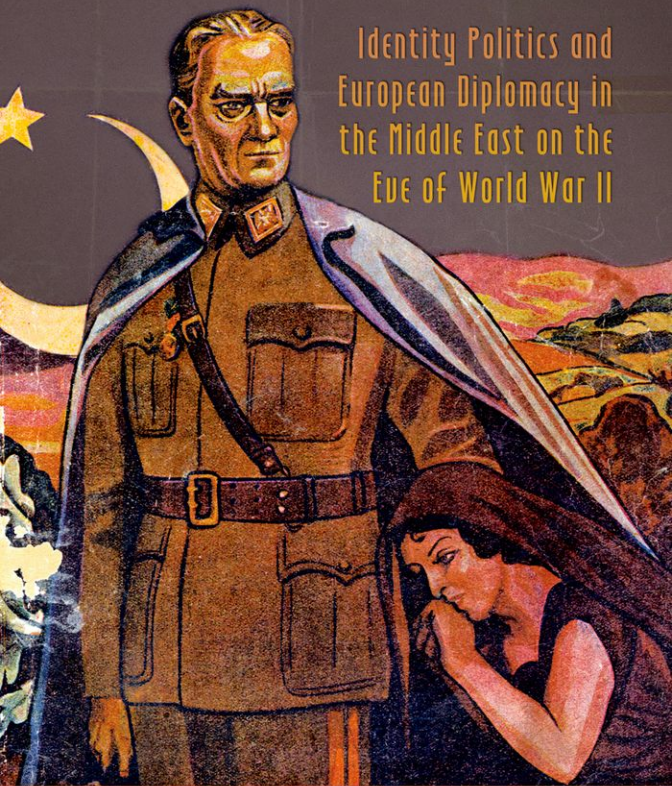


# FEZZES IN THE RIVER

Identity Politics and  
European Diplomacy in  
the Middle East on the  
Eve of World War II



SARAH D. SHIELDS

# Fezzes in the River

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SARAH D. SHIELDS

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*To William, with many thanks*

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# CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Note on Names and Translations</i>	xi
Introduction: Saydo's Argument	3
1. Fezzes and Hats	17
2. The League Takes the Case	48
3. The League Decides	78
4. Transition to Independence	112
5. Independence	143
6. Registrations Begin	176
7. Martial Law	204
Conclusion	232
<i>Appendix I</i>	251
<i>Appendix II</i>	253
<i>Note on Sources</i>	255
<i>Abbreviations</i>	257
<i>Notes</i>	259
<i>Bibliography</i>	289
<i>Index</i>	297



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## NOTE ON NAMES AND TRANSLATIONS

The problems created by fracturing the commonalities of the past are evident on every page of this book and have created a serious challenge for the author. Most of the cities in the contested Sanjak gradually acquired two different names. Was the altercation at Karim's café in Rihaniye (transliterated from Arabic) or in Reyhanlı (Turkish spelling)? I have tried to provide place names consistently as they appear in 2010 international usage to make it easier for readers to actually locate them on maps. The index will provide alternative names.

Even more difficult, and central to the whole project, is the problem of personal names. The same four Arabic letters, for example, would be used to identify Muhammad in Syria and Mehmet in Turkey; four other Arabic letters could indicate Cemil in Turkey and Jamil in Syria. What should I call these men? The spelling I choose could, unfortunately, appear to assign an identity with which Muhammad/Mehmet or Cemil/Jamil might disagree. Hyphenating names would be completely unwieldy. I ask the reader's indulgence if I have provided inaccurate cues through the spellings of individual names. I hope it will remind readers of the common origins of the people of the Sanjak, the arbitrariness with which they were asked to "identify" themselves into mutually exclusive and externally constructed categories, and the confusion that resulted when people who had long been allowed multiple identities were informed that they could henceforth belong only to *either* one group or another.

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# Fezzes in the River

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# Introduction

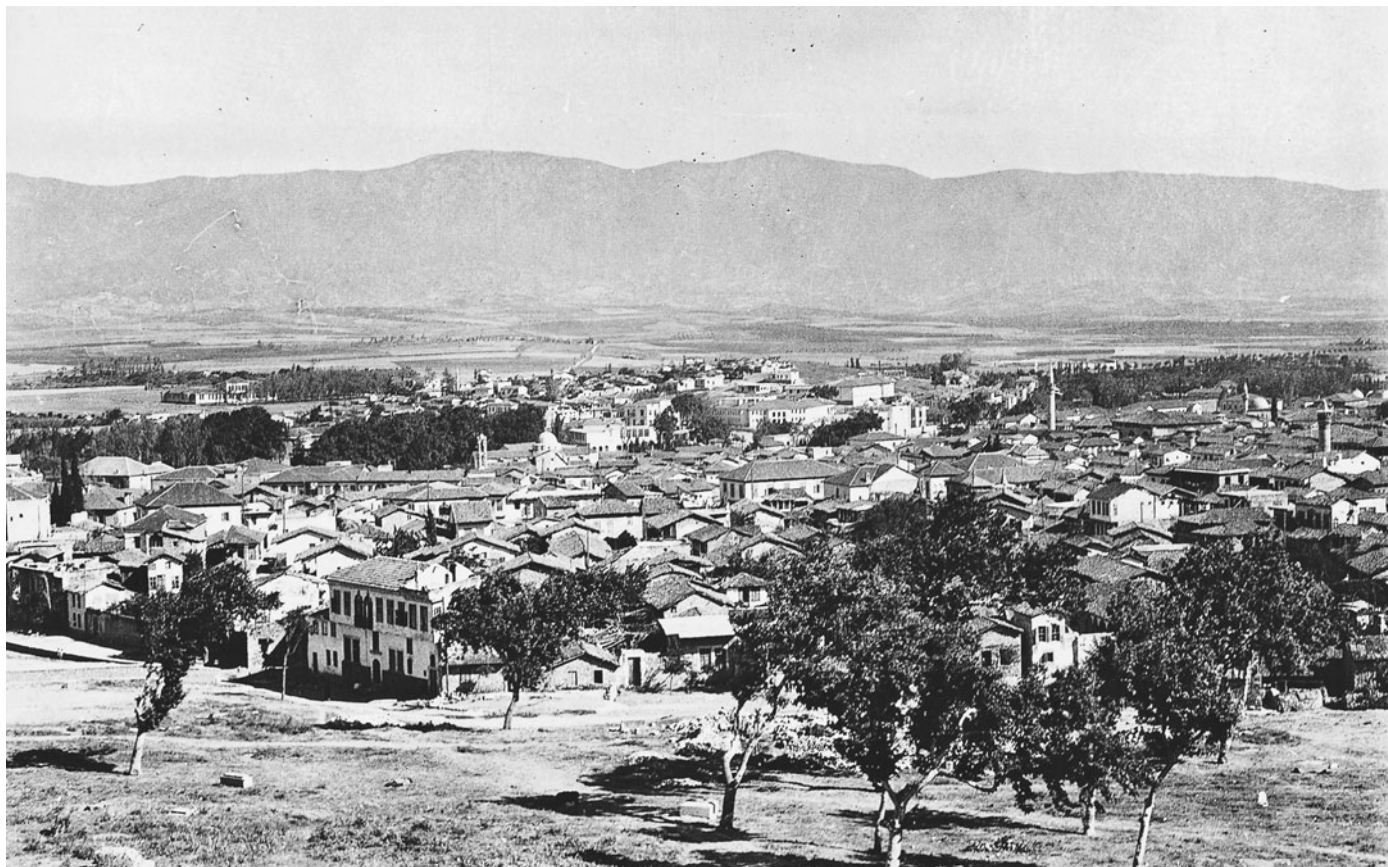
## *Saydo's Argument*

In the early afternoon of May 10, 1938, a chauffeur named Saydo sat chatting in front of a café in the town of Reyhanlı, in the Sanjak of Alexandretta. Haydar Hassan Musto and a group of friends saw Saydo, approached his table, and began screaming at him. Witnesses described the scene that followed: harsh words, blows, and revolvers brandished in the air. When prosecutors questioned the witnesses, however, most were unable to recount the crescendo of words as Haydar insulted Saydo's mother, demanded that Saydo declare himself to be an Arab, threatened to kill him if he claimed to be a Turk, and taunted him about the brimmed hat he was wearing. The witnesses were unable to recount the argument about whether Saydo should declare himself an Arab or a Turk because it had taken place in a language they did not understand: neither Arabic nor Turkish, but Kurdish.<sup>1</sup>

In Saydo's argument, the main participants were Kurds, but one Kurd was demanding that the other claim to be an Arab instead of registering as a Turk. Saydo's argument suggests that nationalism in the Middle East was somehow fluid—that people were not convinced they had single, fixed identities, or that their identities had to determine their political outlooks. This study examines how people in the Sanjak of Alexandretta struggled to articulate their complex set of allegiances and beliefs when the League of Nations demanded, in 1937, that every man declare his "identity."

Although Saydo's argument took place thousands of miles from Europe, it was one of the countless ripples reverberating from the Europeans' reinvention of the world at the end of World War I. The war had been catastrophic, leaving more than eight million people dead, another 21 million wounded, and making refugees of uncounted millions more. As diplomats, generals and politicians contemplated the future, they searched for clues on how to proceed. Like forensic investigators at an arson site, European statesmen shifted through the ashes of their old order to try to discover the causes of the inferno that seemed to have





Antioch, circa 1940. Courtesy of: Mehmet Saplama.

engulfed the world and forever transformed it. Their varied analyses of the causes of the war, added to their perceptions of the consequences of the peace, would produce over the next decades an array of ideological impulses ranging from a new liberalism, through communism, fascism, and Naziism.

That wide range of ideologies reflects the complexities of the questions facing Europe's leaders at the end of the Great War. What caused the war? How could Europe cope with frustrated nationalists, like the gunman who killed Francis Ferdinand? What kind of government—indeed, what type of state—should replace the expansive and autocratic empires just defeated? What should happen to the Asian and African colonies of the defeated powers? How could the colonial competition that had exacerbated European animosities be brought under control? To the urgency of finding answers in the ashes was joined the exciting possibilities inherent in vast reconstruction.

U.S. President Woodrow Wilson articulated the exhilarating potential of the new opportunities, insisting that the postwar settlements would constitute “a readjustment of those great injustices which underlie the whole structure of European and Asiatic society.” Those great injustices, for Wilson, were rooted in the absence of democratic rule. The new postwar order would put all governments “in the hands of the people and taken out of the hands of coteries and of sovereigns, who had no right to rule over the people. It is a people's treaty, that accomplishes by a great sweep of practical justice the liberation of men who never could have liberated themselves. . . . The men who sat around the table in Paris knew that the time had come when the people were no longer going to consent to live under masters, but were going to live the lives that they chose themselves, to live under such governments as they chose themselves to erect. That is the fundamental principle of this great settlement.”<sup>2</sup> It was a liberatory impulse that had led to the postwar settlements, he insisted, consonant with the demand for “self-determination of peoples” that he had articulated during his 1917 speech to the U.S. Congress.

The League of Nations was constructed as the embodiment of the new order and the repository of its hopes. Here, statesmen could work out their disagreements without recourse to war; in its chambers, people's grievances could be addressed before they escalated into revolution. Among the first projects of the League of Nations would be to legitimize the territorial settlements that resulted from the defeat of the enormous empires and to agree on a means for dealing with their colonies. Working from a set of assumptions about the superiority of nationalism and self-determination as the future of civilized Europe, the League of Nations carved out new nation-states, trying to satisfy potentially destabilizing nationalists where possible and creating a series of treaties to protect “minorities” when it became clear that each group claiming to be a nation could not be awarded an independent state.

But in the territories of the defeated Ottoman Empire, as in other areas of Asia and Africa, the statesmen controlling the League of Nations were loath to take “self-determination of peoples” so far that it would end their hold on colonial territories. Explaining that local populations were hardly civilized enough to be qualified to determine their own futures, the League of Nations assigned a European power to each of the new post-Ottoman states and to all of the former African and Asian colonial possessions. The League of Nations assigned the territories as mandates and assigned the mandatory power the task of helping them attain the level of discernment and administration required to become independent. The new system of mandates was to be administered through the League, though with extremely limited oversight.

The Sanjak of Alexandretta, where Saydo’s argument took place, had been occupied by French troops at the end of World War I. In 1920, the League of Nations had included the Sanjak in the mandate for “Syria,” one of many new countries the victorious European states carved out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, and assigned France the task of administering Syria while elevating its people to that lofty level of civilization at which they could become capable of ruling themselves. The years that followed were marked by repeated efforts by the Syrians to throw off French control. Finally, at the end of bloody riots in 1936, France negotiated a treaty of independence for the whole of its Syrian territories. Turkey continued to insist, however, that the Sanjak not be included within the new, independent Syrian state because of its large Turkish-speaking population, which should guarantee it a special status apart from the Arab Syrian state. Having only recently been forced to accept the loss of Mosul province to Iraq, the Turkish regime insisted on doing anything necessary to hold on to the Sanjak. France initially refused Turkey’s claim, arguing that the League of Nations had given France the mandate for Syria, and that the mandate prohibited Paris from alienating any of Syria’s territory. Both governments agreed to refer the case to the League of Nations for resolution.

The Republic of Turkey thus staked its claim to the Sanjak not on geopolitical grounds but on an assertion about identity: the population of the Sanjak, they argued, was Turkish. With this identity came a host of affective commitments; indeed, the story goes that the founder and hero of the new Turkey, Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk), had been overcome on hearing Turkish spoken in the Sanjak while he was stationed there during World War I. He had vowed all those years before to include the Sanjak in his new state as soon as he was able. Most striking, however, was not that Turkey presented statistics to prove its claim, numbers the French could easily dispute, but instead the twin assumptions on which the claim was based. Turkey’s argument before the Council of the League of Nations implied both that the *identity* of the population should determine the future of the territory and that a neighboring power had the right to intervene

over issues of identity. Underpinning this claim was an assertion about the primacy of linguistic affiliation: Turkey could claim neighboring territory because the people there *spoke Turkish*. Under the Ottoman, Hapsburg, and Russian empires, claims had been made and territories defined on the basis of the power of the ruling family. Linguistic groups had lived for centuries divided among competing empires, and each empire had always contained more than one linguistic group. Now the Turks were playing by new rules—rules in which linguistic identity marked “national” affiliation, which in turn would determine territorial destiny.

But, as this book shows, these were not rules that Atatürk’s new Turkish Republic had created. Rather, nationalism was the fundamental assumption behind the League of Nations; the League’s ideology of nationalism provided a blueprint for allocating both power and territory. Thus, Turkish claims that the Sanjak should have special treatment because it was home to a preponderance of Turks resonated among the European states deliberating at the League’s headquarters in Geneva. Irredentist claims, in which one country asserted its right to territory on the basis of the inhabitants’ identity, had become the daily fare of the League of Nations by the time the French and Turkish governments brought up the question of the Sanjak of Alexandretta. Indeed, by 1936, when the dispute first garnered international attention, Germany had already left the League after its own territorial claims based on linguistic identity were frustrated. With the radical new ethnolinguistic definition of political identity, the League’s problem in the Sanjak became simple: once it had devised a process to define accurately the people of the Sanjak, the League of Nations would know how to allocate the Sanjak’s territory.

This new, widespread acceptance of the notion that the language of a territory’s population indicated a distinct ethnic identity that defined its political affiliation was a marked departure from previous notions of belonging, and not only in the Ottoman Empire. Throughout Europe, states incorporated diverse linguistic groups, while at the same time excluding many people who spoke the majority language of the state; many tongues could be heard within Germany’s borders, for example, and German was spoken by people who were citizens of other states. Censuses taken by the newly defeated Ottoman Empire had reflected only religious groups; linguistic groups like Turks, Kurds, and Arabs never made sense under Ottoman imperial ideology. The Ottoman Empire that had ruled the Sanjak for centuries before Saydo’s argument was hardly Turkish. It was a polyglot, multiethnic empire, home to many religious groups, and held together by its ruling family, the descendants of Osman. That remarkable diversity was quite evident in the Sanjak of Alexandretta, where people often spoke more than one language, where Kurds married Turks, Arabs married Kurds, and the church steeples were easily visible from neighboring minarets. This is not to

assert that the Ottoman Empire was a stranger to discord but that Ottoman conflicts during its first six hundred years of existence played out along lines not defined by language. As the story of Saydo suggests, the lines dividing “ethnic groups” were still porous in 1938, with Kurdish-speakers in this court case arguing over whether to “be” Turks or Arabs.

This new focus on the pivotal role of language and identity in political decision-making accompanied the notions of popular sovereignty and liberal democracy that emerged victorious with the defeat of the old-style Ottoman and Hapsburg empires during World War I. In the postwar world, it was “the people” who would rule themselves and determine their own destinies. But who were “the people”? The nationalism mobilized to answer this question was a European corollary of the Enlightenment notion that legitimate rule comes from the consent of the governed. Each territory’s people were to be permitted to plot its own collective political trajectory. First, the collective (“nation”) had to be identified, and defined (in the new ideological world of the 1920s and 1930s) on the basis of the common identities of the population. The reasoning was curiously circular: the “nation-building” of the League of Nations began by positing (or “planting”) a national identity, which the League then had to affirm, verify, and validate, all the while asserting that this identity was, *a priori*, an already-extant foundation for the “nation” that the League then insisted would naturally represent the people with this national identity.

In the lands of the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, however, this nation-building project was complicated by centuries in which mixed populations had lived in close proximity, a multilinguistic history that had left its legacies in the multiple vernaculars of the population. Each state the League created from the empires’ ruins contained not only the “nation” that defined it, but a host of other groups speaking different languages. What was to be done about those whose identity did not match that of the anointed “people” in the new states? The fate of “minorities” became arguably Europe’s greatest crisis during and after World War I, leading to massacres, expulsions, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. When the League of Nations legitimized Europe’s long-standing desire for hegemony over territories to its south and east by giving the European Great Powers the mandates that provided control over Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, the League brought the “minorities question” with it in its baggage.

After France (then in control of Syria) and Turkey turned to the League in 1936 with their dispute over the Sanjak of Alexandretta, the contestation of the identity of the population would become a crucial determinant of the Sanjak’s fate. In the League’s understanding of the universal human condition, each individual had one identity, which was imagined to be fixed, impermeable, and fundamental. The League planned to decide whether the Sanjak “belonged” in Syria or in Turkey by analyzing the preponderance of the people: was more of the



population “Syrian” or “Turkish?” It would be necessary to count the numbers of Turks, Arabs, Kurds, and others who lived within the Sanjak.

Yet as Saydo’s argument suggests, identity on the ground in the 1930s Middle East was much more complicated than the League of Nations had imagined. The province of Alexandretta was called home by people who spoke Arabic, Turkish, Armenian, Kurdish, and Greek, and whose community worship took place on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Moreover, religious differences embraced far more variety than Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Christian groups included the Orthodox, Catholics, Armenians, and Protestants; Muslims were predominantly Sunni or Alawi. To say that these groups had simply “coexisted” over four centuries of Ottoman rule, though, would imply that they were somehow mutually exclusive. Instead, they had mingled, merged, and crisscrossed as linguistic and religious identities intersected. By the time the Ottoman Empire was defeated at the end of World War I, the people of the Sanjak of Alexandretta had affiliations that were overlapping and multiple, comprising a society that could be likened to a mosaic only if some of the tiles could be layered atop adjoining tiles.

Nonetheless, European political ideologies *required* the nation, and the Turkish government made its argument about the Sanjak by claiming that “the Turks” there constituted a majority. The new Turkish republic, established in 1923, was based on the same kind of nationalist ideology that was so much in vogue in Europe during the interwar period. It was founded by a group of nationalist officers led by Mustafa Kemal who rejected the treaty imposed on the Ottoman Empire by the victorious World War I powers. After defeating the World War I allies in Turkey’s war of independence, the group created a modern republic in the central lands of the former Ottoman Empire. The new Turkish republic adapted its Ottoman past, defining its new identity as Turkish, modern, secular, and Western-leaning. Indeed, by the 1930s, nationalism was such a central element in the ideology of the new state that the Turkish government created a foundational myth to explain its interest in the Sanjak, and pressed the Sanjak into service as a stage on which to perform national identity. The Turkish government’s “invention of tradition” included not only new narratives about the origins and significance of the Turks but also the “rediscovery” of specifically Turkish folk music and poetry and the creation of new national habits: anthems, flags, even costumes. The Sanjak’s Turkish nationalists not only wore but even enforced the wearing of the symbolic Western-style brimmed hats that had come to connote the new Turkishness. This was, indeed, the sort of hat Saydo was wearing when he was accosted by Haydar.

Syrian political identity, by contrast, was chiefly anticolonial, aimed less at the creation of a Syrian nation than at eliminating the hated French occupation. Historians have debated the nature and extent of Syrian or Arab nationalism. However, like many groups in the late Hapsburg Empire who had claimed for

themselves a separate identity and political future, some Ottoman Arab elites by the early 1900s were calling for recognition of their Arabness, even if not independence. After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, while Turkey was remaking itself as a nationalist republic, Arab populations were straining against the European control institutionalized as the League of Nations mandates, and their collective political efforts worked not so much to define who they were as to eliminate the foreign European occupiers.<sup>3</sup>

When Turkey made its claim to the Sanjak, then, it was France, not Syria, that determined the course and the outcome of the struggle. The 1936 treaty giving Syria its independence had been neither ratified nor implemented. The Syrian government-in-training, led by Jamil Mardam, had no control over the country and little room to maneuver. Focusing their emerging ideology and their activism on gaining Syria's sovereignty left the Damascus government unprepared for a struggle based on internal identities and, in any case, hardly a fair match for the organized nationalism of the government in Ankara. During the course of the struggle over the Sanjak, Syrian and Arab nationalist ideologies grew, especially under the leadership of Zaki al-Arsuzi, who would later become one of the major thinkers behind the Ba'ath party. But when Saydo met his antagonist, the Damascus government-in-waiting was ill-prepared to advanced nationalist claims to territory based on ideologies not yet developed.

Saydo's argument, related in the documents of the League of Nations Special Tribunal, is only one of many cases adjudicating the violence that accompanied the effort to register people to vote in the first elections of the independent Sanjak. Collectively, the court testimonies demonstrate that national identities were neither fixed nor mutually exclusive during the decades immediately following the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. Over and over, witnesses brought before the Special Tribunal recounted stories of the Sanjak's people changing their identities for political or economic reasons. As I pondered these cases, my conviction grew that the people of the Sanjak of Alexandretta had multiple and porous identities, and that examining the court records and the context in which they were embedded would tell a new story about how people perceived their collective identities.

The question of national identity in the Sanjak is not—and was not—merely an academic enterprise. Disputes over identity worsened over the three-year course of the Sanjak dispute. Turkish nationalists and Syrian nationalists hardened their positions and tried to find adherents within local communities, with violent consequences. By the time the League of Nations ended its role in the affair in 1938, demonstrations and harassment had given way to arson and murder. The process of displaying nationalism had become deadly.

Yet the bloody spectacle on the Sanjak stage had no role whatsoever in the outcome of the contest. Instead, the Sanjak's fate was decided by a backroom

deal in Geneva made while the League was discussing the question in official session. The outcome was a travesty of the League's stated principles about self-determination, as the French colonial occupiers collaborated with the Ankara regime to circumvent the established electoral system and "create" a Turkish majority where none existed. In the end, the dispute over the Sanjak would hinge not on nationalities, but on France's own strategic needs as it weighed its obligations to its Syrian charges against the changing climate in late 1930s Europe. This book argues that it was European needs, not Middle Eastern identities, that determined the Sanjak's fate. In this way, the Sanjak question reflects broader European concerns of the period.

My account of the Sanjak question engages two of the urgent issues of the decades after World War I. If one of the most significant themes that defined the League of Nations and the international community at large during the 1930s was self-determination (and its shadow, the minorities question), the other was certainly appeasement. Appeasement became after the 1930s a term of opprobrium suggesting huge and dangerous compromise. Faced with the nationalist German leadership's insistence on claiming neighboring territory, European leaders agreed again and again to give Berlin what it demanded in order to avoid conflict.

In the Sanjak, too, the outcome was based on France's fear, this time her anxiety about the consequences of alienating Turkey. The Paris government was adamant about keeping the government of the new Turkish republic on its own side during the threatening European war, insistent that Atatürk not repeat the fatal mistake of his Ottoman predecessors. Many decision-makers in Paris and Geneva were convinced that Turkey's loyalty hinged on the outcome of the Sanjak question. In the face of the looming war, the government of France gave the Turkish government whatever it sought, hoping thereby to neutralize Turkey, and thus guarantee anti-German forces a nonhostile regime in the eastern Mediterranean and access to Turkey's Straits and the Black Sea.

In French calculations, consideration of the Syria mandate took second place to France's own strategic interests in the approaching war, an outcome hardly inconsistent with the nature and origin of the mandate system. After all, the League of Nations mandates had provided a novel compromise that allowed European powers to extend their control over other world areas while at the same time providing the facade of self-determination that Wilsonian ideology demanded. Colonialism had become unacceptable in the ideological aftermath of World War I, as articulated by Woodrow Wilson in his Fourteen Points speech to Congress in 1918, but Europe's Great Powers had been unwilling to relinquish their empires. The League's mandate system responded to these calls for self-determination, allowing European governments to reconfigure their former colonies in a way that could provide a facade of self-rule while continuing Great



Power hegemony over Asia and Africa. The mandates served European interests, under the guise of providing mentoring so that their former colonies, now mandates, could attain the maturity required for independence. Mandates in Africa were even more rigid than those in the Middle East, where the populations had been promised at least some semblance of self-rule. Nonetheless, the mandate system was quite flexible in permitting the continuation, even the expansion, of European control. For at least some in Paris, then, the Syria mandate was to benefit France; if it had to be altered to serve French interests, there could be little room for noble regrets.

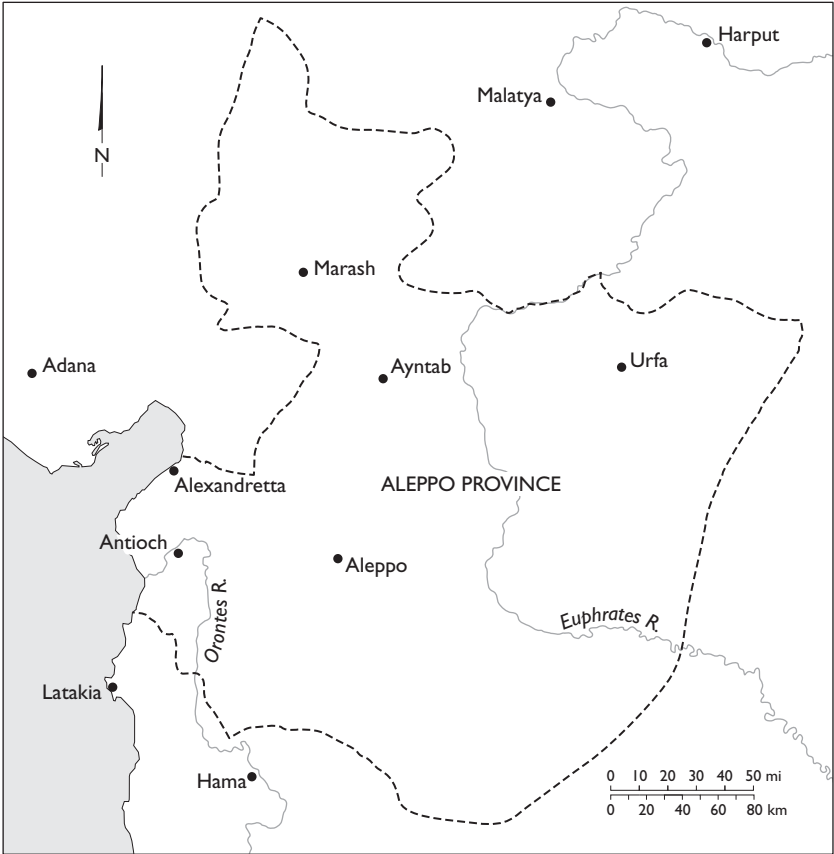
Policy-makers in Paris, although cognizant of their responsibilities to the people of Syria that resulted from their mandate over the territory, made their decisions primarily on the basis of considerations of French diplomatic and military requirements. Having acquiesced in the League of Nations' politics of identity that insisted local populations would determine their own futures, French officials set in train a process of polarization in the Sanjak in which mutual regard gave way to violence as newly empowered identity groups consolidated their separateness and competed for adherents. As the process was turning violent, the French turned their back on the whole project, walking away from the League's insistence on identifying the national affiliations of the people in favor of a back-door deal with Turkey that ignored any semblance of self-determination or the consent of the governed.

Despite the sub-rosa process by which the Sanjak of Alexandretta became part of the Republic of Turkey, the ideology of self-determination has been seen as so essential to legitimate government that the fiction has been maintained for decades. Today's Turkish citizens "know" that the population of the Sanjak "voted" to join Turkey. Turkish narratives, interviews, and memoirs reverberate with nationalist pride over the Sanjak that was "returned" to Turkey through the wishes of the people.

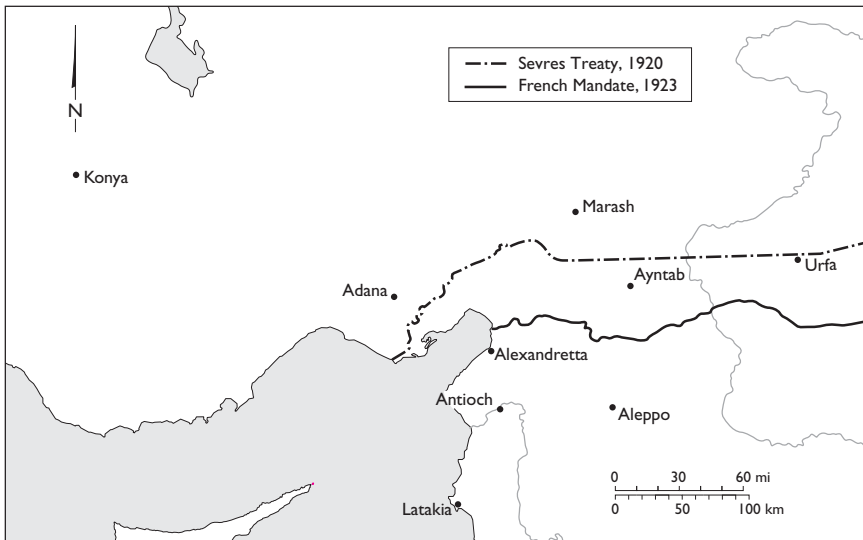
Like any victory narrative, this tale eschews accuracy and nuance in favor of simplicity and parable. Although Turkey and Syria have begun the process of opening their borders to each other, Saydo's argument retains a broader significance. In the name of self-determination of peoples, communities were divided, neighbors became hostile, and exclusionary identities were the presumed new normalcy. The ambiguity so common in Saydo's world—where an individual could claim more than one collective or change affiliation as needed—continues to give way to violent conflict as outsiders insist that "peace" is dependent on the creation of ethnic, linguistic or religious homogeneity. The story of Saydo and his neighbors offers a glimpse into how animosities can be created and conflict fomented, challenging the notion that essential identities are unchanging and hence necessarily divisive.



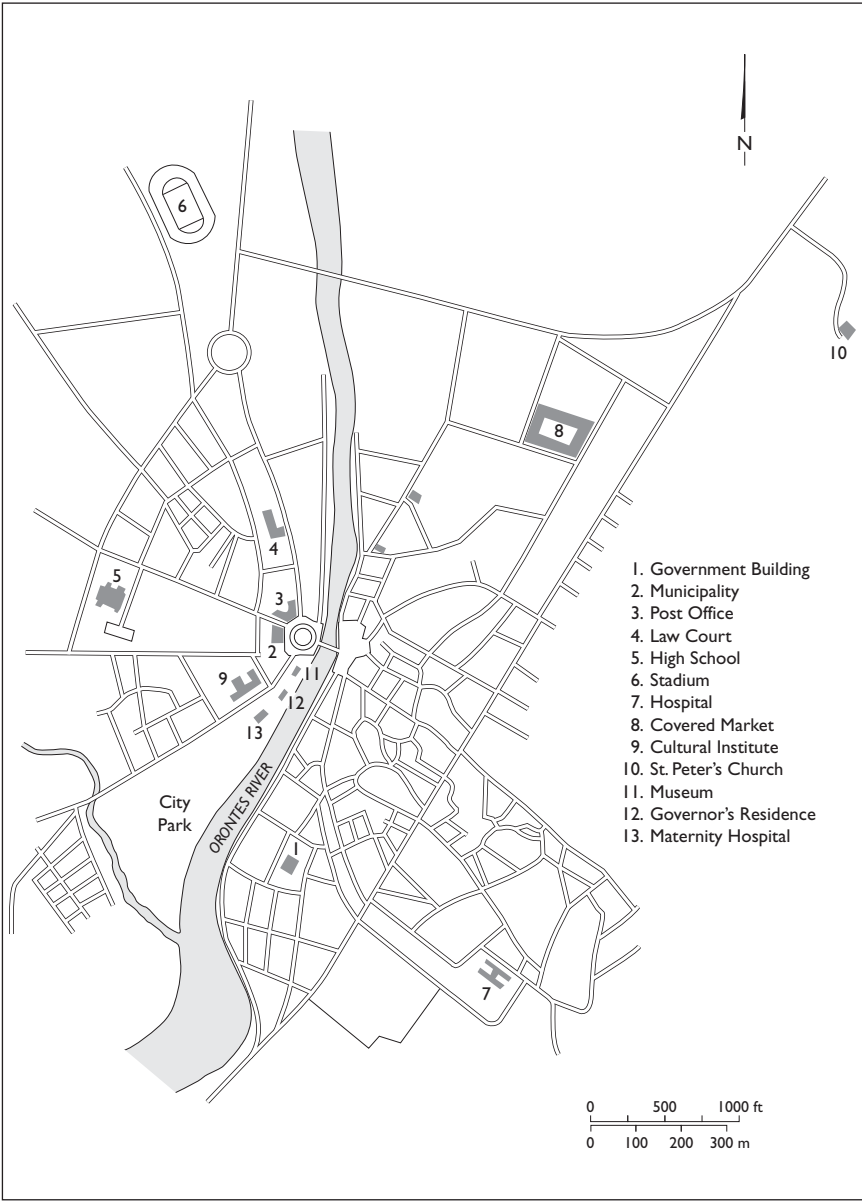
The Sanjak in the Eastern Mediterranean



Ottoman Province of Aleppo, Nineteenth Century



Treaty Borders



City of Antioch, Circa 1940

## Fezzes and Hats

Antioch's markets pulsed with the hum and clatter of the craftsmen's instruments and the cries of its peddlers. From the shops and the streets wafted conversations and sales jingles in Arabic, in Turkish, and in various mixtures of the two languages, to which certain French words were added, "bizarrely pronounced." In the words of government official Pierre Bazantay, it could seem either an untranslatable music—or cacophony.<sup>1</sup>

These markets stretched for miles from their entrance just beyond the bridge over the Orontes (Asi) River, snaking their way in the direction of the mountains overlooking the Sanjak of Alexandretta's largest city. On any given day, the people of the city mixed with those who came in to sell or to shop. Muslims, Christians, and Jews, Turks, Arabs, and Kurds greeted and jostled each other in the market, which housed not only the shops where people purchased their produce and clothing but also the workshops where many of the area's goods were manufactured. People returned home along Antioch's narrow streets, which wound along the riverbank and up toward the hillside that was home to the ancient Cave of St. Peter, the cave in the mountains above Antioch that had served as the first Christian church. Indeed, Antioch had long been a city of enormous importance to Christians. St. Peter and St. Paul lived in Antioch in the early years after the death of Christ, and the city became home to a patriarchate and a center of Christian life.

But the Christians had not been the first to consider Antioch's site important. Long before the birth of Christ, its location on the Orontes River had drawn the attention of traders and emperors, who had built towns that meandered along the river's path. One of Alexander the Great's generals founded Antioch around 300 BCE. By the early Roman period, the city boasted a population of close to half a million people, making it the third largest city in the world (after Rome and Alexandria). It was controlled in succession by Persians, Byzantines, Arabs, Armenians, Seljuks, and Crusaders before becoming part of the Ottoman



Bridge over the Orontes River, downtown Antioch. Courtesy of: Mehmet Saplama.

Empire in 1516. From the Ottoman conquest on, Antioch was attached to its neighbor, Aleppo, and stood midway between that great international emporium and its port in Alexandretta.

Alexandretta, for which the Sanjak was named, is a coastal city, commanding a protected, accessible bay on the Mediterranean to its east and controlling the pass through the mountains by which invaders marched west and north toward Anatolia. Through the end of the nineteenth century, Alexandretta was the port for goods carried on donkeys' backs from northern Syria and by camel caravans from Iraq. It had functioned for centuries as Aleppo's outlet to the sea, and Aleppo's role as one of the largest European trading centers of the entire Ottoman Empire had reinforced Alexandretta's significance.

Most of the Sanjak's forty-seven hundred square kilometers, however, was rural—acres and acres of farmland scattered with small villages and the market towns to which the cultivators were drawn. Like most of the rest of northern Syria, the people of the Sanjak grew olives, wheat, and vegetables, raised animals, and manufactured many of the products needed by the regional population.<sup>2</sup>

That population was remarkably diverse, a legacy of those many groups who had crossed, conquered, and settled the region. By the early 1930s, five languages were heard commonly in the streets: Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, Circassian, and Armenian. The city of Antioch boasted a number of places of worship: three Armenian institutions (Gregorian, Protestant, and Catholic), a variety of Catholic congregations (Chaldean, Syriac, Latin, Greek, and Maronite), and Jewish and Greek Orthodox groups—in addition to its many mosques.<sup>3</sup>

Although little has been written about how the local people responded to such remarkable variety, it is likely that Antioch's population shared the outlook of their neighbors in the regional hub city of Aleppo, a mere forty-five kilometers away. Aleppines thought of their great diversity as a positive sign, reflecting their role as a center of commerce: the city's human diversity reflected its importance.<sup>4</sup> In any case, linguistic diversity was so common that most people spoke more than two languages. Far from determining one's national identity, language was an instrument for commerce, prayer, and government—and often a different language would be used for each.<sup>5</sup>

The people of the Sanjak of Alexandretta had been under Ottoman rule since 1516. In the Ottoman world, group affinity had been based not on language but on religion. Muslims were the majority, and Islam the official religion of the empire. Under Ottoman rule, non-Muslim communities were officially recognized, even permitted to implement their own laws and allocate their own taxes. Censuses counted Muslims, varied Christian groups, and Jews. Although the Sanjak was home to two schismatic Muslim groups, the Alawis and the Druze, they were still counted as Muslim in the Ottoman census.