AUB and Ras Beirut: An Idyllic Twinship

When the American Board of Commission for Foreign Missions launched its “sacred errand” at the turn of the nineteenth century to evangelize the non-Christian world, they established about sixteen “stations”in the Levant, Turkey, and Anatolia. If one considers New England Presbyterianism as a cultural transplant (since all the founding fathers of the Syrian Protestant College were carriers of this brand of Puritanism), it is inevitably essential to probe into the special circumstances which accounted for the success stories of both the transplant and the setting in which it was grafted.

In other words, what was it about Ras Beirut in particular that accounted for the transformation of the Syrian Protestant College into one of the most distinguished role models of American liberal and higher education outside America? Both transformations were fortuitous and largely unintended, but both were a by-product of the unusual symbiosis between them. The stories of their success must both be found in showing how the unique attributes of each were enriched by the other: how a mission on route to reclaim the land of Christ in Palestine ended up in Ras Beirut, how in the process a desolate farming area was transformed into one of the most arresting and vibrant cosmopolitan urban centers in the Arab world. Neither could have succeeded without the other.

Unmistakably, the founding of the college in 1866 can be clearly singled out as the first instance of institutional invasion of a garden farming area. This is, incidentally, quite a historic leap. Despite the initial problems the college faced in securing recognition for its degrees and safeguarding its underlying message and philosophy of education, particularly the pervasive fear of Ottoman censure or possible closure, in no time it became an imposing institution in both physical terms and scholastic stature. Indeed, by the turn of the century it evolved into an almost full-blown campus with twenty elegant edifices and a walled sanctuary of about 73 acres. From then on, the college campus stood out as a prominent landmark punctuating the then thinly settled suburban sprawl of West Beirut.

From the original sixteen students (only five graduated in the class of 1870), enrollment leaped to about 600 by 1902. At times, the construction of buildings was not quick enough to accommodate the increasing demand for dormitory space. All through the records of the early years runs the urgent plea for more scholarship funds. Equally impressive was the growth in the curriculum, particularly in its diversity in course offerings. For example, while in the 1880s there were not more than three general departments (preparatory, collegiate, and medical), by 1900 four new schools were added; namely, pharmacy, commerce, Biblical archaeology, and philosophy.

This growth, it should be noted, was all the more remarkable, because it occurred at a time when America's power in the region was still at its lowest ebb. America had not as yet figured in the geo-politics of the Near East. It was far removed from Turkey and could not clearly exert the influence or patronage the European powers were already mobilizing on behalf of their client groups in Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere in the Arab world.

The parallel growth of Ras Beirut, almost in tandem, was clearly a reflection of the imposing presence of the college. Initially, the largely desolate area had an indigenous population of roughly not more than thirty households, mostly Sunni Muslims, Greek Orthodox, and Druze landowners and tenants. Interestingly, despite sectarian differences, they emerged as a homogeneous group and developed a strong sense of loyalty and attachment to their neighborhood. The first few generations of this original population remained the least educated and, at least initially, resisted Western and secular incursions. Whatever socioeconomic mobility or elevation in economic status they enjoyed was largely a by-product of their land ownership and the subsequent appreciation of land values and speculation of real estate. We had here, in other words, the nucleus of a truly urban bourgeoisie.

By the turn of the century, the presence of the college began to attract another group that slowly contributed to the growth of the indigenous community. Although made up of a composite group of varied backgrounds, these initial migrants had much in common; they were mostly Christian families from rural areas who were drawn to Ras Beirut by the cultural facilities and employment opportunities the college was beginning to generate. Initially, the influx was very low, roughly about four to five families every year. Soon after World War I, however, their number increased appreciably. By the time the Syrian Protestant College had become renamed the American University of Beirut in 1920, real estate transactions showed that a sizeable portion of those families had already become landholders. Along with some of the prominent Druze families (e.g., Rawdah and Talhuq), Greek Orthodox (e.g., Bassul, Surati, Tarazi, Rubayz, Bikhazi), and Sunni Muslims (e.g., Itani, Taqush, Yamut, Zantut, Nsuli, Naja, and others), property was being transferred to a growing number of newcomers. Names like Khawli, Dumit, Makdisi, Rassi, Baroudi, Nassar, Nassif, Qurtas, Jurdaq, Kurani, Hajjar, Khuri, and Haddad, to name a few, began to appear in the cadastral register. They were all Protestants, or more appropriately, converted Protestants who were attached to the University and the burgeoning activities of its affiliated missions.

Although not numerous, they constituted a socially significant group, one that was to mold the character of the area for at least the subsequent fifty years. They were not only converted to the faith; they also acquired some of the concomitant puritan and Protestant lifestyles. The so-called "Protestants of Ras Beirut," in fact, became a euphemism to define the identity and social character of this new urban community. And it was a community in almost every sense of the term: orderly, cohesive, God-fearing, sparked by the frugal habits of work and accountability, and a strong sense of communal solidarity. They maintained close family ties and displayed a civic-minded concern in the affairs and welfare of their community. Voluntary associations of all kinds, ranging from serious political and cultural societies to more mundane organizations such as boy scouts, Sunday school meetings, and women's auxiliary gatherings in support of charitable causes, began to attract wider participation.

Education and exemplary behavior were the keys to social mobility. Despite their modest socioeconomic backgrounds, the Protestants of Ras Beirut soon emerged as a highly literate and mobile social group. The colorful and vivid autobiographical accounts of some members of this early generation attest to their swift elevation in socioeconomic standing. Their successful careers as scholars served them well in more than just the symbolic rewards of status and self-esteem. In a fairly short time, they were able to enjoy some of the comforts of elevated standards of living. Most of them, for example, amassed considerable wealth, invested in real estate, and built commodious houses in Ras Beirut and in their mountain villages.

The rise in social status of the Protestants and their swift assimilation into the urban community of Ras Beirut was quite apparent in the slow but persistent increase in construction activity. The interwar period between 1920 and 1940 witnessed an intense development, particularly along the main streets radiating from AUB. Affordable land values encouraged further construction. Suburban villas with red-tiled roofs, walled gardens, and well-tended patios emerged as landmarks to stamp the urban character of the whole community.

One remarkable feature of these developments is that despite the spatial and social transformations the area was undergoing for years, Ras Beirut retained its communal and village character. On the whole and despite their receptivity to secular and Western lifestyles, the Protestants remained a rather timid and cautious social group. The typically middle class morality they were imbued with proved effective in generating an achievement ethic, a community consciousness holding some of the moral dictates of Puritanism.

This seeming timidity, however, did not restrain the community from partaking in the "silent revolution" so visible in the cultural and ideological transformations Ras Beirut was hosting at the time. This was most apparent in the type of questions and issues the burgeoning intelligentsia was beginning to probe and address publicly. It was also visible in some of the unobtrusive but fundamental changes in everyday life. Other parts of Beirut no doubt contributed to this cultural and literary awakening. Those articulated around Ras Beirut, however, were comparatively richer in variety and scope. By virtue of its openness and proclivity for experimentation, the area served in fact as a testing ground for many of the controversial and polemical issues and the provocative ideologies and permissive lifestyles that the other more cloistered communities hesitated to adopt.

This cultural awakening was no doubt heightened by the critical political transformations overwhelming the region at the time. This was, after all, the period of national struggle, marked by a growing hostility towards Ottoman, French, British, Zionist, and other colonial and occupying forces. It was a time of upheaval and bafflement, fraught with the fearsome specters of Ottoman oppression, ravages of famine, the cruelties of two World Wars, and the hopes and frustrations of the struggle for independence and self-determination.

It was during the period that Arab thinkers were grappling with the nagging question regarding the nature of nationalist sentiments, political identity, and cultural heritage, and how to forge autonomous political states without alienating themselves from Pan-Arabist sentiments. Fortunately, it was then that the first generation of Western-trained local (mostly Ras Beiruti) scholars started to return to Lebanon. In virtually every discipline or program within AUB—initially in Arabic, history, education, and then gradually in the social, physical, and medical sciences—a critical mass of resourceful and spirited scholars was emerging to assume a more prominent role in the intellectual life of the community. The small nucleus of local scholars (Yaqub Sarruf, Faris Nimr, Jabr Dumit, and Bulus Khawli) who had accompanied the University since its inception, was joined by another handful (Mansur Jurdak, Jurjus and Anis Makdisi, and Philip Hitti) at the turn of the century. It was not, however, until the 1920s and 1930s that the first sizeable group of local scholars returned to AUB. The intellectual and cultural life of the community, as well as the enhanced stature of the University, has not been the same since.

The limited scope of this essay does not permit an adequate recognition of the collective or individual legacy of this generation of "mavericks" who took residence in Ras Beirut. I can only name a few in passing here: Assad Rustum, Constantine Zurayk, Zeine Zeine, and Nabih Faris in history; Jibrail Jabbur, Anis Frayha, and Kamal Yazigi in Arabic; Charles Malik in philosophy; Said Hamadeh and Husni Sawwaf in business administration; Albert Badre and George Hakim in economics; Habib Kurani, George Shahla, and Jibrail Katul in education; Nicola Shahine in physics; Aziz Abdul-Karim and Adib Sarkis in chemistry; Philip Ashkar, Henry Badeer, Dikran Berberian, Hrant Chaglassian, George Fawaz, Sami Haddad, Amin Khairallah, Mustafa Khalidi, Nimeh Nucho, Philip Sahyoun, and Hovsep Yenikomshian in medicine; Charles Abou Chaar and Amin Haddad in pharmacy.

Much like their American mentors, they devoted the most productive years of their career to the University and immersed themselves in the life of the community, many of them not leaving AUB until their retirement. Their presence served as a source of inspiration to successive generations of younger scholars. More distinctively perhaps, they had a broad and public conception of their role, which extended and deepened the sphere of their influence and enhanced their public image. Partly because of their exceptional gifts and the unusual circumstances of the time, they did not confine their intellectual concerns within the narrow walls of the campus. They were sparked by a spirit of public service and a longing to participate in debating and resolving the critical problems and public issues the Arab world was facing at the time.

This is quite apparent in both the nature of their scholarly output and the extent of their public involvement. While the earlier generations excelled in establishing local periodicals and popularizing issues (e.g., *Al-Kulliyeh, Al-Muqtataf*), addressing themselves primarily to Arab audiences, this "middle generation" extended and internationalized the scope of their intellectual and professional interests without ignoring the cultural needs of their local and regional constituency. They launched scientific research projects, published in professional foreign journals, and produced what were to become standard reference works for years to come.

Incidentally, it was out of such small cliques that some of the most resourceful endeavors of distinguished scholars and public figures emerged. One such striking instance is the handful of colleagues drawn from a variety of disciplines—Said Hamadeh, Charles Malik, Constantine Zurayk, George Hakim, Charles Issawi, Husni Sawwaf, Halim Najjar, Anis Frayha, and Zeine Zeine—who collaborated together in editing volumes and publishing *Silsilat al-Abhath al-Ijtimaiyya* (Series of Social Studies) in the early 1940s. Such similar collaborative efforts, often sparked by little more than the enthusiasm of like-minded colleagues, produced other impressive landmarks in the form of journals (*Al-Abhath, Middle East Forum, Middle East Economic Papers, Berytus*), research centers (Economic Research Institute, Middle East Area Program, Arab Chronology and Documents), international conventions (The Middle East

Medical Assembly), and associations (the Alumni Association, *Al-Urwa Al-Wuthqa*, Civic Welfare League).

It was during the interwar period that participation in such activities, along with the burgeoning facilities for competitive sports, public performances, music, art, and theater, began to attract wider appeal. As in other more serious endeavors of research, political activism, welfare and civic-minded concerns, the seemingly more frivolous pursuits that often underlie competitive athletics and expressive artistic events also allowed individuals to transcend their parochial identities and melt into a common cosmopolitan subculture. Sports events, particularly annual field days and weekly football matches between national teams were staged and celebrated with much fanfare and style. The same was true about the performances, plays, recitals, variety shows, exhibits, and public lectures which were hosted in West Hall. Indeed, for a while, West Hall became one of the highly sought venues for such public events.

The massive increase in urbanization and the sweeping sociocultural, political, and commercial transformations Beirut witnessed during the 1950s and 1960s acted as another timely windfall to both Ras Beirut and AUB. Both spatially and culturally, Ras Beirut was considerably more open than the other communities, enabling it to accommodate the growing demand for urban space. Since no confessional or ethnic group had complete dominance over the area, it became particularly receptive to successive inflows of marginal Anglo-Saxon groups. Beginning in 1948, waves of Palestinian migrants started taking up residence in the area. Political events in both Syria and Egypt, particularly after the Suez crisis of 1956, generated another influx. Armenian refugees, particularly professionals and semi-professional groups who had settled elsewhere in Lebanon after the massacres of 1914, also started to converge on Ras Beirut.

Though they were all displaced groups, they retained little of the attributes of refugee and marginal communities. They evinced a noticeable readiness to be assimilated into Ras Beirut and were instrumental in accelerating the pace of change by enriching the cultural and economic vitality of the area. The upper and middle-class Palestinians, many of whom managed eventually to acquire Lebanese citizenship, brought with them professional skills, and a comparatively high proportion of them were professors and university graduates.

The inflow of capital from the Gulf and the concomitant speculation in real estate provided other employment opportunities. In addition to providing a handy reservoir of professional talent, Palestinians, Egyptian, and Syrian dissidents ventured into profitable and enterprising sectors of the economy. This was particularly visible in banking, insurance, business services, and retail. Armenians were equally resourceful. They, too, contributed their own ethnic and occupational skills, particularly in professional and semi-professional vocations such as pharmacy, dentistry, nursing, photography, and electronics.

By the late 1950s, Ras Beirut was already displaying all the characteristic features of increasing commercialization and rapid growth. Urbanization was so swift, in fact, that in less than two decades the spatial character of Ras Beirut was almost totally transformed. Mounting pressure for urban space, the invasion of commercial establishments, and the sharp rise in land values and speculation in real estate resulted in large-scale construction and corporate financing. The attractive red-tiled villas, which once graced the suburban landscape, soon gave way to a more intensive form of land utilization. Towering structures in reinforced concrete with glittering glass facades and prefabricated aluminum frames began to overwhelm the urban scene. Gradually, Ras Beirut started to lose its cohesive and wholesome character as a residential neighborhood and became, instead, a tempting ground for sightseers, shoppers, tourists, and other transient groups who sought refuge in its anonymity and permissive outlets for casual and titillating forms of entertainment and consumerism.

Despite these inevitable transformations, and thanks to AUB's presence as a sanctuary of high culture, Ras Beirut managed to retain its appealing open and cosmopolitan character. Indeed, the commercialization of popular culture, reinforced by a permissive political climate and a free and uncensored media, encouraged further eclecticism and sensationalism. The highbrow exclusive periodicals of the early 1960s were supplemented by a plethora of new tabloids and glossy magazines. Even daily newspapers broadened their coverage to reach the growing pseudo-intellectual interests of its readership. Many, for example, started publishing literary and cultural supplements.

Art, theater, music, and dance displayed a variety of genres, ranging from serious surrealistic expression to mediocre manifestations of kitsch and low esthetic standards. Traditional folklore, arts, and crafts were not spared. They, too, were victimized by the ethos of cash and excessive commercialization. Publishing houses with an eye to quick returns were also eager to publish almost anything. Book exhibits became celebrated events and bookstores, despite the inevitable debasement of literary standards, continued to sell perhaps the richest possible variety of books and periodicals found anywhere in the Arab world.

In this climate, AUB could no longer remain an exclusive cultural sanctuary. Other centers and outlets emerged to satisfy the aroused appetite for popular culture, ideas, and ideological discourse. For example, many foreign embassies and their cultural centers established their premises on adjoining streets: the Kennedy Center, British Council, Goethe Institute, University Christian Center, Italian, Spanish, and Russian cultural centers, Arab Cultural Club, Islamic Cultural Center. All contributed to the diversity of "voices" and "scripts." More important, one was at liberty to listen and incorporate what was heard. In short, despite the inevitable commercialization and politicization of cultural and intellectual expressions, Ras Beirut remained an exuberant place;

diversity, once again, animated and enriched life in the community, allowing all groups to lead divergent lives yet live side by side.

The deformations associated with the outbreak of civil hostilities in 1975 are far too complex and profound in their manifestations to speak of. For about two decades, Ras Beirut like the rest of the country was subjected to some of the most barbaric forms of reckless violence, protracted chaos, and decadence. AUB, of course, paid dearly with the tragic assassination of President Malcolm Kerr in 1984, the destruction of College Hall in 1991, and the other hardships it endured. But again as before throughout its earlier encounters with adversity, AUB always managed to transform the misfortunes of hard times and public despair into grounds of vantage.

This is another remarkable feature of its outstanding legacy. It is not common to associate the success of educational institutions to their humanitarianism and benevolent attributes, or with their proclivity to offer relief and welfare in dark times. AUB's role in this regard is quite striking, if not unique. Its credibility and, at times, its survival is largely a by-product of such circumstances. Throughout its eventful history, it has been intimately associated with chronic crises. Willfully or otherwise, it found itself drawn into the life of the community in times of national disaster, war, and public unrest. Every time Beirut was beset with the menaces of war and epidemics, the campus became a refuge, a safe haven for panic-stricken citizens and refugees.

It was, after all, the massive population shifts and exodus from Mount Lebanon—a by-product of the civil disturbances of 1860—which heightened the awareness of AUB's founding fathers to the relief and educational needs of dislocated groups. During both World Wars—much like the latest decades of civil unrest—AUB played a vital role in providing emergency and rescue aid, medical rehabilitation, and general welfare.

In most such instances, the involvement of the college left it with an enhanced status and public image, enabling it to extract special privileges and concessions not available to other foreign institutions. On more than one occasion, for example, Ottoman officials would seriously consider closure or suspension of the college, only to revoke their intentions upon visiting its premises or learning of tangible evidence of the invaluable services it was offering. So bereft was the country and the region at times of the basic amenities that the provision of any form of human relief or rehabilitation was always gratefully received and acknowledged. These ranged from medical missions and rescue operations in embattled war zones to the provision of scarce supplies in times of famine or public shortages, to public health campaigns during epidemics, and to hospital emergency services during episodes of collective strife.

Much of this early voluntary social work and concern for welfare was limited to activities like night schools for vagrants, dispensing charities, and providing recreational programs in the vicinity of the campus. Gradually, this spirit of unselfish service, benevolent deeds, and practical work was expanded and secularized in the 1930s to incorporate agricultural extension and rural development projects in remote villages. Organizations like the "Institute of Rural Life" and the "Civic Welfare League" offered students and teachers collaborative opportunities to supplement their theoretical training with practical and applied work in depressed areas. They turned out to be, judging by the favorable reception and impact, extremely innovative and effective. Novel and accessible forms of upgrading the quality of village life—from marketing and credit cooperatives to animal husbandry and crop rotation—were attributed to such ventures. So successful were they at the time that they served as role models for inspiring similar schemes in Palestine, Syria, and elsewhere in the Middle East.

In retrospect, it is a credit to the proverbial resilience and tenacity of both Ras Beirut and AUB that they were able to resist so much relentless punishment for so long. Ras Beirut is perhaps the only community in Lebanon that did not experience any direct violent confrontation between its co-existing groups. Surely the quiescent and untroubled setting of the protective land itself, embraced by sea and sky, must have sheltered AUB from further adversity, enabling it unfailingly to restore and enrich its distinguished legacy.

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