

Ash-Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Asīr

Biography and Achievements¹

(1230 – 1307 AH / 1815 – 1889 AD)

His Name and Designation

He is Shaykh Yūsuf Bin ‘Abd al-Qādir Al-Ḥusaynī Al-Asīr, also known as *Al-Azharī* (the Azharīte). All sources agree that the name Al-Asīr is also an epithet, which means “captive”. His grandchildren still consider themselves as Ḥusaynī (descendants of Ḥusayn Bin ‘Alī). What is interesting is that Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Asīr himself explains in the preface to his book on Islamic law, *Sharḥ Ra’id al-Farā’id* (*A pioneering Elucidation of the Obligations*), the meaning and reasons for his name and both epithets *Al-Asīr* and *Al-Azharī*. And so he notes in Arabic prose:

“Thereafter, the poor slave Yūsuf / known as the Azharīte Captive”

He then goes on to explain this verse in one of his poems:

“The slave’ and ‘the poor’ are similar word adjectives, the former means the submissive obedient while the latter means the needy. As for ‘Yūsuf’, it is a Hebrew name meaning an increase or abundance, and by tracing his lineage, he is the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, peace and prayers be upon our Prophet and upon them. As for the epithet *al-Asīr*, it means captive and follows the Arabic word form of *‘fa’īl*’. I inherited this title name from my grandfather, who was held captive for a while by the Franks on a ship during the war of Malta, before returning as a free man to his homeland of Sidon and recounting what he had witnessed from its people.”²

¹ Text by Muḥsin Al-Aḥmar, *Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Asīr, 1815-1889 AD / 1230-1307 AH, Ḥayātuh wa Nītājuh* (Lebanese University, 1970), 2–21. Thesis submitted for the certificate of competence for teaching at secondary level, supervised by Dr. Jabbūr ‘Abd An-Nūr.

² Yūsuf Al-Asīr, *Sharḥ Ra’id Al-Farā’id* (Beirut, 1290), 4–5.

How was he captured and why? He makes no mention of that. His grandson, Khalīl bin Muḥammad bin Yūsuf Al-Asīr, informed me that his ancestors were *Husaynīs*, who hailed from Morocco and while passing near Malta, they were captured by its men, and that is how their grandfather came to be known as the captive upon his return to Sidon, where he became settled.

Had the Shaykh known of this story, he would have most likely mentioned it. As for the reason behind the title of *Al-Azharī*, he explains: “And *Al-Azharī* is in reference to Al-Azhar, which is the mosque built by Gawhar, commander of Caliph Al-Mu‘iz, during his conquest of Egypt, [...] and I was only identified with Al-Azhar because in its presence I was flooded in the light of its full moon [...]”¹

His Birth and Adolescence

All sources agree that Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asīr was born in Sidon in 1815 AD / 1230 AH. Viscount Philippe de Tarrazi gives the date of his birth as the eleventh month (Dhi Al-Qi‘da) of this year², when Sulayman Pasha was the *walī* of Sidon. It was also a year beset with swarms of locusts and plague.³

Yūsuf was raised in the bosom of his father who was a trader — although there is no mention of the nature of his father’s trade in any of the studies on Shaykh Yūsuf. However, his grandson Khalīl had mentioned to me that he was a regular merchant dealing with grains, foodstuffs, and some fabrics, and he had owned a warehouse by the sea in Sidon. Mystery surrounds the life of Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Asīr [in his early years], and all that we know about his childhood is that he learned the religious sciences, through reading and writing, in his home city of Sidon. Shaykh ‘Abd al-Razzāq Al-Biṭār mentions in his book *Hilyat Al-Bashar fī Tārīkh Al-Qarn Ath-Thālith ‘Ashar* a detail of this stage of Al-Asīr’s life, in that “he studied the Quran when he was seven years old under the

¹ Al-Asīr, 5.

² Phillipe de Tarrazi, *Tārīkh al-Sihafa Al-‘Arabiyya: Yahtawi ‘ala Akhbar kul Jarida wa Majalla ‘Arabiyya Dhaharat fī al-‘Alam Sharqiyyan wa Gharbiyyan ma’ Rusum Ashabiha wa al-Muharririn fiha wa Tarājim Mashahirihim*, vol. 1 (Bayrut: al-Matba‘a Al-Adabiyya, 1913), 135.

³ Haydar Aḥmad Shihabi, “Al-Ghurar Al-Hisan fī Akhbar Abna’ Az-Zaman,” in *Lubnan fī ‘ahd Al-Umara’ Al-Shihabiyyin*, ed. Asad Jibrail Rustum and Fu‘ād Afram Bustani (Beyrouth: Publications de l’Université Libanaise, 1969), 608, 629.

direction of Shaykh Ibrahim ‘Ārfah, and he learned to recite it under the direction of Shaykh ‘Alī Al-Dayrabī, and then furthered his education for another five years under Shaykh Al-Sharambalī.¹

He did not possess a liking for trade, his father's profession, and rather gravitated from the earliest age towards the pursuit of education. Ya‘qub Sarruf² agrees in his written excerpt with Shaykh Al-Biṭār in that Al-Asūr had memorized the Quran by the age of seven. Also, Father Shaykhū and Viscount de Tarrazi³ both confirm that while in Sidon he had studied under the direction of Shaykh Aḥmad Al-Sharambalī.

Al-Asūr remained in Sidon until the age of seventeen before leaving for Damascus, where he boarded and studied at the Murādiyyah School under the direction of its qualified scholars. This is according to most references and by this he would have made his trip to Damascus in 1832 AD, where his stay there was short-lived. He had been at the aforementioned school for only six months⁴ when news of his father’s death forced him to return to his hometown of Sidon in order to take charge of his family’s affairs.⁵ It seems that his father had not been so well off, which is why Shaykh Yūsuf had to provide for his family. He spent three years in Sidon, having taken charge of both his father’s business and looking after his siblings.⁶

He did not enjoy living in Sidon given his pursuit of and commitment to education and his desire to increase and deepen his knowledge in the sciences. Thus, he travelled to Egypt, his destination of choice being Cairo and specifically Al-Azhar University, which was then considered the highest-ranking educational establishment in the whole of the Islamic world.

When did Yūsuf Al-Asūr travel to Cairo?

¹ ‘Abd-ul-Razzāq Al-Biṭār, *Hilyat al-Bashar ft’ ahd al-Amir Bashūr al-Thānī*, vol. 3 (Damascus, 1963), 1616.

² Ya‘qub Sarruf, *Al-Muqtaṭaf*, no. 15: 132.

³ Tarrazi, *Tārīkh al-Sihafa Al-‘Arabīyya*, 1:135.

⁴ Al-Biṭār, *Hilyat Al-Bashar*, 3:1616.

⁵ Jurjī Zaydān, *Tarājim Mashāhīr Al-Sharq ft’ Al-Qarn At-Tāsi’ ‘Ashar*, 3rd ed., vol. 2 (Misr, 1922), 164.

⁶ Al-Biṭār, *Hilyat Al-Bashar*, 3:1616.

According to Viscount Philippe de Tarrazi, “Yūsuf al-Asīr became part of the student body at Al-Azhar, which was headed by Shaykh Ḥasan al-‘Aṭṭār and then by Ḥasan Al-Quwayṣīnī following the latter’s death.”¹ In *Tarājim Mashahīr al-Sharq*, Jurjī Zaydān gives an account of Al-Asīr’s stint in Egypt: “he would often attend the public examinations that often took place in the presence of ‘Aziz Miṣr (the Mighty One of Egypt, in reference to then Khedive Muḥammad ‘Alī Pasha)...”² We quote these passages in order to help us speculate about the year Al-Asīr may have travelled to Cairo because there is no mention of it in the references at hand. What do we conclude from these two passages? Upon close inspection, there are two points that deserve attention:

The first is that Yūsuf Al-Asīr joined Al-Azhar as a student. The institute was chaired by Shaykh Ḥasan Al-‘Aṭṭār and succeeded by Shaykh Ḥasan Al-Qawīnsī. The second point is that Al-Asīr had encountered Muḥammad ‘Alī Pasha.

And we already know that after his return from Damascus, Al-Asīr stayed for around three years in Sidon, and we also know that Shaykh Ḥasan Al-‘Aṭṭār died in 1834 AD / 1250 AH and Al-Asīr had encountered Muḥammad Alī, who died in 1848 AD. Thus, Al-Asīr would have most probably returned from Damascus in 1832 AD and remained in Sidon for almost three years before leaving for Al-Azhar in late 1834 AD / 1250 AH, during which time he was contemporaneous with Shaykh Ḥasan Al-‘Aṭṭār for a short period, as it appears, before the latter passed away and was succeeded by Shaykh Ḥasan Al-Quwayṣīnī, who himself died in 1863 AD / 1263 AH.

Al-Asīr received his education under the direction of the sheikhs of Al-Azhar, such as Shaykh al-Bajūrī, Shaykh Muḥammad Ash-Shabībī, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Damnahwarī, and Shaykh Muḥammad Aṭ-Ṭanṭāwī.

¹ Tarrazi, *Tārīkh Al-Sihāfa Al-‘Arabiyya*, 1:135.

On al-Quwayṣīnī, below are verses praising both Ḥasans:

Whereas the folk’s finest departed to his God then came along Ḥasan, finer than fine

You are of the foremost class, leadership and creed; How can anyone be a match of yours?

² Zaydān, *Tarājim Mashāhir Ash-Sharq*, 2:164.

Yūsuf remained at Al-Azhar for seven years.¹ During this time, he became intensely absorbed in his studies and excelled at both the rational sciences (*'ulūm 'aqliyya*) and the transmitted sciences (*'ulūm naqliyya*) and became an influential imam.² These sciences followed a specific method. The revealed sciences are related to religion and its laws and include the science of theology, Islamic jurisprudence, Ḥadīth, and Sufism. The rational sciences covered the remaining other sciences such as philology, prosody, rhetoric, logic and astronomy. The astronomical sciences were only taught for practical purposes, such as the science of calendars, and the identification of prayer timings. Other subjects of the rational sciences also included literature, history, geography, natural and mathematical sciences. However, these subjects had been neglected since the Middle Ages and were taught with less attention and with reliance on trivial sources.³

The Bonaparte invasion of Egypt had some effect on the enlightenment of *Azharī* scholars. Additionally, Muḥammad Alī Pasha introduced some reforms to Al-Azhar, where the rational sciences began to trickle through and flourish. Yūsuf Al-Asīr was fortunate enough to study what was offered in the reformed curriculum at Al-Azhar. He also managed to attain a prestigious status within the Egyptian society, as he mixed with prominent scholars and engaged in some scholastic undertakings. He often prepared questions for public school examinations under his superiors' supervision and served as an invigilator for the public school examinations that took place in the presence of Muḥammad 'Alī Pasha.⁴

What did he do there besides his studies? In '*A lām Al-Adab wa-l-Fan, Al-Juz' Ath-Thani*, Adham Al-Jundī reveals in a chapter dedicated to Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Asīr that Al-Asīr had taught the children of some of Cairo's notables. The assumption is that Al-Jundī may have obtained this information from one of Al-Asīr's relatives as I did not come across this elsewhere.

¹ *Al-Muqataf*, no. 15: 132.

² *Al-Muqataf*, no. 15: 132.

³ 'Abd-ul-Hamid Yūnis and Tawfīq Uthmān, *Al-Azhar*, 1st ed. (Dar Al-Fikr Al-'Arabi, 1946), 78.

⁴ Zaydān, *Tarājim Mashāhīr Ash-Sharq*, 2:164.

Departure from Al-Azhar and Return to Lebanon

Shaykh Yūsuf had spent seven years in Al-Azhar, during which he acquired ample knowledge and experience before having to return to Sidon following a diagnosis of liver disease, one that would haunt him throughout his life.¹ Therefore, Al-Asīr may have possibly arrived in Sidon in the year 1841 AD. Jurjī Zaydān mentions that Al-Asīr was not in his element living in Sidon, as he felt there was little room for his own growth, and so he moved to Tripoli for three years and was well-received by its scholars and notables.² However, we do not know what he did in Sidon, or when he left for Tripoli, with the most probable date of arrival in Tripoli being 1842 AD. What did he do in Tripoli? We know that many of Tripoli’s notables benefited from his knowledge, and his abode was never shy of their presence. The poet Ṣalāḥ Al-Asīr, grandson of the Shaykh, told me that his grandfather had received a great deal of hospitality in Tripoli and that its people and scholars held him in high esteem to the extent that during those three years he almost never had his meals at his own home or any particular home, but he was rather always hosted by the city’s people on a regular basis. This is also confirmed by al-Kastī in the preface to his *Marāthīh Al-Asīr*: “he had told us — may God have mercy upon him — that in his three years living in Tripoli, the people of Tripoli did not permit him even once to eat at his house.” Al-Jundī relates that Al-Asīr’s seminars at the Grand Maṣṣūrī Mosque³ were very popular, but I could not substantiate this information.

Amongst those who, during this period, studied the Arabic language and Islamic studies under his direction, and with whom he shared mutual amity, were Maronite Patriarch Yuḥanna Al-Ḥāj and Yuḥanna Al-Ḥabīb, founder of the Lebanese Maronite Society. Al-Asīr also had a good relationship with and was full of praise for his comrade Shaykh Muḥammad Rashīd bin Abī Bīkr Al-Mīqātī⁴ (1198 AH - 1282 AH).

¹ *Al-Muqataḥaf*, no. 5: 132; Yūsuf As’ad Dāghir, *Maṣāḍīr Ad-Dirāsah Al-Adabiyya*, vol. 2:132; Zaydān, *Tarājim Mashāhīr Ash-Sharq*, 2:164; Yūsuf Ilyan Sarkis, “Al-Asīr, (Shaykh) Yūsuf,” in *Mu’jam Al-Maṭbu’at Al-‘Arabiyya wal-Mu’arraba* (Misr, 1928).

² Zaydān, *Tarājim Mashāhīr Ash-Sharq*, 2:164.

³ Ṭarrāzī, *Tārīkh Aṣ-Ṣiḥāfah al-‘Arabiyya*, 1:135; Adham al-Jundī, *A’lām al-Adab wal-Fan*, vol. 2 (Syria: Maṭba’at Al-Ittiḥād, 1958), 1985.

⁴ ‘Abdallah Ḥabīb Nawfal, *Tarājim ‘Ulama’ Ṭarāblus wa Udabā’uha* (Tripolis: Maṭba’at Al-Ḥadarah, 1929), 56. And below are verses by al-Shaykh al-Asīr praising al-Shaykh al-Mīqātī:

After having spent three years in Tripoli, as aforementioned, Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Asīr moved to Beirut for the quality of its climate and settled there for good. Perhaps he arrived there around 1845 AD. His fame was widespread, for he had barely set his foot in Beirut before students and admirers were in quest of him — which is reminiscent of his return from Al-Azhar to Sidon, when students from all over rushed to him to receive education.¹

At the time, Beirut began booming with more schools and printing presses,² such as the Syrian Protestant College, the Jesuit Missionary College (Saint-Joseph University), as well as the American press and Jesuit press amongst others. In addition, more private schools were established, such as the schools of the charitable Maqāṣid Islamic Society³, which was founded in 1878 by twenty-five young men (namely Maḥmūd Kharmā, Hāshim Al-Jammāl and Ṭaha An-Nuṣūlī) with aims for helping the poor and setting up schools for males and females.⁴

Before we begin to trace Al-Asīr’s activities in Beirut, and for the sake of scientific objectivity, it is worth recalling this story by Adham Al-Jundī. He reports that Al-Asīr had once travelled to Istanbul, and was nominated by the Grand Mufti to serve as a judge in one of its provinces in exchange for a thousand qurush per month. However Al-Asīr declined this offer and was only content with teaching. After having returned to Beirut during the reign of Prince Haydar Abī-al-Lama⁵, he was appointed as judge in Matn and Kisirwān and served in this position for four years.⁵ We know that Prince Haydar Abī al-Lama⁵ was nominated as qaimaqam in the year 1840 AD, and Al-Asīr had left Tripoli around the year 1845 AD, the year of Prince Haydar’s death. Accepting the accuracy of al-Jundī’s tale, Al-Asīr would have most probably travelled to Istanbul in the period between the year 1845 AD and the year Prince Haydar resigned as qaimaqam. That is if

Visit God’s country and choose a home / in Ṭarāblus ash-Sham, O disciple

There you shall find no one more distinguished / or in the highest rank of piety save Rashid

¹ Tarrāzi, *Tārīkh Al-Sihāfa Al-‘Arabiyya*, 1:135.

² Tarrāzi, 1:135.

³ *Thamarāt Al-Funun*, no. 181 (1871): 1.

⁴ *Thamarāt al-Funun*, no. 185 (1871).

⁵ Al-Jundī, *A’lām al-Adab wal-Fan*, 2:325.

we were to assume that al-Jundī's account is accurate. In all the references I consulted, I did not find any mention of Al-Asīr having visited Istanbul twice. What I know from Ṣalāḥ Al-Asīr is that his predecessor had only travelled to Istanbul to revise *Al-Majalla Al-Shar'īyya* (publication on the Ottoman codification of the sharia) at the request of an official there, but he was not sure of the year.

Be that as it may, we shall examine all references. Al-Asīr left Tripoli for Beirut, so what did he do there? Shaykh Yūsuf was appointed as chief clerk at the sharia court in Beirut “during the incumbency of Judge Mustafa ‘Ashir Effendi.”¹ When was he appointed and for what duration? The references are quite compelling and leave no room for speculation in this regard. It is not known when Mustafa ‘Ashir Effendi served as judge of the sharia court; however Al-Jundī purports that he did for many years. In accepting that Al-Asīr assumed this position following Prince Haydar's nomination as qaimaqam, then this would have happened in the 1850s. Khalīl Al-Asīr has relayed to me that during this period his grandfather had begun writing on the science of the ordained quotas. He was then assigned to the position of mufti in the city of Acre², however the date is unknown to us. Khalīl recounts that there was this phrase being commonly used by people at the time: “O Yūsuf, the righteous, counsel us.”

Then arrived the year 1860 carrying with it those bloody events unto Lebanon, followed by the promulgation of the *Mutasarrifate* Protocol of Lebanon and the appointment of Dawūd Pasha as Mutaṣarrif of Lebanon, during which Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Asīr was sworn in as public prosecutor in Mount Lebanon.³ He served in this position for seven years⁴, or during the period when Dawūd Pasha was Mutaṣarrif from 1861 AD to 1868 AD.

In Istanbul: Why did Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Asīr travel to Istanbul?

¹ Zaydān, *Tarājim Mashāhīr Ash-Sharq*, 2:164.

² Tarrāzi, *Tārīkh Aṣ-Ṣiḥāfah Al-'Arabīyya*, 1:164, 132.

³ Sarruf, *Al-Muqataṭaf*, no. 15: 132; Zaydān, *Tarājim Mashāhīr Ash-Sharq*, 2:164. However, Yūsuf As'ad Dāghir, *Maṣāḍīr Ad-Dirāsa Al-Adabīyya*, vol. 2:132, mentions the following: “The Mutaṣarrif Fu'ād Pasha appointed him as public prosecutor of Mount Lebanon.” Yet we do not know of any such name amongst the governors of Mount Lebanon. It may be an oversight or a typing error.

⁴ Dāghir, *Maṣāḍīr Ad-Dirāsa Al-Adabīyya*, 2:132.

The books I have consulted, for the most part, relate that the Shaykh moved to Istanbul without mention of the reasons. The poet Ṣalāḥ Al-Asīr recounts that the Shaykh was asked to serve as an examiner at the Ministry of Education. In a book Ṣalāḥ had given me, entitled *A'lām al-adab wal-fan* (The Figures of Literature and the Arts) by Adham Al-Jundī, I happened upon two handwritten papers covering the life of Mustafa Al-Asīr, son of Shaykh Yūsuf. The first of these read: “Mustafa Al-Asīr is the third son of the famous late Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Ḥusaynī Al-Asīr. He was born in Beirut in 1856 AD and was educated in the government schools of Beirut and Istanbul, when he and his family were tagging along with their father on his travels. The Shaykh was summoned by the Ottoman government to the capital Istanbul in order to discourage him from leading a campaign aimed at annexing the coastal cities in the province of Beirut to the Mutasarrifate of Mount Lebanon.” I stood with reservation at this information as the Shaykh had mentioned the following in his 600 page manuscript *Majmu' Al-Asīr* (Collection of Al-Asīr):

“The birth of our children: Muḥammad on 9 Shawwal 1263 AH, Aḥmad on 9 Dhu-al-Hijja in the year 1264 AH, Mahmud on 12 Rabi Al-Awwal in the year 1266 AH, Farida on 27 Jumada Ath-Thānī in the year 1268 AH, Mustafa on 8 Jumada Ath-Thānī in the year 1271 AH, and Ḥasan Ḥamid on 20 Sha‘ban in the year 1282 AH.”

It appears, from this, that Mustafa is the fourth son and the fifth child. That is why I have practiced caution with regard to what has been mentioned in these two pieces of paper, where Mustafa is written down as the third child of Shaykh Yūsuf. On the other hand, Khalīl Al-Asīr has recounted the following story: “when my grandfather the Shaykh was the public prosecutor of Mount Lebanon, he discerned the inconvenience felt by the people of Beirut and Mount Lebanon journeying between both regions as well as moving between Mount Lebanon and some areas of the Bekaa. He thus attempted to annex the province of Beirut to Mount Lebanon, which did not rank well with the Ottomans, who then sent the Ottoman Emiri vessel Balik that transported Shaykh Yūsuf from Beirut to Istanbul “under a guard” of state security officers. Arriving in Istanbul, he was detained at the Topkhana prison before, as it happened, Minister of Justice Khairi Bey saw and

recognized him there and instantly commanded that the Shaykh be moved to lodging arrangements corresponding with his standing. The next day Khairi Bey brought the Shaykh to meet the sultan and explained to the latter the importance of the Shaykh, having previously met him in Beirut and known of his esteemed stature. In carrying out the sultan's wishes, Al-Asīr remained in the Ottoman capital and presided over the panel of examiners at the Ministry of Education. Shortly after, Yūsuf summoned his family to Istanbul, where they all lived there for a while.

To quote Laḥd Khāṭir in his book *'Ahd al-Mutaṣarrifīn fī Lubnān* (The Period of the Mutaṣarrifs of Lebanon): “After Yūsuf Bey Karam was exiled from Lebanon in 1867, Dawūd Pasha was able to establish his full authority over Mount Lebanon. He had imagined he would rule as Mutaṣarrif of Mount Lebanon for the rest of his life, and so his arrogance drove him to embarrass the Porte by leading the efforts to expand the territory of the Mutaṣarrifiyya to include Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon, Wādī Taym, Bekaa and Baalbek. To add salt to the injury, a petition signed by the people of Sidon was sent to the sultan requesting annexation to Lebanon [...] upon which he was recalled from his position back to Istanbul in 1868.”¹

Based on the above, it does not seem farfetched that Al-Asīr may have been behind the petition, especially, as we know, that he was public prosecutor in Mount Lebanon under Dawūd Pasha. This substantiates the possibility that the Ottoman Empire must have seen in Al-Asīr an ally to Dawūd Pasha in enlarging the territory of Mount Lebanon and thus had him exiled to Istanbul, as was his master.

It is important to note that this is not an indication of Al-Asīr's interest in an independent Lebanon as he was devoted to the Ottoman state. However, his ambitions in back then seemed only focused on amending the borders of Mount Lebanon, assuming the aforementioned account to be accurate.

¹ Khāṭir Laḥd, *'Ahd al-Mutaṣarrifīn fī Lubnān, 1861-1918*, 14 (Beirut: Lebanese University Publications, (Qism Ad-Dirāsāt al-Tārīkhiyya, 1968), 24.

If he had gone to Istanbul under the circumstances mentioned above, then he must have arrived there in 1868 AD having given up his position of public prosecutor of Mount Lebanon. What did Shaykh Yūsuf do in Istanbul? He chaired the panel of examiners at the Ministry of Education.¹ He also became an instructor in the Arabic language at the Dar Al-Mu‘allimīn Al-Kubra (the Higher Normal School).² During his time in the Ottoman capital, he was in close contact with its notables and scholars, some of whom benefitted from his knowledge such as Grand Vizier Rushdī Pasha Sharawānī, Minister of Education Aḥmad Jawdat Pasha, Chief Clerk of the State Legislative Council, Waṣfī Effendī, and Chairman of the Council of Education Dhīhnī Efendī, and French Ambassador Monsieur Bourée.³ He was highly revered amongst the Ottoman political elite in Istanbul, to the extent that their relationship with him was, in every sense of the word, akin to student and teacher. It is said that he was offered a high-level position with a high salary and the promise of promotion but refused in order to pursue his scholastic ambitions.⁴ According to Adham al-Jundī, “he was invited to serve as member of the State Legislative Council but had turned it down.” It is probable that al-Jundī may have derived this story from Khalīl al-Asīr, who also told me that the Shaykh was also appointed to the State Senate only to resign as he was an independent thinker and was not in agreement with how matters were being conducted there. And he felt that laziness and complacency pervaded the State Legislative Council (lolling place) while he enjoyed serious work, thus he declined to accept the offer despite the tempting salary.

Viscount Philippe de Tarrazi states that Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Asīr had written for Al-Jawab newspaper, which was found by Aḥmad Fāris Ash-Shidiaq.⁵ However, I had consulted the microfilms of this newspaper at the American University of Beirut and found no trace of Al-Asīr’s signature.

¹ Luis Shaykhu, *Al-Mashriq*, vol. 12, 1909, 542.

² *Al-Muqataṭaf*, no. 15: 132; Tarazi, *Tārīkh Aṣ-Ṣiḥāfah Al-‘Arabiyya*, 1:137.

³ *Al-Muqataṭaf*, no. 15: 132; Tarrazi, *Tārīkh Aṣ-Ṣiḥāfah Al-‘Arabiyya*, 1:137.

⁴ Zaydān, *Tarājim Mashāhīr Ash-Sharq*, 2:165.

⁵ Tarrazi, *Tārīkh Aṣ-Ṣiḥāfah al-‘Arabiyya*, 1:137.

Al-Asīr did not stay long in Istanbul as he was averse to its cold weather and so he returned to Beirut. However, his return to Beirut was held over by the Minister of Education, who, at the time, declined to accept his resignation in hopes of keeping him in his position due to his erudition and the great acclaim gained by the books he had corrected.¹ But the Shaykh's insistence was stronger, and he returned to Beirut.

In Beirut, al-Asīr devoted his time to researching and writing about jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the ordained quotas (*farā'id*).² He also edited in most of the city's newspapers at the time. He was the editor-in-chief of *Thamarāt Al-Funūn* (The Fruits of the Arts) newspaper,³ which belonged to the eponymous society and was published by 'Abd al-Qādir Qabbānī. He was also an editor in Lebanon's official newspaper, *Lubnān*,⁴ which was founded by Lebanon's first Mutaṣarrif Dawūd Pasha. He was also, for a period of time, the editor-in-chief of *Lisān-ul-Ḥāl* (Voice of the Present)⁵ newspaper, which was established by Khalīl Sarkis in Beirut in 1877 AD.

Not only did Al-Asīr write in newspapers but also went on to teach in the schools of Greater Beirut and elsewhere. He taught jurisprudence and Ottoman law for two years at the Maronite Sagesse School, which was established by Archbishop Yūsuf Dibs. He also taught at the American school at 'Abayh, which was founded in 1846 AD by Dr. Cornelius Van Dyck with the help of the scholar Butrus al-Bustani. He also joined the teaching establishment at the National School, which al-Bustānī had established in the year 1863 AD. He also taught at the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut⁶ and the Greek Orthodox school, the Three Doctors.⁷

We would have loved to learn more about the dates when al-Asīr taught at these schools and what lessons he had given. But the sources and references at hand impart so little.

¹ Zaydān, *Tarājim Mashāhīr al-Sharq*, 2:165.

² Shaykhu, *Al-Mashriq*, 12:542.

³ Tarrāzi, *Tārīkh Aṣ-Ṣiḥāfah Al-'Arabiyya*, 1:138.

⁴ Tarrāzi, 1:135.

⁵ Tarrāzi, 1:138.

⁶ Dāghir, *Maṣāḍir Ad-Dirasa Al-Adabiyya*, 2:132.

⁷ Tarrāzi, *Tārīkh Aṣ-Ṣiḥāfah Al-'Arabiyya*, 1:137.

While he taught grammar at the National School and jurisprudence and legislation at the Sagesse School, he did not disclose the subjects he taught at other establishments. However this ambiguity does not lessen of the Shaykh's significance and value, for he was recognized as a reliable mentor of the Arabic language in general, as well as an authority in resolving jurisprudential issues and clarifying what is obscure.

His Marriage

It is difficult to determine the year in which Shaykh Yūsuf got married. However, in his manuscript *Majmū' Al-Asīr*, in which he discloses on page 600 his children's birthdates and their ages at the time of writing, as previously revealed, al-Asīr mentions that his eldest son, Muḥammad, was 22 at the time of writing (1285 AH). Assuming he did not have children soon after marriage, al-Asīr would have probably wed in the period spanning 1260 AH / 1844 AD and 1262 AH / 1846 AD.

Shaykh Yūsuf first married the daughter of his paternal aunt, Ḥanīfah daughter of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Naqīb al-Ḥusaynī, and together they bore five boys and two girls¹ respectively: Muḥammad 1263 AH / 1847 AD, Aḥmad 1264 AH / 1848 AD, Mahmud 1266 AH / 1850 AD, Mustafa 1271 AH / 1856 AD, Ḥasan Hamid 1282 AH / 1866 AD and Farida 1268 AH / 1852 AD, and Thurayya. He is believed to have also had a son named 'Abd al-Raḥmān, but I do not know whether this child was from his first or second wife. His second wife was Amīna Khurshīd of Tripoli, as mentioned to me by his grandson, Khalīl bin Muḥammad bin Yūsuf. His son Mustafa has authored two books, *Kitāb An-Nibrās wa Ma'āthir Dīn Al-Islam* (The Light and Feats of Islam), and *Tafsīr Al-Alfaz Al-Lughawiyya Al-Wārida fil-Qur'ān* (Linguistic Interpretation of the Words and Terms in the Quran), which is thematically organized in 164 pages according to the suras and was published twice in Beirut without mention of the publication year.

Of his most prominent grandchildren is the poet Ṣalāḥ Al-Asīr, who had a hand in this research as he has revealed some information and supplied me with his grandfather's manuscript *Majmū' Al-Asīr*.

¹ *Al-Muqataf*, no. 15: 132–33.

His Relationship with his Contemporaries

Lebanon was ruled by Prince Bashir II until 1840. During his reign, Ibrahim Pasha Al-Masri visited Syria and was praised by Al-Asūr as we shall see. Al-Asūr was a contemporary of four Mutaṣarrifs (not to mention Omar Pasha the Austrian): Dawūd Pasha (1861 AD – 1868 AD), Franco Pasha (1868 AD – 1873 AD), Rustum Pasha (1873 AD – 1883 AD) and Wāṣā Pasha (1883 AD – 1892 AD). And Sulayman Pasha was the walī of Sidon when Al-Asūr was born, and Buṭrus Al-Bustānī was archbishop of Sidon and Tyre before the latter was exiled to Jerusalem in 1878 AD. Al-Asūr also lived to witness the reigns of the Ottoman sultans ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, ‘Abd al-Ḥamid, and ‘Abd Al-Majid.

Al-Asūr interacted with his contemporaries and many of Lebanon’s greats and notables studied under him. Those who did, towards the end of his life, included Patriarch of Antioch Gregory IV, who was ordained on 18 June 1906.¹ Al-Asūr’s grandson, Khalīl Al-Asūr, told me that he had seen for himself a picture that Patriarch Gregory had given his grandfather and signed in his own handwriting with the following:

To my father, Muḥammad Al-Asūr / you have obliged me the despicable
This picture testifies, and professes / I am a captive of the son of Al-Asūr

The inferior to Almighty God
Patriarch of Antioch and All the East:
Gregorius Haddad the Fourth

He also taught Doctor Martin Hartmann, Professor of Arabic at the School of Oriental Languages in Berlin.² In addition, Khalīl Al-Asūr has mentioned to me that Antwan Shḥaybir, who taught at Kiftin School for some time, studied under the Shaykh.

Shaykh Al-Asūr was also involved with the American missionaries and translated a large number of religious hymns derived from the psalms and scriptures in the Bible, all of

¹ Shākir Khoury, *Majma‘ Al-Masarrāt*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Maṭba‘at al-Ijtihād, 1908), 624.

² Tarrazī, *Tārīkh Aṣ-Ṣiḥāfah al-‘Arabiyya*, 1:138.

which were printed and chanted in Protestant churches. [...] He had also taught some Americans the Arabic language, such as Doctor Cornelius Van Dyck, and Doctor Eli Smith, who moved the American printing press from Malta to Beirut in 1834 and commenced translation of the Bible into modern Arabic but passed away in 1857 before completing this task. Thus, it was taken over by Doctor Van Dyck with help from the Shaykh, who corrected and edited the translations.

The Shaykh had remained in touch with some Azharī scholars, notably Shaykh Muḥammad At-Tandatawi, who was impressed by Al-Asīr’s work and composed a poem praising his virtues while he was in Saint Petersburg.¹ In turn Al-Asīr replied with the following poem:

My beloved teacher who utters sagacity / and goodwill exudes and elegant eloquence
Muḥammad, O luminary scholar worthy / of deference and grace through all times
His love has exalted me and bestowed me / with kindness and a blind eye to my faults
His poem for me is a touching avowal / to which priests kneel and Sahban prostrates²

He also exchanged epistles (poems or prose in the form of a letter) with authors of his time and enjoyed a deep friendship with Shaykh Ibrahim Al-Ahdab to the extent that Mārūn ‘Abbūd said of them in his smooth style: “they were two friends who lived their lives as if they had an appointment together, for when Al-Asīr passed, Al-Ahdab followed him only a few months after [...]”³ He was on good terms with Shaykh Aḥmad Fāris Ash-Shidyāq, whom Al-Asīr defended fervently against other rival linguists and protected him from their cast arrows “and would bounce them back at their archers.” He also enjoyed a friendship with Shaykh Nāṣif Al-Yāzījī while he was alive.

¹ Zaydān, *Tarājim Mashahir Ash-Sharq*, 2:164.

² Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Asīr, *ad-Diwān* (Beirut, 1306 AH), 25–26. “And Sahban (died 674 AD), from the tribe of Bahila, was an example of an eloquent orator and that is how this saying came about: “more eloquent than Sahban Wa’il.”

³ Marun ‘Abbud, *Ruwwad An-Nahda Al-Haditha* (Beirut: Dar Al-‘Ilm lil-Malayin, 1952), 72.

His Death

Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Asīr passed away in Beirut at an age of seventy seven lunar years on the night of Friday the 6th of Rabī‘ Ath-Thānī 1307 AH¹, corresponding to 28 November 1889 AD and seventy four years of age.² The day after his death, or on Saturday 29 November, his body was washed and enshrouded, and prayed upon at the Great ‘Umari Mosque. Notables and vast multitudes of people attended his funeral, and he was buried in the Bashūrah cemetery in Beirut.

No sooner did news of his passing spread, and the people of Beirut and the rest of the Levant regretted his loss, newspapers across Lebanon and the Arab world eulogized al-Asīr and so did poets and authors. His close friend, Ibrahim al-Ahdab, gathered these poems and tributes in a book entitled Eulogies for Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asīr (Marāthī Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asīr) and published in Beirut as a medium sized book consisting of forty-one pages. The three introductory pages were al-Ahdab’s tribute to al-Asīr, in which he said: “And so, the academic world has been hit by the greatest calamity [...] as it was dealt a heavy blow [...] the world has lost the scholar and ingenious wordsmith [...] Shaykh Yūsuf Al-Asīr [...] and the garden of scholars was split.³ For the spokesman (*Lisān-ul-Hāl*) laments his loss as does the fruits of his arts (*Thamarāt Al-Funūn*), it wanders the vast lands with the harvest (*Jawā’ib*) of his treasures that have filled the eyes with meadows of knowledge (*rawd* - plural of meadows - for *Rawdat Al-Ma‘ārif*). And clarity (*Ṣafā*) was replaced with darkness, in spite of the clarity in its monody. And the avant-gardist (*Ar-Rā’id*) returned disappointed without a drop to quench the thirst. And tears of sorrow have flown in streams into the mouth of Beirut. And the bearer of glad tidings (*Al-Bashīr*) found bad tidings in his loss, for his deeds were cherished, and to him Egypt bespoke Cairo, and the pyramids (*Al-Ahram*) were given a burden heavy to bear until they became weary-eyed. And the selection (*Al-Muqtaṭaf*) had unearthed what it had

¹ *Al-Muqtaṭaf*, no. 15:(n.d.), 133.

² While I was going through the book by Edward Abbott Van Dyck, *Iktifā’ Al-Qanū’ bi ma Huwa Maṭbū’*, ed. Muḥammad Alī Al-Babalāwī (Miṣr: al-Hilāl, 1896), I found on page 300 that Shaykh Yūsuf passed away in 1885 in contradiction with all other sources. This could be a typing mistake or a slip because there is no doubt about the year of his death.

³ And *ṣāḥa ash-shay’ yuṣawwihuhu ṣawḥan shaqqahu* means to be split and to get cracked. Butrus al-Bustānī, *Muḥīt-ul-Muḥīt: Qamūs Muṭawwal lil-Lughā Al-‘Arabīyya* (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1987), 523.

selected from his treasures... And the Muqattam Mountain (*Al-Muqattam*) became flattened upon learning of his decease. And in the name of all truths (*Al-Haqa'iq*), it is a true right to eulogize him. And the balance (*Al-Mizan*) has for him held a balanced metre, neither limited nor forbidden [...].”¹ Al-Ahdab arranged this book into an introduction, written by Shaykh Abu al-Ḥasan Qasim Al-Kasti, and two other parts, of which the first is a collection of poems dedicated to him and the second is a collection of elegies printed in newspapers. The introductory chapter is a reflection on Al-Asīr’s life, and in these verses Al-Kasti mourns him:

You, who the Lord invited to the house of victory / God suffices, delight with noble
dignity...

If all people were like you, nevermore will be / the infernal regions and their good names
untarnished in history...²

The most beautiful lament came from his friend Shaykh Ibrahim Al-Ahdab:

The scholastic world has been dealt a blow / the loss of all losses, the most shattering
This Yūsuf has scared off the misfortunes of time / that Jacob the trickster was left in
deep lamenting

The pockets of their hearts were emptied by this crime / that scholars became drowned in
deep hurting³

Among those who have also eulogized him in poetry and mentioned in the book by Al-Ahdab: Mufti of Jaffa Alī Abu Al-Mawahib Ad-Dajjānī, Shaykh Muṣṭafā Najā, and Ḥasan Bayhum who said:

The prisoner of piety has now this life departed / left us heartbroken and within us sorrow
What knowledge upon us he has imparted / What grace have many sought him to borrow
God has bestowed him with the highest mercy: / Behold! you enter the glory of the
eternal world tomorrow¹

¹ Ibrahim Al-Ahdab, *Al-Marathi (Marathi Shaykh Yūsuf al-Asīr)*:1–2. The words between quotation marks are the names of periodicals that were published in Beirut, Cairo and Istanbul and Shaykh Al-Asīr used to be an editor in several of them.

² Al-Marathi, 7.

³ Al-Marathi, 16.

And Mohammed Lababīdī enumerates his scholarly attributes:

The scholar of all scholars, one of a kind / in grammar, inflection and recitation
And words and their morphology and etymology, / Ḥadīth, jurisprudence and
monotheism

As for prosody, he became immersed / in vast and infinite seas of rhyme and alliteration

And Shaykh Muḥammad Al-Kastī refers to his role in education:

O time, how you have orphaned schools with his passing /that the congregation of
scholars has become dispersed²

He was also eulogized by Shaykh Ibrahim Al-Majdhūb, Shaykh ‘Abd-ur-Raḥmān As-Salām, Khiyam Marji ‘yūn’s poet Muḥammad Al-Ḥāj Ḥasan ‘Abd-Al-Lah, Fāris Shuqayr, Muḥsin Amīn, Judge of Mount Lebanon’s Court of Appeals Shaykh Sa‘id Hamdan, Raghib ‘Izz-Ud-Din, Muhyi-d-Din Al-Khayyat, Prince Nasīb Irlān, Rāghib Ad-Durzī, Elias Ḥunaykātī, Registrar (or Court Clerk) at the Shūf Court, Aḥmad ‘Umar Al-Khaṭīb from Barjā, Farḥāt Hammādī, Ḥasan Hammādī, Ilyās Jirjis Ash-Shidiāq, Salīm Suj‘ān Abū Yāghī ...

As we have seen in the excerpts from Al-Ahdab’s introductory comments, all newspapers lamented his loss, namely *Aṣ-Ṣafā*, *Al-Laṭā‘if Al-Adabiyya* newspaper, *Jarīdat Beirut Ar-Rasmiyya*, *Thamarat Al-Fanūn*, *Hadīqat Al-Akhhbār* newspaper, *Lisān-ul-Ḥāl* newspaper, *Al-Misbāḥ Al-Munīr*, and *Al-Ahrām*, to mention a few. The region was in a flutter over his loss as he was of high morals and a kind reputation.

His Character and Demeanor

Shaykh Yūsuf was a tall, medium build, dark-skinned, black-haired man with a thick beard.³ His calm and collected countenance was a reflection of his distinguished core. He was insightful, silver-tongued, masterful in poetry and prose.⁴ He was not heavy in the

¹ Al-Marathi, 10.

² Al-Marathi, 12.

³ Zaydān, *Tarājim Mashāhīr Ash-Sharq*, 2:165.

⁴ Shaykhu, *Al-Mashriq*, 12:542.

dourness of scholars, but was rather light-spirited, of pleasant company.¹ He was also very gentle and pious, easy to get along with, ascetic in his lifestyle,² genuine with his promises, and possessed good memory. He was also pedantic having placed his trust in jurisprudence and the Arabic sciences.³

Shaykh Yūsuf was loving of knowledge and supportive of scholars. He was of the Shafi‘ī doctrine and followed in the steps of his predecessors, who held the torch of seeking and spreading knowledge for the greater benefit of mankind. He lived by his faith, steadfast in following the sacraments of religion, not wrapped up in the material world but did not withhold to provide the necessities for his own home. He had a lot of passion for reciting and listening to recitations of the Quran on a daily basis⁴ to the point where he was known to have said that “if we had discovered the Quran in the wilderness, we would never doubt that it was sent from God Almighty.”⁵ He was also known to have been far removed from blind fanaticism.⁶

Owing to his impressive works in the fields of education, journalism, legislation and editing, not to forget the important positions he held, the Ottoman authority endowed him with a monthly pension.⁷ To quote from *Thamarāt Al-Funūn*, a weekly periodical issued every Monday: “Local newspapers have reported that Al-Asīr was the recipient of the honor of an imperial favor benefitting from a monthly pension of five hundred qurush, our gratitude to the Sunni kindness, and the imperial generosity towards scholars.”⁸ However, this blessing was short-lived as the Shaykh passed away on 28 November 1889, and he thus received only one month’s worth of the designated pension.

¹ Abbūd, *Ruwwād-an-Nahḍa al-Ḥadīthah*, 67.

² Zaydān, *Tarājim Mashāhīr Ash-Sharq*, 2:165; Sarkis, “Al-Asīr, (Shaykh) Yūsuf.”

³ Dāghir, *Maṣāḍīr Ad-Dirasa Al-Adabiyya*, 2:123.

⁴ Tarrazi, *Tārīkh Aṣ-Ṣihāfah-l-‘Arabīyya*, 1:138.

⁵ Al-Aḥḍab, *Al-Marāthi*, 5.

⁶ Al-Jundī, *A’lām Al-Adab wa-l-Fan*, 2:325.

⁷ Al-Aḥḍab, *Al-Marāthi*, 41, quoted in *Al-Ahram* newspaper.

⁸ *Thamarāt Al-Funūn*, no. 753 (14 October 1886). It was under the direction of ‘Abd-ul-Qāḍir Qabbānī.