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Refugees and the definition of Syria, 1920-39

I. Introduction

Between the French occupation in 1920 and the outbreak of the Second World War, one of the most striking and controversial features of political and social life in Syria was the arrival and settlement of large numbers of refugees. Armenians and other Christians escaping Anatolia; Kurdish insurgents evading the Turkish military; Assyrians fleeing Iraq: all took refuge in French mandate Syria, where they joined refugees who had arrived, before the French, during the First World War.

But what was 'Syria' in this period? The answer was not clear. At the most basic level, the geographical boundaries of the state were ill-defined. For some four hundred years prior to the war, the mandate territories had been part of a much larger entity, the Ottoman empire, which in its later years had become an increasingly integrated state.¹ Although the war years had drastically eroded the authority and legitimacy of Ottoman rule,² the empire's sudden collapse and dismemberment in 1918 was nonetheless a terrific trauma for the inhabitants of what became the mandate territories. Over the next two years, British, French,

¹ This process and the many tensions it created are covered by the relevant chapters of Reşat Kasaba (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Turkey, Volume Four: Turkey in the Modern World* (Cambridge, 2008); see, in particular, Carter Vaughn Findley, 'The Tanzimat'; Benjamin C. Fortna, 'The Reign of Abdülhamid II'; M. Şükrü Hanioglu, 'The Second Constitutional Period, 1908–1918'. On the Arab provinces see Thomas Philipp (ed.), *The Syrian Land in the 18th and 19th Century: The Common and the Specific in the Historical Experience* (Stuttgart, 1992); Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schaebler (eds.), *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation: Bilâd al-Shâm from the 18th to the 20th Century* (Stuttgart, 1998); Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1921* (Cambridge, 1999); and on Damascus, Stefan Weber, *Damascus: Ottoman Modernity and Urban Transformation, 1808–1918*, 2 vols. (Aarhus, 2009).

² Melanie Tanielian gives an excellent account of this erosion in Lebanon; see her 'The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon (1914–1918)' (Univ. of California Berkeley Ph.D. thesis, 2012). Elizabeth Thompson explores its social and political effects; see her *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Mandate Syria and Lebanon* (New York, 2000), esp. ch. 1.

and Arab actors struggled to define what would replace the empire. The Arab nationalist claim for ‘the complete independence for Syria within her natural boundaries’ found popular resonance in the cities,³ but the naturalness or otherwise of those borders was never tested on the ground: the Ottoman Arab provinces were quickly divided between British and French mandates. Only the French part was called ‘Syria’, and it soon got smaller: in 1920 an expanded Lebanon was made into a separate state, and the remainder was divided into autonomous statelets within a ‘Syrian federation’. Most of this became ‘Syria’ again in 1925, but two small statelets — one for Alawis and one for Druzes — retained a degree of autonomy.⁴

So the internal boundaries of the mandate territories continued to evolve. Their external borders were also ill defined at first, especially in the north. In 1919, French forces had occupied what they called Cilicia, beyond the ‘natural frontiers’ of Syria, between the Amanus and Taurus mountains — an uneasy occupation that was rejected by most of the population there and contested by the rising forces of the Turkish nationalist movement. In 1921, France sought and reached a diplomatic accord with the emerging government in Ankara, ending the conflict and handing Cilicia over: the border they agreed between Turkish and French territory ran far to the south of the line claimed by France in the wartime Sykes–Picot agreement. But making it a meaningful reality on the ground took decades after it had been agreed in principle and on paper: simply translating the line on the map onto the actual

³ James Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley, 1998), *passim*.

⁴ Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton, 1987), 57–60 and *passim*. The clearest articulation of France’s policy of administrative division is Robert de Caix, ‘Esquisse de l’organisation de la Syrie sous le mandat français (17.07.1920)’, reproduced in Gérard D. Khoury, *Une tutelle coloniale: le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban: Ecrits politiques de Robert de Caix* (Paris, 2006).

topography of a 600km-stretch of territory took the bilateral border delineation committee well into the 1930s.⁵ Syria's southern and eastern borders, with the British mandate territories of Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq, were agreed more peacefully, but not without incident.⁶

In other words, the actual territory of the state called 'Syria' was being defined in this period. State authority within that territory was uncertain too, in several senses. Practically speaking, effective state authority was tenuous away from the main lines of communication, especially in remoter parts of the mandate territories. Legally, it was unclear who held state authority. France held *power*, but its presence in Syria was legally mandated, and limited, by the League of Nations. The mandate was exercised on behalf of Syrians, and Syrian nationalists were quick to argue, with some legal justification, that it was to the Syrian nation that ultimate authority — that is, sovereignty — belonged.⁷ But this raised a third uncertainty: what was the Syrian nation? Who was 'Syrian', and what did that mean to a population that a short time before had been Ottoman? That too was unclear in 1920, and for a long time thereafter.

This article argues that, for various actors, the arrival and settlement of refugees in the mandate territories offered a means of resolving these fundamental uncertainties: during the mandate period and beyond, the modern state of Syria was formed around and against refugees. Practically, refugee flows brought the geographical borders of Syria into much sharper definition, drew state authority into rural areas where it had hitherto been virtually

⁵ Seda Altuğ and Benjamin Thomas White, 'Frontières et pouvoir d'État: La frontière turco-syrienne dans les années 1920 et 1930', *Vingtième siècle: Revue d'histoire*, ciii (2009).

⁶ Eliezer Tauber, 'The Struggle for Dayr al-Zur: The Determination of Borders Between Syria and Iraq', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, xxiii (1991).

⁷ On the deliberate ambiguity over sovereignty in the mandate territories see Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford, 2015), ch. 7.

absent, and stimulated its intensification in the cities: state practices of territorialization, from border checks to agricultural engineering, were stimulated by and applied to refugee flows.⁸ The new state's nationality law was designed so as to incorporate refugees; their arrival and settlement provoked different actors to argue for this and other state institutions to be defined, and to behave, in particular ways, just as they gave rise to competing definitions (and redefinitions) of national identity. The competition between these different claims was one of the fields upon which the modern state in Syria was produced.

Refugee settlement implicated the French mandatory authorities and the League of Nations. In ways that the available sources sometimes — perhaps intentionally — obscure, it also implicated the institutions of the Syrian state that existed under mandatory supervision. Indeed, allowing refugees to enter the country and settle there unavoidably posed basic questions of sovereignty, which Syrian Arab nationalists were quick to raise. The refugee issue not only gave them grounds to protest against both French rule and the mandate itself: it also allowed them to define a certain territory as 'Syria', promulgate a Syrian national identity within it, and assert a nationalist claim to state authority over the territory and population thereby defined.

In making this argument, the article demonstrates the value of adopting the 'itinerant perspective' of the refugee for understanding state formation in the Middle East — 'a particularly appropriate means of elucidating a period of history characterized by flux: massive population displacements, shifting territorial borders and cultural boundaries, and

⁸ This process had antecedents in the Ottoman period. On the place of Muhajirin — the refugees' or migrants' quarter, where Ottoman Muslim refugees from Crete and the Balkans were settled after 1867 — in the development of state urban planning in late Ottoman Syria, see Stefan Weber, *Damascus*, i, 98–103. On rural resettlements see Norman Lewis, *Nomads and Settlers in Syria and Jordan, 1800–1980* (Cambridge, 1987), ch. 6.

new political and social formations in the process of self-definition and delimitation,'⁹ as a flowering of recent work on eastern Europe has shown.¹⁰ But it also nuances a seminal argument that has informed much of that literature, made a generation ago by Aristide Zolberg: that the formation of new states is a refugee-generating process.¹¹ As far as it goes that is true, but so is the reverse: refugees can drive state formation. In some cases, they do so as makers of new states: among other examples, witness the contributions of displaced Balkan and Caucasian Muslims to the creation of the Turkish Republic, or of displaced European Jews to that of Israel. In other cases, refugees have played a role as those around and against whom states are made.¹² This article shows that for state institutions and Syrian Arab nationalists, refugees were a site for the construction of the national. But, because of the mandatory context, international actors were also directly involved: French officials, the League of Nations, and international humanitarian agencies, as well as the governments of other states near and far, also made Syria's refugees a site for the articulation of the national and the international (a sphere which was itself in construction in the period). In all this,

⁹ Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell, 'Population Displacement, State-Building, and Social Identity in the Lands of the Former Russian Empire, 1917–23', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, new ser., iv (2003), 55.

¹⁰ Representative examples include the contributions to Richard Bessel and Claudia B. Haake (eds.), *Removing Peoples: Forced Removal in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2009); Philipp Ther and Ana Siljak (eds.), *Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944–1948* (Lanham, 2001); Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron (eds.), *Warlands: Population Resettlement and State Reconstruction in the Soviet-East European Borderlands, 1945–50* (Basingstoke, 2009); Jessica Reinisch and Elizabeth White (eds.), *The Disentanglement of Populations: Migration, Expulsion and Displacement in Post-War Europe, 1944–9* (Basingstoke, 2011). Single-author studies include Gerard Daniel Cohen, *In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order* (Oxford, 2012), and R. M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (New Haven, 2012).

¹¹ Aristide R. Zolberg, 'The Formation of New States as a Refugee-generating Process', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, cdlxvii (1983), 24–38.

¹² A phenomenon brilliantly explored by Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar in her work on the multi-faceted role of Partition refugees in the making of independent India and Pakistan: Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, and Histories* (New York, 2007).

refugees themselves were far from passive: their actions, above all, drove the processes explored here.¹³ The next section introduces them.

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II. The refugees

Three main groups of refugees entered Syria between the wars: Armenians and other Christians from Turkey, in the 1920s; Kurdish insurgents, also from Turkey, from 1925 on; and Assyrians from Iraq in the 1930s. In their countries of origin, the relationship between them and state authority was simple: they were fleeing it.

Armenians in Anatolia after 1915 were more numerous than one might think, given the genocidal massacres and deportations that marked the war years. But once the Turkish nationalist government in Ankara had defeated its foreign enemies and established the Republic in 1923, the new state made a sustained effort to impose its authority in southern and eastern Anatolia through the extension of physical infrastructure — roads, bridges, telegraph wires, military posts — and a heavily militarized bureaucracy.¹⁴ The Republic's Kurdish populations were the main target (see below), but for the remaining Armenian population of the east, and for other Anatolian Christians such as the Syriac Catholics of Mardin, the result was to bring them face to face with the hostile Republican state. When state authority was still tenuous and contested, during and after the war with Greece,

¹³ Dawn Chatty's work has illuminated the experiences of Middle Eastern refugees themselves, focusing on displaced groups' strategies for maintaining their communal cohesion and achieving 'integration without assimilation' in their new home states. Informed by extensive interviews with refugees and their descendants, Chatty gives ample evidence of the 'immense social and individual price' of their forced migration. Dawn Chatty, *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, 2010), esp. 4, 279.

¹⁴ Soner Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?* (London, 2006), ch. 6. See also references in following paragraph.

departures occurred amidst violence.¹⁵ Later in the 1920s the question was more one of unrelenting bureaucratic pressure, for example through the confiscation of property, culminating in an ‘invitation’ to leave the national territory. Thousands succumbed to this pressure, their passports stamped ‘Not to re-enter Turkey’ upon departure.¹⁶ For Anatolian Christians, Syria was the obvious destination: there, as a French report put it, they could be ‘on friendly territory, under French protection’.¹⁷ The last major wave of arrivals came as late as 1929.¹⁸

The intensification of Turkish state authority also caused the arrival in Syria of large numbers of fleeing Kurds. The Republic aimed to erode existing political structures in the region, for example through the exile of Kurdish leaders and their families to western Anatolia.¹⁹ The Kurdish population more generally felt the effects of these efforts to remake the political landscape. Between 1925 and 1939, the growing pressure from Ankara on the Kurdish areas provoked armed resistance on the part of some Kurds — which in turn

¹⁵ Some 30,000 Armenians were evacuated to Syria and Lebanon from Cilicia when the French occupation there ended in 1921. In 1922–3, around 27,000 more Anatolian Christians arrived, overland and without assistance, in much worse conditions. République française, Ministère des Affaires étrangères, *Rapport sur la situation de la Syrie et du Liban (juillet 1922–juillet 1923)*, 18–22. NB — The ministry’s published reports are cited frequently below, hereafter in the short form MAE, Report to the League, [year covered]. By the late 1920s they covered the calendar year, not July–July, with each year’s report being issued the following year. I consulted them at the ministry’s archives at La Courneuve (where those for 1930 and 1933 are missing).

¹⁶ Vahé Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute-Mésopotamie: Aux confins de la Turquie, de la Syrie et de l’Irak (1919–1933)* (Paris, 2004), 278.

¹⁷ MAE, Report to the League, 1922–23, 18. The following year’s report, a little more expansively, mentioned ‘the protection of the French, Syrian, and Lebanese authorities’: MAE, Report to the League, 1923–24, 28.

¹⁸ Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute-Mésopotamie*, 277–85.

¹⁹ Kemal Kirişçi, ‘Migration and Turkey: The Dynamics of State, Society and Politics’, in Kasaba, *Cambridge History of Turkey, Volume Four*, esp. 179–182; David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd edn (London, 2004), 184–211.

provoked an ever greater intensification (and militarization) of the state's presence.²⁰ At times when this conflict flared up, Kurdish insurgents, usually armed and often accompanied by their flocks and even families, would escape the reach of the Turkish authorities by fleeing into French territory, like the twenty-four who were disarmed and placed under surveillance at Hasaka in the late summer of 1931, after attacking a Turkish army post between Mardin and Diyarbakir.²¹ The category of 'refugee' was only grudgingly extended to Kurds, partly because they were often armed and partly because they were Muslims.²²

The Assyrians who arrived in Syria after 1933 had also originated from Anatolia, but they were coming via Iraq. A small Christian population, they had fled to Mesopotamia following violent confrontations with the Ottoman state in their mountain homeland during the war, and been resettled in Mesopotamia by British occupying forces, initially at the Ba^cquba refugee camp northeast of Baghdad. The modern state of Iraq was built around them, and the refugee Assyrians (who remained largely distinct from Iraq's own long-standing Assyrian population) were heavily reliant on the British during the mandate that

²⁰ See McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, ch. 9; Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London, 1992), ch. 5; Nicole Watts, 'Relocating Dersim: Turkish State-Building and Kurdish Resistance, 1931–1938', *New Perspectives on Turkey*, xxiii (2000); Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950* (Oxford, 2011), chs. 3–4; Senem Aslan, 'Everyday Forms of State Power and the Kurds in the Early Turkish Republic', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, xxxiii (2011).

²¹ Centre des archives diplomatiques de Nantes, series Mandat Syrie-Liban (hereafter CADN-SL), box 572, dossier: *Installation des réfugiés Kurdes à Hassetché* — a slim dossier of documents on this group. See also Altuğ and White, 'Frontières et pouvoir d'État', and Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh, 2011), ch. 4.

²² In the annual French reports to the League of Nations on the mandate territories, Kurds never featured in the sections dealing with 'assistance aux réfugiés': only Christians, principally Armenians and Assyrians, appeared here. In the French High Commission archives, they are more likely to figure as 'Kurdes réfugiés en Syrie' ('Kurds who have taken refuge in Syria') than as 'réfugiés kurdes' ('Kurdish refugees'). It is also harder to judge total numbers of Kurdish refugees from French sources: individual groups entering the country were counted quite carefully, but there is a striking absence of global figures. Middle Eastern Christians were privileged targets for a longer-standing humanitarian interest among Christian states and publics in Europe and America: see Davide Rodogno, *Against Massacre: Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire, 1815–1914* (Princeton, 2012).

followed. From the start, they were also incorporated into British armed forces in Iraq. During the 1920 revolt against British rule, refugees at Ba^cquba were armed and sent out against the civilian inhabitants of the region. When a group recovered arms and ammunition from a derailed train then proceeded to ‘offensive measures’ that included burning four Arab villages in one morning, the camp commander Lt.-Col. Cunliffe-Owen reported admiringly that ‘There is no doubt about it that these Assyrians can easily lay out the Buddoo’ (that is, Bedouin).²³ This military relationship was later formalized in the Assyrian Levies.

But Iraq achieved independence from Britain in 1932, and if its independence was nominal where foreign policy was concerned, its freedom of action over its own population was much more real. The refugee Assyrians had hoped for some form of local autonomy, and were dismayed by Iraqi independence; Iraqi nationalists, understandably, viewed them as suspect. These mutual suspicions flared into violence in 1933, when the government’s attempt to register Assyrians for conscription triggered armed opposition which was harshly repressed.²⁴ ‘The Assyrians ought to obey the rule of the country,’ the Iraqi minister of the interior warned, ‘and the government will not tolerate, in their capacity as an independent State, to see any one in the country ignoring the laws and order, under which all the subjects

²³ British Library, India Office Records IOR/L/PS/10/775: message to Baghdad by C/O Flight-Lieut Desoer., R.F.A. (but actually signed Cunliffe-Owen), 15 Aug. 1920, enclosed with ‘Monthly report on the refugee camps for the month of August 1920’ under minute paper ‘Mesopotamia: Report on Refugee Camps for Aug.’. (The report, dated 1 Sept., was received on 8 Oct. 1920.) Among quite substantial documentation, the minute paper emphasises these particular words of Cunliffe-Owen’s (and glosses ‘Buddoo’).

²⁴ An account sympathetic to Iraqi leaders is Khaldun S. Husry, ‘The Assyrian Affair of 1933’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, v (1974), in two parts — viewed as ‘a remarkable revisionist attempt to exonerate the Iraqi military’ by Mark Levene, ‘Creating a Modern ‘Zone of Genocide’: The Impact of Nation- and State-Formation on Eastern Anatolia, 1878–1923’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, xii (1998), n. 24. A nuanced account of Assyrian aspirations is in Sami Zubaida, ‘Contested Nations: Iraq and the Assyrians’, *Nations and Nationalism*, vi (2000). My own understanding of these incidents also draws on contemporary French mandatory sources, some of which are cited below.

are bound.’²⁵ In the aftermath of these events, Syria, still under the direct control of a Christian occupying power, became a place of secondary refuge for Iraq’s refugee Assyrians — or a convenient export destination for a government that wanted to get rid of them.

So much for the relationship between these refugees and state authority in the countries they were leaving. But what about the country they were entering? In Syria, all three of these refugee flows acted to *draw in* state authority, in the practical sense of the effective presence of state institutions on the territory and in the population’s lives. This occurred at the border first, and then in many parts of the interior.²⁶

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III. The territorial definition of Syria: at the border, in nationalist discourse, and internally

The way in which refugee flows helped define Syria’s borders can best be seen by looking at the region known as the Jazira, formed by the Euphrates river and the Turkish and Iraqi borders in the remote north-east of the country. In Ottoman times this area had been thinly populated, and better connected with Diyarbekir to the north and Mosul to the south than the cities of Aleppo and Damascus on the far side of the Syrian desert.²⁷ Indeed, parts of it lay beyond the area claimed by Syrian Arab nationalists in 1918–20: it was the borders agreed by France, Britain, and the Turkish nationalists that made the Jazira part of ‘Syria’

²⁵ Khalil Azmi Bey, in a speech to Assyrian leaders at Mosul, 10 Jul. 1933. Quoted in Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (forthcoming).

²⁶ A comparable argument, for a state that was newly independent rather than under mandate, is made by Joanna Tague, ‘A War to Build the Nation: Mozambican Refugees, Rural Development, and State Sovereignty in Tanzania, 1964–1975’ (University of California, Davis, Ph.D. thesis, 2012). I encountered this work only after writing this article.

²⁷ Christian Velud, ‘Introduction’, *Bulletin d’Etudes orientales*, xli–xlii, special issue on ‘Le nord-est syrien’ (1989–90, but published 1993), 12.

along with Aleppo and Damascus. But in the 1920s, these borders existed more in diplomatic texts than on the ground. The Jazira was agreed to be under French jurisdiction as part of the Syrian mandate, but French knowledge of the region was extremely patchy. Even for the Euphrates valley, where two major towns sat on the most significant waterway in the mandate territories, at the outset of the mandate the French army had an incomplete and imprecise map at 1:250,000 scale.²⁸ Long after 1920 the French presence beyond the Euphrates was minimal at best, especially in the upper Jazira (*Haute-Djézireh*) beyond the Khabur river. In 1926, a French intelligence report on this district admitted that for the previous three years it had been more or less outside French control.

In May of that year, the report continued, two border posts with a total of 60 men were established, but '[t]heir presence did not modify the general physiognomy of this region, whose principal characteristic continued to be a profound anarchy.'²⁹ The extremity of the mandate territories, the narrow panhandle leading to the Tigris — what the French called the *Bec de Canard*, the 'duck's bill' — was not occupied for several years after that. Planning the operation in December 1929, General de Bigault du Granrut thought carefully about how many troops would be needed. Money was tight, and he also wanted to 'avoid the ridicule that Military Command would surely incur if it set off against windmills with

²⁸ Bernard Geyer, 'L'Euphrate et sa vallée, 1922–1990', in Institut français de Damas, *Une mission de reconnaissance de l'Euphrate en 1922: enjeux économiques, politiques et militaires. Deuxième partie: les textes* (Damascus, 1995), 11.

²⁹ Service historique de l'Armée de terre, Vincennes (hereafter Vincennes), box 4 H 168, dossier 1: *Opérations des troupes du territoire de l'Euphrate dans la Haute-Djézireh (occupation du Bec de Canard) 1927–1930*, subdossier *Organisation des Postes du Bec de Canard et occupation de [ces postes — these words are near-illegible]*. 'Note sur l'action politique menée dans la Région Nord de Djézireh d'Août à Novembre 1926 et sur les résultats obtenus pendant cette période', prepared by the Service des Renseignements for the *caza* of Khérou, 1 Dec. 1926.

exaggerated strength'.³⁰ On the other hand, his subordinate in Aleppo had argued that the force should be fairly substantial, for two reasons:

1° to show some faces [*montrer du monde*] (so as to establish our prestige there).

2° to have a sufficient workforce that by November 1930, time of the first rains, the posts can be built in masonry, roofed, and linked to the railway by a paved road passable to automobile trucks.³¹

In other words, the force had to create the physical infrastructure that would permit the mandatory state to exercise its authority in this part of the territory. The necessary materials would have to be brought to the railhead before operations began. Troops under Bigault du Granrut's command only reached the Tigris in June 1930.³²

But what does this have to do with refugees? An answer can be found in the 1926 intelligence report cited above. It attributed the need for French troops to establish a presence in the northeast to 'disorder' caused by 'the actions of a large number of Kurds, originating from the Turkish zone, who have taken refuge on our territory following the events in

³⁰ Vincennes, box 4 H 168, same dossier and subdossier. Commandant Supérieur des Troupes du Levant [de Bigault du Granrut] to Général Commandant les Troupes des Régions Nord de la Syrie [Pichot-Duclos], 31 Dec. 1929.

³¹ Vincennes, box 4 H 168, same dossier and subdossier. Pichot-Duclos to de Bigault du Granrut, 26 Dec. 1929.

³² Pierre Fournié and Jean-Louis Riccioli, *La France et le Proche-Orient 1916–1946: une chronique photographique de la présence française en Syrie et au Liban, en Palestine, au Hedjaz et en Cilicie* (Tournai, 1996), 153.

Kurdistan'.³³ State authority did not simply exist in the upper Jazira after the First World War, and nor was it extended into the region at leisure by the unilateral will of the mandatory power. It was drawn in by the need to deal with, and the desire to derive political advantage from, the arrival of large numbers of refugees in a swathe of territory that was nominally — but hitherto *only* nominally — under French jurisdiction.

French officials believed, with some justification, that a great 'unmixing of peoples' was taking place in Anatolia and Mesopotamia, like that witnessed in central and eastern Europe at the same time. They hoped that it would be to their advantage, and sought to make it so. 'The regroupment of the populations of Upper Mesopotamia (Upper Jazira and North Iraq) that is in course, will necessarily be to the profit of the territory most quickly delimited and reorganized': so wrote the High Commission's informant, Fr. Antoine Poidebard, in 1928.³⁴ But in order to monitor, control, and profit from the arrival of refugees, the mandatory state needed first to be present. Poidebard explicitly drew the link between refugees, borders, and state administration: 'this settlement of Kurdish and Christian refugees requires the rapid solution of the delimitation of frontiers with Iraq and Turkey, the indispensable condition for the installation of a good administration closely controlled by the Mandatory Power.'³⁵

³³ The original wording is 'Kurdes, originaires de zone turque, réfugiés sur notre territoire à la suite des événements du Kurdistan' — *réfugiés* is here an adjective describing Kurds (see n. 22 above).

³⁴ Poidebard had already been involved with assisting Armenian refugees in Beirut. On this multifaceted figure see Fabrice Denise and Lévon Nordiguan (eds.), *Une aventure archéologique: Antoine Poidebard, photographe et aviateur* (Marseille, 2004).

³⁵ Both quotes from CADN-SL, box 1055, dossier *Mouvement Kurde (1928)*, subdossier *Mouvement kurde*, report entitled 'Situation des réfugiés en Haute-Djezireh. Octobre 1927', 6 Jan. 1928.

This was how the arrival of refugees helped define the territory of Syria, in a very real sense: it drew in the state, to assert its authority within the whole area it claimed, and, through topographical surveying and diplomatic bickering, to demarcate that area on the ground.³⁶ Hence Poidebard's journeys through, and flights over, the Jazirah; hence the two military posts established in May 1926, at Darbisiyya and ʿAmuda on the new border, and others like them.

Syrian Arabs had little to do with the definition of this border. It was drawn by diplomatic agreements between France and Turkey; it was laid out on the ground, monitored, and patrolled by French and Turkish officers and officials working in uneasy cooperation. Its demarcation was largely a response to the movement of Anatolian Christian and Kurdish refugees. But as the border was drawn, the arrival and settlement of refugees allowed Syrian Arab nationalists to claim the territory it defined for themselves.

An October 1931 headline in the Damascus newspaper *al-Yawm* gives a good example. 'The Armenian national home', it asked: 'is it a fantasy or a reality?'³⁷ A real threat, at least, was the message of the article that followed. 'The Armenian homeland', the author wrote,

has laid its foundations in Syria and its pillars are strengthening day by day thanks to those [i.e., the French] who watch over its establishment and

³⁶ This argument complements the discussion of the 'production of space' in Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria Under French Mandate: Insurgency, Space, and State Formation* (Cambridge, 2012).

³⁷ 'Al-watan al-qawmî al-armanî: hal huwa khayâl am haqîqa' [The Armenian national home: is it a fantasy or a reality?], *al-Yawm*, 14 Oct. 1931. NB — All Syrian newspapers were consulted at the Assad library (Maktabat al-Asad) in Damascus, prior to 2011.

their support for it. It has become today a thick line of towns and villages stretching along the northern Syrian borders, beginning with the villages of ‘Ayn Diwar, Dayrik, Damirqali, Qubur al-Bid, al-Qamishli, ‘Amuda, al-Qarahmaniyya, Ra’s al-‘Ayn, al-Burak, al-Hamdi, al-Hasaka, al-Tall al-Abyad and al-‘Ayn al-Bayda’ in the Syrian district of the Jazira, and Jarablus and some villages of the districts of A‘zaz, ‘Afrin, and Qiriqkhan — among them the villages of the ‘Amuq [plain], and Antioch and Alexandretta, until this line ends at the Mediterranean Sea.

This ‘thick line’ did indeed run the whole length of the mandate territories’ northern border. At its thicker eastern end it filled out much of the Jazira. But lying behind this almost incantatory recitation of place-names is more than the simple wish to alert the public to the refugee threat. Just as important was the need to inform a nationalist public that these places — mostly small settlements, many of them very remote from the cities and at least one of them (Qamishli) barely five years old — were a part of Syria: that the all-too-porous administrative dividing line the refugees had crossed constituted ‘the northern Syrian borders’, and the area around Hasaka ‘the Syrian district of the Jazira’.

These propositions were not self-evident. The railway line might have linked some of these places to Aleppo in the last few years of Ottoman rule, but the more important part of that city’s hinterland was to the north, in Cilicia, now part of the Republic of Turkey. Historically, its important connections beyond the immediate hinterland were with cities in

Anatolia, or with Mosul in northern Iraq.³⁸ Damascus, meanwhile, looked to the south (Palestine, and the Holy Places of the Hijaz), or to the west (Beirut, and the wider world beyond), or to the east (the old desert route to Baghdad).³⁹ Prior to 1920, Damascus was less important to Aleppo than many areas that fell outside the bounds of French mandate Syria, and vice versa; the ‘Syrian district of the Jazira’ meant still less to either of them. Palestine was more prominent on the mental map of most Damascenes than the Jazira, and remained so for long thereafter.⁴⁰

It is Palestine, of course, that the article’s headline evoked: in nationalist eyes, the ‘Jewish national home’ that was being built there was the reason why Palestine had been detached from a greater Syria. There were many similar articles. In January 1932 *al-Ayyâm* called the Armenian national home a ‘danger that is growing day by day’⁴¹; *al-Sha‘b* had warned some years earlier that ‘The Armenian national home harms the Syrians and angers the Turks’, and in another article on the same subject made the link to Zionism in Palestine explicitly.⁴² All three of our refugee groups inspired this kind of comment. Another article in *al-Ayyâm* warned that ‘Kurdish refugees are working to establish a national home’ in Syria, while yet another raised the spectre of refugee groups cooperating — or rather conspiring —

³⁸ Abraham Marcus, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1989), 147–8; Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 17.

³⁹ The pattern of development of the city’s railway links after 1890 is instructive in this regard: Ross Burns, *Damascus: A History* (London, 2005), 257–9.

⁴⁰ Even in the 1990s the region was, for Syrians in the large cities, ‘little known [and] little appreciated, no doubt because still poorly integrated into the Syrian national whole’. Velud, ‘Introduction’, 12.

⁴¹ ‘Al-watan al-qawmî al-armanî’ [The Armenian national home], *al-Ayyâm*, 5 Jan. 1932. *Al-Yawm* — ‘the Day’, or ‘Today’ — and *al-Ayyâm* (‘the Days’) were essentially the same newspaper, the former running when the latter was suspended by the French.

⁴² ‘Al-watan al-qawmî al-armanî fil-shimâl: yu’lim al-sûriyyîn wa yuthîr sukht al-atrâk’ [The Armenian national home in the north: it harms the Syrians and angers the Turks], *al-Sha‘b*, 20 Jan. 1928; ‘Al-watan al-qawmî al-armanî fî Sûriyya’ [The Armenian national home in Syria], *al-Sha‘b*, 28 Dec. 1930.

to form a ‘Kurdish-Armenian national home’⁴³ on territory detached from Syria. A bit later, *al-Sha‘b* would also warn of an Assyrian national home.⁴⁴ Given the multiple partitioning and re-partitioning of the post-Ottoman Levant, these fears were plausible enough.

The authors of such articles protested against the refugees, the French authorities who allowed them in, and the League of Nations mandate that the French took as justification: Najib al-Rayyis, editor of the nationalist newspaper *al-Qabas*, did all these things in an article protesting against the settlement of Assyrian refugees from Iraq.⁴⁵ But I would argue that something else was going on, too. Talk of the refugee threat was also a rhetorical strategy aimed at those who read the newspapers, or listened to others read them aloud in cafés, or talked about them. Like nationalist condemnations of ‘separatism’ in districts which were still gradually becoming part of a Syrian state, it was intended to persuade residents of Damascus, Aleppo, and other parts of the mandate territories that these places were part of the national territory, and needed defending as such.⁴⁶ (‘Separatism’, indeed, was often — though not exclusively — associated with refugee populations.)

Nor did the role of refugees in defining Syria as a territorial unit end once they had crossed the border. Most of the refugees, especially Armenians and Assyrians, remained in

⁴³ ‘Al-haraka al-kurdiyya fî Sûriyya’ [The Kurdish movement in Syria], *al-Ayyâm*, 11 July 1932; ‘Mu’âmarat fasl al-Jazîra al-‘ulyâ: kayf dubbir al-watan al-kurdî al-armanî’ [The plot to detach the upper Jazira. How the Kurdish-Armenian homeland was concocted], *al-Ayyâm*, 29 July 1932.

⁴⁴ ‘Sûriyya allatî la hurma lahâ: watan qawmî al-âshûriyyîn fî Sûriyya’ [Syria, where nothing is sacred: The Assyrians’ national home in Syria], *al-Sha‘b*, 13 Dec. 1935.

⁴⁵ Najib al-Rayyis, ‘Hal Sûriyya lil-sûriyyîn am li-‘Usbat al-Umam?!’ [Does Syria belong to the Syrians or to the League of Nations?], *al-Qabas*, 5 May 1935. Reprinted in Najib al-Rayyis, *Yâ dhalâm al-sijn (1920–1952): al-‘mâl al-mukhtâra 1* [O prison darkness (1920–1952): Selected works 1] (London, 1994), 313–17.

⁴⁶ White, *Emergence of Minorities*, ch. 3.

Syria long-term. Resettlement of refugees in agricultural colonies would transform peripheral rural zones into developed and populous parts of a territorial unit centred on Damascus.⁴⁷

The first agricultural colonies involved Armenian refugees of rural origin, who, French officials felt, were doing worse in the Aleppo refugee camps than those who had come from Anatolian towns. After some abortive efforts to identify suitable locations in the Syrian and Lebanese countryside, by 1928 several such colonies existed in the sanjak of Alexandretta: three lowland villages in the Amouk plain, one settlement seven hundred metres up on Jabal Musa for refugees originating in the Anatolian highlands, and a semi-rural colony in the small town of Kirik-Khan.⁴⁸ (Notice that two of these three names figure in the list reeled off by the article in *al-Yawm*, discussed above.)

Such colonies were naturally established in peripheral zones. As a French report to the League of Nations put it, ‘It is necessary to find land of good quality at affordable prices, without dispossessing the existing populations nor obliging them by any kind of pressure to

⁴⁷ On agricultural resettlement as a characteristic response to population displacements in this period see Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees from the First World War Through the Cold War*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia, 2002), 114–21. Many contemporary examples are described in John Hope Simpson, *The Refugee Problem: Report of a Survey* (London, 1939).

⁴⁸ For a narrative description of the colony at Kirik-Khan (Qiriq Khân in Arabic, Kırıkhan in modern Turkish), see Louis Jalabert, ‘Un Peuple qui veut vivre: les Arméniens émigrés en Syrie et au Liban’, *Etudes: Revue catholique d’intérêt général*, 5 Oct. 1933, esp. 57–62. MAE, Report to the League, 1926, 101, gives details of a settlement at Ra’s al-^cAyn on the Lebanese coast near Tyre, but its failure is analysed in MAE, Report to the League, 1927, 67. In Syria itself, MAE, Report to the League, 1925b, 95, describes a plan to settle refugees on Syrian state lands in the Ghab plain, while MAE, Report to the League, 1926, 104, mentions plans to create colonies at Meskène or Jisr al-Shughur. None of these efforts seem to have succeeded. The settlements on Jabal Musa and Kirik-Khan are already mentioned in MAE, Report to the League, 1927, 68; their more successful progress, and the establishment of the Amouk settlements, are mentioned in MAE, Report to the League, 1928, 69. NB — By the later 1920s, these annual reports had become much longer, partly as a result of the greater French engagement with the Permanent Mandates Commission following the ‘legitimation crisis’ sparked by the French bombing of Damascus in 1925 (see Pedersen, *Guardians*, ch. 5). They also had a stable format, which they retained through the 1930s, with similar sections appearing in the same place each year, hence the very similar page references for reports about refugee settlements. Two short reports were issued for 1925 (1925b refers to the second): the revolt that broke out that summer interrupted their compilation.

sell their land. That necessitates the choice of a fertile but relatively little-populated region.’⁴⁹ But the areas where they were settled became less peripheral through their settlement. Their presence brought the attention, and investment, of the state. To follow one example from the central budget down to ground level, the French allocated funding to the district agricultural engineer in the sanjak of Alexandretta for the creation, with his assistance, of plantations of trees in the lowland refugee colonies of the Amouk plain.⁵⁰ (This plain was swampy and malarial, partly occupied by a large shallow lake: the following decade saw plans to drain it and promote its *mise en valeur*.⁵¹)

More colonies were set up for Armenians later, in 1939, after the sanjak was ceded to Turkey and most of its Armenian population fled, including the inhabitants of these earlier settlements.⁵² By that time, Syria had also witnessed several successive influxes of Kurdish refugees from Turkey. They often crossed the new border with guns in hand, and sometimes with their families and livestock. They were disarmed; their herds were counted, and customs duties collected — or waived, as a means of gaining cooperation.⁵³ A 1926 agreement with

⁴⁹ MAE, Report to the League, 1927, 68.

⁵⁰ MAE, Report to the League, 1928, 69.

⁵¹ A. Gruvel, *Les États de Syrie: Richesses marines et fluviales: Exploitation actuelle* (Paris, 1931), 267–72; ‘Syrie-Liban: quinze années de mandat: L’outillage national’, *Correspondance d’Orient*, cdlxxxii (1938), 40–42, and ‘Syrie-Liban: quinze ans de mandat’, in *Correspondance d’Orient*, cdlxxxix (1938), 403–5.

⁵² Two such were at ^cAnjar, on the Lebanese border, and Ra’s al-^cAyn on the coast, where the earlier settlement had failed. CADN-SL, box 530, dossier *D 7 : T – Alexandrette – Exode. Dossiers divers*. ‘Note pour Monsieur le Conseiller du Haut-Commissariat aux Affaires Financières’, on the subject ‘Installation des émigrés du Sandjak’, 17 Nov. 1939.

⁵³ CADN-SL, box 1055, dossier *Mouvement Kurde (1928)*, sub-dossier *Question Kurde – Immigrants – Réfugiés Kurdes*. Letter from Principal Inspector of Customs for Syria and the Alaouites to Lt.-Col. Ripert, assistant delegate of the High Commissioner for the Sanjak of Dayr al-Zur, ‘24 X^{bre} [actually December] 1927’. (Note that the word *immigrants* has been crossed out and replaced with *refugees* in the title of this subdossier.) Customs duties were waived permanently for insurgents who demonstrated a commitment to staying in Syria (including taking Syrian nationality), provided that they declared that the herds were not destined for sale in the near future. Insurgents who kept their Turkish citizenship gained free but temporary (renewable) admission for

Turkey meant that the French removed them, or at least their most vociferous leaders, from a 50km-wide exclusion zone on the frontier.⁵⁴ Agricultural resettlement plans were less elaborate for Kurds than they were for Christian refugees (they certainly never figured in French reports to the League of Nations), but they existed. Especially when they were resettled in towns like Dayr al-Zur or Damascus, these rural populations often fell into severe poverty: ‘Excellence have pity on Kurdish refugees who suffer from hunger and cold’, one leader telegraphed the High Commissioner in February 1928.⁵⁵ For both humanitarian and political reasons, the French attempted to arrange for Syrian state lands to be distributed to them — while recognizing that this ‘would be a somewhat vain measure if not completed by the gift of agricultural implements and advances of money.’⁵⁶

Perhaps the largest single integrated scheme to resettle refugees in agricultural colonies, though, was implemented for Assyrians from Iraq. In 1933, a dispute involving several hundred armed Assyrian men who had crossed into Syria but been sent back by the French authorities triggered the Iraqi army’s brutal campaign against Assyrians in the country. It left many dead, and thousands more displaced to a camp outside Mosul. Over the

their herds, which were numbered, and a formal engagement given that if they crossed back over the border duties would be paid. See also White, *Emergence of Minorities*, 106–11.

⁵⁴ Many Kurds spent time in ‘résidence obligatoire’ in Damascus or in an internment camp at Qadmus. For Qadmus, see CADN-SL, box 1055, dossier *Mouvement Kurde (1928)*, subdossier *Réclamations turques a/s des chefs Kurdes de Hte Djézireh – Hadjo, Emin Agha, Edem Tcherkesse, Mudir d’Amouda, Fils d’Ibrahim Pacha*. Décisions no. 824 (11 Oct. 1927) and 827 (12 Oct. 1927), both citing the 1926 agreement. In 1930, the tribal leader Hadjo Agha spent ten months in forced residence in Damascus after a failed incursion into Turkey. On his release, he could not return to his home in Kubur el-Bid because it was within the 50km exclusion zone — instead he went to Hasaka, where the costs of settling him were born by the Syrian state. CADN-SL, box 572, dossier *Passage de Hadjo Agha et des fils Djemil Pacha en Turquie 1930*. Letter, HC’s delegate in Syria to HC, 5 June 1931.

⁵⁵ CADN-SL, box 1055, dossier *Mouvement Kurde (1928)*, subdossier *Question Kurde – ~~Immigrants~~ Réfugiés Kurdes*. Telegram, Cheikh Abdulrahim to Ponsot (20 Feb. 1928).

⁵⁶ CADN-SL, box 1055, dossier *Mouvement Kurde (1928)*, subdossier *Question Kurde – ~~Immigrants~~ Réfugiés Kurdes*. Maugras (on behalf of HC) to delegate in Damascus (1 May 1928), and following documents.

next few years, several thousand of those refugees would be transferred to Syria — a transfer which the French agreed to, partly because they feared that if they did not, disorderly expulsions would be the alternative.⁵⁷

Through the mid-1930s, the League of Nations made several ambitious plans to resettle all of Iraq's Assyrians — first world war refugees and longstanding residents alike — in third countries: options in British Guyana, Argentina, and Brazil were all investigated, but abandoned as unfeasible.⁵⁸ In the meantime, with League assistance, French officials proceeded with a smaller-scale transfer of refugee Assyrians onto Syrian territory. The French always referred to it publicly as provisional: in the two pages about the Assyrians in their annual report to the League on Syria for 1936, for example, their settlement was described as 'provisional' or 'temporary' three times.⁵⁹ But this was the most diaphanous of rhetorical veils, intended to appease Assyrian objections (some, though by no means all, Assyrian leaders continued to press for resettlement in a third country), Syrian Arab nationalist opposition, and — the chosen location being close to their borders — Turkey and Iraq.⁶⁰ By this time nearly nine thousand people were already settled in sixteen new villages built under this 'temporary' plan.

⁵⁷ See the warning from the British diplomat Robert Vansittart, forwarded by the French ambassador in London in March 1935. Archives diplomatiques, La Courneuve, series Service français de la Société des Nations (hereafter La Courneuve, SFSDN), vol. 486, fos. 1–7.

⁵⁸ The Brazilian scheme, for example, failed because of new immigration restrictions. La Courneuve, SFSDN, vol. 485, fos. 3–11: de Martel to MAE, 29 June 1934.

⁵⁹ MAE, Report to the League, 1936, 55–7. Each of these references is in fact carefully qualified: 'provisional in principle', 'only considered thus far as temporary', 'temporary in principle'.

⁶⁰ On nationalist objections, see for example 'Sûriyya allatî la hurma lahâ' [Syria, where nothing is sacred], *al-Sha'b*, 13 Dec. 1935, and CADN-SL, box 731, dossier *Pétition Fakri Baroudi contre politique générale du Haut-Commissaire et installation des Assyro-chaldéens en syrie 1935*. For French warnings of Turkish and Iraqi objections, see La Courneuve, SFSDN, vol. 485, fos. 3–11: de Martel to MAE, 29 June 1934, and fo. 18: Lépissier to MAE, 6 July 1934. Lépissier was French ambassador in Baghdad.

These villages were located in the Jazira, on the banks of the Khabur river, a major tributary of the Euphrates. The largest of them was Tell Tamer, where a hospital, a workshop for agricultural machinery, and a gendarme post had also been built. Thirteen of the villages had a school, with 755 students enrolled in total by the end of 1936 — that is, within only three years of the first Iraqi Assyrians arriving in Syria.⁶¹ In 1938, a year of good rains and agricultural prosperity, plans were made to abandon four of the villages and rebuild them further south, to move them away from hard-to-drain marshlands: malaria had been endemic among the refugees on their arrival, and their region of settlement was certainly malarial too. Shifting the villages would improve public health among the Assyrians as a group, and was part of a wider effort that had seen 7,525 people (over 80% of the Assyrian population) undergo medical examinations that year, with a file being kept for each of them. 207 cases of trachoma had been treated, and 348 children vaccinated against smallpox.⁶² And it was in this year, too, that the first Assyrians to arrive in Syria began to become eligible for Syrian citizenship.

To understand how this scheme worked to make the settled area part of a Syrian state, it is useful to outline the reasons why an earlier alternative failed. In 1933–35, while the League of Nations was considering options for expatriating the Assyrians to a third country, three possibilities for a permanent settlement in Syria were also investigated seriously. The first of these would have seen them settled in the Ghab, at that time a flat, marshy but potentially highly fertile depression watered by the Orontes river, lying between the coastal mountains and the railway that linked Aleppo and Hama before continuing south to Homs

⁶¹ MAE, Report to the League, 1936, 57.

⁶² MAE, Report to the League, 1938, 51–2. (This is the last year for which a report to the League was prepared.)

and Damascus.⁶³ A combination of drainage and dam-building could make part of this land into a permanent home for the Assyrians. But the plan fell through in 1936, for a combination of political and economic reasons.⁶⁴ Politically, 1936 was a year of intense nationalist activity in Syria. In the spring, serious unrest finally persuaded the French to enter negotiations with a nationalist delegation over a treaty that would lead to independence. But the nationalists ‘made it clear that they would not favour giving state domains to accommodate the Assyrians while the Orontes valley was being drained.’⁶⁵ A report in *The Times* offered a clarification that French sources gloss over: notwithstanding the earlier assertion that resettlement of refugees must proceed ‘without dispossessing the existing populations nor obliging them by any kind of pressure to sell their land’⁶⁶, the High Commission had planned to make land available for Assyrians by pressuring banks to foreclose on heavily mortgaged landowners in the Ghab. This became politically impossible in 1936: the nationalists were ‘not at all anxious that men of their country and religion should lose land for the benefit of a batch of Christian aliens’, and now the French actually had to take their views into account.⁶⁷ Renting private land nearby was too expensive in this densely inhabited agricultural region. Extensive

⁶³ Maurice Bérard, ‘Installing the Assyrians in the Orontes Valley (translated from a paper)’, *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, xxiii (1936). The plan had been abandoned by the time this article came out.

⁶⁴ La Courneuve, SFSDN, vols. 487–90 contain extensive documentation on the plan and its eventual failure.

⁶⁵ Bayard Dodge, ‘The Settlement of the Assyrians on the Khabbur’, *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, xxvii (1940), 308. Dodge was personally involved in the scheme.

⁶⁶ MAE, Report to the League, 1927, 68.

⁶⁷ ‘Settling the Assyrians: A Rebuff to Optimism’, *The Times*, 6 June 1936. This is included (in a typed copy rather than as a cutting) in La Courneuve, SFSDN, vol. 489, fos. 274–7.

hydraulic engineering, and indemnifying owners of land that would expropriated for flooding, raised the total estimated cost to over 122 million francs.⁶⁸

This was why the French turned to the Khabur valley. At a first site, near the river's confluence with the Euphrates, the sparse population meant that land expropriations would not be necessary — but the proposed dam-plus-irrigation scheme would be even more costly, at about 230 million francs over ten years.⁶⁹ Further upstream, by contrast, where the Assyrians had initially been settled, irrigation works would be much cheaper. So the upper Khabur was chosen. Although far from the centres of urban and rural population in Syria, the political cost of settling refugees here was not insignificant. It kept them near Iraq (and Turkey); it also increased the 'minority element' in an outlying region that was 'already centrifugal':

The danger is thus in no way excluded of seeing the same state of affairs which today makes it opportune for the Assyrians to leave Iraq repeat itself, and assuring the protection of the refugees against the possible consequences of that state of affairs will be harder because of their distance from the coast.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Among many sources for these figures for total costs of the three schemes, see La Courneuve, SFSDN, vol. 486, fos. 13–23, 'Aide-Mémoire remis par M. [illegible] à M. Lopez Olivan le 21 Mars 1935'.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

But while centrifugal forces might one day incite the aggression of a Damascene government, in the short term resettling the refugees here would keep them well out of the way of most of the Syrian public. (The Ghab settlement location, by contrast, was only a few miles downriver of Hama, a city of strong nationalist sentiment.) And, precisely because this was such a remote and peripheral region, it was much cheaper. Developing agriculture on the upper Khabur needed only pumps and irrigation channels, not expensive dam-building or drainage schemes. Land was easier to find, too. Here, the Syrian state could more easily be persuaded to allocate land it owned to the refugees; and even after such allocations ceased, in 1936, making more land available only required the purchase, from semi-sedentarized Bedouin tribes, of ‘occupation rights’ on land they cultivated irregularly.⁷¹ The scheme pushed at the limits not only of settled agriculture in Syria, but also of French knowledge of the territory. When the foreign ministry prepared an aide-mémoire on the three resettlement schemes for the League of Nations in 1935, of five locations mentioned along the upper Khabur only one was ‘sufficiently well known for the projection concerning it to be considered a certainty as of now’. The cost of surveying the other locations, for example by air, would have to be included in this scheme, and costs would rise as distance from ‘the inhabited zone and supply centres’ increased.⁷² But the other costs shrank accordingly.

In the populated lands of western Syria, settling refugees meant interfering with a dense web of state-backed ownership rights and contractual obligations, well established since Ottoman times. These linked the land and those who farmed it to the urban landowning notables who dominated the National Bloc, but also, through the cadastral survey and

⁷¹ MAE, Report to the League, 1936, 56.

⁷² La Courneuve, SFSDN, vol. 486, fos. 13–23, ‘Aide-Mémoire...’

agricultural taxes, to the Syrian state. In the Jazira of the 1930s, that web was much skimpier. Insofar as it linked the region to a state bureaucracy centred on Damascus, it was new, too. Re-weaving it to make room for the refugees was somewhat simpler. Once they were settled, the web naturally thickened to incorporate them and the land they farmed: settling the refugees here made the upper Khabur ‘Syrian’, as it had not been before. The gendarme post built alongside the houses for refugees in Tell Tamer is a concrete example of the Syrian state’s presence there. In 1936 the land allocated to the Assyrians was held communally and had not yet been added to the land register; by 1938 it had all been divided into plots for individual families.⁷³ The state could ‘see’ the refugee population down to the individual level: births and deaths were registered, birth rates and death rates (both improving) calculated for the Assyrians as a whole. The 348 Assyrian children vaccinated against smallpox in 1938 could be counted among that year’s total of 102,605 smallpox vaccinations carried out in the whole country.⁷⁴

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IV. Syrian state, Syrian nation

Settling Assyrian refugees permanently on the Khabur, then, helped make this region part of a Syrian state governed from Damascus — a process that also functioned in the other cases examined here. But that process was considerably more complicated than I have so far made it appear. This is not because refugees themselves objected to being resettled in this way, though some of them did; nor is it because neighbouring states interfered, though

⁷³ MAE, Report to the League, 1936, 56; MAE, Report to the League, 1938, 52.

⁷⁴ MAE, Report to the League, 1938, 92–3.

Turkey and Iraq alike applied pressure both on the ground and via diplomatic channels through Paris and Geneva. Much more complicated than either of these issues was the set of questions that refugees raised over where state authority actually resided in Syria: whether it was with the French mandatory authorities — the High Commission and its agents — or with the Syrian state bureaucracy, staffed and nominally governed by Syrians. It bears repeating: the High Commission in Lebanon and Syria did not simply equate to a colonial state. It was a slender top layer, ‘advising’, albeit forcefully, Syrian and Lebanese state bureaucracies that were cut from Ottoman cloth. The chief point of contention between the French in Syria and their nationalist opponents was the balance between French freedom of action, both justified and also constrained by reference to the League of Nations, and the autonomy (or independence) of the Syrian state, as a nation-state intended to represent *Syrians*.

The presence of refugees weighed heaviest at precisely this point, where competing claims to state authority met. Allowing refugees into the country raised the question of control over its (new) borders. Providing them long-term assistance and resettlement not only had territorial implications, but also fed a debate about the responsibilities of the Syrian state towards all its citizens. Giving them Syrian nationality — under newly-minted nationality laws — raised the question of how exactly that nationality should be defined.

To understand the relationship between refugees and the Syrian state, it is useful first to consider how they figured in French policy-making in the country. French personnel in Syria certainly expressed humanitarian concern for refugees. But the High Commission and the Quai d’Orsay never lost sight of political calculations when deciding whether to assist them, and how. Allowing refugees to enter Syria and settle could be useful to the French imperial presence there. In remote areas they could become a loyal frontier population of

‘soldier-settlers’. (It is no coincidence that Poidebard’s archaeological interest lay in understanding the Roman-Byzantine imperial *limes* in Mesopotamia.⁷⁵) The French even tried to persuade the Syrian government that ‘the constitution in certain regions of a sort of Kurdish march’ could be useful for ‘the security of its borders’⁷⁶ — though they themselves realized that a concentration of nationalist-minded Kurds there could also lead to trouble, both in Syria and with its neighbours.⁷⁷ Kurds were nonetheless incorporated into the gendarmerie. Armenians were also brought into the French military, especially as irregulars during the suppression of the great revolt in 1925–7: a pernicious policy that deliberately worsened tensions between a vulnerable refugee population and the host society. (An older refugee population, Circassian Muslims, also served in this way.) Echoing Britain’s similar use of Assyrian refugees in Iraq, the practice also recalls the Ottoman state’s deployment of Balkan and Caucasian Muslim refugees against its Christian populations in the previous decade. Whether there was a conscious connection between the three cases, or simply similar imperial responses to similar sets of circumstances, is an open question.

Refugees were also useful, more specifically, to France as the mandatory power.

Among the civilian employees of the Syrian state that France had a duty to establish, Armenians were over-represented.⁷⁸ (When commissioner Théodore Nagear of the Sûreté

⁷⁵ Among other works, see R.P. [révérend père] Poidebard, ‘Mission archéologique en Haute Djéziré (1928): rapport’, *Syria*, xi (1930). The Armée du Levant provided aeronautical assistance on this mission — Poidebard was a pioneer of aerial archaeology — and a battalion of 40 Assyrian soldiers to work on its excavations, and the French military topographical bureau drew the map for the report. But funding was solicited from the *Syrian* state (see p. 33).

⁷⁶ CADN-SL, box 1055, dossier Mouvement Kurde (1928), subdossier Question Kurde – ~~Immigrants~~ Réfugiés Kurdes. Maugras (on behalf of HC) to delegate in Damascus (1 May 1928).

⁷⁷ White, *Emergence of Minorities*, ch. 4.

⁷⁸ Ellen-Marie Lust Okar, ‘Failure of Collaboration: Armenian Refugees in Syria’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, xxxii (1996), 58; Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 123.

interviewed refugees from Turkey in the late 1920s, the secretary assisting him was one Haroutioun Kalaydjian.⁷⁹) This could be justified by their high level of education, especially knowledge of French and other foreign languages, but it also helped ensure French influence over a state bureaucracy that was supposed to be the instrument of *Syrian* governments. The mandatory obligation to favour local self-government could be abused by the French to ensure that places on representative institutions were disproportionately allocated to (carefully vetted) members of groups they patronized, refugee communities among them.⁸⁰ As the settlement of Kurdish, Anatolian Christian, and Assyrian refugees led to rapid population growth in the upper Jazira, its administrative status was upgraded accordingly: once just a backward part of the sanjak of Dayr al-Zur, it first became a distinct administrative district (*caza*) and then a governorate (*muhafaza*) in its own right — changes that also manifest the development of the Syrian state apparatus there. But despite requests from Christian and Kurdish leaders, and notwithstanding all those nationalist newspaper articles about plans to detach it, the French did not make the upper Jazira autonomous of Damascus (except partially and briefly during the three years of nationalist government, 1936–39). Keeping it within Syria improved the imperial balance of forces: the Jazira returned deputies to the Syrian parliament, for example.

Assisting refugees had other advantages. In the region and in France, it boosted the French self-image as protector of the Christians of the Orient.⁸¹ When Kurdish refugees began to arrive in Syria, French officials hoped they might be a means of applying pressure

⁷⁹ Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute-Mésopotamie*, 281.

⁸⁰ Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, *passim*.

⁸¹ CADN-SL, box 567, dossier *La question des réfugiés dans les Etats du Levant sous Mandat Français*, subdossier *Divers Installation Réfugiés*. Telegram to HC (de Martel), 26 Aug. 1934.

on their often threatening northern neighbour: ‘The Kurdish question, still unresolved despite all the rigorous measures taken by the Angora Government, may one day offer us some very useful assets’.⁸² The agricultural resettlement schemes outlined above presented a way of promoting economic development in Syria while channeling its benefits towards groups over whom the French felt they would retain greater control — and away from, for example, the Sunni Muslim landowners who dominated the National Bloc. Similarly, the urban development schemes that turned Armenian refugee camps in Aleppo (and Beirut) into prosperous quarters with amenities a generation ahead of neighbouring districts helped transform the refugees into what the French hoped would be a loyal, Christian middle class.⁸³

Refugee assistance was also important for justifying the mandate internationally, at the League of Nations in Geneva. In February 1935, prominent nationalists in Damascus sent a telegram to the High Commission (for forwarding to Paris and to the League) expressing their — or rather, ‘the country’s’ — worries about the settlement of Assyrians in Syria: ‘All Syria protests energetically against such eventuality which would bring incalculable difficulties [in] political social economic domains’.⁸⁴ The High Commissioner, Damien de Martel, forwarded this telegram to Paris, noting explicitly that it would provide the French representative in Geneva with ‘one more argument’ for justifying French policy to the Permanent Mandates Commission:

⁸² Vincennes, box 4 H 168, dossier 1: *Opérations des troupes du territoire de l’Euphrate dans la Haute-Djézireh (occupation du Bec de Canard) 1927–1930*, subdossier: *Organisation des Postes du Bec de Canard et occupation de [ces postes — near-illegible]*. ‘Note sur l’action politique menée dans la Région Nord de Djézireh d’Août à Novembre 1926 et sur les résultats obtenus pendant cette période’, Service des Renseignements for the Caza of Khérou (Sandjak of Deir), 1 Dec. 1926.

⁸³ Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton, 2006), 289. Armenian refugees overwhelmingly remained in cities and towns, especially Aleppo; almost all the Assyrian refugees, and probably most Kurds, settled in rural areas.

⁸⁴ La Courneuve, SFSDN, vol. 485, fo. 150 (telegram, 12 Feb. 1935). See also following note.

If the Upper Jazira is currently attached to the State of Syria, it owes it solely to the efforts deployed by the Mandatory Power, under the aegis of the League of Nations. For there is no doubt that, reduced to their own strength, Damascene circles would have had great trouble surmounting the considerable difficulties which the Mandatory Power had to overcome when the border was being determined and demarcated.

By protesting so vehemently against the settlement on virgin lands of refugees who can only contribute to the economic development of the country, Damascus nationalism demonstrates how easily it would risk becoming oppressive, were it not contained within the necessary limits.⁸⁵

Assisting refugees provided a way of deprecating Syrian Arab nationalism as well as justifying the mandate. This helps to explain why the French, as mandatory power, cooperated with League efforts to resolve refugee crises like that of the Iraqi Assyrians, and why the foreign ministry's annual reports to the League always included a section on *Assistance aux réfugiés*.

Working with international institutions in this way served another important purpose for the French: it opened up sources of funding. In the early 1920s, philarmenian groups provided charitable donations that were pooled together and channelled to the mandatory power by the International Labour Office: this helped pay for refugee assistance both in urban camps and in rural resettlement colonies.⁸⁶ In the 1930s, Britain and Iraq both

⁸⁵ La Courneuve, SFSDN, vol. 485, fos. 148–9. HC to MAE (15 Feb. 1935). The note forwarding it to the SFSDN (22 Feb. 1925) is fo. 147.

⁸⁶ MAE, Report to the League, 1927, 69.

transmitted large sums to cover the cost of assisting the Assyrians, and the League itself provided much more money through a special committee set up by the League Council. (Kurds seem not to have benefited from such international support.)

This was funding that could be used, via refugee assistance, to promote economic development in Syria — but in a way which remained in the gift of the High Commission. As much as it took the burden of caring for refugees away from the Syrian state, it took the authority to make political decisions about refugee issues away from Syrians. The High Commission and the Quai d'Orsay were willing to share that authority with the League and with other international actors: this was a necessary precondition for receiving the money. But Syrians were excluded. The resettlement of the Assyrians was overseen by a three-man Council of Trustees operating under the aegis of the League. The League appointed its president and one member; the High Commission, the third member.⁸⁷ No Syrians were involved, either as members or in choosing them.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Syrian Arab nationalists were scandalized by French policy towards refugees. The French presented refugee assistance as humanitarian and technical, and attempted to keep it under the purview of purely technical agencies, League ones such as the Nansen Office or the Council of Trustees if necessary. But the issues raised by the arrival and settlement of refugees were highly political, and French responses to them were highly politicized.

We see this more clearly if we consider the ways in which refugee assistance, even when it was being kept under French or international control, always implicitly or explicitly

⁸⁷ League of Nations communiqué C.103.M.44, *Etablissements des Assyriens de l'Irak: Statut du Conseil des Trustees*, 29 Feb. 1936. Consulted in La Courneuve, SFSDN, vol. 489, fos. 35–7.

depended on the Syrian state. For refugees to be hired as employees of the Syrian state — whether Armenians as clerks and interpreters or Kurds as gendarmes — or to receive grants of state land, they had to be given Syrian nationality.⁸⁸ When the High Commission was attempting to arrange for state land to be distributed to Kurdish refugees, the Syrian government — at that point made up of figures who were closely controlled by the French — nonetheless protested against assisting refugees from Turkey, at a time when rural Syrians were suffering great hardship in the aftermath of the great revolt and its brutal suppression. When refugee Kurds were exempted from customs duties on the possessions they brought with them, the Syrian state lost revenue. The Assyrian resettlement scheme also required refugees to be offered special privileges by the Syrian state: their possessions, too (including a reported 80,000 head of livestock), were to be exempt from customs duties; they were granted long term tax relief. And yet the Syrian state would incur costs: for example, the League of Nations refused to cover the cost of policing the Assyrian settlements, on the grounds that ‘responsibility for the police service should devolve on the public authorities of the State receiving the Assyrians as settlers’.⁸⁹ When the French optimistically estimated the cost of the Ghab plan at 87 million francs in 1935, they expected 22 million to come directly from the Syrian state budget — at a time when drought in southern Syria was driving thousands from the land, and the mandatory authorities offered no help.⁹⁰ Refugee assistance could come indirectly from local states, too, as an example from Lebanon shows: in 1927 the

⁸⁸ On nationality as a pre-requisite for receiving state land, see La Courneuve, SFSDN, vol. 493, quarterly report to the League of the Council of Trustees (fos. 152–61), 7 Nov. 1939.

⁸⁹ La Courneuve, SFSDN, vol. 488, fos. 228–37. ‘Draft observations of the Committee of the Council for the settlement of the Assyrians of Iraq on the budget of the year 1936 submitted to it by the Assyrian Settlement Trustee Board’ (n.d.).

⁹⁰ MAE, Report to the League, 1935, 52; Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 451.

High Commission allocated three millions francs to the refugee quarters of Beirut from Lebanon's inherited share of the Ottoman public debt.⁹¹

In all sorts of ways, then, the French needed the cooperation of the Syrian state that existed under mandatory supervision, for all that they did their utmost to keep political control over refugee issues out of Syrian hands. (This may explain the great ambiguity in the published French reports to the League over how refugee assistance was financed, and who had carried it out.⁹²) This, though, made refugee assistance politically explosive. It is not surprising that despite pressure from the Council of Trustees to grant Syrian nationality to the Assyrian refugees as soon as they began to become eligible, in 1938, the High Commission judged it politically inopportune to do so. Only in 1939, after the High Commission had suspended politics and resumed direct rule in Syria, were Assyrians given Syrian nationality — by decree, as Armenian refugees had earlier become Syrian nationals.⁹³

Even leaving aside the highly instrumental ends to which the High Commission hoped to put refugees, refugee assistance thus entailed fundamental political decisions that concerned the Syrian state. But Syrians were excluded from making those decisions. In these circumstances, one can see why the arrival and settlement of refugees sparked resentment and opposition, both socially, in areas where refugees were settled, and politically, in nationalist discourse. The point of nationalist protestations was not just to incite hostility to refugees,

⁹¹ MAE, Report to the League, 1927, 69.

⁹² For example, refugees are never mentioned in the sections of the reports that detail the activities of municipal councils (as organs of the local states). But under *Assistance aux réfugiés*, the reports boast of extensive urban improvements to refugee quarters of Aleppo and other towns: it is very likely that these were carried out by the local administrations, and paid for in whole or in part from the municipal budget.

⁹³ Documents on the naturalization of Assyrians can be found in La Courneuve, SFSDN, vol. 493, especially fos. 140–61. The Council of Trustees' quarterly report to the League dated 7 Nov. 1939 (fos. 152–61) gives a good overview.

though. Arguing that French refugee policy went against the interests of the Syrian nation allowed nationalists to assert their own claim to state authority, and their own definition of the Syrian state as a nation-state that deserved to be independent: if the mandatory power and the mandate charter were hindering that, they should be dispensed with.

This claim rested on an implicit assumption that the Syrian nation existed. We should be aware of the constitutive role that refugees played here, though. Earlier, we saw how protesting about refugees' infringement of the national territory allowed nationalists not just to assert their own right to rule over that territory, but to disseminate an awareness of 'Syria' as a defined territorial unit among the public they addressed. Something similar happened with national identity, not just at times when refugees were new arrivals, but also later — and the nation could be defined in ways that included refugees, not just in ways that excluded them.

The 'thick line' article cited above is a good example of definition by exclusion. Its author did more than warn of the threat Armenian refugees posed to the border of the national territory. He also warned of the threat they posed to the Syrian nation. Defining the people of the border zone as the 'original Arab inhabitants', he marked out the edges of an Arabic-speaking nation which excluded the Kurdish or Turkish-speaking populations of northern Syria alongside the Armenian newcomers.⁹⁴ Moreover, as well as trying to defend the 'nation' so identified, the author was trying to promote — in opposition to the newcomers — a sense of nationhood among its members. He found that sense sadly lacking, compared with the 'hard work' and 'mutual solidarity' of the Armenians. (It is striking how closely these

⁹⁴ The term used is *dukkhalâ*, which literally means 'entrants' but also, by extension, 'newcomers' and 'foreigners'.

terms echo those that French observers such as Louis Jalabert used when writing approvingly about the Armenians.⁹⁵) Precisely because of their greater dynamism as a community, the latter were a threat, but also an inspiration.

Refugees could also inspire a more inclusive definition of the Syrian nation. In a 1932 article which recognized the role refugees had played in making the Jazira part of Syria, the moderate newspaper *Alif Bâ*’ also listed some place names, but it argued that ‘the territories of Qamishli, Hasaka, ʿAmuda, Darbisiyya, Ra’s al-ʿAyn and Tall Abyad were empty and desolate, the abode of predatory animals’ before Anatolian Christians and Kurds were settled there.⁹⁶ Rejecting the arguments of newspapers that were hostile to the refugees, *Alif Bâ*’ affirmed that the newcomers had benefited the nation by helping the Jazira develop as a commercial partner for Aleppo, offsetting the damage caused by the new border.

The arrival of refugees — more specifically of the Armenians — also offered nationalists a different way of defining the nation: not by marking its exclusive boundaries, but by affirming its moral character. The Armenians who arrived in Aleppo during and after World War One, wrote Muhammad Kurd ʿAli in his great history of Syria (published in 1928), had fled persecution and extermination at the hands of the Turks. Arriving in a state of fear, they had been met in Syria not by hostility and persecution but by Arab hospitality: ‘The Arabs showed... kindness and help for the weak, as is inherent to their morals [*mâ futirat*

⁹⁵ Louis Jalabert, ‘Un peuple qui veut vivre’.

⁹⁶ ‘Lâ haraka infisâliyya fil-Jazîra: fitnat al-Jazîra wa asbâbuhâ’ [No separatist movement in the Jazira: The unrest in the Jazira and its causes], *Alif Bâ*’, 1 Sept. 1932. Note that this was before the arrival of Iraqi Assyrians.

‘*alayhi akhlâquhum*], and the Armenians were touched by no harm, even in the farthest east and south of Syria where ignorance and barbarism are great.’⁹⁷

Writing in the 1920s, when the influx of Armenians was still in its final stages, Kurd ‘Ali nonetheless evidenced a certain hostility towards them. His description of the 1919 riots in Aleppo, in which over fifty Armenians were killed, blames the riots on the refugees themselves, under the heading ‘The sedition of the Armenians and their aggression against the Arabs’. *Al-Muqtabas*, the newspaper Kurd ‘Ali had founded before the war, edited from 1925 by his brother, published many articles in the 1920s warning of the dangers of Armenian immigration.⁹⁸ But this hostility towards Armenians was forgotten, and the discourse of Arab hospitality reaffirmed, when Kurd ‘Ali published his memoirs in 1946. Here he wrote that ‘the Armenians encountered in abundance what the Arabs know of nobility of the soul and protection of the stranger; they considered Syria their second fatherland. Some of them grew wealthy in our land by toil and hard work, and we did not resent them.’⁹⁹ Where once Kurd ‘Ali accused Armenian refugees of benefitting unfairly from imperial aid and adopting a disdainful attitude toward the Arabs, now he states that the Armenians have, unresented, prospered through their own effort. The tone is admiring,

⁹⁷ Muhammad Kurd ‘Ali, *Khitat al-Shâm* [lit: The topography of Syria], 6 vols. (Damascus, 1983 [1925–28]), iii, 163. I would like to thank Kaïs Ezzerelli for bringing this reference to my attention.

⁹⁸ For example, ‘Jinsiyyat al-arman’ [The nationality of the Armenians], 20 Mar. 1925, arguing against the refugees being granted national rights; ‘Khatâr al-hijra al-armaniyya ‘ala al-qawmiyya al-‘arabiyya fi Halab’ [The danger of Armenian immigration to Arab nationhood in Aleppo], 27 Mar. 1927; ‘Iskân al-arman bi-Sûriyya’ [Settlement of the Armenians in Syria], 30 June 1927, which asks — rhetorically — ‘Do the people of the country accept it?’ On the 1919 riots, see Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East*, 198–209; see also ch. 5 for accounts which (like the second article listed here) presented post-Ottoman Aleppo as an Arab city.

⁹⁹ Muhammad Kurd ‘Ali, *Mudhakkirât* [Memoirs], 4 vols. (Damascus, 1949), iii, 686.

though they still appear as a foreign community: ‘we’, the Arabs, remain distinct from ‘them’, the Armenians, and Syria is their *second* fatherland.¹⁰⁰

By 1946, Armenian refugee camps had turned into settled, prosperous quarters: the former refugees were no longer newcomers receiving disproportionate favours from the state, but a self-sufficient, well-established, and in many ways integrated part of Syria’s urban life. Perhaps more important in explaining Kurd^c Ali’s changed attitude, Syria was now on the verge of real independence. The country had become a considerably more integrated territorial unit, and a national consciousness had spread within it in opposition to imperial rule. Further French threats to the country’s territorial integrity, of which the detachment of Lebanon and the cession to Turkey of Alexandretta were painful examples, had been warded off. Certainly Armenians posed no threat to it: the 1921–23 settlement in the Middle East had stabilized (for the time being) without an independent Armenia, and the genocide of 1915 and emigrations of the 1920s had left far too few Armenians in Anatolia for an Armenian national home to be constituted there, let alone one incorporating parts of northern Syria. No longer growing through outside immigration, the Armenian community in Syria did not threaten the Syrian Arab nation. Granted Syrian citizenship by the French after 1925, the Armenians kept it at independence. But down to the outbreak of war in 2011, the refugee origins of Syrian Armenians marked them out as a distinct group in Syria, not part of the Syrian Arab nation — even if their presence in the country was not contested.¹⁰¹ The discourse of Arab

¹⁰⁰ Refugees, for their own reasons, can also adopt the notion of their host country (or even a refugee camp) as a *second* fatherland: see Adam Ramadan, ‘In the Ruins of Nahr al-Barid: Understanding the Meaning of the Camp’, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, xxx (2010), 52–3.

¹⁰¹ Nicola Migliorino, “‘Kullna Suriyyin?’ The Armenian Community and the State in Contemporary Syria’, *Revue des mondes musulman et de la Méditerranée*, cxv–cxvi (2006); *(Re)Constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-Cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis* (Oxford, 2008). This is also an example of what Dawn Chatty calls ‘integration without assimilation’: Chatty, *Displacement and Dispossession*, ch. 1, *passim*.

hospitality, occluding the real tensions that (understandably) marked the mandate years, continued to be reproduced spontaneously on both sides. For Syrian Armenians it was a means by which the community's distinct status *as* a community was reproduced; it may also have served a propitiatory function vis-à-vis the wider society and the Syrian state. For Syrian Arabs, meanwhile, it remained a way of asserting the nation's moral character while also defining its boundaries.¹⁰²

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V. Conclusion

I began researching this article before the war in Syria made the country a major exporter of refugees. Initially, what struck me about the subject was the range of comparisons within the same period, which show that the Middle East and Europe share one history of population displacement and state formation. But since 2011, the present-day resonances have become more apparent. This is not a history that can be bracketed off to the interwar years.

The contemporary comparisons are numerous: mass population displacement was one of the key drivers of state formation and state-building across much of western Eurasia in the first half of the twentieth century, from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Displaced populations created states, or attempted to. States new and old acted to incorporate, and instrumentalize, displaced populations that they recognized as their own nationals; against other displaced

¹⁰² This moral argument about refugees was, no doubt, of relatively modest importance for the articulation of Syrian Arab nationalism by comparison with the experience of wartime disruption, Ottoman delegitimation, and French occupation (though perhaps of greater significance for the position of Armenians in Syrian society). But in recent debates about refugees in the UK and Spain, I have personally observed Scottish and Catalan nationalists arguing for a more welcoming stance towards refugees, thereby distinguishing themselves morally from the larger state.

populations they erected barriers, to keep refugees off their territories, or to exclude refugees already present on their territories from the services offered to the rest of the population.

In Baltic Europe, for example, the delineation of borders was mostly decided by wars between new states, but the management of refugee flows across them was a key part of the process by which they took root as a social reality and the locus of state practices, even where the refugees concerned were accepted as nationals by the state. In the early 1920s, the new Lithuanian state struggled desperately to develop the border apparatus that would allow it to control the flow of Lithuanian refugees across its frontier with the Soviet Union, while the new Polish government monitored incoming refugees as potentially both a political and an epidemic hazard.¹⁰³ State monitoring of the frontier allowed refugees defined as non-nationals — in the Russian borderlands especially Jews — to be delayed, or refused entry.¹⁰⁴ (The concern to move ‘suspect’ displaced populations away from borders was also widespread.)

Further south, Greece offers one example of how the agricultural resettlement of refugees allowed new lands to be bound into the national territory, in this case the northern border region conquered in 1912–13 and resettled with ‘exchangees’ from Turkey after 1923.¹⁰⁵ As a large-scale project with international backing, the League project to resettle 25–50,000 Armenian refugees in the Soviet Caucasus offers an instructive comparison with the

¹⁰³ Tomas Balkelis, ‘In Search of a Native Realm: The Return of World War One Refugees to Lithuania, 1918–24’, in Nicholas Baron and Peter Gatrell (eds.), *Homelands: War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia 1918–1924* (London, 2004), 88–9; Peter Gatrell, ‘War, Population Displacement and State Formation in the Russian Borderlands, 1914–24’, in Baron and Gatrell, *Homelands*, 24–5.

¹⁰⁴ Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell, ‘Population Displacement, State-Building, and Social Identity’, 78.

¹⁰⁵ Anastasia N. Karakasidou, *Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood: Passages to Nationhood in Greek Macedonia, 1870–1990* (Chicago, 1997), chs. 5 and 6; Elisabeth Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia: The Rural Settlement of Refugees 1922–1930* (Oxford, 2006).

Ghab plan in Syria, though it failed for different reasons.¹⁰⁶ Within many states, the question of assistance given to refugees, and the extent to which they were given access to legal employment, provoked a debate that was a dissonant counterpoint to the emergence of modern welfare programmes.

Finally, even in well-established national states the arrival of refugees prompted different actors to put forward their own definitions of national identity. In France, for example, the arrival of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany after 1933 allowed some nationalists to assert definitions of French identity that excluded not only refugee Jews, but French Jews too (and, for that matter, to attack many other French citizens as un-French). For others, the Republic's welcoming attitude to those seeking asylum was one of its defining features.¹⁰⁷

These examples — and many more could be offered — also demonstrate that the apparent complexity of claims in Syria was not unusual. In Syria, the activities of a great range of actors intersected around refugees and their places of settlement: the League of Nations and its agencies, the High Commission, the Syrian state bureaucracy and the nationalists who aspired to control it, other states, refugee political organizations, and private organizations were all involved. Their interactions around, and with, refugees were a

¹⁰⁶ Marrus, *The Unwanted*, 119–20; John Hope Simpson, *The Refugee Problem*, 36–8. The League Council discussed the scheme at its 26th session, 17th sitting (25 Sept. 1923); see La Courneuve, SFSDN, vol. 1797, fos. 026–034, a volume which contains other relevant documentation including a large map (fo. 019). Dr Jo Laycock kindly discussed the scheme with me and sent me a copy of a conference paper on the subject, entitled 'Displacing, Circulating and Resettling Armenians: Transcaucasia and Transnational Relief and Resettlement in the Inter-War Period', presented at the ARISC Caucasus Connections Conference, Apr. 2014.

¹⁰⁷ Among many others, see Greg Burgess, *Refuge in the Land of Liberty: France and its Refugees, From the Revolution to the End of Asylum, 1787–1939* (Basingstoke, 2008), chs. 8–10; Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933–1942* (Stanford, 1999); Timothy P. Maga, 'Closing the Door: The French Government and Refugee Policy, 1933–1939', *French Historical Studies*, xii (1982); Patrick Weil, *Qu'est-ce qu'un Français? Histoire de la nationalité française depuis la Révolution*, rev. edn (Paris, 2004), esp. 117–40.

powerful shaping force on the modern Syrian state. But similar arguments could be made in all the comparative examples given above. The League's involvement is obvious across the board, for example in the Greek Refugee Settlement Commission. On one state's territory, other states' agencies (or armies) would often concern themselves with refugees: examples include the American Polish Typhus Relief Expedition, or the more general provision of aid to evacuated White Russian troops by the French and British armies. In these cases, as in that of Syria between the wars, the involvement of other states, directly or through the League, recalls Sophia Hoffmann's subtle and persuasive argument that interacting with refugees on one state's territory can allow many other states to buttress their sovereignty within an international system.¹⁰⁸ International voluntary organizations, too, were everywhere involved with refugees: the Red Cross, Near East Relief, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee are only some of the largest. The presence of the mandatory power in Syria may add another layer to this complexity, but it hardly increases it by an order of magnitude.

To these points of comparison, we should add others that link the experiences of refugees themselves in Syria to those of other refugees elsewhere. The multiple displacements across generations that affected Assyrians (in 1915 and after 1933) or Armenians (after 1915 and, for some, again in the late 1930s) are paralleled in repeated displacements of Caucasian and Balkan Muslims, of European Jews, or of Palestinians. But the history of refugees is not just one of displacement, encampment, and survival. Syria also offers as many examples as anywhere of the capacity of refugees to shape their own destinies, whether by 'voting with their feet' to stay in a major city rather than an agricultural colony (or indeed to emigrate to

¹⁰⁸ Hoffmann's case study is Iraqis in Syria between 2003 and 2010, whose ambiguous status — migrants or refugees? — she carefully analyses. Sophia Hoffmann, 'Disciplining Movement: State Sovereignty in the Context of Iraqi Migration to Syria' (Univ. of London, School of Oriental and African Studies Ph.D. thesis, 2011), esp. ch. 6.

Marseille or Boston rather than stay in Aleppo or Beirut), seeking an accommodation with the imperial power, lobbying the League of Nations, taking a collective decision to integrate themselves with the host society, or organizing themselves politically and socially to construct and maintain a collective cohesion — and perhaps work for nationalist aspirations.

Population displacement, as Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell have argued, is not ‘a pathology of modernity’: it has been ‘integral to the development and constitution of modern Europe’, and of the modern Middle East as well.¹⁰⁹ Population displacement has been a formative phenomenon in the region’s modern history: refugee flows into interwar Syria fit into a sequence that stretches back into the late Ottoman period, and includes the displacements and genocidal deportations of the First World War, the Greek-Turkish population exchange, the Palestinian exoduses of 1948 and 1967, and multiple displacements of Kurds, as well as the mass displacements caused by the wars of the past decade, from Iraq after 2003 to Syria since 2011. Only by adopting the ‘itinerant perspective’ can we understand how displacement has made and remade states in the region.

Integrating histories of the Middle East can also challenge a well-established historical narrative of modern displacement, in which the ‘refugee problem’ emerged with the collapse of European dynastic empires after the First World War and went global with the collapse of European colonial empires after the second. Histories which describe the European population displacements during and after the First World War as unprecedented in scale are ignoring the expulsion and flight of millions of Muslims from the Caucasus and the Balkans from the 1860s on. If histories of displacement can recast our understanding of the

¹⁰⁹ Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell, ‘Population Displacement, State-Building, and Social Identity’, 55. Laura Robson’s forthcoming *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* makes an important contribution to our understanding of this history.

modern world, then histories of the Middle East can recast our understanding of displacement.¹¹⁰

In our own time, the mass displacement of Syrians — descendants of the people discussed in this article, refugees and others — has stimulated the same phenomena of state formation and the same debates about national identity, sovereignty, and the role of the state. In Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, but also across the Balkans and the European Union, the material accretion of state authority at borders has intensified (or, within the Schengen zone, been renewed). Public debates about the control of borders, faced with forced migration, are also debates about sovereignty — does it lie with the EU or the nation-state? — and national identity; refugees' own experiences may provoke them to new political mobilizations. In Europe, as in the Middle East, the history of population displacement and state formation is also our present.

¹¹⁰ Donald Bloxham, 'The Great Unweaving: The Removal of Peoples in Europe, 1875–1949', in Bessel and Haake, *Removing Peoples*, esp. 198–9.