CHAPTER 4

THE BORDER AND THE KURDS

Introduction

In the spring of 1939, the French High Commissioner planned a visit to the Jazira. So nationalists in Qamishli asked the beleaguered National Bloc government to send them Syrian flags, and flagpoles to hang them on during his visit. They wanted ‘to show their sound nationalist feeling’, and demonstrate this turbulent region’s loyalty to Damascus. But hostility to Damascus was strong there, too, and when the flags arrived at the local railway station a group of anti-nationalists tried to intercept them. The stationmaster at first refused to give the flags to anyone other than the addressee, and with seventy armed nationalist youths guarding them, the anti-nationalists hesitated to press him. It was only when they returned with a detachment of Circassian troops sent by the local French officer that the stationmaster was persuaded to relinquish the packets containing the flags. ‘Then’, wrote the Minister of the Interior, ‘they opened them near the municipal offices [dā’irat al-baladiyya] and burned them before a crowd of people, and carried out acts of the basest kind [a‘māl sāfila lil-ghāya].’ The qa‘immaqam of Qamishli was more specific. One Dawud ‘Aziz Hana ‘donated a Syrian pound from his own pocket to whoever would urinate on the Syrian flags after burning them, and indeed paid the Syrian pound to one of the rabble [shakhs min awbāsh al-nās]’, since the latter did just that.2

There are many interesting things about this incident, but one thing is interesting by its absence: the Syrian–Turkish border. Qamishli was a border town, and the recently-drawn border ran just south of the railway line. So the local station was in Nusaybin, less than a mile away on the Turkish side, and the reluctant stationmaster was a Turkish state employee. But the documents relating these events nowhere mention the border, even though they describe two
mutually antagonistic groups of Syrians, at least some of them armed, strolling onto Turkish territory for a stand-off that involved one of them – backed by French military force – pressurising a Turkish official. If any of those involved faced any hindrance at the border, or indeed surveillance, it is not mentioned. The border might as well not have existed.

Ostensibly, historians of the Middle East have been much preoccupied with borders. The artificiality or otherwise of the region’s modern frontiers is a staple of scholarship: how they were drawn by the colonial powers (‘Winston’s hiccup’); the consequences for state stability and legitimacy. Disputes that affected the route of particular borders are well studied: works on the Alexandretta crisis could fill a bookshelf, works on Israel’s wars a library. But the border itself has often been taken for granted, perhaps because – like so many other phenomena related to the development of modern states – borders now have such a strong presence in the collective psyche that they are taken as part of the natural order of things, seeming to need no explanation. Philip Khoury notes, quite accurately, that the Syrian–Turkish border cut Aleppo off from its natural hinterland; but how? Jean Perez states, of the mandate period, that the transhumant pastoralism of the Bedouin of the Syrian desert led them to ‘make a mockery of frontiers [se jouer des frontières]’, as if the frontiers had been there before the Bedouin arrived. It would be truer to say that the region’s borders – lines drawn very recently on a map that would itself have been quite useless to the nomads concerned – se jouaient des Bédouins. Even scholarship whose professed subject is a border, such as Eliezer Tauber’s article on the determination of borders between Syria and Iraq, can offer a perfectly sound and thoughtful account of how a particular border came to follow a particular route without asking either the question of what the border actually was – how it was delineated, both concretely and institutionally – or the rather more difficult question of what it meant: how the border’s concrete and institutional existence served to constitute the territory of the states concerned, how borders relate to state authority, how they affect populations whether resident close to or far from them.

In one sense the importance of borders to the subject of this book is quite obvious: it is the delineation of a nation-state’s borders that decides who, in that state, is going to be a majority and who a minority. The point is too pessimistic: not all nation-states are condemned to a zero-sum struggle between different groups among the population. More important, it is misleadingly obvious, assuming the existence and coherence of the groups involved from the outset. I will be arguing, instead, that majority and minorities are constituted in relation to the state through the process of its establishment, including the drawing of its borders. And it offers a fairly unproblematic view of the border, concentrating on the effect of different groups arguing over where a particular border should run without examining how the establishment of fixed,
nation-state borders is a constitutive process in the making of modern states’ authority and ‘identity’.

In this chapter I try to draw out the complexities in both areas: how borders define minorities (and a majority), and how borders are related to state authority. The chapter continues my analysis of the relationship between state authority, territory, population and identity. The first part of the chapter asks what material presence Syria’s new borders had in the mandate period: that is, how the state’s authority was manifested concretely at its boundaries. The second part examines the relationship between the border and state authority across the whole territory and population through the lens of the ‘Kurdish question’ that arose in the region after the First World War as nation-states replaced the Ottoman Empire. This section concentrates on the Syrian–Turkish border in the mid- to late 1920s, when that border was (gradually) created. The final section shows how the drawing of Syria’s borders came to ‘minoritise’ all Kurds resident in the country.

The Border’s Physical Presence (or Absence)

The example that opened this chapter suggests that there was no actual ‘border’ between Syria and Turkey at Qamishli in 1939, and the point holds for long stretches of Syria’s borders throughout the mandate period. Tauber’s article shows that the zones under the control of Faysali Syria, on the one hand, and British-occupied Iraq, on the other, were defined not by a contest over a particular line, but by a contest for control of certain towns and villages (and their respective gendarme posts and government buildings) across a swathe of disputed territory. In this situation, the term ‘crossing the border’ was literally meaningless: the border had no material presence, nor was its location agreed by the two jurisdictions it was supposed to separate. Moreover, insofar as Syria’s borders did ‘solidify’ in this period, it was more as demarcation lines between two mutually recognising jurisdictions than in any material sense of lines marked by a physical barrier or permanent surveillance. The fences and watchtowers that mark the Syrian–Turkish border today are for the most part far more recent (1970s), while Syria’s long desert frontier with Iraq was largely unmarked on the ground until the aftermath of the US invasion of 2003.

After the First World War, the border between the two new states of Syria and Turkey remained uncertain for several years, into the 1920s, when the Ankara government in Turkey and the French occupation authorities in Syria fought a war over where it should lie. Neither jurisdiction recognised the other: French troops briefly occupied a large area claimed by the Ankara government, which in turn sent armed bands deep into French territory and supported anti-French activities in Syria. With the Franklin-Bouillon Agreement of 1921, France and the Republic of Turkey stopped fighting and formally recognised each other, agreeing a border between Turkish and French mandate
territories that was confirmed by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. But the border remained very loosely defined: the Lausanne treaty established a joint border delineation committee to fix its exact route on the ground, but the job took years.12

This was partly because it was a large and complex task. But both states were also weak along this particular edge – especially the mandatory state. In northeastern Syria, for example, the French only established a semblance of permanent authority in May 1926, with two posts totalling sixty soldiers established at Darbisiyya and ‘Amuda. ‘Their presence did not modify the general physiognomy of this region, whose principal feature continued to be a profound anarchy.’13 The installation of more, larger military posts, notably at Qamishli from 1926, seated French authority more firmly in the western part of the ‘Bec de Canard’, the panhandle of Syrian territory extending towards the Tigris with Turkey to the north and Iraq to the south; but troop movements further east were limited. When a diplomatic protocol of 1929 agreed the precise border in this zone, there were four French and six Turkish military posts between Nusaybin and the Tigris – but the haziness of the border hitherto can be gauged from the fact that four of the Turkish posts were in Syrian territory, well to the south of the agreed border.14 (Charles de Gaulle was an officer with the French detachment that finally reached the Tigris in June 1930. ‘I went with the general’, he wrote to his father, ‘and we dipped our hands in the river, not without some emotion.’15) Whether the border represented any kind of real barrier even after that, though, is dubious: in August 1930, for example, the exiled Kurdish leader Hajo Agha was able to lead an abortive armed incursion across the border onto Turkish territory.16

Nor was it only in the furthest northeastern reaches of Syria that the border was ill-defined and state authority hazy. In April 1934, the qa’immaqam of the Kurd Dagh, Khayri Rida, made an inspection tour of his caza, a region of limestone hills lying between Aleppo and Antioch. His report begins by noting the ease with which armed bands – especially one led by ‘the famous Ali Karu al-Shiqqi’ – were slipping across the border at night ‘to carry out acts of robbery, plunder, and murder against the persons and properties of Syrian subjects’, then returning with the takings to their safe refuge in a Turkish village.17 With the caza’s gendarme chief, Rida decided to increase patrols ‘in this sensitive spot’. But it was not just the border that was sensitive. ‘Ali Karu’s gang had hiding places in at least four Syrian villages where they could take refuge among the inhabitants. On his tour, Rida summoned forty village chiefs and warned them against harbouring criminals, but the incident is revealing. The Syrian state was now reaching down to village level, but it could not take the population’s cooperation – which it needed – for granted. Its control over the territory could be asserted by the deployment of coercive forces, but to keep order in the face of border-crossing bandits, as Rida told his superior in Aleppo, ‘we rely on private individuals to observe
the criminals and those who dare to harbour them [and] to inform the government immediately’.

As this suggests, the state’s ability to secure the border depended on its effective authority within its own territory, and vice versa. But the Syrian state’s means in this border region were modest indeed, as the rest of Rida’s report shows. He describes the functioning and facilities of the offices of the chief of each nahiya or administrative district in his caza. In the nahiya of Bulbul, Rida reported, this office (the mudiryya) was not even furnished. ‘Please’, he asked his superior, ‘if possible, assign a sofa and two wicker chairs to this office [arjū idhā kān fil-imkān takhsīs maq‘ad wa kursiyayn khayyurān li-hādhihi al-mudiryya].’ The link between the state’s material presence on the territory and the border would be demonstrated sharply in this very area a few years later. One of the villages Rida visited was al-Hammam, on the Aleppo–Alexandretta road. (He was not impressed by the mudir’s disorderly office-keeping.) When the French ceded the sanjak to Turkey, the new border’s winding path through the village – which brought certain valuable buildings (a hotel, the eponymous mineral baths) and the municipal gardens into the sanjak and out of Syria – was partly defined by the personal political loyalties of their proprietors and partly by the fact that the pro-Turkish authorities in the sanjak sent out a police unit and installed a police station in the village faster than the Syrian authorities.¹⁸ Such was the importance of the material presence of the state that Rida sought to augment: the line of the border depended on it. But as we saw from the flag-burning incident, even in a place where the apparatus of state authority was present on both sides of the border – the towns of Qamishli and Nusaybin, seat of a Syrian qa‘imaqam and Turkish kaymakam respectively, faced each other at a bare kilometre’s distance – as late as 1939 the border itself did not necessarily pose much of an obstacle.

The mandate period, then, witnessed a steady accretion of state authority along the border, in the shape of military installations, bureaucratic institutions and even wicker chairs (if they ever arrived). This is in line with my argument in the previous chapter about the spread and ‘deepening’ of state authority across the territory. Yet the border itself as a physical barrier seems to have remained almost negligible right through the mandate period. Its real development in this period was as a jurisdictional barrier.

The Border as a Jurisdictional Barrier, the ‘Kurdish Question’, and State Authority on Both Sides

As mentioned above, the Franklin-Bouillon Agreement of 1921 brought mutual recognition between the French authorities in Syria (and thus the Syrian state too) and the new Turkish government in Ankara. Although their common frontier remained to be precisely defined, it would now be done by diplomatic cooperation rather than military contest. This mutual recognition
immediately had one important consequence for the border, in that each side's military forces retreated to the agreed frontier: the French left Cilicia and Turkey reduced its support for armed bands on French territory. In other words, the states on either side of the new border no longer transgressed it (or at least did so more discreetly). Both the Ankara government in Turkey and the French High Commission in Syria were newly-established regimes facing many internal and external challenges to their authority; for each government, mutual recognition removed one important challenge and freed up men and resources for dealing with others: war against Greece for Ankara, uprisings in northern and western Syria for France.

These pressing but temporary political reasons that pushed France-in-Syria and Turkey to recognise one another and agree to a common frontier were supplemented by longer-term reasons of statecraft. The state-building project on which each government was engaged involved building a nation-state (albeit with greater conviction on the Turkish side\textsuperscript{19}), with a national territory and fixed borders. One effect of the modern transformation of the state – as state authority becomes theoretically uniform across the entire territory, and modern communications permit some practical approximation of this – is that these sharp dividing lines replace the buffer zones and indistinct frontiers of earlier periods. Important state functions, not only related to defence, move to the frontier: notably, monitoring and collection of customs duty moves from strategic points within the territory to a point of entry at the border. The links between the definition of fixed borders, on the one hand, and the development of state authority, on the other, are multiple and complex.\textsuperscript{20} My intention here is to concentrate on one particular aspect of this question: how these interlocking developments also contributed to the emergence of ‘minorities’, with specific reference to the Kurds.

The new Turkish state’s policy towards the Syrian border zone in the years after the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) reflects its wider policy towards southern and eastern Anatolia. The republic was seeking to replace Ottoman authority in zones that had been occupied by France after the war; impose permanent state authority across a broad swathe of territory with a culturally diverse population; contain the opposition which this process naturally provoked; and forestall any future challenges, including such as might be launched from outside the national territory by groups claiming sections of it. All of this involved the border, and Syria, because in a number of cases the populations involved spread over (or had previously been expelled) into the mandate territories.\textsuperscript{21}

The end of the Ottoman Empire and establishment of the Turkish Republic had seen the almost complete elimination (by massacre, expulsion, flight or arranged transfer) of Anatolia’s Christian populations, considered inassimilable to the Turkish ‘nation’ in construction. Nationalist policy towards
non-Turkish Muslim populations, most importantly the Kurds of eastern Anatolia, was rather different. The republic had no intention of expelling the Kurds en masse: the aim was to incorporate them as citizens, preferably as Turks. Opposition among Kurdish elites to Ankara’s imposition of authority was rooted in the challenge to their political and economic position in the region, and expressed itself in religious terms (as opposition to secularising reform) and in some cases as incipient Kurdish nationalism. Insofar as it therefore posed an existential challenge to the republican regime, armed opposition was put down violently, those involved liable to execution or internal exile – many fled across the border into Syria. Provided that they could be incorporated, however, the republic was not hostile to the existence of Kurds on ‘Turkish’ territory. What it feared was any movement which posed the risk of a Kurdish state on Turkish territory. This Turkish interest in Kurdish affairs had important implications for Syria and the border.

The archives of the French High Commission contain much evidence of the scale of unrest over the border in Kurdish areas of Turkey. During the first major outbreak of violence, the Shaykh Sa’id revolt of 1925, Turkey received French permission to transport troops by rail from Mersin or Adana to the affected areas (the railway line crossed French territory); for several months the French monitored their numbers, which ran into the hundreds or even thousands per day. Although this was one of the largest revolts, violence remained endemic down to the Dersim repression of 1938 – and the French in Syria paid close attention. That unrest was a reaction to the expansion of Turkish state authority. Soner Cagaptay describes how the regional bureaucracy in 1930s Dersim, for example, ‘focused on building roads, bridges, and gendarme stations throughout the region’, strengthening Ankara’s authority: local opposition focused precisely, and vocally, on these bureaucratic and infrastructural infringements. But by a process of feedback, opposition also contributed to the expansion of state authority, by bringing the state into the Kurdish regions in force: 25,000 soldiers were deployed in Dersim to repress, brutally, what Ankara viewed as a rebellion. It stimulated the development of a permanent state presence. The extension of state authority in general was tending to harden the frontier, but the need to ‘manage’ the Kurds impelled this process in particular: partly because this population spread beyond the borders claimed by the new republic, and partly because military repression sent Kurdish refugees – especially insurgents and their families – into Syria. Once there, they remained politically active and interacted with others (Syrian Kurds, other refugees, the French authorities and Syrian Arabs) in ways that heightened the border’s significance.

For fleeing insurgents, the border’s value was clearly as a barrier beyond which they could shelter from Turkey. Even if it was neither precisely defined nor materially ‘there’, diplomatic accords meant that Turkey recognised
the border as a jurisdictional limit. Thus, soon after the Shaykh Sa’id rebellion began, the French Assistant Delegate for Aleppo wrote to the High Commissioner to ‘attract [his] attention to the probable repercussion of current events in Kurdistan on the Syrian zone of the Syro-Turkish frontier, in large part populated . . . by Kurdish tribes’, anticipating that ‘to escape the chastisement that threatens them numerous rebels will seek refuge with their brothers in Syria’. This prediction remained accurate for years to come. But although the border afforded them an opportunity for protection, and even a haven from which to prepare future action against the Turkish state, once they had crossed it the frontier also became a barrier which the republic could use to keep them out. Both of these functions depended on, and simultaneously stimulated, the development of state authority on the French side of the border – not just at the border, but deep within the territory too.

At the outset of the Shaykh Sa’id rebellion, the nearby border was not precisely delineated; on the Syrian side, French authority was extremely tenuous. Insurgents fleeing into this zone were not relying on the protection of French troops, but on the fact that the Turkish state recognised French authority and would not follow them there. In many cases, when insurgents arrived and settled on ‘French’ territory they were entirely outside meaningful French influence. The High Commissioner Henri Ponsot made this point in September 1927, in one of very many documents produced by French officers rebutting or contesting Turkish claims that the mandatory authorities were permitting or even assisting refugee insurgents to organise for further action on Turkish territory. Two Kurdish leaders who provoked Turkish suspicions, Hajo Agha and Emin Agha, ‘were installed in a part of the Syrian territory of which we have only really taken possession since the creation, 7th August last [that is, only weeks earlier], of the posts of KUBUR EL-BID and DEMIR-KAPOU’.

French authority was weak when Kurdish insurgents first started fleeing into this ‘French’ territory: this example shows how the need to bring the region and the insurgents who arrived there under control stimulated the expansion of state authority. A slightly earlier example can be cited further to the west, where French authority was imposed earlier. In March 1925, soon after the Shaykh Sa’id rebellion began, the High Commission ordered that a Service de Renseignements (SR) post be established at ‘Arab Punar, another frontier village. Its mission was to gather information on the Kurdish movement and the military operations of the rebellion; to monitor the state of mind of Kurds on the Turkish side of the frontier; and to ‘survey the attitude of the Kurds of Syria and prevent any manifestation of solidarity’ between them and the Turkish Kurds. All these aims are clearly linked to the events in Turkey, though the third is equally clearly intended to forestall threats to French authority in Syria. But achieving them, again, implied a strengthening of state authority on the border. The post was staffed by one SR officer, assisted by an interpreter and a platoon of gendarmerie mobile, whose tasks included...
carrying out surveillance missions among local tribes and ‘making frequent patrols along the frontier’. The post’s personnel – and indeed its office furnishings – were to be seconded from the existing post at Jarablus, but it was to report directly to the SR’s regional centre in Aleppo.

At its establishment, this post was intended to be temporary. But although Jarablus was assured that it would get its typewriter back, it probably never did: an intelligence post was still functioning at ‘Arab Punar in the late 1930s. The general trend was towards the development of permanent state authority: not just military, but also bureaucratic; and not just on the frontier, but ‘behind’ it as well. This was necessary not only for monitoring the newcomers, but for tasks such as assessing the customs payments they would have to pay on the flocks they brought across the border with them, if any; granting them Syrian nationality, in some cases; and, more pressingly, disarming them and moving them further away from the frontier.

This brings us back to my earlier point that from the Turkish perspective, while the border might have created inconvenience insofar as insurgents could escape across it, once they had done so it also served as a barrier for keeping them out. This function depended on the development of French authority on the other side of the frontier, without which the border was an ineffective barrier: this explains the concern of the Turkish authorities to keep refugees not only on the French side of the border, but far on the French side – and monitored carefully wherever they were. But it stimulated the development of state authority on the French side, too, because of the constant Turkish pressure on the High Commission (via officials in the border region, Turkish diplomats in Beirut and Paris, or French diplomats in Turkey) to keep a tight reign on Kurds and other groups in Syria who were suspected of threatening the nervous and unstable young republic as it sought to impose state authority on its own side of the border.

Turkey’s most pressing concern for border security was to prevent any armed insurgents who had fled beyond it from crossing back with their guns. To address this, in early March 1925 the High Commissioner (at that point General Sarrail) sent instructions to his personnel regarding the refugees. Individual insurgents taking refuge among Syrian Kurdish tribes were to be watched to ensure that they did not ‘constitute any centres of anti-Turkish agitation’. To this end, the tribes were to be carefully monitored and gendarme units in the area ‘reinforced if necessary’. Groups of insurgents were to be treated differently: they ‘should be settled at a distance of at least 30 km from the frontier’, and ‘once settled, they should be disarmed in order that they constitute a threat neither to our own tribes nor to the Turkish populations north of the border’. Later documents sent to the High Commission by officers on the ground, or by the High Commissioner to Paris, make clear that these guidelines remained operative for years. Indeed, after a Franco-Turkish accord on ‘good neighbourliness’ (bon voisinage) in 1926, the ‘exclusion zone’
was extended to 50 km from the border. This was still the agreed distance in the early 1930s, when the Kurdish leader Hajo Agha – whose tribal lands spread across the new frontier – could not return to his home village after a failed incursion into Turkey because it was less than 50 km from the frontier. (A few years later, the Turkish chair of a meeting of the League of Nations council on the subject of Assyrian refugees from Iraq expressed his country’s preference that these ‘victims of the world war’, if settled permanently in Syria, be kept 100 km from the border, though 50 km would do.)

Sometimes the exclusion zone was not enough, and the French authorities expelled the person concerned from Syria entirely. In June 1925, the French ambassador in Turkey, trying to persuade Ankara that ‘without damaging our higher principles of humanity, every measure has been taken to make it impossible for the persons in question to foment new disorders on Turkish territory’, noted that another participant in the Shaykh Sa’id revolt, Edhem Bek, had been expelled from Syria – a handwritten note to this letter suggesting that the words ‘even before the Turkish request’ be added. Edhem Bek ended up in Iraq, where a newspaper recorded his disappointment with Syria: entering it ‘thinking that it was a free and independent country’, he had found the French authorities – their ‘higher principles’ notwithstanding – ‘ready to cast underfoot every sentiment of humanity’, and too willing to believe ‘Turkish spies’.

Of course, we may doubt the effectiveness of the exclusion zone: Hajo Agha’s incursion is just one example of a Kurdish leader passing beyond French control. The limits of state authority were set by the available resources. Shaykh Sa’id’s brother ‘Abd al-Rahim, upon arriving in Syria in December 1927, was placed in obligatory residence at Dayr al-Zur, far from the border, and his followers dispersed in the Syrian interior, but around the same time, another prominent Kurdish notable – Hajo Agha’s brother Emin Agha, returning to Syria after an illegal trip into Turkey – was permitted to stay much closer to the border, at Hasaka. As the High Commissioner pointed out in a letter to the Quai d’Orsay, Hasaka was still outside the (then) 30 km exclusion zone, and settling him there meant that it is easier for him to find the means of existence through agricultural cooperation with families long since settled in the country, whereas the Budget of the State of Syria would have had to subsidize his needs had he been obliged to settle in the capital of the Sanjak [of Dayr al-Zur].

The letter also mentions that it would have been difficult for the French ‘man on the spot’, Captain Terrier, to prevent Emin Agha’s illegal crossing of the border ‘since we did not yet occupy the region of Kubur-el-Bid where he had taken refuge’. Nonetheless, this letter asserts state authority even while admitting its
weakness: Hasaka was considered a suitable place of residence for Emin Agha because an SR officer and mobile garrison were stationed there, ‘permitting easy surveillance of the refugees, which must give every guarantee to our neighbours’ – namely, the Turks. Such surveillance could mean keeping a close count of how many refugees were in each place, and how many weapons they had surrendered: ‘Abd al-Rahim, for instance, was reported to have entered Syria at Ra’s al-‘Ayn with a group of 195 refugees. When the Turkish authorities requested reassurances about this group from the High Commission, the Assistant Delegate in Dayr al-Zur pointed out that 103 of them had already been moved away from the border, to Hasaka, where the rest ‘should join them shortly’. Also in Hasaka were twenty-four members of another group that had entered Syria around the same time; others had briefly been unaccounted for, but again, even before the High Commission’s telegram arrived they ‘were sought out and redirected by a detachment of gardes-mobiles’. Meanwhile, ‘the disarmament of these refugees was proceeding as normal; more than 70 combat rifles were already in the hands of the Hassetché [Hasaka] SR officer’. This figure had risen to 124 by the time of writing, albeit ‘against the will of certain refugees, who sought to conceal their weapons or make them disappear’.47

Again, whether the French could always exert such precise control in these regions is doubtful: we have already encountered several open or tacit admissions of the limits of their authority. When responding to Turkish complaints, the mandatory power had numerous reasons to overstate its own effectiveness, starting with the desire to hush those complaints. But this is beside the point: no state can maintain perfect surveillance and control over its territory and population. What matters is that the state’s authority over peripheral areas of the territory increased significantly in this period. The border played a complex role in this process as both a causative factor and a consequence. This role is illustrated by a report written in 1928 by a priest named Father Poidebard, a valuable source of information on the far north-east of the mandate territories for the French in the mid-1920s. He stated that ‘the regroupment of the populations of upper Mesopotamia (the Syrian Haute Djézireh and northern Iraq) that is in course will necessarily be to the profit of the territory [that is] most quickly delimited and reorganized’.48 The arrival of Kurds, like the arrival of Christian refugees, was part of that ‘regroupment’ – which was a consequence of the division of what was once part of the Ottoman Empire into several different jurisdictions. But it also caused the new borders to be more swiftly and sharply delineated, by inciting the new states to spread their authority into the border zone. As Poidebard put it, ‘this establishment 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 good administration, closely controlled by the Mandatory Power’.
The Border and the ‘Minoritisation’ of Syria’s Kurds

The dynamic of border creation – the delineation of the border itself and the concomitant development of state authority behind it – meant that Kurds who fled to Syria from Turkey got ‘stuck’ there, so to speak. They found themselves in a state with a largely Arabic-speaking population, a developing bureaucracy centred on Damascus and other state institutions – from the courts to the parliament – whose official language was Arabic. Especially as the development of those institutions gathered momentum in the 1930s, and a Syrian Arab nationalist movement more successfully asserted its claim over them, they created a powerful logic that tended to define all Kurds within the country – not just recent arrivals in the Jazira, but also longstanding residents of Damascus – as a single, minority, community.

This tendency was influenced by several factors. The reader will by now be well aware of the French preference for viewing Syrian society as a mosaic of distinct ethnic and religious groups, and governing accordingly. In the case of the Kurds, that view was further conditioned by the wider regional ‘Kurdish question’. This is evident from the structure and content of the French archives: boxes whose titles refers simply to ‘Kurds’ or ‘Kurds of Syria’ contain material that overwhelmingly focuses either on events that might have repercussions across the border (such as refugee Kurds organising themselves politically), or on events across the border involving the Kurds that might have repercussions within Syria (such as renewed violence creating more refugees). French officials constantly had the wider region in mind when considering the Kurdish populations: it was quite normal for French intelligence reports coming from peripheral, sparsely populated bits of Syria to cite a ‘serious source’ in support of the claim that a Kurdish nationalist committee was ‘working actively to bring about a new Kurdish insurrection’ (plausible), and that ‘all the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq, Persia, and even Syria would be in agreement to unleash this movement as of next autumn’ (less plausible).49

The French fretted that ‘the ever more powerful pressure that the Turks are striving to apply to the Kurds of their country’ might transfer ‘the whole Kurdish question’ onto Syria, and thus France.50 But at the same time, they were not unhappy to accept Kurdish immigration, as long as they could control it – in the ‘monitor and disarm’ sense outlined above – and draw advantage from it. Weighing up the pros and cons, in the mid-1920s, of creating an autonomous Kurdish zone, the senior French army officer in northern Syria came down against such a measure, citing ‘the dangers that could result’. The first, predictably, was ‘possible complications with Turkey’, but the second was ‘the predominance without counterweight of the Arab element in the rest of the State’.51 It served French policy to keep the Kurds of the northeast within a unitary Syrian state, where they could act as that counterweight – especially if they were considered as one community with Kurds elsewhere in the country.
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But it also ensured that they were a minority within it, whereas the Druzes and ‘Alawis, for example, were not numerical minorities within their statelets.

Pressure from Turkey to restrict Kurdish activities in Syria reinforced the High Commission’s tendency to see all Kurds as forming a single group. Ankara was suspicious of any political activity among Kurds in Syria, tending to assume that such activity would naturally be hostile to Turkey. But some of the measures enacted by France in response to that pressure may, in fact, have worked to increase a sense of shared Kurdish identity between Syria’s existing Kurdish population and the newcomers.

Turkey had two great worries about Kurds in Syria. The first was that the Kurdish refugees, in coordination with Syrian Kurds or other groups (including Armenian refugees, but also anti-Kemalist Turkish exiles) might contribute to insurrectional activity in the republic – either through direct participation or by supplying money and weapons. This was a realistic fear. The second was that the French authorities might grant Kurds within Syria some kind of formal territorial autonomy that would create a very uncomfortable precedent, even a direct threat, for Turkey. As we have seen, this was less likely. ‘It seems very difficult for France to launch herself on a Kurdish adventure that would encounter the hostility of England [mandatory power in Iraq] and Turkey at the same time.’ These fears, though, help to explain Turkish interest in Syria’s Kurds. Within a developing framework of diplomatic relations with the French government and the High Commission, Ankara sought reassurance regarding populations it viewed as hostile.

Turkish fears were particularly acute when those populations were in the borderlands. Suspicion of Kurds (or Armenians) animated many a cross-border diplomatic exchange, leading to the border’s ‘hardening’ in a number of ways: for example, when the French agreed to establish three new gendarme posts along the border (Darbisiyya, ‘Amuda, Nusaybin) after a somewhat obscure violent incident at Darbisiyya in 1926. Ankara immediately expressed worry, though, about ‘the employment of Armenians or Kurdish rebels’ at the posts. The French were already aware that the recruitment of Kurds or Armenians into the security services on the frontier posed a problem: during the Shaykh Sa’id revolt the High Commissioner’s delegate in Damascus launched an enquiry to find out what proportion of gendarmes on the border were Kurds, planning to transfer them away if necessary.

In the High Commission’s records on the Kurds for these years, complaints from Turkey that Kurds in Syria were preparing military action against the republic are a common feature, as are accusations that the mandatory power was assisting such action. Following the Darbisiyya incident, the Turkish Embassy in Paris claimed that the cross-border skirmish there was ‘the prelude to a large-scale action directed against Turkish territory’. It accused the local French SR officers of supporting Kurdish requests to the High Commission for arms and ammunition, and claimed there was ‘no doubt about the preparation
on Syrian territory of a vast Kurdish insurrectional movement’. These similar complaints persisted through the inter-war years: for example, Ankara suspected that the 1937–8 unrest in Dersim might be linked to groups in Syria, perhaps Armenian. These suspicions were not necessarily unfounded: there certainly was Kurdish–Armenian cooperation in Syria in the mandate period, albeit uneasy, and we have already seen that some insurgents who had taken refuge in Syria did return to fight in Turkey. (Others returned to cut deals with the government.) This helps us understand why Turkey concerned itself not only with insurgent refugees near the border, but also with Kurds in the rest of Syria. From the Shaykh Sa’id revolt onwards, there was increasing Kurdish political organisation within Syria, notably with the Khoybun (‘Independence’) committee founded in Lebanon in 1927. This committee espoused a common Kurdish cause for the region; closely monitored by the French, it claimed that its activities were restricted to ‘non-political’ activities, such as raising money to support the refugees. The French, worried that the Turks might take umbrage at the committee’s existence, always took its claim to be non-political with a pinch of salt, calling its stated aim of ‘saving and protecting Kurds abroad’ a ‘euphemism [which] permits a Kurdish nationalist committee to be called “philanthropic”’. At the same time, to the Turks they frequently argued that French surveillance was tight enough to restrict the committee’s activities, an argument that rang rather hollow after it coordinated a major uprising in southeastern Turkey. From 1928, when it was prohibited in Aleppo following strong protests from Ankara, the committee was also an instrument of Kurdish–Armenian cooperation, apparently channelling funds from the internationally-active Armenian Dashnak Party to support Kurdish anti-Turkish activism: it was through monitoring this cooperation that the French were able to report, for example, that the Armenian company Matossian was employing Kurdish notables as ‘money-collectors and salesmen’ in the border zone, allowing them to carry out political activities also. One of these Kurds, Kamran ‘Ali Badr Khan, later complained to the Turkish Consul in Beirut – in a surprisingly cordial meeting – that he had lost this job because the French had forbidden him from travelling near the border. He also mentioned that the French had expelled one of his brothers from Syria, and responded favourably to all the demands presented by your Government concerning measures to be taken with regard to the Kurds.

Those ‘measures to be taken’ covered a wide range of potentially Kurdish nationalist endeavour, from military organisation to cultural affairs, throughout Syria. Partly because of Turkish complaints, and partly because of their own desire to limit any Kurdish activism that might provoke Turkish intervention (or otherwise threaten French authority), the French closely monitored Kurdish activists in Syria. They kept particularly detailed notes on members of the Khoybun and their activities, at one point collecting information sheets (fiches de renseignements) on thirty-eight of them from intelligence officers.
throughout the mandate territories – an example of how securing the border required effective state authority across the territory. But Turkish complaints prompting a French response also touched on what Ankara viewed as Kurdish propaganda activities (such as those of one Hilmi Yıldırım, in Beirut), or cultural activities. In 1936, the High Commissioner banned the entry, sale, circulation, usage or publication in Syria ‘of the Kurdish phonographic disks no. 507/11 and 508/11 put on sale by the “Société Orientale Sodwa” of Aleppo and sung in Kurdish by Said Agha Jisraoui’ at the request of the Turkish Consul General.

Ironically, such measures may have encouraged the integration of border-crossing Kurdish insurgents and the longer established Syrian Kurdish population. Earlier, I discussed the French policy of distancing certain groups and individuals from the Syrian–Turkish frontier. In some cases, Kurdish activists were moved not only outside the ‘exclusion zone’, but to Damascus or Beirut. At one time or another, most of the prominent leaders of the Kurdish movement in the Jazira – the Badr Khan brothers, Hajo Agha and so on – were in résidence obligatoire in one of the major cities. Among them was ‘Uthman Sabri, who founded a Kurdish-language school in the (heavily Arabised) Kurdish quarter of Damascus and actively promoted ‘Kurdist’ politics there: not, one imagines, the neutralisation that Turkey hoped for when it pushed for activists to be removed from the frontier zone. Others settled in Syrian cities voluntarily. Once there, men like Sabri certainly did not refrain from politics, as we will see shortly; but as the example of his school shows, they were also active in the field of cultural production. Jaladat Bey Badr Khan developed the Latin script for writing Kurdish and published a review in the Kirmanji dialect of the language while resident in Damascus. His brother Kamran ‘Ali Badr Khan also published a review, and in the 1940s would broadcast in Kurdish on Radio Levant and successfully lobby the High Commission for funding to send Kurdish students to study in France. Earlier, in 1924, a Kurdish writer from Iraq resident in Aleppo had requested a French subsidy towards publishing a history of the Kurds, written in Kurdish (in Arabic script). These activities targeted the Kurdish population not (or not only) of the border zone, but of the cities – just as the Turkish pressure that had put these men in the cities applied to all of Syria’s Kurds.

It seems reasonable to suggest that cultural activities of this kind contributed to the development of a greater sense of Kurdish identity among Damascene Kurds. Such a sense of identity should not be taken for granted as politically salient: the inhabitants of the Kurdish quarter of Damascus – Hayy al-Akrād, literally ‘quarter of the Kurds’ – were largely Arabised and well integrated into the social structure of the city. The leading notable families of the quarter, the al-Yusufs and the Shamdins, were among the most prominent in the city: they owned land in the countryside around Damascus, had served the local Ottoman administration at high levels, and in the nineteenth century had like
other families of their class left their quarter of origin for more comfortable accommodation in Suq Saruja.\(^73\) (Very comfortable: the Yusuf house covered some 2,070 m\(^2\).\(^74\)) Like other such families, however, they also retained their patronage networks in their quarter of origin. In these circumstances, it may seem odd that in the 1930s we find ‘Umar Agha Shamdin supporting Kurdish claims to autonomy in the far northeast of Syria\(^75\): the mere fact that activists from that region (or Turkey) were in obligatory residence in Damascus only goes part way to explaining it.

A further explanation lies in the local micropolitics of Damascus under French rule. The High Commission was ever keen to divide Syrians up into ethnically or religiously distinct groups, and promote chosen interlocutors as ‘leaders’ of those groups at the expense of actors with broader Syrian loyalties. For Syria’s Christian communities, clergymen often claimed that role. Similarly, presenting himself as representative of Syria’s Kurds (rather than ‘just’ a Damascene notable) could give a figure like ‘Umar Agha privileged access to the resources of the mandatory state. This could be a distinct advantage in the inter-family notable politics of Damascus – especially after 1936, when many of the city’s notables were committed to the National Bloc government, and the French were seeking ways to undermine it. (It is not surprising that the French paid particular attention to Kurdish mobilisations in Hayy al-Akrad, and the participation in them of notables like ‘Umar Agha, during the Bloc’s rule.)

At the same time, promoting a Kurdish variety of politics among the inhabitants of ‘their’ quarter would give such notables a means of renewing their traditional patronage networks under a new form, in the face of the threat from new social forces and the transformation of politics they heralded in the 1930s – a threat that the notables of the Bloc also faced, and (for the time being) successfully. We see this dynamic at work in the tension between communists in the quarter, including the leader of Syria’s Communist Party, Khalid Bakdash, on the one hand, and, on the other, the quarter’s notables and Kurdish activists from the northeast in forced residence in the city. Communists in Hayy al-Akrad were hostile to French imperialism and to those who treated with it; they tended to perceive Kurdish activities as serving French ends. Hence, when a club in the quarter produced propaganda in favour of Kurdish autonomy in the northeast, the French intelligence services reported that ‘communist members inhabiting this quarter . . . are leading active measures to check the development of this idea, saying that the movement’s promoters are in the pay of the French’.\(^76\) But this antagonism worked both ways: when Bakdash attempted to set up a ‘so-called Boxing Club [Club sportif de Boxe]’ he ran into bitter opposition from ‘Uthman Sabri, who, ‘in agreement with certain notables of this quarter’, sought to persuade the French authorities to prevent the Interior Ministry from authorising Bakdash’s request. Sabri and Bakdash were already in conflict: Sabri’s anti-communist propaganda among young
Kurds had led many to abandon the Communist Party. ‘He is thus very vio-
lently attacked by Bakdash and his friends who openly accuse him of being a 
spy in the pay of the “French”.’

All this is to say that there was nothing self-evident about the choice of 
some residents of Hayy al-Akrad to adopt a politics based on Kurdish identity. 
Nonetheless, the logic of the nation-state form tended to create links between 
Kurds across the territory of the new state; or rather, to create the potential 
for shared political action on ‘ethnic’ grounds. As soon as the new border 
was drawn, it placed Damascus and other Syrian cities within a single field of 
political action with the northeast, while cutting that region off from centres 
that were closer – certainly geographically, perhaps culturally, and in the past 
politically – such as Mosul or Diyarbakir (not to mention the old imperial 
centre of Istanbul). Hence two leaders of the first great Kurdish revolt against 
the Turkish Republic, in exile in the Jazira in the 1920s, receiving permission 
to visit Damascus ‘to collect the subsidies of the local Kurdish community 
there’. Hence, too, Jaladat Bey Badr Khan travelling to Damascus in late 
1931, where the intelligence services reported that he was ‘canvassing [trav-
aille, literally ‘working’] Kurdish circles, in favour of cooperation with the 
fatherland’.

Even activists from the Jazira whose aspirations lay in that region or over 
the border in Turkey were drawn to Damascus by the structures of the Syrian 
state. When Kurds who had left Turkey sought to be integrated in the Syrian 
security forces in the early 1930s, they requested the help of a Kurdish deputy 
to the Syrian parliament, Mustafa Shahin Bey. For all Shahin Bey’s own 
Kurdish nationalism, they thus became implicated (like him) in Syrian political 
structures centred on Damascus. The same dynamic, in which the Jazira had 
become a peripheral zone of a Syrian nation-state centred on Damascus, is 
visible in the case of one Yunis Agha, ‘Kurdish notable of the Haute-Djézireh’. 
He hoped to improve his chances of becoming that province’s governor by 
coming to the capital in September 1937 ‘to make contact with the notables of 
the Kurdish quarter’ and seek their support. Kurdish identity provided him 
with a means of bolstering his political ambitions on the periphery by creating 
a potential link between him and figures at the centre who had some leverage 
there, as influential actors in the city or (particularly) as favoured interlocu-
tors of the French. But it was the new state form of Syria that brought him to 
Damascus in the first place.

Conclusion

In the summer of 1930, a group of Kurdish notables sent a petition to the High 
Commission requesting that the Syrian state bureaucracy in the Jazira employ 
more Kurds. The French, though they viewed it as a manoeuvre of the Badr 
Khans intended to strengthen Kurdish communal feeling, were sympathetic to
this desire insofar as it permitted them to treat the Kurds as a distinct population. But their response shows how Syrian state structures determined the options open to Kurds and French alike.

The Jazira was still part of the Sanjak of Dayr al-Zur at that point, and the French Assistant Delegate there noted that seven of the nineteen signatories to the petition were refugees who had ‘not yet lost Turkish nationality’: to be considered for employment in the Syrian administration Kurds had to be Syrian nationals. But he did agree with the way of accommodating the petition’s wishes that his superior had suggested: in the absence of candidates who were both sufficiently educated and Syrian nationals in the region itself, a Damascene Kurd should be appointed to head the still rudimentary local bureaucracy. ‘And when the administration is definitively established, we might investigate if among the Kurdish population of Syrian nationality in the Haute-Djézireh there are a few individuals apt to be admitted to subaltern positions.’

The example shows how the unpredictable dynamics of state construction had brought all Kurds within Syria’s borders together, in a not entirely voluntary way. In the context of the new state, a shared identity could be a useful vehicle for individual actors’ political ambitions, allowing them to forge links with new allies across the territory. Such an identity-based form of politics gained a boost from the presence of the French, with their preference for structuring divisions into Syrian society – which in some cases forced a politicised ‘identity’ onto ordinary Syrians from above. But it was made possible by the development of the modern state apparatus.

The border, as we saw, was both an outcome of that development and a spur to it. It played a crucial role in the politics of community in the new state, by working to delimit – literally – the field of political action that was open to individuals within it, even when their aspirations lay across the new border in southern Anatolia. As a cross-border group, the Kurds were particularly affected by the border, but they were not alone: Turks in northern Syria or Arabs in southern Turkey also found themselves transformed into minorities by the region’s new borders, and dozens of groups in Europe were in a similar situation in this period. The existence of such cross-border groups could, and in some cases did, cause the embryonic borders of the inter-war world’s new nation-states to be redrawn; but it also stimulated the development of those borders, as nervous states perceived such groups as a threat, and sought to manage them. It was not the only factor in the firming-up of frontiers, but it was important, and as the borders hardened they in turn acted to constitute such populations as minorities within each state. Those minorities did not exist as such before the borders were drawn: the border defined them as a numerical minority within the state, and the modern state’s developing institutions and policies influenced their political and cultural existence as a coherent
community: for example, by bringing a Kurdish nationalist activist from the Jazira to open a Kurdish-language school and make political connections with notables among the Arabised inhabitants of Hayy al-Akrad.

What holds for the communities brought together as minorities within Syria, though, also holds for the community brought together as a majority. The notion of a shared Arab identity allowed urban nationalists in Damascus to counter Kurdish demands for autonomy in the northeast:

we want them to build their independence in their homeland [diyārihim] ‘Kurdistan’, not in the Arab Jazira, the birthplace [mauto] of Shammar, ‘Anaza, Tayy, al-Jabbur, and other great Arab tribes. The Jazira was the cradle of Arabness [mahd al-‘uruba] before the Islamic conquest . . .

That a people should work to amputate an essentially Arab part [juz’ ‘arabi samim] from their fatherland for the sake of a hundred Kurdish villages in the north of the Jazira that were and remain grazing lands for the flocks and horses of the Arabs – this is a grave matter, that all the Arab lands will shake over [hādhā amr jalāl tahtazz labu al-aqtār al-‘arabiyya jam‘ā’].

Here, it is a nationalist who is using cultural identity to build a political alliance with actors at the periphery, and claim the territory of the Jazira for an Arab Syria.

This also shows the danger of identity-based politics in the modern nation-state. When the state is conceived of as the expression of the will of one nation, there is a risk that mobilisations on the basis of a different cultural identity will be seen by the state and ‘its’ nationalists as inherently threatening to the integrity of the state. It does not follow, though, that states are condemned to a zero-sum struggle between majority and minorities. The nationalisms that link states to their populations do not have to be closed and exclusive. In the context of anti-colonial struggle it is not hard to see why Syrian Arab nationalism was suspicious of other mobilisations on ethnic grounds, but hostility was not foreordained: we also saw examples of Syrian Kurds who were not attracted to Kurdist mobilisations. Khalid Bakdash is the most obvious of these: as a communist, Bakdash believed that Syrian Arab nationalism was a historical necessity, and accompanied the National Bloc delegation to Paris in 1936 as an adviser. The documents that relate his clash with ‘Uthman Sabri make clear that he was not the only communist in the Kurdish quarter, and Sabri’s Kurdist group competed for support among the quarter’s politically active youth not only with the communists, but with the League of National Action, an Arab nationalist formation that was younger and more radical than the Bloc.

That young Kurds were involved in these political movements shows that their political identity was not defined by being Kurdish; it also shows that these nationalist groups were not closed to ‘Kurds’ by definition. When we see
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actors using cultural identity as the basis for their political claims, it may be more useful to ask how the game of political competition – played out on the terrain of the modern nation-state – encouraged them to make cultural identity the vehicle of their ambitions, rather than assuming that cultural identity automatically inspired and defined those ambitions. After all, in this same period, Kurdish leaders in the highlands of the Kurd Dagh near the western end of the Syrian–Turkish frontier were claiming a Turkish identity, and requesting their region’s incorporation into Turkey. The development of the modern nation-state made majority and minority into meaningful categories in Syria, as elsewhere, but it did not determine how those categories would be defined.

Notes

1. Many of the places referred to in this chapter are marked on Map 2. I would like to acknowledge at the outset my debt to Seda Altuğ for several long discussions that directly influenced (and benefited) my thinking in this chapter.

2. All details on this incident are from MWT wathā‘iq al-dawla, sijill 2; wizārat al-khārījiyya. 23 – particularly the interior minister’s letter to the foreign minister (27/2/1939) and the handwritten letter from qa’immaqam of Qamishli to minister of interior (21/2/1939) that informs it.

3. Also unclear is whether the flags were defaced on Syrian or Turkish territory: it happened in front of a cafe near the municipal building, but the documents do not say which town.


5. There are exceptions, such as Inga Brandell (ed.), State Frontiers: Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006). Like much of the best work on borders, however, this is anthropological rather than historical.

6. Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, pp. 104, 122, 135, 185. This was also evident to commentators at the time: see references to Alif Bā‘ (1 September 1932) in Chapter 3.


9. See Chapter 3 for a discussion of the dār al-hukūma and other sites of state authority.

10. The information on the Syrian–Turkish border comes from Seda Altuğ; the information on the Syrian–Iraqi border is familiar to anyone who has followed the news since the invasion.


16. Details, including Hajo Agha’s subsequent interrogation in Damascus, are in AD-SL Box 572, dossier *Passage de Hadijo Agha et des fils de Djemil Pacha en Turquie 1930*. NB: for this and other Kurdish names I have used a rough but consistent transliteration rather than adopt any one of the multiple variants in French sources.


18. MWT *wathāʾiq al-dawla*, sjill 2; *wizārat al-kbāriyya*. 21: documents dated 27/12/1938–15/1/1939. By this time, incidentally, the name of the caza had been Arabised from the Turkish Kurd Dāgh to the Arabic Jabal al-Akrād.


21. Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*, chs 5–8, examines this question from the vantage point of the communities regarded as inassimilable by the republican government.

22. A more detailed account of Turkish policy towards the Kurds in this period can


24. For a recent discussion of Turkish policy towards the Kurdish regions in this period, see Soner Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey. Who is a Turk?* (London: Routledge, 2006), ch. 6.


27. AD-SL Box 1054, same dossier and subdossier, *Message téléphone*, Délégué Adjoint (Aleppo) to HC, 19/3/1925 gives figures for mid-March – well over 1,000 troops, plus supplies, carried by several trains on 17th, for example. Such heavy use of the line actually strained the economy of the whole Aleppo region: same location, telegram from SR to Mougin, French ambassador to Turkey (27/3/1925). Some figures for June are in AD-SL Box 1054, same dossier, subdossier *Passage des Troupes à Musliimi*.

28. Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism*, p. 106, lists numerous minor and major insurgencies in different parts of Turkish Kurdistan in these years.

29. See, e.g., AD-SL Box 1054, dossiers *Kurdes 1925, Kurdes 1926 and Kurdes 1927*, though more material (up to the early 1930s) is scattered throughout boxes 1054 and 1055. The Service des Renseignements reported in February 1928 on Turkish military preparations intended to pre-empt a spring recurrence of the Kurdish insurgency: AD-SL Box 1055, dossier *Question Kurde – Mouvement Kurde en Syrie – Année 1928. Bulletin de renseignements N° 10* (4/2/1928).


31. Some doubt that an actual rebellion had even occurred prior, rather than subsequent, to Turkish repression: Martin van Bruinessen, ‘Genocide in Kurdistan? The suppression of the Dersim rebellion in Turkey (1937–38) and the chemical war against the Iraqi Kurds (1988)’, in George J. Andreopoulos (ed.), *Conceptual and..."


35. Before assuming that this material weakness of the state was restricted to colonial backwaters like Jarablus, consider Eugen Weber’s comment on metropolitan France in the 1930s: ‘Machines in general were not much in demand. Inspecteurs des finances on tour through the provinces remember few or none in banks, post offices, tax bureau; no typewriters, and no typewritten reports, no calculators’: The Hollow Years, p. 63.

36. It was the source for several Informations produced by the Direction de la Sûreté générale – successor to the SR – included in Box 572, untitled dossier (material released under sixty-year rule), subdossier Les Kurdes en Syrie – Informations.


38. This and following quotes from AD-SL Box 572, dossier Passage en Syrie de populations Kurdes ou chrétiennes ou de déserteurs Turcs. Note N° 868/K.3, signed Sarrail (5/3/1925). This document also gives instructions regarding potential Assyro-Chaldean immigrants from Iraq, and deserters from the Turkish army. The arrival of the former was considered imminent (a harbinger of events in the 1930s); they too were to be kept away from the Turkish border. The latter remind us that the imposition of Turkish state authority on the Kurds also involved asserting it, through conscription, over other citizens – some of whom were evidently unenthusiastic.

39. There are literally dozens, if not hundreds, of such documents in the French records on the Kurds for these years. One, sent by the assistant delegate for the Sanjak of Dayr al-Zur to refute Turkish claims about the activities of Kurds who had settled there, refers to the 1925 note as ‘still in force’ in 1927. AD-SL Box 1055, dossier Question Kurde – Mouvement Kurde en Syrie. Années 1926 et 1927. Ripert to HC, 9/12/1927.

40. Mizrahi, Genèse de l’État mandataire, p. 178. Mizrahi discusses these agreements
in some detail (pp. 172–8), and describes (p. 178) the ‘difficult extension towards the east of the logics of state’.

41. He spent a year or so in forced residence in Damascus before being permitted to settle in Hasaka in June 1931. Details are in AD-SL Box 572, dossier _Passage de Hadjo Agha et des fils Djemil Pacha en Turquie_ 1930.

42. AD-SL Box 620, dossier _Mouvement minoritaire Chrétien_, subdossier _La question des minorités en Syrie et en Irak (Généralités – correspondances, informations)_ Minutes of League Council meeting (entitled _Protection des minorités. Etablissement des Assyriens de l’Irak_), n.d. but internal evidence makes clear the meeting took place on 17/4/1935.


44. AD-SL Box 1055, dossier _Mouvement Kurde_ (1928), subdossier _Réclamations turques a/s des chefs Kurdes de Hte Djézireh – Hadjo, Emin Agba, Edem Tcherkesse, Mudir d’Amouna, Fils d’Ibrahim Pacha_. Extracts from Essiasa (that is, _al-Siyāsa_), forwarded to Beirut by French Consul in Mesopotamia in letter (27/6/1925).

45. AD-SL Box 1055, dossier _Question Kurde – Mouvement Kurde en Syrie. Années 1926 et 1927_. HC (though signed Maugras) to HC’s acting delegate in Damascus (13/12/1927). Other documents refer to ‘Abd al-Rahim as Sa’id’s son.

46. AD-SL Box 1055, same dossier. HC to MAE (14/12/1927).


49. AD-SL Box 572, untitled dossier (material released under sixty-year rule), subdossier _Les Kurdes en Syrie – Informations. Information N° 4196_ (14/9/1932). NB: the ‘would be’ translates an untranslatable French use of the conditional to report alleged or unconfirmed facts.

50. AD-SL Box 572, dossier _Immigration éventuelle de Kurdes en Syrie – exonération[s] taxe douanière pour les [troupeaux]_. HC’s delegate to Syria to delegate-general (relations extérieures) (25/8/1932).

51. AD-SL Box 1054, dossier _Kurdes 1925_, subdossier _III l 01_. Billotte to acting HC (26/5/1924).

52. One such was Jalal Qadri [Celal Kadri], who usually figures in French sources...


54. AD-SL Box 1055, dossier Mouvement Kurde (1928), subdossier Incidents de Derbissié – mai 26. Compte-rendu sommaire de l’entrevue franco-turque, du 7 Mai 1926 à Derbessié. (Different spellings of the same place name are entirely normal.) This document also outlines the conflicting accounts of what had actually happened. The Turks claimed it began when rebel Kurds had crossed the border to attack Turkish soldiers guarding a train; French enquiries suggested that the attack was provoked by Turkish soldiers trying to steal sheep from Kurds south of the border.

55. AD-SL Box 1054, dossier Kurdes 1925, subdossier Pièces au sujet du passage en Syrie de populations Kurdes ou chrétiennes ou de déserteurs turcs. Letter to Commander-in-Chief of Armée du Levant [that is, HC], 18/3/1925. For a later expression of Turkish worry on this subject, see AD-SL Box 1055, dossier Mouvement Kurde (1928), subdossier Question Kurde – Immigrants – Réfugiés Kurdes. Note, MAE to Turkish Embassy (13/4/1927).


57. Cagaptay, Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism, p. 112.


59. AD-SL Box 1054, dossier Kurdes 1927, subdossier III l 01. Note pour le Lieutenant Colonel Arnaud (19/11/1927).


63. AD-SL Box 1055, dossier Kurdes – 1932, subdossier Entrevue du chef kurde Kameran Beder Khan avec le Consul de Turquie à Beyrouth. Information N°
77 (8/12/1932) – the long account here is evidently based on Badr Khan’s own description of the meeting.

64. AD-SL Box 571, dossier [Relations extérieures] en Syrie, subdossier Fiches sur les membres du Comité Kurde – [+ illegible].

65. AD-SL Box 572, dossier Requête du Consul général de Turquie als des brochures de propagande pro kurde publiées par le nommé Hilmi Yıldırım. Turkish Consul General in Beirut to Meyrier (Délégué Général), 24/9/1936. An unattributed French intelligence document headed Hilmi Yeldurum (27/10/1936) suggested that he was, rather, a Turkish agent.

66. AD-SL Box 571, dossier Requête du Consul Général de Turquie als disques de propagande pro kurde mis en circulation à Alep. Décision du Haut-Commissaire N° 343. The Consul-General’s request is also included in this dossier (in fact, just a slender paper folder).

67. I am using this term to denote political mobilisations around the sense of Kurdish cultural identity, without accepting the nationalist claim that all such mobilisations are Kurdish nationalist. Future instances will be without inverted commas.

68. AD-SL Box 572, untitled dossier (material released under sixty-year rule), subdossier Les Kurdes en Syrie – Informations. Information N° 404/S (23/6/1939).


70. AD-SL (Series B) Box 33, dossier 1053: Docteur Kameran Bey BEDER KHAN. Note: Docteur Kamouran Béder KHAN (27/4/1944). It seems likely that the review in question was the same as that published by Jaladat Bey. However, this source gives its place of publication as Beirut, while McDowall gives Damascus for Jaladat Bey’s.


72. McDowall estimates that some 40 per cent of its inhabitants were ‘entirely Arabicized’ by 1920: A Modern History of the Kurds, p. 467. Tejel Gorgas (‘Le mouvement kurde’, p. 112), citing but not referencing a British diplomatic source, states that the quarter was divided into three sections, one largely kurdophone, one largely arabophone and one where neither language predominated. See also Benjamin Thomas White, ‘The Kurds of Damascus in the 1930s: development of a politics of ethnicity’, Middle Eastern Studies (2010), 46(6): 901–17.


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75. AD-SL Box 572, untitled dossier (material released under sixty-year rule), subdossier Les Kurdes en Syrie – Informations. Information N° 5411 (3/7/1939).
77. This and preceding quotations from AD-SL Box 572, same folder and subdossier, Damascus Sûreté Information N° 404/S (23/6/1939). NB: the quotation marks around the word «French» are pencilled-in on this document.
78. AD-SL Box 1055, dossier Mouvement Kurde (1928), subdossier Question Kurde – Immigrants – Réfugiés Kurdes. High Commissioner’s delegate to State of Syria to HC (27/3/1928). The subsidies were to support destitute refugees (though the Turks suspected, probably not without reason, that they were used to fund military activities too).
79. AD-SL Box 572, dossier Menées Arméno-Kurdes. Information N° 4401 (24/11/1931). The phrase in French is actually ‘la mère patrie’, the ‘mother fatherland’ (patrie being feminine). That Kurdistan was the ‘fatherland’ of the residents of Hayy al-Akrad in this romantic nationalist sense is itself a nationalist assumption.
80. AD-SL Box 572, same dossier and subdossier. Information N° 2273 (11/5/1932).
81. This and preceding quotes from AD-SL Box 572, untitled dossier (material released under sixty-year rule), subdossier Les Kurdes en Syrie – Informations. Information N° 4532 (2/9/1937). In this document his name appears as Younès.
82. This and preceding quote from AD-SL Box 572, dossier Passage en Syrie de populations Kurdes ou chrétiennes ou de déserteurs Turcs. Assistant Delegate (délégué adjoint) for Sanjak of Dayr al-Zur to Delegate for State of Syria (5/8/1930).
83. This also explains why the border worked to constitute as minorities populations which, unlike the Kurds, did not spread across more than one state.
84. In Arabic, ‘al-haraka al-kurdiyya fi Sūriyya. läjī’ū al-kurdi yas’a’n li-ta’sīs watan kurdī’. Al-Ayyām, 11/7/1932. This article does not refer to Damascene Kurds, however, and nor do others I found regarding the ‘Kurdish question’.
85. On the League see Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, especially pp. 400–34 for its origins and composition.
86. We should also remember that the archives we study were not constructed by neutral observers: French imperial policy in Syria is reflected in the construction of the archive itself, which in its very classifications emphasises the political salience of ‘Kurdishness’ in Syria. See White, ‘The Kurds of Damascus’.
87. E.g., during the Alexandretta crisis (see documents in AD-SL Box 571, dossier La question des Kurdes en Syrie. Correspondance. Les Comités Kurds).