Toward a Conceptual History
of *Nafir Suriyya*

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Both words of the title of al-Bustani's pamphlets require investigation, as well as his definition of them as *wataniyyat*: What did he mean by *nafir* and what would have been its connotations? And what did *Suriyya* mean to al-Bustani and his generation? Was it a description of a real territory or a potentiality? *al-Nafir* and *Suriyya* are terms that go back to antiquity, but neither had much traction outside liturgical literature until contact with Protestant missionaries gave them new political valence.

al-Nafīr means "clarion" or "trumpet," which was perhaps so self-evident that al-Bustani did not explain the term in his pamphlets.[1] But in *Muhit al-Muhit,* he dedicated almost an entire page to the different declinations and meanings of the root *n-f-r* (from the "bolting of a mare," to "raising of troops," "the fugitive," "estrangement," and "mutual aversion"), before defining *al-nafir* itself: "someone enlisted in a group or cause," and "*al-nafir al-ʿam* means mass mobilization to combat the enemy." The Protestant convert al-Bustani also lists *yawm al-nafir* (Judgment Day)[2] and informs the reader that *al-nafir* is also a trumpet or fanfare *(al-buq)*[3] containing associations with Israfil,

the archangel of death alluded to in the Bible and the Quran.[4]
Then he mentions *Nafir Suriyya* itself as a set of "meditations
on the events of 1860 published in eleven issues that we called
wataniyyat." Like many historians before us, we translate the
term as "clarion" in order to capture both the apocalyptic mood
of the text and the author's passionate call for social concord and
overcoming adversity.[5]

At first sight, the term *Suriyya* is less complex. After all, al-
Bustani defined the territory as Barr al-Sham and Arabistan,
two Ottoman terms for what later Syrian nationalists considered
Greater Syria. But al-Bustani did not give clear boundaries for
this land except to lament in issue 5 that "Syria lies between
two countries [Egypt and Turkey] that have often pulled it in
different directions." So why did he replace Barr, or Bilad al-
Sham, the common referent for Ottoman Syria, with the ancient
Hebrew and Latinate term *Syria?*[6] In his *Khutba* of 1859, he had
delineated the essence of and threats to Arab culture, but he
made no reference to Syria. *Nafir Suriyya* was the first instance
where al-Bustani annunciated "ancient Syria" as a parameter of
identity, as a benchmark for contemporary Syrians and a source
of social unity.[7]

The political semantics first began to shift from Bilad—or
Barr—al-Sham and Arabistan to Syria during the Egyptian
occupation from 1831 to 1840.[8] *Nafir Suriyya*'s paradigmatic adop-
tion of "Suriyya" very likely stems from its author's contact with
American missionaries, particularly Eli Smith. In 1833, the same
year Nasif al-Yaziji wrote his *Historical Treatise on the Conditions
of Mount Lebanon in Its Feudal Age,* Smith had defined Syria as the
"general name for the country that lies along the whole breadth
of the Eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, extending inland to
the deserts of Arabia, and having the territories of Egypt on the
south, and the river Euphrates with the mountains of Cilicia on

the north."[9] From the first literary society al-Bustani cofounded with Eli Smith in 1847 to Daniel Bliss's Syrian Protestant College in 1866, the Americans propagated a Syrianist imagination that was conspicuously at odds with Muslim, Ottoman, and Lebanist geographical imaginations.

Nafir Suriyya contained many ideas about Syria that were already expressed in Beirut's first privately run newspaper, *Hadiqat al-Akhbar.* Its editor-in-chief, Khalil Khuri (1836–1907), was al-Bustani's neighbor, a noted fiction writer, and an amateur historian.[10] His book *Kharabat Suriyya, the Ruins of Syria* (1861) was the first in Arabic to use Syria in the title of a major *Nahda* publication and drew on archaeological texts of the early missionaries and adopted their mournfulness about current day Syria: "Where are the temples of Baalbak and Jerusalem? Where is the royal purple of Tyre? Where are the workshops of Saida and the academies of Beirut? . . . All is long gone."[11] The missionaries had set out to reclaim the Holy Land but instead of returning to the roots of Christianity, they ended up in Beirut, where contact with its inhabitants, particularly the literary figures, and the civil war of 1860 forced them to adjust their preconceived ideas.[12] One of *Nafir Suriyya*'s remarkable features was how it turned the experience of violence and loss—without diminishing it—into a calling for hope that even American missionaries came around to adopting. It is in this sense of forging a Syrian community of suffering that the idea of patriotism with all its contradictions— "it repeats the event it wishes only to have described"—was born.[13]

Subsequent local historians of the "Syrian nation," starting with Elias Matar (1874), Jurji Yanni (1881), and Yusuf Dibs (1893–1905), elided "Syria's" "baptism of fire" of 1860 and telescoped deep into the past.[14] Like Khuri and al-Bustani, they did so relying largely on European literature.[15] What changed was

the emergence of geographical determinism. It had its origins in French cartography and archaeology, particularly Elisée Reclus's influential *Nouvelle géographie universelle* (1884) and Victor Bérad's *Les Phéniciens et l'Odyssée* (1902), and was popularized in Beirut by the Jesuit geographer and historian Henri Lammens (1862–1937). The geographical determinism of these geographers and their students at the Université de St. Joseph was Islamophobic and anti-Ottoman. It conjured up Syria as a distinctly Christian and non-Arab territorial entity in which "Lebanon is for Syria what the Nile River is for Egypt."[16] These early expressions of Syrianism and Lebanism had much in common with each other but little with those of the Bustanis. These exclusivist ideas were an anathema to the pre-Mandate *Nahda*.

Only when the Ottoman decentralization movement and Arab nationalism challenged both Phoenicianism and the Syrian antiquity narrative after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 did Syrian and Lebanese nationalisms start to move apart and compete with each other.[17] Syrian nationalists challenged the old narrative that Syrians were Christian. They insisted that Syrians were Arabs and began to claim that Damascus was "the beating heart of Arabism." Since the political turbulence following the end of Ottoman rule, most articulations and explorations of Arab nationalisms have focused on their transformation from "birth" to maturation to aberration, apogee, or "death." This diachronic scheme charts the transition from territory-based patriotism to ethnocentric nationalism, i.e., from nineteenth-century *wataniyya* to twentieth-century *qawmiyya*. If *al-qawmiyya* came to challenge the colonial division of the Arab nation in the twentieth century, it also criticized the alleged parochialism of *wataniyya* formations.[18] These later conceptual battles were not al-Bustani's problem space. His idea of

Syria was unencumbered by colonial and nationalist occupation with the geographic form of the nation, border drawing, and demographic exclusions. Rather, he was preoccupied with the constitution of a transcendent harmonious community.

al-Watan was the central concept throughout *Nafir Suriyya*. But in *Clarion 5*, a new sociological concept appeared for the first time, *al-jinsiyya:* the new "the source of attachment . . . is kinship *(al-jinsiyya)*." In this passage, al-Bustani laments the way in which the resurgence of prejudice *(al-gharadh)* against other groups has shifted from an interfactional designation of us versus them to one based on hitherto "sacred names, . . . like Druze and Christian, then Muslim and Christian." *al-Jinsiyya* has come to mean nationality and the normative source of attachment to the independent nation-state. al-Bustani's *al-Jinan,* Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq's *al-Jawa'ib,* and other journals that cropped up from the 1870s onward first willed the semantic shift from kinship to nationality.[19] They understood that language can formulate new political communities.

al-Jinsiyya, an abstract noun derived from *al-jins,* occupies center stage in *Nafir Suriyya* starting from the November 1860 *Clarion,* notably when the discussion shifts from Syria to Arab culture: "we advise you to avoid this natural inclination to condemn an entire race *[al-jins]* and to attack it because of the failings of some of its members." *al-Jins,* too, has undergone significant shifts in meaning since al-Bustani penned *Nafir Suriyya.*[20] The abstract noun of *janasa* (to make alike, to classify, to assimilate), *al-jins* has been around since early Arabic literature. But in the context of racial stereotyping, it was of recent coinage, and al-Bustani may have been alerted by American missionaries' discourse on the Arabs. For example, Eli Smith invoked *al-jins al-ʿarabi* in a lecture to one of al-Bustani's new cultural societies in 1849. The fact

that al-Bustani speaks of a "*natural* inclination" suggests that *jins* may not have referred to a new concept imported by foreigners but was likely a new term for an existing concept.

Nahdawis and missionaries alike believed that people could escape racial stereotypes. The particularly brutal history of racism in the Americas along with insights of the twentieth century spawned anticolonial theorists and critical race theorists. al-Bustani, by contrast, did not have the vocabulary to challenge racism itself. So, instead of challenging the epistemic Eurocentrism of his times, he advocated a program to improve the destiny of Arab society and individuals and adapt to new conditions. The concepts central to this undertaking were *al-adab* and *al-tamaddun.*

Today's Arabic readers know *adab* as "literature."[21] In classical Arabic *al-adab*'s semantic range included sophisticated habits, good behavior, and the ability to fulfill one's role in society, a sense it retains today negatively in the phrase *qalil al-adab* (uncouth) and positively in *muʾaddab* (polite). In al-Bustani's times, *al-adab* was located somewhere between morals *(al-akhlaq)* and education *(al-taʿlim).* The former had ethical resonances in Islamic political philosophy while the latter denoted the *Nahda*'s mantra of public education, expressed by al-Bustani in his lecture "On the Education of Women," written in 1849. Neither alternative term appears in *Nafir Suriyya*—al-Bustani used *akhlaq* only once, in his follow-up article "Patriotism is an Element of Faith" in *al-Jinan,* published in 1870. In his lecture on *ādāb al-ʿArab,* published in 1859, al-Bustani gestured toward the academic concept of the "Arab humanities" in the plural of *al-adab*—"the subject is *ādāb al-ʿArab,* or the sciences *(al-ʿulum),* arts *(al-funun),* or knowledge *(al-maʿarif)* of the Arabs."[22] But most translations, correctly, render the title as "the culture of the Arabs."[23] In *Nafir Suriyya* the meaning of *al-adab* is some-

what different from that in his lecture a year before; the empha-
sis is more on lessons learned from the mistakes of belligerent
human behavior and collective "unbridled passions." In this
context, *moral* and *morals* seem to have a more apt connotation
in our translation of *al-adab/adabi* than the semantics of *culture*
and *cultural*.[24]

al-Bustani dedicated issue II of *Nafir Suriyya* to the desirability
and acquirability of civilization.[25] In this final patriotic pamphlet,
al-Bustani sets out to differentiate the population, between those
who merit the homeland and the reforms he advocated, on the
one hand, and those who disqualify themselves by their unwor-
thy deeds, on the other. Drawing on Ibn Khaldun, he claims that
al-tamaddun (civilization) is derived from the word *madina* (city)
and "opposed to the lifestyle of the Bedouins who lack civiliza-
tion." "The natural state into which man is born is barrenness"
but with innovation, hard work, and diligence one can achieve
the highest standards of civilization. In many ways, al-Bustani
shared Matthew Arnold's conservative, if not elitist, definition
of culture as "the study of harmonious human perfection."[26]

Adopting the racist taxonomy of Western missionaries, al-
Bustani holds that half way between the "cannibals of distant
Africa" and the "dignitaries of Paris and England," the fault line
between barbarity and civilization passes right through Syria
between "the Arab inhabitants of the desert and the inhabit-
ants of Beirut." But "genuine civilization is that state of social
organization which suits the development of all forces of the
human race, individually and collectively." If everybody was to
be brought into the national fold and given the chance at civili-
zation, the prospective nation would be a distinctly urban uto-
pia. Stereotypical Arab Bedouins, however, remain a constant
menace and anxiety-inducing threats of civilizational relapse.

Culture-talk and clash-of-civilization narratives have haunted the West and the Middle East since civilization first entered the Orientalist paradigm in the early nineteenth century.[27] But, as Peter Hill reminds us, the Arab discourse on civilization changed even during al-Bustani's lifetime. In fact, there was a significant shift between Khalil Khuri's use of *tamaddun* in the late 1850s and the invocations in *Nafir Suriyya* that reflects an intellectual crisis of confidence in al-Bustani, precipitated by the war of 1860. While the owner of *Hadiqat al-Akhbar* expressed optimism for the "new age" and autogenetic attainability of the highest stages of "civilization," the author of the "Lecture on the Culture of the Arabs" and *Nafir Suriyya* was not so sanguine about the prospects of cultural refinement alone and insisted that in the current global competitiveness, no culture is an island. By the 1870s the meaning of being a civilized compatriot had consolidated around the mastery of synthesis of essential Arab qualities and contingent European accomplishments.[28]