5 The Genesis of Arab Nationalism

In the early nineteenth century the social structure of Greater Syria, the birthplace of Arab nationalism, was similar to that of Egypt before the reforms of Muhammad ‘Ali. The system of tax-farming known as iltizam in Egypt was called muqata‘a in Syria. Although also under Ottoman rule, Syria differed from Egypt in that it had not been governed centrally, but by a number of contending independent local dynasties. Hence it was more difficult to surmount the feudal system in Syria than in Egypt, and the feudal system in fact survived longest in this part of the Ottoman Empire. In Egypt the social structures had undergone an almost complete transformation as a result of the destruction of the feudal system by Muhammad ‘Ali after 1805. In the Ottoman heartlands a similar transformation had taken place in the reign of Mahmud II (1808–39), particularly after the dissolution of the sipahis and the Janissaries. In Syria, however, social conditions remained virtually unchanged until the 1830s. The continuous internecine struggles between the local dynasties on the one hand and between themselves and the civil and military representatives of the Porte on the other had exhausted the country. Furthermore, outlying cities were regularly pillaged by Bedouin raiders, and, ‘the inevitable consequence of this state of affairs was the impoverishment and depopulation of both towns and the countryside’.

An exception to this was the Lebanese coastal area, inhabited mainly by Christian Maronites, who had had contacts with Europe since the sixteenth century. They had maintained regular trading relationships with the Italian merchant republics, and were culturally linked with Rome and later with France, especially after the establishment of French missions in the area. It was here that the first bourgeois strata in Greater Syria developed, partly because the inhabitants were mostly Christians who had no religious loyalties to the Islamic foundation of Ottoman rule, and partly because their
changing social status brought them into increasing conflict with the feudal system of Greater Syria. For some time these new social groups were unable to obtain any political power, since, as Christians, they had the status of subjects and were of course excluded from the Muslim umma. Even the foreign missions, both French Catholic, and, since 1820, American Presbyterian, who were supposedly protecting the Christians, were unable to work unhindered until the invasion of Syria in 1831 by Muhammad ‘Ali’s armies under the command of his son Ibrahim Pasha, since the Sublime Porte always contrived to hamper their activities as far as possible. After 1831, however, a new phase in the history of the region began. The innovations and reforms which Ibrahim introduced into Greater Syria, on the lines of those in Egypt, and the emancipation of the Arab Christians which he encouraged, had the effect of promoting the beginnings of the Arab national movement, whose seeds had already been planted.

This section will provide a general outline of the historical development of Greater Syria, as an essential background to the Arab national movement since the First World War, and particularly to provide an understanding of the influence of Sati’ al-Husri. A brief outline of the situation of Greater Syria under Muhammad ‘Ali between 1831 and 1840 will be given, together with a discussion of the impact of the foreign missions in this period, during which they had complete freedom of action. This will be followed by an examination of the impact of Tanzimat reforms on Greater Syria, and of the emergence of a European-educated Muslim petty bourgeois stratum in addition to the European and American-educated Arab Christians. An attempt will then be made to examine the role of these two wings of the Arab national movement. In the course of this chapter some major questions will be discussed only briefly, since they will be dealt with at greater length later on. These include the differences between Arab and Egyptian nationalism, and the role of Islam and of secularism in these two movements.

(a) Syria under the Rule of Muhammad ‘Ali: The Emergence of Secularism, and the Contribution of European and American Christian Missions to the Arab National Literary Renaissance

Due to its geographical location, the Arab Middle East became increasingly important during the early period of the European