Book Review:

*Fezzes in the River: Identity Politics and European Diplomacy in the Middle East on the Eve of World War II*


Reviewed by Ahmet Serdar Akturk.

In *Fezzes in the River*, Sarah D. Shields analyzes the incorporation of the former Ottoman Sanjak of Alexandretta by Turkey in July 1939, 19 years after it had been assigned by the League of Nations to French Mandatory Syria. Shields examines the place of the Sanjak question in the European political debates regarding the similar territorial disputes on the European continent, activities of the competing Kemalist Turkish and Syrian nationalist movements in the Sanjak, and the impact of the Sanjak questions on the formation of their nationalist discourses in the 1930s and the following decades. This book is the product of meticulous research based on personal interviews and archival documents and newspapers in a variety of languages.

According to Shields, the Sanjak question was a product of the new global order established in the interwar years. Ignoring the fluid nature of identity in the Middle East shaped by the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ottoman heritage, the victorious powers applied the idea of national self-determination to the post-Ottoman Middle East. As a result, rather than bringing peace and justice, the politics of national self-determination caused disorder, violence, displacement and dismantling of cosmopolitan societies like the one in the Sanjak of Alexandretta. Moreover, the issue of identity which had dominated the dispute over the Sanjak would end up playing no role in the outcome. Eventually, France’s strategic interests overshadowed even the League of Nations’ role in the conflict.

The Sanjak of Alexandretta’s polyglot and multi-religious society had regarded their diversity as an asset during the Ottoman period in which religion determined one’s communal identity. The Sanjak became a part of Syria which was put under the French Mandate in 1920. Turkish and Syrian Arab nationalists accepted the new idea that the linguistic identity of a region’s population should determine the national affiliation of that territory. In the name of the Turkish speaking majority, Turkey laid claim to the Sanjak. In 1921, as a result of the Ankara Treaty between France and Turkey, the Sanjak of Alexandretta was given a special status. Shields argues that “identity on the ground” was more complex than the French and the local nationalist leaders assumed as for centuries Arabs, Turks, Kurds, Circassian, and Alawis had lived together and mixed. Since protecting minorities in the region was a major rationale for French presence in the region, the French were not discontent with Turkey’s concerns about the Turks in the Sanjak as long as it remained a part of Syria.

The Franco-Syrian Treaty of Independence signed by the Syrian National Bloc and France in September 1936 left the fate of the Sanjak unclear. In that context local Kemalists tried to make the Turkish speaking population visible to the French and to the commissions sent to the Sanjak by the League of Nations. In order to mobilize Turkish speaking people, they imported the new Turkish nationalist symbols including the Turkish national anthem, the new brimmed hat which replaced the Ottoman fez, and the new Turkish alphabet. Shields emphasizes the role of the brimmed hat as the major marker of the Kemalists in the Sanjak. The secular Kemalist reforms such as unveiling women, ironically, divided the Turkish speaking
people in the Sanjak as they did back in Turkey. Kemalists also manufactured a narrative claiming the Sanjak as the ancestral homeland of the Turks before their departure to Central Asia, and even renamed the Sanjak as Hatay, the homeland of Hittites. Kemalist efforts included convincing the Armenians and Alawis in the Sanjak to claim their identity as Turkish by explaining the “historical” findings regarding their origin. Radio broadcasts in Turkish and Arabic from Turkey and the local Kemalist press were important instruments of Kemalist propaganda in the Sanjak. The author also argues that “the Hatay question” was used by the Kemalists to unify people in Turkey around the official ideology which was challenged at the time by the Alawi Kurdish rebellion in Dersim.

Shields highlights the ineffectiveness of the Syrian Arab Nationalists in the face of the very well organized Kemalist Turkish propaganda in the Sanjak. The National Bloc had to act responsibly in order to convince the French to ratify the 1936 Treaty of Independence. Thus, other political groups which were overtly anti-colonial, like the League of National Action, assumed the task of challenging both Kemalist propaganda in the region and French indifference to Arab claims. They organized riots and student protests across Syria. Like the Kemalist nationalists, they wanted to make their own people visible to the League of Nations commissions. They mobilized local people to register as Arabs to prove the Arab identity of the Sanjak. Moreover, as a response to their opponents’ major marker, the Arabs in the region replaced the Ottoman fez with the sedara, the Arab national head covering. The Sanjak question brought the new nationalist leaders to the front and the failure of the National Bloc leadership in the Sanjak question would become an important element in the emergence of the Ba'ath Party.

As Syria was under the French mandate, the League’s involvement in the Sanjak dispute was inevitable. Three missions were sent to the Sanjak by the League between 1936 and 1938. However, their reports played little role in the League members’ decisions in Geneva. The Sanjak was first given independence by the League in January 1937 while the first delegation was still on the ground preparing its report. After independence the League sent two other missions, in November 1937 and in April 1938, to prepare electoral regulations and to observe the elections to the Sanjak’s assembly. During their stay in the Sanjak both the Kemalists and Arab Nationalists were determined to prove the justice of their cases. Their conflicting propaganda campaigns led to violent confrontations. Despite the powerful Kemalist propaganda machine, even “traditionalist” Turkish speaking people were disappointed with the Kemalist reforms, while many Kurds and Alawis were not registered as Turks. What was more interesting and, according to the author, a good example of the flexibility of identity in the Sanjak, was the fact that some even changed sides. However, Turkey was determined to create a Turkish majority in the Sanjak. France, following a policy of appeasement toward Turkey in order not to lose an ally in the Mediterranean region, could not have opposed Turkish plans. Turkey’s belief in the existence of a Turkish majority in the Sanjak was accepted by France and a Turkish-dominated Sanjak assembly was formed which eventually approved the unity with Turkey. People of the Sanjak had been given a chance to determine their identity, which would have determined the fate of the Sanjak. But eventually they were unable to make their own history. The outcome meant victory for some and displacement for others, as those who were not happy with the Turkish rule left the Sanjak for the French mandatory Syrian region.

Shields argues that despite the claims based on national identity, strategic interests played the determining role in the Sanjak question. Ataturk regarded controlling the Sanjak as necessary to balance rising Italian influence in the region. For France, the Sanjak was less important than having Turkey as an ally in the region against Germany, which was becoming more aggressive. The author shows how German newspaper coverage of the Sanjak question was decidedly pro-Turkish, by comparing Turkish claims in the Sanjak with the German claims in its neighboring territories, which was viewed with alarm by France and Britain. Though the French objected to German irredentism in Europe, they tolerated Turkish claims in the Sanjak in order not to lose an ally to the German side.

The author concludes by explaining competing Syrian and Turkish narratives regarding the incorporation
of the Sanjak of Alexandretta into Turkey. Syrians see the Sanjak of Alexandretta as Syria’s stolen province. On the other hand, Turkish official history presents it as “Hatay’s joining the motherland by the will of people.” Shields refers to a speech on Hatay by the former Turkish president who was known as ardently Kemalist. She adds that despite the close relationship between Turkey and Syria, the Sanjak question continues to be an unsolved issue. Considering the new vision of the current Turkish president and prime minister, the Turkish government’s policy towards Turkey’s neighbors, and the generally positive Syrian response, we might ask whether Turkey, Syria, and other nations in the region might follow the lead that Germany, France, and other European nations took in Europe following the Second World War that ended the territorial disputes through integration. Fezzes in the River is a very engaging book, not only shedding light on the process that ended with Turkey’s incorporation of the Sanjak of Alexandretta, but also opening a window into the interwar years in the context of the Middle East. It will be an essential work for students and scholars dealing with issues of identity in the Middle East in the interwar era, French imperialism in the Middle East, Turkish diplomatic history, and modern Syrian history.

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