

Syria and Lebanon

A POLITICAL ESSAY BY

A. H. HOURANI

*Issued under the Auspices of
The Royal Institute of International Affairs*

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DEDICATION

To MY PARENTS and MISS RAY

PREFACE

THE course of events during the war, in underlining afresh the importance of the Middle East in international politics and strategy, has drawn attention to the lack of up-to-date studies on this region. The present is the first of several books which Chatham House plans to issue on Middle Eastern countries and problems. In Syria and Lebanon, with their diversities of religious, political, cultural and economic outlook, and the legacy of their status as Mandated Territories, most of the issues which affect the Middle East as a whole are to be seen in their most complex and baffling forms. No authoritative work has appeared in English on these questions during the last twenty years, and Mr. Hourani is, by background, training and recent experience, exceptionally qualified to present a reliable survey of their character and their wider bearings.

*Chatham House,
St. James's Square,
London, S.W.1.
July 1945*

ASTOR
Chairman of the Council

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

THIS book, like all political works written in war-time, suffers from certain defects. At a time when the face of the world changes so rapidly and the process of publication takes so long it is inevitable that books on current political problems should be partly out of date as soon as they are published. Moreover, there are important and delicate subjects which in normal times would require the fullest treatment but now can only be dealt with tentatively and circumspectly, if at all. Three chapters, in particular, are affected by these reservations. In Chapter VIII, which deals with foreign interests in Syria and Lebanon, I have analyzed those interests as they existed in 1939, leaving it to the reader to estimate how much they and the policies based upon them will have changed when the war comes to an end. In Chapter XII the narrative of events during the war years ends with the assumption of office by nationalist Governments in the middle of 1943; but the controversial happenings of later months are summarized in a postscript. At the same time, Anglo-French relations in the Levant since 1941 have only been treated in outline, without insistence upon painful detail. Finally, the discussion of Arab unity in Chapter XIII should be reviewed in the light of the series of conferences and discussions which began in Alexandria in September, 1944, after the book was substantially completed. In spite of these deficiencies I have decided to allow publication of the book to proceed because of the importance and urgency of some of the problems with which it deals.

At all stages of its growth my book has owed more than I can say to the many friends and colleagues who have helped me to an understanding of Middle Eastern politics, brought relevant information to my notice and read parts of the manuscript. I am particularly conscious of my many-sided debt to Dr. C. Malik, Dr. C. Zurayq, Professor H. A. R. Gibb, Mr. H. Beeley and Commander C. Schaeffer. More perhaps than they know they have influenced my thinking upon Arab questions, and what positive ideas the book contains mostly derive from one or other of them. I owe a debt of another kind, but equally great, to various members of the staff of the Royal Institute of International Affairs and

the Oxford University Press, who prepared the book for publication during my absence from England. To all who have helped in any way I must express my warmest thanks.

London, 1945

A. H. HOURANI

PREFACE TO THE THIRD IMPRESSION

THIS book was written in 1942-44, and published in 1946. The circumstances in which it was written made it impossible to deal fully and frankly with certain aspects of the subject, and in particular with Anglo-French relations in the Levant. Moreover, even when it was published it was not wholly up to date, and of course in the last eight years it has been left far behind by events, not only in Syria and Lebanon but also in the surrounding countries. In these years too my ideas have changed; were I to write the theoretical chapters in Part II again, I should write them in quite a different manner.

Nevertheless, the book does not seem to have been superseded by anything else of similar scope, and frequent requests for a reprint of it have been received from students of the Middle East. The historical sections—Parts I and III—still seem to me to be substantially correct within their chosen limits. Parts II and IV will show how not I alone but many observers of the Arab world looked at its problems a decade ago, before the tragedies of peace broke upon us. A reader who wished to know more about the development of Arab society and the Arab mind could supplement these chapters with such works as J. Weulersse, *Paysans de Syrie et du Proche Orient* (Paris, 1946); P. Rondot, *Les Institutions Politiques du Liban* (Paris, 1947); Charles Malik, "The Near East: The search for Truth" (in *Foreign Affairs*, January 1952); and Musa Alami, *The Lesson of Palestine* (translation in *Middle East Journal*, October 1949).

The section which is most out of date is of course the Postscript, which I wrote while we were still in the midst of the events it describes. For an adequate picture of the end of the French Mandate, the reader should consult, at the very least, the two volumes of George Kirk, *The Middle East in the War* (London, 1952) and *The Middle East, 1945-50* (London, 1954); and General Catroux, *Dans la Bataille de Méditerranée* (Paris, 1949).

I may also draw attention to two reviews of the book, one by Robert Montagne in *International Affairs*, January 1947, and the other by Pierre Rondot in *Politique Etrangère*, May 1947; both of them criticisms from the French point of view, done with perfect courtesy and care.

A. H. HOURANI

1954

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INTRODUCTION

I

THIS essay springs from a number of beliefs about Near Eastern affairs, which have been constantly in the author's mind during the writing of it, and to clarify which was the main reason for its being undertaken. They may be summarized as follows :

- (i) The spread of Western influences since the beginning of the nineteenth century has caused a fundamental change in the life of Syria and Lebanon, as in that of the other Arabic-speaking countries. The process of change has raised two questions which cannot wholly be separated from one another : first the question of forming a unity out of the two civilizations, their own and that of the West, between which the Arabic-speaking peoples are torn ; and secondly, the question of establishing a ' healthy ' relationship, based upon equality and mutual respect, between them and the peoples of the West.
- (ii) The solution of these two problems is of great importance not only for the Arabs themselves but also for the West, since the West now possesses living and inescapable relations, both moral and material, with the Arab lands.
- (iii) Arab nationalism is the political form of the response which the existence and the consciousness of these problems has aroused among the Arabs. It is an attempt to defend the existence of the Arab community against forces which threaten to disrupt it, and to control and direct the process of Westernization in the light of principles which the Arabs accept as valid.
- (iv) Arab nationalism is still an unformed movement and has not yet decided its attitude towards the West. There are two paths which it can follow, which may be called those of ' excommunication ' from and of ' communion ' with the West. The movement may become primarily one of opposition to the West, borrowing only the technical skill of Europe and America in order the better to resist both the encroachments of Western States and the challenge of the

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Western spirit. It may, on the other hand, become a movement for the reconstruction of Arab society through a fundamental assimilation of the best elements in Western life (although not necessarily by imitation of them) ; in this task the help of Western Governments and peoples will be essential.

For the sake both of the Arabs and of the West, it is essential that the nationalist movement should take the second of these paths. If it takes the first, it will become impossible to establish a ' healthy ' relationship with Europe, and nationalism itself will turn into a purposeless movement of hatred and fanaticism. This will distort not only the political development of the Arabs, but their life in all its aspects.

- (v) Which of the two paths it will take will depend upon many factors. Among the most important of them are : the attitude of the Western Powers to the Arabs ; the changes in Arab social and economic life ; and the development of the Arab intellect. But the most important factor, and perhaps the least easy to predict, is the relationship which is established between Islam and a Westernized society, and between Islam and Christianity.
- (vi) In the great changes which are remoulding the life of the Arabic-speaking peoples, Syria and Lebanon have a peculiarly important part to play. On account of their geographical situation, their traditions and certain characteristics of their people, they can serve as mediators of Western civilization to Arab Asia. But they can only carry out this function if their political relations with the other Arab regions and with the Western Powers are defined in a satisfactory manner.

It is therefore of particular importance to study the problem of Westernization in Syria and Lebanon, and to make clear the conditions under which a unity or a balance can be established between the traditional and the new elements in the life of the Syrians and Lebanese, and between them and the Western peoples with whom they are in contact.

This essay is an attempt to consider these problems in their

political aspect. It tries to make clear the effect of changing spiritual, intellectual and social conditions upon political life ; the attempts which are being made to establish new political forms adequate to the needs of a new age ; and the relations of Syria and Lebanon with one another, with the other Arabic-speaking countries and with the Western Powers.

The first part of the book summarizes the history of Syria and Lebanon, with particular attention to the successive forms of government to which they have been subjected, the relations of those Governments with local communities, and the various influences which have helped to mould the nature of the inhabitants ; the process by which French rule was established is described in some detail. Part Two analyzes the general problem which lies at the root of almost all the political difficulties of the present period : the problem of a traditional society changing fundamentally under the impact of Western civilization. The effects of this impact on the economic, social and intellectual life of Syria and Lebanon are sketched ; its effects in the political sphere are discussed at length. It is shown how the contact between old and new has given rise to the Arab nationalist movement. The nature and weaknesses, the internal and external difficulties of nationalism are described ; and especially the difficulties which spring from the existence of a number of important minorities. This part ends with a summary of the interests of the Western Powers in Syria and Lebanon. Part Three contains a narrative of political history from the beginning of the French occupation to the present day. It deals mainly with the conflict between French policy and the aspirations of the nationalists, and summarizes the steps which have been taken and the statements made since the Allied occupation of 1941. Finally, Part Four sets forth the principles upon which must rest a successful definition of the relations of France with Syria and Lebanon, and of France and Great Britain in Syria and Lebanon. It ends with some general considerations upon the path which the Arab movement might profitably take.

In the course of the book questions are raised too numerous, complex and profound to be disposed of in so slight a work. The author has laid his main emphasis upon certain of them, and in a perhaps arbitrary manner has chosen only to touch the surface of others ; for example, the social and economic bases of Arab nationalism are dealt with in a summary fashion.

Other questions which would call for full discussion in a comprehensive treatise have been wholly ignored. The work has been described as an essay in order to indicate these limitations in its scope, no less than to avoid making too high a claim for the studies and experience upon which it is based.

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It is important to make clear the way in which the term 'Syria' is used in the title and the text. Confusion has sometimes arisen from its use in several different senses : (i) In the past it has often been used to refer to the whole area stretching from the Taurus Mountains in the north to the Sinai Peninsula in the south, and from the Mediterranean Sea on the west to the Syrian Desert on the east. This area constitutes in many ways a single geographical unit, and its indigenous inhabitants form in some sense a single people. (ii) After the War of 1914-1918 this geographical unit was divided into two political areas ; the southern area, which includes the regions now known as Palestine and Transjordan, was placed under a British Mandate, and the northern under a French. The term 'Syria' is sometimes used to refer to the whole northern area. (iii) This northern area was subdivided by the Mandatory Power into several political units, to which was given the collective name of 'Les États du Levant' or 'The Levant States'. From 1925 to 1936 they were four in number : the States of Syria and Greater Lebanon, or, as they are now called, the Syrian and Lebanese Republics, and the Governments of Latakia (known at first as the 'State of the Alawis') and Jebel Druze. In 1936 the two Governments were formally annexed to the State of Syria, and were known no longer as 'Governments' but as 'Provinces'. Thus the term 'Syria' is often used in a third sense, to refer to the State of Syria, before 1936 excluding, and since then including, Latakia and Jebel Druze.

The explicit subject of this essay is 'Syria' in the second of the three senses defined above. This area will ordinarily be referred to as 'the French Mandated Territories', 'Syria and Lebanon' or 'the Levant States'. In the historical chapters (I-IV), however, it has been necessary to deal in general with the larger, geographical unit of the first definition. In these chapters, therefore, the term 'Syria' will be used to

cover the whole of that unit, which will normally be referred to as 'geographical Syria'. Elsewhere in this book the word 'Syria' will only be employed to describe the State of Syria or Syrian Republic : that is, in the third sense.

All these terms are used simply for convenience and without any desire to prejudice the questions, which will be touched upon in the course of the essay, whether and on what grounds the political separation of the British from the French Mandated Territories, and of Syria from Lebanon, was justified.

PART ONE

I. THE HISTORY OF SYRIA¹

I

EVEN were there no Syrian people a Syrian problem would still exist. Syria owes its political importance less to the qualities of its population than to its geographical position. Before its history can be fully understood, it is necessary to grasp the nature of the land and its relation with the surrounding world.

Syria is part of a larger area which may be treated as a single unit, in the sense that the course of affairs in one part of it has always had a peculiarly close relationship with that in some or all of the other parts. The southern base of this area is the Arabian peninsula, bounded on the west by the Red Sea, on the south by the Indian Ocean, and on the east by the Persian Gulf. The west of the peninsula, the Hejaz and Yemen, is hilly and in parts fertile, and so too is a smaller area in the south-east; but the greater portion of the interior is fit only for pasturage, except in the oases. In the south, it is a sandy waste, in the centre, Nejd, a dry, hilly and often stony steppe. North of Nejd there is another belt of sand; and north of this belt is the dry steppe of the Syrian Desert, growing narrower as it goes northwards. Running in a semi-circle around the edge of the Syrian Desert is the 'Fertile Crescent', a belt of cultivable land bounding the area of pasturage. It may itself be divided into two parts. The western part is a land of mountain-ranges, valleys and plains; this is geographical Syria. The eastern part is a vast plain, created and maintained by the two great rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, which run southwards through it, finally meeting and flowing together into the Persian Gulf; this is Iraq or Mesopotamia. The Fertile Crescent is bounded on the west by the Mediterranean Sea and on the south-east by the head-waters of the Persian Gulf. In the north and east it is hemmed in by mountain-ranges: to the north the Taurus Mountains, the southern part of the Anatolian highlands which stretch across Asia Minor, to the north-east the mountains of Kurdistan, and to the east the Persian plateau. Joined to the western part of the Fertile Crescent by the peninsula of Sinai, but separated from Arabia by the Red Sea, is the land of Egypt, the fertile valley of the Nile surrounded by sandy deserts.

¹ In Chapters I-IV the word 'Syria' is used to refer to 'geographical Syria' as defined in the Introduction.

