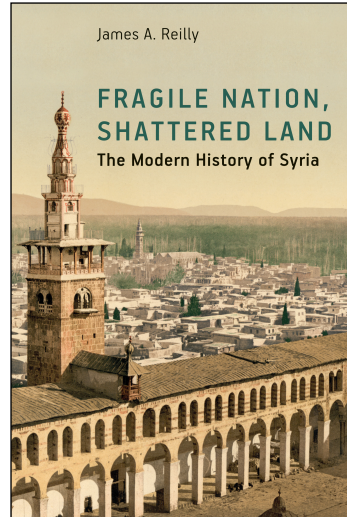


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Fragile Nation, Shattered Land: The Modern History of Syria

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INTRODUCTION

On the night of 23 July 1920, Yusuf al-Azmeh, the Minister of War of the recently proclaimed independent Syrian kingdom, marched westward from Damascus to a mountain pass to confront an advancing French army. As he left his home in the hillside Muhajirin neighborhood of Damascus, al-Azmeh commanded a disparate force of a few thousand men and a small number of women. His forces included elements of an official army that until recently had been supported by Britain, as well as volunteers mobilized by national committees. More than one week before, the French commander had sent an ultimatum to the Arab king of Syria, Faisal, demanding that he disband his army and permit France to march on Damascus, fulfilling the terms of an Anglo–French agreement that awarded Syria to France. Aware of the weakness of his position Faisal agreed, but his capitulation did not dissuade the French, determined as they were to make a show of force. Meanwhile, popular committees mobilized Damascenes, urging them to resist the advancing colonial power and to wage a holy struggle, a jihad, in defense of the city and country.

As al-Azmeh marched out of Damascus at the head of his rag-tag and hastily assembled force, he was rushing to the defense of Syria. But what did the name ‘Syria’ mean? Nationalists had declared statehood the previous March, but Syrian statehood was unrecognized by the Great Powers who were poised to redraw the Middle Eastern map. Much of what nationalists called ‘Syria’ was now under French and British military occupation, former Ottoman territories shortly to be designated as Lebanon and Palestine, respectively. For most of the previous 55 years there had been an Ottoman province (vilayet) named Syria, with its capital at Damascus, but this Syria had not included the coast (administered from Beirut) or the north (administered from Aleppo). Northern resistance to the French was being waged in the name of Syria, to be sure, but also in the name of Muslim solidarity under the symbolic leadership of the Ottoman caliphate in Istanbul. The notional Syrian ‘state’ was at best an afterthought in northern rebels’ Ottoman restoration project (a project not shared, it should be said, by the Ottoman sultan himself as he coped with the British occupation of Istanbul). As al-Azmeh and his troops

marched out of Damascus, many of the city's traditional powerbrokers – who had been Ottoman loyalists to the very end – hung back. They had viewed with alarm the arrival of Faisal in the baggage, as it were, of the British army. They mistrusted the political operators around Faisal who hailed from distant regions of the Hejaz and closer regions like Palestine, regarding them as opportunists and outsiders who threatened to displace the city's old notable grandees.

Al-Azmeh and his ill-prepared forces were defeated in a mountain pass west of Damascus known as Maysaloun. The French troops, stronger thanks to tanks and artillery, scattered al-Azmeh's forces, killing him in the process, and entered Damascus on 25 July. Faisal and his allies fled and took refuge with their British friends and patrons. A remaining delegation of city notables surrendered Damascus to the French army, formally inaugurating the period of French colonial rule in Syria.

Al-Azmeh died a martyr to the cause of Syrian independence, and years later he would be honored with songs, statues, street names, and a token (but never actually opened) government museum. But the Syria for which he had died was not the Syria that came into being. In 1920 France and Britain determined the boundaries of what was Syria and what was not-Syria. In the years that followed France repeatedly adjusted the new country's political frontiers, sometimes shrinking them and sometimes expanding them according to political and colonial expediency. When French rule finally ended after 1945, France had created a Syrian *state* but French policy had discouraged the formation of a Syrian *nation*. In three short decades Syria had gone from being a narrowly defined Ottoman province, to being a theater for a sudden, brief and tumultuous assertion of Arab national identity (under British auspices), had experienced deliberately divisive French rule, and came out on the other side as a nominally independent state with a contested sense of nationhood.

The roots of political instability in Syria today are undoubtedly located in the modern state's colonial origins and experiences. These left Syria and its political class ill-equipped to navigate the newly formed Middle Eastern state system after independence. Syria's politicians worked in an unforgiving environment that included weak Arab states with contested borders and acute internecine rivalries, Israel's ethnic cleansing of Arabs from neighboring Palestine, and Israel's serial defeats of Arab armies that created and consolidated a Jewish-majority state there. But it is impossible to fully comprehend the present-day civil war and destruction in Syria without knowledge of the country's intricate, longer-term and pre-colonial history. A centuries-long period of Ottoman rule came to an abrupt end in 1918, leaving in its wake a complex social and institutional legacy. These inherited difficulties and

divisions were subsequently denied, exacerbated and exploited by various foreign powers and claimants to national authority and legitimacy.

This book's distinctiveness is that it tells the story of Syria's modern history over many centuries, linking Ottoman, colonial and independence eras to explain the present and to trace contours and possibilities for the future. The 500-year history is told here for the first time in all of its color and complexity. Also noteworthy, the social and cultural dimensions of Syrians' experiences, and not just their political and institutional histories, are key parts of this account.

Syria's pre-twentieth-century history is one of relationships: between people and the land, between cities and countryside, and between local inhabitants and their imperial Ottoman rulers. Calling these populations 'Syrians' prior to the nineteenth century is of course a case of backward historical projection since the idea of Syria, as a place and an identity, did not receive full articulation until the mid- to late-1800s. Medieval Arab geographers called this region 'the lands of Sham' (*Bilad al-Sham*), originally a reference to areas 'north' (*shamal*) of the Arabian Peninsula. Later, the word Sham (also spelled Cham) became a synonym for Damascus, acknowledging the historic and geographic centrality of the city. The peoples of Syria/*Bilad al-Sham* thought of themselves in other ways: as inhabitants of a city, or a village or region, as members of clans or tribes, and as members of religious communities. Only in the nineteenth century was the name Syria attached to an administrative unit centered at Damascus, and only then did some avant-garde intellectuals propose 'Syrian' as a civic identity for people of the country. But Syria (or *Bilad al-Sham*) as a geographic space is found in historical sources and in the historical imagination. We can call the people who live there Syrians, without necessarily imposing anachronistic concepts of nationhood and identity on them.

My own usage of the place-name Syria will be more or less elastic, depending on the era. While the focus throughout is on the cities and regions that came to be identified as territorial Syria after 1920, the pre-1920 narrative will draw on examples from a wider canvas including what later were defined as Palestine and Lebanon to illustrate points about the Syrian lands or *Bilad al-Sham* prior to the demarcation of modern frontiers. After 1920, references in this text to Syria refer to the country internationally recognized by that name, corresponding mostly to the borders of present-day Syria.

Starting with the Ottoman conquest of the 'Syrian' lands from the Mamluks, this book will show why the Syrian nation is a fragile one: born recently, defined arbitrarily, contested repeatedly and vulnerable to internal schism and external intervention. At the same time, Syrian society is resilient, with a continuous history that spans the centuries. Readers of this book will gain an appreciation of both sides of the paradox.