

Factors of Muslims' Weakness

In July 1860 an evil wave of hatred blew between Muslims and Christians and led to many massacres, accompanied by disturbance and destruction. This event obliged the Ottoman state to put an end to civil war by force. And although disturbance gradually waned out and was about to disappear, the Western states, found that their chance to interfere should not be lost. Therefore, they sent their warships to the area. In August 1860, France sent a military expedition of the French army to Beirut in order to extinguish the rebellion and bring calm to the country. The English and the French also devised civil war in Syria so that it would be a good reason for their intervention. Actually, they interfered and forced the Ottoman state to put a special order for Syria which divided it into two provinces (Wilayat), and offer Lebanon special privileges. Thus, Lebanon was left as a separate entity and began to enjoy local independence. Its governor, a Christian, was assisted by an administrative council which represented the country's major religious sects. Meanwhile the activities of preaching missionaries took a new form which had not been known before. They were not satisfied with: movements, missionary circles, printing houses, and clinics. They went so far as to establish societies. In 1842 a committee was formed to establish a scientific society under the sponsorship of the American mission. This committee went its way for five years until it was able in 1847 to establish the society of Arts and Sciences. Its members were the Lebanese Nassif-Al-Yaziji and Butros-Al-Bustani, the American Cornelius van Dyck, and the English Colonel Churchill. In spite of their efforts, it is a fact that through two years they won only fifty associate members. Most of these were Christians living in Beirut, but none of them was a Muslim. The society died five years after it was established without leaving any effect behind it save one: The desire of missionaries to establish more societies. Consequently, another society, the 'Oriented Society', was established in 1850 by the Jesuits and sponsored by the French Father Henry Du Broniere. It adopted the program of the society of Arts and Sciences, and died shortly after the death of the first society. Then several societies were established but all were stricken by complete failure until in 1857 a society was formed on a new ground which took into account that all members should be Arabs, and so no foreigner was allowed to join it. This condition was sufficient to encourage Muslims to enroll as members in this society; its founders called it the Syrian Science Society. By virtue of its efforts and its appearance in the Arab guise, it was able to influence people so a great number amounting to fifty joined it. Among its board were many outstanding Arab personalities: Mohammed Arislan a Druze, Hussein Bayhom a Muslim, Ibrahim Yaziji a Christian. This society lasted longer than the preceding societies, for part of its program was to conciliate between the views of religious factions and to awaken Arab nationalism among them. In 1875, (The Secret Society) was formed in Beirut. Holding the political idea of awakening Arab nationalism, this society was established by five individuals who received their education at the Protestant College in Beirut. After a short time, it won a few members and began, through pamphlets and other means of communication, to call for Arab political independence and Arab nationalism. It also excited a feeling of hostility to the Ottoman state by calling it Turkish. The society also worked for the separation of religion from state through he can be definitely sure that the Westerns were the ones who established, observed, and supervised them. Moreover, the Western wrote reports about their activities. The British Consul in Beirut, for instance, sent his government a cable on July 28, 1880 saying: "Revolutionary pamphlets appeared; it is likely that Medhat was their source, calm dominates, details by air mail". This cable was sent immediately after the society had distributed the pamphlets in the streets of Beirut and stuck some of them on its walls. This cable was followed by several letters from the British Consuls in Beirut and Damascus, letters which stood for reports about the secret movement which was born in the Protestant College and proceeded work in Syria.

Although the activities of the society were quite noticeable in Syria itself, they were nevertheless effective in other parts of the Arab world. This is obvious from a letter which the British consular Agent in Jeddah wrote to his government in 1882: "I understood that some people even in Mecca itself started to adopt the idea of liberation, and it seems to me that, as a result of what I heard, there is a fixed plan to unite Najd and the south of Iran under the command of Mansour Pasha, and Assir and Yemen under Ali Ben Abed".

Not only England was concerned with Arab nationalism but France too cared to a great degree. In 1882 a French man in Beirut wrote indicating France concern, thus: "The spirit of independence spread on a large scale. During my stay in Beirut I've seen young Muslims completely engaged in the formation of societies which work for the establishment of schools, hospitals and the country's progress. What attracted my attention to this movement is that it was liberated from any sign of sectarianism, for this society aimed at admitting Christians among its members." A Frenchman wrote to the same effect from Baghdad: "I was faced in every place with that common steady feeling 'hatred or Turks' and it seems to me that there is in the far horizon the ghost of an Arab movement, one which is newly born, and of its people who were helpless until now but will soon demand to assume their natural place amid the Islamic empire and their leading role in the future of this world."

Ar-Raya Magazine, May 1992