

# Secularity in the Syro-Lebanese Press in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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Any history of secularity in the Arab world needs to dedicate a special chapter to the Syro-Lebanese press in Beirut in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Not only that the first explicit expressions of secularism in the region were articulated on its pages; it was the forum in which the earliest debates in Arabic about the relationship between religion and other social spheres were conducted in universal, abstract terms between members of different religious communities (as opposed to debating this relationship from within a particular religious tradition).

The periodic press in Beirut had secularising effects on Arab thought and culture thanks to the combination of four interrelated factors: (1) many of its journalists were supporters of Ottomanism<sup>1</sup>; (2) it articulated the ethos of a modern-liberal middle class in the city of Beirut and its vision of a society that transcends religious divisions; (3) the press adhered to the logic of print capitalism, which necessitated a cross-confessional appeal; (4) it exposed Arab readers to European secular thought and informed them about the secularisation efforts by some European governments.

## Overview of the Syro-Lebanese Press in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

The history of Arabic periodicals began in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when authorities in regional capitals launched official bulletins to report government activities and disseminate official announcements.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Ottomanism was a political vision advocated by reformist officials and intellectuals in the Ottoman Empire, according to which all Ottoman subjects, regardless of ethnicity or religion, should be equal before the law. This vision was inscribed in the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 (Article 17), “The Ottoman Constitution, Promulgated the 7<sup>th</sup> Zilbridje, 1293 (11/23 December, 1876),” *The American Journal of International Law* 2, no. 4 (1908): 369.

2 For an overview of the history of the Arabic press, see Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 11–49.

Crucial role of the Syro-Lebanese press in the history of secularity in the Arab world

Emergence of a thriving  
print media sector in  
Beirut in the 1870's

During the 1850's and 1860's a number of private newspapers and missionary bulletins were launched in Beirut, Istanbul, and France, but they were for the most part short-lived.<sup>3</sup> It was only in the 1870's that one could speak of a thriving print media sector in the Arabic-speaking world, when more than twenty periodicals were launched in Beirut alone. The most notable examples of these periodicals were the literary-scientific journal *al-Jinān* and its weekly counterpart *al-Jannah*, both of which were established in 1870 by Butrus al-Bustani<sup>4</sup> – one of the most prominent figures of the Arab *Nahḍa*.<sup>5</sup> Other significant periodicals of that era were *Lisān al-Ḥāl*, *al-Muqataḥaf*, *Thamarāt al-Funūn* along with two missionary periodicals, *al-Nashra al-Uṣbū'iyya* (by American Presbyterian missionaries) and *al-Bashīr* (by the Jesuit mission).

Most of these periodicals were privately owned and financed by subscriptions, sales, and advertisements, but they occasionally received financial support from public officials and wealthy merchants. Periodicals at the time were individual rather than institutional efforts and journalism was not yet a full-time, specialised profession. Most of the people running these periodicals were active in other fields as civil servants, entrepreneurs, and local politicians. In terms of censorship, the attitude of local Ottoman authorities to the press initially ranged between supportive and apathetic, which gave journalists a substantial margin of freedom at the time, even when compared with contemporary European countries. However, in the

3 The two notable exceptions were *Ḥadiqat al-Akḥbār* (1858–ca. 1909), founded by Khalil Khuri in Beirut, and *al-Jawā'ib* (1861–1884), founded by Ahmad Faris al-Shidyāq (a native of Mount Lebanon), in Istanbul.

4 Butrus al-Bustani (1819–1883) was a Maronite native of Mount Lebanon. He converted to Protestantism in the 1840's while working for American missionaries and diplomats in Beirut. However, by the end of the 1850's he felt alienated from missionaries and embarked on a distinguished intellectual career that gave birth to the first modern Arabic dictionary, the first modern Arabic encyclopaedia, and two of the most influential early Arabic periodicals. For more details about Butrus and other prominent members of his family, see Fruma Zachs, "Al-Bustāni Family," *Encyclopedia of Islam THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

5 The *Nahḍa* (renaissance) was a movement of cultural revival and social reform by Arab literati in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the aim of which was to create an Arab subject that is at once rooted in classical Arab culture and well-integrated into the modern world. The following volume contains a collection of texts of the *Nahḍa*, including extracts from periodicals, translated into English: Tarek El-Ariss, ed., *The Arab renaissance: A bilingual anthology of the nahda* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2017).

1880's censorship became more restrictive and arbitrary, which was one of the factors behind a mass migration of Syro-Lebanese journalists to other countries, especially Egypt.<sup>6</sup>

### Social and Historical Context: Ottoman Beirut

The history of the Syro-Lebanese press, including its relationship to secularity, is closely linked to the transformation of Beirut over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from a minor coastal town to the main commercial port in the eastern Mediterranean and an important administrative and cultural hub in the region. In fact, Jens Hanssen considers the vibrant press as an integral part of *fin de siècle* Beirut that was woven into its urban fabric.<sup>7</sup> Beirut owed its remarkable growth to the integration of Syrian territories into the capitalist world-economy dominated by Europe, which necessitated the infrastructural, legal, and economic development of the city. The rise of Beirut is also related to the social turmoil that shook the neighbouring region of Mount Lebanon in the middle of the century. The collapse of the old feudal order that had prevailed in the Druze- and Maronite-dominated Mountain<sup>8</sup> for centuries was marked by violent sectarian conflicts between the two religious communities, which culminated in a civil war in 1860 that claimed some 10,000 victims, mostly Christians. Shortly afterwards, violence erupted against Christians in Damascus claiming thousands more victims.<sup>9</sup>

Rise of Beirut in the 19<sup>th</sup> century amid sectarian conflicts in Greater Syria

6 There were economic factors behind this migration as well, since the Egyptian periodicals market was larger and less exploited compared with the Syrian one. Regarding censorship, see Donald J. Cioeta, "Ottoman Censorship in Lebanon and Syria, 1876–1908," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10, no. 2 (1979): 167–86.

7 Jens Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The making of an Ottoman provincial capital* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 213–35.

8 The Druze is a religious community that broke away from Ismaili Shi'ism in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The Maronites, on the other hand, are members of an autonomous Syriac Church that is in union with Rome. In addition to Maronites and Druze, there were Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Shi'i, and Sunni communities in Mount Lebanon and surrounding areas.

9 For a detailed study of the 1860 civil war in Mount Lebanon, see Ussama Makdisi, *The culture of sectarianism: Community, history, and violence in nineteenth-century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). For the massacres in Damascus, see Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *An occasion for war: Civil conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 78–100.

Formation of a Christian bourgeoisie and the idea of Syrian patriotism

The large influx of Christian refugees boosted the economy of Beirut and its cultural life. Syrian Christians generally enjoyed a high economic and educational standing thanks to the *Tanzīmāt* reforms,<sup>10</sup> which granted them legal equality with Muslims, and increasing European influence (economic, diplomatic as well as missionary), which benefitted them more than, or even at the expense of, their Muslim counterparts. Consequently, a Christian bourgeoisie consisting of entrepreneurs, salaried clerks, intelligentsia, and practitioners of liberal professions emerged as core players in political and economic life in Beirut. This Christian middle class resented the sectarianism that prevailed in Mount Lebanon along with its traditional social order dominated by feudal families and Christian clergy, especially the Maronite Church, which was one of the biggest landowners. They envisioned instead a modern society encompassing all the inhabitants of Greater Syria, regardless of religion, who were held together by bonds of a shared land and a common Arab culture.

Support by Ottoman authorities

This Syrian identity, it should be asserted, was not conceived in opposition to the Ottoman Empire but in support of its reformist project and its political ideal of Ottomanism.<sup>11</sup> Beirut, in fact, was described as a model city of the *Tanzīmāt*, embodying its project of economic and urban development as well as state expansion and administrative integration.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the Muslim community of Beirut, which was dominated by merchants rather than traditional notables (large landowners and military elites) or the *'ulama'*,<sup>13</sup> were not isolated from these developments, as they took part actively in

10 The *Tanzīmāt* were a series of modernising reforms undertaken by the Ottoman state, which began with the *Gülhane Edict* of 1839 and culminated in the proclamation of the Constitution of 1876 and the election of the first Ottoman parliament in the following year. This constitutional era, however, proved to be short-lived, lasting only until 1878, when Sultan Abdülhamid II dissolved the parliament and reinstated absolutist rule.

11 Ottoman officials themselves were supportive of a Syrian regional identity, which they saw as a counterweight to attempts by colonial powers to nurture Christian separatism, as they did in the Balkans. Fruma Zachs, "Pioneers of Syrian Patriotism and Identity: A Re-evaluation of Khalil al-Khuri's Contribution," in *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories, Pioneers and Identity*, ed. Adil Beshara (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 102.

12 Samir Kassir, *Beirut* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 131–33; Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, 236–63

13 Donald J. Cioeta, "Thamarat Al Funun, Syria's First Islamic Newspaper: 1875–1908" (PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 1979), 39–40

its political and economic life. Overall a thriving cross-confessional life developed in Beirut, which manifested itself in local politics,<sup>14</sup> scientific societies,<sup>15</sup> mixed neighbourhoods,<sup>16</sup> and non-confessional schools.<sup>17</sup> It constituted an expression of the *ideology of the city*, to borrow Albert Hourani's term.<sup>18</sup> For this ideology, the press was not merely an outlet, but an embodiment.

### **Nafir Sūriyya: Secularism as an Antidote to Sectarianism**

The first reference problem in light of which the issue of secularity was discussed in the Syro-Lebanese press was, expectedly, sectarianism. In fact, what could be described as the 'founding text' of secularism in the Arab world, Butrus al-Bustani's *Nafir Sūriyya (The Clarion of Syria)*, was composed in the immediate aftermath of the 1860 sectarian conflict. Technically, *Nafir Sūriyya* was not a periodical but a series of pamphlets (eleven in total) that were published between September 1860 and April 1861. Yet it is usually mentioned in lists of early Arabic periodicals and it can indeed be considered an early experiment in journalism. At any rate, the importance of

*Nafir Sūriyya as the first secularist text in the Arab world*

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- 14 Politics based on class-interests rather than religious community are evident from the work of the Municipal Council of Beirut and from petitions to Ottoman authorities made by the people of Beirut. See Jens Hanssen, "From social status to intellectual activity: some prosopographical observations on the municipal council in Beirut, 1868–1908," in *From the Syrian land to the States of Syria and Lebanon*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Christoph Schumann (Würzburg: Ergon, 2004).
- 15 The Syrian Scientific Society (1868–1869), for example, had members from different religious communities including Sunni Muslims and Druze. See the list of its members in Yusuf Q. Khuri (ed.) *A'māl al-Jam'īyya al-'Ilmiyya al-Sūriyya: 1868–1869* (Beirut: Dar al-Hamra', 1990), 218.
- 16 Jens Hanssen, "The Birth of an Education Quarter: Zokak el-Blat as a Cradle of Cultural Revival in the Arab World," in *History, space and social conflict in Beirut: The quarter of Zokak el-Blat*, ed. Hans Gebhardt et al. (Würzburg: Ergon, 2005).
- 17 Butrus al-Bustani founded in 1863 the first private non-confessional school in the Arab world: *al-Madrasa al-Waṭaniyya* (The Local/Patriotic School). Its notable graduates included Abd al-Qadir al-Qabbani – the first editor of *Thamarāt al-Funūn* and a President of the Municipality of Beirut – and Suleiman al-Bustani – a gifted writer, member of the Ottoman Parliament, and Minister in the Ottoman government.
- 18 Albert Hourani used the term in his discussion of political orientations in post-Ottoman Lebanon, but he pointed out that it had its roots in Ottoman Beirut. He contrasted it with the "ideology of the Mountain" (the romantic-Maronite-rural idea of Lebanon) and summarised the difference between the two by his saying: "For the villager rural society is created by God, urban by man." Albert Hourani, "Ideologies of the Mountain and the City," in *Essays on the crisis in Lebanon*, ed. Roger Owen (London: Ithaca Press, 1976), 37.

Separating religion from politics as a precondition for religious tolerance

Religious elements in the secularism of *Nafir Sūriyya*

its writer as a main figure of the early Arabic press and the “revolutionary” nature of the views it advocated<sup>19</sup> warrant its inclusion in a discussion about secularity in the Arabic press.

In the eleven texts of *Nafir Sūriyya*, al-Bustani exhorted his fellow countrymen to abandon sectarian infighting and unite together under the umbrella of one Syrian homeland. Al-Bustani considered sectarianism to be a new expression of primordial, irrational, and barbarian instincts, albeit one that is more destructive, because it invokes “sacred old names”, such as Christian, Druze, or Muslim.<sup>20</sup> A precondition for resolving this social crisis and realising religious tolerance, in al-Bustani’s view, is the separation between *political* and *religious* matters.<sup>21</sup> For al-Bustani, *religions* concern the relationship between man and his Creator, whereas *civic matters* (*madaniyyāt*) concern the relationship between man and his fellow countrymen or between him and his government.<sup>22</sup> Without a barrier separating these two distinct principles, as achieved by “civilised countries” (i. e. Western countries), both are doomed to failure, according to al-Bustani.<sup>23</sup> Finally, it should be pointed out that al-Bustani’s plea for religious tolerance was not only grounded in the bitter experience of communal strife and the ideals of civilisational progress and patriotism, but also in religious – particularly, but not exclusively, Christian – morality, since he appealed more than once to “true religion” that shuns fanaticism and violence.<sup>24</sup>

19 Al-Bustani’s “call for an explicit removal of religion from civil affairs was genuinely revolutionary” and “far more explicit than anything Ottoman statesmen had envisioned”. Ussama Makdisi, “After 1860: Debating Religion, Reform, and Nationalism in the Ottoman Empire,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 4 (2002), 605–07.

20 Butrus Al-Bustani, *Nafir Sūriyya* (Beirut: Dar Fikr, 1990), 27. The text has recently been translated into English: Butrus Al-Bustani, *Clarion of Syria: A patriot’s call against the civil war of 1860*, transl. Jens Hanssen and Hicham Safieddine (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

21 Al-Bustani, *Nafir Sūriyya*, 27.

22 Al-Bustani, 49.

23 Al-Bustani, 57–59.

24 Al-Bustani, 20, 42–43, 68.

### ***Al-Jinān: Secularism as a Mode of Governance of Religion***

Less than a decade after the publication of his *Nafīr Sūriyya*, Butrus al-Bustani launched the first literary-scientific journal in the Arab world, *al-Jinān* (1870–1886), which proved to be another milestone in the history of Arab secularism. *Al-Jinān*, however, was managed and edited by his son Salim al-Bustani (1846–1884), who wrote much of its contents. While many of the secularist themes articulated in *Nafīr Sūriyya*, such as patriotism and religious tolerance, can also be found in the writings of Salim, he went further than his father in his secularism and focused on a different reference problem, namely, the governance of religion, specifically in Christian communities in the Ottoman Empire. The *Tanzīmāt* reforms, which sought to integrate the administration of non-Muslim communities into state bureaucracy, and the parallel rise of a modern Christian middle class, not to mention active interventions by foreign powers, often resulted in power struggles within these communities. These struggles generated debate on the boundaries of religion and which authorities had the legitimacy to resolve conflicts inside or outside these boundaries: the head of the Church (e.g. the Pope), the Porte, or the local community? And on what basis should it be resolved: political sovereignty, spiritual hierarchy, or representation of local community and its ethnic character?

For the most part, Salim did away with references to religious morality, relying instead on positivist notions of progress and the concept of the ‘new age’ (*al-‘aṣr al-jadīd*). Salim maintained that this ‘new age’ has a distinctive ‘spirit’ or ‘Zeitgeist’ (*rūḥ al-‘aṣr*) that entails a new relationship between religion and politics.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, Salim preached a brand of secularism that places emphasis on the *supremacy* of the state over religious communities or politics over religion rather than on *separation* between the two. As a member of the generation born under the aegis of the *Tanzīmāt* reforms, Salim was a firm believer in the project of state-building and modernisation, unlike his father in *Nafīr Sūriyya*, whose confidence in the Ottoman state was shaken after its failure to prevent the massacres of 1860.

*Al-Jinān*: a second articulation of secularism in the Arab world

Secularism as a response to conflicts within Christian communities

Secularism as the ‘Zeitgeist’ of the modern age

Supremacy of the state over religious communities

25 See for example, Salim al-Bustani, “Rūḥ al-‘Aṣr,” *al-Jinān* 1, no. 13 (1870): 385–88.

The two aspects of religious communities: purely religious and political

For Salim, religious communities have two aspects: the first one is related to doctrines and worship, which he considered to be an internal issue within each religious community that is not of public concern; and the second one is related to power and authority. Since conflicts frequently arise between different social groups or authorities within religious communities, the administration of religious communities for him is a matter of public interest (hence it is legitimate to discuss it in the press) and also of political interest to the state, the task of which is to protect the civil rights and welfare of its subjects. Accordingly, the principle of separation between religion and politics is valid only when it is related to the first, not the second aspect of religious communities.

References to contemporary events in Europe as examples for the supremacy of the state

To support his opinions, Salim frequently referred to contemporary events in Europe, such as the measures undertaken by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck to force the Catholic clergy to submit to the authority of the state instead of the Vatican (the so-called *Kulturkampf* during the 1870's), or the subjugation of Rome by the Kingdom of Italy in 1870. For Salim, a “war” was raging in Europe between the “folk of the spirit of the age” and the “clergymen”, which was going to shape the position of religion in the world for centuries to come.<sup>26</sup>

### Distinctions, Terminology

Binaries denoting the religious domain and its other(s)

The different schemes of secularism advocated by the two Bustanis were reflected in their terminology when distinguishing between religion and its other(s). Salim continued to use terms similar to those used by his father in *Nafīr Sūriyya*, such as *ma'ābid* (places of worship), *i'tiqād* (belief), *akhlāq* (ethics), *ḍamīr* (conscience), *dīn* (religion), *madhhab* or *tā'ifa* (denomination, religious community), and *rūhī* (spiritual) to refer to various aspects of the religious domain; and *siyāsa* (politics), *madaniyyāt* (civil matters), *'umūm* (the public), and *'ālamīyyāt* (worldly matters) to refer to the other domain, which at the time had not yet had a general name in the sense of ‘secular’ (*'almānī* in contemporary Arabic). However, since he distinguished between the two aspects of religious communities – one purely religious and another political/public – Salim occasionally resorted to

26 Salim al-Bustani, “Jumla Siyāsiyya,” *al-Jinān* 5, no. 1 (1874): 1–3.



‘double binaries’ – that is, combining a term that refers to the religious domain with one that is often deployed in the secular domain. For example, in a response to criticisms by *al-Majma‘ al-Vātikānī* (a predecessor of the Jesuit periodical *al-Bashīr*) that *al-Jinān* was intermingling in the religious affairs of the Armenian Catholic community, Salim asserted that he was not discussing their “religious beliefs” (*al-i‘tiqādāt al-dīniyya*) but their “religious politics” (*al-siyāsa al-dīniyya*).<sup>27</sup> Not all of these distinctions and binaries became established widely over time,<sup>28</sup> but the very act of making distinctions repeatedly reinforces the notion that there are certain social spheres that are not subject to religious imperatives.

It should be mentioned that *al-Jinān*’s contributors not only distinguished between religion and other social spheres, such as politics or the economy, but also between religion and other dimensions of identity, such as ethnicity or political allegiance. As the Greek Orthodox Church disintegrated into several ethno-nationalist churches in the Balkans over the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christian communities in Syria were faced with the question whether their respective religious identities or liturgical languages (Greek, Armenian, or Syriac) entailed by definition distinct ethnic identities. The matter was a frequent subject of debate in the Arabic press in Beirut.<sup>29</sup> Salim, on his part, indicated in two editorials that one may be at once Greek Orthodox (by religion), Arab (by ethnicity and language) and Ottoman (by political allegiance).<sup>30</sup>

Use of double binaries to denote the political aspect of religious communities

Distinctions between religious, ethnic, and political dimensions of identity

## Other Periodicals

The secular orientation of al-Bustani’s periodicals was shared by some other periodicals, such as *al-Muqṭataf* and *Lisān al-Hāl*, but

27 See “Al-Asitāna al-‘Ulyā,” *al-Jinān* 1, no. 7 (1870): 195–96; “Al-Arman al-Katholik fi al-Asitāna,” *al-Jinān* 1, no. 8 (1870): 228–29; “Al-Majma‘ fi Rūmiya,” *al-Jinān* 1, no. 9 (1870): 262–68. These articles were unsigned, but there is no reason to think they were written by someone other than Salim.

28 This is an era when the modern social and political vocabulary of the Arabic language was still relatively fluid.

29 *Al-Janna* published a supplement to its issue no. 280 containing several letters sent by Greek Orthodox readers expressing different views about the relationship between religion, ethnicity (*jīns*), language, and political allegiance. *Al-Janna* 4, no. 280 (1873).

30 Salim al-Bustani, “Jumla Siyāsiyya,” *al-Jinān* 3, no. 23 (1872): 793–96; *al-Jinān* 4, no. 1 (1873): 1–4.

**Thamarāt al-Funūn: first periodical published by Muslims in Beirut**

there were other orientations toward religion in the Syro-Lebanese press. *Thamarāt al-Funūn* (est. 1875) – the only periodical of the Muslim community of Beirut at the time – was Ottomanist during its first decade, when it was still under the editorship of Abd al-Qadir al-Qabbani. It included calls for unity between Ottomans regardless of religion<sup>31</sup> and featured contributions by prominent Christian writers, such as Adib Ishaq and Ya‘qub Sarruf. However, starting from the 1890’s, it gradually transformed into an Islamic-reformist periodical thanks to the influence of figures such as Mohammad Abduh, who contributed articles to the newspaper during his stay in Beirut from 1884 until 1888, and Ahmad Tabbara, who succeeded al-Qabbani in editing the periodical in 1898. Consequently, Islamic themes and news about Muslims around the world became more prominent in the discourse of *Thamarāt al-Funūn*.<sup>32</sup>

**Missionary periodicals**

The Jesuit *al-Bashīr* was the most vocal anti-secular periodical in Beirut. It frequently asserted that religion (represented by the Catholic Church) should be the guiding framework for all personal, social, and cultural spheres, including politics. *al-Bashīr* was for the most part concerned with European politics and the issues of Catholic denominations in the region. It defended the Catholic Church against any perceived attacks by other periodicals, asserting the rights of the Pope to temporal power and rejecting any claims that the authority of the Church is limited to spiritual matters only.<sup>33</sup> Its Protestant rival *al-Nashra al-Usbū‘iyya*, on the other hand, acknowledged the need to separate religion from politics (mostly in its polemics against the Jesuits),<sup>34</sup> but it still considered public morality as subject to religious imperatives.

### The Logic of Print Capitalism

The secularising effect of the Syro-Lebanese press was not only due to its secularist content but also to its capitalist *modus operandi*. Before the development of the press, knowledge production and circulation were largely undertaken within the confines of each religious

**Formation of a transregional and transreligious Arab public sphere**

31 See for example, “Al-Ittiḥād,” *Thamarāt al-Funūn* 1, no. 3: 3; also no. 5: 2–3.

32 Cioeta “Thamarat Al Funun,” 271–82.

33 See, for example, its criticisms of *Ḥadīqat al-Akhbār* and *al-Jinān* in this regard in “Fī shawka nabatat mu’akhhkharan fī Ḥadīqat al-Akhbār,” *al-Bashīr* 2, no. 22 (1871): 169–72.

34 For example, see *al-Nashra al-Usbū‘iyya* 1, no. 23 (1871): 8.

community. This pattern began to change in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>35</sup> but only with the appearance of an active periodical market starting from the 1870's one may speak of the formation of a transregional and trans-confessional communication-based public sphere<sup>36</sup> or reading public.<sup>37</sup> The owners of periodicals in Beirut naturally wanted to reach the widest audience in order to make a profit or at least to cover the costs of production. Hence, even though the vast majority of them were Christian (of different denominations), they tried to appeal to members of other religious communities, including Muslims, not only as consumers but also as contributors. One popular section in *al-Jinān* that attracted contributions from people of diverse backgrounds were riddles, mostly mathematical or linguistic. Readers sent solutions to riddles published in previous issues or sent their own riddles to be published in later issues. Furthermore, readers contributed literary pieces, translations, commentaries on current events, or responses to materials published in the same or in another periodical.

This cross-confessional appeal<sup>38</sup> demanded that the authors avoided references to specific creeds, an overtly sectarian language, or topics that may have incited religious controversies.<sup>39</sup> Religious topics and contributions by clergymen were not absent, but they tended to be formulated in an ecumenical language that appealed to religious people from different denominations focusing on non-doctrinal

Appealing to members of different religious communities

Use of cross-confessional language and arguments in the press

35 Hala Auji documents how the American Missionary Press in Beirut (established in 1834) gradually oriented its production of books toward a cross-confessional audience by toning down its Evangelical message and avoiding overtly confessional themes, both in text and visual layout. Hala Auji, *Printing Arab modernity: Visual culture and the American press in nineteenth-century Beirut* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2016), 35–63.

36 Hanssen, “The Birth of an Education Quarter”, 148.

37 Elizabeth M. Holt, “Narrative and the Reading Public in 1870s Beirut,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 40, no. 1 (2009), 37–40.

38 The relationship between print capitalism and cross-confessional appeal is not straight-forward. Print capitalism may as well capitalise on religious strife, which is evident from the proliferation of polemic pamphlets during the Protestant Reformation. A. Johns, “Printing as a Medium,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes, (Amsterdam: Elsevier, Pergamon, 2001), 12053.

39 This does not apply to missionary periodicals *al-Bashīr* and *al-Nashra al-Usbū‘iyya*, which contained a wealth of sectarian polemics, in particular against each other. But even in these periodicals, there were articles that defended religious positions using relatively neutral vocabulary.

issues such as personal morality. Even when scriptures were cited, some authors (Muslim or Christian) made sure to cite both the Qur'an and the Bible.<sup>40</sup> Abd al-Qadir al-Qabbani, the editor of *Thamarāt al-Funūn*, requested from contributors to avoid lengthy Qur'anic and hadith citations in their letters, because newspapers were not suitable in his opinion for holy words.<sup>41</sup>

### Influence

In a population where literacy rates most probably did not exceed 10%, the Arabic press at the time was certainly an elite phenomenon.<sup>42</sup> Yet this does not necessarily mean that its influence was limited to its immediate readership. First, these periodicals were often read in public spaces and social gatherings.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, the 'élites' that consumed these periodicals were spread all over the Arabic-speaking world. They in turn – later in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – launched their own periodicals, founded schools, and emerged as leading intelligentsia in their own countries. In addition, thanks to the geographic and social mobility of Syro-Lebanese journalists, the influence of the Syro-Lebanese press extended to many other countries. In Egypt, roughly 20% of all periodicals founded between 1800 and 1914 belonged to the small Syro-Lebanese community that did not exceed 0.3% of the population of the country.<sup>44</sup> In Morocco, Syro-Lebanese journalists, who founded *Lisān al-Maghrib*, the first national newspaper in the country, were at the forefront of the constitutionalist movement of 1908.<sup>45</sup> More importantly perhaps, the Syro-Lebanese press laid the grounds for the development of a standardised, deterritorialised, and secularised version of the Arabic language along with

Syro-Lebanese press' influence extended to other countries

40 For example, see the following articles of Ahmad Wahbi Effendi (a writer from Aleppo): "Nūr al-Ma'rifa," *al-Jinān* 2, no. 20 (1871): 698–700, where he used both Christian and Muslim names when referring to generic individuals, and "Al-Ṣabr," *al-Jinān*, no. 14 (1871): 481–82, where he cited both Islamic and Christian scriptures.

41 Cioeta, "Thamarat Al Funun", 73–74.

42 For a discussion of literacy rates in Syria and Egypt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see Ami Ayalon, *The Arabic Print Revolution: Cultural Production and Mass Readership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 154–76.

43 Ayalon, *Arabic Print Revolution*, 177–93.

44 Thomas Philipp, *The Syrians in Egypt: 1725–1975* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1985), 97–98.

45 Odile Moreau, "Press Propaganda and Subaltern Agents of Pan-Islamic Networks in the Muslim Mediterranean World Prior to World War I," in *The press in the Middle East and North Africa, 1850–1950: Politics, social history and culture*, ed. Anthony Gorman and Didier Monciaud (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 156.

its modern political and social vocabulary, that is Modern Standard Arabic,<sup>46</sup> which is the language of politics, culture, and science in the Arab world till today.

Influence on Modern  
Standard Arabic

## Conclusion

The Syro-Lebanese press had tangible secularising effects on Arab thought in the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It contained the earliest arguments in the region for separation between religion and politics or for the subjugation of religion to political authority. It functioned, moreover, as a forum for the first debates in the Arab world about the relationship between religion and other social spheres in abstract, universal terms. Within this forum, a variety of positions were articulated (secular, anti-secular, reformist, among others), but they all tended to be expressed in a neutral language that appealed to people with different religious affiliations. While one may not speak of a self-conscious secularism nor of an explicit religious-secular binary in that era, the Syro-Lebanese press had arguably contributed to their fuller articulation in the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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46 Stephen Sheehi, “Towards a Critical Theory of al-Nahḍah: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 2-3 (2012), 293–96.

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