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ARTICLE

Competing to Protect: Repatriation and Legal Protection of Syrians in Istanbul under Allied Occupation (1918–1923)

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Abstract

This article examines interstate competitions over "Syrians" whose legal status as Ottoman subjects was not yet terminated by a peace treaty at the end of World War I. Focusing mainly on occupied Istanbul, it traces French efforts to protect or bring Syrians back home to a "Syria." Given that Syria was still in the making, the stakes here were high and determined postwar reconfigurations that connected Istanbul and Beirut. I argue that competition over Syrians in occupied Istanbul—especially the wealthier and those with military experience—proved critical in the construction of new diplomatic and legal significance accorded to the categories of "Syria" and "Syrian" in the early 20th century. In addition to offering new insights into the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, the article historicizes projections of imperial influence after World War I and sheds new light on the foundations of French mandate rule in Syria and Lebanon.

Keywords: governance; League of Nations mandates; nationality; Ottoman Empire; Syria; World War I

After the armistice was signed between the Ottoman Empire and the Allied Powers in October 1918, Istanbul became a tense arena of competition for multiple empires. The scope and stakes of these imperial competitions extended far beyond the city. They encompassed a vast space of postwar (re)configurations, including Anatolia as well as the lands occupied by the Allies in the "Arab provinces" of the Ottoman Empire. As it took more than five years to determine the political fate of occupied Ottoman territories through a peace treaty—the Treaty of Lausanne in July 1923—protracted uncertainties loomed large over the legal status of peoples of the Ottoman "occupied territories," a term with vague and evolving significance itself due to new occupations of Ottoman lands after 1918. In Istanbul, at the very heart of the Ottoman Empire, how the people of these occupied territories were treated in legal and diplomatic terms was an especially delicate matter. When the Allied military presence in the city turned into a formal occupation in March 1920, the Ottoman capital was dominated by a coalition of victorious powers led by the British, French, and Italian High Commissions, all of whom were attentive to the question of which state authority was to be exercised over which people in which occupied Ottoman territory. They had good reason to be mindful of this question, as it would play a critical role in determining the political future of occupied Ottoman territories—a process that remained ongoing throughout the period between 1918 and 1923.

This article aims to enhance the scholarly understanding of this process by focusing on the people whom French officials categorized as "Syrians" and sought to "protect" within and outside "Syria" despite the ambiguities surrounding these terms in the absence of a

peace treaty.[1] With their country's deep-seated claims over what later became Syria and Lebanon, the leading statesmen at the new French High Commission in postwar Beirut and Istanbul were convinced that they had to protect and assert authority over Syrians, wherever they might be. This was especially the case in the capital of the defeated Ottoman Empire, where the relative wealth and large numbers of Syrians meant that the claims over them were charged with particularly high stakes. Whereas "the people of Mesopotamia and Palestine" in Istanbul were fewer and poorer in comparison, "the Syrians, by contrast, [were] very numerous (estimated by French officials to be around 10,000 men in early 1921), and [occupied] important positions as merchants, bankers, and proprietors."[2] Moreover, in addition to the protection of wealthy individuals in Istanbul, high stakes also were identified in taking the Syrians among Ottoman soldiers and prisoners of war back to Syria as a way of "repatriation." Many of these men with military experience had made their way to Istanbul for one reason or another, and numbered, according to one French estimate in March 1920, around forty thousand.[3] But what would it mean to repatriate Syrians to Syria when that country was not yet established as a distinct entity? Whom among Ottoman subjects could be categorized as Syrian, through what processes? What broader political consequences would follow the practices that shaped these processes?

This article aims to tackle these questions in two main parts. The first part deals mainly with questions of categorization. It examines which Ottoman subjects in occupied Istanbul were categorized as Syrian for purposes of French repatriation and legal protection. Efforts to cope with vestiges of Ottoman bureaucratic practices amid ongoing conflicts were critical in these categorization efforts. The second part deals more with how Syrians experienced practices of French repatriation and legal protection. These practices relied heavily on relations of patronage and involved significant logistical and administrative complications. By way of raising these points, the article advances a twofold argument. First, it stresses that competing claims over Syrians in occupied Istanbul played an important role in the construction of Syria and Syrians as categories with new diplomatic and legal significance after World War I. Second, it underlines that conflicts and reconfigurations not just in Syria and Lebanon but in a wider postwar space across the eastern Mediterranean were critical in the establishment of mandatory rule in these former Ottoman domains. The conditions and priorities that shaped French protection of Syrians in that wider postwar space were conducive to reliance on patron–client relations to project the benevolent tutelage of an empire.

Scholarship on the modern Middle East has yet to move beyond the long-accepted notion that the Ottoman capital ceased to have any significance for the Arab Middle East once Ottoman rule came to a de facto end in these lands by late 1918. Historians have fruitfully examined Arab experiences in Istanbul and Anatolia in the period before 1918, offering precious insights into the multilayered cultural and political contexts of these experiences.[4]

[1] The Province of Syria (Vilayet-i Suriye) was formed in the Ottoman Empire in the 1860s, but by the turn of the century there was hardly an overlap between Ottoman administrative units and the long-existing, broader geographical notions such as Bilad al-Sham or Greater Syria. Bilad al-Sham corresponds roughly to the area stretching from the Mediterranean in the west to the North Arabian Desert in the east, from the Taurus in the north to the Sinai in the south; encompassing today's Palestine, Jordan, Israel, and parts of Turkey as well as Syria and Lebanon. This area included multiple provinces and autonomous districts in the final decades of the Ottoman Empire.

[2] See page 5 of "Note sur la Protection des Syriens de Constantinople," dated 21 February 1921, in Archives diplomatiques, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Nantes (hereafter CADN): 36PO/1 - 145 - Comité Franco-syrien de Constantinople (25-V).

[3] See page 1 of the report "Comité Franco-Syrien de Constantinople," with the note on top of the first page "Rapport de M. Huart soumis le 3 Mars [1920], " in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Comité Franco-Syrien de Constantinople (25-V).

[4] For instance, see Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, "Ottoman Arabs in Istanbul, 1860–1914: Perceptions of Empire, Experiences of the Metropole through the Writings of Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, Muhammad Rashid Rida, and Jirji Zaydan," in *Imperial Geographies in Byzantine and Ottoman Space*, ed. Sahar Bazzaz, Yota Batsaki, and Dimiter Angelov (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies, 2013), 159–82; Ilham

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However, in the years after 1918 as well, Istanbul was a crucial landscape in the making of the modern Middle East. This might not be immediately apparent in the more frequently consulted historical sources of this period. One could hardly argue that news about Istanbul was omnipresent in the Arabic press in the period between 1918 and 1923. Yet, even in the prominent Arabic newspapers like *Lisan al-Hal* (The Mouthpiece) and *al-Bashir* (The Messenger), appearing in Beirut, a city that would gradually become the center of the French mandate in Syria and Lebanon, the prevalent attitude toward the Ottoman capital was not one of total indifference. The attention paid to events in Istanbul and Anatolia increased after the Turkish nationalist victories led to the Lausanne Peace Conference in late 1922, but the more sporadic attention paid earlier also was far from insignificant. On 19 January 1920, for example, *Lisan al-Hal* drew attention, right in the middle of its first page, to the sad state of affairs in al-Asitana, the predominant word for Istanbul in Arabic at the time. Following a gloomy description of the exorbitant prices of basic services, drastically increased costs of rent, and a general lack of security due to widespread violence and petty crimes, the audience heard of how "a city that was once heaven [*janna*]" now faced "the worst of fates."[5] This image, that of the Ottoman state failing even in its capital, would make protection from a stronger state only more appealing—in Istanbul and in Beirut. Even if not much positive was said about al-Asitana in the Arabic press, the Ottoman capital remained critical, not as a heavenlike cosmopolitan city, but more like a familiar neighborhood with increasingly difficult circumstances and new hierarchies.

The critical place of Istanbul in that wider postwar space was seen and acted upon by figures such as Henri Gouraud, the French general whose victory in the Battle of Maysalun crushed the Arab Kingdom under Amir Faysal in July 1920 and gradually established French control over Syria and Lebanon. As the French general could not afford to overlook, broader contexts of military conflict and imperial rivalry necessitated the coordination of French efforts in the Levant through institutions such as the Bureau du Levant and the Franco-Syrian Committee in Istanbul, as will be elaborated. In October 1920, Gouraud wrote that the capital of the defeated Ottoman Empire was still "the Metropolis of the entire Orient," as "the seat of the Caliphate, of different Christian patriarchies of the Orient, capital of Turkey, headquarters of the French High Commission and soon of foreign embassies, headquarters of the French command in Turkey and the naval command of the eastern Mediterranean."[6] He saw Istanbul as a center of "direct significance for the French work pursued not only in Turkey proper but also in Cilicia, Syria, Upper Mesopotamia, in all the French mandate territories."[7] Projecting power in, and from, occupied Istanbul was critical for imperial influence across multiple countries in the postwar Middle East. Tracing competing claims over Syrians with a focus on occupied Istanbul helps us interpret this historical period outside the compartments delineated by present-day nation–state borders.[8] It also facilitates seeing beyond binaries of colonized "locales" (which means, in much of the existing literature, new Middle Eastern capitals) versus imperial machineries operating from distant European capitals.

Khuri-Makdisi, "Narrating the Self in Istanbul: Sources from Arab Travelers and Residents in the Late Ottoman Period" (unpublished 2017 paper cited with permission from the author); Talha Çiçek, "From 'Notable Syrians' to 'Ordinary Anatolians': the Politics of 'Normalization' and the Experience of Exile during World War I," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 65 (2021): 49–77; and Mostafa Minawi, *Losing Istanbul: Arab-Ottoman Imperialists and the End of Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023).

[5] *Lisan al-Hal*, 19 January 1920, 1.

[6] See the instructions dated 30 October 1920 from Gouraud to LaBonne, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Comité Franco-syrien de Constantinople (25-V).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Recent contributions in this area include Gülsüm Polat, *Türk-Arap İlişkileri: Eski Eyaletler Yeni Komşulara Dönüşürken (1914–1923)* (Istanbul: Kronik Kitap, 2019); Alp Yenen, "Envisioning Turco-Arab Co-Existence between Empire and Nationalism," *Die Welt des Islams* 61, no. 1 (2020): 72–112; and Hasan Kayali, *Imperial Resilience: The Great War's End, Ottoman Longevity, and Incidental Nations* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021).

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Indeed, a particularly inspiring aspect of recent studies on international frameworks of politics at the League of Nations headquarters in Geneva has been their contribution to moving beyond dualist frameworks of imperialist imposition versus local resistance.[9] Tracing how a mandatory power asserted authority over Ottoman subjects in occupied Istanbul likewise represents a useful way to see beyond these dualisms. Although this is by and large neglected in the relevant literature, assertions of French authority over Syrians in occupied Istanbul shaped the foundations of French mandatory rule in Syria and Lebanon. Examining this assertion reveals insights into the practical foundations of international trusteeship in the Middle East after World War I. Questions of which Ottoman subjects were to be protected as Syrians and brought home to Syria interwove projections of imperial influence with discourses of benevolent care and guardianship. They involved competitions not primarily over territory, resources, or markets, but over people whose subjecthood and allegiance mattered, to them and to multiple states, in concrete, tangible terms. Mainly through records of internal and external state correspondence, the discussion that follows sheds new light on the diplomatic, bureaucratic, and legal dynamics that shaped a post-Ottoman future for Syria and Syrians under French mandate. For so many Ottoman subjects who fell under this delineation, the initial steps in the making of that future involved difficulties and tensions over their very categorization as Syrian. First, therefore, I discuss these difficulties and tensions.

Syria and Syrians: Strenuous Categorizations

The terms "Syria" and "Syrian" were certainly not invented from scratch after World War I. The vast relevant literature includes studies that trace the etymology of the term Syria across centuries, those that discuss how Syria was constructed as a geospatial and political concept in the modern era, as well as those that highlight the role of particular phenomena such as refugee flows in defining the modern state of Syria in the interwar period.[10] Over the years, the scholarship on modern Syria and Lebanon evolved fruitfully to include wider geographic scopes of analysis and wider sets of historical actors and relationships. The analytical perspective is no longer fixed on encounters between European colonial statesmen and local nationalists with varying degrees of fervor and success.[11] Still, much of the pioneering work on Syria in the early 20th century dealt mainly with questions of

[9] For instance, see Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015); Natasha Wheatley, "Mandatory Interpretation: Legal Hermeneutics and the New International Order in Arab and Jewish Petitions to the League of Nations," *Past and Present* 227, no. 1 (2015): 205–48; and contributions to the *AHR* roundtable, "Reflections: One Hundred Years of Mandates," *American Historical Review* 124, no. 5 (2019): 1673–1731. For further insights into the evolving state of the art in this vibrant field, compare Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett, eds., *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); with Andrew Arsan and Cyrus Schayegh, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[10] For instance, see Lamia Rustum Shehadeh, "The Name of Syria in Ancient and Modern Usage," in *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories, Pioneers and Identity*, ed. Adel Beshara (New York: Routledge, 2011), 17–29; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); and Benjamin Thomas White, "Refugees and the Definition of Syria, 1920–1939," *Past and Present* 235, no. 1 (2017): 141–78. Compare also the use of the term "Syrians" in Thomas Philipp, *The Syrians in Egypt: 1725–1975* (Stuttgart, Germany: Steiner-Verlag-Wiesbaden-GmbH, 1985).

[11] For instance, consider the evolution of approach that can be traced in the following book-length studies: Stephen Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958); Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism (1920–1945)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Andrew Arsan, *Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Schayegh, *The Middle East*; Camila Pastor, *The Mexican Mahjar: Transnational Maronites, Jews, and Arabs under the French Mandate* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017); Stacy Fahrenthold, *Between the Ottomans and the Entente: The First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908–1925* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019); Talha Çiçek, *Negotiating Empire in the Middle East: Ottomans and Arab Nomads in the Modern Era, 1840–1914* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); and

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nationalism, mass politics, and consequences of the emergence of the nation–state form.[12] Due attention has yet to be paid to a crucial process in which new diplomatic, and so legal significance, was ascribed to the terms Syria and Syrian in the immediate aftermath of World War I. Simultaneous with the partition of the Ottoman Empire, this process was defined by efforts to reconfigure the legal link of Ottoman subjects to particular lands and to state authorities with competing claims on those lands. Insights into this process can be gained through a focus that is not solely on the terms Syria or Syrian, but on the link between the two as projected and contested by competing states, mainly the Ottoman Empire and France but also others, most notably Britain, as will be illustrated.

French claims to authority over Syrians in occupied Istanbul were admittedly at odds with international law in the absence of a ratified peace treaty. The Ottoman government invoked "universally" accepted principles of international law to protest French protection of people who were legally still Ottoman subjects.[13] However, although the French High Commission in Istanbul recognized that "from the viewpoint of international law, Syrians remain Ottoman subjects until the Peace Conference has taken a final decision on this subject," reference was made to "the current situation in which Syria is placed" and "the serious breach of justice [Syrians] suffered throughout the entire war" to defend French efforts to "protect Syrians wherever they may be."[14] Even after the stillborn peace treaty signed between the Allies and the Ottoman government in Sèvres in August 1920, the legal status of Syrians in Istanbul remained disputed. The Treaty of Sèvres did not extend capitulations to Syrians, and article 123 stipulated that inhabitants of Istanbul would remain Ottoman subjects since they were not habitually resident in a territory detached from Turkey.[15] As late as June 1923, on the eve of the Treaty of Lausanne, even the Turkish government in Ankara refrained from considering the people (*ahāli*) of the lands of Syria and Lebanon (*Sūriye ve Cebel-i Lübnan ḳıṭʿası*) as foreign subjects: the matter was not addressed in the Ankara Accord the Ankara government had signed with France earlier in October 1921, and state sovereignty over these lands had not yet changed through a ratified peace treaty.[16]

Examining how Ottoman subjects were categorized as Syrians in these circumstances enhances, first of all, the scholarly understanding of how the Great War as well as its aftermaths were experienced in former Ottoman domains.[17] This attention to postwar

Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, eds., *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918–1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

[12] For instance, see Rashid Khalidi, Lisa Anderson, Muhammed Muslih, and Reeva E. Simon, eds., *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); James Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); and Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: Politics and Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), to name but a few.

[13] See the note dated 16 February 1920 from the Sublime Porte to the French High Commission in Istanbul, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français (25-VI).

[14] See the response dated 26 March 1920 from the French High Commission to the Sublime Porte, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français (25-VI). At this point in time, before the Allied Powers reached agreements with respect to the allocation of mandates at the San Remo conference in April 1920, it is unclear what aspect of "the current situation" French officials had in mind as the basis of their claims to authority over Syrians in Istanbul.

[15] French protection of Syrians therefore remained without a firm legal basis even after August 1920. This was recognized in correspondence among French officials. See, for example, page 1 of the memo dated 21 February 1921 from Gouraud to the French High Commission in Istanbul via Labonne, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Comité Franco-syrien de Constantinople (25-V).

[16] State Archives of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Istanbul-Ankara (hereafter BOA): HR. İM.: 75-46-1.

[17] This contributes to an expanding literature on World War I and its multiple Ottoman contexts. As examples of studies focusing on the Middle East in particular, see Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1918* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Talha Çiçek, *War and State Formation in Syria: Cemal Pasha's Governorate during World War I, 1914–17* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Leila Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); and Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: the Great War in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2015). For broader context, see also Yücel Yanıkdağ, *Healing the Nation: Prisoners of War, Medicine and Nationalism in Turkey, 1914–1939*

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reconfiguration of state–subject relations also contributes to a vibrant strand of literature that places questions of nationality and citizenship at the center of analyses on the broader political transformations the war brought about in its wake.[18] Moreover, a context of imperial dissolution and partition, during times when the Ottoman Empire was defeated like never before, is particularly revealing in view of the de facto assertions and practices that shaped late Ottoman contexts of protection, nationality, and sovereignty.[19] Finally, although the period between 1918 and 1923 produced multiple comparable contexts to examine postwar recategorization, protection, and repatriation of Ottoman subjects, it was in the intense political landscape of occupied Istanbul that the stakes of these practices became particularly high and visible.[20]

There were at least several key factors that conditioned the categorization of Ottoman subjects as Syrians in French efforts to protect and repatriate them after 1918. One of these was what biographical information Ottoman official records did and did not readily reveal, and the predicament this represented in Allied efforts to categorize Ottoman subjects on the basis of race or ethnicity. This categorization was important for sustaining military occupations of Ottoman territories, by France as well as by Britain, and for turning these occupations into new political regimes with minimum resistance. A second crucial factor was the French reliance on makeshift institutional frameworks and patron–client relations to manage difficulties amid postwar exigencies. This included the pressing need they saw to exclude Ottoman subjects "of Turkish race" from repatriations to Syria. Military conflicts

(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Ryan Gingeras, *Fall of the Sultanate: The Great War and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1922* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016); Elif Mahir Metinsoy, *Ottoman Women during World War I: Everyday Experiences, Politics and Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Yiğit Akın, *When the War Came Home: The Ottomans' Great War and the Devastation of an Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018); Nazan Maksudyan, *Ottoman Children and Youth during World War I* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2019); and Çiğdem Oğuz, *Moral Crisis in the Ottoman Empire: Society, Politics, and Gender During WWI* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2021).

[18] For instance, see Daniela L. Caglioti, *War and Citizenship: Enemy Aliens and National Belonging from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Marcella Aglietti, ed., *Citizenship under Pressure: Naturalisation Policies from the Late XIX Century until the Aftermath of World War I* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2021): particularly relevant are the chapters by Marie Bossaert, Filippo Espinoza, and Çiğdem Oğuz); and contributions (particularly by Ellinor Morack, Dmitar Tasić, Cristiano La Lumia, and Frank Caestecker) in the special volume *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'Histoire* 28, no. 2 (2021).

[19] On these multifaceted contexts, see Will Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality: Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Aimee Genell and Lâle Can, "On Empire and Exception: Genealogies of Sovereignty in the Ottoman World," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 40, no. 3 (2020): 468–73; Lâle Can, Michael Christopher Low, Kent F. Schull, and Robert Zens, eds., *The Subjects of Ottoman International Law* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020); Lâle Can, *Spiritual Subjects: Central Asian Pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj at the End of Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020); and Mostafa Minawi, "International Law and the Precarity of Ottoman Sovereignty in Africa at the End of the Nineteenth Century," *International History Review* 43, no. 5 (2021): 1098–1121.

[20] In part due to the analytical opportunities offered by the greater visibility of these stakes, occupied Istanbul received attention at a host of scholarly conferences and workshops in 2022 in cities as far apart as Berkeley and Naples as well as in Istanbul, under titles such as: "Dilemmas of Peace: Comparing the Greek and Armenian Communities during the Armistice Period, 1918–1923"; "Nationality and Citizenship in Occupied Istanbul, 1918–1923"; "Occupied Istanbul: Urban Politics, Culture and Society, 1918–1923"; and "Istanbul, 1914–1922: War, Collapse, Occupation and the History of Resistance." Publications resulting from these conversations are likely to join highly useful calls for attention to the broader significance of interactions in occupied Istanbul, as in, for instance, Burak Sayım, "Occupied Istanbul as a Comintern Hub: Sailors, Soldiers, and Post-Imperial Networks (1918–1923)," *Itinerario* 46, no. 1 (2022): 128–49. For a recent bibliography of the rapidly growing relevant literature, see Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal and Gizem Tongo, *A Bibliography of Armistice-Era Istanbul, 1918–1923*, BIAA Electronic Monographs 12 (London: British Institute at Ankara, 2022). See also the 2022 volume of *YILLIK: Annual of Istanbul Studies* for a special dossier on occupied Istanbul coedited by MacArthur-Seal and Tongo, accompanying the exhibition *Occupied City: Politics and Daily Life in Istanbul, 1918–1923*, held at the Istanbul Research Institute between January and December 2023.

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and imperial rivalries played the dominant role in shaping these categorizations, not a set of fixed, stable criteria.

During the war years, and especially after the Arab Revolt declared by Sharif Husayn of Mecca in 1916, Allied authorities were already engaged in efforts to make distinctions between Ottoman subjects by race or ethnicity, most notably to recruit Arab volunteers for the Sharifian forces. Although it was relatively easy to identify an individual's religion, categorizing Ottoman Muslims by ethnic origin was more difficult if these Ottomans did not readily accept and identify with that type of categorization. Ottoman records about soldiers and officers indicated *place* of origin, not necessarily ethnic origin.[21] In the aftermath of the war, getting Ottoman prisoners of war and demobilized soldiers back home was managed mainly on the basis of where one was from, in large part because this was the question available Ottoman records answered. However, as during the war years, place of origin did not constitute a satisfactory basis for the distinction the Allied authorities wanted to make between Turks and others. Making this distinction as safely as possible required one-to-one interrogations or inquiries through personal acquaintances and quasi-institutional networks.[22] Mechanisms were put in place, therefore, to facilitate direct, in-person processes for distinguishing Syrians from other Ottomans within and beyond Syria after the war, most notably in the very capital of the Ottoman Empire.

French authorities relied on processes that left considerable room for semiofficial networks and personal judgments in the categorization of Ottoman subjects as Syrians. The Franco-Syrian Committee in Istanbul is a poignant example in this regard. This committee played a pivotal role in deciding who was a Syrian or not in occupied Istanbul. Created soon after the armistice, in early 1919, it served a wide range of purposes closely linked with French political interests within and beyond Istanbul.[23] When dealing with "humanitarian issues of interest to Syrians of Constantinople," the committee had a particular interest in reaching out to Syrians "returning from exile or different fronts of the war to Constantinople and harboring the hope of returning to their native country."[24] Besides relying on Ottoman records to determine an individual's place of origin, a major role was assigned to the Arab and Syrian representatives of this committee for personally verifying the origins of individuals to be taken "home" in light of the information they provided about where that home was for them.[25] A similar mechanism shaped the process through which the Syrian origin of an applicant was verified for the certificates issued to "the Syrian colony" in Istanbul as special protégés. These certificates were issued after the president of the Franco-Syrian Committee "certified in writing the Syrian origin of the applicant." The committee's president was responsible for the proper delivery of the certificates "given the situation of his family, his conscientious and judicious mind, and his long

[21] As described by the historian Mesut Uyar: "All one can get from a standard registry logbook entry are: name, nickname (if any), father's name (sometimes also his profession), date of birth, home town, and physical appearance." See Mesut Uyar, "Ottoman Arab Officers between Nationalism and Loyalty during the First World War," *War in History* 20, no. 4 (2013): 530, esp. footnote 16. On the ethnic composition of the Ottoman army during World War I, see also Mehmet Beşikçi, *The Ottoman Mobilization of Manpower in the First World War: Between Voluntarism and Resistance* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 252–57; and Selim Deringil, *The Ottoman Twilight in the Arab Lands: Turkish Memoirs and Testimonies of the Great War* (Brighton, UK: Academic Studies Press, 2018), xxv–xxxiii.

[22] This is why there was a critical role to be played at POW camps by figures like Jaʿfar al-ʿAskari, an Ottoman officer who became a POW in Egypt in 1916 before serving in the Sharifian forces and becoming a leading statesman in postwar Syria and Iraq. Recruiting Arabs for the revolt was not easy in prisoner camps in Egypt, even for a man with al-ʿAskari's insights and familiarities, as they were "mixed" (*mukhtaliṭ*) with Turks. Jaʿfar al-ʿAskari, *Mudhakkirat Jaʿfar al-ʿAskari*, ed. Najdat Fathi Safwat (London: Dar al-Lam, 1988), 105.

[23] On this committee, see the report "Comité Franco-Syrien de Constantinople," with the note on top of the first page "Rapport de M. Huart soumis le 3 Mars [1920]," in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Comité Franco-Syrien de Constantinople (25-V).

[24] As pointed out at the beginning of the article, the number of these men were believed in March 1920 to be around forty thousand; ibid., 1.

[25] Ibid., 1–2.

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experience," as well as his ability to discern those "worthy of having in their possession this title of protection of the High Commissioner of the Republic in the Orient."[26] This quasi-institutional procedure hardly functioned without problems. Yet, the method of placing particular individuals, regardless of who they were, in positions of such authority when categorizing Ottoman subjects as Syrians would not be an intolerable problem for French authorities. More important would be whether or not they exercised this authority in ways favorable to French imperial prestige and influence.

In the several years after 1918, the categorization of Ottoman subjects as Syrians was an especially delicate matter in the context of repatriations. French efforts to take Syrians back home spanned across Istanbul, Beirut, and other cities in the eastern Mediterranean, such as Izmir and Alexandria, and involved indigent persons, internees, and exiles as well; however, repatriation of soldiers and officers was particularly significant.[27] Repatriation of demobilized army units involved the movement of large numbers of men across lands where fighting continued after 1918. The management of these processes had ramifications for shaping the course of ongoing military conflicts, as well as postwar interstate rivalries that continued among the Allies. Moreover, as will be explained, there was a profound political dimension to all this. Especially in cases of Ottoman soldiers whose places of origin were located in the territories now under Allied occupation, the release of these men from duty and transportation back home had key implications for the future political ties of these territories with the Ottoman Empire.

Postwar demobilization and repatriation of Ottoman soldiers are seldom considered essential processes in the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, these processes and the new categorizations that shaped them were critical in how the Ottoman Empire was undone in practice. After the 1918 armistice, the Ottoman government in Istanbul faced increasing pressure from the Allied Powers with respect to demobilization. This pressure would become particularly urgent in cases involving some men under Ottoman military authority.[28] Eventually, an Ottoman imperial decree was issued in October 1919, mainly due to British pressure, for the "release from duty of the soldiers from the people of Syria and Iraq born between 1310–1313 [1895–1898] desiring to return to their place of origin [*memleket*]."[29] A measure like this was extremely significant at a time when a peace treaty was not yet signed. In September 1919 the Ottoman Ministry of War had in fact identified "immense political harm" (*ʿaẓīm bir maḥẓūr-u siyāsī*) in releasing from duty soldiers from particular territories of the empire while their peers from other territories were still under arms. He believed that this would imply "the acceptance of the severance of long-existing bonds [*rābıṭa-yı ḳadīme*] between the lands of Syria and Iraq [*Sūriye ve ʿIrāḳ ḳıṭʿaları*] and [Ottoman] imperial domains."[30]

Neither these Ottoman measures nor the Allied pressures that led to them were based on clear, fixed understandings about which territories constituted Syria or Iraq. Let alone an agreement over the legal significance of the term Syrian, Ottoman officials did not even share with their Allied counterparts an understanding of where Syria was.[31] The Allied

[26] Ibid., 1–2. These were written about the President Shaykh Shahin al-Khazin of Lebanon. He seems to have played a role similar to those of community "experts" on whom the French police relied in wartime Europe to decide about the loyalties of Polish Jews as described in Caglioti, *War and Citizenship*, 149–50.

[27] Consider in this connection the telegrams dated 22 November 1918 from Gauthier to Duparc, and from Pichon dated 8 January 1919, in CADN: 36PO/1-8-1-VII - Syrie.

[28] Note that the attention paid to the Ottoman demobilization in the Arabic press in Beirut, albeit sporadic, was significant in relation to whose release from duty was awaited with particular eagerness. Consider the attention drawn to Christians in particular, for instance, in the news on the "Ottoman demobilization" (*tasrīḥ al-jaysh al-ʿUthmānī*) in *Lisan al-Hal*, 3 March 1919, 1.

[29] BOA: BEO.: 4594-344492-1-1.

[30] BOA: İ. DUİT.: 162-94-4-1.

[31] Ottoman bureaucrats would have difficulty preparing a list of Ottoman military buildings in Syria even in late 1921, due to not having a clear sense of where the borders of Syria were. See Archives of the Turkish General Staff

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demands involving Syria were certainly not clear either. In March 1919, for example, the British General Milne, in Istanbul as the commander in chief of the British Salonika Force at the time, was protesting that "Arabs and other natives of occupied territory" were still "retained in the Ottoman Army," and asking the Ottoman minister of war to issue definite orders so that "these Arabs, etc, be at once repatriated."[32] This was a projection, on rather vague grounds, of a link between Ottoman subjects of a certain ethnic background (in this case, Arabs) and lands defined primarily as occupied territory. The Ottoman Ministry of War was hesitant to act on protests like these, not the least because it was unclear exactly whom the Allies wanted to have demobilized and repatriated.[33] The cause of tension here was not the difficulty of translating words or communicating concepts. It was more the difficulty of categorizing peoples of occupied territories as Syrians or Iraqis when the significance of Ottoman occupied territory continued to change amid ongoing conflicts and competitions.

These conflicts and competitions involved a multiplicity of sides, and occupied Istanbul offered constant reminders of this. It was particularly visible in the Ottoman capital that the men who served the Ottoman army during the war were now under difficult circumstances. Already by late 1918, Istanbul newspapers were giving voice to demands of attention from the Ottoman deputies of Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra to the situation of "Iraqi [*ʿIrāḳlı*] reserve officers and demobilized soldiers in a state of misery and desolation" within and outside Istanbul.[34] In Beirut, almost a year into the armistice, newspapers such as *al-Bashir* would still report Ottoman failures to find the means to bring prisoners of war back home.[35] This was not simply inaccurate, derisive propaganda. Within several months after the 1918 armistice, growing concerns about public order and health had actually convinced the Ottoman Ministry of War of its need for Allied logistical support in managing postwar transportation of soldiers from "Syria and Iraq among the occupied territories."[36] Because an active role in managing repatriation meant greater leverage over the political futures of the repatriated, this was a field of competition. In the period before July 1920, the competitors for that leverage over Syrians in occupied Istanbul also included the Arab government in Damascus. In January 1919, the French High Commission in Istanbul was informed of Rushdi al-Safadi, a lieutenant colonel entrusted by the Arab government in Damascus with "the repatriation of Mohammedans and Arab sub-officers from Syria."[37] Al-Safadi was described as responsible for examining the situation of around 18,000 soldiers who were demobilized and brought to Istanbul without any measures taken by "the Turkish Government" to ensure their subsistence or transportation elsewhere.[38]

Although these competitions must have served as incentives for French authorities to be as inclusive as possible when claiming authority over Syrians, they also felt a need for vigilance concerning exclusion. In the first half of 1920, with the growing strength of a Turkish resistance movement in Anatolia, the exclusion of ethnic Turks from Syrians became a priority when regulating returns to Syria. Pursuing this priority eventually caused tensions even among the French military-political establishment working across occupied Istanbul and Beirut. What caused these tensions was not a difference of opinion about whether or

Military History and Strategic Studies Directorate, Ankara: İSH - Kutu 1517 - Gömlek 7 - Fihrist ve Belge no: 7-1, 10, 7-8a, 7-9a; and BOA: MV.: 223-4.

[32] Milne noted his willingness to also "assist with their care and transport" if these men were sent to the Selimiye Barracks in Istanbul. BOA: BEO.: 4599-344890-3-1.

[33] BOA: BEO.: 4599-344890-2-1.

[34] *Sabah,* 20 December 1918, 2.

[35] *Al-Bashir*, 16 October 1919, 1.

[36] BOA: BEO.: 4552-341347-2-1; BOA: BEO.: 4552-341347-1-1.

[37] See the telegram dated 28 January 1919 by Picot from Cairo, in CADN: 36PO/1-8-1-VII - Syrie. On al-Safadi, see also Eliezer Tauber, "Syrian and Iraqi Nationalist Attitudes to the Kemalist and Bolshevik Movements," *Middle Eastern Studies* 30, no. 4 (1994): 898–99.

[38] Telegram dated 28 January 1919 from Picot, in CADN: 36PO/1-8-1-VII - Syrie.

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not such an exclusion was morally and politically acceptable. There was tension primarily because of the practical difficulty of making the desired categorizations in ways that addressed the security concerns defined by that military-political establishment.

In May 1920, the French high commissioner in Beirut, General Gouraud, reminded the French authorities in occupied Istanbul of his earlier signaling of the "dubious acts" of the Franco-Syrian Committee with regard to repatriations. He wrote that in the last batch of repatriated Syrians arriving in ports in Zone West of territories under Allied occupation (essentially the coastal regions of present-day Syria and Lebanon), he found 164 Turks on their way to various districts, including Marash, Haifa, and Mosul.[39] "Besides the fact that my budget does not have to bear the cost of repatriating Turks to Asia Minor, to Palestine or to the Zone East of Syria," Gouraud wrote, "it is absolutely inadmissible for the Franco-Syrian Committee, under the surveillance of our service of the Dragomanat (translation office), to be an accomplice of the agents of Turkish propaganda who are engaged in Syria and Cilicia in an open war against us." Gouraud vowed to send the 164 Turks back to Istanbul, and called for exemplary punishment of the responsible individuals whose complicity he thought acquired "the character of a true betrayal."[40]

To the French authorities in Istanbul, it was evident that the individuals in question were former prisoners of war. It was pointed out that their repatriation was "necessarily made on the basis of Turkish military documents indicating the origin of prisoners."[41] The Turks mentioned in Gouraud's telegram were probably from the places their papers indicated, and they wanted to return there. "It is very difficult," Gouraud was told, "not to accept origin or even that of residence in Syria as a determinant of the quality of [being] Syrian."[42] What infuriated Gouraud was the undesirable result of reliance on Ottoman records. This reliance involved considerable risks while fighting in and around Syria continued. Not long after Gouraud's furious telegram about the arrival of Turks in various ports of Zone West, whom the General did send back to Istanbul, the French High Commissioner in Istanbul had bad news to give him. The former POW Turks subject to that telegram, as well as 200 others from [natives of] cities such as Aintab, Marash, and Urfa, who were temporarily quartered in Istanbul, had by July 1920 joined the nationalist forces to fight on the side of the Ankara government.[43]

By the time this bad news reached him, Gouraud was already in the process of taking steps to ensure that repatriated Syrians did not include Turks. He wanted firm application of certain conditions in repatriations: only those whose repatriation he approved could land in Beirut; he asked French officials in Istanbul to send him lists of individuals to be repatriated in advance, with exact indication of their final destination and names of respondents for each of them in the Zone West of Syria. After carrying out inquiries on the basis of these lists, Gouraud would send back a list of those whom he would accept. "Using his rights as the occupier," he would send away those without his approval.[44] Upon finding "ex-prisoners of Turkish race" wishing to land in the territories under his control, Gouraud's initiatives to keep them out would include reaching out to British authorities in Egypt as well. In one instance, following the arrival of a ship in Beirut carrying 817 former Ottoman prisoners of war, Gouraud sent away 361 of them who were recognized "to be of Turkish race."[45] In these processes of deciding on an Ottoman subject's race and so

[39] See the telegram dated 11 May 1920 from Gouraud, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Comité Franco-Syrien de Constantinople (25-V).

[40] Ibid.

[41] See the telegram dated 14 May 1920 from Defrance to Gouraud, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Comité Franco-Syrien de Constantinople (25-V).

[42] Ibid.

[43] See the telegram dated 6 July 1920 from Defrance to Gouraud, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français.

[44] Telegram dated 4 June 1920 from Gouraud, in response to Defrance's telegram dated 14 May 1920, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Comité Franco-Syrien de Constantinople (25-V).

[45] See the telegram dated 12 July 1920 from Gouraud to Istanbul, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français.

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suitability for coming back to a home in Syria, it is hard to imagine a method other than one-to-one interrogation following an initial inquiry into Ottoman records about place of origin. A categorization process so vital for thousands of Ottoman subjects wishing to return to Syria after the war was shaped in large part by orders from those at the top of military hierarchies, personal judgments of appointed individuals, and practices which left "the categorized" with little room, if any, to claim any rights vis-à-vis state authority.

Before concluding this section, attention to a specific case will be useful to underscore that uncertainties and legal limbos might have been difficult to navigate for those in positions of vulnerability, but they were not necessarily limiting for those in positions of power. A case in point is that of a certain Osman Nureddin and the questions raised in occupied Istanbul about his Syrian origins. As outlined above, in cases of repatriation involving soldiers and officers of Turkish race, one's place of birth was a necessary but insufficient condition to be considered Syrian. However, in cases of individuals with a different profile, one evidently did not even have to be born in Syria to be considered Syrian. Categorization as Syrian depended on the calculation of risks and advantages in particular cases. What brought Osman Nureddin's case to the attention of Ottoman and French authorities in occupied Istanbul was the charge that he acted dishonestly in claiming the status of a French protégé. After an encounter with Ottoman officials in the city (during which he seems to have insulted the Ottoman district governor of present-day Bakırköy), doubt was raised about whether Osman Nureddin really was a native of Syria as he claimed. In due course, it was realized that he was actually born in Erzincan (present-day northeastern Turkey), although the title given to him as a French protégé indicated his place of birth to be Latakia.[46] Upon investigation, the French High Commission in Istanbul ruled out the charge that Osman Nureddin was fraudulent in obtaining his title. A list of the documents that obtained him his status was furnished, and it was stated that his registration as having been born in Syria was due to an error; he was a native of Syria, but not born there.[47] Evidently, documents indicating the birth of one's father in Syria (not to mention a list of properties he owned there) could allow the consideration of individuals like Osman Nureddin as a native of those lands.

Practical difficulties and political priorities conditioned the qualification of Ottoman subjects as natives of particular lands. If you were a Damascene Ottoman POW identified to be of Turkish race, you could very well fall outside the category of Syrian for the purposes of French repatriation and legal protection, even if you were born in Damascus to a father born in Damascus. If, on the other hand, you were a relatively wealthier individual in occupied Istanbul whose documents included a list of properties owned by your family, birth outside Syria did not prevent your qualification by French authorities as a native of Syria. This indicates more a consistency than contradiction of the dynamics that shaped French categorization of Ottoman subjects as Syrians in occupied Istanbul. Although place of birth and blood relationships were important reference points, security concerns and material interests played the dominant role in these categorizations.

Precarious Grounds for Building New Bonds

The difficulties encountered in the repatriation and legal protection of Syrians were not limited to those of categorization. French authorities needed reliable structures and functioning mechanisms to project the image of an advanced nation benevolently and efficiently caring for Syrians. They had to address logistical hardships, charges of misconduct, and corruption. These were important challenges, not the least because Syrians were far from a homogenous

[46] See the note addressed on 14 October 1920 by Le Roux in Istanbul to the French High Commissioner in the city, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français (25-VI).

[47] For a list of these documents, see the information forwarded on 28 October 1920 by Defrance to Le Roux, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français (25-VI).

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group of individuals ready and willing to side with France under whatever circumstances. However, as I will describe, for many Ottoman subjects recently categorized as Syrian, the tutelage of an advanced nation was built on the foundations of bureaucratic and logistic shortcomings, dependence on patron–client relations, and the primacy ascribed to material benefit in relations between an empire and those envisioned as its allies.[48]

Syrians in occupied Istanbul and in Anatolia were not always quick to accept the hand French authorities extended to them as one of benevolent care and protection.[49] More than a year after the armistice, French officials in Turkey still deliberated on the difficulty of mobilizing Syrians for repatriation. The prevalent reasoning in these deliberations did not foreground competing loyalties of Syrians due to multilayered identities; the possibility that they were hesitant due to uncertainties awaiting them in Syria; or that some of them perhaps refused the auspices of an enemy the Ottoman Empire had just fought against. The greater part of the French reasoning focused on what were seen as obstructions by the Ottoman authorities or the fearful attitude of the Syrians themselves.[50] However, challenges encountered in the process of repatriating Syrians can hardly be boiled down to a lack of free will or a wish to escape state control. It is worth asking, for example, what the mechanisms put in place to manage their repatriation promise Syrians about a future in Syria.

This is a useful question to pose because the very experience of these mechanisms tested the reliability of political prospects promised through them. One cannot but note, for instance, that even transportation means suitable for repatriations to Syria remained an unsettled matter for an extended period of time in occupied Istanbul. Following the initial difficulties in gathering large numbers of Syrians for repatriation at once, the Franco-Syrian Committee in Istanbul suggested using naval vessels already headed to Syria, since reserving entire ships meant large expenditures.[51] However, French naval commanders raised concerns about mixing troops with additional passengers. What made more sense to French officials in Istanbul by early 1920, therefore, was to reserve space for repatriations on chartered vessels already scheduled to depart from Istanbul toward Syria. It took long and combined efforts across Istanbul and Beirut to find the suitable means of transportation that were economic as well as "favorable to French propaganda and influence."[52] Logistical difficulties kept testing the practical value of political claims and projections. Much to the regret of French authorities in Istanbul and Beirut, these tests involved charges of misconduct and corruption as well.

In the case of repatriation efforts, historical records indicate multiple instances in which Syrians were exposed to corruption in occupied Istanbul or in Beirut. As part of one investigation into such instances, it was reported that an employee of the Franco-Syrian Committee unduly charged the individuals repatriated in October 1919 on the boat *Caucase* of Messageries Maritimes (a leading French maritime shipping company,

[48] This underscores the importance of combining attention to violence, legal and administrative measures, and material interests in analyses of state formation. More recent scholarship on Syria is moving in this direction. For example, compare the different emphases in this regard in two studies: Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Adam Mestyan, "From Administrative to Political Order? Global Legal History, the Organic Law, and the Constitution of Mandate Syria, 1925–1930," *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 2 (2022): 292–311.

[49] In fact, in the months following the 1918 armistice, the Turkish press in Istanbul could still report gladly that only a few Ottoman "Arab officers" (that is, officers from among "the people of Arab provinces" [*vilāyāt-ı ʿarabiye ahālisinden*]) decided to join the new armed forces being formed under Arab governments. For instance, see *Yeni Gün*, 25 February 1919, 2.

[50] According to the French estimate in January 1920, Syrians to repatriate in various provinces in Anatolia numbered around six thousand, with those in Istanbul alone numbering around two thousand. See the memo dated 29 January 1920 submitted to General D'Esperey in Istanbul, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français (25-VI).

[51] For instance, in 1919, when the ship *l'Asie* was reserved for repatriation to Syria, of the 1,200 persons registered for the trip only about 500 showed up at the time of departure; ibid.

[52] Ibid., 2–3.

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transporting passengers as well as commodity) for the small amounts of personal belongings they took on board, even though the company did not require this payment.[53] A woman named Shadiya Ismaʿil was asked by the employee to pay for her journey even though her repatriation document meant she did not have to.[54] There was not a set of fixed, consistent rules that guided the issuance of repatriation documents and determined their practical significance. Individuals would not normally have to pay for their repatriation, but corruption damaged predictability. This was detrimental to instilling in people the sense that the ship they boarded under French auspices was taking them to a country under good government.[55] At least some cases of extortion were investigated and addressed, but bringing an end to them was not easy. As the next example reveals, some complaints of corruption involved even the relatives of people whom the French authorities had placed in positions of authority over the futures of people wishing to return home after the war.

The complaint submitted by a certain ʿArif Salama in July 1920 is a striking example in this regard, not least because Salama pointed to dozens of individuals in situations similar to his. Written while he was at the French House of Refuge in Pera, Istanbul, Salama's complaint involved an individual employed at the quarantine center in Beirut who was identified in the relevant correspondence as "the brother of the ex-President of the Franco-Syrian Committee of Constantinople."[56] By the end of the war, Salama was a prisoner of war in Egypt who wanted to reach his hometown Homs, but upon arriving in Beirut he was refused entry and sent away to Istanbul. Rather than a policy or ideologically motivated decision, what Salama pointed to as the primary reason for his suffering—and that of thirty of his compatriots—was the corruption at the port in Beirut. His complaint is worth quoting in length, as it offers insight into how the broader repatriation process worked for former POWs like Salama:

> I am Syrian and I was a prisoner of war in Egypt. The English military authorities having recognized me as Syrian repatriated me to Beirut on 24 May 1920 with other prisoners. When I arrived at the port of Beirut, I was quarantined for three days. The employee of the quarantine, Manzur Khazin, and the interpreter Selim asked me for 3 English pounds to let me enter Beirut. Since I did not want to satisfy them, they took all my papers from me, tore them up, and sent me to Constantinople as an Ottoman subject. I am currently without resources at the Franco-Syrian refuge in Pera. About thirty compatriots who for the same reason were directed, with me, to Constantinople, and who are currently at the *Selimiye* Barracks, can certify the truth of the facts I have just mentioned. I therefore respectfully allow myself to beg you to repatriate me to Homs in Syria.[57]

When former POWs encountered such hurdles across the Mediterranean and returned to occupied Istanbul in frustration, this went far beyond questions of logistics. Instances such as these tested how willing and capable France was in caring for Syrians. The actual value of alignment with France had to be established in practice, and hardships such as those

[53] See the confidential report by the committee attached to the note dated 29 January 1920 from Defrance to Gouraud, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français (25-VI).

[54] Ibid.

[55] Scholarly engagement with what constituted "good colonial government" in the years following World War I can be significantly enhanced by paying in-depth attention to specific practices such as postwar repatriation and legal protection. This is a topic discussed with very different focus in seminal works such as Veronique Dimier, "On Good Colonial Government: Lessons from the League of Nations," *Global Society* 18, no. 3 (2004): 279–99.

[56] See the note dated 15 July 1920 from Defrance to Gouraud, outlining the basics of the complaint submitted by Salama, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français (25-VI).

[57] See the handwritten letter signed by ʿArif Salama with the date 8 July 1920, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français (25-VI).

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experienced by Salama did not help the process. Charges of misconduct and corruption were acerbic in political settings where not all Syrians were on board with the political visions and projects associated with France through notions such as the "Franco-Syrian cause."[58]

Among the charges the Franco-Syrian Committee in Istanbul had to address in early 1920, after a request from General Gouraud in Beirut, were charges of misconduct related to legal protection.[59] As it responded to "rumors transmitted to Beirut," the committee had to speak back against charges of issuing documents of protection in return for money, to "strangers to Syria," and even to "proven [political] adversaries."[60] These documents (*maḥmiyet veşīḳası*) were the papers Syrians were given to indicate their protection by France, which meant exemption from the legal authority of the defeated Ottoman Empire and more favorable terms in commercial interactions and at courts. When refuting the charge of granting documents of protection to proven adversaries in particular, a name seemed to be an obvious point of reference to the committee: "M. Fakhuri, a native of Beirut":

> He was indeed our adversary. But since the creation of the [Franco-Syrian] Committee of Constantinople, he has consistently shown himself to be Francophile and very devoted to the Franco-Syrian cause. He rendered great services to the Committee, spent a lot for the success of our policy, [and] ultimately advanced nearly 3,000 Turkish liras to the Committee that was short of money. It was he who made the Syrian colony of Constantinople understand that it had to come to the help of the poor class. He is of great use for our influence among Syrians.[61]

In addition to serving as a reminder that not all Syrians had the same fixed view of the Franco-Syrian cause, this description showcases the importance of dynamics among Syrians in occupied Istanbul. Fakhuri was a wealthy and well-connected Beiruti on whose support the committee relied to penetrate across multiple levels of patronage. He is only one example of men who represented critical assets because of their likely contribution to the image of France as a benevolent bigger patron in harmony with other, more immediate patrons. This is the gist of what protection meant in this historical context. Rather than an act of ensuring safety from a particular enemy or threat, protection was essentially a means to construct new patron–client relations so that actors vying for power at the top could project and sustain new hierarchies in the aftermath of World War I.

This reliance on patron–client relations had consequences for the new bonds French authorities sought to construct with Syrians. Operating within frameworks of patronage was conducive to the prioritization of short-term material interests when defining mutual expectations. French authorities may have made frequent references to values and ideals in their articulation of reasons to protect Syrians in occupied Istanbul. But it is impossible to overlook the primacy they ascribed to material interests when qualifying the stakes in that protection. The remarks quoted below provide striking evidence for this. They are again remarks by a figure of no less influence than General Gouraud, in early 1921:

> It is above all through material interests that Orientals can be attached to us, and there is no doubt that if effective protection in their property and business is accorded to Syrians of Constantinople, whose ties with those of Beirut are numerous, this

[58] The Franco-Syrian cause rested on the understanding that France had commitments to Syria due to firm historical bonds, especially with the Maronites of Mount Lebanon, going all the way back to the Crusades. The political significance envisioned for these bonds evolved during and after the war. See, for instance, Asher Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia: The Search for Identity in Lebanon* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014); and Idir Ouahes, *Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate: Cultural Imperialism and the Workings of Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018).

[59] See the confidential report by the committee attached to the note dated 29 January 1920 from Defrance to Gouraud, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français (25-VI).

[60] Ibid., 2–4.

[61] Ibid., 3–4.

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measure will not fail to have a happy repercussion for French influence in the entire Levant.[62]

From this perspective, the large fortune of "the Syrian colony of Constantinople" would be a key reference point when qualifying the importance of protecting them.[63] It was due to the wealth of these Syrians that French officials believed litigation support was an indispensable component of their protection.[64] A litigation department set up under the Franco-Syrian Committee in Istanbul regularly wrote to courts in the city to secure the suspension of trials involving Syrians, based on a decision of the Ottoman Ministry of Justice dated 8 June 1919 to suspend all trials and sentences against subjects and protégés of Entente powers. With the claim that Syrians of Istanbul belonged to this group, this litigation department would cooperate with the French Gendarmerie to intervene in numerous cases of dispute over rent and property.[65] Under stringent postwar circumstances, being as powerful as possible in material terms indeed would be appealing, and certainly not just to "Orientals."

The appeal of these prospects was in fact one of the main reasons for the interstate competitions that unfolded in occupied Istanbul. France was only one among the Allied Powers competing to establish fruitful bonds with the peoples of the occupied Ottoman territories. As in the case of repatriation efforts, Britain featured prominently in French considerations. Power dynamics within the occupied Ottoman capital could convince even the more influential among the sultan's subjects to compromise when French officials weighed in on a case through litigation support.[66] But the situation was different in disputes involving British authorities who also questioned the legitimacy of French desires to protect Syrians in occupied Istanbul. A dispute over the rent contract of a building in occupied Istanbul could pit the Allies against one another when it involved a native of Syria and a native of Baghdad.[67] For its part, Britain was likewise attentive to disputes involving the natives of lands that became Palestine and Iraq in the 1920s. When compared with the peoples of other Ottoman Arab provinces under Allied occupation, the relative wealth and large numbers of Syrians in occupied Istanbul meant that French claims to authority over them represented an especially significant, but not an entirely unique case. Britain also competed to protect. Patrons would not want to let their clients down when it came to safeguarding material interests in difficult times.

These postwar imperial rivalries were critical in the construction of League of Nations mandates in the Middle East. By early 1921, French authorities in occupied Istanbul worked

[62] See page 3 of Gouraud's memo to Istanbul dated 21 February 1921, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Comité Franco-syrien de Constantinople (25-V).

[63] Ibid. This fortune was estimated to be a minimum of half a billion francs at the time. By early 1921, 850 Syrians, almost all married with children, were registered in Istanbul as French special protégés. See page 5 of "Note sur la Protection des Syriens de Constantinople" dated 21 February 1921, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Comité Franco-syrien de Constantinople (25-V).

[64] Pages 3–4 of the report "Comité Franco-Syrien de Constantinople," with the note on top of the first page "Rapport de M. Huart soumis le 3 Mars [1920]," in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Comité Franco-Syrien de Constantinople (25-V).

[65] The cases taken up did however include various kinds, commercial as well as civil; ibid. For useful broader perspectives on the evolving legal regime(s) in occupied Istanbul, see Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal, "Resurrecting Legal Extraterritoriality in Occupied Istanbul, 1918–1923," *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, no. 5 (2018): 769–87; and Marie Bossaert, "Tous Italiens! Les Demandes de Protection et de Nationalité Italiennes dans Istanbul Occupée," in *La Danse sur le Volcan: Istanbul 1918-1923, Une Capitale sous Occupation*, ed. Frédéric Hitzel and Timour Muhidine (Paris: CNRS Éd, forthcoming in 2023).

[66] Consider, as an example, the dispute between the Ottoman field marshal Kazım Pasha and two Syrians, Elias Gina and Youssef Zebouni. See page 2 of "Note sur la Protection des Syriens de Constantinople," dated 21 February 1921, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Comité Franco-syrien de Constantinople (25-V).

[67] Consider the dispute between Elzebedani, a native of Syria, and Behjet, a native of Baghdad, which was essentially a dispute about the rent contract of a building on the Divanyolu Street in Istanbul; ibid., 4–5.

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with the understanding that if they failed in protecting "Syrians whose country has been placed under the French mandate," it would be a shortcoming that would impact "the prestige of France in the entire Near East."[68] The allegiance of "the Syrian colony of Constantinople" was considered vital, as this clientele was likely to offer key contributions to French commerce and influence. Rivals were expected to do their best to prevent this.[69]

In June 1921, almost a year after the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres, the French High Commissioner in Istanbul was still concerned about the ramifications of competitions in Istanbul for the French mandate in Syria and Lebanon. He was convinced that it would be too costly if the Allied authorities treated Syrians in occupied Istanbul without distinguishing them from other Ottomans. He lamented that on many occasions these Syrians were subject, "like the other Ottomans" to "requisitions or similar measures which [the French authorities] could not legally prevent; particularly [in the cases of] a number of important immovable properties belonging to Syrians which were, despite [French] demands, requisitioned by British authorities."[70] The French High Commissioner in Istanbul was eager to have the upper hand in such encounters. "If, on our part, we fail to have Syrians benefit from any favor," he thought, "this could result in an unfortunate state of mind likely to have repercussions in the Levant, where the interest of natives in serving our cause is naturally dependent on the services we give them back and the protection they ask to benefit from outside Syria."[71] Much to the chagrin of French authorities, their claims to protect Syrians in occupied Istanbul continued to be contested even after this point.[72]

Subsequent events in the later stages of Allied occupation in Istanbul would only increase the significance of protection in al-Asitana. By late 1922, once the Ankara government's strength in the city increased after its military victories, newspapers like *Lisan al-Hal* would be reporting not only the by-now-familiar lack of security in al-Asitana but also the news of large numbers of Greeks, Armenians, and foreign subjects fleeing the city in dire need of protective assistance.[73]

Conclusion

The ramifications of competing claims over Syrians in occupied Istanbul deserve further attention as part of inquiries into the establishment of a French mandate in Syria and

[68] Ibid., 5–6.

[69] Ibid., 5. On inter-Allied rivalries in occupied Istanbul see also Nur Bilge Criss, "Müttefik İşgali Altındaki İstanbul'dan Bir Kesit: 1918–1920 Yıllarında İngiliz-Fransız Rekabeti ve İdari Sorunlar," *OTAM* 1 (1990): 79–88; as well as Nur Bilge Criss, *Istanbul under Allied Occupation, 1918–23* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); and Abdurrahman Bozkurt, *İtilaf Devletlerinin İstanbul'da İşgal Yönetimi* (Ankara: AAM, 2014).

[70] See the draft letter dated 28 June 1921 from General Pelle to General Charpy, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français (25-VI).

[71] Ibid.

[72] In November 1921, when the issue was debated in the Allied Juridical Commission in Istanbul, the French position was again challenged on the question of "tribunal competence" in cases involving Syrians. See the summary of a discussion of the commission on 14 November 1921, titled Protection des Syriens, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français (25-VI).

[73] *Lisan al-Hal*, 16 November 1922, 2; *Lisan al-Hal*, 17 November 1922, 2; *Lisan al-Hal*, 22 November 1922, 3. In a study with a broader scope, it would be useful to analyze French claims over Syrians in tandem with the evolving relations of France with other communities such as Armenians. For analyses that can be particularly helpful in this context, see Vahé Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute-Mésopotamie, Aux Confins de la Turquie, de la Syrie et de l'Irak, 1919–1933* (Paris: Karthala, 2004); Nicola Migliorino, *(Re)Constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-Cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008); and Ari Şekeryan, *The Armenians and the Fall of the Ottoman Empire: After Genocide, 1918–1923* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023). Also noteworthy in this context is the case of Chaldean natives of Diyarbakir and Mosul, for example, toward whom French willingness to protect in occupied Istanbul seems to have faltered over time after changes in the envisioned area of postwar French influence in the Middle East. See the letter dated 10 March 1921 from the French High Commission in Istanbul (involving Elias J. Devlet) to M. Chauvet in Bagdad, in CADN: 36PO/1 - 145 - Syriens Protégés Français (25-VI).

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Lebanon. A couple of initial suggestions in this regard are possible in light of the discussion above. It is clear, first of all, that the relations French authorities sought to construct with Syrians in occupied Istanbul centered on patronage rather than rights and entitlements. This is significant especially in relation to a point Melanie Tanielian has raised in her highly useful recent work, underlining that "French government officials used and replicated wartime politics of provisioning to establish their neopatrimonial imperial rule of the Lebanese Mandate."[74] This neopatrimonial imperial rule seems to have been established in a spatial context that extended far beyond Syria and Lebanon after World War I. Istanbul was particularly important, but not the only occupied urban space that shaped a future for postwar Syria from beyond Syria. Izmir (Smyrna), the Adana-Mersin region (Cilicia), as well as places beyond the prewar Ottoman Empire, such as Thessaloniki (Salonica), are worth particular attention.[75] Analyzing competing claims over Syrians across these postwar contexts can reveal precious new insights into the postwar reconfigurations examined in this article with its focus on occupied Istanbul.

Finally, it is worth underlining that the new legal significance constructed for the terms "Syria" and "Syrian" after World War I was first and foremost diplomatic, and therefore legal. This significance was claimed and challenged in particularly consequential ways at the intersections of interstate rivalries, state–subject relations, and questions of nationality: not primarily on public grounds of interaction shaped by principles of international law, debates about constitutions, or competing ideologies and (self-)perceptions. States played the dominant role in drawing the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that shaped modern Syria and Syrians, largely in the disputed and evolving legal spaces of occupied territory. In fact, even after the international ratification of the Treaty of Lausanne in August 1924, nationality-related claims and disputes involving Syrians did not cease to be politically significant. There would now be tensions over who could and could not legally be considered Syrian, and have the right to opt for that nationality as stipulated in the Treaty of Lausanne. As the aftermaths of World War I continued in former Ottoman lands, so did interstate competitions, over not just territory, resources, and markets, but also peoples.

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[74] Melanie Tanielian, *The Charity of War: Famine, Humanitarian Aid, and World War I in the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 239.

[75] Izmir, occupied by Greece in mid-1919, is an especially pertinent example. After "some residents of Izmir from the people of Syria and Adana" claimed French protection in legal and commercial affairs, the Ottoman government had to instruct local officials in January 1920 that this protection was invalid. BOA: DH. EUM. AYŞ.: 37–62.

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