

1.1: Syrian National Development at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century

It is generally accepted that the idea of a distinctly "Syrian" nationalism was virtually non-existent in Syria in the earliest part of the nineteenth century. At the time, writes George Atiyah, it would have been very unconventional for anyone "to contemplate or dream that a people or nation would rise against another and fight a conflict out as a people and not as [zealot followers of] an Amir or a feudal lord." Moreover, religious differences at the time were profound and varied. Each faith tended to coalesce into a compact social and political block whose first allegiance was not to the country but to the Empire or itself. The country experienced social unrest, and separatist movements did emerge from time to time, especially in the region of Lebanon. Atiyah regarded these movements as essentially parochial in nature, and saw them as being totally unrelated to any assertion of nationhood. Indeed, up until Muhammad Ali's invasion of Syria in 1830, the sect and the clan were the distinctive elements of identity. Under the millet system, which organized the political-administrative structure of each region in the Empire on a confessional basis, patriotic inclinations in the national sense were inconceivable and the individual gave loyalty to the sectarian group to which he or she happened to belong. This affiliation also determined the relationship with the supracommunity of the Ottoman Empire. Also, at that stage, hardly anyone called the country by its correct name. Instead of the name by which it has come to be known, ie., Syria, it was often called Bilad al-Sham, a loose term that did not always have the same geographical meaning. Sometimes it meant the whole of Syria, other times simply Damascus, and on occasions it referred to the stretch of the Syrian coast only. Whenever the need arose for the people of Syria to distinguish themselves from their counterparts in the Empire, they called themselves "sons of Arabs" (awlad arab) rather than Syrians. Thus Gregory M. Wortabet, a native of Syria, wrote: "I was surprised to find, whilst traveling in Egypt some years ago, that all the Syrians, no matter where they came from, were called Damascenes, and the whole coast of Syria called Barr-el-Sham, the coast of Damascus." It may be added that in Turkish parlance the country was known neither by its traditional name of Syria, nor by its Islamic designation of ash-Sham, but as Arabistan.