

Quietly Author(iz)ing Community:

Biography as an Autobiography of Syrian Women in Egypt¹

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In February 1937, "Some of the famous women in Syria" headed the "Famous Women" feature that opened each issue of *Young Woman of the East*, Cairo's longest-running women's journal. The essay named eight women linked by geography and a passion for learning, and separated by centuries and religious orientation. First came four Muslims: Zaynab al-Ghaziya, a medieval poet who "studied with her father and brother"; Zaynab bt. Makki, who "gathered so much knowledge that she was the pride of girls of her homeland in her time" (13th century); Zaynab Fawwaz (1850–1914), outspoken contributor to Egypt's 1890s press; and A'isha al-Maqdisiyya, (1297/28), famed transmitter of "hadith" (acts and words of the Prophet Muhammad, exemplary for every Muslim).

Then came four Christians of the 20th century's turn: Mariyana Marrash (1848–1919), writer, whose "learning did not distract her from domestic duty"; Anisa and Afifa Shartuni (1883–1906, 1886–1906), sister contributors to Arabic women's journals before their early deaths; and Soeur Maryam Jahshan (1855–?), who taught in Egypt in her own minority ethnic-religious community, "raising many girls at her own expense".²

Impeccably respectable in their allegiances and commitments, these women shared territorial origin. To assume that their senses of self were shaped importantly by territorial belonging would be to dehistoricize their lives. Yet, for early 20th-century Arab elites, territorial loyalty was growing in salience. In an era of nationalist ferment in Egypt, wherein gendered changes in the social array seemed at least discursively urgent, to celebrate achievement associated with females from this neighboring terrain was both apt and am-

1 This essay has its origin in my paper for the "3rd Conference on the Syrian Land: Bilad al-Sham: Processes of Identities and Ideologies", Institut für Politische Wissenschaft, Friedrich-Alexander Universität, Erlangen-Nürnberg, July 2000. I thank Professor Dr. Thomas Philipp and Dr. Christoph Schumann for inviting me and participants for comments.

2 "Shahirat al-nisa': Ba'd al-shahirat fi Suriya" (Famous Women: Some of the Famous Women in Syria), in: *Fatat al-sharq* (Young Woman of the East), 32, 5 (1937), 257–259. Most of these biographical sketches have no author's byline; this signals that they are by the editor, but I reproduce the references here as published without any attribution to a specific author.

biguous. Syria's daughters (and sons) were enriching the multiethnic cultural scene of Egypt's cities, a presence sometimes welcomed locally, often resented. The journal in which these "daughters" appeared was the creation of a Syrian woman resident in Egypt. *Young Woman of the East* (in Arabic, *Fatat al-sharq*) produced these short narratives of women so varied in era and experience as exemplary subjects for readers claiming linkage to the Syrian lands (wherever one lived: Damascus, Cairo, Sao Paolo, New York) yet also for a broader elite in Egypt, the publication's home address.³

How does this press articulate elite communal identities, specifically in the genre of short "great-woman" biographies?⁴ What can these texts tell us about the impact of identity rubrics on the time's print culture? Can they inform us on women's experiences of geographic origin and political subjecthood (as Ottoman subjects but residents of Egypt) as shaped by anti-imperialist nationalist discourses in which gender as a sign of difference – of promise and danger – was key? How does biography become autobiography, individual yet opening the individual to shared identities? Must it privilege an ideology of individualism or can it encourage collective identities and ties?

Drawing on the genre of exemplary biography that pervaded this women's press from the 1890s into the 1930s, I raise these questions for a Syrian minority in Egypt highly visible in the country's nascent print culture and disproportionately supplying the era's gender debates with female scriptors and editors. I then propose the writings of Zaynab Fawwaz as a distinct presence among the Syrians in Egypt's print culture, perhaps signaling religious identity and training as differently and significantly positioning these immigrants.⁵

Syrian women's interventions in Egypt's press suggest the articulation *and* submergence of origin-based identities in this time and place. Regarding such identities as fluid and internally conflicting in individual psyches, I ask how gender trumped or was muted by other nodes of social identity shaping female intellectuals' textual personae – hence significant to meanings a multi-origin female readership might elicit. Too, we must read between the lines for what is not said, a necessity reflecting the precarious situation of Syrian writers in Egypt. Biographical texts by and/or of resident Syrians express a condition both precarious and confident that marked Syrian elite presence – and voice – in Egypt. Perhaps both defensively and from a felt sense of belonging, missionary-educated and often multilingual Syrian Christians tended to emphasize their participation in and

3 See Bilad al-Sham, "the Syrian lands," comprise present-day Syria, Palestine/Israel, Lebanon, Jordan – provinces in the Ottoman Empire until after World War I. By the time of this essay, 1937 they were under European mandates.

4 Elsewhere I pose questions of identity in biography: Marilyn Booth, *Biography and Feminist Rhetoric in Early Twentieth-Century Egypt: Mayy Ziyada's Studies of Three Women's Lives*, in: *Journal of Women's History*, 3, 1 (1991), 38–64; the same, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: "Famous Women" Biography and Gendered Prescription in Egypt, 1892–1935*, in: *Signs*, 22, 4 (1997), 827–890; the same, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 2001; the same, "Amthila min al-bina' al-adabi li-hayat Malak Hifni Nasif" (Instances of the Literary Construction of Malak Hifni Nasif's Life), in: Hudā al-Sadda ed., *Min ra'idat al-qarn al-'ishrin* (Among Female Pioneers of the Twentieth Century), Cairo 2001, 61–71.

5 Fawwāz was a Shi'i rather than a Sunni Muslim, unlike most Egyptians. The space of one essay does not allow exploration of this.

identification with an Arab majority-Muslim culture, while *carefully* celebrating sub- and supra-national geo/ethnic identities in print. Paradoxically, women's magazine editors, proclaiming their journals to be "nonpolitical", gave print space to a politics of place. Quiet about the politics of separatist Egyptian nationalism (at least until 1919), through biography Syrians praised Egyptian, Turkish, and European women – and Syrian women to a far lesser extent – for their nationalist activisms.

Could women, more distant in daily life from immediate political confrontation, removed as individuals if not as family members from economic and discursive frictions, express cross-community identity with other women yet not alienate their origin-based or religion-defined community? Could they assert Syrian identity more readily than could men without incurring criticism from Egyptians?

Syrians in Egypt

From the late 19th century the presence of a minority Syrian community had seemed politically and economically vexing to many Egyptians. Syrian immigrants faced and partly generated a battery of sensitivities about loyalties, religious identities, and economic privileges. A visible minority despite sharing language and cultural heritage with native-born Egyptians, immigrants from the Levant arrived in waves cresting before the century's end, as repression, censorship, and economic hardship increased in the Ottoman Empire's eastern provinces. Egypt's imposed quiescence following Britain's 1882 occupation, and relative press freedom attracted enterprising Syrian journalists.

That many women's magazines published in Egypt from 1892 on were founded, run, and largely written by Syrian immigrants paralleled Egypt's mainstream press: Many of its early stalwarts had moved to Egypt from the Syrian lands then under Ottoman rule. Family relationships were key in providing facilities and encouragement to Syrian women such as Ruz Antun, Labiba Hashim, and Hind Nawfal as they founded magazines targeting female readers.⁶

Syrians' presence in Egypt is familiar historical ground, well-tended by historians.⁷ Yet in scholarship on early gender politics in modern Egypt, generalizations about the status of this minority population in Egypt, its range of identities, and its allegiances abound. The evident Westward gaze of some is invoked to claim a wholly westernizing orientation among elite Syrian immigrant *women* especially.⁸ Still unexplored are textual strategies by

6 See Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press*, New Haven 1994.

7 See Albert Hourani, "Syrians in Egypt in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries", in: *Colloque Internationale sur l'histoire du Caire*, Cairo 1969, 221–233; Nadia Farag, *Al-Muqtataf 1876–1900: A Study of the Influence of Victorian Thought on Modern Arabic Thought*, PhD diss. Oxon 1969; studies by Thomas Philipp listed below.

8 See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, New Haven/London 1992; Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Princeton 1995; Baron, *Women's Awakening*, see note 6; and note 18 below. Philipp's early discussion of the Syrian women's press is more nuanced: Thomas Philipp, "Feminism and Nationalist Politics in Egypt", in: Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie ed., *Women in the Muslim World*, Cambridge 1978, 277–294.

which Syrian female intellectuals might have worked through their positions in Egyptian society as able but ambiguously privileged commentators. Recognizing the impossibility of always distinguishing lineaments of intention that underlie "strategy", can we consider whether and how gender inflected self-identities in writing? If the early nongovernment Arabic press was disproportionately founded and maintained by Syrians in Egypt, then any study of that press confronts the question of what difference it might make to be Syrian. In identity circuits available to Arab elites then – emergent nationalisms and self-questioning about loyalty to the crumbling Ottoman Empire – how important was birthplace?

Was it significant that the essay noted above stressed shared geography, other links muted? That the title defined its subjects as "in Syria" seems curious – or a subtle admission of local sensitivities. Some were *min* (from) rather than *fi* (in) Syria. And it was uncommon to group profiled women by place. It's not that Syrian women were absent from the biography columns that women's magazines consistently featured, whether edited by Syrians or native Egyptians. But out of 600-some biographies in Egypt's women's press 1892–1940, the above essay is the sole instance of a profile organized around "Syria". In the late 1930s, Egyptian feminists were reaching beyond the nation's borders to Arab sisters elsewhere; perhaps the 1937 appearance of this textual group portrait, though in a Syrian-edited venue, gestured to an emerging supranational bond. By this time, "Syria" connoted not so much a geographical space as it named a country struggling with French control and moving toward sought independence, similar to Egypt in its history of confronting British imperial rule. To claim pre-20th-century women for "Syria", to do so in Egypt, was meaningfully anachronistic. If the late-19th-century subjects were of a period when geographic terminology might connote a proto-nationalist identity, to apply that term in the same breath to Arab women of the first through seventh Islamic centuries was to layer a modern definition of ethnic-national belonging over a historical awareness that this would have been a secondary, differently defined, possibly unarticulated identity for these heroines of the pre-modern Islamic *umma*, community through religious belonging that bridged geographic, linguistic, and even temporal boundaries.

If there is no firm evidence for a shared Syrian identity among immigrants to Egypt before the late 19th century, perhaps it was then that animosity from Egyptians began negatively to create a shared identity. By 1914, about 35,000 Syrians lived in Egypt.⁹ Thomas Philipp *has* noted internal differences among Egypt's Syrians in education, background, and outlook. He emphasizes "socioeconomic stratification" over "sectarian lines" in defining Syrians' responses to their adopted home. Among professionals and merchants, despite similar economic status "their different educational background and interests led to ... different relations toward Egyptian society and to different cultural and political attitudes".¹⁰ Even among Syrian journalists allegiances differed.

Yet, distinctions were not always made by native Egyptians. Philipp notes that although "only educated Syrians ... stood in the way of the Egyptian national intelligentsia ... national sentiment turned against all Syrians, whether intellectual or merchant and ... whether Christian or Muslim". There were economic motivations. As more Egyptians ob-

9 See Thomas Philipp, *Syrians in Egypt, 1725–1975*, Stuttgart 1985, 47, 98.

10 Philipp, *Syrians*, see note 9, 96.

tained access to formal education, Syrians holding jobs in the press or government incurred resentment. Often trained by missionaries, Syrians were sought for employment by the British-run administration, for European language skills and assumed sympathies. “[T]he Egyptian intelligentsia first saw the enemy of the nation in that section of society which was of greatest social and professional concern to themselves ... Professional competition with the Syrians soon acquired nationalist overtones.” Some Egyptian nationalists gestured rhetorically to solidarity with Syrians while disparaging the Syrian presence in Egypt.

Pro-British journalists were often Syrians.¹¹ But the Syrian-run press was neither homogeneously pro-British nor consistent over time. After World War I, many Syrians identified with Egyptian nationalism. To the extent that Syrian intellectuals prominent in periodical production were pro-West, it was often a question of cultural identification more than of strict political allegiances. Peripatetic Syrians often had closer ties to Europe, and their publications mirrored these familiarities.

Although in the late 19th century, as Philipp notes, “among them for the first time were a number of educated Muslim Syrians”¹², Christians (of various creeds) were disproportionately numerous among this immigrant population. Not surprisingly, for Egyptians newly asserting a sense of national leadership against an older ethnically Turkish ruling aristocracy, unease about Syrians was shaped strongly by religion.

As individuals, most women did not experience the friction occasioned by professional competition. Yet, as family members with community identities such sensitivities did affect them. To what extent did elite women of the Syrian minority in Egypt experience communal bonds based on place of provenance? Did being in Egypt enhance a sense of Syrianness and encourage Syrian nationalism?

Biography and Geographic Spaces

Young Woman of the East bore a title befitting its founding year, 1906: It partook of the heyday of enthusiasm for the rubric *al-Sharq* (The East) and its attributive adjective, *Sharqiyya* (Easterner [m/f]). *The East* signaled a usefully vague, potentially inclusive political and cultural identity that Arab intellectuals often celebrated as spiritually if not materially advanced (ironically, given Western Orientalist stereotypes of “Eastern” societies). Yet, even materially and in terms of global politics, “the East” was also a discursive vessel for optimism; writers repeatedly invoked Japan as success story and model. Japan’s 1905 victory over Russia fueled enthusiasm. *The East* was ascendant. The “Eastern woman” had to be ready.

Young Woman of the East’s 1908 profile of writer Afifa Karam (1883–1924) relied on this trope. Karam, a mere 25 years old, had moved to New York. Hers was an exemplary tale in process:

11 See Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900–1930*, New York 1986, 15–16.

12 Philipp, *Syrians*, see note 9, 105.

We are hopeful for her future achievements, and envision her as the best possible example for daughters of the East to follow, ... a guiding light to knowledge's paths, by which daughters of the East will be freed of fantasy's shackles ... to realize that they were created for something better than serving the beauty of the face, and that their time is too precious to spend before a mirror.¹³

Throughout the early women's press, "the East" sounded as a collective social geography. To criticize "the East" or "Eastern women" was vague enough to placate local sensitivities yet specific enough to raise urgent issues for targeted readerships. For Syrians in Egypt, *Sharqi* was a politically smart, socially comfortable, intellectually broad rubric, an alternative to the more colloquial *Shami* often used pejoratively by Egyptians.

Young Woman of the East's founder-editor, Labiba Hashim (1880–1947), reached out determinedly beyond her own immediate territorial and religious communities while signaling collective identity and regional pride. Biographies of individual "Famous Women" in volume I (1906–07) featured contemporaries – Syrian Muslim Zaynab Fawwaz and Syrian Christians Maryam Makariyus (1888) and Emily Sursuq; Muslim Egyptian poet A'isha Taymur (1840–1902); Muslim Turkish writer Fatma Aliye (1862–1936). All were preceded by a famous Arab Muslim "grandmother", Ikrisha bt. Al-Atrash of Islam's first century, publicly urging troops on at the famous battle of Siffin (657). The volume ended with a life of early Muslim poet Aliya bt. al-Mahdi (776/7–825) – thus beginning and ending with (broadly) "local" models. Issue seven profiled European traveler Olga de Lebedef, justifying this departure by her recent visit to Egypt. Only in the journal's third year did it begin to profile European women regularly – while featuring Arabs and other Muslims just as often.

Despite claims that westward orientation characterized Syrian women writers of this time, from the start Arab and Muslim women were present in force as biographical subjects in all Syrian-founded women's journals. For example, in 1916 Syrian poet Warda al-Yaziji (1838–1924, of a prominent Christian intellectual family) used *Young Woman of the East's* "Famous Women"-column to warn a younger generation that they must be simultaneously good mothers and culturally productive members of society. Muslim Arab poets of Spain were the exemplars al-Yaziji offered. Speaking of and to contemporary (elite) Arab women, she said, "I hope this era's literary women can hear those women ... then can they awaken and become active in reforming our situation as women, for this is incumbent upon them. God is the guide to the Way forward."¹⁴

Biography, a consistently measurable presence, suggests a complicated politics of identification. Even when Western women outnumbered Arab and/or Muslims profiled, biography's rhetoric brought ambiguity back in.¹⁵ Syrian Christian editors emphasized shared regional or "Arab" interests. "Young Woman of the East" celebrated Arab Muslim women as exemplars for Arabs while adding Turkish (fellow Ottoman) Muslims but not

13 "Shahirat al-Nisa': al-Sayyida 'Afifa Karam" (Famous Women: Madam Afifa Karam), in: *Fatat*, see note 2, 2, 4 (1908), 121–229.

14 Warda al-Yaziji, "Shahirat al-nisa" (Famous Women), in: *Fatat*, see note 2, 10, 6 (1916), 201–206.

15 In *The Young Woman*, 12 of 15 profiles featured Western women; in "Sociable Companion's" 1898 volume, 6 of 6.

other non-Arab Muslims. It included Western women but privileged Arabs and Muslims numerically. In fact, before 1919 the Egyptian Coptic-run *Gentle Sex* featured a higher percentage of Westerners than did any Syrian-run journal.

It may be that Syrian editors featured so many Arab Muslims partly to offset their outsider status and, as time went on, to prove local nationalist credentials. If they were drawn to the West by education, travel, and religious ties, these women were careful to emphasize shared aspects of heritage and outlook that linked them to Egyptians and other Arabs, and – most were Christians – to Muslims. Egyptian-run women's magazines, emerging a decade or two later, divided their biographical columns among Arab and other Muslims and Europeans, while occasionally featuring Arab Christians (Egyptian Copts, Syrian Orthodox, Catholics, Protestant converts).

As Egyptian magazines emerged, Syrian women were not absent from them. Significantly, they were more often *in* Syria rather than immigrants to Egypt, Muslim more often than Christian. For example, in 1927, Egyptian Muslim Labiba Ahmad's (1875–1955) *Magazine of the Women's Awakening* featured Syrian Muslim activist (in Syria) Nâzik al-'Abid, lauding not only her refusal to worry about being branded eccentric for closeting herself to read “all she could find”, but also her work for Syrian independence and Syrian women's suffrage.¹⁶ When the journal featured an expatriate Syrian in Egypt, it stressed benefit to the Egyptian nation. Publishing a portrait of Ruz Antun Haddad (a Syrian magazine publisher in Egypt), Ahmad praised her for *local* work “in the service of the Egyptian woman long ago. We do not forget her excellence or her magazine's, in literature, child-rearing, and education. May God multiply working women and take the hand of awakening ones”.¹⁷

Exemplary biographies of “Famous Women” constituted not only an entertaining feature, not only a proto-feminist marshalling of inspiring grandmothers, but also a prescriptive discourse for young women. From the turn of the 20th century, a growing number of elite daughters were entering newly formed government schools as well as missionary and sectarian schools. They constituted a new sector of the Arab reading public whom editors of women's magazines explicitly addressed and worried about: What should young (by definition impressionable) girls read? How and what were they to be taught? Might introduction to other cultures and languages infect their national loyalties and “pure” cultural roots? How were editors to motivate girls toward sober educations and appropriate careers without “endangering” their duties to home and nation? Last but surely not least, what features would appeal to school funders both governmental and private, who might buy multiple subscriptions for the schools?

Biographies offered explicit though often ambiguously consequential maps of a modern female destiny incorporating learning, social activism, possibly waged employment, and most of all careful domesticity, buttressing an elite nationalist program that envisioned companionate marriage and the rationally trained teamwork of the nuclear

16 See Muhammad 'Abd al-Fattah Ibrahim, “‘Azimat al-nisa' fi al-'alamayn al-sharqi wa'l-gharbi qadiman wa-hadithan 5: Nazik 'Abid” (Great Women in the Eastern and Western Worlds, no. 5: Nazik Abid), in: *Majallat al-nahda al-nisa'iyya* (Magazine of the Women's Awakening), 5, 53 (1927), 166–168.

17 *Majallat*, see note 16, 2, 12 (1923), 329.

family as basic to a vigorous independent nation (Egypt, and then, by implication, Arab territories under imperial control). These biographical sketches, across different journals and over time, were part of an elite local discursive formation involved in construction of a new nation, and dependent on translations and migrations from Euro/American societies. Biography helped to construct a classed and gendered identity for daughters of a rising bourgeoisie. Anti-aristocratic in focusing on individual work and merit, on sober education and thrift, biographies tended to presume a level of material ease in tacit assumptions about household organization and size, presence of servants, availability of a range of food and clothing and the possibility of lifestyle choice, and the likelihood of formal education for boys and girls. These assumptions, visible in both the choice of biographical subject and her textual treatment, carried across societies, as magazines offered biographies set not only in Arab societies but also in India, Europe, the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, China, and North America. Subjects of biography were of materially middle-class or wealthy provenance, or were said to show aspirations and hard work to that end. Pre-modern subjects came from or attained elite social status in their respective milieus. Anachronistically, pre-modern women were delineated through categories defining modernity for colonized elites: a separable domestic sphere and child raising as a trainable skill (both linked to if not fully defined by Egypt's entry into international capitalist structures); ultimate loyalty to the concept and reality of a nation-state; consciousness of subjectivity and identities as partly changeable and chosen paths.

Individualization might mean seeing oneself as part of overlapping communities. If being modern meant awareness of being able to define personal identity along a continuum of community and self-identity, biography was a perfect vehicle to shape readers into modern national subjects who embraced a notion of nation as community yet saw themselves as a class at the forefront of a modern state formation where they would represent the rest. The interface of (quasi-colonial) modernity and subject formation of readers of (a growing) elite compels recognition that "Famous Women" biographies were all about class, if subtly so.

Biography in its vital specificity conveyed a sense of personal linkage, encouraged empathy about other women's lives, offered down-to-earth detail that might remind readers how difficult it is to prevail over gender-specific barriers while offering the sanguine reminder that women *had* surmounted them – from Euro/American settler Margaret Brent to Syrian nurse Theodora Haddad.¹⁸

The paradox of biography constructed upon famous bodies – that the exceptional is to be read as exemplary, therefore repeatable in the reader – operates rhetorically here by commending the communal impact of individual subjects' acts and gesturing to their role-model potential in the context of the text's first reception.¹⁹ Within this pedagogical project, how was the reader to elicit "community"? Focusing on individual voices within a textual field ("the women's press") that has mostly been studied en masse releases it as a space of multiple identities where gender is one but not the only defining axis. If a periodical – even if produced by one person – is almost always a multivocal space, then a

18 See Booth, *Biography*, see note 3, chap. 2–3.

19 See Booth, *Biography*, see note 3, chap. 2–3.

set of periodicals defined by reader/writer/topic focus surely speaks with many, often contradictory, voices; various interests are articulated – and concealed – in the term “women’s press”.²⁰

Syrian Journeys

Syrian-run journals featured lives of Syrians, but they were a minority among Arab women who were given biographical space. They tell a story, though, of Syrians as traveling – perhaps hybrid – subjects. They follow women, often on their own, into a diaspora that would have had autobiographical echoes for some readers. North and South America, Egypt, Europe: Syrians worked and formed community across continents. Of 36 lives of 29 Syrian women, 1893–1937, twelve spent time in Egypt but had been born in Syria or in diaspora to Syrian parents. Zaynab Fawwaz moved from south Lebanon to Cairo and Alexandria; Theodora Haddad arrived in Alexandria at her brother’s invitation in 1886 and “lived with him for a stretch of time in which she arranged his house, put his state in order, and adorned his rooms with her handwork”; Alexandra Avierino came to Alexandria aged of ten, “guided on her path by the light of intelligence”; renowned poet Warda al-Yaziji educated in Beirut’s first girls’ school, moved late in life to Alexandria to live with her physician son.²¹ Singer Mary Jubran, born in Beirut, became famous in Egypt, Turkey, and Europe, and worked at Cairo’s Le Bosphore. Virginie Basili directed a Syrian Orthodox girls’ school in Alexandria, having “given up the pleasures and pursuits of the wealthy to serve the girls of her kind”. Mary Ajami founded a women’s magazine in Damascus after heading a Coptic girls’ school in Alexandria. The formidable Betsy Taqla, born in Beirut and partly raised in an uncle’s household in Manchester, England, ran Egypt’s leading newspaper when its editor-in-chief, her husband, died. Salma Qusatili, gynecologist and educator, moved between Damascus, Alexandria and Beirut.²²

An even wider circuit that characterized Syrian lives also structures biographies and

20 Men were significant as publishers, writers, and implied audiences in certain periodicals; how might participation in “the women’s press” signify and yet mask a discussion on changing concepts of masculinity? See my “Woman in Islam: Men and the ‘Women’s Press’ in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt,” *IJMES*, 33, 2 (2001), 171–201.

21 “Shahirat al-Nisa’: Al-Sayyida Zaynab Fawwaz” (Famous Women: Madam Zaynab Fawwaz), in: Fatat, see note 2, 1, 8 (1907), 225–228; “Shahirat al-Nisa’: Tiyudura Haddad” (Famous Women: Theodora Haddad), in: *ibid.*, 2, 28, 8 (1934), 393–395; “Al-Amira Aliksandrah di Afirinuh Fizinuska” (Princess Alexandra di Avierino Wiznieuska), in: *ibid.*, 10, 1 (1915), 2–11; “Wardat al-‘Arab” (Warda of the Arabs), in: *al-Fatat*, 1, 7 (1893), 301–305; “Shahirat al-Nisa’: al-Sayyida Warda al-Yaziji” (Famous Women: Warda al-Yaziji), in: Fatat, see note 2, 2, 1 (1907), 1–7.

22 See Ahmad M. Hasan, “Ahadith al-Hisan: Al-Fatat al-nabigha al-anisa Mary al-jamila” (The Belles’ Conversations: The Brilliant Young Woman, Lovely Miss Mary), in: *al-Hisan* (The Belles), 4, 10 (1929), 20–21, 26; “Al-Anisa Firjini Basili” (Miss Virginie Basili), in: *Majallat al-Sayyidat wa’l-Rijal* (Magazine of Women and Men), 8, 6 (1927), 415–416; Jurji Niqula Baz, “al-Yubil al-faddi lil-anisa Mary ‘Ajami” (The Silver Anniversary of Miss Mary Ajami), in: Fatat, see note 2, 20, 9 (1926), 403–407; ‘Isa Iskandar al-Ma’luf, “Shahirat al-Nisa’: al-Tabiba Salma Qusatili al-Dimashqiyya” (Famous Women: The Physician and Damascene, Salma Qusatili), in: *ibid.*, 14, 7 (1920), 241–244.

shows a wide, varied, and visible trajectory that elite Arab women inhabited (a fact stubbornly invisible even now to most Euro/American audiences). Almaza Kayruz, widowed with four children, left the family farm in Lebanon to take up farming in the Transvaal, where she prospered. Hanna Kurani spent three years in the United States trying to make a living through writing and speechmaking after attending the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Afifa Karam emigrated from Lebanon to New York City and founded the newspaper *al-Huda*. Lydia Tadros took over her husband's New York business after his death.²³

Fewer subjects remained in the homeland. Nasra Baridi spent half a century as a teacher in Nazareth. Rahil Ata married Butrus al-Bustani and they started the National School in Beirut. Druze aristocrat Habus al-Shihabi took an active role in ruling Jabal Lubnan, first with and then against her father. Mariyana Marrash of Aleppo was known for her writing.²⁴

Thus biographies constructed a "Syrian" identity that spread across continents. For readers and writers in Egypt, perhaps local minority status was mitigated by repeated if subtle invocation of this transcontinental community. For female readers and writers, pride in individual countrywomen and a sense of shared destinies might be psychologically bracing.

We must examine not just editors' choices of biographical subjects but also their rhetorical framing. Internal patterning – notations of alignment and difference, new deployments of conventional diction, invocations of group identity – signals that editors believed readers would read life narratives actively. Explicitly invoking subjects as role models for young Arab women, conventional modes of praise became semantically full; cliché usages offered pointedly revised social meanings for young readers (and their mothers). But rarely did such phrases as "May God increase her likes among educated women" impart geographic exclusivity. Biographies were more likely to make a claim of pride on behalf of *an entire gender*, subsuming geography, nationality, religion, and class that would be divisive from the perspective of a nationalist program. Invoking individuation and exemplarity, thus gesturing to both individual identity and shared group goals, gender is the primary point around which collective identity rhetorically clusters here.

23 See "Dhikr al-sadiq ila al-abad: wafat khayrat al-sayyidat fi al-mahjar" (Remembrance of the Eternal Friend: Death of the Finest Woman in the [Arab] Diaspora), in: *Majallat*, see note 22, 9, 10 (1928), 739–740; Jurji Niqula Baz, "Shahirat al-Nisa': Hanna Kasbani Kurani" (Famous Women: Hannah Kasbani Kurani), in: *Fatat*, see note 2, 2, 10 (1908), 362–366; "Shahirat al-Nisa': Madam Taqla Basha" (Famous Women: Madam Taqla, [Spouse of] Taqla Pasha), in: *ibid.*, 19, 1 (1924), 3–5; "Shahirat al-Nisa': al-Sayyida 'Afifa Karam", in: *ibid.*, 49–51, 121–122; "Shahirat al-Nisa': al-Sayyida 'Afifa Karam", *Fatat*, see note 2, 19, 2 (1924), 49–51; Ruz Haddad, "Sayyida Suriyya tudiru mahallan tijariyyan 'aziman fi Niyu Yurk" (Syrian Woman Manages Large Commercial Establishment in New York), in: *Majallat*, see note 22, 7, 7 (1926), 377–378.

24 "Al-Anisa Nasra Baridi" (Miss Nasra Baridi), in: *Majallat*, see note 22, 8, 1 (1926), 60; 'Isa Afandi Iskandar al-Ma'luf, "Shahirat al-Nisa': Rahil 'Ata zawjat al-mu'allim Butrus al-Bustani" (Famous Women: Rachel Ata, Wife of the Teacher Butrus Bustani), in: *Fatat*, see note 2, 14, 1 (1919), 3–4; "Shahirat al-Nisa': Habus ibnat al-amir Bashir al-Shihabi" (Famous Women: Habus, Daughter of the Emir Bashir al-Shihabi), in: *ibid.*, 4, 3 (1909), 81–82; 'Isa Iskandar al-Ma'luf, "Shahirat al-Nisa': Mariyana Marrash" (Famous Women: Marianna Marrash), in: *ibid.*, 13, 9 (1919), 345–351.

As gender formed a less porous boundary than other layers of group identification, biographies naturalized gender as a pre-existing difference, prior to other differences posed as bridgeable or erasable. Syrian women, if encouraged by Syrian exemplars, were urged to think of themselves as a larger community unified supposedly by gender. And (but almost never explicitly) by class: The discursive work of "Famous Women" biography seems tailor-made for instituting the "invisible" ideology of bourgeois primacy that Egypt's insertion into European-controlled capitalist circuitry was making paramount.

Concomitantly, posing positive, "local" role models in its biographical column, by "local" *Young Woman of the East* did not mean either "Syrian" or "Egyptian". Subnational or subregional communal belonging was noted but circumspectly so, while "welcome" rather than competitive tension characterized the management of majority-minority relations in Egypt. Speaking of one Syrian immigrant to Egypt, Salima Abu Rashid, Hashim said, "she is the only woman in our present era who manages a political newspaper; Egypt welcomes the mistresses of finesse and literary refinement, just as Syria takes pride in its daughters in the Arab countries."²⁵ References to work among Syrian communities in Egypt were subdued, too. A male Syrian writer's narrative of the unconventional life of Salma Qusatili, opening with a traditionally phrased prologue of praise ("She was a skilled writer and proficient physician, beautiful of demeanor, incisive of mind, eloquent of tongue, strong of memory"), explicitly noted her contribution to girls "in Egypt" who were implicitly Syrians. "This energetic young woman spent her life a virgin, standing on her own two feet to serve literature and the girls of her kind in Egypt. She was famed for self-reliance and individual effort, until she died, a foreigner in Cairo."²⁶

As Philipp says, the journalistic output of Syrians in Egypt was not directed at the small Syrian population there. "The Syrian intellectuals would, on occasion, discuss the issue of the Syrian presence. But rarely would they address themselves in their writings to the Syrians alone..."²⁷ The daily Egyptian political press did feature discussion of the Syrian presence in Egypt. Was the relative absence of such a discussion in Egyptian-run women's magazines significant? Syrian-run journals were silent on this topic, too, and reticent on events in Ottoman and later Mandate Syria. Even during World War I, when famine in Syria caused consternation and anger in the local press, women's magazines rarely mentioned it. When they did, it was to urge women in Egypt (of whatever origin) to send clothing, food, and money.²⁸

Recall, too, that, "The leading position of the Syrians in journalism did not imply that they all displayed an identical attitude toward Egypt and its politics." In fact, the leading newspaper *al-Ahram*, founded and run by Syrian immigrants, was "a strong but lonely voice of opposition to the British", though its opposition was fueled more by a pro-French leaning than by enthusiasm for Egyptian nationalist aspirations. The British felt threatened

25 "Al-Anisa Salima Rashid nazilat Misr" (Miss Salima Rashid, Resident of Egypt), in: *Fatat*, see note 2, 6, 9 (1912), 349.

26 al-Ma'luf, "al-Tabiba Salma", without any other references.

27 Philipp, Syrians, see note 9, 102.

28 See Marilyn Booth, "Where's the Home Front? Women's Political Aspirations in Egypt and Visions of the Great War in Europe", in: *Beiruter Texte und Studien*, Beirut, forthcoming.

enough to underwrite another Syrian-run newspaper, *al-Muqattam* (1888).²⁹ That Syrians were facilitating British commentary in the press was not lost on Egyptians. Syrians were not oblivious of this problem. Syrian journalists were also “concern[ed] with the high visibility of Syrians in government positions and the possible tensions this might create between them and the Egyptians”. It was not surprising, then, that they tended toward silence on their own community’s presence – even as the Syrian periodicals “would often speak in the name of all Syrians”.³⁰

Philipp notes that when Syrian journalists did speak of things and people Syrian, they accented the positive, the identities and concerns that Syrians and Egyptians, of all faiths, shared, such as Ottoman loyalty and an Arab cultural heritage. As we have seen, this mirrors biography in women’s magazines, for both Syrian- and Egyptian-run journals featured Ottoman women and medieval Arab women whom all could claim.

There was a more specific reason to look toward Istanbul. From 1908, “The Young Turk revolution generated a new political interest and hope among all the Syrian intelligentsia in Egypt”³¹, promising reforms that might lighten political repression and economic difficulty in the provinces. That, and the post-World War I Atatürk regime with which Turkey emerged from an imperial past, were observed with interest by Syrian and Egyptian women, uniting women’s-rights activists. Syrian women had double investment – as Syrians and as women. Biography reflected and helped to build this attention by celebrating the highly visible Turkish politician and women’s rights advocate Halide Edip. Appointed by Atatürk to a senior post in the Education Ministry she served in Syria. One profile (in an Egyptian-run magazine) warned that her public image constituted a negative warning rather than a positive exemplarity for “eastern” women, but all other biographies rejoiced in her example.³²

So, in Egypt, if it was important to maintain a sense of the smaller community it was crucial to mute its presence within the larger one. This intersected with the primacy of a territorial nationalist discourse in Egypt. It was important to nation formation that citizens be made conscious of individual and hierarchized roles in the polity; biography might both propose and discipline self-identities. The life journey as chronicled in biography was to end in, and merge with, the teleology of the nation.

One sign of this was the gingerly treatment of public Syrian female identities in Egypt. When Syrian women in Egypt who did have public roles appeared in *Egyptian-run* journals, their *domestic* energies took pride of place. Yet this focus seems challenged by *Young Woman of the East*. The *Egyptian Women’s Awakening’s* obituary for “Madame Taqla Pasha” focused on her power as an exemplar of informed motherhood and not her public role at *al-Ahram*; *Young Woman of the East* did the opposite. Is this explainable by the personal politics of the editors, Hashim versus Labiba Ahmad, who would a decade later be involved in Islamic activism yet whose journal in the 1920s is not univocally “conservative” as has often been assumed? Or did it have to do with sensitivities about public

29 See Philipp, Syrians, see note 9, 106.

30 Philipp, Syrians, see note 9, 101.

31 See Philipp, Syrians, see note 9, 101, 114.

32 See Booth, Biography, see note 4, 71–72, 161.

visibility and activism among local elite Syrians? Said the Egyptian *Awakening* of this “pro-
per exemplar and paragon for mothers in your splendid work and beautiful patience”:

You were the active, knowledgeable woman, your life replete with what makes the eastern woman raise her head high.... How often have ... faultfinders criticized ... the eastern woman ... But your life was proof against them ... you managed the broadest range of activities and brought up the finest, purest children ... Your body is gone but your *jihad* is not.³³

The text mentions “work” but elaborates this mostly by describing Taqla in her domestic activity and praising her motherhood – an ironic emphasis, given Taqla's eminence at *al-Ahram* for years after her husband's death in 1901 (and perhaps before).³⁴ *Jihad* (struggle), a specifically Islamic term denoting the believer's struggle to follow the right path and the community's struggle to maintain the vigor of the faith, refers here to a Christian Arab woman and her “secular” activities as parent first and only then – and only by inference – manager of a major newspaper.

Biographies of these women suggest (proto)national allegiance, exploiting the ambiguously deployed, multiple meanings of *watan*, from “area of birth” to “homeland” to “nation.” (*Al-wataniyya*, patriotism, came in the 1920s if not before to define a modern nationalist sensibility). Afifa Karam “gives her time to the sons and daughters of her *watan*”. A Syrian in New York, what was her *watan*? Alexandra Avierino, educated in European languages, sought more: “love of the *watan* predominated in her and she did not wish to neglect the language of her country, to foreclose communication with her fine sisters, famous women of the East; so she got a tutor to instruct her in literary arts of the Arabs”.³⁵ Even *watan*, like *Sharq*, as it communicated fierce loyalties, tended to designate only generalized territorial commitments. *Watan* was most often deployed in these journals in opposition to what locals labeled “the West”, often not making distinction among different European societies.

Betsy Taqla expended her efforts “for the sake of serving *al-watan*”. Taqla was more closely involved than were many Syrian women in Egyptian activities, even before taking over *al-Ahram*; she was a member of Egyptian charity funds. But her identity, said this profile, was broader. She was “proud of her easternness and jealously protective of its honor, despite having been raised in Europe, educated in European schools”. Yet the text also suggested a local vision. “She was very pleased with the educated Egyptian woman ... in her eyes Egypt represented a stronger future for nations of the East. She detested those who did not work for the *watan* ... and was not afraid to say so.” (It must be kept in mind that this biography appeared in the 1920s. By then, some Syrians remaining in Egypt identified with Egyptian nationalism.)

Syrian- and Egyptian-run women's journals show no consistent difference in treatment of iconic women of “East” or “West”: Malak Hifni Nasif of Egypt, Maria Mitchell of the United States, Jeanne d'Arc of France, A'isha bt. Abi Bakr of the Arabian Peninsula in the

33 “Ayyatuha al-rahila” (O This Departed One), in: *Majallat al-Nahda*, see note 16, 4, 39 (1924), 100.

34 See Ilyas Zakhura, *al-Suriyyun fi Misr* (The Syrians in Egypt), 1, Cairo: al-Matba'a al-'asriyya 1927, 165–173.

35 “Al-Amira Aliksandrah”, see note 21, 2–11.

seventh century. Syrian-run journals tended to assert the relevance of “Eastern” models more vociferously. Syrian magazines did feature ancient Egyptian royal women, but less often and less enthusiastically than did Egyptian journals; and there seems to have been no ethnically or territorially defined premodern yet “nationalist” parallel to Hatshepsut for Syrian magazines.

Zenobia, ancient ruler of the kingdom of Palmyra, Syria (third century CE), appeared in both sorts of magazines but was not celebrated explicitly as a proto-national figure, unlike Pharaonic queens. Of nine Zenobia profiles 1908–38, four appear in *Young Woman of the East* and one in the Syrian-run *Belles (al-Hisan)*; the other four are in the Egyptian-run *Egyptian Woman's Magazine* and *The Women's Awakening*. In *Young Woman of the East*, Zenobia is an “Eastern” patriot, wearing “only cloth woven in the East to encourage industry in her country”, thereby fulfilling a normative, historically attested female role in using household consumption politically and encouraging others to do so.³⁶ In a later biography (1938), linguistic nationalism is significantly evident: Rather than calling the subject “Zenobia,” which the magazine calls a “European corruption”, she is now the Arab/ic “Zaba”, and is situated in “*al-‘asr al-jahili*”, “the time of ignorance” but specifically the pre-Islamic period, therefore pointedly placed and defined with respect to Islamic history. Her female subjects imitated “her every movement, confident that she was the ultimate exemplar in all attributes”. Zaba’ took advantage of this gendered exemplary role “to draw them toward all that would benefit the *umma* concerning practices of home economy and home management”.³⁷ Zenobia embodies female thrift and rational domesticity that journals insist as a mark of the patriotic woman. Marked out more nationalistically here, through an Arab genealogy and a pre- rather than non-Islamic identity, Zenobia as icon in the text for her own female subjects becomes icon for today's female Arab readers in a strategic move common in the women's magazine biographies.³⁸ Yet Zenobia's “modernity” is not a Syria-specific reference in any explicit sense, as Hatshepsut was a specifically Egyptian exemplar in Egyptian-run magazines.

Similarly, said a biography of Zenobia by Egyptian pedagogue Muhammad Mukhtar Yunus in the *Egyptian Women's Awakening*, she left glory and might to her *umma* and to all women”. Just what the *umma* is he leaves ambiguous; Zenobia conquered both Egypt and Syria.³⁹ Less ambiguous is that the *umma*, whatever it is, defines a line of first loyalties, even as close reading of this mass of biographical sketches hints the possibility of a female-centered, gendered bonding across other identity boundaries. In any case, ambiguity about the identity of an ancient leader from the Syrian lands was constructive at this moment of territorial nationalist fervor: the biography appeared in 1923, four years after the 1919 popular outpouring of support for Egypt's national independence, a year

36 See “Shahirat al-Nisa': Zinubiya” (Famous Women: Zenobia), in: Fatat, see note 2, 9, 1 (1914), 2–4.

37 “Shahirat al-Nisa': al-Zaba” (Famous Women: Zaba), in: Fatat, see note 2, 32, 9/10 (1938), 513–514.

38 Booth, Biography, see note 4, chap. 3. Similarly, on Joan of Arc as a figure of modernity and feminine anticolonial activism within gendered boundaries defined by a “public-patriarchal” nationalism in Philipp, Egypt, see note 9, chap. 6 and the same, “The Egyptian Lives of Jeanne d'Arc”, in: Lila Abu-Lughod ed., *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, Princeton 1998, 171–211.

39 See Muhammad Mukhtar Yunus, “Shams al-tarikh 4: Zaynab” (The Sun of History, No. 4: Zaynab), in: *Majallat al-Nahda*, see note 16, 2, 6 (1923), 161–164.

after formal (and very partial) “independence”, as a national constitution was being written, and as the Egyptian Feminist Union was in formation.

Politics of Literary Identification

Exemplary biography had roots in an indigenous cultural tradition and was associated in its Arabic origins with Islam. Biographical compendia had long served to indicate and scrutinize the credentials of individuals who transmitted Hadith and therefore had to be personally impeccable. At the same time, exemplary biography in the women’s press drew on European legacies in both its choices of subject and sometimes its internal patterning. The genre itself, as practiced in this press, offered an ambiguous – or multiply signifying-literary politics, just as the choice and framing of female subjects posed ambiguous allegiances for readers poised between anticolonial fervor and gender alliances that might broach North/South boundaries. Yet, as in European and American biographical dictionaries, the loud silence remains class, as an organizing yet textually invisible scaffolding for a putative postcolonial modernity, an aporia that signals also the severe limits to choice that even a female elite could expect – or that at least a male nationalist leadership could hope to control – in an envisioned nation liberated from European political control, though not from West-centered distributions and uneven flows of capital.

To conclude exploration of the complexities of Syrian and gendered identities in Egypt, consider the biographical writing of Zaynab Fawwaz – one Zaynab featured in the 1937 essay with which I began. Trained in traditional rhetoric, associated with the Islamic-nationalist press in Egypt, a Syrian who looked to Ottoman Istanbul rather than to Europe for cultural ties, Fawwaz’s positioning diverged sharply from those of Christian patriots. Yet, given these differences, Fawwaz’s biographical politics showed much in common with those of both Hashim and Egyptian writers. Fawwaz had demonstrated biography’s reformist and feminist potential by writing a biographical dictionary of women in the late 19th century. So had (Christian) Maryam Nawfal. Yet it was not just Nawfal who offered narratives of European lives.

In an article for one Islamic-nationalist paper, Fawwaz called on “women of the East” to eschew “laziness” and to “work”.⁴⁰ Nothing startling here: Many in Egypt and elsewhere were saying the same. But Fawwaz’s directive took a specific and somewhat unusual turn. Calling for a knowledge-based awakening among women, she proposed that women focus not on kinds of work women of the West were doing but on reviving traditional handwork, “which we abandoned for manufactures of the West”.⁴¹ Yet this was not at all a rejection of “Western” ties. For Fawwaz had a specific and urgent end in mind. The World’s Columbian Exposition, then being mounted in Chicago, “has opened its doors to every kind of work’s presentation in the Women’s Section”, she exclaimed.

40 See Zaynab Fawwaz, “Wujub al-nahda al-‘ilmiyya lil-mar’a al-sharqiyya” (Necessity of a Knowledge Renaissance for Eastern Women), in: *al-Nil* (The Nile), 213 [n.d.]; repr. in her *al-Rasa’il al-Zaynabiyya* (Epistles by Zaynab), Cairo: al-Matba’a al-mutawassita, [1323], 59–60.

41 Fawwaz, *al-Rasa’il*, see note 40, 60.

Fawwaz had written to Berthe Honoré Palmer, president of the American committee organizing a separate women's exhibition. Fawwaz offered to send her biographical dictionary of famous women, not yet published but apparently finished by late 1892, to the Women's Library.⁴² When she heard back from Palmer, welcoming her contribution and others,⁴³ Fawwaz exhorted "the daughters of my kind" to send the fruits of their labors to Chicago. Who were the daughters of her kind?

Regard the young Syrian women who brightened history's pages with their works and their striving to acquire knowledge and arts ... If you women would strive too, you would lighten certain spheres of work for your menfolk. Let every one of you work hard at something you are capable of, and make it your business to send it to the women's section whose exhibition will be mounted in 1893. Mrs. Berthe Honoré Palmer ... is working to energize young women. She sent her thanks to Syrian women and directed her words to you, O Egyptian women. You are honor-bound to heed her call, fine women: she has placed confidence in you.⁴⁴

Here, Fawwaz went beyond the vague identity marker "women of the East". To exhort women to action, she was willing to broach differences, possible sources of competition and thus tension. She invoked Syrian women to provoke her implied audience of Egyptian women.

We might expect Fawwaz, with her Arabic-Turkish focus, Islamic-nationalist venue, and Ottoman orientation, to focus on Arab and Muslim women. Yet her compendium embraces women of "East" and "West" both. Fawwaz's training, rooted in an Arab-Islamic literary heritage, shows in her adherence to the classical Arabic biographical form. With a particular rhetorical logic, biographies of European women are brought into a culturally local generic fold, sounding like Muslim subjects in premodern Arabic biographical dictionaries whom Fawwaz also profiled. Eugénie, Empress of France, whose visit to Egypt at the opening of the Suez Canal spurred the writing of the opera *Aida* and construction of a palace, Fawwaz praised eloquently and in traditional terms: "what God gave her of goodness and grace and good upbringing, along with astuteness, refinement and wit raised her husband to a position that the seven heavens would envy". (Fawwaz also puts in a good word for Egypt's glories when she describes Eugénie's visit to Egypt as "the drink that fate had given her from a paradisiacal spring"). Though this echoes a moralizing rhetoric also evident in European biographical dictionaries of the time, it also evokes an Arabic biographical stylistics.

The rhetoric and balance of subjects in this volume have the effect of situating European women as minority Other, to be emulated yet held at a distance, admired on (and in) one's own terms. Arab experience, Arab-Islamic territory and history, are the center here; "the West" is the periphery. Fawwaz's text, like Syrian-run magazines founded soon

42 See Booth, *Biography*, see note 4, chap. 1.

43 See Fawwaz, *al-Rasa'il*, see note 40, 63-64.

44 Fawwaz, "Wujub al-nahda," see note 40, 60. On the official Syrian contribution, Jeanne Weimann, *The Fair Women*, Chicago 1981.

after her dictionary was published, praised women of the West but steadily featured Arab sisters and grandmothers, highlighting shared heritages. The structure and balance of Fawwaz's book were emulated by editors, and her phrasing was sometimes repeated word for word. But later magazines with their modernized rhetoric and modernizing agendas, while featuring Arab women, did often seem to shape their stories into models emulating European forms of social organization.

The "Famous Women" genre highlights complications in defining community and identity for elite women in Egypt, whether Syrian or Egyptian in origin. This genre overturns the standard scholarly mantra that Syrian Christian women were overwhelmingly western-oriented while also reminding us that not all Syrian immigrants were Christians. Zaynab Fawwaz, whose own exemplary role as a biographer was evident in the manner that editors (Christian and Muslim, Syrian and Egyptian) borrowed whole entries from her volume, was from a culturally active Shi'i Muslim region. She was certainly not European-identified, but she was as interested in European women as were her Christian compatriots. Women's textual presence in pre-modern Arabic biographical compendia, and the featuring of early Muslim heroines, gave Syrians and Egyptians alike an indigenous authority and source of respectability for their own inscriptions of women's life narratives, according to their own autobiographical experiences, self-narratives, and desires. And, as Fawwaz inserted narratives of "Western" women among those of "the East", Syrian Christians who followed her were following a Muslim writer in doing so.

Did Egyptian readers accept exemplary Syrians as sufficiently "local"? What difference might gender have made? We can only wonder, as we read these lives, years later. Yet, to judge by biography as well as other texts in this press and in Syrian women's writing in general, elite women from Syria were less likely than their countrymen to partake in what Philipp has called "the alienation of the Syrian intelligentsia from the Egyptian cultural and political scene".⁴⁵

If Egyptian women saw Syrian women as an alien group, this is muted to the point of invisibility in the press. Class and gender, it seems, trumped origin or national identity and professional visibility. A reformist morality, the notion of a regenerated shared future, and articulation of a leading role for educated, elite women seemed to erase possible conflicts and competitions, at least discursively, and across the entire period I have discussed, despite enormous changes in the political context. If exemplary biography indexed autobiographical longings for a small but growing population of intellectually and socially privileged females living in Egyptian cities and those of the Levant, it seems that gender goals outweighed ethnic concerns.

Emily Sursuq, from a wealthy Beirut family, sent to Alexandria to complete her schooling, exhibited (said her biographer) "the most splendid ornaments of beauty". Following social expectations (for Christian and Muslim girls both), she married her paternal first cousin and "appeared to the world crowned by the ornaments of virtue and perfection, becoming famous for doing good and rescuing the poor". She was a model of the feminine patriot that Arab elite male nationalists saw as ideally emerging from girls' education.

Sursuq founded a girls' school in Beirut and initiated other philanthropic projects.

⁴⁵ See Philipp, Syrians, see note 9, 101.

These were pursuits, said the magazine, “that so infrequently a young [unmarried] woman thinks of or a [married] woman concerns herself with, especially in this era”. The biography served as rhetorical platform for a more general (and common) criticism: “For amusement places have become numerous, and among [today’s] people the malady of gambling has spread, so that now [1907] there hardly exists a woman who is not tempted by these harmful pursuits and whose mind doesn’t descend to the abyss of decadence and indolence.” This frightening pair, *inhitat* and *khumul* (decadence and indolence), had become twinned leitmotifs throughout the Arabic press, dark warnings about the impact of European societies *and* about the anticipated consequences of a local modernity in formation that reformers often feminized in their diatribes. “Famous Women” represented – sometimes explicitly – the *opposite* of a dangerous modernity: Their life stories repressed intimations of such dangers, in favor of a carefully supervised feminine modernity that blended education with domesticity, piety, childrearing, and maintenance of local culture (variously defined). “We hope”, declared the magazine, “for [Sursuq’s] continued advancement, and we ask God to make her likes abundant among women and to recompense her in the best possible way for her deeds.”⁴⁶

Sursuq as metaphor for resistant forces to “decadence and indolence” relies on a diction of religious virtue and reward that elided boundaries separating Christian and Muslim, or Syrian and Egyptian. This model appealed to elite women across the magazine’s hoped-for readership. And perhaps Sursuq, though Syrian, was a safer choice than some. After all, *she* had returned to Syria to live.

46 “Shahirat al-Nisa’: al-Sayyida Imili Sursuq” (Famous Women: Madam Emily Sursuq), in: *Fatat*, see note 2, 1, 9 (1907), 257–258.