

1919

A Handwritten Note by Alfred Sursock, Omar Beyhum, Habib Trad, Joseph Audi, and A. Bassoul, to General Henri Gouraud

Citation:

"A Handwritten Note by Alfred Sursock, Omar Beyhum, Habib Trad, Joseph Audi, and A. Bassoul, to General Henri Gouraud", 1919, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Document #1554, Sursock Archives, Phoenix Center for Lebanese Studies, Université de Saint Esprit, Kaslik, Lebanon. Contributed, translated, and annotated by Cyrus Schayegh. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/291011>

Summary:

In the last two years of World War I, British Empire troops based in Egypt succeeded in occupying Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria, roughly present-day Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan), which had been Ottoman from 1516/17. In October 1918, British troops evacuated the area roughly corresponding to present-day Lebanon, and a French contingent landed in Beirut and spread southwards along the coast. The following month, France occupied also Cilicia, in present-day southern Turkey, and in July-August 1920 it took Syria, terminating the originally British-supported Arab Kingdom there governed by the Hashemite King Faysal I (1885-1933) and imposing a League of Nation Mandate over that country and Lebanon that it had in principle received in the Allied San Remo conference, in April 1920, and that became official in 1923. (France evacuated Cilicia in March 1921, following a treaty with the Turkish National Movement, which would establish the Turkish Republic in 1923.) With these measures, France implemented key parts of the 1916 Franco-British Sykes-Picot Agreement regarding the post-war, post-Ottoman administrative-territorial order of Greater Syria, Iraq, and southeastern Anatolia. (While secret, this agreement was made public by the Bolsheviks in November 1917.)

In November 1919, General Henri Gouraud (1867-1946) became France's new political representative and troop commander in Lebanon, and French troops took full control of most parts of present-day Lebanon. The below printed here, a short note to Gouraud that may or may not have been sent in actual fact, was penned by a number of Beirut's leading Christian and Muslim merchant-politicians. Picking up concepts current following World War I in other parts of the world and especially Europe—discussed e.g. in Dominique Kirchner Reill's *The Fiume Crisis. Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire* (2020) — the authors of this document show how much the postwar order was in flux, as discussed in Carol Hakim's *The Origins of the Lebanese National Idea, 1840-1920* (2013) and, for Bilad al-Sham, in Cyrus Schayegh's *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (2017). Beirut did not become a Free City or free port, though it did

become the capital of Greater Lebanon, created in 1920, and the headquarters of the French Mandate government over Lebanon and Syria.

Original Language:

French

Contents:

Original Scan

Translation - English

[Translator's note: The note is undated but must have been written in the fall of 1919.]

His Excellency General Gouraud, Paris

Our unlimited trust in your person encourages us to ask you to help realize the almost unanimous wish of the city of Beirut, to make it a Free City and free port, seat of the Mandate. Having envisioned all other hypotheses, we find that [the status of] Free City and free port alone can assure the future of Beirut, whose prosperity would benefit Lebanon. We hope you will join [this view] and assure you that consultation by ballot would obtain the virtual unanimity [of Beirut's] populations.

[signature] Alfred Sursock

[signature] Omar Beyhum

[signature] Habib Trad

[signature] Joseph Audi

[signature] A. Bassoul