

6

A REASSESSMENT OF ANTI-OTTOMAN PLACARDS
IN SYRIA, 1878-1881

Ş. Tufan BUZPINAR*

Soon after the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78, anti-Ottoman placards appeared in important cities of the province of Syria, like Beirut and Damascus, between 1878 and 1881. There are four groups of placards that appeared in Syria during the period under study. The first instance took place in July 1878 when two placards, one in Turkish and one in Arabic, appeared on the streets of Damascus. The second group appeared on the streets of Beirut in June 1880 and John Dickson, the British acting consul, provided a copy of each of the two different placards in Arabic. The third group of placards were posted up on the streets of Beirut, Sidon and Tripoli, and Dickson provided the British Foreign Office with a copy of the placard that had appeared in Beirut. The last placard under review is a printed one, dated March 1881 and distributed by the foreign postal services to the European consuls serving in the Arab provinces.

Since the 1930s, several attempts have been made to explain the meaning of these placards and to identify the individuals who were responsible for them. The majority of the available studies on the subject examined the placards that appeared in 1880, while a few of them focused specifically on the 1881 placard.¹ However, no attempt has been made to explain the placard affairs within the context of the repercussions of the disastrous Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-8 in the region. Similarly, not enough attention has been paid to the two significant aspects of the placard affairs, namely; the Ottoman response and the local reaction to the placards. Thus, this article aims first to contextualise the placard affairs in the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War; second to shed light on the Ottoman response as well as to illuminate how the local dignitaries reacted to the appearance of anti-Ottoman placards. While introducing new information on the subject mainly based on

* Department of History, Istanbul Şehir University. I owe special thanks to my colleagues Gül Tokay and Ayşe Başaran for their invaluable contributions to this article. This article is an updated and revised version of my “Osmanlı Suriyesi’nde Türk Aleyhtarı İlanlar ve Bunlara Karşı Tepkiler, 1878-1881”, *İslam Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Sayı 2, 1998, 73-89.

¹ As will be seen in the following pages, George Antonius, Zeine N. Zeine, A. Latif Tibawi, Shimon Shamir and Butrus Abu-Manneh examined the 1880 placards while Jacob Landau and Selçuk Günay focused on the printed placard of 1881.

Ottoman archival documents, an effort will also be made to reassess what the existing literature has already claimed about the subject matter.

I

George Antonius was the first scholar who gave an account of some of those placards that appeared in 1880, in his well-known book *The Arab Awakening*. As an Arab nationalist, Antonius wrote his book in the mid-1930s, when he was working hard to enhance the Arab cause in Palestine as well as in Britain and the United States. After briefly explaining the placard affairs, Antonius asserted that, the texts of the placards show “a specific programme of national aspirations”.² He also claimed that a secret society formed in Beirut in 1875 by Faris Nimr and his close friends was responsible for the texts and the dis-tribution of the placards.³ Apparently, Antonius was deeply influenced by his father-in-law, Faris Nimr, during their several interviews in Cairo in 1935, when the latter was, at the age of 80, trying to recollect his activist years at the Syrian Protestant College.⁴ He had worked there until he was fired in 1885 because of his Darwinist views. Interestingly, Nimr was only able to give “an idea of their general trend and purport”, but nothing about the content of the placards. During the same period, Antonius interviewed another anonymous member of the claimed secret society, who also did not remember the texts of the placards.⁵

Zeine N. Zeine was the first historian by profession who evaluated the placard affairs in his book entitled *The Emergence of Arab Nationalism*.⁶ Ze-ine made an important contribution to the subject by publishing the Arabic copies of the three placards that appeared in Beirut at different times in 1880, and explaining the backgrounds of some members of the so-called secret society. He also made it clear that the placards were not serious signs of Arab nationalism; rather they were the works of some Christian members of the

² George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1945, (first published in 1938), 84. For two different assessments of this book see, Sylvia Haim, “The Arab Awakening’: A Source for the Historian?” *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series, Vol. 2/4 (1953), 237-250; Albert Hourani, “*The Arab Awakening* Forty Years After,” in his *Emergence of the Modern Middle East*, London: The Macmillan Press, 1985, 193-215.

³ Zeine gives 1876 as the date of its establishment, apparently relying on his interview with Faris Nimr. See, Zeine N. Zeine, *The Emergence of Arab Nationalism With a Background Study of Arab-Turkish Relations in the Near East*, New York: Caravan Books, 1976, 52.

⁴ For Nimr’s short biography see, Y. M Choueiri, “Nimr, Faris”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition (EI2), Vol. VIII., 48-49.

⁵ Antonius, 81-82. Although Nimr migrated to Egypt in 1885, Antonius erroneously gives the date as 1883. See, 81 fn.1.

⁶ The first edition of Zeine’s *The Emergence of Arab Nationalism* was published under the title *Arab-Turkish Relations and the Emergence of Arab Nationalism*, (Beirut: Khayat’s, 1958) and the third edition was dated 1973. In this article, second printing of the third edition (New York: Caravan Books, 1976) is used.

Beirut Masonic Lodge who were eager to see the end of the Ottoman rule in the region.

Zeine, too, interviewed Faris Nimr on the issue of the placards before he died in 1951 and interestingly, unlike what Antonius claimed, Nimr “emphasized that the idea of ‘nationality’ did not exist in the minds of the masses of the people in the Near East at that time. All the ties, relationships and loyalties were denominational and religious, primarily Muslim or Christian...

National unity was impossible under the circumstances.”⁷ However, Nimr reiterated his claim that “their secret society was responsible for issuing a number of these placards and that several of them were in his handwriting.”⁸ They were, as Nimr asserted, strongly provoked against the Ottomans by some members of the French Masonic Lodge of Beirut of which they also became members. As time progressed, they realised that without Muslim participation, it was impossible to weaken the Ottoman rule in the region and by 1883, the society dissolved itself.⁹

After the 1960s, the issue of the placards in Syria became the subject of several studies. Each of these studies tried to shed new light on the issue but since they mostly relied on the same sources, i.e., consular reports and recollection of some local individuals, their contribution to the subject matter was bound to remain limited. The first of these studies belongs to A. L. Tibawi, who made an effort to explain the placard affairs first in the 1960s, and then in the 1970s. In his first attempt, Tibawi’s main contribution was to provide the English translations of the three Arabic placards that appeared in Beirut in 1880, which had previously been published in Arabic by Zeine. After giving full translations and making a brief textual analysis of the placards, he held that they “had very little or no effect” and that the “Ottoman authorities did not take the placards very seriously.”¹⁰ In his first effort, Tibawi was in-decisive about the authors of the placards. In his own words, “the specific demands constitute what might be considered as the ‘national’ programme, common to Muslims and Christians”.¹¹ In his last publication on the subject, entitled *Arabic and Islamic Themes*, however, after republishing the English translations of the three placards, he concluded that “the grievances voiced in

⁷ Zeine, *The Emergence of Arab Nationalism With a Background Study of Arab-Turkish Relations in the Near East*, New York: Caravan Books, 1976, 52.

⁸ Ibid., 55.

⁹ Ibid., 53-54. There is no evidence on the secret society of Beirut and its activities other than what Faris Nimr told Antonius and Zeine during their interviews.

¹⁰ A. L. Tibawi, “Greater Syria 1876-1890: Divided Loyalties: Ottoman, Muslim or Arab”, *The Islamic Quarterly*, XI/1 (1967), 21-24. The same text is republished in his *A Modern History of Syria including Lebanon and Palestine*, London: Macmillan St. Martin’s Press, 1969, 63-167.

¹¹ Tibawi, “Greater Syria...”, 23.

such graceful Arabic style...can only be made by Muslims... and the Christians played only a secondary part”¹²

Shimon Shamir was the first researcher who tried to explain the placard affairs in the light of Ottoman archival documents along with the British ones. Shamir did not make any comments on the contents of the placards; rather, he focused on the issue of identifying who was responsible for them. He seems to have been influenced by anti-Midhat delations (*journals*) in the Ottoman archives and held the view that Midhat Pasha played an important role in the agitation of post war years in Syria. The governor’s main aim was to put “pressure on the Porte to maintain him in his post on the terms that he had laid down.” Thus Shamir concluded that Midhat was “responsible for the anti -Ottoman placards which appeared in Syrian towns towards the end of his period of governorship.”¹³

Butrus Abu-Manneh was the next scholar who tried to explain the placards of 1880 in Beirut. In his article on Midhat Pasha, after summarizing the available information on the subject in the publications by Antonius, Zeine and Tibawi, Abu-Manneh concluded that collaboration in political agitation between Muslims and Christians did not last long because “when the sultan promised better government and especially when he launched his Islamic policy at about the same time, many Muslims seem to have lost their zeal for political action against Istanbul.”¹⁴ In his recent article, entitled “The Province of Syria and the *Mutasarrifiyya* of Mount Lebanon (1866-1880)”, Abu-Manneh suggested a different and novel explanation to the placards in Beirut. After closely examining the *Reglement Organique* of Mount Lebanon and identifying similarities between the demands in the placards and its statute, he argued that Lebanon’s “better administration and prosperity compared to Syria caused its neighbouring districts to wish to join it or to aspire to a similar status.”¹⁵

The only printed placard dated March 1881 was the subject of Landau’s article entitled “An Arab Anti-Turk Handbill, 1881”. This was the only placard distributed to several Arab provinces and thus was the subject of reports by the local Turkish authorities,¹⁶ as well as by the British and French

¹² A. L. Tibawi, *Arabic and Islamic Themes: Historical, Educational and Literary Studies*, London: Luzac & Company Ltd., 1976, 120-121.

¹³ Shimon Shamir, “Midhat Pasha and the Anti-Turkish Agitation in Syria”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 10/2 (May 1974), 115-141, quotations from pages 129 and 131.

¹⁴ Butrus Abu-Manneh, “The Genesis of Midhat Pasha’s Governorship in Syria 1878-1880”, in Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schaebler (eds.), *Process of Integration and Fragmentation in Bilad al-Sham from the 18th to the 20th Century*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998, 266.

¹⁵ Butrus Abu-Manneh, “The Province of Syria and the *Mutasarrifiyya* of Mount Lebanon (1866-1880)”, *Turkish Historical Review* 4 (2013), 133.

¹⁶ This is the only placard, an exact translation of which is available in Yıldız section of the Ottoman archives. See, Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA), Yıldız Esas Evrakı (YEE), 44/145. For the transliteration in modern Turkish see, Selçuk Günay, “II. Abdülhamid Döneminde Suriye ve

consuls in the region. Unlike the Beirut placards of 1880, nobody claimed responsibility for this placard and Landau asserted that judging from internal evidence, “the author (or group of authors) was probably Muslim, well-versed in Arabic”.¹⁷ Landau held that while the placards of 1880 “show clear Christian influence”, the 1881 placard was the work of “Muslims –if not solely, then certainly for the most part”.¹⁸

II

It seems that Syria was one of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire most affected from first, the crisis in the Balkans in the mid-1870s and then from the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78.¹⁹ Since the spring of 1876, an important number of troops in Syria were sent to Istanbul. In December 1876, a general conscription was ordered of all men between the ages of twenty and thirty. By the time Russia declared war on 24 April 1877, majority of them had already departed from Syria to join the Ottoman armies in the war zones. In addition, a general fund raising initiative was started throughout the province in the summer of 1876 and continued in 1877. Moreover, the government could not pay salaries regularly during the war and at times new taxes were collected in order to meet the increasing cost of the war. Regarding the degree of hardships suffered by some local Muslim families, it is worth mentioning that soon after Cevdet Pasha, the newly appointed governor of Syria, arrived in Damascus in March 1878, he was confronted with a demonstration of women, mainly the families of departed Redifs, protesting against a rise in the price of bread.²⁰

As for the impact of the war on the Syrian population, since many families had sent their male members to the war zones, many fields were left un-planted which led to the reduction of production that in turn had a negative impact on food prices and commercial life in the province. Moreover, during the war, the Ottoman military defeats and Russian advances as far as *Yeşilköy* near the city of Istanbul led to unexpected political developments. Frightened by the prospect of a total Ottoman collapse, a group of Syrian notables held secret meetings towards the end of 1877 to discuss the future of Syria and the possible threat of a foreign occupation. After long discussions, they agreed that if the war with Russia was to end the Ottoman rule in Syria, they would

Lübnan’da Arap Ayrılıkçı Hareketlerinin Başlaması ve Devletin Tedbirleri”, *Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi*, XVII/28 (1995), 92-94.

¹⁷ Jacob M. Landau, “An Arab Anti-Turk Handbill, 1881”, *Turcica*, IX/1 (1977), 218.

¹⁸ Ibid, 220. Eliezer Tauber summarised the information in the literature on the placards in his *The Emergence of the Arab Movements* (London 1993), 16-21.

¹⁹ For the serious difficulties that the Ottoman Empire faced during the period under study see, Feroze A. K. Yasamee, *Ottoman Diplomacy: Abdülhamid II and the Great Powers 1878-1888*, Istanbul: The Isis Press, 1996, 53-72.

²⁰ The National Archives (TNA), Foreign Office (FO), 195/1201, Jago to Derby, no. 5, political, Damascus, 27 March 1878.

work for full independence of the region. As for the spiritual ties with the Ottoman Caliphate, influential notables, like the Algerian Emir Abdulqadir (d.1883), insisted that “the Ottoman Caliph should remain the caliph of all (Sunni) Muslims.”²¹

The war had also exacerbated the existing tensions between Muslims and Christians. Muslim resentment was provoked by the fact that the Ottoman Empire had been badly defeated by a Christian power which had launched an aggressive war in the name of protecting the Christians of the Balkans. There was also the fact that the Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire in general, and the Syrian Christians in particular, did not share the burdens of the war. While Muslims had to contribute to the war effort with men and money, their non-Muslim compatriots had enjoyed the privilege of being non-Muslim, for they were not subject to conscription and extra taxes that levied during the war.²²

Finally, the arrival of several thousand Balkan and Caucasian refugees in Syria only added to the existing problems. The estimated number of refugees in the region during the first half of 1878 was over 20,000.²³ They first arrived in port cities like Beirut and Tripoli and then were taken to cities in the interior like Damascus, Hama and Hums. In fact, the disposal of vast number of refugees caused much embarrassment to the provincial authorities: on the one hand, some of the local inhabitants were unwilling to receive them in their midst, and on the other, there was the difficulty of finding them lodging, food, and transport. Moreover, to meet their expenses an additional tax was collected from the registered taxpayers.²⁴

Under these conditions, the newly appointed governor Cevdet Pasha had to face the formidable task of rehabilitating the province administration and boosting the morale of the population. As far as the civil administration was concerned, he scored an initial success. As Jago, the British Vice-Consul in Damascus, reported in March 1878, “the machinery of the civil government had once more set in the motion and a marked change for the better in respect of administrative routine at least was apparent”.²⁵ Barely a week later, however, Cevdet Pasha was disturbed by the European press reports of a powerful opposition to the Ottoman administration in Syria, and of public demonstrations in favour of annexation to Egypt. Both reports were denied by Cevdet Pasha, and by British consuls in the area. Cevdet and the British consuls ad-

²¹ Zeine, *op.cit.*, 54-55.

²² FO, 195/1201, Jago to Derby, no. 5, political, Damascus, 27 March 1878.

²³ Tufan Buzpinar, *Hilafet ve Saltanat: II. Abdülhamid Döneminde Halifelik ve Araplar*, İstanbul: Alfa yayınları, 2016, 263.

²⁴ Tufan Buzpinar, “The Repercussions of the Russian-Ottoman War of 1877-1878 on the Ottoman Arab Provinces”, in Ömer Turan (ed.), *The Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878*, Ankara: Middle East Technical University, 2007, 231-232.

²⁵ TNA, FO, 195/1201, Jago to Derby No. 5, Political, Damascus, 27 March 1878; FO, 78/2850, Jago to Layard, no. 10, Damascus, 28 April 1878.

mitted the existence of discontent and complaints against the Ottoman government, especially among those who had sent relatives to the battlefield, but emphasized that the degree of discontent and disaffection reported was nowhere near to rebellion or uprising.²⁶

III

The degree of discontent and disaffection against the government, however, was still enough to cause some anxiety in Damascus. It manifested itself in the form of two placards, one in Arabic and one in Turkish, copies of which were posted up in July 1878 in a number of places in Damascus. The identity of the authors is unclear, though Nasif Meshaka,²⁷ the dragoman of the British consulate in Beirut, who had seen the originals and translated them into French, was of the opinion that a certain Abdallah Ldilbi [sic] knew the authors but declined to reveal their names.²⁸ According to Nasif, everything happened in such a short time that not many people became aware of the placards. Consequently, there was a good deal of talk, but no effect worthy of notice was produced.²⁹

As for their contents, the Turkish placard was almost entirely devoted to Cevdet Pasha's alleged misdoings; he was mainly accused of taking bribes. This may also explain the reason why it was written in Turkish. There was no evidence of any revolutionary ideology, but strikingly, it complained about the tithe and asserted that the rebellion of the Bulgarians, Montenegrins and Serbs had been caused by the question of the tithe. In other words, the author/s warned the governor that under the post war conditions of Syria, tax collection was a delicate issue that could create serious problems. The placard concluded with the following warning to Cevdet Pasha:

²⁶ For Cevdet's statement on this issue see, BOA, YEE, 35/67. For the British consul general's report see, TNA, FO, 195/1201, Eldridge to Derby, Beirut, 26 March 1878. Immediately after he returned from Syria to Istanbul in October 1879, Layard, the British Ambassador, reported to Lord Salisbury, the Foreign Secretary, that while in the region he "did not hear anything about annexation to Egypt". Sinan Kuneralp, *The Private Letters of Sir Austen Henry Layard During His Constantinople Embassy 1877-1880*, Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2018, 643.

²⁷ Nasif was son of Mikhail Meshaka (1800-1888), diplomat and historian who served as the first vice-consul of the United States of America in Damascus between 1859 and 1870. Meshaka family served for the American and British diplomatic missions in the region until the WWI and were under British protection. Nasif himself served for the British consulate in Beirut as a dragoman since the 1860s. For the diplomatic role of the Meshaka family in Syria and the Lebanon see, E. Keskinliç and E. Ceylan, "Her Majesty's Protected Subjects: The Mishaqa Family in Ottoman Damascus", *Middle Eastern Studies*, (2015) 51/2, 175-194; Eugene L. Rogan, "Sectarianism and Social Conflict in Damascus: The 1860 Events Reconsidered", *Arabica*, LI/4 (2004), 493-511.

²⁸ TNA, FO, 226/194, Nasif Meshaka to Eldridge, two private letters, Damascus, 26, and 29 July 1878.

²⁹ Ibid.

“We keep daily accounts of all your business and your deeds. That is enough for the moment to make you reflect.

Behave as is necessary in the high mission in thanking divine providence for having accorded to you this gift which you do not deserve. Otherwise if you act contrary to the will of God and of the prophet we are ready to post up, in the streets of the town, all your affairs and to expose them.”³⁰

The Arabic placard was much more important in content. Although the starting point was the same, namely, the oppression of the local officials, it bore an openly revolutionary character, and its author/s were evidently educated and acquainted with Western ideas of a liberal and secular stamp. Nasif Meshaka saw a copy of the Arabic placard, which was “written by Abdallah Ldilbi [sic] in his usual bad hand writing”. Nasif stated that Abdallah “seemed to know the authors but I could not get their names”.³¹ The authors implied that they were not Syrians but presented themselves as friends of Syria and added that there were other friends who would help the Syrians in reforming faults. It addressed the Syrians in general, both Muslims and Christians, and called upon them to separate religion from politics. The following is an extended summary of the translation made for the British consulate in Beirut:

The principal cause of the consolidation of the basis of peoples is the correction of the faults of the governors and the amelioration of the administration. It is necessary that the subjects make efforts to reach this goal by following the path of diligence and liberty and by pushing aside every personal interest and every discord.

Syria! Raise yourself without delay from negligence. Put yourself to work. [...] It is enough that you suffer from the oppression and misfortune, from abasement and opprobrium. [...] The hand of the governors and of the administrators raise upon you. The bureaus are corrupt and the tribunals oppressed. There is no respect for your virtuous ones, no estimation for your man of learning [...] they have removed from you the most precious gift of union and concord. Do you not know that religion does not enter into politics?

Syria! The greatest enemy of your progress is he who sows discord among your population, Christians, Muslims and others... Follow the path of liberty with persistence and concord.

³⁰ TNA, FO, 226/194, Meshaka to Eldridge, private letter, 26 July 1878. One Turkish and one Arabic placard were seen and translated by Meshaka, the dragoman of the British consulate. However originals of the placards were not sent to Eldridge. Meshaka does not explain why he did not provide the British consulate with a copy of the original placard. For the French translation of the Turkish placard see, TNA, FO, 226/194 Meshaka to Eldridge, 26 July 1878; and of the Arabic one see FO 226/194 Meshaka to Eldridge, 29 July 1878. Eldridge summed up the contents of the placards and sent to Salisbury and Layard: TNA, FO, 424/73, No. 305, Eldridge to Salisbury no. 62 Political, Aleih, 2 August 1878; Eldridge to Layard No. 74, 2 August 1878.

³¹ TNA, FO, 226/194 Meshaka to Eldridge, private letter, 29 July 1878. Bad handwriting might be the reason why Meshaka did not send Eldridge an original copy of the placard.

Do not believe Syria that you are alone in reforming faults. We have other friends who will aid you and who await you.³² Awake yourself from your sleep... Personal interests must be put aside when the prosperity and progress of your country are in question. Beware not to empty your pen and tongue, because the reigns of the government are going to pass to you. All this is mysterious. But it is for you who are intelligent to understand that the duty of a friend is to commence. It is for you to achieve. In any case, I will return to you in one of these days.³³

None of the figures involved in providing Eldridge with these translations of the placards commented on them, and Eldridge's only comment was as follows: "I do not pretend to understand the meaning, if they have any, of these allusions to external aid. The whole spirit of this placard is one inviting the inhabitants to resist the oppression of Djevdet Pasha...though there are no signs of dissatisfaction against the Ottoman rule."³⁴ Interestingly, in a detailed report addressed to the Porte about the regional affairs, like Eldridge, Cevdet Pasha also underlined the existence of local dissatisfaction, but he held that it was against the local officials' abuse, not against the Ottoman government.³⁵

The 1878 placards were the first of their kind in Syria in the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78. The principle target of both placards was local officials headed by the governor general. The Arabic placard consistently complained about oppression, corruption, and negligence. It then asked the people of Syria to put aside personal interests and discord and advised them that they could improve their position only by union and concord. It underlined that being identified as Christians and Muslims was a serious discord that served the interests of the rulers. Therefore, it asked the Syrians to put religious identities aside and unite on the concept of homeland, Syria. In other words, the authors were aware of the existence of strong religious identities among the population of the region and wished to weaken it by a united action against the local government. British diplomatic reports from the region support the view that religious identities were strong enough to lead to clashes between Christians and Muslims in those years.³⁶ Finally, the absence of any reference to Arabs or Arabism in both placards is also worth noting.

³² Underlined in the original.

³³ According to Abdallah Ldilbi, the only source, copies of the Arabic placard were posted up in the following places in Damascus: Seraglio, Umayyad Mosque, Malek al-Zahir (near the Umayyad mosque), Bab al-Barid and Akkaybeh [sic]. Ldilbi also mentioned that the copy, which was posted up in the Umayyad mosque, was taken to Cevdet Pasha by sheikh Salem al-Attar. TNA, FO, 226/194, Meshaka to Eldridge, private letter, 29 July 1878. Salem al-Attar (1817-1889) was one of the leading scholars of Damascus. For a short biographical information see, Muhammad Muti' al-Hafiz, Nizar Abaza, *Tarikh Ulema Dimashq*, Dimashq: Dar al-Fikr, 1986, 89-92.

³⁴ TNA, FO, 424/73, No. 305, Eldridge to Salisbury, No. 62, Political, Aleih, 2 August 1878.

³⁵ BOA, YEE, 35/67, Cevdet Pasha to the Porte, n.d.

³⁶ TNA, FO, 424/73 and FO 78/2848, Eldridge to Layard no. 76, Aleih, 3 August 1878.

News of disturbing developments in Syria soon reached Istanbul and was followed by a direct approach to the Porte by the British ambassador Layard, warning that serious accusations against Cevdet Pasha's gross corruption had reached him.³⁷ Meanwhile the Porte decided to send two officials, Halil Eyüp Efendi and Rıza Efendi, to Syria to carry out investigations into the affairs of the province and into a possible plot or revolutionary activity in the region.³⁸ The investigators stayed in Damascus for some time and spoke to several notables (*meşayih, Urban*) of the city. Rıza Efendi, in particular, carried out investigations in the Christian quarters of Damascus.³⁹ Cevdet held that Halil Eyüp's "aim was to make the Porte believe that a rebellion in the Mount [Lebanon] was imminent and that could spread all over Syria". Since Cevdet's own investigations did not support this view, the investigators received little assistance from him who argued that:

If there is something in the province to be investigated, or any information is needed about a particular case, the provincial officials should have been consulted [in the first place], for it is the province officials who know the true nature of local events and political developments.⁴⁰

The reports of the two investigators have not been traced. Therefore, it remains unclear to what degree Cevdet Pasha was guilty of the charges of corruption levelled against him. However, Rousseau, the French Consul in Damascus, had cast doubt on accusations against Cevdet Pasha. In a report on this issue dated 30 July 1878, Rousseau "claimed to know from personal experience that several Greek Orthodox members of the Vali's personal staff were corrupt and made it appear as if he would settle no business without pecuniary assistance".⁴¹ Eldridge, on his part, warned his superiors that he could not undertake to prove the charges against Cevdet Pasha.⁴² Equally unclear is the reaction of the authorities in Istanbul. The fact that Cevdet Pasha was ordered in September 1878 to resolve a communal conflict in Kozan, a town in the province of Adana,⁴³ suggests that the Porte was not too disturbed: it

³⁷ *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, No. 43, 15 August 1878; TNA, FO, 78/4275, White to Salisbury, no. 216, Secret, Constantinople, 21 May 1890, enclosing a copy of Layard's despatch to Salisbury, no. 1072, Constantinople, 27 August 1878; TNA, FO, 78/2771, Salisbury to Layard, no. 1096, TNA, FO, 14 September 1878.

³⁸ Both men were originally from Syria but at the time were employed at the Porte. Halil Eyüp Efendi was a junior interpreter at the Porte whereas Rıza Efendi worked for the Ministry of Police. See, BOA, YEE, 35/67, Cevdet Pasha to the Porte, n.d.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Max L. Gross, *Ottoman Rule in the Province of Damascus, 1860-1909*, Unpublished PhD thesis, Georgetown University 1979, Vol. I, 253, fn.116.

⁴² TNA, FO, 424/73, Eldridge to Salisbury, no. 62, political, Aleih, 2 August 1878.

⁴³ TNA, FO, 78/2848, Eldridge to Salisbury, no. 78, Political, Aleih, 15 September 1878; Ibid.,? Eldridge to Layard No. 113, Beirut, 10 November 1878.

would scarcely have permitted the Vali to leave Damascus, if it believed major trouble was imminent.

Be that as it may, the Porte recalled Cevdet Pasha from Syria in November 1878, shortly after his return from Kozan. The documents governing the appointment of his successor Midhat Pasha make it plain that the Porte held the view that Syria deserved a better administration and increased prosperity; hence, Midhat was chosen as a strong ruler who would achieve the stated goal.⁴⁴ At the same time, the fact that Cevdet was soon promoted to the post of the Minister of Trade and Agriculture⁴⁵ does not permit us to draw the conclusion that the central government was dissatisfied with Cevdet's performance in Syria.

IV

During the first year of his governorship in Syria, Midhat Pasha achieved important successes in the areas of security, justice department and administrative structure; he established two new sub-governorships (central Damascus (*merkez mutasarrıflık* and *Jabal Nusayr*), restructured the police department, and increased the number of courts. He also made new arrangements geared toward reducing the cost of annual hajj caravan (*surre*). However, from the last quarter of 1879 onward, and especially after the Porte's decision to make the courts independent of the provincial governors, Midhat's relations with the Porte deteriorated. He argued that in order to increase the degree of security and stability in Syria, it was important that the courts would be subject to the governor as the highest authority in the province. Interestingly, it was during the period of strained relations between the governor and the Porte that anti-Ottoman placards appeared on the streets of Beirut and Damascus.

Anti-Ottoman placards appeared three times in the second half of June 1880 on the streets of Beirut. Although no evidence remained from the first group, Dickson, the British acting consul, obtained a copy of each of the second and the third group of handwritten placards. Each placard has a sketch of a drawn sword followed by a short text.⁴⁶ In the first placard, after referring to Moses, Socrates, Jesus and Muhammad respectively in chronological order as distinguished reformers, the authors presented themselves as people, who cared about the welfare and honour of the Syrians. The Turks, as rulers of the country, were presented as careless and degraded and did not uphold the honour of the local people. The main emphasis was on the Syrians irrespective of

⁴⁴ BOA, Irade Dahiliye, 63122, 15 Zilkaade 1295 (10 November 1878).

⁴⁵ Ebul'ula Mardin, *Medeni Hukuk Cephesinden Ahmet Cevdet Paşa*, 1822-1895, reprint, Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayını, 1996, 145-146.

⁴⁶ For the reproduction of the original placards obtained by Dickson see, Zeine, *op. cit.*, 152-153; for English translations see TNA, FO, 195/1306, enclosures in Dickson to Goschen, no. 47, Beirut 3 July 1880; Tibawi, *Arabic & Islamic*, *op. cit.*, 117-118.

religious denominations and only in the concluding part, there was a single reference to Arab pride. The second placard appeared a few days later and was written with a different handwriting, as a kind of continuation of the former. It was devoted to the criticism of Turkish rule and argued that any hope of the reform of the “Turks is impossible”. That is why it asked compatriots to assume responsibility to rule the country.⁴⁷

The two placards contain some interesting features. First, both placards put a clear emphasis on Syria without using the term “fatherland” (*watan*)⁴⁸, addressed their audience as “O sons of Syria”, a new concept that started to develop especially since the 1850s and adopted by Christian intellectuals like Butrus al-Bustani (1819-1883) and Khalil al-Khuri (1836-1907).⁴⁹ Although Syria was used for the first time in 1865 as an official name for the newly created province comprised of cities like Damascus, Beirut, Tripoli and even al-Quds, it is not clear whether it was used in the provincial context or wider/narrower than that.⁵⁰ Recent studies suggest that other than as an official name for the province, by the 1880s a limited number of Christian intellectuals referred to the religiously and politically diversified Syrian region as their *watan*. However, its exact meaning was still ambiguous in the period under study: what it meant to be a Syrian, which areas were parts of the Syrian territory and how it was going to co-exist with existing deep-rooted identities especially the religious ones. The religiously heterogeneous people of the region could not produce a common answer to these questions.⁵¹ Considering the possibility of Christian and Muslim joint action against the Turks, John Abcarious, the dragoman of the British consulate in Beirut, stated a week after the appearance of the second placard that “no earthly power can bring these two elements into union”. He also stated, “patriotism is a word without mean-

47

A loose translation of this placard into Turkish is in the Yıldız Palace archives. It has no date, no comment and no signs that might help to evaluate it. BOA, YEE, 147/27.

48

The term *watan* (fatherland) is used three times in the second placard. Traditionally the Arabic term *watan* meant one’s own district, city or village and its environs.

49

For Bustani and Khuri’s role in introducing new concept of *watan* see Adel Beshara (ed), *The Origins of the Syrian Nationhood: Histories, Pioneers and Identity*, Oxon: Routledge, 2011, 57-78; 91-107.

50

For a significant account of how the name “Syria” came into use in official and unofficial circles see, Butrus Abu-Manneh, “The Establishment and Dismantling of the Province of Syria, 1865-1888”, in John Spagnolo (ed), *Problems of the Modern Middle East in Historical Perspective: Essays in Honour of Albert Hourani*, Reading: Ithaca Press, 1992, 7-26. In December 1887, a few years after the placard affairs, Beirut was separated from the province of Syria and became the centre of a new province comprised of Latakia, Tripoli, Acre and Nablus. *Ibid*, 24.

51

See articles by Lamia Rustum Shehadeh, “The Name of Syria in Ancient and Modern Usage”, Arnon Groiss, “Communalism as a factor in the rise of the Syrian idea in the 1800s and the early 1900s”; and Fruma Zachs, “Pioneers of Syrian patriotism and identity: A re-evaluation of Khalil al-Khuri’s contribution” in Adel Beshara (ed), *The Origins of the Syrian Nationhood*, 17-29; 30-54; 91-107, respectively.

ing to the Orientals generally”.⁵² Second, while both placards displayed an openly anti-Turkish attitude, the emphasis on the Arabs was unexpectedly weak. The term Arab was used only once in the first placard and it did not appear in the second at all. Finally, both placards contained strong invitations to revolt against the Turks and to take the control of the country, i.e., Syria, in their hands.

As for the immediate impact of the placards on the people of Beirut, it appears from the British diplomatic correspondences that not many people became aware of their contents. No doubt was the appearance of such anti-Turkish placards unexpected and Dickson stated that “this incident is one so unusual for such a quiet town as Beyrout”. Although they caused a feeling of curiosity among some circles as to the people behind them, “very little effect has been produced on the minds of the people of Beyrout”. Dickson himself thought that it might be taken as an indication of a united voice of Muslim and Christian “against Turkish misrule”.⁵³ His dragoman John Abcarious, however, had a different view. Under instruction, Abcarious prepared a report on the placard issue and it began by stating that “it is difficult, not to say impossible, to believe that the outcry, as set forth in the placards, is one of a joint contribution between Muslims and Christians throughout Syria”.⁵⁴

Abcarious, being a native educated Christian, spent almost a week on the issue of placards and tried to find out who organized them. He examined the alternatives one by one; firstly, he addressed the possibility of Muslim Christian joint action against the Turks. He then categorically eliminated the possibility of such an action and argued that each community had its own goal, “one may be struggling to overthrow the Turks and establish an Arab Caliphate, while the other may be working for a Christian Kingdom”.⁵⁵ Secondly, the possibility of a purely Muslim initiative was out of question, because Muslims would not choose a city like Beirut where they were not in majority and, also as a port city, Beirut was “within the reach of naval force”, thus inconvenient for any resurgent action. Moreover, “the Muslims have now been under Ottoman power for several centuries, giving due respects to their rulers and devoted to them by religious ties never showing any spirit of revolt, so it would be hardly fair to attribute the agitation to them”. Thirdly, the Christians could not be behind this event for they were divided in “so many different denominations that no probability of joint cooperation is at all likely”. The only design they could have was “to give the country to a foreign

⁵²

Dickson instructed John Abcarious to make inquiries confidentially concerning the subject. For the memorandum submitted on 3 July 1880 by Abcarious to the Beirut consulate see, TNA, FO, 195/1306, enclosure in Dickson to Goschen, no. 47, Beirut 3 July 1880.

⁵³

TNA, FO, 195/1306, Dickson to Goschen, no. 47, Beirut, 3 July 1880.

⁵⁴

Enclosure in *Ibid.*

⁵⁵

Faris Nimr, allegedly a member of the Beirut secret society of the 1870s, underlined during his interview with Zeine that “all ties, relationships and loyalties were denominational and religious, primarily Muslim or Christian. The Muslim was principally either Sunni or Shi’i and the Christian was chiefly either Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant”. Zeine, *op. cit.*, 52.

power but in this they will also disagree for the Roman Catholics would be fighting for France and Greek Orthodox for Russia while the few Protestants will be longing for England”.

Abcarious concluded that the motives “must be sought elsewhere”. To him, it had to be attributed either to the “personal interests of one or two Beyrout Moslems who have been turned out from office or who being wealthy and of standing think themselves better qualified than the Turks to get into power, or to the personal interests of Midhat Pasha...with the view of either intimidating the Porte and obtaining the unlimited power he has been seeking to procure” or to show the European powers especially to England that “a spirit of revolt has sprung up in Syria... and thereby induce them to take up his cause”. He was inclined to think that Midhat Pasha was likely to be behind the outcry because of the following reasons: Firstly, “the placards were hung up in a city where no danger is supposed to issue from the excitement”. Secondly, the governor of Beirut was a “confidential friend of Midhat Pasha”⁵⁶. Thirdly, no effort was made by the Turkish authorities in Beirut to find out the agitators. Finally, from the time Midhat Pasha arrived in Syria, editors of local newspapers were allowed to speak “freely on the future prospects of Turkey, on the mismanagement of the Turks in general”.⁵⁷

Dickson did not share his dragoman’s conclusion that Midhat Pasha could be responsible for the placards. However, he admitted that many Muslims and Christians of Beirut were of the view that the governor general could be behind the agitation and Abcarious could have been influenced by it. He believed that it was “scarcely probably that His Highness is the prime mover in a revolutionary project. Since it would be too dangerous an expedient for him to venture upon considering the desire he had at present of consolidating the Sultan, with a view if possible, of obtaining a place in the ministry”. However, Dickson gave credit to the view that Midhat Pasha on purpose displayed “a certain amount of indifference as showing the disorganised state of the province and the necessity of acceding to his often repeated for full powers in order to introduce reforms”. He attributed the responsibility of the placards to a secret society, which existed in Syria since 1875 and had the aim to obtain “a sort of administrative autonomy for the province, the Sultan being acknowledged as nominal sovereign”, if this was not possible, “to make a strike for entire independence. These placards may have emanated from this society”.⁵⁸ Dickson’s view was supported by Faris Nimr, a member of that secret society. Faris Nimr told Zeine, the first historian of the subject, that

⁵⁶ At the time the governor, Mehmed Raif, was in Istanbul.

⁵⁷ TNA, FO, 195/1306, report by Abcarious in, Dickson to Goschen, no. 47, Beirut 3 July 1880. For almost identical views on this issue expressed by Layard in October 1879 see Kunalalp, *Private Letters of Sir Austen Henry Layard*, op.cit., 640.

⁵⁸ TNA, FO, 195/1306, Dickson to Goschen, no. 47, Beirut, 3 July 1880.

“their secret society was responsible for issuing a number of these placards and that several of them were in his handwriting”.⁵⁹

While speculation about the Beirut placards was still around, Jago, the British vice consul in Damascus, reported that the revolutionary placards had been posted up on the streets of Damascus, one even being stamped on his door. Unfortunately, he did not preserve a copy of the placards, but described it in the following few words: “It is written evidently by one of the Ulema class, part of it being couched in Qur’anic language, is addressed to the people as if by an outsider, and exhorts them to rise and shake of the rule of those who left the precepts of the Qur’an”. As for its impact, Jago stated, “little or no notice has been taken of these appeals, there being, as far as I can judge, no party or individuals in Syria to take the initiative in any overt act against the government by reason of the absence of leaders”.⁶⁰ According to Jago, the main reason why there was no serious opposition to the government was that the Muslim notables of Damascus were integrated into the Ottoman administrative system and formed “the official entourage of the government”.⁶¹

Although the placards did not have a serious impact on the local population in Beirut or Damascus, their impact on the Porte was noticeable. Publication of news about the placards in the press apparently increased the Porte’s concerns about Midhat’s governorship in Syria. News of the placards appeared in *al-Jawaib*, the Arabic newspaper published in Istanbul, reporting that proclamations written in high level Arabic were posted up in different parts of the region inciting the people against the government and asking for independence (*istiklal*).⁶² Thus, not surprisingly, within a fortnight of the appearance of the last placard in Damascus, Midhat Pasha was dismissed from Syria and appointed to the province of Aydın, in Western Anatolia.⁶³ Years after Midhat’s dismissal, Abdulhamid II explained his decision as follows: “Upon the appearance of the placards and published declarations against the Sultanate and the government, complaints against the court system and the finance (*Adliye ve Maliye*), slogans like “long live vali and long live so and so” which implied independence of the area and complaints against the Vali during his governorship, [...] the Vali was removed”.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Zeine, op. cit., 55.

⁶⁰ TNA, FO, 195/1306, Jago to Goschen, no. 13, Damascus, 3 August 1880.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² *Al-Jawaib*, 28 July 1880, 3.

⁶³ TNA, FO 19571306 Dickson to Goschen, no. 53, Beirut 13 August 1880; Jago to Goschen, no. 14, Damascus 16 August 1880.

⁶⁴ BOA, YEE, 4/29, n.d.

V

Midhat's removal from Syria, however, did not end the discontent manifested in the form of placards since 1878. In the last week of December 1880, new anti-Ottoman placards appeared first on the streets of Sidon, and then on 31 December, in Beirut and Tripoli. "At Sidon a little apprehension, especially among the Christians, was created and a few persons, supposed to be implicated, have been arrested by the authorities". However, in Beirut "no effect whatever has been produced and these placards are looked upon as the result of the discontent with the existing government that prevails amongst a small minority". Dickson, the British Acting-Consul general in Beirut, concluded his report by saying that "beyond the appearance of these revolutionary placards there is nothing, that I am aware of, which evinces any tendency to disturb public tranquillity".⁶⁵

Dickson enclosed a copy of the placard that appeared in Beirut on 31 December 1880 in his despatch of 14 January 1881. The placard had two drawn swords pointing downwards at the top (the previous ones had one horizontal drawn sword) and, unlike the previous ones, did not address the Syrians.⁶⁶ After an initial anti-Turkish rhetoric and a reference to glorious Arab past and pride, it included some points that were not found in the previous placards: Firstly, it implicitly criticised the article 18 of the 1876 Ottoman Constitution, which declared Turkish as the official language of the state, as a regulation aimed to destroy Arabic. Secondly, for the first time, it accused the Turks of stealing the caliphate from the Arabs. Thirdly, the Turks were blamed for sending Arab soldiers to battlefields outside the Arab populated regions. Finally, it concluded with three clear demands: Autonomy (with an explicit reference to Lebanon), the recognition of Arabic as official language and the employment of Arab soldiers in their territories.⁶⁷

This placard has some novel issues: Firstly, unlike the previous ones, it did not address the Syrians; rather it started with an ambiguous title "O people of the fatherland". As mentioned earlier, the term "fatherland" had no single and clear meaning in the minds of the Arabs in the region. Secondly, for the first time, the Turks are explicitly accused of stealing the caliphate from the Arabs. As recent literature demonstrates, the issue of the caliphate became the subject of debate in the last years of the 1870s in Britain as well as within the Ottoman Empire itself.⁶⁸ Finally, it had clear demands from the Ottoman

⁶⁵ TNA, FO, 195/1368, Dickson to St. John, no. 1, Beirut 3 January 1881.

⁶⁶ For the reproduced version of the original placard see, Zeine, *The Emergence...*, 154

⁶⁷ For the full translation of the placard in English see, Tibawi, *Arabic...*, 118-119; in French see, TNA, FO, 195/1368, Dickson to St. John, no. 2, Beirut, 14 January 1881.

⁶⁸ Ş. Tufan Buzpinar, "Opposition to the Ottoman Caliphate in the Early Years of Abdulhamid II: 1877-1882", *Die Welt des Islams*, XXXVI/1 (1996), 59-89. For Abdulhamid's suspicion that Britain wished to promote Arab independence that would lead to a rival Arab Caliph, see Yasamee, *Ottoman Diplomacy*, 26-27.

government such as autonomous administration and Arabic as official language. All these demands had to wait until the 1910s to be clearly and openly pronounced by the Arabist intellectuals.⁶⁹

As for the authors of the placards, in the absence of any solid evidence, Dickson conveyed all the current speculations about the new placards. In his first report on the subject, he stated that, “these placards are looked upon as the result of the discontent with the existing government that prevails amongst a small minority”.⁷⁰ However, in the second, he underlined the fact that the placards appeared in Beirut and Tripoli on the same day, 31 December, “would indicate that they are not the production of two or three disaffected individuals, as many supposed, but a secret society having branches in different parts of the country”. Moreover, he was informed that a Christian of Sidon wrote to Hamdi Pasha, the new governor of Syria, and accused the “Society of Good Intentions” of organizing the revolutionary placards.⁷¹ This complaint was not surprising in view of the fact that the Christians of Sidon were disturbed by the establishment of the society of good intentions in the city.⁷² In his last report, Dickson increasingly came under the influence of the prevailing view “amongst the most persons” that the placards were the works of the Society of Good Intentions. Although the Society had been founded in 1878 before Midhat Pasha was appointed to Syria he had good relations with members of the society during his governorship. That is why some people believed that Midhat was in communication with members of these societies even after his dismissal from Syria. Hence, some circles in Beirut thought that at Midhat Pasha’s “instigation, through his secret agents, the placards in question have appeared in Syria. I am, however, unable to verify these accusations against him”.⁷³

A close examination of the benevolent societies does not validate this suggestion. Nor does there appear to be any firm ground for the suggestion that Midhat Pasha had employed certain benevolent societies with which he had good relations, and in particular, the "Society of Good Intentions" of Si-

⁶⁹ Zeine, op.cit., 88-90; Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 91-94 and 128-129.

⁷⁰ TNA, FO, 195/1368, Dickson-St. John, no. 1, Beirut 3 January 1881.

⁷¹ TNA, FO, 195/1368, Dickson to St. John, no. 2, Beirut, 14 January 1881.

⁷² It is worth noting that Dickson reported on 17 November “the feeling at Sidon especially among the Christians is one of distrust and uneasiness which arises principally from the suspicious nature of the ‘society of good intentions’ established there. [...] Its ostensible purpose was to promote education and knowledge amongst the Muslims alone”. TNA, FO 195/1306, Dickson to Goschen, no. 61 Beirut 17 November 1880. For more on the Christian attitude toward the society in Sidon see, TNA, FO, 78/3130, Ardern Beaman to Dickson, 6 November 1880, ‘Report on the country between Beyrout, Sidon, and Damascus’.

⁷³ TNA, FO, 195/1368, Dickson to St. John, Beirut, 17 January 1881.

don, to organise the placard campaign.⁷⁴ The benevolent societies in Syria were deliberately non-political, focused on the education of Muslim children and "the members of the benevolent societies included men of some standing in their local communities". Such men were not to be easily manipulated by Midhat, for "they were not dependent on Midhat for their position"; rather it was Midhat who needed their support in view of his shaky relations with the Porte. Moreover, Midhat's successor, Ahmed Hamdi Pasha, had cordial relations with benevolent societies in the region, which leaves no room for subversive activities.⁷⁵ As for the argument circulating during the appearance of the placards in June 1880 that Midhat Pasha was suspiciously slow to respond to the placards, and that his apparent indifference to them amounted to tacit encouragement⁷⁶, it must be born in mind that the first placards appeared in June in Beirut, when the city's governor Raif Efendi was absent, and these placards were posted close to the foreign consulates- in some cases, on their doors. These facts alone might explain the authorities' slow initial response.⁷⁷

Be that as it may, the provincial authorities acted on a rather different information and arrested three Christians in Damascus on charge of being connected with the latest placard. One of them was a certain Shakir al- Khuri, who belonged to the Protestant community in Damascus.⁷⁸ He knew English well enough to offer private lessons as well as to teach at the British missionary schools. Representatives of the Protestant missionaries in the region requested the British vice-consul to communicate with the Ottoman authorities to secure Shakir's release. The vice-consul admits that the intelligence he had gathered led him to believe that Shakir "behaved extremely foolishly in the matter". Nevertheless, he had contacted the provincial authorities who stated that "they had strong proofs against him". Still, the vice-consul was convinced that Shakir would be "detained for a short time as an example and then liberated".⁷⁹

Not surprisingly, the local missionaries were not satisfied with this answer and tried to put pressure on the *vali*, Ahmed Hamdi Pasha, to release Shakir. Shakir himself wrote letters of appeals to several individuals and tried to "stir up opinion against the Governor General". The vice-consul Jago was

⁷⁴

For the establishment of the society and its impact on the local Christians see, TNA, FO 78/3130 Report on Beirut, Damascus and Sidon by Arden Beaman, the British Acting Vice-Consul at Beirut, Beirut, 17 November 1880; TNA, FO, 195/1306, Dickson to Goschen, no. 61, Beirut, 17 November 1880.

⁷⁵

Donald Cioeta, "Islamic Benevolent Societies and Public Education in Ottoman Syria, 1875-1882" *Islamic Quarterly*, 26/1 (1982), 52-53.

⁷⁶

TNA, FO, 195/1306, Dickson to Goschen, no. 47, Beirut, 3 July 1880.

⁷⁷

Zeine, op.cit., 62; FO, 195/1369, Jago to Goschen, no. 12, Damascus, 4 June 1881; BOA, YEE, 79/87.

⁷⁸

British documents reveal only one name, Shakir al-Khuri, whereas Ottoman documents reveal all three names as Shakir al-Khuri, Yusuf al-Haj and Georgi Meese. Shakir and Yusuf were members of the Protestant community in Damascus.

⁷⁹

Memorandum on Shakir al-Houri, in Jago to Goschen, no. 12, Damascus, 4 June 1881.

informed that in reply to the missionaries the *vali* gathered information on the matter, which strengthened the case against Shakir. Thus, the *vali* asked the missionaries to stop agitation in favour of Shakir, if not, “it would be worse for the accused”. Jago described the position of the missionaries in the following words: “with my representations to them of the impolicy of their conduct, ignorant as they necessarily were of the nature of the exact proofs held by the authorities, resulted in their ceasing their action”. Jago’s final note was also interesting to show the complex nature of the developments on the matter: “The zeal of the Mr. Houri’s advocates was much stimulated by the statements made by the Christian members of the court that there was no case against him, but that his acquittal was resisted by pressure from the higher authorities”.⁸⁰

It appears that one of the arrested suspects, Georgi, was released early in 1881 and the trial of the remaining two, namely Shakir and Yusuf, continued until the summer, when the local court decided to acquit them by a majority of three out of five members. The *vali*, however, informed the British vice-consul that because of the gravity of the charges against the suspects and in accordance with the views of the prosecutor general and the president of the court, he had decided to transfer the case to the Ministry of Justice in Istanbul for final decision. Moreover, the Ministry of Justice ordered an enquiry into the cause of Shakir’s detention and requested information on the subject.⁸¹ Meanwhile, the *vali*’s cautious attitude was justified by a letter privately sent to the Palace trying to prevent the release of the suspects. The anonymous letter, written by someone who apparently occupied a high position in the provincial administration, informed the Sultan that “verse and prose of the placards belong to Shakir and handwriting to Yusuf”. It further claimed that the constant demands for the release of the suspects by the Protestant missionaries and some members of the British consulate in Damascus indicate the people who were behind this agitation.⁸² Interesting enough, the Foreign Office in London ordered the British ambassador to Istanbul to bring “crisis eventually to notice of the Porte and ask for his [Shakir] liberation on bail”.⁸³ What took place at the Ministry of Justice is yet to be discovered, but what is clear is that Shakir’s companion was released early in October and Shakir himself was released on 8 November 1881.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ TNA, FO, 195/1369, Jago to Goschen, no. 2, Damascus 18 October 1881.

⁸² BOA, YEE, 79/87.

⁸³ TNA, FO, 195/1369, Jago to Goschen, no. 2, Damascus 18 October 1881.

⁸⁴ TNA, FO, 195/1369, telegram from Jago, Damascus, 9 November 1881.

VI

The last placard⁸⁵ under review, dated 9/19 March 1881 (7/17 *Rabi' al-Thani* 1298)⁸⁶, has some special features. It was the only printed one in a flysheet form and the longest one with the best page setting. It was distributed by the foreign postal services to the European consuls serving in the Arab populated cities and it appears that the Arab subjects of the state could not become aware of it. It should also be underlined that it was the only placard that reached the Ottoman authorities in the region, probably on purpose, and they in turn made an exact translation of it into Turkish and submitted it to the Palace.⁸⁷ It was widely distributed by post from Khartoum in the Sudan to Algeria in North Africa, from Alexandria in Egypt to Baghdad in Iraq. In his letter of 27 July 1881 addressed to the Palace, Safvet Pasha, the governor of the Hijaz, mentioned the arrival of a package of printed anti-Ottoman placards in the Hijaz and stated that one of them was even addressed the Amir of Mecca, Abdulmuttalib Pasha, with whom he was not on good terms.⁸⁸ It appears that the placard reached different destinations in different times depending on the nature of the postal network of the time, thus, reports by foreign consuls and Ottoman officials on the subject dated between April and July 1881.⁸⁹

As for its printing location, the quality of the printing led to a general conviction that it had been printed outside the Ottoman Empire. In this connection, an interesting deduction came from Plowden, the British consul general in Baghdad, who provided the only copy available in the National Archives. Plowden confiscated three copies of *al-Ghairat*⁹⁰, an Arabic and Persian newspaper published in London, and comparing the type of the Arabic letters used in *al-Ghairat* and the placard, he reached the conclusion that both had been printed in the same printing house in London.⁹¹ Dobignie, the French consul at Alexandria, however, assumed that it was printed either in

⁸⁵ Original copies of the placard are available in British and French archives. Landau published it in Arabic and English. See, Landau, "An Arab Anti-Turk Handbill, 1881", 322-327. For the English translation of the British consulate in Baghdad see, TNA, FO 195/1370, Plowden to Granville, confidential no. 21, Baghdad, 20 May 1881.

⁸⁶ The Ottoman translation of the placard bears the date 9 March 1881 whereas the copies available in the British and the French archives are dated 19 March 1881.

⁸⁷ BOA, YEE, 44/145.

⁸⁸ BOA, YEE, 44/145, 29 Şaban 1298/ 27 July 1881.

⁸⁹ From the French consuls in the region, the earliest report dates Alexandria, 23 April 1881 and the latest from Khartoum 28 June 1881. See Landau, "An Arab Anti-Turk Handbill, 1881", 215, fn. 2 & 3; The only report in the National Archives in London is dated 20 May 1881. See, TNA, FO, 195/1370, Plowden to Granville, no. 21, Baghdad 20 May 1881. BOA, YEE, 18/94-26/94/44, 29 Şaban 1298/27 July 1881.

⁹⁰ *Al-Ghairat* was a pro-Ottoman bilingual newspaper published in London by a certain Indian Abdul Rasul who apparently received financial support from the Ottoman Embassy in London. See, Azmi Özcan, *Pan-Islamism: Indian Muslims, the Ottomans and Britain, 1877-1924*, Leiden: Brill, 1997, 120-121.

⁹¹ TNA, FO, 195/1370, Plowden to Granville, confidential no. 21, Baghdad, 20 May 1881.

France or in Italy. He also held that “contents and the style” of the placard indicated that an educated European was its author.⁹² Judging from the language structure, frequent grammatical mistakes and foreign concepts and ideas in the placard, Arabic language and literature experts supported Dobignie’s view that the author could have been an educated European. Moreover, all these internal evidences evoke a possibility that the original text could have been written in a European language and then was translated into Arabic.⁹³ Ironically, despite the obvious contrary evidence, Landau asserts that “the author (or group of authors) was probably Muslim, well-versed in Arabic”.⁹⁴

Regarding the contents of the placard, it started with a new and unfamiliar concept of the Arab nation (*al-umma al-arabiyya*), a concept which would have to wait for decades to take ground in the Arab populated regions. It was followed by desperate efforts to address the Muslims and to agitate them against the Turks.⁹⁵ The anti-Turkish agitation tone was here the highest of all the placards since July 1878. However, the content of the text did not support the main goal, since the emphasis was on the Christians who revolted against the Ottoman Empire and examples were chosen from the Christian countries in the Balkans who expelled thousands of Muslims, some of whom had to settle in the Arab provinces, particularly in Syria.⁹⁶ The second paragraph also had a contradictory character for it emphasized the Arab sacrifices during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78, but in reality, only the Muslim Arabs participated in the war which became a source of resentment on the part of the Muslims against the Christians. Likewise, an effort to address the Arabs as a nation did not correspond to any clear meaning in the minds of the majority of the Arabs, Muslim or Christian even in cities like Beirut.⁹⁷ The text itself in paragraph six encouraged the Christians to end disunity among them-

⁹² Landau, op.cit., 218-219. Dobignie’s view is not out of question in view of the fact that during the period under study, there were some European figures who were eager to end the Ottoman rule in Arab provinces. One such figure was Wilfrid S. Blunt (1840-1922) who worked hard between 1879 and 1881 to organize an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire. He even collected some rifles, revolvers, and cannon to distribute to the Arabs in order to use against the Ottomans. See, Elizabeth Longford, *A Pilgrimage of Passion: The Life of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt*, London 1979, 200. For more on Blunt’s anti-Turkish activities in Arabia see Tufan Buzpinar, “Opposition to the Ottoman Caliphate in the Early Years of Abdülhamid II: 1877-1882”, *Die Welt des Islams*, 36/1 (March 1996), 80-88.

⁹³ I wish to express my gratitude to Özgür Kavak and Abdul Rahman Harash, Arabic language and literature experts at Istanbul Şehir University, for sharing their views and analysis on its contents and language structure. During my studies for a Turkish version of this article, the late Ibrahim Dakuki, an expert on Arabic language and literature and Turkish Arab relations had expressed similar views on the placard’s language structure and style. I remember him with great respect and appreciation.

⁹⁴ Landau, op.cit., 218.

⁹⁵ Four out of seven addresses were “O you Muslims!”.

⁹⁶ For the Muslim Arab feelings after the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78 see, Buzpinar, *Abdulhamid II and the Arabs: The Cases of Syria and the Hijaz, 1878-1882*, University of Manchester, unpublished PhD thesis, 1991, 131-132.

⁹⁷ Zeine, op.cit., 52; Groiss, op.cit., 30-54.

selves and to unite with the Muslims against the Turks. The underlining feature of the whole text was its repetitive agitation to make the Arabs revolt against the Turks.⁹⁸ For the first time, the Turks were accused of selling Arab territories to Russians, Serbs and Bulgarians and if they had another chance, they would sell more territories to the Greeks. Interestingly, the idea that the Turks would sell some parts of the country was common in the minds of some contemporary British politicians and businessmen after the Russo Ottoman War of 1877-78.⁹⁹

As for the reactions shown by the local dignitaries, the provincial authorities and the Porte, the available literature based on the European diplomatic correspondence converged on the view that there was no serious local reaction against the placards that appeared in different cities between 1878 and 1881. However, the Ottoman documents and newspapers of the period do not support this view; on the contrary, they prove that there was a strong local reaction in Beirut and Damascus. *Al-Jawaib*, the Arabic newspaper published in Istanbul, reported news of reactions from local newspapers such as *Suriyya*, *al-Asr al-Jadid* and *al-Misbah*. *Al-Jawaib* reported that *al-Misbah* of Beirut viewed the placards as works of “ignorant and careless people who wished the people revolt against the government”. *Al-Misbah* urged the government to take necessary measures to prevent the recurrence of such seditious acts.¹⁰⁰ According to *al-Asr al-Jadid*, the local authorities did not take the placards seriously thinking that it was the work of a foreigner (*rajul afranj*), but these placards were products of insane and inauspicious people who should be punished by law.¹⁰¹ The “rich and influential inhabitants”¹⁰² of Beirut displayed the strongest reaction against the last placard of December 1880. Although they did not see the placards themselves, but heard about their appearance in Beirut, they condemned the perpetrators and emphasized that they were always with the state, observed full obedience and would not accept anything that would undermine their loyalty to the state. They also emphasized their loyalty to the Sultan who held “the Great Caliphate” (*Al-Khilafa al-A‘zam*).¹⁰³

Moreover, on behalf of the people of Syria (*Suriye ahalisi*) the dignitaries of Beirut and Damascus visited Ahmed Hamdi Pasha, the governor, in several groups to express their sadness for the news in foreign newspapers on

⁹⁸ The degree of anti-Turkish agitation can be deduced from the fact that the term “Turk” is used for fifteen times in a negative sense whereas the term “Arab” is used three times in a positive sense.

⁹⁹ People like Laurence Oliphant worked hard after the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78 to persuade the Ottoman authorities to sell some territories in Palestine but all their efforts proved futile. See, Anne Taylor, *Laurence Oliphant*, 1829-1888, Oxford 1982, 190-214.

¹⁰⁰ “Ahwal al-Suriyya”, in *Al-Jawaib*, 28 July 1880, 3.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in *Al-Jawaib*, 18 August 1880, 2.

¹⁰² TNA, FO, 195/1368, Dickson to St. John, no. 2, Beirut, 14 January 1881.

¹⁰³ *Al-Jawaib*, 31 December 1880/27 Muharram 1298.

the appearance of anti-government placards and conveyed their thanks for the government services. Hamdi Pasha seemed convinced of the sincerity of the dignitaries and the loyalty of the Arabs to the state and the “Great Caliphate” and blamed outsiders who were trying, through some secret agents, to agitate and incite the Arabs against the government.¹⁰⁴ In addition, the dignitaries of Beirut, Damascus, Hama and Nablus sent petitions to the Porte expressing their loyalty and obedience to the Caliphate and the Ottoman state. Although Hama and Nablus petitions are not yet discovered, the ones in Beirut and Damascus demonstrate the determination of the dignitaries to react strongly against the anti-Ottoman efforts in the region. Thirty-seven (twenty-three of them were sealed) dignitaries of Beirut and one hundred (ninety-nine of them were sealed) dignitaries of Damascus came together and signed separate petitions, expressing their loyalty and support to the caliphate and the government. Dickson reported the Beirut initiative in the following words: “An address has been forwarded to the Vali, signed by most of the rich and influential inhabitants of Beyrout, expressing their loyalty to the Sultan and deprecating any wish to sympathize with a revolutionary movement”.¹⁰⁵ The Beirut petition, by strange coincidence, bore the date of the third placard available in original, i.e., 31 December 1880. It was written on a letterhead paper with a symbol of the formula *Bismillāh al-Rahmān al-Rahīm (basmalah)* at the top and the format was in line with the Ottoman orthography. It began by an expression of sadness to see news in foreign newspapers about the anti-government placards that appeared in the country (*baldah*) and continued by emphasizing their feelings of “utmost loyalty and complete obedience” to the state (*al-sadāqat al-tāmmah wa al-tā‘at al-mutlaqah*).¹⁰⁶ The Damascus petition, dated 11 January 1881, was written on a plain paper and started with the formula *Bismillāh al-Rahmān al-Rahīm* followed by a traditional Islamic prayer with a language of the ‘*ulamā*’ class. The content, however, was similar to the Beirut petition in the sense that they learned sad news from foreign newspapers regarding the anti-government placards appeared on the streets of Damascus which aimed to insert mistrust between the people of the region and the state. They emphasized that they are “satisfied with the sublime state” and are aware of the fact that the state protects their lives, honour and properties.¹⁰⁷

The Ottoman authorities in the province and the centre were pleased to see the local dignitaries’ strong reaction against the anti-Ottoman placards. In his letter to the Porte on the subject, Hamdi Pasha emphasized that the people of Syria had made and continued to make great contributions to the state, and because of their religious understandings, they considered it necessary to obey

¹⁰⁴ BOA, Y.A. Res., 9/64, Hamdi Pasha to the Porte, 13 Safer 1298/15 January 1881.

¹⁰⁵ TNA, FO, 195/1368, Dickson to St. John, no. 2, Beirut, 14 January 1881.

¹⁰⁶ BOA, Y.A. Res., 9/64 enclosure 3, 27 Muharrem 1298 (19/31 Kanun-i evvel 1296).

¹⁰⁷ BOA, Y.A. Res., 9/64 enclosure 1, 11 Safer 1298. Forty-seven seals out of ninety-nine on the petition belong to the members of *ulema* class.

orders coming from the Caliph. Although the placards would not have any negative effect on their loyalty to the state, they, however, wished to prevent any possibility of discrediting the people of Syria in the eyes of the government and the caliph. It was mainly for this reason that the “distinguished and esteemed” (*mu‘tabaran wa mutahayyizan*) people of Beirut and Damascus presented petitions to the governor and asked him to submit them to the Porte and the Palace.¹⁰⁸ In addition, Hamdi Pasha held that the people of Syria, during the Russo Ottoman War of 1877-78 and after, did excellent service to the state and deserved to be rewarded by the state with various orders and decorations. To ease the work of the central government, he prepared a list of 114 distinguished people from the region and proposed an order or decoration that would be appropriate for them. In the list, there were many members of the well-known families in the region such as Attarzade, Azmzade, Hamzazade, Ajlanizade, Mardam Bekzade and Kaylanizade.¹⁰⁹

The Council of Ministers discussed the issue of placards and the reaction of the people of Syria. They also examined the list of leading people sent by Hamdi Pasha. They were impressed by the support displayed by the Syrian dignitaries and proposed to the Sultan that such a strong display of loyalty deserved special thanks. The Council also proposed that the letters of loyalty sent by the Syrian dignitaries to be announced through the press and found Hamdi Pasha’s suggestion of the distribution of orders and decorations acceptable.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Porte and the Palace displayed how delighted they were to receive loyalty letters from Beirut, Damascus, Hama and Nablus. These letters of “loyalty and obedience” were announced in the press as the authors wished to see it. In addition, Hamdi Pasha was informed about all these developments and asked to convey the message to the people of Syria that the government had been pleased to see their constructive attitude.¹¹¹ As for the rewards of orders and decorations for the people listed by Hamdi Pasha, the Palace decided to postpone one third of the list and approved the rest.¹¹²

VII

In conclusion, this article is the only study that examines all the copies and translations of the placards that appeared in the Syrian region between 1878 and 1881. The heavy defeat of the Ottomans at the 1877-78 Russo-Ottoman

¹⁰⁸ BOA, Y.A. Res., 9/64, Hamdi Pasha to the Porte, 13 Safer 1298/15 January 1881.

¹⁰⁹ BOA, Y.A. Res., 9/64, Hamdi Pasha to the Porte, 13 Safer 1298. For the influential families in Damascus politics, Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, *Families in Politics: Damascene Factions and Estates of the 18th and 19th Centuries*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1985, 110-218.

¹¹⁰ BOA, Y.A. Res., 9/64, Said Pasha to the Palace, 25 Safer 1298/27 January 1881.

¹¹¹ The Porte’s letter of 8 Rebiulahir 1298/10 March 1881 to the governor of Syria is reproduced in the *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, no. 857, 3 May 1881, 2.

¹¹² BOA, Yıldız Resmi Maruzat Defterleri, no. 21, 9 Receb 1298/26 May 1881.

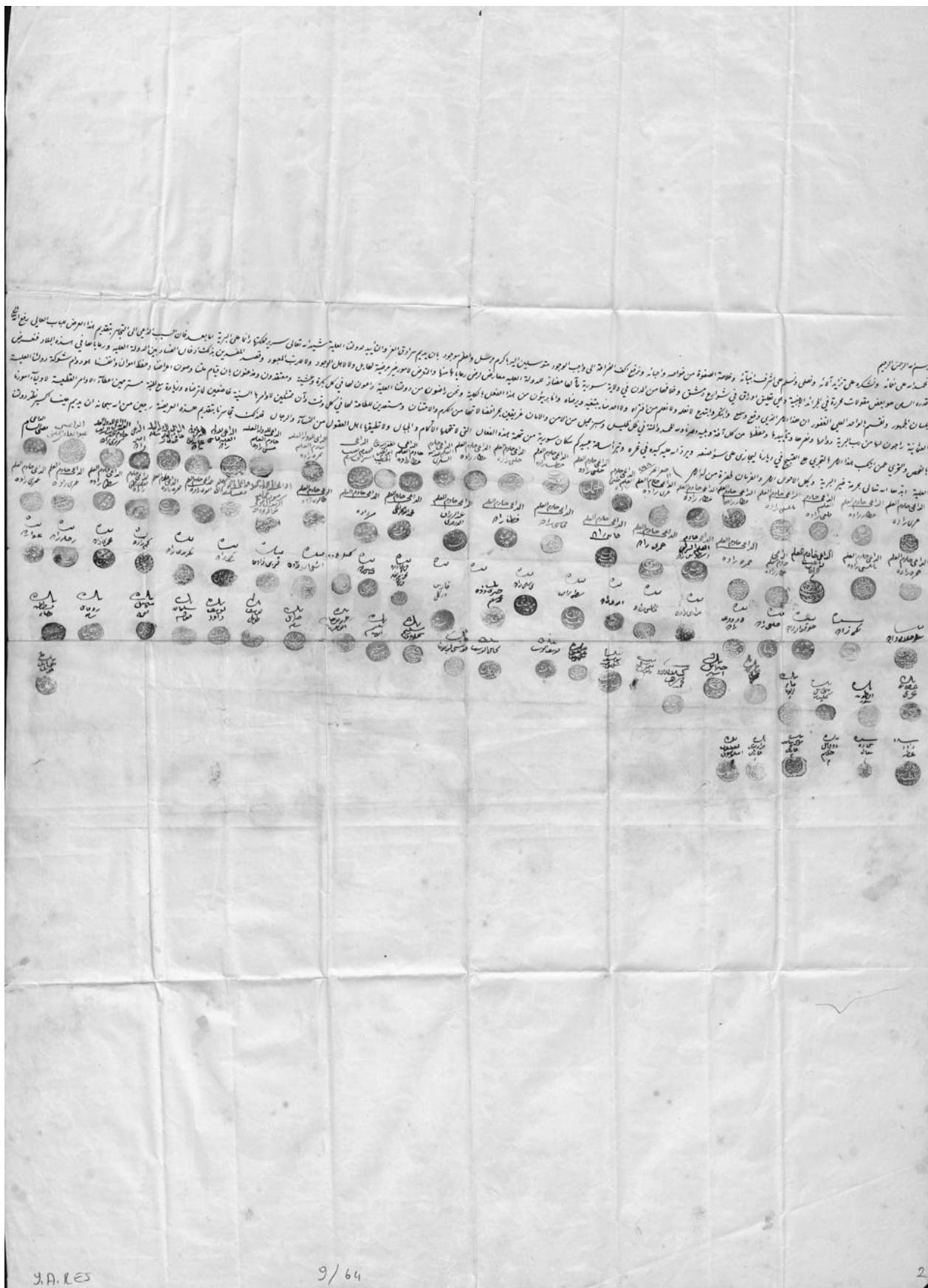
War led to serious questions especially in Syria and Lebanon as to the future of the Ottoman state. In this context, its negative impact on the Muslims in Syria was especially noticeable during and immediately after the war and displayed itself in the form of a series of meetings. However, it did not last long. On the other hand, the negative impact of the war on some circles among the Christians in the region lasted a bit longer. It appears that the war created a slim hope in the minds of some young Arabs to end the Ottoman rule in the Arab provinces in general and in Syria and Lebanon in particular. All indications of the period under study suggest that these young Arabs were mostly educated at the missionary schools or had connections with the missionaries in the region. The available evidence suggest that the Muslim Arabs did not play a role in the placard affairs. Ottoman documents regarding the Damascus placards and Faris Nimr's interviews with Antonious and Zeine also support this view. In this context, there are clear references to the war and its burden on the region in some placards. The clearest and most significant one to the war is in the printed placard of March 1881.

All the placards taken together, it is possible to identify some of their common aspects. Firstly, the authors tried to make sure that copies of the placards should reach British and French consuls in the region. This would suggest that they primarily aimed to influence the two major imperial powers' views on the future of the Ottoman state. In other words, their primary audience was not the Arabs living in major cities like Beirut and Damascus. This may help to explain why not many Arabs were aware of the appearance of the placards until the placard news were published in European newspapers. It also explains why there was not a strong reaction in the region until the local dignitaries learned the news of the placards in foreign press. Several references in the placards to Western concepts such as "Arab nation", "Turkish state" and "fatherland" that did not correspond to any clear meaning in the minds of local Arabs also suggest that the primary audience in the minds of the authors were not local Arabs. Secondly, the authors used the language of an outsider, positioned themselves as friends, who advised the Syrians to end the Ottoman rule in the region. Apart from the last and the printed placard, all the others addressed Syria, the fatherland and the Syrians. Part of this advice was consistent with the anti-Turkish agitation in all the placards, asking the people of the region to awake, i.e., to revolt against Ottoman rule. Thirdly, the placards reiterated the need to reform and the lack of hope that the Turks would carry out the desired reforms. Finally, the texts of the handwritten placards suggest that authors were native, modern educated and secular minded people, who had strong feelings toward reforms and decentralization. The last and the only printed placard, however, has a very different place among all others: it has many grammatical mistakes, inconsistencies among paragraphs (cf. 1st and 4th) and usage of some concepts and phrases which were not used in Arabic of the period such as "Turkish state" and "Arab nation". It is also the only one that addressed the Arabs in general irrespective of reli-

gious and regional differences whereas the others addressed Syria or the Syrians.

Finally, what brought the end of anti-Ottoman agitation in Syria? It seems that a number of factors worked in favour of the Ottoman state in the region. Firstly, by the end of 1881, the Ottoman state managed to give strong signals that it was recovering from the heavy damage of the Russo-Ottoman war of 1877-78. Unlike the intensive discussions about the future of the state in 1878, the local dignitaries showed that they had strong confidence in the Ottoman state by coming together and signing petitions to denounce the anti-Ottoman agitation. The strong pro-Ottoman attitude of the local dignitaries was an important setback for the anti-Ottoman elements in the region. As time progressed, the Syrians' confidence in the state became noticeable even by foreign observers, who were closely monitoring developments in the region. One such observer was Wilfred S. Blunt, who had worked hard to alienate the Arabs from the Turks since 1878. However, by 1881, it became clear to Blunt that Sultan Abdulhamid gradually consolidated his power in Arab populated provinces and the Muslim Arabs generally accepted him as the Caliph.¹¹³

¹¹³ Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *The Future of Islam*, London 1882, reprinted by Sind Sagar Academy, Lahore 1975, viii-ix; 91-93.



A petition in Arabic signed by one hundred dignitaries of Damascus to express their loyalty and obedience to the Caliphate and the State. BOA, Y.A. Res. 9/64 11 Safer 1298/13 January 1881.