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The Architecture of the Colonial State

European colonialism marked a new stage in the political rule of the Middle East, but its arrival did not necessarily entail a radical rupture to the structures and forms by means of which the region was governed. In the nineteenth century, Ottoman state reformers had introduced novel organisational technologies designed to enhance institutional efficiency, bureaucratic rationality and state autonomy. The contours of Ottoman social space also shifted around this time to produce new forms of culture (newspapers, novels), new foci for identity (the nation, the municipality) and new frameworks for thought (secularism, science and religious reformism). These typically modern governmental forms thus preceded direct European rule in the Levant. Nevertheless, Ottoman governmentality remained sporadic and discontinuous; it was only after the First World War that such strategies of power were intensified, as they became concentrated in, and dependent upon, the unique possibilities afforded by the structures and institutions of the self-consciously 'modern' Mandatory states.

Both Ottoman reformism and late European colonialism in the Levant were underpinned by the premise that state action could – and should – transform indigenous society to render it more easily governable, more smooth-running and essentially more modern. The extension of French and British control into the Arab provinces of the former Ottoman Empire was mediated through the newly created system of Mandates approved by the League of Nations. Temporary trusteeships which would in principle last only until the populations of the Levant were capable of governing themselves, the Mandates system provided a legal formula by which the new imperatives of independence and self-determination championed by US President Woodrow Wilson could be reconciled with the old

prerogatives of overt colonial dominion. Although the Mandates did not pose a serious obstacle to British and French strategic objectives in the region, this new institutional framework deeply shaped the genesis and implementation of colonial policy in the interwar years. In particular, tasking the Mandatory Powers with preparing the political entities created in Syria, Mesopotamia and Palestine for eventual independence meant that colonial power had to flow through the matrix composed by the forms, fields and practices of the modern state.

This chapter maps the contours of the colonial state in French Mandate Syria. It begins with a historical overview of the establishment of the Mandates system in the Levant in 1920 and outlines the subsequent Syrian resistance to French occupation, which resulted in a prolonged campaign of colonial pacification during the 1920s. This resistance peaked in the Great Revolt of 1925–27, before being crushed into submission by French forces. The sheer brutality with which the Great Revolt was suppressed meant that Syrians subsequently shied away from armed violence in the struggle for independence. After sketching the architecture of the colonial state in Syria, the chapter characterises both French and Syrian regimes of violence and discusses the function of armed force during the first decade of colonial occupation.

THE MANDATES SYSTEM IN THE LEVANT

The end of the First World War is often understood to have heralded the beginning of a new era in international history. As European and American politicians, lawyers and activists turned to study the forces and events that had led to years of horrific, mechanised slaughter, a consensus emerged that fault lay with nothing less fundamental than the existing structure of the world political system. In the early post-war years, critics from Britain and, increasingly, the United States attacked the wild anarchy of the nineteenth century, when great powers had wrestled with one another in frenetic competition for economic resources, military supremacy and territorial control.[1] This unrestrained clash of sovereign wills was blamed for bringing civilisation to the brink of destruction. Although there was much disagreement over the details, liberal Anglophone thought converged around the notion that the recurrence of such a devastating war could be prevented only by founding formal institutions to rein in unruly

[1] David Kennedy, 'The Move to Institutions' in *Cardozo Law Review* 8,5 (1987), pp. 856–63.

states and transform international conflict and chaos into peaceful order.[2] In 1919, this conviction found its expression in the establishment of the League of Nations.

Woodrow Wilson, American president, was the driving force behind both the League of Nations and the legal framework of Mandates that followed it. First proposed in December 1918 by General Smuts of South Africa, the Mandates system envisaged great-power tutelage of those 'incapable of or deficient in the power of self-government' who required 'nursing towards political and economic independence'.[3] Implicitly, this tutelage was to be limited in duration; explicitly, it was to be limited in application. Formulated as a solution to governing only the European peoples of the collapsed Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, Smuts deliberately excluded the application of the Mandates principle to Africa, whose inhabitants he described as 'barbarians'.[4] Yet the expansion of this idea of international tutelage to encompass even the uncivilised Africans was not uncommon among Smuts' contemporaries. In a report published in January 1918, an American named George Lewis Beer had proposed similar arrangements for the German colonies in Africa and the Ottoman lands in Egypt and Mesopotamia. 'Under modern political conditions', wrote Beer, 'apparently the only way to determine the problem of politically backward peoples who require not only outside political control but also foreign capital to reorganize their stagnant economic systems, is to entrust the task of government to that state whose interests are most directly involved'.[5] With Beer being part of a team advising President Wilson on foreign policy, his opinions were influential.[6] Yet during the drafting of the Covenant of the League of Nations, the Mandatory principle was applied on a scale which exceeded the proposals

[2] Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 63–72. Even today, International Relations scholars still recognise the seismic shift this introduced to global political order: 'War, one of the traditional and accepted institutions of the international system, was now seen as a radical "rupture" to be exorcised from interstate relations. By identifying war with chaos, and peace with systematic organisation, the "move to institutions" created the topos that peace was synonymous with organization'. Friedrich V. Kratochwil, 'Politics, Norms and Peaceful Change' in *Review of International Studies* 24 (1998), pp. 206–7.

[3] Smuts, *The League of Nations: A Practical Suggestion* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918).

[4] David Hunter Miller, 'The Origin of the Mandates System' in *Foreign Affairs* 6,2 (1928), p. 283.

[5] G. L. Beer, *African Questions at the Paris Peace Conference* (London: Macmillan, 1923), pp. 424–5, cited in Quincy Wright, 'The United States and the Mandates' in *Michigan Law Review* 23,7 (1925), p. 722.

[6] Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, p. 12.

of either Beer or Smuts: it was extended well beyond Europe to Africa, the Asia Pacific and the Arab Middle East. At the same time, its application within Europe was curtailed after the negotiation of other formulae to govern the former territories of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires.[7] The Mandates system consequently became not just a tool of the incipient international community to engineer global peace, but also a technique for refashioning old colonial possessions into new polities more appropriate to the *zeitgeist* of Wilsonian international liberalism.

In his speeches of 1918, Wilson had made it clear that the US commitment to joining the war was conditional upon Europe's acceptance of the principle of self-determination. The fifth of his famous Fourteen Points called for the 'free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims', with the interests of the local population considered equal in weight to those of the governing authority. His twelfth point referred explicitly to the Ottoman territories. The Turkish portion was to obtain 'secure sovereignty', while the 'other nationalities ... should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development'. Wilson sketched a vision of a world in which political independence and economic freedom went hand in hand. Colonialism had effaced natural human liberties by capturing people's sovereign independence and eliminating their right to choose in the free market. That age had now ended. As Wilson pointed out at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, 'We are done with the annexations of helpless peoples meant by some Powers to be used merely for exploitation'.[8] In place of nineteenth-century anarchy, which had seen trade monopolies emerge within closed colonial blocs and the subsequent ossification of international commerce, Wilson advocated an 'open-door' strategy which would allow the free export of goods across the surface of the globe.[9] Domestically, this strategy would be underpinned by the respect of private property rights and legal contract; internationally, it would require new organisations to circumscribe the unfettered freedom of action that states had previously possessed. The League of Nations and the Mandates system were key mechanisms through which the hitherto inviolate sovereignty of

[7] Wright, 'The United States and the Mandates', pp. 718–19.

[8] Ruth Cranston, *The Story of Woodrow Wilson* (1945), p. 318, cited in Antony Anghie, 'Colonialism and the Birth of International Institutions: Sovereignty, Economy and the Mandate System of the League of Nations' in *International Law and Politics* 34,3 (2002), p. 523.

[9] Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, pp. 5–7.

the state would now be constrained. Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations bestowed legal existence upon the Mandates. It read:

To those colonies and territories which as a consequence of the late war have ceased to be under the sovereignty of the States which formerly governed them and which are inhabited by peoples not yet ready to stand for themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilization ....

The best method of giving practical effect to this principle is that the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who, by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position, can best undertake this responsibility and who are willing to accept it, and that this tutelage should be exercised by them as Mandatories on behalf of the League.

The British and French navigated the uncharted waters of the post-war settlement along quite different courses. While the British government in London quickly grasped the new rules of the game, the British Dominions of South Africa, Australia and New Zealand obstinately refused to relinquish their right to impose traditional colonial relations on proximate territories. To compromise, the lands to be disposed of were placed into one of three categories according to their perceived level of advancement. African and Pacific territories were classified as 'B' or 'C' Mandates, with the latter reserving particularly extensive powers of control for the Mandatory Power. The 'A' category comprised the more advanced regions of Mesopotamia, Palestine and Syria, where international scrutiny was particularly acute.[10] As Peter Sluglett has pointed out, British officials with the India Office who were stationed in Mesopotamia were rather more reluctant than their metropolitan colleagues to acknowledge that the move from colonial rule to the Mandate system was anything other than mere rhetoric, although the new reality was admitted when the Colonial Office took over responsibility for Iraq in February 1921.[11]

For the French, in contrast, Wilson's principles of trusteeship and eventual self-determination compounded fears of external interference in their colonial possessions. In the immediate post-war period, the Mandates system was seen as a potential Trojan horse for Anglo-Saxon influence in

[10] Wm Roger Louis, 'The United Kingdom and the Beginning of the Mandates System, 1919–1922' in *International Organization* 23,1 (1969), pp. 76–93; Anghie, 'Colonialism and the Birth of International Institutions', pp. 525–7.
[11] Peter Sluglett, 'The Mandates: Some Reflections on the Nature of the British Presence in Iraq (1914–1932) and the French Presence in Syria (1918–1946)' in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett, eds. *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 118–19.

French-controlled territory and thus viewed with some suspicion. Although Clemenceau was uninterested in expanding the French empire, his loss of the presidency in 1920 opened the door for the colonial lobby (*le parti colonial*) to reassert France's ostensibly traditional interests in Syria and Lebanon, even if it meant accepting the new constraints attendant upon a Mandatory Power. These constraints included oversight by the Permanent Mandates Commission of a League of Nations in which French influence was minimal.[12] Yet if France intended to be involved in the Levant, its government had little choice but to accept the Wilsonian principles of the Mandates system. The new political mood was reinforced by facts on the ground: at the end of the war, British troops in the Near East numbered more than 100,000, compared to a mere 15,000 French soldiers.[13] Despite French acquiescence to the new rules, colonial policy in the Mandates of Syria and Lebanon was rather less 'Wilsonian' and rather more interventionist than it was in the British Mandates of Palestine and Mesopotamia.[14]

Historians highlight that France's special interest in Syria and Lebanon was based on three distinct factors. The first was its role as religious protector of Catholics in the Middle East, a role which originated in the seventeenth century and was reinforced over the years by a growing network of missionaries and educationalists. As Philip Khoury points out, this historical relationship between France and Arab Christians necessarily constructed a division between them and the Arab Muslim and heterodox minority communities. With religious identity valorised as the most important of the ties that bind, the French saw the Levant as a complex, fragile mosaic of ethno-religious communities locked in internecine conflict. Each of these communities was seen as separate and self-contained; they were viewed as living alongside one another in a state of perpetual mutual

[12] Louis F. Aubert, 'France and the League of Nations' in *Foreign Affairs* 3,4 (1925), pp. 637–9; Sluglett, 'The Mandates: Some Reflections', pp. 119–20; Christopher M. Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forster, *France Overseas: The Great War and the Climax of French Imperial Expansion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981).
[13] Jean-David Mizrahi, *Genèse de l'état mandataire: Service des Renseignements et bandes armées en Syrie et au Liban dans les années 1920* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003), p. 33. The *Détachement français de Palestine-Syrie* held the coast from Acre to Alexandretta. In 1917 it numbered just 6,200 men, as the bulk of the French army was still involved in fighting on the home front. By the end of 1919, this force, renamed the *Troupes françaises du Levant*, had increased to 15,000. *Le Livre d'Or*, p. 18; N. E. Bou-Nacklie, 'Les Troupes Spéciales: Religious and Ethnic Recruitment 1916–46' in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25 (1991), pp. 645–60.
[14] Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1987), pp. 88–9.

mistrust. Levantine society was thought to be so fragmented that social peace could be guaranteed only by an external protector who stood above the petty squabbles of local communities. Divisions between Christians and Muslims, Sunnis and Shias, Druze and 'Alawīs, Greek Orthodox and Catholics, Kurds, Turcomans and Circassians, townsfolk and nomads were seized upon by the colonial lobby to support arguments for occupation. For them, colonial rule was in the objective interest of the peoples of the region, even if their uncivilised state meant they were not in a position to recognise this truth for themselves. Such paternalistic sensibilities were more than mere rhetoric to disguise France's underlying material interests: French visions of a mosaic society productively informed the strategies by which the Mandatory Power consciously sought to govern the Levant.[15]

France's second interest in the Levant was economic. It was the leading investor in the Ottoman Empire prior to the Great War and held a majority stake in the Ottoman Public Debt.[16] French investors provided more than half the capital needed by the Lebanese silk industry, and French companies controlled the purchase of Beirut silk exports: silk production in Lebanon served to bind the littoral into the Europe-dominated world economy much as cotton production did in Egypt during the nineteenth century.[17] In a similar fashion, the agricultural region of the Ḥawrān, in what is now southern Syria, was increasingly linked to the world markets by virtue of newly built roads and increasing monetisation.[18] Even so, the Syrian interior was less extensively penetrated by international capital than the coast, although French-owned companies eventually took over the lucrative tobacco monopoly, controlled the railway network and invested in public works there. The idea of transforming Syrian agriculture into a more productive and more profitable industry – especially for cotton production in the Jazīra region – was also enticing.[19] The shift towards a Mediterranean or Franco-centric economy at the turn of the twentieth

[15] Benjamin White, 'The Nation-State Form and the Emergence of "Minorities" in Syria' in *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 7,1 (2007), pp. 64–85; Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, p. 53.

[16] Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, pp. 30–1.

[17] Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 154–60.

[18] Leila Hudson, *Transforming Damascus: Space and Modernity in an Islamic City* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris Academic Studies, 2008), pp. 49–53, 127–8; Owen, *The Middle East*, pp. 247–8. See also Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and Capacity in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 52–96.

[19] Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, pp. 43, 50–52.

century may have been indirectly encouraged by local efforts to win more autonomy from Ottoman control. As Leila Hudson points out: 'The coastal-trade view of Syria's future provided an alternative to domination by Egypt and increasingly an alternative to Istanbul'.[20] Needless to say, this particular means of realising an alternative vision of Syria had far-reaching, unanticipated consequences.

The final element of French interest in the Levant was strategic. Whereas some military officials concocted elaborate notions that France needed to control the eastern Mediterranean Sea for security reasons, a broad consensus held that the Levant was of little direct importance to France itself. A more pressing concern was that French control of North Africa might be jeopardised if new ideas about Arab nationalism managed to percolate from east to west. One recurrent concern was that Arab nationalism would provide another vehicle for the expansion of British influence into French areas of interest. During the first decade of the occupation of Syria, the Mandatory Power imagined the hidden hand of perfidious Albion to be behind most local resistance movements, consistently underestimating the extent to which indigenous nationalism was developing independently of external instigation.

The inhabitants of Syria did not leave French claims of special interest unchallenged. In 1916, the British had encouraged Sharīf Ḥusayn of Mecca to lead an uprising against the Ottoman Empire; Ḥusayn's son Fayṣal was given command of the army that moved north from the Ḥijāz through Palestine and on to Damascus. When the army entered Damascus, Fayṣal promptly assumed responsibility for governing the 'liberated' city. With British support, Fayṣal extended his claim of authority to include the cities of Ḥomṣ, Ḥamāh and Aleppo.[21] A rudimentary Arab state was established in 1918 with Fayṣal at its head. Welfare programmes and donations to prominent notables helped win this administration popularity, yet it was poorly institutionalised, badly managed and exerted only a nominal degree of control outside Damascus.[22] Fayṣal's political career in Syria was jeopardised when British forces withdrew from Lebanon, leaving the region in the hands of French forces. In Damascus, this was interpreted as signalling an end to aspirations for the independent, unified Arab state in anticipation of which Fayṣal was proclaimed king by the Syrian Congress in March 1920.

[20] Hudson, *Transforming Damascus*, p. 102.

[21] James L. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 27.

[22] Ibid., pp. 28–33.

By this time, Fayṣal's rule was faltering from a combination of post-war economic hardship, financial mismanagement and popular anger at his ill-judged attempts to impose conscription upon the population of Damascus.[23] Although French officials had been sympathetic to the idea of an Arab kingdom,[24] the risk that popular nationalist agitation might spread from Damascus to contaminate Lebanon – and from there, to North Africa – was too great to countenance. After issuing Fayṣal with an ultimatum to demobilise his army and recognise the Mandate, French troops marched on Damascus. A short battle against a force of soldiers and irregulars led by Yusuf al-ʿAzmah, Fayṣal's Minister of War, took place at Khān Maysalūn on 24 July 1920. The next day French troops occupied Damascus and Fayṣal left for the protection of the British in Baghdad, bringing an end to the first and only experiment in building a fully independent Arab state in the Levant. In its place, the new Mandatory Power created in Syria the more extensive and more invasive – yet equally fragile – apparatus of a modern colonial state.

THE COLONIAL STATE IN SYRIA

Whereas the novelty of the borders that carved up the post-Ottoman Middle East cannot be denied, undue emphasis on the 'artificiality' of states such as Syria and Lebanon, Iraq and Transjordan can be misleading. Implicit to such an approach is the hypothesised existence of a converse body: the 'organic' state, which is supposedly the natural expression of a particular civilisation or society. Yet the idea that organic states exist anywhere in the world is difficult to uphold without recourse to problematic notions of cultural essentialism. *All* states are artificial constructs that are imposed on populations; *all* states are products of political struggles for control and particular dynamics of power. Only when state-building projects ultimately achieve hegemonic status do they attempt to obscure their contested origins with the veil of organic genesis or natural evolution. Strident denunciations of the inherent artificiality of the French colonial state in Syria are merely echoes of a dull platitude. More important than this general artificiality are the specific features and relations of the colonial state form, which must be analysed to reveal the extent to which characteristic statist logics infiltrated the broader social field. How the colonial state was organised in the Levant necessarily informs how order was imposed on colonised society there.

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[23] Ibid., pp. 39–46.
[24] Mizrahi, *Genèse*, pp. 59–61.

The transformative agency of the state was a concept not unfamiliar to the Ottoman Empire. Building on earlier efforts to update the state's military institutions, Ottoman rulers in the mid-nineteenth century sought to recast the balance of power between central authorities and local elites by modifying the existing systems of land tenure, tax collection and education.[25] Provincial governors based in Damascus implemented similar local reforms to improve government administration, communications infrastructure and schooling.[26] Although undertaken for the purely instrumental purpose of institutionalising political power, these reforms subtly altered the social fabric of large parts of the late Ottoman Empire. New methods of census-taking, land registration and taxation focused on the individual rather than the village or the tribe, creating pressure for collective loyalties to give way to more atomised forms of identity. Where individuation was not possible, collective identities were gradually reshaped by new state policies intended to improve public health in urban centres like Beirut or to settle migrant Bedouin tribes in permanent villages on the borders of the Syrian Desert.

The Ottoman reforms were avowedly modernising, often directly modelled on techniques of government typical of the world's leading powers, most notably France, Britain and Prussia. Ottoman reformers, however, saw themselves not as mimicking a European civilisation of which they were not part, but as implementing a process of modernisation which all civilised peoples were undergoing at the same time. Just as countries like Spain and Sweden were adopting reforms pioneered in London or in Paris, so too would the Ottoman Empire learn from best practice. Modernisation would thus be undertaken by *all* civilised states – among the ranks of which was also counted their own Ottoman imperial polity.[27] In fact, so seriously did the Ottomans take their modernity that they also carried out their own *mission civilisatrice* to bring enlightenment to the barbarians. Peripheral regions of the empire, such as Yemen and the Sudan, were duly subjected to what can only be described as colonial strategies of control emanating

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[25] Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 2–20. See also Kemal Karpat, 'The Transformation of the Ottoman State, 1789–1908' in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3,3 (1972), pp. 243–81; Haim Gerber, *The Social Origins of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1987).
[26] Hudson, *Transforming Damascus*, pp. 15–31.
[27] Birgit Schaebler, 'Civilizing Others: Global Modernity and the Local Boundaries (French/German, Ottoman, and Arab) of Savagery' in Birgit Schaebler and Leif Stenberg, eds. *Globalization and the Muslim World: Culture, Religion, and Modernity* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004).

from the imperial centre. Although ultimately unsuccessful, Ottoman efforts to pacify, civilise and modernise these unruly fringes drew on the same body of practices used by France and Britain in their colonial possessions such Algeria and Egypt – territories which, ironically enough, had themselves been appropriated from the Ottomans.[28]

These instances provide salient reminders that modern forms of state power existed in the Levant prior to the European occupation.[29] Though French and British military pressures provided the impetus for modernisation, Ottoman reforms unfolded through osmosis rather than imposition. These reforms were predicated upon an analogy between persons and states: just as the human body had hands with which it could manipulate other objects, so too did the state have instruments by which it could act on external entities. The states created in the region by the Mandatory Powers were also metaphorically endowed with the capacity of *agency*. This agency allowed the state to act upon bodies from which it stood apart, of which the most important was that body of population which had come to be called 'society'.

The expectation that the state practically could and normatively should shape society was evident from the earliest days of the French Mandate. Deliberations focused not on whether it was appropriate to use the state form to organise the Mandated Territories, but on *how many* of these states it would be appropriate to create. French understandings of the mosaic nature of Levantine society implied no need to unite its inhabitants within a single political framework: such a move would, it was believed, foster Islamic xenophobia or Arab nationalist extremism. Instead, the

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[28] Serim Derengil, '"They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery": The Late Ottoman Empire and the Post-Colonial Debate' in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45,2 (2003), pp. 311–42.

[29] This helps explain why the state forms 'introduced' to the Middle East by France and Britain have proven so remarkably stable, despite their ostensible artificiality. Whereas Ottoman governmentality has been explored in the literature only recently, Marxisant historical sociologists long ago established that the changing Ottoman political economy paved the way for European domination. See Roger Owen, 'Europe and Egypt: From French Expedition to British Occupation' in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, eds. *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London: Longman, 1972); Bill Warren, *Imperialism: Pioneer of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1980); Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State*, pp. 86–134; Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics: State Formation and Development* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993). On the colonial economy as a constructed form of governmental power, see Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 84–119; U. Kalpagam, 'Colonial Governmentality and the "Economy"' in *Economy and Society* 29,3 (2000), pp. 418–38.

French divided the territories under its Mandate into a patchwork of independent mini-states and special administrative units with autonomous or semi-autonomous status. The borders were in part drawn in perceived accommodation with the ostensibly 'natural' religio-ethnic communities of Syria. As the Druze and 'Alawīs were concentrated in particular geographical locations, they were granted administrative autonomy in an attempt to induce a strain of separatism that would divorce them from their more nationalist Sunni Arab neighbours. Colonial ethnological visions of the mosaic society were thereby translated into institutional reality. Problematically, this principle could not be extended across the entirety of the Mandated Territories. Some minority communities, such as the Ismā'īlīs or Circassians, were not concentrated into particular locations but scattered throughout the country; they were necessarily incorporated into regional frameworks based on geography rather than race.[30]

The logics of border demarcation were variable, changing with time as well as place. For example, a Mediterranean coastal strip scored from its surrounds by a line drawn to group together Maronite Christians, Shias and Sunnis in 1920 subsequently acquired a permanent fixity and consecrated the existence of a separate Republic of Lebanon. Other imagined lines of enclosure proved more ephemeral. The states of Damascus, Aleppo and the 'Alawīs (in the north-west) were created at the same time as Lebanon. The three states, independent at first, were federated in 1922. Just two years later, the configuration shifted again: the states of Aleppo and Damascus were dissolved to create a single state which also included the Sanjak of Alexandretta, attached to but administratively distinct from the region of Aleppo. The 'Alawī State was not included in this new arrangement and was only formally united with the state of Syria in 1936, along with the Jabal Druze in the south, which had until that point been a separate governorate. Both the 'Alawī State and the Jabal Druze were detached from Syria in 1939, only to be reunited in 1942.[31] In all these jurisdictions, there was at first an unclear, overlapping distinction between military and civilian rule. Only after 1926, when exclusively civilian High Commissioners were first appointed to Beirut, were civilian and military jurisdictions formally differentiated within the colonial state. Excepted from this process of regularisation was the Syrian Desert, which uniquely remained subject to direct military rule for the full twenty-six

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[30] White, 'The Nation-State Form'.
[31] Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, pp. 57–9.

years of the Mandate. Colonial state architecture in Syria was thus highly complex, variegated and unsettled.

The fragmented institutional framework established by the Mandatory Power allowed for considerable regional variation in political, bureaucratic and even military practices. Colonial policy in Syria was broadly modelled on the methods that Maréchal Hubert Lyautey had developed in Morocco between 1912 and 1925.[32] There, Lyautey's success had been based on a strategy of divide-and-rule that depended on an intimate knowledge of Moroccan society, culture and customs. This information was collected, analysed and transmitted by specialist military officers armed with all the modern weapons of colonial warfare. Foremost among these weapons was the science of ethnography. General Gouraud, who was to be appointed the very first High Commissioner of Syria and Lebanon in 1919, had made his reputation in Morocco and had even been deputised for Lyautey personally; Gouraud was joined in the Levant by a number of old hands from North Africa who sought to import the same model to the Eastern Mediterranean. Gouraud's principal civilian advisor, the influential Robert de Caix, ambitiously advocated in 1920 that Syria should be run by a corps of expert officer-ethnographers analogous to the *Bureaux Arabes* and *Service des Affaires Indigènes* of the Maghreb, but the French parliament refused to approve the vast expenditure necessary to train and maintain such a body.[33] Instead, a more indirect kind of administrator was required, one more in keeping with both the political spirit of the Mandate and the financial limitations of post-war France. The Levant's *Service des Renseignements* (SR) was founded in 1921 to meet this need. Although only seventy to eighty strong for most of the 1920s, SR officers were responsible for gathering military and political intelligence, and also detailed knowledge of the minutiae of Syrian society, from topography and economy to local customs, genealogies and histories.[34] A similar organisation, the *Contrôle Bédouin* (CB), was created with responsibility for the Bedouin tribes. According to the Mandatory principle of tutelage, the role of the SR and CB was to oversee and advise Syrian functionaries.

Although their role was meant to be advisory, in practice, the intelligence agents of the SR and CB often arrogated the function of direct government to themselves. The memoirs of Syrian rebels are replete with

accounts of SR officers imposing their petty despotisms on those around them. Munīr al-Rayyis, for example, describes the situation he personally witnessed in Miṣyāf in 1921:

> It became clear that the Special Service Officer had the last word in the region of the State of the 'Alawīs and that the *qā'imaqām* [the administrative head of the district] – whose position should make him the highest official of the *qaḍā'* [district] in the Syrian interior – was merely an employee of the French councillor in that state. He could not accept a complaint from the people without first submitting it to the councillor's office for agreement, so that he could consider it first, or keep it with him, or ignore it, or personally intervene in the immediate situation. Similarly, before each day's session of court, the head of the court would explain to the intelligence officer the cases before him and listen to his personal opinion of the parties involved. The word of the councillor sometimes went beyond the [limits of] the law, but woe to whomever opposed him![35]

By their own admission, the French authorities were faced with occasions where the behaviour of their officers would simply go too far. High Commissioners would remind SR officers that they should limit their activities to observing the population and transmitting intelligence to the military authorities, without personal interference in local affairs.[36] The crudeness of official interventions sometimes created serious problems for the Mandatory Power. The behaviour of Capitaine Gabriel Carbillet, the authoritarian governor of the Jabal Druze, was so extreme that in 1925 it provoked a major uprising that soon spread to the rest of the country. This resulted in a large-scale rebellion that threatened French control of much of Syria. Even after this Great Revolt was suppressed at great cost, certain SR officers seemed still impervious to its lessons. In one notorious 1927 episode reminiscent of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the SR Officer for al-Raqqa acquired the habits of a 'King of the Negroes' at his isolated post on the edge of the desert and had to be reassigned to a French regiment for rehabilitation.[37] While policy intellectuals at the apex of the Mandatory hierarchy projected a vision of ordering Syria based on the Moroccan model, local officials had considerable flexibility in deciding what that

[32] Edmund Burke III, 'A Comparative View of French Native Policy in Morocco and Syria, 1912–1925' in *Middle Eastern Studies* 9,2 (1973), pp. 175–87.

[33] Mizrahi, *Genèse*, pp. 67–9.

[34] Martin C. Thomas, 'French Intelligence-Gathering in the Syrian Mandate, 1920–1940' in *Middle Eastern Studies* 38,1 (2002), p. 5.

[35] Munīr al-Rayyis, *Al-Kitāb al-Dhahabī li'l-Thawrāt al-Waṭaniyya fī al-Mashriq al-'Arabī: Al-Thawra al-Sūriyya al-Kubrā* [The Golden Book of National Revolutions in the Arab East: The Great Syrian Revolt] (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī'a li'l-Ṭabā'a wa'l-Nashr, 1969), p. 113. See also Fawzi al-Qāwuqjī, ed. Khayriyya Qāsimiyya. *Mudhakkirāt Fawzī al-Qāwuqjī* [The Memoirs of Fawzī al-Qāwuqjī] vol. 1: 1912–1932 (Beirut: Dār al-Quds, 1975), p. 74.

[36] Centre des Archives diplomatiques, Nantes, Fonds Beyrouth-Mandar, 1er versement [henceforth CADN] 437, Arrêté 1672/K1, Beirut, 11 December 1925.

[37] CADN 438, Delegué-Adjoint du Haut Commissaire au Sandjak de Dayr al-Zur to Envoyé Extraordinare au Syrie et au Djebel Druse, 3 February 1927.

meant in day-to-day reality. Unless some controversy attracted the attention of the relevant Delegate of the High Commissioner, stationed in the capital of each state, there was little supervision of Mandatory officials on the ground.

The improvised and often intuitive character of French colonial rule can be seen as something of a liability. Tolerating and even encouraging individual colonial officials to use their discretion meant that wayward officers were not detected until a crisis arose, by which time it was often too late to rectify the problem. Yet this policy did generate organisational flexibility, adaptation and innovation. Low levels of institutionalisation meant that borders between administrative units were relatively porous: techniques pioneered in one locality could easily be imported into another.[38] Although scholars often refer to it in the singular, 'the' colonial state in Syria was a heterogeneous assemblage of diverse, incomplete and overlapping regimes of practices. Whereas the colonial state intended for its control of the Levant to be smooth and uninterrupted, the improvised and personalised mechanisms used by individual officers on the ground produced a profound unevenness at the very heart of colonial government.

The prism of a mosaic society also shaped French strategies of rule in the military domain. Although the French army in the Levant had grown to 70,000 men at the start of the Mandate, by 1924 budgetary restraints had caused its numbers to fall to a mere 15,000. Whereas the officers and technical specialists of the *Troupes du Levant* were French, the rank-and-file was comprised of recruits from French colonial possessions in North Africa, Madagascar and Senegal.[39] With many colonial soldiers deployed in Morocco to fight the Rif War, reinforcements were slow to arrive in Syria when the Great Revolt broke out in 1925. The investment in quashing this rebellion was so great that subsequently the Syrians themselves were made to bear the cost of maintaining French troops. Efforts were made to recruit a local force, called first the *troupes auxiliaires et supplémentives* and then renamed the *Troupes Spéciales* in 1930. Although relatively unimportant in terms of the overall colonial security posture, the *Troupes Spéciales* disproportionately drew on minority communities (especially Christians, Circassians, 'Alawīs, 'Ismā'īlīs, Druze and Armenians),[40] establishing recruitment patterns that would have profound

[38] Jean-David Mizrahi, 'La France et sa politique de Mandat en Syrie et au Liban (1920–1939)' in Méouchy, ed. *France, Syrie et Liban*, pp. 40–44.
[39] Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, p. 79.
[40] N. E. Bou-Nacklie, '*Les Troupes Spéciales*', pp. 645–60.

implications for Syria after independence in 1946.[41] During the 1920s, however, the locally raised troops were ineffective in combat and insufficiently trusted by the French to be used in what they euphemistically referred to as 'pacification' operations against the Syrian population. This distinction remained the preserve of the *Troupes du Levant*.

OCCUPATION, PACIFICATION AND THE GREAT SYRIAN REVOLT

Conventional historiography recounts how, in the course of the 1920s, the *Troupes du Levant* extended French control from the Mediterranean coast to the cities of Damascus and Aleppo and from there to the countryside and farther east across the desert. The French were determined to penetrate the Syrian interior, despite considerable local opposition. Paris had already abandoned its claim to Cilicia after encountering well-organised resistance from Turkish forces there, and the French military was resolved not to make the same concession in Syria proper. Colonial forces found themselves harried and harassed by a string of rebellions in areas resistant to their control. In Syria's north-western mountains, Ṣāliḥ al-'Alī and his 'Alawī supporters began a rebellion in 1919 which took two years to repress. Around the same time, rebel bands roamed the border region between Aleppo and southern Anatolia and were gradually incorporated into an organised network by Ibrāhīm Hanānū, who fought the French until his capture in 1922, when the dissidence died down. In the south, the Druze religious minority inhabited a region of volcanic basalt known as the Jabal Druze (*Jabal al-Durūz*), the Druze Mountain, where guerrilla bands led by Sulṭān al-Aṭrash found hospitable terrain until their first rebellion ended in 1922. The Bedouin tribes mostly confronted the Mandatory Power in an indirect fashion, rarely engaging in overt rebellion, but the Syrian Desert was nevertheless believed to represent a vast reservoir of potential insurgents. It was not until 1925 that its expanses were declared fully pacified.[42] Despite

[41] Alasdair Drysdale, 'The Syrian Armed Forces in National Politics: The Role of the Geographic and Ethnic Periphery' in Roman Kolkowicz and Andrzej Korbonski, eds. *Soldiers, Peasants, and Bureaucrats* (London, Boston and Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1982).
[42] *Le Livre d'Or des Troupes du Levant 1918–1936* (Beyrouth: Atelier Typographiques des Troupes du Levant, 1937), p. 14. On the Hanānū revolt, see Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 174–82; Mizrahi, *Genèse*, pp. 117–49. The penetration of French troops into remote north-eastern Syria (the 'Bec du Canard') did not take place until 1930.

French preoccupations with the desert, it was from rural Syria that the most successful anticolonial revolts were to be launched.

French troops soon discovered that the rebels they had initially dismissed as mere bandits were surprisingly effective at modern warfare. Instructed in the techniques of guerrilla warfare by former army officers who had studied in Ottoman military academies, Syrian rebels formed loose-knit bands of irregular forces known as 'iṣābāt (sing. 'iṣāba) to carry out hit-and-run raids, repeatedly evading the slow-moving French forces. The size of each 'iṣāba would fluctuate from as few as a dozen to as many as several hundred, at times buoyed by waves of villagers whose homes had been destroyed by French reprisals, at others diminished as its members decided to follow another rebel leader, strike out on their own or return to their families. While Ba'thist historiography and the Syrian popular imagination have subsequently recuperated these rebels as heroic nationalists, their activities straddled a complex set of interests and motivations, from traditional highway robbery to political careerism to religious or nationalist resistance against foreign occupation. Recruits tended to join bands in groups, alongside men from the same village or city quarter; each 'iṣāba cultivated its own distinct identity. Bands ranged along a social and political spectrum, which complicated efforts to create any kind of meaningful coordination between rebel leaders already mindful of guarding their autonomy. Although these early episodes did see some communication and even cooperation between different rebellions (notably between those of Ibrāhīm Hanānū and Ṣāliḥ al-'Alī), it was not until 1925, with the outbreak of what came to be called the Great Syrian Revolt (al-Thawra al-Sūriyya al-Kubrā), that a distinctly trans-local or nationalist uprising took place.

The Great Revolt began in the Jabal Druze in July 1925 as a reaction to the particularly invasive and brutal regime of the local colonial governor, Carbillet.[43] Led by Sulṭān al-Aṭrash, who later adopted the title of

[43] On the Great Revolt, see Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, pp. 151–242; Salāma 'Ubayd, *Al-Thawra al-Sūriyya al-Kubrā 1925–1927 'alā Ḍau' Wathā'iq Lam Tunshar* [The Great Syrian Revolt of 1925–1927 in the Light of Unpublished Documents] (Beirut: Dār al-Ghadd, 1971); al-Rayyis, *al-Kitāb al-Dhahabī*, pp. 148–64, 209–13; Ẓāfir al-Qāsimī, *Wathā'iq Jadīda 'an al-Thawra al-Sūriyya al-Kubrā* [New Documents on the Great Syrian Revolt] (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1965); Philip Khoury, 'A Reinterpretation of the Origins and Aims of the Great Syrian Revolt, 1925–27' in George N. Atiyeh and Ibrahim M. Oweiss, eds. *Arab Civilization: Challenges and Responses: Studies in Honor of Constantine K. Zurayk* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Lenka Bokova, *La Confrontation franco-syrienne à l'époque du Mandat, 1925–1927* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990); Joyce Laverty Miller, 'The Syrian Revolt

Commander of the Revolt, what began as a Druze rebellion soon spread farther north, to the largely Sunnī urban populations of Damascus, Ḥamāh and Ḥomṣ. Although Damascene nationalist leaders were largely disinclined to support a popular insurrection which might challenge the traditional political monopoly of the notable elite, their hesitations were overwhelmed by the torrent of public anger against the Mandatory Power. Nationalist notables felt obliged to acquiesce to the strategies of violent opposition advocated by rebel leaders from the Jabal Druze and the popular classes of Damascus. France responded to the threat of a nation-wide revolt with unprecedented force. When rebels looked set to seize the capital in October 1925, the French military ordered the aerial and artillery bombardment of the city for three whole days: hundreds were killed and entire quarters of the city were levelled. The bombing of Damascus caused a scandal in the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations, though this was due less to disgust at the needless killing of Syrian civilians than to outrage that the resident community of diplomats had not been warned to evacuate the city prior to its bombardment. With Damascus still in French hands, the rebels took to the countryside and roamed freely between the oasis of the Ghūṭa, in which Damascus nests, and the regions of Qalamūn and al-Nabak farther north towards Ḥomṣ. South of Damascus, the Jabal Druze and the Ḥawran also entered into rebellion at this time; farther west, the rebels dominated parts of Lebanon. During the winter months of 1925–26, Damascus was surrounded by a sea of rebels and effectively cut off from the outside world.

This siege caused the Mandatory Power to reassess its military strategy. As the rebels' success seemed to derive from their superior mobility and mastery of space, the French calculated that rebel defeat would result from redefining the borders of that space to nullify any strategic advantage. Military movements, rural geographies and urban space were all subjected to new forms of organisation that sought to pin down the rebels and eradicate the insurgency. By late 1926 this socio-spatial engineering began to have an effect, and by 1927 it had apparently succeeded: the last trickle of revolt dried out. The transformations introduced by the counter-insurgency outlasted their immediate military utility; the new spatial logics became enmeshed with other social arrangements of space and survived long after the Great Revolt had ended. As subsequent

of 1925' in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 8,4 (1977), pp. 545–63. For a discussion of Syrian historiography, see Birgit Schaebler, 'Coming to Terms with Failed Revolutions: Historiography in Syria, Germany and France' in *Middle Eastern Studies* 35,1 (1999), pp. 17–44.

chapters will demonstrate, the colonial violence of the 1920s profoundly affected the processes of state formation and colonial order in Syria.

Organised violence in the 1920s was a complex creature. To begin with, Syrian *'iṣābāt* and French forces fought their wars very differently. One explanation for their distinctive ways of warfare would propose that military strategy is the product of relative location within the field of battle. From this perspective, French and Syrians were enacting that familiar dichotomy of small wars, which opposes the ordered armies of foreign occupation to the irregular guerrillas of local resistance. But functionalist explanations cannot account for the fact that the rationality of war-fighting is not single, universal and homogeneous: military strategies bring with them particular understandings of the utility of violence, the nature of the enemy and the transformative potential of armed force. These understandings are contingent on the contours of a wider social field, not the narrow strategic topography of the battlefield. Strategies of violence are constituted within networks of practices, values and meanings that traverse and connect the realms of military and civilian. For the *Troupes du Levant*, pacification was not simply the military imposition of nominal French rule: it entailed nothing less than the complete social, political and economic transformation of the conquered societies. French colonial tradition, articulated in an archipelago of imperial possessions scattered across North Africa, Indochina and Madagascar, had established that violence could serve as a delivery mechanism to implant the seeds of modernity within primitive societies: violence and civilisation went hand in hand. The next chapter explores the political rationalities that made it possible to imagine such an unlikely pairing.

3

Political Rationalities of Violence

In April 1926 General Maurice Gamelin, commander of the *Troupes du Levant*, commended his soldiers for turning the tide in the war against the rebel bands of the Great Revolt. Gamelin's praise demonstrates the fluency with which French colonial officials in the Levant, by this time, had come to speak the language of a Wilsonian Mandatory Power. 'You fight here not to defend your homes or to support a conquest', said Gamelin, 'but in the name of the civilisation which you represent. The more selfless your ideals, the more noble will be your sacrifice'.[1] The creation of the League of Nations can be seen as enacting a rupture with the past and providing an innovative institutional and legal framework to direct interwar colonialism, but older understandings of colonial action nevertheless extended into the Mandates system. The 'civilisation' invoked by Gamelin has a genealogy which can be traced back to a time much earlier than that of Wilson liberalism.

The principles of pacification that were applied in Syria during the 1920s were drawn from a colonial tradition dating back to the French conquest of Algiers in 1830. The perpetration of violence in the colonies on a scale unthinkable in the hexagon of mainland France was enabled by two distinct, yet overlapping discourses. The first of these was the deeply rooted metropolitan notions of the inferiority of the colonised, an inferiority which straddled culture, race and material advancement. In Syria, this universal language was translated into the specifically Levantine vernacular of the mosaic society.

The second discourse evolved during the nineteenth century and informed colonial pacification more indirectly, although just as profoundly.

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[1] SHAT 4H159, Ordre général 106/3, Beirut, 4 April 1926.