

**From Mandate to Independance:
Syria's Shifting Perspective on Arab Unity 1920-1946**

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Received: 9/9/2025

Accepted: 1/12/2025

Published: 30/6/2026

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DOI:<https://doi.org/10.59759/art.v5i2.1458>

Abstract

Objectives: This study examines the Syrian perspectives toward Arab unity plans from the inception of the French Mandate in 1921 until Syria's independence in 1947. It analyzes the stance of the French Mandate authorities regarding various proposals for Arab unity and explores the impact of World War II on the region. This study as well evaluates two major unification projects that emerged following independence: the Greater Syria Plan and the framework of the Arab League.

Methods: This research combines archival research with historical and comparative analysis. This approach not only clarifies Syria's pivotal role but also engages with broader historiographical debates on nationalism and post-colonial

sovereignty in the Middle East.

Results: Findings reveals that Syrian engagement with Arab unity was fundamentally shaped by its colonial experience and the geopolitical turmoil of World War II. It finds that Syrian elites consistently prioritized republican sovereignty and national independence over pan-Arab ideological commitments.

Conclusions: This research concludes that the Syrian case illustrates a central paradox of the post-Ottoman order: the colonial division of the Levant simultaneously ignited the dream of Arab Unity while creating the structural and political barriers that made its realization impossible. Syria's pivotal role, as both an object of unification schemes and an architect of the Arab State system, was decisive in shaping the modern Middle East.

Keywords: Syria, Greater Syria, Arab League, Abdullah, Unity, Mandate, Independence.

من الانتداب إلى الاستقلال: تحول الموقف السوري من الوحدة العربية (١٩٢٠-١٩٤٦)

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ملخص

الأهداف: تبحث هذه الدراسة في تطور الموقف السوري من مشاريع الوحدة العربية منذ بداية الانتداب الفرنسي عام 1921 حتى حصول سوريا على استقلالها عام 1947. وتحلل موقف سلطات الانتداب الفرنسي من مقترحات الوحدة العربية المختلفة، وتستكشف تأثير الحرب العالمية الثانية على المنطقة. كما تقيم مشروعي توحيد رئيسيين برزا بعد الاستقلال: مشروع سوريا الكبرى وإطار عمل جامعة الدول العربية.

المنهجية: اعتمد هذا البحث على المنهج التاريخي التحليلي والمقارن، مدعوماً بالبحث الأرشيفي. لا يقتصر هذا المنهج على توضيح الدور المحوري لسوريا فحسب، بل يساهم أيضاً في النقاشات التاريخية الأوسع حول القومية والسيادة في مرحلة ما بعد الاستعمار في الشرق الأوسط.

النتائج: كشفت الدراسة أن الموقف السوري من الوحدة العربية قد تشكل بشكل أساسي من خلال تجربة الاستعمار والاضطرابات الجيوسياسية خلال الحرب العالمية الثانية. كما أظهرت أن النخبة السورية قدّمت أولوية واضحة للسيادة الجمهورية والاستقلال الوطني على الالتزامات الأيديولوجية القومية العروبية.

الخلاصة: يخلص البحث إلى أن الحالة السورية تجسّد مفارقة مركزية في النظام ما بعد العثماني: حيث أن التقسيم الاستعماري للبلاد الشام أشعل حلم الوحدة العربية وفي الوقت نفسه صنع حواجز هيكلية وسياسية جعلت تحقيق هذا الحلم مستحيلاً. وكان الدور المحوري لسوريا، بوصفها محوراً لمشاريع التوحيد ومهندسةً لنظام الدولة العربية في آنٍ واحد، حاسماً في تشكيل ملامح الشرق الأوسط الحديث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سوريا، سوريا الكبرى، جامعة الدول العربية، عبد الله، الوحدة العربية، الانتداب، الاستقلال.

Introduction

The concept of Arab Unity began to take shape in the late nineteenth century, specifically with the emergence of the Arab Renaissance movement (*al-Nahda*), which extended into the early twentieth century. As a modern political and cultural idea, Arab Unity is rooted in historical foundations, most notably the Arabic language, shared historical heritage, and the Islamic religion, which, despite the secular conception of Arab Unity, constitutes a profound spiritual and historical bond among Arabs. Against this backdrop, and influenced by the French Revolution and the rise of European nationalist movements, the initial impetus for Arab unity emerged as a reformist response to Ottoman authoritarianism and Western colonial ambitions in the Arab Region.

The Great Arab Revolt of 1916, led by Sharif Hussein and his sons, Faisal and Abdullah, in coordination with Arab nationalist movements and associations, aimed to establish a unified Arab State encompassing the Levant, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula. This revolt is widely regarded as the first practical embodiment of the concept of Arab unity.

In addition to its religious and sectarian diversity, Syria enjoys a geostrategic location that gives it major and central strategic importance. This importance cannot be overlooked in any Arab unity project in the region. Home to the pioneers of the Arab Renaissance, the majority of intellectuals and leaders of the Arab Unity project were Syrian. Moreover, the city of Damascus served as a hub for clandestine Arab Societies advocating Arab independence and unity (Al-Rimawi, 1988).

The imposition of the French Mandate on Syria in 1921 profoundly influenced Syrian visions of Arab Unity. A crucial question arises: Did this colonial arrangement serve as a catalyst for intensifying Syrian efforts toward Arab unification, or did it primarily strengthen resistance to the Mandate itself, thereby distracting from broader Pan-Arab aspirations? To answer this complex question, it is essential to examine the emergence of political parties during the Mandate period and analyze their ideological orientations and political programs.

With reference to Sharif Hussein's project for Arab Unity, his successor,

Emir and later King Abdullah, played a significant role in shaping Syrian perspectives on Arab Unity during his rule over Transjordan. Syrian political parties held divergent views regarding Abdullah's influence in this context, underscoring the importance of examining and analyzing this stance.

Indeed, the concurrent presence of the French Mandate in Syria and the British Mandate in Transjordan meant that the historical rivalry between these two powers, each seeking to assert control and extend its influence over the Arab World, significantly impacted Syria's project for Arab Unity. This competition became particularly pronounced following the outbreak of the Second World War and the subsequent takeover of Syria by the Vichy French government. The ensuing geopolitical shifts and power struggles further complicated Syrian efforts toward unification, as external actors manipulated local political forces to serve their strategic interests in the region.

Finally, Syria's emergence from under the Mandate system and its entry into the era of independence mark a highly significant period in its modern history. This transition had clear and profound implications for the two most prominent projects of Arab Unity during that time: the Greater Syria Project and the establishment of the Arab League. The newfound sovereignty enabled Syria to actively shape and pursue these initiatives, reflecting both its aspirations for regional leadership and the complex interplay of national interests and collective Arab identity.

The Mandate's constraining framework and the Syrian search for unity

The two Syrian general conferences held in 1919 and 1920 were the starting point for the Syrian national project. The speakers called for Syria's independence and wanted Syria to be a constitutional monarchy with Emir Faisal as king. They also insisted on Syria's territorial unity (MAE, Levant 1944-1952, Carton. 37, 1920). On March 7, 1920, the Syrian Congress met in Damascus and unanimously proclaimed the complete independence of Syrian territories within their natural borders, including Palestine, Transjordan, and Lebanon, on a civil and parliamentary basis, with Emir Faisal as constitutional king, while safeguarding the rights of minorities

and firmly rejecting Zionist claims to make Palestine a Jewish national home (Fournie, Riccioli, 1996).

France and Great Britain considered the decisions taken in Damascus null and void. Paris and London requested that the Supreme Council of the Allies be convened in San Remo and the European Mandates be established in the Levant. It was therefore in the absence of any Arab representatives that Syria's fate was sealed in that city on April 25, 1920: the Supreme Allied Council decided to offer France the mandate over Syria and Lebanon, and Great Britain the mandate over Iraq, Palestine, and Transjordan (Klieman, 1970).

In Syria, two groups were opposed: the radicals and the moderates. The first group included Syrian nationalists, notably the Arab Youth League. They opposed the Faisal-Clemenceau agreement and wanted immediate independence for Syria. The second group favored a compromise with France. It mainly included moderate notables from Damascus and Aleppo who were influential in the high administration of the Mandate (Fournie, Riccioli, 1996).

Between August 18 and September 1, 1921, General Gouraud implemented his plans based on the principle of partitioning Syria in order to better control it. In addition to the Arab State that existed in Damascus under the reign of Emir Faisal, Gouraud created, by decree, the following two states: the territory of the Alawites by decree 319 of August 31, 1920 and an independent government of Aleppo by decree 330 of September 1, 1920 (Chagnollaude, Souiah, 2004).

The following year, after the fall of Emir Faisal's government during the Battle of Khan Maisaloon, General Gouraud regrouped the states of Damascus, Aleppo, and the Alawites into a sort of confederation through decree 1459 of June 28, 1922. In October 1922, another entity was established with the State of Jebel Druze, based on an agreement signed in March 1921 between the High Commissioner and Druze leaders by decree 1641 of October 24, 1922 (Chagnollaude, Souiah, 2004).

In 1925, the new French High Commissioner, General Maurice Sarrail, allowed Syrian politicians to form political parties. Dr. Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar, founder of the People's Party during the reign of Emir Faisal, was among these politicians.

In early 1925, Arab Nationalism took shape around this party, which brought together Syria's main political leaders in vigorous opposition to the government installed by the French. Dr. Shahbandar led an Arab national movement that spread throughout Syria with the following objectives: the unity of Greater Syria, the formation of a national government, and the drafting of a Franco-Syrian treaty leading to Syria's independence under the authority of Emir Faisal. Towards the end of 1926, the People's Party was dissolved by the French Mandate authorities. In December of the same year, Dr. Shahbandar went into exile in Iraq (Raymond¹⁹⁸⁰).

In 1928, the National Bloc was also founded in Damascus. This bloc was a political party that played an important role in Syrian politics, particularly during the French mandate in Syria. It was not a structured party but rather a coalition of parties hostile to the French presence in Syria. This party was formed by Syrian politicians, such as Hashim al-Atasi and Shukri al-Quwatli, most of whom were part of the Ottoman administration in Syria. Within the National Bloc, despite different positions and varied perspectives for Arab Unity, the members of this Bloc were unanimous in their support for a united and republican Syria. Its cohesion seemed to be based above all on opposition to the Mandate policy.

As part of its plan to oppose any legal framework that would establish Syria as a single political entity with a central government, thus promoting Arab Unity projects, French authorities in Syria abolished the second article of the Syrian constitution in 1930. This article was established by the Syrian Constituent Assembly in 1928, which stipulated that the Syrian territories detached from the Ottoman Empire constituted an indivisible political unit (Abu al- Sha'r, al- Bakhit, 1994).

As for the position of the Syrian political parties on Arab Unity, it must be noted that they were divided on the issue. The following parties were hostile for example to the Greater Syria project: the Communists, the National Bloc and the Christian parties. The latter disapproved of the project, accusing its Hashemite founders of seeking to promote Jewish penetration into the Arab States.

The National Bloc was made up of a coalition of political parties that had always opposed the Greater Syria project. Their members, proponents of the republican regime in Syria, derived a sense of strength from the support they received from the

Syrian government (Khoury, 1989).

The Greater Syria project, conversely, found support among the following political parties: the People's Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Arab Socialist Resurrection Party "*Hizb al-bath al-Arabi*".

The Syrian Social Nationalist Party, founded in 1932 in Beirut by the Lebanese intellectual Antoine Sa'adeh, was a nationalist and secular party that advocated a greater Syrian nation. This party was one of the most famous political organizations that believed in the idea of Greater Syria. It had contacts with Emir Abdullah, and its members believed that Jordan should be part of Greater Syria since that the Hashemites had a glorious history in the struggle for Syrian independence and unity. The Arab Socialist Resurrection Party "*Hizb al-bath al-Arabi*" endorsed the Greater Syria project; however, it envisioned its leadership under a republican system of government (Al-Rimawi, 2000).

The People's Party, formed in 1924 by Dr. Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar, ranked among the most prominent Syrian political organizations advocating for the unity of Greater Syria. The Party's ideology was predicated on the conviction that Greater Syria was inhabited by a people united by language, customs, and ethics, that the people of Greater Syria had the right to enjoy and benefit from this unity, and that foreign interests should not deprive them of their legitimate rights. Consequently, the French Mandate authorities actively opposed the Party's platform and censored its publications, prohibiting the dissemination of its political statements (Al-Rimawi, 2000).

The doctrine of Arab Nationalism found a wide audience in Syria on the eve of World War II, and was characterized by several schools of thought. Constantin Zurayq, a professor at the American University of Beirut, published "The nationalist consciousness" (*al-Wa'y al-Qawmi*) in 1939. In this work, he advocated the fusion of Western culture, the prerogative of modern societies, with Arab Civilization (Zurayq, 1939).

Another prominent Pan-Arabist intellectual, Zaki al-Arsuzi, emphasized, in his articles published in Damascus and Beirut, the indivisible unity of the Arab

Nation (Hanna, 1973): *“Arab unity is the object of our nationalist aspirations and the goal we set for ourselves. It is this unity that will annihilate the underdevelopment and suffering of the Arab World”*.

Michel Aflaq, a high school teacher in Damascus, began in 1940 to speak of the eternal mission of the Arab Nation in his writings given to the Syrian press. In 1941, he founded, with Salah al-Bitar, the Arab Socialist Resurrection Party *"Hizb al-bath al-Arabi"*. According to the statement of its first fundamental principle, this Party considered that the Arab Nation formed a political, economic and cultural entity and that no Arab country could therefore completely ensure its conditions of existence by remaining separated from brother countries. The revolution had to lead to this unity. For Michel Aflaq, Arab Unity was the core ideology of this political Party. Indeed, this Party believed that its main objectives could only be achieved through revolution and struggle.

Sati' al-Husari, a Syrian intellectual who played a fundamental role in the development of Arab Nationalism, argued in his work “opinions and remarks on patriotism and nationalism” (*Araa' wa Ahadeeth fi al-Wataniyya wa al-Qawmiyya*) that (Davet, 1967): *“a territorial, linguistic, cultural unity underpins the nation. The current Arab countries can therefore be unified since all the conditions for a union exist: they are bordering, the Arabic language is common to them, the culture, the history, even the religion, for the majority of the populations, are identical as all express themselves in the same language”*.

Despite the different opinions of the Arabs towards France and Great Britain, some leaders of the Syrian Nationalist movement expressed their goodwill towards the Allies, especially on the eve of World War II. The former Syrian Prime Minister, Jamil Mardam Bake announced, on August 1939, that (MAE, Papiers Puaux, 1939): *“Even if there are differences of opinion between France and the Syrians, the difficulties can be ironed out after the war. Syria will always remain France's ally”*.

Another example of this political attitude was Dr. Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar, a well-known Syrian pan-Arab extremist and supporter of Emir

Abdullah of Transjordan. He stated that (MAE, Papiers Puaux, 1939) “*Despite our disappointment with French policy in Syria, the Arab Nation believes that it is in its interest to be with the Allies*”.

The Second World War and the reconfiguration of Syrian Arab Nationalism

In the wake of its military defeat by German and Italian forces, France sought an armistice, which was signed in June 1940. Article 3 of this agreement stipulated the following (Berger²⁰¹¹) : « *in the occupied regions of France, the German Reich exercises all the rights of the occupying power. The French government undertakes to facilitate by all means the regulations relating to the exercise of these rights and their implementation with the assistance of the French administration. The French government will immediately invite all French authorities and administrative services in the occupied territory to comply with the regulations of the German military authorities and to cooperate with them in a proper manner* ».

The British immediately set about countering the danger that threatened their security and risked compromising their resistance to the German advance in the western desert. They therefore undertook to sponsor a campaign for Arab unity themselves. In addition to being an excellent distraction from local nationalism, this British policy had the long-term advantage of excluding France from the Levant. Having weighed up all the risks involved in taking such a position from the outset, British officials nevertheless considered that, once it was the sole master of the Middle East, Great Britain would be in a position to maintain and strengthen its hold on the region because it would remain the only World power present there. At the same time, it would be the inevitable arbiter in all the dynastic, social, religious, and economic conflicts between weak and unstable Arab States. Furthermore, circumstances in the Middle East offered the British an exceptional opportunity to oust France from the region. France was primarily concerned with the liberation of its metropolitan territory.

London had its own project for Arab Unity. On May 29, 1941, Anthony

Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, revealed his government's intentions, announcing to the House of Commons that the British government was prepared to support any project that would strengthen cultural, economic, and political ties between Arab countries. Antony Eden stated that British Government was well disposed towards the independence of Arab countries, including Syria, and the principle of Arab Unity. Eden emphasized that his government would support any unity project that had the consent of all parties concerned (Mahaftha¹⁹⁸⁵).

After French forces in Syria and Lebanon declared their allegiance to the Vichy government, Emir Abdullah realized that the time was right to realize the project of Greater Syria. That is why some units of the Transjordanian army participated, alongside Great Britain, in military operations aimed at liberating Syria from forces loyal to the Vichy government (Mahaftha¹⁹⁹⁰).

Syria thus offered a very convenient base for Germany, a power that wished to extend its political and military influence in the Middle East. The armistice of June 1940 brought relief to the Syrians, who feared an extension of the conflict to the Arab region. But for the Mandate authorities, the real difficulties were just beginning: By the end of 1940, the political climate in Syria had changed. In December 1940, the Vichy regime replaced Gabriel Puaux, High Commissioner of the French Republic in Syria and Lebanon, with General Dentz.

General Dentz estimated that it was time to make some compromises with the Syrian nationalists. On April 4, 1941, he announced the formation of a government with broad powers and the convening of a consultative assembly. He asked the Syrian government to implement a public works program to improve social and economic conditions. General Dentz declared (Hourani¹⁹⁵⁴): « *Syria's independence remains the goal to which Syrians aspire. France has consistently supported this goal. But under the current circumstances, no definitive reform resolving Syria's status can be envisaged* ».

Although François Darlan, head of the Vichy government in France, believed that the landing of German aircraft in Syria would lead to a British military operation against the French Mandate, he nevertheless gave in to German pressure : On May 9, the first German aircraft landed in Syria (Aron, 1954). Germany's use of

Syrian airports was a very dangerous threat to the Allies in the Levant. Britain's response was swift, bombing Syrian airports from May 14 to 16, 1941(MAE, Guerre 1939-1945, Vichy-Levant¹⁹⁴¹). General de Gaulle, leader of Free France, was sympathetic to an Allied intervention in Syria because he believed that unilateral British action could revive old British ambitions in Syria (Davet, 1967).

François Darlan failed to convince the Germans to withdraw their aircraft from Syrian airports in order to avoid British military intervention. Soon, British military forces concentrated on the Syrian borders. On June 8, 1941, under the command of General Henry Maitland Wilson, Allied troops entered Syria. To ensure the favorable neutrality of the population, General Catroux, Free France High Commissioner for Syria and delegate of General de Gaulle, abolished the French Mandate over Syria and Lebanon. On the very day that Allied troops entered Syria, Catroux unilaterally declared the eventual independence of Syria and Lebanon, but without changing anything in the Mandate administration. He addressed the Syrian and Lebanese peoples (Catroux, 1949 ; Woodward, 1972): « *You are now sovereign and independent peoples and you may either form two separate states or unite into a single state. Your independence and sovereignty will be guaranteed by a treaty which will also define your mutual relations* ».

On June 21, 1941, General de Gaulle, leader of Free France, arrived in Damascus two days after British and Gaullist forces entered the city, which had been evacuated by Vichy forces. General de Gaulle wrote in his memoirs (De Gaulle, 1994): « *I arrived in Damascus on June 23. During the following night, German planes came and bombed the city* ».

The situation was becoming impossible and desperate for the Vichy regime in Syria: Charles Rochat, Secretary General of the French Foreign Ministry under the Vichy regime, sent a note to the US ambassador in Paris stating that it had been decided to allow French General Dentz to contact British General Wilson to discuss the conditions for ending military operations in Syria (MAE, Guerre 1939-1945, Vichy-Levant, 1941).

The internal situation in Syria deteriorated. Dr. Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar

was assassinated on July 7, 1941, and Shukri al-Quwatli became the leader of the Syrian National Movement. Economic difficulties since the armistice continued to grow, fueled by the British blockade. Under General Dentz's mandate, Syrian nationalists regained some credibility as the former French administration found itself discredited due to its defeat. Arab Nationalism was at the center of propaganda campaigns conducted by both the Allies and the Germans. The assassination of Dr. Shahbandar, one of the leaders of the syrian uprising in 1926, further amplified the antagonisms. Indeed, General Dentz sought to exploit this event to accuse the National Bloc and its leaders of the murder in question (Grandemange, 2006).

On July 8, 1941, a request for an armistice was entrusted to the American consul in Beirut, who was responsible for British interests, by General Dentz, High Commissioner and representative of Vichy in Syria, to be forwarded to the British command. Fighting between Vichy French and Free French forces ceased on July 11, and armistice negotiations began on July 12 in Acre. General de Verdilhac headed the Vichy delegation and General Wilson headed the British delegation (Lipschits, 1962). Despite the presence of General Catroux, General de Gaulle's delegate, he was not asked to sign the final agreement (Hokayem, 1994). On July 14, 1941, the Franco-British armistice in Syria was signed in Acre, providing for the presence of British and Free French troops on Syrian territory.

Despite their wartime alliance, the historical rivalry between France and Britain for influence in the Levant persisted throughout the Second World War. French officials viewed with apprehension any potential expansion of British influence into Syria, a concern that was significantly heightened by Britain's support for various projects advocating Arab Unity, a political arrangement that inherently included Syria and threatened to undermine France's imperial position in the region. An example of this dynamic is illustrated in the correspondence from General de Gaulle to Prime Minister Winston Churchill following the defeat of Vichy forces in Syria. In his message, de Gaulle expressed acute concern over the political and military vacuum created in the aftermath of the conflict, emphasizing the necessity of preserving French prerogatives and opposing any

unilateral British intervention or influence in the region. On August 14, 1942, de Gaulle wrote to Churchill (De Gaulle, 1994) : « *I regret to note that the agreements concluded between the British government and the French committee concerning Syria and Lebanon are being violated. The constant interventions by representatives of the British government are incompatible with Britain's political disinterest in Syria, with respect for France's position, and with the Mandate system. I am compelled to ask you to restore the application of the agreements we had agreed upon in this country* ».

On September 28, 1941, in his capacity as delegate of Free France in the Levant, General Catroux recognized Syria's independence under British pressure (CAB 95/7, 1941): « *As Great Britain has already committed itself on several occasions to recognizing Syria's independence, Free France will immediately intervene with the other Allied and friendly powers to ensure that they also recognize the independence of the Syrian State* ».

The departure of the Vichy regime created a new situation in Syria. As for General Catroux, delegate of Free France, after promising the Syrians their independence without conditions, he assumed all the powers of High Commissioner of France. To avert the danger posed by Syrian nationalists, he appointed Shaykh Taj al-deen al-Hasani as head of the Syrian state.

Syrian nationalists expressed their rejection of the measures taken by General Catroux, awaiting the fulfillment of the promises of independence made by Free France. The Iraqi, Egyptian, and Transjordanian governments supported the Syrian demands. As Free France did not have the means to impose its authority forcefully and under pressure from Great Britain, General Catroux gave in to popular demands for general elections. He therefore announced a return to constitutional rule on March 18, 1943.

In Syria, the 1943 elections brought President Shukri al-Quwatli of the National Bloc and Prime Minister Sa'd Allah al-Jabiri of the Independence Party to power. On August 17, the new Syrian assembly held its first session. It appointed the heads of state. The new Syrian government was composed of nationalists who had

experienced exile and prison, fought the Turks and then the French Mandate (Catroux, 1949).

It is noteworthy that these elections facilitated the ascent of Syrian Nationalist leaders to power and that a new era began for this country, that of independence. On October 20, 1943, the Syrian government dispatched a formal communication to Jean Helleu, Delegate of Free France, demanding the restoration of Syrian independence, that legislative and administrative powers be transferred, and that the French General Delegation be transformed into an Embassy. This direct exigence could be regarded as one of the main factors that forced the French to reexamine their Mandate in Syria (MAE, Guerre 1939-1945, Londres-Algérie, 1943). Political negotiations continued until 1946. On April 17, 1946, the last foreign troops left Syria. It was therefore the first Arab country under Mandate to gain independence.

The Arab League, the Greater Syria project, and the syrian path to independence

Syria's approach to unity was uniquely complex and often fraught with contradiction. Having just achieved independence from France in 1946, the Syrian political landscape was a vibrant and volatile arena where republican ideals, dynastic ambitions, and pan-Arabist fervor clashed. It was within this context that two distinct, and ultimately competing, visions for the region's future emerged: the Greater syria project and the consensus-based framework of the Arab League.

From 1924 onwards, the question of Arab unity, and in particular that of Greater Syria, dominated British and French policy in the East. The promoters of this idea, Emir Abdullah in Transjordan and Emir Faisal in Iraq, were considered by the French government to be supported by Great Britain, which saw the Greater Syria project as a means of getting rid of its rivals in the Arab Levant and which, through Emir Abdullah, encouraged the nationalist aspirations of the Arabs. Until 1933, the hopes of the syrian unionists crystallized around Emir Faisal, the only leader capable of imposing himself on all the Arab countries north of the Arabian Peninsula. However, after his death in 1933, his brother, Emir Abdullah, continued to envisage Arab unity through the plan of Greater Syria, drawing on the sympathy he retained

among the popular classes and certain groups of intellectuals in Syria.

At the same time, the French authorities in the Levant discovered the existence of a secret organization, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, which brought together, without distinction of confession, Muslims, Christians, and Druze, and which had taken up the idea of Greater Syria. It is curious to note that this movement, numerically small, but which at the time constituted the only serious attempt undertaken with such a goal, had as its leader a Christian, Antoine Sa'adeh. From 1936 to 1939, Arab unity projects took a back seat to the concerns of Syrian politicians, whose entire attention was then occupied by the question of independence (MAE, Levant 1944-1952, Proch-Orient, Carton. 73, 1945).

The year 1943, which was marked by the beginning of the negotiations that were to lead to the conclusion of the Arab Pact, also saw Emir Abdullah redouble his activity: he feared that the talks that were beginning about the Arab League would cause his plan for a Greater Syria to fail. On April 8, 1943, he made his candidacy public for the first time, by launching a proclamation to urban and nomadic Syrians, from the Gulf of Aqaba to the Mediterranean and up to the heights of the Euphrates, explaining to them the foundations and importance of his unity project (Abu al-Sha'r, al-bakhit, 1994). This statement was not disseminated to the Syrian people as Emir Abdullah had planned, as the French authorities intercepted the statement and prevented it from appearing in local newspapers. Nevertheless, Syrian Unity remained the primary basis of the Emir's discussions with the British government. In Syria, the Emir's proposals were referred to in government circles as "the English Project".

The official Syrian position on the Hashemite project for Syrian Unity can be clearly defined by the first official Syrian statement regarding this project. During the Syrian-Egyptian consultations for the establishment of the Arab League on October 26, 1943, Syrian Prime Minister Sa'd Allah al-Jabiri affirmed the Syrian government's rejection of the Hashemite project for Syrian unity, explaining that: (Afif, 2006) *"Damascus cannot therefore abandon its status as a Republic capable of maintaining its system. The Syrians don't accept any alternative to its republican*

system”.

In February 1944, Nuri al-Sa‘id, then Iraqi Prime Minister, went to Damascus to sound out the Syrian leadership on the possible implementation of this project. Nuri al-Sa‘id's proposals met with strong opposition from the Syrian leadership. From this date onwards, emissaries and agents of Emir Abdullah began to conduct intense propaganda against the Syrian government, which opposed this plan (MAE, Levant 1944-1952, Carton. 37, 1920). Indeed, while the actions of the Royal Court in Amman met with some success among certain members of the opposition in Syria, they did not fail to upset the Syrian government.

Emir Abdullah depended on the Syrian opposition Parties to carry out his Greater Syria project. The plan of these Parties was to try to dissolve Parliament in order to organize new elections with a view to putting men in power who supported this project. In this context, Jamil Mardam Bake, former Syrian prime minister, seemed ideally suited to serve the Hashemite point of view. Syrian opposition circles also took advantage of British and Hashemite support to thwart the Syrian government by relying on the moral and material aid of the British services and the Emir's emissaries. Thus, Hasan al-Hakim, former Syrian Prime Minister and supporter of the Hashemite project, suggested to the Syrian President, Shukri al-Quwatli, the dissolution of the Syrian parliament. On the other hand, the supporters of the Hashemites in Syria led an intense campaign aimed at convening a constituent assembly whose mission would be to revise the Syrian Constitution. This propaganda, which was discreetly fueled by Jamil Mardam Bake and Colonel Marsack, a British intelligence officer working to promote the Hashemite project in Syria, found fertile ground among Muslim religious circles and Bedouin tribes, with the exception of a few chiefs loyal to Ibn Saud. Jamil Mardam Bake also continued his mission by declaring in Cairo, where he had been appointed as a representative of the Syrian government, that Syria was willing to give up even its regional sovereignty in favor of total Arab Unity. This statement caused great concern in political circles in Syria (MAE, Levant 1944-1952, Carton. 37, 1920).

In Egypt, after completing consultations with the delegates of the Arab Countries and receiving suggestions from Emir Abdullah regarding the Greater

Syria project, the Egyptian Prime Minister decided to convene a preparatory committee for the General Congress for the creation of a League of Arab States. This Committee, which was convened in Alexandria from September 25 to October 7, 1944, resulted in the signing of the Alexandria Protocol, providing for the establishment of a League of Arab States. Despite the differences, the Pact of the League of Arab States was signed in Cairo on March 22, 1945, by the delegates of the Arab Countries meeting in a General Congress (Wissa-Wassef, 1973).

The position of the Syrian leaders was very solid in the face of the Hashemite project because the recently acquired independence had given them confidence in their ability to influence the destiny of their country. During the parliamentary session of 23 November 1946, Khaled al-Athm, interim president of the council in the absence of Sa'd Allah al-Jabiri, who was detained in Cairo by the council of the Arab League, stressed that Syria did not want a union in which it could not enjoy the rights recognized to the independent powers whose status it had acquired, nor a union based on any basis other than the republican regime that Syria had chosen for itself nearly 20 years ago and to which it was attached (MAE, Levant 1944-1952, Carton. 37, 1920).

At the same session, Khaled al-Athm clarified the Syrian government's attitude towards the project of Greater Syria in response to a statement made to the Arab League Council by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Jordan (MAE, Levant 1944-1952, Carton. 37, 1920): *"The position taken by the leaders of Transjordan is in contradiction with the Arab League Pact on the necessity which requires every State to respect the political system in other States and to refrain from interfering in their affairs. This attitude harms the spirit of cooperation between Arab Countries"*.

It should be noted that King Abdullah was not a proponent of the Arab League. He did not rely on the League to achieve his project of a Greater Syria, as he had realized that this plan would never garner the support of either Egypt or Saudi Arabia. According to a telegram from the French Consul General in Jerusalem to the French Foreign Ministry, the Swiss publication *Schweizer Illustrierte* had printed an interview that King Abdullah had granted to its correspondent in February 1947.

When queried on the significance of the Arab League, King Abdullah reportedly characterized it as a political instrument engineered by Egypt and Saudi Arabia to oppose broader Arab unification efforts (MAE, Levant 1944-1952, Carton. 37, 1920).

In August 1947, King Abdullah called for a General Arab conference to discuss the Greater Syria unity project. To this end, he dispatched a communication to Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatli, Prime Minister Jamil Mardam bake, and members of the Syrian parliament, proposing the drafting of a new Syrian constitution to facilitate the Greater Syria initiative. The Syrian government, however, formally rejected this proposal, declaring that the project was finished and that it had been decided to cancel it at the Arab League Council (Mousa, Al-Madi, 1959).

The Syrian Parliament similarly demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm for the Greater Syria proposal; its members opposed the Greater Syria project and adopted the position of the Syrian government, which had rejected it. During the session of September 29, 1947, the Parliament rejected the Hashemite thesis advocating for the creation of a Greater Syria, articulating its rejection in the following terms: (Mousa, Al-Madi, 1959) *“such plans affect the independence, sovereignty and system of government of Syria, and violate the charter of the League of Arab States. Consequently, the Parliament urges the Syrian government to take effective measures to eliminate attempts to carry out this project”*.

Following the defeat in the 1948 war, chaos and unrest swept across Syria, leading to the resignation of the Syrian prime minister in December 1948. Subsequently, on March 30, 1949, Husni al-Za‘im led a military coup, which was the first of its kind in Syria and the Arab World. Husni al-Za‘im, who was initially a supporter of the Greater Syria project, attributed Syria's military defeat to its rejection of the idea of Syrian Unity with Iraq and Jordan (Al-Ayyashi, 1950).

As he sought economic and regional aid, Husni al-Za‘im changed his stance on Syrian Unity after forming an alliance with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which had opposed this project. Furthermore, al-Za‘im was aware of French opposition to the project, a country that retained considerable influence over Syrian army officers. al-Za‘im wanted to obtain French diplomatic recognition of the military coup he had carried out. On the other hand, he realized that the Greater Syria

project would limit his authority and make him only a temporary president. He then withdrew his support for the project and became a fierce opponent. The Syrian officers who supported the project were accused of treason and sentenced to death during a military trial.

This policy led to the dissatisfaction of a number of Syrian officers led by Colonel Sami al-Hinnawi, who in turn led a new military coup that led to the fall of Husni al-Za'im from power on 14 August 1949. Al-Hinnawi was then a member of the Syrian Nationalist Party and therefore a supporter of the Syrian Unity project; he reopened negotiations with Jordan and Iraq to realize this project. However, France and Saudi Arabia used their influence within the ranks of the Syrian army to prevent the Hashemite project for Syrian unity from coming to fruition. This led to a large number of Syrian officers working to thwart this project and prepare the conditions within the Syrian army for a new military coup. On December 19, 1949, Adib al-Shishakli led a new military coup that overthrew the regime of Sami al-Hinnawi. Al-Shishakli represented the opposition movement to the Hashemite project: from the moment he took office, he opposed the Greater Syria project (Abu al-Sha'r, Al-bakhit, 1994).

In May 1950, al-Shishakli entrusted Dr. Nathem al-Qudsi with the formation of the Syrian government. In November of the same year, the latter made an official visit to Amman to discuss Arab affairs. Although Dr. al-Qudsi personally believed in Syrian Unity, he represented his government, which opposed the plan. The Syrian delegation accordingly requested King Abdullah that Jordan pursue a policy which would refrain from transforming Syria into a theater for inter-Arab conflicts, thereby permitting it to maintain amicable relations with all other Arab States (Abu al-Sha'r, Al-bakhit, 1994).

Conclusion

The colonial mandates fractured the Arab world, making unification impossible. As new states developed divergent political and economic systems, Syrian politicians rejected unionist projects in favor of national sovereignty. The outbreak of World

War II initially prompted Arab leaders to declare neutrality. However, the fall of Paris and the prospect of a British collapse encouraged open sympathy for Germany. The Axis powers eagerly exploited this shift, fomenting disorder in Syria to weaken the Allied position. Amid this turmoil, with the country a battleground for great powers, plans for Arab unity became a secondary concern.

In the wake of World War II, the Middle East emerged from the shadow of European colonialism into a dawn of uncertain independence. For the newly sovereign Arab states, the central political and ideological question of the era was how to navigate the tension between nascent nationalism and the powerful, enduring dream of Arab unity. In the middle of this debate sat Syria, a country whose geographic position and historical significance made it a main actor in reshaping the postwar Arab order.

Syrian political parties were sharply divided on the vision of Arab Unity, a schism that precluded a unified national stance. Key factions like the National Bloc, the Communists, and the Christian parties were hostile to the Hashemite-led Greater Syria project, which they viewed as a vehicle for foreign influence. Conversely, parties such as the People's Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and the Arab Socialist Resurrection Party "Hizb al-bath al-Arabi" championed the unionist cause. This fundamental disagreement over Syria's political future ensured that Arab unity remained a contested ideal, rather than a practical goal, on the eve of independence.

Following independence, Syria's political attitude towards Arab unity projects began to crystallize. The nation was confronted with two distinct models. The first was the Greater Syria plan, championed by Transjordan's King Abdullah, which sought to unite Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Transjordan under his Hashemite crown. For many in the Syrian republican elite, however, this scheme was perceived not as a genuine path to unity but as a direct threat to their hard-won sovereignty, a veiled annexation by a rival monarchy. Conversely, Syria emerged as a founding and fervent member of the Arab League in 1945. This institution presented a more palatable alternative: a league of sovereign states advocating for cooperation and coordination while formally safeguarding the independence of its members. This structure aligned more comfortably with Syria's desire to exercise leadership

within a collective Arab framework without suffering subordination to a rival ruler. Consequently, the position of successive Syrian governments towards the Greater Syria project hardened, culminating in its fundamental rejection in the years following independence.

Finally, successive military regimes, which ascended to power in Syria in the wake of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, pursued a distinctly Syrian nationalist policy. This orientation led them to reject pan-Arab unionist projects.

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- The following abbreviations are used throughout the footnotes to designate collections of archival documents:
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- **MAE:** Records of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Diplomatic Archives Centre, La Courneuve (Paris) and Nantes.
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