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The Syrian Question

Whether the proponents of a natural Syria like it or not, contemporary Syria is the outcome of a deliberate although not always rational work of construction. All the protagonists who participated in forming it over the last two centuries – politicians, officers, men of ideas or men of faith, popular movements, foreign powers, and others – sought to build something to reflect their inner convictions or their overt or covert interests. Some preferred a fragmented and multiple Syria; others saw it as a single entity around which to rally. For the latter, who were in the majority in the local population about a century ago, Syria had to be an ideal political construction bringing together the whole population in all its diversity. But for others, a unitary Syria was something to be avoided at all costs; or at least being part of it was. Colonial-style compromise among European powers, sometimes corrected by Syrian nationalists' victorious struggles in the field, ultimately decided the scope, nature, and shape of contemporary Syria. Between dream and reality, construction and abstraction, Syria was to become a fact while continuing to be an ideal to be achieved – for Syria remains, more than ever, an unfinished creation.

The history of contemporary Syria begins with the history of the Syrian Question, which was an integral part of what Europeans called the Eastern Question throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries. It is generally accepted that the Eastern Question began with the peace of Küçük-Kaynarca in 1774 between the Ottoman empire and Russia and ended with the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne that consecrated the dismemberment of the empire.

Chronologically, the Eastern Question falls into two main periods. The first extends from the 1774 peace to the Greek crisis of 1827; the second from 1827 to the end of the Ottoman empire in 1923. In the first period, the Eastern Question was a matter of finding and maintaining some sort of balance among the five major European powers (Austria, France, Great Britain, Prussia, and Russia) who were all eager to parcel up the Ottoman empire's possessions. With the 1827 Greek orthodox uprising

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and their fight for national independence supported by European states and public opinion, and by Russia in particular, the Eastern Question changed nature. It was no longer a matter of wars between the Ottoman empire and a European power, nor of diplomatic protection of certain Christian subjects of the Sublime Porte by a European power. For the first time ever, Europe interfered directly in Ottoman internal affairs and promoted separatism of a part of the population. European intervention in the Greek affair had weighty consequences for the empire's future. The Eastern Question now took on a new dimension. The traditional issue of an external balance among European powers was now compounded by in-fighting among rival Ottoman factions, which themselves gradually came to be closely tied in to the interplay among European powers.[1]

The internationalization of the empire's internal crises was again strikingly evident in the Syrian campaign (1831–41) of Mohamad Ali, viceroy of Egypt. This military campaign, theoretically conducted by a vassal against his sultan, saw direct intervention by European powers in an Ottoman crisis, this time not to support an emancipation movement in the eastern Mediterranean as with the Greek orthodox uprising, but on the contrary, to quell one.

The 1860 crisis was an opportunity to create a great Syrian entity. Great Britain made a proposal along these lines but France would have preferred a Syrian Arab kingdom under Emir Abdel Kader. In the end, taking advantage of the divergent views of the French and British and of Abdel Kader's refusal to ascend the Syrian throne, the sultan recovered control of the Syrian provinces while granting local autonomy to Mount Lebanon.

After the two nineteenth-century Syrian crises of 1831–41 and 1860, it was not until the early twentieth century that the Syrian Question arose again on the international stage. This time it was settled within a decade (1913–22).

The formation of modern political Syria began in 1918 with the separation of the Ottoman empire's Arab provinces after more than four centuries of shared history. The break with the Sublime Porte was experienced as a liberation by the Arabs who, during the final years of the empire, had suffered tremendously under the Young Turk government's policies of domination and discrimination and the ferocious repression ordered by its local representative, Jamal Pasha. Political oppression and endeavours to bring Turkish rule to the Arab provinces had intensified with the

[1] Laurens, *Le royaume impossible*, p. 80.

loss of the European provinces (the Balkans) and the transformation of an empire that was initially multi-ethnic and multi-religious into a Muslim empire with a Turk–Arab majority governed by Turks.

1.1 Ibrahim Pasha's Syria

The characteristic features of a modern and unitary Syria (in terms of territory, population, and administration) began to emerge with the Syrian campaign led by Ibrahim Pasha against the Sublime Porte in the name of his father, Mohamad Ali, viceroy of Egypt. At the same time, the European powers were taking on a paramount role in the eastern Mediterranean and their interventions began to have an impact on both the unfolding and the outcome of the Syrian crisis. The geographical location of Syria at the crossroads of three continents – Europe, Asia, and Africa – bordering the eastern Mediterranean and crossed by two major rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, had made it the cradle of ancient civilizations and a strategically important route for intercontinental trade. This channel of communication was coveted by all powers wishing to project their influence or having economic and political interests in the Old World. If there was one rule in geopolitics that had changed little from antiquity to modern times it was that, to assume fully their role and defend their interests, the dominant powers at any given time had to control this route interconnecting the three continents. At the time of Mohamad Ali's 1831 campaign, Ottoman Syria formed a buffer zone between several leading regional players: Ottoman Anatolia, the heart of the empire that still encompassed large swaths of the Balkans and eastern Europe; Egypt, which was formally under the Porte's control but which, under Mohamad Ali's energetic command, aspired to political autonomy; the Arabian peninsula torn between the Ottoman caliphate and the new Wahhabite sect practising a strict Islam and who for a time dominated the Najd and the Hejaz and even launched razzias into Syria; and finally Persia, concerned about the development of this new sect on the other shore of the Gulf. Each of these regional actors had its own interests to defend and Syria appeared to be high stakes for at least two of them, Cairo and Istanbul.

The Syrian campaign saw two wars. The first lasted from 1831 to 1833 and the second from 1839 to 1841. Some historians argue the origins of the Syrian campaign are to be sought in the Greek crisis from 1821 to 1827. At the time, the Ottoman sultan Mahmud II, being unable to put down the Greek uprising, sought military aid from Mohamad Ali, who sent his fleet and army. But because of the unanimous support from the

European powers, the war turned to the advantage of the Greeks despite the reinforcements from Egypt. The Egyptian fleet was sunk at Navarino and Mohamad Ali's army was routed. In consideration of his support and the heavy losses he incurred, Mohamad Ali expected to receive Syria or at least the Pashalik[2] of Acre from the sultan. Instead, he received the Pashalik of Crete by way of recognition and compensation, which somewhat embittered the viceroy of Egypt.

Ottoman Syria was divided administratively into five pashaliks: Damascus, Acre, Saida, Tripoli, and Aleppo. The population of Syria had always been religiously and ethnically diverse. In some places, the population enjoyed a degree of autonomy from Istanbul, as was the case on Mount Lebanon, which was only nominally associated with the Sublime Porte and where Druze and Maronites cohabited under the authority of Emir Beshir Shehab. Christians living on the mountain and in the cities and countryside enjoyed traditional privileges associated with their status. Elsewhere the Arab population was mostly Sunnite, with some Muslim minorities not recognized by the Ottoman rulers, such as the Shiites, Alawites, and Ismalians. Sunnite Arabs were treated as equals in theory with Sunnite Turks.

The European powers were familiar with the context of the Syrian campaign of 1831 to 1841. The regime of Capitulations inaugurated by Suleiman the Magnificent had granted François I of France protection over the Maronites in 1536. This undertaking was renewed in 1553 and 1740. Great Britain had secured protection of the Druze in 1583 and Russia that of Orthodox Christians in 1774.

Ever since ancient times, Syria had been strategically important for Egypt. For Mohamad Ali, it enabled him to protect his domain by creating a buffer zone between him and the sultan. It also enabled him to control the growing trade between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean. Syria was of strategic importance for Istanbul, too. As the crossroads of the empire, it linked the empire's European territories and the Nile Valley and it commanded the route to Arabia and Islam's two holiest sites of Mecca and Medina. The Ottomans held Damascus to be the fourth holy city of Islam, after Jerusalem.

Seizing the pretext of a quarrel with the Pasha of Acre, who allegedly gave refuge to almost 6,000 Egyptian fellahs who had fled the Nile delta to avoid paying taxes, Mohamad Ali sent his son Ibrahim Pasha

[2] An administrative division governed by a pasha appointed by the sultan.

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to invade Syria in October 1831 at the head of an expeditionary force of 30,000 men. Ibrahim was a battle-hardened warrior and formidable military leader, adulated by his men and feared by his enemies. He had already participated in the Sudan campaign in 1821–22, but it was primarily in the expedition against the Wahhabites in 1816–19 that he had distinguished himself. He had driven them from the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, pursued them to their capital Diriyah in the heart of the Najd, where Riyadh now stands, and razed it to the ground on his father's orders. He had also fought in the campaign against the Greek insurgents from 1824 to 1827.

The expedition conquered Gaza early in 1832 and then made for Haifa, Jerusalem, and Nabulus. After a siege of several months, Acre, which had valiantly held out against Bonaparte in 1799, finally fell to Ibrahim in May 1832. Ibrahim then headed for Damascus, which was rising against Ottoman rule. He entered Damascus in June and pursued the Ottomans as they fled north. A month later, Ibrahim defeated an Ottoman army of 50,000–60,000 men near Homs in central Syria and marched on towards Anatolia. After liberating Hama and Aleppo, he crossed the Taurus mountains and took Adana before making for Konya in central Anatolia in December 1832, where he defeated nearly 55,000 Ottoman troops. After a few weeks' break, he resumed his march towards Istanbul and on 2 February 1833 he took Kütahya, just 240 km from Istanbul. Being cautious, Ibrahim halted at Kütahya and awaited his father's instructions. Panic-stricken, sultan Mahmud II called on Great Britain to send its fleet to the Dardanelles and Alexandria. But the British cabinet was against this. In desperation, the sultan asked the czar for help in protecting Istanbul. For the first time in its history, the Russian fleet entered the Bosporus in February 1833. Once the danger of Ibrahim Pasha had receded, before withdrawing from Istanbul the Russians signed an eight-year non-aggression treaty with the Ottoman empire on 8 July 1833. This Treaty of Hunkar Iskelesi prompted acute concern in the other European capitals.

The European powers, worried about the czar's maritime expansion towards the strategic straits connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, realized that to get the Russian fleet to stand down and leave the Bosporus, Sultan Mahmud II would first have to come to an understanding with Mohamad Ali. They therefore acted as go-betweens for the overlord and his vassal. Mohamad Ali would have liked to declare his independence as the Greeks had done a few years earlier, but the European powers dissuaded him for fear of the collapse of the Ottoman empire and the Russians laying hands on the Bosporus straits in the

aftermath. A realist, Mohamad Ali finally accepted a compromise signed at Kütahya on 4 May 1833 (an agreement known as the Peace of Kütahya) bestowing on him Egypt and the five pashaliks of Syria for life and granting the Adana region to Ibrahim Pasha. No sooner was the agreement concluded than Mohamad Ali abolished the five pashaliks and entrusted the administration of his new territory to his son, Ibrahim Pasha. For the first time ever, Syria formed a single province with Damascus as its capital. This Syria, under Egyptian administration, stretched from the Taurus in the north to Sinai in the south, and from the Mediterranean in the west to the Euphrates in the east. Although nominally still dependent on the Porte, power no longer lay with the Turks but with the Arabs, whether Syrian or Egyptian. Syria was part of a vast Arab-speaking territory controlled by Cairo and stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to the Euphrates and also encompassing the Nile Valley and the Red Sea.

The Egyptian administration soon proved far more effective than the Ottoman administration that had preceded it because of strong central rule that was tried and tested in Egypt. Syria under Ibrahim Pasha was divided into four constituencies (Damascus, Aleppo, Tripoli, and Saida) with Adana enjoying special status. Representative councils of the population were created on which Christians and Jews sat alongside Muslims. Syria experienced its first modern industrial development, increased trade, the beginnings of public education in Arabic, the opening of schools (for boys and girls) and university departments (600 students in Damascus, 600 in Aleppo, and 400 in Antioch), and Christian missionaries were also authorized to open schools. Measures were implemented to drain marshland, develop agriculture, organize regular tax collection without distinction between Muslims and Christians, reform customs duties, begin the settlement of the bedouin who had for generations plundered the countryside and robbed travellers on the highways, introduce mandatory conscription (except for Christians), develop the postal service, and open up Damascus and Jerusalem, which were not among the Ports of the Levant, to Europeans.[3]

But a combination of internal and external factors made this first experience of Syrian unity a failure. The drawbacks of a centralized and modernized administration were not slow to show through. The notables of the big cities did not appreciate losing their traditional role to mere

[3] On the achievements of Ibrahim Pasha's government in Syria see Soulaiman Abou Izz Al-Din, *Ibrahim Pasha in Syria* (Arabic), pp. 149–64.

government officials. Muslim resistance to mandatory conscription was heightened by the unpopularity of the new personal taxes, which were thought humiliating because of their similarity to the poll tax imposed on non-Muslims. The interference from Great Britain to bring about the failure of the Egyptian administration in Syria and its almost open support for the Druze revolt, the endemic irredentism of certain groups of the population to any form of central power, the intrigues of the Porte that incessantly fomented domestic disorder and aspired to recover control of Syria were all challenges facing Ibrahim and that weakened his rule before and after the second Syrian war triggered by the sultan (1839–40). The Porte began the war in May 1839 to recover possession of Syria, but once again Ibrahim won out masterfully at the battle of Nizip in 1839, which some commentators have called the 'Austerlitz of the East'.[4]

After the victory at Nizip the entire Ottoman fleet went over to Mohamad Ali. It seemed nothing could stop Ibrahim in his march on Istanbul or Mohamad Ali in his quest for the independence of Egypt and Syria. But as in 1833 the fear of the collapse of the Ottoman empire and of Russia seizing the straits prompted the other European powers to intervene. This intervention, which was first diplomatic and then military, forced Mohamad Ali to withdraw his troops from Syria, so ending the experience of a unified Syria.

In addition to their incitement to internal disorder, the European powers' intervention intensified from diplomatic persuasion (ultimatums) followed by military intimidation (gunship diplomacy) to direct intervention (landings). The Syrian crisis turned international in the summer of 1840. Representatives from Austria, Great Britain, Prussia, Russia, and the Porte met in London, without France, whose July Monarchy was deemed too favourable to Mohamad Ali. They adopted the Treaty of London on 15 July 1840 in agreement with the sultan. Under the treaty, the five powers offered Mohamad Ali Egypt on a hereditary basis and the Pashalik of Acre for life[5] in exchange for his withdrawal from the rest of Syria, Arabia, and the region of Adana in Cilicia. The powers gave Mohamad Ali ten days to accept. After that, the offer was to be withdrawn and replaced by the concession of Egypt on a hereditary basis alone. The second offer was valid for just ten more days, after which it was to lapse and the powers

[4] Sinoué, *Le dernier pharaon*, p. 460.

[5] The London Treaty determined the boundaries of the Pashalik of Acre, termed 'southern Syria', which corresponded to the borders of the territory that was to become Palestine under the British Mandate in 1922. For details see Laurens, *Le royaume impossible*, p. 102.

would take concerted measures to enforce the arrangement (Treaty of London, art. 4).[6]

The first offer was made to the viceroy by a representative of the Porte and the consuls general of the four powers on 14 August 1840. The viceroy declined it and the clock began to tick. After ten days, Mohamad Ali lost the possibility of maintaining the Pashalik of Acre for life. When the second deadline began to run, the viceroy left matters to the sultan's will, which was construed as a second refusal.

Consequently British warships bombarded Beirut on 3 October 1840. On 5 October, 1,500 British naval troops and some 8,000 Turkish troops landed at Juniyah and Nahr el Kaleb north of Beirut. On 10 October the allied troops occupied Beirut. Emir Beshir Shehab, the Maronite lord of Mount Lebanon and ally of Mohamad Ali from the outset, surrendered on 11 October and was exiled to Malta. On 6 December 1840, the allies made their final offer to Mohamad Ali, to evacuate Syria and return the Ottoman fleet in return for keeping Egypt. France urged him to accept. He did so on 10 December 1840. Finally, on 13 February 1841, the sultan granted hereditary rule to the viceroy of Egypt and Mohamad Ali's army withdrew from Syria.

1.2 The Lessons of Ibrahim Pasha's Syrian Campaign

The Syrian campaign involved some valuable lessons for the future. It was the first experience of a unitary Syria, which admittedly was not independent because it was subject to the Cairo government and in theory still Ottoman; but it was the first time that the various 'Syrian' provinces, as they were generally known, were united within an administrative entity stretching from the Taurus mountains in the north to the Sinai and Arabia in the south and from the Mediterranean coast in the west to the Euphrates in the east. This province that had Damascus as its capital was unusual in including a near-autonomous region, Mount Lebanon, and experienced fairly harmonious multi-sectarian coexistence. In the aftermath of the Great War, after the Arab provinces separated from the Ottoman empire, the Arab-Syrian independence movement attempted to construct a kingdom of Syria with Faysal as its constitutional monarch within virtually the same boundaries as Mohamad Ali and Ibrahim's Syrian province.

[6] See Sinoué, *Le dernier pharaon*, pp. 490–1 for the principal articles of the Treaty of London.

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Unitary Syria was constructed and later deconstructed based on a combination of international, regional, and local factors. Foreign interference came either through direct intervention or a subtler form of involvement by setting sectarian communities one against the other.

Despite its brief existence, unitary Syria served as a framework for the emancipation of Christians. It also served as a framework for asserting equal treatment and equal rights and duties among the inhabitants even before the beginning of the Ottoman reform era and the announcement of the *Tanzimat* (Reorganization) by the 1839 Edict of Gulhane proclaimed by Sultan Abdul-Majid.[7] This modern Syria has proved a suitable framework for multi-religious coexistence of its various component parts.

It was also during this period that the 1840 Treaty of London defined contractually a region called 'southern Syria' and that by coincidence had the same boundaries as what was to become Palestine under British mandate in the next century.

One of the reasons for the failure of this first Syria was that it was not perceived by the local population or by Europeans as embodying a struggle for Arab national emancipation and independence from the Turks, nor indeed was it presented by Mohamad Ali and Ibrahim in that way. Yet it had all the characteristics of such a struggle. But the idea of a nation – the dual heritage of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution – was not yet the yardstick of identity in Syria. Religion and membership of Sunnite Islam were still the primary sources of identity. The national factor was later to become the paramount feature of identity in the final years of the empire. Yet the Syrian campaign probably had all the hallmarks of a fight for national independence, comparable to the fight the Greeks had waged a few years earlier. For while the religion was the same on the two opposing sides in the Syrian campaign, the war against the Sublime Porte for independence for Egypt and Syria largely coincided with a geographical and linguistic divide that can be summarized as Arabs versus Turks. Mohamad Ali only became aware of this towards the end of the Syrian campaign around 1838, but his son Ibrahim was attuned to it long before then.

Several facts and testimonies illustrate this claim. Three serve as examples. First, after the 1832 battle of Homs in the first war of Syria, Ibrahim allegedly proclaimed, 'I shall go as far as I can make myself understood

[7] See the text of the Edict of Gulhane in Laurens, *L'Orient arabe*, pp. 58–61.

when speaking Arabic'.[8] It is not yet Arabism nor the demand for a nation-state but it is a boldly asserted awareness of Arab identity. Then, in 1833, he received France's special envoy, Boislecomte, who reported his conversation with Ibrahim in detail:

> He [Ibrahim] openly announces his intention to revive an Arab nationality, to truly give the Arabs a homeland, to admit them to all positions, whether in the domestic administration or in the army; to make them into a self-supporting people, enjoying a share of public revenue and sharing in the exercise of power, as in the charges required to maintain the state.[9]

Lastly, in 1838, Mohamad Ali sent a letter to the Austrian consul general in Cairo via his foreign affairs minister, stating that, 'the viceroy notifies the representatives of foreign powers that he is compelled to proclaim independence because the Sublime Porte seeks only to undermine his power and authority. Only definitive separation between the two states, Turks and Arabs, can avert for their capitals the baneful consequences of a civil war and foreign invasion.'[10]

Great Britain's dogged intent to terminate this Syrian province under Egyptian administration at any price is noteworthy. The European powers, except perhaps France, had every reason to want the viceroy of Egypt to withdraw from Syria. Those reasons were related to the necessity of maintaining a balance among the powers by perpetuating the status quo in the eastern Mediterranean and the Bosporus. Great Britain and France wanted to prop up the Ottoman empire for fear that if it fell apart Russia might grab the straits connecting the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. These strategic considerations were compounded for London by substantial economic interests. The Syrian crisis coincided with the early development of British imperialist doctrine under foreign secretary Lord Palmerston. This policy did not involve acquiring colonies, which was to come later, but defending British interests wherever they were threatened.[11] Accordingly, the extension of Mohamad Ali's control over territories from Syria to the straits of Bab El-Mandeb between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean was perceived as a direct threat to British commercial interests, not because Mohamad Ali opposed the passage of British goods, but because of the taxes levied on them. In 1838 Great Britain

[8] Cited in Sinoué, *Le dernier pharaon*, p. 384.
[9] Laurens, *L'Orient arabe*, p. 94.
[10] Sinoué, *Le dernier pharaon*, p. 441.
[11] See Mansfield, *A History of the Middle East*, pp. 56–7.

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convinced the sultan in the Treaty of Balta Liman to dismantle the system of state monopolies and authorize European powers to trade throughout the empire at a 3 per cent tax rate. Mohamad Ali refused to apply the agreement in the territories under his control so as to protect the nascent local industry.

For Palmerston, in addition to objective reasons of state because of the interplay among the great powers and incipient British imperialism, there was a more personal and subjective ground for wishing to see a unitary Syria connected to Cairo disappear. Palmerston belonged to a millennialist evangelistic Christian movement that believed that the return of the Jews to Zion, that is, the Holy Land, would hasten the coming of the Messiah. This Christian Zionism, which was a forerunner of Jewish Zionism, was quite widespread in some British circles at that time. Palmerston's personal convictions would not have needed mentioning had they not impacted British foreign policy during the Syrian crisis from 1831 to 1841. The concern with restoring the Promised Land to the Jews gave British foreign policy under Palmerston a near-mystic quality that made Great Britain God's instrument.[12] Furthermore, once Mohamad Ali's armies had withdrawn to Egypt, Palmerston asked the sultan to place the Protestants and Jews in the Holy Land under Great Britain's protection. The sultan refused. This conjunction between British political interests and the personal religious convictions of some British leaders about the return of Jews to Palestine arose again in the twentieth century with Lloyd George's policy in Palestine.[13] This policy was to lead to the 1917 Balfour Declaration and Lloyd George and Clemenceau's 1918–19 revision of the 1916 Sykes–Picot agreement entailing the carving up of Syria and promoting the creation of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine.[14]

[12] According to the leading authority on Palmerston's diplomacy, his policy 'became connected with a mystical idea, never altogether lost in the nineteenth century, that Britain was to be the chosen instrument of God to bring back the Jews to the Holy Land'. Sir Charles Webster quoted in Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, p. 268. Anthony Ashley-Cooper 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, who was closely related to Lord Palmerston, wrote in July 1853 to Prime Minister Aberdeen that Greater Syria was ' "a country without a nation" in need of "a nation without a country … Is there such a thing? To be sure there is, the ancient and rightful lords of the soil, the Jews!' See Mary Grey, 'Preparing the Ground for Balfour – the Contribution of Shaftesbury', in balfourproject.org. It is believed this has later inspired the Zionist description of Palestine as being 'a land without [a] people for a people without a land'.

[13] On Palmerston and Lloyd George's Christian Zionism see Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, pp. 268–9.

[14] The Sykes–Picot agreement is discussed in Chapter 2, 'The Syrian Monarchy'.

1.3 A Wasted Opportunity to Create an Independent Syria

The idea of creating a politically independent Syrian entity recurred fleetingly after the 1860 religious crisis that shook Syria and Lebanon. First France then Great Britain suggested creating an Arab kingdom of Syria or Greater Syria.

The 1860 crisis began in the areas of mixed Maronite and Druze settlement of Mount Lebanon. Although initially a Maronite peasant revolt against Christian and Muslim landowners, the disorder quickly became religious and Druze massacred Christians. This blaze of religious violence quickly spread to Damascus where certain fanatical Muslims also slaughtered Christians. There were several reasons for this sudden outburst of violence in regions used to centuries of multi-religious coexistence. First was the Muslims' mistaken perception of the purpose of the sultan's reforms from the 1839 Edict of Gulhane to the 1856 Hatt-i Humayun.[15] The ensuing emancipation of Christians, favouritism towards them from European powers in commerce and education, the abusive extension of the system of Capitulations by European consuls, the change in the millennial order of things based on the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, the centralization of the state with mandatory conscription for Muslims alone, Christians being exempted from certain tax payments, and the new fiscal arrangements, were all factors that exacerbated inter-community tensions in Lebanon and Syria.

The exemplary conduct of Emir Abdel Kader during this crisis and his protection of the Christian population and the French consul in Damascus earned him the praise of Napoleon III, the French press, and European public opinion generally. Napoleon III despatched the French fleet to the Syrian coast. He was in favour of creating an Arab kingdom in Syria with Emir Abdel Kader at its head. But Abdel Kader wanted none of it. So the plan never materialized and the Sublime Porte seized the opportunity of this crisis of 1860 to take the Syrian provinces back in hand. The French expedition, presented as an armed humanitarian intervention, was followed by the establishment of an international commission tasked with establishing a new regime for the Syrian provinces.

[15] See Laurens, *L'Orient arabe*, pp. 65–6 on the Hatt-i Humayun. As stated earlier, the emancipation of the Christians in Syria started under Ibrahim Pasha before the Sultan issued the Edict of Gulhane in 1839.

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In reaction to the 1860 religious massacres and fearing that France might grasp the chance of imposing a protectorate on Syria, Great Britain's representative on the international commission on Syria proposed creating a unified Greater Syria administered by a governor general appointed by the sultan but approved by the European powers.[16] This Ottoman Syria, which was much like the Egyptian Syria of Mohamad Ali and Ibrahim Pasha which, ironically, London had actively helped to dismantle in 1840–41 would, like Egypt, become gradually autonomous and eventually independent. Paradoxically, the British proposal was made when the government was headed by Palmerston, who, as foreign secretary two decades earlier, had gone to great lengths to destroy Mohamed Ali and Ibrahim Pasha's Syria. France, hoping to create an Arab kingdom in Syria under Abdel Kader, was hostile to the plan. Exploiting the opposition between France and Great Britain, the Sublime Porte used the 1860 crisis to recover and intensify its control over the Syrian provinces while granting autonomy to Mount Lebanon in 1861 where a *mutassarifia* was set up governed by a Christian official appointed by the Porte with the agreement of the European powers.

After the failure of the plan to create an Arab kingdom in Damascus and until the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, France was not to have a specific Syrian policy but merely an Ottoman policy encompassing Syria. Paris continued to support the *Tanzimat* reorganization process undertaken by the Porte and stood as guarantor of the empire's territorial integrity. France had everything to gain and under the aegis of the Ottoman empire her interests thrived. In the final fifty years of the empire, France multiplied its cultural, educational, medical, and charitable infrastructures,[17] developed a network of religious missions, and furthered its economic interests. French educational establishments and schools provided a basis for cultural and political influence that relied largely on a mainly Christian clientele, educated in French schools scattered throughout the empire in cities such as Istanbul, Beirut, Aleppo, Damascus, and Mosul.

All of these relations woven by France within the Ottoman empire formed an 'auxiliary France' or 'France of the Levant' which could not be territorialized because it had no geographical basis. A partition of the empire would have forced France to territorialize its influence, which it

[16] Laurens, *Le royaume impossible*, p. 126.

[17] French charitable establishments, hospitals, dispensaries, and schools were often referred to at the time as 'les œuvres françaises'. See Riffier, 'Les œuvres françaises et l'invention de la littérature de la Syrie', pp. 223–40.

refused to do before 1914. Alongside this, Paris was not slow to remind the other powers that might have had views on Syria that France had more interests there than any other European power and that in the event of a carve up it intended to stand by them. A 1909 memorandum of the Quai d'Orsay summarizes French policy up until the outbreak of the First World War:

> Since we hold more than ever to the integrity of the Ottoman empire, we must guard ourselves against seeming to contemplate laying hands on Syria. But our standoffishness must not comfort the other powers in concluding that they might themselves lay their hands on this country without having us to deal with. It is good that it should not be forgotten that we have abandoned to no one the traditional interests we have in Syria.[18]

The 1912 Balkan crisis had entailed a degree of agitation in Syria and Mount Lebanon. Fearing that Great Britain might take advantage of the unrest to internationalize the Syrian question, France secured a formal declaration from foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey that his country had no intention to act, nor any design or aspiration of any kind in Syria.[19] Britain, being tied to France by the *Entente cordiale*, respected its ally and pulled out of the eastern Mediterranean on the eve of the First World War.

1.4 The Gradual Assertion of a National Identity

The 1860 crisis gave the sultan an opportunity to strengthen his hold on the Syrian provinces. While they were not to experience any crisis similar to that of 1860 again, they were to form the crucible in which the feeling of a Syrian national identity was slowly forged.

1.4.1 The Arab Nahda

Arabs living in the Ottoman empire gradually began to show an awareness of nationhood in several ways before the outbreak of the Great War. Some historians date the national awareness of Arabs to the onset of the *nahda*, that is, the Arab renaissance movement that began in the nineteenth century with the arrival of the ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution during Bonaparte's 1798 Egyptian campaign. This

[18] M.A.E., Turquie, 112, 82, memorandum by Jean Gout, sub-directorate Asia–Oceania, 26 May 1909, cited in Cloarec, *La France et la question de Syrie*, p. 21.
[19] Cloarec, *La France et la question de Syrie*, p. 33.

renaissance was accentuated by the political determination of the master of Egypt, Mohamad Ali, to modernize his country and escape as far as possible from cumbersome Ottoman tutelage. The Syrian campaign launched by his son Ibrahim Pasha in 1831 was the opportunity to project the power of the political ideals of the Arab *nahda* in a Near East where the population had still not become fully aware of nationhood.

But the Arab *nahda* also had a substantial religious dimension and other historians date the onset of the Arab renaissance to the work of Jamal Din Al-Afghani, the nineteenth-century advocate of reformism and the renewal of Islam. Al-Afghani held the Ottoman imperial order that had governed the nation for more than three centuries responsible for Islam's backwardness compared with Europe.[20] The torch he lit was taken up by his faithful disciple of Syrian origin, Ahmad Abdo, who found fertile ground in Egypt for propagating his ideas based on a liberal reading of Islam. Before him, Rifaa Tahtwai, sheikh of Al-Azhar, on returning from a stay in Paris between 1826 and 1831, had published *The Gold of Paris* in which he developed the theme of a possible synthesis between European innovations and ideas and the spirit of Koranic revelation.[21]

The Arab renewal was also manifested by a sizeable strand of literary and artistic thinking involving Syrian and Lebanese creators of all sectarian origins and especially Orthodox Christians, some of whom did not hesitate to go into exile so as to be able to express themselves freely. Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad created Arabic cultural clubs and religious study groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These associations were tolerated by the Ottoman authorities as long as they did not undermine loyalty to the empire and they confined themselves to promoting Arabic or calling for a renewal of Islam under the sultan. Some of these clubs were created in Istanbul and for a brief time enjoyed the freedom offered to the empire's subjects when the 1876 constitution was restored in 1908.

The first movement created by the Arabs in the wake of the 1908 coup d'état and the coming to power of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) or Young Turks was the Association for Arab–Ottoman Brotherhood. It set itself up as a defender of the 1876 constitution, while asserting its loyalty to the sultan. It advocated equality and brotherhood

[20] Other Syrian thinkers advocated similar ideas, such as Abdel-Rhaman Al-Kawakbi, author of the celebrated *Om al-koura (Mother of Cities)* (i.e. Mecca), published in 1902.

[21] Sorman, *Les enfants de Rifaa*.

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among Arabs and Turks and sought to propagate teaching in Arabic. It was authorized to open branches throughout the Arab provinces and to publish its own newspaper. But the honeymoon between Arabs and Young Turks did not last. The centralizing power of the CUP and the determination to Turkify the Arab provinces soon alienated the support they had enjoyed among the enlightened Arab elite in 1908–09. The Association for Arab–Ottoman Brotherhood was dissolved. Arab associations now split into two groups: those advocating a renewal of Islam remained within the Ottoman fold while those calling for the national emancipation of Syrians changed into secret political societies or emigrated to more sympathetic countries.

Christians of the Orient played a leading part in associations asserting Arab and Syrian identity. The two terms were perceived as largely interchangeable at the time. Two countries, France and Egypt, became places of refuge for the exiled associations. Five of these associations deserve a mention because they played an important role in the gradual emergence of the national identity factor:[22]

(1) The Ottoman Administrative Decentralization Party was created in Cairo in 1912. Ever since the imposition of a British protectorate in Egypt in 1882, the primary political activity of nationals of the land of the Nile had been to free their homeland from British domination. Because all of the Egyptian nationalists' energy was mobilized to achieve this objective, they left to the Syrian and Lebanese nationals responsibility for the Arab national struggle for liberation from Turkish domination. Cairo became a place of refuge for Syrian and Lebanese exiles fleeing the repression of the Ottoman authorities.[23] This is how Syrian exiles in Cairo created the Ottoman Administrative Decentralization Party, which, as its name suggests, called for the decentralization of the empire's Arab provinces. The party set up branches in the utmost secrecy in the main cities of Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. In Lebanon, the party worked with the Reform Committee, a secret nationalist association established in 1912.
(2) Al-Kahtania was formed in Istanbul in 1909 in reaction to the CUP's centralizing policy. The association sought to transform the Ottoman empire into an empire with two crowns, one Turk and the other Arab. The planned scheme was similar to the Austro-Hungarian empire

[22] See Wadi', *Syria, Creation of a State and Birth of a Nation* (Arabic), pp. 221–6.
[23] It was a Lebanese exile of the time who began the famous Cairo newspaper *Al-Ahram*.

model. Turks and Arabs would each establish their own kingdom with their own constitutions, parliaments, institutions, and languages under the authority of the sultan, who would wear the crowns of both kingdoms. This association was made up mostly of Arab officers of the Ottoman army.

(3) Al-Arabia Al-Fatat (Arab Youth) was formed in Paris in 1911 by seven Muslim students from Damascus, Jenin, Beirut, Nabulus, and Ba'albek. Its purpose was to secure full independence for the Arab provinces. The association's head office was transferred to Beirut in 1913 before being finally settled in Damascus. The association was to play a leading part in the political developments in Syria between 1915 and 1920.

(4) The Reform Committee was formed in Beirut in 1912 and comprised members from all sectarian origins. It advocated the decentralization of the Arab provinces and the use of Arabic, including in the Istanbul parliament. It also demanded that Arab conscripts should do their military service in their home province in peacetime. The committee set up branches in Damascus, Aleppo, Nabulus, Acre, Baghdad, and Basra.

(5) Al-'Ahd (The Covenant) was formed in Istanbul early in 1914 by former members of Al-Kahtania. It recruited mainly from the officer corps of Iraqi origin. It set up secret branches in Baghdad and Mosul. Al-'Ahd recommended the same objectives as Al-Arabia Al-Fatat but the members of the two associations, one military and the other civilian, were unaware of each other's existence until 1915. They made contact in Damascus in 1915 and decided to join forces to free the Arab provinces from Ottoman domination.

1.4.2 The 1913 Arab Congress in Paris

On the eve of the First World War, the themes of the Arab renaissance movement, the *nahda*, had already propagated in one form or another – political, religious, or literary – in all the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire. The national project began with an initial phase calling for mere administrative autonomy within the Ottoman empire before taking the shape of a political programme of action that soon took on all the characteristics required for the formation of a true national project.

In reaction to the determination of the Istanbul government dominated by the CUP to stifle calls for reform from the Arabs, Al-Arabia Al-Fatat took the initiative of inviting members of the Party for

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Ottoman Administrative Decentralization and members of the Reform Committee as well as independent figures including representatives of the Syrian–Lebanese community in exile in America to participate in a Syrian congress in Paris in the first half of 1913.[24] A preparatory committee (comprising four Muslims and four Christians) was appointed to prepare for the congress. The committee was tasked with contacting participants and explaining the objectives. The need to hold the congress outside the empire's territory was self-evident. The Ottoman authorities under the CUP would not have countenanced it. Paris was chosen as it was host to Al-Arabia Al-Fatat and a sizeable Syrian community.

The congress was held in Paris from 18 to 23 June 1913. The main points on the agenda were (i) national life and the refusal of Turkish hegemony; (ii) the rights of Arabs within the Ottoman empire; and (iii) the need to reform the empire on the basis of decentralization. The twenty-four participants were all Christian and Muslim Syrians, save two Iraqis, whose presence meant the congress became officially at the last minute the 'Arab' rather than 'Syrian Congress' as originally planned. The name change because of the presence of two Iraqi delegates is indicative of how nationalists at the time perceived Arab and Syrian identity. Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians were all considered Syrians, who were different from Iraqis, although all were Arabs.

In accordance with the agenda for the congress, all the interventions focused on the need to decentralize the Ottoman empire. At no time was the separation or secession of the Arab provinces evoked. The points most addressed in the interventions were the need to set up an Ottoman government that was neither Turk nor Arab, equal rights and duties of all Ottoman subjects, and the absence of discrimination among subjects of the empire because of their ethnic or religious origins.

The main conclusions of the congress were the need to reform the empire in depth, the recognition of Arabs' political rights to participate effectively in the central administration of the empire, the recognition of Arabic as an official working language in the Istanbul parliament, the recognition of Arabic as the official language in the empire's Arab provinces, the assignment as a matter of principle of Arab conscripts doing their military service in the Ottoman army to the Arab provinces of the empire, save in exceptional circumstances, and support for Armenian claims for

[24] Sultan, *History of Syria* (Arabic), pp. 168 ff.

decentralization of their province.[25] The conclusions of the congress may seem timid and its demands limited. But they were consistent with the organizers' initial objectives. The congress was an important step in developing awareness of a Syrian national identity. It was also the consecration of years of effort by the network of Syrian associations, cultural clubs, and political societies.

The greatest achievement of the Arab Congress of Paris was probably the convergence of interests and objectives expressed for the first time by Syrian Christian nationalists, who were traditionally proponents of the secular Syrian nationalist strand, with Syrian Muslims, who could a priori be seen as more favourable to a more Arab-Muslim nationalist strand. In this, the Paris congress was an important step towards political emancipation and the assertion of the national identity of Syrians of all creeds, Christian and Muslim, without distinction or discrimination based on religion. This fundamental feature was to be inseparable from the very idea of Syria from then on.

1.5 The 1915 Damascus Protocol

The Istanbul government despatched an emissary to Paris to discuss the recommendations adopted by the congress with the representatives there. He accepted them all and they were ratified by the sultan's government. But in practice, implementation of the recommendations was very hesitant and confined to a few measures such as the appointment of certain Arabs to honorific positions in Istanbul.[26]

The second stage in the development of a Syrian political project was the call for national independence. This radical change of outlook was embodied in the drawing up of the 1915 Damascus Protocol.

The First World War began in the East in November 1914. After a short period of reflection in the aftermath of the outbreak of war on the European front, the Ottoman empire opted to side with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire. One of the very first decisions by the Ottoman authorities, even before they officially entered the war, was to abolish the Capitulations. By siding with Germany, the Young Turks hoped the war would end the economic tutelage of France and Great Britain, remove the military threat from Russia, and restore the Sublime Porte's influence in Egypt. There were many theatres of military

[25] Sultan, *History of Syria* (Arabic), pp. 175 ff.
[26] See Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks*, pp. 177–8.

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operations in the East. In 1914 the British landed in Basra to ensure the control of the oil fields and began a long and painful trek to Baghdad. In 1915 the French and British attempted to occupy the Dardanelles so as to then attack Istanbul. But this attack ended in failure at Gallipoli. In February 1915, Jamal Pasha, the Turkish governor of Syria, tried in vain to take the Suez canal through raids from Sinai. The capture of the canal was intended to foreshadow the Ottoman empire's reclaiming of Egypt.

The Arabs soon appeared as one of the important stakes in this war for both sides because of their supposed ability to muster support from Muslims worldwide. France and Great Britain, through their colonial empires, were Muslim powers, albeit secondary ones compared with the Ottoman empire, the sultan's caliphate, and his control over Islam's holy places. But even so they had considerable areas of influence in the Muslim world. The Ottoman authorities wanted Sharif Hussein of Mecca, descendant of the prophet and guardian of the holy places of Islam, to declare *jihad* on the Allies. For their part, the Allies tried to persuade him to rise against Turkish domination and declare *jihad* on the Ottoman empire. On the spot, relations between Sharif Hussein and the Ottoman representative in Medina became strained. The Young Turks did not have complete faith in the sharif's loyalty to the empire. The sharif disapproved of the Young Turks' stated intention to Turkify the Arab provinces. He resisted the Sublime Porte's demands to declare *jihad* on the pretext that the Hejaz needed Egypt for its supplies.

In 1914 correspondence began between the British representative in Cairo, Lord Kitchener, and the Sharif of Mecca. The British tried to convince him not to support the Ottoman empire's war effort. In January 1915, the secret society Al-Arabia Al-Fatat sent an emissary from Damascus to gauge the sharif's readiness to head an Arab revolt against the Turks that the Syrian civilian and military nationalists were preparing. In March 1915, Sharif Hussein sent his son, Emir Faysal, on a mission to Istanbul officially to meet the Ottoman leaders and complain of the misdeeds of the governor of Medina.[27] Unofficially, Faysal was instructed to make contact with Damascene nationalists and try to glean information about the Syrian revolt being prepared against the Turks mentioned by the emissary of Al-Arabia Al-Fatat.

[27] Sharif Hussein suspected the Sublime Porte wanted to replace him at the end of the war. See Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, pp. 425 ff.

1.5.1 Arab Nationalists in Damascus

En route to Istanbul, Faysal stopped off at Damascus for nearly four weeks. As agreed, he used his time to meet discreetly the Syrian nationalists and especially the most eminent members of the two main secret societies, Al-Arabia Al-Fatat and Al-'Ahd, who were fighting Turkish domination. They explained that they had the trust of most Arab officers stationed in the Arab provinces. Faysal was won over. He joined both secret societies and swore allegiance to them.[28]

Faysal was to inform the Syrian nationalists of the contacts already made by his father with the British and the two letters exchanged with Lord Kitchener. The nationalists noted this important development with interest, but were reluctant to break ties with the Ottoman empire and turn against the Turks, fearing European ambitions for the Arab provinces. Having lived with Turks within the same state for almost four centuries, if it meant choosing between Europeans and Turks, the Syrian nationalists would prefer to remain within the framework of the Ottoman empire. The state of mind of the Syrian nationalists at this particular time reflected contradictory feelings towards the Ottoman empire, mixing moral considerations, such as loyalty towards the Sublime Porte and religious solidarity, with political considerations, such as the fear of European aims and yet ample complaints about Ottoman policy and administration in its Arab provinces.

On his return from Istanbul in May 1915, Faysal again stopped off in Damascus for a few days. But he was to find a whole new situation. During Faysal's time in Istanbul, the two secret societies Al-Arabia Al-Fatat and Al-'Ahd had jointly come to a major decision for the region's future: to sever the ties between Arabs and Turks and to accept British support in the war should Britain accept the independence and unity of the Ottoman Arab provinces. The two secret societies of Damascus drew up a common document that they handed to Faysal to give to his father upon returning to Mecca. The document, known as the Damascus Protocol, was to be of great importance subsequently in the correspondence between Sharif Hussein and the British and for rallying the Arabs to the Allied cause.

1.5.2 From Decentralization to Independence

The Damascus Protocol is a brief text containing the terms on which the Arabs might contemplate joining the Allies against the Ottoman

[28] Sultan, *History of Syria* (Arabic), pp. 425 ff.

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empire. These conditions reflected the change in the nationalist movement and Syrian Arabs' awareness of their identity. The deal was to be independence and unity of the Arab provinces in exchange for a long-term alliance with Britain. The document is novel in that it outlines the geographical borders of the future Arab state. This demarcation was to be fully endorsed by Sharif Hussein and taken up in his correspondence with McMahon, the high commissioner in Cairo, in the following weeks and months. The Protocol called on Great Britain to recognize the independence of a great Arab Asian state in the Middle East and the Gulf with the very understandable exception of Aden, a British colony of capital strategic importance on the route to India. Under the terms of the Protocol, the Arab state was to extend to the Taurus mountains in the north, the Arabian Gulf in the east, the Indian Ocean in the south, and the Red Sea and Mediterranean in the west. Just as with Aden, it was not asked that the Arab state should extend to African Arab territories (Egypt, Sudan, Libya, North Africa) then under Allied (British, Italian, and French) domination.

The Damascus Protocol also called for the abolition of all privileges granted to foreigners. It proposed the signing of a defence agreement between Great Britain and the future Arab state and the preference for Great Britain over any foreign power in economic projects.[29]

The Damascus Protocol is surprising and unprecedented for three reasons. First, this was when the Arab secret societies first called for separation from the Turks. The Damascus Protocol no longer called for simple administrative decentralization of the Arab provinces and recognition of Arab linguistic and cultural rights within the Ottoman empire as the Paris Congress had done, but, on the contrary, advocated a complete break with the Sublime Porte and the alliance of the Arabs with Great Britain in the Great War in exchange for recognition of their national rights to independence and unity.

Second, the peculiarity of the Damascus Protocol – which seemed surprisingly bold to both the Sublime Porte and the allied powers, who only discovered much later that the Arab revolt had been suggested by Syrian nationalists and that Sharif Hussein's claims had been formulated by those same nationalists – was that it sealed an alliance between the nationalists of Damascus and Sharif Hussein of Mecca. As a true association between

[29] See the full Arabic text of the Damascus Protocol in Wadi', *Syria, Creation of a State* (Arabic), p. 231.

political modernity and historical-religious tradition, this geopolitical alliance brought the Hejaz region close to the Bilad Al-Sham (or geographical Syria) and for a time bound the Arab nationalists of the major urban centres of the Near East, beginning with Damascus, to the bedouin tribes of the Arabian peninsula under the authority of the Sharif of Mecca.

Third, the other peculiarity of the Protocol is the request from the Damascus nationalists to Sharif Hussein to take command of the Arab revolt in recognition of his incontrovertible legitimacy as descendant of the prophet Muhammad and protector of the holy places of Islam. The Damascus nationalists saw Sharif Hussein as a saviour, or at least as the emblem behind which the whole region might rally. It is interesting that almost a century earlier, during the first Syrian crisis of 1830, Mohamad Ali, viceroy of Egypt, had already briefly contemplated resorting to the Sharif of Mecca to support and legitimize his rebellion against the Porte. Mohamad Ali's line of argument was to deny the legitimacy of the sultan-caliph in Istanbul who, unlike Sharif Yahia of Mecca, did not descend from the lineage of the prophet.[30]

Syrian nationalists were quite confident in 1915 of their ability to move into action at the right time and to trigger an Arab revolt because most of the Ottoman units stationed in Syria were composed of men and officers of Arab origin who were broadly favourable to their cause. Faysal expressed his enthusiasm for the organization of Al-'Ahd, most of whose members were Arab officers of the imperial army. However, as a precaution or out of necessity, Arab troops were transferred by the Ottoman governor Jamal Pasha to remote fronts, and especially to Gallipoli, where one of the major battles of the Great War was fought. That deprived the nationalists of the possibility of triggering themselves the insurrection against the Turks from Syria. This powerlessness to act was to be intensified by the ruthless repression they suffered from Jamal Pasha in the form of persecution, arrest, imprisonment, and execution of nationalists in Damascus and Beirut. In the future, any Arab revolt could only be started from the Hejaz by the Sharif of Mecca. This occurred in June 1916 on the basis of what was to say the least an ambiguous agreement between the Sharif of Mecca and the British.

The full inclusion in the correspondence of Sharif Hussein with McMahon of the geographical boundaries of the future Arab state was to

[30] Laurens, *Le royaume impossible*, p. 88.

be the main reference for Syrian territorial claims at the end of the war.[31] The creation of this future Arab state was to rally fighters from Arabia, the Near East (Syria), and even Mesopotamia (Iraq) in revolt against the Turks. This later prompted Faysal to say that while it was the men of the Hejaz who triggered the Great Arab Revolt, it was the Syrians who were its soul and inspiration.

The British and French knew nothing of the part played by the Syrian nationalists in developing the objectives of the revolt and their prior understanding with the Sharif of Mecca. This major failing meant that London and Paris were unable to properly understand the Arabo-Syrian national phenomenon. The French underestimated it and saw in it an epiphenomenon created by the British services to have the Arabs rise against the Turks so as to eliminate French influence in the region. The British underestimated the influence of Syrian nationalists and put all their hopes in the Hashemites whom they considered the true heralds of the Arab revolt, whereas the heart of Arab nationalism lay in Damascus, as they were later to discover.

Faysal returned to Damascus in January 1916 at his father's request to meet the nationalists discreetly. The situation he discovered had changed radically since his previous visit. The Ottoman governor Jamal Pasha had in the meantime transferred the Arab regiments stationed in Damascus and Aleppo to the remote fronts of the First World War and replaced them with Turkish-speaking units who were judged to be more loyal. On his return, Faysal informed his father that the revolt could no longer be triggered from Syria and had to come from the Hejaz.

The Great Arab Revolt was begun in June 1916 from the Hejaz by Sharif Hussein, who conferred command on his son Faysal. After a difficult start, the revolt was triumphant with the decisive aid of allied forces under General Allenby.[32] Upon entering Damascus, Allenby divided the Arab provinces liberated from the Ottoman empire into three separate occupied zones (east, west, and south), covering the four major cities of the interior (Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo) and east of the Jordan river (Irbid, Amman, Al-Kark, and Aqaba) for the eastern zone; the Mediterranean coast and Cilicia for the western zone;[33] and Palestine for the southern zone. It was these three occupied zones that Emir Faysal,

[31] The ambiguities of the correspondence between Hussein and McMahon are examined in Chapter 2.

[32] For a detailed account of the Great Arab Revolt see Kauffer, *La Saga des Hachémites*.

[33] Cilicia was later detached from the western zone to form the northern occupied zone.

commander-in-chief of the Arab forces and future king of Syria, sought in vain to unify as the Arab Kingdom of Syria.

Less than a century separates the Syria of Ibrahim Pasha (1831–42) from that of Emir Faysal (1918–20). The first had conquered Syria by force of arms at his father's command while the second freed it for his father with the decisive help of the British. This could only restrict his control over the liberated zones. The territories conquered by the former and claimed by the latter were largely the same. This Syrian geographical area covers what are now Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine/Israel, and part of Turkey.

Ibrahim's main strength lay in his army whereas Faysal's strength lay in Arabo-Syrian nationalism. Between Ibrahim and Faysal the perception the population had of its national identity had changed. Although the emancipation of Syrian Christians began under Ibrahim, his promotion of equal rights between Christians and Muslims in the context of religious coexistence within a modern administrative framework encouraged a gradual collective awareness of a common Syrian national identity. This national sentiment was made manifest by the participation of members of both communities in Arab political and literary clubs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in the Arab Congress of Paris in 1913. Faysal's short reign confirmed this intention of Muslims and Christians to live together and for the first time introduced into the history of the Near East, through the 1920 constitution, the principle of a civil, non-religious state and laid the foundations for Syrian secularism.

The Syrian Christian and Muslim elites began by calling for administrative decentralization before demanding national independence. This change reflected the transition from Arab-ness to Arab-ism. This Arabism encompassed a larger area than geographical Syria. It was manifested by the Damascus Protocol and the alliance between Syrian nationalists and the Arabs of the Hejaz. The challenges faced by Syrians in the aftermath of the Great War changed it into sovereignist nationalism that was little inclined to compromise.

These features of Syrian identity that gradually emerged between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – a Near Eastern geographical space, a diverse population, and an idea – were reflected in a Syrian national project that the Founding Fathers were to develop during the brief but intense period of the Syrian monarchy.