

The Founding of Damascus University 1903-1936: An essay in praise of the pioneers

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Abstract

Damascus University, a pioneer in Levantine academia, has generally been ignored by Syriatologists and historians. Its story speaks volumes about the founding fathers of the Syrian Republic, however, and the anti-colonial movement under French Mandate rule. This article looks at its founding years under Ottoman times and ends with the tenure of its founder and first president Riḍā Saʿīd. Given that collapse of higher education in Syria at present, because of the current war, it is imperative to look back and see how Syrian academics emerged from times of war to revamp their university after the turmoil of World War I and French occupation. Present academics might find inspiration and a roadmap for the future in looking at the university's past and the deeds of its founders.

Keywords: Damascus, Syria, Damascus University, French Mandate, Education in the Arab World

Introduction

In late December 2011, crime struck at Damascus University. A young man discretely slipped through the campus garden into one of the numerous stone-built arched halls. The high ceilings spoke of age and splendour. The young boy was a sophomore student at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering. He walked into the main auditorium to chat with friends before an exam, slowly taking out a well-concealed gun. At close range he shot two of his friends. They had quarrelled over politics a night earlier. Since that day, hundreds of university students have died in the spiraling war that has gripped all Syrians by the throat. Some were shot on the battlefield, where they gave up their books and grabbed their guns, fighting on both sides of the armed conflict. As the war drags on, more are bound to die.

The story of the young assassin has been completely dwarfed by the cycle of violence that has engulfed Syrians since March 2011. In terms of infrastructure, curriculum, and human resources, university education has been levied to the ground by the tidal wave that has swept through Syria. Young people, after all, are the springboard for change in any society and usually pay a very high price in times of war and social unrest. It wasn't always like this, however. Once, within living memory, Damascus University—known as The Syrian University until 1958—was claimed jewel of the crown of the Middle East. It was

an *avant guard* institution with an alumni history that summed up the ‘who’s who’ of the entire Arab World. Very intentionally, it inspired A-class scholarship, firebrand nationalism, and good citizenship. Quiet unintentionally, it also inspired revolution.

In June 1953, one student from the central city of Homs famously refused to accept his university degree from Syrian President Adīb al-Shīshaklī. The Syrian leader was presiding over a military regime and the young student from the large Sibā’ī family did not like it. As he rose to the podium, he looked al-Shīshaklī straight in the eye—who was seated in the front row wearing his military fatigues—and said: ‘I refuse to obtain a degree in law from a president who doesn’t respect the law!’¹ That single statement set Damascus University ablaze, forcing the army to intervene, conducting a manhunt of faculties, classrooms, and dormitories. Students were arrested and thrown into the infamous Mezzeh Prison on the outskirts of the Syrian capital. Months later, they managed to bring down Adīb al-Shīshaklī.

Apart from one book in Arabic, *Tārīkh al-Jāmi‘ah al-Sūriyyah*, written by Damascus University Professor ‘Abd al-Karīm Rāfiq, there is not a single source of literature covering the early years of higher education in Syria. Only one book complements Rāfiq’s book, being the forgotten memoirs of Damascus University President ‘Abd al-Qādir al-‘Azm. The book, found at The Damascus History Foundation in Syria, is out-of-print and unavailable, either in stock, second-hand, or at libraries either in Syria or Europe. It was presumably published in very small quantity back in 1960, and no second edition was made. The literature stops there. There is nothing of the like either in English or French. Most of the seminal books on French Mandate Syria prefer to discuss other topics like minorities and Syrian politics vis-à-vis the Great Powers during the inter-war period. Most of the primary sources for this essay were gathered from early articles in Arabic penned at the university’s medical journal back in the early 1940s, or through newspapers, memoirs, and interviews with former students and faculty. The university library itself, still operational despite the war as of 2018, is filled with original stacked documents, correspondences, and photographs from the early years of university life, albeit un-organized and often in poor condition. Nobody has done the task of filing or screening the stacks of papers, and sadly many of them have been destroyed at their storehouses in the Damascus suburbs, due to intense fighting, since 2011. The university itself, however, remains standing, despite the current war, and is now approaching its 115th anniversary.

Due to the scarcity of resources, the task of writing the university’s history remains incomplete. Lacking a methodological and theoretical framework, this cannot be labelled an academic study but rather, a collection of data that might inspire future research, if new archival material is unearthed and contextualized. Once and if that happens, the story of Damascus University can properly fit into the political and social history of the broader Middle East, in addition, of course, to that of higher education in the Arab World.

¹ Author interview with Damascus University Professor Munīr al-‘Ajlānī, Beirut, 3 September 2000. See also, ‘Afīf BAHNASI, *Mudhakkarāt ‘Afīf Bahnasī*, Damascus: Wathīqat Waṭan Foundation, 2018: 45.

An ambitious Sultan

A buzz swept through intellectual circles in mid-1900 saying that the Ottoman Sultan ‘Abdülhamîd II was planning to open a top-notch medical school in the old Umayyad capital, Damascus. It was to be funded by the Ottoman Ministry of Education.² ‘Abdülhamîd was a shrewd man and enlightened monarch with a particularly soft spot for Damascus, a city that had been ruled by his ancestors for 400 years, but which he never visited in person. The Ottomans affectionately called it *Şām-ı şerîf* which roughly translates into ‘Damascus the Noble.’ Because of its importance as the point of departure for one of the two great Hajj caravans to Mecca, Damascus was treated with more attention by the Porte than its size might have warranted—for most of this period, Aleppo was more populous and commercially more important. Damascus, however, was the most culturally advanced and historically important Arab city in the Empire, thus explaining ‘Abdülhamîd’s attention.

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Damascus in the early years of the 20th century was run by cosmopolitan merchants well versed in overseas trade, and deeply committed to a spiritual form of Sufi Islam. The city’s notability was pro-Ottoman. Its artisans were ingenious, renowned for their craftsmanship worldwide. The city’s spiritual forces were intact and its *ulema* were among the most highly respected men of science and literature throughout the Muslim World. Back in 661, Damascus had been home to the glorious Umayyad Caliphate of the Muslim Empire, which created a modern navy, a police force, along with its own currency, and exported the Muslim faith to Europe. The Umayyads built the Umayyad Mosque, the largest and oldest mosque in the world, during the era of the great caliph, al-Walîd I. The mosque was universally accepted as the fourth holiest site in Islam. Additionally, many of the Prophet Muḥammad’s wives and companions were buried at the ancient Bāb al-Şaghîr cemetery in Damascus, southwest of the mosque. ‘Abdülhamîd was keen on giving meticulous attention to Damascus, seeing that its aqueducts were maintained, its schools were upgraded, and its hospitals constantly furnished with modern equipment and the Empire’s finest physicians. This was a religious duty for the Ottoman Sultan. His theological mentor, Sheikh Maḥmūd Abū ’l-Shāmāt, was a Damascene notable who constantly lobbied on behalf of the city at the Imperial Palace in Istanbul.³ Three of the sultan’s top advisers, Muḥammad Fawzî Pasha al-‘Aẓm, Aḥmad ‘Izzat Pasha al-‘Abd, and ‘Aṭā Pasha al-Bakrî, were also from the Damascus aristocracy. All of them had the Sultan’s ear and must have surely nodded approvingly when he approached them in early 1900, saying that he wished to see a modern school of medicine up and running within the high walls of Damascus.

The reasons behind ‘Abdülhamîd’s initiative were numerous. The Ottoman Governor of Damascus, Nāẓım Pasha, had written to the Sultan in 1899, complaining that Damascene midwives were ignorant, thus explaining the high mortality rate among newborns.⁴ He suggested creating a school to train them in modern birth-giving techniques. Prominent

² *Al-Aḥwāl*, 12 February 1900.

³ ‘Abd al-Karîm RĀFIQ, *Tārīkh al-Jāmi‘ah al-Sūriyyah: al-Bidāyah wa’l-numuww, 1901-1946*. Nobel Books, Damascus, 2004: 10.

⁴ RĀFIQ 2004: 9.

Sunni Muslim families from Damascus had also petitioned the Porte asking for such an institution. There were only three similar schools in the Empire. One was the state-run Ottoman Medical Institute in Istanbul. Second was the Faculty of Medicine at the French-run Jesuit University in Beirut. Accredited by Lyon University, it started granting degrees in medicine to Ottoman subjects in 1888, although the university itself had been set up by the Catholic Church in 1875. The third was at the prestigious American-run missionary school; the Syrian Protestant College (later renamed the American University of Beirut) perched neatly overlooking the Mediterranean. It was established by an American protestant reverend Daniel Bliss back in 1866. Studying at any of these three schools was costly for the Damascene elite. Additionally, it wasn't very attractive for conservative Muslim Sunnis to study at the hands of Christian clergy either at AUB or the Jesuit University. Also, students from Damascus had to lodge at dorms while living in Beirut or Istanbul.⁵ A school in Damascus would be extremely convenient, relieving them of the hardships and cost of travel.

The Damascenes had mixed feelings about 'Abdülhamîd II. Some regarded him as an enlightened monarch, others were highly critical—in private—seeing him as an unfathomable despot. Having been in power since 1876, the longevity of his era was remarkable. With lasting peace came stability and prosperity. He was nevertheless a highly paranoid man, very suspicious of the covert activity of European diplomats scattered throughout the Empire, whom he believed, strove to implode his state from within. He detested foreign schools that had mushroomed throughout the Empire in the second half of the 19th century. In the vilayet of Syria, for example, there were eight papal schools operating at the time, employing forty staff members, with 1,150 students. There were twelve British schools, with 1,580 students, and seven Dutch schools. Additionally, twenty American institutions were operating in the Empire, headed by the Syrian Protestant College, with 1,200 students; forty Russian schools with 5,100 students, and two Jewish schools, with 1,160 students. In total there were 89 foreign schools licensed in the Empire at the time, with a total of 307 faculty and staff members, teaching 10,490 students.⁶ As far as 'Abdülhamîd was concerned, they were breeding ground for espionage, treason, and the uncontrolled influx of dangerous foreign ideas. For 'Abdülhamîd, their faculty were spies; their students potential traitors. One way of controlling their influence would be to establish an Ottoman institute in Damascus, which would rise to challenge, and one day outdo, all foreign missionary schools in the Empire.

The Ottoman Medical Institute in Damascus

On 27 September 1901, 'Abdülhamîd issued a sultanate decree, mandating the establishment of an institute of medicine in Damascus. The school would be run exclusively by Ottoman doctors and would offer two degrees in biology and pharmacy, free of charge to

⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶ 'Abd al-'Azîz Muḥammad 'AWAD, *Al-Idāra al-'Uthmāniyyah fī Wilāyat Sūriyā 1864-1914*, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1969: 69.

Ottoman subjects. Lodging at its dormitories would cost six Ottoman coins per year.⁷ The language of instruction would be Ottoman Turkish. Proper command of French was a must, since this was the language of medical textbooks. Pharmacology would be a three-year academic program while studying medicine would take up to six years. Degrees would be issued by the Ottoman Medical Institute in Istanbul and graduates would automatically be eligible to open clinics and practice medicine throughout the Empire. Students seeking enrolment had to provide an authentic high-school diploma either from state-run Ottoman schools or an officially recognized foreign school operating within the Empire. They also had to provide a 'health certificate' proving that they were physically and mentally in good shape, suffering from no contagious or terminal disease.⁸ The institute's budget was set at 10,000 Turkish pounds, equal to 230,000 French Francs.⁹ Authorities at the Ottoman Treasury cautioned that they did not have enough money for such an endeavour, saying that it would completely drain coffers of the central government. Undaunted, 'Abdülhamîd levied a piaster tax at slaughterhouses throughout the Empire, to raise money for the Damascus project.¹⁰

The institute would be opened in the southern section of a grand hospital in the Barāmkeh neighbourhood of Damascus, a stone's throw from the Old City near the fabled Barada River, with gushing water and tall trees that grew seasonal fruit and offered remarkable shade in the hot Damascus summers. Named after the Ottoman Sultan, the Hamidian Hospital had been constructed overlooking a splendid mosque built on the orders of Suleiman the Magnificent in the mid-1550s. An Ottoman inspection committee had labeled the hospital as the 'finest throughout the Empire.'¹¹ It was eventually to become the Syrian University Hospital. Students at the Medical School would train and work at the Hamidian Hospital. The royal decree was front page news in the Damascene press, hailed as one of 'Abdülhamîd's grand achievements. The new school was to open on the 27th anniversary of the Sultan's enthronement: 1 September 1903. It was to be 'Abdülhamîd's pride and joy.

Coinciding with the sultanate order was the vicious outbreak of a cholera epidemic throughout Damascus. It was a blessing-in-disguise for the Medical Institute. The central government in Istanbul sent a medical team to inspect the city, headed by a respected Turkish doctor named Feyzüllâh Pasha. Happening to be in Damascus that winter, 'Abdülhamîd appointed him director of the newly chartered Medical School.¹² Little is known about him except that he did not speak a word of Arabic, and yet, was kind, charming, and developed an instant liking for the Damascenes and remarkable dedication for the Sultan's project. His tenure was brief; he was recalled to Istanbul in May 1904 and replaced by

⁷ RAFIQ 2004: 10.

⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁹ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (MAE). Nantes. Correspondence Constantinople – Damascus, Series D. 24 August 1903.

¹⁰ RAFIQ 2004: 13.

¹¹ PUBLIC RECORDS OFFICE (PRO), 618/3, Laeros Pasha to Istanbul, 9 July 1904.

¹² PRO 618/3, British Consul (Damascus) to London, 10 January 1903.

another Ottoman doctor named Maḥmūd Bey.¹³ An aging physician from Istanbul, Maḥmūd Bey had served as director of academic affairs at the Ottoman Medical School in the Imperial Capital.

The new school indeed opened its doors on 1 September 1903. Forty students shuffled into class early in the morning on 22 September, dressed in dark suites with their hallmark Ottoman fez. The event was big news in Damascus. Red Ottoman Flags dotted the landscape and heavy security was stationed at street corners in Damascus. The pompous ceremony was attended by the proud Ottoman governor Nāẓım Pasha, the school director Feyzūllāh Pasha, and Ḥaqqī Pasha, commander of the Fifth Ottoman Army in Damascus. Seated in the front row were ‘Oṣmān Pasha and Ḥikmet Pasha, lead surgeons at the Ottoman Army and Hamidian Hospital respectively.¹⁴ One by one they took turns at praising ‘Abdūlhamīd’s vision, while highlighting the religious and political importance of Damascus. The premises, still under construction, forced the school administration to temporarily lodge at a spacious white palace in the Ṣālhiyyeh neighbourhood, not very far from the Marjeh Square where government headquarters were located. That palace, now long gone, was owned by a member of the powerful ‘Azm family.¹⁵ The ‘temporarily lodging’ was not-so-temporary after all. It lasted for an entire decade, and the school did not move to its current premises in al-Barāmkeh until 1913.

The Ottoman government fixed faculty salary along the following lines: 1,000 piasters for the school director, 1,200 piasters for lecturers, and 1,300 piasters for chemists.¹⁶ Full-time professors were paid 3,000 piasters per month (thirty Ottoman pounds). This was a remarkably high salary for Ottoman Damascus at the turn of the 20th century, equalled only by the monthly income of beys and pashas. The official salary of the governor of Damascus, for example, was 150 Ottoman coins per month.¹⁷ In its early years, Feyzūllāh Pasha hired Ottoman officers to teach, and only two posts were given to ‘local staff.’ In striking Ottoman favouritism, Damascene employees were paid only 300-500 piasters, per month. In total, fifteen people worked at the new school in Damascus, including a director, an accountant, a secretary, lab chemists, and twelve locally hired janitors. The annual salary budget was set at 8,000 Turkish coins, to be paid by the Ottoman Ministry of Education.¹⁸

The school operated well for the next five years. Electricity came to Damascus in February 1907. The first building to be lit was the Grand Umayyad Mosque, followed by the Grand Serail and the School of Medicine. Tramcars started operating in the city, and stopped near the Medical Institute, making travel easier for students. In 1908, however, a coup rocked the Imperial City and brought a group of hard-line officers to power, known as the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP). By then, the Empire was in shambles. Outside main towns, Ottoman governance had vanished. In most of these territories, the

¹³ RĀFIQ 2004: 12.

¹⁴ *Al-Ahrām*, 24 September 1903.

¹⁵ Ṣabāḥ QABBĀNĪ, *Riḍā Saʿīd, Muʿassis al-Jāmiʿah al-Sūriyyah*, Beirut: Jadāwil Press, 2011: 139.

¹⁶ RĀFIQ 2004: 14-15.

¹⁷ The unpublished papers of Munīr al-ʿAJLĀNĪ (1932-1956). Presented to the author during the years 1998-2000.

¹⁸ RĀFIQ 2004: 20.

central government was barely able to collect taxes or provide basic security. When the Great War broke out in 1914, only about five percent of taxes were being collected by Istanbul.

Aftershocks of the coup quickly spread to Damascus. Within three weeks, most Ottoman doctors employed at the Medical Institute in Damascus were recalled to Istanbul. Many were given jobs in the new administration—others were fired for being too loyal to ‘Abdülhamîd. This created havoc at the Damascus Institute in August 1908. The academic year was just around the corner and there was nobody to teach the students or prepare their class syllabus. Those who stayed behind petitioned the CUP, saying that the quality of education and discipline are bound to dramatically drop at the Medical Institute. The labs were abandoned, the halls were dirty and unattended, and much of the furniture had been stolen and was being sold in the old markets of Damascus.¹⁹ They advised either to seriously reform the school and provide it with new staff or close it down altogether. Unless something was done fast, they added, Ottoman prestige in the Arabic speaking provinces of the Empire was at stake.²⁰

The CUP officers debated the matter and decided to keep the school. They despatched a new generation of doctors—this time retired officers—to Damascus, whose salaries would be paid by the Ottoman Ministry of Defense and not the Ministry of Education. This would keep them under the watchful eye of the military trio now running state affairs: Enver Pasha, Tal’at Pasha, and Cemāl Pasha. As part of their early policy of appeasement, the CUP officers started hiring local Arab academics to teach in Damascus. They were well-educated, cheaper, and easier to lodge. Automatically, Arabic began to replace Ottoman Turkish as the language of instruction.²¹ In 1913, the CUP appointed the German-educated Dr. Ḥasan Rashād, as director of the Damascus school, replacing Maḥmūd Bey after nine years of service.²²

The school of medicine in Damascus remained in operation for a total of fifteen years, from 1903 to 1918. It briefly shut down with outbreak of World War I in the summer of 1914 but was quickly re-opened at the orders of Cemāl Pasha, a powerful officer who was to become governor of Ottoman Damascus throughout the Great War. It closed again when the last Ottoman troops left the city on 26 September 1918. Over this period of time, despite all odds, the school graduated a total of 240 doctors and 289 pharmacists.²³ According to official records, the breakdown of graduates during the years 1906-1919 was the following:

¹⁹ Munīr al-‘AJLĀNĪ, Beirut, 3 September 2000.

²⁰ RĀFIQ 2004: 23.

²¹ Murshid KHĀṬĪR, “Nash’at al-Ma’had al-Ṭibbī bi-Dimashq,” *Majallat al-Ma’had al-Ṭibbī*, 1st edition, Volume 1.1 (January 1924): 9.

²² Ibid.

²³ RĀFIQ 2004: 26.

year	doctors	pharmacists
1906	0	5
1907	0	11
1908	0	23
1909	10	25
1910	25	10
1911	21	15
1912	25	19
1913	22	31
1914	23	25
1915	0	0
1916	15	20
1917	30	28
1918	30	35 ²⁴
1919	39	42

The year 1915 was particularly harsh for Damascus, because of the outbreak of World War I. Since the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, all male subjects between the ages of seventeen and fifty-five had been forcefully conscripted into the Ottoman Army. They were sent to die in faraway places, and their families never properly compensated for their service. By 1916, the army stood at a staggering 2.8 million. Of the 2.8 million sent to fight, 325,000 died in combat between 1914 and 1918.²⁵ Another 240,000 died of disease, while no less than 250,000 were listed as ‘missing’ or ‘prisoners of war.’²⁶ Nevertheless, the academic feat of sustainability during war was in itself remarkable. During a fifteen-year time span, for example, the Jesuit University in Beirut graduated 290 doctors and sixty pharmacists. At AUB, 313 doctors were given degrees, since the American university did not have a school of pharmacy back then.²⁷ We do not have a breakdown of background and ethnicity of students at the official records of Damascus University today, relating to the pre-war and World War I era. But if we were to compare with student enrolment at AUB or The Jesuit University, student backgrounds would probably have been similar. At AUB, for example, during the fifteen-year time span, we had 154 students from Syria (which included modern Palestine and Lebanon) in addition to sixty-seven students from other Ottoman provinces, seventy-five students from Egypt, nine from the United States, and eight classified as ‘other’ (Europe, Hejaz, and Asia). At the Jesuit University, we had 125 students from Syria, forty-nine from other imperial territories, ninety-three from Egypt,

²⁴ Ḥusnī ŠABĀḤ, “Taṣdīr wa-Dhikrayāt,” *al-Majallah al-Ṭibbiyyah al-‘Arabiyyah*, 90 (March 1986): 7-14.

²⁵ Elizabeth THOMPSON, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privileges, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000: 22.

²⁶ THOMPSON 2000: 22.

²⁷ RĀFIQ 2004: 28.

eighteen from France and its colonies, and eight from other countries.²⁸ It is safe to assume that a roughly similar background was present at the Damascus School—minus students from the United States and France, of course. To compare, during the years 1887-1907, the Jesuit University graduated 290 doctors and 60 pharmacists, while 313 doctors graduated from AUB in 1871-1907, before a School of Pharmacy was established.²⁹

The Institute of Law

In 1913, the Ottomans took several important academic measures in Damascus. They continued to hire local teachers to teach in Arabic, relying less and less on Ottoman professors. They took the Damascus Medical School to its new premises in al-Barāmkeh. They hired a new director, and they issued a decree to establish a school of law in Beirut, similar to the medical one in Damascus. The new school, with its four-year academic program, was launched in October 1913. With the school of medicine, this school was to form the nucleus of the Syrian University ten years later, in 1923. But originally, the new school was a direct and *ad hoc* response to the opening of a faculty of law at Jesuit University in November 1913. Panicking, the CUP hastily put the Beirut Law School together making sure that it opens its doors to students one month before the Jesuit University.

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The outbreak of the Great War led to a huge drop in student enrolment, prompting Ottoman authorities to move the law school from Beirut to Damascus only one year after its opening. It was given temporary premises at an old teacher's center on the banks of the Barada River, not very far from the Medical School. At one point during World War I, the Law School had three students only, yet Cemāl Pasha ordered that under no circumstances should it close down. He did not want to give the Jesuit University or AUB a chance to gloat at Ottoman institutions of higher education. Its early years were rough, to say the least. In 1916, a military revolt was launched against the Ottoman Empire, headed by Sharīf Ḥusayn, the emir of Mecca. Scores of young Damascenes fled the city by night, taking up arms with the Arab underground.

The grief caused by the massive death toll of the war cast a shadow of fear over the lives of an entire generation of Syrians. They watched in horror as loved ones and neighbours disappeared behind the front lines of the Ottoman Army, fighting for a cause that never concerned them. The anguish of war was destructive to both the rich and poor in Ottoman Syria, thanks to an Allied embargo of all goods coming into the Empire. A sharp decline in heating fuel, for example, led entire families in Damascus to spend the winter of 1915 in cold and darkness.

As if death and psychological trauma were not enough, a famine broke out in Beirut that same year, and soon headed towards Damascus. City notables either escaped on European liners before the Port of Beirut was shut down or came to Damascus for sanctuary. The

²⁸ Ibid., 29.

²⁹ Ibid., 28.

population of Beirut dropped from 180,000 in 1914 to 75,000 in 1916.³⁰ This nightmare, which Syrians read in the daily press and heard first-hand from Beirutis flocking into Damascus, hit Syria next. A Christian Pastor from Minneapolis who visited Syria in 1916 said that in Damascus, people were dying in the streets every single day. ‘Starvation and famine are everywhere’ said the Pastor, adding that ‘the men of Damascus are either in military service or hiding. The women and children are reduced to beggary.’³¹ The Damascus Police collected no less than seventy unidentified dead bodies daily.³² This was an extremely unhealthy environment for schools and universities to operate. Both the law and medical institute sluggishly pushed through the Great War until they forcefully shut down when the Ottomans left Damascus—this time never to return—in September 1918.

Higher education during the Fayṣal Era (1918-1920)

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On 1 October 1918, Arab troops marched into the liberated city, destroyed by four days of looting, fires, rape, and theft. The breakdown of law and order gave hoodlums and thieves a free hand to terrorize Damascene society. Sharīf Ḥusayn’s son Emir Fayṣal marched triumphantly into Damascus on 3 October, accompanied by 1,500 horsemen and his British advisor Colonel T. E. Lawrence, the mastermind of military operations against the Ottomans. Thousands took to the streets to welcome him. History was being made, as women threw rice and rosewater from balconies, young men danced on sidewalks, and shots were fired in the air from old rusty weapons. The Damascenes watched in bewilderment and awe. In his all-time classic, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Colonel Lawrence describes the scene:

Every man, woman, and child in this city of a quarter-million souls seemed on the streets, wanting only the spark of our appearance to ignite their spirits. Damascus went mad with joy!³³

An Arab government was set up in Damascus, headed by Emir Fayṣal. He had only briefly visited the future capital of Syria during the Great War. Apart from a few friends, he knew nothing about Damascus. Fayṣal appointed the Damascene notable, Riḍā Pasha al-Riḳābī, as his first prime minister. Riḳābī had been a senior officer in the Ottoman Army who defected to join the Arab rebels in 1916. A native of Damascus, locals knew him well. Fifth year students from the now dysfunctional school of medicine called on new Prime Minister and demanded re-opening of their two schools. Eighty had been on the verge of graduation when the schools shut down with the Ottoman evacuation in September 1918.³⁴ Similar calls were made by students of the Law Institute. The school of medicine re-opened on 23

³⁰ THOMPSON 2000: 20.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ T.E. LAWRENCE, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, London: J.Cape, 1935: 668.

³⁴ RĀFIQ 2004: 42.

January 1919, while the Law Institute did not start teaching again until 25 September 1919—exactly one year after the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

The al-Riqābī government hand-picked a six-man committee charged with re-opening the School of Medicine. These men were the post-Ottoman founding fathers of what came to be known as the Syrian University. All of them shared similar educational paths in Istanbul and were of the same age group and socio-economic background, hailing from the Damascus elite. The one exception was the AUB-trained Dr. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Shāḥbandar (aged 39), a seasoned anti-Ottoman physician, essayist, activist, and secular ideologue, who was a household name in Syria. He hailed from the Damascus middle class and had made a name for himself as private doctor to Cemāl Pasha during the Great War. Another prominent member was the silver-tongued Dr. Riḍā Sa‘īd, a plump trained ophthalmologist who headed the Hamidian Hospital during the Great War. Born in 1876, Sa‘īd was the eldest among the group, aged 43 in 1919. He studied clinical ophthalmology and was trained as an eye surgeon, first in Istanbul, then at Hôtel-Dieu de Paris. During the war he served as Head of the Damascus Municipality and headed the medical department at the Hejaz Railway Company. He was a Damascene notability at its finest hour. He was a soft-spoken man with years of administrative experience. He looked like an old-school Ottoman aristocrat, with a neatly trimmed moustache, and pressed frock coat.³⁵

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A third was Aḥmad Munīf al-‘Ā’idī, aged 33, hailing from a prominent family of educators in Damascus. His father had been a prominent civil servant in the Damascus Municipality. Tall and dignified, he studied at the Ottoman School of Medicine and taught at the Ottoman Military Academy during the Great War. He was also co-founder of the secret National Reform Society, aimed at dismantling the Ottoman Empire one piece at a time. He spoke flawless French and lived a European lifestyle. Al-‘Ā’idī’s most lasting contribution is the Scientific National College (*Al-Kulliyyah al-‘Ilmiyyah al-Waṭaniyyah*), an elite high school that he founded within the old alleys of Damascus in 1907, near the famous ‘Azm Palace, home of the 18th century governors of the city. It offered a full, grade 1-12 education, hiring instructors like the Islamic scholar ‘Alī al-Ṭanṭāwī and the poet Khalīl Mardam Bey. The school, which some called *Madrasat al-‘Ā’idī*, encouraged talent among students, promoting high-school plays (which was unheard of in Damascus) and took them on field trips to Beirut or Cairo. The school offered classes in composition, public speaking, physics, chemistry, along with the history of Muslim Spain. In 1931, the college opened an all-girl branch, teaching young Syrian girls French and English.³⁶

Finally, there was Murshid Khāṭir, aged 31, a Maronite born in al-Shūf, a narrow coastal Christian-Druze district southeast of Beirut. He studied at the Jesuit University Faculty of Medicine, and when World War I broke out, was commissioned into the Ottoman Army as a surgeon. The Arab rebel army of Sharīf Ḥusayn captured him in 1917. He switched loyalties to Ḥusayn and officially joined the Great Arab Revolt, also as a practicing doctor specialized in clinical pathology. In October 1918, he was among an elite group of Arab troops that marched into Damascus, declaring it liberated from Ottoman rule.

³⁵ Sami MOUBAYED, *Steel & Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria 1900-2000*, Seattle: Cune Press, 2005: 484-485. See also ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-‘Uṭarī, *‘Abqariyyāt min bilādī*, Damascus: Dār al-Bashā’ir, 1998: 71-79.

³⁶ Ibid., 81-100.

In 1948, he became director of surgery at the Yūsuf al-‘Azmeḥ Military Hospital in Mezzeh, on the outskirts of the Syrian capital. Between the years 1947-1949, Khāṭir was named Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Chairman of the Department of Surgery.³⁷ Other members of the founding committee included ‘Abd al-Qādir Zahrah, a seasoned doctor in Sharīf Ḥusayn’s Arab Army, and Maḥmūd Ḥāmid Ḥammūdeh, a Damascene who left to the Hejaz two years later to work with the Sultan of Nejd and founder of Saudi Arabia, King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz.

The first generation of alumni

With the exception of Shāḥbandar, who soon became a full-time politician and joined the Arab Government as Fayṣal’s adviser and foreign minister, these educators laid the backbone of higher education in the future state of Syria. For the next year and a half, they slaved away at their offices, translating books from Ottoman Turkish into Arabic, drafting a new curriculum, and hiring professors. They did a Herculean job in hunting down Syrian talent and creating a state-of-the-art institution, almost from scratch. The Paris-trained future dean Muṣṭafā Shawqī, for example, was hired to teach ‘Tissues and Descriptive Anatomy,’ while Aḥmad Munīf al-‘Ā’idī taught paediatrics and physiology and Murshid Khāṭir taught clinical pathology. Future dean Sāmī al-Sāṭī taught Internal Medicine, and Ibrāhīm al-Sāṭī specialized in Gynaecology. The Ottoman-trained Jamīl al-Khānī taught Dermatology and Physics. Shawkat al-Jarrāḥ and ‘Abd al-Waḥḥāb Qanawātī taught chemistry, while Michel Shamandī taught herbal medicine, and the Louis Pasteur-educated bacteriologist Aḥmad Ḥamdī al-Khayyāt specialized in microbiology.

The social influence of these men of letters did not stop with the School of Medicine. Muṣṭafā Shawqī became one of the founders of the Syrian Red Crescent. ‘Abd al-Waḥḥāb al-Qanawātī went on to found Syria’s first pharmaceuticals company in 1929 (named after him) and to help the Damascus Chamber of Commerce bring clean water from the ‘Ayn al-Fījah Spring to the Syrian capital in the mid-1920s. In 1924, Damascus University sent al-Qanawātī on scholarship to study at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he obtained his MA in chemistry. Meanwhile, he worked at Cochin Hospital, and frequented Paris police stations, studying poisons. In 1929, al-Qanawātī founded the shareholding pharmaceutical company in Damascus, along with its small factory.³⁸ The Qanawātī Medical Company manufactured prescription drugs and medical equipment. Jamīl al-Khānī founded the Syndicate of Doctors and became its first president in 1942. Murshid Khāṭir went on to establish then edit the School of Medicine’s prestigious peer-reviewed journal, *al-Majallah al-Ṭibbiyyah* in 1924. Twenty years later, he became his country’s Minister of Health. Although brief—a total of thirteen months—Khāṭir’s government tenure was rich and prolific. He established clinics to combat tuberculosis in Damascus, and a center to eradicate malaria in Homs. He also is accredited with establishing the nursing school of Aleppo.³⁹

37 ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-‘Uṭārī, *‘Abqariyyāt*, Damascus: Dār al-Bashā’ir, 1997: 93-97.

38 ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-‘Uṭārī, *Ḥadīth al-‘Abqariyyāt*, Damascus: Dār al-Bashā’ir, 2000: 265-271.

39 MOUBAYED 2005: 472-473.

Young students of the early years also excelled shortly after graduation, and became the walking, talking proof of the Damascus Medical Institute's excellence. Ḥusnī Ṣabāḥ, for example, became private doctor to presidents Tāj al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī and Shukrī al-Quwwatī, before becoming president of the university in 1943 and then, lifetime president of the prestigious Arab Language Assembly until his death in 1980.⁴⁰ Anastas Shāhīn was another pioneer, born in 1901. His father was a senior officer under the Ottomans who rose to become Chief of Syrian Police in 1922. Upon completing the five-year program in Damascus in 1924, the young Shāhīn went to the Sorbonne in Paris to specialize in radiology. Shāhīn switched majors to study Otolaryngology (diseases of the ear, nose, and throat) where he was trained at Lariboisiere Hospital in the French capital. In 1928, he returned to Damascus, setting up his first clinic in the prosperous Qaymarieh, a location that is now a Greek Orthodox orphanage for girls. A ranking Freemason, he became Chairman of the Department of Otolaryngology and then Dean of the Medical School in 1949, president of the Rotary Club, and attended to the affairs of the Greek Orthodox Church in Damascus.⁴¹

Aḥmad Shawkat al-Shaṭṭī (born in 1900) studied at the Medical School in Damascus and graduated in 1921. He interned at its hospital, and then continued his medical training at Montpellier University in France, and in forensic medicine from Strasburg University. He also studied histology and embryology in Paris, returning to teach both subjects at the newly opened Medical School in January 1919. Al-Shaṭṭī established the first laboratory for histology and embryology in Damascus. In 1943, he co-founded the Doctors Syndicate in Damascus. Three years later, he was one of the co-founders of the Syrian Red Crescent, where he served as president.⁴² Carrying their stethoscopes and wearing the white doctor's cloak, these physicians attended to patients free of charge at the Hamidian Hospital between 10:00-12 noon every single day non-stop, for the next thirty years.

The Birth of the Syrian University

Under the Arab Government, Riḍā Sa'īd was named Dean of the Medicine Institute while a Fayṣal protégé from Nablus, 'Abd al-Laṭīf Ṣalāḥ, became Dean of the Institute of Law. Born in 1882 and educated in Istanbul, he stayed for no more than nine months in Syria, where he was replaced by a Damascene named Musallam al-'Aṭṭār.⁴³ Together these men drafted bylaws for the new institutes, and on paper at least, issued their degrees in the name of the 'Syrian Scientific University.' A total of forty-eight degrees were granted with a banner that billed the two institutes as part of the Syrian University, signed by Education Minister Sāṭī' al-Ḥuṣrī, a renowned philosopher of Arab nationalism. Historians usually

⁴⁰ MOUBAYED 2005:, 480-481.

⁴¹ Author's interview with Dr. Nicolas SHĀHĪN, the son of Anaṣṭās SHĀHĪN, Damascus, 28 May 2013.

⁴² Author's interview with Damascus University professor and former Dean of the School of Medicine, Dr 'Iyāḍ al-SHAṬṬĪ, Damascus, 6 December 2013.

⁴³ Author's interview with former Damascus University professor Ma'mūn al-KUZBARI, Beirut, 1 November 1997.

refer to the university's founding in June 1923, when it was officially licensed as such by French authorities. In reality, however, the name 'university' was first used in 1919-1920. This makes the Syrian University, of course, the third oldest in the Arab World, after Algeria and Egypt. The Algerian university had been established in 1909 whereas Cairo's university dated to 1908, although it did not get official license as an institute of higher education until 1925. In this case, it would come third after Damascus and Algeria.

The 1919-1920 university bylaws were composed of 65 articles, typed on ten-pages. Students with a valid high-school diploma from Ottoman or foreign schools would automatically get accepted to the Syrian University. Those whose degrees were not recognized—or those who had not obtained an official high-school diploma, had to sit for an entrance exam. They were given a choice of language (English or French), science (algebra, trigonometry, chemistry, or biology), and humanities (history and geography).⁴⁴ Only those aged 17 and above could apply to the Syrian University. Also, student applicants had to bring a health certificate proving that they were physically and mentally fit, in addition to a licence of 'good manners' issued by the local alderman, or *mukhtār*. They were also asked for a smallpox vaccination certificate, and two passport photographs. Applications were received between 1 and 20 September. Classes started on 1 October and lasted until mid-May. Exams were fixed between 1 and 30 June.⁴⁵ Students were banned from enrolling in two programs at once. The bylaws go into great detail on how university life ought to be administered. Tardiness was a red-line; students could not be late for more than five minutes to class, and professors had a grace period of ten-minutes. Both student and professor were required to submit an official excuse, to be evaluated on a case-by-case the university president. Both had to sign a roll at the start of class. Political debate, student demonstrations, and graffiti of all kind were prohibited at the Syrian University. Plagiarism was a crime, punishable by expulsion from final exams.⁴⁶

The Medical Institute offered five-year programs, while the Institute of Law confined its period of study to three years.⁴⁷ Marks were given on a scale of 1 to 20, with 20 being the highest, and 10 being a passing grade.⁴⁸ Students failing for two consecutive years in one class would be automatically suspended from the Syrian University. The entrance application fee was set at three dinars, while tuition per semester stood at nine dinars, to be paid in three annual instalments. Students wanting to take a make-up exam, with valid excuse for their absence, were charged six dinars per exam. Once completing the prescribed course of study, ten dinars were charged for obtaining one's diploma.⁴⁹ During the first year of operation after the Ottoman evacuation, twenty-one students were enrolled at the Institute of Law, and 40 made it into the Institute of Medicine.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ RĀFIQ 2004: 40-46.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Khayriyyah QĀSIMIYYAH, *al-Hukūmah al-ʿarabiyyah fī Dimashq bayn 1918-1920*, Beirut: al-Muʿassasah al-ʿarabiyyah lil-dirāsāt waʾl-nashr, 1982: 238-239.

⁴⁸ RĀFIQ 2004: 40-46.

⁴⁹ *Al-ʿĀṣimah*, 26 April 1920.

⁵⁰ RĀFIQ 2004: 54-65.

The start of French rule

The era of Fayṣal I was short-lived in Syria. In 1919, French troops landed on the Syrian coast, preparing to implement their mandate over Syria, as agreed by a Franco-British agreement signed in 1916. They sent an ultimatum to Fayṣal, asking him to disband his army and leave the country, but he refused. The young Syrian Army clashed with invading French forces at Khan Maysaloun on the Damascus-Beirut highway, 25-km west of the Syrian capital. The battle was basically a massacre of Syrian troops. Over 1,500 Syrians were killed including the 36-year old Minister of War Yūsuf al-‘Aẓmeh. The next morning, the French occupied Damascus. Maysaloun left the Damascenes in total despair and fear. They did not want to destroy their city or the relative stability that Fayṣal had introduced, after all turbulence, poverty, and death of the Great War.

Damascus at the time was still a small metropolis, with only 95,000 inhabitants. There were 101 practicing doctors in the city, and only sixteen of them were Syrian University graduates. Seventeen held degrees from the Jesuit University, fourteen from AUB, and fifty-four from the Ottoman Medical Institute in Istanbul.⁵¹ Graduates from the Medical Institute had left to teach in more stable cities, like Cairo, Baghdad, and Beirut. This was taken against the people of Damascus, as French officials argued that there was really no need to maintain a faculty of medicine in Damascus. Two were more than enough in Beirut. A French doctor who taught in Algeria was despatched to Damascus to evaluate progress at the Syrian University. He suggested transforming it into a Franco-Arab institution, run by French doctors and staff, and placing it directly under the authority of the Mandate regime. The first French High Commissioner Henri Gouraud thought otherwise, however, writing a report to Paris saying that the university's reputation 'had spread far and wide throughout the Islamic world.'⁵² He only recommended adding more French professors.⁵³

One of the first major issues raised at the Syrian University in 1920 was accreditation. The French recognized degrees issued by the Syrian University. Several of its top students were already specializing in Paris. Ḥusnī Ṣabāḥ was in France, and in 1924, Anastas Shāhīn was studying at the Sorbonne while Aḥmad Shawkat al-Shaṭṭī was at Montpellier University. British-controlled Palestine, however, did not recognize Syrian degrees, and nor did the Egyptian, Iraqi, or Turkish governments. A doctor from the Syrian University had to take a new set of exams before practicing in Cairo or Baghdad. The reasons for this vengeance are probably two-fold. One might have been jealousy from the reputation of the Syrian University, which outdid all institutions in neighbouring Arab countries, except for The Jesuit University and AUB.

The second reason, of course, was political. Syrian University students were politically driven, and were constantly on the streets, chanting against the British occupation of Palestine. They supported the Palestinian resistance to British rule with money, arms, and human resources. When Lord James Balfour came to Damascus in April 1925, Syrian

⁵¹ RAFIQ 2004: 70.

⁵² Ministerie des Affaires etrangeres (MAE), Archive Diplomatique, Nantes, France. Serie E, Levant 1918-1920, Carton # 108, Beyrouth, 10 April 1920.

⁵³ Ibid.

University flooded the streets, bringing the capital to a halt and forcing him to flee the city, under French protection. As a result, he stayed in town for 19 hours only.⁵⁴ The British took note. The louder the students in Syria, the longer it took for their degrees to receive authentication in countries controlled by the British.

In February 1929, Syrian University students staged an anti-colonial play pocking fun at both the British and the French, written by Egyptian novelist Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūfī.⁵⁵ A third incident was in September 1929, when Law Faculty student Suhayl al-Khūrī (the son of its dean Fāris al-Khūrī) drew up an impressive crowd supporting the killing of sixty Zionists in Hebron. All those taking part in the political underground or in anti-government demonstrations were expelled from university. Sometimes, even professors like al-Khūrī himself were fired, as the case in 1935 when he ‘nudged’ students to take part in anti-French riots in Damascus and Beirut, which brought the country to a 60-day strike. Because of these incidents, the British did not recognize Syrian University degrees until May 1939. ‘Abd al-Rahmān Shāhbandar, a university founder who was now exiled to Cairo and was practicing medicine there, took up the matter with the nationalist prime minister of Egypt, Muṣṭafā al-Naḥḥās Pasha, and it was only then that the Egyptian Government bended, and so did the British. That was 36 years after the university’s founding, however.

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The Syrian University Presidency

In June 1923, the Gouraud’s successor Maxime Weygand issued a decree joining the three departments into one academic entity, to be named ‘The Syrian University.’ It lost all independence enjoyed during the years 1919-1923, and now came under the direct authority of the Ministry of Education. A president was to be chosen from the three departments, by consensus vote among dean of the faculty of medicine Riḍā Sa‘īd, dean of the faculty of law ‘Abd al-Qādir al-‘Azm (who replaced Musallam al-‘Aṭṭār in August 1920), and president of the Arabic Language Assembly, Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī. The president’s tenure was one year, to be renewed on an annual basis. It needed approval of the head of state and so did the appointment of all faculty deans. ‘Azm did not nominate himself, although in his memoirs, he rants that he was more in need of the additional salary than both men, arguing that Kurd ‘Alī made money as a journalist from his popular daily *al-Muqtabas*, and from his job at the Assembly, while Sa‘īd’s clinic made him a fortune, in addition to his academic duties at the Faculty of Medicine. Kurd ‘Alī wanted the job badly, but it ultimately went to Riḍā Sa‘īd. In compensation, Kurd ‘Alī was given the honorary job of instructor of Arabic literature at the Faculty of Law.⁵⁶

Kurd ‘Alī seemingly did a rather poor job. He lacked the authority needed to run a classroom, or the charisma to inspire students. According to a series of articles published by one of them, Aḥmad al-Shihābī, in the Aleppo daily *al-Sha‘b*, he was ‘ignorant in the laws

⁵⁴ Philip KHOURY, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987: 143.

⁵⁵ *Les Echos*, 3 February 1929.

⁵⁶ ‘Abd al-Qādir al-‘Azm, *al-Mudhakkarāt*, Damascus: al-Thabāt Press, 1960: 62.

of grammar that he came to teach.⁵⁷ Once he was confronted by a student delegation that bluntly pointed out his weaknesses and asked him to stop teaching. 'Make way for somebody worthier than you!'⁵⁸ Another added, 'We don't want to waste our time.'⁵⁹ Infuriated, Kurd 'Alī snapped: 'I was appointed by the government and will only leave here by force!' The event caused a major shake-up at the Syrian University. 'Abd al-Qādir al-'Azm, standing up for his colleague and professor, stepped down in protest.⁶⁰ The respected attorneys Fāris al-Khūrī and Fawzī al-Ghazzī was asked to run faculty affairs during the interim period.⁶¹ He wrote in his memoirs that he feared that the French would use the event to close down the Faculty of Law, once and for all, citing student rebellion as a cause. Proving just how politically aware and active was the student body, they assembled to debate the crisis that they had sparked. It was one thing to get rid of a weak professor, but completely different if it put the entire faculty—and its dean—in jeopardy. A student delegation met 'Azm, asking him to reconsider his resignation. They also visited the offices of major Syrian dailies, pleading them to refrain from covering the internal turmoil at the Faculty of Law, to avoid raising French ire.⁶²

From here, however, the university came under the direct authority of consecutive ministers of education. Some were highly committed to its progress, like Fāris al-Khūrī, who assumed the job in 1926. Others, like Kurd 'Alī (who assumed the job in 1928), were not. Ministers came and went and were judged not for good character or academic credentials, but how docile or not they were to the Mandate regime. Kurd 'Alī's appointment was sweet revenge for the Syrian scholar, who had wanted the university's presidency so badly but been prevented from it, then ejected from his teaching post with little respect or ceremony. He stayed at this job until November 1931. Although hailed as a prominent scholar on all four corners of the Arab world, Kurd 'Alī proved rather petty when running affairs of the Ministry of Education. He was constantly at daggers-end with the university president, Riḍā Sa'īd.

A troublesome Education Minister

In 1928, Kurd 'Alī talked Prime Minister Tāj al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī into creating the Educational Council (*Majlis al-Ta'lim*), charged with monitoring curriculum and text books at the Syrian University. It was headed by a council made up of a French advisor, along with the University President, the directors of the Tajhīz high schools, seven appointees from the Ministry of Education (all chosen by Kurd 'Alī himself), and fifteen appointees representing various academic institutions across Syria, in addition of course, to the president of the Arabic Language Assembly, who was still, Kurd 'Alī himself. Meaning,

⁵⁷ *al-Sha'b*, 19 April 1929.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 21 April 1929.

⁶⁰ Al-'Azm 1960: 64.

⁶¹ Ibid., 72.

⁶² Ibid., 65.

Kurd 'Alī gave himself three-fold authority over the University, first as minister, second as president of the Assembly, and third, through the Education Council.

Kurd 'Alī noted that in addition to making giant steps of academic progress, the Syrian University was also generating revenue and self-financing itself, without government support. This added to his snowballing frustration with Riḍā Sa'īd. Expenses for the academic year 1930-1931, for example, stood at 134,000 SP while revenue stood at an impressive 223,480 SP. Tuition fees alone accounted for 130,000 SP. The same could not be said for the university hospital, however, whose revenue stood at 3,000 SP while spending at an all-time high 46,000 SP. In 1929, Riḍā Sa'īd presented the university budget at 204,370 SP. This was a big amount of money, given that the Ministry of Education's budget for the same year stood at 1.6 million SP.⁶³ The lion's share, of course, went to faculty salaries and management of the university hospital, which was still serving poor people (both Syrian and non-Syrian) for free and distributing free medicine at its clinic near what later came to be known as Shāhbandar Square.

There were three levels for patients at the university hospital. Class A patients were charged 250 piasters per day for treatment and single hospital room, with meals. Class B patients were charged 75 *qurūsh* for treatment with a shared hospital room with other patients, with meals. Employees were treated for free, along with their families, as part of their 'incentive package.' For example, the university hospital performed 103 gynaecology operations in 1930-1931, along with 104 ophthalmology operations, 30 ENTs, and 240 emergency calls. All of them were paid operations. During the same period, however, it conducted 2820 operations free of charge, for the city's poor and needy.⁶⁴ Ibrāhīm al-Sāṭī, a veteran professor at the Faculty of Medicine, was now being paid 24 SP gold—an impressive salary by all accounts—while Aḥmad Shawkat al-Shaṭṭī was making 34 SP. Riḍā Sa'īd refused to reduce salaries of his well-trained staff. It was costing the university plenty of money to run the hospital with A-class doctors, and Riḍā Sa'īd needed help—badly—from the Ministry of Interior. That help never came.

Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī slashed the university budget down to 75,000 SP.⁶⁵ He argued that the money saved would be used to upgrade schools in rural parts of Syria. University studies staged a massive demonstration in Damascus on 11 April 1929. The demonstrations spread far and wide, to Beirut and Aleppo. In the Syrian capital, four thousand students from both sexes staged a sit-in on campus, where young woman addressed the crowd. The French paper *Les Echos* speculated that the budget cut had more to do with the bad blood between Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī and Riḍā Sa'īd, than the Syrian government's actual need for additional revenue.⁶⁶

Kurd 'Alī also forced the Syrian University to raise tuition fees to a staggering 60 SP per academic year, to be paid in three instalments. The price of B-Class hospital treatment was also raised from 75 piasters per day in 1931 to staggering 250 piasters in 1940.⁶⁷ For

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ RĀFIQ 2004: 145.

⁶⁶ *Les Echos*, 11 April 1929.

⁶⁷ RĀFIQ 2004: 259.

A-class patients, it rose from 150 piasters per day to 400 piasters. The official reason, government authorities later argued, was the outbreak of World War II and the economic depression gripping both Syria and France. The baccalaureate system, the reduced budget, and the staggering tuition increase were more harmful for the university's progress than anything the French had done during the first ten years of their mandate in Syria.

Conclusion

Undaunted by government regulations, however, the Syrian University continued to grow and expand. Its mission statement outlived the government tenure of Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī. On 1 July 1929, Riḍā Sa'īd inaugurated the university's Grand Auditorium and two years later, he launched the Syrian University Printing Press. It published the Faculty of Medicine periodical, *al-Majallah al-Ṭibbiyyah*, which was edited by veteran educator Murshid Khāṭir. The magazine, which first appeared in 1924, was a monthly peer-reviewed journal with essays by young doctors, academic studies by well-established scholars, and news. It sold at a 25 percent discount for students at the Faculty of Medicine.⁶⁸ Before that, the School of Medicine's magazine had been published by the Greek Orthodox Printing Press in Damascus. Additionally, the university library in 1931 boasted of 4,500 books in Arabic, French, and English. When students began to play tennis on campus, university authorities talked the government into granting them a 100 SP stipend to promote sports and cultural activities on campus. During the academic year 1930-1931, eighty-one students were enrolled at the Syria University, including seven girls. One was Laurice Māhir, the first female at the Faculty of Medicine, who graduated in June 1930.⁶⁹ In the souvenir photo, she is pictured in the back row of a crowd, carrying her university diploma, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with men in black suits and colourful medals wearing their crimson red Ottoman fez. She went to class unveiled, and mingled well with male students, with no discrimination against her sex.⁷⁰

In the mid-1930s, pension and retirement laws were drafted for the Syrian University, forcing professors to step down at the age of sixty. This was applied to Riḍā Sa'īd himself, who retired after an illustrious career, in 1936. The first exception to the retirement rule was the veteran Fāris al-Khūrī, who reached the age of sixty in 1938. Due to his dramatic influence in Syria and the love that students had for him, his academic tenure was extended exceptionally for two years, until 1940.⁷¹ This was despite the fact that Fāris al-Khūrī had studied mathematics at AUB, rather than law. He trained as an attorney, however, and went on to become a brilliant legal mind throughout the Middle East, establishing the modern Faculty of Law and the Lawyers' Syndicate, in addition to drafting two of Syria's early constitutions. Khūrī authored timeless classics that are still taught at Damascus University,

⁶⁸ Author's interview with Wafīq SA'ID, son of Riḍā SA'ID, London, 6 October 2014.

⁶⁹ QABBĀNĪ 2011: 118.

⁷⁰ *al-Qabas*, 1 September 1928.

⁷¹ RĀFIQ 2004: 260.

and signed off PhD degrees in law, but never studied as a lawyer. This basically sums up the intuition, ambition, and calibre of the first and second generation of Syrian educators.

Their departure marked the end of an era, and the start of a new chapter in the history of the Syrian University. By no means did progress stop with the first and second generation of faculty and staff. The Syrian University continued to grow and expand, well into the 1970s. The early 1950s witnessed remarkable leadership, however, during the presidency of the AUB history professor Constantine Zurayq, who saw to it that faculty and students are sent on grants to study in the United States and Western Europe. Then came another seasoned educator, the attorney Aḥmad al-Sammān, during the years of the United Arab Republic (1958-1961). In August 1971, President Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad appointed the AUB-trained cardiologist Dr. Madanī al-Khiyāmī as president of Damascus University. Born in 1914, al-Khiyāmī had been trained by the first and second generation of Syrian educators. One day he visited President al-Asad, who said that he wanted to find employment for eight hundred janitors at Damascus University. Al-Khiyāmī replied, ‘Give me the money allocated for their salary and I will create a new university for you!’ Asad agreed, and with the money, Khiyāmī bought land in Mezzeh and Kafarsūseh, in the vicinity of the city, which are now premises for the Faculty of Arts, Medicine, and the new Faculty of Law.⁷² In recognition, al-Khiyāmī granted Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad an Honorary PhD from Damascus University.⁷³ In 1973, al-Asad chose another independent, Dr. ‘Abd al-Razzāq Qaddūrah, a Brussels-trained nuclear physicist, to head Damascus University. A man of letters, Qaddūrah went on to join the International Atomic Agency (IAE) and to cofound the United Nations University in Tokyo before becoming Vice-President of UNESCO. He was the last of great men at the Syrian University.

Progress came to a grinding halt with the rise of a new generation of ‘educators,’ chosen for loyalty to the Ba‘th Party, rather than their academic credentials. They have been running university affairs since the early 1980s. Revisiting Ba‘th Party founding documents reveals a very promising vision for how society and the Arab world should have looked like. It promised what its very name entailed: an Arab ‘renaissance,’ or ‘rebirth.’ Because of that, the Ba‘th managed to attract the brightest and most capable of Syrian youth from the 1940s to the 1970s. That changed when professors were hired from 1980 onward, not because they were good, but because they were Ba‘thist.

The Ba‘th and the state, along with the university, melded together. As a result, they became bulky, disorganized, and very vulnerable from within.

There are no official numbers for university destructions in the current war. When asked about how to rebuild Syria’s schools and university, the Ba‘th officials stand speechless, responding with big words and thundering promises—rhetoric, more so than substance. Although the war in the Damascus countryside ended in mid-2018, government authorities have failed to provide a roadmap as to how to re-enroll students and lure them into abandoning the gun in favour of an academic future. Most of the fighters, from both camps, are university and high-school drop-outs. One day, the war will come to an end not only in Damascus but throughout Syria. These young men will find themselves way past university

⁷² Interview with Professor Sāmī al-KHIYĀMĪ, Beirut, 11 November 2013.

⁷³ Ibid.

age, with no university degree to empower them in life, and usher them once again, into the Syrian work force.

The war has changed the face and core of everything in Syria, from its social fabric and economy onto its political landscape and university life. If lifesaving measures are not taken, Damascus University will continue to deteriorate and decay, until reaching bedrock—perhaps even losing accreditation. A look at the ‘golden years’ of the Syrian University might sound nostalgic and not provide immediate answers. A scratch beneath the surface, however, proves that this study is not just in pursuit of historical trivia. There is always room for hope and the career and achievements of the Syrian University’s founding fathers can provide inspiration. A back to the future might not be too bad of an idea.

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