

Fact or Fiction? In Search of the “Learned Council” of Ġirmānūs Farḥāt *

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Abstract

The “learned council” of Ġirmānūs Farḥāt (1670-1732) often surfaces as illustrative of ecumenical humanism in the Levant in the century leading up to the Arab *Nahḍa* (Renaissance). Primary information about the group however is essentially nonexistent, prompting the regurgitation of facts culled from a discrete number of early 20th-century researches on Farḥāt and his colleagues. This essay puts the *historical* existence of Farḥāt’s “learned council” on trial and argues that it never existed; nonetheless, its *historiographical* existence is undeniable. Based on a lexicographical study of the Arabic phrase “learned council (*mağmaʿ ʿilmī*)” and a meticulous review of extant scholarship on the group, I claim that the 18th-century group was conjured into existence in the 20th century. I contend that Catholic Maronite scholars invented Farḥāt’s “learned council” in order to insert their confessional community into a crystalizing Protestant-driven narrative of the *Nahḍa*, which then Western historians reinterpreted as evidence of Arab Christian literary activity more broadly. This essay provides an example of dialectical historiography and calls for the careful reevaluation of some “facts” that have infiltrated *Nahḍa* Studies.

Keywords: Farḥāt, learned council, *mağmaʿ*, *Nahḍa*, historiography

Introduction

Ġirmānūs Farḥāt (1670-1732) embodies the humanist spirit of the Arab *Nahḍa* (Renaissance), a cultural phenomenon characterized by literary, social, and political transformations in the Arabic-speaking world in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Farḥāt was a man of God who served the Maronite Church as a priest, abbot, and superior general of monasteries before assuming the archbishopric of Aleppo in 1725. He was also a man of letters who composed homilies, authored grammars, compiled a lexicon, produced an

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œuvre of poetry, and established the Maronite Library in Aleppo.¹ One of his most laudable accomplishments is his “learned council (*mağmaʿ ʿilmī*)”² where scholars, poets, and clergymen from various confessions assembled to translate devotionals, Arabize Maronite liturgy, and even establish an Arabic printing press.³ Fêted as the first of its kind in the modern Middle East,⁴ his “learned council” exemplifies ecumenical humanism and the existence of literary activity in the Levant prior to the *Nahḍa*. Regrettably, his “learned council” has yet to be critically examined and in the absence of any comprehensive or systematic study, historians for over a century have had to rehearse unsubstantiated claims proffered by their predecessors about this 18th-century confraternity.

This essay questions the *historical* existence of Ġirmānūs Farḥāt’s “learned council” and argues that it never existed. Nonetheless, its *historiographical* existence is irrefutable. In scholarship, it is akin to a synecdoche—a rallying point around which the pre-*Nahḍa* period can be positioned, enframed, and subsequently interpreted. Most importantly, as a named entity in history, it permits Farḥāt, his associates, and persons and events contemporaneous with it to be identified, documented, examined, and ultimately archived in the annals of history. I contend that, in the hands of scholars, clergymen, and literary enthusiasts, illusions of collective literary humanism in 18th-century Aleppo were extracted from folios and rebounded, then categorized and encapsulated in nomenclature recognizable to modern scholars as Farḥāt’s “learned council.”

The craft of writing history, i.e., the cultivation of a story, is at the core of this essay that in particular broaches the question: “Who started the *Nahḍa*?” Antonius in 1938 famously credited the American Protestant missionaries for initiating an Arab national “awakening.”⁵ Although Tibawi in 1971 sharply critiqued him for exaggerating their roles and marginalizing the contributions of local Arabs,⁶ the missionaries continue to feature prominently, not as the progenitors of the *Nahḍa* but as protagonists whose involvement cannot be “undervalued.”⁷ Countering this discourse that tracks teleologies sparked by foreign stimuli are studies in search of genealogies that explore ongoing cultural, literary,

1 For a complete biography, see Kristen BRUSTAD, “Ġirmānūs (Jibrīl) Farḥāt,” in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, 1350-1850*, ed. Joseph E. LOWRY and Devin J. STEWART, 242-251 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009).

2 I use the idiomatic scare quotes when mentioning the group in order to underscore the inaccurate and anachronistic usage of this nomenclature.

3 BRUSTAD, “Ġirmānūs (Jibrīl) Farḥāt,” 249, and Abdulrazzak PATEL, *The Arab Nahḍah: The Making of the Intellectual and Humanist Movement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013), 46.

4 PATEL, *The Arab Nahḍah*, 46, and Nihād RAZZŪQ, *Ġirmānūs Farḥāt: Hayātuh wa-Ālāruh* (al-Kaslik, Lebanon: Manšūrāt Maʿhad al-Tārīḥ fī Ġāmiʿat al-Rūḥ al-Qudus, 1998), 45.

5 George ANTONIUS, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (London: H. Hamilton, 1938).

6 A. L. TIBAWI, “Some Misconceptions about the *Nahḍa*,” *Middle East Forum*, 47 (1971), 15-22.

7 David D. GRAFTON, *The Contested Origins of the 1865 Arabic Bible: Contributions to the Nineteenth Century Nahḍa* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 227-236. Also see Fruma ZACHS, *The Making of a Syrian Identity: Intellectuals and Merchants in Nineteenth Century Beirut* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), and Hala AUJI, *Printing Arab Modernity: Book Culture and The American Press in Nineteenth-Century Beirut* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

social, and intellectual practices.⁸ Scholars now are unshackling the colonialist matrices that circumscribed the field⁹ by questioning the epistemological frameworks and ideological terminologies that generated the very notion of Arab *Nahḍa*.¹⁰

In casting doubt on the historicity of Farḥāt’s “learned council,” this essay joins recent studies that interrogate the archival and historiographical record.¹¹ No sources contemporaneous with either Farḥāt or members of the alleged group have surfaced to corroborate its existence. Moreover, the historiographical record on the group dates back to the early 20th century and no further, compelling me to suspect that it was imaginatively constituted in order to advance scholarly agendas aimed at the historicization and nationalization¹² of 18th-century Catholic Maronites in Aleppo. I suggest that scholars invented this “learned council,” retrojected it into the historical record, and apotheosized its founder as a cultural icon.¹³ This study recounts how the 20th century historicized 18th-century Aleppo in light of events that transpired in the Levant in the 19th century. It provides an example of dialectical historiography in the modern Arab Middle East and pleads for the discriminate use of certain “facts” from and about the *Nahḍa* that have in actuality never been thoroughly investigated.

The story of writing Farḥāt’s “learned council” into the historiography of the Arab *Nahḍa* unfolds in three parts. Part one is a lexicographical study of the Arabic phrase *mağmaʿ ʿilmī* (learned council, i.e., “academy”). I map out its semantic evolution in order to explicate the 20th-century quality of the term and its continued popularity to describe the supposed 18th-century coterie of lettered men. Next, I chronologically survey the historiography on Farḥāt’s “learned council.” In part two I look at the nationalization of

8 Albert HOURANI, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (London: Oxford UP, 1962); Nelly HANNA, *In Praise of Books* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2003); Stephen SHEEHI, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2004); Stephen SHEEHI, “Towards a Critical Theory of *al-Nahḍah*: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital,” *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 43 (2012), 269-298; and PATEL, *The Arab Nahḍah*.

9 Tarek EL-ARISS, “Let There Be *Nahḍah*!,” *Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 2.2 (September 2015), 260-266.

10 Ussama MAKDISI, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Ussama MAKDISI, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2008); Tarek EL-ARISS, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (NY: Fordham UP, 2013); and Dana SAJDI, *The Barber of Damascus: Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Levant* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013).

11 Yoav DI-CAPUA, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), and Nadia BOU ALI, “Collecting the Nation: Lexicography and National Pedagogy in al-Nahḍa al-ʿArabiya,” in *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World*, ed. Sonja MEJCHER-ATASSI and John Pedro SCHWARTZ (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 33-56.

12 Jo TOLLEBEEK and Ilaria PORCIANI, “Institutions, Networks and Communities in a European Perspective,” in *Setting the Standards: Institutions, Networks and Communities of National Historiography*, ed. Ilaria PORCIANI and Jo TOLLEBEEK, 3-26 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 5-6.

13 The iconization of a historic/al figure is a well-established practice in the Arabic philological tradition. See Kristen BRUSTAD, “The Iconic Sībawayh,” in *Essays in Islamic Philology, History, and Philosophy*, ed. Alireza KORANGY et al., 141-165 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016).

local history and argue that Catholic Maronite scholars in the 20th century initially constituted the council in order to inject their community into the emergent Protestant historiography on the *Nahḍa*. I explain in part three how predominantly Western scholars next rebranded the Catholic Maronite narrative as suggestive of a broader, Arab Christian cultural movement that occurred before the 19th century. I conclude that historians retroactively established this confraternity under the superintendence of Ġirmānūs Farḥāt to exhibit the active practice of literary humanism among learned Christian users of Arabic in the century prior to the Arab *Nahḍa* itself.

I. A lexicographical study of “Learned Council”

The assembly over which Farḥāt presided is customarily stylized as a “learned council.” However, what does this term signify? Does the term accurately describe the literary-*cum*-intellectual gatherings that ostensibly transpired around him? A lexicographical study of the phrase *mağmaʿ ʿilmī* (literally, “place of learned gathering”) is a worthwhile initial inquiry in search of the historical “learned council” in 18th-century Aleppo. This part of the study details how an Arabic noun evolved from the meaning of “gathering” or “assembly” into an organized intellectual gathering analogous to the English term “academy.” The semantic genealogy presented here is informative because scholars unremittingly refer to Farḥāt’s “learned council;” yet, they have never explained why this particular nomenclature is significant.

To understand the phrase “learned council,” we need to trace the semantic development of the collocation in Arabic. The noun *mağmaʿ* derives from the tri-consonantal root (ğ-m-ʿ) and carries the basic meaning of gathering and assembly. In terms of morphosyntax, it is a noun of place (*nomen loci*), i.e., the place of ġ-m-ʿ (= gathering/assembly). The oldest Arabic dictionary, *Kitāb al-ʿAyn* (The Book of [the Letter] ʿAyn), defines *mağmaʿ* as “where people are assembled (*yuğmaʿ*); it is also the noun for [a group of] people.”¹⁴ Classical Arabic lexicons, such as *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Tongue of the Arabs), *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* (The All-Encompassing Ocean), and *Tāğ al-ʿArūs* (The Bride’s Crown) reiterate a similar yet abridged definition: “the assembly place (*mawḍiʿ al-ğamʿ*).”¹⁵

Among the Arab Christian population in the Levant, the word *mağmaʿ* carries religious and institutional connotations, therein adding a layer of semantic complexity to the word. In the 18th century, Farḥāt wrote *Iḥkām Bāb al-Iʿrāb ʿan Luğat al-Aʿrāb* (Perfecting the Semantic Field of Clear Expression in the Language of the Arabs)—a dictionary with which he inserted the voice of his confession into the Arabic lexicographical tradition. He replaced Islamic attestations with examples drawn from the Christian cultural landscape and also introduced some markedly Christian Arab definitions. For the lexeme *mağmaʿ*, he reiterated the definitions provided by his predecessors and added: “the holy synods (*al-mağāmiʿ al-muqaddasa*) are where Christian leaders, from among the bishops and scholars,

¹⁴ *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, s.v. “ğ-m-ʿ.”

¹⁵ *Lisān al-ʿArab*, s.v. “ğ-m-ʿ;” *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*, s.v. “ğ-m-ʿ;” and *Tāğ al-ʿArūs*, s.v. “ğ-m-ʿ.”

gather to elucidate the true faith and to refute the heretics (*al-mubtadi‘īn*).¹⁶ The noun *mağāmi‘* (synods) is the plural of *mağma‘* and can also be rendered as “councils.”

The confessional resonance and religious authority infused in the word persisted into the 19th century. For example, in 1846, a group in Beirut that fomented to train primarily Arab converts to Protestantism for itinerant preaching named itself a *mağma‘*.¹⁷ Christian organizations proselytizing in the Eastern Mediterranean at the time also capitalized on the word’s religious implications. The Church Missionary Society (CMS, est. 1799), an evangelical association affiliated with the Church of England, stylized itself as “the *Mağma‘* of the English Church,” and the Prayer Book and Homily Society (est. 1812) in London likewise marketed itself in Arabic as a *mağma‘*.¹⁸ The quintessentially Christian hue of the word persisted into the latter part of the century. In 1867, the literary master of the *Nahḍa*, Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819-1883), asserted in *Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ* (The All-Encompassing of the All-Encompassing) that a *mağma‘* is “a group of religious leaders who assemble for the sake of examining religious issues, e.g., the Christian *mağāmi‘* (synods/councils) of provincial or ecumenical [types].”¹⁹ In sum, Arabic users in 19th-century Beirut and its environs understood a *mağma‘* to be an organized assembly imbued with a type of institutional authority derived from religion. While the word suggested human assembly in the broadest of terms, it was closely associated with Christianity. The word was not yet coupled semantically to humanist and intellectual researches pursued in a collective manner at learned cultural societies or scholarly academies.

Near the end of the 19th century, the semantic scope of the word expanded. The noun *mağma‘* was collocated with the adjective *‘ilmī* (learned/scientific) to coin the phrase “learned society,” or more appropriately “academy.”²⁰ The new coinage was possibly modeled on the phrase *société savant* (literally, “learned society”), which a *fin-de-siècle* French encyclopedia defined as “an organization of men of science and of letters, scholars and thinkers, who pool their efforts, knowledge, and resources to procure the advancement of their chosen branch of knowledge.”²¹ It is possible that through this pairing, the noun’s religiosity was neutralized and the institutional authority semantically circumscribing the word *mağma‘* was redirected to serve humanist intellectualism.

16 *Iḥkām Bāb al-‘Irāb ‘an Luḡat al-A‘rāb*, ed. Ruṣayd al-DAḤDĀḤ (Marseille: Imprimerie Carnaud, 1849), “ğ-m-‘.”

17 Letter from Buṭrus al-BUSTĀNĪ to Eli Smith (10 Jan. 1846), Harvard Houghton Library, ABC 50. On the evangelical goals of *Mağma‘ al-Tahḍīb* (the Refinement Council), see chapter one of my monograph titled *Multiple Missions: The Learned Societies of Late Ottoman Beirut* (forthcoming).

18 *Kitāb Tawārīḥ Muḥtaṣar* (Malta: CMS, 1833); *Portions of the Book of Common Prayers (from the Arabic Version Lately Printed at Malta, 1833)* (London: W. Watts; the Prayer Book and Homily Society, 1844).

19 Buṭrus al-BUSTĀNĪ, *Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ* (Beirut: [n.p.], 1867), “ğ-m-‘.”

20 Cf. J. D. J. WAARDENBURG, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (= *EF*), s.v. “mağma‘ ‘ilmī,” accessed 27 March 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0607>.

21 This translation of the French original comes from Jean-Pierre CHALINE, “In the Provinces: Local and Regional Learned Societies,” in *Setting the Standards*, ed. Ilaria PORCIANI and Jo TOLLEBEEK, 153-164 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 154.

An early example of this collocation in use to label an institutionalized organization of lettered social scientists is *al-Mağma' al-'Ilmī al-Šarqī* (the Oriental Learned Society, 1882-1885) in Beirut.²² Populated mostly by graduates of the Syrian Protestant College (est. 1866; now the American University of Beirut, AUB), its membership included the historian Miḥā'il Mišāqah (Michael Meshaka, 1800-1888) and the physician Yūḥannā Wurtabāt (John Wortabet, 1827-1908), in addition to the founders of the literary-scientific journal *al-Muqtaṭaf* ("Digest," est. 1876): Ya'qūb Šarrūf (1852-1927), Fāris Nimr (1856-1951), and Šāhīn Makāriyūs (1853-1910). At the inaugural meeting held on 8 March 1882, the collective prerogative of this group for scientific discourse is evident by the topics addressed: "Astronomy: Past and Present," "Chlorophyll in Living Beings," "Hailstorm," and "Analogy between the Movements of Plants and the Muscular Movements of Children, Called Chorea."²³ The speakers' scientific credentials to discuss these topics are unquestionable. After every name, the letters "bā". 'ayn. (= Bachelor of 'Ilm, i.e., Science)" appear²⁴ to publically announce that these men completed their studies at the new institution of higher learning in the city.

The phrase *mağma' 'ilmī* developed further, semantically consolidating to become the Arabic equivalent for "academy," i.e., "a society or institution for the cultivation and promotion of literature, or arts and sciences, or of some particular art or science or branch of these."²⁵ In the early 20th century, Arab savants, literary figures, and political and administrative bureaucrats residing in the French Mandate of Syria and Lebanon harnessed the institutional authority of the noun *mağma'* and the intellectual liberality of the adjective *'ilmī*, to establish academies by this name in their respective capitals, i.e., *al-Mağma' al-'Ilmī al-'Arabī bi-Dimašq* (the Arab Academy of Damascus, 1919–present)²⁶ and *al-Mağma' al-'Ilmī al-Lubnānī* (the Lebanese Academy, 1927-1930?) in Beirut.²⁷ A faithful English translation of *al-mağma' al-'ilmī* is indubitably "academy," given that the Damascus-based group stylized itself in French as the *Académie arabe de Damas* and considered itself a modern Arab incarnation of famed scholarly academies in world history.²⁸ In the 21st century, the noun *mağma'* stands independent to mean "academy" as evident by the present name of the Syrian institution: *Mağma' al-Luġa al-'Arabiyya bi-Dimašq / Académie de la langue arabe de Damas* (the Arabic Language Academy of Damascus).

22 *A'māl al-Mağma' al-'Ilmī al-Šarqī li-Sanat 1882* (Beirut: [n.p.], 1883(?)); and Isbir ŠUQAYR, "Fī Irṭiqā' al-Insān fī A'māl al-Ḥayāh (25 Apr. 1885)", *al-Muqtaṭaf*, 9.12 (Sept. 1885), 721-728.

23 This address is undoubtedly based on Francis WARNER, "Analogy between the Movements of Plants and the Muscular Movements of Children, Called Chorea," *The British Medical Journal*, 1 (1104) (25 Feb. 1882), 263-264.

24 *al-Muqtaṭaf*, 6.11 (Apr. 1882), 304.

25 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., "academy," accessed 9 January 2018, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/891?redirectedFrom=academy#eid>>.

26 "Naš'at al-Mağma' al-'Ilmī al-'Arabī," *Mağallat al-Mağma' al-'Ilmī al-'Arabī*, 1.1 (Jan. 1921), 3.

27 *Al-Mağma' al-'Ilmī al-Lubnānī* (1930), cover and 5-6. Special Collections, American University of Beirut.

28 'Isā Iskandar al-MA'LŪF, "al-Mağāmi' al-'Ilmiyya fī 'l-'Ālam," *Mağallat al-Mağma' al-'Ilmī al-'Arabī*, 1.4 (Apr. 1921), 97-105, and 1.5 (May 1921), 147-154.

In terms of mission and organizational structure, an academy and a learned society seem complementary with one another. Customarily, government sponsorship and public recognition endow the former with a degree of prestige, consecrating it as an institution, a valued and stable apparatus operative in civil society. As such, the academy is a public exhibition of collective, authoritative learning. It is a symbolic cornerstone of scholasticism and intellectualism, imaginatively siphoned from institutional predecessors such as The Academy of Plato (est. c. 387 BCE) in ancient Greece and the *Académie française* (est. 1635) in Paris. Functionally, the institution of the academy is populated by a recognized “community of inquirers” formed through a three-part process in which participants i) organize themselves formally into an association; ii) distinguish themselves from peer associations and from civil society at large; and iii) enhance scholarly discourse among themselves, regulating their affairs internally and “heightening their credibility in the eyes of the public.”²⁹

In marrying the noun of a religious council/synod with the adjective of erudition, *mağmaʿ* + *ʿilmī*, the humanist “academy” exists in Arabic as an institution dedicated to higher knowledge, one that typically considers its members to be specialists in art, science, and literature and that collectively promotes an opinion to be accepted as authoritative by the general public. It is this late 19th- and early 20th-century collocation that Arabic scholarship used in the 20th century to locate, describe, and ultimately label the “learned council/academy” of Ġirmānūs Farḥāt in the 18th century.

It is conceivable that historiographers of the *Nahḍa* unreservedly adopt the term “learned council/academy” in order to circumscribe Farḥāt and his associates within the neoteric institution of the “academy.” By conferring upon the 18th-century coterie recognizable nomenclature, it becomes possible to insert it at the vanguard of a teleology of institutionalized intellectual and literary activity that, according to initial accounts,³⁰ the establishment of *al-Ġamʿiyya al-Sūriyya li-ʾktisāb al-ʾUlūm waʾl-Funūn* (the Syrian Society of Arts and Sciences, est. 1847) in Beirut launched. An extreme fidelity to Arabic sources has perhaps blinded researchers to the semantic development of the original phrase *mağmaʿ ʿilmī*. Furthermore, the fairly consistent usage of the collocation “learned council” by Western researchers divulges the Arabic origin of their sources and possibly their uncritical dependence on the analysis of previous scholars (discussed in Part Three). Because the veracity of the Farḥāt’s “learned council” was never questioned, scholarship *literally* absorbed both its historical existence and the nomenclature used to define it. And thus, the anachronistic implications of the phrase *mağmaʿ ʿilmī* to explain Farḥāt *et alia* crept into *Nahḍa* Studies.³¹

29 Thomas L. HASKELL, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 19.

30 Šāhīn MAKĀRIYŪS, “al-Maʿārif fī Sūriyya,” *al-Muqataṭaf*, 7.9 (Feb. 1883), 387; Ġurġī ZAYDĀN, *Tārīḥ Ādāb al-Luġa al-ʿArabiyya*, vol. 4 (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Hilāl, 1914), 80; and ANTONIUS, *The Arab Awakening*, 13 and 51-55.

31 Kilpatrick astutely points out that labeling Farḥāt and his coterie a “‘literary circle’ has misleading associations.” Hilary KILPATRICK, “From *Literatur* to *Adab*: The Literary Renaissance in Aleppo around 1700,” *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*, 58.3-4 (2006), 206.

II. Inventing the “Learned Council”

A chronological review of the literature on Farḥāt’s “learned council” reveals that prior to the early 20th century, it did not exist in the historical record. This startling reality prompts a meticulous examination of its historiography in order to discover how the group was birthed *ex nihilo* and why. I argue that its invention served to insert the pre-*Nahḍa* Catholic Maronite community into the Protestant-driven *Nahḍa* narrative that was crystalizing in the early part of the century.³² Fixated on Farḥāt, the groups’ acclaimed leader, Catholic Maronite scholars retrieved this historical figure from their archives and re-presented him as a national icon for their confessional community which was searching for a place within a larger historical narrative.

It seems that it was Ğirġis Manaš (Georges Manache, 1873-1931),³³ an Arab Jesuit scholar and literary historian, who conjured up Farḥāt’s “learned council” into existence. Between 1902 and 1904, he published eight essays on literary and religious personalities who were active in 17th- and 18th-century Aleppo,³⁴ the latter four essays of which he dedicated specifically to Farḥāt’s life and writings.³⁵ Initially Manaš described Farḥāt as having “a learned assembly (*maġlis ‘ilmī*)” and wrote in 1904 that the meetings “happened very much like a learned circle (*ašbaha šay’ bi-dā’ira ‘ilmiyya*).”³⁶ In 1934, the Maronite Church marked the bicentennial anniversary of Farḥāt’s death by erecting a statue in front of St. Elijah Cathedral in Aleppo of the deceased archbishop—a statue that Manaš proposed but unfortunately never saw because he died before preparations were completed.³⁷ In its commemorative publication of the events, the Maronite Church boldly formalized what up till then had been portrayed as an *ad hoc* confraternity. The text itself is circumspect, explaining that Farḥāt directed “a quasi-learned circle (*šibh dā’ira ‘ilmiyya*),” the title of the section within the publication however is captioned “His Learned Council (*maġma’uh al-‘ilmī*).”³⁸ That same year, a certain Būlus Mas’ad published a magisterial study of Farḥāt’s

32 Ğurġī ZAYDĀN, *Tarāġim Mašāhīr al-Šarq fī al-Qarn al-Tāsi’ ‘Ašar* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Hilāl, 1902-1903); ZAYDĀN, *Tārīḥ Adāb al-Luġa al-‘Arabiyya*, vol. 4; and ANTONIUS, *The Arab Awakening*.

33 Ğirġis MANAŠ (Georges Manache) was born in Aleppo on 16 December 1873. He became a priest in the Maronite Church in 1895 and devoted his life to academic pursuits. He taught at various confessional-operated schools in the city and regularly contributed researches to scholarly journals. In 1923, he became a member of the Arab Academy in Damascus. “Al-Ustād Ğirġis Manaš,” *Maġallat al-Maġma’ al-‘Ilmī al-‘Arabī bi-Dimašq*, 11.5 (May-June 1931), 362-365.

34 Ğirġis MANAŠ, “Nī‘ma b. al-Ḥūrī Tūmā al-Ḥalabī al-Šā’ir al-Nāṭir,” *al-Mašriq*, 5.9 (1902), 396-405; “al-Qiss ‘Abd al-Masīḥ Lubyān al-Ḥalabī,” *al-Mašriq*, 5.17 (1902), 786-792; “Tarġamat al-Ṭayyib al-Aṭar al-Ḥūrī Nīqūlāwus al-Šā’ig,” *al-Mašriq*, 6.13 (1903), 96-111; and “al-Ḥūrī Buṭrus al-Tūlawī al-Faylasūf al-Šahīr,” *al-Mašriq*, 6.17 (1903), 769-777.

35 Ğirġis MANAŠ, “al-Mustaṭrafāt al-Mustazrafāt fī Hayāt al-Sayyid Ğirmānūs Farḥāt,” *al-Mašriq*, 7.2 (1904), 49-56, *al-Mašriq*, 7.3 (1904), 105-111, *al-Mašriq*, 7.5 (1904), 210-219, and “Tirkat al-Sayyid Ğirmānūs Farḥāt” *al-Mašriq*, 7.8 (1904), 354-361.

36 MANAŠ, “al-Qiss ‘Abd al-Masīḥ Lubyān al-Ḥalabī,” 789; and “al-Mustaṭrafāt al-Mustazrafāt,” 110.

37 Amīl ŠA‘B, ed., *Rawā’i’ al-Yūbīl al-Mi’awī al-Tānī li-Taḥlīd Dīkrā Faqīd al-‘Ilm wa’l-Faḍīla al-Nābiġa al-Muṭrān Ğirmānūs Farḥāt* (= *Rawā’i’*), Part 2 (Aleppo: al-Maṭba‘a al-Mārūniyya, 1934), cover, 3-4, 11-12, and 25-31.

38 *Rawā’i’*, Part 1, 73.

life in which he described “a quasi-learned council (*šibh mağma‘ ‘ilmī*) whose members eagerly applied themselves to composition and translation.”³⁹ In 1952, the Lebanese historian Mārūn ‘Abbūd dropped the qualifier “quasi- (*šibh*)” and institutionalized the group, stating unequivocally that Farḥāt formed in Aleppo “a learned council (*mağma‘ ‘ilmī*) whose members (*a‘ḍā’uh*) were concerned with translation.”⁴⁰

Within approximately fifty years, the “like a learned circle” that Manaš summoned into being was transformed into a formal “learned council.” This transformation is not simply a matter of nomenclature, i.e., dropping the qualifying words “like a (*ašbaha šay’ bi-*)” and “quasi- (*šibh*).” As discussed previously (in Part One), a more accurate translation of the phrase *mağma‘ ‘ilmī* at this temporal juncture is “academy,” a term that invokes the existence of an institution—a formally constituted gathering of lettered humanists, social scientists, and intellectuals—in civil society. I surmise that Catholic Maronite scholars strategically used the collocation *mağma‘ ‘ilmī* to instill the imagined 18th-century coterie with the temporal and institutional validity of a 20th-century academy. Through this contrivance, they could insert their indigenous voice into the *Nahḍa* narrative that Protestant-educated Arabs were popularizing in the early 20th century.

In comparison to Protestantism, whose first missionaries did not reach the Eastern Mediterranean until 1819, the Roman Catholic Church had centuries-old linkages to the region through its association with the Maronite community.⁴¹ In the 12th century, Maronites entered into communion with Rome, and in 1215 they were officially placed under the authority of the Holy See. Following the Fifth Lateran Council in 1515, Rome embarked on Latinizing the Eastern Churches in order to elucidate commonalities in practice and doctrine that united the Churches. In 1578, Jesuit missionaries arrived in the Levant to reform the rites and rituals of their Christian cousins. In 1584, Pope Gregory XIII established the Maronite College in Rome—a seminary intended to educate and train young Maronites for the priesthood.⁴² This college became a model for educational institutions founded in the Levant in the 17th and 18th centuries.⁴³ Iṣṭifān al-Duwayhī (1630-1704), a graduate from the college in Rome, established the Maronite School in Aleppo in 1682, where Farḥāt and many literary figures of the period supposedly learned from another alum of the college, Buṭrus al-Tūlāwī (1655-1746).⁴⁴ Nearly a century later, the distinguished

39 Būlus MAS‘AD, *al-Dikrā fī Ḥayāt al-Muṭrān Ġirmānūs Farḥāt* (Jouneih, Lebanon: Maṭba‘at al-Mursalīn lil-Lubnāniyyīn, 1934), 82.

40 This study consulted the second imprint: Mārūn ‘ABBŪD, *Ruwwād al-Nahḍa al-Ḥadīṭa* (Beirut: Dār al-Taḳāfa, 1966), 35.

41 The Maronites are primarily centered in Lebanon and trace their origin back to St. Maron (d. c. 433). Their doctrinal roots are Monophysite: belief in the single, unified will of Christ. This is in contrast to the Dyophysite position that holds Jesus Christ maintained two, distinct wills—one divine and one human.

42 Bernard HEYBERGER, *Hindiyya, Mystic and Criminal (1720-1798): A Political and Religious Crisis in Lebanon*, trans. Renée CHAMPION (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2013), 5-6.

43 Aurélien GIRARD and Giovanni PIZZORUSSO, “The Maronite College in Early Modern Rome: Between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Letters,” in *College Communities Abroad: Education, Migration and Catholicism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Liam CHAMBERS and Thomas O’CONNOR, 174-197 (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2018), 175; GRAFTON, 115-116.

44 PATEL, *The Arab Nahḍah*, 44.

graduate Yūsuf Iṣṭifān (1729-1793) established the famed Maronite College at ‘Ayn Waraqa in 1789,⁴⁵ that counts among its alumni *Nahḍa* personalities such as Aḥmad Fāris al-Šidyāq (1805-1887)⁴⁶ and Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819-1883).⁴⁷

In the 19th century, claims to the Maronite legacy embodied in the historical person of Ġirmānūs Farḥāt began to play out between printing presses in the Levant that were largely managed by Anglican, Protestant, and Catholic missionaries. The Church Missionary Society (CHS) published two of his writings at its Malta press (est. 1825): a grammar edited by the Maronite-*cum*-Protestant (later turned-Muslim) Aḥmad Fāris al-Šidyāq⁴⁸ and a treatise on homiletics.⁴⁹ The American Press in Beirut (est. 1834), founded by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), produced a critical edition of Farḥāt’s grammar in 1854, prepared by the Maronite-*cum*-Protestant Buṭrus al-Bustānī.⁵⁰ At the hands of these two graduates from the Maronite College at ‘Ayn Waraqa, the missionaries set out to integrate the Catholic Maronite Farḥāt into the fold of Protestantism.

In 1848, the Jesuit missionaries established their press in Beirut that avidly printed Farḥāt’s writings throughout the second half of the century. This press issued an imprint of his grammar in 1865, his poetry in 1866, and then again his grammar in 1882, which Sa‘īd al-Šartūnī (1849-1912) edited.⁵¹ Perhaps Farḥāt’s greatest proponent on behalf of the Jesuits, al-Šartūnī also edited Farḥāt’s *Faṣl al-Ḥiṭāb fī ‘l-Wa‘z* (The Last Word on Oration, 1896) and his poetry collection.⁵² While continuously printing Farḥāt’s writings might bear witness to the reintegration of pre-modern (i.e., pre-*Nahḍa*) Christians into a broader “inter-religious cultural space,”⁵³ the relentless one-upmanship among presses—manifest in the four different editions of Farḥāt’s grammar within a span of fifty years—hints at a competitive struggle over Farḥāt’s textual remains and the confessional rights to his

45 Akram Fouad KHATER, *Passion and Politics in the Christian Middle East* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2011), 184-185.

46 It is frequently related that Aḥmad Fāris and his brother, the historian Ṭannūs (d. 1859/1861), studied at ‘Ayn Waraqa; yet Ġumayyil lists only the youngest brother, As‘ad (1798-1830), as an alum. Nāṣir ĠUMAYYIL (Nasser Gemayel), *Madrasat ‘Ayn Waraqa fī ‘l-Dīkrā al-Mi‘awiyya al-Ṭāniya li-Ta’sīsi-hā* (Beirut: Maṭba‘at Dikāš, 1989), 47-48.

47 Ibid., 60.

48 *Baḥṭ al-Maṭālib fī ‘Ilm al-‘Arabiyya*, ed. [Aḥmād] Fāris al-ŠIDYĀQ (Malta: CHS, 1836). This title is a reworking of Farḥāt’s name for the grammar, *Baḥṭ al-Maṭālib fī Ḥaṭṭ al-Maṭālib*.

49 *Fī ‘l-Wa‘z* (Malta: CHS, 1842). The original title of Farḥāt’s work was *Faṣl al-Ḥiṭāb fī ‘l-Wa‘z*. The CHS publication included a collection of sermons by its founder, the English evangelical Charles Simeon (1759-1836), that were translated into Arabic.

50 *Miṣbāḥ al-Ṭālib fī Baḥṭ al-Maṭālib*, ed. Buṭrus al-BUSTĀNĪ (Beirut: American Press, 1854).

51 *Baḥṭ al-Maṭālib fī ‘Ilm al-‘Arabiyya* (Beirut: Jesuit Press, 1865); *Dīwān Farḥāt* (Beirut: Jesuit Press, 1866); and *al-Maṭālib fī ‘Ilm al-‘Arabiyya*, ed. Sa‘īd al-ŠARTŪNĪ (Beirut: Jesuit Press, 1882).

52 *Faṣl al-Ḥiṭāb fī ‘l-Wa‘z*, ed. Sa‘īd al-ŠARTŪNĪ (Beirut: Jesuit Press, 1896), and *Dīwān Farḥāt*, ed. Sa‘īd al-ŠARTŪNĪ, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Jesuit Press, 1894). I am unable to locate and subsequently to date the first imprint.

53 PATEL, *The Arab Nahḍah*, 36. See his chapter titled “The Reintegration of Pre-modern Christians into the Mainstream of Arabic Literature and the Creation of an Inter-religious Cultural Space,” 36-74.

historical legacy. In the late 19th century, the *Nahḍa* had not yet been explicitly codified as a seminal episode for Arab society. Nonetheless, Protestant and Catholic factions were already toiling through their presses to weave themselves into the Maronite past and to incorporate the local past into their own futures in the region.

Toward this end, Catholic and Protestant missionaries in Beirut also produced competing Arabic translations of the Bible⁵⁴ and established rival learned cultural societies,⁵⁵ educational institutions,⁵⁶ and periodicals. In 1870, the Catholics issued a weekly titled *al-Baṣīr* (“The Herald”) to which the Protestants responded with *al-Našra al-Uṣbūʿiyya* (“The Weekly Report”) in the following year.⁵⁷ In 1876, alumni from the Syrian Protestant College founded the literary-scientific journal *al-Muqtaṭaf* (“Digest”). Twenty-two years later, the Catholics launched their own journal, *al-Mašriq* (“The Orient”).⁵⁸ The resolve to outshine the Protestants is literally encapsulated in the journal name. The noun *mašriq* denotes the land of the rising sun and is also a historical geographical term encompassing modern-day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine, i.e., “the Levant.”

Ġirġis Manaš, the Jesuit scholar who invoked Farḥāt’s “learned council” into historical reality, might have been inspired to invent it and to promote its leader as a national icon for the Catholic Maronites by the editor-in-chief of *al-Mašriq*, the prominent Arab Jesuit historian of Arabic literature Luwīs Šayḥū (Louis Cheikho, 1857-1927). In 1899, Šayḥū awarded Aleppo prominence in the history of the Arab Renaissance by writing that Christians from various confessions in the city were “seized by national fervor (*al-ḥamiyya al-waṭaniyya*)” to study Arabic literary humanism after witnessing its utmost demise.⁵⁹ Men such as Farḥāt, the poet Niqūlā al-Šāʿig (1692-1756), the printer ʿAbdallāh Zāḥir (1684-1748), and Armenian poet Mikirtġ al-Kasīḥ (1666-?) stand at the forefront of “this group/association (*al-ġamʿiyya*),” as he called them. In the 20th century, these men became distinguished representatives of the city’s literary landscape during the pre-*Nahḍa* period.⁶⁰

There is a historiographical dissonance between Manaš and Šayḥū. The latter associated the literary movement in Aleppo in the early 18th century with the Roman Catholic Church. Šayḥū credited the Jesuits for “exciting their [i.e., Arab Christians] zeal, reconciling their hearts, and seeking to strike the fire of their ingenious capabilities;” he also praised the Jesuit missionary Pierre Fromage (1678-1740) for his efforts and work with the lettered

54 Rana ISSA, “The Missionary Bible (1860)” and “The Jesuit Bible (1877),” in *The Bible as Commodity: Modern Patterns of Arabic Language Standardization and Bible Commoditization in the Levant*, PhD diss. (University of Oslo, 2014), 110-150.

55 ANTONIUS, *The Arab Awakening*, 51-53. Information on the Jesuit *al-Ġamʿiyya al-Mašriqiyya* (the Oriental Society, est. 1850) comes from Yūsuf Ilyān SARKIS, “*al-Ġamʿiyya al-Mašriqiyya fī Bayrūt*,” *al-Mašriq*, 12 (1909), 32-38.

56 Samir KASSIR, “Between Boston and Rome,” in *Beirut*, trans. M.B. DEBEVOISE (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 180-202.

57 Robert Bell CAMPBELL, *The Arabic Journal al-Mašriq: Its Beginnings and First Twenty-Five Years under the Editorship of Père Louis Cheikho, S.J.*, PhD diss. (The University of Michigan, 1972), 7.

58 Ibid., 8. See pages 5-11 on the founding of the journal.

59 Luwīs ŠAYḤŪ, “Šāʿir Ḥalabī Maġhūl,” *al-Mašriq*, 2.12 (15 May 1899), 442.

60 Ibid.

men in the region.⁶¹ Curiously, Manaš excised Fromage from the “learned council” membership because, I suspect, the inclusion of a foreign missionary among the coterie that he was writing into the historical record would tarnish and dilute the indigenous composition of said group.

The roster that Manaš provided for the group hints at his scholarly agenda: to underscore the local Maronite quality of the “learned council” and through induction, to highlight Catholic contributions to the *Nahḍa*. In it he prioritizes the ecclesiastical titles of members over their vocational talents:

Priest (*ḥūrī*) Buṭrus al-Tūlāwī, the famed philosopher; presbyter (*qiss*) Yūsuf al-Bānī, the famed scholar; presbyter ‘Abd al-Masīḥ Lubyān, the famed liturgist; and presbyter ‘Aṭṭallāh Zindah, the scribe and famous versifier.⁶²

While Manaš mentions philosophy, scholasticism, and versification, these liberal arts are subordinate in importance to the clerical positions that these men held. He considered these figures to be clergymen first and foremost and thus presented their scholarly pursuits as derivative of their religious occupations. These men however were skilled practitioners of *belles-lettres*, many of whom received formalized training and were prolific producers of humanist literature. For example, Buṭrus al-Tūlāwī (1655-1746) studied in Rome, taught at the Maronite School in Aleppo, and translated several texts on philosophy and theology. Yūsuf al-Bānī (?-1725)⁶³ taught Syriac and Arabic in Rome⁶⁴ and translated into Arabic many devotionals and spiritual contemplations by Jesuit mystics, aesthetics, and exegetes from 16th- and 17th-century Europe.⁶⁵ ‘Abd al-Masīḥ al-Lubyān (?-1742) learned philosophy, literary, and theoretical theology at the Maronite School in Aleppo and then enjoyed a career as a church treasurer, educator, translator, copyist, and liturgist.⁶⁶ In foregrounding their rank within Church hierarchy, Manaš promoted their literary humanism as supportive at best.

Manaš also overlooked men who were not unquestionably Maronite, even though future scholars would consider them members of Farḥāt’s “learned council.” He did not count two Melkite poets, an Armenian poet, or the French Jesuit missionary (discussed in Part Three) because presumably their affiliation to other Eastern Churches or their foreignness would

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² MANAŠ, “al-Mustaṭrafāt al-Mustaẓrafāt,” 110.

⁶³ ‘Umar Riḍā KAḤḤĀLA, *Mu‘ḡam al-Mu‘allifīn*, vol. 13 (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāṭ al-‘Arabī lil-Ṭibā’a wa’l-Naṣr wa’l-Tawzī’, 1957), 285.

⁶⁴ Yūsuf al-BĀNĪ (Giuseppe BANESE), trans., *Orationi di S. Brigida* (Rome: The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, 1677), cover.

⁶⁵ Among his translations are Juan Eusebio NIEREMBERG’s (1595-1658) *De Discrimine inter Temporale et Aeternum* (The Difference between Temporal and Eternal), Alphonsus RODRIGUEZ’s (1526-1616) *Ejercicio de perfección y virtudes cristianas* (Practice of Perfection and Christian Virtues), Giovanni Pietro PINAMONTI’s (1632-1703) *L’inferno aperto a cristiano perché non v’entri* (Hell Opened to Christians, to Caution Them from Entering into It), and many commentaries by Cornelius A LAPIDE (1567-1673). Georg GRAF, *Geschichte der Christlichen Arabischen Literatur* (= GCAL), Vol. 3 (Rome: Vatican Library, 1949), 383-389.

⁶⁶ MANAŠ, “al-Qiss ‘Abd al-Masīḥ Lubyān al-Ḥalabī,” 786-792.

not corroborate the regional Arab story that he was trying to tell: local Maronites (read: Catholics) were central to the *Nahḍa* and pre-date the contribution of the American missionaries (read: Protestants). His Maronite-centric roster became the foundational membership list for Farḥāt’s “learned council,” as evidenced by the 1934 commemorative publication that duplicates it almost verbatim and keeps the order in which members are mentioned and their religious titles intact.⁶⁷ Furthermore his 1904 essays on Farḥāt became the indispensable source on the 18th-century figure.⁶⁸

The invention of Farḥāt’s “learned council” was the prerogative of one man, Ġirġis Manaš, who the Maronite Church in 1934 applauded as “the first to embark upon publicizing Farḥāt’s accomplishments.”⁶⁹ As an origin for the *Nahḍa* crystalized mainly in the hands of Protestant-educated Arabs, the Catholic Maronite community perhaps resented their extraction and undervalued contribution to the socio-cultural phenomenon of the Arab *Nahḍa* that occurred in the previous century. They preceded the Protestants in time yet received minimal recognition for their efforts which dated back to the 16th century. In designing an intellectual hub in Aleppo around a hometown boy, local Catholic Maronites spearheaded by Manaš were able to claim indigenous agency and ownership to the *Nahḍa*. In this way, the Catholic community could assert a role in cultivating the Arab literary and humanist movement, one that temporally preceded the comparably recent role of the Protestant missionaries.

III. Reinterpreting the “Learned Council”

In the second half of the 20th century, Farḥāt and his “learned council” became a reference point, a contrivance to describe literary activities in the Levant prior to the 19th-century *Nahḍa*. As his “learned council” proliferated in Western historiography on the *Nahḍa* and its membership expanded, I argue that his status as a national icon for the Catholic Maronite community was calculatingly rewritten to be a cultural icon for all Arab Christians. His “learned council” became indicative of a broader, Arab cultural phenomenon which was coded as illustrative of intra-confessional cooperation.

Initially, European scholarship was careful to avoid the phrase “learned council.” In *Encyclopaedia of Islam, First Edition* (1913-1936) (hereafter, *EI*¹), Ignatius Kratschkowsky wrote that Farḥāt “was able to gather a circle of poets and scholars around him.”⁷⁰ In the encyclopedia’s second edition, A.G. Karam rewrote Kratschkowsky and wrote that Farḥāt

⁶⁷ *Rawāʿi*, Part 1, 73.

⁶⁸ GRAF, *GCAL*, Vol. 3, 408-409; I. KRATSKHOKOWSKY, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, First Edition* (1913-1936) (= *EI*¹), s.v. “Farḥāt”, accessed 16 January 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2214-871X_ei1_SIM_2399>; I. KRATSKHOKOWSKY and A.G. KARAM, *EI*², s.v. “Farḥāt,” accessed 8 February 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_2282>; Joseph FÉGHALI, “Ġermānos Farḥāt: Archevêque d’Alep et arabisant (1670-1732),” *Parole d’Orient*, 2.1 (1966), 129; RAZZŪQ, *Ġirmānūs Farḥāt*, 45n58; and BRUSTAD, “Ġirmānūs (Jirbīl) Farḥāt,” 250.

⁶⁹ *Rawāʿi*, Part 2, 11-12.

⁷⁰ KRATSKHOKOWSKY, *EI*¹, s.v. “Farḥāt.”

“gathered around him a circle of poets and scholars.”⁷¹ The targeted removal of “was able to” recast the Maronite archbishop’s action as intentional, and historiographically it indicates a preliminary step toward the group’s formal institutionalization. Next the nomenclature of a “learned council” was adopted in translation from Arabic sources. In the 1950s and 1960s, it surfaces in French as “une sorte d’académie,”⁷² an exact gloss for Manaš’s “like a learned circle.” Lately the qualifiers “like” and “quasi-,” which Arab scholars originally used to equivocate, vanished. In 1998, Nihād Razzūq baptized it “the first learned council (*awwal mağma‘ ‘ilmī*) in the history of the East.”⁷³ In the 21st century, this conclusion and nomenclature were unapologetically transferred into English. In the definitive biography on Farḥāt, Brustad stylized the group as Farḥāt’s “learned council,”⁷⁴ which Patel relabeled as a “learned society.”⁷⁵

To bolster claims that group participation reached beyond the Maronite Church and included non-clerical residents of Aleppo, Manaš’s membership list was expanded. *EI*¹ inaugurated the process of transforming the confessional composition of the group into one filled with *littérateurs*:

... and he [i.e., Farḥāt] was able to gather a circle of poets and scholars around him. Of his friends mentioned in the *Dīwān* special reference may be made to Niqūlā al-Šā’ig ..., of Greek descent, who shares with him the honour of being a very popular poet ..., Mikirtīğ al-Kasīh, an Armenian by birth ..., the poet Ni‘matallāh al-Ḥalabī ..., ‘Abdallāh Zāḥir who rendered great services to printing ..., the theologian Ilyās b. Faḥr ..., etc.⁷⁶

The men with whom Farḥāt exchanged poetry formed a metaphorical circle around him. Whether intentionally or carelessly ignoring the symbolic nature of this list, this coterie of five received automatic membership to the purported “learned council.” And just like that, the Melkite poets Niqūlā b. Ni‘ma al-Šā’ig (1692-1756) and Ni‘matallāh b. Tūmā al-Ḥalabī (d. 1767?)⁷⁷ became full-fledged members, along with the Armenian *littérateur* Mikirtīğ al-Kasīh b. ‘Abdallāh al-Muḥalla‘ (1666-?), the printing pioneer ‘Abdallāh Zāḥir (1684-1748), and the British dragoman, Ilyās b. Faḥr (d. 1757).⁷⁸

The “learned council” roster currently in circulation is based on Manaš’s 1904 list and “friends mentioned in the *Dīwān*,” as presented in *EI*¹. In terms of methodology,

71 KRATSKOWSKY and KARAM, *EI*², s.v. “Farḥāt.”

72 Pierre RAPHAEL, *Le Rôle du Collège maronite romain dans l’Orientalisme aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Beirut: Université Saint Joseph, 1950), 164, and FÉGHALI, “Germānos Farḥāt,” 119.

73 RAZZŪQ, *Ġirmānūs Farḥāt*, 45.

74 BRUSTAD, “Jirmānūs (Jibrīl) Farḥāt,” 249.

75 PATEL, *The Arab Nahḍah*, 46.

76 KRATSKOWSKY, *EI*¹, s.v. “Farḥāt”. I changed the transliterations and expunged all dates and in-line citations in order to facilitate readability.

77 MANAŠ, “Ni‘ma b. al-Ḥūrī Tūmā al-Ḥalabī al-Šā’ir al-Nāṭir,” 405. *EI*¹ cites c. 1770 as a possible year of death, whereas *EI*² and Patel suggest c. 1700 as the year. KRATSKOWSKY, *EI*¹, s.v. “Farḥāt,” KRATSKOWSKY and KARAM, *EI*², s.v. “Farḥāt,” and PATEL, *The Arab Nahḍah*, 46.

78 Peter HILL, “The First Arabic Translations of Enlightenment Literature: The Damietta Circle of the 1800s and 1810s,” *Intellectual History Review*, (2015), 3.

individuals have been admitted to the group throughout the past century without any explicitly stated criterion. The conditions for inclusion appear to be personal or professional engagements with either Farḥāt and/or his fellow colleagues. In other words, a discernable presence in his loosely-defined social network garners an individual admission to his fictitious assembly. The roster therefore is a cobbled list of translators, literary enthusiasts, and clergymen who lived in Aleppo at some time during Farḥāt’s own lifetime.

The roster in circulation is permeable, accepting literate men and lettered notables whenever historians deem it appropriate.⁷⁹ For example, Patel recently proposed the Patriarch of Antioch, Aṭanāsiyūs III Dabbās (1647-1724), as the eleventh member of the group, given his interest in printing and his association with ‘Abdallāh Zāḥir.⁸⁰ Following these criteria-of-practice, I nominate the Jesuit priest Pierre Fromage (1678-1740)⁸¹ for membership because of his active presence in the literary and religious milieu shaped by Farḥāt and his associates. Born on 12 May 1678 in Laon, France, Fromage served as a missionary in the Levant from 1710 until his death in 1740. He was a prolific literary figure, authoring and translating a total of thirty-three books.⁸² Zāḥir and his cousin, Niqūlā al-Šā’ig, corrected many devotional texts translated by the Jesuits. As a corrector, Zāḥir provided “the form” to translations to which Fromage had provided “the substance.”⁸³ Zāḥir printed many of these translations at the Arabic press founded at St. John the Baptist Monastery in Choueir in 1733.⁸⁴ Rome valued Fromage’s close association with the Maronites in the Levant, inviting him to deliver the inaugural address at the Maronite Synod held at Our Lady of Louaize Monastery on 30 September 1736.⁸⁵ If an identifiable network of literary producers did exist in the Levant in the early 18th century, it is conceivable that Fromage was a dynamic contributor. Yet Fromage was a Frenchman and a Jesuit missionary. Because neither his country of origin nor career promote the narrative of a local, Arab-led literary and cultural movement, I suspect he has been denied membership in the made-up “learned council” until now.

Were he to be admitted, his presence would enrich the religious diversity and general character of the group. Of the twelve men generally considered members, nine came from

⁷⁹ Consult Appendix A for the roster of purported members.

⁸⁰ PATEL, *The Arab Nahḍah*, 47 and 71n40.

⁸¹ Gabriel LEBON, “Silhouettes de Missionnaires du Levant. Un initiateur : le P. Pierre Fromage,” *Revue de l’histoire des missions*, 3 (1938), 408-427.

⁸² Alphonsus RODRIGUEZ, *Kitāb al-Kamāl al-Masīhī*, trans. Pierre FROMAGE (Beirut: Jesuit Press, 1868), 5-7.

⁸³ LEBON, “Silhouettes de Missionnaires du Levant,” 413. These books include *De Discrimine inter Temporale et Aeternum* (The Difference between Temporal and Eternal) by Juan Eusebio NIEREMBERG, *Introduction à la Vie Devote* (Introduction to the Devout Life) by François DE SALES (1567-1622), and *Ejercicio de perfección y virtudes cristianas* (Practice of Perfection and Christian Virtues) by Alphonsus RODRIGUEZ.

⁸⁴ For example, *Kitāb Mīzān al-Zamān wa-Qisṭās Abadiyyāt al-Insān* (Choueir [Lebanon]: St. John the Baptist Monastery, 1734); and *Kitāb Madḥal al-Ibāda* (Choueir [Lebanon]: St. John the Baptist Monastery, 1744).

⁸⁵ LEBON, “Silhouettes de Missionnaires du Levant,” 420.

the clergy and held a range of offices from deacon up to archbishop and patriarch.⁸⁶ A variety of Christian confessions were also represented. Farḥāt and al-Bānī were Maronite. The poets al-Šā'ig and al-Ḥalabī were Melkite Catholic, as was the Patriarch of Antioch, Dabbās. After the Melkite Church spilt into two factions in 1724, the controversialist Ilyās b. Faḥr aligned with the Greek Orthodox Church and wrote anti-Roman Catholic treatises.⁸⁷ Al-Kasīḥ was Armenian Orthodox. The membership of the Jesuit missionary Pierre Fromage further diversifies the composition of the group.

The seemingly indiscriminate approach to populating the “learned council” has also made it difficult to identify a specific location for group operations. Aleppo is implicitly accepted to have been the location and ergo, a center of pre-*Nahḍa* literary humanism. The historiographical record however never pinpoints a place, nor does it reveal a specific moment of establishment, a duration for its operations, or a moment of closure. This timelessness and absence of locational specificity has permitted chronological contradictions to be overlooked or perhaps willfully ignored. If we take Farḥāt’s archbishopric (1725-1732) as a possible timeframe for the group’s existence, many core members did not overlap with him temporally in the city. Dabbās died in 1724, the year before Farḥāt returned to Aleppo. Al-Bānī died around 1725. Lastly, Zāḥir lived at St. John the Baptist Monastery at Choueir from 1722 until his death in 1748, except for brief periods at the monasteries of ‘Ayn Tūrā and Zūq Mīḥā’l between 1722 and 1731.⁸⁸ Aleppo could not have been the headquarters of the group in the years preceding Farḥāt’s years as archbishop because he spent little time in the city of his birth after he joined the Lebanese Maronite Order, at the age of twenty-five. From 1695 until 1725, he resided primarily in the Qādīšā Valley in the north of modern-day Lebanon.⁸⁹ For the first thirty years of his adult life, Farḥāt resided in locales other than his birthplace and is known to have return to his hometown just three times, in 1705, 1713, and 1720.⁹⁰ If he did preside over a “learned council” of sorts before his tenure as archbishop, it was at best an itinerant confraternity without a defined city as a base. If he established it in Aleppo after 1725, then the haphazardly assembled membership list is rendered even more problematic.

This review of the historiography on Farḥāt’s “learned council” exposes the imaginings of scholars on the existence of said council. Farḥāt’s “like a learned circle” was recast as a

⁸⁶ Farḥāt was an archbishop, Dabbās was the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, and al-Tūlāwī and Fromage were priests. Al-Bānī, Lubyān, and ‘Aṭṭallāh Zindah were presbyters in the Maronite Church. Zāḥir was a deacon and al-Šā'ig served as the abbot and then the general superior of St. John the Baptist Monastery at Choueir.

⁸⁷ GRAF, *GICAL*, Vol. 3, 134-140.

⁸⁸ Jūzif Ilyās KAHHĀLA (Joseph Elie Kahale), *‘Abdallāh Zāḥir: Muṭtakir al-Maṭba‘a al-‘Arabiyya* (Paris: Markaz al-Inmā’ al-Ḥaḍārī, 2000), 68 and 75-76.

⁸⁹ He was at the monasteries of St. Mūrā in Ehdn (1697) and St. Joseph in Zḡartā (near Tripoli) (1700-1705), and then St. Elisha in Bšarrī (1705). After a trip to Rome and Spain (1711-1712), he returned to the Monastery of St. Elisha (1712) and then moved to the Monastery of St. Anthony at Quḏhayā (1714) and Our Lady of Louaize Monastery at Zūq Muṣbiḥ in the Kisirwān (1717). RAZZŪQ, *Ġirmānūs Farḥāt*, 35-37 and 65.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 38-39. Mas‘ad suggested the three trips were in 1713, 1715-1716, and 1720-1721. MAS‘AD, *al-Dikrā*, 34-35.

“learned council” in its own right in order to pinpoint an episode of institutional humanism and intellectualism in evolutionary time, in a historical moment that was right before the literary and cultural renaissance known as the Arab *Nahḍa*. Through the process of making, naming, and reinterpreting the group in Aleppo as Farḥāt’s “learned council,” scholars could retroactively stumble upon the first learned society operative in the temporal zone just before the 19th-century Arab *Nahḍa*.

Final Remarks

The historical existence of Farḥāt’s “learned council” was on trial in this study. In reconstructing the literature on the group and the lexicographical history of the Arabic term “*mağma‘ ʿilmī* (learned council/academy),” I established that it is a fabrication of *Nahḍa* historiographers in the 20th century. Catholic Maronite scholars invented it on behalf of their confession which then mostly Western scholars reinterpreted as descriptive of the Arab Christian socio-cultural landscape of 18th-century Aleppo more broadly. The institutional character of a “learned council” titillated the imaginations of historians searching for an example of indigenous intellectual life in the century preceding the Arab *Nahḍa*. Reading the past against the matrix of a renaissance, the first generation of scholars used Farḥāt’s group to insert themselves, local Arab Catholic Christians, into the revival narrative written chiefly by the local Protestant community. Future generations of scholars then disregarded the confessional motivations of their predecessors and reinterpreted the group as suggestive of ecumenical humanism in 18th-century Aleppo. Within this crucible of indigenous forces and foreign influences, Farḥāt’s “learned council” was conceived, cultivated, and ultimately christened as the first modern learned society in the Arab Middle East.

This study is an intervention in *Nahḍa* historiography. It asks that what seem to be established facts be revisited and that their historical validity be tested. Discovering Farḥāt’s “learned council” to be a chimera reminds us that not all information ensconced in scholarship is necessarily historical truth. A critical eye must be turned to some 19th- and early 20th-century sources that scholars frequently consult when writing *Nahḍa* history because implicit in all writings is a prerogative. Scholars of the *Nahḍa* must become investigators of the *Nahḍa*. They must interrogate not only the figures who lived before and after the period in question but also the seemingly innocuous facts that their predecessors in the field left behind.

Because Farḥāt’s “learned council” is a product of historiographical fiction, its acceptability as a synecdoche for assembling the cultural and intellectual landscape of pre-*Nahḍa* Aleppo has been compromised. Ġirmānūs Farḥāt however did exist. He *is* a historical fact. Farḥāt might have been a forerunner of the Arab *Nahḍa* but this epithet is the result of historiographic hindsight. To accurately position the Maronite ecclesiastic-cum-philologist within the *Nahḍa* narrative, a thorough examination of his catechisms, lexicon, grammars, and poetry would be instructive. And in order to mitigate the diffusion of “fake news” about him, his contemporaries, and 18th-century Aleppo, what secondary sources relate should be corroborated by primary evidence, not a trail of citations to a single, relatively recent secondary source. We should read what he wrote and not what others

wrote about him. In closing, this study petitions for increased scholarly vigilance against (mis-)information that lingers in accepted histories. As an example, it offers the imagined Academy of Aleppo under the leadership of Ġirmānūs Farḥāt.

Appendix A: Members of Farḥāt's "Learned Council"

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|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Yūsuf b. Ġirġis al-Bānī | b. — d. 1725 |
| 2. Aṭanāsiyūs III Dabbās | b. 1647 – d. 1724 |
| 3. Ilyās b. Faḥr | b. — d. 1757 |
| 4. Ġirmānūs Farḥāt | b. 1670 – d. 1732 |
| 5. Pierre Fromage | b. 1678 – d. 1740 |
| 6. Ni‘matallāh b. Tūmā al-Halabī | b. — d. 1767 (?) |
| 7. Mikirtīġ al-Kasīh | b. 1666 – d. |
| 8. ‘Abd al-Masīh Lubyān | b. — d. 1742 |
| 9. Niqūlā b. Ni‘ma al-Šā’ġ | b. 1692 – d. 1756 |
| 10. Buṭrus al-Tūlāwī | b. 1655 – d. 1746 |
| 11. ‘Abdallāh Zāḥir | b. 1684 – d. 1748 |
| 12. ‘Aṭṭallāh Zindah | b. — d. 1742 |

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