From Damascus to Beirut

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Contested Cities in Arab Writing (1969-1989)

By

Hazem Fadel

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To my little girl Serene, thank you for coming into my life and for giving me the strength and hope I need to carry on living and dreaming. You will always be my window into beauty.

INTRODUCTION

This book takes as its focus four works published in Arabic between 1969 and 1989: *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* (1980) by the female Syrian writer Ulfat Idilbi, *Returning to Haifa* (1969) by the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani, *Memory in the Flesh* (1985) by the female Algerian writer Ahlam Mosteghanemi, and *The Journey of Little Gandhi* (1989) by the Lebanese writer Elias Khoury. The order in which these novels appear in this book is dictated by the historical event that they describe and not by their time of publication despite the fact that, obviously, all the writers presented here were also influenced by, and keen to address, their contemporary political scenarios. The novels under scrutiny here have been chosen because each of them deals with a specific city at a very crucial moment in the history of that city, the country it belongs to, and the Arab world as a whole. Each chapter has one of these novels at its core: the first chapter, for instance, looks at Damascus during the French Mandate of Syria (1918-1947), as represented by Ulfat Idilbi while the second chapter examines Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Returning to Haifa* and his treatment of the Palestinian issue through his representation of the city of Haifa from 1948, the date that saw the establishment of the state of Israel on Palestine's soil, until the Arab defeat in 1967 which resulted in full Israeli occupation of Palestine and the capture of other territories in Syria and Lebanon. The Algerian war of independence (1956-1962) and the decades that followed Algeria's independence from French colonialism in 1962 provide the historical background for Ahlam Mosteghanemi's novel *Memory in the Flesh* and particularly for her representation of the city of Constantine which will be the focus of chapter three. This book concludes with an analysis of Elias Khoury's *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, a novel that portrays the Lebanese capital at a time when the civil war (1975-1991) had already divided Beirut among its warring factions and left almost 130,000 people dead. The cities in question are all contested places, albeit for different reasons, and the novels that I have chosen bring to the fore the tensions and contradictory dynamics which have constituted their social fabric and political aspirations at the point in time in which these works are set, and at the time in which they were written, which in the case of three of these works—namely, *Damascus Bitter Sweet* (1980), *Returning to Haifa* (1969)

and *Memory in the Flesh* (1985)—is significantly different. In each case, I will put the past and the present in dialogue in order to get a better sense of the way the works in question engage with these cities and their roles in the history and politics of the Arab world.[1]

As anticipated, I begin my quest in Damascus in the 1920s when Syria, like most Arab countries, was struggling to gain independence from European colonialism. At that time, the fragmentation of the Arab world into artificial political, separate entities by European powers, which cast their domination over these entities, instigated the rise of different forms of political resistance, the mobilisation of different ideologies and the creation of various political movements. Nationalists took a leading role in forming political parties in many countries in the Arab world, one of which was the Syrian Social Nationalist. The dominance of the nationalist idea at the time opened the debate over issues pertaining to the meanings of nation and nationalism, a debate that was inseparable from the struggle for independence and the building of a new social and political order. The Syrian Social Nationalist party was founded by Antun Saaheh (1904-1949) in 1932. What was of utmost importance for him was the advancement of the nationalist idea in his divided society; he was an advocate of Syrian unity (Greater Syria, which comprised Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan) and for that matter he put Arabism before regional and religious affiliations.[2] In other words, he called for the liberation from all religious and sectarian loyalties in favour of secularism and a pan-Arab nationalist loyalty.

Saadeh's Pan-Arabism, however, was confronted by Islamic ideological movements, the most powerful of which was the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in the later 1920s by Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) who, unlike Antun Saadeh, stressed the need to return to the origins of true Islam: the Qur'an and the *Hadith* (Prophet Mohammad's sayings). Adherence to the Islamic Law was considered the pillar for the re-establishment and restoration of the power and the glory of what to him

[1] I use the terms "Arab World", "Arab Nation" and "Arabs" interchangeably to refer to people who speak the Arabic language or, nowadays, different dialects of formal Arabic. The Arab world constitutes a group of independent states that extend across the whole of North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula or the Gulf region, and the Fertile Crescent (Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon). This region is bounded by the Mediterranean and Turkey from the North, the Atlantic Ocean from the West, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian Ocean from the South, and Iran from the East.

[2] See Antun Saadeh, *Antun Saadeh: The Man, his Thought: An Anthology*, edited by Adel Beshara (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2007).

had to be, crucially, a *Muslim* nation.[3] Al-Banna's teachings found resonance in many Arab countries and in Syria Mustafa al-Sibai (1915-1964) followed in al-Banna's footsteps. Al-Sibai regarded the *liberal* pan-Arabism of Saadeh and his likes as an illusory project and he instead promoted a political vision which blended elements of religion and social justice in an attempt to show that there was no gap between religion and life.[4] Crucially, the two political movements had different views on gender politics: while Saadeh regarded political democracy and the emancipation of women as integral components of the struggle for national liberation, al-Sibai stressed the division of roles between men and women. For al-Sibai, although women were spiritually equal, they had different responsibilities in the family hierarchy where their specific roles were mothers, wives, and daughters. Those who were influenced by al-Sibai's teachings put constraints on women's engagement in the public sphere and consequently on their participation in the struggle against the coloniser.

As Nationalism and Islamism were the major schools of thought that prevailed during the period of national struggle for independence in the Arab world, in Syria, the voices of their proponents reflected deep divisions within the Syrian society. These divisions were mostly visible in the Syrian capital, Damascus, during the 1920s and 1930s and it is the city at that particular time that is the setting of Idilbi's *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet*. The socio-political situation outlined above plays a crucial part in the plot of the novel and in the development of its female protagonist. As we will see, Idilbi, who was born in Damascus and lived in the city during the French Mandate, brings to the fore the ways in which gender, patriarchy, and colonialism affected the Damascene urban setting during that period and the role they played both in the long anti-colonial struggle and, crucially, in the immediate aftermath of Syria's independence.

If, following World War Two, Syria and many Arab countries finally celebrated their national independence, disaster was looming in Palestine which had been under British Mandate since 1920. Britain was under pressure from the United Nations to withdraw its troops from Palestine, and therefore, decided to withdraw its troops from Palestine on a fixed date, the 14th of May 1948. Prior to the withdrawal of its troops, however,

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[3] For an historical and political study of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, see Richard Paul Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[4] See Mustafa al-Sibai, *Ishtirakyyat al-Islam* [*The Socialism of Islam*] [In Arabic] (Cairo 1960). See excerpts of *The Socialism of Islam* in *Arab Socialism*, edited by Sami A. Hanna and George H. Gardner, translated by Sami Hanna & George Gardner (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 67-78.

the British government, stirred by the massacres committed against the Jews in Europe, had facilitated a large scale Jewish immigration to Palestine. The Jews in Palestine were more united than Arab Palestinians and also had military training due to their service in the British mandate forces. As the country's largest city and major port, Haifa was the destination for shiploads of migrant Jews; the scale of this migration is better understood if one considers that by the end of 1946 the migrant Jews had taken over the city of Haifa whose inhabitants were prevalently Arabs. The Jews soon took advantage of the decrease in British forces in many parts of Palestine in preparation for their full withdrawal and, in late April 1948, Haifa became a Jewish stronghold and part of the first area to be secured by the newly declared state of Israel.

The fall of Haifa, for the Arab world, represented the beginning of the *Nakba* ('*Catastrophe*'): the Jews soon took over large parts of Palestine and on 14 May 1948, the Jewish community declared its independence and the establishment of the state of Israel. This action was immediately confronted by neighbouring Arab states who sent their military forces in an attempt to regain Palestinian territories from the Jewish settlers. The Arab forces were defeated and, by the end of 1948, the Jewish forces were able to occupy more than two thirds of Palestine. The remainder of the land, which included East Jerusalem and the West Bank, was annexed to Jordan. During the war, thousands of Palestinians were killed and more than 750,000 were expelled from their land and became refugees in neighbouring Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.[5] Haifa and the *Nakba* of 1948 are therefore inextricably connected. The Palestinian exodus from Haifa and its consequences are investigated by Ghassan Kanafani in his novella *Returning to Haifa*, which is analysed in chapter two and is set in 1967 but interspersed with flashbacks of 1948. Although Kanafani was not born in Haifa, he lived with his family in the city until they were expelled by Zionists in 1948. Haifa, clearly, bears a sentimental value for Palestinians for it was the first city to fall into Israeli hands and the place from which began the mass exodus of Palestinians from their land when Israelis took control over it. For this reason, the Palestinian notion of "Return," their return to their homeland—a recurrent theme also in Kanafani's work—always identifies Haifa as the epitome of the lost homeland and therefore a first point of destination. A point of destination, however, that Kanafani does not idealise as immutable, but presents to us as deeply altered by the

[5] For an historical overview of the *Nakba*, see Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab Israeli War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

twenty years of history which separate the two important moments explored in the novel.

The defeat of 1948 and the transformation of the Palestinians into stateless people deeply affected the collective Arab psyche and brought with it a state of despair and loss of faith. In particular, the 1948 defeat was a blow for advocates of pan-Arab nationalism and their dreams of Arab unity. However, the 1952 revolution in Egypt revitalised the Arab world and generated new hopes among the masses particularly when, in 1952, Jamal Abd al-Nassir became the new president of Egypt. After the Suez crisis in 1956, when Britain, France, and Israel attacked Egypt, Nassir emerged victorious and became the unquestioned hero and leader who had returned to the Arab countries the sense of pride they had lost in the 1948 defeat. With Nassir, a revival of pan-Arab nationalism took place as he called for Arab countries to transcend their individual differences and to unite as one. The unity with Syria in 1958 strengthened the notion of pan-Arabism with its rallying cry for Arab unity. In the eyes of most Arabs, Abd al-Nassir appeared as a symbol that was able to take the Arab peoples towards unity and genuine emancipation. The spread of Nassirism or pan-Arab nationalism that believed in an "Arabism" that transcends religious and national boundaries immensely influenced the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962).

Algeria was subjected to an intensive form of French settler colonialism from 1830 until 1962. For the French, Algeria was not an occupied country but an integral part of metropolitan France. Therefore, the French carried out an educating mission which had the imposition of a French school system and a compulsory education in French at its core. The roots of the Algerian revolution can be traced to the teachings of Abd al-Hamid Bin Badis (1889-1940). Bin Badis was born in the Algerian city of Constantine and was an Islamist reformer and a national leader who founded the Association of Algerian Ulama (Scholars). He saw the imposition of the French language and culture as policies adopted by the French to alienate Algeria from the rest of the Arab world and Algerians from their native language and culture. His motto was "Islam is our religion, Arabic is our language, Algeria is our homeland." Bin Badis stressed the Islamic and Arab identity of Algerians against fierce French attempts to crush it and his writings on religion and politics had a great impact on the Algerian mindset and prepared Algerians for independence from the French. Although Bin Badis' nationalism still affected most Algerians prior to the revolution, in the early 1950s, as anticipated, the notion of pan-Arabism became equally influential among the Algerians. Algerian pan-Arab nationalists believed in the unity of the Arab nations

and considered the liberation of Algeria as a stage in the path for revolutionary change and emancipation in the entire Arab world. Unlike in Syria, where they were one against the other, in Algeria Islamists and liberal nationalists joined forces during the revolution which broke out in the city of Constantine, Bin Badis' home city. Constantine plays a crucial part in Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh* both as a concrete place and, due to its glorious history of resistance, as a symbol of rebellion. In chapter three we will see how the city played an important role in the struggle for independence and how it inspired many Algerians in their attempt to shape their new nation which, as many believed, was an important stepping stone towards a pan-Arab independence era. The optimism that pan-Arabism generated prior to and after Algeria's independence, however, was soon shattered by the sudden defeat of the Arabs in their war against Israel in June 1967.

The June war of 1967 lasted only six days. On 5 June, Israel attacked Egypt and destroyed its air force. In the next few days of the fighting, Israel occupied the Sinai desert and reached as far as the Suez Canal. Jerusalem and the Palestinian part of Jordan were captured along with the Golan Heights in southern Syria. The war was a turning point in many different ways. It was clear that Israel was militarily stronger than any combination of Arab states. Abd al- Nassir's defeat was also a defeat of pan-Arab nationalists who, before 1967, saw in Nassir's leadership the hope for achieving Arab unity and for resolving the Palestine question. The most important outcome of the 1967 defeat was the Israeli occupation of the rest of Palestine: East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank. As a result, the numbers of Palestinian refugees in neighbouring Arab countries increased and the highest percentage of Palestinian refugees concentrated in southern Lebanon close to Israeli border. Palestinian refugees in South Lebanon formed a guerrilla called *Fidayeen* (freedom fighters) that acted as the military wing of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) which was founded in 1964 and was considered at that time as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. After the defeat of June 1967, and particularly in the year 1969—a date that, incidentally, also witnessed the publication of Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* in Beirut, where Kanafani had moved to be involved in the activities of the PLO—the PLO started to carry out military attacks against Israel from Jordan and Lebanon.

In 1970, the PLO, in fact, made South Lebanon a military base for attacks on Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories which eventually instigated Israeli reprisals into Lebanese territory. As a result, the Lebanese right, which mainly included pro-West Maronite Christians, grew increasingly restless and demanded the PLO's immediate departure

from Lebanon. On the other hand, the Lebanese left, mainly comprised of Muslim and Christian (mainly Greek Orthodox) pan-Arab nationalists, supported the PLO as a legitimate resistance organisation. The political conflict between the two parties became an armed confrontation after a group of Christian Maronites killed twenty seven Muslim Palestinians in Beirut in April 1975. Henceforth, the conflict also took a religious aspect and a civil war erupted in Beirut. During the fifteen years civil war, Beirut was divided between warring oppositions on basis of religious and political loyalties. Nearly 130,000 people were killed and Beirut was about to fall into Israeli hands in 1982.[6] Beirut, before and during the 1982 Israeli attacks, is at the core of the fourth work that I analyse in this book, namely Elias Khoury's *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, which was published in Beirut only seven years later when the war in Lebanon was still going on. Khoury was born in Beirut and knew these events at firsthand because he was living in Beirut during this time. Khoury, a Greek Orthodox and a pan-Arab nationalist, even participated in the civil war in support of the PLO and was severely injured.

Politics also dictated these divisions which became more visible in the Lebanese capital during the civil war. Beirut was split into two: East Beirut and West Beirut. The opposed territories were separated by what has become to be known as the Green Line. The Green Line became associated with religious and political loyalties. East Beirut comprised all territories occupied by the Lebanese-Forces Militias that were predominantly Christian Maronites and pro-West. West Beirut comprised all territories occupied by Muslims and pro-Palestinians. The creation of the Green Line and Beirut's partition are fundamental factors in Khoury's representation of Beirut during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1991). As the fighting intensified, other parties joined the war. In 1982, the Maronite forces (also called the Lebanese-Forces or the *Phalangist*) were about to be defeated by the PLO with the help of the Syrian military forces. Israel then intervened to rescue its allies in Lebanon and in late September 1982 Israeli forces invaded the western part of Beirut. Under a United Nations' resolution, a ceasefire was implemented and Israel withdrew its forces from Beirut in early 1983. Civil violence and division continued to rule the streets of Beirut until the guns fell silent in 1991.

The Lebanese civil war reignited the debate between Islamists and pan-Arab liberal nationalists which, as I explained earlier, started in the 1920s.

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[6] For an historical introduction to the Lebanese civil war, see Samir Kassir, *Beirut*, translated by Malcom Debevoise (California: University of California Press, 2010). In particular, consider the last two chapters, "The End of Innocence" and "Beirut, O Beirut!," 468-520.

The civil war in Beirut was yet another example of Arab disunity and another blow for pan-Arab nationalists who, beside the question of Palestine, continuously reiterated the call for the establishment of an overarching, unified, democratic, secular and egalitarian "Arab nation." In fact, the aftermath of the June defeat in 1967, up to the Israeli invasion of Beirut, saw a revival of Islamic movements and ideologies that had remained dormant for decades and confined to a few narrow circles. "The turn of Islam has come,"[7] a motto that the Egyptian Islamist Sayyed Qutb (1906-1966) used in the 1960s, was recycled to announce the revival of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the late-1970s-early-1980s. Particularly after the Arab defeat in 1967, the Muslim Brotherhood criticised the work of socialist and nationalist parties as they no longer spoke the same political language as those whom they claimed to represent. For the Muslim Brotherhood, ruling parties like al-Ba'ath in Syria and the Nationalist party in Algeria used pan-Arab rhetoric in the service of dictatorial regimes whose aim was to preserve wealth and the existing social order.[8] At this point, since the pan-Arab Nationalism had failed, Islam was the only unifying force. In Syria, and in order to implement their ideology, the Muslim Brotherhood resorted to violence and retaliated against the regime's endeavour to exclude them from the government. The military wing in the Muslim Brotherhood (or, the Fighting Vanguard as they used to be called) carried out several suicide bombings in Damascus in 1982 in an attempt to overthrow the regime and al-Ba'ath party and to establish an Islamic rule instead. Significantly, Idilbi, who was also a member of al-Ba'ath party at that time, wrote *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* during that period. More importantly, the political situation that accompanied an Islamic resurgence in Damascus and its effects on society and particularly on women had undoubtedly cast its shadow on the plot of the novel.

Similarly, in Algeria, Islamists stirred civil protests against the Nationalist party: despite post-independence promises of welfare and social justice, independent Algeria's financial health had collapsed under huge debts from foreign creditors. This resulted in poverty, unemployment, and overpopulation in cities and led to a series of protests and riots demanding social and economic reforms. Islamists took the forefront in these protests, which first took a violent aspect in Constantine and then spread to Setif, Algiers, and Oran: between 1979 and 1990 civil violence

[7] Sayyed Qutb, *Milestones* [1964] (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2002), 5.
[8] See, Raphael Lefevre, *Ashes Of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (London: Hurst & Company, 2013). See in particular, Part Two "The Islamic Opposition to Ba'athism," 43-74.

in Algeria claimed the lives of hundreds of Algerians.[9] The sense of betrayal felt by the Algerian people and militants, who had fought against the French and found themselves deprived of civil liberties and condemned to poverty by the post-independence administration, plays a fundamental part in the development of the plot in Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh*.

The authors in this book, apart from Kanafani (for obvious reasons), lived in the cities they describe at the time of writing and were either born in or had been long-time residents of the cities they put at the centre of their stories and which are the products of an intimate, firsthand knowledge of their respective surroundings. Idilbi and Mosteghanemi write from what one could call a troubled post-colonial context, while Khoury and Kanafani from the context of a civil war and the continuing struggle against the Israeli occupation of Palestine. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that their Damascus, Constantine, Beirut and Haifa are, above all, sites of struggle and contestation.

These cities are privileged as focal points because they are the spaces where the struggles over issues of nation-building, gender, religion, and class, as well as the patriarchal, colonialist, Zionist, and sectarian violence linked to these issues, manifest themselves most evidently. Idilbi's Damascus, Kanafani's Haifa, Mosteghanemi's Constantine, and Khoury's Beirut are social and historical products, and, as such, as Henri Lefebvre maintains, are deeply rooted in politics and affected by ideology.[10] The novels under scrutiny here, moreover, present us with cities which are characterised by specific geographical features, historical variables, traditional social structures and new existential contingencies that also influenced the production of specific spaces *within* these cities. Hence the creation of cosmopolitan areas or of neighbourhoods which were instead strictly reserved for a specific ethnicity or religious denomination, bridges and city gates which made these cities permeable or impermeable, private homes and public spaces where repression and/or rebellion were differently articulated.

The cities discussed here, in fact, display the ebbs and flows of political and social life in their respective countries and in the Arab world in general. Each city, as we have seen, stands at a crucial point in the

[9] See Luiz Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War* (London: C. Hurt & Co., 2000), x-xiii.

[10] Henri Lefebvre, "Reflections of the Politics of Space" [1970], in *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, edited by Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden, translated by Gerald Moore, Neil Brenner, and Stuart Elden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 171.

history of the Arab world, and the way in which they are represented by their respective authors sets the stage for, and sometimes even foreshadows, an upcoming defeat or disappointment. Albeit for different reasons, Damascus, Haifa, Constantine and Beirut are all expressions of failures either on national, political, social, or economic levels. Paradoxically, however, they are also the repositories of their people's hopes and aspirations as well as of their disappointments.

Looking at these cities in the order that I have outlined, in fact, serves to highlight a historical continuum in the Arab world which reflects a lack of vision particularly in relation to issues like nation-building and social justice but also a strong desire for change. All the novels I have chosen, in fact, express their authors' engagement with the past, present, and, crucially, the future politics of their cities and their countries. They are, as Halim Barakat would say, "novels of revolutionary change" that utilise the problems of their cities as "incentives for a more serious reflection and for attaining greater readiness for self-transformation and confrontation of reality."[11]

[11] Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State* (Berkeley: University of California Pres, 1993), 9.

CHAPTER ONE

GENDERING THE CITY AND THE QUESTION OF NATION-BUILDING IN ULFAT IDILBI'S *SABRIYA: DAMASCUS BITTER SWEET* (1980)

The first city under scrutiny is the Damascus described by Ulfat Idilbi in her novel *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet*, first published in Arabic in 1980 as *Dimashq Ya Basmat al-Huzn* (*Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet*).[1] Ulfat Omar Basha Idilbi (1912- 2007) was a Syrian short story and novel writer. She is considered by many the doyenne of Syrian women writers. Having married at a young age, Idilbi could not pursue her formal education beyond the secondary level and was largely self-taught. She owed her initial literary awareness to her author uncle Kazem Daghestani,[2] who introduced her to the work of the Egyptian scholar Taha Hussein (1889-1973). Taha Hussein was an Egyptian writer and intellectual and one of the leading advocates of the modernist movement in the Arab world. In *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, for instance, Hussein called for the separation between religion and the state, and the restriction of religious practice to personal life. Speaking of Egypt, Hussein maintained that the nation/state does not prosper by a return to an Islamic past or any other Islamic modernist reform. On the contrary, he saw Islam as incapable of meeting the demands of modern life and therefore minimized the importance of religion in nation-building. The nation for Hussein had

[1] The original Arabic version, *Sabriya: Dimashq Ya Basmat al-Huzn*, was published in Damascus by Dar Tlas Publishing House in 1980. The English Translation by Peter Clark appeared in 1995. All quotations are from the English translation.

[2] Kazem Daghestani wrote many books and articles on the Syrian society and family, and particularly in Damascus. His works include: "The Evolution of the Muslim Family in the Middle Eastern Countries," *International Social Science Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1953): 681-691; *Hikayat al-Bayt al-Dimashqi* [*The Tale of the Damascene House*] (Damascus: Alif Ba'a Publishing, 1972); *Sociological Study on Contemporary Muslim Family in Syria* [published in French] (Paris: Leroux, 1932).

to adopt a liberal, secular reform model similar to what he saw in Europe when he lived in France.[3] Idilbi was also influenced by the Syrian Damascene writer and intellectual Sati' al-Husari (1882-1968). Many historians regard al-Husari as the intellectual father of Arab nationalism, and Damascus as the cradle of Arab nationalism.[4] Albert Hourani, for example, describes al-Husari's oeuvre as a coherent and systematic formulation of Arab nationalism.[5] Arabism or belonging to the Arab world, not religion, al-Husari contended, was the main thread of Arab nationalism. To him, Arab nationalism was secular, liberal, and intellectually extricated from the Islamic customs and traditions. Unlike language and history, al-Husari asserted that religion did not play a fundamental role in national formation.[6] More importantly, the nationalism that al-Husari preached during Syria's struggle for independence in 1920s and 1930s stressed the notions of gender equality between men and women, and social justice.

Born to an elite Damascene family, Idilbi was profoundly affected by Hussein and al-Husari's views on nation and religion and she projected them onto the scene of the Syrian revolt against the French Mandate rule in 1920s. Idilbi's first collection of short stories was published in 1954 under the title *Damascene Stories*: at that time, she was still caught up in the pan-Arab spirit of the Syrian national struggle for liberation, and was particularly keen to denounce the atrocities committed by the French against the people who were involved in the struggle for Syria's independence. In the decades that followed, however, Idilbi took a different stance and her writing mainly focused on problems pertaining to Syrian society and particularly in Damascus. Idilbi was particularly concerned about the rise of political Islam, which she saw as a threat to the pan-Arab liberal, secular ideals she favoured as the cornerstone of the nation-building project in Syria. In the mid-1970s, the Ba'athist ruling party and the National Progressive Front[7] were able to suppress the

[3] See, Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (1938), translated by Sidney Glazer (New York: Octagon Books, 1975), 21-33.
[4] See, Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 310-314. Also, see Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism: A Critical Enquiry*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).
[5] Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 312.
[6] Tibi, *Arab Nationalism*, 122. Also see Sati' al-Husari, *What is Nationalism? Enquiries and Studies in Light of Events and Theories* [1924] (Beirut: Dar al-I'lm, 1962) [In Arabic], 210.

Islamic political opposition in Syria. The 1980s, however, saw the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Syria represented at that time by the Muslim Brotherhood movement. The Muslim Brotherhood followed the teachings of Sayyed Qutb, who believed that social life should be lived only according to the Islamic rules and heritage.[8]

The Muslim Brotherhood employed radical views particularly in relation to women and their role in society: for them, Islam had granted women their "rights" and consistently stressed the axiom that the natural place for women's mission in life was in the home. The Muslim Brotherhood also believed that the mixing between the sexes had to be controlled and confined to necessity. In Damascus, despite being the seat of the government and al-Ba'ath stronghold, the Muslim Brothers were significantly influential and their views found resonance with large segments of the Damascene society. In the 1980s and 1990s Idilbi, who was also a member of the National Progressive Front, often expressed her anxiety towards the threat that the radical Islamic ideology posed on Syrian social and national fabric by drawing parallels between the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s and 1980s and the experience of women in the city of Damascus during the 1920s and the following decades leading to independence in 1947. Idilbi gave voice to her frustration with the notion of liberation and the nation-building project once proposed in the 1920s and 1930s by nationalists like al-Husari. She wrote essays on the social position of women in Syria and, toward the end of her writing career, she also wrote two novels about the pressure that Syrian women had been going through and the suffering they had been enduring since the national struggle for liberation.[9] The question of women's liberation and their role in nation-building was the focal point from which Idilbi launched her criticism against the patriarchal and religious structures which she believed were seeking to deny Syrian

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[7] The National Progressive Front, established by Hafez al-Assad in 1973, is a coalition for the left-wing secular political parties that support the Arab nationalist orientation of the Syrian government and the essential role of al-Ba'th party in leading the country and society.

[8] See Qutb, *Milestones*, 4-5. Also, for an historical and political study of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Syria, see Lena Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of the Ba'athist Secularism* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[9] See for example, *Nazrah Fi Adabina al-Sha'abi* [*A Study in Our Popular Literature*] (Damascus: Ittihad al-Kuttab al-Arab, 1978); *Nafahat Dimashqiya* [*Damascene Scents*] (Damascus: Dar Tlas, 1990; *Hikayat Jaddi* [*Grandfather's Tales*] (Damascus: Dar Tlas, 1991), translated into Arabic by Peter Clark (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1998).

women equal social rights to their male counterparts. By making central her rejection of costums and traditions that elevated men's status and made women secondary, Idilbi's work has been seen as a call for Syrian women to know their own strengths and weaknesses.[10]

Idilbi was particularly concerned with the way Damascene women were trying to negotiate the complex socio-spatial division of roles that sought to incarcerate women in the realm of the domestic and the private in contrast to the public realm of socio-political power occupied by men. It has been highlighted how the dichotomy public-private is meaningless unless studied in reference to culture and historical time. Many social and feminist historians emphasize that the notions of public and private must be historicised by associating them to the social relations and the hierarchies of power in which they are embedded.[11] The Damascus described by Ulfat Idilbi in *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* examines the public-private dichotomy in the Syrian urban politics of the decolonisation period and, indirectly, of the 1980s. As the capital of Syria and the centre of the national struggle against French colonisation, Damascus embodied and reflected the major political and social trends in Syria during the crucial period between 1918 and 1947, which will be the focus of study in this chapter.

Damascus is considered to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Based on archaeological discoveries, many historians date its urban longevity as far back as the third millennium B.C. This 5000-year old city is, nowadays, the political and cultural capital of Syria. When it was declared a Mandate under French rule in 1918, Damascus retained several of its medieval focal points: a congregational mosque (The Umayyad), a citadel (Damascus Citadel), a central market place (al-Hamidiyya), and a complex of residential quarters like Bab Tuma, Suq Saruja, and al-Amara.[12] The quarters of the old city were isolated from one

[10] See Miriam Cooke, *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 49.

[11] See Dorothy O. Helly and Susan M. Reverby, "Introduction: Converging on History," in *Gender Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 6. Also, see Joan B. Landes, *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Michelle Rosaldo, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding," *Signs* Vol. 5 (Spring 1980), 389-417.

[12] For detailed histories of Damascus during the early twentieth century, see Philip Shukry Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Albert Habib Hourani, *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (California: The University of California Press, 1981).

another by walls and each was characterised by a maze of crooked narrow streets known only to each quarter's residents[13] (for example, see figures 1.1&1.2). The residents of each quarter were "generally associated within their own quarters, among people who were familiar to them."[14] During the Mandate period, the residents of the Muslim quarters were active in the traditional religious, political, and commercial aspects of life in the city. Moreover, Muslim-inhabited quarters had a higher concentration of wealthy residents compared to other quarters like Bab Tuma and Hay al-Yahud, where resided religious minorities and immigrants from the countryside.[15]

Figure 1.1: Hay al-Yahud; Old Damascus.[16]

[13] Philip Shukry Khoury, "Syrian Urban Politics in Transition: The Quarters of Damascus during the French Mandate," in *The Modern Middle East*, edited by Albert Hourani, Philip Khoury, and Mary Wilson (London: I.B.Tauris, 2005), 435.
[14] Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, And Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 175.
[15] S. Khoury, "Syrian Urban Politics," 433-4.
[16] Source http://www.brooonzyah.net/vb/t101263.html (accessed 20 August 2014).

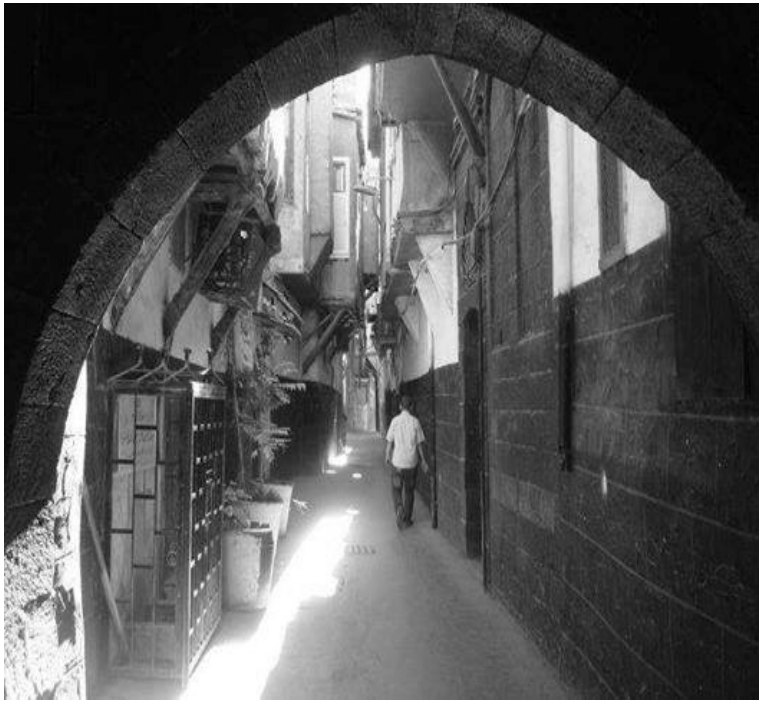

Figure 1.2: Bab Tuma; Old Damascus.[17]

As late as the end of the French Mandate, "Damascus was still characterised by deep cleavages between different religious and ethnic groups, and between the rich and the poor."[18] The quarters of the old city were also characterised by their inward looking houses. An old Damascene house had "a single entrance and a central courtyard onto which the rooms of the house opened"[19] (see figure 1.3). The house marked the borderline between what was regarded as public or male dominated, and private spaces of the city. Gender represented the criterion that regulated access to the house for certain individuals including family members and relatives. Women's quarters inside the homes were the most restricted or private

[17] Source, http://www.traveladventures.org/continents/asia/damascus-old-city.html (accessed 20 August 2014).
[18] S. Khoury, "Syrian Urban Politics," 429.
[19] Christa Salamandra, *A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 26.

spaces "where unrelated males were never permitted to enter."[20] Public spaces like the streets were controlled by complicated rules of engagement, particularly for women who were only given access as long as they were veiled and under male supervision. Damascus was, therefore, a city segmented by communities, but was also one where divisions based on religion, gender, and economic status coexisted. In 1925, Syrians began their long march to independence with what was called The Great Syrian Revolt. This was sparked by the Druz in the Houran region in southern Syria, and the battles quickly spread to Damascus. The maze quarters of the city proved to be a geographical threat to the French in that they were unable to detect the movements of the rebel forces in and out of the surrounding orchards (known as al-Ghuta) which eventually became the rebels' base of attack.[21]

Figure 1.3: An old Damascene House.[22]

[20] Thompson, 175.
[21] Michael Province, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 102-105.
[22] Source, http://ammar-shawesh.weebly.com/old-damascus.html (accessed 20 August 2014).

With the outbreak of the revolt and the subsequent formation and strengthening of nationalist and religious movements, the women of Damascus found themselves at the intersection of multiple urban battle fronts: one between the nationalists and the colonisers, another between religious men and liberal nationalists, and even another between the elite and the poor. Driven by a pan-Arab nationalist fervour, in the mid-1930s more and more women went out in public in Damascus to participate in the national struggle against the French coloniser. As a result of the rising of the liberal pan-Arab nationalist movement, Islamists attacked the advocators of women's liberation and a debate even ensued as to whether women should walk in the streets at all.[23] As the tensions between the nationalists and the Islamists polarized Damascene politics, gender became a primary site of conflict. Liberal nationalists stirred issues regarding women's enduring inequality as citizens and called for women's participation in Syria's national struggle. Islamists, on the other hand, burdened women with notions of honour and dignity, and regarded their exposure to public spaces as a weakening of the moral fabric which they wanted to protect against colonial infiltration. Women, they insisted, had to be largely excluded from public spaces and, even if they were allowed to be present in public, they were supposed to be veiled. Despite the significant role of women in nationalist struggle in Syria, including the 1934 demonstration in Damascus and the 1936 mass protest in many Syrian cities, Islamists were successful in forbidding women from taking part in public activity, an act that in the late 1930s resulted in almost complete masculinization of the streets and of mass politics. As we will see, the conflicting voices and orientations that prevailed in Damascus during the period prior to independence play a crucial role in the plot of Idilbi's *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* and in the development of its female protagonist.

Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet, as anticipated, takes place in the city of Damascus and covers a critical period from 1918, when the city was declared a Mandate state under French rule, to independence in 1947. The story is told in the first person in Sabriya's voice and is relayed by her teenager niece, Salma. The story tells of the trials and tribulations of the female heroine, Sabriya, who has been thwarted in her education and her love life. Deeply saddened by the loss of her favourite brother Sami, and oppressed by her elder brother Raghib who, as the reader learns, is also responsible for the death of Adil, Sabriya's lover, Sabriya is obliged to

[23] See Nikki R. Keddie, *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 97.

stay at home to take care of her sick mother until she dies, and then of her paralysed father for ten years until he dies. After her father's death, Sabriya faces Raghib's intention to sell the family house and force her out after all the services and the sacrifices she had made. In retaliation, Sabriya hangs herself from the lemon tree in her Damascene house's courtyard but before doing this she leaves to the young Salma her diaries which make up the bulk of the novel that we read.

In their introduction to *Gendering the City,* Kristine B. Miranne and Alma H. Young use the term "boundary" in relation to how women use and change the space they inhabit within the urban environment. The concept of boundary, they suggest, explains "the interconnectedness between socially constructed gender relations and the visible and invisible boundaries that affect how women use urban space."[24] I will employ the concept of boundary as a focal point to critically investigate the dialectic between gender and space in the contested Damascus in Idilbi's novel. My main argument in this chapter is that the relationship between space and gender is not merely a matter of physical territory; rather, it is a theoretical and political issue controlled by those who possess power and are therefore able to distribute space and establish boundaries. This chapter, therefore, delves into issues that focus on Sabriya's relationship with her family, her love life, and her public engagement with the city. I begin my incursion into the notions of gender and space by investigating the initial difference in status between male and female members within Sabriya's household. I will examine how certain gender assumptions embedded in religious practices and traditions create certain types of gendered spaces and that the spatial segregation in turn reinforces prevailing male advantages. In particular, I will highlight the veil as a tool of oppression and suppression and as a boundary marker that regulates Sabriya's behaviour in public space outside the house. I will, furthermore, illustrate the role that Sabriya's mother plays in enhancing the division of roles within the family and how her attitude reflects received responses to common gender assumptions and the ways in which they are reflected in the daily life of the city. As we will see, however, Sabriya's love relationship with Adil and their secret meetings in public defy the spatial and social structures of the city. I intend to read the couple's relationship as a catalyst for producing alternative spaces within the city that deconstruct the received public-private dichotomisation of space. Sabriya's active engagement with the public space of the city and her anti-

[24] Kristine B. Miranne and Alma H. Young, "Introduction," in *Gendering the City: Women, Boundaries, and Visions of Urban Life*, edited by Kristine B. Miranne and Alma H. Young (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 1.

colonial activities serve to problematise the dialectic between confinement and liberation. Her subsequent incarceration in the family house, furthermore, becomes Idilbi's questioning of nationalist discourses in relation to women liberation and their citizenship rights. I will conclude this chapter by looking at Sabriya's incarceration in the family house and her eventual suicide. I will show how segregated and disempowered spaces can produce their anti-thesis and can function as sources of empowerment against public systems of oppression. Sabriya's suicide, I will argue, can produce a powerful message that centres on matters of voice and visibility of the female subject.

At the beginning of the novel, Sabriya is presented as someone who is clever and successful in her studies. For a ten-year-old, Sabriya looks and sounds more mature than her brothers. Unlike Sabriya, her elder brother, Raghib, is dumb at school and fails his grades every year. When Sabriya passes into the fourth grade, she receives a "certificate of appreciation commending her brightness and success."[25] Sabriya proudly shows her father the report and the certificate but, instead of acknowledging his daughter's success, the father looks at Raghib and says,

> [y]ou are an ass (…) Aren't you utterly ashamed in her presence? She has succeeded in her grade and you have failed yours. You spend all your time fooling about and dreaming, while she has been at her books studying, and what is the point of her studying? She'll be getting married soon and will be devoting her time to her home and her children. But as for you, what is a man's value in this day and age unless he has some education and qualification? (50)

The father clearly does not give much weight to Sabriya's achievement; rather he is frustrated at his son's failure. Raghib is the son of a respectful Damascene merchant and the natural successor in his father's business. Embedded in the father's comment, therefore, is his ordering of status within the family where his male son should naturally be higher in the family's pyramid when it comes to education and practical success. At that particular moment, the school report elevates Sabriya to a better status and destabilises Raghib's privileged position as the male in the family. This explains the father's furious reaction which also reveals his concern over his son's inability to meet the duties of his expected role in the future. The father appears as an authoritarian figure who wields the power bestowed upon him by the traditional norms that are adopted in the city.

[25] Ulfat Idilbi, *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet*, translated by Peter Clark (London: Quarter Book Limited, 1995), 49. Subsequent page references in text.

Clearly, the father wants his son to exercise the same power, and therefore, he fosters the division of spaces according to which a female's place is in her house as a wife or a mother while the male must succeed in the outside public domain.

The shamed and frustrated Raghib initially demonstrates his male dominance in terms of physical abuse against his sister: he even beats Sabriya in front of their mother who, however, seems oblivious to her son's actions. When Raghib abandons his studies after a long run of failure, his mother asks the father to give Raghib money so that he can start a business with another merchant's son. Although the father is sceptical toward Raghib's potential to succeed, the mother manages to convince him not to abandon Raghib now that he has become a young man. She even goes further and suggests that, being a male, Raghib does not need high qualifications in order to succeed:

> [t]here are plenty of others like him. That's the way they're made. He is, praise be to Allah, able to read and to write and to add up. Don't you see him everyday reading the newspaper from cover to cover? … That's enough. Goodness, did you have a string of diplomas and certificates? But, praise Allah, things have gone well enough for you. (59)

Here, the mother twists the father's own logic and utilises it to her son's favour and gives voice to the assumption that men are socially more important than women. Under patriarchy, mothers tend to value more the male child in the family and accordingly, the mother tolerates Raghib's careless behaviour and spoils him regardless of his actions. The mother's privileging of her male son directly relates to matters of space as it increases the rigidity of boundaries and segregation between male-public and female-private or domestic spaces which is stressed as the mother projects sexist, domestic norms onto Sabriya.

Sabriya describes how her mother wakes her up every morning before dawn to clean the house and prepare breakfast for her brothers. Sabriya reveals her frustration with the situation where in Damascus, and more broadly in Syria, "they train a girl, as soon as she is aware of herself, to serve the men, be it a brother, husband, or son. So when she has grown up she feels that such servitude is part of nature" (52). Sabriya's relegation to the private realm of domesticity is a way of life and not merely a matter of physical bondage to the house. On one occasion, Sami, Sabriya's liberal brother, urges the mother not to give in to the idea of Sabriya getting married before she gets her school-leaving certificate. The mother responds and addresses Sami "what's the use of a school-leaving certificate (…) if your father won't agree to her going out to work? We

won't necessarily find the ideal husband at a time that suits us" (64). The mother's response not only enhances the prescription of roles stressed earlier by the father, but also mimics the way she has been brought up. By making her daughter's only potential revolve around marriage, the mother reproduces for Sabriya the same dependency on men that has characterised her life: her blind support of patriarchy banishes Sabriya, both physically and figuratively, to the private realm of family life and denies her daughter the right to public access and other aspects of self determination. Indirectly, as we will see, the mother also tries to instil in Sabriya certain qualities and capacities that regulate the young girl's inclusion and exclusion from specific spaces within the city. Idilbi, in fact, insists that one of the ways in which the mother attempts to make Sabriya embrace her prescribed female role is related to the religious practice of wearing the headscarf.

When Sabriya is only seven years old, in fact, her mother begins to force her to wear the headscarf or *Hijab*. The headscarf irritates Sabriya's neck and prevents her hair from swinging on her neck (48). She adds: "I had to take care that it never slipped from my head. I was a young girl and men were not permitted to see my head uncovered. Otherwise Allah would punish me with hellfire on the Day of Judgement" (48-9). The suffocating symbolism of the headscarf connotes the limits imposed on Sabriya to act freely in public. The reference to the Day of Judgement, furthermore, is part of the religious ideology employed by the mother so that Sabriya learns to differentiate between what is traditionally accepted and what is taboo. The headscarf becomes part of Sabriya's initial education regarding the "virtue" of segregation between sexes. The mother instils fear in Sabriya against committing the sin of exposing herself in public and the *Hijab* makes her aware of the public perception of her as a female each time she walks in the city.

Significantly, Raghib is the one who suggests that Sabriya is old enough to wear the veil when he says to their father: "look, Father, in the whole of our neighbourhood is there a single girl as tall as Sabriya who goes out of the house unveiled?" (55). Despite Sami's rejection of Raghib's logic, the father decides that Sabriya should not go outside "without her face uncovered" (55) and even rebukes Sami for his lack of consideration for his sister's "honour and dignity" (55). While Raghib emerges triumphant from this conversation, Sabriya feels "fettered by heavy chains" (55). At that moment, Sabriya realises that she cannot fight against the way her family prescribes and tailors her life as a woman. Now, the veiled Sabriya has to negotiate the space of the city according to