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978-1-107-00006-3 - Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation

Daniel Neep

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Occupying Syria under the French Mandate

What role does military force play during a colonial occupation? The answer seems obvious: coercion crushes local resistance, quashes political dissent and consolidates the dominance of the occupying power. Yet violence can also have more subtle and more ambiguous consequences. This discerning and theoretically rigorous study focuses on Syria during the French Mandate from 1920 to 1946, a turbulent period in which conflict between armed Syrian insurgents and French military forces not only determined the strategic objectives of the colonial state, but also transformed how the colonial state organised, controlled and understood Syrian society, geography and population. The book shows how, in addition to the coercive techniques of air power, collective punishment and colonial policing, civilian technologies such as urban planning and engineering were commandeered in the effort to undermine rebel advances. In this way colonial violence had a lasting effect in Syria, shaping a peculiar form of social order that endured well after the French occupation. As the conclusion surmises, the interplay between violence, spatial colonisation and pacification continues to resonate with recent developments in the region.

Dr Daniel Neep is Lecturer in Middle East Politics at the University of Exeter and Research Director (Syria) at the Council for British Research in the Levant.

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Acknowledgements

My association with Syria nearly did not happen. As an undergraduate student of Arabic and French, I had decided it was only natural for me to focus on North Africa. A trip to Damascus in the summer of 1997 caused me to change my plans completely. That was the beginning of an ongoing fascination with Syria which so far has spanned fourteen years, some four or five of which have been spent there. I still have not made it to North Africa. This book represents a small advance in my understanding of Syria, an understanding that nevertheless remains limited, incomplete and always woefully inadequate.

I have incurred numerous debts in writing this book and the doctoral thesis from which it developed. The Politics Department at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) provided a fertile environment for the critical study of the Middle East. Charles Tripp, my supervisor, has been a consistent source of patient encouragement and sound advice over the years. This book no doubt reveals the extent to which his work has shaped my thinking about state, society and history in the Middle East. I am deeply grateful for his support. The intellectual vigour, political engagement and sheer energy of Laleh Khalili, my second supervisor, have been exemplary; her comments on my work have been insightful, incisive and, above all, supremely generous. My peers at SOAS helped deepen my awareness of politics within and beyond the Middle East: special thanks to Marie Gibert, Julia Gallagher, Mark Sedra, Vivian Ibrahim and Saleem Haddad. At St John's College, Oxford University, Robin Ostle and the late Elizabeth Fallaize were formative influences in my study of the Arab Middle East and French post-structuralism. My PhD examiners, Peter Sluglett and Martin Shaw, offered valuable advice on how to improve

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I adopt the system of Arabic transliteration from the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*: the initial *hamza* is unmarked; the ξ is represented by ‘; and the *tā’ marbūṭa* is represented by ‘-a’ or by ‘-at’ (in an *iḏāfa*).

Some Syrian places have well-known English names (Damascus, Aleppo, etc.); others I have transliterated according to their standard Arabic spellings (e.g. Dayr al-Zūr). However, the names of city quarters, villages, and so on in the region of Damascus have been rendered to approximate their colloquial pronunciation (e.g. ‘al-Merjeh’ for ‘al-Marjah’, ‘al-Mlayḥa’ for ‘al-Malīḥa’).

All translations from Arabic and French are my own unless specifically noted. My translations err on the side of naturalness, readability and fidelity to the overall meaning of the passage. I provide the original term in square brackets at points where my translation might conceivably be accused of undue exuberance.