Leaving Her Footprint
Women's Struggle for Power in French Syria & Lebanon
1920-1936

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Introduction

*In the Times of Transition*

Puzzling at first but fascinatingly rich in its detail the more it is observed, the photograph above captures the diversity of questions and influences affecting the post-Ottoman society of the 1920s. Staged and taken by Marie al-Khazen of herself and her sister
Alice, dressed in men’s clothing, the photograph demonstrates new assertions of gender roles\(^1\) in the post-war period. Its composition includes elements of social class, patriarchal authority, traditions, and modernization in an Eastern setting.

Marie and her sister, in the lighter suit, are seated in a masculine posture, with their legs crossed and holding cigarettes between their fingers. Dressed in men’s European style suits with neckties and the traditional fez on their heads, the women present themselves in both Western and Ottoman attire. The fez, considered a symbol of the modernized elite, and the Persian carpet, a sign of luxury, communicate the women’s social status. Hanging above these women is a portrait of the great patriarch Shaykh Sa’id, possibly al-Khazen’s grandfather.\(^2\) The women minimize their femininity, as they are unveiled and their hair is tucked away behind them. Without the caption, it would be difficult to realize that the subjects are actually women. The remarkable peculiarities of the photograph make it “neither European nor Middle Eastern, neither masculine nor feminine.”\(^3\) It is a picture that embodies the transition defined by the 1920s: women entered new spaces that were traditionally dominated by men, Western powers entered lands ruled by the Ottomans for 400 years, and existing patriarchal establishments entered a post-World War I period of restructuring.

While al-Khazen expressed her ideas through the photograph, many women became renowned through activist writings and publications. It was a trend which emerged from Egypt at the close of the 19th century, with leading figures such as Huda Shar’awi and Qasim Amin, the latter credited in the Middle East as “the champion of women’s emancipation”\(^4\) with his book *The Liberation of Women* in 1899. The growing Egyptian press attracted women from

\(^2\) Ibid., 6.
\(^3\) Ibid., 7.
other Middle Eastern countries to write for them. For example, Lebanese Zainab Fawwaz whose article “Fair and Equal Treatment” in 1892 advocated women’s capabilities in comparison to men’s: “For woman was not created in order to remain within the household sphere, never to emerge. Woman was not created to become involved in work outside the home only when it is directly necessary for household management, childrearing. But woman is a human being as a man is, with complete mental facilities.”

In Syria, Mary ‘Ajamy, born to a Greek Orthodox family in 1888, was one of the leading women figures who started the first women’s journal, The Bride in Damascus in 1910 under Ottoman Rule. In the next 20 years, women’s press flourished with new journals and writings surfacing from Beirut and Damascus, the two major cities of Lebanon and Syria. A new generation of literary women emerged with popular magazines such as Girl of Lebanon by Salima Abu Rashida in 1914, Light of Damascus by Nazik ‘Abid in 1920, and Minerva by Mary Yanni in 1923. Julie al-Dimishqiyya, who established The New Woman magazine in 1921, also founded The Association of Damascus, the first literary salon with a goal to unite Syrian women of all religions through literary exchanges. Mary ‘Ajamy and her contemporaries launched a new literary tradition in Syria, as writing enabled women to enter a “new intellectual territory.”

Within this new arena, women found a voice to discuss, debate, and bring to attention domestic and international issues—“it was a forum unmediated by the paternalistic male press.” Between 1918 and 1933, thirteen of the women’s magazines “were edited by women

7 Ibid., 197.
8 Thompson, 214.
for women.”

‘Ajamy featured stories about the First World War and the plight of European suffragists, and idealized Egyptian women as models for Syrian women. She had dedicated the first edition of *The Bride* to: “those who believe that in the spirit of woman is the strength to kill the germs of oppression and that in her hand is the weapon to rend the gloom of oppression and in her mouth the solace to lighten human misery.”

Dimishqiyaa wrote biographies of exemplary women and showcased activities of local school girls. In 1928, Nazira Zayd al-Din became the first woman to interpret the Qu’ran and, in her books, defend women’s rights from a theological perspective. From addressing the devastation of the war, the equality of women, the right to vote, the politics of the veil, and national struggles, these magazines drew Syrian women into a public sphere, which had solely been dominated by men.

These women who established the female literary tradition also united as leaders in a movement to achieve equality. While the writing had offered an independent realm to introduce their ideas, the reality of post war Syria and Lebanon was much more complicated to achieve their goals. Within the political sphere after World War I, women’s equality and roles in society were consistently redefined as a result of competing ideologies and powers. With the introduction of the French as a mandate power, the representation of women evolved during the 1920s and 1930s as the ideas of the movement shaped and reshaped to fit the political conditions. The existing local patriarchy and French patriarchy created an environment which slowed the progress for women in society.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire following World War I did not leave a vacuum of power as there was “remarkable degree of continuity in the character of political life in Syria

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9 Thompson., 214.
10 Cited in Thompson, 120.
under the Ottoman and the French Rule.” The continuity of political life stemmed from the local political power in Syria; the notables who were influential under the Ottomans maintained their power under the French. The French regime, however, proved to be very unpopular and unstable in the interwar years. Their presence fuelled reservations about their political ambitions, but also their cultural influence as a Westernized power encroached traditional Ottoman ideals. For women, they represented another form of a patriarchal institution which did little to address women’s needs. Women were caught between embracing feminist and modern ideals portrayed by the West and joining the growing nationalist sentiments which advocated traditional culture and customs of society. While the political life among the patriarchs continued, the French Mandate created a divide in the Syrian society and in the perception of equality among women leaders.

The Impact of World War I

The post-war time period of the 1920s represents a morsel of the larger, long existing process of establishing a political identity and citizenship in Lebanon and Syria. Before the 1850s, the Ottoman Empire had maintained a status quo about creating a unified national identity. Stemmed by European influence in the region and the first wave of globalization, Ottoman rulers sought to create a universal “Ottoman” identity. In 1856, the Hatti Humayun legislation started off the Tanzimat Reforms in the Empire. This edict granted equal civil and political rights to all non-Muslims and thus, paved the path for their influence into the social and political system. For the empire, it was a step toward modernization.

12 Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, 3.
Even with the Tanzimat, the empire steadily declined with disastrous wars and a struggling economy. Considered to be “the Sick Man of Europe,” the Ottoman Empire officially collapsed during World War I. Syria, an Ottoman province, joined World War I on behalf of Germany. Its defeat in the war brought a decisive end to the empire, splitting its regions into independent and mandated states. The war was not only a catalyst for political change, but also for social transformation.

The war marked the end of an economic expansion (between 1880 and 1914) brought about by the Ottoman reforms. French investments in the silk industry had helped it boom and the state’s rural security helped the agricultural sector experience a growth.\(^\text{14}\) The war shattered the economy, which forced families to re-locate. When men left to fight in the war, women had to become the head of the household and take on men's roles. The men's absence compelled more and more women to be active outside of their domestic sphere, where they accepted employment to support their families.

The society faced many hardships as the war devastated the region, causing widespread famine and disease. Evidence exists that the Entente created blockades of supply routes to Lebanon during the war as part of its strategy to defeat the Axis powers.\(^\text{15}\) The famine resulted in a great number of civilian deaths, which combined with military fatalities exceeded the European rates of casualty. An estimated 500,000 died of famine and 150,000 died serving in the military, and in a prewar population of 2.5 million, the number accounts for nearly 18% of the Syrian/Lebanese population.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{14}\)Thompson, 30. 
\(^{15}\)Ibid., 21. 
\(^{16}\)Ibid., 23.
Since one in six adult males never returned home from the war, women carried on supporting their families in the decades after the war. Syrian women conveyed the image of their participation by assuming men’s responsibilities and working outside their homes. They used this memory of war and their commitment as a mirror to men’s efforts in contributing to their society. The war time experience encouraged women to demand more political rights, as the question of gender role and citizenship became more apparent on a larger scale. It was a part of the global trend as years immediately after the war, women across the world like United States, United Kingdom, and even Turkey (an ex-Ottoman territory) in 1926, were granted the right to vote. They were included in the political process of their country; however, in Syria and Lebanon, women after the war were alienated by the Mandate government and the idea of citizenship was fuelled once more.

**Between French Colonialism and Syrian Nationalism**

France was awarded the mandate of Syria and Lebanon on the terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, an Anglo-French partition plan of Ottoman territories, which was officially legalized by the 1920 San Remo Conference. The seed of Syrian nationalism was sown at the inception and realization of the agreement because the British reengaged their promise to Faysal ibn al-Husayn. In the Husayn-McMahon Correspondence of 1915-1916, he was promised an independent Arab state for his alliance with the Allied powers. The British had helped install Faysal’s regime in Syria through military and financial support. After the war, the British had to choose between France’s share of Ottoman inheritance and King Faysal’s
nationalist claims of Syria. From the fear of losing French support in Europe, Great Britain, which had its own stake in Iraq, “did not deny the French a similar interest in Syria.”

From the very beginning, the nationalist claims were ignored as self-serving Western nations imposed their power onto the old Ottoman territories. The mandate separated the region into Syria and Lebanon, and disguised under the rhetoric of a mandate, the two territories were eventually treated as colonies by the French. Article 1 of the Mandate stated that the mandatory power “shall further enact measures to facilitate the progressive development of Syria and the Lebanon as independent states” and “encourage local autonomy.” However, the system was weak and “imperfectly conceived” as the French rule was illegitimate and colonial. Their power rested on the strategy of divide and rule, and this included: exploiting minority differences in Syria through territorial partitions, pitting rural areas from nationalist cities, and using traditional Syrian elites to help govern.

Although article 8 of the mandate stated, “no discrimination of any kind shall be made between the inhabitants of Syria and the Lebanon on the ground of differences in race, religion, or language,” the French rule was built on prejudices. As the following chapters will demonstrate, the French did not uphold the ideal terms of the mandate, and instead used unbalanced policies to favor one group over another in the region. The regime preferred elites over peasants and workers, Christians over Muslims, Lebanese over Syrians and men over women. There were divisions across all aspects of society: class, religion, territories, and gender. “The ultimate object of the Mandate was to invest the mandatory power with the legal and moral duty to lead backward nations to a higher level of civilization, whose flower was

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24 Thompson, 77.
independence and democracy.”²⁵ The French rule in Syria was supposed to be transitory, adhering to the legal and moral definition of the mandate, but in practice, it was an illegitimate, colonial power which lasted till 1946.

The French presence gave rise to an opposing nationalist movement, initiated under King Faysal’s fleeting regime. The local notables, who were influential during the Ottoman era, retained their power under the French. Through the absentee landowning class, the French had an indirect colonial rule as the mandate “relied on local intermediaries with past administrative experience.”²⁶ The traditional elite who sided with the French (despite the loss of their credibility) justified their cooperation with the need of “a strong external force to re-establish stability in the country.”²⁷ On the other side, the elites, who wielded influence under King Faysal, maintained their nationalist aspirations during the interwar years.

These elites were part of the delicate balance of power in the region, as they competed against the French for influence. They consolidated their power as an association, creating the Nationalist Bloc. The four major cities of Syria, Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs became centers of nationalism. Through propaganda and revolts, the nationalists ascended to power, and their activities defined the phases of the French rule. The first phase which lasted till 1927 was full of violent military confrontations. The second phase spanned from 1927 to 1936, when French decided to make concessions for an autonomous Syrian government. The third phase between 1936 and 1939 was a transitional period of power in which the Nationalist Bloc shared power with the French High Commissioner. The final phase was during World War II which concluded with Syrian independence in 1945.²⁸ The mandate period was unstable as it

²⁵ Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, 45.
²⁶ Ibid., 66.
²⁷ Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, 68.
could be considered a “failure of diplomacy” on behalf of the French, and a poor articulation of interwar nationalism by the elites.\textsuperscript{29}

Many female intellectuals espoused the nationalism even though the nationalist elites (along with the religious authorities) were part of the existing patriarchal structures. Women's attention was drawn to the nationalist aspirations to preserve the Arab identity, the traditional culture, and territorial integrity. They were wedged between the politics of colonialism and nationalism. The goals of feminism were redefined during the mandate era as they negotiated the paternalist and patriarchal influences in society. They were affected by the tensions between Western and traditional ideals, foreign and local powers, and advancements and preservations of the Syrian society. While some scholars argue that the feminist associations did not stop developing during the mandate,\textsuperscript{30} others believe that the blossoming of the movement during the mandate period was restricted.\textsuperscript{31} Between 1920 and 1936, the cascade of complications shaped the feminist ideologies. At times, it restricted their endeavors and even, redirected their interests to the nationalist aspirations. Marie al-Khazen’s representation of women encapsulates the dynamics of being a women in a patriarchal society as the photograph “can be seen as a complex dialogue between women as objects of patriarchy and women as agents of their own future.”\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{30} Dakhli, \textit{Une Génération}, 202.
\textsuperscript{31} Charara, 6.
\textsuperscript{32} Nachabe, 7.
Figure 2. Map of Syria and Lebanon, 1936
Source: Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*
Chapter 1

Women and French Patriarchy

The balance of political power in the interwar period was delicate, as the mandate government's rule depended on three pillars of support: soldiers, patriarchal elites, and civilian bureaucrats.¹ Reeling also from the devastation of World War I, France did not have all the resources available to firmly buttress its rule and aid in Syria's developments. The enormity of post-war relief in France included “pensions for 750,000 war orphans, more than a million permanently disabled veterans, and thousands of war widows.”² Because of its financial responsibilities, the French government was strife with political divisions and ideological struggles between colonialists and anti-colonialists: between those who wanted to focus the government's energy domestically to rebuild a war-ravaged France and those who wanted to invest in mandated territories for economic gains. The power shifted erratically within the French government. Within a span of 20 years, the office of Premier was filled by 19 different men, with fluctuations in power 33 times among the political parties.³ This instability in France pervaded its rule in Syria; it “made her presence in the Levant all the more awkward and insecure.”⁴

The first pillar of support was the soldiers stationed in the region. When the Syrian discontent of the mandate spilled into major revolts in the 1920s, military rule to maintain French power was inevitable. The first armed resistance rose against the French occupation of Syria when King Faysal had refused to relinquish his power to the new government in 1920. In response to the downfall of Faysal's government and the forced French presence, the Syrian dissent grew, and in 1925 again, Sultan al-Atrush organized the largest armed revolt of its day.

¹ Thompson, 42.
² Ibid., 63.
³ Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, 46.
⁴ Ibid., 46.
Known as the Great Revolt, the uprising lasted till 1927 and required large dispatches of the French army to suppress it.\textsuperscript{5} During the formative years of the mandate, the French military rule was necessary. Even the first three High Commissioners were generals in the French military.\textsuperscript{6} By World War II, 80\% of France’s 5 billion francs of investment in Syria was spent on defense and security,\textsuperscript{7} reflecting mandate’s unstable regime.

Patriarchal elites, the second pillar, served as intermediaries between the colonial citizens (which included peasants, workers, and women) and the French government. These elites were comprised of religious institutions and land-owning bourgeoisie. The French bought the loyalty of some elites by awarding them Ottoman lands, and even guided the religious patriarchs influence by providing subsidies for their schools and charities.\textsuperscript{8} Through these alliances, the mandate government was able to wield power outside the constitutional framework as the “urban leadership remained the basic building block of political influence.”\textsuperscript{9} They were important in determining the fate of women’s status in the society because many of the mandate policies were designed to maintain the status quo. As a result, the French avoided taking a strong position on newly, emerging issues regarding women.

Finally, the civilian bureaucracy was an integral part of the regime. Recruiting the locals, the French organized them into separate departments of “public health, public works, education, telephone and telegraphs, and agriculture” and by mid-1930’s, it had more than 13,000 Syrian and Lebanese civil bureaucrats.\textsuperscript{10} While Lebanon and Syria were two distinctly defined regions with separate governments, the bureaucracy connected the two in social and economic policy under a centralized administration.

\textsuperscript{5} Khoury, \textit{Syria and the French Mandate}, 79.
\textsuperscript{6} Thompson, 42.
\textsuperscript{7} Khoury, \textit{Syria and the French Mandate}, 80.
\textsuperscript{8} Thompson, 54.
\textsuperscript{9} Khoury, “Urban Notables,” 508.
\textsuperscript{10} Thompson, 62.
Colonial officials were primarily concerned with establishing stability for themselves in a complex political environment, as “her [French] position in Syria was inherently unstable, much more so than the Ottoman position had ever been.”\footnote{Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 5.} With their fixation to stay in power, the administration was largely indifferent towards women’s issues. It was an attitude which marginalized Lebanese and Syrian women.

**Women’s Health**

The mandate French regime’s policies towards women’s health at the time were inconsistent. While rigorous action was taken to regulate prostitution in Syria and Lebanon, little was done to address the dire need of maternity care. The practice of prostitution, already legalized under the Ottoman Rule,\footnote{Moubayad, Sami. “Sexual Repression in Syria.” PostGlobal. *Newsweek*, 27 February 2007, \url{http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/sami_moubayed/2007/01/sexual_repression_in_syria} (accessed 22 February 2012).} was upheld by the French, and its continuation was resented by many, as Syrian female and male leaders publicly condemned it. The resources for mothers and newly born children were scarce, and the mortality rate was high during childbirth. Yet, the mandate government failed to act on this exigency. Concerning women’s health, the French made policies based on their self-interest, a character of their rule in the region which added to the regime’s unpopularity.

Regulating prostitution was intended to improve the health of the French troops in the area when there was an outbreak of venereal diseases.\footnote{Thompson, 87.} The regulation was not primarily designed for the welfare of the local women (prostitutes), but for the welfare of their troops, the primary pillar of support. In addition to the Armée du Levant, there were 1,000 French officers. During first seven years of the mandate, which can be defined as the “Era of Military...
Confrontation,” the colonial troops expanded from 12,889 in 1919 to 69,416 in 1921. The year, with such a dramatic increase of troops, corresponds to the year the state issued new regulations towards prostitution.

By 1921, dancers, singers, and prostitutes were obliged to register with the local police, “carry identification cards, work in designated *maisons de tolerance*, and submit to twice weekly medical exams.” Beirut had 120 official brothels, with a total of 800 girls and mistresses. Taking into account clandestine and unregistered prostitutes, the number jumped to 1,600 in a city of 250,000. The state built separate hospitals and clinics for these women and sent those who refused the examination to court. By 1927, Syrian clinics had taken over 44,000 tests on more than 1,000 women, and treated 2,400 cases of venereal diseases.

Laws to regulate prostitution were also in effect in France, where concerns about its morality and welfare were often expressed by French activists. Similarly, the issue of regulating prostitution, instead of an outright ban, had stirred controversy when the Syrian parliament was formed in 1932. The rise in clandestine prostitution in some neighborhoods perhaps had led to this controversy. In newspapers, the readers were often asked to report any suspicious activity to the police immediately. The *maisons de tolerance* had also begun to attract local Syrian men by 1930s. In the beginning, the regular visitors of *maisons de tolerance* were mostly foreigners and Frenchmen. In 1933, a political debate raged on the Ghânine law, a proposition on the question of prostitution and venereal disease prevention in the Syrian parliament. It was a sensitive topic as the newspaper reporting the debate remarked on how women and even some deputies left the room with their sense of propriety at the start of the debate.

14 Ibid., 49.
15 Ibid., 87.
17 Thompson, 87.
discussion. The debate was led by representatives of the country side who wanted the practice of prostitution to remain in the cities. The newly adopted law outlawed building more *maisons de tolerances* in the villages. One deputy noted, “The privilege was left to capital and the big cities, centralization of habits [prostitution] in a regime which inaugurated the decentralization!”

In the 1935 Feminist Conference, which invited European feminists including Madame Malaterre Sellier of France and Madame Von Boss of Netherlands, Mary ‘Ajamy gave a discourse to “establish the psychology between Western and Eastern women as a move to strengthen the relationship between them.” She emphasized that the East was not “stagnant, as easily observed” and even with faith in the Western culture “[the West] provoked a disintegration of faith and morals,” alluding to prevalence of prostitution under the French rule as Syrian men began to visit brothels. She allied with the Western feminists in fighting prostitution towards which “such a hate is equally shared by men and women,” and because of its practice, “we as women create the egoism in men.”

The appeals of women activists to outlaw prostitution were ignored for a long time. Prostitution remained legal till 1959, when Syria joined the United Arab League.

The aggressive action taken by the French to regulate prostitution contrasted with their “relaxed attitude” towards maternity needs when there was “clear demand by women for professional medical care.” Syrian women faced daunting health challenges during the mandate as there was a shortage of programs despite high infant mortality rates. In an era of large traditional families, women were expected to have many children. There were 33 births for every 1,000 people. As a result, there was a high infant mortality rates as most women

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23 Thompson, 86.
depended on midwives. In 1920, 20% of all deaths were newborns under the age of one, and the situation slightly improved by 1927, as 10.5% of deaths in Syria were of children under one and 38% were children under the age of ten.

The ratio of hospital facilities to the Syrian population was 1 bed for every 1,500 persons. The largest proportions of hospitals were in Beirut, Damascus, and Aleppo. “Special institutions for women and children are conspicuous in their absence in Syria. There is very little beyond the maternity hospitals in Beirut...very little public effort to solve the problems of maternity and infant welfare,” as Y.W.C.A director of Beirut Elizabeth Woodsmall noted. In Aleppo, only eight beds in the civil hospitals were kept separately for maternity care. Damascus depended on the school of medicine for maternity. Beirut had one designated maternity hospital of 38 beds and its partial subsidy was one of the only government investments towards maternity care.

While consulting doctors had become common among urban societies, women of conservative cities such as Hama and Tripoli faced prejudice for visiting male doctors. The government lacked a centralized effort to alleviate these challenges for women, as female doctors were rare in this period. The “training of women health workers, nurses, and midwives” fell “under the general handicap of the East” as the lack of women working in the health sector remained an obstacle for the large female population. Women were compelled to rely on midwives, who were not obliged by law to hold proficiency licenses, and consequently, it led to high death rates while giving birth. In 1921, women who died in childbirth accounted

\[24\text{ Ibid., 86.}\]
\[25\text{ Ibid., 86.}\]
\[26\text{ Woodsmall, Ruth Frances. Women in the Changing Islamic System (New Delhi: Bimla Publishing House,1936), 322.}\]
\[27\text{ Ibid., 323.}\]
\[28\text{ Thompson, 86.}\]
\[29\text{ Woodsmall, 325.}\]
for five percent of deaths in Damascus, Homs, and Hama.\textsuperscript{30} The few, free state-run clinics were often looded by women, mostly for childbearing needs, as women’s visits outnumbered men’s by 30\% in 1927.\textsuperscript{31} Hospitals were run separately by the Americans, the British, and the French; the state did not implement any strong policy to centralize their efforts or encourage women to join the health sector.

It was rare for women to enter the medical field as they were very often denied admission into schools of higher education. Even Nazira Zayd al-Din, who eventually gained fame from her book on veiling, had initially wanted to attend Jesuit Medical School of St. Joseph, but she too was denied admission on the basis of being a women.\textsuperscript{32} One of the select few women who were able to become a doctor spoke in the 1932 feminist conference. Dr. Laurice Maher, the first female doctor of Damascus who received her degree from the Syrian University in 1930,\textsuperscript{33} urged women to enter the medical field because of the “necessity of women’s intervention in public schools to detect and prevent disease, such as tuberculosis.”\textsuperscript{34} She encouraged the profession of nursing, in hospitals or as visiting nurses, which required tremendous education. Female activists advocated this possible solution for health: that the inclusion of females in the health industry would promote women to seek professional care, instead of relying precariously on untrained midwives.

To address women's health, the mandate government depended on women's activism and philanthropic societies. A branch of the Red Cross, Sociétés des Mères (Society of Mothers) was formed between 1919 and 1921 in major cities to take care of wounded soldiers, children, and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{30}] Thompson, 86.
\item[\textsuperscript{31}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{33}] “La première femme medicin Syrienne,” \textit{Les Echos}, 22 May 1930, p. 3.
\item[\textsuperscript{34}] “Discours du Dr. Laurice Maher au Congres Féministe de Damas,” \textit{Les Echos}, 19 October 1932, p. 1.
\end{itemize}
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pregnant woman, and the elderly.\textsuperscript{35} For the welfare of infants, two \textit{Goutte de Lait} centers were founded in Aleppo and Damascus in 1922 “to supply sterilized, food, clothing, and medical advice to the children of impoverished women.”\textsuperscript{36} The government promoted, but did not fully finance, the \textit{Goutte de Lait} centers. It was a relief organization run by elite French, Lebanese and Syrian women. These centers distributed milk daily to infants. In 1922, it gave out 8,850 bottles of milk. By 1930, two more clinics in Beirut and Latkia were opened, distributing 234,000 bottles of milk to 2,000 nursing mothers.\textsuperscript{37} It promoted that “Mother’s Milk is the Best Milk”\textsuperscript{38} through posters that even illiterate women could understand. However if the mother was unable to provide adequate milk for her baby, the society provided the daily milk.\textsuperscript{39} In 1924, it provided between 350 and 400 free consultations every three months.\textsuperscript{40} The society fundraised through hosting grand balls, which \textit{Les Echos} helped publicize through various years, illuminating and supporting good cause of the society.\textsuperscript{41}

The mandate government’s relaxed attitude towards maternal care was also inconsistent with their domestic policy in France, where a pro-natalist movement was on the rise. To compensate for the 1.5 million lives lost during the war, the government took patriarchal measures to increase the birth rate and ensure that “motherhood became a part of the social function.”\textsuperscript{42} In 1920, the government banned contraceptives and birth control, and in 1923, it attempted to ban abortion completely. The government also offered monetary incentives to families to encourage having more children, and for mothers, crèches (day care

\textsuperscript{35} Thompson, 84.
\textsuperscript{36} “Qu’est ce que La Goutte de Lait?” \textit{Les Echos}, 11 February 1933, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{37} Thompson, 85.
\textsuperscript{38} Woodsmall, 323.
\textsuperscript{39} “Le bal de Goutte de Lait” \textit{Les Echos}, 13 February 1933, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{42} Reynolds, 18.
centers) became more available. These centers took care of babies of impoverished working mothers. The policy promoted healthier-working class and citizens.\textsuperscript{43} Establishments which employed more than 100 women were required to have nursing rooms and provide extra breaks for mothers to nurse their infants.\textsuperscript{44} These policies were designed to benefit the interest of the country by preventing depopulation, and in comparison to the policy in Syria and Lebanon, they emphasized that the value of a French infant (and mother) was much more prized to the state than of its colonial citizens.

For the French administration, the most pressing issue regarding women’s health was the issue which directly affected its primary pillar of support. The outbreak of venereal disease led to a rigorous regulation of prostitution, as it affected the health of the stationed soldiers. The urgent necessity towards maternity care and infant mortality rate was not recognized and did not entail the same centralized effort by the government. It took efforts of charities, such as Sociétés des Mères and Gouttes de Lait centers, essentially funded by the government but spearheaded by elite women to provide some relief. The philanthropic organizations, run by the bourgeois class, also were symbolized as “Franco-Levantine Cooperation.” Politically, they bound the elites to the mandatory state as wives of high ranking political officials were often named the presidents of the charities.\textsuperscript{45} The French policies towards prostitution were unpopular, and towards maternity care, they were indifferent. Together, the government in effect sustained the primary pillars of support: soldiers and patriarchal elites.

\textbf{Women’s Education}

Historically, education has been a tool for paternalistic aims by the state. The Ottomans used it as a means “for survival against mounting European aggression and intervention.” King

\textsuperscript{43} Reynolds, 35.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{45} Thompson, 85.
Faysal’s government made education a “top priority after World War I—as a means of propagating the Arab Nationalism and loyalty to the state” as he opened 36 new schools in Damascus, including 10 for girls.46

Under the French Mandate, the High Commissioner was responsible for public education, and according to article 8 of the Mandate charter, “the Mandatory government shall encourage public instruction, which shall be given through the native languages in use in the territory of Syria and the Lebanon.”47 Because Arabic was the native language and French was the cultural and administrative language, both were made compulsory and equally important in schools. “If one language unites the people, multiple languages can erect barriers them.”48 The teaching of both languages reflected the French approach of divide and rule.

Despite the expansion of state education between 1922 and 1930, only 3.4% of Syrian population was enrolled in schools, compared to 12.6% in Lebanon. Approximately 54% of Christians were educated, but they represented about 23% of the population.49 The French subsidized Christian schools making them “quasi-state schools and it led to increasing numbers of missionary schools which promoted French culture and traditions. Thus, the education policies were a vehicle for French propaganda. Benefitting from the French partiality, the Maronite Christians received one third of the subsidies granted to private schools.50 With more resources available to these schools, Lebanese and Christians had greater access to education than Syrians and Muslims.

For women, education was considered a pillar of patriotic motherhood, and while the number of schools increased, women’s access remained limited. A 1925 report showed a rise of

46 Thompson, 74-76.
47 The French Mandate, Article 10.
49 Thompson, 79.
50 Thompson, 79.
demand for women’s higher education, a slight change in class connection to girls’ education, a collective attitude towards promoting girls’ education across all religions, and the parental control over the daughter’s learning environment.\(^{51}\) There was a development in schools with the American Junior College for Women (AJCW) in 1924 and the establishment of coeducational vocational schools, such as the School of Arts and Crafts. In 1925, the National School of Music, which later became the National Conservatory, was opened to encourage Lebanese and Arab culture. However, the new schools hardly kept up with the need, and even in vocational schools, girls had fewer choices such as pottery or weaving.\(^ {52}\) The success stories of women entering higher education were far fewer than those who were denied admission. At the end of the 1920s, the economic recession caused budget cuts in public education and state schools. In the meantime, however, the prevalence of private schools and missionary schools increased.

In 1928, girls’ enrollment in schools in all of Syria and Lebanon was about 54,145 in a total population of about 2.14 million. Of the enrolled girls, 14,208 were Muslims, and 13,228 of them attended government schools.\(^{53}\) The society heavily relied on government-run schools, which was affordable for families, who viewed their daughter’s primary education “as the least they can do for their girls.”\(^ {54}\) The availability of secondary education for women, which could have provided them with tools for a career, was still slow. “Girls’ education was treated as optional rather a necessity.”\(^{55}\)

Female activists drew attention to the need for education, and Dr. Laurice Maher, in the 1932 conference, addressed the importance of education in the changing times and encouraged

\[^{51}\] Lattouf, 84-85.
\[^{52}\] Ibid., 86
\[^{53}\] Woodsmall, 204.
\[^{54}\] Lattouf, 84.
\[^{55}\] Thompson, 90.
parents to educate their daughters. “Within the context of young women’s marriage, while waiting for it [marriage]” she iterated, “the young women sacrifice their future in a hard life, under a humiliating dependence [of a husband].” 56 Even in a “noble role of a wife and a mother, or other different roles women are called to fill, a solid education will always be advantageous and valuable.”57 Maher also emphasized the link of education to citizenship of women.

Maher’s address to parents showed some of the hesitation in promoting women’s education. While some parents wanted their daughter’s to be educated, others were distrustful of the idea and system as Elizabeth Woodsmall recounted from her travel experiences. One woman, removed from school when she was 11, returned at the age of 25 to finish her education without her father's knowledge, as her family and neighbors kept her secret.58 Another woman, from the influence of her brother, had unveiled and was sent to an American school to learn English and complete the “modernization” process.59 In 1934, one of the two Muslim women enrolled in American University of Beirut had lifted her veil and was attending the university with her husband.60 While the three cases indicated women’s eagerness to learn, they also show the dependence of women on a patriarchal authority. The first woman defied her father’s wishes to study and the other two had advanced their education because of the support from their brother and husband. Women’s education was dependent on the attitude of their fathers, brothers, or husbands—if the male guardian supported the idea to send them to school. The uncertainty of families who did not support education stemmed from the French control of education and its Western influence. The education system created by the French favored one group over the other (Lebanese over Syrians, Christians over Muslims). The

57 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 212.
60 Ibid., 214.
system was not designed to encourage the inclusion of women or dispel the hesitation of many traditional families.

**Women’s Employment**

In the late 1920s and 1930s, the local newspaper *Les Echos* portrayed examples of women working all around the world as they hold positions of power in unconventional disciplines. The articles, for example, praised the American women who worked in banks with more than 2,500 occupying executive positions and being “particularly encouraged by their example.” In 1931, women were recruited to the police force the New York City, and in Turkey, 4 male and 8 female candidates had finished their studies to join the police. Turkey even had the first female police commissioner in 1932. The newspaper remarked on Turkish women being very advanced and emancipated as they registered in school, and even joined the police.

In Syria and Lebanon, the prevalence of women working and entering new disciplines was much different that the ones depicted in the press. Mary ʿAjamy noted the difference between the West and the East, where women were not that encouraged to join the work force. The French government also carried an indifferent attitude towards women’s employment, and from the beginning of its influence, women who joined the work force were underprivileged and underpaid to serve the foreign interests.

France had been economically involved in the Ottoman Empire since 1860 when it had intervened in the Civil War in Mount Lebanon. Its efforts as the mediator led to a treaty known as the *Règlement of 1861*. “The treaty exposed Lebanon to a much greater degree of European

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intervention through heavy negotiations with the Ottoman Empire.” The intervention in the war had served as a pretext to further the French economic interests in the area particularly in the silk industry. It was cheaper for the French to invest and establish factories in Lebanon and to hire the local men and women to work in them. Men were paid 40% of what Frenchmen were paid in a Lyonnaise silk factory and peasant women received 22% of the wages of a working Frenchwoman.

It was advantageous for the French to hire “factory girls” because they could be paid lower wages than men. The practice of local girls being hired by foreign men led to a controversy since it did not adhere to the traditional seclusion of women from males. It blurred the gender roles in peasant society with women’s transgressions into public space, interaction with males, and also working past the prime age of “marriageability” between the ages of 16 and 20. Factory girls lost honor, which could ironically be gained back only by marriage. The Maronite church disapproved the hiring, but the French circumvented the problem by indirectly hiring through male intermediaries and family connections. The male relatives negotiated the wages and conditions for the girls, so they would not have to speak directly to foreign men. Another form of patriarchal control allowed women’s work to seem appropriate to the society. For the girls, working outside the house was nominally advantageous as it equated to a smaller degree of “social power” from their wages. They did not earn money by traditionally working on their family fields. The outside money coming supplemented the income of the peasant family and “any shame that was associated with women’s work in

67 Ibid., 28.
68 Ibid., 37.
69 Khater, 34.
factories was counteracted by the fact that income from that work allowed men to continue their 'honorable' work in the fields.”

The “factory girls” were part of the nascent industrialization of Lebanon and Syria and also the beginning of worker's exploitation by a foreign power. Women's low wages in private industries were tolerated by the administration. By the time French mandate came to power, the silk industry had dissolved. Its collapse greatly attributed to a 50% drop of women's employment from 165,000 in 1913 to 65,000 in 1937. The devastation of the First World War had compelled families to rely on women's supplementary income, and the loss of their wages disrupted their way of life. The state hired very few women to participate in road construction and in tobacco factories when it was still under the state monopoly. Fewer than 500 women were employed by in the government's civilian bureaucracy of 13,000 locals by 1930. Even in 1930, when the mandate government was notified of the rise in women's unemployment, it did little to alleviate the problem and create jobs.

The labor movement in other modern sectors, such as food processing, textiles, shoemaking, and cement factories, did develop to combat the worker's exploitation, but the unions were formed exclusively by males for males. Women, who represented a small number of the workers, did not unionize. In some cases, the male unions called for equal pay between for men and women, but not with the intention of equality. It was an underhanded strategy to prevent companies from hiring women over men for lower wages. The labor unions demanded rights from the administration, but the French government refused the call to action in 1933 by arguing that the Lebanese and Syrian workers “did not deserve protection that their own

70 Ibid., 33.
71 Thompson, 64.
72 Ibid., 64.
73 Ibid., 90.
workers [in France] enjoyed."\textsuperscript{74} The attitude reflected the French manipulation of the colonial populations as the government treated them as inferiors. The French once again disregarded the need for reforms when it came to employment: tolerating women’s low wages and ignoring the calls for reforms when unemployment rose. The French industries created a system to exploit local women, but also a system which led to families’ reliance on women’s nominal income. When women lost their jobs, the government did little to alleviate the problem and marginalized the women’s struggles.

Conclusion

Through its social policy on health, education, and employment, the French administration maintained each of its three pillars of rule by its neglect of women’s needs and calls for reforms. “Women’s participation in the civic order was, finally, more indirect than men’s, where their access to state benefits was often mediated by bourgeois philanthropists, religious elites, and male guardians to whom they were legally bound.”\textsuperscript{75} As a result of the French indifference to women’s struggles, the feminists vehemently join the organized nationalist opposition in favor of Syrian independence. The illegitimacy and injustice of the mandate government fuelled their zeal to reorganize their priorities, which eventually placed the nationalist agenda above the feminist goals.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{75} Thompson, 90.
Chapter 2

Women and Syrian Patriarchy

Nationalism in Syria was brewing before World War I, as it was a product of increasing “Ottoman centralization, Turkish insensitivity to local Arab needs, and exposure to European modes of thought.”1 Syria was the birthplace of Arab Nationalism and “it was to Damascus that Arab nationalists in Palestine, Iraq and elsewhere looked for inspiration, guidance, and moral support in the interwar period.”2 The occupation of the French and the mandate’s capricious policies pushed nationalism to become the most dominant and relevant post-war ideology, a principle which greatly impacted the feminist movement and women’s progress in society.

Faysal ibn Husayn’s government was autonomous after World War I, but its ardent anti-French sentiments vexed the mandate power. The nationalist attitude was reflected in the harassment of French sympathizers in Lebanon, rejection of the new currency introduced by the French, attacks on railways which impeded the movement of French troops, and Turkey’s material support to the northern Syrian rebel forces.3 When King Faysal refused to demobilize his army and recognize the mandate in an ultimatum sent by France, the French forcefully occupied Damascus by July 1920 and claimed Syria, much to the discontent of its citizens.

The unpopularity of the mandate also emerged from its division of Syria and Lebanon. The mandate government situated its administration in Beirut and implemented its policies from there to the rest of the mandated territories. Their special relationship with Lebanon had existed since the 1860s, when France had intervened in the civil war on behalf of the Maronite Christians. The Maronites were mainly concentrated in Beirut and Mount Lebanon, and as their religious protectorate, France had justified its mandate claims to the region. Most of the

1 Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, 97.
2 Khoury, “Factionalism Among Syrian Nationalists during the French Mandate,” 441.
3 Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, 40-41.
mandate’s education and missionary activities appealed only to the Christian groups, as the “French commitment to a Catholic protectorate automatically raised cultural and political barriers between Frenchmen directly involved in Syrian affairs—whether missionaries, traders or officials of Quai d’Orsay—and the Muslim majority.” As a result, the schism between the French administration and Syria with its Muslim majority was a lot more heated, compared to Lebanon, where the Christian majority tipped in favor of the mandate power.

Syrian nationalism grew in opposition of the French government with the goal to restore balance of power between the government and society. It promoted unity of all Arab people by their common culture, language, and ethnic origin—an identity and loyalty which grew at the “expense of other loyalties to religion, family, tribe, and region.” In the mandate era, the activities of the nationalists were limited to the urban elite in major Syrian cities. The divisions created by the French made it difficult to organize the masses in the countryside where the political consciousness was also low among the peasant class. A widespread organization was prevented also by the fear of disturbing the agricultural production if the rural society mounted resistance, which would interrupt the financial investments of the nationalist leaders from the landowning elites. Despite the popularity of nationalist ideology, its movement was actually led by a select group of elites. The movement lacked revolutionary elements to drive out the French fully and the nationalist leaders “became increasingly embroiled in personal and ideological disputes which the French successfully exploited.” But next to the mandate government, the nationalists wielded the greatest influence in society, and the interwar period could be defined by discordant competition of power between the two.

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5 Ibid., 6.
6 Ibid., 7.
7 Khoury, “Factionalism,” 442.
The feminist endeavors were not untouched by the political complexities, as the women's agenda throughout the decade changed in response to nationalism. Marginalized by the mandate government, the women put their efforts even more fiercely behind nationalism, championing for an independent Syria sometimes more than the male nationalist themselves. The increased public presence and activities of women in the decade surprised the Syrian men, leading to their gender anxiety. The angst stemmed from the presence of a foreign rule and the rise of women in society undermining Syrian patriarchy. The men were supposed to be defenders of their homeland and women, but they were upstaged. As a result, this anxiety seeped into the activities and strategies of the nationalists and the patriarchal powers. Women's progress in Syrian society, however, struggled but endured as feminism by adapting to the dynamics of nationalist politics and the growing male anxiety.

**Entering the Public Sphere through Protests**

Women emerged publicly and participated in the political affairs through protests. One of the leading feminists at the time, Naziq ‘Abid, became known as the Syrian ‘Joan of Arc’ for her leadership and service during the 1920 conflict against the French occupation. She supported King Faysal’s government, and during its struggle against the mandate power, she volunteered to serve in the Syrian Army with medical help, where she was named as honorary general by King Faysal. When his regime was overthrown, she was exiled to Istanbul for a few years. She was also among the first women to unveil publicly when she met American officials of the King Crane Commission, which came to Syria to survey and assess the conditions of ex-Ottoman territories before the partitioning. Abid’s motivation behind unveiling was her desire to show a secular and liberal Syria and to prove that Faysal’s regime in Syria was progressive.\(^8\)

Photographed in history books wearing a soldier’s uniform, Naziq ‘Abid became a nationalist

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\(^8\) Moubayed, Sami M. *Steel & Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria 1900-2000* (Seattle, Washington: Cune, 2005), 360.
icon and her role in the protests emanated a new powerful image of women in the public sphere.

With ‘Abid as an inspiring figure, women participated in public protests expressing their discontent towards the mandate. The year 1925 was a turning point in the Levant, as the start of a massive uprising against the French, the Syrian Revolt. Lasting for more than two years, its goal was to mitigate the power of the mandate administration, but instead, it helped fortify the French rule in the region for a longer period, and establish its foundation as a military rule. Some scholars argue that the revolt was the growth of Arab nationalism seeded from King Faysal’s rule, as it eventually led to the formations of nationalist parties, such as the National Bloc. But because the Arab Revolt started in the countryside first, and then spread to the cities, the revolt it did not initially express the urban elite’s nationalism; its anti-French sentiments resonated throughout Syria. Nevertheless, the revolt was considered to be the largest armed revolt against a foreign colonial power up till that point and has been a rich subject of study. Not many scholars have focused on the role of women in the protests and the persistence of women’s demonstrations over the years. Women’s participation in the revolt was also very crucial.

Urban and rural women were involved in street demonstrations physically, but they also smuggled “weapons, food rations and medicine to rebels, often hiding them under their cloaks at checkpoints.” Adila Bayhum, a leading feminist, smuggled food and weapons to guerrillas in Damascus while they were in hiding; In 1926, estimated 4,000 women went out of their neighborhood and marched a kilometer to where the Syrian leaders resided, imploring

9 Thompson, 49.
10 Thomspn, 48.
11 Moubayad, Steel and Silk, 431.
a cessation of hostilities. The revolt also initiated a new wave of women’s philanthropic activity, as Naziq ‘Abid helped start the Woman’s Awakening Society in Damascus, which included “English and sewing lessons for poor girls, hospital visits, and monthly cultural lectures.” Bayhum also gave textile lessons to rural women widowed by the revolt and provided their children with housing and education.

Women’s rhetorical combat was evident in the leaflets they spread in bazaars. For example, an excerpt of a Women’s Society pamphlet from Damascus reflected women’s nationalist sentiments: “O Arabs, descendants of glorious ancestors, we appeal to you awake in these critical times of great tragedy under the government of France. There is nothing left to us but to mount a vigorous attack and expel this government from our country...The time has come to realize what you have promised to yourselves. Unleash your arms before the enemy who has invaded our homes set fire to our temples of God, and tread on our sacred books...” The call to action was explicit with its anti-colonial sentiments, revealing the mandate’s illegitimate rule. The goal of these notices was the mobilize men and fulfill to their duty, which later added to the gender anxiety.

There can be a speculation whether the public protest by women were inspired by men or spontaneously decided for reasons more abstract: religion, moral, or homeland. Like men, women also rejected the French Mandate. Historically, drought or rise of food prices (flour or bread) has brought women out on the streets in protests such as the one in 1937 which was

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12 Tresse, René. "Manifestations Féminins à Damas Au XIX Et XX Siècles." Entretiens sur l’évolution des pays de civilisation arabe 3 (1939) : 118
13 Thompson, 96.
16 Ibid., 119.
sparked by the rise in the price of bread.\textsuperscript{17} Even in 1935, about 50 female students protested to the head of Public Education about their teachers.\textsuperscript{18}

While the veil was relatively less politicized by feminist leaders, sometimes it played out through protests as women manipulated the veil to demonstrate publicly, and use it as a basis to hide their identity if caught by the police authorities. In November 1933, women protested the Franco-Syrian treaty. The participating women collided with the police,\textsuperscript{19} and remarkably, the veil hid their identity when they were arrested. Refusing to unveil publicly during the trial, these women were acquitted from a lack of identification. In March 1935, women who were caught alongside the Nationalist Bloc were pardoned from paying fines from the lack of identity of the veiled protesters.\textsuperscript{20} Women’s invisibility behind the veil allowed them to be on the streets.

However, when there were protests calling the suppression of veil, it was much to chagrin of the males and the protests died quickly. The issue of the veil was sensitive and explosive during the mandate era, as discussed in the later chapter. For example, in 1925, Lord Balfour’s travel to Damascus provoked a rally against Zionist Palestinians and naturally, the French government which supported Balfour. During the rally, women called for suppression of the veil, much to the astonishment of male nationalists who had organized the event.\textsuperscript{21} Even in 1928, women started a new protest in a small commercial street against veiling, but it failed “against the popular anger which challenged these movements to be “too emancipated.”\textsuperscript{22} From

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 117.
\textsuperscript{19} Tresse, "Manifestations Féminins," 121.
\textsuperscript{20} Thompson, 190.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{22} Tresse, "Manifestations Féminins," 120.
time to time, “women reclaimed the proposition to suppress the veil” to the disappointment of men.\textsuperscript{23}

Protests introduced women to the public sphere, and unveiling stirred mixed reactions. While women were criticized for it, some did not care as they joined the nationalist aspirations. The political position of women were often more risky than the one of men’s.”\textsuperscript{24}

**Women’s Political Rights**

The post-war period had begun with a promising debate of women’s suffrage under King Faysal’s brief rule of Syria. Influenced by the suffragist movement in Western countries and Egypt, feminist leaders Naziq ‘Abid and Mary ‘Ajamy evoked the question of women’s suffrage in their magazines as the right to vote would have established a direct relationship of women to the state. In 1919, ‘Anbara Salaam and a group of Lebanese women submitted a petition on women’s rights to King Faysal.\textsuperscript{25} Around the same time that the French were awarded the mandate at San Remo Conference in April 1920, the Syrian Congress discussed women’s suffrage in Damascus. Ibrahim al-Khatib, a Lebanese delegate, “proposed a limited form of suffrage...that the right to vote be granted to women of a minimum age holding secondary certificates.” While it would have extended suffrage to a small number of women, the proposition was still a work in progress which received support. It was backed by Sa’dallah al-Jabiri of Aleppo, and even Shaykh Sa’id Murad, a religious scholar, who argued that “right given to women to testify, to judge, and to be a scholar in Islamic tradition implied a similar right to vote.”\textsuperscript{26} Another delegate added that women’s military service proved their importance and involvement in society.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 120.
\textsuperscript{25} Thompson, 118.
\textsuperscript{26} Thompson, 118.
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Faysal’s supporter generally endorsed women’s suffrage, but his congressional opponents, specifically the “older, conservative and landowning politicians with religious and French sympathies” posed a challenge. These opponents “sought to project women’s suffrage as a revolutionary threat to the entire gender hierarchy.” Despite many European countries that had not granted women suffrage, some even claimed that the idea was an imperialist influence which stained Syria’s integrity and purity. The debate raged till July of 1920: the religious conservatives arguing the right to vote would threaten husband’s control over wives, the moderates promoting women’s education instead as a diversion to postpone the question of suffrage, and the liberals calling out Syrian men’s blindness to the Western powers, who justified their rule in the East as a civilizing mission. The proposal was ultimately defeated in July 1920 as the constitution was ratified without the inclusion of women in the electoral law.

Meanwhile, the French assaulted Damascus, toppling King Faysal’s government. As Faysal’s government collapsed, women lost the biggest platform to pursue suffrage with Faysal as their advocate. In the following years, ‘Ajamy’s Bride in Damascus and Dimashqiya’s New Woman in Beirut continued the discussion of suffrage in their magazines, keeping the issue alive. Marie Yanni’s Minerva also expressed its solidarity with the foreign feminist movements, as the June 1923 issue featured the conference of International Women’s Suffrage Alliance. In 1924, the issue of women’s suffrage surfaced once again in the Lebanese Representative Council led by Shaykh Yusuf al-Khazin, acting on behalf of women’s leaders.

The issue had emerged from a few men's complaints in 1923 about women joining the civil service and taking the jobs away from men. The debate regarding women’s right to

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27 Ibid., 119.
28 Ibid., 120.
29 Ibid., 122.
government jobs had expanded to include other aspects of women’s status, and the debate on suffrage was postponed for another year. In 1924, al-Khazin’s proposal to grant suffrage to a few educated women elicited a largely negative reaction from the council because they believed that women’s suffrage would undermine the entire legal system.\textsuperscript{31} The 1924 Council debates was the final discussion of women’s suffrage in the mandate era.

The politicians’ arguments against women’s suffrage had little to do with the actual credibility and capability of women. The proponents of the suffrage regarded women’s participation in the war efforts and protests, work alongside men, and education as sufficient proof of their commitment and progress to the state. They believed it would enhance their status in society. The detractors instead focused on how suffrage would undermine the religious institutions and male authorities by threatening men’s inheritance rights and husband’s control over wives. The 1923 and 1924 debates on women’s social status materialized from men’s insecurity about losing jobs to women. The men who did support women’s suffrage were greatly outnumbered by those who viewed the equality as a threat to their power. For the remainder of the mandate period, this male anxiety influenced their attitude towards women.

**Patriotic Motherhood**

The demand for suffrage and equality, which characterized feminists’ goals in the first half of 1920s, was transformed by the end of the decade. The nationalist aspirations were prioritized higher than women's rights and equality, and the influence of the religious patriarchy was still significant as it affected the nationalist aims. Their involvement in protests showed women's physical contribution to the national fervor, and the popularity of patriotic motherhood indicates the ideological turn to adapt to nationalism and the men’s gender

\textsuperscript{31} Thompson, 122-123.
anxiety. Shifting from equality and political rights, patriotic motherhood instead focused on women’s domestic roles, raising strong children, and being intelligent companions to their husbands.

Women’s groups and magazines reflected this shift in ideology, as they avoided the question of women’s political status. The Feminine Union of Syria and Lebanon, which was founded in 1924, hosted a Feminine Congress in Beirut in 1928 to address: women’s work, indigent diseases, the cleanliness of bakeries, the length of hospital stays, and the visits to see the detained in prisons.\textsuperscript{32} Regards to matrimony, the minimum age was set as 17 for women and 20 for men to marry. Women advocated against polygamy and divorce and hoped that women could inherit property despite a contrary testamentary disposition.\textsuperscript{33} Regarding the economy, the feminists addressed the necessity to establish a budget for their household, and they proclaimed solidarity for women and education. One of the delegates, Ibtihage Kadoura, commented on women’s participation in the Arabic language, claiming that “feminine press had not sufficiently developed.”\textsuperscript{34} The topic of political rights for women, especially suffrage, was eluded as women focused on their domestic roles, demonstrating the shift in the movement and validating women’s role at home to be beneficial to the society.

Even Madame Malaterre-Sellier, Vice President of International Alliance, gave a discourse on the “Definition of Feminism” which identified with the Syrian women’s progress. After a warm introduction, she delved into the differentiating bad and good feminism. The first she said “feeds the ego by the trying to reclaim rights,” while “good feminism put duty before rights.” The duty of women included being educated, having children and preparing their sons for military service. She remarked that “claim on reforms of justice should reflect the dignity of

\textsuperscript{32}“Congres Feministe à Beyrouth,” \textit{Le Reveil}, 30 June 1928, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
women, their rights and factors of it development and an improvement of the children's conditions.” The role of women was tied to their contributions to the state when international tensions were brewing as “woman at home will be the best agent of peace.”\textsuperscript{35} In a later interview, the French feminist complimented the Syrian women, that they ask a lot of interesting questions, and that women are ready for “small reforms” through a peaceful revolution.\textsuperscript{36}

Adila Bayhum’s Damascene Women’s Awakening Society, founded in 1927, established the slogan “first Independence, then women’s rights.”\textsuperscript{37} Bayhum even supported the National Bloc, leading anti-French organization in Syria, as a fundraiser. In Minerva, Marie Yanni coined “The mother, she is, the nation.”\textsuperscript{38} There was no opposition to the extreme valorization of women as mothers even in the strictest feminist movement.\textsuperscript{39} Women were in the center of discourse even among men in subsequent generations, as the memories of men in their letters often alluded to the role of their mother in fulfilling their destiny. Syrian nationalist icon Abd al-Raham Shahbandar, central to the 1925 Revolt, credited his mother for his success.\textsuperscript{40}

“Our century has too urgent necessities in the face of intense competition, to leave room for conflicting concerns and some respect that we have for the power and capabilities of women, one cannot admit that she can play this double role. So women should not mislead themselves, if they really want to succeed in their plan for independence.”\textsuperscript{41} Written by an anonymous female writer “Mlle R.P.” in 1928, the article highlighted the new role of Syrian women and feminism. The \textit{intense competition} was between the influence of French colonial

\textsuperscript{36}“Les feminisistes damascaines se rendraient à Istanbul à titre privé,” Les Échos, 13 February 1935, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{37}Moubayad, Steel and Silk, 431.
\textsuperscript{38}Dakhli, Une Génération, 200.
\textsuperscript{39}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41}“Femme et Féminisme,” Les Échos, 25 November 1929, p. 1.
power and opposing nationalist sentiments at the time, between modernity and tradition. The *double role* she referred to was of women’s endeavors towards Syrian independence and their efforts towards equality with men. According to her, the two undertakings were incompatible. Mlle R.P. expressed the adaptation to the nationalist spirit through the image of patriotic motherhood.

The newspaper *Les Echos* by 1934 also began to include a “Woman and family” page, geared specifically to the interests of women. It had articles on beauty, health, recipes, children, fashion, and puzzles with very little mention of any political issues. Even the advertisements on the page were customized to attract women and carried chauvinist messages. One of the interesting advertisements was for a cosmetic product designed to make women beautiful and young. Its anecdote featured a woman whose philandering husband made excuses that he was working late, when he was actually going out to a club with a young woman from his office. Suggested by her hair dresser, she decided to use the beauty cream, which revived her skin to make her look as young as on the first day of marriage ten years ago. It also helped “revive her marriage” as she successfully won her husband back from the blond office woman.42 The little anecdote showed no fault for the husband’s behavior, but presented it as a result of the wife’s shortcoming. This was a present theme in the women’s page, as it articles were titled “Want to be really pretty?”43 and to “To stay young madams.”44 The editor of the newspaper, who had once criticized the feminist movement’s turn towards the patriotic motherhood, featured pages which reflect the importance of marriage and women’s central role in preserving it.

In general, there were two views of women: “an extremist feminist is one who wants to live independently of men, to see against him; the second feminist is a reasonable one, one who

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42“Et maintenant il m’aime plus que jamais,” *Les Echos*, 14 September 1934, p. 4.
wants to live in harmony with him, one who can complement him.” The articles envisioned women who were of the latter category. Her role was to be a mother, “moral comfort for men, the woman isn’t supposed to be inferior nor insubordinate to men.”\textsuperscript{45} They called for equilibrium to be established between the two types of women.

**The Male Anxiety**

With the presence of the French and the transformation of women’s roles, the Syrian men showed during the mandate were depicted in the press as “de-masculinized”. The devastation of the war, the presence of a foreign power, and women’s new liberation in combination undermined the power of the Syrian males. Men grappled with women’s new public presence as they emerged from seclusion. They had entered the male sphere through writing, acquiring jobs, attending schools, joining protests, socializing, and even unveiling outside their homes.

For men, these represented encroachments into what had been sole male territories built their anxiety which spilled in rising street violence towards woman\textsuperscript{46} intended to scare them off the streets and reassert men’s masculinity. Newspapers reported these vicious attacks vividly, from being kidnapped, raped in parks, poisoned\textsuperscript{47}, killed by her husband in a “passionate crime”\textsuperscript{48}, to even being to “cut to pieces.”\textsuperscript{49} These stories carried a subtext “to demonstrate the risks women faced if they ventured outside of the home.”\textsuperscript{50}

The political cartoons in French and Arabic newspapers, written and edited by men, often highlighted the “crisis of paternity.”\textsuperscript{51} This gender conflict was an important influence in

\textsuperscript{45}“Le Féminisme,” Les Echos, 28 February 1929, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{46}“L’Accostement des Femmes,” Les Echos, 31 May 1934, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{47}“Un Consul Se Plainit Contre la Police d’Alepo,” Les Echos, 8 August 1931, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{48}“Crime Pasionel” Les Echos, 16 October 1929, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{49}“La Femme Coupé en Morceaux” Les Echos, 5 January 1931, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{50}Thompson, 221.
\textsuperscript{51}Ibid., 172.
shaping the views of the feminists and the representations of women. The cartoons below mocked men for their ignorance, lack of control, and inferiority to women. While not directly acknowledging women’s progress, the cartoons captured its impact on men, and their intentions were to re-masculinize through humiliation.

The political cartoon (Fig. 3) was printed on the front page in 1929 of Les Echos. It read, “le monde renversé ou chacun son tour!” (The world reversed, everyone in turn!). It portrayed women emerging out of their domestic sphere on the streets with the illustrated woman wearing a knee-length skirt with a sleeveless blouse and sporting a popular short hair-cut at the time. The main goal was to emphasize the mentality of Syrian men, rather than Syrian women’s. The veiled native man, recognizable from his fez, is straggling along with a cane guided by a dog, clearly indicating that he is blind to the woman facing him. The sketch showed that women were progressing forward, but also that the Syrian men were veiled (in the dark) and not keeping up with the changes. The woman was looking behind at the man, who physically and symbolically seems to be behind the times. Such an image in the French colonial press ridiculed men for being backwards and not modernizing. Through these attitudes towards the Syrian men, the French justified its civilizing mission in the mandated territories—to modernize the backward society.
Even in the Arabic press, men were lampooned as they were shown doing tasks which had traditionally been women’s jobs. The cartoon (Fig. 4) from a Beirut newspaper in 1928, depicted a man taking care of his two children while another man crossly exclaimed “His wife is busy!” The father is in a submissive stature by the stroller, with a sad expression on his face. The men’s fez symbolically reminded the readers of their traditional roots. The men clearly disapproved the absence of women from their duties, as the mother was busy doing something outside of her domestic roles. The children, crying in the stroller, also cannot be pacified by their father, further signifying the need of their mother. The husband stepping in for his wife’s job was seen as unnatural and un-masculine.

The men who espoused the cause of women were not immune from scathing remarks in the press. The caricature (Fig. 5) reads “Judge Jurji Bâz at Ahmed Zaki Pasha!,” with Jurji Bâz dressed provocatively in a short skirt and high heels. “The representation is ambiguous as it valorized the defense with his raised stature but also ridiculed his role.” The jury, openly looking bored and sleepy, showed their lack of care in the trial, and the accused, Ahmed Zaki Pasha, looked dismayed. Pasha was a staunch nationalist in Egypt, widely known as the “Sheikh

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of Arabism,” who was part of the al-Nahda, the Arab Renaissance. The caricature gave the impression of Jurji Bâz blaming nationalism (symbolized by Pasha) for humiliating women and restricting the feminist endeavors. In an interview in 1930, Jurzji Bâz gave his tough experience of promoting feminine journalism, “evoking the difficulty met launching a press exclusively destined for Lebanese woman and the different violence exercised on him and his readers.”

All the men in this cartoon have been portrayed negatively: Jurzi Bâz wearing women’s dress and shoes, Zaki Pasha holding his head down submissively, the jury appearing bored and sleepy, and the guards looking confused. The cartoon characterized the attitude of the Syrian men during the time period, and the spectrum of their reactions to women’s progress—none of the reaction was represented as strong or masculine.

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54 Dakhli, “Beyrouth-Damas,” 133.
Conclusion

Women’s presence became more public during the interwar years. Even though women were denied suffrage, they continued to participate in politics through protests and demonstrate their commitment to the nationalist cause. For men, women’s emergence from their traditional domestic spheres added to their gender anxiety following the war combined with the intrusion of the French as a mandate power. Women’s new roles in society heightened their angst and sense of powerlessness, as the political cartoons showed. From a Westernized perspective, Syrian and Lebanese men were criticized for their lack of awareness and support towards women’s progress. On the other hand, the local newspapers also criticized them for their lack of control over women’s modernization. The anxiety spilled into violence towards women, and lack of support for their emancipation. Their reaction conveyed the distress of the Syrian patriarchy. The ideological shift towards patriotic motherhood by feminist leaders was not a setback, but an adaptation to the hostile political and social climate. What had been considered to be a natural role of women, patriotic motherhood linked the role of women to the interest of the state. Motherhood, which had been taken for granted for centuries, became politicized as it situated “socially minded mothers as part of the broader nationalist struggle.” Patriotic motherhood was an ideology which fit in the complicated political and social climate of the time. Despite the challenges and pressures they faced, women proved themselves to be active and responsive in a tumultuous society.

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55 Thompson, 143.
Chapter 3

A Veiled Confrontation: Modernity vs. Tradition

France’s presence in Syria and Lebanon is comparable to the British power in Egypt at the turn of 19th century. As Leila Ahmed points out, “from the start the discussion of women and reform was embedded in considerations of the relative advancement of European societies and the need for Muslim societies to catch up.”¹ The proposed solution for women’s oppression in a colonized society was the abandonment of the native culture, in favor of the Western culture.²

In Syria and Lebanon, where veiling was still prevalent among the elite class, the discussion of unveiling erupted in 1928 with Nazira Zayd al-Din’s 420-page treatise Unveiling and Veiling: Lectures and Views on the Liberation of the Woman and Social Renewal, in which the 20-year old author condemned the veil and used it “as a metaphor for the way traditional legal interpretation clouded over the true essence of freedom and equality in Islam.”³ She followed up with a second publication in 1929 The Young Woman and the Sheikhs, in which she clarified her points and addressed the critiques of her first book. She was the first woman to theologically argue for equal rights for women as she went to the source of Islam and interpreted the Qu’ran to dispel the restrictions placed on women.

With her work, Nazira engaged the French patriarchy, Syrian patriarchy, and the leading feminists all at once. The reaction to the book rippled through Syria and Lebanon, and the issue of veiling and unveiling became a litmus test for the mandate society, receiving a broad spectrum of responses. The French, with their mission to “civilize”, culturally advocated unveiling through the press and the thoughts of Western intellectuals, while politically took an

²Ibid., 129.
³Thompson, 128.
indifferent stance to uphold its pillars of power. Syrian patriarchy, embroiled in a gender anxiety, diligently dismantled the credibility of her work. For the feminists, the book stirred mixed reactions and the ideological shift towards patriotic motherhood occurred around the same time. The book can be considered to be a turning point in many ways for the feminist movement.

**Unveiling and Veiling**

The translated excerpts in *Opening the Gates* highlight Nazira’s advocacy to unveil and her criticism of the “patriarchal oppression in the name of Islam.” She addressed the book to men and the religious authorities, wishing that “they [religious leaders] did not look at Islam through the narrow vision of commentaries and interpretations which interpret Islam in ways they want to see it.” Nazira referenced the schools of religions that were established to interpret the Qu’ran and formulate the Muslim legal thought. By 10th century, the four schools—Hanah, Shafi’I, Hanbali, and Maliki—had developed the final body of interpretations and established the Islamic law. These founding discourses “were recognized as absolutely authoritative” and interpretations of only these schools were then used in the Islamic law. Referring to the actual Qu’ran for interpretation was strictly prohibited, and the subsequent religious and legal scholarship was based on existing discourses by the four schools. In her book, Nazira traced her arguments to the actual Qu’ran and remarked how over time, the Qu’ranic interpretations had strayed further away from the truth, molding the laws to fit their beliefs and views of women. “Through God’s wisdom, the persistence of a few traces of those bad customs is a way of soothing the minds of those who practice them. His wisdom is revealed

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6 Ahmed, 90.
7 Ibid.
in several ways and verses... God knew that people with insight would erase traces of reprehensible customs.”

Referring to the various inconsistencies in the Qur’an relating to women’s inheritance worth half of men’s, the value of her legal testimony worth as half of his, and men’s right to polygamous marriage. Nazira deplored the Qur’an as not being interpreted as a whole because several verses, scattered throughout the Qur’an, referred to the same topics. The religious interpreters justified laws looking at specific verses, while ignoring the other verses which might contradict their initial interpretations. She argued that the Qur’an was supposed to evolve over time, as God wanted the people to determine which antiquated customs and new traditions to exclude and include.

“You, Man, the Supporter... If some women, because of the ignorance into which you have cast them, have not recognized the insult to them and to men by the veil, is it for you, the man who has kept himself free seeking perfection and good conduct, to bear this insult that comes to you and your mother, daughter, wife and sister?” In her complex argument, Nazira blamed men for keeping women in the dark while he advanced freely in the world. She continued that if the veil represents “decorum, chastity, and modesty,” men should also adhere to the values and wear veils.

She continued the analysis of the veil from different perspectives and then with her rationale, invalidated their reasoning. “If the veil (hijab) implies the inability of the woman to protect herself without it, it also reveals that man, however well brought up and in spite of supporting the woman, is a traitor and a thief of honor; his evil should be feared and it is better

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8 Kurzman, 105.
9 Kurzman, 104.
11Ibid., 276.
that the woman escapes from him.” In this example, Nazira described the veil as a guard against the immorality of men. It perpetuated the idea that for men to seem honorable, women should be allowed to unveil in front of him. Accordingly, the veil was not a symbol of women’s meekness but of men’s corruption.

The publication of the book also situated itself during a changing time, when the French had been established in Lebanon for nearly a decade, and their influence in society can be discernable, on a political and cultural level as women’s activism was building since the end of the war. It was a decade of firsts for women from receiving law degrees, becoming doctors, and participating publicly. Among them, Nazira Zayd al-Din was an early proponent of interpreting the Qur’an and publishing work of such a large magnitude. She was the first to comment boldly on religious affairs and her publication can be considered the turning point in the ideals of women’s movement as it elicited many types responses, negative and positive.

The initial praise of her book included a letter from Syrian Prime Minister Taj al-Din al-Hasani who considered the book to be a “praiseworthy effort on behalf of the progress of women,” and Ahmed Nami Bey, a former Syrian President, visited her house to congratulate her. The book was also scrutinized by conservative religious authorities, and in 1929, she wrote a follow up book to justify her claims and respond to the criticisms and backlash. Her popularity was limited as she was largely discredited her by Shaykh al-Ghaliyani. Even her appeal to the French administration did not work in her favor. While her fame may not have lasted long, Nazira Zayd al-Din demonstrated the struggles women faced in the mandate society.

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12 Zayd al-Din, 276.
13 Cooke, 60.
Religious Backlash

Nazira Zayd al-Din was the daughter of an appeals court judge in Beirut, Said Zayd al-Din. As a teenager she was exposed to women’s issues when she helped codify the constitution of the Syrian-Lebanese Women’s Union which consolidated 29 women’s organizations in 1924.14 Despite coming from an elite family, Nazira was denied admission from the St. Joseph Medical School in Beirut since it was a men-only institution.15 She had grown up attending Catholic schools which exposed her to Western values and culture, but even within the two cultural spheres, she firmly identified herself as a Muslim. She went to a co-ed high school, Lycée Français Laique where she gave her first talk on "Why Women Should be Educated" in 1927. She graduated in 1928 as the first Lebanese women to receive a French baccalaureate in Arabic and literature.16 Nazira had grown up in an intellectually stimulating and supportive environment. She was mentored and guided by her father, who taught her Islamic Law. With her father’s encouragement, she had written the book, but the liberalism in her household, however, was strikingly greater than what the society at the time tolerated.

Within months of the book’s publication, she was staunchly opposed by influential Shaykh Mustafa al-Ghaliyani. He wrote a lengthy refutation of her work, Views on the Book: Attributed to Miss Nazira Zeinnedine.17 He sought to discredit her work first by claiming she could not have authored such a large body of work “I knew that a Sunni and a Shiite, a Christian and a faithless Muslim and a teacher, a lawyer, and missionary had all collaborated in the writing of this book.”18 He ridiculed her work by not just doubting its authorship, but also asserting that “they” [the multiple authors] verified Nazira to be the most knowledgeable and

14 Cooke, 31.
15 Ibid., 31.
16 Ibid., 32.
17 Ibid., 69.
18 Ibid., 70.
the ulama were “ignorant, stupid, deceitful, hypocritical, and that she [Nazira] alone was able to assume the throne of knowledge and understanding and to interpret the Qur’anic verses, especially those connected with the veil and women.”

Al-Ghaliyani focused more on the author’s gender, than the actual arguments in the book. According to him, a woman had no authority to be so audacious in quoting and interpreting the Qur’an.

Even though Nazira’s book aspired to expand women’s rights through theology, it was “received as a criticism of the mainstream Sunni Islam” since it evaluated the work of prominent scholars for centuries. Other male figures also spoke up in opposition: a teacher in Hama remarked that the book had errors, and it was written with a malicious purpose to stray Muslims away from their religion. The mufti of Beirut emphasized that the veiling was a religious matter and only the trained ulama had the right to judge its issue.

Shaykh Al-Ghaliyani represented on one hand, the response of the conservative ulama, as even the mufti who once praised her book retreated. Nazira, however, wrote a feisty follow up to Unveiling and Veiling with The Young Woman and the Sheikhs in 1929. In the second book, she addressed the reviews and criticisms of her first book vehemently. In some cases, she was considered to be borderline rude in her remarks, as though she was the ultimate authority on Qur’an, diminishing her popularity and credibility.

However, her advocacy on unveiling justified by the Qur’an may have had the power to be accepted widely had her boldness, age, and gender not been used to doubt her credibility, “even those who supported the book doubted that a young woman could have such extensive

\[\text{\textsuperscript{19}}\text{Cooke, 72.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{20}}\text{Thompson, 133.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{21}}\text{Ibid., 133-134.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{22}}\text{Cooke, 89.}\]
knowledge of scripture and legal interpretation.” Shunned by the religious patriarchy, Nazira sought other means to promote women’s reforms.

**Reaction of the French**

While unveiling had become the norm in Egypt and Turkey at the time, veiling was still prevalent among Syrian women through the 1920s and 1930s and was advocated as a personal choice in women’s magazines. Unlike in Turkey where Mustafa Kemal’s government imposed forceful unveiling of women (as a sign of country’s progress), the issue of the veil was not tied to the state in Syria and Lebanon. Nazira Zayd al-Din linked the veil to the state when she asked the mandate government for help.

To Nazira, the French administrators seemed the “third element between the religious authorities and the people. They were the good secularists whose power and commitment to neutrality in matters religion in the colonies made them allies in the fight against the veil.” In May 1928, her letter to High Commissioner Henri Ponsot was printed in the colonial newspaper, *Le Réveil*, in which she was described as “brilliantly defending” the rights of Muslim women as she disclosed the principles of her work. The letter began with acknowledging and therefore, legitimizing the mandate government as she addressed Ponsot as “His Excellence, Monsieur Ponsot, High Commissioner of the Republic of France, in Lebanon and Syrian.” She evoked the French principals of “liberty, equality and fraternity” in orienting her letter to interest the mandate government. She summarized the main points of her book, and she mentioned the Qur’an as the “torch” of truth which clarified the rights of women in the Islam. She asked for reforms, led by the French, which would be new in the Muslim world, assuring that with “such protection, Excellency, the best results could be obtained in the presence of

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23 Thompson, 133.
24 Cooke, 98.
France as a representative agent with us.”

Noting the sectarian divide in politics, Nazira urged the French to encourage fraternizing between Muslims and other people, specifically Christians. In October 1929, she sent a second letter to Ponsot, recapping the arguments of her second book, *The Girl and the Shaykhs*, which went unread.

Nazira, by appealing to the unpopular mandate government, made them a legitimate authority, and also explicitly placed the precedence of civil law over religious law when it came to the veiling system and personal law reforms. In response, she only received a note from a functionary of the High Commissioner, stating her letter and copies of the books were received. The French administration cautiously tiptoed around women’s rights, avoiding conflict with one of the pillars of their rule, the patriarchal elite—which included the religious authorities. “Her demands for changed gender norms and veils were deemed too Francophile and embroilment of the French in this very internal problem was to have grave political consequences.”

In 1931, an official from the Ministry of Education from France came to visit the school establishments in Syria accompanied by the mandate officials. Stopping at a school for young girls, the French inspector visiting classes one by one remarked that certain girls in higher classes stayed unveiled while others maintained the veil. He referred the habit of those who veiled as “little recommended” and the veiled girls as remaining “backward.” Hearing this, the girls complained to their families and the incident led to difficult repercussions for the school. Even though the Western power viewed veiling as a sign of backwardness in society, they did little to address it and the government stayed indifferent.

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26 Cooke, 97.
27 Thompson, 131.
28 Ibid., 132.
29 Cooke, 99.
While women like Nazira made efforts to negotiate within the complexity of powers in the region, the dual legal system (civil and religious) in a way rescued the French from taking any firm stance, despite their belief of the veil as a symbol of backwardness. Ignoring Nazira’s letter rendered no consequences for the administration, but taking action to promote her ideas would have stirred agitation among the patriarchal alliances of the French. The mandate government’s indifference continued towards women’s issue, but for Nazira, calling upon the French government had the effect of legitimizing their oppressive rule in, much to chagrin of the Syrian feminists and nationalists.

Despite the administration’s usual indifference to calls for reform and veiling, Nazira’s book incited a cultural interest. The colonial newspaper, *Les Echos*, carried out a “Grand Survey of Feminism and the Question of Veil,” by posing major questions to the public and their about Syrian women’s societal status women and the suppression or maintenance of the veil.  

For more than two months, the newspaper published articles and the public’s responses on the front page. Most of the printed responses chosen by the editor were in favor of unveiling. One response stated it would be hygienic and healthy for women. Some considered it to be “an invention of egoists” and that “women would not be free with a retrograde mindset and fanaticism…and education will reduce this social problem born of ignorance.” From the perspective of a tourist, the veiled women attracted the same attention and curiosity of men with a “hidden mysterious beauty” that the veil was worn to prevent.

At the end of the survey, the newspaper had received 38 responses, 29 in Arabic and 9 in French. Of these, 27 males and 3 females had responded positively in support of women’s

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liberation, while the other 8 men and 1 woman responded unfavorably.\footnote{Auteur de notre enquete” Les Echos, 7 April 1929, p. 1.} Later that year, \textit{Les Echos} printed another article written by its editor to dispel the values of veiling. Titled to, “Those who still believe...that the veil for Muslim women is a protector!”\footnote{A ceux qui encoré croient...” Les Echos, 24 August 1929, p. 1.}, the article claimed that the veil confined rather than protected women, and it hid the vice but did not protect the virtues. If a veiled woman committed a crime, she cannot be recognized and traced to her actions.

In its “Woman and Family” page by 1934, the newspaper often depicted women dressed in Western attires (Fig. 6) without veils and its fashion section featured European styles, showcasing modernity. Symbolizing women’s oppression, the veil was never represented in a positively while unveiling was connected to liberation. The newspaper, based on the responses it had decided to print during its survey, showed a biased opinion which favored the suppression of the veil. Interestingly, these editorials were also mostly written by men who responded to the question regarding Syrian women. They outnumbered women’s responses by more than threefold and showed that even the decision to liberate women and suppress the veil rested on the male (patriarchal) authority in the society.

In the press, the unveiled Turkish women\footnote{Vue par L’Ecrivain Francais” Les Echos, 29 January 29, 1935, p. 1.} were often represented as the paradigm of women’s emancipation. Within the Syrian society, Westernized intellectuals admired the

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\caption{Figure 6. \textit{Les Echos} June 6, 1934
Source: Bibliothèque Nationale de France}
\end{figure}
unveiled peasant women as liberated. The intellectuals advised the elite women to follow the peasant woman’s example as one scholar noted that the “Arab women stay[ed] the most backwards in the world.”\(^{38}\) Abdul Hassami, a Syrian scholar living in Paris expressed, “our peasants have unveiled because they work with their husbands.”\(^{39}\) Another professor, Tcheng Cheng, from Sorbonne remarked that only women of the lower class have unveiled from going to work on the fields. He advised to Syrians to “accustom women to work which will be the best factors for their liberation and unveiling...if they were raised to be capable to work and felt an equal footing to men, they will never accept to stay slaves as a passive object and have an independent life.”\(^{40}\) Like many others, he linked veiling to be a cause of polygamy because both represented women’s oppression. He equated unveiling to liberation of women. To the West, veiling symbolized the oppression of women, while unveiling signified emancipation.

**Reaction of the Feminists**

Among the Syrian feminists, Nazira’s book provoked a mixture of reactions. One of Nazira’s earliest supporters was Naziq ‘Abid who had helped finance the book in Lebanon.\(^{41}\) ‘Abid was also one of the few leaders who had unveiled. When the American King Crane Commission had come to survey the Syrians and Lebanese before the official mandate, ‘Abid had unveiled in 1919 to represent the modernity and enlightenment of Faysal’s Arab government. Hayat al-Barazi, another feminist, had unveiled with the backing of their brothers and husbands.\(^{42}\) Huda Sharaawi, a feminist icon from Egypt, who had famously unveiled in a train station in 1923, wrote a letter to Nazira in response to the book, thanking her for the


\(^{41}\)Moubayed, *Steel and Silk*, 473.

\(^{42}\)Thompson, 128.
“impassioned cry for the liberation of women...our sex is honored and made proud of the likes of you.”

Feminists who viewed the veil as a symbol of women’s oppression supported the book, especially in the West. The July 1930 Feminist Congress in Beirut was attended by women’s suffragist group from other countries, including the International Alliance, which presented the political status of women around the world. “Of the 46 countries that are part of the organization, 21 have already obtained complete political emancipation and to the same conditions as men,” the speaker, Aura Theodoropolutz noted. She referred to the Anglo-Saxon countries, such as the United States of America and Great Britain, who had granted women’s suffrage, and how women “were active participants in the government...taking their country to a new social level with raised morals, decreased infant mortality.” The Latin countries had also entered the movement, and in Italy and Spain, women were already given some municipal rights with restrictions. In France, the government was discussing women’s voting status. Romania, Turkey and Greece had passed women’s suffrage and now, women work side-by-side with men. The speaker finished her talk congratulating these countries, and also hoping that the Arab women would be unveiled in the next Congress session, “liberated from the veil, last vestige of an obsolete social state.” To the Western feminists, unveiling was represented as a sign of emancipation.

The popularity of patriotic motherhood may also have been a response to the backlash Nazira’s book received. The praise of her book was eventually overpowered with criticisms especially after Nazira’s plea to the French High Commissioner. By addressing the Islamic Law in her book and then seeking support from civil law to promote unveiling, Nazira put herself as

43 Cooke, 64.
45 Ibid.
well as other feminists at a disadvantage. In response to the book, the idea of unveiling developed as a threat reflecting the influence of the West. Women were often attacked on the streets with acid for not veiling and even for wearing Europeanized attires, as a conservative group League of Modesty emerged in 1934 to reinforce veils.\textsuperscript{47} Between the years of 1928 and 1936, the image of patriotic motherhood was widely accepted and popularized by the feminist leaders, and it was not by chance that its beginning corresponded to the year \textit{Unveiling and Veiling} was published.

The 1935 feminist conference which invited Western feminists including Madame Malaterre Sellier of France and Madame Von Boss of Netherlands, Syrian feminist Hayat el-Mouied al-Barazi gave a discourse on the evolution of feminism in Syria, reaffirming the “unity of Eastern women and her sister in the West.” Echoing Nazira, she used theological principles to defend women’s rights, “Syrian and Arab women would have evolved and achieved a superior a degree of emancipation long ago if circumstances had not prevented the Islamic religion that has granted them the rights.”\textsuperscript{48} She mentioned that the Qu’ran had never imposed veil on women, and that Prophet’s wives and royal women wore the veils “to show a difference between them and the crowd.” Regards to the abolition of veil and the right to vote, she thought it would be better to raise these questions at a later time without hostile elements; she preferred a slower evolution of Syrian women’s rights and instead of relying on protests, she reminded women to be “ready to retake the issue at the ‘right moment.’”\textsuperscript{49} For al-Barazi, the hostile elements were the gender anxiety of the Syrian men and the presence of the French rule. Accordingly, the right moment meant when Syria gained independence from the mandate government—the nationalist aim of patriotic motherhood ideology.

\textsuperscript{47} Thompson, 138.
By 1935, the issue of unveiling was still sensitive for many women and rejected the symbol of veil as a sign of women’s oppression. Also during the conference, the Dutch feminist Madame Von Boss provoked agitation, alluding to Huda Sharawi of Egypt, by asking the Syrian women in audience to reject the veil indefinitely. She offended the veiled women, stating “the veil represents a symbol of inferiority and enslavement of woman in relation to man.” Because of the adverse reaction in the room, the translator had to ask the speaker to restate her comment, and the Holland feminist then suggested women to “hold on to the veil until the time is appropriate to reject it.”  

Even Madame Malaterre-Sellier, Vice President of International Alliance, gave a discourse on the “Definition of Feminism” which identified with the Syrian women’s progress. On the issue of veil, she respected the religious tradition, but was also aware “that the custom had nothing in common with the text [Qu’ran] and spirit of the religion.” She too held a belief that the veil will fall, without the need of a coup like in Turkey, but a slow, serious process.

In the following months, when Syrian feminists were planning to attend the international women’s conference in Istanbul, conservative nationalist and Syrian Prime Minister Shaykh Taj refused to financially sponsor the delegation as official representatives of the state. While he had initially offered praise for Nazira’s book, he modified his view to suit the nationalist aspirations as he was the leader of the Nationalist Bloc, which allied with conservative ulama for power despite its secular ideology. Under the false pretext that the use of Arabic language was prohibited at the conference, he refused to give sponsorship and wanted the feminists to boycott the conference. The location of the conference had a great role in the Taj’s refusal, as Turkey had granted to women the right to vote, and participating Egyptian and Turkish

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50 Ibid.
feminists would have been unveiled.\textsuperscript{53} The Syrian delegates who attended the conference privately funded their trips to Istanbul, and Marie ‘Ajamy, who dropped out of the conference abruptly, had set the Syrian agenda at the conference, “restraining it to a discussion of the intellectual and social condition of women and on the possibilities of maintaining peace in the world and the East.”\textsuperscript{54} The issue of the veil in their discourses was conspicuously missing.

For the Syrian feminists, Nazira Zayd al-Din’s book drew the attention that targeted their movement. Up until this point, the women were negotiating through the masculine spaces, without directly undermining the patriarchal authorities. Nazira’s bold efforts, while admirable, was also risky in trying to compromise with the illegitimate French government and the religious patriarchy. The frenzy behind her books died down two years after the publication and even Nazira Zayd al-Din took a step back from the limelight to fulfill her roles as a wife and a mother.

**Conclusion**

Nazira Zayd al-Din’s works were considered an impressive feat at first, but after two years, the excitement around her books died and her writings were forgotten. Based on the complex political climate at the time, however, it was important for women’s work and contributions to be supported by a patriarchal power. It was perhaps why the concept of patriotic motherhood was more popular among the women’s movement than the idea of political and social equality between men and women. “Motherhood” seemed in line with the nationalist aspirations whereas the idea of equality was too ambitious. Because of Shaykh Mustafa Ghaliyani’s staunch repudiation of her books, Nazira was discredited by the conservative religious authorities, and the “learned ulama vehemently reclaimed veiling as a

\textsuperscript{53}Thompson, 139.
matter of religious law, not of personal choice or civil law.” She tried to appeal to the French to implement the ideas in her book, and while she received praise and attention for her work, the mandate government was largely indifferent towards women’s issues. Her plea to the French High Commissioner did not help her popularity as it was considered anti-nationalist by some, and led Nazira to stand out as a lonely figure in women’s movement for her boldness.

*Unveiling and Veiling* was a risky venture as it interpreted religious law, but sought change in the status of women through civil law. She directly attacked the ulama’s misogynist laws, and undermined the religious authorities. She directly asked the French High Commissioner to suppress the veil, and undermined the nationalist sentiment, which considered the mandate to be illegitimate. Unveiling was championed in the West as the hallmark of women’s liberation. But for the religious authorities and even nationalists, unveiling was considered to be a form of Westernized corruption. The leading feminists at the time, in negotiating with their surroundings, did not universally unveil. *Unveiling and Veiling* opened up the debate of the veil to the Syrian and Lebanese society. The meaning of the veil became diverse representing the suppression of women, a religious symbol, a traditional custom, a cultural practice, or a personal choice.

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55 Thompson, 135.
56 Ibid., 129.
Conclusion

Leaving Her Footprint

Syria and Lebanon,

Christians and Muslims,

Colonialism and Nationalism,

Western and Eastern,

Elites and Peasants,

Religion and Secularism,

Tradition and Modernity,

Unveiling and Veiling.

While the mandate period was distinctive for the divisions it sowed through society, the women of this time period are memorable for weaving through these intricacies and leaving a unique footprint in history. Mary ‘Ajamy, Mary Yanni, Julie Dimashaqiyya, Nazik ‘Abid, Adila Bayhum, and Nazira Zayd al-Din were all exemplary leading figures. Their efforts went beyond the separation of Lebanon from Syria, as they were geared towards improving the status of all women, Lebanese and Syrian. Mary ‘Ajamy was raised a Christian, Nazira Zayd al-Din as a Druze Muslim, and ‘Adila Bayhum as a Sunni Muslim, yet religion rarely prevented the collaboration among the feminists. French colonialism and the rise of opposing nationalism were challenging to the women’s endeavors, yet women adapted to keep up as they aligned themselves with new ideologies. Even the gender anxiety among men was a sign of women’s rising influence in society. Through education, protests, and employment women emerged from the traditional domestic sphere, as women of all classes experienced this new freedom. The veil, even today, holds different meanings—from modernity to tradition, suppression to freedom, religion to culture—depending on personal choice.
All too often, the women’s contributions have been neglected in construction of national citizenship. When men left to fight during World War I, women took charge as they emerged from the domestic sphere. When the French entered Syria, women resisted the occupation alongside men. When the male anxiety seeped through society, women reprioritized their feminist goals and embraced nationalist ones—a shift which could be viewed as women restoring the honor of Syrian and Lebanese men. The French, who justified their mandate as a civilizing mission, showed indifference to women’s issues. The Syrian patriarchs were also polarized by empathizing or being undermined by women’s. While influenced by entangled politics and growing diversity, women were not passive—they were “active, practical, powerful, and resourceful.” Despite competing ideologies and powers, women negotiated through them to develop an exceptional identity for themselves.

Even after the French had left Syria and Lebanon after World War II, the struggle for power and instability never left the newly independent nations. The absence of French patriarchy was soon replaced by another paternalist authority. Lebanon became embroiled in sectarian division as a confessional state because of its 1926 Constitution, which gave access to the highest government position proportionally based on the state’s religious populations. In Syria, where the nationalists finally ascended to power, new groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, with its ideologies rooted in Islamic traditions, rose in competition to the secular power. The power struggles were based on man-made demarcations and chauvinism, and while “Syrian and Lebanese women did finally win the right to vote, the way the achieved it underlines how fundamental gender bargains have been to defining regimes.” The issue regarding women’s status and rights were used as a political tool in the hands of patriarchal regimes.

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2 Thompson, 289.
Syrian and Lebanese feminists leave a unique footprint in history, as their writing gave them access to the public sphere. Many women, traditionally represented as living in seclusion, stepped out into the streets to receive education, to seek employment, or to enjoy a movie. Even when suffrage was denied by the patriarchal powers, women voted with their feet expressing their political discontent through protest and embracing the patriotic motherhood. Some women crossed the threshold and emerged publicly by lifting their veil, while others decided for themselves what the veil meant. The interwar period was rife with conflicting powers and ideologies, and within this struggle, women found their own stride.

Marie al-Khazen's photograph shows a transition, capturing these intricacies of the interwar period. The fixed details in the photograph correspond to difference facets of identity, continuously changing with time. It questions the layers of identity of a woman—in relation to men, to class, to religion, to culture, to family, and finally, to nation.
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Books & Articles


