Chapter V

The French Mandate

At the San Remo Conference in April 1920, the League of Nations granted France and Britain a mandate over the Arab provinces of the crumbling Ottoman Empire. The new tutelary power, which came into effect following the French victory at the Battle of Maysalun, determined Syria’s immediate future as an integral part of the French Empire. While advocates of colonisation may have had their eye on Syria and wished to extend French control to these Mediterranean territories, no clear policy was established at the time. On the contrary, the land first had to be conquered, controlled, administered, and demarcated.

The history of the Mandate has been long neglected. There are several reasons for this lack of attention: As a latecomer, it was somewhat obscured in historical studies on the colonial empire, while accounts were also somewhat biased as they were based on British sources and publications by British officials stationed in Iraq. Until the 1990s, the French Mandate was mainly seen from the British perspective. Apart from a few contemporary texts that denigrated the political model, or memoirs by French leaders who sought to showcase their time in Syria, this period was largely overlooked. However, as a result of access to French sources, renewed interest in the period emerged in the 1990s and continued to grow in the following decade.

In one masterly study, Philip Khoury traced the fate of the families of Ottoman notables before and after the imposition of the Mandate, while others, such as Jacques Weuleverse, focused on the dynamics of religious communities and members of certain professions. It was not until the launch of much larger research projects, however, that a wealth of historical detail on this period began to emerge. Important milestones were reached in 2002 and 2015, with two major international conferences on Mandate studies.

Attempting to capture the unique nature of the period and to put it in its rightful place within Syrian history is a major challenge, since there is a huge amount of documentation in the Mandate archives in Nantes, and there are numerous memoirs by those who lived through the period. The aim here, however, is not to provide an exhaustive description of the French Mandate in Syria, but rather to suggest some avenues for anyone wishing to undertake a social history of this unique period.

In just a few years a new territory emerged that was partly the result of the creative and destructive efforts of the dominant power, and partly the consequence of the resistance or compromises of the local inhabitants. These encounters gave rise to the new Syria, whose new borders were drawn around communities who were seeking to defend their own sovereignty.

# The invention of a territory

Defeat at the battle of Maysalun precipitated the fall of the Arab kingdom. For the new authorities, however, there was a huge amount still to be done. Supported by political figures such as Robert de Caix, the French army’s first and most urgent task was to demarcate the territories under French rule. This meant dividing up the vast area that was to become part of the colonial empire. This division resulted from a number of dynamics, some driven by the reality on the ground, others by decisions made at a political level. It was clear that the French authorities had entered Syria without a preconceived plan. Since their declared intention was to “defend minorities,” they sought to preserve a Greater Lebanon, which would include the Beqaa plain in order to provide essential wheat, in short supply during the war. They also extended the principle of defending minorities to the Alawite and Druze groups, in areas now named after the inhabitants. A chain of independent provinces thus enclosed the two large inland areas, whose main centres were Damascus and Aleppo. These became independent states, largely overlapping the territory of the former Ottoman provinces. However, the new international border limited the state of Damascus to the south, while the loss of Cilicia deprived Aleppo of its hinterland. Most importantly, neither Damascus nor Aleppo had access to the sea.

However, it took a long time for this map to be applied on the ground. Faisal’s defeat did not end the violent clashes in the north. On the contrary, Mustafa Kemal’s actions in Turkey prompted new conflicts at a time when the international border had yet to be established. French troops quickly withdrew from Cilicia in 1920-1921 and then attempted to contain the incursions of armed bands. In 1921, the Ankara Agreement led to the division of the territory between the Turkish and Mandatory territories, with the Baghdadhan railway line marking the emerging international border. But this didn't mean that everything was settled. The armed bands that gathered in Aintab (now Gaziantep) continued their incursions every summer until 1924 and adjustments to the border were needed to bring the villages under Killis under Turkish sovereignty. Further east, there was intense debate between the French and Turks over the borders between Syrian and Turkish al-Jazira. It was not until 1928 that the northern border was finally settled.

The new border gave rise to a number of local dynamics. Firstly, it forced residents to register and identify with only one of the two territories, as Syrian citizenship precluded Turkish citizenship. There were no large-scale transfers of land, however, as families retained members on both sides of the border to oversee their properties. Members of tribes also continued to migrate, although systems were set up to monitor their movements and, above all, to limit the violence for which they might be held responsible. The new border also affected the movement of goods. A change of currency—the Turkish lira was no longer legal tender—new customs duties, and restrictions on movement all led to a collapse of former trade flows. In particular, trade to Aleppo came to a standstill, as it was deprived of its immediate hinterland in Cilicia. While Antakya provided a port to rival Beirut, transit was no longer possible. And further to the east, Mosul belonged to another imperial domain.

However, the creation of the northern border did not only mean the end of existing dynamics. With the establishment of checkpoints, a string of small towns grew up along the railway. Jarabulus, Tell Abyad, Arab Punar (now Ayn al-arab/Kobane) and Qamishli all sprung up along an area that had hitherto been crossed freely by tribes. These centres were soon adorned with the symbols of urban civilization, some with a *seraglio*, a grid layout, and houses with courtyards. An urban fabric took shape that made it possible to control the border, and some towns flourished, becoming the last refuge for a small number of Armenians fleeing Cilicia, which was about to fall under Turkish control. Others found refuge in Aleppo and Damascus.

Further to the east and in the south, the shape of the border depended on negotiations with Great Britain. In the case of Iraq, the city of Deir ez-Zor, occupied for a time by forces led by Tawfiq al-Suwaydi, was returned to French control. Thereafter, French and British diplomats followed the border of the Vilayet of Mosul to divide the two mandates. The discovery of oil in the vilayet and occupation of the territory by British forces at the end of the war had made it a disputed area, which Clemenceau agreed to cede to Great Britain in exchange for a stake in the oil company being set up. Here, the Tribal Control body was responsible for supervising the movement of Bedouins, throughout this immense territory, in much the same way as in other parts of the French Empire.

The most immediate effects were economic. In particular, there was a sharp decline in camel herding. The principal activity of the nomadic tribes declined against a backdrop of drought, the end of the caravan routes, the disruption of links between Syrian and Iraqi towns, and new, more lucrative economic activities. Small-scale livestock farming replaced the large camel herds, while a new social hierarchy led to an increase in the importance of towns. While the establishment of borders was not accompanied by urbanisation as in the north, the urban order strengthened its hold on the region.

To the south, British authorities imposed a border that enabled Transjordan to provide an air corridor that would connect India and Europe via areas under Crown control. The most problematic border was with the border with the Druze state that was being established at the time. The exodus of pro-independence supporters rejecting French tutelage made this border a strategic and poorly controlled area. Lastly, the Hauran region and the Golan Heights were separated at the end of the negotiations between the British and the French. Even so, it took more than three years after the San Remo conference to reach final agreement on the border markers. The 1923 agreement removed the town of Zarqa, but extended Syria’s southern border to the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Finally, to the west, Greater Lebanon now extended as far as the ridges of the Anti-Lebanon range. The exact border with Damascus was still to be determined, however, as the Mandatory authorities were in no hurry to establish the precise boundaries of the two administrative units. Syria thus gradually took shape between the mid- and late 1920s with new lines dividing areas that had previously been united.

The new Syria brought closer links between some places, altered hierarchies, and led to changes in the movement of people and goods, while also creating new inequalities: Damascus claimed the title of capital, as in Faisal’s time, while Aleppo, Hama and Homs found themselves marginalised. And Beirut became the main political centre. When Aleppo and Damascus were united in January 1925, not even the Mandatory authorities suggested designating Homs as the capital and the choice was rejected. This new administrative geography led to Aleppo, which was already isolated from its Cilician hinterland, being relegated yet further. As a result, the emerging urban heart of Syria involved competition between the main cities, partly concealed by the struggle against the French.

The way the mandate was organised obliged the various groups to define their loyalties. This meant recognising who they were subordinate to politically and who they felt they really were. The establishment of Mandate borders around religious communities, as in the Druze and Alawite autonomous regions, forced the inhabitants to make a choice. Did one consider oneself Syrian? Greater-Syrian, in the sense of an inhabitant of the *bilad al-sham*? Druze? Christian? A supporter of France? Arab nationalist? Each denomination referred to a cultural and political position within the different parts of the mandated territories. The question was particularly acute in the case of the new autonomous states: to call oneself Druze was to implicitly endorse an alliance with the French, while to call oneself Syrian was to seek to belong to a wider Syrian entity. These rifts divided the elites and their clienteles, and paved the way for future struggles.

The defeat at Maysalun may have raised hopes of a rapid pacification of Syria, but the Mandatory authorities were soon forced to recognise a number of difficulties. In the north, the rebellion led by Saleh al-Ali stirred up a number of Alawites who refused to accept the proposed autonomous region. They were eventually defeated in 1921, but their struggle revealed how minorities could resist those who claimed to be protecting them. Incursions across the Turkish border continued until 1924, with armed bands spending their summers on the outskirts of Maarat an-Numan until agreements between the French and Turkish authorities put an end to their armed comings and goings. The cessation of clashes demonstrated the new weight of the state authorities. The Turks refused to back the tribal leaders, whose movements were controlled with increasing force by French intelligence services in charge of border management. Every time there was an uprising, former Ottoman officers rubbed shoulders with local peasants, leading to a politicisation of the country areas.

No sooner had solutions been found in the north than demonstrations broke out in Damascus. In his account of the strategies of politicians active during the reign of King Faisal, Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar relates that the visit of Charles Crane, due to take place on April 5, 1922, prompted a meeting of several activists. On April 8, some eight thousand people demonstrated at the Umayyad Mosque in central Damascus, proof of the ability of these political speakers to gather large crowds. The movement soon disintegrated, however, with some leaders being arrested and others going into exile. Nationalist leaders found refuge in Transjordan or Cairo, bringing new international dynamics into play. As far as the French were concerned, Amman and Cairo had now become havens for their opponents, despite the fact that Transjordan and Egypt were under British rule. It didn’t take much to then blame Great Britain for all France’s woes.

The truth was, however, that the Mandatory troops also faced difficulties in the country areas, which were far removed from any British influence. In 1920, the peasants of the Hauran rebelled. The causes were primarily economic—rising prices and difficulties in obtaining supplies—but this didn’t mean they were not also political. The murder of Abdul Rahman al-Yusuf and Aladdin Al Droubi, two representatives from the capital who had come to calm the situation down in the countryside, was a sign of the anger against those who seemed to accept French authority. For several weeks, colonial troops patrolled the countryside in an attempt to restore order. These disturbances were also fuelled by the politicisation prompted by the imminent war. Revolutions and the imminent world war had fostered a political spirit that caused conflicts. Despite these upheavals, the direct colonisation approved by the Mandate continued.

At the beginning of the 1920s, the authorities in charge of the Mandate were instructed by the metropolis not to rely on external subsidies, and in 1923, the budget for Syria was cut by 52%, a drastic reduction. The funds were used primarily to pay for the army and to repay the Ottoman debt. As new sovereign powers, the heirs of the empire, mainly Iraq and Syria, had agreed, through their French and British representatives, to take on part of the debt left by the defunct empire. At issue, however, was the currency in which the debt was to be repaid, with the Syrian authorities seeking to pay in francs rather than gold. Eventually, payments stopped in 1932, putting a strain on the resources of the new state. However, the budgets for the first few years underlined the paradox of the French policy: it wished to establish absolute direct control over this territory, but was not prepared to make the financial effort that this entailed. It therefore adopted an approach that had been applied in Africa: a small number of civil servants, low budgets augmented by local taxes, and a string of specialist services.

What was the nature of the new country’s administration? With no agreed plan, it consisted of a number of separate technical departments, some for health, others for military matters (such as the intelligence services), and one for land management. Each of these adopted pre-existing practices. In the field of health, for example, epidemiological monitoring along the pilgrimage route had been carried out by European doctors during the Ottoman period. The doctors’ remit was now simply extended without a clearly defined objective. The first mandate administration appeared to be a hodgepodge of soldiers, missionary priests, and doctors. Administrators were slow to arrive, as the metropolis, which had suffered enormous loss of life and property, refused to allow any civil servants to leave. Colonial troops were also sent in to maintain order. This was particularly shocking to the locals, who were reluctant to welcome black soldiers led by white officers who knew nothing of local customs and manners.

Alongside the litany of different services, a new administrative hierarchy gradually took shape. The High Commissioner was responsible for administrative decision-making, while delegate commissioners were stationed in each state, where they held discussions with the representative councils. The role of the councils was to express the views of local notables although they had no decision-making powers of their own. This balance remained fragile and highly personalised, with the main policy decisions being made by the High Commissioner. It was within this context that Gouraud felt obliged to resign following the sudden reduction in the budget in 1923. The power vacuum was brief, but it highlighted the instability of the Mandate administration. The man who had championed the idea of colonising Syria gave up his post due to a lack of resources to enable him do so. His successors would have to come up with another solution.

Although there was little enthusiasm on the streets of Damascus, the union of the two states of Aleppo and Damascus in 1925 ushered in a new era. However, the situation was different in the Druze and Alawite territories. Captain Cabillet had been appointed interim governor of the Druze territory, which prevented Hamad, a local dignitary, from occupying the position. In an approach that had much in common with the traditions of the *Bureaux Arabes*, the French officer sought to reform local communities according to egalitarian principles. He did so by denouncing chiefs, calling for new infrastructures, and controlling elites that were deemed to be decadent. His approach was seen locally as an attempt by the state—a colonial state at that—to take control of local land, and was widely criticised. Moreover, the dominant Atrash clan, whose traditional chief Salim had stepped down, perceived this power grab as a direct attack.

The persistence of Captain Cabillet, who was backed up by his superiors, encouraged the Atrash clan to forge closer links with the families belonging to the Druze Assembly, the governing body created by the French. During the first six months of 1925 there were an increasing number of disputes. A delegation from the assembly went to meet High Commissioner Sarrail to request the appointment of a Druze governor, under the terms of a treaty signed in 1921, but Sarrail refused to receive them. It was in this tense atmosphere that the assembly met again on 3 July, 1925. During heated discussions, a French officer, Lieutenant Maurel, was struck by Hussayn Murshid. When the meeting broke up, the French authorities demanded that Murshid be handed over. Three Druze delegates were invited by the French representative in Damascus to discuss the situation with a view to finding a solution, but on the night of 12 to 13 July, the Druze representatives were arrested and machine guns sent to the Jebel. More arrests followed. On 19 July, Sultan Atrash delivered the news of the arrests to representatives of the surrounding villages, a speech that enabled him to recruit several hundred horsemen. He and his men reached Salkhad, the second largest town in the Jebel, which had been left unguarded by French forces at the time. In response, the French dispatched a detachment under the command of Captain Gabriel Normand. On 21 July, Normand’s column was attacked by Druze waving the traditional *bayram* flag. A movement was gradually taking shape that drew on local traditions of warfare, popular sentiment, and modern military techniques. When the column was defeated, Sultan Atrash formed a revolutionary council under his leadership in order to mobilise the mountain region. His declared aim was not to take on the political burden of leading the uprising, but rather to liberate Syria altogether.

The rebellion was primarily local, although contacts between Sultan Atrash and the families of notables such as the al-Bakri family made it possible to secure external support if needed. This aid, the repeated failures of the French strategy to establish fixed points to control the area, and the aura of glory surrounding the fighters who were taking on the foreign occupiers helped to rally further support. At the end of the summer, the insurrection in the mountain region reminded the French of the troubles they had experienced in the Rif in Morocco. Rebellions also broke out elsewhere. The former Ottoman officer Fawz al-Qawuqji succeeded in gathering armed auxiliaries and attacking Hama in the centre of the country. Although he was forced to abandon the city centre for a while following the mediation of a prominent member of the Barazi family, he continued his fight on the outskirts. At the end of the autumn, the inhabitants of the agricultural areas around Damascus also joined the insurrection, both through collaborating with others and through their own protests. The terrain of Eastern Ghouta, with its hedges and small fields, was particularly well-suited to the struggle, Damascus became the main focus of the insurrection, but the French reaction was swift when the rebels entered the city. The French bombed the centre, destroying a quarter of the city. By the end of 1925, French troops were holding the city centres. However, they found it difficult to leave and avoided travelling at night.

The spread of the struggle throughout the country led the Syrian nationalists to propose a new platform for their demands for independence. At the same time, the French authorities revised their strategy, with greater mobility and urban defence to prevent intrusions into the towns. The arrival of a new High Commissioner, Henry de Jouvenel, known for his liberal stance on colonial issues, cleared the way to a period of negotiation and the selection of potential interlocutors. The leadership of the revolution was split between Atrash, who demanded immediate independence, and other politicians who were prepared to discuss reforms. After bitter fighting and food shortages, the rebels gradually gave in at the end of 1926. Everything seemed to point to a return to calm, but the French authorities had to accept the obvious: they would never be able to control Syria in the way they had envisaged. With the rebellion in the south, the Druze territory joined other Syrian territories in a joint bid to become part of a new country.

# A constitution for a new country

When High Commissioner Henri Ponsot took office on 29 January 1927, he outlined a new vision for relations between the Mandatory Power and the Syrians. For the first time, France acknowledged that colonial rule in its nineteenth-century form was completely unrealistic as it would entail human and financial costs that, by the late 1920s, were far beyond France’s capacities. It was therefore necessary to find local partners. The French authorities looked closely at the pattern of events in Iraq, which had been on their minds since 1920. Following a massive uprising, the British had made Faisal the constitutional king of Iraq, and imposed a treaty of alliance on the new regime.

This change of heart gave the leaders of the rebellion in the cities fresh hope. The nationalist leaders could no longer hope for an armed solution, but any discussion with the Mandatory power risked undermining their credibility in the eyes of those in exile in Egypt, Switzerland, and Transjordan. Whatever was decided would have to be rapidly sanctioned by a treaty or an international agreement if they were not to be betrayed as they had been after the First World War.

In late 1927, Hashim al-Atassi and Jamil Mardam Bey and others came together to form the *kutla al-wataniyya,* or National Bloc. The new political union saw itself as a genuine party that would negotiate its way towards independence. It was immediately interested in Ponsot’s talk of holding elections that would lead to a constituent assembly. These representatives of the national struggle were confident of victory in an election that had not yet been scheduled. The French, however, could see another way out of the crisis, the route taken in Iraq.

What had happened in Iraq became increasingly important from 1928 onwards. In return for granting Great Britain special status—military bases, the right to appoint advisers, and so on,—the government of Nuri al-Said had succeeded in securing a treaty that would lead to Iraq's independence. King Faisal, ousted from Syria in 1920, once again became the head of an independent state, one that was soon to join the League of Nations. This development encouraged the Syrian leaders to obtain equal status and reignited the controversy over Faisal’s role in Syria. He still had supporters who saw him as the unifier of the Arab world. These included Shahbandar, who was particularly active. A Syrian-Iraqi union, however, was not unanimously welcomed. Some members of the *kutla al-wataniyya*, most of whom were close to Saudi Arabia and based in Damascus, were hostile to the idea. This created a geopolitical split that divided the Syrian political class.

The plan to involve Faisal was quickly abandoned, as it did not even enjoy the support of the European powers. The French authorities still regarded Faisal as an enemy who could challenge French influence. The British did not want Faisal in Syria either, as it would lead to Iraq uniting with Syria, strengthening the new state. The union would give pride of place to the French education system and would jeopardise British influence. The aftermath of Iraqi independence soon distracted the king from the Syrian plan, and his health deteriorated, forcing him to travel to Europe. He died on 8 September 1933, hailed by Syrian politicians as a great man.

In 1928, two-tier elections in accordance with Ottoman law were held in Syria. The moderates, led by Taj al-Din, won narrowly in Damascus, were very successful in the provincial towns, and formed the largest group in the assembly. The Arab nationalists, however, managed to rally behind Hashim al-Atassi. Sporting a well-trimmed white goatee and often wearing a tarboush to cover his bald head, the nationalist leader had gained solid political experience since becoming head of the Assembly in 1920. The son of the city mufti, he was born in 1875 in Homs. He was educated there, before moving to Constantinople to continue his studies. He then entered the service of the Ottoman Empire, becoming *qa'imaqan*\* of Beirut in 1894. After the war, he joined the ranks of King Faisal and rose to become chairman of the National Congress.

With their eloquence and party discipline, the nationalists of the National Bloc dominated the debates of the newly elected chamber, opposing the constitutional draft submitted to the assembly by the French. The main articles discussed did not pose any problems for them or for those in the public paying close attention to the debates. The Syrians welcome a constitution that established an efficient parliamentary system like the one debated in France in the 1920s and 1930s. Most of the nationalist politicians were lawyers who had studied French law, which had recently been applied to various sectors of society, such as in the postal system and in labour law, etc. And they were not opposed to a system in which the president would have considerable power, but whose influence would be balanced by a single chamber—more powerful than in a bicameral system—that would elect the president. The chamber would itself be elected according to Ottoman law, with secondary electors voting for the deputies. Most importantly, this form of government gave them the chance to strengthen their influence.

On the other hand, two articles were heavily criticised. The first concerned the independence of Lebanon, which was largely rejected by Syrian politicians, who considered Lebanon to be part of Syria, along with the Druze and Alawite territories. The second article, 116, provoked the strongest condemnation because it stipulated that the French Mandate should be recognised as a permanent solution.

The nationalist elite therefore faced battles on two fronts. They needed to gain enough support to win a majority in the Assembly, and they had to fight against a constitution that endorsed French rule. Although the constitution was not ratified by the assembly, the High Commissioner went ahead and promulgated it anyway. New elections were organised in a climate of violence, with riots causing many deaths. When the elections were won by the moderate wing of the National Bloc led by Mardam Bey, the newly elected representatives did not receive the approval of the High Commissioner and the political process came to a standstill, demonstrating the limits of the negotiated programme that had been proposed by the party.

By the end of the 1920s, Syria had undergone major changes under the Mandate. Road and rail networks were being expanded and there were now regular services to all the towns between Aleppo and Deraa. The first road to cross the Syrian desert also made Deir ez-Zor accessible. The advent of the state in its colonial form involved opening up the entire territory. This did not put an end to regional characteristics, however, and there continued to be considerable endogamy within families. On the other hand, it did connect up different parts of Syria and communities could no longer ignore each other. Relationships remained highly hierarchical, and nomads, albeit in decline, continued to come into conflict with more sedentary peoples. The Bedouin Control body restricted both their movements and their raids, but it was the economic effect of the demise of the caravans that played a greater role in destroying the foundations of nomadic life, whose customs and lifestyles have been recorded by anthropologists. Finally, the registration of tribal lands in the name of their chiefs endowed the leaders with a status that was closer to that of urban landowners. The tribal lands became more widely known, and there was considerable investment in certain sites, such as Palmyra and Mari, which were uncovered by French archaeologists.

Meanwhile, the cities acted as crucibles for a world undergoing major changes. The most striking developments were the new infrastructures. The first running water and electricity networks appeared in neighbourhoods being built outside the old cities, primarily Damascus and Aleppo, and to a lesser extent in cities like Latakia, around the port, and Deir ez-Zor. The cities gradually expanded, nibbling away at the river gardens and oases on the outskirts in a quest for comfort on the part of certain notables who had accumulated wealth and wished to adopt lifestyles similar to those of Europeans. Europeans also preferred to settle in the new districts, which were now more accessible thanks to the major roads. In Damascus, the Rue Abu Roumaneh gradually linked the Mandatory authorities’ residential area of Jisr al-Abyad with the turn-of-the-century neighbourhoods around Marjeh.

New roads and transport facilities enabled traffic to flow freely in the new suburbs outside the city walls, with wide boulevards being built on the outskirts to protect the city from the rebel Ghouta countryside. And trams provided more rapid travel, complementing the few cars in the city. The tram companies, however, reaped the benefits of a new form of city management, an effect of the new economic system. Often operated with French capital, these concession holders won all the contracts for major public services. This prompted condemnation from locals, who opposed the involvement of foreigners in local business. At the same time, the industrial bourgeoisie was investing its capital to meet the needs of the population, while foreign firms also developed franchises to compete with French companies.

Funded by a large group of industrialists led by Lutfi Haffar and Faris al-Khoury, the most original venture was the construction of a canal from the Fijeh spring outside Damascus in order to supply drinking water to the city. This model was followed by other entrepreneurs who emerged between the wars. Khalid al-Azm and Muhammad Amin Sayyid, for example, both began their professional careers in this way. More generally, a whole series of entrepreneurs took advantage of the law on public limited companies to establish an industrial base in the country.

France’s financial and political difficulties led to changes in customs policy and the introduction of entry taxes in 1928. This enabled the French authorities to secure new revenue to supplement the mandate budget and forced them to create the so-called “common interests” institutions, which administered everything that fell within the Mandate’s territories that could not be divided up in practice. These institutions grouped Syria and Lebanon in the same fiscal entity, and, importantly, assured France of the support of the growing industrial class. The first boom of new factories took place between the wars, turning Aleppo into a major textile centre.

Cities enjoyed strong growth. New cultural features were emerging, such as the radio, which replaced the storytellers in the popular cafés, and while the tarboush was common, there were still traditional areas in the old town that served as a power base for the great families. The *za'im*, the heads of a network of clients, whom they recompensed in various ways, relied on henchmen, known as *qabadayât*, to maintain order in the neighbourhoods. The *qabadayât* encouraged residents to vote in exchange for resources and a degree of freedom to engage in legal trade. New families were formed that attempted to disguise the fact that the first generation had only just arrived in town. Their lineage allowed them to establish themselves and dominate a particular area. There were numerous personal links in these areas between the political and economic elite, who lived in huge mansions, and the recently arrived, or long-established working classes The two groups shared a common neighbourhood identity and possibly a religious or tribal identity as well.

Those who lived in the countryside were often also beholden to those who lived in the cities. The Land Code of 1858 had exacerbated the inequality of the two groups. Urban dwellers took possession of the land, reducing the areas under *musha'a* tenure, or common land. The outskirts of towns were sometimes dominated by a few families, but this did not mean that there were contiguous plots of land all belonging to the same individuals. Thierry Boissière has identified three main groups in Homs. Land was rented out, often providing the owner with up to half the produce. To this initial imbalance were added the loans that the peasant farmers needed to bridge the gap and pay what they owed in cash. But loans were taken out at an average interest rate of 12%., which initiated a cycle of debt, and with it a cycle of dependency, because the law forbade farmers to leave the land if they were in debt.

Not everyone was in the countryside was poor, however, as people’s circumstances varied and there were contradictory trends. Those with a few acres, for example, were better off than small farmers. As a result, some families, such as those of village dignitaries, could enjoy a decent standard of living. These differences could also be seen in life expectancy, family size, and health. Vaccination campaigns, the establishment of dispensaries in rural areas and road safety measures all gradually brought down the mortality rate. Although trends varied from one religious community to another, the demographic transition in general began with a sharp increase in population. A new generation was born at the turn of the 1930s, triggering an undeclared race for land.

Against this backdrop, the 1929 crash upset Syria’s fragile economic equilibrium. Its effects were felt from 1931 onwards, with a depreciation of the currency and a slowdown in trade and agricultural production. However, in an economy based partly on barter and subsistence farming, the impact was uneven. This did not prevent endemic unemployment, with 15-20% of the working population being out of work, while the poor harvest of 1932 made matters worse, since large numbers of unemployed craftsmen and farmers were more likely to respond to a call to protest.

These changes, which strained social and working relations, were taking place at a time when a new constitution had been imposed on the country and the nationalists had demonstrated their hold in the 1932 elections. It was also a period in which normal political operation required greater collaboration between authorities and local elites, who could easily mobilise their clienteles and henchmen. A disagreement was all it took to reignite the protests. And so, in 1932, a major congress of the National Bloc was held in Homs in order to demand independence. In response, High Commissioner Martel suspended the institutions. The shutting down of political debate could only lead to greater tensions, especially as Martel was seeking to implement a programme of vigorous decentralisation aimed at fragmenting the territory.

# Activism, mobilisation, and the birth of a political arena

On 20 January 1936, the shutters in the souks of Damascus remained closed, marking the start of an unprecedented strike that spread gradually to all of Syria’s major urban centres. The closure of the National Bloc office in the al-Qanawat district of Damascus triggered an unusually large wave of protests. In its forms, locations, and leaders, the 1936 strike demonstrated how radically the Syrian political scene had changed in little less than a decade. Faced with a breakdown in negotiations, the nationalist leaders now drew on the support of the world of trade and industry and launched strikes and demonstrations as part of a struggle that was now more in keeping with the norms of social movements. Gone were the days of battles in the countryside, as in the days of the Druze insurrection, and the city now became the focus of protests. The new call for full sovereignty channelled the popular discontent that originated in social demands

The ground rules for the struggle in the cities were laid down during the protests. Held in the older parts of the city, the protests alternated between rallies, such as those held in the main mosque, and groups of protesters dispersing through the alleyways. The marchers, mostly men, carried banners, shouted slogans, and occupied the streets. The rallies often started with gatherings presided by the main leaders at the homes of private individuals. Personal contacts played a major role in the strength of the movement. The final weapon in the struggle was provided by leaflets and newspapers. Thus, by the beginning of 1936, civil forms of confrontation had turned cities into the focal points for protests and the conquest of power.

The authorities in charge turned their attention away from the strikes for a while, hoping that they would fester and die. However, political changes in France brought a significant shift in the political landscape. In the spring, the Popular Front coalition won the legislative elections and a government composed of radicals and socialists came to power. The Matignon Accords ushered in paid holidays and the forty-hour working week. New, more liberal approaches to colonial rule were proposed, and the Mandatory authorities in Syria were obliged to reopen negotiations with the local groups. Elections were held and the National Bloc won by a wide margin. Now the parliament itself became an echo chamber for nationalist demands.

However, two currents emerged within the movement. One group, led by Jamil Mardam Bey, believed that the agreement with France was the only way to achieve immediate independence. Another group, who followed Shukri al-Quwwatli, the leader of the Damascus deputies, believed that it was necessary to take a radical line and demand independence. The High Commissioner intervened to ensure that Jamîl Mardam Bey was appointed head of government, and a delegation, led by Bey, was sent to Paris to determine the outlines of the next treaty. Discussions proceeded rapidly and a text was agreed at the end of 1937. All that remained was for it to be ratified by the two parliaments. This did not seem to pose any particular problem for the Syrians.

The return of the delegation, from Turkey and by rail, was given a largely warm welcome. The new government team took advantage of the positive response to introduce a number of new policies for a future independent Syria. Faced with the effects of the crisis, the Wheat Board, for example, set about coordinating production and trade. There was every reason to hope that powers would soon be transferred from the Mandate to local authorities. However, there was little evidence that this was happening automatically, and the Syrians soon realised that the French were constantly postponing the date for ratifying the agreement.

The treaty precipitated two types of protest that largely changed the face of politics in Syria. The promise of independence and membership of the League of Nations made certain aspects clearer: power would be transferred to Damascus and the two independent territories would be united under a team that represented the Syrian people. Two sets of objections were raised, however, which must be analysed separately for the sake of clarity. The first set related to the populations and powers attached to Syria by the treaty, that is to say, all the peripheral areas: the Sanjak of Alexandretta, the Druze and Alawite territories, and al-Jazira. The other set of objections came from the political groups not represented by the government. Similar processes prompted antagonism in both cases. The Alawites and Druze were in similar situations. With the treaty due to result in the absorption of the autonomous entities, their elites were divided. For some, the Syrian solution was the preferred option, while for others, the search for autonomy or French tutelage seemed like a good way of protecting themselves from distant urban elites whose influence they feared. The strength of the two currents varied in the different territories, with opposition in the Druze autonomy being weaker than in the Alawite region. This was mainly due to two factors: the relative disarray of the Druze elites after the suppression of the 1925 uprising and the pro-Syrian legacy of the insurgents who had gone into exile. Druze clans such as that of the Atrash family gave their support to an independent Syria, without specifying the practical details, while in the case of the Alawites, numerous factions supported an autonomous solution, albeit with divisions between tribes. All it took was for the Kildiyya representatives to come out in favour of Damascus for the Kalbiyya to oppose them.

One figure on the autonomous front, Salman Murshid, stood out. Born in the Alawite mountains of Sulayman Yunus, he was considered to be special in his community from a young age because of his epilepsy, a reputation that earned him the scorn of powerful locals. Followed by those attracted by his mysticism, he eventually left for Raqqa. On his return, he married into the elite, and the number of his followers continued to grow. His success won him the support of the French authorities, who backed his decision to stand for parliament in 1936. The career of this political mystic highlights the influence of the French in the final negotiations that were to shape Syria. The authorities in charge, who were also fragmented, ended up adopting a localist or autonomist stance. From their point of view, their aim was to defend the minorities they had formerly governed, to promote civilisation, and to continue France’s work, etc. In the end, however, the rapprochement between the autonomous local factions and the French administration created rifts.

Developments in the Sanjak of Alexandretta and in al-Jazira ended in two very different ways. In both cases, the state of affairs in the 1930s was largely the product of what was left unsaid after the First World War. The wealth of literature on the Sanjak provides an insight into the negotiations that led to the region’s eventual separation from Syria. After the war, the large Turkish-speaking minority and French uncertainty in the face of Kemalist troops had led France to create a sanjak, an autonomous province, on the coast, with Antakya and Iskenderun as its urban centres. Now in 1936, the new treaty worried the Turks. Like the League of Nations, the Turkish government feared that the Turkish-speaking population would be oppressed by the Arabs. It therefore demanded guarantees. The German government at the time was taking the same line on the Sudetenland. France conceded that elections were due.

The dividing lines on the ground were sectarian, linguistic and tribal. The Alawites in the Sanjak were in favour of full integration with Syria. The office of the Muslim Brotherhood, a pan-Arab movement, for example, was headed by Zaki al-Arsuzi, who, along with his supporters, clashed with the local French authorities. Their offices were eventually closed down and the leaders driven into exile. In addition, the Turkmen and Turkish-speaking minorities embraced the propaganda coming from Turkey. Local opposition and clashes between factions created an explosive situation at a time when the 1936 treaty had not yet been ratified. Three “events” led to the Sanjak eventually being transferred to Turkey: In an irony of history, Mustafa Kemal returned to the scene of the last of his battles at the head of the Ottoman armies in 1918. Initially, the French recognised a degree of autonomy in the region and fought against the pro-Syrian positions of several local chiefs. Second, a treaty was drawn up with Turkey. Lastly, elections organised well in advance confirmed the region’s desire to return to Turkey in a referendum.

There were a number of issues that contributed to the partition: geostrategic issues, local positioning, minorities’ choices, and concerns about a new, independent power. In February 1939, the territory was amputated from Syria. This separation left a deep wound in the collective memory. It revived the colonial divisions of the early days of the First World War and showed how the agreements of politicians could lead to further loss. This was visible in the flood of refugees reaching the Syrian capital, Damascus. It was there that Zaki al-Arsuzi founded a literary club calling for Arab revival (al-baath) with two young teachers, Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar, who had been dismissed because of their stance against France. Numerous Armenians, who feared potential massacres, also moved out of the Sanjak.

In the case of al-Jazira, the diversity of groups, the composite nature of the population, and deep local divisions prevented the formation of an autonomous region. Intelligence officers encouraged tribal leaders and their Arab and Kurdish clients to demand greater autonomy, but their policy was stymied by the effects of the mandate. The urban sprawl along the border with Turkey, greater integration with the rest of Syria through increased movement and the growth of economic networks, and the domination of urban elites from Aleppo or Deir ez-Zor undermined the autonomist arguments. Lastly, the local Kurdish population, with its own ethnic origins, was reluctant to adopt a common identity that might prevent them from establishing themselves as a political group of their own. In the end, the impending war had the opposite result to that in the Sanjak. And neutrality was not up for negotiation; on the contrary, Damascus’s control of the area prevented any move towards joining the Axis powers.

The protests of the peripheral communities cannot be understood without taking into account the intense political activity on the Syrian scene. Two sets of objections to the treaty emerged. Some people heaped opprobrium on the moderate negotiators for their failure to ratify the agreement, the secession of the Sanjak, and the 1936 Palestinian rebellion, which developed into a civil war between 1937 and 1935-59. The faction led by Shukri al-Quwwatli gained in importance from then on, in particular because he was supported by the original nationalists, such as the Azmih brothers, who had returned from exile. Through them, he was able to control the party’s finances. However, not all the exiles joined the National Bloc. Young people entering politics and veterans of former conflicts found a standard-bearer in Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar, who was in favour of immediate independence. He was a real alternative to the *wataniyyin*, and only his brutal death in 1940 put an end to the hopes of his supporters. These two currents show the extent to which the demands for immediate independence were gaining strength before the outbreak of the war in 1939.

At the same time, new ideological groups were emerging that were the product of several influences: local aspirations, European ideas brought by returning students, and regional political positioning. Some groups, particularly the communists, were copies of the metropolitan parties. This was particularly the case for communism, which was adopted by religious or ethnic minorities and by Armenians, both those in exile in Syria and the resurgent community in Armenia. The Mandatory authorities, however, feared the development of Bolshevism as an agent of foreign influence and set out to neutralise it. The Communist Party of Lebanon, Syria and Palestine was founded in the 1930s along the same lines as its French counterpart, but its alignment with Moscow in 1936 in favour of the treaty with France discredited it somewhat in the eyes of the Syrians.

Apart from the Communists, most groups coalesced around one or other idea of the Syrian nation. There were three opposing currents. The first followed the theses of Antun Saadeh, an exile who had returned from Latin America who defended the idea of the *bilad al-sham*, a distinct and civilised Arab territory that linked all ethnic groups and faiths within a Levantine form of syncretism. Saadeh’s party, the Syrian People’s Party (SPP) followed a fascist model in its search for an authoritarian leader to guide and modernise the nation. The ulema also made a name for themselves by fighting against legislative innovations. Their association, founded in 1938, aimed to bring Islam into politics. It attracted followers returning from their studies in Cairo, where they had been exposed to the ideas of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Although they had not yet founded a Syrian branch, they were enthusiastic about the ideal of Islam as a means of reforming society and the political world. They associated it with a defence of authenticity and of the *umma,* or nation of Muslims, against imperialism. The last trend was Arabism, which was expressed in cafés and literary circles like the one mentioned above run by Aflaq and Bîtâr.

On the eve of the war, the Syrian political scene was particularly lively. All the parties were using masculine, aggressive language and had set up youth and paramilitary units. The time had come to defend the nation that had been ravaged by European colonisation. Coloured shirts marched in the streets, revealing support for the ideas of Mussolini. Intellectuals perceived this ideological amalgam as a practical solution to the problems of the national struggle and the cult of the leader also enjoyed a sympathetic following. Fascist Italy itself, on the other hand, aroused a great deal of suspicion. The war against Ethiopia and the colonial revival in Libya prompted distrust of this potentially imperialist power. On a different note, while the Germans were regarded with a benevolence inherited from the Ottoman era and nurtured by diplomats from the times of Kaiser Wilhelm, there was nothing to suggest that Nazism had any local support. It was largely unknown. Despite the struggle against Zionism in Palestine, the racist ideology did not make any significant inroads in Syria.

The Palestinian uprising revealed the paradoxes of insurrectionary combat for some Syrians and gave others the opportunity to distinguish themselves in battle. The Hamaiot warlord who had led the resistance in 1925, Fawzi al-Quwaqji, led a guerrilla war against the British occupiers and Zionist settlements, but was forced to flee in 1939. Britain’s relentless repression had a devastating and lasting effect on the Palestinian elite. In Syria, on the other hand, the uprising provided great publicity for the Arab cause. The first support networks politicised young people eager for ideals and new solutions. These young political activists were waiting for the end of the Mandate to play a full role; before then, however, they had to face up to the experience of the war that broke out in 1939.

# From international tensions to the Second World War

The first news of the world war came through rival radio stations, Radio Bari, and then Radio Berlin, who urged Arabs to shake off the yoke of colonialism. In 1939, however, the main international news that Syrians were aware of was the French decision to cede the Sanjak of Alexandretta in return for Turkish neutrality. In addition, rumours of war, together with the institutional blockages caused by the failure to ratify the treaty, precipitated the suspension of the constitution. In May, the French government, through its new representative Gabriel Puaux, decided to choose new interlocutors, and a new government was formed, with a new title, that of Executive Committee.

This turnaround reflected the way in which France intended to employ Syria in the coming conflict. Italy’s desire to wage war in the Mediterranean, Germany's territorial advances, and the still uncertain appetites of the USSR made Syria an excellent base. It was therefore important to ensure that Syria was at peace and that its population was obedient. In the usual colonial fashion, therefore, opposition leaders were rounded up and taken to the prison town of Qamishli on the Turkish border. In addition to this forceful crackdown, plans were drawn up to launch operations in the Balkans. The events of September 2, 1939 did nothing to change these preparations.

The first months of the Second World War were also a phoney war in Syria The military leadership was poised to go into action, but there was no direct enemy to fight. Things changed with the collapse of the French front in May 1940. The surrender of France in June was traumatic for General Dentz and his subordinates, who were far away from France and uncertain how to react. De Gaulle’s appeal was heard on the shores of the Levant, but his failed attempt to rally the French West Africa in Dakar, where he was driven off by cannon fire, and the destruction of the French fleet by the British at Mazalquivir thwarted his intentions. After some hesitation, the officer corps in Syria decided not to join the Free French.

The aim of the Vichy regime was to reinforce French authority in Syria, and therefore it persecuted the Arab nationalist leaders, who were accused of having assassinated Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar. Although Shahbandar had been very hostile to France, he was also hostile to the National Bloc, which he accused of ceding Syria’s sovereignty. His sudden death led to the disintegration of his movement, which had been united mainly by its charismatic leader. At the same time, the prosecution of Jamil Mardam Bey and Shukri al-Quwwatli led them to seek refuge in Iraq. At the beginning of 1940, despite the military turbulence surrounding the Hashemite monarchy, Baghdad was still a safe haven for Arab exiles. Without leaders, the National Bloc faded into the background for a while, leaving behind only a few ministers.

Things changed radically in the first half of 1941. The reason for this lay outside Syria. In April, after several previous attempts, four colonels—the Golden Square—who were fierce proponents of Arab nationalism, orchestrated a coup d’état in Baghdad. This forced the regent to go into exile, along with his pro-British ministers. The colonels called for a rethink of ties with the former Mandatory Power and gave a warm welcome to the distinguished Palestinian exile, the Mufti of Jerusalem. The Mufti had initially sought refuge in the Iraqi capital after the failure of the revolt in Palestine in 1939, and he now joined with the new Iraqi leaders in their defiance of Europe. However, when war broke out, caution was the order of the day. Requested to declare war on Germany, the Gaylani government, supposedly led by the colonels, complied, but refused to sever diplomatic relations with Italy. In the feverish spring of 1941, Winston Churchill, who was attempting to put out fires on all the fronts, feared the slightest reversal in the underbelly of the Empire and ordered an invasion in May 1941.

In Paris, a new agreement to the French government led by Darlan was proposed by Otto Abetz. As recorded in the Paris Prototocols, Berlin agreed to meet certain demands made by the French state if Vichy agreed to the use of Syrian airfields by the German army, who would lend their support to the Iraqi rebels. A small number of German troops, carrying a limited number of weapons, immediately left for Aleppo. But Germany, in the spring of 1941, had no intention of further delaying Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the USSR. Given the disorganisation of the Reich, the few initiatives taken in Iraq were not enough to change the situation on the ground. Meanwhile, Iraq attracted many Syrian fighters, including Jalal Sayyid and Akram al-Hawrani. Faced with the turnaround by Vichy France, Churchill planned to invade Syria. The Gaullists were keen to take part in the operations.

In June 194, a war between the two French sides was thus taking shape. The Vichy camp wanted to face up to the situation and avoid Syria becoming involved, which could lead to negotiations in the event of victory, while, before the invasion, General Catroux was authorised by de Gaulle to proclaim that in accordance with the 1936 treaty Syria would be granted independence, which would take effect at the end of the war. This declaration received little publicity, however, as the Syrian press was censored. On 25 June, three columns set off in three directions: along the Lebanese coast, towards Daraa and toward the Golan Heights. They quickly reached Damascus but struggled to take Beirut because of fierce resistance. At the end of June, two further columns set off for Palmyra and Aleppo. At the beginning of July 1941, operations were halted and talks were held in Saint-Jean-d’Acre between the British and members of the Vichy regime, with the Gaullists only partially involved.

The Free French took control of Syria, which now ceased to be a theatre of war. Operation Barbarossa, German stagnation in the Libyan desert, and Turkish neutrality ruled out the possibility of Syria again becoming a theatre of operations. But belonging to the Allied camp brought changes on the ground. The Free French now had to honour their promise of future independence and Syria became part of the Middle East Supply Centre set up by the British.

Power was gradually transferred to the Syrians. Once the constitution was restored, legislative elections were held in 1943, with the National Bloc emerging as the clear favourite. The opposition party, that of Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar, had disappeared with the death of its leader in 1940. Within the nationalist formation, new balances resulted from Shukri al-Quwwatli’s leverage of the party’s financial tools. Able to control candidates within the group more easily, Quwwatli succeeded in imposing himself at the head of the list for the capital. The nationalist party’s victory in the elections enabled him to put himself forward as primus inter pares, and when, according to the constitution, the assembly met to appoint the president, he won a majority of the votes.

As in 1918, the resumption of normal political life saw the emergence of a proliferation of political parties, classified by the French authorities into extremists, fundamentalists, and moderates. The first group was opposed to any ties with France, as was the second, which drew on Islam as a weapon in the fight against the colonists. However, none of the groups had more than a few hundred members, and they were more like clubs than structured parties. What the situation does reveal clearly, however, is the way in which Syrians used the restoration of constitutional freedoms to revive the civil movement.

The war years had a major impact on the economy. The Middle East Supply Centre helped to coordinate transport and production in order to prevent renewed shortages and potential disruption. The Supply Centre fulfilled its function reasonably well, replacing the offices set up before the war, but it was unable to create a unified market in Syria, leading to price fluctuations and occasional shortages. There were two main effects: On the one hand, the gross domestic product (calculated a posteriori) grew at a rate of 7% per year, and there was an acceleration in industrial and agricultural production, which was also due to the high demand for products by Allied soldiers. But at the same time capital could not be invested. On the other hand, high inflation and market imbalances penalised the urban working classes and small farmers. When the war ended in 1944, demonstrations were organised against the high cost of living. The legacy of this period of the war, however, was the country’s first experience of an organised economy and significant resources to be invested in productive activities.

Political events depended on the course of the war. Until 1944, the Free French were able to negotiate the transfer of powers, but they made progress in the talks conditional on the liberation of metropolitan France. They also refused to hand over command of the special forces, creating deadlock. At the same time, Syria, as a state, became a member of the new international institutions, with a delegation chaired by Faris al-Khuri in San Francisco, and another by Mardam Bey in Cairo, which had been dispatched to help establish the Arab League. There was now a paradox: Syria, sovereign on the international stage, was dependent on internal French affairs by virtue of a mandate conferred by a body, the League of Nations, which had now ceased to exist. But not even the American and Soviet governments recognised Syria's independence in 1944.

It was against this background that the garrisons were rotated in the spring of 1945. The news was immediately interpreted in the same way as it always had been since the First World War: if France was sending new soldiers, it meant that it wanted to hold on. This meant that only an uprising could prevent the restoration of colonial power. The Syrian troops and their officials soon rose up, followed mainly by the inhabitants of Damascus and Hama. The combination of the two movements, accompanied by strikes and demonstrations in various parts of the country (as far as Deir ez-Zor), led to the situation getting out of hand. Following the usual pattern, the High Commissioner ordered troops to open fire. Over the course of two days, 28-29 May 1945, Damascus was bombed, the Parliament set on fire, and leading figures took refuge with foreign diplomats. The American ambassador opened his home, while the US government joined the British in criticising France’s attitude, which was risking alienating the Arabs.

On 30 May, the British government issued an ultimatum: if the French troops did not return to their barracks, the British forces would be forced to open fire. Unable to change the situation, the French government complied. Control of the special forces was handed back to the Syrian authorities in the following months. Shukri al-Quwwatli, now President of the Republic, protected by the United States, Great Britain and, in the region, by Saudi Arabia, ratified a timetable for the withdrawal of the French forces. On 17 April 1946, the last soldier of the power that had arrived in 1920 was obliged to leave the country.

The period between 1920 and 1946 was a remarkable period in the history of Syria. Despite the Syrian constitutional movement forming a government under the leadership of King Faisal, France was granted control over territories after the First World War for which it had no real plans. However, once the inhabitants had been subjugated—at least, ostensibly—, it set about developing an administration, a transport system, and other infrastructures in this new part of the empire. However, regular fighting and rebellions quickly demonstrated the futility of the post-war colonial order and other forms of control and management had to be found. A new parliamentary system was formed around a constitution that was modelled on the French system. The supporters of the pre-war civil movement, some of the most powerful families, therefore reinvested their political know-how and strengthened their local networks and powers through political assemblies. Using the modern political tools of the new state and with the help of a nationwide struggle, they were able to secure a new hold over the country. The struggle united them with other groups that had previously been marginalised by the urban population, such as the Druze, whose representative Sultan Atrash provides an enduring model of a militant Syrian identity. Composition, several reconfigurations, and the eventual emergence of a new Syria, these were the processes that led to a state that now claimed sovereignty over the newly formed territory. The elites still had a huge task ahead of them: to give meaning to their past struggles in an independent Syria.