

# The 'Woman Question' in the Aftermath of the Great Syrian Revolt:

## A Transnational Dialogue from the Arab-Argentine Immigrant Press

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Beyond the geographical borders of the Middle East, discourses and debates about Middle Eastern women played an important role in the Arabic immigrant press in the *Mahjar* (diaspora). This article explores the particular case of *al-Istiklaal* in the final moments and aftermath of the Great Syrian Revolt, “the largest, longest, and most destructive of the Arab Middle Eastern revolts” (Provence, 2005, p. 12). From its first issue in June 1926 until late 1929, this Arab-Argentine newspaper systematically attacked the French Mandate and advocated for an independent Syria and Lebanon, which should be part of a larger pan-Arab political entity. Although *al-Istiklaal* was a political publication produced by men and intended for a male audience,<sup>2</sup> it nonetheless introduced women as an iconographic and discursive element. *Al-Istiklaal* incorporated in its issues visual images of female activists and prominent Middle Eastern and European women along with editorial articles on debates about the veil and education that, to some extent, reproduced those taking place in Syria and Lebanon. What were the reasons that led a pan-Arab political publication in Buenos Aires to include women? What was the relationship with the politics expressed in the publication? How did *al-Istiklaal* reproduce or transform general debates on women and gender in the late 1920s in the Middle East?

Although still in its early stages, the literature on Syrian and Lebanese immigrants in Argentina is a growing field with groundbreaking works from scholars such as Ignacio Klich, Michael Humphrey, Gladys Jozami, Christina Civantos, and Margot Scheffold, among others. Their studies explore the intersections between identity, ethnicity, and nationality in the context of a heterogeneous immigrant community that dates back from the last decade of the nineteenth century. As is the case with Middle Eastern studies literature, however, women have been a neglected subject in most of these works (Fleischmann, 1999, p. 93). This article builds on previous work in the field and sheds light on how general debates in Syria and Lebanon on the 'Woman Question'<sup>3</sup> in the 1920s were adopted and, in some cases, adapted to accommodate the special characteristics of *al-Istiklaal* as a pan-Arab newspaper published in Argentina. The 'Woman Question', thus, becomes an analytical tool to explore the tensions that originated in the intersection between national identity and transnational nationalism as represented in *al-Istiklaal*.

**The Great Revolt: the Courage of Exceptional Women in Exceptional Times**

*Al-Istiklaal* came into being in June 1926 as a political and



intellectual response to the upheaval caused by the Great Syrian Revolt. The revolt was an anti-colonial nationalist movement that by 1927 had been brutally repressed by the French authorities (Thompson, 2000, p. 46). But the revolt also had a component of mass mobilization; as expressed by Michael Provence, “[f]or more than two years a ragtag collection of farmers, urban tradesmen and workers, and former junior officers of the Ottoman and Arab armies managed to challenge, and often defeat, the colonial army of one of the most powerful countries in the world.” As historian Elizabeth Thompson has shown, gender and women were also integral parts of the mass mobilization of this revolt. While gender was “both a discursive and physical battlefield” among Syrian nationalists and French authorities, women “participated in the physical and rhetorical combat” (Thompson, 2000, pp. 46-47). Although published in Argentina, *al-Istiklaal* reflected both the ‘physical and rhetorical’ combat of women in the battlefield on three occasions.

On July 15, 1926, *al-Istiklaal* reproduced the letter that a Druze woman had sent in April to the wife of a French Captain after he had perished in a battle in Sweida. After giving her condolences to the widow, the anonymous Druze woman harshly criticized the brutality of French military attacks in Sweida and explained why the Syrians were fiercely fighting against the French. In addition to this letter, and still during the last months of the fighting, *al-Istiklaal* once more reproduced an article, this time from the *Daily Chicago News*, in which a French correspondent praised the courage of Druze women in the battlefield. The article included the opinions of French military officers who expressed their surprise at the courage of Druze women joining Druze men in their fight against the French troops. Seven of those women died in fierce combat. However, there was no mention of any specific female heroes, from which we should conclude that these were Druze peasant women.<sup>4</sup>

The final article was a long editorial describing the fight of a Druze woman, Um Sa’id, mother and wife, who had fought and died with her husband and son in order to defend her family and her nation. The dramatic description of her death led the journalist to reproduce an article by Muhammad Jamil Bey offering a historical overview of the courage of relevant women in the history of early Islam. In this particular article, *al-Istiklaal* reproduced prevailing discourses of elites in Syria and Lebanon who, “influenced by Salafi reformist thought[,] looked to the days of the Prophet Muhammad for models of how to behave as Muslims and how to reform their communities” (Thompson, 2000, p. 124). In this vein, biographies of female Arab warriors like Zenobia or exemplary women in the history of early Islam like ‘Aisha were featured in women’s magazines (Thompson, 2000, p. 124).

Despite the initial fervor that the courage of these women produced in male discourses about women in Syria and Lebanon, Elizabeth Thompson concludes that these discourses were exceptional and did not add support to the feminist movement at the end of the armed conflict. *Al-Istiklaal* adopted the regressive attitude of Syrian and Lebanese men. Although this is not the place to narrate in detail the intricate history of ‘nationality status’ among Syrian and Lebanese emigrants in the *Mahjar*, it is important to mention that citizenship issues were not compromised as a result of these vibrant narratives about women’s heroic collaborations. After the revolt, and despite the concern over citizenship issues among Syrian and Lebanese immigrants, *al-Istiklaal* did not raise the question of citizenship rights so that they could also be granted to women. In this way, *al-Istiklaal* perpetuated the general male consensus that women’s heroism during the revolt was nothing but “women’s duty toward the community to protect it in times of need” (Thompson, 2000, p. 124).

#### **Pan-Arabism, Islam, and Modernity in an Argentine Context**

*Al-Istiklaal*, however, did not merely mimic its Syrian and Lebanese counterparts. In its treatment of women and gender, the political biweekly reflected the tensions of a newspaper published in Argentina with a pan-Arab leaning. This tension was explicit in two main instances: the discourses about the veil and the choice of what can be called exemplary women. In order to understand fully the nature of this tension, we need first to contextualize *al-Istiklaal* in its double sociopolitical backdrop as a newspaper published in Argentina that related to Middle Eastern politics.

#### **Shakib Arslan and the Istiqlali Faction of the Syrian-Palestine Congress**

*Al-Istiklaal* was the initiative of Emir Amin Arslan, who by 1926 was an experienced newspaper editor and well-reputed intellectual in Argentina.<sup>5</sup> Cousin of Emir Shakib Arslan, Amin Arslan had arrived in Buenos Aires as the Ottoman Consular representative to Argentina in 1910 (Klich, 1993, p. 182). Despite his well-known loyalty to the Committee of Union and Progress, during the war Amin Arslan sided with the French. This political choice undermined his diplomatic credentials and exposed him to harsh criticism from the Syrian community.<sup>6</sup> He reasserted his pro-French position in December 1918 when he was made honorary president of Union Siria, a Syrian-Lebanese organization, sponsored at that time by the French government.

However, Arslan’s friendly rapport with France did not last long beyond the war. In 1925, he launched a fierce campaign against the French in Syria and Lebanon.

Following the general outrage after France's harsh repression of armed Druze rebels, Arslan published a short pamphlet in Spanish about the Great Syrian Revolt entitled *La revolución siria contra el mandato francés* (The Syrian Revolt against the French Mandate). In this work, Arslan denounced the French Mandate as a disguised colonization (*colonización disfrazada*) (Arslan, 1925, p. 42). Like other critiques of the French Mandate at the time, Arslan printed photographs and graphically described the ruthless bombardments of Damascus and its population at the hands of the French military (Arslan, 1925, p. 86). Arslan was not the only Syrian-Lebanese emigrant to radicalize his position against the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon during the Great Revolt. As greater research shows, many Syrians and Lebanese in the Americas actively protested the French military presence in Syria through letters to French consulates and formal complaints to the League of Nations.<sup>7</sup>

This radicalization of politics among the Syrian and Lebanese in the *Mahjar* paralleled the changes brought about by the Revolt within the Syrian national movement. According to historian Philip Khoury, the revolt sharply divided the members of the Syrian-Palestine Congress, the opposition movement in exile. Divisions between the two main factions, the Arslan-Istiqalali and the Shahbandar-Lutfallah, had already emerged before the Revolt as both factions held opposed political visions. However, their differences grew with the adoption of radically different approaches to the negotiation of the conflict (Khoury, 1987, p. 225). As the name of the editor and the title of the publication may already indicate, Emir Amin Arslan was a close follower of the predicaments of his cousin Shakib Arslan and the politics of the Istiklaal party. The political ideals of the Arslan-Istiqalali faction have been defined by historian Philip Khoury as: "anti-British, [reluctant] to align with the Hashemites, [the] use of Berlin as a major center for his propaganda campaign against the French, [the] interest in gaining Turkish support for the independence of the Arab territories, and [the] emphasis on an Arab nation whose underlying moral principles were based on the Divine Law of Islam, were bound to clash with the Lutfallah-Shahbandar factions' British and Hashemite links, its suspicion of the Turks, and its secularism" (Khoury, 1987, p. 225).

Amin Arslan's support of the Arslan-Istiqalali faction did not translate into open criticism of the Lutfallah-

Shahbandar faction. On the contrary, *al-Istiklaal* mostly portrayed opposition to the French Mandate as a united anti-colonial movement. However, his support of the Arslan-Istiqalali faction, although not explicit, was clear in the subtext of his writings and editorial options. This became evident in the series of articles reproduced in *al-Istiklaal* authored by Shakib Arslan that were reprinted from 1927 onwards. The necessary question that arises from this situation is how to interpret Arslan's editorial strategy of not offering explicit political support for the Arslan-Istiqalali faction. Should we consider that Arslan was not aware of the internal politics of the Syrian-Palestine Congress? Due to his extensive political experience, his contacts, and the cosmopolitan outlook of the Arslan-Istiqalali movement, it would seem appropriate to look in a different direction for the answer. The publication of his short anti-French pamphlet suggests that Emir Arslan presented himself to the Argentine community as a member of a larger unified anti-French movement. It should also be pointed out that in it he had characterized the division of Lebanon and Syria as a '*sainete*' (a grotesque situation or comic sketch). How would factionalism among the Syrian anti-French movement have been regarded by Argentine society whose knowledge of

the Middle East was limited to some orientalist notions?<sup>8</sup> Could Emir Arslan as a pan-Arab leader in Argentina afford to share the internal divisions in the anti-colonial movement?

Arslan's editorial strategy is important in our analysis for one main reason: it evinces his awareness of the position of his own writings as a Middle Easterner writing about the Middle East in Argentina. This awareness had an important effect in the treatment of the 'Woman Question,' and may help us explain some of the apparent contradictions in *al-*

*Istiklaal*'s discourses about women and gender. Although *al-Istiklaal* was published in Arabic, it included some Spanish content as well, especially in the form of captions. More important, however, was the common practice of magazines and newspapers among the Syrian and Lebanese community of commenting upon each other.<sup>9</sup> Since many of these publications were bilingual, these commentaries about other newspapers could be subject to interpretation by a Spanish audience. In other words, it could be argued that the Syrian-Lebanese immigrant press in Argentina functioned as an alternative public sphere with its own control mechanisms. Therefore, Arslan had the double need to consider the impact of his writing and editorial choices on the Syrian-Lebanese and

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Argentine audiences, while maintaining his own political principles. This tension between Arslan's political ideals and loyalties to the Middle East on the one hand, and his position in Argentine society on the other, was manifest in the depiction of women in *al-Istiklaal*. The question of the veil and the choices of exemplary women were the two occasions that further highlighted this tension.

### Nazira Zayn al-Din and the Debate over the Veil

According to Elizabeth Thompson, one of the most intense debates on gender issues occurred in March 1928 after Nazira Zayn al-Din published her *al-Sufur wa al-Hijab* (Unveiling and Veiling). In it, the Lebanese Muslim feminist "not only condemned the veil, but also asserted her authority, as a Muslim tutored by her father, to speak generally on issues of Islamic law... Zayn al-Din called for a spiritual understanding of Islam, whose essence was to promote the freedom and well-being of all Muslims... she argued that women's veiling violated the spiritual message of Islam, which generally favored equal rights between men and women" (Thompson, 2000, p. 127). The writings of Nazira Zayn al-Din sparked positive responses not only among some prominent Muslims like Muhammad Kurd Ali and Muhammad Jamil Bayhum (Thompson, 2000, p.133), but also from Syrians and Lebanese abroad. The Maronite Lebanese society, *Ittihad Lubnani* or in its French version, *Alliance Libanaise*, for instance, referred to it as 'very beneficial and useful' (*al-jazil al fa'ida wa al-kathir al-nafa'a*) (Nazira Zayn al-Din, 1998, p. 201), calling for the Syrian and Lebanese community to hold it in high esteem (Nazira Zayn al-Din, 1998, p. 203).

However, *al-Istiklaal* did not take a clear stance on Zayn al-Din's book. Beyond the acknowledgement of her work, *al-Istiklaal* did not pronounce any explicit opinion about Zayn al-Din's writings. As it had been the case with the earlier editorial strategy adopted in regards to factionalism, *al-Istiklaal* limited itself to reproducing the debate between Nazira Zayn al-Din and the Mufti of Beirut. Once more, the position of the *al-Istiklaal* is understood through its editorial choices, as it only published the argument between her and the Mufti of Beirut, disregarding, for example, the positive words of Muhammad Kurd Ali, whose writings had previously been included in other issues. However, it is worth asking why Arslan's publication did not take an active position in its criticism of Nazira Zayn al-Din's work on veiling. In this case, it can be argued that the stance of *al-Istiklaal* may have reflected a combination of tensions: first, the tension between the Islamic ideals and morals of the Istiqlali party and the reality of how the veil was perceived in Argentina possibly as an element of 'cultural backwardness;' second, the tension between rival political factions within the Syrian and Lebanese emigrants, such as Ittihad

Lubnan, which reacted positively to Zayn al-Din's ideas. However, it is important to read Ittihad Lubnan's comments as coming from a Maronite Lebanese association that advocated for a Greater Lebanon under the auspices of the French Mandate. The political animosity between the ideals of Ittihad Lubnan and other anti-French groups and personalities such as Amin Arslan may have played a role in the overall tension of negotiating Islamic ideals in a non-Islamic society. Until further information on the representations of the veil in the Arabic immigrant press becomes known, we can provide a general conclusion: it is clear that the veil had become, once more, the battleground for issues beyond veiling itself.

### An Eclectic Mix of Exemplary Women

Like veiling, representations of women were another provocative subject that reflects the tension in *al-Istiklaal*. The iconographic display of what I call 'exemplary' women offered an interesting and puzzling picture of the 'ideal woman' that *al-Istiklaal* envisioned. During the first two years of the publication from 1926 to 1928, Arslan's newspaper included a series of portraits of European and Middle Eastern women who had made significant contributions to their societies. Some of the achievements of the Middle Eastern women chosen by *al-Istiklaal* fit into our notions of what *Salafi* reformers had envisioned for women. These were the cases of Suheila Saadeh, the first Muslim graduate nurse in Beirut; or that of Thariyya Fakhoury, founder of an organization against tuberculosis and pulmonary diseases. However, among these prominent Middle Eastern women there were professions less likely to fit the *Salafi* ideals. These were, for instance, the Egyptian singer, Munira Mahdi; the Egyptian actress and writer Fatima Rushdi, the first graduate student to attend Cambridge university, Firdaus Bassiouni, and a prominent leader of the women's movement in India, Sajjoni Naidu (Haidu, according to *al-Istiklaal*). All these women appeared hand-in-hand with leading European women like the first Parisian woman to obtain her PhD in law, the first female German judge, and others like them.

How is one to reconcile the apparently contradictory mix of Suheila Saadeh and Fatima Rushdi in Arslan's publication? From Elizabeth Thompson we know that theater and cinema had been the battleground of protest in the most conservative religious (Muslim and Catholic) sectors of Syrian and Lebanese societies in the 1910s and 1920s (Thompson, 2000, p. 202) Why then would *al-Istiklaal* include an actress as an 'exemplary' woman? These are questions that have no definite answer but suggest some other interesting ones: Could it be possible that the pan-Arab ideals of Shakib Arslan and the Istiqlali faction conceived of women in a more 'open' way than we might think? Or should we perhaps consider the Argentine

backdrop as an element that may have led Emir Arslan to visually represent Middle Eastern women in a way that could 'speak' to an Argentine audience?

Unfortunately, the excellent work of William Cleveland (1985) on Shakib Arslan does not shed any light on this topic, and more extensive research on Shakib Arslan's journalistic writings is needed before we arrive at some further conclusions on the question of how the pan-Arab nationalist movement had envisioned the participation of women in society. However, what is clear from this ten-

sion is that even in the distant *mahjar*, women had become another battleground in which notions of modernity were to be defined. Could Emir Amin Arslan speak of women as nurses and teachers in a society where feminism had become a relevant social activity in the hands of both conservative and progressive women?<sup>10</sup> Could Arslan afford to refer to the pan-Arab nation in terms of modernity without mentioning women as active participants in a vibrant society? This article raises these questions as a step toward further research in this area.

## Endnotes

1. *Al-Istiklaal* was the original transliteration in Spanish from the editors.
2. On this issue, it is interesting to note how most commercials included in *al-Istiklaal* were oriented towards a male audience.
3. I have borrowed the term 'Woman Question' from Ellen Fleischman. As she herself explains, the use of this expression is a translation from *Qadiyyat al-Mar'a*, an "underlying framework for all of the discussions related to women and gender in the Palestinian press" (Fleischmann, 2003, p. 246)
4. This conclusion follows Elizabeth Thompson's on the fighting of peasant Druze women during the revolt, see pp. 122-25.
5. Ignacio Klich's "Argentine-Ottoman relations..." is the most complete biographical secondary source on the life of Emir Amin Arslan. Recently, Christina Civantos has reevaluated some of Arslan's work.
6. As Ignacio Klich narrates and my own archival research shows, much of the criticism to Arslan came from his political rival in Argentina at the time Khalil Saadeh, father of Antun Saadeh (founder of the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, SSNP).
7. I develop this further in my larger dissertation research.
8. See Christina Civantos (2006) for further detailed information on Orientalist notions in the context of Argentine history.
9. I analyze this practice in my larger dissertation work.
10. For a detailed account of the feminist movements see Asuncion Lavrin, 1995.

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