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# THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF THE HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE EAST MANDATES

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## FRENCH MANDATE COUNTERINSURGENCY AND THE REPRESSION OF THE GREAT SYRIAN REVOLT

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Negative motifs about the Arab world pervade popular perceptions in Europe and America. Notions of endless religious conflict, sectarian fanaticism, authoritarianism, and violent barbarism feature prominently. Ordinary people, journalists, politicians, and intellectuals sometimes argue directly, more often by implication, that such characteristics are essential to the region and its people. Observers more knowledgeable about the region's history make reference to the usually unspecified legacy of foreign intervention, occupation, and colonial rule between the World Wars to explain conflict and social and governmental problems.

This chapter asks a simple question: how did the French colonial state in Syria confront armed opposition? The answer lies in the exhaustive records of the French, British, and League of Nations archives. In earlier work, I sought out and read all Arabic sources on Syrian opposition to the French Mandate during the Great Revolt of 1925, and argued that defeat in the First World War, legacies of Ottoman state modernization, and common opposition to colonial occupation explained more about armed struggle in Syria than suddenly awakened national consciousness. I argued further that ex-Ottoman military officers played decisive roles in politics and all armed movements in post-Ottoman lands after the war, and that these movements should be properly considered together, rather than as a struggle of this or that new nation.

I did not ask what Mandate colonial rule and colonial violence meant at the time, or what it meant for the long-term prospects of the region. These are the questions this chapter considers. This chapter explores how the Mandate government crushed an anticolonial popular revolution, and what the introduction of new methods of counterinsurgency, suppression, violence, and state control might mean for society generally. I do not intend to represent the thoughts or actions of Syrians, but rather, to show in detail what colonial practice did in Syria. This approach poses risks. An emphasis on French colonial counterinsurgency may seem to essentialize barbarous practices within European society and history, in a kind of mirror image of the usual defective essentialist claims about Middle Eastern society and history. Conversely, it might be argued that emphasizing European colonial practice and European archives, while ignoring Syrian rebels and their actions, could buttress the old argument that modernity came from the West to the East, and that there was no historical agency in the Middle East. But such arguments have always been made to bolster the claimed exceptionalism of the West and bemoan the essential deficiencies of the East.

Such arguments have long been a central component in the rhetorical armament of colonialism and more recent interventions. Altruistic proclamations accompanied and legitimated the League of Nations Mandates regime in the Middle East. French and British politicians and civil servants claimed the Mandates were "a sacred trust for civilization," enacting an unspoken assumption that they embodied "civilization" and could bestow it at will on less fortunate others. This chapter suggests that colonial officials subscribed to the story of their own altruistic mission, and reacted with disproportionate violence when colonial populations rejected the gift.

In mid-summer 1925, a group of farmers and First World War veterans began what came to be called the Great Syrian Revolt. French Mandate military repression was ineffective in the first months of the uprising in the summer of 1925, and the armed movement spread. The revolt started in a rural region 100 km south of Damascus, but by September, it had spread to the farming villages surrounding the capital on all sides, known as the Ghuta, and armed rebels had begun to infiltrate the major cities of the region. French metropolitan politics affected colonial policy since the army, colonial bureaucracy, and lobby was notably rightist, and the Mandate High Commissioner, General Maurice Sarrail, had been recently appointed by the leftist bloc government, the *cartel des gauches*, elected in 1924. Sarrail maintained silence in diplomatic and press correspondence for the first weeks of the revolt. An official communication finally broke the information blackout in late July.

In reprisal for numerous acts of brigandage (murder, pillage, fire, etc) committed by the rebels against the peaceful population who refused to take part in the revolt, several tons of explosives have been dropped on the offending localities. This bombardment has met with complete success.<sup>1</sup>

On the morning of Sunday, 18 October, armed rebels entered Damascus to the exuberant welcome of many citizens. Police and Mandate troops evacuated the French residents and left the walled old city, retreating into the citadel at the city gates and to the newer quarters up the hillside of Mount Qasyun, which looms over the city to the northwest. Artillery batteries at the citadel and the hillside quarter of Salihyya began a barrage along with bomber aircraft flying from the airstrip at nearby al-Mazza at 17:00 Sunday evening. There was no formal warning before the shelling began, though the first few shells might have been blanks.

Artillery and aircraft shelled and bombed every quarter where insurgents had been reported. The attack continued for 48 hours. After the insurgents left the city on Tuesday morning, a group of leading citizens asked the Damascus representative of the High Commissioner to stop the bombardment, which he did after warning that the city would be required to pay a heavy fine in money and weapons. General Maurice Gamelin issued a demand for 200,000 Turkish gold liras, quickly reduced to 100,000, and 3,000 rifles, due by Saturday, 24 October, otherwise, the bombardment would resume. When the news from Damascus became known, authorities in Paris realized that they could not resume bombardment. Eventually, after months of bitter discussion, the next High Commissioner canceled the fine in May 1926.<sup>2</sup>

The bombardment of Damascus opened a new chapter in the modern practice of war and colonial counterinsurgency. A handful of French villages had been destroyed by aerial and artillery bombardment during the First World War, and Italian forces had used artillery and airplanes on villages in Ottoman Libya in 1911. British forces had used aerial bombing as the main, low-cost tool of counterinsurgency in rural Iraq in 1920, and German Zeppelins and airplanes had dropped bombs on London, but Damascus was probably the first major city to be subject to intensive aerial bombardment.<sup>3</sup> The self-described intention on the part of the mandatory

government, which the League of Nations had endowed with a "sacred trust for civilization," was to frighten the population into revoking its support for rebellion.

Airpower and bombing was meant to intimidate inhabitants with the destructive power of the French military, and to restore French prestige. English-speaking observers of the French counterinsurgency strategy described bombing as intended to instill "frightfulness."<sup>4</sup> The colonial military government had made aerial bombardment a central strategy of counterinsurgency in Syria, but the villages bombed and destroyed from the air were rural and mostly unknown to foreigners. Mandate press censorship was effective, and news from the countryside was based on rumors and stories told by refugees who fled the affected regions on foot. The bombing of Damascus was a different matter.

From 1,000 to 1,500 people were killed, and an entire quarter of the city was left a smoldering ruin. The densely built-up commercial heart of Damascus, between Suq al-Hamidiyya and Suq al-Tawil, known in the Bible as the "street called straight," was destroyed, and when rebuilt, even the streets were redrawn. The area stands out in the old city of today by its grid-like streets and modern buildings and retains the name it gained in 1925, *al-Hariqa*, or *Fire*. General Sarrail claimed before the French senate that 250 houses and 100 commercial buildings had been destroyed. Other estimates were far higher, and in testimony to the Mandates Commission in 1926, the French representative admitted the area destroyed was four hectares, though it was actually half again larger.<sup>5</sup> Among the ruins was the vast eighteenth-century palace of the Quwadi family, considered one of the architectural jewels of the city. Foreign newspapers reported the bombing of Damascus, and the British consul, who had remained in his old-city consulate during the bombardment, wrote an angry and detailed report on the events. The bombardment brought unwelcome international attention to Mandate policy and embarrassed the League of Nations.

The week preceding the bombardment had featured an escalation of military operations in the area of Damascus. Damascenes had witnessed a series of public hangings in the central Marja square. Bodies had been left strung up for hours after morning executions, and signboards around the necks of the corpses described their alleged crimes. Mandate forces had failed to flush insurgents out from the dense gardens around Damascus, but a few days before the bombing, an infantry patrol had returned with a column of pack animals loaded with 26 dead rebels. A large crowd gathered and the Damascenes claimed the dead had been ordinary peasants killed in their fields, since Mandate forces had been unable to engage any actual insurgents. The corpses were plundered, their possessions displayed by soldiers, and their bodies paraded through the streets on the backs of donkeys until they reached the central square where they were laid out in a row on the ground. The government newspaper, *La Syrie*, called it "un splendide tableau de chasse" in a banner headline complete with gruesome photograph. *The Times*, probably the only European newspaper with a local reporter at the time, covered the bombing of Damascus and what the article heading called "A Parade of Corpses" ten days later.<sup>6</sup> Photographs show hundreds of people viewing the spectacle.

The international crisis that followed the bombing of Damascus led to the recall of High Commissioner Sarrail. But Sarrail was punished for his politics and the embarrassment he brought to France and the Mandate.<sup>7</sup> More than in North Africa, French colonialism in Syria and Lebanon was intimately bound up with both the army and the Catholic Church. The Mandate was unpopular among the majority in Syria and the Maronite Catholics of Lebanon were the only sectarian community favorable to the Mandate. The two High Commissioners who preceded Sarrail, Generals Henri Gouraud and Maxime Weygand, were clear in their understanding of France's colonial mission in the Levant: opposition to Syrian nationalism and support for the French missionary institutions and the Maronite Christians. This formula ensured opposition of the majority populations and planted seeds of sectarian conflict in Lebanon, but it also secured

a loyal client population among the Christians. General Gouraud had declared the creation of Greater Lebanon to favor the colonial mission's most enthusiastic supporters, a small group of mostly Christian Ottoman exiles, resident in France in the years before and during the First World War.

Sarrail's anticlerical republicanism immediately alienated the few indigenous supporters of France's Mandate. Upon his arrival in Beirut, in January 1925, Sarrail publicly expressed his opposition to the special status of the Church and the Maronite Christians in Lebanon.<sup>8</sup> Months later, upon the beginning of the revolt, a series of blunders and military disasters led the rightist press and opposition in Paris to attack him and the *cartel des gauches* government. Journalist and former cavalry officer Henri de Kerillis of *L'Écho de Paris* was Sarrail's most effective enemy, and he called for his sacking even before the beginning of the revolt. Kerillis also had access to leaked military intelligence reports, which he published to embarrass Sarrail.

The most damaging attack on Sarrail was Kerillis's charge that Sarrail had ordered a punitive column, destroyed and humiliated by rebels in July, into the field over the protests of its commanding officers. Sarrail was recalled at the end of October and it was resolved to send a civilian as High Commissioner. Sarrail had imposed a regime of silence in his communication with Paris and underplayed the scope of the disasters befalling the Mandate. When he was recalled, *L'Écho de Paris* crowed sarcastically, "calm reigns in all Syria, Sarrail reports."<sup>9</sup>

The new League of Nations had endorsed British and French "Mandates" carved out of the occupied territories of the defeated Ottoman Empire. The internationalism of the League and its Mandates regime created a new, internationally monitored form of colonial rule. But the internationalism of the Mandates produced some perverse outcomes. The Mandate powers were supposed by the Mandate Charter to run their new colonies as benevolent adult guardians of minor children. Colonial functionaries resented League oversight, notwithstanding its impotence. The post-Ottoman political elite of the Mandates resented their suddenly subordinate positions and protested bitterly their relegation to the position of "minors" on the world stage. They organized and began a campaign of lobbying and petition writing in Geneva, Paris, and London. The institutions and legal structures introduced under mandatory rule were inevitably designed to satisfy the new-found internationalism of bureaucrats of Geneva, not to endow Mandate inhabitants with the legal rights of citizens.

### French counterinsurgency, 1925–1926

Henry de Jouvenel was appointed as new High Commissioner to suppress the revolt and salvage the mandatory mission. As a prominent and well-connected liberal journalist and politician, and the first civilian High Commissioner, de Jouvenel aimed to avoid Sarrail's mistakes. Sarrail had been damned for his suspicious and secretive nature, his unwillingness to convey frankly the seriousness of the situation, and the damage he caused to French prestige when the truth leaked out. Before de Jouvenel accepted the appointment, he asked for and received an increase in the colonial *Armée du Levant* of 10,000 soldiers. De Jouvenel made clear his intention to maintain open communication with Paris and with British mandatory allies, and pay minimal attention to the wishes or demands of mandatory citizens or critics. Before he embarked for Beirut, he visited a number of French diplomats and colonial statesmen, interviewed Sarrail, and talked to the French press. He also went to London to meet the Foreign and Colonial secretaries and to speak with the British press.

The new, open style contrasted favorably with Sarrail, but de Jouvenel soon made clear that colonial policy was inflexible. In London, he declared that France would not withdraw or abandon the Mandate over Syria. De Jouvenel, who had never visited Syria, and at the time of this

statement had not met or spoken to any Syrian politician, was evidently able to speak from a position of self-confident authority when he claimed

He [would be] in a position similar to that of a commission of inquiry, with the difference that he would arrive at his own conclusions on the spot and take action upon them. His business, in accordance with the civilizing Mandate which France had accepted, was to give the populations justice, liberty, and prosperity. . . . If he restored peace and organized the French Mandate, his mission as a political authority would be completed. The task of France would be accomplished on the day when Syria was capable of governing herself.<sup>10</sup>

On his way, de Jouvenel called upon Turkish President Mustafa Kemal. Upon his landing in Istanbul, de Jouvenel told a Turkish newspaper "Ghazi Mustafa Kemal Pasha is the outstanding genius of the present day."<sup>11</sup> His visit aimed to ensure the solidity of Franco-Turkish peace agreements over the border region of northern Syria and southern Turkey, and to gain assurances that Kemal would not supply weapons or assistance to his former Ottoman compatriots in the Syrian Mandate. When the Syrian rebels finally sought help from Kemal, they learned that de Jouvenel had already visited and evidently had more to offer than they.<sup>12</sup> He also promised that France would eventually cede territory in its Mandate to the Turkish Republic. The 10,000 new French troops arrived in Syria before the new High Commissioner had completed his tour.

De Jouvenel approved the renewal of martial law before his arrival. Martial law had been in effect with few interruptions since the beginning of the Mandate, and de Jouvenel's renewal preceded a series of new counterinsurgency decrees, the most notable of which was seizure of property and the destruction of houses connected to insurgents. Leading families in Damascus accused of connection to the insurgency found their homes and lands seized. Destruction of houses was a commonplace method of punishment and often houses of suspected rebels were bombed from the air as punishment. Rural villages were required to formally submit to Mandate forces, and if they did not, the village and its property would be subject to seizure and destruction under martial law decrees. Collective punishment for suspected crimes against the authorities could include a fine of money, labor, or detention levied on a village or neighborhood. Occasionally, male villagers were gathered together and executed randomly.<sup>13</sup>

Martial law decrees also allowed hundreds to be condemned without formal trial in military tribunals. What were called tribunals consisted of lists compiled by Mandate intelligence officers. Once a name was known to the *Service des Renseignements*, the individual would be listed as wanted, and eventually tried, and condemned. During 1926, the Damascus military tribunal sentenced, condemned, and executed 355 Syrians without legal representation or civil due process. Many were publicly hanged in the central square and left hanging for hours to intimidate the population. Hundreds were tried and sentenced to death in absentia. Scores more were sentenced to varying terms including life of hard labor.<sup>14</sup>

Since 1920, all local police forces and civil authorities had been subordinate to the jurisdiction of the French military. The military authority claimed the right to search the home of any Mandate inhabitant, day or night, without prior notice or arrangement, to remove and detain suspects from their homes or from local jurisdiction without charge or explanation, to suspend rights of speech and of the press and of public association at will, and to seize the property of any inhabitant without explanation or compensation. The High Commissioner delegated to the military commander the right to detain and, if necessary, kill any citizen at any time without judicial or administrative oversight or review.<sup>15</sup> French authorities prevented League of Nations Mandate Commission efforts to learn about the functioning of martial law in Syria.

De Jouvenel's arrival in Syria brought a flurry of well-publicized offers and decrees, none of which provoked the slightest gesture of serious reconciliation among French officials or rebel leaders. De Jouvenel met a delegation of prominent Syrian citizens not involved in rebel activity. The members of the delegation made the following demands as essential for the restoration of peace:

- 1 A general amnesty.
- 2 Unification of the country, presently separated into sectarian "statelets," including Beirut and other recently added parts of greater Lebanon, but excluding prewar Mount Lebanon.
- 3 Real authority for a national government, with French personnel acting strictly as advisors.
- 4 Selection of an Assembly to frame a constitution.
- 5 A time limit on the duration of the Mandate.

All of these demands were in keeping with the terms of the Mandate as promulgated and promoted by the League of Nations, and agreed to by France as mandatory power. De Jouvenel replied to the demands with studied vagueness, and the delegates returned from their meeting dissatisfied that he had agreed with nothing and disagreed with nothing.<sup>16</sup>

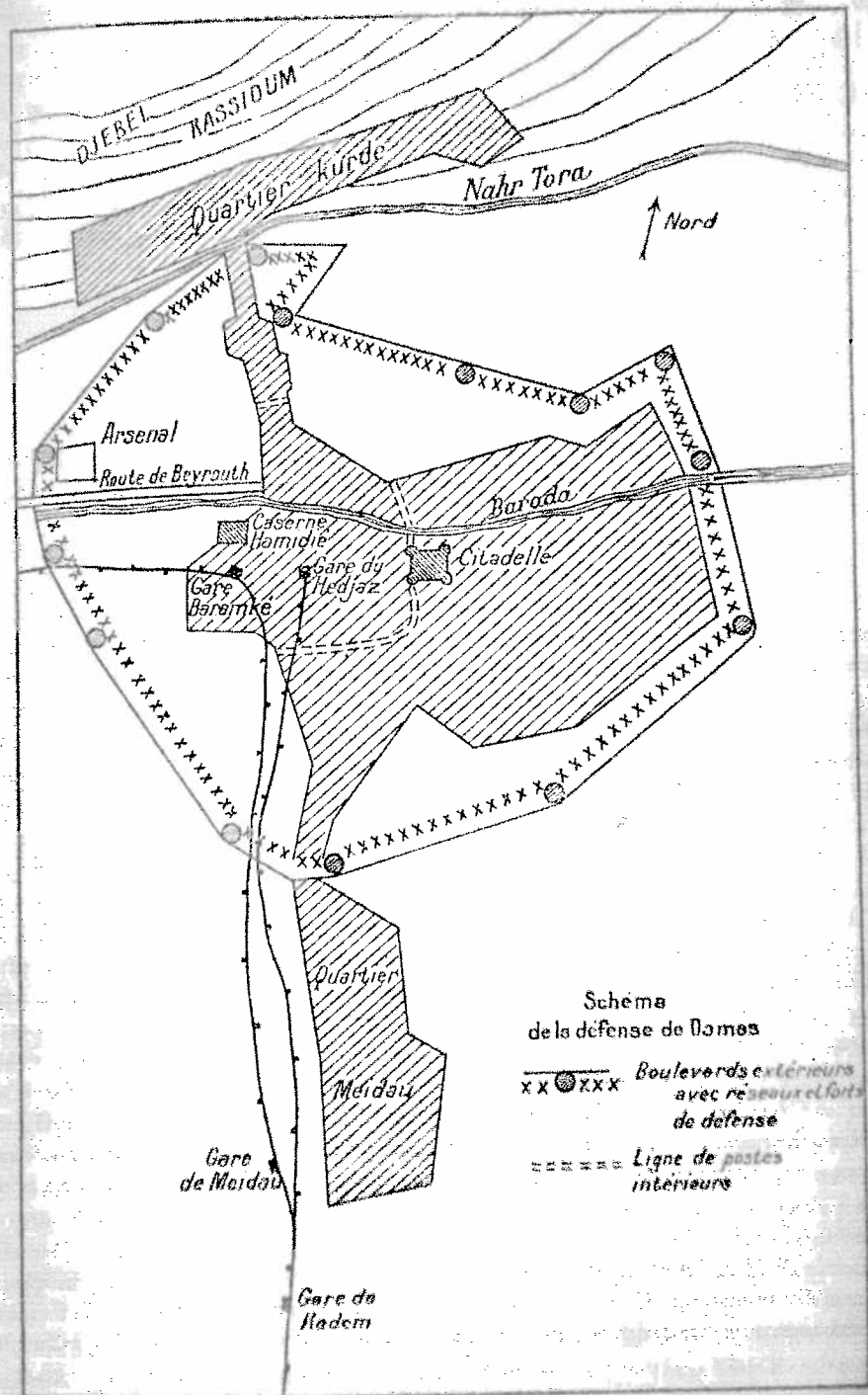
De Jouvenel sought to enlist Syrian elites in suppressing the revolt. But when he published his reply to their demands in the days after the meeting, he made clear his policy of no concessions before the country was fully pacified, whether by the surrender of the rebels or by their complete defeat. He declared that restoration of peace was the condition under which amnesty and a constitution would be granted, and that the continuation of hostilities risked the ruin of the country. Insurgents reasonably assumed capture or surrender would result in execution or lengthy imprisonment. Any negotiated peace settlement between the rebel leadership and Mandate authorities was consequently impossible. Once the formalities of rhetorical conciliation were out of the way, a fully military counterinsurgency strategy prevailed, outside of international view, and, after the bombardment of Damascus in October, away from the foreign residents and witnesses of the capital city.

Rebels controlled the countryside and villages surrounding Damascus. The train lines, roads, and telegraph lines to Beirut in the west and Palestine in the south were regularly severed.<sup>17</sup> Newly arrived soldiers were garrisoned in and around Damascus to protect the city and prevent renewed rebel infiltrations. With additional forces, a new counterinsurgency strategy emerged under the command of General Charles Andréa. Andréa had been promoted to general after ably leading Foreign Legion troops in Hawran during the disastrous fall of 1925. His forces were mixed, including a small force made up mostly of European Great War veteran Foreign Legionnaires; a somewhat larger force made up of French officered colonial troops from Senegal, Algeria, and Morocco; and a shifting number of locally raised and trained irregular troops, mostly comprised of Armenian refugees. Andréa established the defensive cordon around Damascus, and implemented a new doctrine of offensive operations.

The outlying sections of the city were cut off by means of barricades, barbed wire, and roadblocks. Mandate forces established permanent posts astride all the entries into the city, and between the surrounding villages. The posts were used as forward firing stations, and so when insurgents approached and fired on the posts, French military spotters could quickly call artillery fire from the citadel or other artillery batteries, or air strikes from bases just to the southwest of the city. Bands of rebels remained active in the city, but getting in and out was harder. Mandate forces punished neighborhoods where insurgents had been active.<sup>18</sup>

After a neighborhood was bombed from the air and shelled from stationary artillery batteries, Foreign Legion troops in armored cars and tanks would drive along the larger streets. Memoirs





Map 8.1 Map showing the defense of Damascus, from Général Charles Joseph Andréa, *La révolte druze et l'insurrection de Damas* (Paris: Payot, 1937), 82.

of soldiers who took part noted that these punitive expeditions were not intended to actually engage rebels, but to intimidate people and punish association with insurgents. General Andréa ordered the summary execution of anyone found in possession of firearms, which were legal in the Syrian Mandate, during the course of operations.<sup>19</sup> Armored columns would move slowly along the streets, firing at houses and structures. After the armored sweep, colonial and irregular troops would move through the neighborhood on foot and enter houses. The irregulars were mostly Armenian refugees from Anatolia, and the use of Christian shock troops by a Christian colonial power to pacify Muslim neighborhoods provoked much hand wringing and discomfort among the European consulates. At least a few revenge murders of Armenian refugees and Syrian Christians took place. The local irregulars were perennially accused of the worst outrages, but from the perspective of the Mandate commanders, they were considered sufficiently unimportant to risk in direct contact with the population. Eventually a neighborhood would be declared pacified, and the cordon would be expanded further outward from the city, and permanent posts would be established.

Thus does the work of attrition ruthlessly proceed: The French policy is evidently to crush the rebellion by the maximum use of every mechanical contrivance and with the minimum use of French troops, whose lives are not risked when other troops (i.e. Circassian, Armenian, Kurdish or other irregular) can be employed.<sup>20</sup>

Pacification of the countryside was slower. It proceeded first by the recruitment, arming, payment, and minimal training of those segments of the colonial populations conditionally friendly to the mandatory government. In the region of Lebanon and the mountains more generally, this meant arming Christian villagers. In the southern and northern regions, it meant arming Bedouin, Ismaili, or Alawi Muslims. There was some concern and cognizance that such policies had the potential to ignite sectarian civil war, but the immediate crisis was sufficiently pressing that such concerns were not an impediment. Sectarian conflict confirmed French prejudices about Syrian society and served as rhetorical support for the colonial mission. Middle Eastern colonial regimes have continued to recruit local minority troops for security duty. Such policies have the added benefit of fragmenting unified movements of nationalist opposition.

The Muslim Druze minority sect dominated the region where the rebellion first emerged. The earliest insurgents were mostly Druze, but as the rebellion spread, many others from most sectarian communities also participated. Many former Ottoman soldiers joined. In 1921, Robert de Caix, then serving as secretary general to the High Commissioner, had designed a system of sectarian autonomy for the Druze and created something called "the state of Jabal Druze." Members of the Druze community in Hawran, including the most famous leader of the 1925 insurgency, Sultan al-Atrash, had rejected the autonomy agreement and maintained that Druze were Syrians and that Syria should be a united, independent state of all its people.

Sultan al-Atrash had sent a petition to the League of Nations in 1922 in protest of the de Caix agreement. Although the letter is still in the League archives, there is no indication that de Caix, or the members of the Mandate commission, knew that the leader of the revolt had protested the sectarian partition and colonization of Syria in resolutely secular terms years before the uprising of 1925. In 1922, Sultan al-Atrash had demanded in the name of the Syrian nation the right of "self-determination," an end to the Mandate, and the preservation of Syria within its natural, prepartition borders. Sultan al-Atrash often repeated the familiar Syrian nationalist proclamation, "religion is for God, but the nation is for all."<sup>21</sup>

Syrians argued that their revolution was nationalist and nonsectarian. In Geneva and Cairo, the Syro-Palestinian Congress challenged the French conception of Syrian society. A detailed

report prepared and submitted in answer to the reports of the Mandate authority for the League Council read:

The French have done everything in their power to stir up religious antagonism and to favour one community at the expense of another. [In Ottoman times] the people were divided into two main categories—Moslems and non-Moslem. The new decree pronounced by the High Commissioner has divided the nation into fifteen religious communities, viz. Moslems, Chiites, Druses, Nossaris, Ismailians, Orthodoxes, Greek-Catholics, Latins, Protestants, Armenian-Catholics, Orthodox Armenians, Syrian-Catholics, Orthodox Syrians, Maronites, and Jews. The seats on the representative council are distributed between these communities. If a community has less than 6,000 members, it is regarded as a minority and is not entitled to representation.

At Damascus, a distinguished barrister, formerly an Ottoman parliamentary deputy and minister at Damascus, at present President of Corporation of Barristers, professor of law and member of the scientific institute, is not entitled to stand for the sole reason that he is a Protestant. All this goes on in Syria under cover of Mandate, and yet article 8 of its terms is quite explicit on this point. "No discrimination," it says, "shall be made between different religious communities."

This is how France, the home of liberty and the proclaimer of the rights of man, applies her noble precepts in Syria and the Lebanon.<sup>22</sup>

In 1925, Robert de Caix had become Accredited Representative for the Mandate authority to the League of Nations. In his description, the uprising was the "Druze Revolt," and did not represent any form of unified Syrian movement or aspiration. De Caix himself had designed the sectarian partition of the Syrian Mandate into five separate microstates, each with a specific sectarian majority. In explaining the insurgency that confronted France in his testimony before the Mandates Commission, de Caix claimed that Syria comprised 17 or 18 separate, mutually antagonistic religious sects. Without France, they could be expected to annihilate one another. In explaining the Mandate policy to arm and recruit Christian irregulars and potentially exacerbate sectarian tensions, de Caix claimed that Muslims killing Christians was endemic to the country. Only France could save them. "In cases of disorder in these countries, there is no need of any special resentment to explain a massacre of Christians." French colonialism was the solution, not the problem.<sup>23</sup>

Early in January 1926, and just weeks after his arrival, de Jouvenel ordered the aerial dropping of leaflets throughout the rebel-held areas in the southern countryside.

To the Druze:

Why do you fight?

I have brought you the right to make your own constitution and to choose your leaders.

Your leaders will bring only death and famine to women and children.

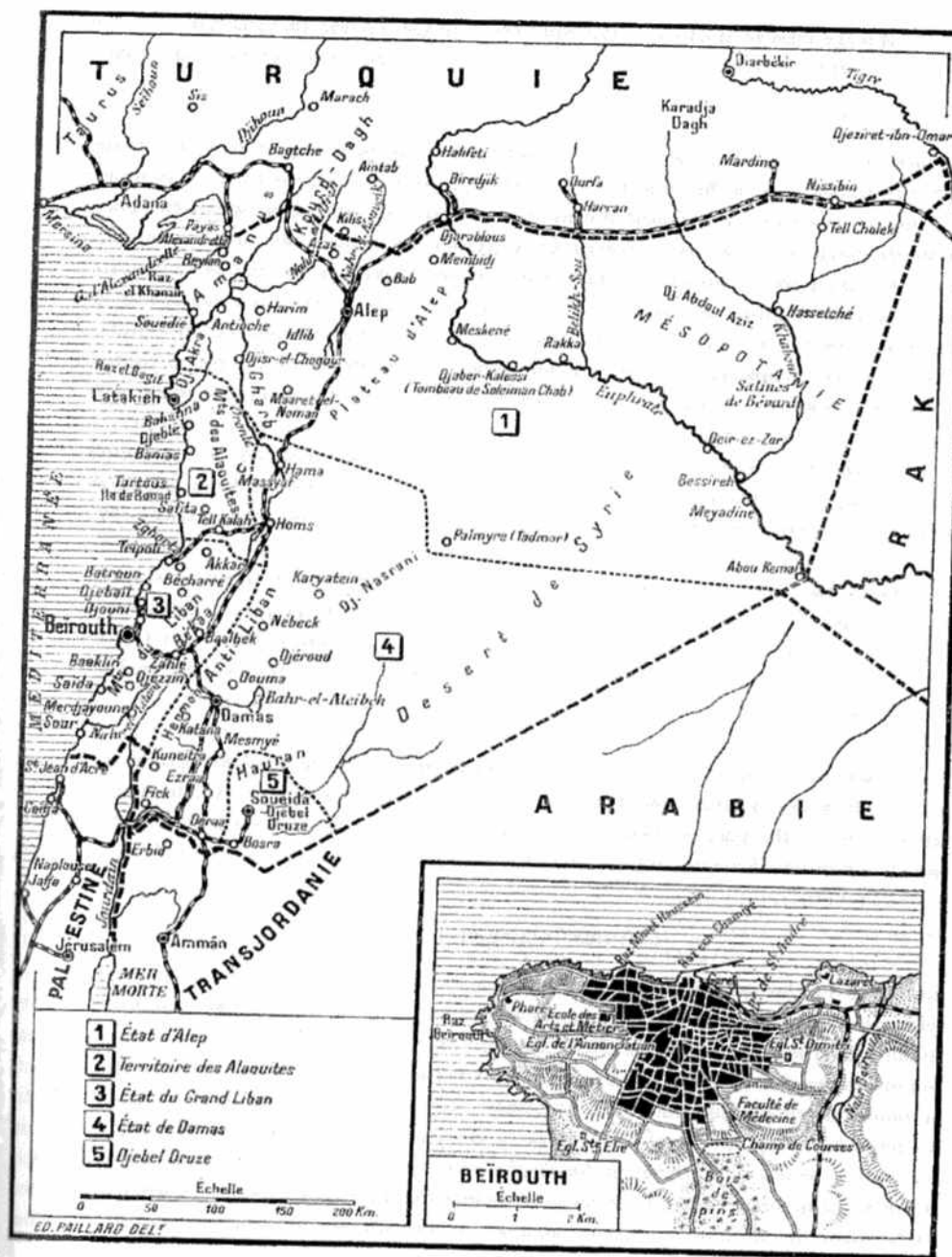
There is no more reason to fight.

Why? For whom?

It is the fault of Sultan al-Atrash. Let the blame fall on him!

Only France can provide you wheat, water, roads, schools, and national liberty.

Before the hour of your last battle, I warn you that the starvation of your women and children, and the ruin of your country will not be the fault of France.



Map 8.2 Map from Robert de Caix, *Histoire des colonies françaises et de l'expansion de la France dans le monde* (Paris: Henri Dehérain, 1931), p. 472.

It is the fault of Sultan al-Atrash and those foreign interests that pay him.  
Remember you can do nothing against France and she can do everything for you!

De Jouvenel<sup>24</sup>

Given his recent arrival, de Jouvenel himself could not have known why the Syrians were fighting France. The leaflet illustrates the presumptions underlying French colonial policy. Syrians are identified and addressed only by their religious affiliation. From the perspective of the Mandate, they cannot be identified as Syrians, or nationalists, or members of one or another of the political parties that had claimed to be speaking for them, but only as members of this or that religious grouping, territorially arranged, and tutored in sectarian schools and institutions by France. Their religious identity thus determines their political consciousness, which has been manipulated by their chiefs, who they are following blindly in contradiction to their true interests, which lie with France; the only power that can grant roads, schools, or national liberty, etc.

This leaflet blames Sultan al-Atrash and the foreign interests he serves for the ruin of Syria. On the other hand, blaming insurgent leaders meant that those who ordered disproportionate measures of suppression held themselves blameless. The British consul in Damascus opined that

On the face of it, this [leaflet] would seem to mean that the French are now resolved to suppress the rebellion by force of arms, and that these vague peace suggestions are made only with a view to conveying the impression to the world that France has done all she can to make peace and that the ultimate repression has been forced on her by the rebels' uncompromising attitude.<sup>25</sup>

The volcanic mountain region of Jabal Hawran remained the rebel stronghold and origin point of the revolt. Despite daily bombing raids, the region could only be subdued by a massive offensive across the plain of Hawran stretching 100 km south of Damascus. Everyone knew French forces would march on Hawran in the spring.

### Counterinsurgency, 1926–1927

Europeans in Damascus expected the rebellion to collapse by early 1926. It did not. Late in February, a delegation of Damascene notables tried to mediate between the Mandate authority and insurgent leaders in Hawran. The delegation called on the military command to learn what guarantees they could offer the insurgent leaders, before visiting the rebels and determining their minimum terms for surrender. The delegation failed completely because the French authorities refused to offer any terms of surrender, and argued that to answer any Syrian grievance in negotiation would undermine the foundations of the Mandate itself.<sup>26</sup> Most of the members of the Mandate commission in Geneva had agreed and argued that the extremists who rejected the Mandate should never be allowed to profit from their rejection. They had to be shown that only by surrender to France's Mandate could they achieve any relief from the situation they had brought upon themselves.

In late April, a large French military force marched on Jabal Hawran. General Andréa led the column of many thousands of French soldiers, scores of armored cars and tanks, dozens of large mobile cannons, a hundred trucks, and three dozen bomber aircraft. The Syrian defenders, well-fortified in the heights of their mountain, amounted to two or three thousand men and boys, with nothing beyond rifles and horses. They had two artillery pieces they had captured the previous summer. The outcome was predictable, but not easy. The army marched across the plain

of Hawran to the foot of the mountain that rose to the east. They camped on the plains in view of the largest town of the mountain, Suwayda.

The British liaison officer accompanying the force witnessed a startling sight as night fell. "All the heights round SOUEIDA suddenly lit up with brilliant bonfires, which formed the well-known Druze rallying signal for war, and showed their decision to resist."<sup>27</sup> The next day, after a hard fight, lasting many hours, the French force captured and occupied Suwayda. Over a thousand were killed and wounded, evenly split between Mandate soldiers and Syrians. The French forces occupied the town and the Syrians retreated to more remote villages further up the mountain. Over the next months, under pressure from continuous bombing, the insurgents fled over the Mandate border to Azraq in Transjordan, where their families had already moved to refugee camps. Pressure from Paris forced the eventual expulsion of the refugees from the Transjordan Mandate and many spent the next decade in exile living in tents in the Sultanate of al-Sa'ud, surviving on donations from Syrian immigrant communities abroad channeled through the Syro-Palestinian Congress.

Immediately after the capture of Suwayda, de Jouvenel appointed a new native government, including three nationalist ministers who were expected to help convince the insurgents to surrender. One of the nationalist ministers was Faris al-Khuri, the Damascene lawyer, cited in the Syro-Palestinian Congress petition. Within two weeks, however, the nationalists were in jail and the government tottered on the brink of collapse. The new government had been accompanied by vague promises of amnesty and reconciliation from the High Commissioner, but a few days later, on 7 May, the Maydan quarter was intensively bombed over a 22-hour period starting before dawn. Did de Jouvenel approve the destruction of Maydan for his own reasons, or did the generals order it to discredit his conciliatory gestures toward the insurgents?

Maydan was known for its grain storehouses and its hospitality to insurgents. The neighborhood is long and finger shaped, extending south from the city and straddling the road toward Hawran, Palestine, and along the pilgrimage route to Hijaz beyond. It was also on the way to the main-line Damascus train station and the major French garrison at al-Qadam. Maydan had been cut in two when General Andréa had a swath of houses and shops demolished and cleared to create the security cordon early in 1926 in his attempt to seal the city from infiltration. The quarter was tied to Hawran as the main road south and the entry to Damascus, but it was also the neighborhood where the merchants who bought and sold the Hawran grain crop lived.<sup>28</sup>

A series of offensive operations in February had further inflamed the quarter, and caused the inhabitants to welcome insurgents more enthusiastically than other neighborhoods. Tank patrols and probing operations had been relatively continuous, and in mid-February, when an armored patrol came under fire, a troop of locally raised Christian irregulars looted and burned a number of houses, beating and killing approximately 80 people. Algerian colonial troops put a stop to the rampage of their fellow soldiers, earning the gratitude of the inhabitants.<sup>29</sup> Andréa made a speech, declared he would return the loot, and dismissed 37 irregular recruits.

The May bombardment destroyed Maydan. In advance of the bombardment, water and electricity to the quarter were cut. Without water, the inevitable fires could not be extinguished. While Robert de Caix had claimed in his testimony to the Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC) that the October 1925 bombardment of Damascus had been moderate and restrained, and that the proof of this was that if the bombardment had been more serious, the entire town would have been ruined, the shelling and bombing of Maydan was intensive by any standard. The offensive rendered many of the 60,000 inhabitants homeless, destroyed 1,200 houses and 400 shops, and killed at least 1,000 people, only 50 of whom were insurgents. After the bombardment stopped, irregular troops moved in and were widely reported to have pillaged and burned the remaining structures. Nearly the entire population of the quarter became refugees within the



city, which was already overfilled with destitute refugees from villages surrounding Damascus. The authorities made no efforts to house or feed refugees.<sup>30</sup>

The new Syrian government collapsed after the imprisonment of its ministers and the destruction of Maydan. A week later, shelling destroyed the suburb of Jobar, but in a new development, and owing to consular protests, a press release warned the inhabitants that unless they paid a fine and fulfilled certain conditions, the village would be bombed. Soon after, the military announced that no more individual warnings could be given because warnings allowed insurgents to escape. The commanding general published a notice in the press declaring the patience of France at its end, the entire Damascus region a war zone, and villagers who remained were assumed to be hostile. Those who were innocent had been warned to leave and if they chose to stay, the risk was theirs.<sup>31</sup>

June continued with shelling and sweeps through the villages around Damascus. In the middle of July, French forces under General Gamelin launched the final major offensive on the insurgency in the agricultural villages and gardens surrounding Damascus. Gamelin attacked the villages in a surprise nighttime enclosure (*nettoyage*) with between 15,000 and 25,000 soldiers divided between infantry, cavalry, tanks, and artillery. The forces converged on the town from its distant outskirts in five directions. Artillery based in Damascus fired in a decreasing radius as the French forces closed the net.<sup>32</sup>

Counterinsurgency tactics in the countryside had not become gentler. The Mandate forces took hostages among villagers who had not fled and forced them to act as guides and shields for the advancing troops. A few villages submitted the customary fine in Ottoman gold pounds in advance, and so were occupied but not destroyed, but most of the villages in the area still standing after a year of hostilities were shelled, bombed, pillaged, and burned as the forces converged on Damascus. The operations were preceded by the preemptive detention of 400 to 500 people ranging from small children to the elderly. The prisoners were held in the citadel for several days until the end of the battle. More than 500 Syrians were killed, and 200 or more French soldiers were also killed, including two colonels by land mines or crude explosives. Even in the nights after the end of operations, insurgents approached the city's barbed wire barrier and fired on the French positions repeatedly. The British consul considered this a display of rebel bravado, rather than any indication of the insurgency's remaining vitality.<sup>33</sup>

European observers in Damascus considered the July offensive to have definitively crushed the insurgency. The leading insurgents had all been sentenced to death in absentia, and the French army made clear the intention to accept nothing less than complete victory and surrender. European critics in Damascus and Beirut attributed this attitude to an obsession with protecting French prestige. The army was determined to respond to every show of resistance with immediate and overwhelming firepower to fully display the futility of opposition.

Opposition did not end. Several of the rebel bands continued to enter the city and occasionally fire upon French forces. Insurgents attacked convoys and fired on armored vehicles outside Damascus. Telephone lines were cut and trains were attacked, and in late August, rebels attacked and captured a convoy of provisions and ammunition near Damascus. French soldiers continued to be killed by snipers and in attacks on isolated outposts. Two small bands, one led by Sultan al-Atrash, and another made up of some ex-Ottoman soldiers, remained active until mid-1927, when the survivors scattered into exile.

In August, public notices printed in the newspapers boasted of French victories. General Andréa reported that he had toured a number of Hawran villages accompanied by three battalions of approximately 1,500 soldiers. Everywhere, notables and ordinary villagers had welcomed him and sworn their sincere fidelity to France. He awarded medals to colonial soldiers in public

ceremonies, and collected submissions of eight machine guns, seven mounted guns, 2,935 rifles, and 3,175 Ottoman gold pounds.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The French Mandate repressed the Syrian uprising with new techniques and theories of counterinsurgency. Syrian political aspirations figured minimally in the equation. According to functionaries of the Mandate in Paris, Beirut, and Geneva, Syrians had to learn the consequences of their rejection of French tutelage and rejection could not be rewarded with conciliation. Mandate officials described mechanized violence against civilians as an effort to awe the population into submission and complacency. Airpower, artillery bombardments, and armored vehicles in towns and villages were intended to intimidate Syrians with French power and instill respect for the prestige of the mandatory authority. Syrians, the theory went, would see the awesome capabilities of France, and would rationally choose to repudiate armed elements of society who claimed to defend their rights. The population would embrace, or at least acquiesce to, France's claims to provide everything for the colonized society. But eventually the revolt collapsed from exhaustion at colossal human cost. Similar techniques and theoretical arguments have come to characterize most twentieth-century conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere.

The repression of the revolt produced no accolades or glory for the high officials of the Mandate. Their counterinsurgency innovations became a lasting, but mostly unacknowledged, legacy of the Mandate. The repression of the revolt involved various, complicated, and tangled issues of the personal limits and ambitions of individual colonial officials and politicians, French civil and military politics, contests between the right and left in metropolitan and colonial France, and French nationalism and self-image as bearer and exemplar of Western civilization to the East. Such internal conflicts and collective pathologies featured in many colonial wars of the past century.

But just as industrial techniques of counterinsurgency were new in 1925, the legalistic role of international organizations was also new. The League of Nations Mandates system had promised justice to the colonized, but it delivered a veneer of legality and legitimacy to the colonizer. The Mandate system served to dilute responsibility for a system of colonial rule based on military occupation and the unrestrained use of military force against civilian populations. In its reliance on violence over consent, the Mandate system cannot be distinguished from other examples of colonial rule in Africa and Asia. But the Mandate system, in providing a screen of international legitimacy and legalism, constituted a new and uniquely innovative way to deprive colonized peoples of their basic rights to self-representation. Leaders of the postcolonial state absorbed these lessons too, and colonial tactics and structures continue to deny citizens in the region the ability to meaningfully challenge the structures or conditions of rule.

## Notes

- 1 The National Archives/UK Foreign Office (hereafter, FO) 371/10835, SECRET, British Liaison Officer, Beirut, 30 July 1925. The posthumous defense written by Sarrail's secretary, Paul Coblentz, was titled *Le Silence de Sarrail* (Paris: Louis Querelle, 1930). In his telling, Sarrail's silence was a virtue.
- 2 Ministère des Affaires Étrangères/Archives Diplomatiques-Nantes (hereafter, MAE-Nantes), carton 1704, BR 198, 21 October 1925. League of Nations, Permanent Mandates Commission (hereafter, LN PMC), carton R24, 3 July 1926. See the recent dissertation of Simon M. W. Jackson for the economics of mandatory taxation and fines, "Mandatory Development: The Political Economy of the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon, 1915-1939" (PhD diss., New York University, 2009). FO 371/11506, "extrait d'un discours prononcé par M. de Jouvenel," Damascus, 20 May 1926.



- 3 There is a growing body of excellent, recent scholarship on intelligence and counterinsurgency in the French and British Mandate. See, for example, Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Matthew Hughes, "A British 'Foreign Legion'? The British Police in Mandate Palestine," *Middle Eastern Studies* 49:5 (2013): 696–711.
- 4 This language comes up repeatedly. FO 371/11505, Report P4, Air Attaché, Paris. "Memorandum on the Aerial Activity of the Military Air Service in Syria, 1925."
- 5 "General Sarrail's Explanation," *The Times* 9 November 1925. LN PMC, *Minutes of the Eighth Session*, p. 155. De Caix noted three to four hectares. I measured 6.5 hectares during my own survey, April 2006. The number of dead range from Sarrail's claim of "135 found among the ruins" to over 2,000 cited by some newspapers; the Syro-Palestinian Congress, sober and authoritative on such matters, cited 1,075: LN PMC, carton R24, Syro-Palestinian Congress, 3 July 1926.
- 6 *La Syrie* 8 October 1925, quoted in Alice Poulleau, *A Damas sous les bombes, Journal d'une Française pendant la révolte Syrienne, 1924–1926* (Paris: Yvetot, 1926), 80–81; "Parade of Corpses," *The Times* 27 October 1925. *Le Temps* 24 October 1925.
- 7 "Le Crime: Sarrail Envoie au Massacre la Colonne Michaud," *L'Écho de Paris* 5 October 1925; "Marshal Lyautey Resigns, Maker of French Morocco, A Brilliant Career," *The Times* 29 September 1925; and "Agitation Against General Sarrail," *The Times* 9 August 1925.
- 8 Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 140.
- 9 "Le rappel du Général Sarrail est décidé," *L'Écho de Paris* 30 October 1925.
- 10 "M. de Jouvenel and his Mission," *The Times* 9 November 1925.
- 11 "M. de Jouvenel in Turkey," *The Times* 13 February 1926.
- 12 These attempts are mentioned in Fawzi al-Qawuqji, *Mudhakkirat Fawzi al-Qawuqji*, ed. Khayriyya Qasiniyya (Beirut: Dar al-Quds, 1975), 115. De Jouvenel's secret offer of Syrian territory to Kemal was a violation of the Mandate charter. He also allowed the Turkish Army to use rail lines in northern Syria to move troops for the suppression of a Kurdish revolt in eastern Anatolia.
- 13 FO 371/11505, "Arrêté No. 53," "Confiscation of Rebel Estates," 26 January 1926. Also "Arrêté No. 97, "Arrêté réglementant le mode de perception et d'administration des amendes collectives imposées pour faits de pillages et de banditisme." Bennett J. Doty, *The Legion of the Damned* (New York: The Century Co., 1928), 172–175.
- 14 Haut-Commissariat du Mandat Français, *La Syrie et le Liban sous l'occupation et le Mandat français, 1919–1927* (Nancy: Berger-Levrault, 1928), 53. See the Great Revolt Mixed Court files (*muhakamat al-mukhtalifa*), Syrian National Archive (*Markaz al-Watha'iq al-Tarikhiyya*), Damascus.
- 15 Haut-Commissariat de la République Française en Syrie et au Liban, *Recueil des actes administratifs du Haut-commissariat de la République Française en Syrie et au Liban*, vol. 6, 1925 (Beirut: Jean d'Arc, 1925), Arrêtés nos. 4/S and 5/S, 6–11; LN PMC, *Minutes of the Eighth Session*, 22.
- 16 FO 371/11505, "La délégation de Damas chez le Haut-Commissaire," Enclosure in no. 174, Consul Beyrout to Foreign Secretary, 24 December 1925, and Smart to Chamberlain, 6 January 1926.
- 17 Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 108–124.
- 18 Général Charles Joseph Andréa, *La Révolte Druze et l'insurrection de Damas* (Paris: Payot, 1937), 82; FO 371/11505, Smart to Chamberlain, 11 January 1926.
- 19 Doty, *Legion of the Damned*, 172–175.
- 20 FO 371/11506, Vaughn-Russell to Chamberlain, 1 April 1926.
- 21 LN PMC, carton R 22, Arabic petition with French translation and cover letter from Shakib Arslan, signed and sealed from Sultan al-Atrash, Ahmad Murayad, and Mahmud Iqab, September 1922. The slogan appears in all the Arabic histories of the revolt: *al-din Allah wa-l-watan lil-jami'*
- 22 LN PMC, carton R24, reproduced in *Minutes of the Eighth Session*, annex iii, "Executive Committee of the Syro-Palestinian Congress, Appeal Addressed to the Sixth General Assembly of the League of Nations," 29 September 1925, 181. The lawyer mentioned, but not named, was nationalist politician and eventual Syrian Prime Minister and first Syrian UN delegate, Faris al-Khuri. The system of sectarian proportional representation, exactly as described, still operates today in Lebanon. Sectarian proportional representation is widely hated and regularly denounced by Lebanese citizens of all religions.
- 23 LN PMC, *Minutes of the Eighth Session*, 74–75, 151.

- 24 FO 371/11505, "Aux Druzes," enclosure in Mayers, no. E 297/11/ 89, 14 January 1926. My translation is slightly condensed for reasons of space.
- 25 FO 371/11505, E 426/12/89, Smart to Chamberlain, 4 January 1926.
- 26 FO 371/11506, Smart to Chamberlain, 1 March 1926.
- 27 FO 371/11506, SECRET, "The Capture of Soueida," Liaison Officer report, 5.
- 28 Andréa, *Révolte Druze*, 82; FO 371/11507, Smart to Chamberlain, 10 March 1926.
- 29 FO 371/11507, Smart to Chamberlain, 10 March 1926.
- 30 LN PMC, carton R24, "Dernière catastrophe du Meidan," 7 May 1926; "Recent Bombardment of Damascus: Reported Heavy Loss of Life," *The Times* 2 June 1926. Also: *The Daily Express* 20 May 1926; FO 371/11507, Vaughn-Russell to Chamberlain, 2 June 1926.
- 31 FO 371/11507, Proclamation du General Vallier, "Avis aux Habitants de la Ghouta," 2 June 1926. French officers claimed these measures were humanitarian, but their practical effect, and intended purpose, was to terrify the remaining rural population and disavow responsibility for their suffering. Contemporary psychological operations (psy-ops) by American and Israeli forces in Iraq, Lebanon, and Gaza continue these traditions, both with leaflets, and more recently, mass cell and text messages advising people of the imminent destruction of their homes and villages.
- 32 FO 371/11507, SECRET, Report of the British Liaison Officer, Beyrouth, 22 July 1926. "Les Morts du Maroc et de Syrie ne Suffissent-ils pas à M. Painlevé?" *L'Humanité* 9 July 1926.
- 33 FO 371/11507, Vaughn-Russell to Chamberlain, 11 August 1926.
- 34 FO 371/11507, Vaughn-Russell, 7 September 1926, Enclosure, "Extract from *La Syrie*," 3 August 1926.