“Charles Dana and the game of ‘American’ relief in WWI Lebanon”

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In a 1918 letter to the secretaries of the Foreign Board of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUSA), Charles A. Dana, the Secretary of the American Mission Press (Beirut) and Treasurer of the Syrian Station wrote: ‘I am sorry to have to report to you my absence from my post of duty, but I can assure you...that I am carrying on my work...of supplying the Mission with necessary funds.’ A year later, Dana revealed that his absence was due to his arrest and detention by the Turkish government and reflected that ‘it seems difficult at times to reconcile some of my actions with missionary work, because during the time when we were under the Turkish regime, it was mostly a game of deception’. This ‘game of deception’ that Dana played pertained to his (possibly dubious) acquisition of hard currency to pay the expenses of the Syrian Mission during the WWI. This included a relief effort whereby Syrian residents of the Mahjar placed money orders to the Foreign Board in New York that were channeled through Dana and the American Press for distribution to relatives in Syria-Palestine. In pursuing this game, Dana and the other workers of the Mission Press created a system of relief that paralleled, but was distinct from that operated by his colleagues with the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR). In so doing, Dana’s ‘game’ reveals the heterogeneous nature of ‘America’ and ‘American mission/relief work’ during the war years. The aim of this paper is to illuminate the manifold and sometimes conflicting definitions of ‘American’ that encompasses the transnational history of US-Middle East encounters. The story of Charles Dana and his work in facilitating remittances through the Mission Press provides a microhistorical view onto the divergent articulations of the American identity asserted by missionaries in Ottoman Beirut. Using primary sources found at the Near East School of Theology (NEST) archives and the memoir of Dana’s niece, Margaret McGilvary (who also worked at the Press), this paper will compare the ‘American’ identity performed by Dana and the American Press, to the ‘modern missionary work’ of ACASR, as well as of fellow missionary George A. Ford in Sidon. As these individuals/institutions presented divergent definitions of ‘American relief’ to American and Syria audiences in the United States/Mahjar (North and South America) and the Middle East region, this paper will highlight the global playground for these identity negotiations. It will also consider the impact of religion and gender, specifically masculinity, as contending factors in this negotiation processes, arguing that the divergent channels of ‘American relief/mission work’ were performances of differing interpretations of the national/religious/gendered self.