

Introduction

Translating Civil War

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News of the spell of atrocities and abominations committed this summer by the troublemakers in our midst has reached the corners of the Earth. All over the civilized world, it has drawn pity and gloom on one hand, and anger and wrath on the other.

With these opening lines, *Nafir Suriyya*—*The Clarion of Syria*—launched its urgent appeal to overcome the civil war in Mount Lebanon and Damascus in the summer of 1860, and to rebuild Syrian society in the war's aftermath. This key text of the *Nabda*—the nineteenth-century Arabic reform and revival movement—has recently received renewed popular and scholarly attention.¹ At the time of its publication, *Nafir Suriyya* ran as a series of eleven pamphlets by an anonymous author from September 1860 to April 1861.² The pamphlets did not present a detailed litany of atrocities, which other contemporary eyewitnesses provided.³ Rather, they addressed an array of universally

resonant and locally relevant themes that render the pamphlets pertinent beyond their immediate context. With a style oscillating between Paulinian sermon and Socratic dialogue, the author ponders the meaning of civil war in relation to religion, politics, morality, society, and civilization.

The author expresses gratitude for European intervention but warns in passing of its potential long-term harm. Key passages evince a subtle understanding of the rights of “man” on the one hand, and a bourgeois deference to the rule of law and political authority on the other. The pamphlets also advocate the twin prerogatives of opposing separation between people of the same homeland based on religion or kinship and proposing the separation of religious and political authority; they espouse an Ottoman reformism that affirms loyalty to the imperial center but calls for the rulers to attend to the welfare of their subjects. Other passages grapple with the task of refuting Orientalist stereotypes about Arabs while at the same time embracing some of its underlying assumptions. Still others extol the value of Western civilization and its racialized hierarchy of nations but warn against superficial emulation. Above all, *Nafir Suriyya* was an antisectarian clarion call to build a cohesive and “civilized” Syrian society in place of what the author considered a community riven with the most pernicious of conflicts, violent fanaticism, and factionalism. As the author put it:

The worst thing under the firmament is war, and the most horrendous among them are civil wars, which break out between people of a single country and which are often triggered by trivial causes and for ignoble aims. (*Nafir Suriyya* 5, November 1, 1860)

Current impressions of Yemen, Libya, and Syria to the contrary, civil wars are not a particularly more common occurrence in

Middle Eastern history compared to other regions.⁴ But as is the case in other parts of the world, past conflicts that would qualify as civil wars by today's standards cast very long shadows into the present. One example is the Battle of the Camel, which broke out in 656 AD and marked one of the first wars between Muslim armies. Even though it was a war over worldly succession that took place over a millennium ago, it continues to be invoked to incite sectarian strife and explain contemporary Sunni-Shia rivalries.⁵ The memory of foreign invasions, too, continues to haunt the Arab world. The sackings of Jerusalem by Crusaders in 1099 and of Baghdad by Mongols in 1258 had their apocalyptic chroniclers whose lamentations have resurfaced repeatedly since American-led armies started the current destruction of Iraq in 2003.⁶ In the modern period, revolutions were often derided as civil wars by conservatives or royalists.⁷ Some conflicts that came to be labeled "civil wars" were, in fact, state pogroms (like the Young Turk genocide of Anatolian Armenians during World War I), settler-colonial conquests (like the Zionist ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948), or wars of independence, most notably the Algerian liberation struggle against colonial France (1954–62).⁸

The French invasion of Egypt in 1798 gave modern Arab intellectual history its colonial frame.⁹ At the time, however, Napoleon's army elicited an entertaining mixture of opprobrium and ridicule. The chroniclers 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti and Hasan al-'Attar believed Napoleon's rhetoric of liberating Egyptians from Mamluk oppression no more than the Iraqis greeted US soldiers with flowers in 2003.¹⁰ By contrast, the *Nakba* of Palestine in 1948 prompted Constantin Zurayk's famous call in his *The Meaning of Disaster* for a fundamental social, political, and military transformation of the Arab world in order to survive and

compete against the persistence of imperialism and the success of Zionism.¹¹ The subsequent Arab military defeat in 1967 generated Sadik al-'Azm's *Self-Criticism after the Defeat*, in which he blamed the lack of a sustained intellectual response on, among other things, the Arabs' purported "clever personality" syndrome, or *al-fablawiyyab*. Despite the ideological differences between Zurayq and al-'Azm, as well as the latter's orientalist psychologizing, both authors warned that Arab defeats were partly a symptom of deeper social ills. They implored their readers to take the catastrophes as wake-up calls to expose the bankruptcy of existing regimes and build progressive societies capable of autonomous and equitable national development.¹²

Its specific historical context notwithstanding, the eleven pamphlets that made up *Nafir Suriyya* anticipated the ambivalence of introspection found in Zurayq's and al-'Azm's texts. Its anonymous author had to deal with civil war—"the most disparaged of all wars"¹³—and the specter of European encroachment. What elicited particular concern on the pages of *Nafir Suriyya* were the ominous signs that before "fellow countrymen" could become good neighbors again, the purportedly empathetic European eyewitness would turn into military saviors and suspend the process of social healing indefinitely. While *Nafir Suriyya* grappled with the civil war in Mount Lebanon and the ensuing Bab Tuma massacre in Damascus, the full diplomatic and journalistic force of Great Power rivalry on the Eastern Mediterranean shores unleashed the first international humanitarian intervention of its kind.¹⁴

The duplicity and opportunism of this intervention by European imperial powers during the "Syrian disturbances" are largely absent from al-Bustani's account. But they were astutely dissected at the time by Karl Marx in one of his regular

dispatches to the *New York Daily Tribune*.¹⁵ The author of *Nafir Suriyya* appreciated and generally ascribed noble motives to Ottoman, European, and American intervention. By contrast, Marx noted that the French press feigned outrage at the disturbances and supported Napoleon III's designs of pacification by annexation, and that the Russian government, too, favored military intervention to deflect from domestic troubles. Four years after the Crimean War, it was evident according to Marx "that the autocrat of France and the autocrat of Russia, laboring under the same urgent necessity of sounding the war-trumpet, act in common concert." Meanwhile, the Prussian government was opposed to military action but, Marx opined, only because a Prussian adventure in Syria would put in jeopardy the project of German unification.¹⁶ Despite his scathing critique of foreign power intervention and connivance, Marx shared the biases of the liberal press and the conservative politicians about the "barbarous clans of the Lebanon" as he ended his article with a damning judgment of international incitement and local political pathologies:

In respect to England I will only add, that, in 1841, Lord Palmerston furnished the Druses with the arms they kept ever since, and that, in 1846, by a convention with the Czar Nicholas, he abolished, in point of fact, the Turkish sway that curbed the wild tribes of the Lebanon, and stipulated for them a quasi-independence which, in the run of time, and under the proper management of foreign plotters, could only beget a harvest of blood.¹⁷

In light of even the most astute European commentators' reductionist assumptions about the local "wild tribes" of 1860s, the historical and literary significance of *Nafir Suriyya* cannot be overestimated. *Nafir Suriyya's* author evokes the language of "tribalism," but as part of a more elaborate critique of the local

dimensions of the civil war that befell his homeland. Civil wars rarely speak their names. Frequently, euphemisms like “disturbances,” “troubles,” or just “events” mask the atrocities committed and the modern forces that produced them. Lebanon and Syria are no exception. *Nafir Suriyya* used *al-kbirba* (ruinous event) and the more conventional label *al-fitna*, which is invoked today to refer to the “discord” of 656–80 that supposedly begot perennial Sunnis-Shia rivalry.¹⁸ More significantly, *Nafir Suriyya* also introduced the term *civil war* (*al-harb al-abliyya*).¹⁹ This neologism gestured toward two important aspects that set 1860 apart from previous conceptions of communal violence: it was “civil” in that the violence was carried out between fellow inhabitants, by armed civilians on unarmed civilians; and it was a “war” because of its scale and international dimension. For *Nafir Suriyya*’s author, this was a social conflict carried out by military means at a time when communal feuds and factionalism were supposed to have been superseded by the march of history and by people’s recognition of the human interdependence in modern society. The civil war has led—he laments—to human suffering and material loss, to mass dispersion of people, forced and voluntary exile, and widespread “homesickness” among fugitive victims and perpetrators alike. Even as the immediacy of the civil war and its author’s evolving subjectivity make *The Clarion of Syria* a visceral, contradictory, at times repetitive, and always challenging text to read, it evinces a profound and painful hermeneutic process on the part of its author that was unprecedented in Arabic literature and remarkable by any standard for its time.

It is unclear when exactly the identity of the pamphlets’ author—a “patriot”—was revealed. Contemporary obituaries of one of the leading intellectuals and scholars in Beirut, Butrus

al-Bustani, indicate he was known to be behind these pamphlets during his lifetime. He himself claimed authorship of *Nafir Suriyya* in the entry for *nafara* in *Mubit al-Mubit* (1867). Born into a socially reputable Maronite family in 1819, al-Bustani came into contact with American missionaries around 1840, which shaped his thinking throughout his life. In the 1850s, he worked as a dragoman for the American consul. It is no surprise then that al-Bustani's *Nafir Suriyya* shared a civilizational discourse with foundational Euro-American texts that cut across geography, culture, genre, and style. Its ardent patriotic tone, if not content, resonates in part with "The Address to the German Nation," which Johann Gottlieb Fichte penned in Berlin during the French occupation in 1807, and in some respects with Simón Bolívar's "Jamaican Letter" of 1815, which later became a South American independence manifesto. Perhaps a more accurate analogy with Romantic idealism is Heinrich Heine whose love-hate relationship with fellow Germans and Jews resonates with *Nafir Suriyya's* concern for—and scathing critique of—Syrians' purported lack of self-respect, misplaced sense of honor, and violent intolerance. *Nafir Suriyya's* invocation of the promise of civilization and the threat of barbarism also conjures up the conservative elitism of Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1867) and of Domingo Sarmiento's liberal autobiographical novel and political manifesto for a strong Argentinian state, *Facundo* (1845).²⁰

After the civil war in 1860, al-Bustani dedicated his life to Arab history, literature, and language. He founded schools, newspapers, encyclopaedias, and dictionaries. When he died in May 1883, his obituaries listed *Nafir Suriyya* among his major literary achievements.²¹ One year later, his son Salim also passed away. The death of the Bustanis marked a downturn in Beirut's *Nabda*. Starting in the late 1870s, the Ottoman sultan Abdülhamid II's

regime clamped down on political activism in Beirut. The press came to be censored, and many journalists left for British-occupied Egypt, where they embraced the new scientific outlooks: Darwinism, materialism, and socialism.²² Finally in 1886, the Ottoman authorities closed the flagship of the al-Bustani family's intellectual enterprise, *al-Finan*, apparently because of a glowing editorial by al-Bustani's son, Najib, in praise of the sultan's erstwhile nemesis Midhat Pasha, who had been the architect of the Ottoman constitution and governor general of Syria in the late 1870s.²³ American missionaries at the Syrian Protestant College, too, had clamped down on the liberal aspirations of students and some faculty. English became the language of instruction. This was anathema to al-Bustani, who had insisted in *Nafir Suriyya* on Arabic as the unifying language of education. Moreover, the college administration sacked a recently hired chemistry professor for challenging Christian creationism and endorsing Charles Darwin's and Charles Leil's ideas on evolutionary biology.²⁴

These new political, economic, and cultural developments from the early 1880s onward challenged the way the Bustanis' and their contemporaries viewed their role as public intellectuals. New Imperialism and the attendant discourses of race threatened but did not eliminate the Bustanis' "ecumenical humanism"—to use Ussama Makdisi's evocative phrase.²⁵ These sociopolitical transformations had a profound effect on the Arabic language, not least because some experimental vocabulary disappeared while many terms changed their meaning. The role of al-Bustani in reviving and revising modern Arabic, partly through translation, is undeniable.²⁶ Translation was the activity that characterized all phases of his life. As a boy, he studied classical and modern languages extensively; later in life, he

helped translate the Bible into Arabic before serving as a dragoman for the US consulate; he edited al-Mutanabbi's *Dirwan* and translated Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. As the host of many literary societies and founding editor of *al-Jinan* he dedicated himself to the dissemination of historical knowledge and foreign ideas. As a lexicographer, he defined the meanings of terms and pinned down the semantic structure of Arabic; and as a cultural entrepreneur he made available a concise history of the world in the homes of educated Arabs.

His mastery of Arabic notwithstanding, al-Bustani struggled to find the right language to translate the horrors of the civil war into lessons learned. For us, the task of rendering his interpretation legible in English more than a century and a half later was a double struggle of translating text and context. To address this twin challenge, the book is divided into two parts. Part 1 provides context—historical, conceptual, and biographical—to the war, the work at hand, and its author. Part 2, beginning with chapter 6, offers the first full translation of all eleven pamphlets. In part 1, the first chapter outlines the socioeconomic and political conditions that underlie the civil strife of 1860. Contrary to what al-Bustani suggested in *Nafir Suriyya*, the war was much more than a product of communal hatred and sectarian prejudice triggered by “trivial causes.” Elite rivalries, class conflict, imperial reform, and foreign intervention planted the seeds for an all-out violent conflagration and stoked its fire afterward. These complex social transformations left their deep mark on al-Bustani's own life trajectory, which we chart in chapter 3. We highlight al-Bustani's religious conversion, literary innovation, and cultural contribution through his writings and educational activity, all of which turned him into a key figure of the nineteenth-century *Nabda*. Chapter 4 discusses the historiography

that produced different scholarly articulations of the *Nabda* through diverse interpretations of *Nafir Suriyya* and its meaning. We close our contextual section with a conceptual study of the etymological origins and sociopolitical significance of al-Bustani's innovative terminology, such as *nafir*, *gharadb*, *al-barb al-abliyya*, and most prominently, *al-watan*. This last term lay at the heart of a new lexicon of communal belonging and patriotism that al-Bustani and other Arab reformers of his time sought to instill in their interlocutors. Far from the chauvinistic nationalism that might be conjured up today, al-Bustani invoked love of the homeland—as we elaborate in chapter 5—as an antisectarian panacea, a necessary individual and collective disposition to build an inclusive postwar society, with all its utopian promises and concrete contradictions.