

3

THE LAST OTTOMAN MERCHANTS: REGIONAL TRADE AND POLITICS OF TARIFFS IN ALEPPO'S HINTERLAND, 1921–29

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On 21 March 1925, the Zaloom Brothers, a company that specialised in the import of pistachios from Aleppo, contacted the American consulate in the city to inquire ‘if Aintab and Marach [*sic*] are commonly known to be a part of Syria’. Joseph A. Zaloom, who emigrated to New York City only few years prior, was curious, in part because of the growingly competitive local pistachio trade in the US, where the imported crop was incorrectly marketed to American consumers as Cilician nuts. Zaloom hailed from Aleppo and knew that the pistachios feeding the city’s exports mostly originated from Aintab and Marash, but it was the American consulate that had to inform him that ‘neither Aintab nor Marash are in Syria’.² In late May of the same year, the American consul received a similar letter, this time from the International Transportation Association which had forwarded the

¹ I would like to thank Remzi Çağatay Çakırlar, Jordi Tejel, Samuel Dolbee, Orçun Can Okan and Alexander Balistreri for their help and suggestions.

² The National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA) College Park, Record Group 84, Consular Aleppo, Syria, Vol. 116: ‘Zaloom Brothers Company to American Consulate, Aleppo’, 21 March 1925; ‘American Consulate, Aleppo, to Joseph A. Zaloom’, 16 April 1925.

information it compiled on travel conditions and touristic sites in Syria to be double-checked for any errors before the publication of their handbook. In its response, the consulate noted that ‘the city of Aintab which you have listed as being located in Syria is in Turkey’, suggesting that it should instead ‘be included in the section on Turkey’.³

Back in October 1921, namely four years before the exchange of these letters, the Ankara government and France had agreed that the Turkish–Syrian border would pass just north of Aleppo, following the tracks of the Berlin–Baghdad railway from the Çobanbey station until Nusaybin in the Jazira. The railway, which was foreseen in the early 1900s as a project that could help reinvigorate the Ottoman Empire by linking its incongruent units to one another, ironically became the very site of the empire’s definitive dismemberment after the First World War.⁴ The railway-cum-border practically divided the Ottoman province of Aleppo into two, separating the commercial hub that the city of Aleppo was from its southern Anatolian hinterland, where the cities of Aintab and Marash were located. The letters that the American consulate received in later years makes sense only in this context of post-Ottoman territorial divisions that ruptured what was once a connected regional economy – one the Zaloom Brothers knew by heart. For them, infrastructural investments, such as roads and railways, had made considerable strides since the late nineteenth century in making the disparate units of the empire increasingly interdependent, facilitating a range of everyday mobilities that ultimately defined the practical meaning of imperial rule. This chapter primarily asks what happened to these mobilities in the absence of the empire.

To be sure, we have come a long way as a field in our approaches to the end of imperial rule and emergence of nation states, increasingly wary of neat depictions of the transition between the two. In particular, scholars continue to explore Ottoman legacies and continuities in the making of the Middle

³ NARA, College Park, Record Group 84, Consular Aleppo, Syria, Vol. 120: ‘International Transportation Association to American Consulate, Aleppo’, 25 May 1925; ‘American Consulate, Aleppo, to International Transportation Association’, 27 June 1925.

⁴ Sam Dolbee, ‘The Locust and the Starling: People, Insects, and Disease in the Late Ottoman Jazira and After, 1860–1940’, (PhD thesis, New York University, 2017), pp. 13–14.

East, a growing literature rooted in, but also going well beyond, the earlier critiques of official nationalist narratives.⁵ Most recently, Michael Provence examined the post-imperial odysseys of what he called the last Ottoman generation, reconstructing the stories of how the Ottoman military and civilian elites, educated and socialised in imperial academies, eventually came to terms with the collapse of the empire by trying to carve out a career for themselves in the emerging cadres of leadership across the Middle East.⁶ Yet, what about a more ‘ordinary’ generation of Ottomans, such as merchants, peasants and townspeople, who were less under the influence of an imperial education? What did the end of imperial arrangements mean to them? Keith Watenpugh had already shown what it was like for the inhabitants of Aleppo to get disconnected ‘from the ideological and cultural networks binding them to the Ottoman centre’.⁷ This chapter seeks to contribute to this strand of literature by tracing how the end of imperial rule unfolded in the realm of economy, examining particularly the ways in which it ruptured the world of commercial mobilities that the Aleppines, such as Zaloom Brothers, had navigated for generations.

In pursuit of this line of enquiry, the choice of focusing on Aleppo is a strategic one, for it had historically been an imperial hub of mobility that not only connected the caravan routes from Iraq to Syria but also stood at the centre of a voluminous import and export trade that fed into various regional and transnational nodes of commerce. Aleppo therefore holds an empirical promise that could help chart the complex politics of post-Ottoman mobilities. Yet, Aleppo is also historiographically relevant, particularly as to the way we could re-think the end of Ottoman rule in the Middle East. Even if the notion of an Ottoman decline has been discredited

⁵ Erik Jan Zürcher, *The Unionist Factor: The Role of the Committee of Union and Progress in the Turkish National Movement, 1905–1926* (Leiden: Brill, 1984); L. Carl Brown (ed.), *Imperial Legacy: The Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

⁶ Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁷ Keith David Watenpugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 125.

for the past few decades now,⁸ historians continue to make sense of the collapse of the empire by synchronising it with political and socio-economic processes that presumably underlay the empire's disintegration.⁹ As the interwar economic history of Aleppo will illustrate, however, the collapse of the imperial rule was far from being a uniform experience across the Ottoman domains. It was in fact particularly contentious in places which had once been at the core, but were ultimately reduced to peripheral status as a result of post-Ottoman territorial divisions. I argue this was particularly the case in Aleppo, where the post-war settlements ruptured the very connections that had long defined the city's central position within the Ottoman East.

The first section below first seeks to substantiate the claim that the Ottoman domestic economy indeed got increasingly intra-connected and interdependent. After sketching the broad outlines of this nineteenth-century development, and Aleppo's significance within it, we will see that this intertwinement continued uninterrupted during the First World War. The second part of the chapter will then examine the economic policies that informed the post-war settlements, particularly paying attention as to how the mandatory powers sought to secure the continuity of interregional economic ties across the Ottoman Middle East. While these efforts bore fruit in some regions, the case of Aleppo will show the contentious ways in which this episode had eventually unfolded. More often than not, the economic future of the city had become a bargaining chip during protracted negotiations that sought to revise the post-war settlements in the Middle East in general and along the Turkish–Syrian border in particular. We will examine this process by tracing the negotiations on tariff policies by Turkey and French Syria, the two new states that came to control the northern and southern portions of the Ottoman province of Aleppo. As the chapter will ultimately seek to illustrate,

⁸ David A. Howard, 'Ottoman Historiography and the Literature of "Decline" in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Journal of Asian History*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1988), pp. 52–76; Donald Quataert, 'Ottoman History Writing and Changing Attitudes towards the Notion of "Decline"', *History Compass*, Vol. 1 (2003), pp. 1–9.

⁹ For a critique, see Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'Point of No Return? Prospects of Empire after the Ottoman Defeat in the Balkan Wars', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2018), pp. 65–84.

the Ottoman Empire did not ‘collapse’ like a house of cards, but rather get disentangled, particularly in places like Aleppo where imperial rule was less of an imagined affair than a connected one.

Towards an Ottoman Single Market

The emergence of the Ottoman Middle East as a single market and Aleppo’s place within it was not a historical given, but rather a long drawn-out outcome borne out of a particular conjecture. Back in the late eighteenth century long-distance trade across the Ottoman Empire did certainly exist in the form of trans-desert caravans, but the volume and frequency of this trade were far from creating interdependent markets. Even though the caravans linked the land ports of Aleppo and Damascus to Mesopotamia and Hijaz, they often brought in luxury goods that were not consumed locally but instead transited to Constantinople as well as other major European markets. At a time when transport costs were prohibitive, Middle Eastern cities largely met their subsistence needs by cultivating limited dependencies with their ‘green belts’ – immediate rural hinterlands whose *raison d’être* was their proximity to urban markets.¹⁰ Any agricultural and manufacturing surplus from these suburban zones of cultivation was in turn earmarked for the army, the palace and the metropole, as well as other provincial capitals – a system that was in line with the traditional Ottoman economic policy of provisionism.¹¹ In this system, which was configured on maintaining self-sufficient administrative units, domestic trade was given secondary importance, as it was kept subject to internal duties – collected both on overland routes and along the coast – which made interregional commercial exchange costly and therefore limited to luxury goods that were light in bulk but high in value.¹²

¹⁰ James A. Reilly, ‘Regions and Markets of Ottoman Syria: Comparisons and Transformations’, *Chronos*, Vol. 10 (2004), pp. 111–44.

¹¹ Mehmet Genç, ‘Economy and Economic Policy’, in Gabor Agoston and Bruce Alan Masters (eds), *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, (New York: Facts on File, 2009), p. 192. In the far-flung Arab provinces of the empire, the rural and urban surplus formed the backbone of struggles among a number of powerful households that sought to maximise their share of the surplus. See Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 18–22.

¹² Mehmet Genç, ‘Osmanlı Devleti’nde İç Gümrük Rejimi’, *Tanzimat’tan Cumhuriyet’e Türkiye Ansiklopedisi*, Vol. 3 (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1985), pp. 786–90.

The Industrial Revolution in Europe, with its growing need for raw material, had significant consequences for the provisionist Ottoman economy, as the prices increased at home due to rising external demand. The Ottoman state accordingly began to embrace a set of interventionist policies into changing market dynamics, seeking to limit the access of foreign merchants into the Ottoman interior. This situation changed radically in the decades after the Treaty of Baltalimanı (1838), however. While maintaining the pre-existing lower tariffs for imports, the treaty opened up the Ottoman markets to foreign traders by removing the limits placed on the export of raw material, bringing the Ottomans into the fold of export-orientated European mercantilism.¹³ In the absence of provisionist policies, merchants across the Middle East first began to channel themselves towards port cities where agrarian surplus became the return cargo of ships that had brought in machine-made manufactured goods from the West. Interstate conflicts, such as the Crimean War (1853–56) and the American Civil War (1861–65) deepened this dependency, facilitating the export of Ottoman cereals to meet the wartime necessities.¹⁴ Increasingly connected to the world markets, but also meeting the needs of the region's growing local populations, cereals became the engine of agricultural growth in the Eastern Mediterranean, registering a nearly threefold increase of output from 500,000 tonnes in the 1830s to 1,300,000 tonnes by 1914.¹⁵

Growing output of cereals as well as other agricultural produce throughout the second half of the nineteenth century was interlinked to a host of crucial processes that in one way or another related to developments borne out of war-making. For one, the Ottoman state, increasingly eager to revitalise its economy, became deeply invested in its attempt to institute greater

¹³ Seyfettin Gürsel, '1838 Osmanlı-İngiliz Ticaret Antlaşması', *Tanzimat'ın Cumhuriyet'e*, pp. 688–90.

¹⁴ Françoise Métral, 'Changements dans les routes et les flux commerciaux du désert syrien, 1870–1920: Le sort incertain des oasis du nord de la Palmyrène', in Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schaebler (eds), *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation: Bilād al-Shām from the 18th to the 20th Century* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), pp. 41–42.

¹⁵ Linda Schilcher, 'The Grain Economy of Late Ottoman Syria and the Issue of Large-Scale Commercialisation', in Çağlar Keyder and Faruk Tabak (eds), *Landholding and Commercial Agriculture in the Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 174.

public security across its provinces in pursuit of greater sources of manpower and taxation.¹⁶ This was particularly visible in the outlying arid sectors of the Aleppo province from the 1860s onwards, a time when ‘the state needed the frontier . . . while the frontier might not have needed the state’.¹⁷ In this effort, the authorities were aided by the adoption of new rifle technologies that made it easier to extend military control over tribal zones, which began to be dotted with military outposts that sought to secure trade routes.¹⁸ A similar, but much more concentrated effort at state penetration took place in the Northern Caucasus by Tsarist Russia, which had led to the displacement of nearly one million Muslims until 1914. Their resettlement by the authorities across Ottoman Syria became an important way in which the Sublime Porte implemented its goal of expanding cultivable land, while also increasing rural population numbers.¹⁹

This process went hand in hand with attempts to encourage sedentarisation of tribes as well. After all, the Ottoman Empire was as much a pastoral empire as an it was an agrarian one.²⁰ While these efforts by the Porte to colonise ‘empty’ lands through sedentarisation certainly resulted in conflicts over lands and resources, they also expanded networks of capital, creating more interdependent regional markets.²¹ In Aleppo, these interlinked

¹⁶ Bruce Masters, ‘Aleppo: The Ottoman Empire’s Caravan City’, in Edhem Eldem, Daniel Goffman and Bruce Masters (eds), *The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir and Istanbul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 66–67.

¹⁷ Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 9.

¹⁸ Norman Lewis, *Nomads and Settlers in Syria and Jordan, 1800–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 46–48.

¹⁹ Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, ‘Imperial Refuge: Resettlement of Muslims from Russia in the Ottoman Empire’ (PhD thesis, Stanford University, 2018); Patrick J. Adamiak, ‘To the Edge of the Desert: Caucasian Refugees, Civilization, and Settlement on the Ottoman Frontier, 1866–1918’ (PhD thesis, University of California, San Diego, 2018).

²⁰ Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants & Refugees* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

²¹ Yücel Terzibaşoğlu, ‘Landlords, Nomads, and Refugees: Struggles over Land and Population Movements in North-Western Anatolia, 1877–1914’, (PhD thesis, University of London, 2003); Nora Elizabeth Barakat, ‘An Empty Land? Nomads and Property Administration in Hamidian Syria’, (PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2015).

developments manifested themselves in the realm of imperial estates, as the Ottoman sultans began to acquire large plots of lands starting from the mid-nineteenth century. This policy reached a peak during the reign of Abdülhamid II, whose properties constituted the majority of lands to the east and south of Aleppo. These estates not only came with the added benefit of increased security in the shape of gendarmerie posts, but also provided cheaper rates to those who were willing rent and toil smaller plots, including, but not limited to, the incoming flows of Circassian refugees. The Land Law of 1858 consolidated the trend, whereby important Aleppine families also began to expand their own landholdings around the city.²²

These developments not only expanded the cultivation of lands beyond the traditional bounds of green belts that had surrounded Middle Eastern cities for generations, but also created conditions conducive for interregional trade. To be sure, the centres of textile manufacturing such as Aleppo had been losing their market outlets in Europe since the late eighteenth century, but the Aleppine merchants sought to compensate their losses by seeking new markets both for transit goods and locally manufactured commodities. The coming of the Long Depression (1873–96) in particular became the most opportune moment, as the radical drops in the purchasing power of Ottoman consumers naturally curtailed the volume of imported goods, since the latter remained well beyond their reach.²³ Ottoman manufacturers stepped in to fill the gap by beginning to exercise a variety of cost-cutting techniques, ultimately producing cheaper clothes that catered towards a local, but impoverished clientele across southern Anatolia, Iraq, Syria and Egypt.²⁴ Many smaller cities, such as Aintab, Urfa and Marash, which were previously Aleppo's markets for textiles, slowly developed their own manufacturing capacities too, forming new divisions of labour among neighbouring cities in textile production.²⁵ This level of market integration was further aided in

²² Lewis, *Nomads and Settlers*, pp. 49–54.

²³ Donald Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 68.

²⁴ George Hakim, 'Industry', in Said B. Himadeh (ed.), *Economic Organization of Syria* (Beirut: American Press, 1936), p. 121.

²⁵ Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing*, p. 103.

1874 by the abolition of internal customs duties that ceased to be collected in internal ports of trade such as Aleppo.²⁶

Yet, Aleppine merchants did not solely sell manufactured textiles to an expanding hinterland. Like other artisanal centres across the Ottoman Empire throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Aleppo, too, began to develop a growing dependency with the coastal regions where cultivation had already shifted to cash crops of cotton and silk. The corresponding increase in demand for foodstuffs in these littoral zones were in turn met by the increasing engagement of animal husbandry in areas that once stood on the margins of agriculturally productive zones.²⁷ Accordingly, Aleppo also emerged as an important commercial centre where livestock merchants bought sheep from the plains of Eastern Anatolia and northern Iraq – most notably Mosul – for the growing consumption needs in the littoral. While the wool processed in Aleppo found export markets across the globe and the sheep guts were earmarked for export to the West to be used as sausage casings, the rest of the animals supplied the growing demand for meat down south in Syria and as far as Egypt. This interdependence between Aleppine merchants and pastoral herders even led to the formation of long-term partnerships, whereby merchants began to own their own flocks of sheep tended by nomads – an arrangement through which the urban commercial elites and the Bedouins shared the risks posed by climatic conditions and rustling.²⁸

On the eve of the First World War – the conflict that would eventually bring an end to the Ottoman rule – Aleppo's economy was not one of decay and ruin that foreshadowed an empire on the verge of collapse. The city was instead more connected to its hinterland than a century before, enjoying interdependent commercial networks that deeply embedded the surrounding rural economy to its urban centre. The population statistics confirmed the trend. In 1908 Aleppo reached the population levels it had known back in the seventeenth century, since the city began to tap into flows of rural

²⁶ Genç, 'Osmanlı Devleti'nde İç Gümrük', p. 787.

²⁷ Faruk Tabak, 'Local Merchants in Peripheral Areas of the Empire: The Fertile Crescent during the Long Nineteenth Century', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Spring 1988), pp. 179–214.

²⁸ Sarah D. Shields, *Mosul before Iraq: Like Bees Making Five-Sided Cells* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 170–79.

to urban migration.²⁹ Various railway building schemes underway also bore fruit from the early 1900s onwards, as Aleppo became connected to Damascus as well as Tripoli on the coast. By the end of the Ottoman rule, the Arab provinces of the empire were not only more integrated into the global circuits of trade, transport and communication than a century before, but they were also much more connected internally with a greater level of market cohesion. As James Reilly noted:

By 1914, the local economies of Syria had ceased to be self-subsistent. They had been linked in regular and significant ways with neighboring regions and with the world market. Syria itself was developing into an interconnected market, tied to global economic forces as well as linked regionally to Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Egypt.³⁰

Unlike one might expect, the outbreak of the First World War had a similar function in facilitating regional integration across the Middle East. From autumn 1914 onwards the Ottoman war effort quickly led to the improvement and extension of infrastructure across the region.³¹ Cemal Pasha's description of the journey from Istanbul to Damascus – the headquarters of the Fourth Army he was appointed to command – was dotted with myriad difficulties he encountered while travelling through the patchwork of an incomplete transport network. As Cemal crossed the Dörtyol-Alexandretta branch line in a handcar at night, observing the enemy boats anchored only some miles ahead, he became determined to turn his tenure in Damascus into a programme focusing on improved transport.³² This he did across a region that became more interconnected as the empire came to a close.³³ As Edward F. Nickoley noted, 'never before had roads been in such good

²⁹ Masters, 'Aleppo', p. 72.

³⁰ Reilly, 'Regions and Markets', p. 139.

³¹ Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 96–123.

³² Cemal Paşa, *Hatıralar: İttihat ve Terakki, 1. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, Alpaz Kabacalı (ed.) (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2001), p. 169.

³³ Hasan Kayalı, 'Wartime Regional and Imperial Integration of Greater Syria during World War I', in *The Syrian Land*, pp. 293–306; M. Talha Çiçek, *War and State Formation in Syria: Cemal Pasha's Governorate during World War I, 1914–1917* (New York: Routledge: 2014).

condition as they were in 1918'.³⁴ The efforts of Germany, the Ottoman ally in the war, certainly contributed to this trend. The engineers and labourers working on the German designed, financed and constructed Berlin-Baghdad railway continued their work throughout the war, working on the tunnels that cut through the Taurus and Amanus mountains, but they only managed to finish the project in August 1918.³⁵ In other words, only by the end of the war did Aleppo become better connected to Cilicia in its northwest and Nusaybin in its northeast. While this was no doubt ironic, it also foreshadowed the protracted trade wars that were to come, as the railway that was supposed to interconnect Aleppo's markets further became the very site separating the city from its southern Anatolian hinterland.

Parameters of Post-war Economic Reconstruction

The world economic order that the outbreak of the First World War disrupted was one that was based on the principles of free trade and open markets propagated by Britain, the hegemonic power of the nineteenth century. The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 essentially sought to restore this economic order, taking the reconstruction of 'the pre-war multilateral trading system as a priority on both economic and political grounds'.³⁶ The outlines of what this restoration would look like in the Middle East became clear to all parties in late 1917, when the Bolsheviks published the full texts of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916). In addition to establishing zones of direct and indirect control by Britain and France, this secret agreement stipulated that the existing Ottoman tariffs would remain in force for a period of twenty years across the Middle East, unless Britain and France would bilaterally agree to change them.³⁷ The later Treaty of Sèvres, too, signed with the Ottomans in 1920, included similar clauses that required the continued application of Ottoman

³⁴ Nickoley, 'Transportation and Communication', in *Economic Organization*, p. 178.

³⁵ Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 341.

³⁶ Barry Eichengreen, 'Versailles: The Economic Legacy', *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (2019), pp. 7–24, 11.

³⁷ Sykes-Picot Agreement, 1916 <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/sykes.asp>

tariffs of 1907.³⁸ The developments in the course of the war and the post-war resistance to the scramble of the Middle East ensured that both the Treaty of Sèvres and Sykes–Picot Agreement remained a dead letter. Yet, the mindset that had shaped these diplomatic arrangements deeply informed how the economy of the Ottoman Middle East was ultimately restructured in ways to serve the larger imperial interests.

For one, the mandate charters that established colonial oversight over former Ottoman territories promised ‘an open-door policy’ that aimed to provide all members of the League of Nations as well as the US equal access to the mandated territories, where they would enjoy lower duties on their imports.³⁹ This open-door policy was initially championed by the US, largely influenced by the Secretary of State John Hay’s ‘Open Door Notes’, which had underlined the guidelines for US trade relations with the Far East.⁴⁰ Much like in China, where the Great Powers exercised different spheres of influence within a single market zone, the introduction of open-door policy to the Middle East intended to divorce politics from commercial competition by promising equal tariff rates to all parties that were part of the post-war reconstruction. In countries such as Egypt and Turkey, however, whose independence were recognised in 1922 and 1923 respectively, open-door policies would have to take a different form. While politically independent, both countries were forced to accept the continued application of the latest Ottoman tariff of 1916 for a five-year period. For Egypt, the lower tariffs were accordingly fixed at 8 per cent *ad valorem*, which would expire on 16 February 1930,⁴¹ while the arrangements for Turkey would terminate some months earlier on 6 August 1929.⁴² Bluntly

³⁸ Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (hereafter CADN), *Ankara Ambassade*, 36/PO/1, 146, ‘Note sur les Arrangements Douaniers à Faire avec la Turquie’, p. 3.

³⁹ Roza I. M. El-Eini, ‘Trade Agreements and the Continuation of Tariff Protection Policy in Mandate Palestine in the 1930s’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1998), pp. 164–91, 179.

⁴⁰ Bruce A. Elleman, *International Competition in China, 1899–1991: The Rise, Fall and Restoration of the Open Door Policy* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 13–17.

⁴¹ Middle East Centre Archive, St Antony’s College, Oxford (hereafter MECA), Eden Tatton-Brown Collection GB 165-0433, 5 Memoirs, p. 43.

⁴² The Turkish Republican Archives of the Prime Ministry (hereafter BCA), 30.10.0.0, 179-238-10, 8 August 1933, p. 11.

put, while Britain and France chose to do away with the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the First World War they wanted to keep intact its economic networks and their time-hardened privileges within them.

For mandatory authorities, ‘the central problem’, as Cyrus Schayegh noted, ‘was how to square Bilad al-Sham’s considerable degree of economic integration with its political division’.⁴³ These considerations quickly drove the British and French as early as 25 August 1921 to establish a customs union between Syria and Palestine, since the latter was seen as an indispensable market of the former.⁴⁴ To be sure, imperial powers were first and foremost motivated by their own economic interests in pursuing these policies. In commenting on Transjordan, for instance, the Acting High Commissioner argued against its existence as ‘a separate political entity’. He reasoned that ‘economically Trans-Jordania should continue to be bound up closely with Palestine’, in part because the precious mineral deposits on either side of the Dead Sea should be subject to a single regulation.⁴⁵ The French embraced a similar attitude towards its mandates, too, as it sought to restore the former position of Syria as an intermediary of trade between Europe and Asia, from which France could then claim a fair share.⁴⁶

These self-serving positions – coupled with an awareness of the broader risks involved with the economic impact of the partitioning Ottoman territories – drove the mandatory authorities to develop policies geared towards absorbing associated economic shocks of the transition from an empire to a world of nation states.⁴⁷ As a result, the continuity of imperial commercial links had become the hallmark of mandatory policies in restructuring the economy

⁴³ Schayegh, *The Middle East*, p. 157.

⁴⁴ This customs agreement included many arrangements that enabled duty-free exchange of locally manufactured goods, in addition to establishing rules for the conduct of transit trade between the two countries. The National Archives (hereafter TNA), CO 733/22, 32026, ‘Report on Administration for Period 1st July 1920 – 31st Dec 1921’, ff. 500–501.

⁴⁵ TNA, CO 733/22, 27135, 26 May 1922, f. 257.

⁴⁶ CADN, *Ankara Ambassade*, 36/PO/1, 136, ‘Bulletin Périodique no.69, Période du 26 juillet au 1er septembre’, Aley, 4 septembre 1923, p. 11.

⁴⁷ The mandatory agreements, for instance, also included an optional clause that allowed the conclusion of special customs treaties with states that neighboured the mandates, such as Turkey and Egypt. Norman Burns, *The Tariff of Syria, 1919–1932* (Beirut: American Press, 1933), p. 41.

of the post-Ottoman Middle East. These were the plans for Aleppo as well, despite its division into two by a national border. Yet, their execution would prove more contentious than the French had anticipated, for commerce was inextricably linked to politics in the eyes of Turkey. After all, Ankara was home to a burgeoning nationalist elite that saw the granting of economic concessions to the West as a prelude to later political domination, a lesson they learned all too well as participants of the late Ottoman political economy.

Aleppo in the Post-war (Dis)order

On 7 September 1920, one-and-a-half months after the French military took control of the city, proclamations were posted on the streets of Aleppo, where General Gouraud framed the French presence as ‘the fulfillment of the wishes of the local people’, promising the Aleppines economic prosperity concomitant with the natural and financial resources of the province.⁴⁸ Yet, these were not the only placards decorating the streets of Aleppo. Local resistance committees announced their anti-French slogans through similar means, while situating themselves as part of a wider Ottoman struggle against the institution of colonial rule.⁴⁹ Led by the former Ottoman officers under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, Ottoman resistance managed to push the French out of Marash, Urfa, Aintab and Kilis – cities that formed the northern rim of Aleppo’s hinterland.⁵⁰ The invasion of western Anatolia by Greek forces and the start of their offensive, however, turned the focus of the organised resistance away from Aleppo, where the struggle instead began to take the form of low-intensity guerrilla warfare conducted by roaming bands originating from the Turkish sector. The ensuing insecurity delivered a severe blow to Aleppo’s interregional commercial links, as trade became stagnant and largely restricted to ‘a radius of some twenty miles from the town’.⁵¹

⁴⁸ TNA, FO 861/68, ‘Aux Habitants du Vilayet d’Alep et du Sandjak d’Alexandrette’, 7 September 1920.

⁴⁹ For the complex dynamics of mass politics in the period preceding the French occupation, see James L. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁵⁰ Watenpaugh, *Being Modern*, p. 172.

⁵¹ TNA, FO 371/6454/E5774, 23 April 1921, f. 156.

Amidst rampant insecurity on the roads, the goods that would normally get exported abroad piled up in the Syrian interior, with only few camel convoys transporting them to Aleppo.⁵² The situation did not fare any better for the import of goods from Europe, as the risks associated with political unrest drove the costs of camel transport between Alexandretta and Aleppo to considerable levels, leaving only the links to Tripoli and Beirut viable for trade.⁵³ But even then, the shipment of goods to Beirut remained prohibitive for merchants due to exorbitant freight rates. The state of things was certainly made worse by the ongoing military requisitioning of the railway infrastructure.⁵⁴

The burgeoning discontent of the Aleppine merchant community was the outcome of this growingly contentious relations between the Kemalists and the French. When General Gouraud visited Aleppo in late June 1921 its inhabitants quickly aired discontent and complained how often the roads to the city were cut off, a situation that brought commercial activity to a standstill. The merchants noted their desire for peace and political settlement instead. A month of ‘unusual calm’ earlier in May had already translated into an increase in the numbers of Turkish traders who purchased local goods, and eventually raised hopes of Aleppo’s residents ‘that the commercial barriers between Aleppo and the Turkish zone were [finally] broken down’.⁵⁵ The resumption of banditry, as it often did with the coming of summer months, however, quickly overrode these short-term improvements.⁵⁶

Ankara’s tacit support for the ongoing activities of armed bands in northern Syria was no doubt a way of pressuring the French to a diplomatic resolution of the conflict. The attempts to do so already bore its first fruit on 9 March 1921 after the negotiations in London between the Turkish foreign minister

⁵² NARA, College Park, Record Group 84, Consular Aleppo, Syria, Vol. 74: From Consul Jackson, 21 April 1921.

⁵³ NARA, College Park, Record Group 84, Consular Aleppo, Syria, Vol. 78: From Consul Jackson, 30 November 1921, p. 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. 74: From Consul Jackson, 21 April 1921.

⁵⁵ TNA, FO 371/6455/E9105, 23 July 1921, ff. 150–52.

⁵⁶ On the cyclical nature of banditry in northern Syria, see Jean-David Mizrahi, ‘Un “Nationalisme de la Frontière”: Bandes Armées et Sociabilités Politiques sur la Frontière Turco-Syrienne au Début des Années 1920’, *Vingtième Siècle Revue d’Histoire*, Vol. 2, No. 78 (2003), pp. 19–34.

Bekir Sami Bey and the French premier Aristide Briand. This was when France accepted to forgo its claims on the zones already occupied by Turkish forces and promised to evacuate Cilicia in exchange for a range of economic concessions.⁵⁷ In turn, this agreement projected for the very first time the institution of a Turkish–Syrian border along the tracks of the Baghdad railway.⁵⁸

The news of such a settlement which would divide the Ottoman province of Aleppo into two, quickly created a backlash in the local Aleppo press. '[Fifty per cent] of the goods, exported by Aleppo to Europe and America,' *Le Franco-Syrien* noted, 'are brought from the territories which the recent Franco-Turkish agreement puts under Turkish dominion, and will be separated from Syria by a line of custom houses.'⁵⁹ Statistics were harnessed to make the case: based on the 1913 figures of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce, Southern Anatolia was indeed the only provider of nearly all tragacanth gum, raisins, yellow berries and gall nuts that came to Aleppo for export, while the region also supplied to local and foreign markets through Aleppo more than 50 per cent of pistachio nuts, wool, almonds, animal skins and liquorice root, among many other products.⁶⁰

Even if the fears of the Aleppine mercantile community were indeed well justified, the agreement in March ultimately failed to get ratified by the National Assembly in Ankara due to the extent of economic concessions it had granted to the French.⁶¹ Yet, the agreement foreshadowed two things. First, the institution of a border between the two countries would eventually

⁵⁷ The possibility of a French withdrawal from Cilicia in exchange of economic concessions has a longer history going back to early December 1919 when it was first suggested by F. Georges-Picot during his visit to Mustafa Kemal in Sivas. See Sina Akşin, 'Franco-Turkish Relations at the end of 1919', in Hamit Batu and Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont, *L'Empire Ottoman, la République de Turquie et la France* (Istanbul: ISIS Press, 1986), p. 442.

⁵⁸ BCA, 930.2.0.0, 1-7-1, 9 March 1921.

⁵⁹ NARA, College Park, Record Group 84, Consular Aleppo, Syria, Vol. 74; Paul Burain, 'Alep Menacée de Ruine', *Le Franco-Syrien*, 27 Mars 1921.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 'Provenance de certains produits exportés par Alep'.

⁶¹ For instance, its clauses also stipulated the conclusion of a special customs arrangement between Turkish and Syrian districts, while also giving concessions to French companies in Cilicia and southern Anatolia. BCA, 930.2.0.0, 1-7-1, 9 March 1921. After the rejection of the agreement by the parliament in Ankara, Bekir Sami Bey also resigned from his post. See *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Gizli Celse Zabıtları* (hereafter *TBMMGCZ*), 12 May 1921, p. 73.

separate Aleppo from its south Anatolian hinterland. Second, the Kemalists would resist any French attempts to carve out a zone of economic influence in southern Anatolia that would not only lessen the impact of a border on Aleppine merchants, but also help advance French interests.

Despite the standing differences in principles, geopolitics dictated the necessity of rapprochement between the two parties. Two months after the rejection of the London Agreement, Ankara handed in a counter-proposal to the French and by June, Henry Franklin-Bouillon arrived in Ankara to start bilateral negotiations once again, this time directly with Mustafa Kemal.⁶² While the parties agreed on basic terms of the agreement, Franklin-Bouillon left Ankara for further consultations with Paris.⁶³ Only in September 1921 did the developments bring these diplomatic talks towards more conclusive directions. This was when the Turkish armies managed to repulse the Greek advances away from the doorsteps of Ankara – a victory which made it clear that military coercion alone would not suffice to dislodge the Kemalists. On 20 October, a week after signing the Treaty of Kars with the Bolsheviks, Ankara also concluded the long drawn-out talks with the French and signed the Treaty of Ankara, which formally instituted the Turco-Syrian border. While the treaty did not include any customs arrangements between Syria and Turkey, and left the matter to be decided later on in mixed commissions, Mustafa Kemal's address to the deputies in Ankara made the Turkish position clear:

I openly shared with Franklin-Bouillon our position on the customs question – that we do not accept the institution of a special sphere of influence [in Aleppo's Anatolian hinterland]. We told him we are afraid that by making us agree to such a principle – however limited it may initially be – they could then use it as a basis to argue for a larger sphere of economic influence that will stretch to our entire country.⁶⁴

⁶² For the timeline and details of these negotiations, see Bige Yavuz, '1921 Tarihli Türk-Fransız Anlaşması'nın Hazırlık Aşamaları', *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi*, Vol. 8, No. 23 (1992), pp. 273–308.

⁶³ For the depiction of his journey and the negotiations in Ankara in early June 1921, see Yusuf Kemal Tengirşenk, *Vatan Hizmetinde* (İstanbul: Bahar Matbaası, 1967), pp. 246–53.

⁶⁴ *TBMMGCZ*, 18 October 1921, p. 362.

The French continued to hope otherwise. In addressing the notables of Aleppo, French General de Lamothe tried to convince them of the positive benefits of the settlement, highlighting the continued French commitment to prevent the creation of a customs barrier between Turkey and Syria as a result of it.⁶⁵ This was not a passing promise made in the heat of the moment, but a genuine French desire dictated by the nature of Aleppo's interregional economy. In fact, two days after the pact with Turkey, General Gouraud issued an *arrêté* (no. 1079), announcing that 'the refund system', which was already tested between Syria and Palestine, would also be implemented in commercial transactions with Asia Minor.⁶⁶ Accordingly, the city's merchants would be able to import goods from abroad as usual and pay Syrian customs upon arrival; if they sell (i.e. re-export) these goods to their usual customers in southern Anatolian hinterland and therefore pay customs duties for a second time on the Turkish side of the border, the merchants will get refunded the original duties paid to the Syrian authorities, as long as they can present original Turkish receipts.⁶⁷ The refund system was therefore designed as a temporary relief in case Ankara were to apply tariffs before the conclusion of a customs agreement with the French.

This was exactly what soon happened, as the Turkish authorities in Aintab began to apply 20 per cent *ad valorem* on the goods the merchants brought from Aleppo, effective from 3 December 1921 onwards.⁶⁸ The impact of these tariffs was felt well beyond Aleppo. It was reported, for instance, that the port of Beirut produced one million francs less in revenues in January when compared to December, and half a million francs less in the first days of February when compared to early January.⁶⁹ The situation was far worse

⁶⁵ TNA, FO 371/6457, 24 November 1921, f. 176.

⁶⁶ CADN, *Ankara Ambassade*, 36/PO/1, 146, 'Note sur les arrangements douaniers à faire avec la Turquie', p. 2.

⁶⁷ It should be noted that the refund system only applied to imported goods or raw material that received some level of processing work in Syria. TNA, FO 371/7846/E4798, 24 April 1922, f. 183.

⁶⁸ Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (Aix-en-Provence) (hereafter ANOM), Papiers de Mougin, 11 APOM 34: Télégramme par le Délégué à Alep, 1 janvier 1922.

⁶⁹ ANOM, Papiers de Mougin, 11 APOM 34: Télégramme par Robert de Caix au Délégué à Alep, 16 février 1922.

in Aleppo itself. As Selim Djambart, the chair of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce, described the situation in mid-February:

Aleppo market is paralysed, stocks are piling up, bankruptcies have already been declared, and news of fear, panic, and dismay are taking over the once flourishing trade. If protective measures are not taken quickly, people who are disappointed are thinking of an exodus to regions where the business will get redirected. Bitter murmurs rise in this large city that Aleppo is threatened to become an economically poor town, with a desert to its southeast and a closed border to its north.⁷⁰

As planned, the refund system indeed kicked in to rush help to the merchants in this moment of need. Some local companies reported in March and April that they were able to receive reimbursements from the Syrian authorities for the duties originally paid on Syrian ports of arrival. Yet these refunds were far from restoring to Aleppo the historic role it had once played as the entrepôt of the Eastern Mediterranean. For one, the costs of imports were higher for Aleppine merchants than before, since the system did not refund the difference between the low Syrian and high Turkish tariffs. Also, in the absence of a customs agreement, Ankara prohibited the import of a certain class of luxury goods, such as silk textiles among others, which corresponded to a portion of Aleppine re-exports.⁷¹

A more permanent settlement on the customs question was therefore necessary, not least because Turkish goods continued to come into Syria tax free while Syrian goods were kept subject to high tariffs.⁷² In its assessment of the situation, the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce suggested the institution of a free trade zone that would unify the customs of the ports of Alexandretta and Mersin, in addition to establishing free warehouses in Aleppo for re-export trade. Such an arrangement would allow Turkey in turn to claim a fair share in the customs revenues of Syria, which would be proportionate to the value

⁷⁰ ANOM, Papiers de Mougin, 11 APOM 34: Djambart à Poincaré, 18 février 1922.

⁷¹ TNA, FO 371/7846/E2717, 11 March 1922, f. 40; TNA, FO 371/7846/E4798, 24 April 1922, f. 180–81.

⁷² Comte R. de Gontaut-Biron and L. Le Révérend, *D'Angora à Lausanne: Les étapes d'une déchéance* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1924), p. 48.

of re-exports shipped from the free zone to Anatolia.⁷³ In fact, the positions of the merchants of Aleppo entirely overlapped with those of the French as both asked for a free trade zone between Aleppo and its Anatolian hinterland.⁷⁴ Yet, the exact shape of how this arrangement would look like was yet to be worked out with Turkey.

Negotiating Aleppo, 1922–26

Throughout the spring of 1922 the French continued their overtures to Turkish authorities, seizing opportunities as they presented themselves to convince Ankara to start trade talks with a view to solving trade limitations that, in the words of Raymond Poincaré, ‘created a precarious situation in the region of Aleppo’, both politically and economically.⁷⁵ These efforts finally bore fruit in late May when a Turkish delegation arrived in Beirut, composed of a handful of experts who had had considerable local experience in Mersin and Adana.⁷⁶ In the evaluation of the British, however, the Turkish mission seemed less interested in commercial affairs than in military matters.⁷⁷ Seeing the Franco-Turkish rapprochement as a deviation from the post-war order they sought to establish in the region, the British agents speculated that Beirut was ‘a pleasant summer resort’ to spend an entire summer under the pretext of commercial negotiations, arguing that Ankara not only used their presence in Beirut as a base to spread pro-Turkish propaganda across the Middle East but also repeatedly pressed the French during the negotiations with more concrete demands, specifically eyeing the

⁷³ TNA, FO 371/7846/E4798, 24 April 1922, f. 181–82.

⁷⁴ ANOM, Papiers de Mougin, 11 APOM 34: Télégramme par Robert de Caix au Délégué à Alep, 16 décembre 1921.

⁷⁵ ANOM, Papiers de Mougin, 11 APOM 34: Poincaré à Mission Française à Adana, 11 mai 1922; For earlier efforts, see CADN, *Ankara Ambassade*, 36/PO/1, 146, ‘Mission Française en Cilicie à Monsieur Poincaré’, Adana, 25 avril 1922. BCA, 30.18.1.1, 5-18-3, ‘Gümrük Komisyonu Reisi Zekai’den Mevrud Şifre’, Adana, 27 Nisan 1338, p. 10.

⁷⁶ BCA, 30.18.1.1, 5-14-5, Kararname, 7 Mayıs 1338.

⁷⁷ Understandably, London was rather anxious of the Turkish-French rapprochement, and its implications for its position in Mosul. TNA, FO 371/7847/E6391, ‘Report of Franco-Kemalist Relations and Situation in Syria during the Latter Half of May’, 6 June 1922, f. 121.

shipment of war material to Anatolia.⁷⁸ To be sure, the Kemalists were busy in preparing a final offensive to force the Greek units out of their holdouts in Western Anatolia and probably needed all the supplies they could get on top of what they had already secured from the Bolsheviks. Yet the evidence the British conclusions were based seemed flimsy at best.⁷⁹

Unlike whatever the British might have thought, the negotiations in Beirut in fact lasted the whole summer due to the complex issues the French and Turkish delegates had on the table.⁸⁰ For Turkey, the ultimate goal during the negotiations was not to yield any economic privileges that could compromise its strict rejection of Ottoman capitulations, which only allowed its delegates to concede limited privileges that were valid only for a short period of time; Ankara also asked them to prioritise the protection of native industries at home.⁸¹ Only after the fulfilment of this principle could the Turkish delegation offer some special arrangements for Aleppo and its port Alexandretta – cities that continued to maintain significant trade links to Anatolia.⁸² The Turkish position left very little room to negotiate. Ideally, the French delegation sought to secure an arrangement similar to the customs-free zone established between Syria and Palestine back in 1921, which applied to both agricultural products and manufactured commodities.⁸³ While the Turkish delegation agreed on the duty-free circulation of local agricultural produce in its border zone with Syria, the real contention lay in customs duties on manufactured commodities – namely, over the question if Ankara was ultimately willing to allow Aleppo to play its historic role as a centre of distribution to its Anatolian hinterland

⁷⁸ TNA, FO 371/7848/E10961, 3 October 1922, f. 85.

⁷⁹ TNA, FO 684/1, 22/7: 'Situation in Syria', Aley, 13 July 1922, f. 4.

⁸⁰ On top of commercial issues, the Turkish delegation also saw the customs meeting in Beirut as an opportunity to rectify the Turkish–Syrian border. See CADN, *Ankara Ambassade*, 36/PO/1, 148, 'Le Haut-Commissaire au Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, 13 juin 1923.

⁸¹ The basic principles of the Turkish delegation revolved around the protection of home industries, particularly that of cotton textiles, the institution of maximum tariffs on silk goods, and the validity of any arrangements only for a period of five years – hence the retention of the right to change commercial policies under changing circumstances. *TBM-MGCZ*, 15 June 1922, pp. 416–17.

⁸² BCA, 30.18.1.1, 5-18-3, 'Hariciye Vekaleti' nin Tezkere Sureti' and 'Suriye Mukavelenamesine Esas Olacak Talimat', pp. 13–18.

⁸³ ANOM, Papiers de Mougin, 11 APOM 34: Beyrouth, Télégramme du 3 juin 1922.

of manufactured products, whether of local or European origins. The divergence of opinions on this issue prolonged the negotiations considerably, as the Turkish delegation had to await negative responses from Ankara to each French counter-proposal.⁸⁴ One such proposal that Ankara dismissed involved a scheme for the transformation of the port of Alexandretta into a free trade zone which would also feature the presence of Turkish customs officials for the collection of Ankara's share of customs receipts.⁸⁵

Even though a deal was finally reached on 30 September 1922, curiously the outlines of the agreement were not made public in the upcoming months.⁸⁶ Local newspapers such as *La Syrie* published editorials describing that the deal secured favourable treatment from Ankara towards locally manufactured silk and cotton goods, among others.⁸⁷ The American consulate similarly reported that the deal included clauses for 'the increased use of the railroad between Aleppo and her natural seaport of Alexandretta, since this road passes through Turkish territory for a part of the distance'; because the deal also foresaw the establishment of Aleppo as a port of entry, it was reported that French authorities soon began to establish bonded warehouses that could be used in the storage of goods in transit from Aleppo to Turkey.⁸⁸ Despite all these preparations, however, the Turkish National Assembly did not ratify the customs agreement that had consumed so much energy to finalise in Beirut.

After all, by the time the deal was agreed upon in autumn 1922, the interstate context had changed radically, as negotiations for a new peace treaty between Turkey and the Allied Powers began in Lausanne. In this new context, the settlement of commercial disputes with mandatory authorities and deriving short-term benefits from it was not a priority any longer. Much to the contrary, the use of armed bands in northern Syria once again emerged as

⁸⁴ CADN, *Ankara Ambassade*, 36/PO/1, 146, 'Mission Française en Cilicie aux Conseil des Ministres des Affaires Etrangères', 15 juillet 1922 et 8 août 1922.

⁸⁵ CADN, *Ankara Ambassade*, 36/PO/1, 136, 'Mission Française en Cilicie aux Haut-Commissariat', Adana, 27 octobre 1922, p. 3.

⁸⁶ TNA, FO 371/7853/E867, 'Situation in Syria and the Lebanon', 10 January 1923, f. 108–9.

⁸⁷ TNA, FO 371/7848/E11883, 18 October 1922, f. 129.

⁸⁸ NARA, College Park, Record Group 84, Consular Aleppo, Syria, Vol. 115: 'Annual Report upon Commerce and Industries in the Aleppo Consular District, 1924', pp. 2–3.

a way of pressuring the French to come to terms with a settlement favourable to Ankara. The British were joyful reporting that the rapprochement between the French and Turks – one that had worked against the British interests for the past two years – was finally coming to an end.⁸⁹ In expectation of the imminent *cheta* (armed group) warfare, the French began to install barbed wire and machine gun posts and dig trenches around Alexandretta – the port city whose trade with Aleppo they were seeking to restore to Turkey only a few months earlier.⁹⁰

Indeed, by early 1923 everything seemed to be back to square one. During the negotiations in Lausanne the Turkish delegation requested the revision of the southern border in their favour, but the French did not budge. Ankara was not alone in its desire to revise the border, however. The influential Aleppine politician Ihsan al-Jabiri, who also attended the talks in Lausanne as part of the Syro-Palestinian Delegation, for example, gave an interview, where he claimed that Turkey might be forced to accept a frontier that crossed further in the north.⁹¹ Al-Jabiri's position largely banked upon the souring of relations between Turkey and France throughout the negotiations in Lausanne. Yet, 'except for those who had won their rights by force of arms', as Provence put it, the likes of al-Jabiri would return disappointed from Lausanne.⁹²

When they did, the situation was similarly tenuous back home. Some merchants in the Aleppo market had put up portraits of Mustafa Kemal on their windows, much to the chagrin of local French authorities.⁹³ The discontent of the city's Muslim and Christian merchants, the British concluded, were less rooted in ideology than economic difficulties, as the situation pushed them 'to toy agreeably with the idea of a refound economic unity under the Turkish aegis'.⁹⁴ When the French High Commissioner General Weygand visited Aleppo on 20 July, only few days before the signature of the Lausanne

⁸⁹ TNA, FO 371/7853/E646, 20 December 1922, f. 5.

⁹⁰ TNA, FO 371/9055/E2345, 12 February 1923, f. 81.

⁹¹ TNA, FO 371/9053/E600, 10 January 1923, f. 47. Similar views were expressed in the Aleppo Representative Council by El Sayed Rabih el-Menkari and Subhi Barakat. TNA, FO 371/9053/E12168, 12 December 1923, ff. 215–16.

⁹² Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation*, p. 148.

⁹³ TNA, FO 371/9055/E2345, 12 February 1923, f. 81.

⁹⁴ TNA, FO 371/9053/E6332, 31 May 1923, f. 131.

Treaty, he encountered a barrage of complaints coming from the merchants on issues ranging from customs difficulties with Ankara to rural insecurity in northern Syria and prohibitive railway freight rates to the south. In a bid to appease them, the general noted that with the imminent peace in Lausanne, ‘most of the troubles now besetting Aleppo would be swept away’.⁹⁵ Weygand practised what he preached in public. In line with his broader optimism on solving problems that beset Syria, he noted that opening up ‘the very important field of transactions between Aleppo and the area seceded to Turkey’ is indeed a task that attracted all their attention. In his assessment, the six long years of war had devastated much of Anatolia and the opportunity was ripe for the French to control Turkish markets via Syrian merchants, whom the French called ‘perfectly aware of the habits of the Turkish customers’.⁹⁶

The short-term developments soon after the successful conclusions of talks for the Treaty of Lausanne seemed to have proved Weygand right. By December 1923 the Kemalists had suppressed the low-profile warfare raging around Aleppo by expelling the *chetas* from the border zones to the interior.⁹⁷ With the re-establishment of the rail link from Alexandretta to the Euphrates, too, as Weygand happily noted, ‘a considerable movement of cereals was taking place from Birecik to Alexandretta for reshipment by sea to Smyrna and Constantinople’; the customers from southern Anatolia were also slowly trickling in the markets of Aleppo, just ‘as in the old days to make purchases and that Aleppo merchants are even granting them credit’.⁹⁸ Therefore, by the end of 1923, the Ottoman interregional markets seemed to have become re-connected despite the absence of the empire – or at least it seemed so for the time being. After all, it was clear that the commercial future of Aleppo would remain at the mercy of turbulent Franco-Turkish relations for the months to come.⁹⁹ If it took nine months to negotiate the terms of the peace treaty in Lausanne, more than a year had to pass before the ratification of the treaty, since the most contentious issues were actually left unsolved.

⁹⁵ TNA, FO 371/9053/E8075, 23 July 1923, f. 144.

⁹⁶ CADN, *Ankara Ambassade*, 36/PO/1, 136, ‘Bulletin périodique no.69, Période du 26 juillet au 1er septembre’, Aley, 4 septembre 1923, pp. 10–11.

⁹⁷ Mizrahi, ‘Un ‘Nationalisme de la Frontière’, p. 24.

⁹⁸ TNA, FO 684/1, 23/3: French Railway Policy in Syria, Beirut, 13 December 1923, f. 27.

⁹⁹ Gontaut-Biron and Le Révérend, *D’Angora à Lausanne*, p. 49.

The French, for one, returned from Lausanne particularly upset over the unclear status of Catholic schools in Turkey as well as the uncertainties as to how Ankara was to pay its share from the standing Ottoman debt, where the French creditors were in the majority.¹⁰⁰ In delaying to ratify the treaty, the French sought to pressure Ankara to attend to these problems, which left very little leverage for Paris to change the situation for the better in northern Syria. On 1 May 1924, for instance, the French increased the general Syrian tariffs and in doing so distinguished member states of the League of Nations (15 per cent) from the non-members (30 per cent) – a measure to check German influence. Despite being a non-member state, Turkey was still given preferential treatment and enjoyed the League rate, while it continued to apply maximum tariffs to Syrian goods.¹⁰¹ This ultimately illustrated that the French had little muscle to reverse the situation on the ground and Aleppo (and therefore Paris) had more to suffer from a tariff war that could bring Turkey back to the table to negotiate the terms of an open-door policy between southern Turkey and northern Syria.

The situation took a positive turn in late spring 1924, however, when Édouard Herriot came to power in Paris – a welcome development for Ankara. His *Parti radical* not only promoted an ideological outlook that inspired the Kemalist cadres, but also featured important members, such as Henry Franklin-Bouillon, who enjoyed personal connections to Mustafa Kemal dating back to 1921. In line with the party's broader willingness to compromise on the harsh terms of the Versailles settlement, Herriot announced in early June that France would soon ratify the Treaty of Lausanne.¹⁰² If Herriot's stint as the prime minister provided a window of opportunity to mend relations, Ankara's worsening tensions with Britain over the Mosul question since late 1924 required compromising with the French. The outbreak of the Sheikh

¹⁰⁰ TNA, FO 424-538, 'Turkey: Annual Report, 1923', p. 11.

¹⁰¹ Burns, *The Tariff of Syria*, p. 56.

¹⁰² Remzi Çağatay Çakırlar, 'Radikal Faktör: Tek Parti ve Kemalizm'in Oluşum Sürecinde Radikal Parti Etkileşimleri', in Sevgi Adak and Alexandros Lamprou (eds), *Tek Parti Dönemini Yeniden Düşünmek: Otoriter Devlet ve Toplum* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yayınları, 2021) pp. 209–36. The Treaty of Lausanne went into effect on 6 August 1924 after Italy, Japan and Great Britain ratified it, which was soon followed by the French ratification.

Said Rebellion in February 1925, for which Ankara blamed British intrigues, helped facilitate the Turkish-French rapprochement, as the French abided by their treaty obligations – much to the irritation of the British – and let ‘excessive numbers of Turkish reinforcements’ pass via Aleppo on their way to contain the uprising, using the railway-cum-border.¹⁰³

The French High Commissioner of the time was Maurice Sarrail, who had recently been appointed to the post by Herriot and his broader coalition known as the Cartel des Gauches. Sarrail hoped to harness the friendly relations between France and Turkey and convince Ankara to allow Aleppo to be the region’s re-export centre by reaching an agreement on customs formalities. In doing so, he also hoped to also solve the series of more practical problems that beset the operation of the border railway line by *Chemin de fer Cilicie-Nord Syrie*.¹⁰⁴ After all, multiple reports continued to suggest that the Turkish customs authorities were prohibitively vigilant with the operation of the railway. Urfa customs, for instance, repeatedly refused to process the certificates of origins for goods re-exported from Syria, on the grounds that the practice had markedly begun to shift international trade away from the Turkish ports to those in Syria.¹⁰⁵ In the face of these problems, Sarrail wrote:

The overriding need to maintain and, if necessary, increase the flow of trade between the northern Syrian regions and Anatolia – an essential outlet for their traffic – has forced us to separate the customs and economic question from other contentious cases and enter into isolated negotiations.¹⁰⁶

These talks came to fruition on 26 July 1925 when a customs convention was concluded between Turkey and Syria. Yet, more than a year still had to pass before France agreed to rectify the border to Turkey’s favour, which had become Ankara’s pre-condition to ratify the agreement. In the absence

¹⁰³ TNA, FO 424-538, ‘Turkey: Annual Report, 1925’, p. 11.

¹⁰⁴ CADN, Fonds Beyrouth, 575, Cabinet politique: 1926–1941, de Sarrail à Mougin, 2 mars 1925.

¹⁰⁵ CADN, *Ankara Ambassade*, 36/PO/1, 137, de Jesse-Curely à Sarrail, Beyrouth, 11 avril 1925.

¹⁰⁶ CADN, *Ankara Ambassade*, 36/PO/1, 340, ‘Un projet de convention douanière conclu avec la Turquie’, Beyrouth, 14 septembre 1925.

of a ratification, Ankara continued to leverage procedural difficulties on the operation of the railway to its benefit, not only stifling the Aleppine trade with Turkey but also creating problems within Syria. For example, when Aleppo merchants shipped goods using the railway to northern parts of Syria, because parts of the railway crossed into Turkey before arriving back into the Syrian territory, Turkish customs authorities demanded a guarantee in cash that equalled the overall value of the goods in transit. Even if the cash guarantee was to be reimbursed after the goods were unloaded on the Syrian side of the border, it amounted to a sum that required considerable capital investments, which was often beyond the reach of many local merchants.¹⁰⁷

While these commercial difficulties reflected systemic problems in the north, it was in fact the outbreak of the Great Revolt in southern Syria that ultimately motivated the French to settle its differences with Turkey on the northern frontier.¹⁰⁸ The deal reached in February 1926 included, among other things, the rectification of the border around Kilis – a demand long entertained by Turkey, which the French agreed to accept on the condition of the ratification of the customs agreement.¹⁰⁹ After a few more months of delays and considerable French pressure, Ankara finally ratified the customs convention which took effect on 1 September 1926, valid for a period of three years. Similar to the agreement concluded in Beirut back in 1922 – the one that never got ratified by Ankara, the 1926 convention included the circulation of agricultural and animal products on very low tariff rates between Turkey and Syria – an arrangement favourable to Ankara. Similarly lower rates applied to the trade of Syrian textiles into Turkey, but these lower tariffs were only applicable to the textiles that were fully manufactured in Syria.¹¹⁰ This latter clause, however, kept the majority of domestic Syrian textiles subject to high Turkish tariffs, since

¹⁰⁷ CADN, *Ankara Ambassade*, 36/PO/1, 137, de Jesse-Curely à Sarrail, Beyrouth, 25 December 1925.

¹⁰⁸ TNA, FO 424-538, 'Turkey: Annual Report, 1926', pp. 6–7.

¹⁰⁹ Soheila Mameli-Ghaderi, 'Le tracé de la frontière entre la Syrie et la Turquie (1921–1929)', *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains*, Vol. 207 (2002–2003), pp. 125–38.

¹¹⁰ For a full text of the agreement, see 'Türkiye-Suriye Gümrük İtilafnamesi', *Gümrük Mecmuası*, 1 (1 Teşrin-i evvel 1926), p. 5.

the domestic producers in Aleppo and Damascus often imported either yarn or dye, if not both.¹¹¹

The long sought after customs agreement was not necessarily a win-win situation for the parties involved. Statistics proved the pattern. Syria's imports from Turkey already reached its pre-war levels by 1924 and did not fluctuate much thereafter, but Syria's exports to Turkey never recovered its pre-war position, even after the 1926 customs convention.¹¹² Neither France nor the Aleppine merchants could do much to change the situation. From the very outset, Ankara navigated a careful legal path in order to keep Syrian goods beyond the bounds of the favourable treatment to which Turkey had committed itself back in the Lausanne negotiations.¹¹³ In this sense, unlike what General Weygand predicted, the Treaty of Lausanne did not solve Aleppo's problems; it rather empowered Ankara to keep in check possible French sphere of influence over southern Turkey via Aleppine merchants. Ankara's strategy was successful until late 1929 when the customs convention of 1926 expired. By then, the world had become a radically different place and the restrictions that Turkey would put in place in response to the Great Depression would have the unintended effect of creating a different set of opportunities in the hinterland of Aleppo for those who were willing to navigate them.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

'The most important and richest customer of the pistachio produced in Aintab is North America, which consumes seventy per cent of our total annual yield', the Turkish daily *Cumhuriyet* reported in March 1936. 'Yet, because the export is carried out via Syria, the profits disappear due to the intermediaries and it is the Syrian merchants that benefit the most from this trade'.¹¹⁵ This small piece of local news in fact spoke to the persistence of commercial ties that had not only

¹¹¹ For patterns of the Syrian textile industries during the interwar years, see Geoffrey D. Schad, 'Colonialists, Industrialists, and Politicians: The Political Economy of Industrialization in Syria, 1920–1954', (PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2001), pp. 132–53.

¹¹² Burns, *The Tariff of Syria*, p. 62.

¹¹³ The Ottoman Archives of the Prime Ministry (BOA), HR. İM. 176–48, 20 Şubat 1926.

¹¹⁴ See Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, 'The Great Depression and the Making of Turkish–Syrian Border, 1921–1939', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (2020), pp. 311–26.

¹¹⁵ 'Gazi Antebin Ticari Vaziyeti', *Cumhuriyet*, 16 Mart 1936, no 4250, p. 9.

plugged Aleppo into nodes of transatlantic trade since the nineteenth century but also the continued linkages of Aleppine merchants to the city's traditional hinterland in southern Anatolia, which had certainly transformed but not fully disappeared fifteen years after the end of the Ottoman Empire. Since the early 1920s, when the establishment of the Turkish–Syrian border cut the Ottoman province of Aleppo into two, the ascendant nationalist regime in Ankara had sought to disaggregate commercial zones inherited from the empire and re-channel this trade into the hands of their own bourgeoisie who were to operate in port cities that remained solely within Turkish sovereignty.¹¹⁶ By and large, Turkey had made great strides to do so, but Aleppo continued to be relevant for the Turkish economy well into the 1930s.

The suzerainty of the Ottoman sultans came to an end in 1922 but the economic mobilities that defined their rule in the Middle East did not disappear overnight. Nor did the market dynamics adjust themselves to the new political realities automatically. The emerging political systems in the region had to address the grievances of local producers who once sold their agrarian surplus within a duty-free imperial market, and attend to the problems created by the institution of new borders that suddenly set apart industrial producers and exporters away from their domestic consumers. That being said, the scholarship continues to see the interwar period as a beginning of distinct national beginnings – a time when national histories take over in a bid to recount how nations are made but not how empires were undone. Even if concerns over methodological nationalism are readily and commonly acknowledged, we are less willing to fully let go off the analytic parameters defined by nationalism. It is therefore high time to go beyond what were once certainly useful discussions of imperial legacies and liminal loyalties and frame the emergence of state systems in the region in analytically interactive frameworks.¹¹⁷ In order to do so, we need to treat the Ottoman Empire not just as a historical backdrop, but rather as a bundle of very real networks, relations and infrastructure that had to be disaggregated and negotiated, which, as a contentious process, helped make the modern Middle East. After all, the Ottoman Empire was as much an imagined community as it was a connected enterprise.

¹¹⁶ For a region-wide assessment, see Schayegh, *The Middle East*, pp. 169–81.

¹¹⁷ For one such study that makes a case for a connected post-Ottoman history, see Orçun Can Okan, 'Coping with Transitions: The Connected Construction of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, 1918–1928' (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2020).