The Contingencies of Pro-Americanism in World War I Era Greater Syria

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In the period immediately following World War I, many elites in Greater Syria expressed favorable views of the United States and historians generally cite two reasons for this. First, the benevolence of American missionary institutions in the region and American relief efforts during the war led the elites of Greater Syria to characterize the United States as a largely selfless international actor. Second, the United States had a good reputation in the region simply because it was not France or Britain, both of which were viewed as self-interested imperial powers.

This paper seeks to challenge the prevailing interpretation of America’s favorable reputation in early twentieth century Greater Syria by providing a more nuanced assessment of the various factors that contributed to this discourse of pro-Americanism. Drawing on documents from American and Middle Eastern archives, along with the work of Michel Foucault and Ernesto Laclau, I will argue that the pro-American discourse in the region was both transnational and partially circular. American missionaries transferred their patriotism to elites in nineteenth century Greater Syria. This discourse was bolstered by acts of American benevolence and European imperialism, but it was also reinforced by incomplete information about America’s own imperial forays and by the misleading rhetoric of Woodrow Wilson. Additionally, when this pro-Americanism was fed back to Americans at the end of World War I, it had a tone of politically motivated flattery, with the regional elites employing this discourse in an effort to recruit the United States to be their mandatory power. The good reputation of the United States in early twentieth century Greater Syria, it seems, may have been partly genuine, but it was also contingent upon misinformation and embellished for the purpose of cajolery.