

## 1.2: Syrian National Development During the Egyptian Invasion of Syria

National awareness in Syria remained virtually at a standstill until Muhammad Ali's invasion in 1830. The fall of Syria into the hands of the invading Egyptians had a dual effect upon the development of nationalism in the country. Initially, the invasion retarded the development of a specifically Syrian nationality in two basic ways. Firstly, the new regime, following in the footsteps of the native population, adopted the designation of ash-Sham, instead of the name 'Syria', in its reference to the country. In doing so, it consolidated the predominant conception and plunged the original name of Syria into deeper oblivion. Secondly, and more importantly, Muhammad Ali's plan to carve out for himself an Arab Empire with Syria included tended to stimulate "Arab consciousness" rather than "Syrian consciousness." This is because during the political campaign launched for that purpose, the emphasis was on Arab rather than Syrian nationhood and the aim was to instill into the general population a sense of patriotism based not on Syria's former glory but on the glorious periods of Arab history. The fact that the people of Syria displayed no formal opposition to Muhammad Ali's ambitious scheme and the nationalistic ideas it contained, indicates that Syrian collective consciousness at the time was virtually non-existent. When resistance to the scheme finally came, it was not so much because of its ideas, but because its method of execution aroused widespread social discontent to the point that "when, in 1840, European pressure forced him to evacuate Syria, he had scarcely a friend left in a population which, eight years before, had welcomed him as a liberator." Ironically, it was also during the Egyptian reign over Syria that the first seed of Syrian nationalism was planted. During his occupation of Syria, Ibrahim Pasha, the son of Muhammad Ali, tried to stimulate intellectual and political life in the country by removing all discriminatory laws in force against the religious minority groups. The small but active Christian missions at the time seized the opportunity and rapidly began to expand their activities. This exposed Syria to the new ideas and values of Europe and provided the first real opportunity for its people to develop a national consciousness. The expansion of missionary activity created an environment reasonably favourable to a rejuvenation of Syrian identity. Since the time the Crusaders made Syria "a focus of interest for Western Christianity," foreigners had preferred to use the original name of the country rather than adopt any other designation. Thus about the time the missionaries began to expand their activities, the name "Syria" began to be widely used again, at least in the intellectual circles. The missions also gave the idea of Syrian nationhood a mild forward push by generating domestic intellectual interest in Syria. They funded and helped create three literary societies, two of which carried the name "Syria" in their title. The third described its activity as an invitation for a better and more comprehensive understanding of "Syrian history." The three societies were:

The Syrian Society: Founded in 1847, its aim was to spread knowledge and general information. The Oriental Society: Founded by the Jesuits in opposition to the growing influence of the Protestant mission, it encouraged discussion of Syrian history from a purely religious perspective. The Syrian Scientific Society: Established in 1867, this society attracted about 150 members from Syria's various sectarian communities, including some of the country's best intellectuals, who would later become the standard bearers of the national cause. There is, however, no indication that any of these societies wished to engage directly in politics. This, of course, does not make them unimportant, simply different. These groups were the first sign of an intellectual revival; in addition, from them arose such important figures as al-Yazajiyin, Zaydan, Bustani, Shidyaq and others, who dedicated their pens to

raising consciousness of the nationalist cause in Syria and in the diaspora. There was one other way the missions aided the evolution of Syrian nationalism. In seeking converts to their persuasions, the missions bolstered the spread of education among the general population, through a network of schools, colleges, and other kinds of educational institutions which they helped create. Those which deserve our attention are the Aintourah school, which was founded by the Anglicans in 1834; the Khazir school, which was established in 1846 by the Jesuits; and the Abeyah and Beirut schools, founded by the two American missionaries, Dr Van Dyke and William Thompson, respectively. The Abeyah school was particularly important because it was the first school in Syria to provide graduate teachers to other institutions, and the most important institution to benefit from it was the Syrian Protestant College (later the American University of Beirut) which was also founded through mission help. The work of the missions in educational fields greatly bolstered popular awareness. It particularly fostered interest in the new values and ideas of nationalism. The Abeyah school, for instance, gave its students extensive lessons in history and geography. The textbook it used in the study of geography included an explicit reference to geographical Syria. Written by Dr Van Dyke, it argued, in a rather simplistic form, that Syria consisted historically of two parts, Bilad al-Sham and Palestine, but the two were merged together and called Syria soon after their incorporation into the Roman Empire. From a theoretical point of view, it may be argued that education is important, because it prepares the people and provides an impetus toward change. The schools of the missionaries were important because they gave the desire for change in a national direction its first impetus. On the negative side, foreign educational and religious missions fostered an atmosphere of scepticism and uncertainty. Each mission came to Syria with the aim of cultivating the influence of the country from which it came. In this endeavour, the competition of the various missions was strong and each one exalted the greatness of its land, people and culture to the Syrians in contrast with the material and moral weaknesses of Syria. In the long run, this produced in Syria an "educated" generation devoid of the proper patriotic ideals, a generation that lacked faith in Syria's ability to grow or to attain national sovereignty without the help of one or other of the main powers at the time.