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H-Diplo Review Essay on **Sarah D. Shields.** ***Fezzes in the River: Identity Politics and European Diplomacy in the Middle East on the Eve of World War II***. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-19-539331-6 (hardback, $39.95).

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Peter Wien**, University of Maryland, College Park

The symbolic power of headgear plays an important role in Sarah Shields' intriguing account of the Alexandretta crisis of the late 1930s, when Turkey's claim over the so-called Sanjak of Alexandretta led to the cession of this sizable portion of land in the North-West of the Syrian Mandate territory to the Republic of Turkey, including important population centers such as the cities Antakya (ancient Antioch) and Iskenderun (Alexandretta), in 1939. In the politics of identity that unfolded over the years from 1936 to the eve of World War II, hats symbolized partisanship, with the brimmed hat standing for Kemalist loyalties, Fezzes standing for the pre-nationalist late Ottoman bourgeoisie, whom the Kemalists found hopelessly outdated, and the military-style Sedara, which King Faysal and his military entourage had first introduced in Iraq as a token of one's commitment to Arab nationalism. Recognizable forms of headdress thus became an essential tool in the esthetics of nationalist identity politics in the 1930s. In the Sanjak of Alexandretta, they were used to underscore one's position in the increasingly uncompromising and violent ethno-politics.

The cessation of the Sanjak in 1939 was a scandal because it happened under the eyes of the League of Nations, and under the pretext of the Wilsonian principle of self-determination. In fact it was hardly concealed as a case of horse-trading when the French Mandate Power bought Turkish neutrality in the dawning World War in exchange for delivering territory that was officially under its tutelage in order to meet Turkish security concerns, but also simply to placate the nationalist cravings of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. During times of severe border contestations in Europe – this was the time of the Anschluss, the Sudeten Crisis and the Munich Agreement – the French wanted to avoid further instability in the Middle East. The crux of the matter was, however, that in this post-Wilsonian era of liberal international politics, territory could no longer simply be shoveled from one mighty country to the next, with no regard for the population. Rather, due process demanded plebiscites and elections to determine the will of the populace. In the case of the Sanjak, either elections, or the population itself, had to be engineered in order to produce the desired outcome. In a meticulous study,

mostly based on diplomatic records of this transaction, Shields makes clear that the French were at times reluctant to admit, but always aware, that French reasons of state would trump any scruples that the Mandate officials in Beirut and Damascus, or French representatives in Geneva might have had. In other words, France let itself be bribed and blackmailed only too willingly in this utterly unequal ménage à trois with Turkey, driven by its nationalist desires, and an utterly powerless Syrian government. The latter may have been the first freely elected and bourgeois nationalist government that had entered office after signing a treaty with the Popular Front government in Paris, but it remained a pawn in this ugly game of power politics, together with various nationalist groups and minorities, and most of all the population of the Sanjak. Shields is the first to describe in as much detail how the Turkish government and its agents did not shy away from shady deals and ultimately the usage of violence to secure its share of the spoils of World War I even twenty years after the Mudros armistice had sealed the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. The dawning world crisis and Turkey's own nationalist ascent created the conditions.

Turkey's claim on the Sanjak dated back to the beginnings of the Turkish Republic, and it rested on the untenable assumption that there was a Turkish majority in the Sanjak. Turkish nationalism located the mythical origins of the Turks in the area which they called Hatay, derived from its ancient Hittite population. Ethnicity and ethnic identity were, however, as Shields argues, only a vaguely defined category in the mid-1930s, constantly in flux, not only for the Turkophonic population but also most other minorities, who defined their allegiances rather by location, and who shared a number of common languages. Shields argues in a vivid manner that the idea of mutually exclusive ethnic allegiances only entered the Sanjak as a result, on the one hand, of the efforts of the Turks to engineer the population according to their particular interests, and of the League of Nations on the other hand, which tried with some honesty to gain an overview of the composition of the Sanjak's population.

In early 1937, Turkey and France negotiated an agreement together with the League of Nations that gave the Sanjak a form of independence within dependence, leading to the creation of the short-lived Republic of Hatay. Shields argues that the provisions of the agreements contained several articles that could be interpreted in contradicting ways, either keeping the Sanjak entirely under French Mandatory control, or under some form of joint French-Turkish administration. Regardless of the massive outcry that followed in Syria proper, the conflicts as Shields presents them were fought out between the Turks and the French only. Elections for a separate legislative chamber of the Sanjak should have determined who would ultimately gain the upper hand in the government – either the partisans of Atatürk or those of the Arab League of National Action under its charismatic local leader Zaki al-Arsuzi. The chamber, however, was to be formed by separate electorates based on ethnic affiliation. For this, voters had to register accordingly, which opened the way for all sorts of machinations by propagandists and militant activists of the various factions involved.

It is a great merit of Shields' book to highlight that there were no clear-cut ethnic demarcations in the Hatay region. In many ways, clearly circumscribed identities had to be imposed on the population of this extremely heterogeneous living space that comprised Arabic speakers among Sunni Muslims, Alawis, and various Christian dominations, as well as Turkish speakers and Armenians. Coexistence in a shared living space had been the norm

prior to the formation of nation states in the interwar Middle East. The prerogatives of a national government, and the contestation of territory and self-determination in election and plebiscite in a post-Wilsonian world made the ascription of exclusive ethnic identities a matter of effective administration under League of Nations rule, but also one that invited grand scale manipulation: Wilsonian self-determination became a tool of imperialist expansion in the hands of those who were capable of dominating the ethno-sectarian discourse. In the Sanjak of Alexandretta, this meant that people were pushed and bullied – according to Shields mainly by the Kemalist Turks – to register under one particular ethnicity in the upcoming elections for the chamber of the Republic of Hatay. The remarkably resilient minorities – in particular the Alawites – finally had to give in to various kinds of pressure, including arson and murder. A great part of the minority populations of the Sanjak – but also anti-Kemalist Turks – immigrated to Lebanon and Syria, adding to the stream of refugees that has been a constant characteristic of Middle Eastern life since the days of World War I.

It is unfortunate that Shields founds her account to such a large extent on the records of the French Mandate authorities. These records are today accessible in the *Centre des archives diplomatiques* in Nantes, France. The book suffers from a conspicuous absence of sources representing an Arabic perspective. Arabs speak only through the reports about French interactions with Syrian government circles, or through the dispatches that a vast army of informants sent to the French local intelligence network on a daily basis. There is no doubt that these French reports contain valuable information on Syrian public opinion, or about the contents of speeches given at rallies, or the deliberations during meetings of supposedly secret associations. The intelligence service was well organized, informants were locals, and the officers who supervised them and reported to the French representation in Beirut were often well trained as Arabic speakers. Bias was nevertheless unavoidable and the officers were naturally selective, and sometimes condescending in their attitude. Particularly local newspapers, but possibly also records such as those of the *Dar al-Watha'iq al-Tarikhiyya* in Damascus, which contain private papers that individuals bequeathed to the archives, are a corrective to the colonial account. It is not justifiable to avoid them almost altogether, as Shields does. There are hardly any Turkish governmental sources in the account either but Shields explains that they remain closed until today. In addition, the narrative structure of the study is determined too much by the minutiae of the reports and deliberations of the diplomatic records. A more concise structure and more argument and analysis throughout would have made the book an easier read.

Regardless of this criticism, Sarah Shields has written an important book. In times such as today, when ethnic and religious identities are treated as essential matters again – Sunnis versus Shi'is, Muslims against Christians, Arabs against Persians etc. – it is helpful to understand that the origin of these divisions lies at least to some extent in the imperialist politics of categorization. But it is also enlightening to see how a supra-national institution like the League of Nations that embodied a liberal world view took part in social engineering efforts and could not prevent the forced migration of people in an imperialist context.

Shields argues in her conclusion that issues such as the Alexandretta crisis are still alive in public memory in Syria. It remains to be seen how respective animosities could rekindle under the chaotic circumstances of a post-Assad Syria. Like other regimes of the Arab

world that came into power in the 1970s, the Alawite leaders of Syria used matters of contestation such as the Sanjak issue for their propaganda, but kept them at bay when reasons of state and regime commanded it. With the lid removed, old disputes could surface again and lead to new cross-border contestations.