CHAPTER THREE

“LIBERAL COLONIALISM” AND MARTIAL LAW IN FRENCH MANDATE SYRIA

Michael Provence

Introduction

Imperialism has dramatically returned to the Middle East. For many in the region, particularly in Palestine, the age of colonialism never ended, but some intellectuals in Europe and America have welcomed a new age of muscular imperialism. Niall Ferguson, for whom the principal lament of today’s neo-imperialism is that Winston Churchill can no longer lead its charge and Rudyard Kipling can no longer sing its praises, writes widely from his endowed Harvard chair.

Many glib commentators like to blame all the problems of the Middle East today on British and French imperial maneuvers to fashion dependencies out of the lost provinces of the Ottoman Empire—as if malicious European diplomats somehow invented the ancient fissures between Shiites and Sunnis, or willfully encouraged Jewish settlers to colonize Palestine.¹

European diplomats of the interwar Middle East may not have been malicious, but widespread ignorance, short-sighted incompetence, and self-delusion certainly bequeathed a miserable inheritance to the post-colonial era. Colonial authorities zealously exploited and deepened sectarian and class cleavages in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine. More than encouraging Jewish colonization, British politicians quite literally deeded Palestine to Europe’s Zionist movement, and in so doing gave the world the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the Middle East, endless suffering and misery are widely viewed as the colonial legacy of the twentieth century. American policymakers and academics, on the other hand, prescribe colonial occupation not as a source of the region’s real and imagined ailments, but as a cure, apparently confident that “Western

values” can only be conveyed, or indeed defined, by the self-appointed heirs of the Enlightenment, and delivered with military force and staggering violence. The Iraq adventure will do little to burnish the record of Euro-American imperialism in the Middle East.

The balance sheet for Middle East colonialisms, however, remains contentious. Beyond wars and borders, the enduring traces of colonial rule are more elusive. The Mandates of the former Ottoman Arab lands in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq were based in part on the evolving international legal structures of the League of Nations. Legal arguments not less than racialized theories of European supremacy legitimated the French and British presence in the Middle East between 1920 and the 1950s. The influence of European legal theory and so-called liberal imperialism on the post-colonial state is rarely examined, except in normative law codes or the presence of secular constitutions. This chapter examines a single episode in the history of mandatory Syria to suggest some of the more subtle traces of European occupation.

France occupied Syria and Lebanon in 1920. Agitation against the post-World War I Middle East settlement was widespread in the region, and each of the new French and British colonies, carved from the former Ottoman realms and euphemistically styled “Mandates” under nominal League of Nations supervision, was roiled by massive revolts. In every case the revolts were suppressed with the techniques of industrialized violence innovated during the war in Europe, including air power, poison gas, and mechanized artillery against civilian populations. The mandatory states and the challenge posed by nearly continuous insurrections also spawned large police-state intelligence structures, which the post-colonial states generally inherited after independence in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine.

In August 1925, during a major revolt in Syria, a revolutionary tract appeared in Homs, the Syrian Mandate’s third-largest city. The posterers called for armed resistance against the French military authorities. Mandate intelligence quickly arrested and interrogated a number of well-connected boys and young men. Several were tried and convicted in a closed military court. The investigation and trial led to a lengthy secret file. The documents provide a rare look into the functioning of the colonial security state, as well as providing a glimpse into the production and dissemination of agitation against Mandate rule. During the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925–27 there were dozens of such tracts posted in public places in all Syrian towns and cities. They were usually anonymous, and Mandate intelligence rarely found anyone responsible