A Reconsideration of Phoenicianism

With the decline of the Ottoman empire and WWI, nation-states became dominant globally. In the Levant, despite several other competing nationalist projects, Lebanese nationalism emerged among the local intellectuals with a phoenicianist proposal.

Phoenicianism is the celebration and valorization of ancient Phoenician history. In the Lebanese context, phoenicianism was utilized to justify the particularism of the Lebanese nation. The Young Phoenicians, as Salameh calls them,[1] were early 20th-century intellectuals who championed phoenicianism as integral to Lebanese nationalism.

The ideological feud between the rising nationalisms in the Levant during the 20th century shaped the current historical perception of their emergence and initial goals. Lebanese nationalism is claimed by many, especially pan-syrianists and pan-Arabists, to represent only the sectarianist Maronite Christian elites. They posit that it has emerged only as a reaction to pan-Arabism and pan-Syrianism prompted by French colonial projects. A main argument that is made by the opponents criticizes phoenicianism to be a divisive, sectarian myth rooted in Maronite superiority beliefs and isolationism. On the other hand, the proponents of a particular Lebanese nation attempt to point out the secular, inclusive vision of this nationalism rooted in the ideas of the Young Phoenicians. Subsequently, should phoenicianism be regarded as a sectarian, divisive tool of nationalism? To what extent has it taken a unifying role?

As will be covered in the essay, phoenicianism was not a purely Christian tool of nationalism. It was a true attempt to envision the particularity of a nation, and it served to justify the creation of its state. Both the ideas of its founders or the characteristics of phoenicianism allow an inclusive, unifying role. It is only as a result of political association to far-right parties and colonial support that it became seen as otherwise.

It is only through studying the Young Phoenician intellectuals that one can fully come to that conclusion. By understanding their thoughts and sociology, the answers become coherent. Accordingly, the Young Phoenicians take the form of the Gramscian definition of the intellectual wherein they were the intellectuals of the dominant class.[2] So, they were seen as the real, traditional intellectuals. These Young Phoenicians were often part of the Jesuits at Université Saint Joseph - or at least studied there. As Herzstein argued,[3] USJ was not only an educator, but it created the Maronite elites and built their connections to France and the Catholic church. The Young Phoenicians were also bankers, traders, merchants, or lived

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[1] Franck Salameh, "Young Phoenicians and the Quest for a Lebanese Language: Between Lebanonism, Phoenicianism, and Arabism," in *Arabic and Its Alternatives: Religious Minorities and Their Languages in the Emerging Nation States of the Middle East (1920–1950)*, edited by Heleen Murre-van den Berg, Karène Sanchez Summerer, and Tijmen Baarda (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 111–129.
[2] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 5–14.
[3] Gabrielle Herzstein, "Les Pères Jésuites et les Maronites du Mont-Liban: L'Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 9 (2009): 149–155.

abroad having many foreign connections. It is evident, then, that at a time when education was very limited, the Young Phoenicians were the dominant elites.

The emergence of scientific phoenicianism began in Europe during the 18th and 19th century as more attention was given to old civilizations. In the 19th century, the most famous scholars were Renan, Bérard, and Lammens. Ernest Renan arrived in Beirut with the 1860 French expedition, desiring to excavate ancient Phoenician cities. He later published the influential field study on *Mission de Phoénicie*. His work was a main reference to future Young Phoenicians. After Renan, a great focus was shed on studying Mount Lebanon's history by the French because it was viewed as Christian enclave in a Muslim dominated region - an extension of French culture and civilization. After Renan, several studies on Phoenicians followed, but Bérard and Lammens were the most influential.

Victor Bérard, a French senator, and Henri Lammens, a Belgian Jesuit archeologist, played a vital role in shaping the Young Phoenicians' ideas. Bérard posits in his 1894 book *De l'Origine des Cultes Arcadiens; Essai de Méthode en Mythologie Grecque* that the Phoenician civilization contributed majorly in forming the Hellenic one. At the same time, Henri Lammens, who taught several of the Young Phoenicians, was publishing his works, notably *Panorama of Archeological Inventory in Lebanon* and *Record of Lebanese Maps*. Lammens saw Syria as being vastly different from the Arab gulf, claiming that the Syrian civilization is great because of its unique geography. Lammens provided a map of Lebanon from the 1860s and claimed it to be that of the Phoenician civilization too. Both via historic and geographic determinism laid the ground for political phoenicianism.

Many refer to the aforementioned figures to claim that Lebanese Phoenician identity was primarily a colonial desire. Indeed, a lot of early archeological works in the Levant were the result of European expeditions. Scientifically, claiming that Phoenician civilization was influential and geographically determined is apolitical. With little to no foreign writings on political phoenicianism, it can then be argued that local intellectuals were the politicizers. Furthermore, even if there were French interests in forming the Lebanese state later, there were interests in creating a pan-Syrian state too. A main reason behind preferring the Lebanese state came from the local intellectuals' desires to be autonomous from a Syria led by Prince Faysal. The Phoenicianist project - and, by extension, Lebanese nationalism - is rooted in European sciences but is politically mobilized by local intellectuals.

The first political mobilization of phoenicianism can be traced back to Jouplain (Boulos Nujaym), who in 1908 published his book *La Question du Liban*. Even if Nujaym was not the biggest contributor to phoenicianism, his book and later articles in *La Revue Phénicienne* in 1919 reflects his adhesion to it. Influenced by Lammens, he believed the Lebanese people are distinct from their Syrian and Arab surroundings because of the geography that shapes them. He saw that all Lebanese had a shared geographical and historical heritage, which is

Phoenicia. Nonetheless, according to Marwan Buheiry,[4] in Nujaym's early years, he saw Lebanon as an autonomous region within a bigger Syria wherein Lebanon is the Piedmont of a unified Syria. By 1919, however, he had shifted his focus on expanding Lebanese territories and did not see a viable unification under Prince Faysal. Most importantly, he had a major role in negotiating for a Greater Lebanon in the Paris Peace Conference.

Nujaym's phoenicianist idea reflects a liberal, secular and unifying vision. His ideas reflect that phoenician is a unique ethnicity to which all Lebanese can adhere to. In his early book, his Piedmontese symbolism reflects a desire to achieve a secular, liberal model of a nation state like the French Third Republic. Lebanon, he believed, inherently had these democratic values. He even disassociates from the Maronite Church, claiming that for economic reasons the church should not take hold of a lot of clerical land as it deprives higher productivity. Finally, during his participation in the Paris Peace Conference, despite being a francophile himself, he did not call for any French protection over Lebanon, but he acknowledged the cultural connection between the two nations.

Similarly, his contemporary Charles Corm took a core role in politicizing phoenicianism in a non-divisive manner. He founded *La Revue Phénicienne* in 1919 to push for the phoenician agenda. It, nevertheless, shut down in six months due to financial issues. The journal served an influential role in displaying the Young Phoenicians' vision of Lebanon at a critical time when the Paris Peace Conference and its aftermath were materializing. He is deemed to be the romantic, phoenician poet because of his famous poem *La Montagne Inspirée*.

His poem summarizes his inclusive understanding of phoenicianism.[5] In the first part, he romanticizes Lebanese geography, emphasizing the mountainous terrains as symbols of independence and the coast as an implication of free commerce and economic liberalism. This openness is inherited from the Phoenicians who traded with the world. The second part covers the loss of this glorious past and a desire to recreate it. He sees the resistant spirit of this civilization remaining in the inhabitants of this unique territory. Finally, he focuses on remembering the past through culture, language, and geography to create a national conscience. He reflects his sadness at the loss of the phoenician language: "the mother of the languages of the world" and "the true Lebanese language". He glorifies a common, secular pagan past, "love ourselves as when we loved in our pagan days," preceding a religious life. He even goes as far as claiming that phoenician culture and language founded the monotheistic characteristics leading to Christianity, and later Islam.

His poem is a call to recreate this nation of pluralism, secularism, multilingualism, economic liberalism, and civilization bridge which the Lebanese conscience inherited from its ancestors. "Nous sommes les héritiers des bâtisseurs de cités, des marchands de l'aube, des premiers semeurs d'alphabets et d'espoir." Even if he references Christian symbolism, such as

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[4] Marwan R. Buheiry, "Bulus Nujaym and the Grand Liban Ideal, 1908–1919," in *Intellectual Life in the Arab East, 1890–1939* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1981), 72–93.
[5] Asher Kaufman, "'Tell Us Our History': Charles Corm, Mount Lebanon, and Lebanese Nationalism," *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (2004): 1–28.

Qadeesha Valley, it is normal since he comes from a Christian setting. Although he downplays the importance of Arabic and Islamic culture, he does not deny its influence. Yet, the spirit of the phoenician language in the Lebanese dialect holds the ancient, inherited traditions.

Michel Chiha, one of the writers of the Lebanese 1926 constitution, saw Lebanon as "carrefour du monde, une rencontre de croyances, de cultures, de races." His vision can be regarded as the most inclusive and unifying of all the intellectuals. He envisioned the Lebanese nation as a historical memory. He saw religions as pulling the nation into confessional allegiances. It is the history of commerce and pluralism, inherited from the Phoenicians, that shaped the Lebanese nation as a Mediterranean culture connecting civilizations For him, Arabic and Arab culture is only a part of Lebanese tapestry: "Treize siècles d'influence arabe sont précédés par cinquante siècles de civilisation endogène, méditerranéenne." In his 1942 book *Liban d'aujourd'hui*, he rejects that Lebanese come from just one semitic ancestry. They are a blend of ancient ethnicities. He argued that to achieve phoenician greatness, the Lebanese must be polyglot and open to all cultures even if Arabic is the spoken language. Many of his visions are reflected in the confessional system he drafted to achieve coexistence.

Having covered the three most important Young Phoenicians, it is important to discuss the context that shaped them. Almost all Young Phoenicians were taught by the Jesuits and were influenced by Lammens particularly. They were all bankers, economists, constitutionalists, scholars and/or journalists. They were by education, and some, like Jouplain, by writing, francophiles. Nevertheless, they were not all Maronite: Ferdinand Tyan was a Beiruti Sunni and Chiha was a Greek Catholic. So, this Maronite nationalism is not compatible with reality. Being educated by a French entourage allowed them to have these foreign connections, which they instrumentalized to fulfill their visions of the nation. Claiming that they had been fulfilling the colonial project is untrue, for the same can be said about the pan-Syrianist who saw Syria as a non-Arab nation.

Furthermore, focusing on the wider scope of the competing nationalisms, it is important to clarify trends. First and foremost, all these nationalisms emerged as a response to Ottomanist nationalism.[6] They initially called for more decentralization to face the administrative and economic predicaments of the aging empire. Thus, to criticize Ferdinand Tyan's 1905 book *La Nationalité Maronite* as an example of Lebanese nationalism's divisive, sectarian nature is, for example, incoherent. Prior to Jouplain's 1908 book, Tyan, a Sunni, only attempted to protect the particularity of Mount Lebanon and its minorities. Even Patriarch Hoyek, who led the Lebanese delegation in 1919, reluctantly utilized the Phoenician narrative in order to convince the Europeans.[7] He did not agree with the secularists on a pagan ancestry.

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[6] Carol Hakim, *The Origins of the Lebanese National Idea, 1840–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
[7] Ibid.

Moreover, the intellectuals were supporting various ideologies, but marginality is the natural product of nationalism. The Young Phoenicians and pan-Syrians had aligned with several nationalisms pre-1920. Shukri Ghanem headed the Alliance Libanaise in Paris, but was a strong advocate for pan-Arabism. George Samné was a Syrian Christian who advocated for non-Arab Syria with a Lebanese phoenician particularity. Ironically, according to Kaufman,[8] the latter two were financed by French politicians, challenging the narrative of a colonial, divisive conspiracy. Jacques Tabet, a contributor in *La Revue Phénicienne*, called for a Mediterranean Syria, but he later switched to supporting Lebanese independence. In brief, it would not be until 1919 that each intellectual took a side based on their convictions and on the practicalities of the projects. The need to push for a Lebanese nationalism entailed a partial marginalization of the Syrian and Arab component, and vice versa. Eventually, however, the Lebanese identity was compromised to have an "Arab face" in 1943 despite the so-called sectarian phoenician project.

Finally, it is necessary to understand the nature of the Phoenician claim, for it can be, as any other nationalist project, exclusive or inclusive. Theoretically, this argument can be seen in the dialectic between Anthony's ethno-symbolic nationalism and Hobsbawm's imagined community. The opponents of phoenicianism regard it as an ethnic project. According to the aforementioned intellectuals, it is often rooted in geography and history rather than ethnicity. In fact, in *Lebanese Phoenicianism: Rebutting Anthony Smith's Ethno-Symbolism*, Dr. Maxwell even claims that Phoenicianism was solely an imagined community for it rebirthed a lost nation in an attempt to create a non-sectarian identity.[9] In theory, phoenicianism has all the aspects of an inclusive nationalism.

Practically, the dark extremist history persists in memory, but its unifying soul still exists. The radicalization of phoenicianism is often traced back to Said Aql.[10] Aql expanded on the ideas of Corm, seeing that the Lebanese dialect is a unique language that retains Aramaic influence - the modern remnant of the ancient phoenician language. He attempted to write this Lebanese language in the Latin alphabet - the modern version of the phoenician alphabet. As the civil tensions worsened in the 50s and 70s, he fully supported the radicalizing Phalangist party, which created a dark memory of this project.

A modern version can be recreated. According to Salameh,[11] Amin Maalouf is the modern continuity of the Young Phoenicians today. His writings on identities reflect the mélange of ideologies in Lebanon and the Levant. As Maalouf symbolizes in his book *Leo Africanus*, when Leo says, "But I belong to none," it refers to a resistance against a singular narrow identity. Like Leo and the Young Phoenicians, Amin sees himself as a fusion of different languages and cultures. His inauguration speech at the Académie Francaise also reflects his connection to Phoenicianism as being the bridge of all civilization, which Lebanon represents

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[8] Asher Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia: The Search for Identity in Lebanon* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).
[9] Maxwell, Michael. "Lebanese Phoenicianism: Rebutting Anthony Smith's Ethno-Symbolism," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 24, no. 1 (2024): 89–108.
[10] Bawardi, Basilius. "Young Phoenicianism," in *The Lebanese-Phoenician Nationalist Movement: Literature, Language, and Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 126–144.
[11] Salameh, *The Inevitability of Identity*, 120.

today. Maalouf represents Chiha's Mediterranean Phoenician, which centralizes Lebanese particularity via being an identity of tolerance and plurality.

In conclusion, phoenicianism in essence is not a sectarianist, divisive project as argued by its opponents. The distinct ideas of the Young Phoenicians reflect a civic, democratic, plural vision of nationality that integrates all the Lebanese factions. Local desire politicized the scientific knowledge of European scholars. Its negative memory today is because of the unfortunate radicalization of the civil war; however, with modern intellectuals, such as Amin Maalouf, its unification potential has been retained. Nonetheless, in today's context, with the majority of Lebanese identifying as Arabs, it seems that the phoenicianist project is better placed in Lebanon's rich historical portfolio. Yet, keeping it in history books must not prevent the Lebanese from understanding the internationalist, inclusive spirit of their nation, especially at a time where Lebanese nationalism is shifting to new far-right extremes.

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