

For Immediate Release



AUB academics awarded \$850,000 grant for project on the Syriac writers of Qatar in the 7th century AD

Beirut, Lebanon- 31/05/2011 - AUB history professor Abdulrahim Abu-Husayn and Syriac and Arabic professor Mario Kozah have recently been awarded a grant of \$850,000 by the Qatar National Research Fund (QNRF) under its National Priorities Research Program (NPRP). The grant was awarded to a three-year project in partnership with Qatar University (Professors Saif Al-Murikhi and Haya Al Thani) entitled "The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the 7th century CE [AD]" which was submitted last year and which was vetted and anonymously reviewed by at least four qualified international experts in the field.

Researchers in the relatively obscure field of Syriac studies have long known of the existence of at least seven Syriac writers from the 7th century AD who were born and educated in Beth Qatraye (Syriac for Qatar/Region of the Qataris) of which Isaac of Nineveh is considered to be the most influential of all Syriac monastic writers and who continues to exert a strong influence in monastic circles today. Many of the others like Dadisho' of Qatar, Gabriel bar Lipeh of Qatar, Abraham bar Lipeh of Qatar, Gabriel Arya of Qatar, and Ahob of Qatar - all from the 7th century - were important Syriac writers on spirituality and commentators or exegetes within the Nestorian Church of the East. These writers, who all originated in Qatar and were educated there, reveal the presence of an important center of education that rivaled the other better-known centers such as the School of Nisibis or the School of Edessa. The Syriac writers of Qatar themselves produced some of the best and most sophisticated writing to be found in all Syriac literature.

The ascription 'Qatraya' (Syriac for Qatari/of Qatar) is found added to the names of all of the writers above in the ancient Syriac manuscripts from the 7th - 10th centuries AD now to be found in the British Library, Paris Bibliotheque Nationale, Vatican Library, and Selly Oak Birmingham. In addition, the name Beth Qatraye (Syriac for Land of the Qataris) was used by the Syriac speaking communities who lived there to refer to the whole region of what is now Qatar and Bahrain and the adjacent coast of Arabia. The name Beth Qatraye along with the place names of specific locations within this specific region are to be found in five letters written by Ishoyahb III, the Patriarch of the Church of the East from 650-658 AD, to the church authorities, priests, monks, and lay people of Beth Qatraye. It would seem that the Syriac community in Beth Qatraye were behaving independently of the authorities in Fars and Seleuca-Ctesiphon (in modern day Iraq) to the dismay of the Patriarch.

According to the AUB professors, identifying scholarly communities in the Arabian peninsula that have actively shaped the production of knowledge in the 7th century across the region (including Syria and Mesopotamia) is bound to encourage scholars to rethink the ways in which the field is constructed and defined. Highlighting the contributions of the Syriac writers from

Qatar will thus shape the field of Syriac studies, but also the wider field of Middle Eastern Studies. It will align the rich heritage of pre-Islamic Arabia (especially the Arabic poetic tradition) with other voices, speaking different languages and producing different knowledge, yet sharing the same or adjacent territory. This will create crossings in the cultural and historical studies of Syriac and Arabic, pre-Islamic Arabia and Byzantium. It will also highlight the peninsula's role in producing and contributing to intellectual debates at the time, showing a diversity of writings and ideas with wide ranging effects, emerging from and going back and forth between the Arabian Peninsula and the surrounding empires.

"The importance of this project lies in its attempt to identify an educational environment and cultural movement that has been hitherto unexplored in any systematic fashion," said one of the reviewers of the work. "Identifying Qatar as a vibrant site of cultural production in the 7th century is important because it offers new centers of learning that shift the emphasis from the traditional centers of the time, namely Syria and Mesopotamia. Isaac of Nineveh, who was thought to be from Mesopotamia, given his name, is in fact from Qatar and the product of this vibrant cultural environment. This new information will complicate the structure of "center and periphery" of learning, drawing the Arabian peninsula during that time as a key player in the cultural production beyond its borders. Highlighting the role of Syriac authors from Qatar thus serves to enrich the cultural map of the Middle East during that time. Collecting and translating the work of the Syriac authors from Qatar is an important project."

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of more than 7,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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