

December 19, 1917

Nahwa Suriya (Towards Syria)

Citation:

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Summary:

From the 1880s to 1914, about half a million Ottoman citizens from Bilad al-Sham (present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine/Israel) emigrated, principally for economic reasons. A majority were Christians. Most hailed from what after World War I became Lebanon and Syria; some were from Palestine. While some travelled to Africa—a story analyzed in Andrew Arsan's *Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa* (2014)—a large majority headed to the Americas, where they worked mostly in lower-class professions, soon launched newspapers, and founded numerous local but interlinked migrant societies. Although only few returned permanently, equally few renounced their Ottoman citizenship. Moreover, a good number of emigrants stayed in touch with their place of origin: socially, e.g. through letter exchanges, marriages, and the occasional visit; economically and financially, e.g. through remittances; and politically.

As Stacy Fahrenthold has shown in *Between the Ottomans and the Entente: The First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908-1925*, political involvement grew after the 1908 Young Turk Revolution in the Ottoman Empire. For one thing, Ottoman freedom of expression improved for a few years; for another, the Young Turk regime hoped to politically recruit migrants for the Ottoman cause, though had little success. Migrants' own political involvement increased in World War I. A clear majority turned against the Ottoman Empire. This was reflected also in numerous South- and North-American-Syrian journals.

One was the New York-based al-Fatat, whose founder in 1916, Shukri al-Bakhkhash, wrote the below text; he was born in 1889 in Zahle, present-day Lebanon, and arrived in the United States in the early 1910s. Moreover, thousands sought to, and did, join the war as volunteers on the Allied side, organized by Syrian American recruiters across the Western hemisphere. From 1914-17, migrants enlisted in the French and British armed forces and from 1917 also in the US military, fighting in Europe and the Middle East. (Al-Bakhkhash himself enlisted in the US army in 1918.) This was a political act that they and their communities hoped would further Syria's liberation from Ottoman rule and give Syrians a voice in the postwar world, though they did not quite agree how

post-Ottoman Syria would or should look like and whether a (and if yes, which) foreign country—principally, France or the United States—should play a role in it.

Original Language:

Arabic

Contents:

Original Scan

Translation - English

Between the crib and the trench—the demise of the “sick man” [ii]—the Eastern [Military] Unit accompanies the English attack—the volunteers’ journey from New York—the Central Syrian Committee in Paris defines its program—Syrian independence under French protection [*ri’ayya*]^[ii]—an article by Dr. Georges Samné.

In a few days, humanity’s heart will become light in the middle of the night, and its spirit will turn to the child in Betlehem [Jesus Christ], and the church bells will toll loudly, from the Vatican to San Francisco to Jerusalem, and Christendom rejoice to God for [the advent of] he who chose a manger in the shabbiest village so that people may know his sacrifice.

This year, Christmas has a particular hue. Civilisation has reconquered the cradle of the greatest lawgiver who has benefitted civilization. And the flags of the Allies flutter above the crib and the Turk has taken flight, escaping from the holiest part of earth.

We intended to write an article telling our readers about the crib at Betlehem and about the soldier’s trench in this Great War and sketching out what comes to mind when one thinks of the crib and the trench. Then we saw that we will save that article for the Saturday edition [of this newspaper], because today’s mail brought us a journal from the capital of France that contains information of import for Syrians. Here is what it says.

The journal [in question] is the French *Correspondence d’Orient* (*al-Murasalat al-Sharqiyya*)—the organ of the Central Syrian Committee (*al-Lajna al-Suriyya al-Markaziyya*) in Paris^[ii]—which our readers know. It and the [US] Syria-Mount Lebanon League of Liberation (*Lajna tahrir Suriya wa-Lubnan*)^[iii] agree on efforts and goals and share the same struggle on behalf of Syria; [hence] they are capable of paving a way to that goal.

We have learned that the Central Committee in Paris convened a momentous meeting on 17 November current, which expressed the goal of national protection. Representatives of all of Syria’s races [*anasir*] and religions [*madhahib*] participated, Muslims, Christians, and Jews. With one voice, they declared national unity, considering Syria indivisible, and demanded Syria’s independence under French protection, and the definite liberation from all Turkish rule, actual or nominal. Below is the first paragraph of the committee’s program, which encompassingly clarifies the goals and wishes of every responsible and rational Syrian.

Paragraph 1: The Syrians living abroad who are united with heart and soul with their co-nationals, whatever their race and creed, and who were caught up just like them by the injustice of Turkish barbarism, have decided to establish a committee called “Central Syrian Committee.”

This committee seeks to bring together all Syrians scattered across the Allied and neutral countries and to cement among them the bonds of friendship and brotherhood without which one cannot defend general national interests.

The committee will do absolutely everything in its power so that the Syrians can play their part in rescuing their country with the help of France, whose benefits the sons of Syria have always recognized.

The committee’s ultimate aim is Syria’s liberation and its categorization [as a country worthy] of obtaining independence under French protection and with France’s assistance and guaranty. It will have central sovereign rule, and its different provinces—like Lebanon, which enjoyed internal independence [*istiqlal dakhili*], Palestine, etc.—will have their distinct hue and the freedom to develop their just wishes.

In my view, this means that the Paris Committee is following exactly the views of the great specialist of the Syrian Question, the great late Nadrah Beg Mutran, author of the book *Syria Tomorrow* [*Suriya fi al-Ghadd*], i.e. that Syria is one single indivisible unit from Arish, [on the border to] Egypt, to Iskandariyya, and that it is appropriate for it to be divided into parts that enjoy independent internal administration linked to the central capital—like the states of this splendid country [the United States of America].

The editorial of the journal is by the meritorious editor-in-chief Georges Samné, who composed it following the meeting of the committee, having received news about the English victory at Jaffa.

He wrote: "On November 17, a momentous event happened in the East: the wishes of a bonded nation were realized; I refer to the Allies' entrance into Jaffa. The occupation of Jerusalem and the Allied threat to [Turkish rule in] Beirut and Damascus surely will follow this dazzling victory. So will the demise of "the sick man" in Asia as the Turks lose the greatest religious centers in the world, and, in result, Germany's hopes in the East collapse.

Then, the eloquent author pointed out that the advancing attack into Syria is conducted not only by English armies but also by a French army and a unit of Syrian soldiers volunteering in the Eastern attack. These tidings kindle in us joy and solace. How can't a Syrian not be feel solace when learning that his Syrian brothers brandish the weapon of revenge and are actively participating in rescuing the land of their forefathers from the claws of the Turks.

It now appears that the Syrian volunteers who successfully passed military training in Port Said joined the Franco-English attack. As for the second part of the attack [which will be joined by volunteers stationed in] encampments in Cyprus and on Arwad [Island],[iv] it is awaiting the day when, soon, it will reach and engulf Beirut to then swamp central Syria and its heights.

One can conclude from Dr. Samné's article that the Allies are succeeding in all war theaters: the English are leading in Syria due to its proximity to their primary center in Egypt and the French General [Maurice] Serail [1856-1929] is in charge in Thessaloniki. The Allies' aim and their enemy is one and the same.

The article includes a clear statement that the Syrians prefer France's protection, no other country's. And if we accept as true all that has been said until now about the Syrian Question and if we bear in mind the historical traditions in that nation, then France is worthier than its counterparts in extending this protection. At any rate, reasonable Syrians are content with all decisions by the Allies, who have agreed with [US] President [Woodrow] Wilson to liberate the weak nations and give them the right to live [*haqq al-hayya*]. The Paris committee's decision surpassed our wishes. As Dr. Samné commented with beautiful eloquence:

"The Allies promised the world freedom and pledged to honor the wishes of the peoples, and Syria craves for its merited freedom. And should Syria feel it is not yet mature for full independence, then it would wish independence under protection [*tahta ri'aya*] of a mandatory (*wasi*) from the most civilized nation in the world, which is the French nation.

This is a bit of the text in the journal *Correspondence d'Orient*, of which this much is important for the [Syrian] migrants today: to accept to volunteer *en masse* in the Eastern attack. The nation that does not unsheathe its sword to free itself will not have a voice when the sword is sheathed and the time for talking has come.

Finally, it gives me joy to inform the Paris Committee that the volunteers from here have started to travel [to the war] in droves. This week, we said farewell to a troupe going to Bordeaux. At the present moment, this is the most important thing we can do. The Arabic poetic proverb puts it best:

The sword conveys news more truthfully than books - at its edge, playing ends and things get serious.

[i] Translator's note: The sick man was a European epithet for the Ottoman Empire coined in the nineteenth century.

[ii] Translator's note: The Central Syrian Committee was established in 1916 in Paris by Francophile Syrians including Shukri Ghanim and George Samné (1877-1938), and supported by the French government.

[iii] Translator's note: Founded in New York in 1917; linked to the newspaper in which this article was published, *al-Fatat*.

[iv] Translator's note: Arwad is a Mediterranean island off the city of Tartus, in present-day Syria.