

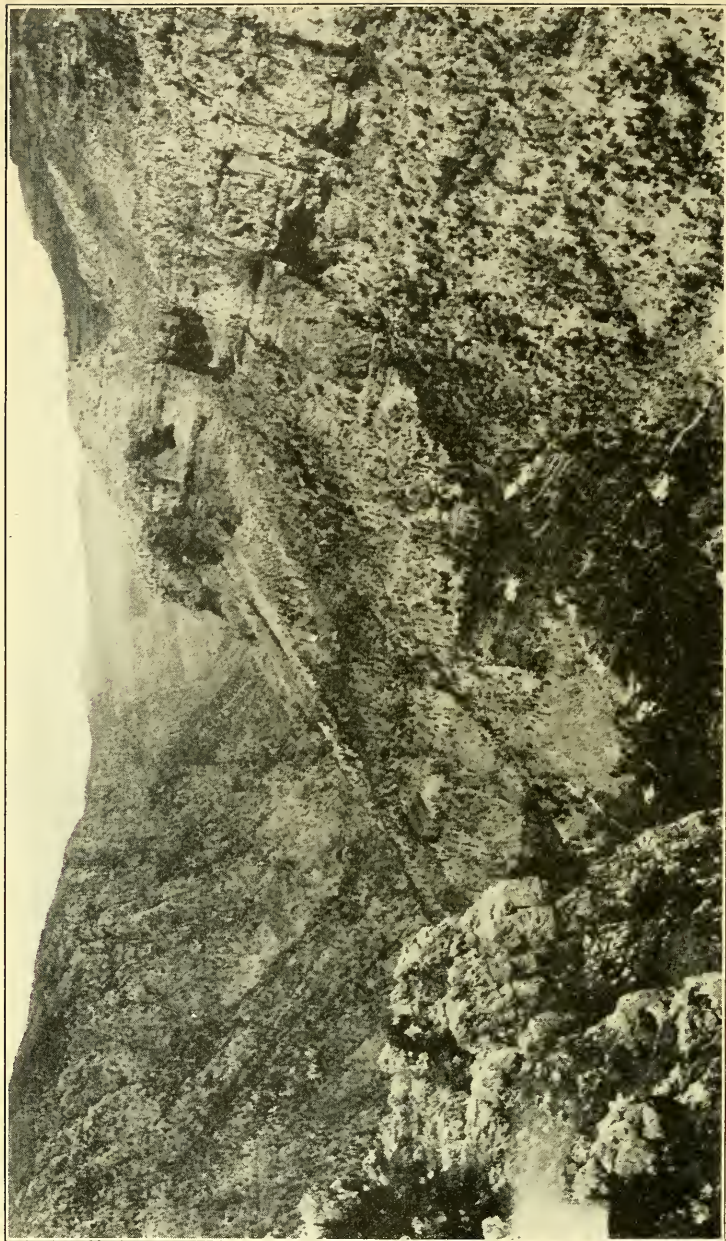
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC TRENDS IN MODERN SYRIA

BY SALLOUM A. MOKARZEL

WHEN Syria emerged from the World War it was seething with the wildest hopes for speedily recovering its old glory. For over four hundred years it had been under alien domination but had never lost its racial and national consciousness. The Turks, its masters, ruled it with an iron hand and with no sympathy for its national aspirations. Nor did they make much effort for improving conditions. They were military conquerors, not colonizers, and if they had a policy at all, it was to keep the subject nations weak and incapable of resistance. Only Turks were eligible for military service and subject races were left to grow timid and submissive. The Syrians, intelligent, deductive, calculative, fretted under this rule. They were helpless to free themselves from its iron grip, but never lost courage or hope.

With the coming of the World War they hoped for liberation at the hands of the Allies and identified themselves with this cause despite the fact that their rulers had chosen to side with Germany and the Central Powers. It was a case of a nation seeking emancipation in order to reestablish itself in the national rights denied it for centuries by foreign oppressors. There was the dream of an Arab federation, of a greater Lebanon to reclaim the prestige of old Phoenicia, of a rehabilitated Syria to revive the glory of the Umayyads, of a reborn Palestine that would again resume its former position as a leader of culture and religion. President Wilson's famous dictum on the right of small nations to self-determination almost gave wings to these high aspirations toward a speedier realization.

The subsequent partition of Syria, its unequal struggle for recognition as a sovereign state and the unsettled political conditions prevailing in it ever since the armistice are only too well known. The political destiny of Syria is not in its own hands, and although the Syrians are known to have heretofore given more attention to politics than to any other branch of human endeavor, present indications seem to point to their energies being diverted to another direction. Observers of recent developments in Syria detect signs of a wholesome birth of interest in more constructive



SACRED VALLEY IN THE NORTHERN LEBANON
Site of Hydro-electric Project

fields. The appeal of the industrialist, the practical economist, the educator, the technician, would seem to rise above the hue and cry of the politician. The Syrians are developing a mood for productive enterprise, and are coming more and more to realize the force of the truism that for a nation to attain political independence, it must first achieve economic independence.

Of this condition I personally was a witness upon my last visit to Syria in the summer of 1929. Everywhere I went I saw signs of feverish preparations for economic revival, of great strides made in the field of education, especially in applied sciences, and of a growing social consciousness that would be surprising among any people in such a short period except the adaptive Syrian. The constructive economic leader would seem to have at last come into his own in this land of golden dreams and grandiose visions. In some instances, the clergy are the outstanding protagonists of this healthy movement, and some of their efforts are known to have resulted in signal success.

For this turn of affairs there is but one logical reason. Syria, culturally and spiritually, has heretofore represented in our scheme of life the philosophy of the East. That philosophy has been more intellectual and moral than material. But Syria has come to realize that we are living in an age and under certain arbitrary conditions the trend of which cannot be continually ignored. That trend is decidedly materialistic, nationalistic, and obviously more applicable to the logic of human struggle for existence. Syria, therefore, proceeded to effect a compromise between the idealism of the East and the logic of the West. It is closer to, and in more frequent contact with, Europe and America, and the influence of this contact is beginning to have its effect. Perhaps no more wholesome benefit can be ascribed to Western influence on Syria than the conviction, slowly growing on its people of the necessity of collective effort. In a country heretofore highly individualistic, whose past achievements may be ascribed more to hereditary leadership and authority than to the operation of the free will of the individual, the evidences of present collectivism are truly surprising. This Syria has learned from the West along with the rudiments of applied sciences through missionary and other educational institutions, and this in the long run may prove the means of its salvation.

And because the Syrians are extremely impulsive and adaptive

this movement of collectivism not only heralds a new era of economic and social progress for the country, but promises to proceed with surprising rapidity. Already native corporate enterprises are springing up in every part of the land and embracing every branch of industry and commerce, where but a few years back such collective effort was most conspicuous by its absence. And perhaps the most distinctive, and certainly the most romantic and characteristic, is the Kadisha Hydro-electric Company of North Lebanon. This enterprise is wholly native in capital and management and was conceived and achieved by native talent and labor. The engineer, a progressive native of the modern school, assured me that with the exception of one technical expert who supervised the installation of the generators, not a single foreigner was employed in the whole project.

This corporate enterprise, aside from indicating the new trend of thought among the Syrians in the field of economics, also sheds interesting light on the orientation of the attitude of the leaders towards the welfare of the people and the future of the country. The prime mover of the Kadisha project, for example, and the one through whose wholesome and constructive influence it was carried on to success, was Archbishop Antoun Arida of Tripoli who not only influenced the investment of capital in the company but served as its acting president. He later launched another company for the manufacture of cement, to which power would be supplied by the Kadisha Hydro-electric Company, making the two enterprises coöperative and interdependent. This same prelate was the one later chosen Maronite Patriarch, and even in this exalted office, his main efforts are directed towards the economic improvement of the country. In a recent public utterance, he declared that the people must patronize their own industries as a necessary step to rehabilitation and stabilization, and that he has no hesitation in avowing that the Patriarchal establishment was confining itself to the use of home products, and dispensing with imported luxuries.

This very point was given graphic illustration from another source. While in Damascus I met a Moslem Nationalist leader of whom I inquired concerning the condition of home industries. He was emphatic in his assertion that the progress of Syrian industry had proceeded so far as to meet all the needs of the country and even to be in a position to compete in foreign markets. As proof he

pointed out that every article of clothing he was wearing was a native product, with the exception, he whimsically added, of the tarboush, whose substitution for a more distinctively native head-gear was also being seriously considered.

This psychological change of the Syrians, whose adoption of modern, practical, economic methods manifests itself principally in a disposition to collective action, as against the decidedly individual-



MODERN DAMASCUS

istic system they have maintained in all the past, is perhaps the most amazing phenomenon of modern Syria.

In the field of education Syria has always been known as the most advanced of all the countries of the Near East. Especially was Lebanon noted for the high ratio of literacy among its people, rising to seventy-five per cent, as against seven to fifteen per cent in neighboring States. But education was mostly academic, the curriculum of almost all schools being confined to literature, academic sciences and the liberal professions. Nor was education suited to the needs of the country, because it was not the result of a study of native requirements. The principal educational establishments were mainly foreign, competitive missionary institutions, and it was no uncommon occurrence to meet natives who were mas-

ters of a foreign language and ignorant of their own, or who could talk to you by the hour on the history or geography of a particular country in Europe or America, according to the nationality of the institution where they were educated, and would not know the most elemental thing about their own people or country.

The result of this condition in Lebanon resulted in a drag on the literary market, and a host of literary men, who could engage in no productive enterprise, turned to the field of journalism for occupation. In Lebanon, a country of hardly more than eight hundred thousand souls, there are more than a hundred newspapers and periodicals, the city of Beirut alone boasting of over sixty of this number. Even before our generation there was an oversupply of literary men in Lebanon, forcing them to migrate to Egypt to put their ability to some practical use, and it is an incontestible fact that primarily to these Egypt owes its literary renaissance.

This has been the heritage of the past, but not so the general trend of mind of the present. One of the most illuminating and surprising statements I have heard from a responsible official on the subject of the present outlook on education was that made to me by President Charles Dabbas of the Republic of Lebanon. He declared that he was in favor of the policy of discouraging higher education indiscriminately for all classes of people. What the country needed, he explained, was a productive element that would not be ashamed to engage in manual and mechanical work. This the overeducated class does not stoop to, the result being an oversupply of office seekers and men given to the literary professions. In an effort to counteract the former tendency, the government has established an industrial school and is using every effort to turn the attention of the people to productive pursuits.

The educational outlook is as bright and promising in all other sections of the country. From the Minister of Education in Damascus I learned that one of the main concerns of the Syrian government was the promotion of facilities for public education. Schools of all grades in the country now number three hundred and fifty, including a teacher's training school and a university of the first rank in which all teaching is conducted in Arabic. Books on technical subjects are being steadily translated into Arabic, and altogether rapid progress is being made to afford education in the native language.

Such evidences of earnest efforts to promote facilities for public education abound in all other sections of Syria. In the Druze Mountain, a hitherto inaccessible country noted for its seclusiveness, not a village but now has an elementary school. In the country of the Alaouites, to the north of the Lebanese Republic, truly surprising progress has been made in the field of public education. This section, it must be recalled, was as strict in its seclusiveness as the Druze country, to the extent that before French occupation its capital city, Latakia, was not connected with the outside world by a carriage road. The same reasons for resentment against foreign influence and outside interference as existed in the Druze Mountain governed it, but now the most conspicuous building to be met in its capital is the modern high school building established through French initiative. Before the war there were only thirty schools of all grades in the whole country. Now there are fully a hundred more.

But where education most flourishes is in Beirut, the seat of the two leading universities of the East, the American University of Beirut and the French Jesuit University of St. Joseph. In the city there are a dozen other colleges of rank, including the newly established *école Laïque* of the French.

No account of Syrian educational activities would be complete without mention of the native school for girls known as the *école Al-Ahliah* of Marie Kassab. This is a purely native institution designed to raise the educational standard of Syrian women. Started during the war, it has developed into the principal institution of its kind in the country, outranking similar foreign missionary establishments which had so far monopolized the field. The support of this institution is wholly native, for Miss Kassab, the founder, makes her appeal to the patriotism of her people and finds ready response. In 1930 Miss Kassab visited the United States to solicit support and was extremely well received, which proves that Syrian national consciousness is finding expression in other than the political field.

When we consider the traditional Eastern attitude towards the education of women, the success of this native girls' school must be taken as an indication of a radical change. Well may it be mentioned that this change of attitude is not confined to any one class or religious denomination. It is true that heretofore the



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Christians were prone to be more liberal in the question of woman's education, but it is equally true that they also were influenced to some extent by the Moslems' general attitude in the matter. Hence the many strange cases where in the same family the boys would have enjoyed the benefits of the highest college education while the girls would remain practically illiterate.

Now, however, Moslems themselves are advocating not only literacy for women but some sort of vocational education and training. A year ago the first Syrian Moslem woman physician to graduate in America returned to Beirut to engage in practice; a Syrian Druze girl last year won her second scholarship at Vassar and, having taken her M.A. and proceeding toward a Ph. D. degree at Chicago, she now holds a research assistantship in the Oriental Institute; another Druze girl, only a few years since, created a sensation in Syria by openly championing the cause of woman's emancipation and discarding the veil.

But what must be greater cause for surprise is the fact that the Syrian government, on its own initiative, sent a Moslem girl to France in 1929 to specialize in the study of modern education. And this comes from the government of a country which in its proverbial observance of religious traditions heretofore had incorporated in

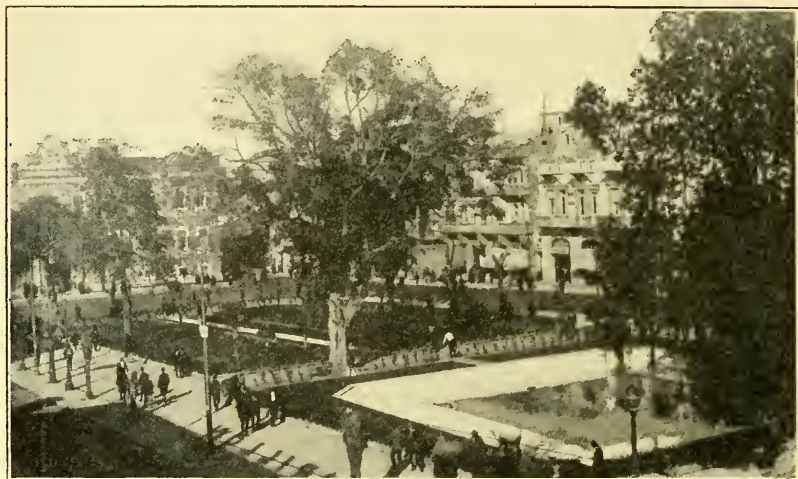
its draft constitution for a Syrian republic the stipulation that the president must be of the Moslem faith.

Attending the various schools of Beirut alone there are now, according to reliable statistics, more than a thousand Moslem girls, while twenty years ago there were not more than thirty.

This educational movement among the women of Syria is accelerating the process of emancipation and already making its impression both on the economic status of women and the general economic organization of the country. My personal experience may serve as an illustration. When I first landed in Beirut, in the summer of 1929, the first customs official I met was a native woman. Later, upon visiting the Saraya to pay my respects to the President of the Republic, I discovered that the head of the government Information Bureau also was a native woman who at one time had been a resident of the United States. I was interested in discovering the extent to which the women of Syria had progressed in their emancipation movement and asked that lady for information on the point. She told me that in the service of the Lebanese government alone there were no less than two hundred young women, while in the city of Beirut much over five hundred were employed at various gainful occupations. I was not surprised, therefore, when later, in passing through one of the principal streets, I came across a large sign in Arabic and French reading: "Girls' Business School—Courses in Typewriting and Stenography."

This change of viewpoint is noticeable in every direction and field of endeavor. Not only industry is being remodeled to conform to modern conditions, but important changes are being introduced in agricultural methods. The governments of the several Syrian States have training schools and experimental stations for this purpose, and in some cases supply not only free information and advice but also seeds and young trees from their nurseries. One can notice particularly the change that is coming over the fertile coastal plain adjacent to Beirut, which formerly was almost wholly devoted to mulberry groves for growing silk, and is now being transformed into various kinds of plantations, principally banana. In the interior of Syria a project that is expected to be developed soon is the diversion of the Orontes river from its regular course to permit the irrigation of the vast adjoining plains. A vast irrigation project is also contemplated for Deir Ezzoor district border-

ing on the Euphrates. The soil of this district is said to be as fertile as that of Egypt and its water supply as plentiful. The Euphrates runs for a distance of almost three hundred miles in Syria and thus far has not been utilized in the least. Now the Syrian government is vigorously pushing the training of technicians, a score or more of whom are now being educated in France at the government's expense, to carry on the work of reclamation and development.

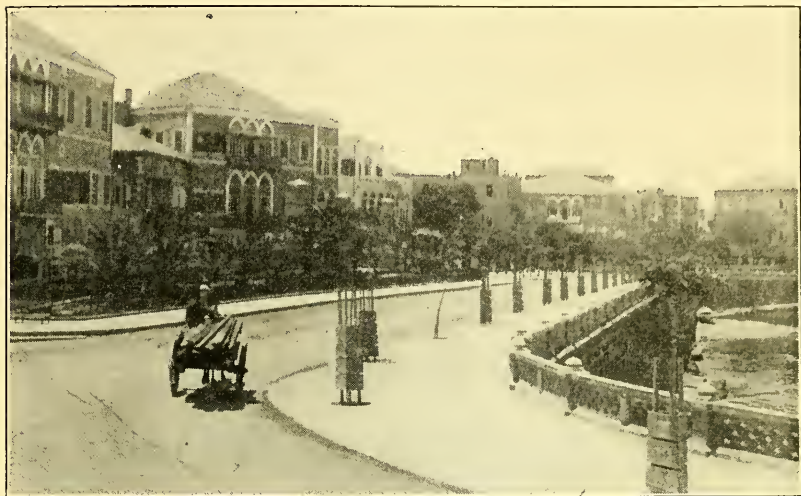


BEIRUT, PUBLIC SQUARE

In still another section Syria is gradually turning modern in its agricultural methods. Emir Hassan Al-Atrash, scion of the principal Atrash clan in the Druze Mountain and titular leader of the country, is conducting experiments on a large scale on his vast lands near Sueida, the capital. He has bought several tractors and other modern agricultural implements which, once he proves their value, he will recommend for general use in the country. The topography of this district and its individual agricultural problems would seem to justify special consideration before reaching a decision as to which method or kind of machinery is most suitable.

The trend of modernism, and the proof that a practical viewpoint is being developed rapidly in Syria, is as evident in the physical transformation of the cities as it is in the psychology of the

people. Rather, one may be taken as the obvious proof of the other. Everywhere one turns in the principal cities one encounters works of demolition and construction that at times take in whole sections of the city. In Beirut, Damascus, Aleppo, Tripoli, and Homs broad modern streets are replacing many of the unsanitary and dingy, narrow bazaars that are a relic of past ages. Tolerably good roads now reach almost every village in the country, not excluding the mountainous sections, while connecting the principal cities are



SEA DRIVE, BEIRUT

broad, macadamized highways that are mostly the product of the past ten years.

In the economic rehabilitation of the country, as well as in its modern tendencies in a good measure, much credit is due to the emigrant sons of Syria and Lebanon. According to some statistics, fully sixty per cent of new industrial and commercial enterprises in the country are traceable to their initiative. They bring not only knowledge and experience but also capital. During the period immediately following the war an amount estimated at between ten and fifteen million dollars flowed annually into Syria from emigrants in the United States, Africa, and South American countries. This was the source of the invisible exports which more than

balanced the apparently unfavorable trade import balance of the country. Perhaps the economic crisis in Syria has been aggravated by the diminution in the past few years of emigrants' remittances. But this will surely work to the country's advantage in the long run, in that it will force them to become more productive and self-reliant. Already a policy of retrenchment has been adopted in Lebanon, when, early in May, the Constitution was partially suspended and a top-heavy governmental structure drastically pruned down. For this, too, the emigrant's influence is partly responsible, and may be considered a most healthy sign in the evolution of the Syrians' character, and their resolve to face and solve their own problems, in a strong and true spirit of self-reliance and independence.