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Cilicia and Imperial Rivalries: Perception, Colonial Policies and Refugee Experiences in the Middle East

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Kilikia és a birodalmi rivalizálás: Percepció, gyarmati politika és menekült tapasztalatok a Közel-Keleten.
Absztrakt: A tanulmány célja, hogy megértsük Kilikia történelmi jelentőségét a közel-keleti birodalmi dinamika összefüggésében. Kilikiát a határok változékonysága és a vitatott szuverenitás jellemzi, illetve egyedülálló perspektívát nyújt a birodalmi hatalmak, a helyi lakosság és a konfliktusok tartós hatásainak vizsgálatához. A kutatás a tudományos források sokrétűségére támaszkodik, hogy feltárja, hogyan látták Kilikiát a birodalmi rivalizálások közepette, a versengő narratívákra, geopolitikai ambíciókra és humanitárius beavatkozásokra összpontosítva. A tanulmány hangsúlyozza a népirtás hatását Felső-Mezopotámiában és a francia gyarmati közigazgatás és hírszerzés összetettségét Szíriában. Az interdiszciplináris megközelítésnek köszönhetően ez a kutatás rávilágít Kilikia sokrétű megítélésére és tartós jelentőségére a kortárs Közel-Kelet megértésében. Új betekintést nyújt azokba a történelmi eseményekbe és politikákba, amelyek befolyásolták a régió mai dinamikáját, kiemelve Kilikia kritikus szerepét a közel-keleti történelem szövevényében.

Abstract
This article aims to understand the historical significance of Cilicia within the context of imperial dynamics in the Middle East. Cilicia, a region characterized by shifting borders and contested sovereignty, provides a unique lens through which to examine the interactions between imperial powers, local populations and the lasting effects of conflict. The study draws on a wide range of scholarly sources to explore how Cilicia has been perceived amidst imperial rivalries, focusing on the competing narratives, geopolitical ambitions and humanitarian interventions that have shaped its history. Key themes include the impact of genocide in Upper Mesopotamia and the complexities of French colonial administration and intelligence activities in Syria. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates history, political science and humanitarian studies, this research aims to unravel the multifaceted perception of Cilicia and highlight its enduring relevance in understanding the contemporary Middle East. This examination offers new insights into how historical events and policies have influenced the region's present-day dynamics, emphasizing the critical role of Cilicia in the broader complexity of Middle Eastern history.

The region of Upper Mesopotamia, which is located between the two rivers, the Euphrates and Tigris, represents a long history of the movement of empires. By the sixteenth century, Cilicia, as other territories of Asia Minor, became a part of the Ottoman Empire. For most of the Ottoman period, Cilicia was inhabited by Armenians, Greeks and Turks.

Adana was located between Syria and Asia Minor, which guaranteed the city's significant strategic importance. According to Stephan H. Astourian, the attempt of the Ottoman government at modernizing and centralizing the Empire also shaped Ottoman Cilicia (Astourian, 2011, 60–61). By the nineteenth century, there were two economic units there: first, Adana, which, according to the Tanzimat reforms, became a vilayet in 1869, and the vilayet of Aleppo, since 1866. Both economic units made Cilicia

the most prosperous region in the Ottoman Empire until the end of the nineteenth century. Cotton production, the introduction of sugar cane and the resources available in the Taurus and Amanus contributed to the economic development of Cilicia. Also, Armenian cotton production was Great Britain's main cotton supplier, dating back to the first half of the nineteenth century.

After the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II, the Ottoman authorities started the confiscations of the lands of Armenian peasants. To clarify this point, it is important to go back and explain the life of Armenian peasants in the Ottoman Empire. The Armenian peasant had to pay a tax, called *hafir*, (Ternon, 2002, book 1) to the Kurdish tribal leader, who was also the landlord. And, in 1876, the Ottoman government had the right to confiscate lands where the taxes were overdue. The deprivation of the Armenians' land was directly related to the Ottoman policy to settle Muslim immigrants from the Balkans and the Caucasus in the six eastern provinces (Erzurum, Harput, Sivas, Diyarbakır, Van and Bitlis), which belonged to the Armenians. In the case of Cilicia, the Ottoman government conducted the policy of the *Fırka-i Islahiyye*. The foundation of *Fırka-i islahiye* (Division of Renovation) was a result of trying to increase the control over nomadic life and to settle them in Cilicia. Between the years of 1865–1866, there was a re-establishment of the administration in Cilicia, the practises of the new authorities were narrated as military actions which date back to the Crimean War (1853–1856) and the defeat of the Ottomans by the Russian Empire. Thus, *Fırka-i islahiye* changed the landownership in Cilicia because certain parts of lands were transferred to the possession of these tribes (Yavuz, 2012, 113–128).

The first attacks against the Armenians and other Christians of Diyarbekir (present-day Diyarbakır) began in February 1895. The reports sent by the French vice-consul in Diyarbekir from May 1887 to March 1890 depict the declining state of the Ottoman social structure, with famines, growing insecurity and the onset of violence against Syriacs in Tur Abdin. These reports highlight incidents that have eroded the harmony between Muslims and Christians, leading to a shift in the perception of Christians as foreigners rather than *dhimmi*. In cases where Christians were denied justice, their community was likely to approach the French consul instead of the government, fuelling resentment among Muslims. Christians, despite being significant contributors to the local economy, were increasingly marginalized and excluded from society. This exclusion increases the temptation to dispossess them of their rights and possessions. Overall, the reports illustrate the deteriorating social conditions and tensions between different religious communities in the region. Moreover, these reports also state that the Armenian villages were looted and burned by the Kurds (Ternon, 1981). Though, on the contrary, Hannibal Travis argues that within the field of regional genocide studies, there is still no common acknowledgement of these Kurdish massacres, which accrued during the twentieth century:

> "Upper Mesopotamia witnessed the dawn of civilization and some of the worst tragedies of the earth. From the alluvial plain of the Euphrates to the mountains that divide modern-day Turkey from Iraq and Iran, the region has served as a backdrop to mass killings, deportation, panicked flight, and the destruction of hundreds of towns and villages. Almost uniquely to this region, and as a result of human action, the population of northern Iraq may have fallen by hundreds of thousands since ancient times. Like the proverb about when elephants fight, civilian inhabitants searched in vain for peace as the clashes of aspiring nations devastated their region." (Hannibal, 2019, 93)

In the wake of the First World War in the Levant and Mesopotamia, the territory of present-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Iraq, France and Britain constructed new independent nations to replace the former Ottoman territories with new independent nation-states. However, the "independent nation-state" definition can not be applied to the former Ottoman territories in this case because the mandate system[1] intended to create independent states, but first, they should have passed the transition period under French and British administration. Hannibal's approach to broaden the understanding of the complex geopolitical processes after the First World War provides a new angle on looking at the state formation and how different ethnic communities approached this question during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Thus, in 1919, Kurdish leaders during the Paris Peace Conference said that there were only a few dozen Armenians left in Kurdistan. In their view, this justified the idea of a Kurdish state. The Armenians had fled or "emigrated" and therefore had no solid links with the territory. Kurdish demands for autonomy were often accompanied by modern maps of Kurdistan. As for the violence of Kurds towards Armenians, the Kurdish authorities referred to it as a "decision [...] taken by the Ottoman Empire" in 1915 (Hannibal, 2019, 98). The population of Upper Mesopotamia during the end of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century significantly decreased and underwent several layers of violence from the organized Armenian Genocide in 1915 to persecutions, massacres and partial genocides of certain minorities such as Kurds, Assyrians and other groups. Among these partial genocides, Hannibal mentions the Simele Massacre in 1933, which happened because even though Assyrian leaders petitioned the League of Nations in 1931 to let them enter Syria to settle under the French mandate fearing massacres from Iraqi governments and Kurds, Assyrians returned to Iraq in 1933, where they faced another wave of violence, which took lives thousands of their lives (Hannibal, 2019, 104–105).

Regarding the Cilician Armenians during this period, by the eve of World War I, Armenians had been deprived of their right to lands in the Eastern provinces, and they

[1] The League of Nations mandate system after World War I aimed to create new administrations in the Middle Eastern countries to provide them with the opportunity to found nation-states based on the Western models (Myers, 1921). In some ways, the mandates helped to defuse the charges of annexation and militarism that threatened to undermine France's colonial legitimacy.

were looking for outside support (Nuri, 2012, 11–115). Armenians initiated a campaign for Armenian sovereignty in Cilicia; however, it was impossible to accomplish their goal without the intervention of French troops, which entered Cilicia in 1919. The French Armenian Legion, created in 1916, also became a part of the Cilician campaign. As Sam Kaplan points out in his work *Territorializing Armenians: Geo-texts, and Political Imaginaries in French-occupied Cilicia, 1919–1922*, Armenian lobbyists used the strategy of submitting petitions and letters, which consisted of "historical narratives and ethnological facts to statistically prove they had a legitimate claim to the region", to the French administration and policymakers. Alongside the petitions and delegations, which were sent to the Paris Peace Conference, Armenian lobbyists attempted to prove their arguments based on the material evidence of ethnography, philology and physical anthropology in Cilicia. Moreover, they also mentioned the ties between Lesser Armenia (1137–1375) and French rulers invoking Crusader history (Kaplan,2007, 399–423). However, the attempts of Armenian lobbyists to use the historical narratives and recreate the image of "commonalities" between the Armenians and the French after World War I failed. The occupation of Cilicia by French troops ended in 1922. The restoration process of the Armenian homeland, which the French government started, brought a new crisis for the Armenian community in the Middle East.

After France got the mandate for Syria, the French High Commissioner to Syria and Armenia, François Georges-Picot, on behalf of his government, appealed to the Cilician Armenians located in Aleppo, Damascus and other cities of Syria to return to Cilicia. Thereby, the French government aimed to strengthen the Armenian element in Cilicia, which, in 1487, was conquered by the Ottoman Empire (Khoury, 1987, 88–89). The years after the establishment of the French mandate led to an ideological crisis. The French moral influence was expressed by the idea of the Catholic protectorate, causing the rise of the nationalist movement, which expanded during the Interwar period. In the framework of Cilicia and the post-Ottoman Middle East, classical imperial theory suggests that imperial expansion was driven by economic interests and the need for capital accumulation. By applying this to Cilicia and Syria, it can be seen how the French government sought to control the region through political and ideological mechanisms because of its strategic and economic value.

I would like to refer to the work of the French philosopher Louis Althusser. In his work *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,* the *state apparatus* is the main force to create such conditions where the production of capitalist society continues. The ruling class — the bourgeoisie — with the help of its legal practices such as the police, the courts and the army, controls the workers' labor for goods and services for the benefit of the capitalist system and does not provide the necessary value of their work in exchange. The Marxist–Leninist theory includes several key points; however, one of the main ones refers to the difference between the state apparatus and state power. While the state apparatus is a system that cannot be easily

replaced by revolutions, state power is an element of a class struggle, and the proletariat seeks to seize state power from the bourgeoisie, which eventually brings an end to both state power and state apparatus by replacing them with a new one (Althusser,1970, 241–242). On the other hand, Althusser argues that this theory should be reconsidered in terms of the state apparatus as a repressive body and incorporate the concept of *Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs),* which includes institutions and mechanisms to spread the *ideology* and influence society's beliefs, identities and values. Among these institutions are the religious *ISA* (the system of different churches), the educational *ISA* (the system of the different public and private "schools"), the family *ISA*, the legal *ISA*, the political *ISA* (the political system, including different parties), the trade union *ISA*, the communications *ISA* (press, radio and television, etc.) and the cultural *ISA* (literature, the arts, sport, etc). Therefore, one of the main important *Ideological State Apparatuses* is in education.

The years after the establishment of the French mandate led to an ideological crisis. The French moral influence was expressed by the idea of the Catholic protectorate, causing the rise of the nationalist movement, which expanded during the Interwar period (Khoury, 2009). To spread French culture, language and values among the Syrian population, the French colonial administration established educational institutions. Local elites and colonial bureaucrats were educated in French schools. During French colonial times, these schools served as a means of French dominance. In this case, the French administration used both the repressive state apparatus and *Ideological State Apparatuses* because there was a growing threat of an Arab nationalist movement by the time of the establishment of the French mandate in Syria. The French government already had experience in establishing their own administrative system over local communities in Africa, specifically, in Morocco. This system was developed by General Louis-Hubert Lyautey, the Resident General of the Moroccan protectorate, and General Henri Gouraud, the first French High Commissioner in Syria, who followed the example of Lyautey. Lyautey believed that "[b]y winning over important local leaders, and by exploiting the splits inherent in any society, the clever native affairs officer could often bring a tribe to submission without having to fire a shot" (Burke, 1973, 177). In cooperation with local Morrocan leaders, Lyautey's proposition brought immediate results. Burke points out that the Lyautey system quickly subdued large areas by providing medical facilities, roads, agricultural assistance and trade in French-organized local markets. Therefore, the new French ideology meant not assimilation but collaboration and association. The local population and new elite were supposed to associate themselves with the French rule even after the declaration of independence. Before he was appointed in Syria, General Henri Gouraud held Lyautey's Moroccan position, which significantly influenced his perspective on French rule in Syria. It is important to mention that Gouraud followed Lyautey's advice that only local men should be appointed and that, through the feeling of security under the French flag and

respect for the local religion and traditions, the local community would love France and feel protected. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the "landowning-bureaucratic" class started to compete with the central Ottoman authorities to build a new political power. European states saw the new Tanzimat reforms in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century as a new opportunity as they had direct connections with the local populations through the urban notables. And after the establishment of the mandate, the French administration could already use this Syrian bourgeoisie (Volker, 1991, 31–37) to implement Lyautey's administrative system. Gouraud used *Ideological State Apparatuses*. He wrote an article entitled *Revue de France* about how the French government established more than 600 more schools with both French and Arabic classes, and the local leaders' children also attended these schools. Gouraud also mentions the construction of hospitals, nurseries, orphanages and maternity homes; moreover, the work of mobile sanitary and medical teams among the people, along with the improvement of education (Burke, 1973, 179). The French colonial power in Syria had all the necessary resources to establish Althusser's *Ideological State Apparatuses*, which was developed way later in theory than the establishment of the French mandate; however, the French officials were wrong in claiming that the same model could work on both Morrocco's and Syria's local administrations. Even though Lyautey's approach was considered a modern and realistic way to shift power in native administrations and to take into account local traditions and religious peculiarities, the resistance of the local population still prevailed the desire of the French government to create a loyal elite within Syria, which would decrease the alienation of the local people and create a social order.

On the other hand, humanitarian initiatives had a significant role in shaping regional politics following the Armenian genocide. While Cilicia, before the First World War, had one of the most outstanding economies in the region, during the war, it lost its access to markets and its main city, Adana, and despite the massacres in 1909, the number of Armenians on the eve of the First World War was still 26,430, mainly residing in the Kheder-Ilias district and the town center. The medieval churches of Saint-Jacques and Saint-Serges, which were still visible in the early twentieth century, are evidence of their presence. Adana had prominent Armenian schools, such as the Apkarian, Achkhénian and Aramian colleges, with 1,500 pupils in 1913. The Armenian population predominantly spoke Turkish, but there were also Catholic and Protestant places of worship and schools (Kévorkian, 1999). Before World War I, Armenian political organizations were involved in civic initiatives in Cilicia. Following the war, there was a significant increase in local and international Armenian humanitarian efforts. Various Armenian civil institutions were established to support relief operations. One such institution was the Armenian Medical Mission (MMA), created by the Armenian national delegation in Paris. Comprised of five doctors and four nurses, the MMA was sent to Cilicia to provide medical assistance to Armenian returnees and

refugees. They set up a hospital in Adana and other dispensaries to primarily provide services for the Armenian community. Another organization, the Armenian Red Cross of Tarsus (ARC-Tarsus), was a local initiative formed by women from Tarsus. ARC-Tarsus ran a hospital in Tarsus and received significant financial support from the local community. While MMA and ARC-Tarsus collaborated with other humanitarian organizations, they faced challenges both internally and externally. MMA doctors were critical of existing medical aid efforts in Cilicia and prioritized care for Armenian patients. Gratien writes:

> "The French government was also involved in the area of public health in Cilicia. By and large, these services carried over from and expanded upon those formerly conducted by the Ottoman public health apparatus. For example, the mandate administration assumed control of the four municipal hospitals in Adana (150 beds), Mersin (25 beds), Tarsus (50 beds), and Ceyhan (25 beds) along with a hospital for "filles publiques." While the mandate spent money to maintain the public health apparatus of Cilicia during the mandate period, most of the employees and expertise in French civilian medical institutions were of local provenance." (Gratien, 2016, 177)

Additionally, there was also the Red Crescent (Hilal-i Ahmer), the Turkish version of the International Red Cross; however, its activities within the French administration remain unclear. Moreover, as Gratien argues, the identity of the Ottoman Red Crescent was an issue before the First World War, as there were debates about its Turkish nature and the translation of its name into European languages. Non-Muslim doctors played an active role in the organization, opening and running hospitals throughout the Empire. The Ottoman Red Crescent had close links with Red Cross societies in Europe, and elite women were involved in its administration. During the war, disagreements emerged between the Red Cross and the Red Crescent over the treatment of Armenians and the distribution of aid. There were cases of atrocities such as the poisoning of children in a hospital, which implicated CUP doctors in genocide. However, despite this, some Ottoman Armenian doctors continued to work in the army such as Samuel Jamgochian, who worked in an Ottoman military hospital (Gratien, 2016, 185).

However, even though these humanitarian initiatives existed, after the war, France faced a huge refugee crisis in Syria and decided to repatriate approximately 25,000–35,000 Armenians to Cilicia. As Ellen Marie Lust-Okar mentions, France chose its economic interests and peace with Turkey over the protection of the Armenians, who were forced to return to Cilicia as a result of the French recognition of Cilicia as part of Turkey according to an agreement signed at Ankara on 21 October 1921 (Lust-Okar, 1996, 56).

During the mandate in Cilicia, France attempted to maintain a balance between the Turkish and Armenian authorities, while there was the threat of establishing the United States Mandate over Armenia. The Paris Peace Conference in January 1919 was the turning point in the Allies' secret war treaties after President Wilson announced his

Fourteen Points and set out the future of the colonial people. The secret treaties became the basis for the partition of the Ottoman Empire. By the Treaty of London, drawn up in April 1915, Italy got the province of Adalia. Under the Sykes–Picot Agreement of May 1916, Britain and France awarded Russia a portion of Turkish Armenia, which included Erzerum, Trebizond, Van and Bitlis. France took a mandate over Syria and Cilicia. During the participation of Wilson in the Paris Peace Conference, he spoke on behalf of the "defeated nations", who were inhabitants of the former colonial territories and their right to administration under an international authority until they could become independent states. By this, he wanted to prevent international tensions and minimize the struggle for the territories after the war.

The French administrative authorities, who invited Armenians to Cilicia, did not take serious measures to ensure their safety. Armenians encountered opposition from the Turkish authorities, who denied their rights to the land. Therefore, French imperialism in the Interwar period can be defined through the so-called mechanism of finding collaborators or *compradores*. This means that indigenous groups within the colonies would support the French strategic interests in exchange for support. This was the case of Armenian–French cooperation as well. Understanding these dynamics and analyzing the topic through different perspectives and perceptions of minorities in the Middle East after World War I also helps to understand modern dynamics in the region.

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