Beirut on the Stage: The Great War in Melodrama[1]

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The First World War proved a period of unprecedented suffering for the people of Beirut and neighbouring Mount Lebanon. The Ottoman government's declaration of *seferberlik*, or general conscription, in the summer of 1914, provoked widespread dread and panic. The Governor General of Syria and Lebanon, Cemal Pasha, was a notoriously harsh ruler who arrested hundreds of political activists and exiled thousands more. In 1916, a special military tribunal in Mount Lebanon condemned dozens of Arab political activists to death. Wartime misery touched the lives of virtually all communities in Lebanon. Government requisition of basic foodstuffs, compounded by a devastating locust plague in 1915 and a strict Entente naval blockade on Ottoman ports, gave rise to a famine that killed up to half a million civilians by war's end. With the Ottoman retreat from Arab lands and the Entente Powers' occupation of Beirut in October 1918, the Lebanese must have wanted to put the whole of the war experience behind them.

Yet within a year of the armistice, a select group of Beirutis chose to relive the horrors of the war in melodrama. On two consecutive nights in 1919, two theatre companies combined forces to produce a new play in Arabic entitled "Beirut on the Stage, Or Four Years of the

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War" by a Lebanese author named George Murad.[2] Little is known about the theatre companies or the playwright. Murad earned a one-line mention for the play in Louis Cheikho's history of Arabic literature, but his biographical details are unknown and "Beirut on the Stage" would appear to have been his only publication.[3] The names of the companies betray their nationalist leanings: the Young Syria Company (*Jawq Suriyya al-Fatat*) and the National Revival Drama Company (*Jawq Ihya' al-Tamthil al-Watani*). Murad appears to have been affiliated with the Young Syria Company, for he assigned the rights for both publication and performance of the play to the theatre troupe.

Against the background of popular war fatigue in 1919, Murad's decision to write his play, the companies' willingness to stage the drama, and the public's interest in attending performances are all open to question. Writing in May 1920, Murad invited the reader to return with him "to past times whose consequences are with us still," to "turn together the bloody pages of a painful history that we might learn lessons from what has passed." The play sought to capture what Murad termed "the ideas of the witnesses of that painful war that played out on the stage of Syria." Of course, Murad, the actors and the audience would have counted among the war's witnesses.

A close reading of the text suggests Murad intended the play to help the war-weary Lebanese make sense of their recent suffering. A romantic and an idealist, Murad clearly sought to

[2] The published edition notes the play was performed in Beirut on two consecutive nights without specifying the date in 1919. Jurj Murad, *Bayrut `ala al-masrah, aw arba`sanawat al-harb* (Beirut: al-Matba`a al-Lubnaniyya, 1920).

[3] Luwis Shaykhu, *Tarikh al-adab al-`arabiyya fi al-rubi` al-awwal min al-qarn al-`ishrin* [The history of Arabic literature in the first quarter of the twentieth century] (Beirut: Matba`a al-Aba' al-Yasu`iyyin, 1926), p.179. Bibliographic searches in leading research libraries have not revealed other works by Murad.

validate the devastating experiences of the war through dramatic and poetic expression.[4] Moreover, he gave meaning to wartime hardship by presenting the audience with a post-war vision of Lebanon's diverse religious communities united in an independent homeland, free from Turkish tyranny, under French protection. Of the audience's reaction, we have only the author's modest assessment from the published edition of the play: "The noble sons of the fatherland were appreciative."

Beirut was already an established centre for Arabic drama well before the outbreak of the Great War. Marun al-Naqqash (1817-1855) is credited with staging the first modern Arabic play *"Al-Bakhil*," a loose adaptation of Moliere's social comedy "*L'Avare*" ["The Miser"], in his home in Beirut in 1848. He later built a hall for dramatic performances adjacent to his house which briefly served as Beirut's first theatre before its conversion to a church following Naqqash's death in 1855. More soon followed. An Italian traveller described a night out in one of Beirut's theatres in the 1870s:

> The theater, a nondescript room, is full of people. I did not expect to find so many, and it seems to me to indicate a certain civilization, that there should be in Beirut so many people willing to spend two francs to attend a comedy. There are no women among the spectators… The governor and other people are sitting right in front of the stage, smoking a water-pipe. The top of the small stage is decorated with a sun with yellow rays, the crescent with a star in the middle, and on the side, Ionian columns.[5]

[4] Paul Fussell examines the literary impulse among British servicemen in WWI in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

[5] The Italian traveller Pietro Perolari-Malmignati was cited in Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), note 15, pp. 197-98.

As this account suggests, the Ottoman authorities kept a front row seat in the rapidly expanding world of Arabic drama. Public venues in which people gathered and exchanged new ideas were suspect in the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876 – 1909). Growing Ottoman censorship drove many of the leading dramatists from Beirut and Damascus to develop their art in the greater freedom of Khedivial Egypt.[6]

With the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, the Ottoman government lifted the Hamidian-era regime of censorship and theatre became overtly political in Syria and Lebanon. Patriotic citizen-playwrights began to stage re-enactments of the Young Turk Revolution, bringing themes of revolutionary reform and social justice to the stage. Theatre directors often invited the audience on stage to play the role of "the people," allowing them to "participate in the performance – and hence discussion and analysis – of contemporary events."[7]

After 1908, Lebanese playwrights increasingly staged quickly-scripted accounts based on both local and international current affairs. In 1909, the Arab Revival Drama Society (whose name, *Jam`iyyat Ihya' al-Tamthil al-`Arabi*, seems to anticipate one of the two companies who staged Murad's play in 1919) performed a spontaneous play inspired by the execution of the Spanish social and political activist Francisco Ferrer in Beirut's New Theatre. In 1911, a play about the Italian invasion of Libya and the bombardment of Beirut packed houses in Beirut and Damascus (indeed, the authorities closed one performance in Damascus when an

[6] Jacob M. Landau, *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1958), pp. 57-74; Mohamed A. Al-Khozai, *The Development of Early Arabic Drama (1847-1900)* (London and New York: Longman, 1984), pp. 31-82; Adam Mestyan, *Arab Patriotism: The Ideology and Culture of Power in Late Ottoman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
[7] Khuri-Makdisi, *Global Radicalism*, p. 83.

audience of 1,100 filled the 800-seat theatre beyond capacity).[8] There were thus precedents for George Murad's instant play about WWI, and pre-war experience to suggest that such plays drew large and appreciative audiences.

Beirut on the Stage

George Murad wrote his play in four acts, distilling the traumas of each year of the war into one act. To overcome the breadth of his subject and the limits of time, Murad inflicted virtually every catastrophe of the Great War upon a single family: Kamil, his wife Salma, and their children Haifa and Jean. Rather than fully-developed characters, the main protagonists serve as vehicles to represent collective experiences of the war. Kamil and his family were passive victims of Turkish injustice and the misfortunes of war, not tragic characters whose lives were shaped by their own decisions.

The play opened with a moment of celebration. On an unspecified day in 1914, Kamil returned from Paris after a four-year absence to be greeted by his loving family. Yet their joy was short lived. Kamil shared grave news that war had been declared and Turkey had concluded an alliance with Germany. Time has been compressed and the events of 1914 unfolded as if on a single day. The abolition of the Capitulations, the closure of leading Beiruti newspapers, Cemal Pasha's appointment as governor of Syria, the Ottoman entry into the war, conscription and wartime requisitioning were all revealed on the day of Kamil's return. And to crown the tensions, Kamil was carrying a secret letter that would spell his family's undoing.

[8] On the Ferrer play of 1909, see Khuri-Makdisi, *Global Radicalism*, pp. 60-62; on the 1911 play, see *Ibid.* pp. 83-84.

Arab activists in Paris entrusted Kamil with a letter addressed to the president of the banned Beirut Reform Society, whose offices had been closed by the Ottoman authorities in 1913 for its proto-national politics. Kamil asked his daughter's fiancé, Fuad, to deliver the compromising document, and Fuad agreed to the dangerous task rather than refuse a request from his future father-in-law. However, on his way to deliver the letter, Fuad learned that the Ottoman authorities had just seized the files of the French consulate in Beirut. Fuad knew that the French held letters that would compromise the members of the Reform Society and returned to Kamil's house, the letter still un-delivered. He found Kamil deep in conversation with his brother Yusif, who was a member of the Reform Society. Yusif took the letter from Fuad and pocketed it. Moments later, the police entered, found the compromising letter, and arrested Kamil and his brother Yusif. The curtain fell on the distraught family who lost their head of house on the very day of his return from abroad.

Act two opened in 1915. Kamil had been exiled to Ceyhan in southern Turkey, a fate that befell many Syrians and Lebanese of doubtful loyalty to the Ottoman state. Kamil's brother Yusif was in yet more danger: he had been put on trial by the military tribunal convened in Aley to judge those Arabists charged with more serious crimes against the state. And Kamil's wife Salma had contracted typhus and was bed-ridden, hovering between life and death. Shortage stalked Beirut. Haifa, their daughter, could buy no flour in the markets. The government was forcing its subjects to convert their gold coinage into paper money that merchants refused to accept. Here again, a year's events were condensed into a single day. But to the Beiruti audience, these hardships of war no doubt would have merged together in memory as they had in the script.

The venality and cruelty of the Turks emerged as a dominant theme in Act Two. Health officials from the Red Crescent, insisting Kamil's wife be quarantined in hospital, only relented when offered a bribe. "Why didn't you speak to us in this language before?" they asked Fuad, Haifa's fiancé, who had assumed the role of head of household since Kamil's exile. Another team of officials arrived, demanding the women of the house undertake forced labour, sewing sacks for the government. A group of surveyors entered to advise the family that their house had been slated for demolition by the municipality to enable them to widen the street. They left a promissory note for the assessed value of the house – a fraction of its market value – payable only after the end of the war.

In a desperate effort to prevent the Ottoman officials from carrying out their nefarious plans, Fuad drew his pistol on the authorities, who promptly overpowered, arrested, and conscripted the young man into the Ottoman army. The second act ended with stretcher bearers carrying away the ailing Salma to be quarantined in a government hospital – effectively condemning the desperately sick woman to death, leaving her two children, Haifa and Jean, homeless and orphaned.

In the third act, the play moved from the interior of Kamil's prosperous home, overlooking the sea, to the open air of Beirut's central square, known since the 1908 Young Turk Revolution as *Sahat al-Ittihad,* or "Union Square." The year was 1916, and the events of Act Three would see the place renamed "Martyr's Square."

The act opened with two Arab officers in the Ottoman Army discussing the breakdown in order in Syria. Desperate women and children were besieging the bakeries in hunger. Theft was on the rise, and government officials proved the biggest thieves of all. As Arabs in

Ottoman service, the two men resented the privileges reserved for Turkish and German officers.

The corrupt Turks and Germans provided comic relief in a play with few light moments. A Lebanese street trader bought contraband from a pair of Germans who spoke pidgin Arabic interspersed with German words. When the hawker tried to pay for his goods with counterfeit paper money the Germans refused – until the hawker took out a better quality of faked banknotes to conclude the deal to everyone's satisfaction. Two street urchins, observing the transaction, managed to steal the hawker's goods from under his nose. A comic scuffle erupted between the man and the two boys which was resolved by an Ottoman *commissaire*, who expropriated all of the contraband for his own benefit.

Jean and Haifa entered dressed in rags, emaciated. They had endured a year of homelessness compounded by personal tragedy. "Our sorrow was complete after my father's exile, my uncle's imprisonment and the death of my mother," Haifa reflected. "They drove us from our house and gave us this valueless deed in compensation." But Haifa could not afford to dwell on the past. Jean was clearly starving. And she found herself warding off the unwanted attentions of a lusty Turkish sergeant, whose offers of money she declined. "Take it for my sake," Jean pleads. "I'm hungry." Tension mounted, with the sergeant seizing Haifa, the virtuous young woman repelling her assailant and Jean screaming in hunger in the background. The crisis was only resolved when the approach of an Ottoman officer forced the sergeant to relent.

As the sergeant withdrew, the poor of Beirut flooded the stage, telling horror stories of the famine afflicting their city and the broader countryside. One had been surviving on lemon

peel he gathered from refuse heaps. Another told of women arrested by the authorities for slaughtering and eating their own children. But the worst was yet to come. The army began to clear Union Square of all the homeless in advance of the entry of the men convicted by the military tribunal in Aley.

An Arab policeman, dreading the task at hand, cracked under the bystanders' relentless questioning.

"Is it true that they are bringing [the Aley convicts] here tonight?"

"Yes," the policeman confirmed, tears in his eyes. "Young and old, the finest intellects, the very spirit of the people. They will all be hanged here from these gallows." He urged the crowd to withdraw to avoid witnessing the horror.

Predictably, the crowds gathered rather than dispersed. Many, uncertain of the fate that awaited the condemned men, hoped to catch a glimpse of their loved ones. An old man and his granddaughter appeared, looking for his son, her father. The policeman, trying to drive the old man back, asked him what business he had with the condemned. Speaking in code, the *shaykh* claimed he had "lost a ewe and feared the butcher might cut her throat."

"There are many lost ewes," the policeman replied in sympathy, "so take a last look for yours, for there will be no saving her."

Sure enough, the girl saw her father making his way towards the gallows. The old man called out to his son, but the condemned man could not hear his loved ones. They watched in horror as he ascended the scaffold and the guards placed the noose around his neck.

Haifa and Jean joined the crowd and saw their uncle Yusif, convicted for his activities with the Beirut Reform Society, among the condemned. As they took in the full horror of the scene, the voices of the martyrs reached the audience from offstage. "The independence of Syria will be built on the skulls of her heroes," they shouted, defiant in the face of death. Their voices were silenced by the hangman's noose. "The sons of the Syrian nations are hanged by the Unionist gang," the Arab policeman concluded (members of the Committee of Union and Progress, the official party of the Young Turk regime, were commonly referred to as Unionists). The curtain fell on the bereaved families singing nationalist songs in honour of the fallen heroes of Martyr's Square.

The last act opened in the pre-dawn gloom – the final hours of despair before the hope of sunrise. It was 1918. Jean and Haifa were among the homeless sleeping in Martyr's Square. Two watchmen discussed the war. The Allies were in Nablus, the Ottomans in retreat. The end was in sight.

As dawn broke, a priest and a Sunni Muslim cleric arrived hand in hand with a few loaves of bread to distribute to the starving poor. They noted how the Turks had failed to divide the people along religious lines. Muslims and Christians had been drawn together through suffering that did not distinguish along sectarian lines. "Pray to God to end this war," the priest began, "and deliver us from this despotic rule," the Sunni shaykh concluded. They woke the sleepers to offer them pieces of bread until their meagre supplies were depleted. Haifa left her brother in the square, and Jean, claiming death was near, curled up to sleep until his sister's return.

Under an ominous overcast sky lit by lightning flashes, Haifa and Jean's father Kamil returned from exile. He was a broken man, dressed in rags and leaning heavily on a walking stick. He returned to find his home demolished and his family dispersed, and he had heard ominous reports about his brother's fate after the hangings in Martyr's Square. Looking over the homeless masses in the square, he marvelled at how the once beautiful city of Beirut had been reduced to such misery.

Kamil came across a young man lying inert on the ground and recognized his son. Yet nothing he said could stir Jean, who had succumbed to starvation before his father's return. Haifa entered at that moment to find her father clutching her brother's body. Yet even in this moment of pathos the state would not leave a family to mourn in peace. A Turkish policeman appeared and insisted on taking Jean's body from his family for examination, suspecting Kamil of having killed the young man. "He died of hunger, sir," Kamil explained. "No, he did not die of hunger," the policeman retorted indignantly. "The government would not permit someone to die of hunger." The bitter irony of the policeman's denial would not have been lost on the audience.

Yet a new day had dawned. A telegraph operator revealed that Allied forces had entered Damascus and the Ottomans were in full retreat. Suddenly, the streets filled with Turkish and German officers, suitcases in hand. Their speech was an execrable mix of pidgin Arabic, German and Turkish. As officials in their fine uniforms crossed the stage to catch their train northwards to Turkey, a crier read an announcement drafted by the Governor of Beirut declaring the end of the Ottoman rule in Syria. The people rejoiced at their deliverance from war and Turkish misrule, the priest and shaykh's prayers fulfilled.

Reports of Allied troops entering Beirut were confirmed as the strains of the *Marseillaise* and *God Save the King* were heard offstage. The Lebanese crowd – and here one imagines the actors inviting the audience onstage in a performative capacity as the crowd – parted to make way for ranks of French and British soldiers entering their city in triumph. "Long live the Allies," the crowd shouted. "Long live France!"

As the Allied troops began to thin, one Arab volunteer emerged from their ranks. It was Fuad, Haifa's fiancé, who had deserted Ottoman service to volunteer with the Allies in the liberation of his homeland. He sang a sad song of searching for his beloved among the ruins of her home and the deserted streets of Beirut. At that moment, Haifa and her father returned from their sad mission to recover Jean's body for burial. As they drew near the soldier, they recognized Fuad. The hardships of the past four years dissolved in the joy of their reunion. The play ended with Fuad clasping the French tricolour to his chest, the *Marseillaise* swelling in the background. Curtains.

Fact Checking

However melodramatic the play strikes us today, it was largely accurate in its historic detail. It had to be: the Beiruti audience, having recently survived the horrors of the war, would not have tolerated fabrication. The power of the play when performed in 1919 lay in the way it connected with the audience's recent lived experience. As such, *Beirut on the Stage* provides valuable insights, documenting public perceptions of the position of the Arab lands before, during and after the Ottoman Great War.

The immediate background to the play's events addresses the rise of Arabism in Beirut. The Beirut Reform Society, which Kamil's brother Yusif had joined before the war, was one of several Arab proto-national movements in Ottoman lands. Not yet nationalist, these 'Arabist' societies called for greater Arab cultural and political rights within the framework of the Ottoman Empire. Organisations like the Beirut Reform Society, the Basra Reform Society and the National Scientific Club in Baghdad met openly with the full knowledge of the Ottoman authorities in the pre-war years – and came under the full scrutiny of Ottoman state security.[9]

One of the most influential Arabist societies was established beyond the reach of Ottoman censors and police. In 1909, a group of Syrian emigres in Paris established the Young Arab Society (*Jam`iyyat al-`Arabiyya al-Fatat*), whose name was appropriated by one of the two theatre companies that performed *Beirut on the Stage*. Al-Fatat sought Arab equality within the framework of an Ottoman Empire reconceived as a bi-national Turco-Arab state, on the model of the Austro-Hungarian Habsburg Empire. As Tawfiq Natur, one of the founders of the party recalled: "All that we, as Arabs, wanted was to have the same rights and obligations in the Ottoman Empire as the Turks themselves and to have the Empire composed of two great nationalities, Turk and Arab."[10]

The Unionists viewed the proliferation of Arabist societies with mounting concern. At the height of the Balkan Wars in 1912-1913, the Young Turks were in no mood to compromise with Arab demands for decentralization or dual monarchies. When, in February 1913, the

[9] On the origins, aims and membership of these and other pre-war Arabist societies, see George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938), pp. 101-25; and Eliezer Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements* (London: Frank Cass, 1993).
[10] Quoted in Zeine N. Zeine, *The Emergence of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Caravan Books, 3rd ed 1973), p. 84.

Beirut Reform Society published a manifesto calling for administrative decentralization, the Ottoman authorities clamped down. On 8 April 1913, police closed the offices of the Beirut Reform Society and ordered the organization to disband. The influential members of the Society called for a city-wide strike and organized petitions to the Grand Vizier protesting the closure. Several Society members were arrested for agitation. Beirut entered a period of intense political crisis that lasted one week until the prisoners were released and the strike brought to an end. But the Beirut Reform Society never re-opened its doors, and its members were forced to meet in secret as Arabism went underground.[11]

Faced with mounting government repression, Arabism moved beyond Ottoman frontiers. Members of al-Fatat decided to convene a meeting in Paris to enjoy the freedom to discuss politics without fear of Ottoman reprisal and to raise international support for their demands. Invitations were dispatched to Arabist societies in the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, Europe and the Americas. Despite the best efforts of the Ottoman ambassador in France to force the closure of the meeting, twenty-three delegates – eleven Muslims, eleven Christians and one Jew – arrived in Paris to take part in the First Arab Congress, which opened before an audience of 150 observers on 18 June 1913. The fact that Kamil returned from a long absence in Paris at the start of the play, with a letter for the head of the Beirut Reform Society, invoked the Arabist politics of the immediate pre-war period. And as the Beiruti audience would have known in 1919, those involved in the Arab Congress returned from Paris as marked men. At least three of the delegates met their deaths at the gallows in 1916.[12]

[11] Eliezer Tauber, *The Arab Movements in World War I*, (London: Frank Cass, 1993) pp. 1-9.
[12] Tawfiq al-Suwaydi, *My Memoirs: Half a Century of the History of Iraq and the Arab Cause* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2013), pp. 63-70 check.

The sequence of events leading to the executions in Union Square as recounted in the play correspond to the historical record. In the autumn months of 1914, as diplomats of the Entente Powers prepared to leave the Ottoman Empire in advance of its predicted adherence to the Central Alliance, the British and French consulates and embassies entrusted their documents to the United States missions for safe-keeping. The U.S. was a neutral power (until April 1917) and, representing Entente interests in Ottoman domains, agreed to put British and French documents under American seal for the duration of the war. After the Ottoman entry into the war in November 1914, however, the Turkish authorities seized the papers of the British and French consulates in violation of American diplomatic rights. The consular papers in Beirut contained extensive correspondence between French diplomats and Arabists from proscribed organizations seeking French support for their cause. With this compromising material in Ottoman hands, no Arab activist was safe from government reprisal. This was the ominous news that Fuad learned early in the First Act as he aborted his mission to deliver yet another compromising letter to the head of the banned reform society.

The Governor General in Syria, Cemal Pasha, waited several months before acting on the intelligence gleaned from the French papers. He hoped to mobilize popular support for the war effort in Syria, and to launch an attack on the British in Egypt. It was only after the failure of the first Ottoman assault on the Suez Canal in February 1915 that Cemal began his clampdown on Arab activists in Syria and Lebanon. Men implicated in the French correspondence were arrested and placed on trial by a military tribunal convened in the Lebanese mountain village of Aley. After months of closed hearings, the court announced its findings in April 1916. Dozens of the defendants were convicted for "treasonable participation in activities of which the aims were to separate Syria, Palestine and Iraq from

the Ottoman Sultanate and to constitute them into an independent State."[13] The Ottoman authorities supported their harsh sentences by publishing the evidence seized from the French consulate in Turkish, Arabic and French editions.[14]

While everyone knew that treason carried the death penalty, few believed the government would actually execute the sentences. Many of those convicted came from prominent families and had held high office as members of the Ottoman Parliament and Senate. It seemed unthinkable that the government would hang such notable citizens like common criminals. Hence the shock when, on 6 May 1916, twenty-two men were hanged with no advance warning in the main squares of Beirut and Damascus. The depiction of the hangings in the play conforms to Turkish and Arabic eyewitness accounts. The Turkish journalist Falih Rifki witnessed the hangings in Beirut: "Most of those hanged in Beirut were young nationalists," he recalled sympathetically. "They went from their cells to the noose with their heads held high, singing the Arab hymn." Dr Ahmad Qadri, a Syrian member of al-Fatat who was twice arrested and released by the Ottoman authorities for suspected Arabist activities, recorded the heroic last words of many of those executed in Beirut.[15] Many in the audience would have shared with Haifa and Jean the horror of losing an acquaintance in Martyr's Square. No doubt the actors repeated the same nationalist anthems that the condemned men had sung before meeting their deaths at the gallows. Such songs would have moved the audience to tears – and to sing along with the actors on stage.

[13] Antonius, *Arab Awakening*, p. 190.
[14] The French edition was published under the title *La Verité sur la question syrienne* (Istanbul: Tanine, 1916).
[15] Falih Rifki Atay, *Le Mont des Oliviers: L'empire Ottoman et le Moyen-Orient* [The Mount of Olives: The Ottoman Empire and the Middle East], (Paris: Turquoise, 2009), pp. 73-79. Ahmad Qadri, *Mudhakkirati `an al-thawra al-`arabiyya al-kubra* [My Memoirs on the Great Arab Revolt] (Damascus: Ibn Zaydun, 1956), pp. 55-56.

Only a fraction of those deemed a serious threat to the Ottoman state were actually executed. Thousands more were uprooted from their homes in the Arab provinces and exiled to Turkish Anatolia with no due process. Cemal Pasha took much of the credit for this policy. "There are people I have personally exiled everywhere," he once boasted to his aide, the Turkish journalist Falih Rifki.[16] The primary targets were men suspected of Arabist leanings and Arab Christians whose churches had enjoyed Russian (the Armenian and Orthodox churches) or French (the Latin, Catholic or Uniate churches) protection. Exile was an effective means to neutralize the threat an individual posed to the state by disconnecting him from dangerous associates. Men in exile were forced to live off their personal resources and, when these were depleted, left them totally dependent on the Ottoman government. It was also a way to impose indirect pressure on their friends and family, who went to great lengths to demonstrate loyalty to the government to help secure the return of their exiled loved ones. The Ottoman authorities exiled an estimated 50,000 men in the course of the war.[17] Kamil's experiences of sudden arbitrary exile and deprivation would thus have been a common experience for Murad's Beirut audience.

The general suffering of civilians captured in the play would have been shared by everyone in Murad's audience in 1919. All would have remembered the dread they felt when the government announced *Seferberlik*, or general conscription, in the summer of 1914. In time, the word *Seferberlik* came to represent the totality of civilian wartime suffering.[18] This included the forced labour imposed on civilians, captured in the play by the demands to produce sacks for the military, and the introduction of worthless paper money and

[16] Rifki Atay, *Mont des Oliviers*, pp. 29-30.
[17] Tauber, *Arab Movements*, p. 38.
[18] Najwa al-Qattan, "Safarbarlik: Ottoman Syria and the Great War," in Thomas Philipp and Christoph Schumann, eds., *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon* (Beirut: Orient-Institut, 2004), 163-174.

government promissory notes in return for requisitioned goods. The mass movement of people – soldiers, refugees and exiles – gave rise to ideal conditions for the spread of contagious diseases, and civilians suffered from extensive outbreaks of typhoid, typhus and cholera in the course of the war. Those like Salma who were taken into Ottoman hospitals often met their deaths through lack of medicine and poor sanitation.[19]

Yet famine proved the greatest horror of the war. The combination of the government's requisitioning of food crops to feed their army and a devastating locust plague in 1915 gave rise to unprecedented shortage. The lack of bread and flour that Haifa described in Act 2 had become a general crisis across Greater Syria. "I haven't seen darker days in my life," Ihsan Turjman, a native of Jerusalem, recorded in his diary in December 1915. "Flour and bread have basically disappeared since last Saturday. Many people have not eaten bread for days now." He described crowds of men, women and children jostling for flour near the Damascus Gate. As their numbers swelled, the mob broke into fights. "We have so far tolerated living without rice, sugar, and kerosene. But how can we live without bread?"[20]

As soon became apparent to all, without bread civilians died. In 1916, hunger turned to famine. One Syrian contemporary who travelled through Syria and Lebanon in April 1916 encountered survivors who had fled dying villages in search of food. He found the skeletons of victims along the roadside, unburied where they had fallen. He quoted a disillusioned Arab officer in the Ottoman Army in Damascus who accused the government of deliberately

[19] On civilian suffering in WWI, see Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). On wartime epidemics, see Hikmet Ozdemir, *The Ottoman Army, 1914-1918: Disease and Death on the Battlefield* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008).
[20] Salim Tamari, *Year of the Locust: A Soldier's Diary and the Erasure of Palestine's Ottoman Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 142-43.

provoking famine. "They put the sword to the neck of the Armenians, as they intend to annihilate the Lebanese by starvation, so that they never trouble their Turkish masters again."[21] These views grew increasingly prevalent in the final years of the war, as the death toll mounted to between 300,000 and 500,000 in Beirut and Mount Lebanon.[22] Murad's audience would have been outraged by the Ottoman policeman's claim that Jean had not died of starvation for "the government would not permit someone to die of hunger."

The one liberty Murad seems to have taken with the historic record was his implication of French forces in the liberation of Beirut. The first troops to arrive in Beirut on 8 October would have been the British and Dominion soldiers from Allenby's army. One letter written by a Gurkha to his family back in India gives a poignant description of Beirut in October 1918.

> The town is nice and it must have been nicer still before the war. Nowadays the people are suffering on account of scarcity. […] Small children are left in the streets quite hungry. […] O God! Let there be peace soon and then these people will be saved from starvation! I pity them much. If a piece of chapatti or a biscuit is thrown out, men, women, boys and girls run and scramble for it in a way that I can't describe; but their dress is finer than any that I have ever worn in the whole of my life.[23]

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[21] Q.B. Khuwayri, *al-Rihla al-suriyya fi'l-harb al-`umumiyya 1916* [The Syrian journey during the Great War, 1916] (Cairo: al-Matba`a al-Yusufiyya, 1921), pp. 34-35.

[22] George Antonius claimed between 300,000 – 350,000 died from famine; *Arab Awakening*, p. 245. Contemporary German accounts suggest the number of deaths from famine might have reached 500,000 by 1918; Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, "The Famine of 1915-1918 in Greater Syria," in John Spagnolo, ed, *Problems of the Modern Middle East in Historical Perspective* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1992), pp. 229-58.

[23] The letter from the anonymous Gurkha is preserved in a volume of translated letters from the British military censors preserved in the Cambridge University Library, D.C. Phillott papers, MS.Add.6170, letter dated 18 October 1918.

The Beirut described by the Gurkha would have been tragically familiar to the audiences attending "Beirut on the Stage" one year later. Yet they would have noted the anomaly of French soldiers liberating Beirut in 1918, with Fuad clutching a French rather than a British flag and singing the *Marseillaise*. The first French forces arrived two days after the liberation of Beirut, on 10 October.[24] Admittedly, the *Marseillaise* was popular with Lebanese audiences, and had come to represent a revolutionary tradition celebrated in earlier Lebanese plays.[25] Beyond an established appreciation of the *Marseillaise*, their acceptance of such dramatic license perhaps reflected the political worldview of both George Murad and his target audience in the turbulent year of 1919.

For Lebanon, With France

It is worth pausing to consider the transformed political landscape of Lebanon when "Beirut on the Stage" was performed in 1919. No longer part of the Ottoman Empire after over four centuries under Istanbul's rule, Beirut and Mount Lebanon were under Allied occupation. The first flag to fly over post-Ottoman Beirut's municipality was the Sharifian banner of Britain's wartime ally, the Hashemite Amir Faisal bin Husayn. From his base in Damascus, Faisal sought to extend his control over Greater Syria, including Lebanon, and his partisans raised the Arab flag over the Beirut Saray on 6 October, before the first British troops reached the city. However, France had already staked its claim to Beirut and Mount Lebanon (along with the rest of Syria) in the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement with Britain, and demanded

[24] Samir Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), pp. 296-97.
[25] "In the last decades of the nineteenth century 'The Marseillaise,' probably the strongest signifier of the French Revolution, had been appropriated and adapted to the local stage (at least its tune was)." Khuri-Makdisi, *Global Radicalism*, p. 80

the striking of the Arab flag until Lebanon's final status had been agreed in the Paris Peace Conference.

The Lebanese were themselves divided in their political aspirations. Arab nationalists, who advocated either one Arab super-state or a federation of smaller Arab states based around Mesopotamia, Greater Syria and the Hijaz, supported the Hashemite cause and sent representatives to Damascus to take part in the Syrian General Congress, which convened in Damascus in June 1919. Maronite Christians resisted Hashemite rule and sought a greater Lebanese state, combining Mount Lebanon, the coastal cities of Tyre, Sidon, Beirut and Tripoli, and the Bekaa Valley. Struggling against the dominant Arab nationalist current, the Lebanese nationalists knew they needed a great power patron to realize their ambitions, and turned to their traditional protector, France. The Administrative Council of Mount Lebanon sent a five-man delegation to present their aspirations to the Paris Peace Conference in February, 1919: "A Lebanon free to pursue its national destiny and re-established in its natural frontiers" with French support and guarantees of Lebanon's independence.[26] It is clear from the published edition of his play that George Murad subscribed to this vision of Lebanese independence, and used the theatre to promote the "Libanist" political project.

Murad revealed his politics in choosing to dedicate his play to the "zealous nationalist Na`um Efendi Bakhus":

> I saw you during the four years of the war fighting for the national good and bandaging the wounds of the afflicted!!

[26] The text of the Administrative Council's presentation to the Paris Peace Conference is reproduced in George Samné, *La Syrie* (Paris: Editions Bossard, 1920), pp. 231-32.

I saw you in those painful days defy danger of death to travel under cover of darkness to Arwad Island!!

I saw you as the unique connection between the French government and the Lebanese people!!

I saw you as mighty in your struggle while others showed interest only in themselves and paid attention only to the gratification of their desires!!

It was inevitable that I dedicate this play to you in recognition of your works and your faithfulness and dedication to the cause of Lebanon

Arwad, the island off the Syrian coastline opposite the port of Tartus, came under French naval occupation in September 1915 and served as the base of French intelligence operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Once can deduce from Murad's dedication that Na`um Bakhus had served as liaison between the Lebanese and the French during wartime – for which, had he been caught, he would certainly have been executed as a spy by the Ottomans. But it is Murad's final line, celebrating Bakhus's "faithfulness and dedication to the cause of Lebanon," rather than that of Syria or the Arabs more broadly, that confirmed their shared Libanist agenda.

After the war, Na`um Bakhus made common cause with Maronite luminaries such as Emile Edde, Michel Chiha, Bishara al-Khoury and Alfred Naccache, founding the Parti du Progrès, "for Lebanon, with France."[27] These activists were leading figures in the politics and culture of post-Ottoman Lebanon, founding magazines and newspapers to spread their views. One such organ was the *Revue Phénicienne*, founded and edited by Charles Corm, with support from Chiha, al-Khoury and Naccache, among many others. In its four issues, published

[27] Fadia Kiwan, "La Perception Maronite du Grand-Liban," in Dana Haffar-Mills and Nadim Shehadi, eds, *Lebanon: A History of Conflict and Consensus* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), p. 130.

between July and December 1919, the magazine set out a clear agenda critical of Hashemite aspirations in Syria, and calling for total Lebanese independence under French assistance. Corm set out his views in an editorial in the first issue: "We have neither an army nor a navy nor cannons, artillery or machineguns, but we have our unshakable confidence in France. She is our only arm, our only defence. She has never abandoned us. Pray God she never does."[28]

Corm was no less emphatic in his objection to Hashemite claims to Syria and Lebanon. His magazine openly called for "national defence against the Arab invasion" of the Faisali state in Damascus and warned against "Hijazi machinations" to seize Lebanon after the Ottoman retreat. "The Lebanese and the Syrians are not Arabs," he asserted. "The Hijaz, which draws them into the farce of a so-called Syrian Congress in Damascus, is only promoting pan-Arabism." Corm denounced the repeated references to the "Arab awakening, Arab honour, Arab civilisation, the Arab circle, the Arab flag…. What remains of Syria in all of this Arab invasion?" Corm had no objection to the creation of an Arab state – in Arabia, but not in Syria and not in Lebanon.[29]

Though published in French, rather than in Arabic as Murad's play, the *Revue Phénicienne* reflected the same politics and world view as "Beirut on the Stage." The magazine ran one-act plays on nationalist and pro-French themes, research articles on politics and the economy, nationalist poetry, and essays on the recent experience of the war. One essay, making the case for reparation payments to Lebanon for Ottoman crimes, traced the same historic

[28] Charles Corm, "L'Ombre s'étend sur la montagne," [The shadow spreads across the Mountain], *Revue Phénicienne* 1 (July 1919), pp. 11-12.
[29] Editorial, *Revue Phénicienne* 3(September 1919), p. 129; Corm, "Méditations Nationalistes,"*Ibid.* pp. 177-78.

trajectory as "Beirut on the Stage," from the Ottoman seizure of the papers from the French consulate, to the arrests, exiles and executions of Lebanese that followed, and above all the terrible famine. "The extermination of the Lebanese by hunger was studied, planned and executed with a determination that only the Turkish soul, breathed on by the German spirit, was capable of delivering."[30] Far from wanting to put the painful memories of the war behind them, the Maronite Libanists were determined to remember, and to use their recent history to realise their nationalist ambitions: an independent Lebanon under French protection. George Murad could have expected an enthusiastic reception from both the writers and the readers of the *Revue Phénicienne*.

Conclusion

"Beirut on the Stage" was a highly political play. Drawing on a pre-war tradition of theatre as "a central organ in the formulation and dissemination" of political ideas, as "a press for the masses," the play was clearly staged as an act of political performance using recent history to frame a set of nationalist demands for the future.[31] Yet the play did more than mobilize the public to support the Libanist agenda. It clearly sought to give meaning to the terrible wartime suffering endured by the Lebanese people. If by war's end the Lebanese secured their independence, from both the Ottomans and the Hashemites, then their losses would not have been in vain.

The tragedy of the play, as of the Libanist project, was the confidence the Lebanese placed in France delivering their independence. Charles Corm gave early expression to his doubts in a

[30] Alfred Coury, "Le Martyre du Liban: Sanctions et réparations," *Revue Phénicienne* 4-5-6 (December 1919) pp. 230-32.
[31] Khuri-Makdisi, *Global Radicalism*, p. 62.

heavily censored essay in the *Revue Phénicienne*, in which he warned his readers against expecting France to be disinterested in its dealings with Syria and Lebanon. Corm urged the Lebanese to advance their own nationalist goals lest "the Westerners do them too much honour in colonising them."[32] It was a sharp line that the censors allowed into print, and it proved prescient.

By the time "Beirut on the Stage" reached the printers in May 1920, the Great Powers had agreed to award Lebanon to France as a League of Nations Mandate at the San Remo Conference in April 1920. As France began to prepare for its mandate over Lebanon, its military administrators started to impose their policies on the Administrative Council in Mount Lebanon. The politicians in Mount Lebanon began to question the wisdom of seeking French assistance in state-building. In July, a majority of the Administrative Council's members made a spectacular reversal in policy and sought an accommodation with King Faisal's threatened government in Syria. All were arrested by the French on the way to Damascus, and the French authorities in Beirut dissolved the Administrative Council. Later that same month, the French occupied Damascus and forced King Faisal and his provisional government into exile, as France completed its premeditated control over Syria and Lebanon. These developments, giving the lie to Libanism's fundamental premises (for Lebanon, with France), condemned both "Beirut on the Stage" and its author to a century of obscurity as bad theatre and failed politics.

[32] Corm, "Meditations Nationalistes," p. 178.