“Between Bilad al-Sham and Uncle Sam: Metaphors of America in Eastern Mediterranean Political Writing c.1900-1914”

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‘Antum fi bilad al-sham, wa nahnu fi bilad ‘am al-sam’: it was with this couplet that the Lebanese journalist Najib Diyab, the owner of the New York newspaper Mira’t al-Gharb, evoked in 1913 the far-flung relationship between ‘Syria’ and its American diaspora. This paper sets out, like Diyab, to consider the ties between America and the Eastern Mediterranean. However, it is concerned not so much with the material interactions between these two parts of the world, or the filters through which Americans viewed the Arab world, as with the shifting textual relations, and borders, a handful of the thousands of Arabic-speaking Ottoman subjects who migrated to the New World from the 1880s drew between their native land and America.

I focus here upon the writings of three prominent Eastern Mediterranean men of letters – Diyab himself, the Jerusalemite educational reformer Khalil al-Sakakini, and the Lebanese essayist and poet Amin al-Rihani – examining the purposes their invocations and evocations of America served. I seek to understand, in other words, not just how they wrote about Amrika, but also what they hoped to achieve in doing so. For America, that empire of liberty and industry, possessed a metaphorical quality quite distinct from the lived reality of its migrants.

Whether depicted as a ‘land’ whose ‘freedom’ was the obverse of Ottoman ‘despotism’, or as an example of the ‘new servitude’ of capitalism, whose frenetic crowds and dizzying skyscrapers contrasted starkly with the bucolic calm of the Eastern Mediterranean, America was a central trope of these men’s writing – and one which was both bound and bordered, simultaneously intertwined with the Eastern Mediterranean and separate from it. We must recover these metaphorical resonances if we are to make full sense of the political thoughts of these men – political thoughts which were formed in, and filtered through, America.