The Uprisings in Antakya 1918–1926: Guided by the Centre or Initiated on the Periphery?

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Modern Syrian historiography has paid little attention to the uprising in Antakya, probably because most research has concentrated on the national movement and the uprisings and events around the main cities while neglecting the periphery. Contemporary commentators have tended to consider Damascus or Aleppo as the main focus of the rebellions; hence the uprisings in northern Syria have been analysed from the Damascus point of view while ignoring the independent role played by Antakya, which is treated as largely peripheral. This is even more true of the Arabic secondary literature. It is not only that any objective analysis of political defeats in the past stands in the way of the over-arching national myth, but it is also inevitable that interpreting the past always means interpreting the present, a potentially dangerous political undertaking. Most accounts of the early years of the Syrian state are based on the assumption that power was concentrated

1 Many authors have reduced the uprisings in northern Syria, which spread over entire northern and western Syria, to Hananu’s uprising in northern Syria, which is presented as a regional Sunni-religious uprising against the French. In general events in the country are presented as being initiated at the ‘national centre’ and ending at the centre. Research on the periphery has begun only recently: see Dalal Arsuzi-Elamir, Arabischer Nationalismus in Syrien: Zaki Al-Arsuzi und die arabisch-nationale Bewegung an der Peripherie Alexandretta/Antakya 1939–1938, Münster, LIT, 2003, in which the author demonstrates the important independent role played by the periphery of Antakya in influencing and shaping Arab nationalism. Recent studies on other peripheral regions include: Birgit Schäbler, Aufstände im Drusenbergland: Ethnizität und Integration einer ländlichen Gesellschaft Syriens vom Osmanischen Reich bis zur staatlichen Unabhängigkeit 1859–1949, Gotha, Perthes, 1996, Nadine Méouchy, ‘Le Mouvement des ’isabat en Syrie du Nord à travers le témoignage du chaykh Youssef Saadoun (1919–1921)’, in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett, eds., The British and French mandates in comparative perspectives/Les mandats français et anglais dans une perspective comparative, Leiden, Brill, 2004, pp. 649–72, and Michael Provence, The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism, Austin, TX, University of Texas Press, 2005.

2 The Alexandretta region was occupied by Turkey on 5 July 1938, and annexed on 23 June 1939. See Arsuzi-Elamir, Arabischer Nationalismus…

in Damascus, which sits well with the national myth of a single monolithic Arabism representing the interests of the nation. Thus the internal structures, differentiations, and developments in specific regions of Syria are seldom mentioned.

To understand the background of the causes of the uprising in Antakya and the way in which it functioned as the starting point of all uprisings in northern Syria, it is necessary to consider the political and social conditions of the region as a whole.

The Administrative, Social, and Economic Structures of the Region

Around the end of the sixteenth century, several decades after the Ottoman conquest of Greater Syria in 1516, the wilaya system of administration was introduced, under which Antakya, or rather the region of Alexandretta, became part of the wilaya of Aleppo. Under the Law of Wilayas of 1864, the region of Alexandretta continued to be assigned to Aleppo. The entire region of Alexandretta was included in the Blue Zone which was designed to come under French influence (according to the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement of May 1916). On 27 November 1918, the French High Commissioner, General Gouraud established a new political and administrative unit—the sanjak of Alexandretta—in French-occupied western Syria, and this separate status created the circumstances which made possible the cession of Alexandretta to Turkey in 1938/39. In the 1920s, Antakya, Qirqkhan, and Alexandretta were formed into sub-provincial units (qadhas) with Alexandretta as the administrative and political centre of the region and the seat of the local Delegate of the High Commissioner.

The Ottoman Land Law of 1858 facilitated the creation of private property in land, and most peasants became sharecroppers on large estates, while the landowners were generally absentees, living in the cities. Graduates of foreign and Ottoman schools, mostly from the

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6 Zarqa, Qadiyat..., vol. 1, 237.