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James Francis Byrne Casey

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On the Traumatic Origins of Political Community in Modern Syria

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

SUPERVISOR

Yoav di Capua

Benjamin Claude Brower

On the Traumatic Origins of Political Community in Modern Syria

by

James Francis Byrne Casey, B.A.

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For Mom and Dad

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James Francis Byrne Casey, MA

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SUPERVISOR: Yoav di-Capua

This project offers an alternative perspective on the appearance of new forms of political community, types of social solidarities, and intellectual spaces in the French Mandate in Syria. Most previous scholarship on this period pivots on the presumption of once-and-future nationalisms as the driving historical force. The argument here articulates this history by reinscribing it into a wartime and postwar landscape of physical destruction and mass social, intellectual, and economic trauma. Through a close examination of wide variety of French and Arabic primary sources, this project emphasizes the traumatic origins of political communities and solidarities in the space of historic Greater Syria especially the area of the French Mandate of Syria. Arising initially out of the mass physical and institutional destruction of the First World War, this situation was reified by the persistence of manifold forms of French physical, economic, and intellectual violence. While recognizing the eventual nationalist historical outcomes, this project challenges the accepted primacy of its role in defining the historical period it emerged out of. The driving historical force in this period was not an amorphous nationalism but a shattered society's intense political, social, economic, and intellectual anxieties about their current and future place in a vastly changed world. This defined the political shape Syria would assume and better explains how Syria and the region as a whole arrived at a nationalist historical outcome.

Table of Contents

Introduction	
<i>Wasteland</i>	1
Chapter I	
<i>Trauma, Memory, Devastation, and Cultural Obliteration</i>	10
Chapter II	
<i>Towards a Theory of Trauma</i>	36
Chapter III	
<i>Language, Spaces, “Nation”?</i>	48
Chapter IV	
<i>New Locations of Political Contestation</i>	60
Conclusion	
<i>Creative Destruction</i>	81
Bibliography	83
Vita	88

Introduction Wasteland

Alighting in one of the newly supplied German aircraft of the Ottoman Air Force and flying south from Anatolia over Greater Syria¹ in 1916 or 1917, one would have encountered a landscape of incredible physical diversity. However, even the uninitiated visitor would have understood that all was not well in *bilad a Sham*. Passing south over the costal ports of Latakia and Beirut the normal bustle that accompanied the export of the renowned local tobacco out through the former or finished goods from Europe into the latter would have been marked with an unnatural stillness. The usually packed quays hosted few ships of any significance, fewer still any of the ocean-going freighters typically so common. Looking down on the streets of these port cities, one would have been taken aback by thinness of the weekday crowds on the streets, if there were any at all. Peering out over the Mediterranean towards the western horizon it might have been possible to just make out a grey line of warships stretching north and south, even if it would not have been possible to make out the Union Jacks and Tricolors fluttering astern on each. Between them and Syria's coastal ports the only craft plying the sea would have been the kind of small fishing vessels familiar to Herodotus during his travels among the Phoenicians.

Turing east and climbing up, over the Anti-Lebanon range, the unnatural and erie calm that marked the aerial survey of the costal cities would have reprised itself in the Lebanon's innumerable mountain hamlets. Passing low over the orchards and olive groves that clustered around these settlements the strange sight of denuded trees would greet our flyer. Passing over the Beqqa Valley, a similar scene would be repeated in fallow fields, usual abounding with crops.

¹ Roughly the territories of the modern Syrian and Lebanese Republics, parts of southern Turkey especially Hatay, northern Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and northern Jordan.

Proceeding further west over the Hauran² plain on the southwestern edge of the Syrian interior, this landscape of agricultural wastage continued across the region's historically productive grain fields. Here, as in the cities on the Syrian coast and the mountain villages of the Lebanon, Druze villages were still with the calm was occasionally punctuated by bands of men on horses charging into some of these settlements. From the air, it would have been unclear what their aims were, though one would have been taken with a sense of unease about these mounted men. Compounding this unease was the sight of the cars of the Hijaz railway - the recently completed physical statement of the Ottoman Empire's commitment to development and economic modernization - stopped among the fields, abandoned far from any station.

Approaching Damascus from the south, the airplane's occupant might have looked down and seen crowds for the first time in his journey. However, these would not have been crowds going about their business in the marketplace. A riotous scene around the city's bakeries would have unfolded beneath the winged observer. The raucousness may even have distracted him from another equally troubling feature of the landscape: slow moving lines of people streaming from the north converged on the outskirts of Damascus. Columns of people crawled toward the city in a scene that repeated beneath the aircraft as it made its way up the Orontes Valley to Aleppo. Even if the observer could not have known that these were not armies but Armenian refugees staggering out of Anatolia, the distance from the air would not have obscured unnaturalness of this physical and human geography. Even from a distance these changes in the landscape of Greater Syria would have stood out.

² The Sunni/Druze-dominated plain south of Damascus.

Were one to leave the aircraft and take the same journey on the ground, a barren, depopulated moonscape of environmental, human, and economic destruction in the region would have opened before him. A contemporary account evokes what this scene would have looked like to such an observer: it also began in the north with Turkey joining the Central Powers in an act that would see her “intensifying her grip on Syria and Palestine and the rest of the Arab countries which remained under her authority and would annihilate with maximum violence and harshness all separatist movement...in those countries.”³ Lebanon, with which Turkey had “old accounts”⁴ it wished to settle came in for special attention: Turkey “brutalized Lebanon with *nakba* upon *nakba*, upon *nakba* - *nakbat* of war, *nakbat* of locusts, *nakbat* Jamal Pacha...”⁵

Describing the events that befell Lebanon and by extension Greater Syria during the First World War as a disaster or a catastrophe fail to capture the gravity conveyed in the Lebanese writer Mikhail Nu’ameh’s use of *nakba*. Twenty years before the word entered parlance as the description of the expulsion of masses of Palestinians from their homeland in 1948 Nu’ameh deployed it to describe the utter devastation of his own country. *Nekba*, approximately referring to an overwhelmingly devastating catastrophe (a “biblical disaster” one might say) comes closest to giving a sense of the situation people in Greater Syria found themselves in both during and after the war. Since 1948, this word and its usage have been inextricably bound up with the Palestinian people’s sense of loss and catastrophic devastation - social, economic, political,

³ “...*satusheddid qubtaha ‘ala souriyya wa fulustiin baaqiyy al bilad al ‘arabiyya alati kanat la tuzal tahat imratha wa satestahaq nmtnihaa al ‘anf wa al saraama kl harakat al infisaaliyya...fii tilk al uqtaar.*” Nua’meh, Mikhail. *Seba’oun: hikayat umr 1889 - 1959 wihda althania 1911 - 1923*. Dar Beirut lltabi’a wa alnashar. 1964. 38 (my translation from the Arabic)

⁴ “*kanat liha fi thimmat lubnan hisabat qadima*”, *ibid*

⁵ “*wa hakatha inhaalal ‘alayhi bi nakba telwa nakba, telwa nakba - nakbat al harb, wa nakbat al jirad, wa nakbat Jamal Pacha...*” *ibid*

physical - that is associated with it. This linguistic association is useful in that it provides some insight into the meaning of *nakba* that befell the people of Greater Syria during the First World War. The shock to the society was total. Nothing escaped the fury of the conflict or the famine that it invited.

In *Seventy: tales of an age - in the new world*, Nua'meh recounts his experiences as a student in Washington state and his life in America, providing a unique perspective on the period. As he watched Woodrow Wilson win reelection in 1917, he compared⁶ Wilson's election slogan of "he kept us out of the War" with the events unfolding in Greater Syria, looking back to his native land recounting its trials thus:

"Catastrophe after catastrophe, following catastrophe - catastrophe of war, and catastrophe of locusts...thus in the spring of the year 1915 the population wakened to a winged disaster of locusts in their fields and their vineyards and their gardens and their forests - on the [mountain] peaks and on the slopes and in the valleys and spread out to the shores of the sea...

...Then came the turn of the crawling locusts. They conscripted the people to fight. (And when they left they carved a hole in the people in which they bury the armies uncountable, innumerable.) And yet they attempted to dry out the sea with a thimble. They did not become flying locusts and depart the earth with the population blotting out the sun but for afterwards annihilating all greenery in every field and vineyard and garden. Meaning who snatched away the morsel from the mouth of the peasant, and the grasses from the mouth of the livestock. Not for a day or a month. Indeed for two years with its days and months.

And such cut off the grain - grains of wheat, or barley, or maize, or any edible grain - the most precious in the world, and cut off the search for it [grain] the most important job humans do. So in the grain a spark of life was preserved. And without it death was swift.

"And winter approached and in none but a few houses was a month's [grain store] stashed away. And the inhabitants knew that in the Beqqa

⁶ *ibid* 39

valley grain was for sale. And the Beqqa valley⁷ was not a day from Lebanon. And the “attic state’ pointed up to the peaks of the mountains with its tiniest of morsels. So it denied the export of grains from the Beqqa to [the rest of Lebanon]. But hunger is an infidel. So it did not take long for the people to “march”⁸ on the Beqqa - men and women and old men and old women. They marched on their legs in the day and in the night. And in clear weather and the rain and in the snow. So who had some amount of money carried money. And who did not have money carried something of the furnishings of his house - not of any importance if it was a saucepan of copper or a (cloak) of wool or mat or a carpet of fur or a robe or a boot...And all their hopes [were] to return with something of wheat or of barley or lentils or maize and chickpeas buoyed them on their appearance to the biggest and smallest of those starving with hunger.

Hunger inflicted the people from every angle. Who had possessions dear to his heart went and sold them but for their weight in flour. Thus life is dearer than important possessions of honor. And who did not have himself monies nor possessions went searching for trash and the droppings of animals to stave off death even if but for a while. The place was barren of grasses and agriculture. So the udder is dry. And the grazing pastures were deserted...thus a husband does not know where his wife is. And a mother does not know where her son or daughter is. Who knows if the refugees from the Hauran were cut off. Or joining [in] with one of the tribes traveling in Syria. Or [became] cut off bodies scattered on the path or buried under the snow.”⁹

Such was the state of Syria in the final Ottoman rule at the end of the First World War.

Subject to the unforgiving rule of Jamal Pacha and then covered by locusts, the country was the unwilling host to Ottoman armies that lived off the land, extracting the entirety of their supplies from the local population and economy. Of course, these armies did not only take food and

⁷ The fertile central valley between the coastal range and Anti-Lebanon range, situated in the modern Lebanese Republic.

⁸ In an ironic use of language here, Nua'meh deliberately uses the verb *zahafah*, or “to march (an army)” to describe both the approach of the Ottoman conscription forces and the “march” of the “army” of the famine stricken.

⁹ *ibid*

supplies but absorbed the people themselves. Fear of the *Seferberlik* (the Ottoman draft)¹⁰ underlies many accounts of the period and preforms a particular role here in Nua'meh's account of Syria during the war. Clouds of locusts consumed not only the crops, covering every "field, vineyard, gardens [*sic*], forests" from the interior of the country "to the sea" but a second wave of "locusts" sets itself upon the people themselves. This "crawling" swarm of locusts took up the sons of the villages, and towns, and cities so recently beset by the flying kind speaks to the overwhelming sense of siege that Syrian society would have experienced during the war years. In this way, Syrians would have experienced devastation in the most Old Testament sense: a plague of locusts followed by the slaying of the first born (although the Ottoman army certainly did not limit itself to taking only the first born sons of Syrian families). Thus, in having their sons taken away to war, these families were not only losing children but their futures and patrimony with them. Between the Allied blockade of Levantine ports and Ottoman armies in the Syrian interior both of which compounded the devastating famine, the region faced a disaster that was as catastrophic as it was inescapable.

As a primary source, Nua'meh's text is a rich vein to mine not only for the detail he provides but also for the striking way in which he illustrates the intimacy of the devastation. Even more recent regional histories, particularly those accounts¹¹ of Jebil 'Amil note the problems with the provisioning of food but none seem able to provide either the qualitative or even quantitative account of the experience of trauma Nua'meh communicates. It is not merely the detail of his account but the way in which we see what a society looks like as it falls apart. The

¹¹ See: Shirareh, Wadah. *al umma al qalaqa: al 'amlun wa al 'asbiyya al 'aamliyya 'ala 'atba al dowla al lubnaniyya*. Beirut: Dar a Nahar lil Nashar, 1997, 132.

frantic search for food in a country accustomed to adequate harvests, a child's vain search for a vanished parent, and a mother's equally pitiful search for her children: this is what a human catastrophe looks like. Nua'meh's commentary on the famine and physical destruction of his homeland are situated within a larger retrospective of his life away from his homeland in the United States.

The volume of *Seventy: tales of an age* that this excerpt is drawn from is subheaded "the new world," evoking a distance between him and his home on manifold levels. His words not only help frame an historical investigation but bring into sharp relief precisely the extent to which this was a very human tragedy in such a way that is otherwise difficult to capture. The catastrophe of the war - *nekbat al harb* - haunts both examples of his poetry as well as his memoirs. The famine, and especially the effect it had on his countrymen lurks throughout his writing. This is particularly poignant in his narration of the loss that stems from the upheaval and dislocation associated with the famine. Hunger, Nua'meh tells us "is an infidel," using the powerful word *kafir* that carries with it damning spiritual as well as temporal implications. Here, hunger is as all-consuming as it is evil, breaking down social structures and relationships in its relentlessness. Spurred on by hunger, families are shattered by the search for food, with husbands unable to find their wives, mothers unable to find their children all of whom are just as likely as not to be lost on mountain paths or buried under a blanket of snow. In scenes that evoke the images of refugee columns and campus of displaced persons so ubiquitous in contemporary conflict zones, Nua'meh effectively illustrates what an atomized society looks like.

The catastrophe Syria and its people experienced in the war years was at once vast and intimate. Each person would have had a close relative or friend who had died either in battle or

from the famine. Whereas certain areas of France and eastern Europe experienced the ravages of war up close between 1914 and 1918, in no other theatre did the conflict so completely engulf a society in the way it did in Syria. No part of Greater Syria escaped the conflict either in terms of the environmental catastrophe of insect infestation, the resulting famine, or the conscripting Ottoman army and the battles it threw Syrians into, or as host to fleeing refugees. Everywhere and everything “not for a day or a month. Indeed for two years with its days and months” in some way experienced the “catastrophe of the war.” As the locusts of spring 1915 engulfed all vegetation, so too did the war engulf all of Greater Syria.

So total was the environmental and human destruction of the war that Nua'meh advises those returning to region in the years after the war:

...Do not ask when you return to the home country for the bosom of friends;
For hunger has left us no friends with whom we may speak intimately
Except the shadows of our dead.¹²

In a country subjected to years of famine and privation, only “shadows” of the former society remained. This ghostly image of Syria is an effective description for a land where perhaps 500,000 out of a population of less than four million perished in the space of the war years. However, Nua'meh evokes not only the massive scale of death and destruction, but the all-enveloping sense of atomization and disorientation that this catastrophe brought with it. Both emigre intellectuals like Nua'meh as well as those Syrians who had never left their villages in the mountains of the anti-Lebanon range or the verdant farms of the Syrian *jazeera* contended not only with the physical devastation of the famine but a sense of alienation that came with it. In the space of a few years, one in four of their countrymen had died, the economy had been

¹² Nu'aymah, Mikhail. “My Brother” Arthur John Arberry (trans.), *Modern Arabic Poetry*. London: Taylor's Foreign Press. 1950.

shattered, and four hundred years of cultural and intellectual history were forcibly ended by the imposition of French rule. The experience of the war years in Syria was not a matter of being effected either by the famine, or conscription, or combat, or economic devastation, by the sum total of these forces. Thus the Syria that emerged from the war into a new, uncertain, and French-dominated future would have been as Nua'meh says a country of "shadows."

Chapter I Trauma, Memory, Devastation, and Cultural Obliteration

Perhaps as many as 500,000¹³ people died from starvation and related diseases between 1915 and the effective extension of direct French rule throughout Greater Syria in the summer of 1920, out of a population of under four million.¹⁴ With figures like these, the scale of the disaster Syria faced dwarfed by far the casualties in the trenches of the Western Front or on the battlefields of Poland and western Russia.¹⁵ Moreover, this number does not even take into account the influx of Armenians fleeing massacres in Anatolia who died from the combined effects of their privations upon researching Syria.¹⁶ Syria's cities, principally Aleppo and Damascus would host more than 100,000 Armenian refugees by the end of the war.¹⁷ To be certain, some areas of Greater Syria suffered more than others, with Ottoman authorities meting out especially harsh punishment and repression for particular areas in coastal Syria (in modern Lebanon) and acute instances of starvation and disease in the cities of the Syrian interior. Yet, even the overwhelming devastation these figures suggest fail to capture the full scale of the

¹³ The institutional collapse that accompanied the final years of Ottoman rule in Greater Syria makes a precise determination of casualty figures difficult. However, based on a combination of European diplomatic reports especially from previously unexamined German and Austro-Hungarian diplomatic and military reports Linda Schatkowski Schilcher excavates point to a figure as high as 500,000. The percentages were certainly higher in some areas than others with perhaps 200,000 dead in northern Lebanon alone, though devastation was generalized throughout Syria. See Schilcher, 229 notes 2-13.

¹⁴ George Antonious in *The Arab Awakening* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company. 1939. 241) puts the figure at "less than four million. Zine N Zine in *The Emergence of Arab Nationalism (with a background study of Arab-Turkish relations in the Near East)*. Beirut: Khayats. 1966) cites a figure of 3,675,100 for the population of Syria (including: Aleppo, Syria, Beirut, the semi-autonomous *sanjaks* of Jerusalem and Zor, and Lebanon). See Zeine, 160.

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ L. Schatkowski Schilcher. "The Famine of 1915-1918 in Greater Syria." *Problems of the Modern Middle East in Historical Perspective: Essays in honor of Albert Hourani*. Reading: Ithaca Press (for Garnet Publishing Ltd.). 1992. 229-58. 229

¹⁷ Gelvin, James: *Divided Loyalties: nationalism and mass politics in Syria at the close of Empire*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press. 1998. 43

human tragedy that befell the region and its people. Historians have tended to underestimate the extent of suffering during the famine or localize the majority of its impact to the Christian villages of Mount Lebanon. Certainly, disproportionate wrath of the Turkish authorities was visited upon northern Lebanon where perhaps as many as 200,000¹⁸ people in this traditional stronghold of resistance to outside rule died. However, suffering was generalized to the whole of Syria, not only in terms of famine but the preponderance of disease and pestilence which were exacerbated by the Allied blockade and infected soldiers moving between the front and civilian areas.¹⁹

The famine receives only passing mention in Steven Hemsey Lonrigg's seminal *Syria and Lebanon Under French Mandate*²⁰ despite this disaster's central role setting the stage for the much of the Mandate itself. Rather than the emphasis on suffering on the coast and in Christian-dominated parts of the Lebanon that come from early histories of the period such as George Antonius' *The Arab Awakening*,²¹ the German and Austro-Hungarian diplomatic correspondence Linda Schatkowski Schilcher examines shows the famine to be at least as devastating in the rest of Syria as in the Lebanon.²² The German sources which Schilcher excavates also reveal frightening accounts of cannibalism and child murder as effects of starvation. The bread riots in Damascus of 1917-18 (although from German reports we know there were riots as early as

¹⁸ Schilcher recounts that the German informant Sandel related that the Ottoman Mutasarrif of Lebanon put his official death toll at 200,000 in reports to Istanbul. See Schilcher, 229 note 3

¹⁹ Hitti, Philip. *Syria: A short history*. London: MacMillan. 1959. 239

²⁰ Longrigg, Steven Hemsey. *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate*. London: Oxford University Press. 1958. 48-9, 76.

²¹ See: Antonius, George. *The Arab Awakening*. New York: J.B. Lippincott Company. 1939

²² Schilcher, 230

1916²³) illustrate that the truly horrific conditions of coastal Syria and the Lebanon were reflected in the interior.²⁴ Moreover, those in the rural areas closer to food production fared little better. Austro-Hungarian diplomatic correspondence notes railroad workers who raided fields for their unripe fruit and the Jewish Correspondence Bureau reported that far from being only the source of municipal riots, in the countryside and deserts were untold thousands suffering from starvation.²⁵ From the coastal cities where Maronite women were reported to have been kidnapping and eating children to the quiet starvation in the Hauran and desert, the whole of Syria that regularly produced more food crops than it consumed²⁶ wasted away. The Syria that emerged from the First World War and into the Mandate period was a land whose people had been utterly decimated.

A result of natural disaster and planned acts of terror, the terrible famine of 1915-18 was nothing short of a holocaust for the Syrian population. As an American woman related the scene in summer of 1916, “it was a common thing to find people searching the garbage heaps for orange peel, old bones, or other refuse, and eating them greedily when found. Everywhere women could be seen seeking edible weeds among the grass along the roads...”²⁷ However, it is a subject that historians not only have largely shied away from or inaccurately related (above), but one that many seem unwilling or unable to examine. As George Antonius, who provides us with an extensive account of the starvation, notes “one shrinks from a recital of particular cases, and there is not place in them for the portrayal of the agony of a human being” such as the terrible

²³ *ibid*, 238

²⁴ *ibid*, 230

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ Antonius, 204

²⁷ *ibid*

examples related above.²⁸ The famine, its history, and consequences has inspired films and poems but not a great deal in the way of scholarship as most historians of Syria and Lebanon in the period before 1970 tend to focus on more readily identifiable events and trends, such as the execution of partisans opposing Ottoman rule, the rebellion against France during the Mandate et cetera.²⁹

Yet, the famine persisted in living memory among its survivors, manifesting itself in a number of fascinating ways. Mandatory authorities during the Second World War were extremely sensitive to the history of the famine in wartime rationing given that most people in Syria had lived through it.³⁰ Politicians during the first thirty years of the Lebanese Republic, many of them survivors of the famine, cultivated images of themselves as prosperous and generous through personal obesity, becoming known as *shahm*³¹ and *fromagistes*.³² The caricature of the hefty Lebanese politician has clear roots in the suffering of famine years, given the subsequent preoccupation with eating. Furthermore, the famine reinvigorated politically inclined local actors after the war to push for full independence. The great Lebanese and Arab nationalist Riad al-Solh is said to have been so affected by the scene of starvation that he redoubled his already strong commitment to the project of total independence.³³

²⁸ *ibid*, 241

²⁹ Schilcher, 233

³⁰ *ibid*, 233. For more on the origins of the political economy of food in Syria during the late Ottoman and Mandate period see Schilcher, Linda S. "Railways in the Political Economy of Southern Syria 1890 - 1925." *The Syrian Land: processes of integration and fragmentation - Bilād al-Shām from the 18th to the 20th century*. Ed. Thomas Philipp and Brigit Schaebler. Stuttgart: Steiner. 1998. 97-112. Book.

³¹ "perspicacious/gallant", but also "fat/greasy"

³² *ibid*

³³ Seale, Patrick. *The Struggle for Arab Independence: Riad al-Solh and the makers of the modern middle east*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2010. 106.

The persistence of memories of the famine at the popular level are apparent well into the 1970s, with the effects of the famine continuing to shape social relationships. Michael Gilsenan's important study³⁴ of violence and masculinity in provincial northern Lebanese village during Lebanon's (comparatively) peaceful twilight years before the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War provides valuable insight into the degree to which the trauma of the famine remained a fixture of popular memory. A senior man recounted that "you had to steal from yourself to survive...the Turks would be wealthy and the rest wretched."³⁵ Other stories include of men selling their land for a few sacks of wheat and the legendary exchange of a man's land for a slice of orange.

For Gilsenan, these tales are part of the complex social hierarchies of a Lebanese village. However, they are clearly also part of the larger issue of persistence of disaster in society's memory. When one villager relates that "my grandfather was bought for a pail of milk in the time of the First World War hunger"³⁶ sixty years on from the famine he is giving voice to the devastating experience of the famine and the degree to which it punctuates his and his society's history. While these vignettes seem to emphasize suffering in Lebanon, given the evidence of the widespread nature of famine we can be fairly certain that they express the effect of the famine throughout historic Syria. From them there is the sense of a Syria devastated down to a very intimate level, beyond the battlefields and the executions of partisans in Beirut and Damascus that the histories focus on. Arabic language nationalist historiography, such as Khayriyya Qasimiyya's *The Arab Government in Damascus between 1918 - 1920*³⁷ emphasizes traditional

³⁴ See: Gilsenan, Michael. *Lords of the Lebanese Marches: Violence & Narrative in an Arab Society*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. 1996

³⁵ *ibid*, 121

³⁶ *ibid*, 141

³⁷ Qasimiyya, Khayriyya. *al hukuma al arabiyya fii dimashq bayn 1918 - 1920*. al qahira: dar al m'aarifa bi misr. 1971. See especially 24-7

nationalist tropes, such as the execution of partisans and “Turkish terrorism”³⁸ as the defining elements of the war years. Zeine N. Zeine’s seminal *Arab-Turkish Relations* reprises this motif, noting that it was the terror of Jamal Pacha’s rule that increased the spirit of the revolution among the Arabs.³⁹ Even the primary English source, Antonius’ *The Arab Awakening*, minimizes the role of the famine and its devastation in as much as it attributes causality to it at all. The famine and the related physical and environmental destruction itself is seldom named and even when it is, it is almost as an afterthought as though to speak of it is to wish its return. Nevertheless, it was a trauma that affected not only those who experienced it directly but that defined the lives of their descendants and would have major political implications during the Mandate.

The trauma of the famine was compounded exponentially by the economic destruction Syria experienced from the combined pressures of the Allied naval blockade of the coastal ports and rapidly increasing Ottoman fiscal insolvency. For Syria, the Ottoman military defeat was not only a political and cultural disaster but one that heralded economic disintegration.⁴⁰ Even before the Ottoman armies staggered back from Syria into Anatolia in 1918, the damage to the economy had been done. By May, 1917 Ottoman banknotes issued at Istanbul retained only a quarter of their face value, reflecting not only the lack of faith in Ottoman financial institutions by people in the provinces but the general collapse of the Syrian economy.⁴¹ The war increased the cost of living in the Ottoman Empire to a degree six-fold greater than in Germany or Britain⁴², a

³⁸ “*al irhaab a turkii*” *ibid*, 22

³⁹ Zeine, 132

⁴⁰ M. Şükrü Hanioglu. “The Second Constitutional Period, 1908-1918. *The Cambridge history of Turkey: Turkey in the modern world*. Ed. Resat Kasaba. vol. 4 Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2006-2009. 62-111. 98

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² *ibid*

situation that was exacerbated in Syria due to the blockade and the active fronts with the Arab forces in the east and the British in Egypt as well as the relative lack of economic development as compared to western Anatolia. By October, 1918, the Ottoman lira was worth only 14% of its paper value in Syria, adding to the suffering and reflecting the general state of devastation and collapse of the country. Whereas it is harder to measure to scale of human devastation given the lack of documentation in British and French archives and the policy of forbidding access to Ottoman documents dealing with provinces during the First World War by the Turkish Republic as Schilcher notes⁴³ the collapse in the value of Ottoman currency gives a tangible sense of the pressures facing a starving people. As the ports were shut because of the blockade, Egypt was closed to its neighbors, and the Arabs began to harass Syria, economic life would have largely and in some places entirely come to a halt.

The lack of historical investigation into the famine are all the more stark given fundamental the experience of the famine was to subsequent developments in throughout Greater Syria. Not only were new types of political relationships rooted in the famine years, but the famine was a signal political event, inaugurating social and civic cynicism and a mistrust of institutions even as it engendered new ones.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it revealed tensions between regions of Syria, particularly between the grain-producing Syrian interior and the coastal region and Mount Lebanon⁴⁵ that were to portend the political cleavages of the Mandates years and the early history of the Syrian and Lebanese republics in particular. These were real divisions and manifest themselves in the documents examined below. Indeed, the collapse of the Syrian-Lebanese

⁴³ Schilcher, 233

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 258

⁴⁵ *ibid*, 252

Customs Union in 1950 and the subsequent divergent political and economic paths the two countries would embark on were rooted in issues dealing with coastal areas' demands for a cheap, reliable food supply from the interior region of Greater Syria.⁴⁶ These tensions are borne out in the pages of the newspapers examined below, especially the issue of economic and political unity between the coast and interior. They reveal a Syrian society gripped with intense anxieties about its present and future in the aftermath of the catastrophic war years.

Compounding trauma, producing anxiety: reordering the intellectual and socioeconomic world.

Emerging from the devastation and dislocation of the war years, Syrian society faced a round of new threats to its integrity with the imposition of the French mandatory rule in 1920. The experience of the Mandate was, as Schilcher rightly points out, framed by the famine and the trauma of that event persisted throughout its duration. This was amplified by the total disappearance of familiar cultural and linguistic structures, even as the political and economic system of the previous four centuries evaporated. Thus the sense of anxiety is palpable in news reports like those below in which journalists are at pains to describe at once the frustrations with the current system and the desperate need to find a way to make it work. There is an implicit awareness of the peril Syria faced as the constant refrain to the danger the nation faces indicates. This peril and the latent anxiety it betrays backgrounds this and most other example from the press from this period.

Operating a modified version of Marechal Lyautey's divide-and-rule model of colonial domination in Morocco, France immediately set about segmenting Greater Syria (Palestine and

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 252-3

the Transjordan already partitioned and under British Mandate), first separating out Lebanon and then creating a series of internal states within the Mandate.⁴⁷ At the same moment the French set out to reorder political arrangements with these internal states they were also setting up they also were concerned with reordering intellectual life in Syria.

In April and May of 1921 under the auspices of the High Commissioner of the French Republic in Syria and Lebanon General Gouraud, Beirut was host to *La Foire-Exposition de Beyrouth*. While many awards and prizes were awarded to the best mineral water, jewelry, and automobiles showcased, the events were also the forum for a number of conferences on issues dealing with France's new Middle Eastern possessions. The conferences ran the gamut of topics of interest to the French administrators there gathered, from French self-congratulation for one-sided victories at the Battle of Maysalun⁴⁸ to a report on tourism and its potentials, to the condition of agriculture in the Mandate. Of these, one report is particularly striking. Opening with the martial images of victorious French forces marching into the principal cities of Greater Syria, "Instruction in Syria during the period of organization (1919-1921)" M. Chevalley, advisor to the High Commissioner for Instruction describes France's interest in reorganizing education.⁴⁹ This effort at reorganization is driven by a French perception that what defines the state of

⁴⁷ There is much excellent scholarship on the French strategy of divide-and-conquer and its naked intentions of stifling the development of cohesive political communities both in Syria and Morocco and the relationships between these two systems. See Burke, Edmund III "A Comparative View of French Native Policies in Morocco and Syria" *Middle Eastern Studies*, IX (1973), 175-186 and Gershovich, Moshe. *French Military Rule in Morocco: Colonialism and its Consequences*. London: Cass, 2000, and Bidwell, Robin. *Morocco Under Colonial Rule: French Administration of Tribal Areas 1912-1956*. London: Cass, 1973

⁴⁸ The military engagement outside of Damascus in 1920 where a French army defeated a force of nationalist Syrian volunteers paving the way for France's uncontested assumption the Mandate.

⁴⁹ Haut Commissariat de la République française en Syrie et au Liban. *La Syrie et le Liban en 1921. Le Foire-Exposition de Beyrouth, conférences, liste des récompenses*. Paris, Emile Larose, 1922. 103. "En October 1918, les troupes française sont entrées à Beyrouth et, en août 1920, les troupes victorieuses du général Gouraud sont entrées à Damas at Alep...Dans quelle situation avons-nous trouvé les écoles jadis flourishing de ce beau pays? et quelles mesures la France a-t-elle pu prendre, depuis un ou deux ans, pour la réorganisation rapide de l'enseignement en Syrie."

education in Syria, especially in state schools, are problems and paucity: too few location, not enough school materials or furniture, too small a budget⁵⁰ Despite these difficulties, the public instruction authorities in the Mandate acted quickly, issuing instructions that schools were to remain open, staff were to stay on at their posts, and that the French language would replace Turkish as one of the languages of instruction.⁵¹ In its place, the plan sets out “*Français obligatoire*”⁵² as the secondary language of instruction in official schools.

The point about French replacing Turkish as one of the languages of instruction appears to be a matter of course given the new political realities in Syria. However, it is representative of a larger shift. As Michael Provence has demonstrated, education in the late Ottoman Empire was undeniably a more elite affair, however there were important popular levels within it. This was the case in Syria where two levels of Ottoman state education produced young men of more modest background inculcated in the Ottoman milieu as well as elite graduates to administer the empire. These institutions took the form of the Maktab ‘Anbar, an elite, tuition-based school that sent its graduates to the Mekteb-i Mülkiye (the Ottoman Imperial Civil service school) as well the elite foreign and Ottoman law and medical schools, and the more popular Maktab al-I’dadiyya al-’Askariyya.⁵³ Maktab al-I’dadiyya al-’Askariyya, or the Ottoman Damascus Military Secondary Academy, a fully subsidized institution providing a means of entry to education and state service for the sons of peripheral notables, beyond those of the traditional

⁵⁰ *ibid*, 106. “...*pas de locaux, pas de matériel, pas de fournitures, pas d’argent, pas de budget...*”

⁵¹ *ibid*

⁵² *ibid*, 107

⁵³ Provence, Michael. *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 2005. 39

urban elites and landowners.⁵⁴ Importantly, many of the leaders of the 1925-6 Syrian Revolt and members of the National Bloc who shared rule with the French Mandatory authorities from 1928 to independence in 1946 were graduates of these Ottoman military academies.⁵⁵ For these young men Ottoman Turkish as well as Arabic would have been their primary languages of instruction and one of the primary mediums of intellectual reproduction.

Replacing Turkish with French as the co-instructional language exemplifies that massive cultural and intellectual break that the period of 1914-20 represented for Greater Syria. Not only did this population experience the trauma and suffering of the famine and economic collapse, but they faced the loss of four centuries of cultural and intellectual continuity with the imposition of French language instruction. Expressions of imperial Ottoman culture were ubiquitous in the empire's major Arab cities during the late nineteenth century, with great homes adorned with frescoes of Istanbul and the Bosphorus, and other public symbols of Ottomanism.⁵⁶ Thus it is no small coincidence that the martial scenery of Maysalun was invoked at the beginning of the report: this was a campaign every bit as violent as the French Army's drive into the Syrian interior. In order to accomplish this reorganization based on the French language, the Mandatory authorities turned to Egypt, whose educational system was set up along French lines. Ten years of foundational French-Arabic instruction⁵⁷ and passing the requisite exams prepared the Egyptian student to continue higher education in France.⁵⁸ The Syrian exams for primary

⁵⁴ *ibid*

⁵⁵ *ibid*

⁵⁶ *ibid*

⁵⁷ Broken down into two five-year sequences of the *certificat d'études primaires* and the *baccalauréat égyptien*. Haut Commissariat de la République française en Syrie et au Liban, 108

⁵⁸ *ibid*

certification were planned to commence the next year (1922), with the baccalaureate exams in the following year, however poor organization and lack of teachers were seen to be possible reasons they might be put on hold.⁵⁹

On the surface, such educational⁶⁰ reform efforts appears part of the detached scientific progressivism that defined the League of Nations and its Mandate projects, rationalizing a backward system and bringing it in line with modernity. However, this massive, top-down revision of the educational system must be seen as cause of major cultural crisis and anxiety. It is telling that this official has only dire reports about the state of education in Syria, a situation that can only be remedied by making it modern, specifically in terms of French notions of what modern education is. However, modernization here is also part of the program of the de-Ottomanization of Syria and bringing the territory into the French imperial orbit. Effacing the Turkish language from the schools and replacing it as one of the languages of instruction with French breaks with hundred of years of Ottoman linguistic and cultural tradition. Moreover, this was not only a technocratic adjustment but an act of social and intellectual violence against Syrian society. Emerging out of the physical and economic trauma of the First World War period, Syria was confronted not only with attacks on its territorial integrity, but the entire system of intellectual reproduction was being transformed. Compounded by the experience of

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 111

⁶⁰ The main thrust of French activity vis-a-vis educational reforms was focused on the government school inherited from the Ottoman period as the report in *La Syrie et le Liban en 1921. Le Foire-Exposition de Beyrouth, conférences, liste des récompenses* outlines. Of these there were 458 “official schools” between both administrative divisions of the Mandate (Lebanon and Syria) although no distinction is made in the French documents between which of these might have been the Maktab ‘Anbar or the Maktab al-I’ dadiyya al-’ Askariyya or similar institutions (see Haut Commissariat de la République française en Syrie et au Liban, 107). The documents are largely silent as to French intentions vis-a-vis religious education in Syria although they seem to suggest that most attentions were focused on the “official schools.” However, we know that general administration of religious affairs was brought under the purview of the High Commissioner through the office of the Controller-General of the General Commission of the High Council of the Awqaff who was responsible directly to the French prelate (see: Longrigg, 137).

the famine and the political division of Syria, the reorganization of the educational system is a window into the sense of cultural anxiety people in Syria would have been experiencing. In less than a decade, almost all the institutions and structures that had defined life in Syria for four hundred years disappeared. It is in the context of this physical, economic, cultural, and intellectual moonscape that journalists took up the burden of creating a new language to talk about their new circumstances.

The implications of the imposition of this new educational system were not lost on Syrians. To them, the lack of requisite amounts of furniture or a budget was not as important as the alien nature of the new educational paradigms foisted upon them. While the French saw a disastrous situation left by the Turks as they beat a hasty retreat from Syria, Syrians saw a situation that needed reform, not a new, foreign system imposed from the outside. Reflecting back in 1928 on almost a decade of so-called French educational reforms, the newspaper *a Sha'b* tells its readers that “all of us know that the curriculum of learning and the systems which the schools function under here need much in the way of adjustments and reforms⁶¹...” How could one expect “the pupil” in this sorry state of affairs to become an “...upstanding man serving his nation and country”⁶² The Mandatory authorities, it seems, had forgotten that “...adopting the curriculum of instruction and education from the schools of the west and applying it here is absurd therefore because the environment here is not the environment there.”⁶³ Mirroring the hybridized system of education M. Chevalley reported on with such gusto clearly had failed to

⁶¹ “*kulna ya'lim en minahij a ta'liim wa a terbiyya wa a nuthum aletii tusiir 'aleyha al madaaris hunna tehtaaj ila kethiir min a ta'diil wa al islaah...*” *a Sha'b*, 25 August, 1928. 1. The Damascus Historical Documents Center (DHDC)

⁶² *ibid*, “*a telmiith...rejelin 'aalin khaadimin li watanu wa bilaadu...*” *ibid*

⁶³ *ibid*. “*iqtibaas minaahej a terbiyya wa a ta'liim min mdaaris a gharb wa tatbiiqha hunna 'ala 'alaatha skhuf la u'add lihu skhuf wa thalik lienna al bi'aa hunna ghiir bi'aat hunak...*” *ibid*

impress Syrians. The article goes on to complain that the Ministry of Education has been host to a number of ministers, a few of whom promise much and deliver little, others who use the office to seek confessional privileges, and so on.⁶⁴ The system was not just a failure, but a totally alien and alienating experience. The local authorities and their French masters were ignorant of the effect this was having not just on the Syrian pupil, but the nation as a whole. How was the student to improve himself and serve the nation with this education he was receiving that was not suited to “here” but rather to the western “there”? The frustration is tangible given how integral the writer sees education to the future. If the nation was its students, how were the people meant to give it strength with such an alien and poorly administered educational system?

The French did not limit themselves to a reordering of the Syrian intellectual world. Syria was to be a laboratory for a rationalized, reoriented economic space as well. Bringing the Syrian economy in line with the larger French imperial economic system was an operation that demanded a type of socioeconomic violence similar to the French authorities’ violence against the traditional educational system. Much in the way that the reordering of the intellectual and educational sphere in Syria spoke in the language of modernization and scientific detachment, economic “modernization” employed the vocabulary of rational, scientific detachment as part of the process of “renewing” and “reordering” Syria.

Moreover, it is important not to mistake French attacks on the structure of the Syrian economy as part of a pattern of gradual French economic penetration in the Levant since the time of the Latin Crusades (in the way that French colonials and much historiography saw the sweep of French history vis-a-vis Syria and their proprietary claims to it). Looking back on the

⁶⁴ *ibid*

economic relationship between France and Great Syria between 1860 and the First World War reveals this to be a fiction. To be certain, France played a major role in the economy of the Ottoman Empire, with especial emphasis on Greater Syria. However, this was an economic relationship that was always mediated through the filter of the Ottoman State in the form of major capital expenditures. The shrill crowing of the chief British diplomat in Beirut on the eve of the War to declare before the House of Commons that “Turkey’s independence is a vanishing quantity before the advance of the French financiers.”⁶⁵ reveals that France enjoyed an enviable economic position in the Ottoman empire as compared with European rivals. Indeed, At the outbreak of the War, French bankers held sixty percent of the Empire’s public debt (at usurious rates) and accounted for forty five percent of private investment.⁶⁶ Thus, that France played a major economic role in Syria and the Ottoman Empire generally is clear. Yet, the degree to which French capital consumed the Syrian economy of Greater Syria prior to the imposition of the Mandate and its effective colonial rule over the country is typically overstated. French banks did finance the construction of some rail lines,⁶⁷ however, Mark Sykes fears ought not be mistaken as a reference to a massive influx of French businessmen and entrepreneurs into Greater Syria and the Ottoman Empire generally. Rather, Sykes would have been remarking on French capitalists’ role as the overwhelming majority holders of Ottoman sovereign debt and financiers

⁶⁵ Dawn, Ernest. *From Ottomanism to Arabism*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973, 150.

⁶⁶ Andrew, C.M. and A.S. Kanya-Forstner. *France Overseas: The Great War and the Climax of French Imperialism*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1981. 40

⁶⁷ The construction of rail lines exemplified the extent to which French economic inroads into Syria were hewed to major capital projects. Indeed, the overwhelming dependence of French capital on railroad projects in the Ottoman Empire as opportunities for investment above all others is revealed in the French reaction of devastation to At the beginning of 1911, the Russo-German Postdam agreement removed St. Petersburg’s objections to the Berlin-Baghdad railway. This deeply upset the French as it all but guaranteed that the line would go through northern Syria, the region with which France had the deepest cultural, religious, and economic ties. This was preceded in 1902 by another diplomatic catastrophe. Both Italy and Germany secured their own religious concessions from the Sublime Porte, thereby eroded France’s ecclesiastical monopoly in Syria. See: Andrew, C.M. and A.S. Kanya-Forstner. *France Overseas: The Great War and the Climax of French Imperialism*, 42-44.

of some major capital projects. This belies the massive inroads German and Italian cultural and religious institutions and capital had made into Syria in the two decades leading up to the First World War. Syria was certainly an integral part of the Mediterranean economy, just not solely the province of French economic interests - yet.

Moreover, this seeming massive French economic involvement in Syria must be evaluated in context to a general French indifference to this economic relationship. As the doyenne of the colonial lobby, hawkish former Foreign Minister, current Colonial Minister, and diplomatic architect of the Moroccan Protectorate Théophile Delcassé, noted that for France, “Syria is of no value.”⁶⁸ Syria on its own was worthless, and such that it mattered to Delcassé and the rest of the colonial lobby was only in the context of the larger French relationship with the Ottoman state. Thus even the shrillest among the French colonial lobby resisted moves that would facilitate Ottoman collapse. Those, like Robert de Caix, among the most senior and outspoken members of the colonial lobby, remarked that the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire would mark “an incontestable loss for France.”⁶⁹ Unlike Morocco, the occupation and colonial subjugation of which was seen to be integral to the *domestic* security of France, there was never more than a passing interest in Syria outside of the fringes of the colonial lobby who viewed the Franco-Syrian relationship through the twin lenses of religion and myth.

It is crucial to evaluate this complex history alongside both French moves to reorder the educational and intellectual space in Syria but also the economic space. It is a history that reflects an interest in Syria only in terms of its attachment to the larger Ottoman political and economic space. When this history is taken into account, French economic policy in Syria in the

⁶⁸*ibid*, 57

⁶⁹ *ibid*, 74

early years of the Mandate begins to reveal other motivations. In a seldom-referenced event, High Commissioner General Henri Gouraud Edict No. 753 of 2 March, 1921 put the administration of *Awqaff* (religious trust properties) property directly under the purview of the High Commissioner.⁷⁰ This edict opened the way for massive economic change at the local level, a change that had signal implications. Bringing *Awqaff* properties under the direct purview of the High Commissioner gave the chief representative of French authority in the Mandates facilitated the penetration of French influence into the local economy in ways that would have been impossible even for the Ottoman Sultan. Though made up of Muslims, the High Council of the Awqaf was headed by a Controller General that was the effective executive of the High Council's General Commission (all set up in March, 1921 after the edict was issued) was an appointee of the French High Commissioner with direct responsibility to him.⁷¹ Such a move was key to the French program of bringing both the political and economic situation in Syria and Lebanon in line with French "political objectives in realizing a form of a marginal capitalist state" with a "deep degree of dependence on the French capitalist market."⁷²

Awqaff, (singular: *waqf*) or religious trust properties, are a particular religious-economic institution that evolved in the Islamic world⁷³ that sets aside real property to benefit religious causes or institutions. These institutions appear to have had as much a political and social role aside from being financial instruments. Putting real property into *awqaff* prevented the rapacious

⁷⁰ Murad, Muhammad. *al-Tamalluk wa-al-sultah fi al-Janub al-Lubnan, 1920-1975*. Bayrut : Manshrt al-Jmi'ah al-Lubnanyah, 2009. 163

⁷¹ Longrigg, 137.

⁷² Murad, 163.

⁷³ Though it is Islamic law that governs *Awqaff* properties and their administration, Christians and Jews as well as Muslims regularly availed themselves of the favorable tax privileges *Ouqaff* afforded. Indeed, such was the case in Mandate Syria and Lebanon - see: Murad, Muhammad. *al-Tamalluk wa-al-sultah fi al-Janubi al-Lubnan, 1920-1975*, especially page 162.

tax collectors⁷⁴ of the central government (both in the Ottoman period and before) of taking these properties. These properties took two forms: the *ahli* or family *waqf* whereby the owner of the property declared it and its income to be a charitable gift and be maintained within the family or go directly to the specified charitable or religious purpose.⁷⁵ Understood as being “transferred to God”⁷⁶ as “property of God,” these properties (at least in their temporal form) were considered nontaxable, and thus a form of a proto-tax shelter.⁷⁷ Importantly, once designated as a *waqf*, property could not be sold again on the open market, effectively freezing property and curbing the private mass-accumulation of properties.

Along with their obvious financial benefits, *awqaff* had important social and political functions as an example of localism and a check on the prerogatives of the Sultan and his deputies. Push-back on imperial power was a key function of the *awqaff* beyond their technical financial role. - a crucial traditional tool of resistance to domination by outside forces, even if they were nominally allied or technically under the suzerainty of them. These proceeds from the *Awqaff* undergirded the financial structure of a system that provided social benefits and welfare, forming a parallel society that was both financially and (significantly) politically independent of the central government and its agents. The *awqaff* were a major if not the most important force in the nineteenth century Ottoman economy. Between one and three quarters of the arable land in the Ottoman Empire was under the control of some kind of *awqaff* and and even higher percentage in urban areas, putting the majority of taxable land outside the direct control of the

⁷⁴Issawi, Charels. *An Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1982. 173

⁷⁵ *ibid*, 135

⁷⁶ Issawi, 135

⁷⁷ Jones, Janine. “The Contributions of *Awqaf* to the Troubled Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Economy” Unpublished paper, University of Texas at Austin. Cited with author’s permission. 6

Sultan, albeit despite periodic attempts by the central authority to insinuate itself into the governance of the *awqaff*⁷⁸.

Putting these properties under the protection of religious imprimatur effectively created an alternative source of economic and social authority that, while operating within the framework of Ottoman (or previous) rule, preserved a great deal of local control of resources. Of course, this was not some kind of proto-shareholder democracy, but it is an historical trend that expresses a considerable degree of local and regional power. However, as an integral part of the social and economic fabric of Greater Syria, the prevalence of the *awqaff* equipped society with the means to resist encroachment of outside forces.

Yet, Gouraud's Edict No. 753 undercut the entire system of the *awqaff* by ending the independence upon which it depended. This act marked a successful iteration of countless attempts throughout the centuries on the part of the central authorities to impose their control on the periphery through co-opting the *awqaff*. Moreover, this edict provided for the parcelling out of *awqaff* land allowing for the sale and private accumulation of property in new ways that would further French capital penetration.⁷⁹ Both the rural notable Muslim and Christian families whose members administered the *awqaff* retained control of the properties, and the system persisted throughout the period of the Mandate.⁸⁰ Yet, this French act opened the way for the mass-accumulation of smaller properties previously frozen in the *awqaff*. Traditionally, such acts were strictly forbidden or at least sharply curtailed, forestalling the emergence of a leviathan

⁷⁸ For more see *Institution du Vaqf au XVIIIe Siecle en Turquie: Etude Socio-Historique* (Ankara, Turkey, Editions Ministere de la Culture: 1990), 5, as cited in Jones, 6.

⁷⁹ Murad, 163

⁸⁰ *ibid*, 162

state. Such a balance formed no insignificant part of the social compact between local and central authorities.

Situated in the larger history of the French empire in the Middle East, this edict illuminates a larger economic geography and political economy of economic violence. When Gourad issued Edict No. 753, France had ruled Algeria for nearly a century during which time it developed and refined its mechanisms of economic violence. Within a decade of the initial French invasion in 1830, it articulated a policy designed specifically to encourage and facilitate colonization through the French state's legal intervention in the sale of lands previously held in tribal or communal trust.⁸¹ More than one third of the prime cultivable land in Algeria's verdant coastal plain was held collectively by tribal chiefs who paid a 1.5% tax to the state.⁸² In Algeria, the French authorities developed and honed the arguments and legal mechanisms they used to encourage (and sometimes force) the sale of *waqf* properties they determined had fallen into a state of disrepair in the Mandates.

Added to this were specific French actions vis-a-vis the *habous* (the local Algerian term for *waqf*) properties adds to this history of wrenching, economic violence. These properties were confiscated by the French state in 1839, which assumed responsibility for their maintenance and paying the salaries of religious workers.⁸³ Under French direction the *habous* were all but universally mismanaged and figured as one of the most intolerable abuses of the colonial period

⁸¹ Issawi, 139

⁸² The verdant cultivable *tell* region of coastal Algeria was an area of some 14 million hectares of which 5 million were administered by tribal chiefs who paid the 1.5% tax, as well as 3 million more acres of forests that were used for grazing. *ibid*

⁸³ McDougall, James. *History and Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. 2006. 139, note 134

by Algerian nationalists.⁸⁴ By promoting the myth that *habous/waqf* property and communally administered lands in Algeria were used unproductively by the tribes, French authorities were able to legitimate their sale to colonists, breaking down a primary economic barrier to the French colonial project. Thus, French authorities drew on a history of deploying this kind of economic violence in Algeria to forcibly extend its influence deep into the rural economy and thereby the power structure of the area of the Mandates.

The consequences (for Lebanon in particular) were massive and likely contributed significantly to the changed social, economic, and political forces in the modern Syrian and Lebanese republics. Indeed, we can trace much of the instability of modern Lebanon not to tedious ethnic or religious tensions but the fundamental, top-down reordering of the rural agricultural economy that Edict No. 753 facilitated. It effectively opened the way for full private ownership to the major Muslim and Christian families who had been restricted by the *waqf* laws allowing them to dispose of the properties as they saw fit. This new, sudden land market marked not only the abrupt and shocking realignment of the rural (and heretofore largely autonomous if interdependent) economy with the larger French imperial economy but also the beginning of the breakdown of the traditional economic and sociopolitical structures Greater Syria was based on.⁸⁵ While statist interventions in the 1950s and 1960s by nationalist regimes in Syria prevented the worst of the damage, the breakdown of the rural economy and the wrenching reordering of

⁸⁴ *ibid*

⁸⁵ It is true that the *Mutasarafiyya*, inaugurated in 1861 of Mount Lebanon witnessed such changes somewhat earlier, however, our concern here is with the trend throughout Greater Syria from the inception of the Mandate.

the Lebanese economy with all its social and political implications has its roots in these early moments of the Mandate.⁸⁶

Taken as a whole, the intended effect of the Haut Commissariat's edict was to break down the bulwark of rural economic (and therein political) independence to central (French) authority and interference. By promoting the consolidation of rural landholdings under the fully private control of the large Muslim and Christian families resident in the cities, the French encouraged a situation in which these traditional bases of rural autonomy were, in the words of one Lebanese historian, "dissolved."⁸⁷ Couched in the detached language⁸⁸ of the toothless League of Nations Permanent Mandates Commission, it is easy to miss the consequence of a note about new French efforts to register lands and not connect it back to the direct attack on the local economy. The French authorities clearly appreciated the important role the *awqaff* played and its capacity to act as a local buffer to foreign power and encroachment. In this way, "the newly ascendant capitalist landowners would be doubly dependent on the French who thereby increased their power over Greater Lebanon all the more."⁸⁹ The opportunities that permitted their economic ascendancy came directly from this French intervention into the traditional economic system. Moreover, as these families were increasingly absentee landlords living away from lands in the cities⁹⁰ they were all the more dependent on French authority and the Mandatory State to protect their

⁸⁶ For more on the reordering of the Lebanese economy and its social and political ramifications between 1920 and 1960, see al Kassir, Samir. *Tarikh Beirut*. Bayrūt : Dār al-Nahār. 2009 especially pages 381-95.

⁸⁷ Murad, 134

⁸⁸ "*Land System* - The Commission has been interested to learn that the mandatory Power has set up and is beginning to apply a system of registration of lands." From League of Nations Permanent Mandates Commission. "Report on the Work of the Fifth (Extraordinary) Session of the Commission". Geneva, League of Nations, 1924, 3

⁸⁹ Murad, 163

⁹⁰ To be certain, absentee landlordism was by no means the only because of French economic interventions. This trend dates back to the promulgation of the Ottoman Land Code of 1858, however, destabilizing the system of *awqaff* through its effective privatization would have massively accelerated this longer-term trend.

expanding economic interests. This dependent relationship pushed the French economic and political reach deeper into the countryside, further entangling the Syrian and Lebanese economy with the larger French imperial system, often to the exclusion of other economic relationships.⁹¹

The evidence is spotty in some ways but taken overall it points to a French tendency towards destruction and reordering along lines for economically expedient for French interests.

Privileging French goods and employing executive powers such as Edict No. 753, forced the Greater Syrian economy into the structure of the French imperial economy.

Like the edicts that effaced the Ottoman cultural legacy through the imposition of French as the secondary language of instruction, the orders concerning the economy represented acts of violence against a society that had already experienced so much of it. It is important to see this not merely as the detached scientific disinterest of the League of Nations and its Mandate projects. Rather, like the effacing of Turkish from the school curriculum the edict reordering the *awqaff* system was an episode of planned economic violence against Syrian society. This was part of a concerted French campaign of violence of which physicality was but one of several kinds. It is the intellectual and physical violence that not only marks this as an episode of trauma indicative of a larger social trauma, but also as an attempt to create a break with the past and inaugurate a “year zero” in Syria.⁹²

⁹¹ France played so fast and loose with its trusteeship of its Mandates that even the rubber-stamp League of Nations Permanent Mandates Commission was moved to take notice: “The Mandates Commission drew the attention of the accredited Representative to Article 7 of Ordinance No. 2542/I of April 3rd, 1924, imposing a double duty (30%) on goods from countries adjacent to Germany unless accompanied by a certificate of origin and an invoice bearing the visa of a French consul. As these provisions entail an additional financial charge, they therefore give rise to discriminating treatment in comparison with goods from other States Members of the League, which is contrary to the principle laid down in paragraph I, Article II of the Mandate. The Commission has taken note of the accredited Representative’s promise to draw his Government’s attention to this point.” League of Nations, 3.

⁹² I am grateful to University of Texas at Austin Prof. Benjamin Brower’s suggestion to think about the traumatic break in this way.

From total destruction to a national industry?

Readers of the Damascene newspaper *al Zamaan* on the morning of the 30th of April, 1925 would have been looking forward to the second in a series of articles about “Our National Industry.” However, for the second report in a series about “our” national industry there is precious little information of substance on the physical state of industry in Mandate Syria. There however intriguing insights to be gained as to why it is important to *talk* about national industry, “for there is no action without activeness, no fame without advertising, no utility from the treasure in the heart of the earth and depths of the seas”⁹³ without first exerting great efforts. The readers were to understand this as a call to arms to build the nation and its industry as the nation is not “the four walls we live in...and it is not the country we live in...for the nation is what this great patch of earth encompasses from the population, from great intellectual minds...thus the country is its population and its civilization”⁹⁴ The nation, the newspaper inveighed to its readership, was something beyond than what they could touch, beyond their immediate surroundings. Rather, it was the population and its civilization that comprised it and that had to be tapped into to realize the treasures of the earth and watery depths. Only as a unified population would “national industry” realize its full potential.

Conversations about marshaling populations and the strength of civilizations for the benefit of a national goals and involved discussions of happenings along international borders are subjects we have come to expect from the vastly changed political geography of the Middle East in this period. This history of the Mandates in the 1920s, especially those in the space of the

⁹³ “*fa la nishaat bilaa nashiit wa laa shura bilaa da’aiia wa laa fa’ida min kenz medfun fi qulb al ard ou ‘a’maa q albihaar.*” *a Zamaan*, “*a sina’aa alwataniyya*” 30 April, 1925. DHDC

⁹⁴ *ibid*

former Ottoman territories in the Levant is most often read back through the filter of the modern republics that began to take on real shape only in the late 1930s and 1940s. The heady nationalism that characterized this later period thereby tends to inform the approach of these histories. However, when we read this history forward through the final years of Ottoman rule, the war, and the arrival of the French, new questions emerge: Why is it that in Syria in the 1920s do we find a discussion about borders in a place that is not yet a nation? What is the significance of mention of an (as yet) unrealized “national industry” only a few short years after a war and famine that killed perhaps 500,000 of Syria’s people? What is this collective forgetting about and does this language tell us by not telling us? Where and why did they develop the language to talk about the vastly different political, economic, social, and intellectual circumstances they found themselves in?

As such, we can point to this as a traumatic break with the larger experience of trauma in Syria - the trauma of the famine, of the war, of manifestations of French violence - as the driving historical force in the years immediately before and after the imposition of the Mandate. It would be inaccurate to clumsily psychologize the nuanced experience of trauma and destruction in Syria as an example of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, despite certain obvious parallels.⁹⁵ Indeed, the primary medical reference material on trauma tells us that “specific assessments of traumatic experiences and concomitant symptoms are needed for such individuals.”⁹⁶ While there is no doubt of the continuity of certain historical trends that emerged before 1914 and continued long after the appearance of the modern Lebanese and Syrian Republics, there were

⁹⁵ “Individuals who have recently immigrated from areas of considerable social unrest and civil conflict...may be especially reluctant to divulge experiences of torture and trauma...” American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition, Text Revision. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Association. 2000. 446

⁹⁶ *ibid*

fundamental ruptures that reshaped society. The experience of the war and famine but especially French efforts at a top-down remaking of Syrian society illustrates that the trauma was not only the driving historical force of the period but that it defined the political foundations of the Mandate. Schilcher is right to argue that the famine was a signal political event as well as an environmental and physical disaster.⁹⁷ Yet, to say that the famine was a remarkable historical event in its own right does not go far enough: the famine was but the most catastrophic and readily apparent of several traumas that Syrian society endured. It was the reaction to these traumas, particularly the economic and intellectual violence of the French Mandatory authorities that drove the political discussion among Syrians. The language encountered in the public reactions to the reordering of the educational system (above) and in the extensive discussions about “borders” and (below) was a reaction to this trauma.

Negotiating the idea of a “nation” and other new concepts in the political space of the Mandate found in these newspapers especially should not be read as being about the nation *per se*. Rather, this is an anxious response by a traumatized population to their physical and social trauma of the famine and the the new and on-going violence inflicted by the Mandatory authorities. In Syria, the political community was not imagining itself as a nation out of sense of connection to a once-and-future Syrian nation. Rather, this was a desperate, anxious search for a way to create some kind of new political community that could serve the needs of a traumatized population and bring a stop to ongoing French violence. By taking trauma as the point of departure, the events of the Mandate and the nature of the modern republics come into sharper resolution.

⁹⁷ Schilcher, 258.

Chapter II Toward a Theory of Trauma

In the wake of the devastating 1984-5, Ethiopian famine very little indigenous memorialization appeared to have survived. Cormac Ó Gráda, in his comprehensive *Famine*, points out how this trend of forgetting reflects the “porosity of memory,” that “even those who composed verses at the time had forgotten most of them - or perhaps did not want to remember them.”⁹⁸ Such a tendency toward forgetting the memory of the famine - or perhaps the willful forgetting - is very much what Mikhail Nu’ameh is suggesting in telling his readers “... do not ask when you return to the home country for the bosom of friends; for hunger has left us no friends with whom we may speak intimately except the shadows of our dead.”⁹⁹ Not only is there a physical absence of friends and family who have died but their memories have been forgotten - consciously it would seem - as well. This reveals much about the impact of a massive, unprecedented traumatic event in shaping memory and memorialization (or the conspicuous lack thereof).

Shattering the polity: political trauma

The experience of Greater Syria during the war years in terms of social and cultural trauma best explains the political outcomes of the subsequent decades. The famine played a major role fundamentally reshaping and reordering the political, economic, and social landscape as Schilcher argues. However, the famine as a traumatic experience altered peoples’ relationship to their memory of the event. Thus, we need to go beyond a limited examination of the famine and consider how the totality of this traumatic episode - conscription, economic collapse, the

⁹⁸ Ó Gráda, Cormac. *Famine*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2009. 39

⁹⁹ Nu’aymah, Mikhail. “My Brother” Arthur John Arberry (trans.), *Modern Arabic Poetry*. London: Taylor’s Foreign Press. 1950.

imposition new French linguistic, intellectual, and economic paradigms - formed a new kind of political community in Syria.

“The essence of trauma” as Slavoj Žižek relates, “is precisely that it is too horrible to be remembered to be integrated into our symbolic universe...”¹⁰⁰ Traumatic phenomena defy our systems of understanding and our coping mechanisms, both collectively and as individuals. More to the point, traumatic memory is a kind for which no interpretation has yet been formed.¹⁰¹ Traumatic events are particular historical episodes in that they produce unique types of memories on the part of those who experience them: they are “events that resist meaning.”¹⁰² These are events that are so unprecedented, so outside of our expectations, that we do not know what has happened. Thus, it is not a matter of remembering what we thought happened, rather one can only remember what one saw. This specific visual experience forms the unspeakable memory. Wartime conscription, death in battle or long winters are tangible in the sense that they can be remembered. Yet, all of these combined with famine - at once a ubiquitous and invisible catastrophe - is difficult to quantify as an historical experience. “Trauma is” as Maurice Blanchot says “the disaster unexperienced. It is what escapes the very possibility of experience.”¹⁰³ Indeed, “the power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all.”¹⁰⁴ Not only is the trauma forgotten but it *must* be forgotten. Thus trauma’s “...unexpectedness and horror

¹⁰⁰ Cited in Edkins, 1

¹⁰¹ Edkins, Jenny, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 36

¹⁰² *ibid*

¹⁰³ Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster: L'Écriture du désastre*, trans. Ann Smock, new edn (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), cited in Edkins, 38

¹⁰⁴ Edkins, 39

cannot be placed in the schema of prior knowledge.”¹⁰⁵ It is only experienced after the fact once it has been forgotten.

It is important to emphasize this point as it goes directly to the consequences of trauma in Syria. This trauma could not be accommodated within the existing social or cultural framework and therefore signals a major traumatic breaking point. It represents a moment in which a Syrian society, totally unfamiliar and unprepared to deal with such a catastrophe on this order of magnitude would have begun to look for new ways to go forward. The physical trauma of the famine and war years coupled with new French assaults on traditional intellectual and economic orders in Syria would have compelled Syrian society to adopt new ways to accommodate these traumas. As Edkins argues, “trauma is fundamental to the production of political communities” and in this we find a new way to think about the trauma and the consequences it might have had on subsequent historical outcomes in the following decades. Communities must rethink and rearticulate themselves to emerge from a state in which the symbolic order has collapsed, even if confronting the end of that symbolic order head on is impossible. Whereas other societies that experienced the trauma of the First World War possessed the institutional means to remember given their own particular histories, Syria and the Greater Middle East did not. There was never an opportunity to come to terms with a trauma that was orders of magnitude greater than anything European societies experienced in the War. Thinking about the role of trauma as a historical force in this way suggests a potential new way of understanding political outcomes in the countries that developed out of Greater Syria beyond the usual

¹⁰⁵ Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1995. 5

conversation about “the imagined communities” of Benedict Anderson¹⁰⁶ and all of its concatenated limitations. Indeed, the appearance of the “nation” as an intellectual and linguistic concept as we find it in the newspapers in Syria only a few years after the famine can only be understood by interpreting it through this history of trauma and suffering.

Given that “the language we speak is part of the social order, and when the order falls apart around our ears, so does the language,” people would have been unable to talk about this trauma.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, professional historians themselves have expressed the difficulty they face in confronting the famine in their efforts to write the history of modern Syria. Here, the historian George Antonius’ words discomfort in recalling the specifics of the famine evokes the stupefying nature of trauma. So shattered was Syria that the language with which to describe the trauma would seem to have collapsed along with it.

What we do see is that people are turning from the unspeakableness of the famine to expressing their anxieties through talking about the need for a nation and all of its trappings. Yet, here people are not so much imagining themselves as a nation in the Andersonian sense rather they are looking to the vocabulary of the nation as a place that can protect them. The language of the nation provides a new framework in the place of the one that was missing. Indeed, the insistence on using this language about the nation that we find in the newspaper publications of the 1920s would seem to suggest that it is the language about the nation and not the nation itself that is the most important factor. This would be representative of what Edkins terms the “act of

¹⁰⁶ Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities; reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006) set the tone for the discussion of nations and nationalisms over the last two decades. His is a foundational work in the study of political communities and how they conceive of and define themselves, though not without its problems. Much has been written critiquing particular elements of his thesis, the most relevant to the issues treated here being Lisa Wedeen’s *Peripheral Visions: publics, power, and performance in Yemen*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. See especially pages 5-11.

¹⁰⁷ Edkins, 8

facing trauma” whereby “the symbolic order itself and its institutions are under threat or in suspense and where people as individuals face the horrors of battle, persecution, famine, or bombing.”¹⁰⁸ Thinking of Syria in terms of a collapsing symbolic order is a helpful way by which to conceptualize both the trauma Syrians were facing and the challenge faced in articulating a response to it. Even before French moves to replace them, the four-centuries-old Ottoman intellectual, linguistic, and cultural symbolic order collapsed, leaving only anxiousness and an inability to come to terms with the catastrophe directly.

Moreover, “some forms of remembering can even be seen as ways of forgetting: ways of recovery from trauma by putting its lessons to one side, refusing to acknowledge that anything has changed, restoring the pretense”¹⁰⁹ The inability (or insistence) to forget is a trend that typifies the reaction of many to the trauma. It would seem to explain why Antonius feels moved to tell us that “one shrinks from a recital” of examples of suffering during the famine years. Thus, even in recalling the famine, it remains unspoken and indeed forgotten. More literary examples, such as Nu’ameh similarly reflect this tendency to forget even as one recalls. His solemn lament that once-familiar faces are now but ghosts at once recalls the famine through mentioning its victims yet leaves the circumstances of their deaths ambiguous. It would seem that in no small way, trauma in Syria is experienced as much through forgetting it as through its memorialization. This tendency would have major implications in terms of the type of political community that would emerge in Syria. While Schilcher rightly points out the connection between the famine and the emergence of particular economic and political relationships in postwar Syria, I argue that we need to go much further. By conceiving of this in the larger notion

¹⁰⁸ Edkins, 15

¹⁰⁹ Edkins, 16

of an all-encompassing trauma, we know it was the combination of these catastrophes and the experience of trauma that drove the creation of a new polity in Syria. Trauma best explains the situation we find in Syria: why so little was written about it in its wake and why there was such an anxious lurch toward nationalism.

Cultural Trauma

While the consequences for Syria from the trauma of the famine and war years are readily demonstrable, the issue of a cultural trauma is equally important in mapping the history of this period. Syria highlights the extent to which trauma reorders a society: Syria in the 1920s faced a situation in which not only had the political order disappeared but the cultural and intellectual orders had been fundamentally reordered as well. To borrow Jeffery C. Alexander's framework, "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subject to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identities in fundamental and irrevocable ways."¹¹⁰ Trauma produces fundamental changes that affect societies beyond political structures as it influences changes to their cultural composition as well.

Moreover, for a trauma to even matter and "emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises."¹¹¹ Alexander observes that "at the level of the social system, societies can experience massive disruptions that do not become traumatic"¹¹² pointing out that a particularly high standard must be met before labeling an event as a trauma. This is a challenge when evaluating the history of the period between 1915-1920 in Syria: were these a series of

¹¹⁰ Alexander, Jeffery C. *et al.* *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. 1

¹¹¹ Alexander, 10

¹¹² *ibid*

misfortunes in a place accustomed to such circumstances or did each represent a life shattering and society-altering trauma? It is important to revisit the fact that Syria did not have a history of the type of scarcity and privation the famine years witnessed.¹¹³ The disaster of the locusts coupled with a poor harvest was massively amplified by the allied blockade and the demands of a rapacious Ottoman army in Syria. The country was totally unprepared either physically or in terms of having a referential historical experiences by which they could measure it or compare. There was no means to limit the crisis to a particular sector of society or place, and no way for any part of it to escape. Moreover, subsequent French moves against the intellectual sphere in Syria further illustrate that the trauma was not limited and scope and involved a major cultural crisis as well. Imposition of new intellectual norms in the form of a new education system along with the abrupt end of four centuries of Ottoman cultural legacy were major traumas that, while not on the order of mass starvation, would have been experienced as sudden and shocking.

To be certain, applying the theoretical framework of trauma to the historical situation in Syria raises certain challenges. Primary among these is the literature's emphasis on the problematic relationship between the act of memorialization and the production of trauma.¹¹⁴ Thus the institutionalized expressions of remembrance are absent in the case of the great famine in Syria: no cenotaphs or parades or museums. Despite this difference between the theory and the reality of the situation in Syria, the role of trauma as a primary historical agent in shaping the historical outcomes of the twentieth century in the area is clear. Given the volume of evidence of a culture of anxiety¹¹⁵ present in the area of historic Greater Syria up through the republican

¹¹³ Hitti, 239

¹¹⁴ Alexander, 31

¹¹⁵ See discussion (above) relating to Gilsenan's work in rural Lebanon and Schilcher's investigation of particular cultural phenomenon relating to the famine decades afterward.

period, a foundation of trauma is the most concise explanation for a multitude of historical outcomes.

Trauma and the force of history

The precise role trauma might have is, as Cathy Caruth puts it, that the “historical power of trauma” is that it is the “unclaimed experience”¹¹⁶ Caruth explains that “the historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all.”¹¹⁷ In this way, we might reconcile the clear role of trauma as a primary historical agent with the relative lack or at least diffuse of memorializations. Furthermore as Caruth notes, “for history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs...history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence.”¹¹⁸ This is precisely the circumstance one encounters with the history in Syria as it relates to the role of trauma: it is largely referential, fleeting, and diffuse in terms of memorialization.

Caruth’s argument is key in understanding the situation in Syria in that it both bridges the the gap between the traumatic memorial and willful forgetting we find in the Syrian case as it clarifies the role of trauma itself. Perhaps then there is as much willful forgetting of the famine as there was inability to comprehend it as it occurred. It was only future generations that could have some appreciation of the magnitude of this horror, made all the more terrible by the fact that no one was able to speak of it in anything more than circumspect terms.

¹¹⁶ Caruth, Cathy. “The Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History.” *Yale French Studies* No, 79, Literature and the Ethical Question (1991) 181-91. 181, 187

¹¹⁷ Caruth, 187

¹¹⁸ *ibid*

Famine in history, trauma in famine: the implications for Syria

Despite the variety of its manifestations, famine is a universal human experience, a part of history as long as there has been human civilization. The Book of Kings and Deuteronomy comment on the manifestations of famine's privations, even the tendency to infanticide.¹¹⁹ Despite the fact that such stories of survivor cannibalism during famines remains difficult to come by, "there can be little doubt of its existence".¹²⁰ Such horrors evoke the scenes of cannibalism¹²¹ reported by foreign observers in Syria during the war making the Syrian case part of this larger historical sweep. Indeed, the relative veracity of these stories, or the volume of incidents they represent are secondary to the point that they express the terror and anxiety in moments of social collapse. Famines are events that "invariably entail much antisocial behavior as the bonds of family and neighborhood break down. Famine victims become desperate and self absorbed, and lack shame, their basic instincts promoting actions that would be unthinkable in normal times."¹²² Famine is synonymous with social collapse and the disappearance of familiar relationships and solidarities. As sociocultural phenomena, they are events that "erode hospitality, solidarity, and community, and examples abound of appalling inhumanity and heartlessness among victims"¹²³ of famines.

Famine bears with it a degree of alienation and terror that mere periodic scarcity cannot produce. Ó Gráda concisely captures what distinguishes mere subsistence and scarcity from famine noting "most of our ancestors lived close to the margins of subsistence. Still, history

¹¹⁹ Ó Gráda, 64

¹²⁰ *ibid*

¹²¹ Antonius, 204

¹²² Ó Gráda, 48

¹²³ *ibid*

suggests that the communities they lived in were usually resilient enough to cope with one-off harvest failures...the poor suffered and some may have died, but on the whole they did not starve en masse.”¹²⁴ The refrain of alienation and terror in literary accounts from the period as well as those of foreign observers illustrate the traumatic experience of the famine in Syria. Ó Gráda points out the defining characteristic of famine as it relates to trauma: it is a universalizing experience, no one is spared either directly from death or in the knock-on effects of social and cultural trauma.

The devastation of famine, particularly in the Syrian example, is in its inescapability. This was particularly true in the case of Syria as a country, a traditional crossroads of peoples and commerce transformed almost overnight into a open air prison. Hemmed in from the south by the British army in Egypt, from the desert in west, Ottoman armies in the north, and the Allied sea blockade along the Mediterranean coast, Syrians were left to face the famine and the collapse of their society. Moreover, we know that famine and food were weaponized with devastating effects elsewhere during the First World War. In the context of its effect on Germany “an early academic assessment of the Allied blockade of 1917-1919, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Germans, found that no means could have more effective in breaking the morale of an enemy...”¹²⁵ This suggests the implicit contemporary understanding of famine as an effective weapon of terror during the First World War. Both on the part of the Allies in seaborne blockades and Ottoman authorities, famine was deployed against civilian populations precisely because of the terror and social destruction it caused. The parallels between the German and Syrian

¹²⁴ Ó Gráda, 69

¹²⁵ *ibid*, 230

examples are striking. Indeed, the primary difference is only that the the Syrian famine was comparatively much more devastating and longer lasting.

Toward a meaning of trauma

It is tempting to look to a theoretical framework to answer all the questions that the archive cannot, that theory will somehow produce meaning in situations where it is otherwise elusive. To this end, the nation has served as the point of departure for much of the recent excellent scholarship on Mandate Syria and Lebanon, particularly that of James Gelvin and Michael Provence. Urban subalterns, marginal military actors from peripheral communities, and others provide fascinating insight into this contentious period and demonstrate the lively (and often violent) contest over the space of the Mandate. We depend on theoretically informed analyses of these phenomena to explain the developments of the political communities that eventually happened to take the form of a republican Lebanon and Syria in subsequent decades. Thus, nationalism and the category of the nation have served as the primary analytical frameworks for approaching the history of this region.

However, foregrounding these discussions in the category of the nation and taking it as their point of departure presupposes the primacy of nationalism as the determinant historical force. Useful as the category of the nation can be, it is inherently limiting, even ahistorically overly determinist. Often, historians presume the paramount role of nationalism by processing the history of the First World War and the Mandates through the filter of the modern, nationalist republics, understanding the 1920s and early 1930s through the lens of the 1940s to 1960s. As such, scholarship on this period tends to privilege nationalist outcomes in their analysis without thorough consideration of the other major historical trends. Significantly, this approach largely

ignores the profoundly creative role of trauma in shaping the history of the region. The experience of trauma in Greater Syria through massive internal displacement and the influx of refugee populations, intellectual oppression, the unspeakable physical devastation of war and famine, and the persistence of violence of all kinds - physical, intellectual, cultural - throughout the Mandate, played a vastly greater role in shaping the outcomes of twentieth century economic and political communities than the idea of membership in a once-and-future nation. In destroying the underpinnings of the social, intellectual, political, and economic communities of the Levant, trauma opened the way for new historical possibilities of which nationalism was one of many possibilities. This is merely to suggest that we not accept as a sacred tenet the notion that nationalisms appeared for the same reasons, under the same circumstances, with the same motivations irrespective of local histories and trends. Nationalism was one of these possibilities, but it is incumbent upon us to reevaluate from where and why this discussion of the nation was coming from.

Chapter III Language, Spaces, “Nation”?

Questions unanswered: linguistic nationalisms

The devastation of the famine expressed itself in myriad ways during the Mandate period, especially in how people reacted to and processed new social and political catastrophes. The sense of cultural anxiety around issue of education and the intellectual space of the Mandate is palpable in the newspapers examined above. It reveals the close link between language and the challenges facing the political community it emerges from, reflecting the aspirations and assumptions the community makes about itself. Political communities and especially the nations they aspire to be assume an ancientness or celebrate a shared unity, especially those communities coming out of a period of bondage as Robert Miller notes¹²⁶. This relates directly to the historical development of the language of the press in Syria. Beginning in the late Ottoman period, editors were strictly forbidden to use vocabulary suggesting or encouraging the political or national selfhood of Syria specifically because of the fear of the power this type of language would have in hands of Arab nationalists.¹²⁷ Bondage was no theoretical concept to these journalists.

The literature dealing with language and linguistic nationalism convincingly illustrates a potent nexus between the development of political communities and language with similar trends throughout the world. Language fosters solidarities that lead to political communities and plays a strong role in the development of national polities. It raises important points, especially in regards to what happens with language when a nation has to be created quickly, a question of

¹²⁶ Miller, Robert. *Language, Nation, Power: An introduction*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. 2005. 12

¹²⁷ Sarkis, Selim. *Garai`ib al Maktoubji*. Bayrūt : Dār al-Ḥamrā` lil-Ṭibā`ah wa-al-Nashr, 1990. Selim Sarkis recounts that among other terms, the Ottoman censors banned “*hurryya*,” (freedom) “*jumhuriyya*” (republic), and “*huquuq*” (rights). 5

special importance to Syria. However, when we look closely at this literature and apply it to the situation in Syria at the beginning of the Mandate period, it cannot account for what is happening there in terms of language and its role in the development of a new political community. This literature is problematized by the fact that it sees the state as the primary agent in advancing political agendas through language. The state language agency (or in the case of Revolutionary France the army) is the central actor in deploying language for political purposes. However, in Syria the Ottoman state (censors) that actively suppressed political speech disappeared only to be replaced by a French regime more interested in tangible matters than potentially subversive political language¹²⁸. Contrasting the statements in the newspapers with what the literature on linguistic nationalism would suggest we find demonstrates the inadequacies of the existing theories of linguistic nationalism.

Arabic emerges out of the late Ottoman period as a developed and articulated means of communication, especially in the realm of the press. Thus, the new political community of Mandate Syria did not require the selection of a new language. This was not the case in many of the new political situations the literature on linguistic nationalism takes as case studies. Here, the state is paramount in conjuring a language forth as a vehicle of nationalism. The postcolonial language agencies of the new nations of East Africa express the difficulties of choosing an authentic language and in so doing, the distinct differences between language there and in Syria. In the case of Tanzania, Swahili evolved as the popular medium of political mass mobilization even as negotiations with the British for independence were conducted exclusively in English.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ This did not stop the French authorities from arbitrarily closing newspapers deemed to have crossed red lines. See discussion below.

¹²⁹ Andersen, Roger. *The Power and the Word: Language, power, and change*. London: Paladin Grafton Books. 1988. 103

Spoken by 90% of the population as a second language, Swahili assumed the role of national language after independence, however not without difficulties.¹³⁰ This was particularly true in the realm of education which suffered from the challenge of reforming the entire system along new language lines. While a shared language provides a rallying point in this case, it developed due to an intervention by a strong state. Language functioned as a unifying force and helped foster a sense of shared political community on the part new Tanzanians by bringing a broader scope of the population into the civil service.¹³¹ Ultimately, the role of language in developing political communities in the new nations of East Africa was, unlike in Syria, an essentially state-led effort. The absence of an effective state in space of the Mandate meant that the role of language was much more contested than state-dominated political situations would all.

Moreover, the continuity in terms of language and the language used before and after the end of Ottoman rule contrast with other new nations, including many former colonial spaces, in that despite the collapse of most every other institution, language persisted virtually unchanged.

The tendency to fixate on the Andersonian “imagined nation” is fundamentally related to the sense of mutual sharing and obligation that defines language as a social practice.¹³² The practical and rhetorical value gained from fostering an official language through some type of state apparatus or intervention define not only development of linguistic nationalism in post colonial societies but in the development of almost all modern political communities.

Revolutionary France is the most often referenced example of the transformative effect of language in developing political communities. Arguably, the French experience embodies the

¹³⁰ *ibid*

¹³¹ *ibid*

¹³² Miller, 200

maxim that a language is merely a dialect with an army. The preponderance of local dialects and entirely different regional languages characterized the *ancien regime* as much as did the monarchy. As such, regionalism in all its forms, particularly linguistic, experienced the wrath of Republican France.¹³³ The imposition of the dialect of Ile-de-France on the whole of the country subsequently through the quintessential republican institution of the schoolhouse furthered the program of nation building through language normalization. To this day, a French person's bilingualism between French and a regional language are considered to be unrepublican to a certain extent by many fellow citizens.¹³⁴ Similarly, the experience of Italian unification represents a massive state intervention in the linguistic realm. Merging the northern and southern parts of the Italian peninsula, arguably two different countries, produced an Italian nation largely through imposing a dialect on this new, unified political space.

In both cases but especially with France, language was the most powerful and transformative tool of the nationalists (here, republican nationalists) in each developing political space. Moreover, in each case, language was used to define this political space by representatives of the state, making linguistic interventions official acts. In a vein similar to the experience of the new political communities of East Africa, the relationship of language to the new national political communities in France and Italy were defined by the state. This is an important contrast with the situation in Syria given the absence of the state and - importantly - a shared language. Arabic, especially as we find it used in the press, provided the the shared medium of communication. There was no need to contrive an authentically "national" language through

¹³³ An illuminating comparative study of the role of language in the revolution and its long-term effect in France can be found in "The Terror and Religion: Brittany and Algeria" by Edmund Burke III in Gregory Blue, Martin Bunton and Ralph Croizier (eds.) *Colonialism and the Modern World Order* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001)

¹³⁴ Miller, 24

either a state agency or force of arms. Indeed, unlike these other situations, the political and cultural moonscape of post war Syria meant that there were no official institutions to bring to bear in advancing a language agenda. The short lived government King Faisal between 1918-1920 faced far more material concerns/ The Faisali government spent P.E. (Egyptian Pounds) 45,000 - a huge sum - from scarce public resources just to feed starving Armenian refugees resident in Syria since their wartime expulsion from Anatolia, to say nothing of the needs of the local population that had to be met.¹³⁵ With practical concerns like these and facing fiscal insolvency,¹³⁶ neither Faisal nor his weak government would have been able to reconstitute social institutions in any meaningful way had it even been a priority. Concerned first and last with colonial domination, the French were even less inclined to rebuild institutions that could in any way challenge their rule. Written Arabic, especially in its printed form, was a medium literate people understood providing a means to negotiate the new political space Syrians found themselves in and experiment with ways to talk about it.

Here, the cases of the United States and the State of Israel are useful to consider because, like those above, show the limitations of the literature and theory addressing linguistic nationalism. Like Syria, they represent situations wherein a political community or people has emerged out of period of bondage or great trauma as Miller relates. Moreover, the shared experience of a common language in both cases reflects the important way Arabic helped produce an esprit de corps in the new political community in Syria. Eliezer ben Yehuda's improbable project creating a modern Hebrew corpus was remarkable not only because of its

¹³⁵ Gelvin, 43.

¹³⁶ *ibid*

success but because it was almost no one's first language in living memory.¹³⁷ The shared experience of a spoken and written language was a crucial component in the success of the Zionist project during the British Mandate Period leading to the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. Moreover, both Syria and Israel were coming to terms with major traumas and cultural crises as early political communities and a shared language provided a means to articulate these emotions. Yet, as important as this was in fostering a shared sense of political community, it was ultimately a victory for state language planning, much in the way Swahili triumphed in East Africa's new nations. The situation of shared language in Syria is far different as it evolved in a much different way and was not born out of a need to foster cultural and political cohesion in a new settler state.

The development of political communities towards nations is not exclusively a phenomenon of the post colonial era as Miller points out.¹³⁸ As the examination of France (above) demonstrates, political communities have experimented with ideas about the nation for centuries. The example of the United States predates even the situation in France and similarly shows how language provides a unifying mechanism for a political community that perceived itself to be emerging from a period of bondage, much as was the case in Syria. Like Israel, the United States is a settler society born of mass migration where a shared experience of language learning has similarly helped satisfy the desire for unity and practical concerns about creating a viable society.¹³⁹ Despite these similarities, language in the United States functions the way it does, as with Israel, due to its origins as the shared language of the originators of the state

¹³⁷ *ibid*, 134

¹³⁸ *ibid*, 162

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 162

project. The emergence of the political community and the shared language are one and the same.

The examples of European nation building, postcolonial states, and settler states are the primary cases that the literature on linguistic nationalism develops its theories around. Yet the circumstances of each of these examples fail to account for the situation in Syria. Arabic in Syria does not assume its primacy in Syria as part of a state language project in a postcolonial society. Indeed, at the time of Syria's initial experience with decolonization, or more aptly put *deottomanization*, modern journalistic Arabic was a well established medium. Syria did not face the challenges with language that confronted other postcolonial societies, such as the struggle of Tanzania to transform the educational system along Swahili lines.

Moreover, increasingly restrictive Ottoman press laws did not quash the development of an Arabic public sphere as much as it brought about its forced modernization.¹⁴⁰ This is all the more remarkable given not only the law's restrictiveness but their arbitrariness.¹⁴¹ Publishers operated in conditions under which permission to publish was at the discretion of the imperial government and "might be cancelled." The laws were particularly sensitive about emerging regionalist trends and strictly forbade "the treatment of [any] political or administrative issues to [sic] the Ottoman lands especially the Syrian Arab lands..."¹⁴² This period of restriction meant that the collapse of the Ottoman order opened the floodgates to a vibrant and dynamic

¹⁴⁰ Syrian journalists faced a series of increasingly restrictive Ottoman press laws and censorship decrees in 1877, 1885, and 1886. Sarkis, 8-10.

¹⁴¹ "toujeh al ithin bi al tusriih min al hukuuma al imbratoriyya li ejlii isdaar sahiifa ou douriyya, wa hatha al ithin matrouk umruh lil sulta wa mumkin ilgkhaa'o" al rifa'ai, shams a din. *tarikh a sahafa a souriyya: a sahafa a souriyya fii al 'ahad al uthmani*. Vol. 1. al qahira: dar a m'aarf bi misr. 1969.75

¹⁴² "men'a al qanun a turki...aya sahiifa ou ay mnshour u'aalj moudou'aat siyasiya ou idariyya ila albilaaad al'athmaniyya wa khususan al bilaad al souriyya..." *ibid*

conversation that had been suppressed. There was no call to invent or expand a new language to fill the artificial confines a new political space. While it had revolutionary potency¹⁴³ (as evidenced by the Ottoman authorities' restrictions on its use) Arabic did not emerge as an expression of political selfhood as did modern French or Italian. Arabic, as the common spoken and written language to the region, did not require an army to impose itself on the new political and intellectual map of this new space. However, it is used to talk about the new political space of Mandate Syria in using the modern, universalist, republican vocabulary so evocative of the French Revolution and Italian Unification but without the force of arms.

Furthermore, models of national language development in new nations typically cite the United States and Israel as examples, yet these too are unable to account for the situation in Syria. There is no “founder effect”¹⁴⁴ on language development as the former situations, rather Arabic emerges unconstrained in the absence of a strong state or revolutionary language program. The inability of the existing literature to give a satisfying explanation of the situation in Syria demands a new framework.

A more rewarding discussion pertinent to Syria is found in the discussions of how language is adopted by independent groups operating in the same political space. Understanding how language operates in transformed spaces, especially in the absence of overt censorship clarifies the role of language in Mandate Syria better than conventional linguistic theories. The new political situation in Syria allowed for journalists' written work to more honestly reflect

¹⁴³ Official Ottoman repression of oppositional and nationalist press in the last decades of the empire indicates the revolutionary potency they possessed. Sarkis' comments about the banning of specific words such as “freedom,” “rights,” and “republic” are illustrative. Moreover, the Arab cities had become centers of journalistic opposition, for both Arabophone and Turcophone writers, emphasizing the climate of revolutionary fervor. See Sarkis, 5 and M. Şükrü Hanioglu: “The Second Constitutional Period, 1908-1918. *The Cambridge history of Turkey: Turkey in the modern world*. Ed. Resat Kasaba. vol. 4 Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2006-2009. 62-111. 99

¹⁴⁴ Miller, 162

their opinion because of the end of tight Ottoman censorship. This ushered in a period when a truer expression of the journalists' opinions found their way to the page. In a striking parallel with Syria, owners of newspapers had been "afraid" to use particular words or of editors who did not express the opinions of newspaper management.¹⁴⁵ Niloofar Haeri describes the anxious effect such censorship has on journalists. Recalling the comments of a copy editor in Nasr's authoritarian Egypt, Haeri relates that he was at pains to excise "dangerous" words from his text that did not conform to the official language of the regime.¹⁴⁶ Although the collapse of the Ottoman order in Syria constituted a major cultural and intellectual trauma, it also saw the end of the elaborate structure of censorship. Initial press laws enacted in 1877 prescribed citations to be issued to those publishers who printed what the government determined to be "inappropriate" and further in 1886, publishers were obliged to send proofs to the official censor before publication.¹⁴⁷ Haeri's investigation of Arabic in Egypt, although more concerned with "correction" or *tashihih* as opposed to censorship or *raqaaba*, is an important point of reference for any inquiry into the effect of regulation of Arabic in pre versus post Ottoman Syria.¹⁴⁸ The notion of text regulation and sites of regulation¹⁴⁹ Haeri unpacks is especially relevant to the situation in Syria. What happens when not only sites of regulation but the entire system collapse invites the reinvention of the role language, massively expanding its possible uses and scope for political action.

¹⁴⁵ "*ila abwaaq temjiid wa ekhgwaal tehdiid yeDatrrub ushaabiha khouwfin li kelima tebduu minha ou min muhrihim yeta'weliha ou'wehuu al ummr 'ala gkhiir maa iraadatihu a jariida.*" Sarkis, 8,

¹⁴⁶ Haeri, Niloofar. *Sacred Language, Ordinary People*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003. 53.

¹⁴⁷ Sarkis, 9.

¹⁴⁸ Haeri, 55

¹⁴⁹ *ibid*, chapter 3

Indeed, the reordering of text regulation from a legal perspective in Syria is of overwhelming importance because of the message it sent to the readership. The initial articulation and ultimate implementation of political programs and policies demands the flow of information, a flow that is encumbered by censorship. However, it is not only the heavy hand of the censor that obstructs the flow of information. Indeed, the official language agencies in the above cases charged with deploying language toward nationalist ends themselves often engaged in restrictive practices as Haeri outlines. Thus, Syria presents a unique linguistic case that defies classification along conventional lines wherein the language itself, recently liberated from the censor becomes the agent of change. The praxis of political speech is both action, in the productive sense, and a reflection of the situation it speaks to.¹⁵⁰ When unencumbered by censors, agencies, or the expectation to be the vanguard of a revolution, language is a transformative agent.

From fragments of a broken society to a new kind of political community?

It is important not to understate the destruction Syria faced at the end of the First World War. It was a destruction so total that the main source of trauma - a devastating famine - inspired a slew of poems and popular memorializations even as its scope defied conventional historians. In a scene that invites comparison to central and eastern Europe at the close of the Second World War, Syria emerged from the suffering of the war only to suffer the further trauma of a new, imposed political order. Gone not only were familiar the structures of administration and government of the Ottoman order but the language and culture of its four centuries of history in

¹⁵⁰ Dallmayr, Fred. *Language and Politics*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press. 1984. 114

Syria. New rulers sweep away all of this and impose their own order, leaving Syrians adrift in a new and unfamiliar political space.

Lisa Wedeen's *Peripheral Visions: Politics, power, and performance in Yemen* addresses some of these problems that emerge in a political space wherein a distinct (Yemeni) selfhood has developed despite all odds to the contrary and persisted since the 1990s. How does a nation like Yemen build and maintain a sense of unified political self in the absence of a strong state and myriad internal divisions? Wedeen argues forcefully that, through a variety of disparate popular actions, something approximating a political community can emerge. Of these actions, or "performances," words are vitally important as a means to articulate abstract concepts about the Yemeni political space, especially ideas about nationhood.¹⁵¹

Moreover, Wedeen challenges the foundation of Benedict Anderson's theory of nationalism in an important way relevant to the present discussion of Syria. Noting that Anderson is heavily indebted to modernization theory that posits nationalism as a complete linear progression from master narrative to realized community.¹⁵² Wedeen is right to point out Anderson's reliance on a modernization theory that presupposes a result of nationhood, reading present national realities back into the past. Indeed, this is crucial point in appreciating the situation in Syria: reading the history of the Mandate and language back through the filter of the modern national republics of this political space presupposes conclusions. There was, to be sure, talk of "our national industry" and commentary on the situation of the borders, however, this must be understood as part of the process of negotiating the new political space.

¹⁵¹ Wedeen, Lisa. *Peripheral Visions: publics, power, and performance in Yemen*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 2008. 15

¹⁵² Wedeen, 6

Ideas about the Syrian nation in the 1920s were massively influenced by the history of the war, especially the trauma of the famine and economic collapse, and were wholly different than the ideas of the muscular nationalism of the late 1930s and onwards. Using language to invoke the nation was less about the nation *qua* nation rather the reaction of a traumatized society looking for a means to offer some coherent response to the thoroughly altered situation it found itself in. As the documents below strongly suggest, this was an active exploration and negotiating of a political space that in the 1920s was anything but a nation.

Chapter IV New Locations of Political Contestation

Negotiating the political space of the Mandate in the popular press

Raucous, cacophonous outbursts defined the daily press in Damascus and Beirut in the 1920s. The decade following the imposition of the Mandate saw a vibrant conversation in the press. While some of its members appeared willing to accommodate French occupation to some degree, many if not most others registered their opposition to it in the strongest terms¹⁵³ but all were engaged in a conversation about the place they were in. For many, this was “Syria”: a nation with borders, with a government, with obligations to the citizens that resided within it. However, a close reading of a decade spread of these newspapers as they talked about the political and physical space of the Mandate reveals that while everyone had an opinion, no one seemed to be able to agree on what, exactly, this place was. The space of the Mandate was understood variously as a nation in opposition to French occupation, as a larger political brotherhood inclusive of Iraq and other parts of historic Greater Syria, a modern nation with defined borders, et cetera. It is a place that is constantly being contested and renegotiated yet there is an extraordinary sense of anxiousness that comes through in these press accounts. It suggests a press and a people equally anxious and concerned about their place in Syria and Syria’s place in the world. If one reads these documents as individual statements, there is an understandable tendency to appreciate this as a rich nationalist conversation. However, a close reading shows the sum total of what is being expressed in terms of a “nation” is less than its parts. There is no doubt a conversation going on here, but its meaning is less straightforward than would appear.

¹⁵³ A particularly favorite epithet some Syrian nationalists leveled at French was “*al kelab fii Baris*” or “the dogs in Paris”

Spaces

It is helpful to begin thinking about the contested space of the Mandate by asking where Syria is. The answer would seem to be straightforward: along the Eastern Mediterranean coast from Alexandretta (after 1936 from Latakia) south to Sour, west across the fertile coastal plain, the Orontes river valley, east to the desert from Qamishle and south again to Deir e Zour. However, such banal physicality does not really give a sense of *where* in the world Syria was in the early Mandate years. Turning to the newspaper accounts reveals an alternative, parallel geography. Suggestions of this parallel geography come in reports such as that which addresses “The Life a Bolshevik in Russia”¹⁵⁴ recounting the doings of a typical soviet apparatchik. As the third in a series on the subject, the reading public (a minority segment of the population to be sure) can be sure have been following this story about “the most important man now in Russia” as the head of several councils and governor of Moscow.¹⁵⁵ Similar reports came in as well, detailing events in China and “news of Turkey”¹⁵⁶ and elsewhere reflecting the range of places Syrians were being exposed to. While this seems to be rather quotidian reporting from various places in the world, they serve a more obscure and revolutionary end as well: they inculcated the idea that Syria was one of several nations, that this is a way to understand themselves in a new, unfamiliar, international context. It reflected a Syria that was increasingly oriented outwards toward a new, international world system of nations.

To be certain, part of what is suggested by these articles and other reports about the new members of this international system is simply the reporting of the news. However, it reflects the

¹⁵⁴ “*hayat al bolshevik fii rousiyya*”. *Alif Baa*, 30 May, 1925, 1. Asad National Library - Damascus (ANL)

¹⁵⁵ *ibid*

¹⁵⁶ “*akhbar turkiya*.” *al ahrar*, 28 February, 1928, 1. ANL

changing map the space of the Mandate was located in. In the space of a only a few years, Syria had gone from integral part of the four hundred year old Ottoman Empire, a province in the latest iteration of the Islamic empires to a (theoretical) equal member of the community of nations - if under French tutelage. These reports would have helped shape how Syrians understood their place both in relation to close neighbors and this new world system. Perhaps Syrians saw a parallel between their new nation and the new nation Russians were building. Looking to these other young nations, they would have seen other new members of this international system that appeared suddenly after the First World War. These documents reflect a people's search for their place in the world, both in their relationship to other places in the postwar international system and what their place (as a "nation") afforded them in terms of rights and privileges. What this place was, what it should be called, how to relate to it as individuals and a society, and what it can do for the individual citizen are all questions lurking in these foreign reports - deceptively so as they address very domestic concerns. Thus the question of "where" Syria was has as much to do with the persistent anxieties of a traumatized society and people as the new unfamiliarity with the world they found themselves in. It is crucial to locate the *political* as well as *physical* space of Syria in the new maps written after the First World War. The map physically changed with the imposition of Mandatory borders, but the global political and administrative border changed as well.

Places: here and there, us and them

If the newspapers provided accounts of events and figures in far away places, they also reported on places familiar to people in the space of the Mandate. However there is a sense in reading these documents that there is something about this new space that makes the familiar

become as unfamiliar - even threatening - as the far off lands reported on in the press. This near unknown as opposed to the far unknown arises frequently as a theme in press accounts from the period. In reports on what are early manifestation of the regional and local particularism that would come to define the region, there is a sense of a single, but divided people. Arab brotherhood is very much a common rhetorical refrain in these documents, however, it would also seem to be a double-edged sword. Specific places emerge time and again, especially those most familiar and close, as being in some way sinister or disruptive. They reflect the ongoing struggle to define this space, and the added difficulty of doing so in the context of immense trauma.

Contention often characterizes these reports, especially when addressing the perceived insubordination of a domestic other. Such is the case of a report on the demands for a separate Christian homelands within Lebanon. After the creation of Grand Liban in 1920, some Maronite nationalists adhered to a more exclusivist vision for their own homeland without the incorporation of Muslim and Druze regions. The newspaper *a Nadim* reported in June of 1928 that a journalist “demanded today...a national homeland and he wants to take from Lebanon a national Christian homeland.”¹⁵⁷ This journalist “attacks the Syrians and their cause [in a] loathsome [way] and does not let an opportunity pass without provoking men of the National Bloc”¹⁵⁸ The frustration with Christian particularism is palpable here and expresses a larger sense of anger and anxiety by Syrian and Arab nationalists in the period. Syrians were portrayed as

¹⁵⁷ “*utaalib al youm....b al watan alqoumi wa uriid en yekhuth min lubnan watanin qoumiyyin messihiyyin*” *a Nadim* 15 June, 1928. DHDC

¹⁵⁸ “*...uhaarib a souriyyiin wa qadiyyatihim muhaaribin mumqoutatin wa la yeda' fursa tumrr bidoun en yeteharsh b rijaal al kitlaat alwataniyya.*” *ibid*

bogeymen bent on usurping the Christian (more specifically Maronite) autonomy and privilege the French Mandate conferred upon them.

That this particular journalist *a Nadim* accused of “attacking Syrians and their cause” and never letting an opportunity pass to provoke (presumably Lebanese as opposed to Syrian) National Bloc politicians represents the anxiety many Syrians experienced. Not only did they face separation from Palestine with imposition of the Anglo-French Mandatory borders, an act that disrupted trade and industry and other traditional solidarities but the carving out of a separate Lebanon in 1920 represented a further political and social trauma. Thus, the characterization that calls for an even more particularist “Christian national homeland” that “takes from Lebanon” would have been seen as but one episode in the larger disintegration of Greater Syria. French efforts to import the Lyautean strategy of divide-and-rule localism from the Moroccan Protectorate into Syria produced a collection of smaller “states” and was a factor in the 1925-6 Great Syrian Revolt. Thus, any call for a specific “national homeland” even if it was in the administratively separate Greater Lebanon would have been taken as especially provocative by Syrians.

Reading beyond the specific political squabble this article reports on reveals an acute sense of anxiety over the arrangement of political space in Syria. Almost in the same sentence once has to accommodate for both the administrative (and increasingly) political separation of Lebanon from Syria while railing against the further particularization of the political space in Lebanon. While Lebanon was outside of the new space of Mandatory Syria it remained within the traditional space of Greater Syria. Therefore any effort to further balkanize the political space of Lebanon would have been seen as an attack on Syria and the larger project of Greater Syria.

Such actions were characterized in harsh terms, one report from August of 1928 reporting on “the issue of unity” and that “the Lebanese work in Paris against unity [with Syria]”.¹⁵⁹ This maddeningly complex and seemingly contradictory conversation effectively expresses the extent of the anxiety Syrians felt about this new space they were in. There remained the notion of a larger Arab homeland as a goal, if impractical in the near term then a long term political vision, if not a more distinctly Islamic *umma*. Thus even within the context of an administratively separate Lebanon demands for a separate Christian “national homeland” would have been extremely provocative. How to accommodate for both the inherent political limitations of the Mandate while also voicing larger ambitions was a constant struggle for a population only just recently having experienced the trauma of the war and the famine.

Reports in the newspapers from throughout the Middle East give context to the larger landscape of destruction and suffering Syria was situated in. The frequent appearance of reports detailing “news of Turkey” reveal as much about the situation within Syria as they do about the goings-on in Turkey. Under the heading of “Transfer of Turks from Greece,” the report details the “population exchange between Turkey and Greece continues” according to the direction of the population exchange commission.¹⁶⁰ The seemingly quotidian nature of this report, indeed only part of a larger news-in-brief on events in Turkey obscures the larger historical landscape it speaks to. The population transfers between the new Turkish Republic and Greece were massively devastating. Some one million Orthodox Greek Christians and 400,000 Muslims were forcibly uprooted from their homes in Anatolia and Greece in shift of populations that entailed

¹⁵⁹ “*qadiyya al wihda*”, “*al lubnaniyoun ya’miloun fii Baris dud a wihda*” *a shab*, 24 August, 1928. DHDC 1

¹⁶⁰ “*naql al atraak mn al younan.*” *al ahrar* 28 February, 1928. DHDC. 1

death and suffering on a massive scale and ended millennia of Greek civilization in Anatolia.¹⁶¹ By the time this news report appeared, the euphemistically titled “transfer” had been underway for two years during which people in Syria would have been watching and taking note.

The issue of population transfers in the Aegean region and western Anatolia would have resonated with people in Syria given that it was the destination for waves of refugees from Anatolia in the early 1920s. By 1919 as many as 70,000 Armenian refugees had sought refuge in Aleppo with perhaps 35,000 more in Damascus.¹⁶² As traumatic as this was for the refugees flooding into Syria, the refugee experience was one shared by their new neighbors in Syria. Concentrated in cities, where the reading public would have encountered them daily, the refugee experience was not limited only to those who themselves had fled: their new neighbors in Syrian cities confronted this massive experience of suffering and trauma by extension. Seeing reports of population transfers would also likely have evoked recent memories from the war when local security broke down entirely¹⁶³ downing the countryside into a landscape of lawlessness and fear. Reading reports of refugees would have struck a chord with people in Syria. They were living in a landscape of disaster that did not end at the artificial borders of the Mandate, rather that extended throughout Anatolia and the Eastern Mediterranean World. What these newspapers do for us is that they connect they connect to a larger history that situates the space of the Mandate within the larger region, more accurately representing the type of forces impacting it locally. The space of the Mandate was anything but a self-contained world, rather is was a the center of an interactive geography of destruction and devastation. Approaching the history from this angle takes us

¹⁶¹ Kayali, Hasan. “The Struggle for Independence.” *The Cambridge History of Turkey: Turkey in the Modern World*. Reşat Kasaba. Vol. 4. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2006-9. 143.

¹⁶² Gelvin, 43.

¹⁶³ *ibid*, 44

outside the suffocating confines of local nationalisms with a perspective of the development of the political space in Syria as that of one intimately connected to and reflective of a regional history of devastation and trauma.

Anxieties over increasing divisions within and adjacent to the space of the Mandate interacted with these reports of upheaval in Turkey. While the idea of “our northern borders” might have actually been a kind of comfort in the face of an increasingly muscular Turkish Republic that was in midst of its own turmoils, they would still have represented a wrenching sense of dislocation with boundaries that wrote new divisions into previously united political, economic, social, and cultural spaces. To appreciate the persistence of trauma and anxiety in the Mandatory period, we have to think about the sense of alienation and unease that comes from the very idea of a “border” - a place that is neither here nor there, just beyond the normative and always at the edges of the law. Borders evoke a sense of hostility and the unknown even in a place that had always been intimate and familiar. They keep the enemy and the unknown out - important in the case of a resurgent Turkey reborn and reinvigorated in its republican form - but they similarly divide and cut off - preventing the realization of the unity of the Arab nations. In the context of Mandatory Syria, the border is both a place and an idea evoking contradictory emotions: it is at once rejected as alien and illegitimate while simultaneously using it as a way to define themselves and the space they are in.

The negotiation of this uncomfortable relationship between the utility of a modern political border as a bulwark against threats (real or perceived) and a wrenching division between parts of a traditionally united continually plays out in press accounts from the period. As Lebanon in the 1920s would have been considered a part of a larger Syria (if having a strange

administrative designation) the separation of Iraq from the traditional space of Syria and artificially set outside the space of the Mandate seems to be even more disruptive. A series of reports appearing in *alif baa*’ on 25 January, 1931 are illustrative. Under the headline “The Problem of the Syrian-Iraqi Borders - put before the Council of the League of Nations” the report details Anglo-French negotiations over the borders of their respective Mandates. Yet, for all the passion and anxiety that appears in commentary about the relationship with Lebanon, reporting on this border dispute is much more detached. In the sense that Syrians only had quasi-ownership over their political space there is a strong current of ambivalence over what is reported as much more an Anglo-French rather than Syrian-Iraqi border dispute, litigated far away before the council of the League of Nations.

Complicating matters further, there is a strong interest not so much in where any particular border line is drawn but in who is in possession of what physical places. There is a focus on the placement of troops and an almost obsessive focus on whose troops control particular physical features of the Mandatory landscape¹⁶⁴ Hilltops and riverbanks, not some invisible lines drawn on a piece of paper in Whitehall or the Quai d’Orsay, were what mattered in terms of defining political possession of the space of the Mandate. Even though the same issue of *Alif Baa*’ contains a report on the state of “Syrian unity” and the “project of unity of the two nations [of Syria and Iraq]” this belies an inherent mistrust and anxiousness about the unknown. High rhetoric about unity and larger national projects were fine goals to be certain, but they counted for little in the ever-uncertain space of the Mandate. The border, as had been the case since the inception of the Mandate in 1920, seemed to change with the wind and thus little was to

¹⁶⁴ “*wa li souriyya hunalik nuqta askeriyya fii qullat al haadi qarab besh khaabour wa tkoum tjaoum [(?)] nuqta askriyya iraqiyya fi nahr miilaan. wa li souriyya aydun naqta askriyya urkhra fi hul ‘ala ba’d 20 kilometre mn sufih jeb l sanjaar.*” “*mushkilat al hudud alsouriyya-alirraqiyya*”. *alif baa*’, 25 January, 1931. DHDC. 1

be gained from investing much faith in them. What mattered was what and where you were able to hold onto. The presence of troops not borders established ownership and made the alien space of the Mandate somewhat more tangible. The general sense of contradiction and upheaval one takes away from these news reports gives an impression of how ideas about how this space ought to be apportioned were hotly contested. Moreover they reveal a series of anxieties: a tendency toward local alignments, calls for adherence to a larger polity or political project, and even attempts to do the impossible and reconcile the two.

Institutions and ideas

Along with determining where Syria was in the new international geography of the post-war years and the anxiousness of negotiating the contradictory spaces of the Mandate, Syrians were confronted with the new intellectual and ideological space within the Mandate itself. Specifically, ideas about the relationship between the “people” and the “government” and the meaning of a government that claimed authority in a political space that was not quite a legal nation are addressed. Anxiety over who and what is legitimate in the opaque and ever-shifting political, administrative, and legal space of the Mandate drives the conversation here.

Negotiating the relationship between “the government” and an emerging *civitas* in Mandate Syria was a source of political passion as much as it was a point of anxious uncertainty. On 24 August, 1928 the newspaper *a Sha 'b* ran an extensive report on the “the poor economic and agricultural conditions” in Syria.¹⁶⁵ The thrust of the article however is less about poor crop yields or interest rates. The sub headline alludes as much: “Complaints of merchants and farmers, The Government’s responses” This demonstrates elements within society made

¹⁶⁵ “*souwa' al ahwaal al iqtsaadiya wa zira'iyya*”, *a shab*, 24 August, 1928: Damascus, DHDC

demands on their government and were in conversation with it about what the government's priorities ought to be. This is not to say that newspapers in Syria were themselves somehow producing a Habermasian public sphere through an expanding print culture. Rather, they are useful in that they reflect a political and social context still heavily influenced by major recent trauma. As Schilcher demonstrates, authorities throughout the Mandatory period were extremely sensitive to anything that resembled a potential food shortage or problems with food provisioning mechanisms. At play in these sort of these demands is the anxiety that goes back to the trauma of the war years and a reordered pyramid of needs. People looked for institutions in this space that could defend their basic interests and provide a tangible sense of stability and security. Very real economic and practical needs, not patriotic calls to rally around some amorphous nation, are the primary motivating factor. An ambivalence, distrust even, about the political system is paired with anxious demands for services and action on more concrete matters: this is what mattered to the traumatized Syrian population.

Moreover, how one was even supposed to interact with the government and triangulate between it and the Mandatory authorities was a contentious subject that was anything but settled and source of considerable anxiety. For some, opposition presented a possible quandary between "either freedom depravity."¹⁶⁶ When French High Commissioner General Sarrail through his deputy (and future High Commissioner) Maxime Weygand suspended publication of the newspapers *al ahrar* and *al ahwaal* by executive fiat for two days in February, 1925, the former of the two publications assailed the decision. However, the thrust of their critique was directed not at the French authorities, rather against the newspapers themselves for instigating the

¹⁶⁶ "houriyya em fajour?" from *al ahrar*: 28 February, 1925: Beirut, DHDC

suspension. The suspension was, *al ahrar* wrote, the consequence of the newspapers' republishing of an excerpt from another publication, the *Licodorian* newspaper. This publication, which sharply criticized taxation policies in the Mandate accused the French authorities of "taking from our pockets," essentially calling out Sarrail and Weygand (by name) as thieves.¹⁶⁷ Economic rationalization policies adopted in the early Mandate saw French authorities mop up most public funds for defense (as permitted by the Mandate Charter) and resolve outstanding debts. The *Licodorian* equated the seizure of locally collected funds by the Public Debt Administration with thievery, triggering the administrative suspension of the newspapers that had reprinted the *Licodorian*'s statement.¹⁶⁸

This episode offers an important and unique window onto the the political space and public discourse in the Mandate around a number of contested issues. While the focus is particularly on the contested control of public finances, it also reveals discord within the ranks of those who considered themselves in opposition to French rule. While critical of the decision to suspend the newspapers, *al ahrar* reserved most it's ire for the "boys of the *Licodorian*" for their lack of "decent criticism"¹⁶⁹ Thus, not only can we locate a fracturing of the public discussion along the lines of those inclined to a "dignified" public debate versus those more polemically inclined, but along generational lines as well. While it is not possible to identify the specifics of the *Licordian* newspaper from this secondary report, it is reasonable to presume that its generational politics were already influencing political activity. This suggests that the

¹⁶⁷ *ibid*

¹⁶⁸ "inna hathahi al imt'adat alati ethefthetna biha al mafudip al 'auliyya hiyya min emwaalina al khasa alati 'adat ilayna mimma faad mn idaara al diyoun al 'amoumiyya.... enn tedkhl hathahi al emwaal min sanadiiq alhukumiyya al mahaliyya..." *ibid*

¹⁶⁹ "aakhlaq a natq" *ibid*

generational divide within the political space of the Mandate (both in Lebanon as well as Syria¹⁷⁰) was appearing in the mid 1920s, far sooner than the late 1930s when historians generally pinpoint it. Philip Khoury's insightful account of the shifting sociopolitical and especially generational alliances among elite National Bloc leaders (in Syria), the *qabadayat*, and rising educated urban groups provides important insight into this evolving and highly contested political landscape.¹⁷¹ However, the frustrations expressed at the "youth" of the *Licodorian* newspaper in the editorial line of the more establishment¹⁷² *al ahrar* would seem to indicate that these relationships were much more fractious and began taking shape much earlier on. The conversation about the appropriate type of opposition to French rule is important because it illustrates that oppositional politics within the political space of the Mandate were heterogenous and highly contested.

How best to oppose French rule ought not been understood as a matter of resistance and collaboration as this newspaper account appears to argue. The "boys of the *Licodorian*"¹⁷³ were not advancing the cause of their nation that was covered by the Mandate. Rather, "they oppose the person of General Sarrail in an irreverent and disregarding tone [and] not from decent journalistic criticism".¹⁷⁴ Rather than an apologia for French financial malfeasance here

¹⁷⁰ While *al ahrar* was published in Beirut, its reporting on this issue addresses an issue at play in both the Syrian as well as Lebanese divisions of the Mandate.

¹⁷¹ The *qabadayat* or urban neighborhood bosses were an integral part of the evolving political scene in Mandate Syria and Lebanon. See Philip Khoury's "A Damascus Qadabay" in Burke, Edmund III and David N. Yaghoubian *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 2006. 152-63.

¹⁷² The publisher of *al ahrar* was Gibran Tuéni, founding patriarch of the eponymous Lebanese publishing family and political dynasty. *al ahrar*, founded in 1924, was Tuéni's first venturing in publishing before founding a *nahar* in 1933, the Arabic language Lebanese newspaper-of-record for most of the twentieth century.

¹⁷³ Both "*subyaan*" and "*gkulmaan*" are used interchangeably here, conveying a meaning of particularly young and naive boys.

¹⁷⁴ "*fa yet'ardun li shukhsiyya al jeneral serraai bi lehja istikhfaf wa istihitar laysat min adab a naqd a sahafii...*" *al ahrar*

specifically and the Mandate more generally, the newspaper argues for a pragmatic approach to resistance. Moreover, it reveals intense anxieties over how journalists were to navigate this new political space of the Mandate in their reporting. While previous Ottoman repression and censorship was a known quantity they understood, the political space of the Mandate was a new geography that proved much less straightforward. How one was to keep up the pressure on the French personally insulting the High Commissioner was a vexing challenge and a clear source of anxiousness about this space they found themselves in.

There was clearly an awareness and an audience for reporting on government corruption and malfeasance its potential to incite controversy notwithstanding. The same issue of the newspaper that addressed the controversy over proper oppositional political speech also carried reports on the preponderance of instances of bribery in Turkish customs service and on the state of press freedoms in the Republic. 330 employees of the customs service were reported to be on the take, reflecting a general state of lawlessness and arbitrary rule. In a similar vein, the managing editor of a newspaper in Izmir was reported to have published a less-than-flattering story about a number of deputies in the Grand National Council and was sentenced to a term of eleven months.¹⁷⁵ While this was all happening in Turkey, there is a clear correlation between events there and what was going on in the Mandate in terms of arbitrary rule, restrictions on press freedoms, and financial malfeasance in government. Indeed, the reports appear side by side. The report illustrates two key elements of the nature of the political space of the Mandate: it situates the readership within the new political geography of the Middle East by referencing

¹⁷⁵ *“hukum ‘ala sahabi” ibid*

events in Turkey and it reveals a sophisticated understanding of the broken mechanisms of government in Turkey and by extension Syria.

Furthermore, even the standards of “decent criticism” that *al ahrar* subscribed to did not prevent it from reporting critically on major political controversies. The government and the Mandatory authorities were regularly taken to task for (real or perceived) inaction or ineptitude. These invocations to action resonated throughout the press of the early Mandate period. Frustrations with government inaction were often bound up with anxieties over the shifting political geography of the Mandate vis-a-vis new political communities in Turkey, Iraq, and (increasingly) Lebanon. A report on “The Railway Company in Anatolia” in February of 1929 is illustrative. Following the subheading of “Schemes of the Turks Northern Syria,” readers are informed that “the Anatolia Railway Company has sold [itself] to its government completely [and] what all with it the rights to this line and transferred to it its rights in Iskedrun,”¹⁷⁶ then in the Sandjak of Alexandretta region of Mandate Syria. Such a move would have been taken to be a direct Turkish provocation in relation to the position of the Sandjak of Alexandretta, the contested region in the northwest of Mandate Syria (to 1938).

Alexandretta was a point of continual tension between nationalist politicians in Damascus and the new Turkish Republic’s leader Mustafa Kemal Pasha, over which France acquiesced to Turkish demands for control in 1938. It is remarkable to see reference to this conflict almost ten years previously, particularly in the economic context. The Turkish state’s attempts to insinuate itself into Alexandretta through control of major economic resources and vital infrastructure was taken to be a naked provocation by people in Syria, especially the newspaper’s Damascene

¹⁷⁶ “...*asharika alkhtout alhadidiyya fii al anadol qud ba’at ila hukumatiha al kamaliyya kul ma ha min al huquq fii hathahi asek wa tunazlt liha ‘anha wa ‘an huquqha fi iskedrun!*”, *a nadim*, 4 February, 1929: Damascus, 1:DHDC

readership. Alexandretta was of huge symbolic importance in the public discussion about what would ultimately constitute the political space of Mandate Syria. After Lebanon was separated out from historic Greater Syria in 1920, Alexandretta became a rallying point for Syrians.

The newspaper expressed the concerns many would have had, both about a creeping Turkish threat in the north and a local government that asleep at the wheel. In a forceful tone, it called for “an awake and sober” Syrian government to “guard the integrity of the country and preserve its rights and unity...”¹⁷⁷ As much as the the concern is with Turkish machinations in Alexandretta, the real frustration and anxiety appears to emanate from an awareness that one could not expect a meaningful response from the Syrian government (such that there even was one). A general state of administrative and political paralysis meant an inability to articulate anything approaching a unified official response on the part of Syria given the amorphousness of the Mandatory governmental structure. While the Turks could back up their claims to Alexandretta not only with military force but a potent political vehicle in the form of Attaturk’s unified Turkish Republic, politically active Syrians had only furious protestations at their disposal. Moreover, the sharp and revealing contrast this moment draws between Turkey and the Mandate illustrates an important element of self perception on the part of people in the political space in Syria: while the Turks could exercise real independence making demands on France and Great Britain and forcing serious territorial concessions from them, the design of the political space of the Mandate hamstrung any attempt to answer threats like those from Turkey.

Of course, this did provoke a pointed reproach of the French. By the late 1920s, criticism of French rule (and its consistently incompetent and obtuse execution) proceeded in the new

¹⁷⁷ “...*hukuma mustayqutha saahiyya...fii sabiil al haras ‘ala kayan al bilad wa hefth huquha wa wihadatha...*” *ibid*

international language of legal rights, responsibilities, and expectations. The report continued thus:

We want to learn to what extent the Turkish schemes [reach] in our country...we, in the name of the Syrian people and in the name of this Arab nation and we demand that French Authority in the name of the Mandate to respect the rights of the nation which are designated to it, the issue of preserving it from...manipulation and encroachment and [preserving] us in the [conditions] of the Mandate and in the instrument of the Mandate and in our explicit rights in the Mandate system and what authorizes us to demand of this project and we say this and we with certainty in that France which claims from time to time that she will not tolerate one foot of Syrian soil [to be partitioned off] or an iota of her rights [to be violated]¹⁷⁸

In these few lines, France has all of the paternalistic, false internationalist vocabulary through which it legitimated its occupation of Syria thrown back at it. It demonstrates that not only the pathetic inadequacy of the Mandate system's flimsy veneer of legality but that France was understood to be as witless as it was impotent. The fact that the Turkish government was the only party acting with any kind of impetus in this situation shows just how irrelevant (if frequently brutal and violent) France was in defining the history of this period. Thus the thesis of a nationalism that defined itself in opposition to the French presence reveals itself to be an inadequate explanation for the historical forces at work in the political space of the Mandate. Anxieties over the possibility of further territorial disintegration were an expression of a history that predated the French occupation, going back to the disaster of the war years. It only reasons that this powerful history and not the Franco-Syrian binary was the defining historical force here.

Furthermore, it is of considerable import to find such extensive reference to the issue of Alexandretta in a public forum as early as 1929.¹⁷⁹ Primarily, this illustrates the centrality of the

¹⁷⁸ *ibid*

¹⁷⁹ My research has not turned up any scholarship that has dated the public discussion to the issue of Alexandretta, particularly in this economic light to before the mid-1930s.

Alexandretta question over the *longue durée* of the Mandate, as opposed to a flashpoint of nationalist anger moving towards the Second World War. Moreover, it shows the sense of siege experienced within the political space of the Mandate on multiple levels. Bookending the issue of Alexandretta in the late 1930s and rolling it in with the foundations of the Second World War in the Middle East fails to represent the role it had in the development of the political community and space of the Mandate. It is crucial to move beyond the Franco-Turkish binary and see the political community in Mandate Syria as an active part of defining the issue. Taken in context with the anxieties and frustrations over the relationship with Lebanon and the anxieties over the border with Turkey, Alexandretta shows itself to have meaning within the political space of the Mandate. The Franco-Turkish agreements of 1921 and 1926¹⁸⁰ on the special administrative status of Alexandretta vis-a-vis the significant ethnic Turkish population were not the only voice in determining the tone of the conversation about the region's ultimate political destiny. Indeed, the Franco-Turkish agreements belies the larger history of a long-standing Syrian-Turkish political dispute to which the French were more often than not mere bystanders.

Moreover, reporting on the elections of the year previous (1928) to the Turkish state's moves to purchase railroad rights-of-way in Alexandretta reveal political similar political trends. In April of 1928, *a nadim*, in an article titled "after the battle," reported on the outcome of the elections. "In truth," the newspaper related, "the battle was not imaginary and blood was spilled in it...in the interest of Syrian sovereignty..."¹⁸¹ In a political space like that of the Mandate which from its beginnings had been defined by uninterrupted episodes of multiple types of violence, we find an evolving political process in which violence is understood by its participants

¹⁸⁰ For details of these earlier accords, see Longrigg, 119 and 172.

¹⁸¹ "*b'ad al m'araka*", *a nadim*, 27 April, 1928, 1, DHCD

to be a vital element of the system. As violence gave shape to the political space of the Mandate, it informed the development of the political process. The Mandate is a place where violence and sovereignty intersected in a new political space. Thus, we find the issue of “Syrian sovereignty” being politically contested in decidedly martial terms. Expressions of a need to elect individuals who could be counted on preserving the “sovereignty of Syria” and assure the “unity and integrity of their country”¹⁸² in the face of Turkish designs on it is an important window onto the political space of the Mandate. Elections and candidates and voting-day violence, ostensibly the focus of the above newspaper report are of secondary importance to the issue of sovereignty.

For a country facing serious threats to its territorial integrity but unable to answer them with the force of arms, elected officials and politics more broadly were the best (and only) recourse in a space that had only ever been violent and militarized. The Turkish Republic’s designs on Alexandretta were a direct attack on Syrians’ sense of sovereignty under the structure of the Mandate. Indeed, the language of the Mandate was the response to the French role. Both in the election reporting and in the issue of Alexandretta, the discussion pivots around a concept of “sovereignty,” both as a political object to be defended and as expression of acute anxiety: sovereignty in the context of the space of Mandate Syria is always characterized as being under threat from all quarters. There is none of the triumphal nationalism of the 1940s and beyond here. Rather, it reveals the desperation and anxiousness over both the political present and future of this space.

The concern this article expresses over Turkish moves on Alexandretta further complicate the traditional concept of nationalism in the Syrian context. Far from the simplistic and

¹⁸² *a nadim*, 4 February, 1929: Damascus, 1: DHDC

antagonistic Franco-Syrian binary that comes out in most histories of the Mandate, the issue of Alexandretta shows a political space that is being defined by multiple actors on many levels. The fraught Turkish-Syrian relationship is illustrative of a situation in which French authority is revealed as completely and utterly impotent, sidelined by both Syrian and Turkish actors. Like the relationship with the developing Iraqi state and the complex relationship with a (n administratively) detached Lebanon, the political space of the Mandate exposes the hollowness of the nationalist narrative. The development of a political community in what would become Syria was due at least as much to the distinct history of trauma and the persistence of violence - physical, cultural, economic, cartographical - as it was to the presence of Moreover, these episodes display an inversion of the traditional colonial paradigm in which the so-called native groups are the primary agents and act upon the colonial other. Above all, the multilayered economic and political complexities of the Mandate make a traditional nationalist narrative totally inadequate and unable explain the situation in Syria. Though it should come as little surprise that formation of political communities is rarely, if ever, as simple as the paradigm of nationalist resistance/colonial Other suggests, what we find in Syria demands a rethinking of the question.

The examination of the literature on linguistic nationalism that existing frameworks are unable to accommodate themselves to the way new ideas about a national and political space in Syria was evolving. Similar to the limits of nationalism as an analytical framework for explaining the historical outcomes in Mandate Syria, existing literature on linguistic nationalism cannot account for the language and concepts we encounter in the press and the clear presence of trauma. The anxiety and sense of dislocation in the conversations above bring us back to this

question of trauma and its role in driving the history of the Mandate. Language and the press emerged as the primary institutions to come out of the horrors of the war years largely intact, yet they bore the indelible mark of the trauma the society had suffered.

Conclusion: Creative Destruction

Trauma plays a misunderstood role in history: known more for its capacity to cause pain and suffering, it also opens up important new historical possibilities. The totalizing effects of catastrophe at the levels of society and politics are fascinating not merely in how they alter political boundaries or topple governments but more for their capacity to fundamentally reorder the individual's relationship to her culture, language, and sense of place. Trauma defined the physical experience of the First World War and early Mandate period in Syria. Physical destruction was amplified by the collapse of the Ottoman symbolic order and familiar intellectual paradigms with the imposition of new French linguistic and political orders in Syria after 1918. The total effect of this catastrophe, indeed a *nakba* in the estimation of one contemporary, was to bring an historical epoch largely to an end.

However, in the landscape of devastation left behind, new historical possibilities emerged. New political and intellectual spaces opened up and were hotly contested. Syrians negotiated emerging political communities through locations of contestation in episodes often borne out in the press. These were vibrant spaces that developed in relation to a new regional political, economic, and social geography. Importantly, these were spaces that largely developed due to local events and realities, often independent of colonial powers. These were events that exposed colonial power as impotent in large measure and even irrelevant - recurring spasms of violence notwithstanding.

For an age that historians have traditionally characterized as an “awakening,” or approached as a search for the sudden emergence of ever-more authentic subaltern “national” actor, one fact stands out: people in Syria were not sleeping. Well-intentioned subaltern

approaches miss the forest for the trees, failing to take full account of the larger historical situation. These intellectual boxes do justice neither to the histories they treat nor the people who were part of them. This was a society that reappropriated its own experience of trauma and moved forward in history with it. Nationalisms may indeed have come out of the political communities that formed in the Mandate and early republican years. However, these political communities emerged out of a different historical trajectory in a landscape of trauma.

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Vita

James Francis Byrne Casey was born in San Francisco, California. After completing his work at Sonoma Valley High School, he enrolled in the University of California, Santa Cruz. During the 2006-2007 academic year he attended the Arabic Language Institute at the American University in Cairo in Cairo, Egypt. He received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History with Highest Honors in the Major from the University of California, Santa Cruz in June, 2008. In the summer of 2008, he was a student in the Arabic language program at Dhofar University, Salalah, Sultanate of Oman. During 2008-9, he was a Fulbright Fellow in Syria, researching at the Asad National Library in Damascus. In August, 2009 he entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin. In September, 2011 he began study in the Department of History at Princeton University in pursuit of his PhD in History.

Permanent address: jfbcasey@gmail.com

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