CHAPTER 6

Political Rights: Women's Suffrage as a Revolutionary Threat

In April 1920, three months before the French occupied Damascus, the Syrian Congress discussed a proposal to grant women the vote. The issue came up at the same time that the Congress was handling complaints by "liberated" women about insults and abuse in the souks (markets) of Damascus. Response was quicker on the latter issue. Within a few days, King Faysal's government issued a warning to would-be street molesters and promised more police patrols in the souks. It also, however, warned women against wearing European-style clothing and advised male guardians to ensure that their women dress properly in public. This reassertion of women's ambiguous status in public, and their dependence on male guardians, did not augur well for a pro-suffrage decision by the Congress.[1]

Behind the campaign for women's suffrage was a contingent of leaders from the nascent women's movement. Inspired by nationalist ideologies, they sought fuller participation in politics and the struggle for independence. They wanted to prove their patriotism by joining men in military battles and demonstrations against the French. Most fundamentally, they sought to transform their subaltern status as citizens, to strip away the mediating authority of men that separated them from the political arena, and to establish a direct relationship with the state through the right to vote. In the longterm, they hoped their voting power would enable them to demand further freedoms and equality through reforms of personal status laws. These women saw no conflict between political rights and religious obligations, for they justified their claims with the ideas of the Salafi Islamic reformers. They did not anticipate that the gender anxiety and conservative backlash produced by war and French occupation would prompt others to employ different interpretations of religious law to block their attainment of these rights.

The women had reason to believe that King Faysal favored their cause. In

1919, a group of Lebanese women, including ʿAnbara Salam, had followed Faysal in the harem section of his train to Damascus to submit a petition to him on women's rights.[2] Meanwhile in Damascus, Nazik ʿAbid, Mary ʿAjamy and others also agitated for suffrage in their women's magazines. They were no doubt inspired by suffragist movements in postwar Europe and women's prominent role in the Egyptian rebellion against the British the previous March.[3] Because there was no formal suffragist movement, however, we have no way of knowing how representative these women were. That others did share their demand for legal equality is suggested by an answer to the question posed in 1919 by ʿAjamy's magazine *The Bride* (*al-ʿArus*): Where would you like to have been born? One woman responded: "I wish I had been born in a more advanced country where women can go about their business in fairness and equality."[4]

In April 1920 (just as the San Remo conference was awarding France the mandate) a Lebanese delegate to the Syrian Congress, Ibrahim al-Khatib, proposed a limited form of women's suffrage during debates on the state's new constitution. Khatib asked that the right to vote be granted to women of a minimum age holding secondary school certificates (estimated to be about two percent of the population). The proposal was seconded by Saʿdallah al-Jabiri of Aleppo, who would later become a leader of the Syrian National Bloc. Support also came from Shaykh Saʿid Murad, a religious scholar from Gaza and former professor at the law school in Damascus. (His daughter Fatma in the 1930s would become one of the first female lawyers in Damascus.) Murad argued that the right given to women to testify, to judge, and to be a scholar in Islamic tradition implied a similar right to vote. Daʿas al-Jurjis, another delegate, added that women's military service during the war was proof of their importance to society.

While Faysal's supporters generally approved of women's suffrage, his opponents in the Congress, including older, conservative and landowning politicians with religious and French sympathies,[5] did not. The opposition was led by Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qadir al-Kaylani, a francophile from a conservative feudal family in Hama. Kaylani argued to the Congress that even in Europe, where women shared many of men's activities, few countries gave women the vote. He then asked: "Giving women the right to vote means she has the right to be an ambassador, and do you want female ambassadors?" Jabiri retorted that Syrian women also mix with men, for example in markets. But Kaylani warned that society was too ignorant and immoral, and that men would resist women's public authority. Interestingly, he acknowledged in his argument the Salafi view that women's seclusion from public life, or veiling, was not in fact required by religion. But he insisted that most people did not share that view:

"Veiling as it exists is an innovation, but when some seek to lift the veil, the fools who follow women will be ridiculed." 'Adil Zu'aytar of Nablus agreed that giving women the vote was dangerous: "Every people has its deep-seated customs and traditions, and if its laws don't conform to them, then it must fear that the laws will lead to revolutions and disturbances."

Indeed, opponents sought to project women's suffrage as a revolutionary threat to the entire gender hierarchy. Ahmad Qadmani of Damascus claimed women's suffrage would upset the natural order: "God created her [woman] with half an intellect!" Rashid Rida, the eminent Salafi scholar, argued that the right to vote was predicated on the condition of individual freedom, and so threatened husbands' control over wives: "Does a woman, under the protection of her husband, have the right to vote if he prohibits her from voting?" Jabiri responded: "Does he have the right to prohibit her from bearing witness in court?" Rida responded in the affirmative. Like other opponents, Rida sought to divert and postpone the issue by calling for more women's education as preparation.

The debate was also colored by the regime's impending crisis, as the French declared sovereignty over Syria and as opposition grew to Faysal's attempts to appease them. Populist militias opposed to compromise and to what they perceived as Faysal's elitist and Europhile modernism attacked women's suffrage with venom. Posing as representatives of the national will, they denounced the suffrage proposal as akin to the rape of Syria's purity and integrity by imperialists. Rida argued that allowing women's suffrage would undermine the authority of the Congress at a time when its political power was being challenged by the militias. "We must fight the reactionaries who want to keep women ignorant, rather than focus on the suffrage issue, which does not derive any benefit now. . . . We don't have time to open the popular door to the fanatics. . . . [who] will give speeches in mosques and hold meetings against the Congress."[6] Rida's views were also likely influenced by his membership in al-Fatat, an adamantly pro-independence nationalist group that had once supported Faysal, but now increasingly opposed his compromises with the French. Rida would become president of the Syrian Congress on May 3, after news of San Remo brought down its pro-Faysal leadership.[7]

Women's partisans rallied, but failed to achieve a vote on the issue. Ibrahim al-Khatib threatened to resign from his party because it was so full of ignorance. Riyad al-Sulh, the future Lebanese prime minister, argued that the Congress should vote on principle, not on opinions in coffeehouses. Subhi al-Tawwil of Latakia argued that women don't have to lift their veils to vote, and, roughly quoting scripture, that an educated woman is worth more than a thousand

ignorant men. In a long speech, Shaykh Sa'id Murad scolded opponents for trying to tie suffrage to other issues, like the veil, in order to defeat it. When he remarked that the West justified its rule over the East because the East persisted in legislating the ignorance of half its people (women), six deputies left their seats and a quorum was lost. The Congress postponed further debate on the issue until early July, when the constitution was ratified, but again made no decision. According to the Congress secretary, 'Izzat Darwaza, there was wide support for the measure, but a knot of opponents blocked debate.[8] The constitution was thus ratified without a change to the electoral law.

Women's reaction to the defeat was valiant. They sought to prove their patriotism even as the state fell within the next two weeks. On July 7, Nazik 'Abid organized the Red Star society on the model of the Red Cross under Faysal's patronage. On July 17, the king awarded her an honorary military rank in the Syrian army (fig. 6). A week later, 'Abid, dressed in her military uniform, led her battalion of Red Star nurses into the fateful battle of Maysalun. When the hero of the battle, War Minister Yusuf al-'Azma, was mortally wounded, it was the Red Star that treated him. 'Abid was dubbed the Joan of Arc of the Arabs, after the saint canonized that same year, and was compared to Khawla bint al-Azwar, an ancient Arab war heroine.[9]

Women took the postponement of the vote as an opportunity to prove their worthiness as citizens. According to the director of the largest girls' school in Hama: "From that date women showed their true colors and worked actively to raise their intellectual and social status through schools and clubs and by publishing women's newspapers and magazines . . . until she recovered her spirit."[10] While three women's magazines had been founded by women before the war, eight more would appear between 1919 and 1930. Women publishers shared a vision of the female reader as an essential player in the nation's future. Salima Abu Rashid had entitled her 1914 magazine *Girl of Lebanon* (*Fatat Lubnan*) to inspire young women to revive the strong morals that had once guided the ancient Lebanese civilization.[11] Mary 'Ajamy revived her journal, *The Bride*, which she had founded in 1910 with the dedication:

> To those who believe that in the spirit of woman is the strength to kill the germs of corruption, and that in her hand is the weapon to rend the gloom of oppression and in her mouth the solace to lighten human misery.[12]

At the same time, 'Ajamy started her Women's Literary Club (Nadi al-nisa'i al-adabi) to foster a female intelligentsia who could help revive Damascus. She

wanted to disprove those who believed women were mentally inferior. ʻAjamy sought more than the vote; she sought the end of paternalism. In her view, women's rights were natural, and women sought only to regain the rights they once enjoyed in a distant era of matriarchy. In seeming response to Rashid Rida's claim that women were not individuals deserving of rights, she said: "Some say women are born to serve their husbands. Others say women are born to serve their fathers . . . [I say her rights] exist for herself."[13]

Many of the women's magazines were founded in the spirit of revival generally felt after World War I. Women were inspired by Egyptian women's magazines, women's prominent role in the 1919 Egyptian revolution, the attainment of women's suffrage in Europe and the United States, as well as their own wartime experience.[14] In 1921, in Beirut, Julia Dimashqiya founded her magazine, *The New Woman* (*al-Mar'a al-jadida*), addressing it "Dear Daughters of My Country." Dimashqiya rallied her readers to embrace women's new roles in social and national affairs since the war: "In the world there is an intellectual revolution undertaken by women, and it is a stronger civilizing influence than the French Revolution."[15] Najla Abu al-Lamʻ said she started her magazine, *The Dawn* (*al-Fajr*) because she "yearned in this new era for new scientific discoveries, new perspectives and new research." A leading article in it proclaimed: "Syria cannot stand up and confront current events without the revival of her girls and women and their participation in liberating the country from outdated education and its debilitating effects."[16]

Indeed, the magazines asserted that women were uniquely suited to heal social divisions and so strengthen the nation. Nazik ʻAbid promised her women's magazine, *Light of Damascus* (*Nur al-Fayha'*), would help remove the main obstacle to national progress, the conflict between men and women:

> And even if a male writer and a female writer argue and fight about a subject, they will understand each other and they will arrive at truths worth expressing, and so lift this wretched nation from the ruin of misery to the peak of happiness, and build an impenetrable fortress between them and the sick, measly ideas that shame and despair bequeathed to us."[17]

In 1923, Afifa Fandi Saʻb, publisher of *The Boudoir* (*al-Khidr*), proclaimed women's duty to serve and unite all people in Lebanon, shunning divisive conflicts of identity: "My nationality derives from three roots: my language, my country, and the legacy of Islam."[18]

These and other women's magazines were read and shared by women in

both Syria and Lebanon, fostering an interurban community that stretched far beyond the intimate world of elite literary salons and that nurtured the blooming women's movement. Dimashqiya's *The New Woman* in Beirut and 'Ajamy's *The Bride* in Damascus were the slickest and most well-known of the magazines. They kept the suffrage issue alive by featuring regular articles on women's suffrage and women in politics in other countries. Meanwhile, women demonstrated their patriotism by participating in public protests. In April and May 1922, dozens of Damascene women marched at the head of demonstrations against the arrest of a nationalist leader, 'Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar. Several women were clubbed and arrested by police.[19]

The suffrage issue was revived in March 1923, this time by the Lebanese Representative Council during a debate on women's work. A group of young men had complained to the council that too many women were entering the civil service, thereby taking jobs away from men. Women had prepared for the debate by garnering the support of Representative Shaykh Yusuf al-Khazin, a Maronite newspaper owner. When Khazin defended women's right to government jobs, the debate quickly expanded to consider broader aspects of women's status. Husayn Bey Qaz'un agreed with Khazin, noting that women in his home district of the Bekaa Valley shared work on the farm equally with men, and so why shouldn't urban women help their husbands too? Fadl Bey al-Fadl remarked that since women assisted their husbands in many professions, like commerce and silkworm cultivation, shouldn't they also help their husbands who are politicians or deputies? Several deputies remarked that many women worked for governments in Europe, India, and elsewhere, and that women had joined the Turkish delegation at the current Lausanne peace talks. One deputy said he agreed with Mustafa Kemal of Turkey that "the chief cause that led to our failure in social organization is our neglect of the women's issue and her low status . . . the happiness of the country rests on women's sharing with men in public affairs."[20]

Opposing council members rejected these efforts to mold Lebanon's civic order on foreign models of progressive gender equity and argued that women did not belong in public. Said Nasri Bey 'Azuri: "Woman was created for the home and in the home she must spend her life." 'Abbud 'Abd al-Razzaq, a francophile representative from northern Lebanon, chastised the council for even taking up women's affairs, since the Lebanese public, he argued, thinks the entire issue shameful. Another representative offered dubious population figures, that 450,000 of the 700,000 Lebanese population were women, and that educating them all would drain the country's resources for men.[21] Emile Eddé, the future prime minister, also dismissed the issue, asking the council to move on to more important administrative problems.

The debate ended in a majority decision that women were created as men's companions and so should share in all of his activities. The council president proposed an increase in the number of girls' schools to compensate for previous bias toward boys' schools. He even included a pledge to support women's magazines, because they were more refined than men's. And he closed with a promise that with increased education women would soon attain the right to vote and to sit as deputies in parliament. The decision perhaps reflected the liberalism of the new high commissioner, Maxime Weygand; however, as chapter four showed, few girls' schools would in fact be constructed.

A year later the Council took up the promised debate on women's suffrage. Optimism that recognition of women's right to work and to education might assure the right to vote, however, proved misplaced. On May 29, 1924, Shaykh Yusuf al-Khazin, acting again on behalf of women's leaders, proposed that the small number of educated women be granted the right to vote. Council reaction was largely negative. Opponents of suffrage included Shibl Dammus, a Greek Orthodox representative from the Bekaa Valley who would in 1925 head the committee to draft the Lebanese constitution. Dammus asked Khazin to withdraw his proposal because its presumption of equal rights would require an overhaul of the entire legal system; for example, under Islamic law now in effect, men receive double the share of women in inheritance. Khazin assured him that he did not intend to infringe on men's rights. Another deputy, Adib Pasha, objected to any tampering with the election law. Khazin replied that it had already been amended to allow foreigners (Armenian refugees) to vote, so why not do the same for educated female citizens?

When asked to stand if they supported expunging the word "male" from article eight of the electoral law, only three of the 30 deputies stood up for women's suffrage: Khazin, Amir Fu'ad Arslan, and Ibrahim Munthir. Munthir was a well-known scholar in Beirut who had taught Arabic to several women's leaders, including Salma Sayigh and Mary Yanni, publisher of a women's magazine. In the record of the session, the three men were registered by the clerk, in a manner apparently intended to shame them, as "Followers of Women." The door left open in 1920 by the Syrian Congress to women's electoral participation was now slammed shut by the Lebanese Council. Dimashqiya wrote in her magazine that she was devastated, ashamed to have even hoped for the right to vote.[22]

Leaders of the women's movement would nonetheless persevere in proving their patriotism and worthiness as citizens. They took heart, for example, that Fu'ad Arslan had praised women's patriotism in supporting national industry, through the Women's Revival Society established in 1924. Women's house-

work, Dimashqiya argued, was as valuable to the nation as men's office work; moreover, women's work in the home underpinned all other national industries because it freed men to work outside the home, and it raised new workers.[23] And as in so many other countries, Syrian and Lebanese women sought to use their role as defenders of the community (umma) in wartime—both World War I and Maysalun—as a basis for gaining political rights. During the Syrian Revolt in 1925, 'Adila Bayhum al-Jaza'iri and other elite Damascene women smuggled food and weapons to men hiding in the orchards outside of Damascus, while peasant women took up arms in rural battles. In 1926, 4,000 women marched to the residence of the Syrian head of state to demand the end of French bombardments of the capital city.[24]

Women's claims to full citizenship in reward for war service were no mere imitation of contemporary European feminists. Syrians and Lebanese were steeped in the lore of heroic and pious warfare in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia. Elites 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 community. In the 1920s, many women's and general magazines featured biographies of female Arab warriors like Queen Zenobia, who ruled a Syrian kingdom in the Roman era.[25] 'Aisha, the Prophet's favorite wife, was often recalled for her participation in battles to defend the Muslim community. One female participant at Maysalun reportedly told her brother: "The wife of the Prophet waged holy war [jihad]. How could you go and not me?"[26] The Prophet's first wife Khadija was another Muslim ideal; she was a faithful wife and self-reliant businesswoman.[27] These examples were often marshalled in support of arguments that women had once been active citizens with full rights, not only as soldiers, but also as judges and teachers.[28] This revisionist view of women's citizenship in the Prophet's era rejected the political marginalization of women as a corruption of the Prophet's original intent.[29]

Women did manage to convince some men that their battlefield service merited the vote, as we saw in the 1920 debate. Some male nationalists even wrote books and articles about women's participation in World War I as proof of women's capacity to serve their nation.[30] But as in many countries, including France, male politicians tended to characterize women's war service as exceptional. They agreed that it was women's duty toward the community to protect it in times of need; however, they insisted that women return to their natural place in the home in times of peace.[31] Their views explicitly rejected women's Salafi interpretations of the Prophet's original intent, and instead embraced later Islamic traditions that sanctioned the exclusion of women from politics.

The postwar shift in the nature of Islamic reformism thus worked against women's suffrage. Even as women appealed to the ideas of the Salafi movement to justify reforms in their legal status, its influence declined among Muslim scholars and officials. Moreover, women were going beyond what many Salafi scholars would permit, as evidenced by Rashid Rida's opposition to their suffrage. Rida, who relocated to Egypt after 1920, would oppose other reforms demanded by the Egyptian women's movement.[32] With the rise of Islamic populist groups, the balance of power was shifting toward conservative and populist interpretations. It is not unreasonable to suggest that a deep gender anxiety underlay the shift, provoking ferocious attacks on women who asserted a public presence in the street and in the parliament. As we saw in chapter one, Syrians and Lebanese of the lower classes had suffered far more than elites during the war, and were particularly stressed by guilt about not having fulfilled their gender roles as protective mothers, fathers, and brothers. This anxiety was now compounded by many people's inability to provide for their families as they had once done.

Gender anxiety was expressed in the language of gender difference deployed in the suffrage debates. The reference to rape, revolution, inversion of natural order, and the threat women's vote posed to the entire legal system suggest a widely held fear of gender reversal, as did the repeated ridicule of men who "followed women." Rashid Rida's warning that women's vote would upset men's authority over their families must have struck a deep chord. If men were representatives of the family to the state, how could women become representatives of the state? Also at play were the more mundane worries of politicians who owed their status to the prevailing paternalistic system, hence Lebanese opponents' reluctance to tamper with electoral laws that had been carefully fashioned by the French to assure their election. Mary 'Ajamy, in a 1924 speech in Beirut, remarked that many men feared women's progress would come at their own expense. She reminded them that Marie Curie and George Eliot had not abandoned their husbands, but rather cooperated with them.[33]

The French took a low profile in the suffrage debates, but likely shared similar anxieties: "The decade after the 1918 armistice witnessed an enormous preoccupation with issues of female identity and women's proper role," writes Mary Louise Roberts. "The blurring of the boundary between 'male' and 'female'—a civilization without sexes—served as a primary referent for the ruin of civilization itself."[34] The French Senate denied women suffrage in 1922 for the contradictory reasons that some senators wanted to preserve paternal authority in the family, while others, belonging to the laicist Radical Party,

feared that women voters would be beholden to the paternalistic and anti-republican opinions of the Catholic Church.[35] Either way, French politicians, like those in the Levant, viewed women's enfranchisement as an unwelcome disruption of the civic order. French views were transmitted to Syria and Lebanon through the press. In 1930, the francophile Beirut newspaper *Le Réveil* published a review of the French novel *The False Warrior* that agreed with the author, Abel Bonnard, that suffrage would not make women happy because, "In a rudimentary society like ours, the simplicity of the natural order is felt anew, and in the rude duel of the two sexes, woman is exposed to blows more cruel than she can herself wield."[36]

While the French did not enter suffrage debates directly, their policy aided and abetted its opponents. The mandate charter, written with French participation, prohibited discrimination according to religion, race,or language, but not gender.[37] Within two years of the Lebanese Council's debate, the Lebanese constitution would be drafted and ratified under French guidance, not only without provisions for women's suffrage, but also without any formal consultation of women. All males aged 21 and over were granted the vote. (Article 12 would, however, contain the previously won guarantee of women's equal access to civil service jobs.) Similarly in Syria, the 1930 constitution decreed by Ponsot granted universal suffrage only to male voters aged 20 or more.

Women found themselves faced with a painful tradeoff, one that men were never asked to face. In seeking political rights, women were told that they were betraying their religious duty. This was a formidable sacrifice for most women, who considered themselves pious. While women's leaders situated their claims to citizenship within the compass of religious values, Christian and Muslim religious leaders portrayed their entrance into politics as a negation of their religiously defined roles as wives and mothers. Indeed, conservative Muslims deemed women *un*patriotic for wishing to participate in public life, in a world view that increasingly saw all changes in gender roles as the corruptive creep of Westernization against the integrity of Islam and Arab tradition. This dilemma produced a crisis in the women's movement. Critical to the outcome of the crisis was the appearance of a book by a young Druze woman in 1928, which would rouse the ire of the conservative Muslims so feared by Rashid Rida during the suffrage debate, and to which we now turn.