

1.3: Syrian National Development and Butrus Bustani

After the Egyptians left, in 1840, the image of Syria as a distinct Arab nation and a fatherland inhabited by one people began to have its first formal expression. The man who took the initiative in publicly expounding this idea was Butrus Bustani, who is known in Syria as al-mu'allam al-awal (The First Teacher). Like many Syrian Christian scholars of his time, Bustani was educated at the Maronite seminary of Ayn Waraqa in the Lebanon. After completing his studies, he worked as a dragoman at the British and American consulates. A close friend of Cornelius Van Dyke and Eli Smith, two of the most influential foreign missionaries at the time, Bustani was a founding member of both the Syrian Society and the Syrian Scientific Society. Bustani first propagated the Syrian national idea in *Naffir Suriyya* (The Clarion of Syria), a broadsheet which he published in the wake of the sectarian unrest of 1860. In this short-lived publication, Bustani urged the people to brush aside their sectarian grievances and adopt patriotism as a principle of life. In a style of language designed to appeal to the patriotic conscience of the people, Bustani told his audience that it was against the "spirit of the age" to confine individual loyalty to religious sects or to substitute sectarian fanaticism for the love of the fatherland. His motto was "God belongs to religion but the fatherland belongs to everyone." According to Bustani

Syria which is widely known as barr ash-Sham and Arabis-tan is our fatherland [watan] in all its diverse plains, rugged terrains, coasts and mountains. And the people of Syria, whichever their creed, community, racial origin or groups are the sons of our fatherland.

Bustani was at pains to emphasize the importance of unity for a national revival in Syria. "The backwardness of the Syrians," he wrote, "is the outcome of lack of unity and love among them, and of the lack in them of earnest concern for the welfare of their country, and of their surrender to the power of sectarian fanaticism." This was a significant intellectual breakthrough by common standards and one that Bustani would repeat to his fellow countrymen in the hope of stemming the tide of fanaticism and setting the country on the path of recovery. Bustani also displayed great pride in the Arab character of Syria. Its pivotal place in Arab history, its Arab culture, and the fact that it spoke the language of the Arabs necessarily made Syria, in his eyes, an unqualified Arab nation. But there is nothing in his writing to suggest that he supported a broader Arab unity, with Syria a part of it. As Butrus Abu-Manneh has noted:

These were the main views of Bustani in 1860: The need to create internal unity, to forget the differences and emphasize the common aspects, to love Syria and to work for its welfare and progress. In this sense he was prob-ably the first Syrian nationalist.

This view of the man clearly contradicts Spencer Lavan's classification of Bustani as a representative figure "in the evolutionary development of the Christian, or non-Muslim, position in Arab nationalist development." One certainty is that Bustani did not accomplish his aim, due to factors beyond his control. Firstly, at the time he was writing, Syria was going through difficult times and parochial loyalties were too deeply entrenched to shake off at such speed. A British travel guide wrote that in the Syria of the mid-nineteenth century "patriotism is unknown. There is not a man in the cou-ntry, whether Turk or Arab, Mohamman or Christian, who would give a para to save the empire from ruin; that is if he be not in government pay... The patriotism of the Syrian is confined to the four walls of his own house; anything beyond them does not concern him." By 1870, very little had changed and in the absence of a national sentiment it was difficult to make the ordinary people understand the changes that were taking place elsewhere in the Empire. Secondly, until

Bustani's time, political aspirations in Syria had remained basically unchanged. Whereas in Europe, and some parts of the Ottoman Empire, the movement for national independence had gained strong momentum, in Syria the notion of independence failed to take any root. In part this can be attributed to the high expectations generated by the Tanzimat and other promises of collective reform. But it is also due to the centrality of Islam in Syrian life and its influence on matters of loyalty and politics. According to Butrus Abu-Manneh, Bustani showed no hint that he wished to break away from loyalty to the Ottoman Empire. He openly welcomed the ideas of the Tanzimat and urged Syrians to embrace them on the grounds that they offered a shelter against the penetrating influence of Western values and a policy of social toleration based on secular ideals. In this sense, "Bustani's vision was of Ottomanism as the progenitor of Syrian patriotism, and he apparently saw no contradiction between the two ideals." In other words, it was a question of prudence in the eyes of Bustani, a choice between risking his life by standing up in defence of an independent nation in Syria and personal security by calling for the integration of Syria within the existing framework of the Empire. The third, and probably most important reason for his failure, was the 1860 civil war. The unrest of that year, which "claimed 12,000 lives in Mount Lebanon and nearly as many in Damascus," created a formidable sectarian feeling that ultimately superimposed itself on the entire social fabric in Syria. This, in turn, reinforced old loyalties and opened up old wounds which pushed the country back into oblivion. As Bustani discovered, it also made it extremely hard to propagate ideas that stressed to the Syrians the common aspects of their lives. Nonetheless, many of the reforms introduced by the Ottoman government into the Syrian provinces, to Bustani's satisfaction, were of direct, or indirect, help to the idea of political community in Syria. The construction of new roads and printing presses promoted social intercourse between various sections of the population. Modern secondary schools were established by the government to "lessen the mutual ill-feelings ... between the sects." In addition, the province of Damascus became a potential nucleus of a larger Syrian entity. In the mid-1860s the area of jurisdiction of this province was greatly expanded and it was for the first time called the 'vilayet of Syria.' At the same time, great efforts were made to improve the administrative machinery, the security conditions, the educational facilities as well as the economic infrastructure of the province