Identities in early Arabic journalism: The case of Louis bnj
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Summary and conclusion

In the present study I have drawn attention to the ambiguity of identities during the Nahḍa era. The first generation of Arab journalists in Beirut could refer to themselves as not only Syrians, Ottomans, Easterners, Arabs, but also as Christians and Beirutis. In addition, I have also highlighted the fluidity of the meaning of these identities during the nineteenth century. In various degrees, the meaning of the religious identity, the Eastern identity, and territorially defined identities that revolve around a fatherland transformed in this period. To complicate things further, some intellectuals ascribed identities to people who did not ascribe these identities to themselves. For example, al-Bustānī claimed the right to define the identity of the people who live in Syria as Syrians. However, in the social consciousness of many people who were—in al-Bustānī’s eyes—Syrians the religious identity played a much more central role.

In the light of this ambiguity and fluidity, what interests me is how individuals themselves deal with their identity and the identity of others in their communication. Membership Categorization Analysis and Discourse Analysis help explain how identities function as something that people do in communication. My approach was specifically aimed at recognizing the possibility that different people, when referring to the same identity, have different ideas about what it means to ‘have’ an identity.

The question that I asked in this study was twofold. Firstly, how does Şābūnji use references to identities in his journalistic texts from the period between 1870 and 1880? Secondly, does Şābūnji’s usage of references to identities support the observation that identities in early Arabic private journalism are ambiguous and fluid? I have addressed these questions in three case studies. In these case studies I have discussed passages that contain information that relate to who ‘we’ are, or how ‘we’ should act, according to Şābūnji. The ‘we’ took different forms in this study: as Easterners, Syrians, and Catholics, but also as civilized and enlightened people. My concerns in these case studies were
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twofold. Firstly, on whose behalf does Ṣābūnjī (pretend to) speak? Secondly, what practices, characteristics, features, and values are couched in terms of the identity under consideration? What follows is a short overview per case study of these two concerns.

Overview of the case studies

The first case study addresses the conflict about Voltaire between Louis Ṣābūnjī, on the one hand, and Buṭrus and Salīm al-Bustānī, on the other hand. Buṭrus al-Bustānī’s ideologically inspired rhetoric, revolving around a Syrian fatherland in which the different religious communities were united, was clearly understood by Ṣābūnjī. In response, Ṣābūnjī suggested that al-Bustānī’s proposal for a Syrian fatherland and identity was really about making people abandon their religion. Ṣābūnjī thereby heavily attacked al-Bustānī’s ideas. More importantly, Ṣābūnjī pointed out that al-Bustānī’s ideal of a Syrian fatherland in fact conflicted with the religious essence of the East. In this way Ṣābūnjī represented al-Bustānī as acting in conflict with what is expected of Easterners. It is in this sense that Ṣābūnjī questioned al-Bustānī’s identity as an Easterner. In addition, Ṣābūnjī used the term ‘fatherland’ (waṭan) without the ideologically charged connotation of unity that al-Bustānī attached to the term. With this usage Ṣābūnjī also subtly undermined al-Bustānī’s ideology of unity.

In this case study, Ṣābūnjī pretends to speak on behalf of the Easterners. At the same time, he also pretends to speak for the community of believers. From this starting point Ṣābūnjī contests al-Bustānī identity as one of ‘us’, as one of the Easterners or one of the believers. The most fundamental practice that Ṣābūnjī addressed is paying attention to the writings of Voltaire. Ṣābūnjī unequivocally couches this as un-Eastern, thereby attacking the Bustānīs and also a number of –unnamed– people from Aleppo. A second practice that deserves mentioning is worrying about potential natural disasters. This is couched as un-Eastern by the Bustānīs. What matters in both cases is that the East is represented as essentially religious. This religious background is characterized by the many Eastern saints and prophets, and by the claim that many different religions trace their roots to the East.
The second case study addresses Şābūnjī criticism of the Maronites. Şābūnjī argues that they maintain beliefs and practices that are backward and reproachable. These practices and beliefs, he points out, do not conform to the norms of the enlightened era that is the nineteenth century, but rather to the ‘dark Middle Ages’. He even goes as far as arguing that any contact with the Maronites should be avoided because of their actions –complaining to the state authorities and not to the church authorities. The Maronites are also represented as hostile, aggressive and dangerous. Besides the Maronites, Şābūnjī also targets the inhabitants of Mount Lebanon; they are represented as backward mountain dwellers who live in ‘the mists of ignorance’.

Şābūnjī pretends to speak on behalf of the Catholics when addressing the Maronites. Şābūnjī also pretends to speak on behalf of those who are progressed and civilized when addressing both the Maronites and the Lebanese. This group is perhaps not a clearly defined collective identity, but Şābūnjī does not fail to point out who falls into this group and who does not. Those included are Şābūnjī himself, the Americans, the Chinese, and Syriac Catholic clergy, and those excluded are the Lebanese and the Maronites. Perhaps superfluously, Şābūnjī underlines that he does not belong to the Lebanese. Characteristics and practices that have been mentioned include the following: living in caves and being ignorant of basic Christian dogmas are couched as Lebanese; recognizing Yūhannā Mārūn as a saint and performing pilgrimages to Maronite Monasteries are couched as un-Catholic; separating good history from corrupted history is couched as progressed.

The third case study addresses how identities are invoked without explicit mentioning, by relying on the background knowledge that was associated with the person’s own community and with the community of foreigners. I have treated al-Naḥla’s Arab public and its English public as two collective identities, coinciding with those who read Arabic and those who read English. The background knowledge that underlay references to these groups was essentially the opposition between native failure and foreign success. The Arab public is repeatedly represented as failing, as backward and in need of progress, while the English
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public as already successful and progressed. Ṣābūnjī assigns himself the role of intermediary between the two publics.

More so than in the second case study, Ṣābūnjī pretends to speak on behalf of those who are progressed and civilized. As such, he discursively places himself in the same category as the Anglo-Saxons. This perspective enables him to see the –backward– Arab public through his –progressed– eyes, and in various passages he paternalizes his Arab public. In addition, to the English public he pretends to speak on behalf of the Easterners. This is significant because he simultaneously represents himself as unlike the stereotypical backward Easterner.

The opposition between native failure and foreign success was articulated in various ways, such as in terms of failing to pay promptly or in terms of the total length of railways that have been constructed.

Ambiguous and fluid identities
The ambiguity and fluidity of identities reverberate in all three cases, albeit to different degrees and in different manifestations. I have identified three general manifestations: disagreement on the meaning of identities, the use of identities as vehicles for underlying concerns, and the use of identities and their underlying concerns for personal purposes. What follows is an overview of these manifestations.

The first manifestation is disagreement on the meaning of identities. The first case study succinctly shows that the meanings of identities were not only ambiguous but were also subject to disagreement and debate. The polemic between al-Bustānī and Ṣābūnjī confronted the readers with the presence of different and conflicting interpretations of what it means to be Eastern and Syrian. Significantly, their debate took place in spite of the fact that both understood themselves to be Eastern and Syrian. The polemic therefore invited the readers to contemplate, firstly, what is expected of Syrians and Easterners, and secondly, whether they agreed with al-Bustānī’s or Ṣābūnjī’s points of view. In other words, in the presence of conflicting interpretations about what it means
to be Eastern and Syrian, the polemic stimulated the readers to reflect on their own identity as Easterner or Syrian.

In the second case study, the meaning of being Catholic was the contested topic, and the readers were confronted with conflicting ideas and norms that apply to Catholics. The conflict ceased to be a purely Catholic issue when Şābūnjī argued that the Maronites failed to adhere to universal norms that apply to everybody and not just to Catholics. In this way, both Catholic and non-Catholic readers are stimulated to reflect on what exactly is expected of them. The first and the second case study demonstrate that the meanings of different identities were not only ambiguous and fluid, but were also discussed and debated by the people who understood themselves to ‘have’ this identity.

The second manifestation is the use of identities as vehicles for other concerns. A recurrent observation in the three case studies is that identities were used as vehicles for fundamental concerns that are not immediately apparent when analyzing identities. What mattered most in all three case studies was ultimately two different concerns. The first concern relates to the normativity of acquiring or maintaining religion in the light of unbelief, and the second concern relates to the normativity of acquiring or maintaining civilization and progress in the light of backwardness.

The first concern, of religion versus unbelief, is Şābūnjī’s central concern in the first case study. With each reference to Syrian, Eastern, Arab, foreign (ajnabi), Maronite and the Protestant identities, Şābūnjī also articulates the norm that one should be religious. References to Eastern, Arab, Maronite, and Protestant identities are informed by the presence of religiousness, while references to foreign, mutafarnij, and the Syrian waṭanī-identities are informed by a lack of religiousness. What is important is that each reference to any of these identities also reminds the readers of the normativity of being religious, regardless of one’s precise denomination.

In the second and third case studies, the normativity of acquiring or maintaining civilization and progress reverberates in each reference to an identity. References to Maronite and Lebanese
identities are informed by their backwardness, while references to Syriac, American, Eastern, Western, Anglo-Saxon, and Chinese identities are informed by their progress and civilization. At the same time, every reference articulates the norm that stipulates that one should be progressed and civilized.

The two fundamental concerns discussed here can also be approached in terms of collective identities. Šābūnjī was most concerned about belonging to the group of believers and to the group of civilized people. From Šābūnjī’s point of view, the group of believers excluded persons who are from another angle one of ‘us’. This is the case for the Bustānīs; they are undeniably Easterners but Šābūnjī took pains to point out that they acted in conflict with what is expected of Easterners. Similarly, the civilized group includes persons who are from another angle outsiders. This is the case for the ‘French elite’ who also hate Voltaire, even though they are not Easterners and therefore not essentially religious. Other outsiders who are counted as civilized are the Americans and the Chinese.

My focus on these underlying concerns sheds new light on the issue of self-view of Nahḍa intellectuals. In particular, these concerns show why a focus on the labels that they applied to themselves, such as Syrian, Eastern, or Ottoman, give a skewed representation of someone’s self-view. As I have pointed out, identities such as Syrian, Eastern, or Maronite were referred to in order to convey more concerns that relate to being religious, progressed, and civilized. A focus on these labels alone –without taking into account the communicative context– diverts attention away from the observation that belonging to the group of believers and to the group of civilized people mattered most to Šābūnjī.

The third manifestation is the use of identities and their underlying concerns for personal purposes. I have argued that in al-Naḥla Šābūnjī made use of existing ideas about the backwardness of the Easterners and the success of –in this case– the Anglo-Saxons, for personal purposes. On the surface, Šābūnjī represents himself as an Easterner who was concerned about realizing success and progress in the light of present Eastern backwardness. Hence, he presents ideas about foreign success and
native failure as the starting point for narratives of reform, geared towards making the Easterners or Arabs more progressed and more civilized.

However, a close analysis of the relevant texts shows that these ideas were also used for more mundane purposes. Almost all of the articles that speak about scientific discoveries or new inventions are only presented to the English public, even though it is the Easterners who seek progress and advancement. I interpret this discrepancy as an indication that Šābūnjī had a personal motive for his magazine. He was concerned with cultivating an image of himself as an atypical –because progressed– Easterner, in order to get in good graces with English policymakers, public figures, or potential financiers.

Important, underlying ideas about native failure and foreign success were essential aspects of this concern. Šābūnjī used the opposition between foreign success and native failure, not as a starting point for narratives of reform, but for personal purposes. Thus, from an unexpected angle, the third case study also highlights the ambiguity of identities. My analysis shows that what is expected of Arabs or Easterners –success and progress through reform– is an ambiguous and undefined aim, which can be invoked for widely different purposes.

**Identities as communication, not as self-view**

The three manifestations of the ambiguity of identity highlight different ways of how identities such as Eastern, Syrian, or Arab, were used in order to accomplish different communicative goals. It is exactly this ambiguity that allowed Šābūnjī and his peers significant freedom to refer to identities with a variety of functions in different context. Moreover, it is this ambiguity which makes the topic of identity a complex issue for scholars of the Nahḍa era.

My approach goes against two approaches that I outlined in the introduction: the overlap approach and the compartmentalization approach. The overlap approach understands one’s identity as the combination of different overlapping identities, primarily Ottoman, Arab, Syrian, and Eastern. The compartmentalization approach attempts to associate
every identity as corresponding with one element of the social experience, such as culture, language, or nation. Both approaches understand terms such as Eastern and Syrian as part of self-views, and take them to require no further discussion.

Neither approach can account for the three manifestations of the ambiguity of identity in a satisfactory way. The debate between al-Bustānī and Ṣābūnji shows that there are conflicting ideas about what is normative, conventional, or suitable for Easterners and Syrians. These conflicting ideas are overlooked when terms such as Easterner are taken to require no further discussion. In other words, these conflicting ideas are overlooked when observing that both viewed themselves as Eastern and Syrian. What should be taken into account is what these references to East and Syrian stand for. In this study, they stand for fundamental concerns; Ṣābūnji was most concerned about belonging to the the group of believers and to the group of civilized and progressed people. Both approaches disregard this aspect of self-view and group identification in favor of territorially, religiously, culturally, linguistically, or nationally defined identities.

A similar observation applies to Ṣābūnji’s London-based *al-Nahla*. In this magazine Ṣābūnji distanced himself from his fellow Arabs and Easterners by attempting to sketch a particular picture of himself in England. From the perspective of self-view, Ṣābūnji presented himself as progressed, civilized, similar to the English and dissimilar to the Arabs and Easterners. Simultaneously, his readers viewed him as an Arab and as an Easterner, which is unremarkable for a journalist and editor of a –partly– *Arabic* magazine. These different points of view again underlines that identities such as Arab and Eastern do not adequately describe Ṣābūnji’s self-view. Again, belonging to the group of civilized and progressed people played a more important role in Ṣābūnji’s social consciousness than belonging to the group of Arabs and Easterners. The conclusion is again that both the overlap approach as well as the compartmentalization approach disregard this group identification.

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**Ṣābūnjī as representative of early Arab journalists**

The present study can be regarded as a single case study on how Ṣābūnjī gave meaning to his social world through referring to identities. One can point out that persons such as Buṭrus al-Bustānī may have constructed identities differently. Al-Bustānī struggled much more than Ṣābūnjī with issues that pertain to realizing native success in the light of native failure. This difference might well resonate in al-Bustānī’s writings, in terms of how identities are used in communication. Studies that apply the same approach to other early Arab journalists may therefore shed further light on the uses and functions of identities during the Nahḍa era.

However, there are reasons to assume that Ṣābūnjī’s writings can also give insight into the values, norms and expectations of his social milieu, that of early Arab journalists. First and foremost, Ṣābūnjī was a public intellectual who did not work in isolation from others. Instead, he operated in a discursive field which was described in the second chapter. He contributed to shaping the meanings of identities in his social milieu by referring to identities. It is for this reason that his references to identities reflect, and give insight into, discourses of identity that are socially shared. The representation of the East as essentially religious is a case in point. Ṣābūnjī referred to the East with this association, but he was not the first nor the last to do so. The idea that the East is religious was an association that was shared by others too. When arguing that Easterners had nothing to worry about, al-Bustānī invoked the same idea in the discussion about the solar flames.

Besides this theoretical line of argument, there are two more reasons as to why Ṣābūnjī’s texts give insight into his social milieu, and not only into his own preferences and opinions. Firstly, his polemical disposition accentuates the unacceptable or unconventional characteristics of his opponents, the Bustānīs and the Maronites. In this way Ṣābūnjī’s texts give insight into what is perceived as normative and conventional for members of a community. Secondly, my biographical sketch has shown that various of Ṣābūnjī’s writings contradict each other. I have explained these contradictions in terms of opportunism, by proposing that Ṣābūnjī wrote what his intended audience wanted to hear. This
principle is also discernible in the third case study, in which I compared the Arabic and the English versions of *al-Naḥla*. On many occasions Ṣā'būnjī explicitly confronted his English audience with the success of the Anglo-Saxons—and hence of the Self—whereas the Arabic audience is only subtly reminded of the success of the – Anglo-Saxon– Other. I have argued that Ṣā'būnjī did so in an attempt to get in good graces with English policymakers, public figures, or potential financiers.

For these two reasons I argue that Ṣā'būnjī’s texts also give insight into the ideas, norms, and expectations that were held by his social milieu. On these grounds, it can be assumed that the two concerns that are discussed in detail above—the need to acquire or maintain religion in the light of unbelief, and the need to acquire or maintain civilization and progress in the light of backwardness—were not only Ṣā'būnjī’s concerns but also those of his peers and of his readers.

**Final remarks**

A few other remarks deserve to be reiterated here. Firstly, in the polemical texts that target the Maronites, religion plays a pivotal role. I have demonstrated that in these texts Ṣā'būnjī essentialized religious differences, and in this way contributed to an atmosphere of religious separation, segregation and polarization. Each negative reference to the Maronites reproduced and reified us-versus-them dichotomies that underlie sectarian tensions. In this way, Ṣā'būnjī’s pamphlets contributed to the culture of sectarianism that Makdisi discerned in nineteenth-century Ottoman Lebanon, in spite of the fact that Ṣā'būnjī nowhere attached any political significance to the religious identity. Ṣā'būnjī texts also diametrically oppose al-Bustānī’s repeated campaigns against religious polarization, an aspect that was discussed in Chapter Four. I am unaware of other public intellectuals who expressed similar provocative sentiments in the same context.

Secondly, this study has highlighted the need for a comprehensive study on what I call ‘auto-Orientalism’. The idea that ‘we’ are Easterners was regularly invoked, and therefore familiar and well-understood by the audience of early Arabic
journalism. In the present study, it was found that the meaning of being Eastern, in particular in contrast to being foreign, lies in its associations with religion and spirituality. In this sense the East and the Easterners were invoked by Ṣābūnjī as well as by the Bustānīs. Nevertheless, it is unclear when this identity emerged and became meaningful, who was associated with its emergence, and in what context this took place. In addition, it is unclear as to how its meaning transformed through the years, and whether different social groups, such as Muslims or Christians, used it differently.

Thirdly, I would like to stress again that texts by less well-known authors are valuable research material for scholars of the Nahḍa era. For instance, my study of the Beiruti al-Naḥla suggests that various concepts and ideas were meaningful earlier than what has commonly been thought. The most pronounced example of this is Bishāra Zalzal’s reference to the Phoenicians as ‘our ancestors’ in 1870, which is almost 20 years earlier than the earliest reference found by Kaufman.¹