


Denying “The Right to Have Rights”: Europe’s Imposition of Mandates in Greater Syria and the Rise of Islamist Movements

Elizabeth F. Thompson 

American University, Washington, DC, USA
Email: eft@american.edu

Abstract

In 1920, the Syrian Congress at Damascus ratified a democratic constitution that would have been beyond the dreams of activists in the 2011 Arab Spring. Under the leadership of the leading Islamic reformer of the day, Sheikh Rashid Rida, the constitution disestablished Islam as a state religion, guaranteed one-third of parliamentary seats to non-Muslim minorities, and promised autonomy to the majority Christian territory of Mount Lebanon. Unlike the Ottoman constitution that had once reigned in Greater Syria, the Syrian document granted the preponderance of power to parliament, not the monarch. Nonetheless, the British and French colluded in the willful destruction of this nascent democracy. And with League of Nations’ support, they divided the Syrian Arab Kingdom into sectarian mandatory states. By stripping Syrian Arabs of a self-determined political community, Europeans denied them the “right to have rights,” as Hannah Arendt argued. The political backlash against European rule transformed the minority question in Syria into a polarized and violent contest, leading to the sectarian conflicts that overwhelmed Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine in the remainder of the 20th century.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire; minorities; foreign policy; democracy; citizenship; Syrian Arab Kingdom; constitution

In April 1922, the publisher of the international Islamic journal *al-Manar*, Rashid Rida, reminded his readers of the democracy that flowered in Greater Syria after World War I: “This infant Arab government came closer to justice, freedom, equality and reform – and it ruled farther from intolerance, nepotism and intellectual and economic corruption” – than the governments set up by the British in Palestine and by the French on the Lebanese coast in 1918, after the Ottomans’ defeat. Under the Syrian government established in Damascus, social inequality disappeared, and “people felt their dignity,” Rida wrote.

In Palestine, the Zionist Jew was favored over the Muslim and the Christian, without rights, and on the coast, Catholics were likewise favored. But the Muslim was not favored in the Damascus government. Neither Christian nor Jew complained about this government or its officials. Nor did they feel discrimination on the part of Muslims. Muslims didn’t expect any better treatment from Muslim ministers or prime ministers than they expected from non-Muslim ministers. (Rida 1922c, 313–314)

Two years earlier, Rashid Rida had been president of the General Syrian Congress, comprised of 87 deputies representing districts from across Greater Syria, which included today’s Lebanon, Syria,

Palestine/Israel, and Transjordan. These deputies drafted and approved a constitution that would have been beyond the dreams of activists in the 2011 Arab Spring. They made the executive subordinate to the legislature, and then elected the son of the Sharif of Mecca, Prince Faisal, as king, in recognition of his role in conquering Syria from the Ottoman Turks. But they denied Faisal the powers to appoint the prime minister or dissolve the legislature that Ottoman sultans had wielded.

The 1920 Syrian constitution also disestablished Islam as a state religion, guaranteed one-third of parliamentary seats to non-Muslim minorities, and promised autonomy to the majority Christian territory in Mount Lebanon. King Faisal ruled as a temporal leader – not as the Islamic caliph, as the Ottoman Sultan had done. He took an oath to “divine laws” and the constitution, not Islamic law. These provisions encouraged inclusion of Christians in government: a dozen served in Congress, and four served in the cabinets. All the Christian patriarchs in Damascus pledged loyalty to the constitutional monarchy. While other religious groups had not organized politically as minorities, constitutional language established a precedent for their inclusion as well (Thompson 2021, 226–246, 339–345, 351–370).¹

However, in July 1920, the French army occupied Damascus and crushed the nascent Syrian Arab Kingdom. Syria’s political leaders fled to exile. Rida published his April 1922 article in the hope that the League of Nations would reject the claims of France and Britain to divide and rule Greater Syria as mandates. As is well known: the League denied Arab claims to self-determination and in July 1922 ratified French and British rule. The mandates formally entered international law in late 1923, only after Europeans and Turks signed the Treaty of Lausanne, the fifth and final peace settlement following World War I (League of Nations, 1919).

To comprehend the historical impact of this legalized destruction of a tolerant and inclusive constitutional regime in Syria, this article draws upon research done to recover the history of the Syrian Arab Kingdom in my book, *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs*. I combine those findings with additional documentation on Palestine and Lebanon to intervene in the historiography of the so-called minority question in the post-Ottoman Middle East. Historians have too often assumed that resistance to minority rights has deep roots in Islamic history and is necessarily tied to the emergence of Arab nationalism (Robson 2016). Like Ussama Makdisi, my research reveals the endurance of an “ecumenical frame” in post-WWI Syria that was undermined by European mandates (Makdisi 2019, 113–119). I go further, here in this article, to demonstrate the importance of contingency against long-term trends of political structure and ideology in explaining modern intolerance: The 1920 destruction of Syrian democracy led to a distinctly new form of popular Islamism.

To make this link, I invoke Hannah Arendt’s analysis of how European Jews were stripped of their rights after World War I, and specifically her understanding that rights are not individual; they are necessarily embedded in community. In Greater Syria, European victors of WWI built states not to consolidate majority nations, as in Eastern Europe, but rather to shatter them. The British and French stripped the Sunni Arab majority of their right to rights and set the stage for political violence in the century to come. My intent here is not to contribute to the formidable body of scholarship on Arendt; rather, I use Arendt to reconceptualize the rise of a popular movement of intolerant Islamism as a direct response to the minoritization of the Arab-Muslim majority in Greater Syria.

Invoking Arendt also permits us to consider the postwar Arab politics in comparison with simultaneous processes in postwar Europe. Erasure of the Syrian Arab Kingdom has led to an over-emphasis on the difference of World War I’s impact on the Middle East and Europe. We might better understand the rise of anti-Western Islamist movements in the 1920s as a response to Arabs’ exclusion from the rights-bearing family of nations represented at the new League of Nations in Geneva. They emerged in parallel to movements built by European dissidents who were, like Arab Muslims, excluded from participation at the peace conference. Like fascists and Communists in defeated countries of Europe, Arab Islamists built support upon the humiliation and injustice they were dealt by vengeful victors in Paris.

Europeans' "Minority Question" and the Syrian Arab Kingdom

Greater Syria, known for centuries as *Bilad al-Sham* in Arabic, stretched south from the Taurus mountains in Anatolia through the booming ports of Beirut and Jaffa to Jerusalem and the Egyptian border at Gaza and Aqaba, eastward from the Mediterranean over the coastal mountains to the ancient inland cities of Aleppo, Deir al-Zor, Damascus, and the Transjordanian towns of Salt and Amman. This territory was ruled from Damascus during World War I by a single Ottoman governor, Cemal Pasha. Prince Faisal claimed it at Paris as an independent Arab state in federation with Arabia, ruled by his father, and in fulfillment of promises made by the British in 1916. Historian Cyrus Schayegh has argued that by World War I, the regional identity of Greater Syria had grown strong. Economic and family relations knit its cities into a vibrant network dominated by an urban elite of Arabic-speaking Muslims and Orthodox-Christians (Schayegh 2017, 3–91).

About 95 percent of the estimated 3.2 million people living in Greater Syria in 1918 spoke Arabic, with small pockets of Turkish, Kurdish, and Armenian speakers in the north and a Hebrew-speaking community of Jewish immigrants in the south. More than two-thirds of the population were Sunni Muslims.² Roughly 20 percent were Christians of varied denominations, 10 percent were adherents of other branches of Islam – mainly Shi'i, Druze, and `Alawi – and less than 5 percent were Jewish. Mount Lebanon and the Lebanese coast were home to the largest concentration of Christians and Shi'i Muslims. The Druze lived in Mount Lebanon and the mountains south of Damascus, and the Alawis lived mainly in the northern coastal region. While Jews lived in cities throughout the region, the greater portion resided in the southern region of Palestine. More than 70,000 non-Arabic-speaking Jewish immigrants had settled there since the late 19th century. All of these groups had suffered population declines during the war due to famine, disease, and forced migration.³

Europeans raised what they called the "minority question" during postwar negotiations over Greater Syria's future, carried out mainly in Paris between 1919 and 1923. At Paris, where peacemakers carved nation-states from defeated empires, "this language of minorities and majorities became a central feature of international politics," wrote historian Eric Weitz. The "Paris system" replaced realms defined by dynasty with states defined by population. Deciding between the claims of majority rule against minority rights in each region necessarily triggered violence. "Two solutions emerged: populations could be either protected or removed," he wrote (Weitz 2008, 1327–1330). The first treaty to protect minorities within a new nation state was imposed upon Poland. In the June 1919 settlement, the Poles agreed to respect the equal rights and religious freedom of its Jewish minority. In 1923, peacemakers authorized the violent transfer of Greeks from Turkey and Muslims from Greece.

The term "minority" had not been regularly used in Arabic before the Paris peace conference. Historians of Greater Syria have shown that "minority" is a modern term and that minority groups have been created in a fluid process (often called minoritization) linked to the formation of nation-states in the 20th century. They largely agree that the imposition of European colonial rule undermined structures that had supported coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims. Studies of the postwar Arab history have also shown how European intervention hardened majority and minority religious identities around religion, although local groups debated, advocated, and sometimes rejected minority status altogether (Culang 2019).⁴

This historical literature has been distorted, however, by its near-universal omission of the period of Syrian self-rule (1918–1920). The period was a liminal one of political experimentation, a disruption between the Ottoman and mandate eras. I draw inspiration from historians like Aimee Genell, in this special issue, and Abigail Jacobson who also emphasize the importance of this transitional, postwar moment (Jacobson 2011).⁵

As demonstrated below, political leaders across Greater Syria conducted intense debates on the existence of minorities. Politicians in Damascus did not use the terms “majority” and “minority” at first. In October 1918, after the Allied armies had ousted the Ottomans, Prince Faisal proclaimed a constitutional state in Syria that would guarantee equal rights of all Arabs, regardless of religion. Rashid Rida, deploying his authority as a religious scholar, declared such equality as an Islamic principle and in the public interest. Faisal and the Arab urban elite viewed *Bilad al-Sham* as a community united by a common Arabic culture that predated religious division.

However, several dissident groups exploited the European concept of minority rights to demand separate states. The Maronite Patriarch sought an autonomous Christian state in Mount Lebanon, where 200,000 Maronites contributed to a Christian majority. Meanwhile Zionist Jews sought to turn Lord Balfour’s 1917 promise of a Jewish homeland into a state in Palestine. In Europe, peacemakers awarded dominant groups control of the new nation-states, and in Syria, they privileged minority claims. In pursuit of imperial gain, they cultivated Christian and Jewish support to contend that religious minorities required their European protection in order to prevent abuse and even massacre by Muslims. These negotiations consequently preempted the establishment of a nation-state based on majority rule and split Greater Syria into sectarian and even minoritarian states. The mandates of Lebanon and Palestine guaranteed non-Muslim hegemony, while the influence of urban Sunni Muslims in the hinterland was undercut by dividing the territory into statelets of Aleppo, Damascus, and the Alawites and the Druze.

The “minority question” formula was inverted in Greater Syria. The majority Sunni Muslim population was minoritized in favor of foreign rule and non-Muslim privilege. The inversion was accomplished in plain sight, under the purview of the institution entrusted with enforcing international law, the League of Nations. In an era of newspapers and the telegraph, Syrians followed the process at every step. It was accomplished, too, by destroying a government built by Arabs who had embraced Europe’s liberal vision of a new world order.

Arabs of Greater Syria, like the Jewish activists studied by James Loeffler in this issue, understood clearly that the new world order demanded that they retain political sovereignty. Only peoples represented by states enjoyed rights under the expansive umbrella of international law promised by the new League of Nations. For this reason, Rida and others carried their appeals to the League headquarters in Geneva after their military defeat in July 1920, to forestall ratification of the mandates. When the League nonetheless ratified them, Arabs made a final appeal to the Turks during the negotiations of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1922–1923.

The Arendtian Perspective

Hannah Arendt, who grew up in Europe after World War I, suggested a parallel between the politics of minority treaties and colonial expansion in her 1951 classic, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In assigning nation-states to dominant groups living in the territories of defeated German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires, the Paris Peace Conference excluded 30 percent of the population, largely Jews. They were stripped of membership in a political community and thus of the “right to have rights.” Under minority treaties, they were made wards of the League of Nations, which was powerless to protect them.

Arendt’s discussion of the right to have rights has since become the touchstone of discussions about universal human rights and the plight of minorities in Europe (Benhabib 2004, 49–70; Kingston 2019, 5, 57–59). This discussion can also elucidate how peoples placed under mandates in the Middle East resembled the stateless and minority populations in Europe: both lacked governments based on popular sovereignty that would protect their rights. As Arendt observed, “The Rights of Man, after all, had been defined as ‘inalienable’ because they were to be independent of all governments; but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them” (Arendt 1985, 291–292). Indeed, the League of Nations first stripped

Syrians of their sovereignty and then refused to protect their rights, leaving them prey to the violent persecutions of their British and French rulers (Pedersen 2015, 142–168).

Syrians living at the time perceived their situation in Arendtian terms. As shown below, they understood that community is the basis of rights. Political leaders negotiated tenaciously for a sovereign state, from the Arab occupation of Damascus in 1918 until the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. In response, French and British diplomats insisted that no nation of Greater Syria existed. Through the Arendtian lens, we can perceive why they decided it was necessary not only to destroy the Syrian Arab Kingdom, but also to erase all record and memory of it as a functioning, representative government. In a new world order built by the Paris peace conference, based on the presumptive right of a people to a territory and state of their own, the British and French divided Greater Syria into multiple mandates, and substates was a method to justify stripping Syrians of their “right to have rights.” Like the stateless peoples in Europe, Syrians were dehumanized and “thrown out of the family of nations altogether” (Arendt 1985, 294, 296).

Destruction of the Syrian Arab Kingdom shaped social relations in the mandate era in ways parallel to the backlash against minority treaties in Europe. In Arendt’s terms, the imposition of mandates set off a “chain reaction” of violence, exploding the comity of nations “beyond repair.” Interwar Arab politics mirrored Arendt’s description of postwar Europe: “The days before and the days after the first World War are separated not like the end of an old and the beginning of a new period, but like the day before and the day after an explosion” (Arendt 1985, 267).

Arendt’s formulation encourages us to consider how totalitarianism and mandatory rule arose from the same crucible. The war and its ill-conceived peace, Arendt wrote, shattered the protective boundaries of community and the rule of law. The status of Arabs under the mandates approximated that of the stateless and the minorities in Europe. “They had lost those rights which had been thought of and even defined as inalienable, namely the Rights of Man. [They had] no governments to represent and to protect them” (Arendt 1985, 268–269).

In Europe, the Middle East, and around the world, a variety of anti-systemic movements arose to oppose the world made by Paris, including fascism, Communism, religious fundamentalism, and anti-colonial nationalism. Arendt was primarily concerned with how the European peace treaties created a political vacuum exploited by totalitarian fascists and Communists. Likewise, in the Middle East, the imposition of mandates gave rise to intolerant forms of Islamism and dictatorship later in the 20th century and to sustained violence against non-Sunni minorities. Scholars who have neglected the existence of the Syrian Arab Kingdom have therefore missed a critical factor in the rise of sectarian violence in the 20th-century Middle East. By replicating colonialists’ erasure of Syrian democracy, they have in effect colluded with their stigmatization of Islam as inherently violent. By retrieving the democratic moment of 1920, we recognize Islamism as the expression of dissent by a people who had entered World War I in 1914 as citizens of a sovereign state and exited the Paris Peace conference in 1923 as subhuman minors subjugated to the unbound violence of mandatory states.

Syria’s Case at the Paris Peace Conference

In October 1918, Syrians began to organize an independent state on the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, just as South Slavs, Czechs, and Poles were then establishing states in territories lost by the defeated German and the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires in Europe. Prince Faisal and his father believed Britain’s promise that Arabs would win an independent state in exchange for their support in defeating the Ottomans. But, as dramatized in a famous closing scene of the 1962 movie “Lawrence of Arabia,” General Allenby refused to withdraw British troops from Syria until the Paris Peace Conference formally determined the status of the Ottoman territory. Likewise, the French occupied Beirut and the Lebanese coast under a temporary military regime of occupation. The neocolonial movie did not show what happened next.

On October 5, Prince Faisal defied Allenby and proclaimed “an absolutely independent, constitutional Arab government” for “all Syria.” It would rule on “the principles of justice and equality” and “treat alike all those who speak Arabic, regardless of sect or religion and not discriminate in its laws between Muslim, Christian, and Jew” (Faisal 1918a). Faisal’s proclamation reflected his contact with Syrian nationalists since early in the war. His call to Arab unity was intended as inclusive of the vast majority of the population: In October 1918, the non-Arabic speakers in Syria consisted mainly of Turks in Aleppo and Armenian refugees who intended to return to their homeland in Anatolia. The Kurdish population was small and Arabized.⁶ His proclamation also echoed Syrian proposals before the war for an autonomous Arab region of the Ottoman empire on the model of the Austro-Hungarian empire. “I exhort my brother Arabs regardless of religion to remain united, advance education and form a government of which we can be proud,” Prince Faisal declared at Aleppo in November 1918. “The Arabs were Arabs before Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed; religions enjoin truth and brotherhood on earth. Hence, he who seeks to create dissension among Moslems, Christians and Jews is no Arab” (Faisal 1918b, 104).

As in every territory detached from empires defeated in 1918, however, loyalties remained fluid. Urban elites in Aleppo and some military officers retained Ottoman-Turkish loyalties; the Maronite Patriarch in Lebanon urged his flock to support France’s promise to establish an independent, Christian Lebanon; and some Palestinian Arabs saw benefits in remaining under Britain or uniting with Egypt (Watenpaugh 2006, 134–184; Tamari 2015).⁷ By contrast, Greek Orthodox Christians emphasized their common Arab identity with Muslims (Tamari 2019, 6–7, 114–117). Palestinian Muslims were also prominent exponents of Pan-Syrian Arab community. In Damascus in 1919, they organized the headquarters of the influential Arab Club, with branches in several towns of Syria and Palestine. Khalil Sakakini, an Orthodox Christian from Jerusalem, composed a national anthem for the Arab Revolt (Seale 2010, 116–155; Muslih 1988, 150–151).

Politicians in Damascus understood that they needed to build national solidarity based on the region’s prior socioeconomic integration and common suffering from the Turks’ deadly wartime dictatorship. The Northern Arab army was another source of unity: while the revolt had begun with tribal troops in the Hijaz, by the time Faisal arrived in Damascus, it was composed mostly of Syrians. Many peasants rallied to the Arab flag (Allawi 2014, 118–137). Resentment of the Turks’ military dictatorship stoked support for restoring the plural and liberal *status quo ante*, embodied in the 1908 Ottoman constitutional revolution that many Syrians had supported.

Political identification with Greater Syria passed a critical test in the June 1919 elections to the General Syrian Congress, conducted under the Ottoman system. The 87 deputies who convened in Damascus came from across Greater Syria and a variety of social backgrounds. Some represented the youthful nationalist movement that supported the Arab Revolt, but most were from conservative landowning families who had represented Greater Syria in the Ottoman parliaments before World War I (Khoury 1983, 86–88; Gelvin 1998).⁸ About half came from the great inland cities of Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Damascus, while the other half came from towns in today’s Lebanon and Israel/Palestine, with a handful from today’s Jordan and Turkey. While most were urban professionals and bureaucrats, some wore the turbans of religious shaykhs and headscarves of tribal leaders. About a dozen deputies were Christian; one was Jewish (Thompson 2021, 107–113, 234–235, 339–340).

These Syrian politicians were well equipped to rebuild the government institutions that they had helped the Ottoman Turks administer. As they began this labor, in November 1918 Prince Faisal departed for the Paris Peace conference in order to gain international recognition of Syrian sovereignty. In consultation with leaders of a Syrian-Arab national movement, *al-Fatat*, Faisal presented Syria to the Supreme Council of the peace conference as the most developed region of the Arab world. Syrians shared a common dialect of Arabic that united them as a nation as much as Poland united Poles, he argued. They had practiced local self-rule for centuries under the Ottomans and had a civilization rooted in the ancient Umayyad caliphate of the 7th and 8th centuries. They

were therefore as ready for self-governance as were the former subjects of the Austro-Hungarian empire, whom the Allies had already granted full independence.

Faisal so impressed Woodrow Wilson that the American president sent the King-Crane commission to poll Syrians on their political preferences in the summer of 1919. The commission interviewed 442 groups and collected 1,863 petitions during a six-week tour that began in Jaffa and wound through southern Palestine and across the Jordan, into Syria, Lebanon, and stretching north to Aleppo and Adana. A majority (80 percent) expressed preference for a united Greater Syria and independence.

In order to present a unified voice to the commission, which arrived in Damascus in late June, Faisal called on the newly elected Congress to draft a report. Over several days of debate, deputies issued a report that demanded full independence. But if Paris insisted on a mandate, the deputies voted for an American mandate because the United States had no colonial ambition in the region.

In August, the King-Crane commission filed its own report in with the Supreme Council in Paris, calling for the unity of Greater Syria because it would foster coexistence, encourage respect for minority rights, and grant autonomy to local regions like Christian Mount Lebanon. The commission warned against a mandate that favored any particular minority group. Only small clusters of Syrians in Mount Lebanon and among Zionists in Palestine supported the division of Greater Syria into multiple mandates (Patrick 2015, 227–231; King-Crane 1919).⁹

However, British and French colonialists mobilized against Wilson's promise of Syrian self-determination. They insisted that Article 22 of the League of Nations' covenant only granted Syrians provisional independence, requiring them to accept guidance (mandates) from more developed countries of their choice. They suppressed the King-Crane report, and they took steps to implement the division of Syria first outlined in their secret 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, wherein the French would rule the northern half of Greater Syria and the British would rule in the southern half. In September, Britain announced it would withdraw its troops from inland Syria so that France might expand its occupation there.

Syrians on the streets of Damascus protested for weeks, to no avail. In November, the British kidnapped the Syrian army's commander, while the French appointed a new, aggressive high commissioner to Beirut who began assembling troops for an invasion. In January, Faisal negotiated a compromise agreement with Premier Georges Clemenceau that became a dead letter when the latter lost his bid for election as president of France. That same month, the Treaty of Versailles entered international law, establishing the League of Nations.

Left unresolved was the question of where sovereignty would lie in a mandate: with the people, with the mandatory power, or with the League? As historians have shown, the language of Article 22 of the League of Nations covenant was vague (Smith 2019; Pedersen 2015, 49–81; Hokayem 1996, 29–34). The text reads:

Certain communities formerly belonging to the Turkish Empire have reached a stage of development where *their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory* until such time as they are able to stand alone. *The wishes of these communities must be a principal consideration* in the selection of the Mandatory. (League of Nations 1919; emphasis added)

On the one hand, the text appears to grant Syria independence as long as it accepts the advice of a mandatory power. It also requires that Syrians approve the choice of mandatory. On the other hand, the article suggests that Syria is not ready to "stand alone." Did that mean that Syria was not sovereign?

The Europeans who negotiated the Ottoman treaty and who staffed the new League offices in 1920 would exploit ambiguity to strip the Syrian majority of sovereignty and rights.

Syria's Congress Establishes a Sovereign Community

Despairing of further diplomacy, the Syrian Congress voted to unilaterally declare independence on March 8, 1920. Deputies took advantage of the ambiguity in Article 22, which did not establish whether sovereignty in a mandate lay with the people themselves or with the mandatory power (Lansing 1921, 47–53; and Smith 2018, 47–53). The Congress reasonably interpreted this language according to the spirit of Wilsonian self-determination, wherein Syrians enjoyed both provisional independence and popular sovereignty. On this basis, it claimed Syrians' right to choose their own form of government – an independent state with the power to choose its own advisors (Haidar 1988, 245).

Rashid Rida, who would soon be elected president of the Syrian Congress, presented the declaration not only as legal but also as the embodiment of the principles of peace declared at Paris. “We still have hope that they [the British] will recognize the new social revolution caused by the war,” wrote Rida in the April 1920 issue of his magazine, *al-Manar*. Rida urged the British (and all Europeans) to resist their colonial lobbies and to welcome a new, egalitarian world order. “If those men are able to overcome their imperial ambitions and if they manage to make their states adopt a new policy that agrees with the interests of Egypt, India, the Arabs, Persia, and other nations, then they will establish the everlasting, greater glory of their Saxon nation” (Rida 1920).

That same day, Congress elected Faisal king and crowned him. Demonstrations praising Syrian independence and vowing loyalty to Faisal were held around Greater Syria. One of the largest was in Jerusalem.

Over the next four months, the Congress drafted a constitution for the new Syrian Arab Kingdom. Public debate was conducted by a committee composed of politicians and lawyers with long experience in government and civil affairs, including two Muslim clerics and a Christian (Arna'ut 2000, 86; Shahrastan 2000, 40, 179–183). On July 5, 1920, the committee presented a full draft of the 148-article constitution to Congress for ratification. Uthman Sultan, deputy from Tripoli, presented the constitution in Arendtian spirit as establishing a community based on rights. It was “shining proof to the civilized world” of Syrians' ability for self-government, “without need for a legal guardian who would control them” (Shahrastan 2000, 179–182, 229). The first six articles, ratified on a second vote before the French invasion of July 24, established a secular, constitutional regime. Article 1 read: “The Syrian Arab Kingdom is a civil representative monarchy. Its capital is Damascus, and the religion of its King is Islam.” The monarchy would be representative, meaning that sovereignty lay with the people. The monarchy was retained against proposals to establish a republic because conservatives argued that Syrians were not ready to abandon custom in favor of a republic (Rida 1934, 69).

More radical was the disestablishment of Islam to assure the equality of all citizens, regardless of religion, the committee argued. Article 1 announced that Islam was to be the religion only of the King, not the state. Article 6 explicitly limited Faisal's religious authority: “When he assumes the throne, the King must swear before the Congress an oath of respect for the divine laws and of loyalty to the nation and adherence to the Constitution” (Al-Hakim 1974, 194–213).¹⁰ The King swore allegiance not to Islamic law, but to divine laws and to the constitution. While the King was to be Muslim, Islam was neither the state religion nor the basis of legislation. Years before the Turkish Republic, Syrians established a secular regime. Unlike the Turks, they did so with the cooperation of religious leaders.

Implicitly included as citizens with equal rights were Maronite Christians, who spoke Arabic even though many believed they were descended from non-Arab Phoenicians. The constitution nonetheless provided for administrative autonomy for Maronites in Mount Lebanon. Also implicitly included as equal citizens were Arabic-speaking Jews, who represented a substantial portion of the 110,000 Jews living in Greater Syria (according to the King-Crane report). In Damascus, the chief rabbi pledged loyalty to the regime; and one deputy in Congress was from the local Jewish community. Zionist European Jews had refused to join the Congress. However, in Jerusalem,

Sephardic Jews were not yet persuaded to live separate from Arab Muslims and Christians in a Hebrew-speaking Zionist homeland (Jacobson 2011, 82–116).

Rashid Rida's position as Congress president was crucial to forging an unprecedented compromise between liberals and Muslim conservatives. He had at first argued in favor of an Islamic state and Islamic law as a basis of legislation. But when he was outvoted, he stood by the democratic process. He argued that equality did not violate Islamic law, but rather fulfilled Islamic principle. Likewise, the constitution's assurance of representative consultation did not violate Islamic tradition. In Rida's view, Islam required that the legislature be free to adopt laws to fit the current "public interest" (*al-maslaha al'amma*), as long as they did not directly violate Islamic law. The overriding public interest in 1920 was to unite Syrian society – and ultimately the Islamic *umma* (community) – against the threat of European rule (Rida 1934, 69; Arna'ut 2000, 47).¹¹

Alongside language of equality, unity, and inclusion, the 1920 Constitution also used the new European term of "minority" (*aqaliya*) to assure representation to non-Muslim citizens. Syrian politicians took up the term in response to challenges from the Paris peace conference. Faisal first used the term minority in a May 1919 speech, upon his return to Damascus from Paris, where the Jewish rabbi of Damascus joined Christian and Druze leaders in pledging loyalty to him. "In my thoughts about the administration of Syria the claims of the minority groups will definitely be given preference over the views and wishes of the majority," he assured them. Faisal admonished all Syrians to treat each other alike, regardless of religion, and so to prove to the Allies that they are a sovereign nation (Faisal 1919a, 111). A month later, he delivered the same message in Aleppo, warning that "some who are unfamiliar with the situation of the Arabs today" will use the status of minorities to challenge Arab independence. "I say that we have no majority and no minority... for we were Arabs before Moses, Mohammed, Jesus and Abraham" (Faisal 1919b, 113).

A year later, the Congress drafted constitutional articles 67, 88, 91, and 128 that set quotas for minority representation in local councils and the national assembly following vigorous, public debate. Some Christian deputies had initially demanded that half the seats be reserved for minorities. But when a majority of deputies rejected their proposal, they compromised to ensure that one-third of seats be reserved for minorities.

Requirements for both minority quotas and a Muslim king appear to contradict the constitution's liberal guarantee of equality to all citizens under the law. They functioned, however, as tools to include reluctant segments of the Syrian population into the political community. While the quotas encouraged the buy-in of anxious non-Muslims, the king's religion was a bone thrown to Muslim conservatives nervous about cutting ties with the Ottoman caliph, Rida explained to his readers. The term "minority" was promoted not only by Christian politicians, but also by the Christian patriarchs who vowed loyalty to Faisal on his coronation day and then formed a council to consult with Congress on the constitution (Thompson 2021, 226–246).

The intent to include non-Muslims was so evident that, days after the July 5 ratification, the Mount Lebanon administrative council voted to defy the French and the Maronite patriarch and to federate with the independent Syrian Arab Kingdom. Led by the Maronite Patriarch's own brother, the councilors set out on the Damascus Road to present their resolution personally to Faisal. However, French soldiers arrested them at a mountain pass, and jailed them as traitors.

The 1920 Syrian constitution threatened to undermine French and British claims for the need to protect Christians and Jews. It overturned Orientalist views of Middle Eastern politics by taking a revolutionary step beyond Ottoman precedents toward the democratic ideal of equal citizenship. Yusuf al-Hakim, a Greek Orthodox deputy and later cabinet minister, endorsed Rashid Rida's claim that the Syrian Arab Kingdom treated non-Muslims equally. "The Muslim majority in the Eastern Zone of Syria [under Damascus jurisdiction] treated minorities as brothers in terms of rights and duties. The government did not discriminate between Muslims and Christians," wrote Hakim in his memoir (Al-Hakim 1966, 160, 164; Rida 1922c 313–316).

The process of ratification augured well for the constitution's viability and the future of a Syrian national community. Elected Syrian leaders forged the terms of coexistence through debate and

negotiation. The existence of dissent by no means invalidates the constitution. As Nathan Brown has argued, passionate argument followed by agreement ensures that a constitution will remain a viable contract binding a community (Brown 2008).

And against European criticisms of poor administration and persistent local violence, we might compare Syria to the new states in Eastern Europe, which also suffered birth pangs. In Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the future Yugoslavia, poorly resourced governments confronted a monumental task of restoring order to their war-ravaged societies that could provide little in tax revenues. Like its European siblings, the new Syrian state ran constant deficits and relied on foreign aid. Rebuilding the administration of various ministries inevitably enflamed rivalries. Nonetheless, the Damascus government was “not bad” even though it was “not as it should be in all respects,” Rida reminisced. “That was good testimony for a new government” (Rida 1922c, 313; Russell 1985, 42–61).¹²

The kingdom had attained a degree of credibility in the international press to Syrians’ declaration of independence in March 1920. The *Times* of London praised it as an act of emancipation and tolerance, emphasizing that Christians were present at Faisal’s coronation ceremony (The *Times* 1920). The *New York Times* signaled support with headlines like “Syria Proclaims Freedom and King,” “Christians in Syria Back Independence,” and “Still A Friend, Faisal Says” (*New York Times* 1920). In France, the socialist *L’Humanité* called on the government to grant Syrian independence and to avert a new war: “The times are too troubled to think of raising Arabs against us in Syria” (*L’Humanité* 1920).

In the French Chamber of Deputies, socialist Marcel Cachin publicly defended Syrian rights: “How can this republican Chamber protest against the general exercise of universal suffrage?” he asked. Syrians’ election of a Congress had simply realized the goal of the 1914–1918 war to defend democracy and to exercise “the freedom of every people to govern themselves.” Therefore, Cachin warned, “They made decisions that you must consider quite sacred.” He then recited out loud the entire text of the Syrian Declaration of Independence to the Chamber (*Journal officiel-Chambre* 1920).

However, Syrians faced an obstacle that their European counterparts did not: despite Faisal’s efforts, they did not obtain diplomatic endorsement of their sovereignty. While the Paris peace conference had recognized the post-Habsburg states, it withheld such recognition from Ottoman territories. Instead, the French and the British insisted that Syria’s administrative difficulties were due to the fact that Syrians were neither civilized nor a nation. Syrians were acutely aware of their differential treatment, compared to Europeans, when they broke with the formal peace process to declare independence. Through Arendt’s lens, we can also discern that they acted preemptively in March 1920 out of fear that they might be denied their rights. While the construction of Eastern European states rendered just 30 percent of the population rendered “remnants,” as described by Arendt, Paris threatened to render 100 percent of Syrians stateless, without sovereignty, under foreign mandates (Arendt 1985, 301–302).

The Suppression of Syrian Sovereignty and Erasure of Community

Also unlike post-Habsburg states, post-Ottoman Syria confronted an entrenched Allied occupation in much of its territory. As Margaret MacMillan, Robert Gerwarth, and other European historians have argued, the powers at Paris could not enforce their will on Eastern Europe because they lacked the military capacity. In contrast, by 1919 in Syria, the French had built a fortress of Maronite Christian support in coastal Lebanon and subsidized a network of Christian patriarchs, wealthy landowners, and tribal chiefs in the hinterland. Meanwhile, the British had consolidated their garrison in Palestine and encouraged Zionists to establish their *Yishuv*.

To buttress their claim to mandates, the British and French argued that Syrian incapacity for self-rule was not a temporary problem of postwar reconstruction. Rather, it was rooted deeply in what they contended was the violent and intolerant culture of Islam. French diplomats tried to block Faisal’s attendance at the peace conference for fear that their North African subjects would likewise

seek entry. They referred to the Damascus government as a “Sharifian” kingdom, which implied it was a foreign government ruled by Sharif Hussein in Mecca, and therefore not representative of Syrian opinion. They also linked Faisal and Syrian Arab leaders to the Ottoman Turks who had exterminated more than one million Armenian Christians during the war. And they blamed a wartime famine that led to more than 400,000 civilian deaths in Greater Syria as a Muslim plot to kill Syrian Christians. Behind this propaganda was the French colonial lobby’s fear that North Africans might also seek independence at the Paris peace conference. The British colluded with the French because they too sought to limit Wilson’s promises of self-determination to white Europeans, against demands for racial equality by the Japanese and Indians (Thompson 2021, 74–96, 151, 191, 234, 252, 254, 287, 310; Lake 2008, 284–309; and *L’Asie française* 1922).

In the days and weeks after Syria declared independence, the French and British privately coordinated plans to impose the mandates against Syrian will – and against Article 22’s requirement of consent by the governed in the choice of mandatory. “It is necessary to destroy Faisal,” advised a leader of the French colonial lobby.¹³ Another colonialist publicly questioned the legitimacy of the Congress in the leading political journal in Paris: “The so-called Syrian Congress is likely composed only of individuals without mandate” (*Journal des Débats* 1920). The French high commissioner at Beirut transmitted the judgment of Paris to Faisal: the Congress had no right to determine the future of Syria, which “can only be determined by the Allied Powers acting together.” Therefore, the declaration of independence was “null and void” (Hokayem 2012, 148–149; Shahrastan 2000, 109–110).

On April 25, 1920, the British and French convened a closed meeting of the Supreme Council – excluding Arab delegates – at San Remo, Italy, to assign the mandates: France took the mandates of Syria and Lebanon in the north while Britain took Palestine in the south.

French Premier Alexandre Millerand immediately launched plans to wage war on “the insolent and threatening Sharifian government.” Millerand’s language placed Syrians outside the protection of international law, calling them “brigands who massacre Christians” (Hokayem 2012, 356–361, 399–400).¹⁴ France must rescue Christians from Muslim jihad, he urged the French Chamber of Deputies. “Islam is poised against Europe,” a deputy agreed. “We are in Syria. We refuse to leave it,” Millerand promised to great applause (*Journal officiel-Chambre* 1920b).

In June 1920, even as the Chamber granted financing for the invasion, the French foreign ministry met with Maronite church leaders to promise they would sever Lebanon from Syria as a separate state for Christians (Khoury 2001, 59–63, 70). In July, French military planes dropped leaflets over Syrian towns, promising that France will protect “la liberté de conscience” for all and warning that the planes would drop bombs if “even one Christian is massacred” (Hokayem 2012, 501–503). On July 14, General Henri Gouraud, the French high commissioner in Beirut, issued an ultimatum to Faisal, accusing him of ruling over a “state of anarchy” under a phony Congress and of deploying an illegal “Sharifian” army against the Allies. “France will not bear the responsibility for the damage that may be done to the country,” Gouraud warned (Hokayem 2012, 479–486).

Likewise, the British dismissed the Syrian Congress as a ragtag band of extremists who had overruled Faisal’s sensible cooperation with the Allies. They referred to him not as the Syrian king, but as a “Hashemite Emir” (Zeine 1960, 141; Darwazeh 1993, 480). Behind the public rhetoric, the British rejected Syria’s declaration of independence particularly because it included Palestine in the Syrian Arab Kingdom. In direct contradiction of Article 22’s assurance that public opinion must be a principal determinant in assigning the mandates, the British violently quashed demonstrations against the Balfour Declaration, the San Remo agreement, and the French invasion of Syria. In July 1920, many Palestinians still insisted on being part of Greater Syria and governed by the Syrian Arab Kingdom. In Damascus, Palestinians helped to organize militias to defend the city (Salhi 2011, 272, 282; Thompson 2021, 183–190).

On July 24, the French Army of the Levant, composed mainly of colonial troops from Africa equipped with tanks and airplanes, defeated the Syrians at the town of Maysalun, outside of

Damascus. They then ransacked offices of the Syrian Congress and sent deputies fleeing into exile, carrying suitcases of documents. French reports on the invasion used a new term for Syrians who opposed the mandate: “*apaches*.”¹⁵ It was a racialized term reserved for barbarians without rights.

The League of Nations did not dispute the forceful imposition of mandates against popular will. It rejected Sharif Hussein’s protest against the violation of the rights of legally elected Syrian officials. In early August, the Allies forced the Ottoman Turks to sign the Treaty of Sèvres, which stripped Turkish sovereignty over most of the empire and denied sovereignty to Arabs by recognizing the mandates (Treaty of Sèvres; Hokayem 2012, 561, 578–579). But Sèvres was never ratified by the Ottomans. Sharif Hussein of Mecca, leader of the only Arab state represented at the Paris peace conference, never signed it.

The denial of Syrian rights under international law was sustained through the erasure of the Syrian Arab Kingdom. On July 29, 1920, Millerand commanded, “All traces of Faisal’s illegal, improvised government must disappear.” Government buildings were seized and sealed; Faisal’s property was confiscated (Hokayem 2012, 534).¹⁶ Syrian officials fled Damascus with a few suitcases of documents. Hasan al-Hakim, the former minister of posts and telegraphs, apparently carried a copy of the constitution with him into Palestine. He would publish it decades later (Al-Hakim 1974, 194–213).

The key piece of evidence was the 1920 Syrian constitution, which contradicted France’s image of Syria as a violent theocracy. French intelligence had obtained a copy that was presented on July 5 to Congress. On August 26, their Beirut bureau issued an official French translation. The Arabic original then disappeared, presumably under Millerand’s orders.¹⁷ The French version was published in 1923 as an annex to a thesis by Philippe David, a mandatory official in Beirut. David changed Article 1 so that the constitution appeared to establish a Muslim theocracy. The original Arabic text read: “The Arab Kingdom of Syria is a civil, representative monarchy. Its capital is Damascus, and *the religion of its King is Islam*.” The French translation substituted “state” for “king,” making it appear that Islam was the state religion (David 1923, annex; Al-Hakim 1974, 194).¹⁸

It is unlikely that the substitution was an error: the translation was approved by Louis Mercier, the chief of the translation bureau who was born in Algeria and known for his excellent command of Arabic. Mercier likely had a hostile motive: In October 1918, he had been assigned as the French liaison in Damascus, but Prince Faisal expelled him for spreading colonial propaganda (Khoury 2009, 130; Russell 1985, 45). And at the same time David defended his thesis, a prominent diplomat published a book portraying Faisal as a “primitive Bedouin” whose government was, in fact, “a cluster of exalted [fanatics] who soon terrorized Syria in the name of Arab nationalism” (Gontaut-Biron 1922, 188–189, 234).

As a political community, the Syrian Arab Kingdom was erased from international law and diplomacy. In 1921, Syrian and Palestinian politicians launched a petition campaign to protest the mandates at the League of Nations. In August 1921, Rashid Rida led a delegation of the Syro-Palestinian Congress to Geneva, where the League Assembly was set to convene for the first time. Rida continued to present himself as President of the Syrian Congress. In Geneva, the Congress submitted a formal appeal, demanding full sovereignty and the right to reunite the territories of Greater Syria under an independent state. The French and Lebanese separatists issued counter-protests against the appeal. The League ignored the issue. The League’s new Permanent Mandates Commission refused any further direct communication from Syrians, because they were no longer a sovereign people (Hokayem 1996, 53–61; Pedersen 2015, 77–83).

Meanwhile, the French filed their first annual report to the League in which they erased Syrians’ constitutional experience. All competent bureaucrats, the report falsely claimed, had departed with the Turks in 1918. By 1920, “Syria offered no indigenous structure upon which the Mandatory Power could rely for the administration of the country.” The report falsely contended that the Ottomans had never permitted the “development of a public spirit or of political experience,”

leaving Syrians with no sense of political community. “The dominant sentiment of solidarity, at least among the masses, was that of the Islamic community.”¹⁹

Without a serious investigation, the League of Nations ratified the French and British mandates in July 1922.²⁰ Syrians who had been governors and members of parliament in the Ottoman era were to be governed as though they had no political experience, on terms comparable to peoples placed under mandate in the former German colonies of Africa and the Pacific.

By 1930, Syria was firmly relegated to the uncivilized, colonial world that did not enjoy the right to self-rule. Quincy Wright, a leading American legal scholar, published a definitive study of the mandate system. He repeated the misconception that Syrian Arabs had been colonial subjects, not citizens, of the Ottoman Empire. Syrians needed political guidance just as Cameroonians, former subjects of the German empire, did. Wright would be quoted decades later by the prominent postcolonial critic of international law, Antony Anghie (Wright 1930, 28–29; Anghie 2004, 176–186).

English-language histories written since 1930 have replicated the French colonial narrative by omitting mention of the Congress and its constitution and by using the contentious term “Sharifian,” which masks the government’s indigenous nature (McHugo 2015; Khoury 1983, 86–87; Khoury 1987, 35, 40). Even Arab historians have neglected the establishment of a democracy in 1920 and the disestablishment of religion in favor of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims (Barout 2013; Sabbagh 2011; Arna’ut 2000; Shahrastan 2000; Qasimiya 1982, Khadduri 1951, 139, 152–153).

Consequences of the Kingdom’s Destruction

The four mandates imposed on Greater Syria shattered its political community: they deprived Syrians of the “right to have rights” by denying their national sovereignty. The French and British governed by force, not by consent of the population. Their high commissioners ruled by decree and through charters drafted in Europe. The new Permanent Mandates Commission determined that the mandate was a contract between the mandatory power and the League, not between the League and the local population. Syrians did not even have the right to petition the League (Pedersen 2015, 91). The provisional independence granted to Syrians by Article 22 in the 1919 covenant was effectively withdrawn. Syrians ceased to exist as rights-bearing human beings.

Between 1920 and 1923, the French and British engaged in public relations campaigns and behind-the-scenes negotiations at the League headquarters in Geneva to obscure their colonialist land grab in violation of Article 22’s original intent. “By the summer of 1920 the mandates system was a naked and shivering shadow of its Wilsonian self,” historian Susan Pedersen wrote (2015, 45). Winston Churchill, as secretary of state for colonies, upheld Lord Balfour’s insistence that Britain was obliged to deny Arab self-determination in support of a higher ideal. “Our justification for our policy is that we regard Palestine as being absolutely exceptional, that we consider the question of the Jews outside Palestine as one of world importance,” Balfour wrote (Friedman 1973, 325).

The French denied that they violated Arab self-determination: They claimed they had not crushed a true, Syrian government. In his officially sanctioned Sorbonne thesis, David declared the “Sharifian” state illegal and the elected Syrian Congress illegitimate. It represented only an elitist “xenophobic minority,” not the popular will. France’s military invasion of July 1920 was therefore a necessary “police operation” to oust a renegade Arab officer, Prince Faisal, from Allied-occupied Ottoman territory (David 1923, 12–18, 47–49, 96–101, 130–131).

Like the British, the French justified their mandate as a moral duty that superseded international law as laid down in the League covenant. “Adversaries of the mandate,” wrote a French journalist in 1929, want “an independent Syria where the 1,500,000 Muslims would subjugate the half-million Christians. If this state of affairs came about, it would not only be the end of western influence in the Orient: it would be the opening of an era of disorders and massacres” (Beauplan 1929, 53).

Until 1922, politicians who had fled Damascus expected the League of Nations to uphold their claim to self-determination. “We approach your Assembly with trust in the founding principles of the League of Nations,” a Syrian-Palestinian delegation to Geneva wrote in 1921. “There is no doubt that you – respected representatives – reject the enslavement of an entire people in the name of your sublime aims.” Delegates reminded the League that they had proved their maturity by “establishing a Syrian state based on order, freedom and peace.” They called on the League to reject the mandates and permit Greater Syria to unite once again under an elected government.²¹ League officials refused to meet them.

Like Rida, politicians who protested against the mandates invoked the memory of the egalitarian regime at Damascus. Moussa Kazim Pasha El-Husseini, who as mayor of Jerusalem in 1920 had celebrated Faisal’s coronation, warned against building a state based solely on the rights of a minority: “We Muslims and Christians desire to live with our brothers the Jews of Palestine in peace and happiness and with equal rights” (Lesch 1979, 85–86).

In 1921–1922, Moussa Kazim led an Arab delegation to London to protest against the British mandate. In his final memo to Winston Churchill, the secretary of state for colonies, he condemned the exclusion of Arab representation in mandatory government and predicted the annihilation of the Arab majority in Palestine. “His Majesty’s Government has placed itself in the position of a partisan in Palestine of a certain policy which the Arab cannot accept because it means his extinction sooner or later,” Moussa Kazim wrote. “We must harbour the fears that the intention is to create... the ‘disappearance or subordination of the Arabic population language, and culture in Palestine.’”²²

In a last-ditch effort to block the mandates in late 1922, Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians rushed to Lausanne, Switzerland, where the Turks entered negotiations with the Allies on the final peace treaty of World War I, concerning Ottoman lands. But the president of the Lausanne peace conference was none other than Lord Curzon, who had coordinated the destruction of the Syrian Arab Kingdom with the French. Curzon blocked the Arabs from direct participation in the conference. Arab delegates turned to the Turks, but they broke their promise to insist on Arab self-determination as a price of peace. The Lausanne treaty was signed on July 24, 1923, exactly three years after the French defeated the Syrian army outside of Damascus. A few weeks later, the mandates entered international law.

Most dehumanizing to Syrians was the European effort to render the Sunni Muslim majority a legal and political minority. Article 22 rendered all Syrians as minorities, in the sense of being immature, because they were “not yet ready to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world.” The mandate charter for Palestine rendered the Arab majority a minority by erasing it. The charter declared its principal purpose to establish a “national home for the Jewish people,” who represented 10 percent of the Palestine population in 1922. It omitted mention of the 700,000 Arabs as a people, except for a clause naming Arabic, along with Hebrew and English, an official language. It assured them no political rights, stating only “that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the *civil and religious rights of non-Jewish communities*” (League of Nations 1923b; emphasis added).

In Syria and Lebanon, the mandate charter granted France control of the military and civil administration (financed at Syrian and Lebanese expense) and foreign affairs. Although the word “minority” was not used, the charter provided for protections for the various “communities” and “peoples” in terms that echoed the European minority treaties: the right to schools in their own language; autonomy of religious authority and personal status law; and freedom for religious missions in spiritual, educational, and humanitarian affairs (League of Nations 1923).

Although there was a single charter, the French mandatory regime had proclaimed a separate Greater Lebanon on September 1, 1920. It attached the cities of Tripoli, Beirut, and Sidon and the Bekaa Valley to historic Mount Lebanon. A controversial 1921 census counted Christians as 55 percent of the population – by including emigrants living abroad (Fahrenthold 2019, 139–149). The French gave preference to Maronite Catholics for posts in the new state bureaucracy and

funneled tax revenues to the Christian districts of Mount Lebanon that were collected from the Muslim-dominated coastal cities. Despite protest, the mandate also adopted electoral laws favoring confessional quotas in parliament that assured Christian dominance.

Confessionalism undercut cross-sectarian loyalties that had grown in the era of the Syrian Arab Kingdom. Lebanon's Shi'i Muslims, for example, had taken up arms against the French in 1920 in support of unity with Damascus. As historian Max Weiss has shown, the French mandatory state played a crucial role in suppressing ecumenical leaders among the Shi'ites (Weiss 2010). Through legal institutions and financial support, the mandatory government amplified the political power of sectarian leaders who cultivated a separate Shi'i community. With the same intentions, the French punished Christians who had in 1920 joined Sunni Muslims in opposing Maronite privilege and favored unity with Syria (Zamir 1985, 97–146; Traboulsi 2007, 81–84; Eddé 2010, 254–261; Weiss 2010, 20, 58–60, 126–129, 230).

As in the defeated lands of Europe, anti-liberal, anti-systemic movements emerged in the Arab world to reject the neocolonial world that Paris and the League had created. Some Syrian Muslims formed militias, fighting guerrilla battles with the French; others joined forces with Turkish nationalists who battled European occupation of Anatolia through 1922. The first Communist parties and anti-colonial nationalist parties organized. In 1922 Damascus, they staged a large demonstration when Charles Crane visited. French repression made headlines in the *New York Times*. Meanwhile, Muslim clerics organized protests in multiple cities against French schools and infringements upon religious authority. They were the nuclei of an Islamic populist movement that spread across Syria in the 1930s (Thompson 2000, 103–110).

From exile in Egypt, Rashid Rida published articles in his magazine, *al-Manar*, about his loss of faith in Europe's universal liberal principles. He predicted another world war between Muslims and Christians. "It does not befit the honor of this League, which President Wilson proposed to include all civilized nations for the good of all human beings [...] To be used as a tool by two colonial states," he wrote to readers of his magazine after the League ratified the mandates in July 1922. "If the Balkans were the spark of war in the West [in 1914] then Syria, Palestine and other Arab countries will ignite the fires of war in both the West and the East" (Rida 1922b).

Rida bitterly described the 1923 Lausanne treaty as the project of the "Christian world" to impose "homelands for Christian minorities" in former Ottoman lands in Armenia and Lebanon. In rhetoric that anticipated that of Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1963, 8), Rida praised the Turks for rejecting minority rights Rida himself had supported in the Syrian constitution three years earlier: "The greatest credit for the new Turkish renaissance goes to its leaders who vomited the poison of despair that European policy had inflicted on them" (Rida 1922).

In August 1925, Syrians resorted to armed revolt against France's divisive and repressive rule. The revolt united rural and urban leaders around the call by Sultan al-Atrash, leader of the Druze, to "remember that civilized nations that are united cannot be destroyed." His proclamation demanded independence, an elected government, and "the application of the principles of the French Revolution and Rights of Man" (Provence 2005, 81–83). The Syrians still demanded inclusion in the world order and their right to rights.

The French responded with brutality, burning villages and sending tanks into the streets of Damascus. They displayed rebel corpses in its main square. In October, the French bombed Damascus, killing close to 1,500 civilians in two days (Provence 2005, 104). Hundreds of protest telegrams arrived in Geneva; most demanded that the League of Nations intervene and strip France of the mandate and grant Syrians sovereignty. But the League did nothing, and the war lasted nearly two more years. Syrians "remained 'petitioners,' without the standing of a member state and unable to speak internationally in their own right," Pedersen observed (2015, 153).

In vain, the American legal scholar, Quincy Wright, published a scathing criticism, arguing that the Syrians were not primitive barbarians deserving of bombardment. Recalling the Syrian Congress, Wright argued that Syria was a state in the making, entitled to treatment under the laws of war (Wright 1926). The British envoy in Syria presciently warned that inaction would damage the

Paris world order. “If it is desired that the League of Nations should gradually acquire a universal character, and not appear as an association of the West against the East,” he wrote, then the League must force France to change its policy (Pedersen 2015, 156).

The damage had already been done. In Cairo, Rashid Rida began giving lectures and publishing articles that inspired Muslims to build an alternative, Islamic system of justice. In 1930, he published a book, *The Muhammadan Revelation*, translating Wilsonian principles into a vision of an Islamic world order, and asked Charles Crane to distribute copies of it in the United States (Thompson 2021, 300–314, 324–333). A student from the Nile Delta, Hasan al-Banna, whose father was an acquaintance of Rida, regularly attended his lectures. Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 and within ten years built it into the largest political movement in the Middle East. Upon Rida’s death in 1935, he continued to publish *al-Manar* as an expression of the Brotherhood’s debt to him. In the early 1940s, Banna would unite with Syrian Islamists to create a transnational Muslim Brotherhood. Fundamental to the Brotherhood’s message was the rejection of the Western liberalism as a model of justice. “[The West’s] political foundations are being destroyed by dictatorships, its economic foundations are being swept away by crises [...] their League of Nations is a phantasm, possessing neither spirit nor influence,” Banna advised Egyptian King Farouk in 1936. “All of humanity is tormented, wretched worried, and confused [...] in dire need of some sweet portion of the waters of True Islam to wash from them the filth of misery and lead them to happiness” (Al-Banna 1936, 58–59; Thompson 2013, 150–176; Frampton, 21–33).

A close associate of Rida in Europe, Shakib Arslan, explicitly linked the rise of Islamic movements to Muslim-Arab exclusion from the so-called universal liberal principles of the 1919 peace conference: “If the Arabs had been Christians, for example like the Yugoslavs, Greeks, Lithuanians, and Estonians (who rendered much less service to the Allied cause), then they would certainly have been granted an independent country” (Arslan 1931, 5).

Upon independence after World War II, nearly all Arab countries adopted constitutions that established Islam as the state religion or a source of legislation. As memory of 1920 faded in the latter half of the 20th century, however, few Arab politicians understood that their Islamized states were historically contingent responses to the destruction of liberal democracy in 1920. Even prominent scholars assumed an unbroken link between the Ottoman caliphate and the establishment of Islam in independent Arab states. One mistakenly referenced the French mistranslation of the Syrian Arab Kingdom’s constitution to assume that it was a theocracy (Khadduri 1951). Even the Muslim Brothers’ encyclopedia, *Ikhwanwiki*, made no reference to the Syrian Arab Kingdom in its extensive entry on Rashid Rida (*Ikhwanwiki* 2022). Out of ignorance of the contingency of the split between liberals and Islamists after 1920, mutual suspicions between secularists and Islamists grew and tragically made compromise impossible in the 2011 Arab Spring (Thompson 2019).

The historical context for the emergence of Islamism, as detailed here, also problematizes common discourses about Muslims’ relationship to democracy in Europe and North America (Huntington 1993; Lewis 1996). Scholars have argued that Muslims are incapable or undeserving of rights because they are by nature threats to democracy (Luizard 2015, 39–58, 93–94). As we have seen here, Islamism emerged not out of rejection of democracy, but rather in angry response to the exclusion of Muslims from sovereign rights in the post-WWI world order.

The history of the Syrian Arab Kingdom and its destruction demands a reinterrogation of how the League mandates aggravated sectarian relations in Greater Syria. The rise of Muslim chauvinism and Christian fear of Muslim violence in the 20th-century Arab world must be reinterpreted as the contingent product of the deliberate destruction of political community – and of the minoritization of the Sunni Muslim majority – in 1920.

New histories of majority-minority relations in the Middle East must also question assumptions of Muslim exceptionalism with deeper comparative study. Arendt herself suggested a parallel between the new states created in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The Paris peace process, she wrote, worked “to shatter all hopes for constitutional government in the new nations and to undermine the republican institutions in the old.” Arendt lamented that few scholars had so far

studied the similarities between colonial and minority exploitation. This article has suggested that in both post-Habsburg Eastern Europe and post-Ottoman Syria, a new, violent politics took hold because civilians realized that “the rules of the world around them had ceased to apply.” Historians must account for the powerful political effect of stripping a people of rights they had once held. The anti-liberal movements in the postwar Arab world clearly paralleled the interwar European movements that Arendt described as expressing “cynicism” and “hatred” by peoples whose political community had been shattered by World War I and its aftermath (Arendt 1985, xx, 267, 268).

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Notes

- 1 The Congress included one Jewish deputy from Damascus, but Zionists had discouraged the participation of Jews from Palestine. In 1920, Muslim sects like the Alawis, Druze and Shi’a did not organize politically as religious minorities.
- 2 According to census counts in 1921–1922. Sunnis represented approximately 78 percent of the population of 757,000 in the southern district of today’s Israel/Palestine; 70 percent of the 1.7 million living in Syria (today’s Syria and Alexandretta); and 62 percent of those living today’s Lebanon. See Barron 1922, 3; Farenthold 2019, 143; Batatu 1999, 6, 355.
- 3 These figures are given to suggest proportions only. They are necessarily inexact, as they are drawn from imperfect censuses. See Zamir 1985, 98; Longrigg 1958, 8–9, 127; Farenthold 2019, 139–144, and Batatu 1999, 6.
- 4 See also Benjamin et al. 2018; Robson 2017, 1–6, 24–34; Robson 2016, 1–16; White 2011, 1–17; McHugo 2015; Maggolini and Ouahes, ed. 2021; Mahmood 2015.
- 5 See also Arsan 2015; Farenthold 2019; Makdisi 2019, 113–146; Patrick 2015; Tamari 2015.
- 6 Later in the 20th century, Kurdish refugees from Turkey would be denied citizenship under the Baath regime’s exclusionary brand of Arabism. See Altuğ 2011.
- 7 See also Provence 2017, 102–108, 112–116; Muslih 1988, 175–190.
- 8 My account is based on the following Arabic sources: the memoirs of the Congress’ secretary, Muhammad Izzat Darwazeh, *Mudhakkirat Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwaza, 1887–1984*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1993), 350–353, 383–385, and the monography by Mari Almaz Shahrastan, *Mu’tamar al-Suri al-‘Amm, 1919–1920* (Beirut: Dar Amwaj, 2000) 35–41.
- 9 The report was not made public until 1922.
- 10 The constitution is translated into English in Thompson 2021, 351–370. This version of the constitution, dated July 19, 1920, consisted of 147 articles. It was recognized as the definitive text by the late historian of the Syrian Arab Kingdom, Khayriyah Qasimiyah. The original manuscript is presumed to be lost.
- 11 I draw on Dyala Hamzah’s study of Rida’s pragmatic reformism: Hamzah 2013, 90–127. On Rida’s political attitude toward non-Muslims, see Ryad 2009. On Rida’s insistence on the need for sovereignty, see Haddad 1997.
- 12 No study has yet been made comparing postwar Syria to postwar Poland, nor is it known whether the Syrians crafted their constitutional articles on minority rights with knowledge of the minority clauses in the Polish treaty. It is my hope that this article may inspire such study.
- 13 MAE-Courneuve, De Caix to Kammerer, March 23, 1920, PAAP 353 vol. 3/microfilm 11203: 214.

- 14 Millerand to Gouraud, May 27, 1920; in Hokayem, *Documents diplomatiques*, II: 356–611 Faisal to Gouraud, June 10, 1920, in Hokayem, *Documents diplomatiques*, II: 356–358, 399–400.
- 15 “Apache” was a popular French term in the early 20th century for a “malfaiteur qui vit hors la loi, en révolte ouverte contre la société, ne reculant ni devant le vol, ni devant l’assassinat.” See <https://www.lalanguefrancaise.com/dictionnaire/definition/apache#3>. (Accessed May 13, 2024.)
- 16 See also MAE-Courneuve, De Caix to Gouraud, July 17/21, 1920, 399 PAAP/142; MAE-Nantes, Millerand to Commandant Armée du Levant, July 29, 1920, Carton 2358; and “Directives,” orders to Goybet, July 24, 1920, Carton 2371; MAE-Courneuve, Gouraud to Toulat, July 29, 1920, PAAP 399 Carton 178, folder “Deroulement.”
- 17 The Arabic copy of the 1920 Syrian constitution possessed by the French in Beirut was likely destroyed, following the spirit of Millerand’s command to destroy all trace of the government. Weeks of research at the French foreign ministry archives at La Courneuve and Nantes failed to locate it. Through a personal communication before her death, historian Khairieh Qasimiyeh, confirmed that she considered authentic by Khairiya Qasimiya. She was author of an Arabic language text on the Faisal era and editor of memoirs by Faisal’s lawyer, Awni Abd al-Hadi.
- 18 Al-Hakim 1974, 194. The Arabic text, transliterated, reads: “hukuma al-mamlaka al-suriya al-`arabiya hukuma milkiya madaniya niyabiya `asimatuha Dimashq al-sham wa din malikuha al-Islam.” In regular Arabic, it reads:
حكومة المملكة السورية العربية حكومة ملكية مدنية نيابية عاصمتها دمشق والشام ودين ملكها الإسلام
- 19 SDN, Série 4284, carton R22, dossier 1, doc. 22042.
- 20 SDN, *Procès-Verbaux de la Première Session*, Geneva, October 4-8, 1921 : 1–10. https://biblio-archiv.unog.ch/Dateien/CouncilMSD/C-416-M-296-1921-VI_BI.pdf. (Accessed June 12, 2019.)
- 21 Petition to the League of Nations assembly reprinted by Muhammad Rashid Rida, “The European Trip, Part 4,” *al-Manar* 23 (June 1922) 455. (Accessed May 13, 2024.)
- 22 The Palestine Arab Delegation to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 17 June 1922, in Correspondence with the Palestine Arab Delegation and the Zionist Organization 1922, *World War I Document Archive- Post 1918*. <http://www.gwpda.org/1918p.html>. (Accessed February 9, 2024.)

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