CHAPTER 12

Cinemas: Gendering a New Urban Space

While streets had a long history—as old as cities themselves—of negotiation between the genders and between local and state authority, cinemas were a new form of public space, and so wide open to competing normative and jurisdictional claims. From the late 1920s to the end of the mandate, Christian and Muslim religious groups contested the French state's regulatory control of cinemas, in essence waging a turf war similar to that waged by nationalists in the streets. While Christians in Beirut campaigned against sexuality on the screen, Muslims in nearly every other city under the mandate campaigned against cinemas as a space of public assembly, and particularly against women's presence in them. Elite women moviegoers became a lightening rod for religious, class, and anti-imperialist tensions. And because women were relatively weak players in the civic order, their demands for equality would once again be sacrificed to the alliance of paternalistic elites, as nationalists chose to ally with religious leaders against the French state. But more so than in the battles of the streets and the veil, women staunchly stood their ground for their right to go to the movies.

Cinemas as Volatile Public Spaces

The first films to be shown publicly in the region were apparently by the pioneering French Lumière brothers, in about 1897, followed by a 1908 show at an Aleppine cafe staged by two wandering entrepreneurs from Anatolia. The first theaters devoted specifically to film screenings opened just before or during World War I.[1] Cinema spread steadily after the war and soon became a regular form of urban entertainment. By 1922, Damascus, Beirut, and Aleppo each had three or four cinemas. While German films had dominated wartime

screens, French and American silents conquered them after 1918. Local favorites included Tarzan, cowboy and police serials, and the comedies of the French star Max Linder and Charlie Chaplin, who even planned a publicity stop in Syria in 1929. Film showings were often accompanied by music, typically a drum and clarinet, and by vaudeville-style acts.[2] The 1930s brought the talkies to cities and silent films to smaller towns. By 1932, 10 of the 22 cinemas in Syria and Lebanon were equipped with sound projectors.[3] American films by then far outnumbered French ones, because local viewers preferred action movies to French romances, and because American companies rented films more cheaply.[4] A retired Damascene policeman remembers that as a boy in the 1930s he climbed atop the roof of his apartment building in Marja Square to watch Gary Cooper movies in an open-air theater next door.[5] By the 1930s, most newspapers had regular movie columns. And by 1939, there were 40 cinemas in both countries, holding 22,000 seats and selling 2.3 million tickets per year. That means 44,000 tickets were sold per week, suggesting a cinema-going public of more than 20,000 people, concentrated mainly in Beirut, Aleppo, Damascus, and Tripoli.[6]

The origins of cinemas in the Levant, however, situated them as socially and politically controversial spaces. Like the working-class origins of cinema in the United States, where storefront nickelodeons located in business and entertainment districts offered cheap thrills, the Levantine cinema first appeared in popular milieux, sharing tents with itinerant shadow puppet (karagöz) shows, or temporarily set up in the upper floors of cafes and merchants' hostels (khans).[7] Cinema's first permanent spaces were located in the new city centers: Burj Square in Beirut, Marja Square in Damascus. Early cinema was thus closely associated with the racy cafe-music-theater culture catering to traveling merchants and elites that thrived in early twentieth century; that is, they were situated on the margins of urban life, spatially outside of residential districts, and culturally outside of the realm of social norms that governed life among the Muslim majority. Many of the earliest proprietors were often foreigners and non-Muslims, minorities in all cities save Beirut.

The advent of talkies appears to have further marginalized the cinema in the 1930s, biasing it toward French-educated elites and minorities. While popular classes could and did attend the silents well into the 1930s, only those literate in a foreign language could fully enjoy European and American sound films, most subtitled in French. The regional market was still too small to justify the cost of separate prints with Arabic subtitles. Local film production was minimal, due mainly to lack of capital. Between 1928 and 1932, four silent feature films were made in Syria and Lebanon, but they failed at the box office because of French

interference and competition from talkies.[8] And while Arabic-language films from Egypt appeared after 1932, only a handful per year were imported until the 1940s. Moreover, cinema was priced beyond the means of the poorer masses. Beirut's theaters were the most glitzy, and ticket prices there were twice as expensive as those in Damascus, where seats averaged 10 cents (U.S.) per show in 1927. That represented about one-third of a male artisan's daily pay; half a day's pay for a typical female worker.[9] The daughter of a Damascene grocer recalls that no one in her family could afford movies, and that their weekly entertainment in the late 1930s was to listen to the famed Egyptian singer Umm Kalthum on the radio Thursday nights.[10] In sum, cinema did not take hold in the Levant as a form of mass culture for the impoverished majority, as in the United States, where the poor and non-English-speaking immigrants flocked to nickelodeons. Cinema became instead the trendy entertainment for elites and minorities, thus situating it on the faultline of social tensions that were flaring into violence in the cities of the 1930s.

Politically, cinemas also occupied a volatile space. The market was not the only arbiter of who would go to the movies, and of what they would see. Cinemas were appropriated almost immediately by governments for propaganda purposes. The Ottomans, who had built the first formal live theater in Damascus in 1880 as part of their efforts toward social reform, built the Janak Kala'a cinema in Damascus in 1916 to screen war footage and propaganda, and appropriated the Taraqi theater in Aleppo for similar reasons. In 1919 Faysal's government sponsored a movie party featuring a documentary about his negotiations in Paris.[11] Immediately after their occupation, the French sought assembly halls to spread their own propaganda, and found the postwar construction of cinemas to suit their needs.[12] Cinemas were used as lecture halls and, increasingly, as venues for French-sponsored charity events. Where no cinemas were available, filmed propaganda could be shown outside under the nightime sky. Yusuf Wehbeh, a retired teacher in Damascus, recalls the first film he saw: footage of French soldiers shown in 1922 by the French army in a local public park.[13] Another Damascene recalls great excitement when the 1921 film "Danton," about the French Revolution, was shown.[14] The French foreign ministry also distributed documentary films to schools and orphanages to "modernize youth" and to provide a "corrective to the impression of moral corruption and social decadence" among Europeans given by commercial films.[15] In 1930, for example, the French distributed a half-dozen educational films on health to schools, including ones on childrearing and prenatal care intended for female normal school students.[16] By the 1940s, the French ran the "Cinéma mobile" program, which projected newsreels of Charles de

Gaulle and Allied troops, along with short comedies and cartoons, to dozens of remote villages where movies had never before been seen.[17] Cinema thus became a primary tool of the French civilizing mission.

Cinemas also became primary meeting places for political parties. In 1925, the nascent Communist Party held a meeting with workers in Beirut's new Crystal Cinema.[18] The Communists, labor unions and youth groups would continue to hold their meetings in Syrian and Lebanese cinemas. In October 1935, a group of students from Italian schools in Beirut attended a showing of "Napoleon" at the Cinema Empire. They all wore black shirts and yelled "Long live Il Duce!" during the film, provoking a riot between them and other youth in the audience. In 1936, the Iron Shirts made a short film of one of their biggest parades in Damascus.[19] Cinemas were also a favorite haunt of the French secret police, who filed reports on audiences' responses to their propagandistic newsreels and foreign films, particularly those from Italy, Russia, and Germany. In sum, the foreign content of most films and the exploitation of the auditoriums by local parties and French police politicized cinemas. They became a node of confrontation between colonizer and colonized, between Western cultural influence and indigenous audiences. In this, cinemas became unique spaces, quite different from the live theaters that preceded them with mainly Arabic dramas and musical acts.

Regulation of these volatile cinematic spaces invoked a familiar pattern of negotiation, wherein the state claimed unilateral jurisdiction, some groups challenged the state's authority and intervened as mediating authorities, and others sought guarantees of access as direct rights claimed upon the state. In the 1920s, the mandatory state imported French regulations that classified cinema as a morally and politically suspect space, requiring all cinemas to register with police and observe curfews. A 1932 regulation ordered cinemas closed on the eve of religious holidays, similar to cafes and music halls. But the state was also expected to make the cinema accessible to all. The state influenced the price of movie tickets through the taxes levied on them. In 1931, Beirut students mounted a protest march for cheaper ticket prices, claiming them as a right just as they demanded cheaper tramway tickets and electric rates. Police were called in, and the state acquiesced. The students continued, however, to organize boycotts against cinema owners' "greed and monopoly" in following years.[20]

The state also regulated film content. In 1928, the French foreign ministry began reviewing all French films sent to their colonies to assure they respected French national interest, traditions, and custom. In 1929, the High Commission formalized its guidelines for film censorship, which had been handled by a minor unit within the General Security police since 1925. The new decree

established a permanent censorship board headed by the General Security director and including five members, all French. Every film imported into Syria and Lebanon now had to pass the board's review, and no appeals were permitted once the board banned a film.[21] Censorship guidelines focused on protecting French prestige and on political issues. In 1931, seeking protection against American competition, Paris ordered French film distributors to market only French-language films in French colonies, and asked American companies to dub their films into French.[22]

French censorship also interfered with attempts at local film production. Syrian and Lebanese filmmakers produced several short documentaries, of the first Syrian parliament in 1932, the 1936 Iron Shirts parade, Emile Eddé's 1936 election, the death of Lebanese President Charles Dabbas, and several demonstrations and strikes. Fakhri al-Barudi of the National Bloc even planned a film promoting the growth of modern industry.[23] These documentaries were routinely cut heavily. In 1925, High Commissioner Sarrail had promised no restrictions on filmmaking in Syria and Lebanon, except for views of military and security installations and activities. However, in 1934, the High Commission tightened those rules, requiring all filmmakers to obtain the prior approval of its office.[24] As World War II drew near, French security concerns heightened censorship in reaction not only to the growing power of the nationalist movement, but also to German and Italian propaganda.

Depiction of sexual relations between colonizers and colonized proved to be a frequent flashpoint in the politicized arena of the cinema. In 1929, for example, the censorship board banned "Insubordinate Woman" ("L'Insoumise") because it depicted an "Arabic prince marrying a European girl which he wants to treat as a slave." When a local film distributor complained, the High Commission defended the ban, claiming the film would incite audiences because it showed the "love of a white woman for an Arab (Mohammedan) and a conflict between the Arabs and European troops."[25] Local audiences, not just the French, rejected the notion of happy union between Europeans and Arabs. In 1933, a French official noted with alarm that an Egyptian film showing "the disastrous consequences of marriage between an Oriental man and a European dancer full of sins and vices" drew large crowds, especially in Aleppo. Audiences applauded especially loudly when the Egyptian husband shot his French wife and her French lover.[26] And in 1936 the first Lebanese talkie, "The Ruins of Baalbek" ("Bayn hayakil ba'labakk"), about a foreign tourist who falls in love with an Arab prince but is blocked from marrying him by his family, passed French censors and actually made a small profit.[27]

Cinema, Women and the Regulation of Public Morality

Film censorship also intensified because of local pressure from religious leaders. In 1928 the makers of the first Syrian feature, "The Innocent Victim" ("al-Muttaham al-bari' "), were forced to reshoot most of the scenes at great cost because ulama protested to French censors against the performance of a Muslim woman as the heroine, despite her family's approval. Reshot with a German actress, the film, about a band of thieves who terrorized the city in the Faysal era, drew overflow crowds to Marja Square on opening night. Although the film was a hit, the cost of reshooting it had bankrupted the nascent production company.[28]

Religious protests against cinema were apparently rooted not in anti-colonial passions, but in earlier protests against sexual morality in live theater. In 1911 Damascus, conservative Muslim clerics had campaigned against a high school play about an Arab hero in Andalusia, on the grounds that Islam prohibited fictional representations as lies and that the play portrayed effeminate behavior by boys.[29] In 1919, another group of Damascene shaykhs protested to Faysal's government against a play to be performed for a ladies-only audience. Women were customarily excluded from the city's theaters. Some ulama of the time argued that women's theater attendance was immoral because male actors could see their faces in the audience. The governor banned the play just before curtain call and substituted a film, drawing vigorous protest from the female audience.[30] In 1921 Beirut, Jesuits organized 300 Catholic students to protest a play called "Musketeers in the Convent" for its portrayal of lusty nuns and priests. Just as the flirtatious abbot and nuns began to dance with the musketeers, the students stood up and whistled to obliterate the scene. At the second performance, they threw a stink bomb inside the theater. High Commissioner Gouraud supported the students, censored the offensive scenes, and promised to censor any future dramas featuring religious personalities.[31]

The insistence on clear distinctions between male and female gender roles, the belief that dramas corrupted women more than men, and the general desire to censor portrayals of illicit sexual relations would later inform religious challenges to the state's regulation of the cinema. Cinema protests would differ from those against live theater, however, in that they came to focus on capturing control of a specific institution, the film censorship board, and in that they became intertwined with colonial politics. These conditions aided in the mobilization of protest campaigns.

Catholic protests against cinema's sexual corruption of women and youth appear to have carried wide influence, particularly among women and students. In 1928 Beirut, the Jesuit newspaper *al-Bashir* called for stricter

censorship to prevent the corruption of youth by movie stars, and proposed a Catholic censorship organization similar to one in France.[32] At the same time, Beirut's Catholic Youth Circle advised parents not to allow their daughters to attend the cinema alone, and better, to take the whole family only to the Circle's own, pre-censored film showings.[33] In 1930, the Eastern Women's Conference in Damascus passed a resolution demanding strict censorship and minimum age limits to protect children from harmful films.[34] In 1933, a group of mothers concerned about cinema's bad influence on youth petitioned the Lebanese president to increase censorship, but the High Commission intervened to veto their demand.[35]

Muslim leaders also demanded control over offensive film content. In 1932, the Beirut mufti protested against the film "Adam and Eve," which had been shown previously in Beirut without complaint. The mufti said a large number of Muslims approached him about the film's demeaning portrayal of holy personages, in violation of an Ottoman law still in effect. He demanded the appointment of a special censor to guard religious prestige.[36] The censorship board took heed and in 1932 banned another film, "The Fortieth Door" ("La Quarantième Porte"), because it featured the kidnapping and abuse of Muslim women and Egyptian drug traffickers. Cecil B. DeMille's "King of Kings" was similarly banned after protests from Muslims and Jews.[37]

French resistance to granting religious leaders a direct role in censorship, however, ignited a crisis in June 1934, when Maronite and Jesuit groups in Beirut protested loose morals in the board-approved French film, "Mme Husson's Rosebush" ("Le Rosier du Mme Husson"), about a village fete for a virgin girl. Reminiscent of earlier protests against the Musketeers play, Catholic clergy demonstrated against the film's indecent posters, and a Jesuit-organized student group threw stink bombs into the cinema where the film showed. Students continued to interrupt film showings by orchestrating a deafening clamor in the theater, leading to their arrest by police. The uproar forced the censorship board to ban future showings of the film, even though High Commissioner de Martel insisted to his superiors in Paris that it contained only "a few slightly risqué allusions."[38] A month later, the High Commission issued a new censorship decree, in an apparent attempt to appease Catholic concerns about sex and the mufti's concern about religious prestige. Revised guidelines expanded grounds for censorship beyond those of French national interest to include respect for public order and morals, respect for the sentiments of all religious rites and races, and the protection of youth "from films that might make too strong an impression on the imagination and senses."[39]

But for the Catholics, the issue was not limited to a few understated love scenes. They redoubled their campaign for a direct role in censoring films. In the wake of the Mme Husson crisis, Catholic students in Beirut formed a group called L'Equipe and began publishing a movie magazine, *L'Ecran*, which published repeated calls for representation of "chefs de famille," presumably fathers, on the state censorship board. The same demand was voted at the 1935 Congress of Catholic Youth of Syria and Lebanon, attended by 800 students from all major cities.[40] Maronite Patriarch Antoine 'Arida soon afterward urged French officials to close all cinemas, as well as houses of prostitution. Posing as the ultimate guardian of public morality, he argued that "it is France that perverts our people and introduces immorality to them."[41]

The French steadfastly rejected these calls for popular representation as an infringement on state sovereignty, so L'Equipe pursued its aim to uplift the morality of films by other means. Through the 1930s and early 1940s, the group spread beyond Beirut, with branches in Tripoli, Damascus and Aleppo. Through *L'Ecran*, the group acted as an unofficial censorship board, providing readers with its own film ratings, according to three categories: films suitable for everyone, for adults only, or condemned as wholly immoral. L'Equipe members, in the spirit of the 1935 Congress, regularly threatened cinema owners who scheduled films they considered immoral, and when the owners did not comply, they overturned chairs in their cinemas and mounted boycotts. In January 1940, 12 members were arrested for protesting nudity in a film shown at Beirut's Rex theater.[42]

As in the United States, it was not only sex on the screen that drew moral censure. Critics viewed the darkened theaters, where strangers mingled away from the public eye, with suspicion, especially when women were involved. Cinemas attracted many women who had never before engaged in public amusements. And also as in the United States, where concern about female moviegoers' virtue was tied to concern about the passing of Victorian social values, cinemas in the Levant became a magnet for the disparate gender anxieties about the emergence of the new urban public.[43] "The cinema hall is the classic place of romantic rendez-vous. . . . It's a closed, dark bottle where moral and physical fermentations reproduce easily," declared a censorship advocate to the 1935 Catholic youth congress.[44] There were also distinctively colonial attributes to Levantine concerns. In an inversion of the American experience, class tensions came to focus on the supposed debauchery of elite, not lower-class, moviegoers. According to Muhi al-Din al-Nasuli's *Bayrut* newspaper, cinemas were the favored place of foreign women to seduce innocent Lebanese men, corrupting their national loyalty.[45] While concerns about mixed-sex

audiences in the United States were addressed by providing better lighting in cinemas, concerns in the Levant would ignite violent conflict. Elite female moviegoers in Syria and Lebanon became targets of three vectors of social and political tension, involving gender, class, and colonialism.

Women's film attendance was controversial from the start, because of their exclusion from live theater and because the first films were shown in cafes, by definition male spaces that were off-limits to women. Movies were, apparently, more acceptable for women than live theater. As the 1919 incident suggested, at least that the movies, actors could not see women's unveiled faces in the audience. With the construction of separate movie theaters, women's attendance increased. Non-Muslim women began going to the movies with their families in mixed-sex cinemas in Christian neighborhoods, while Muslim women began attending the cinema when owners inaugurated sex-segregated showings. As early as 1928 the Victory (Nasr) theater in Damascus's Marja Square offered women's-only matinees every Wednesday afternoon. By the mid-1930s, there were women's-only showings in Beirut cinemas three or four times weekly.[46] Once they discovered the silver screen, women apparently fell in love with it. Although no contemporary statistics are available on women's moviegoing, a survey done years after the mandate period suggests that a majority of upper- and middle-class women in Beirut had attended a film before 1930, and that by 1940 all of them had. A majority of upper- and middle-class women in Damascus and Tripoli began attending the cinema by 1940, while only a few lower-class women did.[47] Nadida Shaykh al-Ard recalled skipping classes on Mondays at the Fransciscan girls' school in Damascus to attend matinees with her friends, especially movies starring Gary Cooper and Susan Hayward.[48]

Mysteriously, however, on June 20, 1928 a fire broke out in the Victory theater one hour before one of its first women's matinees, destroying not only the theater, but also the nearby Hotel Royal and about 100 houses. Twelve people died. Officials determined that the fire was accidental, caused by an overturned lamp in the projection booth.[49] Accidental or not, the fire was a portent. Coinciding with the controversy over women's public presence ignited by Nazira Zayn al-Din's book on unveiling, it ushered in an era of increasingly violent conflict about female moviegoers.

The campaign to exclude women from cinemas was waged in predominantly Muslim cities by Islamic populists. In April 1932, several hundred men in Tripoli petitioned the government to ban women's access to all entertainment halls. The petition drive was organized by the Muslim Sporting and Literary Society, whose goal, according to the French officials who rejected their plea, was to fight the emancipation of Muslim women.[50] The following year in Hama,

a small conservative city south of Aleppo, religious leaders urged men to prevent their women from going to cinemas and blocked the introduction of a sound projector in one cinema, claiming talking films were even more pernicious than silent ones.[51] In Latakia, the Muslim Youth group took up the cause in 1935, distributing flyers that condemned Muslim women moviegoers.[52]

In July 1934, the Hama governor caused an uproar when he ignored religious leaders and authorized the first women's matinee in the city. Forty religious shaykhs, notables, and merchants, including members of the Islamic populist group al-Hidaya, demanded that the governor and the chief of the General Security police cancel the show. When they refused, the group tried to close down the city's main market in protest. Violence erupted when some merchants refused to cooperate, and police were called in to stop it. Leaders of al-Hidaya then sent a telegram to Damascus, threatening the national government with "very grave consequences" if it did not intervene to stop the women's show. When no reply came, the matinee took place that afternoon under heavy police guard. About 200 women attended, among them the sisters and wives of the male protesters. A second matinee was scheduled for the next day.[53] Undaunted, Islamic populists resumed their campaign and in 1936 the Iron Shirts replaced police as guards at women's matinees.[54] Cinemas were thus drawn into the turf wars among male groups, becoming a gendered and spatial boundary line of their ideological differences.

Initial successes at keeping cinema doors open to women were soon reversed. In 1938, conflict reignited in Hama when a number of Muslim women gathered for a women's matinee showing of the first Egyptian talkie, "Song of the Heart" ("Unshudat al-fu'ad"), filmed in Paris in 1932 and starring the famous female singer Nadra as a nightclub singer who sacrificed her career for her lover. Just as the first images flickered on the screen, local officials burst into the theater with orders from the governor that the film not be shown while women were present. According to French police, Hama's mufti, Shaykh Said al-Na'sin, had convinced the governor that "the cinema corrupts the virtue of women." A few days later, a group of shaykhs met with the governor again to reiterate their objections. In response, the governor informed the cinema owner that he could no longer show films to women without his prior approval. As in 1934, the women of Hama insisted on their right to watch movies. A delegation of them met with the governor's wife, who failed to convince her husband to withdraw his censorship order.[55]

Outright prohibitions against Muslim women in cinemas took hold by 1939 in both Hama and Homs, a larger city to the south. In both cities, French police reported that Muslim shaykhs had convinced local governors that the cinema

was "contrary to the decency and modesty that should be the dominant qualities of Muslim women." The shaykhs were powerful enough in these cities to force local officials to adopt the ban.[56] Without documentation from Islamic populists themselves, we can only surmise what they found to be so threatening. It is noteworthy that they objected not only to foreign films, but to Arab ones as well. The scenario of "Song of the Heart" portrayed irregular sexual relations between men and women that Muslim leaders also protested in live Arabic theater, while "The Innocent Victim" had threatened to break all precedent by publicly projecting the image of a Muslim woman. These films also featured women as heroines or in public careers, which might well have offended conservative Muslims' views of feminine modesty. The cinema protests were also clearly linked to Islamic populists' contemporary campaigns against unveiling, Muslim girls' enrollment in foreign schools, and women's work outside the home. In 1934 for example, al-Gharra sent a delegation to the High Commission in Beirut to protest plans for a mixed-sex charity ball at a local high school and a dance sponsored by the ministry of education at the 'Abbasiya theater in Damascus.[57] Women were transgressing customary spatial boundaries everywhere, and the cinema, associated by origin with the immoral milieu of dance and music acts in cafe-theaters, lay across the most dangerous boundary of all. Finally, in the context of prevailing male rivalries to assert paternalistic protection over women in public, Islamic populists may have been making their own bid as intermediaries between the state and female subalterns.

The campaign against female moviegoers climaxed in the capital of Damascus, where the issue coincided with protests against personal status reform. A few months after the March 1938 "Song of the Heart" ban in Hama, the Syrian prime minister and National Bloc leader, Jamil Mardam Bey, announced that he intended to establish an independent, Syrian censorship board, apparently at the request of Islamic populists. Count Ostrorog, the high commissioner's delegate in Damascus, rejected the proposal as an infringement of France's sovereignty, particularly as concerned its control of Syria's foreign relations and trade:

> Every restrictive measure taken without the authorization of the mandatory authority by an organism that may suffer pressure from fanatical and xenophobic elements risks provoking inconvenient complaints from foreign or French [film] companies. . . . To avoid international complications, the high commissioner has asked me to tell you he can accept only that modifications be brought to the censorship board instituted by himself.[58]

The French also apparently feared that local censors would interfere with their use of cinema as a vehicle of their civilizing mission. Commenting sometime later on the ban in Hama, the high commissioner lamented that it put a significant portion of the city beyond the reach of French film propaganda.[59]

Mardam Bey's independent censorship board never formed, but the issue was not laid to rest. Elite female moviegoers who filtered into the male terrain of Marja Square, the city's social crossroads, had by 1938 become primary targets of Damascus's Islamic populists, topping lists of grievances pronounced in their leaflets and demonstrations. Frustrated by Mardam Bey's inaction, the populists decided in late 1938 to circumvent the government altogether. A group of them met with the Damascus association of cinema owners, and, like Beirut's Catholic students, threatened to break all of the furniture in the city's cinemas if they continued to show films to Muslim women.

In January 1939, Islamic populists met again with Mardam Bey and this time secured his support for a national ban on women in cinemas. Mardam Bey desperately needed their support by then, because the French parliament's rejection of the independence treaty threatened to topple his government. The populists had attained considerable political influence in the Maydan and old quarters of the city that National Bloc leaders had largely abandoned. In an effort to save his government, Mardam Bey chose to appease the populists and promised to ban Muslim women from cinemas by the following Saturday.[60]

News of the ban provoked a huge outcry from rivals of the Islamic populists among university students. They mounted a demonstration and submitted a petition to the government, which praised cinema as "a means of instruction of civilization." The students demanded that Mardam Bey retract the ban and substitute a means of censoring films shown to women.[61] Curiously, there is no record of protest from the women's union. Perhaps none was made because its leaders were still begrudgingly committed as patriotic mothers to their nationalist alliance. Or perhaps they were shy of confronting Islamic populists who had hounded them on the veiling issue earlier in the 1930s. While the ban was apparently never enforced by the government, Mardam Bey's effort to ally with Islamic populists would lead to a second betrayal of the aspirations of the women's movement, when he resigned the next month in solidarity with the populists' protest of the personal status law reforms (see chapter eight).

The French, too, apparently caved in to religious pressure. As World War II approached and the French sought to strengthen the paternalistic pillars of their rule, they ceded some of their claims to regulate public morality to mediating religious authorities. This was, after all, a role that Muslim ulama and

Christian prelates had played long before the mandate, and wished desperately to reclaim.[62] While French police had kept cinema doors open in Hama in 1934, they no longer did so in 1938–39. And under Maronite pressure, they banned a French film that portrayed a marriage between a Maronite woman and Muslim man, in which a Maronite priest authorized the woman's family to kill her for her indiscretion.[63]

In the same spirit, in 1942 the French would appease their Druze supporters by banning the first film to star Asmahan, a popular Syrian-Druze woman singer. Her rebellious image won far more hearts among Arab women than the earlier Druze rebel, Nazira Zayn al-Din, did. "Asmahan was oblivious to Arab culture, past and present, and totally absorbed by her own fatally tragic quest for happiness," recalls Fatima Mernissi from her childhood in Morocco. "Arab women, forced to dance alone in closed-off courtyards, admired Asmahan for realizing their dreams of hugging a man close in a Western-style dance."[64] Born Amal al-Atrash, Asmahan was a member of the Jabal Druze's powerful family of the same name. Family leaders protested directly to the High Commission that Asmahan's role in the film "Victory of Youth" ("Intisar al-shabab"), in which she played a poor singer who married a rich youth against his mother's wishes, would embarrass them if released in theaters. The High Commission sidestepped the censorship board to impose the ban itself for "political reasons."[65] Although the French pretended that Asmahan herself must favor the ban, they were clearly deferring to her husband Prince Hasan, who at the time of the ban was rewarded for his wartime aid to the French with the post of minister of war.[66]

The banishment of Asmahan from her home country's screens recalled the 1928 suppression of another Syrian Muslim heroine in "The Innocent Victim" and capped more than a decade of efforts to assert male control over women in this new form of urban public space. Gender had clearly become central to religious groups' challenge to the French state for control of public morality in general, and for control of cinemas in particular. Women's behavior on the silver screen and in the seats of cinemas became the focus of a spectrum of political anxieties. One reason was cinema's marginal location in urban society, situated in the risqué new downtown entertainment centers that fostered a new kind of public life, promoted often by non-Muslim cinema owners and distributors, and appealing to elites who were increasingly resented by popular classes. Another reason was the unique politicization of cinemas as spaces of both France's civilizing mission and anti-colonial expression. Finally, the unification of regulations on cinema in a central censorship board made cinema an opportune target for

political protest. As in the turf wars in the streets, women became the objects of paternalistic rivalries among Syrians and Lebanese themselves, and between them and the French state. To contemporary observers, the stakes of the conflict were high: "The patriarchal family system remains in existence, but its days are probably numbered," wrote Albert Hourani, the future historian, in 1946. "The process of change is being speeded by one manifestation of Western civilization above all: the film which expresses a way of feminine life, and a conception of relations between men and women, which are far from those prevalent in the Islamic world."[67]

Female moviegoers braved many a battle in pursuit of their favorite movie stars, against the message that they were making a dangerous transgression into the new public and that they required a new, political kind of paternalistic protection. Christian women in Beirut ignored Jesuits' call to attend precensored, Catholic film showings. And Muslim women of Hama, as we have seen, repeatedly courted confrontation with Islamic populists. In Damascus, Nadida Shaykh al-Ard refused to stop going to the movies, even though she and her schoolfriends were once stoned by Islamic populists when they entered a theater.[68] The message that transgressive women risked violence would be amplified in the pages of the newspapers and magazines that they increasingly read, and to which we now turn.