PART V

World War II and the Transformation of the Colonial Civic Order

The first effect of World War II on Syrians and Lebanese was fear: fear of famine. "In early September 1939 we were preparing for the new school year when the airwaves carried terror to our souls, pounding us all day with news reports of the Second World War," recalled a Lebanese schoolteacher. "In the next few days, I saw acute pain rise in the breasts of the generation that had lived through the catastrophe of the First War. . . . Work stopped and business dwindled as a wave of profound pessimism engulfed the country."[1] All adults over age 25 recalled the horror of famine: Fear of its morbid return would reign for the first four years of this war, fueling riots, hunger marches, and opposition movements.

Déjà vu struck rulers as well as the ruled. General Georges Catroux, leader of the Free French forces in the Levant in 1941, recalled his earlier term of service in the region. As after the last war, the French were outnumbered by British troops, competing with them for power and prestige through the delivery of foodstuffs. And in 1941 as in 1920, Catroux faced the task of imposing French rule on a hostile population led by many familiar faces among the nationalist opposition.

Despite their memories, the French and the Syrians and Lebanese confronted the trauma of war in a manner radically different from 20 years before. Most salient was the presence of mass movements organized in the 1930s. While women in World War I had typically suffered alone, portrayed in numerous photographs as lone mothers dying of hunger with their children,

they entered World War II armed with charitable, educational, and political organizations that would mount incessant protests claiming their right not only to bread, but also to political participation and national independence. And while men in the last war had been drafted into the Ottoman army, this time they stayed home. They too entered the war with highly organized movements that would demand independence, as well as state protection from the war's hardships. The French position had also changed. In 1918, they had sought to aggrandize their empire; in 1940, they appeared to lose it to the Germans. In June 1941, Catroux and the Free French reconquered Syria and Lebanon from the Vichy government, making them the first major territories reclaimed by the movement Charles de Gaulle had founded a year earlier. According to Catroux, Free France had little materiel, and only moral capital with which to recapture Great Power status.[2]

The combination of these three wartime phenomena—fear, social solidarity, and French weakness—produced a critical opening for change in the colonial civic order. On one side, economic hardship and fear of famine mobilized thousands, particularly workers and women, who pressured the state to extend social rights to a broader spectrum of society. On the other side, Catroux and the Free French were disposed, by their precarious position, to liberalize the regime. Catroux explicitly revived French bargaining strategies of the 1930s, in which calls for independence were diffused with state initiatives in social policy. Indeed, Catroux flirted, more seriously than had Sarrail in 1924–25 and de Martel in 1936–38 before him, with abandoning methods of indirect rule. His policies intended to undermine support for paternalistic elites, opening the way to a liberal regime of equal, individual citizens. By 1943, the revival of street politics and social bargaining produced a significant expansion of the colonial welfare state. The war primed the pump of waters, so to speak, that had risen just before 1939.

But Catroux's strategy would ultimately fail to secure France's imperial prestige, as elite nationalists swept into power in summer elections of 1943 and seized control of vital government ministries in 1944. Independence brought the long-standing crisis of paternity to a climax, but not to resolution. The civic order

was again transformed when nationalist and collaborative elites united as a ruling class. In the absence of French rivals, they no longer had the incentive to court subaltern movements that they had in the mandate era. But the new ruling elite could not entirely ignore subaltern challenges to the legal boundaries of citizenship. The inflated ranks of Communists, labor unions, the women's movement, and Islamic populists made them formidable political opponents. Syria and Lebanon thus entered independence with a civic order polarized as never before. Once again, gender became a primary battlefield for rival visions of the independent civic order. And again, the resolution of conflicts among male citizens was attained in part through bargains to exclude women from full citizenship. The terms of postcolonial citizenship were thus shaped by the contradictory legacies of French rule—the paternalistic tools of forceful repression and mediated authority, and the egalitarian ideals of republicanism and welfarism. The independent states adopted differing strategies to resolve this tension. While Syrian nationalists opted for paternalistic state corporatism, their Lebanese counterparts pursued a form of liberal republicanism that exaggerated the mandate's privatized, mediated paternalism. Neither path would succeed in stabilizing an independent civic order still riven by colonial-era cleavages.