Identities in early Arabic journalism: The case of Louis bnj
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English summary

Between the years 1858 and 1880, the city of Beirut was the indisputable center of Arabic journalism. Numerous newspapers and magazines were published by church authorities, governmental organizations, and private individuals. One of these early Arabic journalists was Louis Ṣābūnji (1838-1931), the central figure of this study.

Louis Ṣābūnji led a remarkable and restless life. He was born in southeast Turkey to a Catholic family. After his studies in Mount Lebanon and Rome, he became a Catholic priest in Diyarbakır and Beirut. While in the latter, he wrote polemical texts that targeted different people. In 1870 his magazine al-Nahla (‘The Bee’) became the first Arabic periodical to be banned by the authorities. Four years later he had to flee Beirut because of an aggressive pamphlet that targeted the –fellow Catholic– Maronites. This pamphlet became listed on the Vatican Index of banned books. In 1876 he found his way to London, where he became involved with Egyptian nationalism, Arab nationalism avant-la-lettre, and issues regarding the Islamic Caliphate. Intriguingly, during this time he published both pro- and anti-Ottoman texts. Between 1890 and 1914 he lived in Istanbul, where he worked as a translator and interpreter of the Western press, in the service of the Ottoman Sultan. The last thirteen years of his life were spent in poverty in the United States.

In this study I focus on the topic of identity and community in the context of early Arabic journalism, and I approach Louis Ṣābūnji’s texts as a window on these matters. Ṣābūnji and his peers could give different answers to the ostensibly simple question: ‘who are we?’ Possible answers were Ottomans, Easterners, Syrians, and Arabs, but also Christians – with very few exceptions early Arabic journalists were Christians– and Beirutis.

A central point of the departure of this study is the observation that the meaning of many of these identities changed during the nineteenth century. Amidst these shifting meanings, I am concerned with friction, discussion, or disagreement about the
meaning of identities in the context of early Arabic journalism. An important conclusion of this thesis is that identity was indeed heavily debated.

In order to highlight different ideas about identities, I focus on how Šābūnjī makes use of identities, by referring to them in his texts. This is therefore a study on discursive practices and specifically on referencing practices. I combine two methodological approaches in this study. Firstly, Membership Categorization Analysis gives insight into how individuals refer to identities in actual communication. Secondly, Discourse Analysis gives insight into the social and discursive context that goes beyond the individual.

In the first case study I analyze the conflict between Louis Šābūnjī and his most prominent peer, Buṭrus al-Bustānī. In 1870 Šābūnjī attacked al-Bustānī because the latter expressed ideas that Šābūnjī traced to Voltaire. Šābūnjī pointed out that expressing these ideas is not comme il faut for Easterners. It is along these lines that he contested al-Bustānī’s identity as an Easterner. Besides references to the Eastern identity, I also analyze references to the Syrian identity, which al-Bustānī regularly invoked.

In the second case study I analyze two pamphlets from 1874 in which Šābūnjī targets Maronite practices and beliefs. His criticism includes lamenting the dirty clothing of Maronite monks, questioning the sanctity of Yūḥannā Mārūn, and arguing that illicit sexual encounters take place in Maronite monasteries. I specifically discuss references to religious identities. I subsequently relate these pamphlets with sectarian violence and religious polarization, an important phenomenon in the history of Lebanon and Syria.

In the third case study I analyze the revived magazine al-Nahla, which appeared in London in the period between 1877 and 1880. It was a bilingual –Arabic and English– magazine, and the two language versions often have different contents. A number of these differences give insight into how Šābūnjī sees the Arabs and the English: the Arabs are represented as backward (the topos of native failure) while the English are represented as advanced (the topos of foreign success). My analysis shows that Šābūnjī made use
of the ideas of native failure and foreign success in order to represent himself as an atypical –because advanced– Easterner.

In all case studies I have found that two fundamental concerns underlie references to identities, whether Ṣābūnjī spoke about Maronites, Easterners, English, Lebanese, et cetera. The first concern is the need to be or become civilized, and the second concern the need to be or become religious. In terms of collective identity, what mattered most to Ṣābūnjī was to be belong to the group of civilized people and to the group of religious people.

Besides my analysis of references to identities, a substantial part of this thesis is devoted to necessary background information about Ṣābūnjī. Various hitherto unstudied sources have shed new light on his biography. This applies most prominently to his life before 1876 and after 1890. An updated bibliography of Louis Ṣābūnjī is included in the appendix. My thesis on Louis Ṣābūnjī demonstrates, in my eyes, that less well-known nineteenth-century Arab intellectuals also deserve to be studied.