PART I

War and the Advent of French Rule: A Crisis of Paternity

A history of Syria and Lebanon in the years of French rule must begin with the devastation of World War I. In November 1914, the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of Germany and Austria against Britain and France. The diplomatic outcome of the Great War in the Levant is well known, through films, scholarly books, and innumerable memoirs in Arabic, English, French, and Turkish. The names of T. E. Lawrence, Sharif Husayn, and Prince Faysal, parties to the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans; of Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot, architects of the region's territorial division between the British and French; and of Lord Balfour, who promised a Jewish homeland, resound even today.

Neglected in most accounts of the war is the profound suffering of the masses and its political consequences. To most villagers and common city folk, the Great War was felt not in the pain of a patriot's heart, but in an empty stomach and a fearful soul. The great famine of 1915–1918 cast a shadow over their lives for the entire period of French rule. The loss of population and of essential tools and supplies devastated the region's economy, and it would take nearly a decade to recover. Memories of hunger caused by foreigners and inflicted upon Arabs—mainly Syrian and Lebanese—lasted through the next world war, and were no doubt an important motive to those who fought for national independence and self-determination.

The war's differential impact on people, according to their gender, class, religion, and place of residence, would also shape the patterns of postwar politics.

The war widened the gap between rich and poor, producing for the first time in the region's history class-based movements. It also enflamed religious tensions: Christians of Mount Lebanon were hit hardest by famine, fueling their search for security through alliance with the French and a state of their own. And while men suffered the hardships of the battlefront, women were left on their own to support their families, and often to die with their children of hunger. The disruption of male and female roles produced widespread gender anxiety that would fuse with disruptions in the authority of religious leaders and ruling elites to produce a crisis of paternity in postwar politics.

To these social and political aftershocks of the Great War was added the imposition of French rule. The French created new states from a congeries of former Ottoman provinces whose residents had not necessarily ever thought of themselves as Syrian or Lebanese. They offered as founding father of these nation-states High Commissioner Henri Gouraud. And they built a new government that intruded into the lives of citizens far more than its predecessor ever had. French rule aggravated the crisis of paternity brought on by the war, which had toppled the Ottoman dynasty that had ruled the region for 400 years. Syrians and Lebanese were themselves divided on who the proper successor to the Ottoman sultan should be. Some even challenged the need for paternal authority at all. When French policies further threatened the power of many local elites—especially Muslim ulama (clerics), urban notables and tribal shaykhs—violent revolts flared through much of the 1920s.

Part One of this book tells the story of the war, the crisis of paternity, and the political bargains that reestablished paternalistic authority in a new, colonial form. In other words, it introduces the process that established, by 1930, a colonial civic order. The term civic order is used here to refer to the institutions and norms that structure state-society interaction. It designates a much larger political space than that occupied by heads of state and parliaments; rather, it traverses the imaginary line between state and society. The civic order encompasses all people who are directly touched by the state—through its military presence, law enforcement, conscription, tax collection, roadbuilding, schools, chambers of commerce, fiscal regulations, labor laws, public

health services, and the like.[1] It is thus the arena where state policy and political power are negotiated among soldiers, politicians, bureaucrats and various social groups. These negotiations effectively establish the bases of authority and terms of citizenship in the nation. As the following chapters will show, the negotiations between the French and the Syrians and Lebanese failed to resolve the crisis of paternity. The colonial civic order that took shape by 1930 rested on an unstable compromise between republican ideals of popular sovereignty and fraternity and paternalistic privileges claimed by both local elites and the French.