār *al-Jāmi‘a* fī Amīrikā” must then be interpreted in the light of the difficult relationship existing between Turks and Arabs in a period when both Turkish and Arab nationalism were definitely taking shape to the detriment of the unifying Ottoman influence. Moreover, the self-confidence of Arabs, regained through the long struggle of the pre-*Nahḍa* and *Nahḍa* decades, was being put to the test. In this situation Damūs’s paper was a major attempt on the Arab/Syrian side to see whether they could still call on the Sublime Porte. But it was also an act of desperate self-defence. How could Syrians in

24 (مندوب في جزيرة المهاجرة) .

25 « ضرورة إيجاد مكان نتعارف فيه » . « منتدى ومكتبة » .

Quotation marks in requests nos. 19-20 as in Arabic original.

26 « الخاتمة » .

America try to turn the situation to their own advantage? How could the condition of being migrants in the United States help them enjoy the favour of the Ottoman regime?

The time they had spent in America had given them the chance to become rich and highly respected in US society, so they seized the opportunity of the new ambassador's appointment in Washington: they had much to offer to their original homeland in terms of wealth and prestige as well as in terms of economic support, not to mention the scientific, technological, managerial and logistical know-how they had acquired abroad, which they were absolutely willing to put at the disposal of their fellow citizens in Greater Syria, the Ottoman Empire as a whole and of every Ottoman citizen residing in the United States, whether Muslim, Druse or Christian. Consequently, having so much to offer to Constantinople, they wanted to feel and to be considered true Ottomans. They needed to give Constantinople the means for understanding these requests. Hence, the decision to write the document and to have it published not only in *al-Jāmi'a al-Yawmiyya*, but also in the monthly magazine, which boasted both a much longer tradition and wider global distribution than the former. Moreover, the monthly magazine was very widely appreciated, which made it highly influential at all levels and even caused it to be feared and vehemently opposed by both private and public institutions.

In January 1908, Syrians in America had one single major and urgent concern: to have their voice heard by the Ottoman Government, embodied in Ambassador Muḥammad 'Alī Bey 'Izzat al-Ābid, who, as a son of Greater Syria, was considered to be the perfect repository of their requests. He could understand, it was hoped, and report their concerns with due respect to his fellow citizens. With this hope in mind, Nāṣif Shiblī Damūs was given the task of writing on behalf of Syrians and preparing a document outlining their hopes and fears. This shows that even in 1908, Syrians in America had confidence in the cultural, social and political project carried out by the team of *al-Jāmi'a*: in Faraḥ Anṭūn's journalistic enterprise they found a valid support for their cause; more significantly, they found substantial help in his daily journal, and consequently gave greater credit to the monthly magazine, which remained the core pillar of Anṭūn's cultural programme. Why, then, would Anṭūn's readers and followers insist that Damūs's paper be published in the magazine? It seems that it *had* to contain a copy of that document, as a testimony of this unforgettable event, an event aiming at paving the way for further positive steps. Thus, as the direct emanation of Faraḥ Anṭūn's (and his sister Rūzā's) personality, *al-Jāmi'a*, like a loving mother, welcomed the insistence of the Syrians and published the paper again in March.

The new publication was made after the requests had been materially submitted to Muḥammad 'Alī Bey 'Izzat al-Ābid on February 22nd, 1908, readers knew this from the few lines that served as an introduction to Damūs's paper. This introduction is an important historical document in itself because it gives vivid testimony of a major political action performed by Syrians in America. Was that event to be considered a turning point in the Arab-Ottoman relationship? Was it to be considered a turning point in the history of Arab-Syrian nationalism? Thanks to the help of Syrian expatriates (the educated activists belonging to the composite world of *al-Jāmi'a*), other Syrian expatriates were willing to address Ambassador Muḥammad 'Alī Bey 'Izzat al-Ābid, who was Syrian like them, no matter how strongly he supported Constantinople. What is more, in 1908, when Turkish nationalism was at its height causing so much distress to Arab-Ottoman citizens both at

home and abroad, it was fundamental to have connections with those close to the centres of power, however feeble this connection might be, or might be judged as such by Western powers. If Ottoman sultans had long been seen by Arabs as a bulwark against Western imperialism in its attempt to subdue the East, it goes without saying that they were also seen as a bulwark against Turkish nationalism, which was menacing the existence of the Sublime Porte, as well as a form of resistance to a multitude of other threats. Nationalism was putting the very life of Arabs both within and outside the confines the Ottoman Empire itself at risk.

Official Reactions to the Call

How did the Ottoman ambassador of pure Syrian stock welcome the requests of his own brothers?

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In April 1908, a brief paper, which included five minor papers in which three different voices emerge, appears in *al-Jāmi'a*.²⁷ First, the editorial staff provides information about the publication in *al-Jāmi'a al-Yawmiyya*, on March 28th (*al-Jāmi'a* 1908: 73), of a letter sent by the magazine editors to the ambassador the same day the latter had received “*Aḥad āthār al-Jāmi'a fī Amīrikā*” from Damūs.²⁸ Second, the editorial staff introduces a short excerpt from Muḥammad ‘Alī Bey’s reply where he declares his own willingness to make every effort to meet those needs and requests, because, as he states, “among my major tasks there is serving the Ottomans present here” (*al-Jāmi'a* 1908: 73)—, in the United States. With this, the ambassador tries to convince all the people concerned of his own absolute goodwill. Nevertheless, the editors of *al-Jāmi'a* rushed to inform their readership of an important interview the ambassador himself had with Niqūlā (al-)Ḥaddād, which had also been published in *al-Jāmi'a al-Yawmiyya*. This was partly presented to the monthly magazine’s readers, who thus learned of the ambassador’s warning to all Syrians, concerning one significant fact: that his benevolence could clash with reality. This meant that not every single request could be met, because of impediments under Ottoman law; as for the others, some of them could be satisfied with his help, while others needed the approval of higher authorities. *Al-Jāmi'a*’s comment was that the ambassador’s interest in his own countrymen’s appeal to the Embassy, namely in an official manner, revealed the start of a new policy of goodwill and favourable attitude towards the matter. Thus, there was, seemingly, some hope for positive change, at least in some areas, in the age-old question of the difficult relationship between Ottoman Constantinople and its Arab subjects abroad.

²⁷ Available at <<http://archive.alsharekh.org/Articles/114/5135/126018/1>>.

²⁸ Unfortunately, I did not have access to the newspaper.

Conclusion

As this paper has shown, in 1908 Syrian migrants living in the United States forcibly denounced the indifference of the Ottoman authorities towards them and put forward some proposals seemingly aimed at strengthening the links between centre (Constantinople) and the periphery (the Syrian community living in the United States and, through it, Syrians living at home, in Greater Syria) and at significantly improving life for Ottomans throughout the world. To do so, they called on a number of intellectuals to give voice to their fears and grievances as well as to their hopes. These intellectuals accepted this heavy burden because they too had migrated from Greater Syria to the United States and were “in the same boat” as the rest of the community. The means chosen to achieve their purpose was the newspaper and monthly magazine of the celebrated Farah Anṭūn, widely read throughout the entire Ottoman community and beyond. Through this document, Syrians in America urged the authorities to assume their responsibility and prove to what extent they considered Syrians true Ottomans and true brothers.

However, how did other Syro-Lebanese intellectuals living and working in the United States react to it?

Actually, the fact that the paper analysed here was signed by a large number of Syrians living in the United States did not necessarily reflect the feelings and the ideas of *all* the Syrians there. Proof of this can be found in another Syrian newspaper, a weekly based in New York: *al-Kawn* (The Universe, 1907-1910), where Damūs and his paper with the twenty requests were fiercely criticised.²⁹ *Al-Kawn* was founded by the Damascene Najīb Ṣawāyā (owner, publisher and editor), and by ‘Uthmān Naf’ī Ad’ham and Ḥāfiẓ ‘Abd al-Malik, and often engaged in quarrels with other journals. As we know, a few years before 1908, Najīb Ṣawāyā had been involved with Damūs in the vicissitudes of a Syrian American Party, struggling against the Ottoman Empire, so he was shocked when reading “Aḥad āthār *al-Jāmi’a* fi Amīrikā” and harshly attacked its author, refuting every single point in a series of articles published between March and April of the same year.

At this point, it is perhaps worth noting that in April (the exact day is not given) *al-Jāmi’a* published another letter, entitled “2086 sūriyyan: Rajā’ akhīr ilā ‘uṭūfat al-safir” (2086 Syrians: A last request to His Excellency the Ambassador), addressed by Nāṣif Shiblī Damūs to the Ambassador, Muḥammad ‘Alī Bey (DAMŪS 1908b).³⁰ It had appeared previously in the newspaper and was completely different from “Aḥad āthār *al-Jāmi’a* fi Amīrikā”, especially as far as its extremely straightforward, plain-spoken, almost threatening style is concerned. Indeed, in the letter, after a quite long preamble where Damūs takes a humble, though strong stance, he finally engages in a fierce attack against his true antagonist, the Ottoman Government. This time, he consciously wields a deadly blow: Syrians in America would be prepared to apply for and obtain US nationality, unless the

²⁹ See *al-Kawn*, issues 61-67, March 12th to April 23. All issues are available on <<https://lebanesestudies.omeka.chass.ncsu.edu/collections/show/72>>.

³⁰ It was introduced by an article by *al-Jāmi’a*’s editorial staff (*Al-Jāmi’a* 2008: 69-70). Both papers are available at <<http://archive.alsharekh.org/Articles/114/5135/126017/2>>, and <<http://archive.alsharekh.org/Articles/114/5135/304601/3>>.

Ottoman authorities showed a sincere willingness to meet their requests and concretely fulfil them.

Could this letter be, among other things, a response to *al-Kawn* and its editor? Could it be Damūs's reaction to the perplexities expressed by his old companion Ṣawāyā, who made of his journal the official organ of the Syrian Ottoman Union Society founded in 1908 (FAHRENTHOLD 2019), to then become the United Syrian Society after a few months following its collaboration with the CUP and the Ottoman Consulate in New York?

What is certain is the significance of all the papers involved, from many standpoints, whether historical, socio-political or literary-linguistic. Above all, they offer an insight into Syrian psychology in a particularly critical period of Arab-Ottoman relations, worthy of further study with a multidisciplinary approach.

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