Colonial Corporatism in the French Mandated States: Labor, Capital, the Mandatory Power, and the 1935 Syrian Law of Associations

Corporatisme colonial dans les États sous mandat français : travail, capital, pouvoir mandataire et loi syrienne de 1935 sur les associations

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La "question sociale" en Syrie à l’époque du mandat français (1920-1946) était pour l’essentiel soumise à la "question nationale". Pourtant, une catégorie de la société syrienne, celle des ouvriers et artisans, luttait pour la reconnaissance de ses droits. Artisans et ouvriers d’usine commencèrent à s’organiser et à se mobiliser pour l’amélioration de leur situation. Le militantisme ouvrier connut un sommet au début des années 1930 avec une série de grèves qui coïncidèrent avec une crise politique et économique de grande ampleur dans les États du Levant, et menaçèrent l’ordre social et le maintien de l’autorité française. La puissance mandataire s’efforça alors de canaliser les griefs de la classe ouvrière/artisanale à travers des “associations professionnelles” sous son contrôle. Les efforts du Mandataire ne connurent qu’un succès limité. Bien que les élites syriennes aient largement accepté le compromis corporatiste proposé par les Français, artisans et ouvriers poursuivirent leur quête d’autonomie. En analysant les motivations, l’impact, et l’héritage de la législation mandataire, cet article propose le modèle du “corporatisme colonial” comme grille de lecture susceptible d’aider à comprendre cette situation ou d’autres situations comparables.

Abstract. The “social question” in Syria during the French Mandate (1920-1946) was by and large subordinated to the “national question”. However, one stratum of Syrian society, the artisanal-laboring segment, did press for recognition of its rights during the 1920s and 1930s. Artisans and factory workers began to organize themselves and to agitate for amelioration of their situation. Labor militancy peaked in the early 1930s with a series of strikes, coinciding
with a major political and economic crisis in the Levant states that threatened to disrupt social order and challenged the maintenance of French authority. In consequence the Mandatory Power attempted to channel artisanal/working class grievances through officially controlled "professional associations". The Mandatory's efforts were only a partial success. Although Syrian elites largely accepted the corporatist bargain offered by the French, artisans and workers continued their quest for autonomy. In analyzing the motivations, impact, and legacy of Mandatory social legislation, it is suggested that a model of "colonial corporatism" is a useful way to approach this and similar situations.

The “social question” in Syria during the French Mandate (1920-1946) was by and large subordinated to the “national question”. That is, for most politically active Syrians, especially the pro-independence politicians consolidated in the National Bloc after 1928, problems connected to the social order were to be deferred until the achievement of formal political independence. Although this strategy did tend to promote national solidarity, it was also self-serving, in that the Bloc leadership was composed very largely of landlord-bureaucrat “notables” whose social, economic, and political dominance would be challenged by attempts to address inequality in Syrian society, especially in rural areas.

Nevertheless, one stratum of Syrian society, the artisanal-laboring segment, did press for recognition of its rights during the 1920s and 1930s. Artisans and factory workers, although they often shared the elites’ nationalist outlook, began to organize themselves and to agitate for higher wages, better working conditions, and the right to strike. This militancy, often abetted by nationalist and communist organizers, reached a peak in the early 1930s with a series of strikes. These strikes coincided with a major political and economic crisis in the Levant states, a crisis that threatened to disrupt social order and challenged the maintenance of French authority. In consequence the Mandatory Power, acting through the subordinate Syrian government and drawing on Ottoman precedent, attempted to channel artisanal/working class grievances through officially controlled “professional associations”. The corporatist character of these associations and the generally corporatist outlook of Mandatory social policy are underscored by the contemporaneous effort to reorganize the institutions representing capital’s interests – the chambers of commerce, industry, and agriculture – also along corporatist lines.

The Mandatory’s efforts were only a partial success. Although economic elites by and large accepted the terms of the corporatist bargain, by which they agreed to close government supervision of their organizations in return for access to power and a representational monopoly, artisans and workers continued their quest for autonomy, ultimately gaining a generous labor law at independence. However, the shape of Syrian associational life continued to be a corporatist one, as the mechanisms of social mobilization used by the later Ba‘th regimes demonstrate (Heydemann, 1999; Sadowski, 1984; Wedeen, 1999). In this
regard the Mandatory phase of Syrian history represents a bridge between the
Ottoman and post-independence periods, emphasizing the continuities in Syrian
institutions across time and under differing regime types.

This paper analyses the legal reform of artisans’ and workers’ organizations in
Syria during the Mandate. It will first examine the patterns of interest represen-
tation under the later Ottoman system. The development of the labor movement
and French attitudes toward it in early Mandatory Syria are treated next. A
close analysis of the legislation enacted under High Commissioner Damien de
Martel then follows, with a particular emphasis on the terms of the 1935 law of
occupational associations (Legislative Decree 152 of 18 September 1935). The
contemporaneous reform of the chambers of commerce, industry, and agriculture
is also discussed as a counterexample of a set of elite institutions which more
readily accepted the Mandatory’s corporatist agenda.

Suggested interpretations of these policies, notably an emphasis on tactical
political motives (Shambrook, 1998) and the concept of a “colonial welfare
state” (Thompson, 2000), are reviewed, and a line of interpretation applying
the concepts of corporatism is suggested as a tentative alternative.

**Interest Representation in the Late Ottoman Period**

As Syria was an Ottoman successor state the Mandatory was obliged to retain
Ottoman law as much as possible, and so the legal status of representative
organizations was an important consideration. The Mandatory Power closely
examined Ottoman precedent in considering changes in Syrian law. Moreover,
France inherited not just formal legal structures in 1920, but also structures
in Syrian society as they were articulated at the end of Ottoman times, so that
the bodies with which the French dealt were also products of the late Ottoman
period. These bodies in turn reflected the changing character of their members.
For our purposes the most important transformational force had been the open-
ing up of the Syrian market to the products of an industrializing Europe on
terms largely favorable to Europeans during the 19th century. Among the conse-
quences of this “infitâb” were an erosion of the position of handicraft industry,
a concomitant acceleration of the decline of the artisanal guilds, changes in the
composition and interests of the urban commercial bourgeoisie, a reorientation
of agriculture toward commercial crops, and the expanding prevalence of capi-
talist labor relations throughout the economy. Of necessity these consequences
were reflected in the outlook and organizational methods of the laboring and
business segments.

The institutions representing the interests of the artisanry had an ambiguous
official status in the late Ottoman period. Like the class of petty producers and
retailers that they represented, their organizations, analogous in some respects
to medieval European guilds, were in disarray. Known by different names (e.g.
ḥirfâ / ḥiraf, ṣinfl / ʿasnâf, mihna / mihan) and operating under a variety of laws
and internal regulations, these bodies (Fr. corporations) had evolved over centuries, regulating admission to the trade, product quality, professional advancement and, depending on the exact locale and time, acting as tax-farmers. These old corporations, with their elaborate initiation rituals and apprentice-journeyman-master advancement system (Qoudsi, 1885; Qasimi, 1960), lost much influence in the 19th century as a result of the competition of cheap European machine-made goods with local handicrafts and the gradual supersession of guild masters by non-guild merchants as employers in many crafts, especially weaving (Vatter, 1993, 1994). Barriers to advancement and the new capitalist relations between merchant-manufacturer employers and craft workers sapped the corporations’ internal cohesion. By the Young Turk period (1908-18) political elites viewed the organizations as anachronisms inconsistent with their own modernizing ethos.

In several laws, significantly the law on “the directives of the guilds (talimât al-niqábat) » of 24 April 1912 (text in Ramadân, 1929, 2: 433-38) the new Ottoman leadership sought to supplant the old guilds by formally constituted, legally recognized organizations, termed niqábat al-âsnâf. Among other obligations the niqábat al-âsnâf had to have written statutes approved by the government. These were not labor unions in the Western sense, being combinations of owners and workers. Just how effective this law was is an open question. It is probable that it was largely unenforceable due to the almost continuous state of war that the empire was engaged in until its demise (Longuenesse, 1977: 42). It would appear that few craft organizations, whether they were closer to the guild ideal or to that of a Western union, adhered to the requirements of the law. Massignon (Massignon, 1953: 38) found in Damascus in the late 1920s that of 114 corporations only 36 had adopted formal written statutes and registered with the municipality as required by the law. A similar situation was manifest in the other Syrian provinces with, for example, the Aleppo weavers’ guild (representing the most important trade of the city) lacking written rules or any legal status as late as 1936-37 (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 1938: 27-28).

By contrast, business associations enjoyed a much clearer status. As part of the Tanzimat reforms, the Ottoman Empire had created new institutions that reflected its altered economic relationship with Europe and which accustomed the Ottoman bourgeoisie to both European business methods and a high degree of state supervision. The commercial code of 1850 was a nearly direct translation of the corresponding French code (text in Young, 1906: v. 7, 55-102). More significantly for our purposes, to provide for the interests of European merchants in Ottoman cities and to engage the native Ottoman bourgeoisie, the empire instituted chambers of commerce. The first chamber, that of Istanbul, was created by ministerial decree in 1876, and provincial chambers, authorized by the same decree, grew up in the 1880s and 1890s (Hoell, 1973: 37, 57; Aleppo, 1985: 1). Chambers of commerce provided the Ottoman government with economic information and recommended measures to promote commerce and industry. The government played an important role in the selection of the chambers’ members, with officials supervising chamber elections (texts of laws
in Ramadân, 1925: v. 2, 254-64; CADN1/Mandat/1e/716 ; Young, 1906: v. 4, 3-13). The business functions of the chambers – essentially those of a registry and notary – made them adjuncts to the executive and judicial functions of the government, and in fact nullified the “voluntary” nature of registration with them, as any businessman who wished to avail himself of these services had to be registered with the chambers.

If this was the juridical position of workers’ and employers’ organizations under the Ottoman system as inherited by the Mandatory in 1920, how did these organizations evolve under the Mandate? Why was it felt necessary by the mid-1930s to reexamine and modify the existing Ottoman statutes?

### Associational Life during the Early Mandate

Despite the paucity of documents, inadequate statistics, and a certain degree of mythology in the official history of the Syrian labor movement (Longuenesse, 1996: 104-05), several trends are clear. As capitalist relations deepened and the manual sector’s competitive position worsened, opportunities to achieve master status and become the sole proprietor of a workshop, arguably the goal of the guild system, evaporated. Increasingly manual artisans came to work for merchant-industrialists in larger workshops for cash wages. Domestic production persisted, the owners of large workshops also patronizing putting-out networks. To take the Aleppo textile industry as an example, the handloom sector was dominated by handful of large proprietors (Fr. patrons), many of whom (notably the Şâ’îm al-Dâhr clan) also invested in the new mechanized sector. The expansion of mechanization in weaving from 1924 onward could not absorb the many unemployed artisans as the manual sector declined. In consequence a large part of the artisanry, which may be considered as a petit-bourgeois segment (cf. Mayer, 1975), was changing into a “proletarianized” working class. The artisanal guilds it had inherited had been rendered obsolete, but what was to replace them? As the artisanal class was in a hybrid state, so too were its organizations, with a range of bodies spanning the spectrum between ideal type “guilds” and “unions”.

A number of properly constituted niqâbât al-asnâf adhering to the 1912 Ottoman law persisted into the Mandatory period. Massignon’s 1927 count of only 36 legal niqâbât al-asnâf among 114 corporations in Damascus (Massignon, 1953: 38) is probably indicative of the situation in other cities. These niqâbât al-asnâf were the only formally recognized artisans’/workers’ organizations.

Apart from legal niqâbât al-asnâf there arose in the 1920s new niqâbât organized by nationalist politicians and mobilized as client groups for the politicians’ following. The case of the city of Hama, where the nationalist notable ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Qunbâz came to dominate the labor movement during

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1. CADN : Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, Nantes.
the late 1920s by forming a score of unions (Ar. niqâbât, Fr. syndicats) among the craftsmen and small businessmen of his city, is the most well-documented example of this process (Gaulmier, 1932; Khoury, 1987: 368-71). Such institutions were obnoxious to Mandatory officials, who had been attempting to marginalize the nationalist leadership and separate it from its clientele since its appearance as an organized force in 1928.

In some sectors organizations approximating to labor unions, but also named niqâbât developed. There is much mythology surrounding the origins of the union movement, stemming largely from the political needs of institutions of the contemporary Ba‘th state for heroic roles in the past. The official Syrian labor history claims that the first true syndicat was that of the Damascus knitting workers in 1925, but Longuenesse has shown this precedence is doubtful. The founder of the knitters’ union would become the head of the General Confederation of Trade Unions and needed to claim priority as a pioneer (Longuenesse, 1996: 104-05).

The Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon (CPSL) played an important organizing role, especially among factory workers and those in urban services. Founded in 1924 by Fu‘ād Shimâlî, a Maronite tobacco worker who had adopted Marxism in Egypt, the CPSL had some success organizing workers in tobacco and other industries, largely in Lebanon. In 1929 Shimâlî published a pamphlet entitled Niqâbât al-‘Ummâl (Workers’ Unions), as distinct from the “craft” implicit in niqâbât al-ašnaf (Shimâlî, 1929). After Shimâlî’s deposition in 1932 by Khâlid Bakdâsh the CPSL, under Comintern guidance, allied itself with the National Bloc and muted the social question, regarding the budding industrialists as a progressive national bourgeoisie (Bakdache, 1944; Gordon, 1973). However, the CPSL remained active in the labor movement, in 1936 quite openly attempting to organize labor unions (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 1937: 50).

Whether communist, nationalist, or other in political affiliation, and irrespective of whatever name they called themselves, technically all associations not adhering to the 1912 Ottoman law were unrecognized. Those styling themselves “unions” demanded legal recognition, the right to strike, limitations on the work day, and a comprehensive labor code. Combined with more frequent spontaneous collective action such as the early 1930s wave of strikes culminating in the 1932 Aleppo weavers’ strike, which threatened civic order, it was plain that matters needed reform. But what was to be done?

The French perception of the labor problem naturally evolved. Early reports to the League of Nations (SDN), which had oversight over French administration of the Levant states, indicated the lack of a recognized institutional framework for the labor movement, observing that the only extant labor legislation, the 1912 Ottoman law on niqâbât and another of the same year on strikes, « n’ont pour ainsi dire reçu jusqu’ici aucune application ». At that early stage the subordinate Lebanese and Syrian governments « n’ont pas encore senti le besoin de réglementer les conditions des travailleurs ». Labor disputes were to
be arbitrated by the Comité corporatif of the corps de métier but in practice this role was exercised by municipal authorities, the chambers of commerce, and traditional guild and religious leaders (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 1925: 44, 45).

Later, in 1932, the Mandatory could note « peu de chose à signaler » in the labor movement, with some small union organizing in Beirut and the establishment of a workers’ mutual-aid society in Latakia (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 1933: 29). Similarly, the next year the mouvement corporatif was described as « pas (…) très marqué et organisé » although the Mandatory did note the emergence of owner-worker cooperation in defending certain sectors (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 1934: 31). The following year, the labor issue was addressed in somewhat more detail. The Mandatory’s report refers again to groupements corporatifs as the characteristic workers’ organizations, with unions as « encore très rares » and more prevalent in Lebanon than interior Syria. Most syndicats are described as « plutôt groupements de patrons et de professionnels que d’ouvriers proprement dits », and the report remarks that some of these (e.g. the chauffeurs union) were « utilisés parfois à des fins plus politiques que professionnelles par des personnages étrangers à la corporation » (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 1935: 30-31).

Mandatory officials were, in general, hostile to artisans’/workers’ organizations, largely for their perceived political threat. As Jacques Couland (1970 : 140) observes,

« Dans les rapports du mandataire à la SDN il faut chercher de plus en plus un reflet de l’activité syndicale non plus à la rubrique “Travail”, mais à celle de la “Sûreté générale”, où elle est mêlée à l’activité communiste et nationaliste, ce qui n’est souvent pour les rédacteurs des rapports que la même chose ».

Significantly, the Mandatory state effectively outlawed the artisans’ and workers’ most potent weapon, the strike, which was regarded by Arrêté 4/H.C. Syrie of 12 February 1932 as an « atteinte à l’ordre public » subject to fines and imprisonment (text in Recueil 14, 1932: 187-91).

Despite this hostility and seeming neglect, some French observers were quite concerned with the situation of the various artisans’/workers’ organizations, and saw in their reorganization an opportunity for France to exert its benign influence on Syrian society. As Massignon remarked in the preface to his 1927 study of the Damascene corporations:

« Le mandat pouvait-il réussir à Damas ce que le protectorat au Maroc (avec un Lyautey) n’avait pas osé tenter : la rénovation sociale du travail par la restauration de l’idéal corporatif ? […] Les compagnons, eux, furent séduits par l’idée syndicale que la puissance mandataire ne pouvait pas favoriser sans appréhension au Levant (puisqu’elle prenait dans la métropole le rôle de fourrier du communisme)… » (Massignon, 1953 : 6)
The Crisis of the 1930s and De Martel’s Reforms

It was perhaps inevitable that eventually the Mandatory Power would seek to revise the legal status of workers’ and artisans’ organizations. That it took place when it did – during the tenure of High Commissioner Sénateur le Comte Damien Joseph Alfred de Martel (1933-38) – and the specific shape it took reflected a particular conjuncture of short- and long-term trends. This conjuncture, a period of acute political, economic, and social crisis, elicited an ambitious policy response. As labor agitation was a key element in the crisis, it was one of the foci of de Martel’s actions.

Politically, Syria had been in a diplomatic deadlock since the 1932 parliamentary elections and the refusal of the Syrian parliament in 1933 to ratify a Franco-Syrian treaty negotiated with High Commissioner Henri Ponsot. De Martel, Ponsot’s replacement and an experienced diplomat, failed to break the deadlock and in consequence repeatedly suspended the parliament from November 1933 and sine die in November 1934. Powers were exercised through a government appointed in February 1934 of which the premier was Shaykh Muhammad Tâj al-Dîn al-Hasanî, a long-time French client (Khoury, 1987: 189, 259). Economically, the combination of the ongoing transformation of the Syrian economy (in particular, the gradual shift in urban manufacturing from a largely decentralized artisanal system to a factory system) with the effects of the global Depression, exacerbated in part by Mandatory monetary and tariff policies, had led to great distress in all sectors of the economy (Owen and Pamuk, 1998: 64-68). This crisis led to a fall off in exports as well as of remittances from Syrian emigrants abroad, a profusion of bankruptcies, and wide unemployment. Some sources estimate that between 1930 and 1934 the equivalent of 15 to 20 percent of the labor force was unemployed (Khoury, 1987: 397). The unemployment is in part explicable by the fact that in manufacturing the manual sector was shrinking fast but the mechanized side was not expanding fast enough.

This economic distress expressed itself in social unrest, most especially as strikes by both artisans and factory workers in such major cities as Beirut, Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs. French records attest to the frequency and intensity of strikes for the maintenance or increase of piecework wages by handloom weavers in these cities from the mid-1920s (CADN/Mandat/1e/1545). From 1930 onwards the weavers of Aleppo were almost continually on strike, facing as they did both the closure of traditional markets in Turkey due to Kemalist policies of étatism and an onslaught of competing Japanese textiles facilitated by the tariff policy. This phase of unrest culminated in a massive weavers’ strike in August 1932 that began as a wage dispute between weavers and patrons but which escalated into a joint protest by both workers and owners against Mandatory tariff policies exploited by the National Bloc leadership. While the immediate result of the strike was the enactment of a series of tariff revisions that brought a measure of protection to what was portrayed as a “national”
industry, in the longer run the Aleppo strike (as well as contemporaneous ones in Homs and the persistence of strikes through 1934) showed the risks posed to the Mandatory order presented by the economic crisis and policies perceived as having contributed to it. The united front of owners and workers against Mandatory policy, the politicization of the strike by the Bloc, the disruption of civil order (the strike had witnessed some violence and pillaging of food stocks), and the transformation of a local crisis into a national cause all indicated that the economic and social tensions engendered by the global Depression had to be addressed if political stability were to be maintained.

De Martel’s reaction to the combined crisis was an ambitious policy response from the French High Commission and its subordinate Syrian government. The Quai d’Orsay’s instructions to de Martel were to « hold the coast and pipeline and… hold on to the whole country » (Shambrook, 1998: 157). As he remarked in April 1934, De Martel’s major emphasis overall was: « All political activity today, however, must be carried out discreetly if we wish to avoid reactivating the opposition, which is at present crumbling. Therefore I am trying to concentrate the public’s attention on economic projects » (Shambrook, 1998: 155).

The most immediate specific policy was an expansion of public works to sop up unemployment. There was gradual change in the tariff system but codification took time. Other items in the package included administrative decentralization, and, the emphasis here, reorganization of the institutions of sectoral representation.

These, then, were the conditions under which the High Commission and the Syrian government reformed the niqâbât in the mid-1930s (and, at the same time, the chambers of commerce): a combined political and economic crisis and the politicization or potential politicization of professional bodies whose status was governed by obsolescent Ottoman legislation. While the authorities most probably had short-term goals in mind, one effect of the legislation enacted was to reinforce the corporatist character of these institutions and their relationship to the state.

As will be seen, with respect to business interests the terms of the corporatist bargain were reaffirmed under de Martel. Labor differed. With the chambers of commerce the existing institutions were essentially viable. In the case of labor, the corporatist institutions the Mandate sought to reinvigorate were already obsolete and could not successfully be imposed on a social segment that had outgrown them.

The « Associations Professionnelles » Law of 1935

The Mandatory Power placed great emphasis on its efforts to reorganize labor representation. It put discussion of the law of 1935 near the head of its report to the SDN on the administration of Syria, and published the entire
law as an annex to the report (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 1936: 73-74, 205-10). Apparently France regarded its efforts in this field as clear evidence of its solicitude for Syrians.

The law enacted, Legislative Decree No. 152 of 18 September 1935 (texts in Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 1936: 205-10 [French]; Syria 1935 [French and Arabic]; CADN/Mandat/1e/1546 [with additional documentation]), did not endorse the formation of labor unions (syndicats) but rather regulated the creation of “professional associations” (French, associations professionnelles, Arabic, niqābât al-ḥiraf wa al-mihan"). The conception of the institution was close to that of the old guilds: they were to be associations of the practitioners of the same “craft” (Ar. mihan / hiraf, Fr. professions / métiers) or of similar crafts of a given district (art. 3). There could be only one association for any trade in a district, and no association could extend its activity beyond its own province (art. 4). Membership was restricted to practitioners of the same trade in an attempt to exclude the notables and members of the liberal professions who had assumed leadership of many workers’ organizations (art. 8). But there was no requirement that a member be a worker, and in fact many of these groups ended up composed of both employers and employees, although separate employers’ associations were also set up under this law.

The law said that the goal of the associations was to « assure the study and the defense of the occupational interests of their adherents » and expressly forbade « all political activity, all participation in demonstrations or meetings of a political character » (art. 2). Such activity figured among the grounds for dissolution of an association (art. 31). Moreover, carrying over the provisions of the Ottoman law, membership was refused to anyone convicted of a felony or deprived of their civil rights, which would exclude political offenders as well as ordinary criminals (art. 8).

In an evident attempt to prevent the appearance of a countrywide organized workers’ movement, permanent federations (Fr. unions permanentes, Ar. ittibād dā’im) of associations were forbidden, as was the fusion of two or more associations, although associations of the same profession within a province could merge with prior government authorization (art. 24). In this regard the authorities were probably responding to the efforts of labor organizers in Beirut and Damascus to fuse their organizations into a Comité central des syndicats de Syrie, projected in 1934 (Couland, 1970: 219). Conferences of the bureaux of associations of the same profession in different districts to study the defense of their common interests were permitted only with prior approval by the provincial administration or the ministry of interior if associations from several provinces were involved (art. 23).

2. As distinct from “niqābât al-ummāl”, which had already by this time acquired the sense of “labor unions” (Fr. syndicats), now often simply niqāba / niqābāt without modification. For the development of new meanings for old Arabic terms to reflect changed social realities, see Sawaie 1999.
Moreover, all existing associations professionnelles (*niqâbât al-mihan wa al-ḥiraf*), guilds (*Fr. corps de métiers*, *Ar. jamriyât al-ṣinârât*), and similar organizations had to apply for authorization within two months and were to be dissolved if authorization was refused (art. 32). Finally, the interior ministry had the power to decide just which trades and professions were allowed to form associations (art. 3). Thus, the government could deny the right to representation to trades whose practitioners showed undue militancy or politicization. Of the liberal professions, lawyers were specifically excluded from the provisions of this decree, their organizations being subject to special legislation (art. 34). Tight government control was also ensured by the associations’ obligation to provide the local court and sûreté générale with a copy of their authorization as well as an annual report on their membership (arts. 7, 12).

These associations, already subject to the foregoing restrictions, had limited powers despite their monopoly within their individual district. For the most part they were those characteristic of a workers’ mutual-aid society rather than of a trade union: providing libraries and professional training; assistance to the unemployed, sick, and injured; creating housing and sports and health facilities; creating information and placement offices; and establishing mutual-aid funds (art. 27). Their role in resolving labor disputes was subject to government guidance (art. 17), and nowhere was it mentioned that these organizations could represent workers against employers since, after all, both groups could belong to an association.

The conception of the professional associations was thus a hybrid one, carrying elements of the old guild bodies and of mutual-aid societies, within a corporatist framework and under close government supervision. This concept becomes clearer when one examines the list of professions and trades permitted to form associations as established by arrêté (*Ar. qarâr*) 163 of the Syrian Ministry of Interior of 24 October 1935. These included the liberal professions, the pursuits of small independent businessmen, the crafts of artisans, more modern manufacturing sectors, and a number of services. Many of these vocations were carried out by individuals working on their own account, indeed of petty businessmen. This reflects the petit-bourgeois character of much of the urban artisanal and retail class. Others involved what could more strictly be called workers, who were employed by others in enterprises of various sizes.

Significantly, the *niqâbât al-ḥiraf wa al-mihan* included both the employers and the employed. This is made explicit in the Arabic text of the decree: the weaving association is specifically described as composed of « the owners of weaving and spinning and knitting (*tricot*) workshops and the masters of the similar crafts [َاشْهَاب ماَامِيل الْناَشْج الْغُّازِل الْحَضْل الْحَيَّاكَة (وَا لْتِرْكُع الْمِهْان الْمُشْعَبِّى)] ». With the lumping together of workers in closely related fields, the division both by skill and material worked, and the combination of masters and workers, we are still close to the guild ethos.

The actual associations founded according to this law varied somewhat from the official list, some sub-fields being organized and others not. Despite the
many restrictions these bodies faced, as the only legal form of representation they were an option that many workers, especially those with associations previously organized according to Ottoman law, readily took up. By the end of 1936 there were 391 associations professionnelles in Syria, on which the Mandatory commented « ces associations, n’ont pas donné ce que le législateur en attendait » (Ministère des Affaires étrangères, 1937: 31). But whether they adequately fulfilled their function was another question. By the next year, France would report

« Du point de vue professionnel, ces organisations qui ont pris rapidement un caractère politique paraissent avoir fait plus de tort que de bien » (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 1938 : 27).

Certain traditional guilds persisted, without reference to either Ottoman or Mandatory law, notably the « organisation professionnelle… des tisserands d’Aleph » (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 1938: 27). But the result was, as the International Labour Organisation would report in 1939, that

« The application [of the new law] has… destroyed the old guilds… The Mandatory Power had attempted to direct the activity of these associations towards questions closely related to the occupations represented by each, and thus to protect them from the influence of politics and politicians. At first the results of the elections for the committees of the different associations justified the hope that this object would in the long run be achieved. However, the occupational activity of the committees in 1936 was negligible, and, but for a number of attempts by certain members to obtain personal advantages from the authority among other workers which their office confers, the existence of these bodies would have passed unnoticed » (ILO, 1939: 524).

If the new associations were a failure, it was partly because many workers were gravitating toward true workers’ unions (syndicats), unrecognized by the law. French reports to the SDN remark on heightened CPSL activity among workers in the later 1930s; non-communist labor organizing continued apace. In 1936 some 20 Damascus organizations formed the Union des syndicats de Damas; a similar Union was created at Aleppo the next year, and a congress marked the institution of a Fédération des syndicats ouvriers de Syrie (Couland, 1970: 228). A second congress in 1938 initiated the General Confederation of Trade Unions (al-ittiḥād al-ʿām li-niqābāt al-ʿummāl), although this body remained technically illegal (al-Ittiḥād al-ʿām li-niqābāt al-ʿummāl fī al-jumhūriyya al-ʿarabiyya al-sūrīyya, 1994: 7, 9). Workers called for the legal recognition of the unions they had formed outside of the recognized associations, the right to strike, and restrictions on the hours of work, and managed to get the Syrian parliament to begin studying a draft labor law in October 1938 (Couland, 1970: 228). Over the course of World War II these demands, reinforced by strikes, garnered support from members of the parliament. Among the first acts passed after full independence in 1946 was a comprehensive labor code that met most worker demands.
Reform of the Chambers, 1934-1938

If the attempt to impose a reinvigorated corporatist framework on the workers’ and artisans’ niqābât was at best a partial success that would be repudiated upon independence, the simultaneous effort to rein in business associations was another matter although it too was a matter of some controversy at the time. In large part, this reflects the very different characters of the artisanal/working class on the one hand and the commercial, industrial and agrarian bourgeoisie on the other. Workers and artisans were essentially struggling for social change. The bourgeoisie, although it too was undergoing transformation, represented the status quo. Although many of the industrialists, in particular, were partisans of the independence movement and had specific disagreements with the Mandatory Power’s economic policies, as a whole the bourgeoisie were, by their position, prone to cooperate with whoever held the reins of power. In consequence they were willing to reaffirm the corporatist bargain that they had originally made with the Ottomans, albeit not without some transient squabbling.

Briefly, in 1934, the Mandatory Power reexamined the legislation governing the chambers of commerce, in part because the nationalists had been holding a series of “economic congresses” that served as forums for criticizing Mandatory economic policies, especially tariffs, concessionary companies, and monetary policy (documentation in CADN/Mandat/1e/730, 862, 1572). These conferences, the exploitation of economic issues by the National Bloc leadership, and the prominence in Syrian business circles of figures closely linked to the nationalist leadership indicated a degree of dissatisfaction with the Mandate in this important constituency. These political issues combined with the increasing diversification of the Syrian economy, particularly the rise of mechanized manufacturing, to convince the authorities that a restructuring of business organizations was necessary. Initially (by Syrian Legislative Decrees 19 and 20 of 15 February 1934, approved by de Martel’s arrêté on 19 April 1934), the chambers of commerce and industry were separated from one another, chamber membership was expanded, and the government directly appointed one-third of the members. In September the procedure was again amended such that the government would appoint all chamber members. The Mandatory Power, cognizant of Syrian premier al-Ḥasanî’s reputation for nepotism, made chamber appointments subject to the High Commissioner’s approval, and the French delegate to the Syrian government in fact drew up the lists of nominees (De Martel to Lavastre, 13 September 1934, and Lavastre to de Martel, 27 December 1934, in CADN/Mandat/1e/716). Although de Martel sought to minimize the political fallout of this move by appointing business figures who were known supporters of the National Bloc, the issue of control rapidly became an item in the ongoing tug of war between France and the nationalists. The issue became defused after the Bloc achieved power in 1936, legislation in 1937 and 1938 restoring the original 1934 idea that one-third of the chamber members be government appointees, the remainder elected (Legislative Decree No. 97 of

Despite appearances, the struggle over the reform of the chambers was never one for the autonomy of “civil society” institutions from the state. The Syrian business community, unlike the artisans and workers, had accepted the corporatist bargain – a degree of government control over its affairs in return for a voice in policy formation and a monopoly on representation – under the Ottomans. The 1930s legislation only slightly modified the terms of the bargain. Rather, the struggle was a political one, the issue of the chambers being one item in the wider contest for control over the state apparatus. Once control of the state was resolved, the bourgeoisie would return to its habitual stance of accommodation to the authorities in power.

**Interpreting De Martel’s Reforms**

How ought we interpret these acts of legislation and their consequences? Several approaches have been suggested for understanding Syria and Lebanon during the 1930s and French policy there. One major trend emphasizes short-term political calculations motivated largely by long-term strategic considerations. Another looks more directly at social policy and argues for a concept of the “colonial welfare state”. While both have their advantages, they fail to get to the heart of the Syrian case. This paper argues that corporatism, perhaps conceived of as “colonial corporatism”, may be of greater utility.

Peter Shambrook exemplifies the political approach. Shambrook maintains that overall French policy was driven largely by strategic concerns (notably the oil pipeline from Iraq) while the immediate tactical concern was to lower political tensions while diverting public attention to other issues, mainly economics (Shambrook, 1998: 155). The focus on the reform of the chambers of commerce, agriculture, and industry clearly fits into this framework. The desire to isolate the associations professionnelles from politics noted by the ILO does too (in this regard, Gaulmier’s analysis of Hama must have influenced some official minds). But Shambrook’s stress on the short term (he covers only the decade 1927-1936) and on high politics slights longer-term trends and the continuities in Syrian history.

For her part, Elizabeth Thompson (2000) proposes the novel concept of a “colonial welfare state” to understand Mandatory social policy. Thompson is largely concerned with the evolution of concepts of citizenship in the Levant states, most especially the roles played by gender and class in defining one’s relationship to the state. She argues that such measures as laws regulating children’s and women’s labor were part of a process by which the struggles of workers, peasants and women combined with Mandatory attempts to placate them while maintaining French rule had by the late 1930s revised the Syro-Lebanese “civic order” such that
« paternalistic social aid once bestowed by France through its collaborating inter-
mediaries was gradually transformed into social rights claimed directly upon the
state itself » (Thompson, 2000 : 6).

Thompson is quite correct to identify the Mandatory period as one during
which Syrians and Lebanese came to identify themselves in new terms. Moreover
her stress on such groups as women and workers is a welcome contribution. How-
ever, it appears that much of her analysis is based on examples from Lebanon
rather than interior Syria. Certain factors particular to Lebanon (the relative
continuity and stability of the state and administrative apparatus, the higher rates
of urbanization and literacy, the presence of a substantial client base for France in
the Christians, especially the Maronites, and the greater participation of Leba-
nese in feminism, labor organizing and ideological politics) make the applica-
tion of the model to Syria questionable. While it cannot be disputed that workers especially
came to see their demands as the embodiment of rights, it is an overstatement
to regard French social policy as constituting a “welfare state”. To the extent that
Mandatory labor policy was governed by any larger conception than dividing
the labor movement from nationalist elites, it was designed to integrate workers
into state-controlled frameworks, not acknowledge rights.

If neither approach fully fits the Syrian case, how ought we comprehend the
reorganization of the bodies representing business and labor? This paper suggests
that the concept of “corporatism” shows the most promise.

Conclusion: Colonial Corporatism

Corporatism, the organization of society into industrial and professional
“corporations” including both employers and workers that serve as means of
political mobilization and control and of resolving conflicts within a given sector,
arose in late 19th-century Europe as an anti-liberal reaction to the stresses of
emergent capitalism and especially the growth of class-based organizations,
particularly among workers. Although often associated with authoritarian and
totalitarian regimes, corporatist ideas have received wide currency in a variety of
societies and regime types. Philippe Schmitter usefully defines corporatism as

« a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organized
into a limited number of singular, compulsory, noncompetitive, hierarchically
ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if
not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly
within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on
their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports » (Schmitter,

This definition of corporatism precisely fits the associations professionnelles
as well as the chambers of commerce, industry, and agriculture as laid out in
the laws establishing them. But if the formal structure of these institutions is
corporatist, what can we say about causes and intentions?
One reason why the institutions that were recreated in the 1930s were largely corporatist in character is that they were based upon corporatist precedents: late Ottoman legislation. In one sense French rule in the Levant was profoundly conservative, seeking to retain Ottoman precedent whenever possible. Beyond that French policy was guided by paternalism and drew (at least in the initial stages) on the French experience in North Africa (Burke, 1973). It is arguable that French policymakers were guided in part by a desire to maintain institutions believed appropriate to Arab/Muslim society. The role that such savants as Jean Gaulmier and Louis Massignon and institutions like the Institut français de Damas played in shaping official understandings deserves further exploration, although François-Xavier Trégan has provided a start (Trégan, 2002, 2004).

France’s own corporatist tradition is another potential influence. French corporatism extended well back into the 19th century and by the 1920s had begun to see some of its ideas put into practice at home (Elbow, 1953: 126-27). It is possible that some Mandatory officials viewed the Levant as a kind of social laboratory for French social engineers, analogous to the process described by Gwendolyn Wright. Wright shows how French architects and urban planners exploited the opportunities available in Indochina, Madagascar and Morocco to explore potential solutions for problems facing French cities, solutions which, for various reasons, were impossible to try at home (Wright, 1991: 2, 3, 12, 19). But this, too, is a matter for further investigation. Mandatory personnel records at CADN are not available to researchers, so that reconstructing the intellectual formation and political outlook of Mandatory personnel is a difficult task. Pierre Fournié has provided some guidance on how to proceed (Fournié, 1986). A creative approach to the Mandatory records at the Centre des Archives Diplomatiques in Nantes and close examination of the archives of the Centre des Hautes Etudes d’Administration Musulmane will help further illuminate this important question.

Questions of French motivations aside, corporatism as a conceptual tool helps underscore the continuities in Syrian history. Few would dispute that the contemporary Ba’th state is, in some measure, corporatist. Although the shape of Ba’thist society is greatly affected by the party’s de facto power monopoly and the role of the military, so much so that in many respects Ba’thist authoritarianism approaches fascism, there were also local corporatist precedents. These, received by the Ba’th from earlier regimes, had been in development since late Ottoman times. The Mandatory period surely played its role in making possible later Syrian corporatism. And, as corporatism is compatible with a range of regime types, is it not possible to develop a model of “colonial corporatism”? Surely, the Mandate must be considered as a species of colonialism. Elaborating a full model will require detailed case studies of a variety of colonial environments, but it is hoped that this paper has provided a first step toward that goal.
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