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MOTOR CARS AND TRANSDESERT TRAFFIC: CHANNELLING MOBILITIES BETWEEN IRAQ AND SYRIA, 1923–1930

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> Ten years ago, cars used to leave Damascus or Baghdad any day of the week to cross the desert, provided they were accompanied by a guide. There were no patrols in the desert, and travellers were vulnerable to gangs or Bedouin vagabonds and looters. Nowadays, the cars only run on two specific days a week and form convoys in which cooperation is guaranteed in the event of a breakdown. Desert police patrols also ensure the safety of passengers and their valuables.[1]
>
> Ameen Rihani – *The Heart of Iraq*

Introduction

In February 1932 the Lebanese writer Ameen Rihani drove from Beirut to Baghdad through the desert. He left an account of his journey in *Qalb al-ʻIraq* (*The Heart of Iraq*), published in 1935, in which he told the story of his road trip and described how the organisation of motor traffic had changed over the previous decade. Rihani was particularly pleased to note that although the desert crossing had been limited to a few days a week, the route was now patrolled and safe. At the time of his journey, the Baghdad–Damascus route had acquired central importance for the new states of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, and was intertwined with local, regional and transregional mobility networks. The route cut across the Syrian Desert, thus linking two regions placed under French and British Mandate by the League of Nations after the First World War, as well as crossed the almost entirely delineated Syrian–Iraqi border. As a matter of fact, the development of motorised transport which led to the opening of the Baghdad–Damascus route in 1923 was concurrent with the emergence of new states in the post-Ottoman Middle East. In other words, the introduction of sovereign territoriality, and thus new borders, coincided with an increase in travel opportunities that resulted in new forms of interaction between Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Against this backdrop, the so-called 'transdesert' route became a matter of concern to local governments and the French and British authorities, who sought to take advantage of the increased movement of people and goods while limiting the negative effects of mobility for their own benefit. This chapter explores the beginnings of the Baghdad–Damascus route in the 1920s by observing how new regimes of mobility took shape. As Tejel and Öztan argue in the introduction to this volume, the formation of states and the creation of borders in the post-war Middle East profoundly reshaped existing regimes of mobility, as the new states – whether independent or under Mandate administration – sought to organise and regulate the flow of people and goods across their borders. In addition to territorial reconfiguration, Tejel and Öztan also point to the extension of colonial rule in the former Ottoman Arab provinces and the persistance of global connections as other elements that contributed to the 're-ordering' of regimes of mobility.

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[1] Ameen Rihani, *Qalb al-ʿIraq* (Beirut: Ṣader, 1935), pp. 64–65. All translations are mine.

Accordingly, this chapter examines the ways in which the French and British mandatory authorities promoted the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route, organised motor traffic and channelled mobility across their territories. Drawing on the work of Valeska Huber, this chapter understands the 'channelling of mobility' as 'the differentiation, regulation and bureaucratisation of different kinds of movement'.[2] It argues that the interplay between the process of state formation and the growth of mobility resulted in the creation of new mobility regimes governing the movement of travellers through the Syrian Desert, which discriminated between different forms of travel. This does not mean, however, that states always succeeded in shaping mobility as they wished. Rather, this chapter highlights the challenges, negotiations and contestations that played a part in the development of a new mobility network between Iraq and Syria.

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[2] Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 3.

The first section shows that the opening up of the Baghdad–Damascus route in the early 1920s offered bright prospects in the eyes of French, British and local officials, who therefore encouraged the development of motor traffic across the region by supporting transport companies and improving travel conditions. As many historians have argued, the coming of new states in the post-Ottoman Middle East did not put an end to regional forms of mobility.[3] This section confirms their statement by examining the development of motorised transport at the regional level. The second section looks at the phenomenon of highway robbery on the transdesert routes and seeks to demonstrate that non-state actors challenged state power in the desert as well as the organisation of traffic. Indeed, tribes, bandits and rebels in the Syrian–Iraqi borderlands started taking advantage of the growing movement of people and goods on the transdesert route by organising hold-ups and robbing passengers. Furthermore, this section explores how the persistence of insecurity led the new states to regulate and organise transdesert traffic in order to ensure the safety of travellers, thus introducing regulations which, in turn, greatly affected the flow of traffic.

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[3] Seda Altuğ and Benjamin T. White, 'Frontières et pouvoir d'État: La frontière turco-syrienne dans les années 1920 et 1930', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, Vol. 193, No. 2 (2009), pp. 91–104; Matthew H. Ellis, *Desert Borderland: The Making of Modern Egypt and Libya* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and the Tribal Question* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Mikiya Koyagi, *Iran in Motion: Mobility, Space, and the Trans-Iranian Railway* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021); 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 (May 2020), pp. 311–26; Cyrus Schayegh, 'The many worlds of Abud Yasin; or, what narcotics trafficking in the interwar Middle East can tell us about territorialization', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 116, No. 2 (2011), pp. 273–306; Jordi Tejel, '"Des femmes contre des moutons": Franchissements féminins de la frontière turco-syrienne (1929–1944)', *20&21. Revue d'histoire*, Vol. 145 (2020), pp. 35–47.

The first two sections shed light on how French and British administrators worked together, voluntarily and involuntarily, to secure the routes. By studying cross-border cooperation, the chapter contributes to the study of the League of Nations mandates in the interwar Middle East by moving away from the methodological nationalism that has long characterised research on this subject.[4] As Robert S. G. Fletcher has demonstrated in his influential book, examining mobility across the Syrian Desert offers historians a way to rethink the history of the region by not focusing on 'the political units that later became nation states.'[5] Nevertheless, Fletcher's primary focus on the 'British desert corridor' stretching from Iraq to Egypt through Transjordan and Palestine tends to leave out an important actor involved in the management of movement across the Syrian Desert – that is, the French – and thus overlooks the importance of transimperial mobility and interstate cooperation in the formation of the states of Iraq and Syria. In this respect, the transdesert route enables us to articulate a history of the Middle Eastern mandates that breaches the gap between the history of Iraq and the histories of Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and Transjordan.[6]

Finally, the third section investigates the channelling of transdesert mobility by French and British administrators, who sought to facilitate some forms of movement while restricting others. It will be argued that the French and British authorities regarded Muslim pilgrims as a distinct category of travellers, because they were less important for their political and economic interests and because they posed a particular challenge to the organisation of traffic. By looking into the movement of pilgrims, this chapter underlines the coexistence of different types of mobility on the transdesert routes and highlights the authorities' proclivity to differentiate between them. In other words, while the process of state formation did not necessarily curtail pre-existing and new patterns of movement, it resulted in the coming of new regimes of mobility that introduced 'differential barriers to movement'.[7]

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[4] Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan, 'Introduction', in Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 13.

[5] Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and* '*the Tribal Question*', p. 69.

[6] Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan, 'Introduction', p. 15.

[7] Nina G. Schiller and Noel B. Salazar, 'Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2013), p. 187.

In studying the early developments of the Baghdad–Damascus route, this chapter also contributes to the burgeoning body of research on automobility in the Middle East, which still remains very incomplete.[8] In doing so, it seeks to go beyond the simple 'question of technology' and examine instead the interactions between motor transport technology, travel practices and the organisation and regulation of traffic by states.[9] Admittedly, the technologies of motor transport intensified and accelerated the movement of people and goods between the Mediterranean and Iraq. By reducing travel time, the motor car produced a process of time-space compression that historians of globalisation have widely analysed. Notwithstanding this, the various sections of this chapter question how this process unfolded in the interwar Middle East by showing that time-space compression went hand in hand with cases of re-routing, slowdown and discrimination of mobility.[10]

Promoting Movement: Imperial Interests and the Beginnings of the Baghdad–Damascus Route

Throughout the Ottoman period, merchants, soldiers and pilgrims crossed the Syrian Desert between present-day Syria and Iraq by following the routes of the trade caravans that circled the centre of the desert to the north.[11]

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[8] [Special issue], 'The Global Middle East in the Age of Speed', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2019), pp. 111–69; Frédéric Abécassis, 'La mise en place du réseau routier marocain', *HAL–Archives ouvertes* (2009), https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00435869; Nile Green, 'Fordist Connections: The Automotive Integration of the United States and Iran', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2016), pp. 290–321; Kristin Monroe, 'Automobility and Citizenship in Interwar Lebanon', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (2014), pp. 518–31·

[9] David Edgerton, 'Creole technologies and global histories: rethinking how things travel in space and time', *Journal of History of Science Technology*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2007), pp. 75–112.

[10] For a seminal work on the concept of time-space compression see: David Harvey, *The Condition of* Postmodernity: *an enquiry into the origins of cultural change* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: B. Blackwell, 1990). For critical studies of the 'time-space compression' narrative see: On Barak, *On Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (eds), *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880–1940* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2014); Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities.*

[11] Christina P. Grant, *The Syrian Desert: Caravans, Travel and Exploration* (London: A. & C. Black, 1937).

While scholarship has long asserted that the development of steam navigation and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 dealt a blow to the caravan trade in the Ottoman Empire, an increasing number of scholars have recently refuted the thesis of a decline and shown, on the contrary, that internal trade remained very important up to the late nineteenth century.[12] The traditional caravan route between Damascus and Baghdad ran across the oases of Palmyrena before reaching the Euphrates and following the river to Hit, Abu Kemal and Baghdad. In the aftermath of the war, relying on these preexisting networks, motorised transport initially developed between Aleppo, Mosul and Baghdad.[13] Nevertheless, the car had a decisive advantage over pack animals. By reducing travel time, it soon made it possible to open a more direct, almost rectilinear route through the heart of the desert. In October 1923, the Nairn brothers – two New Zealanders who had previously served in the British Army in the Middle East during the First World War – managed to open a route linking Damascus to Baghdad with the help of a Syrian gold smuggler.[14] A few months later, two transport companies provided a regular passenger and mail service between Beirut and Baghdad.

At that time, the Arab provinces of the former Ottoman Empire had been placed under French or British Mandate by the League of Nations. Officially, the mandates system was framed to guide the trust territories and their inhabitants towards independence, as they were considered 'not yet able to stand by themselves'.[15] However, the creation of the mandates was also the a posteriori legitimation by the League of Nations of the conquests made by the Allied powers on Ottoman territories during the war.[16] At the end of the war, the regions of present-day Syria and Iraq were entirely occupied by British troops, who withdrew from Syria in 1919 to make way for the French. The deployment of French and British forces between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf was mainly aimed at securing imperial trade and communication routes. This has been amply demonstrated by historical studies in the case of the British.[17] As for the French, historians have often asserted that France's increased presence in the Eastern Mediterranean was primarily intended to fulfil a 'civilising mission' and to assert the prestige of the French nation.[18] Nevertheless, France's commercial interests in the region in the early twentieth century should not be overlooked.[19] Crucially, the creation of the mandates was thus the result of a 'compromise' between the great powers, which wanted to annex the territories they had seized from Germany and the Ottoman Empire during the war, and the advocates of international control over the colonies.[20]

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[12] Sarah Shield, *Mosul Before Iraq: Like Bees Making Five-Sided Cells* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Philippe Pétriat, 'Caravan Trade in the Late Ottoman Empire: the ʿAqīl Network and the Institutionalization of Overland Trade', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 63, Nos. 1–2 (2019), pp. 38–72.

[13] Charles Issawi, *The Fertile Crescent 1800–1914: A Documentary Economic History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 219.

[14] Christina P. Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, pp. 274–278; John Munro, *The Nairn Way: Desert Bus to Baghdad* (New York: Caravan Books, 1980), pp. 35–39.

[15] Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations. Available on the website of the United Nations Library & Archives Geneva. https://libraryresources.unog.ch/ld.php?content_id=32971179 (Accessed 6 May 2020).

The trusteeship entrusted to France and Britain by the League of Nations provided that the mandated territories remained open to international trade and mobility. From an economic point of view, the principle of the 'open-door' required that there should be no discrimination between members of the League with regard to economic access to the trust territories. The mandates system promoted 'freedom of transit' across the mandated territories rather than exclusivist economic policies.[21] Although these commercial rules were not always respected by the mandatory powers, the open-door policy contributed to the 'revival of world trade' between the late 1910s and the late 1920s.[22] The emergence of the Baghdad–Damascus route must be understood in this context, where both the mandates system and British and French imperial interests encouraged the development of new regional, if not global communication networks in the region, creating an imperial transit zone transcending to some extent national borders.

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[16] Pierre-Jean Luizard, 'Le mandat britannique en Irak: une rencontre entre plusieurs projets politiques,' in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 366.

[17] Robert S. G. Fletcher, *British Imperialism and 'the Tribal Question'*, p. 35; Pierre-Jean Luizard, 'Le mandat britannique en Irak', p. 366; Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905–1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 10–11.

[18] Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 60; Peter Sluglett, 'Les mandats/the mandates', p. 111.

[19] Simon Jackson, 'Mandatory Development: The Political Economy of the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon, 1915–1939', (PhD thesis, New York University, 2009), pp. 118–97.

[20] Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan, 'Introduction', p. 2; Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 2.

[21] League of Nations Archives [hereafter LON], Article 11 of the Mandate charter for Syria and Lebanon, August 1922. https://biblio-archive.unog.ch/Dateien/CouncilMSD/C-528-M-313-1922-VI_BI.pdf (Accessed 6 May 2020).

During the 1920s, the Baghdad–Damascus route became the main communication axis between Syria and Iraq. From Damascus, travellers could either take the direct route through the desert to Rutbah, Ramadi and Baghdad, or choose to make a detour via Palmyra, where vacationers and tourists could admire its famous ruins before reaching the main track (Fig. 8.1). Although other routes linking Iraq to the Mediterranean emerged during the interwar period – for instance, between Aleppo and Mosul as well as Haifa and Baghdad – they only gained importance in the 1930s. The Baghdad–Damascus route remained the key transdesert route in the 1920s and during most of the interwar years. A few months after the establishment of the Nairn transport service, between 200 and 300 passengers were crossing the Syrian Desert every month.[23] Four years later, in 1927, statistics indicated that an average of about 800 passengers had travelled that year between Damascus and Baghdad. By 1928, the figures had almost doubled.[24] But even more than the volume of traffic, the diversity of travellers is noteworthy, as it ranged from government officials, merchants and tourists to summer vacationers, scouts and pilgrims. Consequently, while the development of motorised transport built on preexisting networks and practices,[25] it also led to a change in the speed, scale and type of movement. In short, the opening of the transdesert route re-shaped mobility across the Syrian Desert.

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[22] Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (London: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 134.

[23] The National Archives, Kew Garden [hereafter TNA], FO 684/1/24/14, British consul, Damascus to Department of Overseas Trade, 6 November 1924.

[24] TNA, FO 684/7/34/3, report on 'Transdesert Traffic' by Frank H. Todd (British Vice-Consul, Damascus), enclosed in letter from Mackereth (British Consul, Damascus), 26 April 1934.

[25] Robert S. G. Fletcher, 'Running the Corridor: Nomadic Societies and Imperial Rule in the Inter-War Syrian Desert', *Past & Present*, Vol. 220, No. 1 (2013), p. 196.

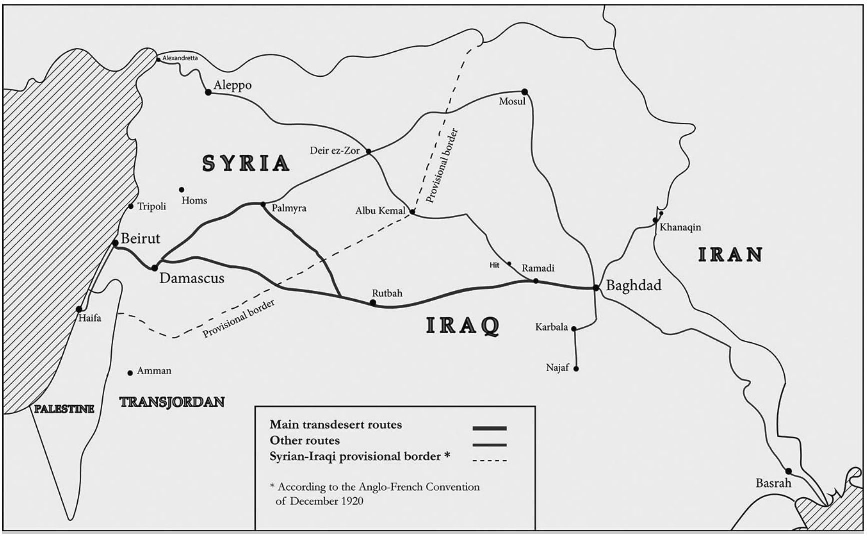
Alexandretta
Aleppo
SYRIA
Deir ez-Zor
Mosul
Provisional border
Tripoli
Homs
Palmyra
Albu Kemal
Beirut
Damascus
Khanaqin
IRAN
Hit
Ramadi
Baghdad
Rutbah
Haifa
Provisional border
IRAQ
Karbala
Najaf
Amman
PALESTINE
TRANSJORDAN
Main transdesert routes
Other routes
Syrian-Iraqi provisional border *
* According to the Anglo-French Convention of December 1920
Basrah

Figure 8.1 Map of transdesert routes (late 1920s).

Credit: Redrawn by the author from Government of Iraq, *Maps of Iraq with Notes for Visitors* (Baghdad: Government of Iraq, 1929).[26]

Imperial perceptions

The sudden success of the first transport companies operating across the desert aroused hopes for the future development of large-scale automobile traffic between the Mediterranean and Iraq, Iran and beyond. Journalists, local government officials and, above all, French and British mandatory administrators shared the conviction that the automobile could overcome the desert, which had been hitherto regarded as an ‘impassable barrier’ or a ‘closed door’.[27] As a newspaper article headlined, the motor car enabled the ‘conquest of the Syrian Desert’.[28] In September 1924, the Lebanese newspaper *Lisan al-Hal* expressed hopes that the new route would enable Syria to once again become ‘the gateway to the East and its majestic bridge’.[29] Put another way, the transdesert route was expected to restore Syria’s position as a crossroads of regional mobilities, which had been circumscribed by the rise in steam navigation and the opening of the Suez Canal in the nineteenth century.[30] As for French and British Mandate officials, they regarded the Baghdad–Damascus route as a crucial communication route for their respective empires, just as the British had viewed the Suez Canal as a ‘highway of the British Empire’ in the previous century.[31] In late 1923 the French High Commissioner Weygand stated that the Baghdad–Damascus route was becoming ‘the safest, the quickest and the least expensive way’ between Iran and Europe.[32] The British, for their part, looked forward to a new ‘imperial route to the East’ linking the British metropole with India.[33] Furthermore, in the eyes of mandatory administrators, transdesert traffic was likely to mitigate the social and economic damage caused by the establishment of international borders in the Middle East.[34]

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[26] Government of Iraq, *Maps of Iraq with Notes for Visitors* (Baghdad: Government of Iraq, 1929).

[27] Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 150.

[28] Centre des Archives diplomatiques de La Courneuve [hereafter CADC], 48CPCOM43, ‘The Conquest of the Syrian Desert,’ reprinted from *The Commercial Motor*, 7 September 1926. For analyses of a similar narrative associated by French officials with the first motor expeditions across the Sahara see: Andrew Denning, ‘Mobilizing Empire: The Citroën

Aware that the opening of overland routes in the Middle East served their economic and political interests, local governments and the French and British authorities sought to promote the expansion of traffic across the Syrian Desert. In the mid-1920s their support mainly targeted transport companies

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Central Africa Expedition and the Interwar Civilizing Mission’, *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2020), pp. 42–70; Jacob Krais, ‘Mastering the Wheel of Chance: Motor Racing in French Algeria and Italian Libya’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2019), pp. 143–58.

[29] American University of Beirut, newspaper archives [hereafter AUB], ‘Ṭarīq Baghdād’, *Lisan al-hal*, 29 September 1924, p. 2. Original text in Arabic: bāb al-sharqi wa jisrahu-l-‘aẓīm.

[30] CADC, 48CPCOM42, Weygand to French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 6 August 1924; AUB, ‘Ṭarīq ul-qawāfili taslukuhā al-sayyārāt’, *Lisan al-hal*, 5 June 1924, p. 1.

[31] Valeska Huber, ‘Highway of the British Empire? The Suez Canal between Imperial Competition and Local Accommodation’, in Jorn Leonhard and Ulrike von Hirschhausen (eds), *Comparing Empires: Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), pp. 37–59.

[32] CADC, 48CPCOM42, Weygand to French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 December 1923.

[33] Harold L. Hoskins, *British Routes to India* (Philadelphia: Longmans Green, 1928).

[34] TNA, FO 424/632, Satow (British Consul-General, Beirut) to John Chancellor (High Commissioner for Palestine), 16 April 1929; LON, R22/4284/47053, ‘Rapport sur la situation de la Syrie et du Liban (année 1924)’.

and took the form of subsidies, contracts for the transport of mail and customs exemptions. The French agreed to provide an annual subsidy to the Eastern Transport Company – a company founded in Beirut by Francis and Alfred Kettaneh – and to entrust the firm with the mail contract for Iraq and Iran in exchange for the addition of French capital to the company.[35] The Nairn Transport Company, for its part, was awarded a contract by the Iraqi government to transport mail between Haifa, Damascus and Baghdad in late 1923.[36] In October 1927, moreover, the French published a first decree granting customs exemptions on cars, tyres, oils and spare parts for the three main transport companies of the time, namely the Nairn Transport Company, the Kawatly Tawil Company and the Makhzumi Company.[37]

Despite the rhetoric of a 'conquest of the desert', travelling through the Syrian Desert in the mid-1920s was an uncomfortable, even dangerous journey. Drivers often had difficulty finding their way through the vast steppe, even more so because of sandstorms that often erased the tracks of cars. Quite often, travellers would get lost in the desert and wander for days without finding a living soul,[38] thus giving full meaning to the nickname attributed by some newspapers to the Syrian Desert: the 'desert of wandering'.[39] In addition, crossing the desert was usually complicated by one or more breakdowns that forced passengers to spend a few extra hours in the Syrian steppe or even abandon their vehicles.

Under these conditions, the development of the transdesert route pursued by the French and British authorities depended on their own capacity to ensure the safety of drivers and travellers across the desert. This common goal prompted French and British officials to collaborate, despite the intense rivalry between the two powers that persisted in the Middle East throughout the interwar period. Taking shape just after the First World War around the control of Middle Eastern territories,[40] the Franco-British rivalry developed into a struggle for economic supremacy in the region in the 1930s, crystallising notably around the competition between the ports of Beirut and Haifa,[41] and then reached a peak during the Second World War.[42] Nevertheless, the British Inspector General of the Iraq Police met with French officers in Damascus in November 1923 to discuss the implementation of common regulations and agreed with the French on the need for traffic control and vehicle inspections.[43] In line with their recommendations, the governments of Syria and Iraq issued in 1924 the first legislations on transdesert traffic, which shared numerous provisions. In particular, they compelled any car running across the desert to travel in a convoy, so that passengers would not get lost and would be able to find help in the event of a breakdown.[44] From then on, motor convoys were assembled either in Damascus or Baghdad under the leadership of a convoy leader and embarked on the transdesert route upon notification of their departure to the responsible authorities on the other side of the desert.[45]

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[35] TNA, FO 371/10093, memorandum, 'The position and prospects of the Eastern Transport Co', enclosed in letter from Sir Edward Crowe, 11 September 1924.

[36] Christina P. Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, p. 274.

[37] 'Bulletin mensuel des actes administratifs du Haut-Commissariat', decree no. 1607 of 8 October 1927. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64598233 (Accessed 14 April 2020).

[38] AUB, 'Sayyāra ḍā'i'a', *al-Shaab*, 22 August 1927, p. 3.

[39] AUB, 'Ṭarīq al-ṣaḥrā", *Lisan al-hal*, 1 April 1924, p. 1. Original text in Arabic: ṣaḥrā al-ḍalāl.

Highway Robberies and the Thorny Problem of Traffic Organisation

The consolidation of the Baghdad–Damascus route did not go without problems, though. Brigands, Bedouins and rebels challenged imperial endeavours while leaving their imprint on the evolution of these desert highways. Already at the end of 1923 there were numerous reports of attacks on cars travelling on the Iraqi road between Fallujah and Deir ez-Zor.[46] With the outbreak of the Great Syrian Revolt in the mid-1920s the Baghdad–Damascus route became the scene of frequent hold-ups. As unrest spread throughout Syria, highway robbers reccurently attacked convoys in the desert, robbing drivers and travellers and sometimes seizing their cars.[47] The largest theft occurred on 26 August 1925 during a violent attack in which several passengers and drivers were injured.[48] On this occasion, the robbers stole a consignment of 15,000 Turkish gold pounds that was being transferred from the Ottoman Bank to the Imperial Bank of Persia.[49] Subsequently, the High Commissioner for Iraq considered that the Baghdad–Damascus route was not safe enough to maintain traffic and decided to temporarily redirect the mail service of the Nairn Transport Company to the Baghdad–Amman route.[50]

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[40] Gérard D. Khoury, 'Introduction de partie. Les conditions d'instauration du Mandat français au Proche-Orient après la Première guerre mondiale', in Nadine Méouchy (ed.), *France, Syrie et Liban, 1918–1946: les ambiguïtés et les dynamiques de la relation mandataire* (Damas: Institut français d'études arabes de Damas, 2002), pp. 51–62.

[41] Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress*, pp. 31–33; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, pp. 251–52.

[42] Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 583–618.

[43] LON, R58/1/17502/44571, report by His Britannic Majesty's Government on the Administration of 'Iraq for the period April 1923–December 1924, p. 42.

[44] TNA, FO 371/10831, Nairn Transport Company to High Commissioner for Iraq, 28 October 1925.

[45] TNA, FO 684/1/24/14, decree no. 22, 6 February 1924 ('règlementant la circulation automobile sur le territoire de l'État de Damas entre la Syrie et la Mésopotamie').

Despite the crushing of the revolt, a group of exiled insurgents operating from southern Syria, Transjordan and the Najd gave the French and the British a hard time between 1927 and 1928 by carrying out a few hold-ups on the Baghdad–Damascus route. These rebels had first moved to southern Syria in 1926, before seeking refuge in the camp of Al-Azraq in Transjordan.[51] In the summer of 1927, however, when British forces expelled them from Transjordan, many of these insurgents went further to Wadi Sirhan in the newly created sultanate of Ibn Saud, while others left for Amman, Jerusalem and Cairo.[52] On 10 August 1928 rebels from Wadi Sirhan attacked a mail convoy on the Baghdad–Damascus route, robbed the passengers and took away two cars and the mail bags. Joint investigations conducted by the Syrian, Iraqi and Transjordanian authorities proved that the outlaws were the same that had carried out robberies in March 1928 and that they were operating from Najd territory.[53] This example points out that Bedouins, bandits and rebels who engaged in highway robbery took advantage of the introduction of sovereign territoriality by crossing borders to escape their pursuers. As noted in March 1925 by a British officer concerned about the development of banditry in northern Iraq, bandits used to cross the border into Syria, making desert policing impossible. 'Small bands of brigands will always be able to interfere practically when and where they choose, and the brigands may come from territory beyond the borders of Iraq'.[54] Although collaboration between officers in Syria, Transjordan and Iraq allowed the mandatory authorities to locate the rebel camp in Wadi Sirhan, they could not intervene directly on Najd territory. Instead, the French and British tried to convince Ibn Saud to extradite the rebels or to prevent them from interfering again with the transdesert traffic, to no avail.[55]

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[46] TNA, FO 684/2/24/109, Bourdillon (Secretary, High Commission for Iraq) to Maigret (French consul, Baghdad), 5 December 1923.

[47] Middle East Centre Archive, St Antony's College, Oxford, Nairn Transport Company Collection [hereafter MECA], 'Desert convoy again attacked: Drivers stripped by raiders', *Times*, 5 September 1925; TNA, Air 5/408, 'Summary of Recent Attacks on Desert Route Convoys', September 1925.

[48] TNA, FO 371/12303, British Consul, Damascus to Foreign Affairs, 26 February 1927.

[49] TNA, FO 371/13072, claim of the Nairn Transport Company for losses in attack on convoy in Syria, 22 December 1927.

[50] TNA, AIR 5/408, telegram from High Commissioner for Iraq to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 2 September 1925.

[51] Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), pp. 142–44.

[52] Laila Parsons, *The Commander: Fawzi Al-Qawuqji and the Fight for Arab Independence, 1914–1948* (London: Saqi, 2017), p. 208.

Disruption of jurisdiction was not, however, the only challenge that state powers had to deal with in these borderlands; just as travellers used modern technologies to speed up the crossing of the desert, so did bandits and Bedouins.[56] As evidenced by the attacks on convoys by Druze rebels in 1928, local actors managed to use motor cars to carry out activities at odds with the interest of Middle Eastern states and the mandatory authorities. The persistent phenomenon of highway robbery shows that the creation of transdesert routes not only served the political and economic interests of the French and the British in the Middle East but also benefited non-elite groups, who took advantage of the new mobility networks allowed by the spread of motorised transport in their own way. In this regard, the Baghdad–Damascus route carried similar implications to those of various roads built in the late Ottoman period, which, as Fulya Özkan has shown, 'were not only a means of establishing state power, but also an arena that provided the space to contest that power'.[57]

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[53] TNA, AIR 23/390, Major Cones (Iraqi Police) to the Adviser to the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, 30 August 1928.

[54] TNA, AIR 5/408, letter from Webster (British Air Council), 21 March 1925.

[55] TNA, CO 732/33/5, Shuckburgh (Colonial Office) to Mance, 19 December 1928.

[56] Mehdi Sakatni, 'From Camel to Truck? Automobiles and the Pastoralist Nomadism of Syrian Tribes during the French Mandate (1920–46)', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2019), pp. 159–69.

The harm caused by highway robberies prompted the mandatory authorities in Iraq and Syria to take action from 1925 onwards, as more and more travellers were attacked, robbed, injured and sometimes even stripped of their clothes.[58] A particular event became the turning point in the monitoring of these borderlands. In early March 1925 Mrs Maillard, the wife of the French Vice-Consul in Iraq, was killed in a hold-up on Iraqi territory while travelling with the Eastern Transport Company.[59] Against this backdrop, French and British desert police officers reached an agreement in April 1925 on a 'monthly desert liaison', which consisted of detachments of Syrian and Iraqi armoured cars patrolling the desert once a month between October and February and meeting near the temporary border.[60] Despite the patrolling of the desert, however, repeated highway robberies occurred throughout 1925 and again required additional measures. Along the lines of previous arrangements made to secure the Mosul–Aleppo route,[61] the French and British authorities set up in September 1925 a system of escorted convoys of cars on the Baghdad–Damascus route. Every Monday at a fixed time, a convoy left Damascus and another left Baghdad under military escort, the two convoys meeting on arrival near the provisional border.[62] If a convoy did not arrive within forty-eight hours of the scheduled time, motor cars and aircraft could be sent to search for the missing passengers.[63] These arrangements inaugurated so-called 'protected days' during which cars were allowed to cross the desert and benefited from a military escort. Over time, the mandatory authorities in Syria and Iraq organised the protection of convoys twice and later three times a week to enable traffic to increase.[64]

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[57] Fulya Özkan, 'Gravediggers of the Modern State: Highway Robbers on the Trabzon-Bayezid Road, 1850s–1910s', *Journal of Persianate Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2014), p. 225.

[58] MECA, 'Desert convoy again attacked: Drivers stripped by raiders', *Times*, 5 September 1925.

[59] CADC, 48CPCOM3, Bagot (Managing agent in Iraq, Eastern Transport Company) to French Consul in Iraq, 8 March 1925.

[60] TNA, AIR 5/408, 'General Arrangements made for the protection of the desert motor routes from Damascus to Baghdad', Headquarters of the French Army of the Levant, Beirut, 1 April 1925.

[61] TNA, FO 371/7851, written statement by Flaxman (Divisional Adviser, Mosul) and Captain Coux (French Officer), 31 July 1922.

[62] TNA, AIR 5/408, Aubouard (Delegate of the French High Commissioner) to British Consul, Damascus, 14 September 1925.

The need to secure the transdesert route, in addition to giving rise to common practices of traffic organisation between French, British and local administrators, also led the states to renounce the strict assertion of their territorial sovereignty. In 1925, for instance, the French and British chose Bir Mulusa as the meeting point of the Syrian and Iraqi patrols of the desert, even though it was located on Iraqi territory, according to the Anglo-French Convention of December 1920.[65] As the site was the most suitable, however, the British accepted to allow French armoured cars to cross the border in order to meet the Iraqi patrol at Bir Mulusa.[66] Subsequently, the meeting point of the escorts moved to a place called the 'switch road', where the route from Baghdad split between the direct route to Damascus and the longer one via Palmyra, but still remained on Iraqi territory.[67] In August 1928 the French and British authorities renewed their agreement to allow armed escorts to cross the border, if necessary.[68]

The drawbacks and shortcomings of traffic organisation

Although the French and British were eager to promote (trans)regional movements of people and goods across Syria and Iraq, the measures enforced to ensure safe travel on the transdesert route introduced numerous traffic restrictions and created serious impediments to mobility. In March 1928 only three escorted convoys per week were organised through the Syrian Desert, leaving Damascus and Baghdad on Tuesdays, Fridays and Sundays.[69] Thus, those wishing to leave Baghdad for Damascus had to wait for the departure of a convoy on one of these days and to comply with the timetables set by the authorities. The restrictions also applied to those travelling in their own car. Maurice Honoré, a Frenchman who travelled from Baghdad to Syria in 1929, was forced to wait several hours in Rutbah for the last car of his convoy to arrive before being allowed to continue his journey. He noted in his travelogue that the system of 'motor caravans' was ill adapted to the situation.[70] To sum up, the organisation of transdesert traffic by the French and British authorities could lead to serious slowdowns in the 1920s.

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[63] Thomas Cook Archive, Peterborough' 'To Baghdad in Nine Days: Further Notes on the Syria-Iraq Motor Route', *The Traveller's Gazette*, Vol. 3 (March 1924), p. 10.

[64] TNA, CO 732/33/5, 'Trans-desert routes', extract from Economic report no. 105, 31 March 1928.

[65] TNA, AIR 5/408, Air staff to Salisbury (British Liaison Officer, Beirut), 30 April 1925.

[66] TNA, AIR 5/408, High Commission for Iraq to High Commission for Syria, 30 April 1925.

[67] TNA, CO 732/33/5, extract from Economic report, 31 March 1928.

[68] TNA, AIR 23/390, 'Notes of conversation with Colonel Le Long, French Chief Staff, Damascus', 11 August 1928.

Moreover, it often produced congestion at the different stages of the journey, in particular at police stations and customs posts, where travellers could observe 'a general gathering of cars of the various convoys'.[71] A frequent spot of congestion was Rutbah, halfway between Baghdad and Damascus in the middle of the desert, where the British built a police post in 1926.[72] The Rutbah Post was later expanded to include a customs post, a health station and, from 1928, a rest house. By the late 1920s, Rutbah was a major location of overcrowding. The Nairn Transport Company – which was in charge of managing the rest house – protested in June 1929 to the British authorities that their clients could not find any accommodation at the Rutbah rest house. 'Native convoys leave one day before us, sleep at Ramadi, and get into Rutba [*sic*] before the arrival of our convoys, and as accommodation there is limited, Nairn passengers have to go without,' wrote Norman Nairn to one of his associates, forwarding him a letter of complaint from the travel agency Thomas Cook & Son.[73] In the view of the British Adviser to the Iraq Ministry of Work and Communication, overcrowding at the Rutbah rest house was due to the restrictions imposed upon desert crossing. 'If the route was open every day of the week then there would not be congestion at Rutba [*sic*] and Nairn's staff there would have an easier time'.[74]

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[69] TNA, CO 732/33/5, extract from Economic report no. 105, 31 March 1928.

[70] Maurice Honoré, *Vers Bagdad* (Paris: Pierre Roger, 1929), p. 168.

[71] Freya Stark, *Beyond Euphrates: autobiography 1928–1933* (London: John Murray, 1951), p. 81.

[72] CADC, 48CPCOM43, 'The Rutbah Post', *Baghdad Times*, 5 February 1926.

[73] TNA, CO 732/39/11, Norman Nairn to Sir Osborne Mance, 7 June 1929.

In addition, car traffic between Iraq and Syria was likely to increase massively in some months of the year due to the movement of pilgrims heading for Mecca. In May and April 1927, for instance, about two thousand pilgrims left Baghdad for Damascus, thus doubling or even tripling the usual passenger traffic. In the months of July and August, reverse traffic reached a similar level. The British Inspector General of Health in Baghdad, reporting on the motor transport situation in 1927, stated that transport companies plying across the Syrian Desert were able to face such a sudden increase in traffic, as they could 'at very short notice quadruple their transport capacity by hiring cars in Baghdad or in Syria'.[75] Unlike private transporters, however, the authorities met with great difficulty in dealing with the seasonal growth in traffic. As the desert crossing was limited to a few days of the week, any sudden increase in traffic created congestion in various places. In order to minimise the inconvenience, the French authorities in Damascus decided in July 1929, when the returning pilgrimage traffic was at its peak, to allow pilgrims to go to Baghdad on days other than the 'protected' days.[76] On many other occasions, the authorities ended up breaking the rules governing transdesert traffic by allowing cars to drive in the desert outside the prescribed days or hours. The British, for instance, were particularly keen to allow travellers to cross at any time of the day to arrive in Beirut in time to board a ship or to travel during the cooler hours of the day.[77]

As these examples demonstrate, the arrangements made to supervise and protect motor convoys between Syria and Iraq produced unexpected results, ranging from overcrowding to delays, which played against the French and British desire to foster quick and efficient transport across the desert. Although road improvements and new automotive technologies were able to

[74] TNA, CO 732/39/11, Wheatley (Advisor, Iraq Ministry of Work and Communication) to Empson (Consular Secretary, High Commission for Iraq), 7 August 1929.

[75] LON, R981-12B-49616-61055, Hallinan (Inspector General of Health, Baghdad) to Major Thomson (President of the Quarantine Board of Egypt), 18 August 1927.

[76] TNA, FO 371/13745, extract from Economic report no. 137, July 1929.

[77] CADC, 50CPCOM358, Paul Lépissier (French Consul, Iraq) to French High Commissioner, 5 November 1929.

reduce the journey time between Damascus and Baghdad, the organisation of transdesert traffic remained a major obstacle to the much-desired 'conquest' of the Syrian Desert. Confronted with multiple obstacles to free-flowing traffic in the late 1920s, the French and British Mandate administrators took more and more unilateral decisions and increasingly violated common regulations on transdesert traffic in order to speed up transdesert mobility.

In this context, a growing number of French and British administrators called for a strengthening of cross-border cooperation. In November 1929 a preliminary meeting was held in Damascus, which paved the way for a broader Desert Traffic Control Conference, convened in the same city on 22 and 23 January 1930. The recommendations of the conference show a mutual willingness to strengthen cooperation and harmonise practices in the field of traffic organisation. For instance, the delegates drew up a draft regulation on the material organisation of traffic that would standardise the rules in force in Syria and Iraq.[78] In addition, these meetings aimed at discussing whether the restrictions on desert traffic should be relaxed to ease traffic flow. At the preliminary session, the British Inspector General of Police, Major Cones, wrote a note in favour of removing the ban on night travel. In his view, allowing it would not only reduce congestion in Rutbah but also significantly reduce travel time between Baghdad and Beirut, which would be greatly appreciated 'in business circles'.[79] Yet the promotion of transdesert traffic went hand in hand with a renewed effort geared towards channelling this mobility.

Indeed, the mandatory authorities and local governments gradually developed ways to regulate and streamline mobility between Syria and Iraq by applying discriminatory treatment to the multiple forms of mobility. Their management of the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca (the hajj) shows that the promotion of transdesert mobility applied unevenly and selectively to people travelling through Iraq and Syria. The next section thus examines the implementation of bureaucratic measures to regulate the movement of pilgrims on the transdesert routes and aims to show that the channelling of mobility between Iraq and Syria, to quote Valeska Huber, involved 'multiple processes of exclusion and deceleration'.[80]

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[78] Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes, Nantes [hereafter CADN], SYR-LIB-1v b703, 'Conférence Syro-Irakienne sur le contrôle du Trafic de la route Damas-Bagdad', minutes of the conference.

[79] TNA, FO 371/13745, copy of Major Cones' note on night travel, enclosed in Economic report for the fortnight ending 29 November 1929.

Channelling Mobility

In the second half of the 1920s an increasing number of pilgrims from Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan travelled on the Baghdad–Damascus route by car and lorry on their way to Mecca. In 1927 about two thousand Iranians crossed Iraq and Syria towards the Hejaz despite the Iranian government's ban on the pilgrimage to Mecca.[81] These hajj pilgrims benefited greatly from the steady decline, throughout the 1920s, in the fares charged by transport companies for crossing the desert. The increasing opportunities for overland travel in the interwar years also led to a revival of the Indian pilgrimage to the holy cities of Iraq as well as to the Hejaz via Iraq and Syria.[82] As the number of pilgrims circulating on the transdesert route increased, the mandatory authorities in Syria and Iraq began to consider regulating their movements.

These dynamics were by no means new, though. In the nineteenth century, empires ruling over Muslim populations had already become concerned about the regulation of pilgrimage traffic between territories under their control and the Hejaz. The regulation of the hajj intensified in the late nineteenth century, as the mobility of pilgrims was increasingly considered by European powers as a major factor in the spread of epidemic diseases and dissident ideas.[83] In 1865 a cholera outbreak erupted in the Hejaz during the pilgrimage season and spread to Europe, urging the different empires to take sanitary measures along pilgrimage routes.[84] At the time, health control largely focused on the Red Sea, because the maritime routes from India were identified as the main propagation channel.[85] The growth of overland pilgrimage routes in the early twentieth century, spawned by the development of rail and road transport, urged the international community to implement similar measures on the land routes from the 1920s onwards.[86]

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[80] Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities*, p. 3.

[81] LON, R2314/6A/6774/655, report to the Council of the League of Nations on the Administration of Iraq for the year 1927, p. 88.

[82] British Library [hereafter BL], IOR/L/E/7/1479, file 6742, letter from Kitching (Administrative Inspector, Diwaniyah) to the Political Secretary to the Government of India, 5 January 1928.

[83] Lâle Can, *Spiritual Subjects: Central Asian Pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj at the End of Empire* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020); Sylvia Chiffoleau, 'Le pèlerinage à La Mecque à l'époque coloniale: matrice d'une opinion publique musulmane ?' in Sylvia Chiffoleau and Anna Madoeuf (eds), *Les pèlerinages au Maghreb et au Moyen-Orient: Espaces publics, espaces du public* (Beirut: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2010), pp. 131–63; Michael C. Low, 'Empire and the Hajj: Pilgrims, Plagues, and Pan-Islam under British Surveillance, 1865–1908', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (May 2008), pp. 269–90; Francis E. Peters, *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

At the French initiative, a Conference on the Muslim Pilgrimage was held in Beirut in January 1929, which set the foundations for the channelling of pilgrims' mobility along the new routes that criss-crossed the Middle East. First and foremost, the representatives of Syria and Lebanon as well as Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine defined itineraries for the overland pilgrimage.[87] Moreover, they took a series of bureaucratic measures that specifically applied to pilgrims. Besides requiring their vaccination against smallpox and cholera, the conference recommended the creation of pilgrimage passes that would only be granted upon production of a return ticket and a deposit guarantee.[88] In so doing, Middle Eastern states sought to reduce the number of (mainly Indian) destitute pilgrims, who were expected to increase with the development of cheap means of transport in Iraq.[89]

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[84] Sylvia Chiffoleau, *Le Voyage à La Mecque: Un pèlerinage mondial en terre d'Islam* (Paris: Bélin, 2017), pp. 163–214.

[85] Eric Tagliacozzo, 'Hajj in the Time of Cholera: Pilgrim Ships and Contagion from Southeast Asia to the Red Sea', in James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (eds), *Global Muslim in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 103–20.

[86] Sylvia Chiffoleau, 'Les quarantaines au Moyen-Orient: vecteurs ambigus de la modernité médicale (XIXe–XXe siècles)', in Anne Marie Moulin and Yeşim Işıl Ülman (eds), *Perilous Modernity: History of Medicine in the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East from the 19th Century Onwards*' (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2010), pp. 144–45.

[87] Luc Chantre, *Pèlerinages d'empire: Une histoire européenne du pèlerinage à la Mecque* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2018), pp. 255–56.

[88] TNA, CO 732/39/9, 'Conference on the Mohammedan Pilgrimage held at Beyrout on 17–18 January 1929: Regulations passed by the delegates.'

[89] BL, IOR-L-E-7-1558, file 162, 'Memorandum on Pilgrimage to the Holy Cities of Islam in Iraq by British Indians and subjects of the Native States of India', British Consulate, Basra, 21 January 1930.

In order to regulate the movement of pilgrims, the British and the French also resorted to granting concessions to private companies, which were responsible for enforcing the new regulations. From 1928 onwards, the French authorities in Syria began to grant yearly concessions on the transport of pilgrims by ship from Beirut to Jeddah.[90] The same measures were also applied to the transdesert route by the Iraqi authorities, who designated the Mesopotamia Persia Corporation as the official pilgrim transporter in the late 1920s, in order to implement the return ticket system recommended by the Beirut Pilgrimage Conference. Although the company did not provide any transport service between Iraq and Syria, it was entitled to sell return tickets on behalf of other companies.[91] This allowed the Mesopotamia Persia Company to make reservations for the entire journey by land and sea from Baghdad to Beirut, Jeddah and finally back to Bombay.[92]

Testimonies and complaints from Indian pilgrims show how these regulations affected their journey across the Middle East. In late 1928 the government of India opened a position of Protector of Indian Pilgrims in Baghdad in response to the growth of overland pilgrimage through Iraq by their subjects. Tahir Hussain Quraishi, the first Protector, was responsible for providing pilgrims with precise information about road and rail services in Iraq.[93] He also collected their complaints and requests, which he transmitted to the British authorities and the Indian government in an annual report. In 1929 the report mentioned many complaints about the new deposit and return ticket requirements imposed in Iraq on the part of well-to-do pilgrims who 'did not understand why they should be subjected to more stringent regulations than ordinary first-class travellers crossing the desert'.[94] The same year, a well-off

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[90] Sylvia Chiffoleau, *Le Voyage à La Mecque*, p. 356.

[91] TNA, FO 371/14456, extract from Economic report no. 4 for the fortnight ended 24 February 1930.

[92] TNA, CO 732/39/9, telegram from High Commissioner for Iraq to Foreign Secretary, India, 6 April 1929.

[93] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1479, file 6742, 'Memorandum regarding the proposed duties of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims in Iraq' (no date, most likely 1928).

[94] TNA, CO 730/159/2, report for 1929 on the work of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims, attached to a letter from Empson (Consular Secretary, High Commission for Iraq), 12 August 1930.

Indian pilgrim talked in detail about his journey to Mecca via Iraq to the Hajj Enquiry Committee, which used to collect the grievances of Indian pilgrims. As his testimony goes, Hussain Mohammed Ladhiwalla was asked in Baghdad to make a deposit of 200 rupees and forced to book with the Mesopotamia Persia Company, although he had already arranged for the transdesert journey with another company that charged lower rates. He commented as follows: 'Thus, I think they get a good profit; as, if a Haji can arrange himself, he can easily get the same ticket for about Rs. 200/- and save Rs. 71/-. This is the heavy burden on Hajis travelling by this route.'[95] In Baghdad, Ladhiwalla also refused to make the deposit of 200 rupees per person with the British consulate and was finally exempted after lengthy negotiations with the consul. In all, however, the various formalities took twelve days, during which he had to remain in Baghdad to follow the bureaucratic procedures that now governed the movement of pilgrims. Other evidence points to shortcomings in the regulation of pilgrimage traffic. Some pilgrims with return tickets, for instance, were delayed in Syria on their way back from the Hejaz because transport companies gave priority to passengers paying in cash.[96] It also seems that, despite the return ticket, pilgrims were obliged at each stage of the journey to exchange their tickets with the numerous agents of the Mesopotamia Persia Company, who each took a commission.[97] Unsurprisingly, a British report noted in 1930 that the number of Indian pilgrims performing the hajj via Iraq had decreased and attributed this decline to 'the stories of restrictions and hardships suffered which were circulated by pilgrims on return home'.[98]

The regulation of the pilgrimage was not limited to the introduction of specific bureaucratic formalities and financial guarantees. At the Desert Traffic Control Conference in 1930 the French and British delegates made recommendations to improve the flow and speed of traffic across the desert while distinguishing between three categories of transport, namely conventional travellers, pilgrims and goods.[99] As pilgrimage traffic had been identified as a major problem of traffic organisation, the delegates considered its regulation as a precondition for the fluidity of transdesert traffic. In January 1930, Major Cones expressed this Iraqi government's request in these terms:

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[95] BL, IOR/L/PJ/7/771-2283, Extract from written statement of Mr Hussain Vali Mohammed Ladhiwalla, attached to letter from the Secretariat of the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Ministry of Interior, Baghdad, 9 December 1929.

[96] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558, file 162, report for 1932 on the work of the Protector of British Indian Pilgrims.

[97] BL, IOR/L/PJ/7/771-2283, extract from written statement of Mr Hussain Vali Mohammed Ladhiwalla.

[98] BL, IOR/L/E/7/1558, extract from Economic report, 1930 [month unknown], enclosed in letter dated 9 July 1930.

> The removal of the current restrictions can only be carried out step-by-step and according to transport categories. As an experiment, Iraq would simply be willing, for the time being, to allow the free transport of pilgrims and the movement of goods outside the days of special protection.[100]

French delegate Veber responded that the League of Nations would not appreciate a practice suggesting that the Mandate authorities were less concerned with the safety of pilgrims than with the safety of other kinds of travellers. To the French, moreover, the British Iraqi proposal seemed to serve no purpose other than favouring the leading Iraqi transporter Haim Nathaniel, who was merely catering for pilgrimage and goods traffic.[101] Therefore, they refused the proposal. The French and British delegates did not reach an agreement during the conference but recommended that the Syrian and Iraqi governments should carefully examine whether they wished to allow unrestricted travel for pilgrim convoys. They also agreed, for a transitional period, to allow the organisation of pilgrim convoys outside the prescribed days, if necessary, and on the condition that the Syrian and Iraqi police be notified in advance.[102] In addition, the delegates also recommended that pilgrims travelling to Syria should use the northern route via Mosul and Deir ez-Zor as much as possible, rather than the direct transdesert route, in order to lessen congestion on the Baghdad–Damascus route.[103]

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[99] CADN, SYR-LIB-1v b703, 'Note relative à la Conférence Syro-Irakienne des 22 et 23 Janvier 1930 sur le contrôle du Trafic de la route Damas-Bagdad.'

[100] Ibid. Translation is mine.

[101] See the handwritten note added at the bottom of the above-mentioned report ('Note relative à la Conférence Syro-Irakienne'), p. 14.

[102] CADN, SYR-LIB-1v b703, 'Conférence Syro-Irakienne sur le contrôle du Trafic de la route Damas-Bagdad', minutes of the conference.

[103] Ibid.

Crucially, the authorities' attitude towards pilgrims differed greatly from their attitude towards other travellers crossing the Syrian Desert. First, during the interwar period, Middle Eastern states were very keen to encourage European and Arab tourists as well as summer vacationers to visit their countries, aware that they represented a very important economic resource.[104] Local governments and the mandatory authorities considered the creation of national borders and the introduction of documentary and customs regimes as strong impediments to the development of tourism and took measures accordingly to limit administrative and customs complications for tourists. In September 1923 the French High Commissioner argued against the raising of the visa tax for tourists to Lebanon in the French consulates in Egypt and Palestine.[105] The question of the visa fees remained subject to much debate in the territories under French Mandate throughout the interwar years, but the authorities were generally eager to keep them low. In 1935, the French reduced the fees for summer vacationers from Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine from 1 May to 1 November so as to encourage summering in Lebanon and Syria.[106] Along the same lines, the French set up facilities for travellers entering the territories under French Mandate with their own cars, most of whom were foreign tourists or well-to-do travellers. In 1926, the authorities decided to exempt motorists affiliated to any tourism company recognised by the Touring Club of Syria and Lebanon from the payment of customs duties on their vehicle upon presentation of a so-called 'tryptique' (travel permit) provided by their association.[107] This measure, which nevertheless took a couple of years to be fully executed, was intended to facilitate customs formalities at the Iraqi border post of Rutbah for motorists travelling between Syria and Iraq.[108] By late 1929 the Iraqi authorities had almost completed similar arrangements with European automobile clubs.[109] Second, at a time when measures governing the passage of pilgrims became increasingly cumbersome – that is, at the end of the 1920s – the French and British authorities initiated discussions to facilitate the movement of government officials, military personnel and high-ranking religious dignitaries between Syria and Iraq.[110] They eventually reached an agreement that granted free visas to various important political, military and religious figures for all travel between the two countries. Lastly, French and British delegates at the Desert Traffic Control Conference were mainly concerned about easing the restrictions on transdesert traffic – especially during the summer months – to promote tourism and business.[111]

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[104] Amit Bein, *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East: International Relations in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 179–214; Idir Ouahes, *Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate: Cultural Imperialism and the Workings of Empire* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018), pp. 65–88; Andrea L. Stanton, 'Locating Palestine's Summer Residence: Mandate Tourism and National Identity', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (2018), pp. 44–62.

[105] CADC, 50CPCOM310, High Commissioner for Syria to French Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 21 September 1923.

[106] CADC, 50CPCOM544, French Ministry for Foreign Affairs to diplomatic and consular officers in Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq, 9 April 1935; NARA, Internal Affairs of Syria 1930–44 (microfilm T1177), roll 4, report by Farrell (American Consul, Beirut), 8 May 1935.

Conclusion

The emergence of territorially bounded states in the interwar Arab Middle East coincided with an increase in travel practices between the nascent states of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, due in particular to the opening of motor routes across the Syrian Desert. As a result, from the mid-1920s, the Baghdad–Damascus route became a major preoccupation of the French, British and local authorities who endeavoured to channel mobility along this route in a bid to 'determine the speed, rhythm, routes, and meaning of mobility'.[112]

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[107] 'Bulletin mensuel des actes administratifs du Haut-Commissariat', decree no. 325, 28 May 1926. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64674508/f3.image.r=triptyque (Accessed 1 May 2020).

[108] TNA, CO 730/129/9, Economic report, 13 October 1928.

[109] Government of Iraq, *Maps of Iraq with Notes for Visitors*, p. 27.

[110] CADC, 50CPCOM544, Sir F. Humphreys (High Commissioner for Iraq) to French High Commissioner, August 1930 as well as French High Commissioner to French Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2 September 1930.

[111] TNA, FO 371/13745, 'Note on the informal discussions preliminary to the Iraqi–Syrian Overland Route Conference proposed for January next', Damascus, 9 November 1929.

From the outset, the French and British were very keen to promote the development of motor traffic between Syria and Iraq, since they were aware of the political and economic opportunities that new regional and transregional mobility networks would create. To this end, they sought first and foremost to organise traffic and ensure safe travel conditions across the desert. Analysis of the French and British archives has shown in particular that the need to organise traffic and secure the route led to active cross-border cooperation between mandatory officials and desert administrators in Syria, Iraq and Transjordan, despite the continuing rivalry between France and Britain in the Middle East. Thus, this chapter has helped to show how cross-border mobility led to tensions but also to cooperation between the new Middle Eastern states.[113] As a transregional space, the Baghdad–Damascus route makes it possible to study mobility at the time of state formation while departing from the methodological nationalism that has long prevailed in research on the French and British Middle Eastern mandates.

On the other hand, the increasing involvement of states in the organisation of traffic due to persistent insecurity in the desert seriously hampered mobility, as the authorities introduced numerous restrictions that caused delays and congestion on the route. The frequent highway robberies on the Baghdad–Damascus route in the 1920s also point to the capacity of non-state actors to challenge state power and undermine French and British economic and strategic interests in the region and beyond. These various elements show that the states under French and British Mandate did not always succeed in shaping transdesert mobility according to their interests.

Finally, while this chapter has confirmed the previous findings that state formation and border making in the interwar Middle East did not necessarily curb preexisting and new patterns of mobility, it has highlighted the many-sided and discriminatory nature of the organisation of traffic and the regulation of mobility by states. The French and British Mandate authorities applied differential treatment to travellers between Iraq and Syria by encouraging and easing the movement of a small number of mostly wealthy travellers – including tourists, government officials and businesspersons – while restricting the mobility of others. This is particularly evident in the case of hajj pilgrims, who had to submit to stricter and heavier bureaucratic formalities than other travellers, not to mention the efforts made to slow down and redirect their movement so as to ease transdesert traffic for others. The contributors to 'Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe', from which the title of this volume derives, call for an approach 'that constantly theorises the relationships of unequal power within which relative stasis and different forms of mobility are constructed and negotiated'.[114] In other words, they encourage scholars to account for the ways in which power dynamics affect the interaction between mobility and immobility or, one might add, with regard to the Baghdad–Damascus route, between acceleration and deceleration of movement. In this respect, it has been argued that the French and British authorities in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq shaped regimes of mobility across the Syrian Desert that excluded certain categories of travellers from a process of acceleration and facilitation of mobility made possible by the development of motorised transport.

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[112] Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk, *Mobility Makes States: Migration and Power in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 20.

[113] Jordi Tejel, '"Des femmes contre des moutons": Franchissements féminins de la frontière turco-syrienne (1929–1944)' *20&21. Revue d'histoire*, Vol. 145 (2020), pp. 35–47.

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