

CHAPTER 2

Butrus al-Bustani

From Protestant Convert to Ottoman Patriot and Arab Reformer

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Butrus al-Bustani is a key figure of nineteenth-century *Nabda*.¹ Historians relied mainly on obituaries and funeral speeches to piece together what amounted to the biography of a remarkably complex and evolving thinker. The family of Butrus, son of Bulus, son of 'Abdallah al-Bustani, hailed from the northern village of Baqr Qasha in Mt. Lebanon, situated between the coastal city of Tripoli and the highland town of Bsharré.² In the late eighteenth century, Butrus's grandfather moved to the confessionally mixed and economically prospering town of Dayr al-Qamar in Mt. Lebanon's Shuf Mountains. The latter sloped up from the coastal strip stretching between the Ottoman administrative center of Saida in the south and the emerging port and economic powerhouse of Beirut in the north. The grandfather then settled in nearby Dibbieh, where Butrus was later born in November 1819.³ Around this time, Maronite peasants began to migrate south into the Shuf—which was dominated by Druze emirs and sheikhs—to look for work in the silk industry. Meanwhile, Greek Orthodox and Catholic families established minor

intellectual centers in nearby Shwayfat, Kafr Shima, Shemlan, and coastal Damour.⁴

Young Butrus attended the prestigious Maronite boarding school at 'Ayn Warqa, where he studied and later taught theology, logic, and philosophy and acquired a number of classical and contemporary languages. According to George Antonius, he "stood out among his contemporaries, both for his character and for the brilliance of his attainments; and the monks selected him for a scholarship at the Maronite College in Rome. He was willing to go but his recently widowed mother wept at the thought of her son being sent so far and entreated him to stay."⁵ al-Bustani left 'Ayn Warqa after the Egyptian occupation and the reign of Bashir II ended in 1840 but remained in the Saida-Dayr al-Qamar-Beirut triangle all his life.

Many of al-Bustani's future associates would leave Mt. Lebanon for the same Beirut neighborhood, the extramural Zokak al-Blat, where Protestant missionaries had set up shop. Nasif al-Yaziji left the court of the Arslan emirs at Kafr Shima in 1840. Other Nahdawis arrived in Zokak al-Blat at around the same time. Khalil al-Khuri (1836–1907), Beirut's first private newspaper owner, was the first to popularize a sense of Syrian identity.⁶ Khalil Sarkis (1842–1915), an orphaned convert to Protestantism who was to apprentice at Khuri's *Hadiqat al-Akbbār*, arrived in the neighborhood as a young boy. Sarkis became al-Bustani's in-law and founded the newspaper *Lisan al-Hal*. After 1860, scholars like Husayn Bayhum (1833–81) and 'Abd al-Qadir al-Qabbani (1847–1935) also moved to Zokak al-Blat from intramural Beirut to form scientific, literary, and educational partnerships with these Mt. Lebanon emigres.⁷

al-Bustani's descent from the Shuf Mountains to the coast was a move into exile in two senses: he left behind his home, job, and family, and he also left behind his Maronite faith.

There are conflicting stories about al-Bustani's conversion to Protestantism but the following reconstruction appears the most plausible: al-Bustani had a faith-related fallout in 'Ayn Warqa—probably with the Maronite patriarch himself. Such disagreement may, in the worst case, have resulted in excommunication and banishment, even death. To escape such a fate, he quit his job and relocated to Beirut, where Protestant missionaries had opened a chapel for preaching in Arabic the previous year.⁸ al-Bustani's reputation as a "famous student from a famous school, proficient in Arabic, Syriac, knowing Latin and speaking Italian" preceded him. He was welcomed in the American mission, where, in the recollections of his friend Cornelius Van Dyck, "it was not long before he acquired the English language."⁹

The less friendly Protestant missionary Henri Jessup recalled that "about the year 1840 [al-Bustani] found, in reading the Syriac Testament, the doctrine of justification by faith, and leaving the monastic retreat, fled to Beirut, where he entered the house of Dr. Eli Smith [in Zokak al-Blat] for protection."¹⁰ Sometime before June 1842, al-Bustani "[had] become gradually, and from his own reflections, a firm Protestant, and manifest[ed] tender conscience."¹¹ al-Bustani and Smith became close friends and intellectual soul mates between 1841 and Smith's death in 1857. During this period, al-Bustani learned typesetting, book printing, and oratory skills. His first major Arabic translation, *al-Bab al-maftuh fi 'amal al-rub* in 1843, was Eli Smith's doctrinal text of the Protestant faith. At the height of his missionary zeal, al-Bustani briefly considered the civil strife unfolding in the mid-1840s as an opportunity to proselytize, or—in his words—"an opening for the propagation of the gospel and a hastening of the approach of the day of the discomfiture of false worships." Yet, when he lost family members in a Druze raid on his village

Dibbieh in 1845, al-Bustani reportedly blamed its occurrence on irresponsible Christians who had provoked the conflict.¹²

al-Bustani's marriage to Rahil 'Ata (1826–94) was a watershed in his life. While unacknowledged in the historiography until recently, their relationship came to influence the *Nabda's* ideals of domestic love and equality.¹³ Rahil 'Ata was born to a Greek Orthodox family in Beirut. She was educated in the household of Eli and Sarah Smith (d. 1836), where she functioned as a kind of translator-companion in residence and “took a rank somewhere between a daughter and a servant.”¹⁴ She became one of the first girls at their American Mission School for Girls to learn English, and soon she began teaching there. She made a name for herself as a translator of children's books into Arabic, and by the time Rahil and Butrus met at Eli Smith's office, she was a leader in the growing community of Beirutis associated with the Protestant missionaries. Rahil hesitated to accept Butrus's marriage proposal. When she finally did in 1843, it forced her to elope because her widowed mother disapproved of the groom on account of his conversion. Although historical sources on her are silent, Rahil appears to have been an active partner in al-Bustani's translation work for the missionaries, the evangelical work for the Native Church, and his social, educational, and literary activism. She also helped set up the first of Beirut's many literary societies in late 1847.¹⁵

In the late 1840s, the American missionaries attempted to recruit al-Bustani to become an ordained minister.¹⁶ As with the Maronites' attempt to send him to Rome, he was reluctant. Perhaps his zeal had worn off, or his family duties took precedence. In a letter dated January 6, 1852, al-Bustani wrote to Smith: “my present resolution is to accept no office either religious or secular that is public, for many reasons which I wish to keep to

myself not wishing to be called upon to give them out.”¹⁷ Instead, he had organized the local Protestant community to petition for an Arabic-speaking Protestant church.¹⁸ After months of resistance from missionaries, the Native Church of Beirut was founded in 1848, the year al-Bustani was recalled to Beirut to work with Eli Smith on the massive project of translating the Bible into Arabic.¹⁹

Two years earlier, al-Bustani had joined the most liberal-minded American missionary Cornelius van Dyck to teach at the new Protestant seminary of ‘Abayh. From there he commuted frequently back to Beirut to maintain his recent marriage and growing family.²⁰ Through Cornelius van Dyck’s intervention, al-Bustani finally obtained financial security when he became first dragoman at the American consulate in Beirut in 1851. The position, which he held until 1862, allowed him to gain financial self-subsistence to devote his career to education, publishing, and cultural life. He cofounded multiple salons that attracted a wide multiconfessional membership.²¹ al-Bustani lectured on slavery, Beirut’s history, and classical Arabic poetry—topics that suggest the growing intellectual curiosity he would pursue more systematically in the 1860s and 1870s. His first publications appeared in the 1840s: he translated *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in 1844; a textbook on arithmetic came out in 1848; and another on accounting three years later.²² His famous lecture “The Education of Women,” published in 1849, “intended to bring about an awakening [*nabda*] of women’s determination to acquire knowledge so that they are treated with dignity, and also to rally men to support the reform of the women’s dire situation and activities.”²³

al-Bustani’s conversion to Protestantism was in part an escape from a Maronite clergy that had just abducted and killed’ As‘ad Shidyaaq, one of the first Maronite converts.²⁴

As'ad Shidyahq died enchained in solitary confinement in 1830, disowned by his family and abandoned by the American missionaries, who refused to come to his defence.²⁵ Much later, al-Bustani “broke the Ottoman-Arab silence that had covered up the tragedy” in his manuscript *Qissat As'ad Shidyahq*. Written in early 1860, it accused the Maronite patriarch in no uncertain terms of culpability while at the same time eschewing the missionaries’ sectarian narrative of the events. As Makdisi cogently argues, al-Bustani did not present a holier-than-thou version but, rather, offered “an unprecedented ecumenism, and later [in *Nafir Suriyya*] a new liberal pluralism as intolerable to American missionaries as it was to the Maronite Church.”²⁶

The promulgation of the Ottoman imperial reform decree—the Hatt-ı Hümayun of 1856—had an immediate and profound impact on al-Bustani.²⁷ What the Ottoman state offered was the opposite of what most foreign missionaries stood for. He became convinced that the Ottoman state’s commitment to protecting the rights of all subjects would overcome the kind of violence and reentrenched feudal privilege that haunted Mt. Lebanon since the withdrawal of Egyptian troops. Equality between Ottoman Muslims and Christians was a noble principle that al-Bustani was willing to endorse in word and deed.²⁸

The death of his friend and mentor Eli Smith, a year after al-Bustani’s Ottoman turn, led him to reconsider further his relationship with the Protestant mission in Beirut. Cooperation on the Bible translation ceased. His break with the American missionaries was complete when, just before the civil war, he published his account of As'ad al-Shidyahq’s conversion. Preoccupation with Arabic literature supplanted his evangelicalism. In 1859, al-Bustani delivered a long and much-referenced speech on Arab culture, its past glories, its independent formation from the rise of Islam, and its challenges in the present and

future. He identified the Arabic language as the cultural unifier of diverse religious groups and “races” in Bilad al-Sham. Revival *and* innovation were indispensable for survival vis à vis the West and essential to live up to the expectations of Ottoman reform.²⁹

If the Hatt-ı Hümayun of 1856 had raised al-Bustani’s hopes for the possibility of creating modern foundations of society, the civil war in the summer of 1860 shook his optimism profoundly. The reckless behavior of “fanatical” Christian and Druze mountain communities not only “cost twenty thousand people their lives [and] burnt down approximately thirty thousand houses.” It also jeopardized the golden opportunity that the Ottoman reform decree provided for the development of their country.³⁰ al-Bustani’s initial reaction to the fratricidal catastrophe was to immerse himself in the urgent task of organizing the international relief effort for the thousands of refugees who had arrived in Beirut from all over Mt. Lebanon and from Damascus in the summer of 1860. But his participation in the world’s first humanitarian aid operation could barely cover up the inner turmoil the civil war caused him. As he watched the mountain go up in “flames,” the suffering of his former Maronite community must have affected him regardless of his conversion or the question of who cast the first stone. It was as if his compatriots were unable to handle the responsibilities that came with the rights granted by the Ottoman sultan.

AL-BUSTANI AFTER NAFIR SURIYYA

It is not entirely clear why al-Bustani stopped writing the pamphlets of *Nafir Suriyya* in April 1861. Given that the eleventh issue reads in large part like a summary of points made previously, he appears to have planned to make this his last intervention. His intention to stop writing may well have had to do with trying to reach a larger audience and having a more profound

effect on society through engaging with more long-term cultural projects. Bustani articulated his first ideas for the three projects his name became most associated with in *Nafir Suriyya*: the foundation of al-Madrasa al-Wataniyya (the National School) in 1863; the publication of a series of journals in 1870, the most long-lived, innovative, and influential of which was *al-Jinan*; and his lexicographical work which started in 1867.³¹

al-Bustani declared education as the prime means to raise politically and socially responsible subjects in the ninth pamphlet of *Nafir Suriyya*. After he passed on his job as a dragoman at the American consulate general to his eldest son, Salim, he began lobbying for Ottoman permissions and local funding for the establishment of a school where he could educate a new generation of young students in the autoemancipatory and self-reflective virtues he had espoused in his writings. In September 1863, 115 boarders were admitted to his al-Madrasa al-Wataniyya—the “native Academy,” as suspicious American missionaries called the building in Zuqaq al-Bulat.³² Although some missionaries complained that the school deprived the mission of its local teaching staff, and that it was not linked to their Protestant work, William Thomson and Cornelius van Dyck—the “liberal caucus” among American missionaries—quickly realized the potential of al-Bustani’s institution:

The teachers are not allowed to impart religious instruction, but still it is an interesting fact that in a little over three years after the dreadful scenes of massacres and blood[shed] in 1860, there should be gathered in Beirut a school of 115 boarders composed of almost all the various sects in the land and that children of Moslem sheikhs and papal priests, and Druze *okkals* should study side by side... It is a promising fact, too, as bearing upon the future success of the college proposed to be opened in Beirut that the youth of Syria are willing to pay for education, and it is plain that the movement for a college started not a moment too soon.³³

The school was oriented toward teaching languages, Arabic, and related disciplines, such as penmanship, translation, elementary jurisprudence, land surveying, and double-entry bookkeeping, all handy subjects for the government service. The school's opening caused huge distress among the Maronite clergy and Protestant missionaries.³⁴ Daniel Bliss, the president of the Syrian Protestant College (now the American University of Beirut) from 1866 to 1902, continued to question the benefit and efficacy of a school that functioned as a preparatory school for his college but displayed so little missionary zeal and taught more students French than English. Efforts by the Syrian Protestant mission's board of directors to interfere with the curriculum of the National School and to impose conditions on Butrus al-Bustani ended in acrimony, and the financial and institutional ties between the two schools were severed once and for all. Daniel Bliss concluded that "we shall not consent to pay for anything we have not absolute control over."³⁵

In the few student recollections that exist, the school was remembered for its tolerance and the quality of its teachers. al-Bustani recruited a dozen established literati and experienced educators for his school who shared the principle tenet that pupils should be accepted "from all sects, *millets*, and races without discriminating against their personal beliefs or any attempt at proselytizing and [should be given] full license to carry out their religious duties."³⁶

In 1867, the teachers at al-Bustani's National School were at the center of a new literary club for young thinkers. The Syrian Scientific Society constituted itself "for the spread knowledge, science, and arts."³⁷ With its well over one hundred members, the society was decidedly interconfessional, if not antisectarian, and had a far greater outreach than its predecessors. Most

of the members were Beirutis in their early twenties, but its network spanned from Istanbul to Damascus and Cairo. The club was again presided over by al-Bustani and his neighbor and future Ottoman parliamentarian Husayn Bayhum. Lectures included topics like Syrian archaeology and Greek philosophy, translations of the works of François Guizot, and *al-tamaddun* as civilization and as Arab modernity. In its two-year existence, the society attempted to relate the past achievements of Arab civilization to modern Western science, sometimes narrated as a cultural debt owed to Arabs, sometimes as a call for reciprocity.

In the 1870s, al-Bustani expanded the reach of his ideological project by publishing what Tibawi wittily called a “horticultural trio” of journals: the monthly journal *al-Finan* (The Gardens), *al-Janna* (Paradise), and *al-Junayna* (Little Garden).³⁸ On the first page of its inaugural issue of *al-Finan*, al-Bustani lays down his mission: *al-Finan* wishes to “open the gates to the gardens of knowledge and a space where the pens of the intellectuals . . . invite participation of elites and commoners in the circulation of ideas and knowledge.”³⁹ Paradise and garden, of course, share genealogical communalities. Both the Quran and the Bible describe paradise as a garden. But not all gardens represented the afterlife or were cosmic.⁴⁰ The semantic recurrence of the garden/gardener in the *Nabda* (not just in Beirut but also in Istanbul, Cairo, and Baghdad) indexed a deeper discursive practice, a “botanical imagination” at the center of the collective effort to “curate” an ideal/Edenic political space and community. In fact, between 1858 and 1900 dozens of Arabic newspapers across the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire invoked the garden in one way or another.

al-Finan, in particular, was a laboratory of social reform, self-criticism, and cultural revival for the growing numbers of

learned men and women in fin de siècle Beirut. Its serialized historical novels and editorials were public opinion-shaping journalistic events around an urban network of correspondents and readers in the Arabic-speaking Ottoman empire and North Africa. Beirut's cultural production capitalized on an unprecedented global demand for Mt. Lebanon's silk between the 1860s and the 1880s.⁴¹ Both fields of production, sericulture and serialized novels published in journals, were economic and affective wagers on the future. Like al-Bustani's most remarkable intellectual feats—the Arabic lexicon, *Mubit al-Mubit*, and his epic work on the Arabic encyclopaedia, the multitomed *Da'irat al-Ma'arif—al-Finan* would have been financially inconceivable without the economic optimism of the 1860s, reliant, as all projects were, on advance subscriptions by Arabic readers.⁴²

al-Bustani's reinvention as an encyclopaedist marks a wider shift in the *Nabda*. *Nafir Suriyya* was an urgent and immediate address to al-Bustani's contemporaries and *al-Finan's* editorials no less impatiently repeatedly told its readers to swallow the bitter pill of self-reliance and autoemancipation. The lexicographical project in the autumn of his life, however, operated on a different horizon of expectation and a much more long-term frame of reform. Removed from the immediate concerns of social cohesion that had so animated *Nafir Suriyya*, al-Bustani was set on erecting a monument of modern Arabic philology for future generations. As he declared in the introduction to *Mubit al-Mubit*, he also saw his lexicon as an attempt to decenter “the Arabian Desert as the *terra prima* of Arabo-Islamic civilization.”⁴³ What was at stake in al-Bustani's project was achieving Arab culture, literally word for word, in order to stem the perceived loss of “pure Arabic” as much as to incorporate its Syriac and other Shami etymological legacies. This was all the more

urgent because, as Ahmad Faris al-Shidyāq intoned in his *al-Saq ‘ala al-saq* in 1855, “While the Europeans have acquired their language from civilization, we have acquired our civilization from our language.”⁴⁴

After 1860, al-Bustani saw his task as reconsidering that civilization critically. Before we consider some key concepts in *Nafir Suriyya* and situate the claims about language and civilization in chapter 5, the next chapter will provide a sketch of the place of *Nafir Suriyya* in modern Arab historiography.