

SHEREEN KHAIRALLAH

Remembering

DR AYYUB TABET

(1875–1947)



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*To all those young Lebanese who, in the face
of violent opposition, are striving to accomplish
what Ayyub Tabet attempted and failed.*

الحقيقة يجب أن تُقال لا أن تعلن
Truth must be told, not bruited about
Ayyub Tabet (1875–1947), *Ibra wa-dhikra*



Truth is the Daughter of Time
Francis Bacon (1516–1626), *Novum Organum*



Veritas odium parit, obsequium amicos
Frankness engenders hatred, Flattery friends
Terence (195–159 B.C.)

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¹ *"The Government of Dr Ayyub Tabet," March to July 1943*, unpublished M.A. thesis, American University of Beirut, Department of Political Studies and Public Administration, 1961.

American University of Beirut, Haigazian University, and Lebanese American University which allowed me their use, as well as to all the student assistants who came to my aid in searching for books and guiding me through the maze of stacks. The Lebanese Centre of National Archives most kindly provided needed documents. The archives of the National Evangelical Church of Beirut houses church records on the Protestant community since its inception, and it was there that I found personal information on the Tabet family. I also owe thanks to Mrs Nada Zakharia, who retyped the manuscript when I erased it. Thanks go to my publisher, who was so patient with me.

In the short time I had in London and Washington DC, it was not possible to find anything on Ayyub Tabet in the Public Record Office and Library of Congress.

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PREFACE

LITTLE has been written about Ayyub Tabet, except in some newspapers and biographies, the latter briefly. After his death, newspaper articles were nostalgic about his work, honesty, simplicity, and accomplishment of his duties. However, some “writers” were downright insulting, often presenting information as their fancy took them, one copying the other almost word for word, and not worthwhile quoting. People enjoy denigrating, not praising.

Head of State, senator, minister, deputy. Ayyub Tabet, the only Protestant Head of State the Lebanon has ever had, remained in office for barely four months (18 March–21 July 1943). Yet his name is still a by-word for integral honesty, both in private and public life. His reputation lay in caring for the little people, for his decent (but stubborn) leadership, and for his reforms. Honesty came foremost with him; he expected it of himself, of those around him, and of his country. For those dishonest persons, and those who

thought – and think – themselves above the law, he became an object of ridicule. Some of his ideas came before his time and are most needed today.

As Head of State, senator, minister, and deputy, he advocated recognition of the Lebanon as an independent entity, non-sectarianism, the vote for emigrants, and cleanliness in government.

He lived in Kantari, the Sanayi‘ district, and walked to his office in the *Saraya* every day. No great police cavalcade for him, sirens blaring, pushing people out of the way, as our worthies are fond of doing. One day, when he was returning home, he was stopped by a thief. Ayyub gave him what he had and wanted to know why the man was a thief. He then told him to go to his office the next day, in order to find him a job. That was what happened.¹

When he escaped to relax in the village, or when he was on private business, he drove his own old car and paid for his ration of petrol. The official car was kept for official business.

His respect for the law was proverbial. One Sunday he was in his car with his driver and bodyguard Raji. At Bab Idris a police officer stopped the car, and an altercation followed. Ayyub Tabet wanted to know what it was all about. The police officer finally admitted that they had gone up a one-way street, for the driver decided on a short cut, since there was no traffic. Ayyub insisted on paying the fine like any common citizen.²

This is the man despised by his enemies, particularly politicians, for his truth, honesty, simplicity, and hard work,

¹ Interview with his great-niece, Mrs Mary Tabet Cassar, 17 April 1992.

² *Ibid.*

point out their defects. I wonder which of our worthies would deign to act in this way.



Regarding transliteration, I have kept to the familiar spelling of names and places, for instance, Bayrut remains Beirut.

As for dates (birth – death) after names, where there are no dates it has not been possible to find them anywhere.

CHAPTER I

The Man

AYYUB TABET, son of Jirjis (George) Tabet and Mariam Francis, was born in 1875,¹ in the village of Bhamdoun, *Qada' al-Shuf* (today *Qada' Aley*), in the *Mutasarrifiyya* of Mount Lebanon. He came from modest origins. His father was a butcher and a Maronite like the Tabets of the village, who had converted to Protestantism. This was the heyday of British and American evangelization, and the missionaries, mostly unsuccessful in converting people to Protestantism, went into the highly successful field of education.

Ayyub was not an only child, being one of eleven children, most of whom died young. In the family *Civil Status*

¹ See *Civil Status Register*, Lebanese Ministry of Interior, General Directorate of Personal Status, which puts his birth date as 1878. However, in *Register no. I* of the National Evangelical Church of Beirut, he was born in 1874. The Ottomans used two calendars, *Hijra* and *Marti*, with one year's difference between the two. According to the *Register of Deaths* of the National Evangelical Church of Beirut, he died in 1947 aged 72, which means he was born in 1875.

Register, no. 6, issued at Minet al-Husn, Beirut, only four names are mentioned: Khalil (1867–1945), Ayyub (1878–1947), Hanneh (1865–1944), Rahil (1869–1957).¹ However, this was much later. Hanneh, who was divorced, had a son, Salim, who lived in Saida. Salim's daughter, Mary Tabet Cassar, died young.

In the *Register of Deaths* of the National Evangelical Church of Beirut,² Hanneh is said to have died aged 80. Her sister, Elisabat (Sabat, 1877–1955) died aged 78. It is said she was very beautiful. At 25, she married an Englishman, Rudolph Young, aged 23, in 1906.³ There was, of course, Rahil, who at one point had lived in Egypt, and a Salim, baptized in 1878.⁴

Interestingly enough, in the *Church Register of Members*, Mariam, widow of Jirjis, joined the Church on 13 March 1881, being originally Maronite.⁵ Others of the family who joined the Church were a certain Lina Jirjis Tabet (a sister?) on 23 May 1886,⁶ Rahil on 9 January 1887,⁷ Sabat on 8 May 1892.⁸

Ayyub's first schooling was in Bhamdoun. At the time, there were a Greek Orthodox school, a Maronite school,

¹ *Ibid.*

² *Register of Deaths*, n. p.

³ *Register of Marriage*, National Evangelical Church of Beirut, n. p. As a child, I knew Sabat and Rahil as very old ladies, as we played with their great-niece Mary.

⁴ *Register of Baptism*, National Evangelical Church of Beirut, n. p.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*

and a Protestant school (established 1861).¹ He most probably went to the Protestant school. He then continued to the Preparatory Department of the Syrian Protestant College (SPC, today the American University of Beirut), from which he graduated in 1889, and went on to the SPC to receive a B.A. (1893), and the Certificate of Merit Highest Standing in his class in *Materia Medica* for the year 8 July 1896.²

He travelled to the United States to study medicine in Texas. He received the Diploma of the Medical Board of Examiners for the 41st Judicial District Del Rio Val Verde, County of Texas, 7 Septembre 1900.³ After that he practised in one of the hospitals in New York, and returned to the Lebanon to practice medicine. His reputation was that of an excellent doctor.

Like most young men, his thoughts turned to politics, for he was born and lived in turbulent times. An Ottoman subject, he at first believed in the attempted reforms of the Sublime Porte. However, he soon became sceptical of genuine reform. Two years after his birth, Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid, the Red Sultan (ruled 1876–1909), granted a constitution under pressure, to “liberalize the Empire.” This liberalization spread to the *Wilaya* of Beirut, which had been opened up in the nineteenth century to western influence and education, particularly French and American. Although the Constitution was suspended during the Russo-Turkish War

¹ See Shereen Khairallah, “The Bhamdoun Station,” *Theological Review*, Near East School of Theology, XII/2, 1991, pp. 81–93.

² American University of Beirut, *Who's Who AUB 1870–1923*, Beirut, American Press, 1924, p. 1171.

³ All these degrees are to be found in the library of HE Dr Joy Tabet.

(1878), liberalism was not completely erased. Yet authority's attempt to suppress all new ideas and the Sultan's Pan-Islamic policy most probably affected the young Ayyub.

Although the overthrow of 'Abd al-Hamid in 1909 by the Young Turks brought about a wave of optimism throughout the Empire, this proved to be short-lived. So Ayyub and many of his generation could not believe in genuine reform because of misrule and ignorance, despite the fact that he had hoped for the secularization of the state. Actually, under the Lebanese Republic many years later, he was the only one who refused to have his religion put on his identity card, which has him down as "non sectarian."¹ Today, many young people are following his example.

A politicized man, he eventually gave up his medical practice in 1908 to devote himself to journalism and politics.

World War I found him in New York, where he remained until 1920. It is there that he most certainly met Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883–1931),² as well as the rest of the triumvirate – Amin Rihani (1876–1940),³ Mikhail Naimy (1889–1988)⁴ – all three the writers of the overseas (*mahjar*). According to

¹ *Civil Status Register, ibid.*

² George Saydah, *Adabuna wa Udaba'una fi l-Mahajir al-Amrikiyya*, Beirut, Dar al-'Ilm li-l-Malayin, 1964, pp. 242–259; C. Nijland, "Jubran Khalil Jubran, 1883–1931," *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 1, pp. 415–416; Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran, Man and Poet. A New Biography*, Oxford, One World, 1998; Robin Waterfield, *Prophet: the Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran*, N.Y., St Martin's Press, 1998.

³ Saydah, *ibid.*, pp. 232–241; Nijland, "al-Rihani, Amin," *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 2, pp. 662–663.

⁴ Saydah, *ibid.*, pp. 260–271; Nijland, "Nu'ayma, Mikha'il," *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 2, pp. 588–589.

one of Gibran's biographers, Robin Waterfield, in the early stages of Gibran's friendship with Mary Haskell, Gibran told her a curious story about his time in Beirut (1898–1900), when he was a student at al-Hikma College, founded by Monsignor Yusuf Dibs (1833–1907) in 1875. He said he had met a beautiful young widow of 22, Sultana Tabet, to whom he was greatly attracted, and that they exchanged letters. She was always distant and that she was the sister of a college friend, Ayyub Tabet, who became a prominent nationalist.¹ This tale was taken up by other writers as being true. However, Waterfield said it was actually a fiction, for

*at an early age Gibran invented an accepted persona for himself. Like all such masks, it was to a degree untrue to reality, yet as time went by he became more and more committed living within its parameters.*²

In fact, it was fiction. In the first place, Ayyub Tabet was not Gibran's college friend, since Ayyub was older. When Gibran was in Beirut, Ayyub was busy earning his medical diploma in Texas. As for the young widow Sultana, Ayyub had no sister by that name. The beautiful Sabat was not even married at the time. It may be that young Gibran had glimpsed Sabat and woven fantasies around her.

¹ Waterfield, *ibid.*, p. 71.

² *Ibid.*

CHAPTER II

The Politician

TO understand the development of the thought of Ayyub Tabet, it is necessary to look at the times in which he lived.

The nineteenth century was one of great change. Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (1798–1801), although disastrous for the French, helped open up Egypt, later Syria and the Lebanon, to Western ideas. In 1805, the Albanian Muhammad 'Ali (1769–1849) took over the government of Egypt. A remarkable reformer, he set Egypt on the path of modernization. He sent students to study in France and return imbued with the new ideas. Advised by the French, he created a modern army and set about conquering parts of the ailing Ottoman Empire. In the name of the Sultan, he chased the Wahhabis out of the Hijaz (1812–1819); conquered the Sudan and founded Khartoum. His son, Ibrahim Pasha (1789–1848), fought the Greeks, but the European powers defeated him at the Battle of Navarino (1827).

He conquered Palestine and Syria (1831–1832) and even marched on Constantinople.

Founder of modern Egypt, head of a family that reigned until 1952, Muhammad ‘Ali’s greatest contribution was in importing Western political ideas to the moribund Ottoman Empire.

Although the Empire was dying, the wind of change was blowing. Railways and the telegraph made transportation and communication easy.¹ From the first half of the nineteenth century educated men and women in the Arabic speaking lands began to feel the power and ideas of the institutions of Europe. To revive their somnolent societies they began to borrow from the West. The centres of these new ideas were Beirut and Cairo. Thus a renaissance (*nahda*) took place with liberal ideas spreading.² The development of universities in the latter part of the century brought an educated elite to the fore.

Just as important, it was the period of the westernizing reforms (*tanzimat*, 1839–1876),³ which came about under pressure from the European powers. These reforms brought a fresh breath of hope. Mahmud V (ruled 1808–

¹ See Shereen Khairallah, *Railways in the Middle East 1856–1948. Political and Economic Background*, Beirut, Librairie du Liban and Longman, Arab Background Series, 1991.

² See George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening. The Story of the Arab National Movement*, Beirut, Khayat, 1955, first printed 1938; Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970.

³ *Tanzimat*, from the Arabic *tanzim* “reorganization,” see Paul Dumont, «La période des Tanzimat», *Histoire de l’Empire ottoman*, éd. Robert Mantran, Paris, Fayard, 1994, pp. 459–522.

1839) annihilated the insubordinate corps of Janissaries. There followed a series of internal reforms, interrupted by the rebellion of Muhammad 'Ali. Following the *Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane*, 1839, promulgated by 'Abd al-Majid (ruled 1839–1861), reforms were made in administration, taxation, justice, education, rights of minorities, and military affairs. These were, most unfortunately, unsuccessful, owing to reactionary opposition and international complications – the Crimean War (1854–1856). Even the *Hatt-ı Humayun* (1856) reaffirming the rights of minorities, accomplished very little.

Later, under 'Abd al-'Aziz (ruled 1861–1876) efforts were made at reform, thanks to the able reforming vizier Midhat Pasha (1822–1884). However, the inept Murad V (ruled 1876) accomplished nothing. Although 'Abd al-Hamid (ruled 1876–1909) began as a reformer, he suddenly turned his back on liberalism and embraced authoritarianism, ruling as an absolute monarch. Thus the *tanzimat* included the reorganization of the administrative units in the Arab provinces, particularly after the massacres of 1860.

With few exceptions, the non-Muslim communities in the Sunni Ottoman Empire were not subject to Sharia law, but to their own sectarian rules. This was, in part, a legacy of Greco-Roman laws and the Byzantine civil laws of Justinian I (482–565). So Ottoman society was clearly divided into groups (*millet*), with their own rules and regulations. This tradition was perpetuated by the French and European powers in the *Règlement organique* of 1861 for Mount Lebanon, and was further continued during the mandate. It was also carried on into the Lebanese Republic. In the twenty first century there are eighteen recognized communities, with

their own personal status laws. Perhaps a nineteenth community will be created if non-sectarian laws are passed.

The second half of the nineteenth century was decisive in Ottoman history. The Empire, despite attempted reforms, was in a state of decay. It lost its European provinces after the Russo-Turkish War, with the Treaty of Berlin (1878). 'Abd al-Hamid suspended the Constitution. In the Arab provinces agitation demanded more liberalism and separation from the Empire.¹ The Sultan resorted to Pan-Islamism; later the Young Turks advocated Pan-Turanianism – Turkey for the Turks. Arab and Turkish secret societies sprang up everywhere.

Matters escalated. On the international scene, there were momentous events: The growth of nationalism, the unification of Italy and Germany, the rise of socialism – in fact all the isms of the nineteenth century had their impact on the awakening populations. Little Japan defeated mighty Russia in 1905, who was forced to grant a constitution to its people. The problem of Macedonia loomed. In addition, the European powers continued to exert pressure on the Ottoman Government. Dissatisfaction was everywhere.

Meanwhile, what was to trigger Arab nationalism was the growth of the Young Turk movement.² For the Empire was sliding into complete ruin. The financial situation was such a mess that the administration of the Ottoman Public Debt was handed over to British and French delegates. The Armenian

¹ See the now classic Zeine N. Zeine, *Arab-Turkish Relations and the Emergence of Arab Nationalism*, Beirut, Khayat, 1958.

² François Georgeon, «Le dernier sursaut 1878–1908», *Histoire de l'Empire ottoman*, pp. 523–576.

massacre of 1894–1896 further discredited the Government. In the Balkans, the minorities agitated for independence.

In the Turkish officer corps, in Salonica, discontent grew. Out of this discontent came the Young Turk movement of 1895 calling for the liberalization of the regime, but it soon took on a nationalist colour. In 1889, students from the military School of Medicine in Istanbul formed a secret society, which they named the Committee of Ottoman Union. ‘Abd al-Hamid succeeded in temporarily suppressing it.

The first Young Turk Congress met in Paris in 1902, from which sprang the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). In 1907, the Young Turks declared “the Ottoman Empire for the Ottomans,” triggering Arab separatism. In their *coup d’état* of 1908, the Young Turks seized power, and forced the Sultan to restore the Constitution of 1876. His counter-revolution failed, and he was deposed a year later, in favour of his brother Muhammad Rashad V, who ruled until 1918. Nevertheless, this movement was also instrumental in the loss of the European provinces as the result of two Balkan wars: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Crete. Therefore, the CUP turned to Pan-Turanianism.

The Young Turks had promised equality to all subjects in the Empire, but these promises never materialized. Consequently, the break between Arabs and Turks became inevitable. At the outbreak of World War I, the minorities had become resentful. At first the Arabs called for reform from within, and then advocated separatism.



It is with this background in mind that Ayyub Tabet was born, matured, and developed. Events forged his character.