

ZAKĪ AL-ARSŪZĪ AND SYRIAN-ARAB
NATIONALISM IN THE PERIPHERY:
THE ALEXANDRETTA CRISIS OF 1936-1939

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Introduction

So far, Arab nationalism in Syria during the French Mandate has almost always been discussed from the standpoint of the political elite in Damascus and the events that took place there. Since the interpretation of history is always also an interpretation of the present, a treatment of this history and the loss of the region of Alexandretta to Turkey has been avoided up to now. The Arab character of the region was called into question by the claims placed on it by Turkey, by the political interests of France, and by the existence of a large Turkish minority living there. Under these circumstances, the concept of Arab nationalism was used as an instrument to challenge such claims – whether of Turkish, French, or even Arab origin. This chapter will attempt to examine the development of the Arab nationalist movement in the region of Alexandretta, to distinguish it from the other forces involved in the struggle for power there, and to define its relationship to them. In this connection, it will be of vital importance to analyze the working methods of the Arab nationalist movement during the Alexandretta crisis and to evaluate the political and intellectual role played by Zakī al-Arsūzī, the most important representative of Arab nationalism in the region of Alexandretta.

¹ This article is part of a larger research project. See Dalal Arsuzi-Elamir, *Arabischer Nationalismus in Syrien: Zaki al-Arsuzi und die arabisch-nationale Bewegung an der Peripherie Alexandretta / Antakya 1930-1938* (Studien zur Zeitgeschichte des Nahen Ostens und Nordafrikas, vol. 9), Münster 2003.

Secondary sources providing details of the development and worsening of the Alexandretta crisis and the international background to it, and primary sources, including the complete works of al-Arsūzī, *al-Mu'allafāt al-kāmila*, have been used. In addition, private archival sources (the Antakyan Collection of Letters)² and official sources (diplomatic reports), whose material has mostly been used for the first time, together with contemporary press reports and newspaper interviews, have been consulted in order to round off al-Arsūzī's biography and to make his intellectual development and political career comprehensible. It is the press reports and newspaper interviews previously mentioned that provide an insight into the internal structures of the region, as well as into the cooperation and disputes between the existing political parties and various population groups, and into the political events of that period.

Prevailing conditions in the region of Alexandretta

The region of Alexandretta lies to the northwest of Aleppo and north of Latakia.³ Its total area is 4,805 square kilometers.⁴ The two largest towns in the area are Alexandretta and Antakya. The town of Alexandretta is situated on the southern edge of the coastal bay of this region, where it functioned as the port for northern Syria and Iraq. Antakya lies in the Orontes valley – between al-Suwaydiyya in the west, Lake 'Umq in the north and Mount Qaṣīr in the east.

The population was comprised mainly of Arabs, Turks, and Armenians, although there were various other groups such as Kurds and Circassians.⁵ In 1936 the population of this area was roughly 240,000. This could be broken down as follows: 49 percent Arabs (117,600 of whom two thirds were Alawites, roughly 20,000 Orthodox Christians and the rest Sunnis); 23 percent Turks (55,000); 18 percent Armenians (43,000); 8 percent Turkomans (20,000); the remaining 2 percent were made up of other minority groups.⁶ The segregation or amalgamation of the different groups (Turks and Turkomans) came about in the mid-1930s as a result of the development and subsequent worsening of the Alexandretta crisis, with the aim of stressing the majority or minority component of a particular group within the population of the area. This is also true of the

² This is a collection of letters which the 'Urūbiyyūn and their sympathizers in the region of Alexandretta exchanged with the 'Uṣba in Antakya for the purpose of clarifying questions of organization, swapping experiences, and passing on information about the political situation. The letters are in the private possession of the author and are here referred to as the Antakyan Collection of Letters.

³ See map.

⁴ Nakhla Ward, *Ḥaḍārat Anṭākiya 'abra'l-ʿuṣūr*, Brazil 1956, 185.

⁵ Yūsuf al-Ḥakīm, *Sūriyya wa'l-intidāb al-faransī*, 4 vols., Beirut 1983, IV, 164.

⁶ Alīsān Bāyirāmyān, *Qaḍīyyat liwā' al-Iskandarīna*, Damascus 1970, 23.

the various Arab groups (Alawites, Sunnis, and Christians) who were classified according to their religious denomination and not their nationality.

The individual groups were unevenly distributed throughout the region. The Turks, for example, made up 50 percent of the population in Antakya, whereas the Arabs comprised only 40 percent, while in the surrounding region they made up 70 percent of the total population. In Alexandretta, the Arabs made up over 70 percent of the population, and in al-Rihāniyya 80 percent. Here 15 percent of the population was Turkish, while in al-Suwaydiyya 90 percent were Arabs. In the villages of Jabal Mūsā and some of the villages of Baylān and Qirqkhān 90 percent of the population was Armenian. 75 percent of the inhabitants of al-Urdū were Turks, while 75 percent of the inhabitants of al-Qaṣīr were Arabs, most of them Sunnis. The rest of this town's population was made up of Turks.⁷

The population of the countryside was comprised mainly of Alawites who cultivated land which they had leased from large-scale landowners. These were mostly of Turkish or Arab Sunni descent. The latter spoke Turkish in addition to Arabic and sympathized with their Turkish "social and religious brethren," something that led to comparative social homogeneity amongst this section of the population. Only a few of the Alawites were well off and had their own land. This relatively small group constituted the notables in the villages where they lived. The town-dwellers amongst the Arabs were, for the most part, shopkeepers or plied some not very lucrative trade. Only a section of the town-dwellers were well off. They were the notables in the various quarters of the towns where they lived; some of them even acted as government officials. The broad majority of town-dwellers worked for wages.⁸

At the beginning of the period of Ottoman rule, the region of Alexandretta belonged administratively to the *vilāyet* of Aleppo.⁹ Toward the end of the sixteenth century, when the state adopted the *vilāyet* system of administration, the region of Alexandretta was annexed to the *vilāyet* of Aleppo.¹⁰ In 1864, while the *vilāyet* system was being reorganized, the region of Alexandretta remained attached to Aleppo. Throughout the entire period of Ottoman administration (1516-1918), the region of Alexandretta never existed as an autonomous regional administrative unit. Sultan Selīm I, who was fully aware of the importance of this region, tried in the sixteenth century to place emphasis on the Turkish language as part of his program of Turkification and to increase the percentage of Turks in the population by settling Turkomans from his retinue. Subsequently the Arabic names of some of the villages and administrative communities (*nāhiya*) were

⁷ Muḥammad 'Alī al-Zarqa, *Qaḍīyyat liwā' al-Iskandarūna: Wathā'iq wa-shurūḥ Antākiyyāt*, 3 vols., Beirut 1993, I, 244.

⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 52.

⁹ Muḥammad 'Alī al-Zarqa, *Adam shar'īyyat al-wūjūd al-turkī fī iqlīm al-Iskandarūna*, Cairo 1967, 11.

¹⁰ Al-Zarqa, *Qaḍīyyat*, I, 18.

replaced by Turkish ones.¹¹ During the French Mandate, Antakya, Alexandretta, and Qırqkhān became districts (*aqḍiya*, sing. *qaḍā'*). Alexandretta became the administrative and political center of the region, as well as the seat of the deputy high commissioner.¹² The Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) incorporated the whole region of Alexandretta into the "blue area," since it belonged to Syria and was therefore to be under French influence.¹³ On November 27, 1918, Gouraud ordered the districts of Antakya, Ḥārim and Baylān to be annexed to the region of Alexandretta, in order to form a new political administrative unit (*sancaq/liwā'*) with self-administration in the western part of the Arab areas occupied by France.¹⁴ At the peace conference (Sèvres), the Ottoman State recognized the region of Alexandretta, as well as Kilikia, as being integral parts of the Arab area which had been separated from the Ottoman State.¹⁵ On April 25, 1920, France was given Mandatory power over Lebanon and Syria, including the region of Alexandretta, which served as the natural port of exports for Aleppo.¹⁶ This Mandate was acknowledged at the meeting of the League of Nations in London on July 24, 1922. In September, 1920, the four units Etat de Grand Liban, Gouvernement de Damas, Gouvernement d'Alep and Territoire des Alaouites had been established on the basis of racial and sectarian criteria.¹⁷ The petty state of Aleppo included the region of Alexandretta, which still retained its own autonomous administration.¹⁸ In September 1921, Jisr al-Shughūr, Ḥārim, Katsaba, al-Bāyir, and al-Basīt, which had been added only a year previously, were separated off and attached to Aleppo and Latakia for "economic reasons."¹⁹ The political price of these changes was paid by the Arabs, since the percentage of Turks living in the region of Alexandretta increased. This was due to the fact that the inhabitants of the districts and regions that had been separated off were mostly Arabs.

France entered into a number of agreements and treaties with Turkey, preceded by a semi-official visit to Turkey by Franklin Bouillon, which was concluded after a series of talks about the First Ankara Agreement of October 20, 1921. This agreement ended the hostility between the two countries and contained a clause to the effect that Turkey,

¹¹ 'Abd ar-Rahmān al-Kayyālī, *al-Marāḥil fī 'l-intidāb al-faransī wa-niḍālinā 'l-waṭanī*, 4 vols., Aleppo 1958-60, IV, 413.

¹² Al-Zarqa, *Qaḍiyyat*, I, 237.

¹³ Dhūqān Qarqūt, *al-Mashriq al-'arabī fī muwājahat al-isti'mār: qir'ā fī tārikh Sūriyya al-mu'āshir*, Cairo 1977, 157.

¹⁴ Al-Kayyālī, *al-Marāḥil*, IV, 407.

¹⁵ Majīd Khaddūrī, *Qaḍiyyat al-Iskandarūna*, Damascus 1953, 5.

¹⁶ *Orient Nachrichten für Wirtschaft, Technik und Kultur* (Journal of the German Orient-Verein e.V.) 29-30, Dec. 30, 1936

¹⁷ Helmut Mejcher, "Der arabische Osten im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert 1914-1989," in *Geschichte der arabischen Welt*, ed. Ulrich Haarmann, Munich 1991, 432-501, here p. 444.

¹⁸ Bāyirāmyān, *Qaḍiyyat*, 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

from then on, would no longer give military support to the Syrian rebels in the north. As part of this agreement, France handed over 18,000 square kilometers of Syrian land to Turkey.²⁰ In addition, article 7 of the agreement stipulated that “a special system of administration” should be introduced for the region of Alexandretta within that of the petty state of Aleppo, something which weakened the relations of this region with Aleppo. On the basis of a special resolution, the French governor of Aleppo handed over to the region of Alexandretta the majority of functions relating to the region, which had previously been under the jurisdiction of the Arab chief administrator of Aleppo.²¹ The agreement strengthened the role and importance of the Turkish section of the population at the expense of that of the Arabs, as privileges were accorded to the Turks in the cultural and financial sectors. It also laid down a special administrative statute, but not a political one. The peace treaty of Lausanne on July 24, 1923 confirmed this agreement, as being the only valid legal basis on which the border between Syria and Turkey could be drawn. France created this particular political situation in the region of Alexandretta by giving it a special status within the French Mandatory territories. By this way France tried, on the one hand, to win Turkey’s friendship and achieve cooperation with it in the eastern Mediterranean area and to enforce its policy of “divide and rule” by strengthening the large Turkish minority in comparison to the Arab majority. In addition, within the framework of her policy to divide the Syrian territory into a series of smaller areas with special rights, France saw no reason to convert the region of Alexandretta into a petty state. It had no clear denominational character which could have justified France in making the region of Alexandretta a denominational state like those of the Druze and Alawites. The Turks were, without exception, Sunni Muslims, the Arabs partly Sunni Muslims or Christians, but mostly Alawites. By granting the region a “special system of administration,” France aimed to satisfy Turkey by not attaching the region of Alexandretta entirely to Syria. One important result of this agreement was that Turkey could now have a say in the affairs of the region, thanks to the official recognition of the Turks living there and the granting to them of special status. Turkey also had the right to make further demands and was ultimately able to annex the whole region in 1938/1939.

On March 20, 1930, the constitution of Alexandretta was ratified, so as to give the political system a legal and constitutional veneer and to protect the policy of separation carried out by France in Syria.²² The various regulations concerning the governmental status in the region of Alexandretta were put together on May 14, 1930, in a fundamental system called the *Règlement organique du sandjak d’Alexandretta*,²³ in which “the

²⁰ Khaddūrī, *Qaḍīyyat*, 7.

²¹ Bāyirāmyān, *Qaḍīyyat*, 28.

²² ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Bīṭār, *Qaḍīyyat liwā’ al-Iskandarūna wa’l-waḥda al-sūriyya min taqṣīm al-dawla al-’uthmāniyya ḥattā taslimihi ilā Turkiyā* 1918-1939, Damascus 1997, 36.

²³ Political Archive of the Foreign Office, Bonn, div. XII Turkey: Drawing the Border between Turkey and Syria (R 105156).

special system of administration” was determined. It was the job of the Mandate committee to make sure that guarantees given to the Turkish section of the population in this area with regard to culture and language, as well as certain other concessions agreed on, were adhered to.²⁴ On the one hand, this constitution gave the region of Alexandretta – as part of Syria – its own administrative, economic, and financial systems; on the other hand, it upheld the existing situation, whereby the region of Alexandretta was dependent on the Syrian government as far as legislation, budget, and the appointment of high-ranking officials and judges were concerned.²⁵

On May 29, 1937, the League of Nations confirmed new laws concerning the *sancağ*: Statut du Sandjak and Loi fondamentale du Sandjak, whereby the region of Alexandretta was to represent an *entité distincte* with complete autonomy in all domestic affairs. Its external affairs were to be controlled by the French Mandatory authorities in Syria which formed a customs and monetary union with the region. This new statute came into force on November 29, 1937.²⁶

Zakī al-Arsūzī and Syrian Arab nationalism: the Alexandretta crisis of 1936-39 and the ceding of the region to Turkey

The Alexandretta problem started on a local level at the beginning of the 1930s, was recognized in 1936 on a regional and international level as being a “question,” and came to be known in the autumn of the same year as the “Alexandretta crisis.” It had gone through a number of preliminary stages.²⁷ The initial stage began with the First Ankara Agreement of October 20, 1921, which is regarded as the first step on the way to separating the region of Alexandretta off from Syria. The French Mandatory authorities justified their policy of Turkification in the region of Alexandretta by claiming that they only wanted to carry out the regulations laid down in this agreement. In this way, they preserved their friendship with Turkey. The “special situation” into which the agreement had put the region of Alexandretta meant that no cooperation or move toward solidarity was achieved among the various sections of the population, nor was there any integration of the groups into the society of Mandatory Syria to which the region of Alexandretta belonged, even after the First Ankara Agreement. The integration of the society within the region of Alexandretta or of the Arab population with the rest of the Syrian

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Al-Kayyālī, *al-Marāḥil*, IV, 411.

²⁶ Political Archive of the Foreign Office, Bonn, div. VII Syria, (R 104793), Geneva May 2, 1937.

²⁷ See Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, London 1987, 494-515; Stephen H. Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate*, London 1972, 237-243; Keith D. Watenpaugh, “Creating Phantoms: Zakī al-Arsūzī, the Alexandretta Crisis, and the Formation of Modern Arab Nationalism in Syria,” *IJMES* 28, 3 (1996), 363-389.

Arab society was prevented first by the discriminatory policies of the French Mandatory authorities, which gave the various sections of the population different rights and duties, secondly by the financial and moral support that Turkey gave the Turkish section of the population, and third by the “special system of administration” that had been introduced in the region. The result was a conflict which boiled up between the two opposing nationalities, the Turks and the Arabs. The Arabs felt threatened by the Turks, who had begun to demonstrate their strength by fighting and provoking the Arab forces and their allies. This political course had been prepared for more than ten years – from the early 1920s – until it took its final shape on both the Turkish and Arab sides. The forces that had developed in order to assert their interests, goals, and needs against those of the others fought a running battle from the early 1930s onward to impose their respective national identities on the region of Alexandretta, once and for all.

The various political events in the region of Alexandretta from 1930-35 paved the way for the second preparatory stage of the Alexandretta problem, which began with the signing of the Franco-Syrian Treaty on September 9, 1936. Turkey exploited the development of Franco-Syrian relations, offered itself as the official partner in the negotiations over internal affairs in the region of Alexandretta, and turned the situation of the Turks in the region into a topic for discussion on an international level. As a solution to their allegedly problematic situation, they demanded that the region of Alexandretta be completely partitioned off from Syria and put under the joint protection of Turkey and France. In this way, the problem was raised from a local and regional level to an international one – in other words to a “problem” or a “question” for the League of Nations, which was asked to recognize the agreements Turkey had reached with France and thereby make them internationally valid resolutions. The result of the negotiations and investigations between France and Turkey, and also by the League of Nations, was the Statut du Sandjak and the Loi fondamentale du Sandjak. Consequently, the second step on the way to separating the region of Alexandretta from Syria had been taken.

The development of the third stage, which lasted until June 23, 1939 – until the official annexation of Alexandretta to Turkey – consisted of developing measures to enforce the previously mentioned resolution made by the League of Nations, which was to come into effect as of November 29, 1937. The enforcement of this resolution was accompanied by measures taken on the part of the French Mandatory authorities against the opponents of the resolution – namely al-Majmū’a al-‘Arabiyya (the Arab Group) and their supporters. At the same time, important political changes in the field of administration were carried out. During the plebiscite in the first few months of 1938, there were violent conflicts and clashes between the Turks and the Arabs. The beginning of the end was the arrival of the Turkish army on July 5, 1938, the election of a parliament in the region of Alexandretta and the proclamation of the independent state of Hatay on September 2, 1938, which existed for roughly a year, until Turkey announced its decision on June 23, 1939, to annex the region of Alexandretta. This

concluded the drama encircling the “Alexandretta question,” which over the years had become the “Alexandretta crisis.”

The most important political factions in the region of Alexandretta

On a political level, the internal history of the region of Alexandretta can be described from the example of two factions which differed from one another as far as their language, culture, and nationality were concerned and which vied with each other for social and political dominance in the society of the region of Alexandretta. Each of the groups suffered under the various internal divisions that determined the political scene in the region of Alexandretta.

The Turkish faction basically comprised two political groups. The most important of these consisted of socially and politically conservative large-scale landowner families. They also were associated with the Sunni clergy and saw in Kemalism a violation of religion; more importantly, they felt that the Kemalist movement challenged their position of power. For that reason they pleaded for self-administration in cooperation with Damascus. Their hallmark, which distinguished them from members of the other groups, was the wearing of *tarbūsh*. The second group consisted of the reformers, the majority of whom acknowledged Kemalism and stood for the separation of the region of Alexandretta from Syria and for its annexation to Turkey. The members of this group wore European hats. Socially and ideologically this group had much in common with the supporters of al-Arsuzī, despite their bitter fight over mutually exclusive nationalist programs.

The Arab faction comprised a variety of political groups; what they had in common was the fact that they rejected the complete independence of the region of Alexandretta from Syria.²⁸ From a religious point of view, the Arab group was made up of Sunnis, Alawites, and Christians. Within each of these groups, there was a variety of political opinions and varying interests. The Alawite leaders at first welcomed the possibility of instituting self-administration in the area, because they were afraid the region would be completely merged with the Syrian state where the Sunnis dominated the government; should it come to a merger, the Alawites would be relegated to an insignificant fringe group. The Christian traders, on the other hand, were frightened of any change in the status of the region of Alexandretta, which would have meant an end to the trade links with Aleppo. The Sunnis repeatedly changed their position. Initially they supported the Geneva Agreement, as they sympathized with their “social and religious brethren,” the Turkish landowners, thereby hoping to gain more power for themselves. In the course of time, though, as they realized that the local Kemalists were giving more and more

²⁸ Paul du Vêou, *Le Désastre d'Alexandretta*, Paris 1938, 42.

weight to their demand for complete independence of the region and its annexation to Turkey, they tended increasingly to support the idea of a merger with Syria, because here they had hopes of enhancing their religious and political influence in the region due to the good political relations they enjoyed with Damascus, but not with Ankara. For the same reason, the large-scale Turkish landowners favored a change in the situation, and partly signed up on the Arab Sunni list,²⁹ instead of on the Turkish one.

In the Arab faction there was a variety of political parties which were strengthened by the fact that a number of Armenians had joined them. The most important amongst them was 'Uṣbat al-'Amal al-Qawmī (League of National Action), whose members and officials were known in the region of Alexandretta as 'Uṣbawīyyūn or 'Urūbiyyūn.

Zakī al-Arsūzī and the beginnings of his political activities: the formation of the Arab nationalist movement

The intellectual and political activities of al-Arsūzī from the beginning of the 1930s onward contributed to an increased political and social awareness amongst his Arab pupils and to the founding of a militant group of nationalist-minded Arabs who launched the slogan "The Arab national heritage is our religion." Al-Arsūzī added to that by declaring himself the "Prophet of Arabism." This, for the Muslim ear rather provocative, almost blasphemous expression – the last prophet being Muḥammad, who had revealed Islam – was meant as a deliberate attempt to overcome the confessionality of society. This break with religion was so successful because al-Arsūzī combined it with a call for social justice and national integration. The majority of the Arab section of the population reacted to his ideological activity by adopting this new national identity and making Arab nationalism the point of reference for its political activity.

In 1930, when al-Arsūzī was given a job as a history and geography teacher at the high school in Antakya, he was shocked by the segregation of pupils and at the way in which the French Mandatory government, represented by the French cultural council, which wanted to promote narrow denominationalism and prevent social integration, discriminated between them. When he started teaching, he did away with the seating plan according to religious denomination, which had been introduced by the French authorities. He justified his action by the fact that the majority of his pupils were Arabs.³⁰ The situation in which he lived and worked developed al-Arsūzī's political determination, and encouraged him to mobilize his pupils by turning his history classes into

²⁹ In articles 9 and 14 of *Loi fondamentale du sandjak*, which came into effect on November 29, 1937, provision was made for the voters to sign up on one of the lists for Turks, Armenians, Kurds, Alawites, Sunni, and Greek Orthodox Christians.

³⁰ Muḥammad 'Alī al-Zarqa, 50-page manuscript written for the anniversary of al-Arsūzī's death, unpublished, Damascus 1969, 28.

lessons about nationalism and morals. He saw in his work as a teacher the opportunity to gain a platform for his message. He believed in freedom, justice, and equality, and his aim was to achieve truth and knowledge for everyone – whoever they might be;³¹ all this, of course, within the frame of an Arab nationalism. His aim was to transform his pupils and followers into citizens living in a free society. Even more, he wanted to educate them and transform them into heroes who would not be satisfied with having just a job and a peaceful life, but who through their unconditional willingness to sacrifice themselves would serve the society in which they lived, without thinking of their reward or striving for personal gain.³² He taught them that liberty consisted of freeing themselves from all forms of repression and tyranny. He taught them what he himself had learned in Paris – namely that everyone should be equal before the law.³³ His deep convictions, together with his didactic skills and eloquence, resulted in his teaching having a profound effect on his pupils. Consequently, a group of them was willing to carry al-Arsūzī's ideas beyond the bounds of the school. In this way, the movement which he had started in a high school in Antakya finally spread to all the Arab schools, as well as to other sectors of public life in Antakya. The newspaper *al-ʿUrūba* describes this development in the region of Alexandretta as follows:

The intellectual revolution took place in the *tajhīz* school (high school) in Antakya. After returning from Paris, al-Arsūzī began to impart the basic principles of his knowledge, following his own program which had been inspired by a thorough study of western culture. The purpose of this was to correct the prevailing concepts about things in general, as well as the commonly held philosophy of life and human existence. The Association of Fine Arts contributed to the spreading and polarization of his philosophy. Al-Arsūzī was in a position to shake the people out of the regression which threatened to engulf them – regression which looked at the past as something sacred and from which it drew its highest ideals. In contrast, al-Arsūzī's perspective was future-oriented; from it he gained his inspiration for a new way of life. This envisaged a form of nationalism in which all Arabs regardless of their religious affiliation were completely integrated. In order to carry out his important experiment, which was conceived by him as an example for the Arab *umma* (nation) on its way to Arab unity, the old social and political organizations had to be replaced and a new constitution laid down, which complied with al-Arsūzī's concept and which corresponded to, and reinforced the feelings of the people.³⁴

The Mandatory power's attention was drawn to al-Arsūzī, and it sent secret agents to keep a close watch on him. Arsūzī tells in his memoirs that once the French school inspector attended his class. Afterwards al-Arsūzī was called to his office and asked: "Do you think you are teaching in a French high school? What you preach is impressive, but

³¹ Zakī al-Arsūzī, *al-Muʿallafāt*, 6 vols., Damascus 1972-1976, I, 9.

³² *Ibid.*, 37.

³³ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁴ *Al-ʿUrūba*, Nov. 15, 1937.

you forget you are in a country which is subject to the French Mandate and the policy of this Mandatory power has certain prerequisites.”³⁵ Things went so far that al-Arsūzī was threatened by secret service officers in front of his pupils.³⁶ His class was closed down and he was dismissed in 1933. The students organized strikes, offered resolute resistance to the head of the high school and other educational institutions, and stayed away from class. According to *al-Liwāʾ* this was the first strike in the region since 1923.³⁷

Even while he was a teacher, al-Arsūzī commenced his political struggle, through his pupils in Antakya in sports and scouting groups, art and culture clubs, which – infiltrated by his supporters – were turned into a meeting ground for nationalist-minded Arabs. During this period, his own house served the same purpose. In this way, between 1930 and 1934, al-Arsūzī’s supporters and followers formed the hard core of a new political movement, and were the advocates of a new philosophy and the authors of every article and essay which appeared in the region of Alexandretta in the name of the young Arabs there.

Al-Arsūzī and the founding of the ‘Uṣbat al-‘Amal al-Qawmī: the structure, political activities, and the goals of the ‘Uṣba

The ‘Uṣba was founded at a conference in Qarnāyil in Lebanon on August 20, 1933.³⁸ The aims of the conference participants, who came from a variety of Arab countries, were defined as follows: the absolute sovereignty and independence of the Arabs, comprehensive Arab unity, the realization of which should enable the Arabs to rule themselves, to flourish economically, and to achieve a national revival. Arab unity was therefore considered to be an imperative goal along the road to power and independence. The most important means to attaining it was the unification of all nationalistic opposition movements in the Arab areas: to encourage their solidarity, to stamp out all feelings of regional and denominational aloofness, and to promote the recognition of the ‘Uṣba al-qawmiyya as the sole representative of this movement. The ‘Uṣba opposed foreign colonialism together with feudalism and social injustice. It was on the basis of this that the ‘Uṣba put together its political, social, and economic program. Through a comprehensive revival movement, the national decline was to be turned around.³⁹ The center of the ‘Uṣba was Damascus. It founded branches in the different Arab states such as Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, and the various towns of Syria – among them Antakya. Al-Arsūzī had

³⁵ Al-Arsūzī, *al-Muʿallafāt*, vol. 1, 10.

³⁶ Al-Zarqa, MS, 29.

³⁷ *Al-Liwāʾ*; Jan.2, 1938, article on the initial awakening of the Arab groups of the *liwāʾ* of Alexandretta.

³⁸ Dhūqān Qarqūt, *Taṭawwur al-ḥaraka al-waṭaniyya fī Sūriyya: 1920-1939*, Beirut 1975, 178.

³⁹ *Bayān muʿtamar al-taʿsīs li-ʿUṣbat al-ʿAmal al-Qawmī al-munʿaqa fī Qarnāyil 1933*, Damascus n.d., 1 ff.

been present with Subhī Zakhūr at the conference of Qarnāyil. In the spring of 1934, he went to Homs with Zakhūr and Ramaḍān Najīb, where they swore allegiance to the ‘Uṣba. After their return to Antakya, he organized sub-groups of the ‘Uṣba in Antakya, Alexandretta, al-Suwaydiyya, Arsūz, and other towns in the region of Alexandretta. Zakhūr was the chairman of the sub-group in Antakya. Al-Arsūzī was in charge of the ‘Uṣba in the whole region of Alexandretta.⁴⁰

The ‘Uṣba had behind it the support of the young Arabs of Antakya, who showed a passionate interest in Arab nationalism which was spreading rapidly – especially among the lower classes in the towns. The ‘Uṣba was able to extend its activities to all areas of the region, first by appealing to people to support the cause of the Arab national heritage and nationalism, and second by opposing denominationalism, exploitation by the large-scale landowners, and all forms of social and political exploitation. This included a call for the emancipation and education of women and the abolition of the veil, which was perceived as the symbol of the backwardness and isolation of women, preventing them from participation in public life and progress. Lastly, the French, who oppressed the Arab sector of the population and supported the separatist Kemalist and Turkish political movements were, to be resisted just as were the officials who collaborated with the Mandatory power. The latter were particularly active in Antakya, the center of the Arab-Turkish struggle. In daily confrontation with the large Turkish minority living there, the ‘Uṣba grew in strength. Within a short space of time, it was able to join forces with rival Arab groups and transform itself into a mass movement, which spread throughout the whole region. Al-Arsūzī’s program was to insist on the subordination of denomination- alism to the communal struggle for the Arab heritage – in contrast to French policy, which stressed denominationalism and tried to split the Arab community. He explained his position as follows: “We are Arabs in the first instance, not Christians or Moslems; let us, from now on, declare nothing but our Arab nationality.”⁴¹ He had realized that the French government’s colonialist policy used the Mandate to combat the idea of Arab nationalism and the organizations that supported it throughout Syria.⁴² This fight for the Arab cause intensified regionally and internationally. An incident on December 10, 1936 shows how united the Arab nationalist movement had become. The Turks closed the big mosque in Antakya to the Muslim Arabs and forbade them to pray there, resulting in the largest nationalist and political demonstration ever. The Muslims consequently held their Friday prayers in a church, in the presence of Christians. This was a manifestation of Arab nationalism in the region of Alexandretta as al-Arsūzī had propagated it.⁴³ Another incident took place on the evening of June 13, 1938, when al-Arsūzī

⁴⁰ Interview with Şubhī Zakhūr, Damascus, August 18, 1997.

⁴¹ ‘Abdallāh Ḥannā, *Min al-ittijāhāt al-fikriyya fī Sūriyya wa-Lubnān*, Damascus 1987, 84.

⁴² Interview with Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Zarqa, Damascus, Sept. 9, 1997.

⁴³ *Al-Liwā’*, Jan. 24, 1937, Şubhī Zakhūr mentioned this event several times in interviews in 1997/1998/1999, as did al-Zarqa and Fāyiz Ismā‘īl.

was arrested. As a sign of protest, several hundred women marched to the seraglio and the hotel where the League of Nations was housed. Since no one was willing to listen to them, the women spent the night outside the seraglio in the open, from where they had to be removed by force on the morning of June 14. The troops used guns, which wounded some of the women.⁴⁴

The leaders of the Arab groups refused to comply with the demand issued by the French Mandatory authorities, and coupled with personal threats, that their supporters should not participate in the forthcoming elections, a move aimed at ensuring Turkish domination.⁴⁵ In addition, “the Arab population could not be won over to the Turkish cause – either by the material enticements offered by the Turks, or by their threat that they would be victors in ‘Hatay’ the following day and then take their revenge.”⁴⁶ A German observer described the success achieved by the Arab movement in its struggle for its national goals as follows:

The Alawites remained faithful to the Arab cause, nor did the Sunnis and Christian Arabs allow themselves to be intimidated by increasing pressure from the Turks during the election. This is all the more surprising, since they must not only have realized that the Arab cause was lost in the region of Alexandretta, but that the French delegate, Colonel Collet, who was known to be hostile towards the Arabs, was doing everything in his power – even, it seems, by threatening to bomb the Arab sectors of Antakya with mortar – to bring home to them that they couldn’t count on France, but would do better not to resist the Turks any longer. With the exception of the large-scale landowners, the Arabs seem to have remained inflexible in their attitude, a sign of their growing sense of nationalism.⁴⁷

The role of the ‘Uṣba movement in this struggle was significant, because it represented not only the political hopes of the majority of Arabs in the region, but also their social interests.

The school had been the didactic and ideological starting point for al-Arsūzī’s Arab movement, from where it conducted its political activities and imparted its insights into the basis and principles of Arab nationalism. The Arab movement expanded from a group of pupils, students, and intellectuals to include craftsmen, farmers, and agricultural workers. Its number of registered members was small – not more than 300 people – but the majority of the Arab population supported it.⁴⁸ To this number a large group of Armenians can be added. Its members and followers – as well as its leaders – came

⁴⁴ Political Archive of the Foreign Office, Bonn, div. VII Syria, (R 104794), Beirut, June 16, 1938.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Beirut, June 7, 1938.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Beirut, March 23, 1938.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, June 24, 1938.

⁴⁸ File 23/Feb. 12, 1938, Markaz al-Wathā’iq al-Tārīhkiyya bi-Dimashq (MWT). Also in a statement by Nabīh al-‘Azma, Feb. 19, 1938.

mainly from the lower and middle classes and belonged to various religious denominations.⁴⁹

The ‘Urūbiyyūn in the region of Alexandretta wore the *sīdāra fayṣaliyya* (military service caps) as a symbol of their struggle and as their hallmark; this was to distinguish them from the Turks, who wore hats. Their idea about the importance of clothing and of one’s outer appearance in the struggle for Arab nationalism was “that the outer appearance of a person reflected his feelings and brought him closer to others. King Fayṣal I had introduced the service caps in Iraq and made them a piece of national clothing which symbolized the will of the Arabs to achieve political unity in the twentieth century. As far as the Arabs in Liwā’ al-Iskandarūna (the province of Alexandretta) were concerned, two additional ideas justified their wearing these service caps. On the one hand, they regarded King Fayṣal as the bearer of the message of Arab nationalism; on the other, they believed that the uniformity of clothing constituted an essential factor in the awakening of a common awareness and in the anchoring of emotions in the soul of the nation. In this way, they wanted to strengthen relations between the people in this area and its mediators. At the same time it complied with their wish to free themselves of outdated traditions,⁵⁰ which were symbolized by the *ṭarbūsh* worn by the traditionally conservative groups.

The representatives of Arab nationalism, which the ‘Urūbiyyūn considered themselves to be, published a newspaper which appeared under the name of *al-‘Urūba*, (“Arabness”), from October 30, 1937. Its job was to make the general public aware of the radical political changes that were taking place in the region of Alexandretta and to inform the Arab world and countries abroad of these changes.⁵¹ In *al-‘Urūba* the name, of the authors seldom appeared under their articles. These authors “were not interested in having their names published, for their prime goal was their work for the Arab national heritage.”⁵² Apart from that, anonymity, of course, saved them from being persecuted. *Al-‘Urūba* was a mouthpiece for the views and intellectual positions of al-Arsūzī.⁵³ The Arab National Heritage Club (Nādī al-‘Urūba) was founded in Antakya, then based in Alexandretta. It spread the Arab message, organized resistance to the Kemalist Turks, and united the Arab factions.⁵⁴ The ‘Uṣba also organized demonstrations and meetings and, on a voluntary basis, a program to eradicate illiteracy – one of its most important and essential tasks. The cultural and sport clubs served the ‘Urūbiyyūn as places for political gatherings and lectures and for a cultural and intellectual exchange. Larger political party gatherings took place secretly – outside the town. The

⁴⁹ Bāyirāmyān, *Qaḍīyyat*, 45.

⁵⁰ *Al-‘Urūba*, Nov. 2, 1937.

⁵¹ *Al-‘Urūba*, Oct. 30, 1937.

⁵² Interview with Ṣubḥī Zakhūr, Damascus, April 1, 1999.

⁵³ Interview with al-Zarqa, Damascus, Sept. 3, 1997.

⁵⁴ Khaddūrī, *Qaḍīyyat*, p. 76, see photograph.

clubs played an important role in creating a political and social awareness among young people.⁵⁵ Indeed, all the public amusement places – for instance cafés – were used by the ʿUṣba for its political activities. The Café Mikhāʿil was a popular meeting place. At particular times, al-Arsūzī or other active members of the ʿUṣba were to be found there discussing relevant issues with the people.⁵⁶ To spread the spirit of Arab nationalism the ʿUrūbiyyūn performed various Arab plays on public squares in the larger towns or in their own clubs, as well as foreign plays translated by them. A patriotic Arab song⁵⁷ was always sung before the theater performances and at the beginning of public functions.

The task of journalists working for the ʿUṣba in Antakya was to report the local news concerning developments in the Alexandretta question as well as to make known what newspapers in the Arab world and abroad were writing about the region of Alexandretta.⁵⁸ On every occasion, the great importance of solidarity amongst all Arab forces fighting for the integration of Alexandretta in Syria was stressed. The necessity of solidarity beginning within the family, in farms, and in the villages was pointed out.⁵⁹ Oral and written instructions were given on how to become active, how to organize campaigns, how to arrange meetings, and how to demonstrate to the Turkish separatist movement and the Arabs the power of the ʿUṣba.⁶⁰ There were also rivalries and different tendencies within the Arab nationalist movement. On one occasion a delegation of 200 ʿUṣba supporters was sent to a demonstration in Alexandretta. This was an attempt to thwart the local National Bloc in its efforts to present its members as the only political force of the Arabs. The ʿUṣba in Antakya sent some of its members to other areas and to other local groups to supervise the political work there and to exchange opinions and experiences. The ʿUṣba in Antakya had permission to dismiss subversive members from other local groups, too.⁶¹ The second problem emanated from the fact that the ʿUṣba, while fighting the Turkish presence in Antakya, was also involved in a bitter power struggle with the Arab National Bloc Party.

The policies of the ʿUṣba were molded not only by mistrust of the aims of the French and those of the Syrian government, but also by a firm stand against the resolution passed by the Council of the League of Nations and against everyone who approved it or who collaborated with the French.⁶² As a consequence of the generally tense political atmosphere and the number of enemies of al-Arsūzī and his Arab nationalist movement,

⁵⁵ *Al-ʿUrūba*, Nov. 5, 1937.

⁵⁶ Interview with Ṣubḥī Zakhūr, Damascus, April 1, 1999.

⁵⁷ Interview with Fuʿād Jabāra, brother-in-law of Shahīn Jabāra, Damascus, Sept. 17, 1972: al-Zarqa, private papers.

⁵⁸ Antakyan Collection of Letters, letter of Oct. 19, 1936.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, message about the delivery of 600 flyers for distribution: work schedules, Nov. 5, 1936.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, see the letter of 28.2.1937 for an example.

⁶¹ *Al-ʿUrūba*, Dec. 1, 1937.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Nov. 16, 1937.

the 'Uṣba proceeded cautiously in the region of Alexandretta and restricted its cooperation with other parties quite considerably. For that reason, a rumor spread that it was very intolerant of everyone who did not belong to it, accusing such people of spying and of treason. Some of the 'Uṣba members in the region of Alexandretta were accused of being fanatical. However, they were also praised for "standing" up to the Turks.⁶³

Its commitment to the Arab national heritage was more important for the 'Uṣba than any denominational or personal considerations, as its members often stressed. It gave this commitment a new, more profound dimension, by not only upholding it theoretically and verbally as other groups did, but by turning it into active and tangible reality. Even its enemies recognized its contributions to spreading and strengthening the spirit of Arab nationalism in the region of Alexandretta, its struggle against the French, who considered a deal with the Turks more advantageous for themselves, and its commitment to uniting the Arab factions and destroying religious denominationalism which the French had politicized. As was reported: "The 'Uṣba has its merits, which must not be forgotten, even if it is extreme and should be more moderate."⁶⁴ The 'Uṣba remained politically and socially active, and was able to record a majority of the votes in the elections of mid-1938, despite the extremely well-targeted Turkish propaganda which enticed or intimidated people, despite the delegation of thousands of voters from Turkey to campaign for the Turkish list and despite the firm decision of the Turkish government to occupy the region of Alexandretta immediately, should the forthcoming elections have an unsatisfactory result.⁶⁵ In this connection, the commission of the League of Nations felt obliged to write a memorandum about the intimidation methods used on the non-Turkish sections of the population, the withdrawal of which was requested by Collet.⁶⁶ When the Turkish army occupied Antakya on July 5, 1938, al-Arsūzī left the region of Alexandretta, together with a group of his pupils, and fled to Syria in the hope of return-

⁶³ Statement by Nūr al-Dīn/file 23, Aug. 2, 1938, MWT. Nūr ad-Dīn was appointed by the Syrian government to proof the case of Alexandretta.

⁶⁴ Ibid., file 23/Feb. 12, 1938, MWT. Also statement by Nabīh al-'Aẓma, Feb. 19, 1938.

⁶⁵ Political Archive of the Foreign Office, Bonn, div. VII Syria, (R 104794), Ankara, May 17, 1938.

⁶⁶ Political Archive of the Foreign Office, Bonn, div. VII Syria, (R 104794), Beirut, June 16, 1938. Both the Turkish and the French governments had conveyed their desire to the general secretary that the commission of the League of Nations stop their work in the region of Alexandretta. It is true that the intervention of the League of Nations was called for by the Turks first, because the French government was not willing to comply with the Turkish demand for a plebiscite in the region of Alexandretta. After French-Turkish negotiations had led to an agreement about the plebiscite with the help of the League of Nations, a commission of the League of Nations was sent to the area to conduct the elections according to the regulations agreed on by the parties and the Council of the League of Nations. Almost immediately after the commission of the League of Nations had begun its work, it turned out that Turkey had been wrong about the plebiscite in the area and that an unbiased plebiscite would not bring the result desired by the Turks. Therefore, Turkish-French negotiations were renewed, with the aim of getting around the plebiscite and ceding the area to Turkey without taking popular opinion into consideration. Foreign Office, Bonn, political div. VII Syria, (R 104794), Geneva, July 1, 1938.

ing later and continuing the struggle. At first, he lived for a while in Aleppo, then made his home in Damascus. In 1939, he officially announced in a number of newspapers that he was leaving the ‘Uṣba, partly because he was shocked at the condition of the ‘Uṣba in Damascus, but mainly because it was clear that the majority of its leaders with whom he had worked earlier were only interested in pursuing their own private interests and because he understood that in spite of all his propaganda he had failed.

Conclusion

During the 1930s the ‘Uṣbat al-‘Amal al-Qawmī played an important role in the political life of Syria and represented the ideology of Arab nationalism in a more coherent and systematic form than earlier generations. The official center of the party was Damascus, but its field of activities was Antakya. The ‘Uṣba remained an elitist group of special character. It was well organized in government schools and at the university, but lacked a permanent mass basis.

The Arab ‘Uṣba, which was led by al-Arsūzī in Antakya, shared many social and ideological aspects with the Kemalist movement of Turkish nationalism. Both pursued programs which excluded the existence of other ethnic groups and recognized national identity as the only relevant organizational principle of politics. Al-Arsūzī’s nationalism also included a strong social component, however, which led him to attack not only Turks but also the upper class of Arab large landlords.

Al-Arsūzī succeeded spreading his kind of Arab nationalism in Antakya, which meant for him also a fight against underdevelopment, sectarianism, and social injustice within society. He succeeded in mobilizing the Arab population to political action. He was especially popular among the young generation. His name stood for change and new ideas, challenging the old elites (*zu‘amā’*) and their claim to leadership. With that he gave the Arab movement in Antakya not only a national but also a revolutionary character. Under his guidance the ‘Uṣba gained importance not only in Antakya but in all of Syria. The party it did not survive his departure in early 1939. However, it left its traces in the national politics of Syria. Former members and sympathizers of the ‘Uṣba had gained the experience and skill to do political work both among the urban and rural masses. This experience especially benefited the Ba‘th when former ‘Uṣba members and others founded it.

Given the fact that the two nationalist projects for the region, Turkish and Arab, were mutually exclusive, only one could “win” in the end. Nevertheless, the question has to be put why it was al-Arsūzī and his Arab movement that failed so disastrously in achieving their objective, in spite of its activism and popularity and in spite of the great intensity with which the struggle for the Arab nation as a whole was fought in Antakya.

The answer can be found in various factors and conditions. In the case of the class of large landowners in Antakya, confessional and ethnic identity played hardly any role: Turkish and Arab landowners⁶⁷ cooperated with each other. They promoted the idea of collaboration with the government in Damascus while maintaining a large degree of administrative autonomy for Antakya. They fought al-Arsūzi's nationalist movement, because of its demands for greater social justice, for example in the case of Antakya mainly more rights for the peasants vis-à-vis the landowners. By 1938 the large landowners were more inclined toward complete integration of the region with Syria, because of their fear of the increasing power of the Kemalists. On the basis of their good relations with the national leadership in Damascus they hoped to be able to maintain their own way of life and their political position and influence.

Syria's uncertain political elite in Damascus was first and foremost interested in maintaining its own landholdings and its (limited) political influence, which was guaranteed by collaboration with the French; hence their willingness to compromise with French interests. In the Alexandretta question they hesitated to take a clear position and even displayed a curious indifference, which resulted from the following circumstances:

(1) The older generation, especially, which had served in the Ottoman Empire, still considered the Turks "brethren of the faith." Even the early years after the war had been full of social and political interaction and cooperation. Turkey was not considered a "foreign enemy," hence it was difficult, if not impossible, to rally all the Arabs in Syria and beyond against the Turkish claims to Antakya. When Şubhî Zakhûr reported on the crisis in the liwâ' at a meeting of the Arab consuls in 1938 in order to gain their support, the Egyptian representative, astonished about the attitudes of the Arabs to the Turks in the region, asked him: "Where is the crisis? What goes out of one pocket comes back into the other."⁶⁸

(2) The elite in Damascus, consisting of upper-class urban notables and large landowners – just like the Arab-Turkish landowning elite in Antakya – looked with a wary eye on the radical Arab movement in the region, because the young nationalists leading this movement insisted also on a degree of social justice, which seemed to endanger the privileges and rights of the upper strata of society. When, in addition, the Arab nationalists in the Alexandretta region refused to be controlled by Damascus or to subordinate their goals to those of the Damascene elite, the latter worked to undermine them.

The origins, development, and solution of the Alexandretta question cannot be separated from the Near East policies of the Great Powers. The measures taken by France and England to "solve" the crisis moved within the traditional frame of international politics of the European powers. In this case it meant conceding Alexandretta to Turkey in order to ensure Turkey's siding with the Western powers. The goal was to

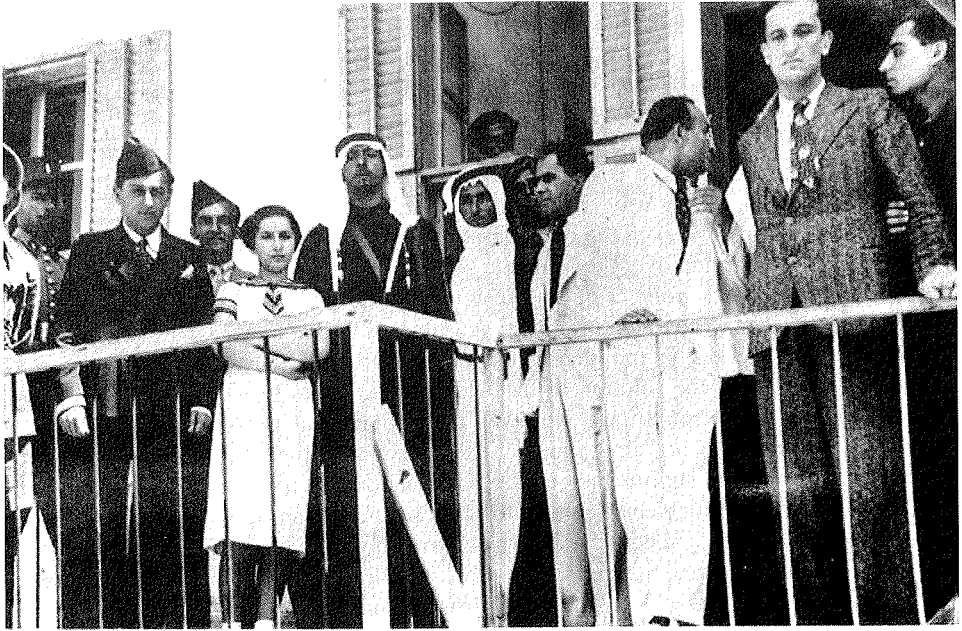
⁶⁷ In this context the expression "Turkified Arabs" is interesting. It reflects well how uncertain the ethnic differentiations and national identities initially were.

⁶⁸ Interview with Şubhî Zakhûr, Damascus, April 1, 1999.

obtain Turkish-English and Turkish-French agreements of mutual assistance against the threat of Germany and Italy in an already predictable war. Turkey was able to exploit this situation and realize its demands for the annexation of the Alexandretta region. France has always been held responsible for not fulfilling its obligation as a Mandatory power, i.e. to guarantee the territorial integrity and unity of the whole Mandate given to them. But in the background it was England that pressured France into agreeing to the cession of Antakya. In this way Great Britain could ensure an alliance with Turkey and, at the same time, also weaken the position of France in the Middle East. The League of Nations, though guardian over the Mandate system, became in the end an instrument for the legitimization of the policies of the Western powers.

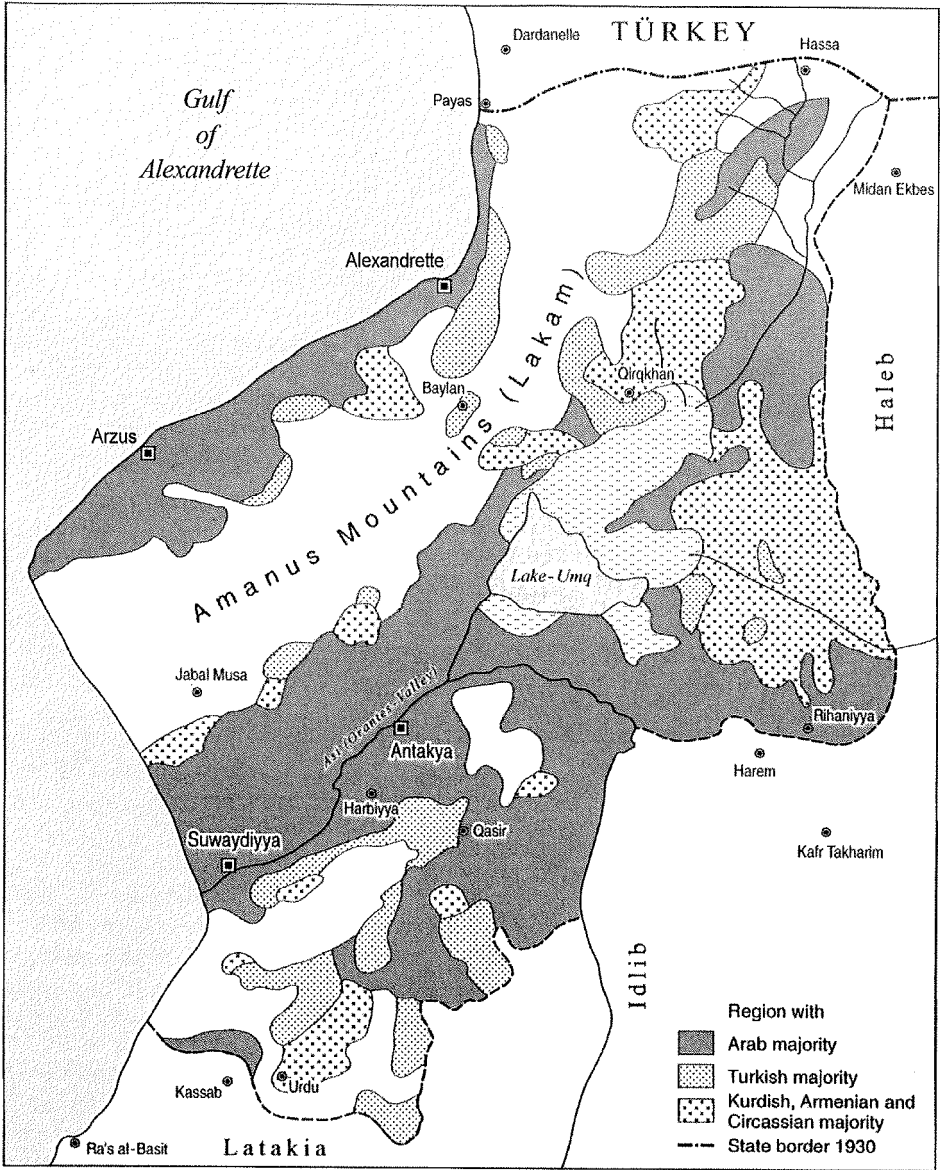
In the last analysis, the intense political activities of 'Uṣbat al-ʿAmal al-Qawmī and of al-Arsūzī, their success in mobilizing the population, and their electoral gains were bound to fail because the solution of the Alexandretta crisis was decided by the Great Powers, France and Great Britain. Not even the hesitant and ambivalent role of the political elite in Damascus had any impact on the decisions of the Great Powers.

The history and the significance of the Arab nationalist movement in the region of Alexandretta has been neglected due to the loss of the region to Turkey in 1938/1939. This omission from the collective memory occurred not only because any critical debate of political failure threatens established national myths, but also because the interpretation of the past is always an interpretation of the present: a risky undertaking in a society so tightly controlled as that of Syria.



في «نادي الفنون الجميلة في انطاكية» الذي أسسته عصبة العمل القومي سنارا لنضالها السياسي . صورة
تجميع الرجل والمرأة ، اليدوي والحضري ، العسكري والمدني .. المعروف من الشخصيات (من اليسار)
زكى الأرسوزي ، صبحي زخور ، غاوديت نعيم . وإلى يسار تسبوخ البندو الثلاثة الدكتور مانوسيان ،
نديم ورد ، نخللة ورد ، إبراهيم فوزي

In the *Nādī al-Urūba* (Club of Arabism)/Antakya 1937: al-Arsuzī (x), on the left behind him Şubhî Zakhûr. They are wearing *Sidāra Faişaliyya* (service caps). With them there is also a group of supporters, among them Odette Na'ûm, on the right-hand side Matûsiyân, Nadîm Ward, Naḥla Ward, Ibrâhîm Fauzî.



The Demography of the Sandjak of Alexandrette 1930