

THE FRENCH MANDATE

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French-British rivalry in the Middle East continued after the two countries had divided the area into spheres of influence at San Remo. In their mandate, the French sought to increase their strength by supporting and separating religious minorities and thereby weakening the Arab nationalist movement. France originally planned to establish three sectarian states: an Alawi state in the north, a Sunni Muslim state at the center, and a Druze state in the south. The three were eventually to be incorporated into a federal Syria. France did create a Christian state in the area of Mount Lebanon. The Sunni Muslim state never materialized. Instead, in 1926 the French, working with Maronite leaders, expanded the original boundaries of the Christian state to create Lebanon. To the east the valley of the Biqa, predominantly populated by Muslims, was added; to the west the Christian state was expanded to the coast and incorporated the cities of Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon, and Tyre.

The rest of Syria was divided into five semiautonomous areas--the Jabal Druze, Aleppo, Latakia, Damascus, and Alexandretta (modern Iskenderun)--which accentuated religious differences and cultivated regional, as opposed to national pan-Arab, sentiment. The Druzes were given administration of the Jabal Druze, the area of their greatest concentration. The northern coastal region and the Jabal an Nusayriyah (where there was a concentration of Alawis, Syria's largest religious minority) were united in the state of Latakia (present-day Al Ladhikiyah Province). North of Latakia, the district of Alexandretta (the present-day Turkish province of Hatay), home of some Turks, had a separate government. In the area to the south, in Palestine, European Jews were promised a Jewish homeland. Opposition by nationalistic Arabs to the many divisions proved fruitless, and Arab nationalists became isolated in Damascus.

French rule was oppressive. The franc became the base of the economy, and currency management was in the hands of French bankers concerned with French, rather than Syrian, shareholders and interests. The French language became compulsory in schools, and pupils were required to sing the "Marseillaise." Colonial administrators attempted to apply techniques of administration learned in North Africa to the more sophisticated Arabs of Syria. Nearly every feature of Syrian life came under French control.

The Syrians were an embittered, disillusioned people whose leaders kept them in ferment. Shaykh Salih ibn Ali led the Alawis in intermittent revolt, Shaykh Ismail Harir rebelled in the Hawran, and in the Jabal Druze, Sultan Pasha al Atrash, kinsman of the paramount chief of the Druzes, led continual resistance, most notably in 1925, as did Mulhim Qasim in the mountains around Baalbek. The revolts, however, were not necessarily expressions of desire for unified Syrian independence. They were uprisings by individual groups--Alawis, Druzes, and beduins--against foreign interference, comparable to those earlier fomented against the Ottomans.

In Damascus Arab nationalism was led by educated, wealthy Muslims who had earlier supported Faysal. Their grievances against the French were many, but chief among them were French suppression of newspapers, political activity, and civil rights and the division of Greater Syria into several political units. They also objected to French reluctance to frame a constitution for Syria that would provide for the eventual sovereignty that the League of Nations mandate had ordered. When the Iraqis gained an elected assembly from the British in March 1924, Syrian Arabs became even more distressed. On February 9, 1925, as a placating move, the French permitted the nationalists to form the People's Party. Led by Faris al Khuri, they demanded French recognition of eventual Syrian independence, unity of the country, more stress on education, and the granting of civil liberties.

The most immediate issue was Syrian unity, since France had divided the country into six parts. In 1925 the Aleppo and Damascus provinces were joined, and in 1926 Lebanon became an independent republic under French control. The League of Nations in its session in Rome in February to March 1926 stated: "The Commission thinks it beyond doubt that these oscillations in matters so calculated to encourage the controversies inspired by the rivalries of races, clans and religions, which are so keen in this country, to arouse all kinds of ambitions and to jeopardize serious moral and material interests, have maintained a condition of instability and unrest in the mandated territory."

A devastating proof of the miscalculations of the French burst into the open with the 1925 Druze revolt. The Druzes had many complaints, but chief among them was the foreign intervention in Druze affairs. The Ottomans had never successfully subdued these mountain people; although split among themselves, they were united in their opposition to foreign rule. Led by Sultan Pasha al Atrash, Druzes attacked and captured Salkhad on July 20, 1925, and on August 2 they took the Druze capital, As Suwayda.

News of the Druze rebellion spread throughout Syria and ignited revolts in Aleppo and Damascus among Syrian nationalists, who pleaded with Atrash to attack the Syrian capital. In October the Druzes invaded the Damascus region; nationalist leaders led their own demonstrations; and the French began systematic bombardment of the city, resulting in the death of 5,000 Syrians. The rebellion collapsed by the end of the year, and

hesitant order replaced open revolt.

The return of order gave the French military government an opportunity to assist Syrians in self-government, an obligation demanded of France by the League of Nations. In 1928 the French allowed the formation of the National Bloc (Al Kutlah al Wataniyah), composed of various nationalist groups centered in Damascus. The nationalist alliance was headed by Ibrahim Hannanu and Hashim al Atassi and included leading members of large landowning families. One of the most extreme groups in the National Bloc was the Istiqlal (Independence) Party, a descendant of the old Al Fatat secret society of which Shukri al Quwatly was a leading member. Elections of that year for a constituent assembly put the National Bloc in power, and Hannanu set out to write a constitution. It provided for the reunification of Syria and ignored the authority of the French. In 1930 the French imposed the constitution minus articles that would have given Syria unified self-government.

Syrian nationalists continued to assert that they at least should have a treaty with France setting forth French aims, since Britain and Iraq had signed such a treaty in 1922. Unrest after the death of the nationalist leader Hannanu at the end of 1935, followed by a general strike in 1936, brought new negotiations for such a treaty. Under Leon Blum's liberal-socialist government in France, the two countries worked out the Syrian-French Treaty of Alliance in 1936. The French parliament never ratified the treaty, yet a feeling of optimism prevailed in Syria as the first nationalist government came to power with Hashim al Atassi as president.

During 1937 Syria's drive for independence seemed to be advancing under National Bloc leadership. France allowed the return of Jabal Druze and Latakia to the Syrian state and turned over many local government functions to the Syrian government. French administration during the previous years had given some advantages to the Syrians. It had built modern cities in Damascus and Aleppo and roads and schools throughout much of the country; and it had partially trained some Syrians as minor bureaucrats. French cultural influence spread in the schools, in the press, and even in the style of dress; social and economic conditions slowly improved.

Under the French, Syria became a refuge for persecuted groups from neighboring countries. Most of the Kurdish population arrived between 1925 and 1938, fleeing Kemalist rule in Turkey. The major immigration of Armenians occurred between 1925 and 1945 as a result of similar persecution. Assyrians, under attack in Iraq in 1933, settled in eastern Syria.

Although the country appeared to be on the verge of peace, true calm evaded Syria. Claims by Turkey to Alexandretta, Arab revolts in Palestine, an economic crisis caused by depreciation of the French franc, and lack of unity among Syrians served to undermine the stability of the Syrian government. The National Bloc was split by rivalries. Abdul Rahman Shahabandar, a leading nationalist, formed a rival organization in 1939 to compete for Syrian political leadership, but he was assassinated a year later. Separatist movements in the Jabal Druze found French support and antagonized the nationalists.

During the course of the Syrian-French treaty discussions in 1936, Turkey had asked for reconsideration of the situation in Hatay--at that time the Syrian province of Alexandretta--which had a large Turkish minority and already had been given a special administrative system under the Franco-Turkish Agreement of Ankara (sometimes called the Franklin-Bouillon Agreement) in 1921. The case was submitted to the League of Nations, which in 1937 decided that Alexandretta should be a separate, self-governing political state. Direct negotiations between Turkey and France ended on July 13, 1939, with France agreeing to absorption of Alexandretta by Turkey. Disturbances broke out in Syria against France and the Syrian government, which Syrian nationalist leaders felt had not adequately defended their interests. Syrian President Atassi resigned, parliamentary institutions were abolished, and France governed an unruly Syria through the Council of Directors. Latakia and the Jabal Druze were again set up as separate units. The French government officially declared it would not submit the Syrian-French treaty to the French Chamber of Deputies for ratification.