

## 1.4: Syrian National Development During the Hamidian Era

The succession to the Ottoman throne in 1876 of Sultan Abdul Hamid II had mixed effects on the development of Syrian nationalism. The promulgation of a new constitution by the Sultan in 1876 gave Syrian politicians their first taste of political power. From the vilayet of Syria four notables were chosen to represent the vilayet in the newly opened Ottoman parliament. As a result, political consciousness in Syria was enhanced and the cry for national independence grew, although only very gradually. Also, in this period, there was a steady increase in intellectual interest in the history of Syria and its origins. In 1881, drawing on the works of several foreign scholars, Jurji Yanni compiled *The History of Syria* which superseded an earlier work by Ilyas Deeb Matar. According to Youssef Choueiri, Matar's book "indicates both a growing Syrian consciousness of a distinct national history, and an Ottoman proclivity to encourage a limited cultural non-political autonomy." Some years later, Yanni also issued his own private magazine, *The Investigator*, in which he wrote various papers on Syria. Yanni's work was followed, in 1893, by the publication of an eight volume history of Syria by the Maronite Archbishop of Beirut, Yusuf Dibs. This was the first comprehensive history compiled about the country, and even though it was written from a Christian point of view, it referred to the existence of an exclusively Syrian national cause. According to Albert Hourani, this upsurge in intellectual interest in Syria

... may have been owing in part to the influence of the Belgian Jesuit Henri Lammens, a great historian of Islam, who taught at the Jesuits University in Beirut throughout his career, and who was a staunch believer in the entity called Syria; his dislike of Islam and Arab nationalism is obvious in all his writings, and he drew the sharpest possible distinction between Syrians and Arabs.

The most extensive writing about the Syrian national cause was done outside the country. The Syrian intellectuals who migrated in order to avoid Hamid's oppressive rule founded, in their new surroundings, various cultural and political societies and newspapers that focused on Syria in one way or another. The Cairo-based *al-Muqqattam*, for example, was "the first independent newspaper to endeavour in the cause of Syrian nationalism." Another was Jurji Zaydan's *al-Hilal* which discussed in an extensive way the main themes of the Syrian idea, though from a purely Arabist perspective. In one of its articles, entitled "Are the Syrians Arabs?," it stipulated that the Syrians were Arabs, not because of origin, but because they share with other Arabs a common language and a common literature. The literary upsurge of this period was accompanied by a growth in political consciousness. In 1880 a secret group of intellectuals plastered the walls of Beirut with placards urging the Syrians to independence and revolution. The group demanded:

(1) The granting of independence to Syria in union with the Lebanon. (2) The recognition of Arabic as the official language. (3) The abolition of all censorship and controls that hindered the spread of knowledge. (4) The use of the military solely within national frontiers.

In evaluating the actions of this group Wajih Kawtharani wrote: "What is striking about these placards, apart from their creative underground communication to the masses, is that they also bear new political concepts quite outside received thinking. For the first time in modern Arab history an appeal is specifically made to a Syrian homeland." At about the same time a group of Damascene and Lebanese notables, impelled by "the growing national consciousness in Syria," met at a secret location to "discuss what had to be done to spare the [Syrian] homeland the particularly tragic fate that a foreign occupation represents." After a series of closed meetings in Beirut and Damascus the group decided to appoint Amir abd

al-Qadir as chairman of the movement on the following grounds:

(1) The recognition of the Ottoman Caliphate as the Caliphate Moslems. (2) The abolition of all censorship and controls that hindered the spread of knowledge. (3) The use of the military solely within national frontiers.

As can be readily seen, in contrast to the Beirut secret society which demanded complete independence, this movement aimed basically for autonomy within the framework of the Ottoman Caliphate. One of its figures noted: Those attending the Damascus Conference had to monitor what was developing at the Berlin Conference in order to respond as appropriately as they could. There was a view among the participants if it turned out that one of the foreign countries was bent on taking over our country... this would leave no option but to demand total political independence. If, on the other hand, it turns out that there is no intent to occupy, the object will then become to seek autonomy as is the case with Egypt and in some of the Balkan areas.

The difference was primarily due to confessional factors. The Beirut society was Christian-inspired and Christians at that time had strong inclinations for independence. The other movement was Moslem-inspired and its members, unlike the Christians, were not prepared to throw down the gauntlet. In general, however, the growth of political consciousness and literary inquiry under Hamid failed to transform the Syrian national idea into a galvanizing political force. Apart from the two minor actions of the secret societies (minor, because they were short-lived), there was no serious attempt to organize the Syrian idea into a definite political movement. As a result, the idea remained relatively inactive and could not be translated into an effective force. The truth is that Syrian nationalism, being basically a non-conformist idea, could find neither political recognition nor popular support. It lacked political recognition because it was a secular idea and, as Hisham Sharabi has noted, "truly secular nationalism [under Abdul Hamid] remained outside the mainstream of political activity and was regarded with suspicion by the Ottoman conservative and Muslim reactionary elements alike." Its lack of popular support was due partly to sectarian differences, which were still powerful, and partly to the religio-political allegiance to the Empire of the majority of the Syrian population, who were Sunni Muslims. But the main reason why Syrian nationalism did not gain wide popular support is that it was consistently overshadowed by more dominant currents and ideas. Among the most important of these currents was "Ottoman nationalism," an idea based on the preservation of the Ottoman community as a means of resisting the danger posed by Europe. Its aim was to safeguard not only the Empire but also the whole Islamic umma -a policy which had a strong sentimental appeal to the Muslim majority in Syria. Another was the idea of pan-Islamism, which also aimed at uniting Islam in face of the European danger. This form of group loyalty expressed itself in various forms. Among the first to embrace it was Sultan Abdul Hamid who, in a calculated attempt to reinforce the loyalty of the Muslim peoples to the Empire, laid claim to the caliphate and called on all Muslims to rally to his support. Its main advocate, however, was Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, an enigmatic thinker who saw Islamic unity from a purely religious perspective. His brand of pan-Islamism has been described as a blend of religious and national feelings which cut across ethnic and tribal affiliations, and stressed new Muslim vigor as well as an adaptation to modern expression. Another important idea that gained wide currency in Syria was Pan-Arabism. Unlike pan-Islamism and pan-Ottomanism, this form of "nationalism" emphasized the element of Arab nationality and called for the creation of an "Arab nation" in which Arab culture and language provided the main cement for individual loyalty. However, since there did not exist a clear, watertight definition of who was an "Arab", the idea assumed several different forms. Some defined the Arab nation as pertaining to the historical entity of geographical Syria; others extended it to include the whole of the

Fertile Crescent and the Hijaz, while the more aspiring Arabists defined it, in the widest possible sense, to include all the countries of the Arab World. If that wasn't enough, Syria was also rocked by separatist movements that served to complicate an already confused picture. The most important of these was Lebanese secessionism whose political aspirations were summed up in the formula: 'an independent Lebanon within its historical and natural boundaries under French protection.' The idea was inspired by an inherent fear of Muslim domination and a strong sense of particularism in the Maronite community of Mount Lebanon. A split in the Christian intellectual ranks, who up until then were leading the Syrian nationalist crusade, came as an added blow. Some, like Jurji Zaydan, came to embrace the idea of Arab nationhood, and others, like Shidyaaq rallied their support behind the idea of Ottoman unity. In Syria itself, Butrus Bustani continued to speak of a Syrian nation while in Mount Lebanon voices seeking a separate Lebanese nation became more common. Finally, the remaining small circle of Syrian nationalists was unable to formulate a workable blueprint for a national revival. Instead of anchoring their views on a movement or on institutions fit to educate the people within a national perspective, they looked to one or other of the Powers of Europe for help. In doing so, they alienated themselves from the people, especially from the Moslem sects, which were bitterly opposed to European encroachment. In the absence of a purely Syrian movement, matters were left to such groups and organizations as al-Fatat, the Association of Arab-Ottoman Brotherhood, al-Qahataniyya, the Ahd society, and the Ottoman Party for Decentralization. Although these groups often had a special feeling for the human community of Syria, they nevertheless lacked an understanding of its real needs. Syria, therefore, entered the First World War uncertain about its future and lacking a clear perception of its political and national goals.