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Continuity and Change in Syrian Political Life: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

PHILIP S. KHOURY

HISTORIANS HAVE DEMONSTRATED a penchant for tracking the forces of change stemming from the political and socioeconomic upheavals that have punctuated the history of the Middle East in the past two hundred years. The effects of the Ottoman reformation (or Tanzimat), the European industrial revolution, World War I, and the collapse of four centuries of Ottoman rule followed by the imposition of European control over much of the Arab Middle East have steered historians in this direction. As a consequence, they have shown considerably less interest in looking for elements of continuity and stability among the many transformations experienced by the region. This benign neglect holds true for historians of the Middle East regardless of the methodologies and frameworks of analysis they apply to their subjects. Indeed, the social and economic historian is no different from today's less-fashionable political historian and the liberal historian no different from the conservative. The study of urban political culture in Syria in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a case in point.

I will argue that political culture in Syria did not change abruptly with the break-up of the Ottoman empire and the imposition of European rule at the end of World War I. Rather, the exercise of political power followed what can be called the Ottoman model for nearly four decades after the demise of the empire. In order to support this contention, three periods of modern Syrian history need to be examined. In the first period, from the mid-nineteenth century until the early twentieth, a political culture in the towns of Syria arose that was intimately tied to the emergence of a single political elite. During this time, the urban elites developed a distinct social character and political role. The second period begins with the collapse of the Ottoman empire and the introduction of French rule and ends with World War II and France's abandonment of Syria. A remarkable degree of continuity in Syrian urban political culture and in the character of the Syrian elite's political role distinguished this era, despite the major upheavals that foreshadowed and characterized the interwar years. The third period corresponds to the early years of Syrian independence. Only then did Syrian political culture begin to assume radically new forms and dimensions, but even this process took nearly two decades to unfold.

This essay is adapted, with permission, from the author's article "Syrian Political Culture: A Historical Perspective," in Richard T. Antoun and Donald Quataert, eds., *Syria: Society, Culture, and Polity* (Albany, N.Y., 1991).

ALTHOUGH MY UNITS OF ANALYSIS in this essay are the major interior towns of what eventually came to be known as the Syrian Arab Republic, a familiar political culture existed throughout the eastern Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire, in Palestine and along the coast of what is today Lebanon. This political culture was distinctly urban and was shaped by a mixture of Ottoman administrative practices, local Arab traditions, and European intellectual and material influences. In Syria's case, independent rural politics on anything more than a local scale began in the post-World War II era, when the rural peoples, especially the compact religious minorities on the Syrian periphery—Alawis in the rugged mountain districts of northwestern Syria and Druzes in the inhospitable hills southeast of Damascus—began their entrance onto the wider stage of national politics.¹

The political configuration of the larger Syrian towns during the Ottoman period suggests two areas of political power: one was external in the guise of the Ottoman state, with its imperial capital at Istanbul, and included the provincial governors and imperial troops; the other was internal, filled by local groups possessing varying degrees of independent social and political influence and acting as intermediaries between the state and the urban populace. The Turkish-speaking governors sent out from Istanbul often were not familiar with the Arabic language and local customs and usually did not have sufficient military backing to exercise direct control in the provinces. Thus they had to rely on those local forces with independent influence in society. This Ottoman dependence on local hierarchies of power allowed a particular type of politics to emerge in the Arab provinces, which Albert Hourani has called a "politics of notables."² In some important ways, this mode of urban politics was operative not only in Ottoman times,³ but also before, during the medieval period, and after, in the interwar

¹ Raymond A. Hinnebusch has written that "for the great mass of the peasantry, government remained a threatening power to be evaded or submitted to, not a system on which demands could be made or support given. Until peasants produced their own leadership from educated sons of the village, rural politics was not to take on a significant sustained class dimension, and national politics remained an urban game largely isolated from village needs and wishes"; *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria: Army, Party, and Peasant* (Boulder, Colo., 1990), 45. There were complex factors that inhibited the development of independent rural politics before World War II, among them the divisive geography and precarious ecology of agrarian Syria, the continuous pull of primordial loyalties to tribe, clan, village, sect and ethnic group, the concentration of agricultural land in the hands of a small number of powerful families resident in the towns, and the consequent organization of politics along clientelist lines. Although socially and economically diverse, the bulk of peasant society found itself squeezed and ultimately dominated by Syria's urban elites from one side and by nomadic pastoralists from the other. On the structure of rural society in Syria and the character of peasant movements, see Jacques Weulersse, *Paysans de Syrie et du Proche-Orient* (Paris, 1946); 'Abdullah Hanna, *al-Qadiyya al-zira'iyya wa'l-harakat al-fallahiyya fi suriyya wa lubnan (1820–1920)*, vol. 1. (Beirut, 1975); and *al-Qadiyya al-zira'iyya wa'l-harakat al-fallahiyya fi suriyya wa lubnan (1920–1945)*, vol. 2. (Beirut, 1978); Jean Hannyoy, "Le Monde rural avant les réformes," in André Raymond, ed., *La Syrie d'aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1980), 273–95.

² Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables," in William R. Polk and Richard L. Chambers, eds., *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1968), 41–68. The year before Hourani's seminal article was published, Ira M. Lapidus produced *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), which has also offered historians important and lasting instruction on how to comprehend urban politics at the macro and micro levels in the eastern Arab-Islamic lands. Written independently of one another and for different historical periods, both studies posit that local politics in the major towns and in the countryside around them were dominated by groups of notables in competition with one another for power and influence.

³ See Abdul-Karim Rafeq, *The Province of Damascus, 1723–1783* (Beirut, 1966); Moshe Ma'oz, *Ottoman Reform in Syria and Palestine, 1840–1861: The Impact of the Tanzimat on Politics and Society*

years of the twentieth century, and even in the years immediately following World War II.⁴

Historians have used versions of the notables paradigm⁵ to study the political configuration of the major towns, the rival factions that dominated them, the relations between notables and foreign rulers, and the role of notables (*a'yan*) in provincial administration, land control, production and trade, and religious organizations, including the Sufi (mystical) orders.⁶ The notables paradigm has been especially valuable in studying the emergence of Arab nationalism in Syria,

(London, 1968); Max L. Gross, "Ottoman Rule in the Province of Damascus, 1860–1909" (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 1979); Karl K. Barbir, *Ottoman Rule in Damascus, 1708–1758* (Princeton, N.J., 1980); Margaret Lee Meriwether, "The Notable Families of Aleppo, 1770–1830: Networks and Social Structure" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1981); Philip S. Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism: The Politics of Damascus, 1860–1920* (Cambridge, 1983); see also Ruth Roded, "Ottoman Service as a Vehicle for the Rise of New Upstarts among the Urban Elite Families of Syria in the Last Decades of Ottoman Rule," in Gabriel R. Warburg and Gad G. Gilbar, eds., *Studies in Islamic History: Contributions in Memory of Gabriel Baer* (Haifa, 1984); Roded, "The Syrian Urban Notables: Elite, Estates, Class?" *Asian and African Studies*, 20 (1986): 375–84; and Roded, "Social Patterns among the Urban Elite of Syria during the Late Ottoman Period, 1876–1918," in David Kushner, ed., *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period: Political, Social and Economic Transformation* (Jerusalem, 1986); Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, *Families in Politics: Damascene Factions and Estates of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Stuttgart, 1985); Abdul-Rahim Abu-Husayn, *Provincial Leaderships in Syria, 1575–1650* (Beirut, 1985); Haim Gerber, *Ottoman Rule in Jerusalem, 1890–1914* (Berlin, 1985); Abraham Marcus, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1989).

⁴ For the medieval period, see Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*; Boaz Shoshan, "The 'Politics of Notables' in Medieval Islam," *Asian and African Studies*, 20 (1986); and R. Stephen Humphreys, "Politics and Architectural Patronage in Ayyubid Damascus, 1193–1260," in C. E. Bosworth and A. L. Udovitch, eds., *The Islamic World from Classical to Modern Times: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lewis* (Princeton, N.J., 1988). On the interwar years, see Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton, 1987). For the postwar period, see Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945–1958* (London, 1965); and C. Ernest Dawn, "Ottoman Affinities of 20th Century Regimes in Syria," in Kushner, *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period*.

⁵ See Philip S. Khoury, "The Urban Notables Paradigm Revisited," *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 55–56 (1990–91): 215–28. Historians working with the notables paradigm for Ottoman Syria have relied on local Arabic chronicles, biographical dictionaries, and, most important, provincial Islamic law (*shari'a*) court registers. These have been supplemented by published Ottoman yearbooks (*salname*) and a variety of European consular archives and travelogues. Few, however, have made significant use of the Ottoman imperial archives in Istanbul to study the notables of geographic Syria; therefore, the view from the imperial capital remains largely a mystery. Two instructive articles on the uses of the law court registers are Abdul-Karim Rafeq, "The Law-Court Registers and Their Importance for a Socio-Economic and Urban Study of Ottoman Syria," in Dominique Chevallier, ed., *L'Espace social de la ville arabe* (Paris, 1979), 51–58; James A. Reilly, "Shari'a Court Registers and Land Tenure around Nineteenth-Century Damascus," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 21 (1987): 155–69.

⁶ See Schatkowski Schilcher, *Families in Politics*; Roded, "Ottoman Service as a Vehicle for the Rise of New Upstarts"; Ramez G. Tomeh, "Landowners and Political Power in Damascus, 1858–1958" (Master's thesis, American University of Beirut, 1977); Bu 'Ali Yasin, *Hikayat al-ard wa'l-fallah al-suri, 1858–1979* (Beirut, 1979); Wajih al-Kawtharani, *Bilad al-Sham, al-sukkan, al-iqtisad wa'l-siyasa al-faransiyya fi matla' al-qarn al-'ishrin: qira'a fi'l withaq* (Beirut, 1980); Abdul-Karim Rafeq, "Economic Relations between Damascus and the Dependent Countryside," in A. L. Udovitch, ed., *The Islamic Middle East, 700–1900: Studies in Economic and Social History* (Princeton, N.J., 1981); Antoine Abdel-Nour, *Introduction à l'histoire urbaine de la Syrie ottomane (XVI^e–XVIII^e siècle)* (Beirut, 1982); James A. Reilly, "Origins of Peripheral Capitalism in the Damascus Region, 1830–1914" (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 1987); and Reilly, "Status Groups and Propertyholding in the Damascus Hinterland, 1828–1880," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 21 (1989): 517–39; Bruce Masters, *The Origins of Western Economic Dominance in the Middle East: Mercantilism and the Islamic Economy in Aleppo, 1600–1750* (New York, 1988).

Lebanon, and Palestine and the most important political and intellectual leaders of that movement in its formative stages.⁷

To become and remain viable political actors, notables relied on a variety of vertical linkages both to dependent groups in the wider society below them and to their foreign governors or rulers above them, whether in the provincial capitals of Damascus and Aleppo or in Istanbul. To enhance their strength, notables also formed horizontal alliances, often of a temporary sort, with other notables. Factions of notables competed with one another for influence in society and with their foreign rulers. The material base of the notables' power and influence was frequently rooted in control of land or the land tax, urban real estate, local handicrafts, regional and long-distance trade, and pious trusts (*awqaf*). Some notables belonged to the ranking families of the religious establishment, while others derived power from their control of local military organizations.

If there is one characteristic that helped define the notables, it was their ability to act as intermediaries between government and local society. Political survival required a delicate balancing act. Notables could not appear to oppose the interests of the government, because they risked being deprived of their access to the ruler; nor could they jeopardize the interests of their local clientele, because they risked losing their independent influence and thus their usefulness to the ruler. Access and patronage were the code words of the politics of notables.

It was usual for local notables to defend the social and political order by supporting the government. But there were occasions on which they led movements against the government by mobilizing those popular forces from which they derived their independent influence. Such occasions arose when a particularly strong governor sought to dissolve the compact between himself and the local notables or when a weak governor could no longer maintain the stability that ensured the prosperity of the local leadership. Rarely, however, did urban notables aim to overthrow the system of rule. Rather, their actions were typically intended to preserve the delicate balance between government and society. The important point to emphasize is that the various political and social movements, revolts, and urban insurrections that occurred in Syria in the nineteenth century were more often restorative than revolutionary movements.⁸

⁷ See C. Ernest Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism: Essays on the Origins of Arab Nationalism* (Urbana, 1973); Yehoshua Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918–1929* (London, 1974); Ann Mosely Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917–1939: The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1979); Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism*; Muhammad Y. Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism* (New York, 1988); William L. Cleveland, *The Making of an Arab Nationalist: Ottomanism and Arabism in the Life and Thought of Sati' al-Husri* (Princeton, N.J., 1971); and *Islam against the West: Shakib Arslan and the Campaign for Islamic Nationalism* (Austin, Tex., 1985); Mary C. Wilson, *King Abdullah, Britain and the Making of Jordan* (Cambridge, 1987); and "The Hashemites, the Arab Revolt, and Arab Nationalism," in Rashid Khalidi, et al., eds., *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (New York, 1991); Philip Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement* (New York, 1988).

⁸ Hourani has made the general argument that restoration, not revolution, tended to be the norm at the higher levels of politics in Ottoman times and during the interwar years in Syria. Albert Hourani, "Revolution in the Arab Middle East," in P. J. Vatikiotis, ed., *Revolution in the Middle East, and Other Case Studies* (London, 1972), 65–72. Revolutionary movements, as such, were rare occurrences in this period, whether in the towns or countryside. But compare 'Abdullah Hanna, *al-Qadiyya al-zira'iyya wa'l-harakat al-fallahiyya fi suriyya wa lubnan (1820–1920)*; and *Harakat al-ammah al-dimashqiyya fi'l-qarnayn al-thamin 'ashar wa'l-tasi 'ashar: Numudhaj li-hayat al-mudun fi zill al-'iqta'iyya*

Before the second half of the nineteenth century, urban leaders in Syria may have had similar aims, but they did not form a single sociological type; their social origins and the foundations of their wealth varied, as did their geographic distribution throughout the towns. Thus the sources of their independent influence were also varied. For purposes of discussion, the urban notables can be grouped into three kinds of leaders, differentiated from one another by their status group, the nature of their material resource bases, and their physical location in the towns. There were the leaders of the great Muslim religious families, including members of the *ulama* (those learned in the religious sciences) and the *ashraf* (claimants to descent from the Prophet Muhammad), who were the guardians of urban civilization and Islamic high culture;⁹ secular dignitaries, a category composed of merchants and tax farmers; and the *aghas* (commanders or chiefs) of the local Janissary garrisons.

The leading religious families were mainly concentrated in the ancient quarters of the old walled city, near the cathedral mosque and central bazaar, where they had strong ties to the traditional commercial activities of production and trade. By the later Middle Ages, the great religious families were often among the most prominent commercial families; hence their wealth came not only from their control of pious trusts but also from their control of production and trade, and, by the eighteenth century, from hereditary tax farms (*malikane*) around the towns.¹⁰

The secular dignitaries were less easily differentiated from the *ulama* and the *ashraf* in terms of where they resided in the towns, and they were also a much

al-sharqiyya, vol. 1 (Beirut, 1985). Studies of political, socioeconomic, and sectarian unrest in nineteenth-century Syria include Ma'oz, *Ottoman Reform*, 131–40; Schatkowski Schilcher, *Families in Politics*, 87–106; Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, “The Hauran Conflicts of the 1860s: A Chapter in the Rural History of Modern Syria,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 13 (1981): 159–79; and “Violent Confrontations in Rural Syria of the 1880’s–1890’s,” in John Waterbury and Farhad Kazemi, eds., *Peasants and Politics in the Modern Middle East* (Miami, 1991); Herbert L. Bodman, *Political Factions in Aleppo, 1760–1826* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1963); Bruce Masters, “The 1850 Events in Aleppo: An Aftershock of Syria’s Incorporation into the Capitalist World System,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 22 (1990): 3–30. For the interwar period, see Zafer Kassimy, “La Participation des classes populaires aux mouvements nationaux d’indépendance aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles: Syrie,” in Commission Internationale d’Histoire des Mouvements Sociaux et des Structures Sociales, ed., *Mouvements nationaux d’indépendance et classes populaires aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles en Occident et en Orient* (Paris, 1971); David Buchanan McDowall, “The Druze Revolt, 1925–27, and Its Background in the Late Ottoman Period” (B. Litt. dissertation, University of Oxford, 1972); ‘Abdullah Hanna, *al-Haraka al-‘ummaliyya fi suriyya wa lubnan 1900–1945* (Damascus, 1973); and *al-Qadiyya al-zira’iyya wa’l-harakat al-fallahiiyya fi suriyya wa lubnan (1920–1945)*, vol. 2 (Beirut, 1978); Edmond Rabbath, “L’Insurrection syrienne de 1925–1927,” *Revue historique*, 542 (avril–juin 1982): 405–47; Philip S. Khoury, “A Reinterpretation of the Origins and Aims of the Great Syrian Revolt, 1925–1927,” in George N. Atiyeh and Ibrahim M. Oweiss, eds., *Arab Civilization: Challenges and Responses* (Albany, N.Y., 1988), 241–71; Abdul-Karim Rafeq, “Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft und politische Macht in Syrien 1918–1925,” in Linda Schatkowski Schilcher and Claus Scharf, eds., *Der Nahe Osten in der Zwischenkriegszeit 1919–1939: Die Interdependenz von Politik, Wirtschaft und Ideologie* (Stuttgart, 1989), 440–81; Peter Sluglett, “Urban Dissidence in Mandatory Syria: Aleppo 1918–1936,” in Kenneth Brown, et al., *Etat, ville et mouvements sociaux au Maghreb et au Moyen-Orient* (Paris, 1989), 301–16.

⁹ Evidence provided by Schatkowski Schilcher (*Families in Politics*) and Roded (“Syrian Urban Notables”) indicates that the *ulama* and the *ashraf* each had their own identifiable status and, it would seem, ties to different economic activities in the towns and their hinterland.

¹⁰ Rafeq, *Province of Damascus*; Barbir, *Ottoman Rule in Damascus*; Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism*; Schilcher Schatkowski, *Families in Politics*.

more amorphous group whose influence depended almost exclusively on wealth, which, as Ruth Roded has suggested, was a “precarious base for prolonged prominence.”¹¹ Unlike the other two status groups, they enjoyed neither inherited prestige nor independent military might.

The *aghās* commanded the local Janissary garrisons, which had permanently lodged on the outskirts of the towns by the eighteenth century. By contrast to the *ulama*, *ashraf*, and secular dignitaries, the *aghās* and their supporters resided outside the town walls in what amounted to suburbs. The Midan quarter to the south of the ancient town of Damascus and Bab al-Nayrab on the south-east of Aleppo were two such suburbs that supported local Janissary garrisons. They were far less homogeneous than the inner city quarters and were filled with a variety of socially marginal in-migrants—uprooted peasants and semi-sedentarized tribes who visited in the winter season, a variety of non-Arab ethnic groups, and the undifferentiated poor, who were akin to Louis Chevalier’s *classes dangereuses*. None of these groups was especially welcome inside the town walls.¹²

The *aghās* derived power in at least two ways: by protecting the marginal and disenfranchised people in their quarters and integrating them into their paramilitary organizations, and by dominating the grain and livestock trade that sustained urban life. *Aghās* could even hold cities ransom by controlling the supply of grain to the towns or by fixing grain prices. In such circumstances, there was bound to be tension between the town center and the suburbs.

The *aghās* were both feared and despised by the more cosmopolitan religious establishment, which considered them socially repugnant and their power dangerous. The *ulama* and *ashraf* often found themselves in a conflictual relationship with the *aghās*, although they might occasionally join forces against the Ottoman governor, especially if he was unusually ruthless or weak. The religious and mercantile leaders in the city center were more committed than the *aghās* to upholding the status quo, for they were the groups with a true stake in urban society. Because they had the most to lose, urban revolt was not their preferred mechanism of correcting the balance of power in the towns when that balance was destabilized, as it so often was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They employed more subtle kinds of pressures to achieve their ends.

It would be incorrect to suggest that before the mid-nineteenth century the notables (and aspiring notables) constituted a “class” in the sense of an economic and social formation that can be defined with respect to property or, more precisely, by its relations to the means of production and to the social position of its constituents. Classes may have existed in the Syrian towns, but “classes” are not meaningful units of analysis in this period; their lifespans were too short because their relations to the means of production and especially to property were

¹¹ Roded, “Syrian Urban Notables,” 180.

¹² See Abdul-Karim Rafeq, “The Social and Economic Structure of Bab al-Musalla (al-Midan), Damascus, 1825–1875,” in George N. Atiyeh and Ibrahim M. Oweiss, eds., *Arab Civilization: Challenges and Responses* (Albany, N.Y., 1988), 272–311; André Raymond, *Grandes villes arabes à l’époque ottomane* (Paris, 1985); Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris pendant la première moitié du XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1958).

generally unstable.¹³ It is more appropriate, therefore, to refer to the different groups of notables as “status groups” before mid-century.¹⁴

Something happened in the second half of the nineteenth century that encouraged these rival urban status groups with independent social and political influence to merge. The elite formed by this merger, and the wider class that supported it, would dominate Syrian political life virtually unchallenged until World War II. The gradual integration of Syria into a European-dominated economy in the nineteenth century and the Ottoman reformation or Tanzimat, which marched hand-in-hand with European expansion into the Middle East, encouraged this merger.¹⁵ One corollary of the Tanzimat, that is, of the increased centralization of Ottoman authority in the provinces of the far-flung empire, was the growth and modernization of the state bureaucracy, which was rationalized and secularized. Another corollary was the modernization of the military. The new Ottoman army may have done poorly on the battlefield against the European powers, but it brought increased control over the Arab provinces after mid-century.

For the religious establishment and the military chiefs in the Syrian towns to survive, they had to adapt to the changing political climate. They could no longer move as freely as they had between the state and society. Istanbul still needed local intermediaries but only those willing to identify themselves with the reinvented Ottoman state and its new policies. To achieve and retain local political influence, a notable now had to move into the modernized state institutions being set up in the provinces. Never before had notables in the towns been obliged to identify their interests so closely with the state or to distance themselves so far from their bases in local society.¹⁶

BUT LOCAL POWER WAS NOT SOLELY A FUNCTION OF acquiring high government office in the provinces. It also became a function of acquiring and retaining property on a large scale. After the mid-nineteenth century, there developed a greater interest in land as a principal source of wealth. This interest had to do with the expansion of the frontiers of cultivation in Syria, the settlement of the tribes on these lands, and, to a certain extent, the commercialization of agriculture.¹⁷ At the same time, the European industrial revolution had caused a gradual deterioration of many traditional Syrian industries in the towns and of the regional trade in local manufactures. Wealthy merchants and other owners of capital

¹³ See Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism*, 3–4.

¹⁴ See Reilly, “Status Groups and Propertyholding,” 517–39. Shatkowski Schilcher prefers to divide the notables into “estates,” of which she has identified seven for Damascus in the nineteenth century; see *Families in Politics*, 107–32.

¹⁵ For the European impact on the economies of the Middle East and, in particular, on Syria, see Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (London, 1981), 57–82, 153–79, 244–72. On the impact of the Tanzimat, see Ma’oz, *Ottoman Reform*; ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Muhammad ‘Awad, *al-Idara al-‘uthmaniyya fi wilaya suriyya, 1864–1914* (Cairo, 1969).

¹⁶ See Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism*, chap. 2.

¹⁷ On the settlement of tribes, see Norman N. Lewis, *Nomads and Settlers in Syria and Jordan, 1800–1980* (Cambridge, 1987). On the commercialization of agriculture, see Owen, *Middle East in the World Economy*, 76–82, 153–72.

began to turn to the land as a more secure investment, and they wanted to own it outright.¹⁸ In response to these economic changes, the Ottoman state created the legal framework for the establishment of private property rights, rights that the state institutionalized in a new land code.¹⁹ Istanbul was conscious of the forces of change around the empire; the Turkish authorities realized they could not halt the gradual spread of private property, but they could regularize the empire's tax collection system on the land. Deeded property meant more efficiently taxed property, and increased tax revenues could help pay for Ottoman modernization schemes.

The gradual acquisition of private property rights by Syria's urban notables in the last decades of the Ottoman empire complemented already existing forms of landholding or land control with which these urban leaders had long been involved: the rights of usufruct (*tasarruf*) to state-owned lands (which were being regularized in this period), hereditary tax-farming, and control of pious trusts.²⁰ Notable families that became well-situated in the provincial government were able to manipulate the new legal system and accumulate significant landholdings, regardless of type. Although notables may not have completely consolidated their position as a class of absentee landowners before World War I, by the 1870s (or even earlier) there developed inextricable ties between large-scale landownership and political power, ties that could be observed as late as the 1950s in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab world.

The merger between the different urban status groups would be sealed by intermarriage. The wealthy, cosmopolitan families of the city center, who were so closely tied to the religious institutions, found it difficult to break with the past and move into the modernized bureaucracy established by the Ottoman state. By contrast, the military chiefs-cum-grain merchants in the peripheral quarters of the towns had less of a stake in the old order; and, powerless to resist a reinvigorated Ottoman state, they began to move deliberately into the administration. But, in towns such as Damascus and Aleppo, the great urban families of the city center possessed one thing that had always been desired by these social

¹⁸ The extent to which the general economy and, in particular, agriculture had become commercialized after mid-century varied from region to region. Reilly, for instance, suggests that "the economy of the Syrian interior was markedly less transformed than was that of the coastal regions, or was transformed considerably later"; "Status Groups and Propertyholding," 531. Also see Carol Frank, "The Transformation of Rural Society: The Syrian Interior, 1830–1930" (D. Phil. dissertation, Oxford University, 1989).

¹⁹ Recent scholarship on the impact of the Ottoman Land Code of 1858 suggests that the new registration system did not encourage the development of a new class of absentee landowners in certain regions of geographic Syria but merely "provided a new idiom for landholding and the registration of property"; Reilly, "Status Groups and Propertyholding," 529. Also see Haim Gerber, *The Social Origins of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, Colo., 1987), chap. 5; and Peter Sluglett and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, "The Application of the 1858 Land Code in Greater Syria: Some Preliminary Observations," in Tarif Khalidi, ed., *Land Tenure and Social Transformation in the Middle East* (Beirut, 1984); Eugene Lawrence Rogan, "Incorporating the Periphery: The Ottoman Extension of Direct Rule over Southeastern Syria (Transjordan), 1867–1914" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1991), 301–07. Notables in Egypt acquired effective control of vast estates decades before the Ottoman Land Code of 1858, which merely codified already existing realities; see Kenneth Cuno, "The Origins of Landownership in Egypt: A Reappraisal," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 12 (1980): 245–75.

²⁰ See Roded, "Syrian Urban Notables," 380–81; Reilly, "Status Groups and Propertyholding," 528–31.

pariahs in the suburbs: a pedigree or high social status. Inter-marriage could bring benefits to both groups: social recognition to the *aghas* and easier access to government and to new economic opportunities that government provided to the religious families, who, incidentally, were already beginning to experience a loss of influence as their traditional monopoly of the legal and educational institutions decayed in the face of creeping administrative modernization and secularization.

Just after the mid-nineteenth century, religious leaders broke with social custom by supporting marriages outside their family networks. By the turn of the twentieth century, the major status groups that provided urban leadership in Syria had crystallized into a single elite with a similar economic base in land and political access through government office.²¹ A fairly stable local upper class emerged in the Syrian towns, as was true of the towns of Palestine and Lebanon—Jerusalem and Jaffa, Beirut and Tripoli.²²

The emerging class of landowning bureaucrats acquired other characteristics that helped to give it shape and continuity long after the collapse of the Ottoman empire. A distinctive Ottoman style of aristocratic behavior arose, which urban notables acquired as they were drawn more completely into the Ottoman system of rule. They traveled the new railroads to Istanbul for an Ottoman professional education in Turkish to prepare them to administer their provinces. They now spoke Turkish politely alongside Arabic. And they adopted the new upper-class dress of the Turkish rulers—the frock coat and the fez. These Ottoman trappings widened the social gap between the notables and the rest of local Arab society. The schools in Istanbul attended by the sons of the Syrian upper class were generally public administration schools, not military academies, which the sons of less well-established families attended.²³ Military careers were thought to be beneath the dignity and social position of the Syrian notables, and they used all kinds of connections to secure exemptions from Ottoman military service. The notables were to carry with them into the twentieth century this hostile attitude toward military service; ultimately, it contributed to their downfall after World War II.

The other characteristic that the notables carried with them into the twentieth century was an inclination to intense political factionalism. Their factionalism was not based on fictive or confessional alignments but on competition between rival, clan-based patronage alliances.²⁴ Linda Shatkowski Schilcher has vividly depicted the competition between the two major factions of notables that dominated urban

²¹ See Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism*, chap. 2; Roded, "Ottoman Service as a Vehicle for the Rise of New Upstarts."

²² See Yehoshua Porath, "The Political Awakening of the Palestinian Arabs and Their Leadership towards the End of the Ottoman Period," in Moshe Ma'oz, ed., *Studies on Palestine during the Ottoman Period* (Jerusalem, 1975), 351–81; Muslih, *Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*; Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Beirut* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983); Michael Johnson, *Class and Client in Beirut: The Sunni Muslim Community and the Lebanese State, 1840–1985* (London, 1986).

²³ See C. Ernest Dawn, "The Rise of Arabism in Syria," *Middle East Journal*, 16 (1962): 145–68; and Michael H. Van Dusen, "Intra- and Inter-Generational Conflict in the Syrian Army" (Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1971).

²⁴ This type of factionalism was prevalent both in Syria and in Palestine; see Salim Tamari, "Factionalism and Class Formation in Recent Palestinian History," in Roger Owen, ed., *Studies in the Economic and Social History of Palestine in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Carbondale, Ill., 1982), 177–202.

politics in Damascus in the first half of the nineteenth century, that is, before the merger. Based in the city center, with ties to the northern and western hinterland, one faction was pro-Ottoman and led by a family of secular dignitaries and former Ottoman provincial governors; the other was localist, incorporated greater numbers of the lower strata than did the city-center faction, and was led by the *aghas* of the Midan quarter, linked to the wheat-producing plains south of Damascus. The political economy of the period provides the key to understanding factionalism and the processes of political mobilization in Damascus. The first faction was supported by merchants engaged in the long-distance trade in luxury goods while the second faction was supported by merchants and artisans involved in local handicraft production and in the grain trade. The ability to adjust to changes and upheavals in the economy determined in large measure the relative strengths of each faction at different times.²⁵ Because the ulama, *ashraf*, secular dignitaries, and *aghas* were hierarchically stratified and thus unable to acquire their own independent political identity, they fell prey to the struggles between the two main competing factions in Damascus.²⁶

Long after the mid-nineteenth century, the intensity of urban political factionalism continued unabated. Members of the urban political elite evidently felt no obligation to close their ranks and clarify their common interests as a class on crucial political issues, because, until World War II, the Syrian urban leadership did not face serious local challenges from further down the social scale to the exclusive position that it had carved out for itself at the summit of politics in Syria.²⁷ It was not until the 1930s that the political elite began to sense a rising danger to its position from restless classes and forces further down in society. Only after Syria gained independence did this danger crystallize into organized movements to depose the veteran elite and break up the social bases of its power. The elite attempted to close ranks then, but it was too late.²⁸

To sum up, by World War I, the major political movements in Syria were led by members of urban notable families who brought to them a certain style of political action and a common way of looking at the world that they had acquired in late Ottoman times. The character of political life could be defined by the relative uniformity and sophistication of political culture in the towns. The characteristics of the local upper class were strikingly similar. In the towns, this class was composed of a socially integrated network of families whose material resource base was built on large-scale landholdings and who furnished the high-ranking bureaucrats and top local politicians as well as cultural and religious leaders.

²⁵ Schatkowski Schilcher, *Families in Politics*, 27–59, *passim*.

²⁶ Bodman has depicted the intensity of factionalism in Aleppo, Syria's other major urban center, in the early nineteenth century; *Political Factions in Aleppo*.

²⁷ The larger implications of the shift in the internal balance of power created by changes in the political economy and by the reinvigoration of Ottoman provincial authority require much more systematic examination, especially the other channels developed to articulate popular interests and demands once the notables began to redefine their traditional role as intermediaries between state and society as their interests became increasingly identified with the Ottoman state. See Khoury, "Urban Notables Revisited," 222, 225–26.

²⁸ In this sense, before the mid-twentieth century, the Syrian urban upper class was a "class in itself" but not a "class for itself." Hanna Batatu makes this very point in the case of Iraq in "Class Analysis and Iraqi Society," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 1 (Summer 1979): 229–40.

Although the great urban families were of mixed ethnic stock—Arab, Turkish, and Kurdish—they were Arabic-speaking and belonged almost exclusively to the Sunni Muslim rite. The bonds of a common language and religion were strong enough to mitigate the potential for ethnic conflict within the class. Its qualities—its nature, style, and political behavior—pointed to a high level of social and cultural homogeneity. In a sense, its domination of urban society was legitimized because a large proportion of the population in the towns—a population that, despite the dramatic changes of the era, was still very much attached to its traditional religious beliefs, cultural practices, and customs—identified the local upper class as the defenders of the faith and guardians of culture as well as the providers of vital goods and services. In brief, a fairly cohesive Sunni Muslim upper class in the towns not only patronized but also represented a predominantly Sunni Muslim population, providing it with its cultural and religious leaders who embodied and articulated its beliefs and enforced its code of moral behavior.²⁹

ONE ADDITIONAL FACTOR CONTRIBUTED TO the Syrian urban leadership's ability to remain at the summit of local politics after the Ottoman empire collapsed: its seizure on the eve of World War I of the ascendant ideology of Arab nationalism. The emergence of Arab nationalism in the early twentieth century initially reflected broad changes in Arab society, especially within the urban upper class of Syria: the rising number of Syrians attending professional schools in Istanbul, increased exposure to European ideas, the accelerated pace of Ottomanization, and, after the ascent of the Young Turks in 1908, growing Turkish insensitivity to local Syrian needs. All these changes encouraged more frequent intercourse among the Arabs, greater interest in Arab history and culture, and the formation of Arab cultural clubs and secret political societies.

Urban notables were the group most essential to the development of Arab nationalism in Syria. The pioneering essays of C. Ernest Dawn have been most helpful in illustrating this point.³⁰ His explanation of the rise of Arab nationalism is in terms of a conflict within the Syrian urban elite. Arab nationalism arose as an opposition movement around the turn of the twentieth century and accelerated after the Young Turk revolution of 1908, when Turkish nationalists began to enforce administrative centralization, streamline the provincial bureaucracy, and replace Arabs with Turks in a number of important administrative posts in the Syrian provinces of the empire. A growing number of Syrian notables lost their jobs and thus their stake in the Ottoman system; it was they who first turned the dormant idea of Arabism into a vehicle for expressing their grievances with Istanbul and for regaining their positions. By contrast, many notables who managed to hold onto their posts supported the empire until the collapse of its authority in the Syrian provinces in 1918. Dawn's analysis has a certain Weberian ring to it: the bureaucratic "haves" versus the "have nots."

²⁹ Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 11–13.

³⁰ Many of Dawn's essays are collected in his 1973 volume, *From Ottomanism to Arabism*, although the most important ones first appeared in the 1960s.

Dawn's fundamental argument—that the emergence of Arab nationalism was a product of conflicts and factionalism within the landowning-bureaucratic class and that before 1918 it appealed only to a small but vocal minority of politically disenfranchised urban notables, mainly from Damascus—proved to be a major watershed in the study of the origins of Arab nationalism. He drastically revised the arguments of an earlier generation of writers who claimed that Syrian and Lebanese Christian intellectuals deserved the lion's share of the credit for the development of Arab nationalism and that its appeal was already widespread before World War I.³¹

Since the appearance of Dawn's revisionist essays and other works inspired by his line of argument,³² historians have brought new sources to bear on the study of the earliest phase of Arab nationalism in Syria that call for some revision of the revisionist thesis first elaborated by Dawn. Whereas Dawn examined the relationship between notables and the rise of Arabism from the vantage point of the Syrian provinces of the Ottoman empire, other historians have begun to treat this relationship from the vantage of Istanbul. Most scholarship, including Dawn's, has relied on a variety of sources that indicate what the Arabs have had to say about the Turks but tell us little about what the Turks had to say about the Arabs. Recently, M. Şükrü Hanioglu has uncovered Turkish documentary evidence that anti-Arab sentiments were present a decade before the Young Turk revolution of 1908 and were directly connected to an emerging Turkish nationalism that conflicted with the empire's reigning ideology of Ottomanism. These documents also indicate that Arabs were already being replaced by Turks in provincial administration as early as the 1890s. Arab notables may have begun to express their hostility to Turkish administrative practices in ethnic terms, of Arabs versus Turks, considerably earlier than Dawn has claimed.³³

Equally important, Rashid Khalidi has provided new evidence indicating that by World War I the Arab nationalist movement attracted a wider and more socially heterogeneous constituency than Dawn and other revisionists have recognized. The growth of the Ottoman state, with a modern army and administration, the spread of modern education through government schools, and the burgeoning of journalism offered new opportunities and created new demands for an expanding modern middle class, whose expectations grew more rapidly than its material interests. This middle class, or what Khalidi calls the "new intelligentsia" of journalists, teachers, professionals, and members of the military, found in Arab nationalism an attractive and useful set of ideas and was able, after 1908, to take part in an expanded political process, as a result of liberal Young

³¹ In particular, see George Antonius, author of the fascinating but flawed *Arab Awakening* (London, 1938). The most penetrating analysis of this book and its author is to be found in Albert Hourani's "The Arab Awakening Forty Years After," in Hourani, *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley, Calif., 1981), 193–215.

³² For example, Cleveland, *Making of an Arab Nationalist*; Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism*, chap. 3.

³³ M. Şükrü Hanioglu, "The Young Turks and the Arabs before the Revolution of 1908," in Khalidi, *Origins of Arab Nationalism*, 31–49. Also see Hasan Kayali, "Arabs and Young Turks: Turkish-Arab Relations in the Second Constitutional Period of the Ottoman Empire (1908–1918)" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1988).

Turk measures.³⁴ This class also provided the Arabist movement with its most radicalized supporters.

Still another historian, David Commins, has suggested that Arabism's appeal before World War I also extended to a group of Muslim religious reformers in Damascus who shared with the Arab nationalist notables "a common political and social agenda." Moreover, while secular urban notables of the landowning-bureaucratic class were engaged in a growing struggle for power and influence with more privileged members of their own class who were identified with Istanbul and the status quo, religious reformers influenced by Islamic modernist trends emanating from Cairo were also engaged in an ideological struggle with high-ranking members of the Muslim religious establishment tied to Istanbul and who supported the status quo.³⁵ That some religious reformers supported Arab nationalist tendencies before World War I is yet another indication of the Arabist movement's appeal to more than an aggrieved group of secular notables with membership in the landowning-bureaucratic class.

By World War I, Arabism was rapidly becoming the ascendant political idea and movement of the times in Syria. Thus, during the war, when many notables began to jump from the sinking Ottoman ship, they grabbed, as they fell, the rope of Arab nationalism. They really had no other choice. It was this rope that enabled them to enter the interwar years with their political and social influence intact.

FOR THE MOST PART, MEN IMPORTANT IN LOCAL AFFAIRS in the last years of the Ottoman empire were the same men, or their sons, who wielded political influence under the French. Political leaders organized their personal support systems in interwar Syria as they had in late Ottoman times. Those with political power continued to be based in the towns and continued to extend that power to the settled countryside and eventually into the semi-nomadic areas.³⁶ The methods urban leaders used to acquire political power and their aims remained constant. Whatever the projected scope of power and whoever the political overlord, the basic building block of political influence in Syria remained the same: urban leadership.

The new system devised to replace Ottoman rule, and the brief post-World War I interregnum when the Hashemite Prince Faisal established an "independent" Syrian government in Damascus, was the mandate system.³⁷ Although this system, as conceived by the European powers after the war, was, in principle, to

³⁴ See Rashid Khalidi, "Social Factors in the Rise of the Arab Movement in Syria," in Said Amir Arjomand, ed., *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam* (Albany, N.Y., 1984), 53–70; and "Ottomanism and Arabism in Syria: A Reassessment," in Khalidi, *Origins of Arab Nationalism*, 50–69.

³⁵ See David Dean Commins, "Religious Reformers and Arabists in Damascus, 1885–1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 18 (November 1986): 420. This argument and related ones are elaborated in his *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (New York, 1990).

³⁶ See Philip S. Khoury, "The Tribal Shaykh, French Tribal Policy, and the Nationalist Movement in Syria between Two World Wars," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 18 (April 1982): 180–93.

³⁷ On the character of politics and economy during the period of Faisal's Arab government, 1918–1920, see Khayriyya Qasimiyya, *al-Hukuma al-'arabiyya fi dimashq bayna 1918–1920* (Cairo, 1971); Malcolm B. Russell, *The First Modern Arab State: Syria under Faysal, 1918–1920* (Minneapolis, 1985); 'Ali Sultan, *Tarikh suriyya, 1918–1920: Hukm Faysal ibn al-Husayn* (Damascus, 1987).

be a benign form of political tutelage of so-called backward societies and not one of direct or indirect colonialism, in fact, the way the French administered Syria (and Lebanon) under mandate,³⁸ and the policies they pursued, had many important features in common with pre-war French colonialism.³⁹

Like any formal colony, Syria was expected to pay its own way financially. It had to foot the bill for the French army of occupation and the French administration. A typical system of colonial finance was imposed. Revenues came from indirect taxes, especially customs revenues, and a high proportion of government expenditure was on security and defense, not agriculture, industry, health, or education. Even though, according to the League of Nations, the overseer of all mandates, France was not to be granted special economic and commercial privileges in Syria, in practice this was disregarded. To complicate matters, the Syrian currency was tied to the French franc, which meant untold misery for the Syrian people in the 1920s and again in the late 1930s, when the franc fluctuated widely.⁴⁰ Syrians on a fixed income suffered most in these circumstances, in particular, bureaucrats and the wider intelligentsia—groups that could cause a future power all kinds of headaches when provoked.

The mandate system was not one of direct rule. The French, like the Turks before them, needed a partner in order to govern. For instance, the League of Nations obliged the mandatory power to prepare the Syrian people for independence; also, France's postwar economy was so fragile that it could no longer afford direct rule abroad. Nonetheless, the character of the new imperial authority differed significantly from the old: it was illegitimate and therefore unstable. France was not recognized to be a legitimate overlord, as the sultan-caliph of the Ottoman empire had been. The Turks had behind them four centuries of rule and the very important component of a common religious tradition.⁴¹ France had the dubious, even in Western eyes, legitimization conferred by the weak and imperfectly conceived mandate system. Because France had historically tried to establish and strengthen its position in the Levant by posing as the protector of the Christians and other religious minorities, the French were doubly distrusted by the Muslim majority in the region.⁴²

³⁸ General accounts of how France became installed in Syria and of French mandate policy can be found in Albert Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay* (London, 1946); Pierre Rondot, "L'Expérience du Mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1918–45)," *Revue de droit international publique*, 3–4 (1948): 387–409; Stephen H. Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (London, 1958); Dhuqan Qarqut, *Tatawwur al-haraka al-wataniyya fi suriyya, 1920–1939* (Beirut, 1975); Safiuddin Joarder, *Syria under the French Mandate: The Early Phase, 1920–27* (Dacca, 1977); André Raymond, "La Syrie, du Royaume Arabe à l'indépendance (1914–1946)," in Raymond, *La Syrie d'aujourd'hui*; Christopher M. Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, *The Climax of French Imperial Expansion 1914–1924* (Stanford, Calif., 1981); Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*. For a recent assessment of French policies in Lebanon during the early years of the mandate, see Meir Zamir, *The Formation of Modern Lebanon* (London, 1985).

³⁹ See Stephen H. Roberts, *The History of French Colonial Policy (1870–1925)* (London, 1929); Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890–1914* (New York, 1961); Henri Brunschwig, *French Colonialism, 1871–1914: Myths and Realities* (New York, 1966).

⁴⁰ Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, chaps. 2–3.

⁴¹ Hourani makes this point in "Revolution in the Arab Middle East."

⁴² See William I. Shorrock, *French Imperialism in the Middle East: The Failure of Policy in Syria and Lebanon, 1900–1914* (Madison, Wis., 1976).

Contributing to this instability of rule was the reality that the French did not have the resources to purchase loyalty on a large scale or to develop the Syrian economy either for the Syrians or for themselves. Syria was not resource-rich. Oil discoveries were insignificant, and cotton production faced a serious setback owing to America's world domination of cotton production and sales and to the development of synthetics in France and elsewhere. French monetary policies had disastrous financial repercussions. The devastation wrought by World War I, the debilitating reorientation forced on the Syrian economy by the partition of geographical Syria and the creation of distinct and separate mandatory regimes, and the continued erosion of Syrian industry by the spread of the European economy helped create and maintain a situation of high unemployment and inflation, which added to the political instability Syria faced in the interwar years.⁴³ Then there were specific French policies that inflamed traditional sectarian conflict by distinctly favoring the minorities and by promoting a series of administratively isolated minority enclaves in the face of local nationalist efforts to unify Syria.⁴⁴ The French threatened the Muslim majority by attempting to take over the organization of their institutions and debasing the symbols of their culture.

Above all, France ruled Syria with its eyes on its North African empire, not a focus that helped make a sound policy. Not only were many policies in Syria judged by their possible effects on North Africa, but the very categories by which Syria was understood were drawn from French experience there. These categories simply did not fit the Syrian situation. Syria under the mandate was not Morocco under the protectorate. The French could not create lasting stability by playing the minorities against the Sunni Muslim majority, the countryside against the towns, and local urban leaders against one another.⁴⁵

The French viewed Arab nationalism as a force that had to be resisted before it spread to North Africa and infected the heart of the French empire. In the early years of the mandate, they thought they could destroy Arab nationalism outright. Their approach differed from the British approach in the Middle East in the sense that the British knew early on that Arab nationalism was a force that would not wither away. Nor did the British think they could crush it outright. Rather, they tried to cultivate Arab nationalism, especially its more moderate leaders, by tying their interests to British interests and by having them contain, with discreet British encouragement, more radical Arab nationalists. Their method was particularly successful in Iraq during the interwar years, though less so in Palestine.⁴⁶

⁴³ See Sa'ïd B. Himadeh, *Monetary and Banking System of Syria* (Beirut, 1935); and Himadeh, ed., *Economic Organization of Syria* (Beirut, 1936); Youssef Khoury, *Prix et monnaie en Syrie* (Nancy, 1943); Badr al-Din al-Siba'i, *Adwa' 'ala al-rasmal al-ajnabi fi suriyya 1850-1958* (Damascus, 1958); 'Abdullah Hanna, *al-Haraka al-'ummaliyya fi suriyya wa lubnan 1900-1945* (Damascus, 1973); M. Abdul-Kader al-Nayal, "Industry and Dependency with Special Reference to Syria: 1920-1957" (Master's thesis, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, 1974); Philip S. Khoury, "The Syrian Independence Movement and the Growth of Economic Nationalism in Damascus," *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies Bulletin*, 14 (1988): 25-36.

⁴⁴ See Itamar Rabinovich, "The Compact Minorities and the Syrian State, 1918-1945," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 14 (1979): 693-712.

⁴⁵ See Edmund Burke III, "A Comparative View of French Native Policy in Morocco and Syria, 1912-1925," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 9 (May 1973): 175-86.

⁴⁶ On British mandate policy in Iraq, see Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq, 1914-1932* (London, 1976);

By the time the French understood the advantages of the British method, it was already too late.

The interwar years in Syria were pivotal in the sense that the country was uncomfortably suspended between four centuries of Ottoman rule and national independence. Nonetheless, politics continued to be organized much as it had been when Istanbul was Syria's overlord. Now, however, Syria's urban leadership was obliged to create a new balance of power between itself and the French. The notables—many of them newly grouped into an array of nationalist organizations and connected from town to town—still sought to rally the active forces of Syrian society behind their respective bloc or party; they still aimed to neutralize all local rivals; and they still wanted to appear as the sole figures of influence whose cooperation the French would have to gain in order to govern Syria.⁴⁷ The French, like the Ottomans before them, had to govern in association with groups from the urban upper classes. But, given the intrinsic illegitimacy of France's position and its penchant for dictatorial policy without regard for the position and interests of the local elite, many urban leaders became forces of opposition. They had to appear more as the spokesmen of the people in the halls of power than as agents of the French. To gain recognition from this strong-minded regime, they not only had to mobilize the popular forces in society but also had to seek broader political alliances than before between the different towns and regions, between the Sunni Muslim majority and the religious and ethnic minorities, and between themselves and like-minded Arab elites in the neighboring Arab territories of Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq.⁴⁸ Hence, they required both a shared dedication of purpose and an ideology to express this new solidarity and drive. Nationalism provided the kind of ideological cohesion and emotional appeal that urban leaders needed to be politically effective between the wars.

Urban leaders shaped nationalism into an instrument by which to create a more desirable balance between themselves and the French. And they molded their movement to suit the particular interests of their class. In their hands, nationalism never was a revolutionary idea with profound social content; rather, it was a means to win French recognition without upsetting the status quo. Nationalism remained a simplistic idea: in its romanticized vision of the Arab past, it appealed

Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, N.J., 1978); Daniel Silverfarb, *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East: A Case Study of Iraq, 1929–1941* (New York, 1986). On British mandate policy in Palestine, see Bernard Wasserstein, *The British in Palestine: The Mandatory Government and the Arab-Jewish Conflict 1917–1929*, 2d edn. (Oxford, 1990); William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945–1951: Arab Nationalism, the United States, and Postwar Imperialism* (Oxford, 1984), 383–572.

⁴⁷ These were the general aims of notables according to Hourani. See his "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables."

⁴⁸ Recently, Daniel Pipes has made the case in *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition* (New York, 1990) that Syrian nationalists were much more interested in unifying "Greater Syria," which comprises what is today Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel and the Occupied Territories, than in some wider pan-Arab unity. Indeed, some nationalists leaned in this direction, but, for the period of the French mandate, their influence within the overall Syrian independence movement was relatively small. Radical pan-Arabists posed the biggest challenge to the main nationalist leadership in interwar Syria, the National Bloc, and their interests ranged beyond "Greater Syria" to include Iraq, where these radicals had strong connections with like-minded Iraqi pan-Arabists. See Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, chap. 15, *passim*.

to the hearts and minds of a broad section of Syrian society. It was an attractive and compelling ideology, more so because it was able to capitalize on Islam's political misfortunes by absorbing the important component of religious solidarity. The very language of this brand of nationalism indicated its class foundations. Apart from the aim of independence, interwar nationalism incorporated the liberal bourgeois language of constitutionalism, parliamentary forms, and personal freedoms.⁴⁹ Hardly a word was heard about economic and social justice—the last thing the nationalist landowners, still able to collect their generous rents from the ground, were interested in discussing.

Local politics was played out in the Syrian towns, where patronage systems cut through and deflected horizontal, class-based politics.⁵⁰ For much of the interwar era, nationalist leaders concentrated on mobilizing merchants, popular religious leaders, quarter bosses, and the urban crowd in their respective towns on an intermittent basis against the mandate authorities. However, the character of patronage also began to change in the 1930s, both in class and spatial terms. The base of the nationalist movement gradually shifted away from the popular classes in the old quarters, where religious chiefs and local gang leaders had traditionally mobilized the street; it shifted toward the new institutions such as the modern secondary schools, the university, the modern professional societies of lawyers, doctors, and engineers, the emerging scouting and sporting clubs and paramilitary organizations, and the infant trade unions, located in the newer, modern districts of the towns where many notables had also begun to relocate their residences in this period. Although this transition was by no means complete at the end of the mandate, by the late 1930s it was clearly irreversible.

For the political leadership, nationalism was certainly a useful instrument by which to mobilize forces in order to convince the French to bargain with them. But it also had the potential to alienate the French completely and destroy the delicate balance between French rule and the nationalists. Thus when the local leadership appealed to nationalism and behind it to religious solidarity, they had to temper their appeal by acts of “political prudence.”⁵¹ In fact, nationalists preferred to mobilize urban forces on a temporary basis, that is, only when these forces could be useful to the elite's specific short-term aims. Mass mobilization on anything like a permanent basis was something to be avoided at all cost. At times, the elite feared mobilizing the streets, the mosques, and the schoolyards even more than they feared the French. Mass mobilization could get out of control and backfire in the face of the nationalist leadership. For decades, the absentee landowning class and its politically active members had worked within a somewhat fragile but comfortable framework as they played out their factional politics;

⁴⁹ Parliament was an ideal, genteel place in which factions could play out their struggles and ambitions. See Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, chaps. 12–14, *passim*.

⁵⁰ See Philip S. Khoury, “Syrian Urban Politics in Transition: The Quarters of Damascus during the French Mandate,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 16 (November 1984): 507–40. On the role of youth organizations, including paramilitary groups, in the independence movement, see Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 406–14, 471–76. On the rise of the Syrian labor movement, see Hanna, *al-Haraka al-'ummaliyya fi suriyya wa lubnan 1900–1945*; and Elisabeth Longuenesse, “La Classe ouvrière en Syrie: Une Classe en formation” (3^{ème} cycle dissertation, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 1977).

⁵¹ Hourani, “Revolution in the Arab Middle East,” 71.

under French rule, they rightly feared that politics might break out of that framework.

It did break out for nearly two years during the Great Revolt of 1925–1927, the most significant rebellion of the 1920s in the Arab world. This genuinely popular uprising among Druze peasants that spread to Damascus and beyond obliged nationalists to throw their weight behind the rebellion in order to hold onto their leadership. Although during the revolt they adopted the language of revolution and even some revolutionary tactics, they did so reluctantly, after more subtle and diplomatic efforts to bring about a relaxation of foreign control had failed. And, while their methods may have seemed revolutionary, their actual aim was to correct an unfavorable balance of power, not to break the yoke of French imperialism.⁵²

After two years, the revolt collapsed in the face of a reinforced French army of occupation, leaving the nationalist leadership in a much-weakened state. Although nationalists were relieved to drop armed confrontation as a strategy for gaining French recognition, their future hinged on French receptivity. Fortunately, the revolt's ferocity and duration had also convinced the French of the need to make some concession to the desire for self-government in Syria. This was an unforeseen opportunity for a defeated and demoralized nationalist leadership. They were able to adopt the more familiar tactics of periodic protest mixed with negotiation in an effort to restore the type of balance between foreign ruler and local leadership that had been operative in late Ottoman times.

The track to Syrian independence had now been cleared. Independence was not to be by popular struggle or revolt but by periodic protest coupled with diplomatic activity. In 1936, the nationalist leadership conducted a fifty-day general strike after several years of unsuccessfully trying to advance its aims of unity and independence. This was immediately followed by diplomacy in Paris that finally brought the nationalists into government for the first time and into a power-sharing relationship with the French. During World War II, the nationalists continued to conduct largely nonviolent strikes and demonstrations while they built a new set of delicate relationships, in this case with a third party, Britain, which during the war had come to hold the balance of power in Syria.⁵³ The

⁵² On the revolt of 1925–1927, see Elizabeth P. MacCallum, *The Nationalist Crusade in Syria* (New York, 1928); Adham al-Jundi, *Tarikh al-thawrat al-suriyya fi 'ahd al-intidab al-faransi* (Damascus, 1960); Munir al-Rayyis, *al-Kitab al-dhahabi li'l-thawrat al-wataniyya fi'l-mashriq al-'arabi: al-thawra al-suriyya al-kubra* (Beirut, 1969); McDowall, "Druze Revolt, 1925–27"; Joyce Laverty Miller, "The Syrian Revolt of 1925," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 8 (1977): 545–63; 'Abdullah Hanna, *al-Qadiyya al-zira'iyya wa'l-harakat al-fallahiiyya fi suriyya wa lubnan (1920–1945)*, vol. 2 (Beirut, 1978); Edmond Rabbath, "L'Insurrection syrienne de 1925–1927," *Revue historique*, 542 (avril–juin 1982): 405–47; Khoury, "Reinterpretation of the Origins and Aims of the Great Syrian Revolt," 241–71; Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, chaps. 7–9.

⁵³ See Hourani, "Revolution in the Arab Middle East," 71–72. On the nature of Anglo-French rivalry and the role of the Syrian nationalist movement during World War II, see Pierre Rondot, "Les Mouvements nationalistes au Levant durant la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale (1939–1945)," in *La Guerre méditerranée (1939–45)* (Paris, 1971); Geoffrey Warner, *Iraq and Syria, 1941* (London, 1974); Ahmed M. Gomaa, *The Foundation of the League of Arab States: Wartime Diplomacy and Inter-Arab Politics, 1941 to 1945* (London, 1977); François Kersaudy, *Churchill and De Gaulle* (1981; New York, 1983); Louis, *British Empire in the Middle East*, 147–72; Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, chap. 23; A. B. Gaunson, *The Anglo-French Clash in Lebanon and Syria, 1940–45* (London, 1987); Avieli Roshwald, *Estranged Bedfellows: Britain and France in the Middle East during the Second World War* (New York, 1990).

nationalists preferred this way of achieving independence. Their methods did not upset the status quo, and they enabled veteran nationalists to take control of government after the French were obliged to withdraw from Syria in 1946.

ALBERT HOURANI HAS OBSERVED THAT, with independence, “the conditions for use of the old kind of political expertise” in Syria disappeared. For the first time, veteran nationalists no longer had to put themselves forward as brokers between the Ottoman state and local society or as popular leaders in the face of an alien authority like the French. They were now the rulers of their own country. Also, for the first time, they were in a position to use the state bureaucracy as “a means of coercion.” In order to govern, the rulers of Syria saw no need to promote new local intermediaries with influence in society, as the Ottoman Turks and French had done before them. The age of a “politics of notables” gave way to a new age and a different type of politics.⁵⁴ But the old framework did not give way suddenly. The political leadership that had emerged in the nineteenth century from the urban absentee-landowning class did not immediately dissolve after generations of activity. It held on for nearly twenty years after independence.⁵⁵

Still, from its first days in the driver’s seat in Damascus, the Syrian leadership’s prospects were bleak. Already during the interwar period, rapid population growth, an inflated cost of living, the collapse of many traditional industries, the spread of modern education to the middle classes, and a changing intellectual climate had produced tensions and dislocations in urban society that eventually required more sophisticated responses than a narrowly focused nationalism provided. Increasing numbers of people had begun to seek support outside the old framework of patronage. Modern ideological parties headed by a rising generation posed a challenge to the old political order and to the veteran elite’s monopoly of the nationalist idea. Its leaders belonged to emerging professional classes and organizations, were educated either in the West or locally, and found the Ottoman political legacy alien. Unlike the nationalist notables, who had resigned themselves to working within the political and administrative system established by the French, this ascendant generation adopted a more revolutionary strategy for achieving independence and unity. In the era of Syrian independence, members of these new groups contributed to the demise of the old way of politics. Indeed, it might be argued that they brought an end to politics altogether in Syria.

In any case, with independence, something had changed. Profound structural changes in the economy and society begun during the world depression and accelerated during World War II unleashed new forces with new methods and aims, which weakened the old framework. The politics of notables was replaced by a politics of “bureaucracies,”⁵⁶ but also by a politics of regionalism and, more

⁵⁴ Hourani, “Revolution in the Arab Middle East,” 71.

⁵⁵ As Seale has persuasively argued in *Struggle for Syria*. Also see Michael Van Dusen, “Downfall of a Traditional Elite,” in Frank Tachau, ed., *Political Elites and Political Development in the Middle East* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 115–55.

⁵⁶ Hourani, “Revolution in the Arab Middle East,” 72.

precisely, by a politics of the countryside, of rural forces struggling against more established urban groups for control of the cities and of government.

As Hanna Batatu described it, “[R]ural people, driven by economic distress or lack of security, move into the main cities, settle in the outlying districts, enter before long into relations or forge common links with elements of the urban poor, who are themselves often earlier migrants from the countryside, and together they challenge the old established classes.” But, “in sharp contrast to the outcome of urban-rural conflicts of past centuries, the country people clinched a more enduring, if unstable, victory by virtue of their deep penetration of the Syrian army,” the army that the veteran elite had long snubbed.⁵⁷

The urban leadership lost power in Syria because it failed to wed nationalism to state power. Hourani has written that “new political ideas—radical nationalism, social reform, and Islamic assertion—provided the channels through which other social groups could pursue their interests: the growing middle class of the cities, teachers and students, and the army officers, many of them of rural origin and destined in the end to destroy the basis of the social power of the old elite, their control of the land.”⁵⁸ These new forces demanded the right to open up and take an active part in a political process that had previously been closed to them.

The veteran leadership eventually found it impossible to exclude the newly radicalized intelligentsia and members of the compact minorities—Druzes, Isma‘ilis, and especially ‘Alawis—who came from peasant and lower-middle class origins and from the rural periphery and smaller towns. Nothing could prevent them from redefining their relations with one another and with the veteran elite in government. On the political level, these new forces gravitated toward modern political organizations—the Communists, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian Social Nationalist party, and the Baath party, which had begun to make their ascent in the years before independence.⁵⁹

With their more rigorous systems of ideas and sophisticated methods of organization, they criticized and challenged the veteran elite in several concrete ways: for failing to uphold the reigning idea of pan-Arab unity, for contributing to the Arab failure to save Palestine in 1948, and for retaining strong, compro-

⁵⁷ Hanna Batatu, “Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria’s Ruling Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance,” *Middle East Journal*, 35 (Summer 1981): 337–38.

⁵⁸ From Hourani’s foreword to Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, xii. For a detailed analysis of the way these new forces made their ascent onto the Syrian political stage, see Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba’thist Syria*, chap. 4, *passim*.

⁵⁹ On the origins of the Syrian Communist party, see Batatu, *Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, chap. 24. On the origins of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, see Johannes Reissner, *Ideologie und Politik der Muslimbrüder Syriens* (Frieburg, 1980); Hanna Batatu, “Syria’s Muslim Brethren,” *MERIP Reports* (Middle East Research Information Project), no. 110, 12 (November–December 1982): 12–20, 24; Olivier Carré, *Les Frères musulmans: Egypte et Syrie, 1928–1982* (Paris, 1983); Umar F. Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley, Calif., 1983), chap. 3. On the origins of the Syrian Social Nationalist party, see Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, chap. 8; Labib Zuwiyya Yamak, *The Syrian Social Nationalist Party: An Ideological Analysis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966). On the origins of the Baath party, see Kamel S. Abu Jaber, *The Arab Ba’th Socialist Party: History, Ideology, and Organization* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1966); Nabil M. Kaylani, “The Rise of the Syrian Ba’th, 1940–1958,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 3 (January 1972): 3–23; John F. Devlin, *The Ba’th Party: A History from Its Origins to 1966* (Stanford, Calif., 1976); Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, chap. 38; Olivier Carré, “Le Mouvement ideologique ba’thiste,” in Raymond, *La Syrie d’aujourd’hui*, 185–224.

mising ties to the Western powers.⁶⁰ These radicalized forces shifted the emphasis of nationalism to better accommodate the accelerated changes taking place in economy and society. The language of nationalism no longer emphasized constitutionalism, parliamentary forms, and personal freedoms but rather social and economic justice for the masses, neutralism in international politics, and, in the case of the eventually triumphant Baath party, pan-Arab unity. Nationalism stressed mass education, land reform, social welfare, and rapid industrialization, all of which were to be brought about by a strong, dynamic interventionist state, for the good of society. Government was to be “for the people, but not by the people.”⁶¹

Hourani has written that “in this new age, the political struggle takes place on two levels. Those inside the system of government compete for favoured access to the ruler and control of important positions of power in administration. Those outside must aim at a total overthrow of the government, using the only method which seems likely to be effective: the armed forces.”⁶² Control of the armed forces went to the rural people—members of the compact minorities—in particular, the ‘Alawis, a dispossessed mountain and hill community armed with a strange, heterodox brand of Islam, who were fiercely tribal and, as Raymond Hinnebusch notes, “the most intense carriers of peasant grievances against the urban establishment.”⁶³ The French had encouraged them to join the army during the mandate; they saw the military as the one avenue for social advancement beyond the rural squalor and isolation in which they lived.⁶⁴

Once the ‘Alawis began to penetrate the military in significant numbers, they used their rural, regional, tribal, and religious solidarity to monopolize its levers of command. At first, they aligned themselves with rural Sunni Muslims in the armed forces to weaken Sunnis from the towns, who were in control of the army immediately after independence. Then the ‘Alawis turned on their rural Sunni allies and the smaller minority communities such as the Druzes in the army.⁶⁵ Finally, the ‘Alawis fought out their own internal struggles, with the cleverest faction in the military winning out, the one headed by the current president of Syria, Hafiz al-Asad.⁶⁶ That members of the veteran elite managed to retain influence in politics until the early 1960s suggests just how tenacious and resilient they were in the face of the growing radicalized movements in the military and in

⁶⁰ See Seale, *Struggle for Syria*. This same pattern could be detected in the cases of Egypt and Iraq in the late 1940s and 1950s.

⁶¹ See Albert Hourani, “Middle Eastern Nationalism Yesterday and Today,” in Hourani, *Emergence of the Modern Middle East*, 179–92; Philip S. Khoury, “Islamic Revival and the Crisis of the Secular State in the Arab World,” in Ibrahim Ibrahim, ed., *Arab Resources: The Transformation of a Society* (London, 1983), 213–36.

⁶² Hourani, “Revolution in the Arab Middle East,” 72.

⁶³ Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba’thist Syria*, 160.

⁶⁴ On the relationship of the compact minorities to the Syrian army, see Van Dusen, “Intra- and Inter-Generational Conflict in the Syrian Army”; Itamar Rabinovich, *Syria under the Ba’th, 1963–66: The Army Party Symbiosis* (Jerusalem, 1972); Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Sectarianism, Regionalism, and Tribalism in Politics, 1961–1978* (London, 1979). On the ‘Alawi religious sect, see Jacques Weulersse, *Le Pays des Alaouites* (Tours, 1940); Fuad I. Khuri, *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam* (London, 1990), chaps. 9, 15.

⁶⁵ See Batatu, “Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria’s Ruling Military Group,” 331–44.

⁶⁶ On Asad’s rise to power and subsequent career, see Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989).

civilian society. But, in the end, they were swept aside. With their departure, an old way of political life disappeared in Syria.

Today, there are fewer and fewer reminders of the time when Syrian political culture and the urban notables were closely identified with one another. For the historian, perhaps the most vivid is the 'Azm Palace in the Suq Saruja quarter of Damascus, which had been the ancestral residence of an important branch of the leading notable family of the town for nearly two centuries. It is now home to Syria's national historical archives. Here, the historian can examine a partial but illuminating record of the achievements and failings of Syria's urban notables in some of the very rooms in which they planned their activities. Could there be a more appropriate place in which to reconstruct Syria's political past?