



## Seferberlik and Bare Feet: Rural Hardship, Cited Dreams, and Social Belonging in 1920s Syria

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Ottoman troops marching near Jerusalem, c.1917. Source: Yeldiz Collection, Istanbul.

### Introduction: Beyond a Honeymoon in the Countryside

Dr. Razi Shakhashir's honeymoon did not go as planned. Bound for Aleppo with his bride, Shakhashir opted instead for the dusty hamlet of Nayrab, about ten miles outside of the Grey City. If the choice of place may have been surprising, so too was the choice of activity. Dr. Shakhashir was not in Nayrab for leisure, but rather for work of an intense sort. He, along with a band of young urban professionals from around Syria, was engaged in a rural development initiative known as the Village Recovery Program. Throughout Nayrab and, indeed, Lebanon and Syria, these youths had fanned out across the Levantine countryside for a number of projects aimed at improving peasant hygiene, health, literacy, and agricultural output. When a reporter

for the Damascus daily newspaper *Al-Qabas* visited, he saw Shakhashir surrounded by dozens of peasants awaiting his medical attention. Although one would be hard-pressed to know it from a look at the historiography on nationalism in French Mandate Syria, this dynamic interplay between notions of urban modernity and visions of rural backwardness functioned as a crucial part of forging national identities. Indeed, those youth in Nayrab who attracted even honeymooners to their ranks believed they were doing nothing short of injecting “a spirit of life in the segment of the Syrian people... who represent the biggest part of the sons of this nation.”<sup>1</sup> An exploration of the ways in which ideas of the rural inflected urban nationalist discourses would surely have merit.<sup>2</sup> But while moving nationalism beyond its typically accepted urban habitat to some extent, such an account would remain ensconced in the grip of urban nationalists as the sole agents of history. This is to say that such an account would be about the urban elite’s ideas of the rural residents rather than the rural residents on their own terms. The nature of this line of argument recalls Philip Khoury’s warning of the danger of considering “advancing national ideals” as “the sole measure of historical agency in the twentieth-century Arab world.”<sup>3</sup>

This article is an initial attempt to balance these tendencies. Rather than taking the *Al-Qabas* reporter’s words as truth – that peasants and other rural residents needed to have the spirit of life awakened in them – and rather than taking the *Al-Qabas* reporter’s words as reflective of truth, a discursive construction of the peasant from an urban, middle-class gaze, I will be attempting to do something more grounded, namely understand what the lives of the rural underclass were actually like. In the process, I hope to raise questions about the ways in which the Ottoman past shaped experiences of the Mandate period (1920-1946) for the lower classes, the ways in which violence underpinned social and economic order, and, finally, the ways in which classes differentiated themselves in this context.<sup>4</sup> By examining the peasants and lower classes with respect to presences rather than absences, I hope not only to bring to light some understudied aspects of lived experience in the Mandate period, but also to question some of the predominant assumptions of histories of the time period.

To make these claims, I will rely on the Syrian writer Hanna Mina’s memoir, *Baqaya Suwar*. Mina’s work chronicles his early childhood, from 1924 until 1929, as his family moved from village to village in northwest Syria in the wake of the Ottoman Empire’s collapse and the early years of the French Mandate. Mina’s memories provide insight into the lives of the rural underclass and, moreover, demonstrate some of the ways in which rural and urban social boundaries were constructed in this period.<sup>5</sup> Over the course of four sections in this article, I will develop an image of rural hardship mitigated by citted dreams: the horrors of the final days of the Ottoman Empire repeated themselves (Section 1) as Mina’s family contended with the intense performative violence that underpinned social and economic order in the countryside (Section 2); the city, however, and its modern institutions represented a respite from this suffering (Section 3), as did consumption of goods deemed of a modern sensibility, namely shoes (Section 4).

Utilizing this work to gain a deeper understanding of the rural social history of

this period presents two main problems, though neither of them is insurmountable. To begin with, as a memoir, the book was written long after the events it describes, an arrangement that can push authors to elide events or thoughts that do not hew to their contemporary ideological and political projects.<sup>6</sup> But while it is true that a certain political agenda at the time of the memoir's writing may promote certain memories over others, the converse is also true: previous lived experiences likely informed contemporary political agendas.<sup>7</sup> Another issue for this article – which attempts to explore rural social history, including that of peasants – is that Mina's family was not peasant per se. Rather, they hailed from the city. However, they were direly impoverished and spent the majority of Mina's early years in the countryside surrounded by peasants. Additionally, I will always be careful to identify the speaker and context of statements regarding social groupings. Thus, while these issues present some challenges to interpreting Mina's memoir as a reflection of rural realities, they by no means vitiate the richness of Mina's work for historical interpretation.

I believe this project is necessary given the hegemonic nature of urban nationalists in the historiography of Mandate Syria. Philip Khoury's magisterial work on the politics of the period set the foundation for this narrative focused on elite urbanites in the National Bloc.<sup>8</sup> While James Gelvin has transcended the notion of a single nationalism by delineating the multiple and conflicting constructions of nation by different social groups, the importance of nationalism and the importance of the city as its incubator remains.<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, who presents a pioneering shift in terms of weaving together a gendered analysis of history with social movement theory, also declares rural space beyond her purview.<sup>10</sup> Michael Provence's work on the seminal role of the rural Druze notables (whom he calls subalterns) in the Syrian Revolt of 1925 is one of the only pieces that challenges the urban bias of the historical narrative; however, Provence does not challenge the focus on nationalism, making it his primary contention that rural actors spearheaded Syrian nationalism.<sup>11</sup> I hope that in exploring rural experiences that have little to do with nationalism, I might shed new light on our understanding of this time period.<sup>12</sup>

## **Seferberlik and Geographies of Suffering**

For Mina and his family, the Ottoman past deeply colored their experiences throughout the Mandate period. These memories did not consist of some multi-ethnic harmonious political culture but instead included the famine, forced migration, and misery that accompanied the empire's dying gasps, referred to by the Turkish word for mobilization, *seferberlik*.<sup>13</sup> Some of Mina's first memories include his mother's tales of suffering from those days. He recalls how "on winter nights when the wind wailed around the house and shadows from the lantern made apparitions on the clay walls of the house, mother told stories to my sisters and me."<sup>14</sup> His mother's memories were not of happy times; indeed, her songs and tales of the past often moved her to tears, which would roll onto young Hanna and rouse him from sleep in her lap.<sup>15</sup> He likened

her memories to the “bitter” taste of “quinine water,” which the family would drink “as a remedy against malaria, whose feverish chills” they were accustomed to.<sup>16</sup> His mother was an orphan, raised by relatives in Suwayda, near the city of Antakya.<sup>17</sup> She lost contact with her sister in the days of seferberlik, and rumor had it that she had married and moved to Greece. His mother’s brother, Rizqallah, worked in a forced labor camp in Anatolia during the war. Yet his obduracy – for example, he refused to eat the Ottoman ration of karvana, boiled water with very few lentils – perhaps made his eventual escape inevitable.<sup>18</sup> Rizqallah sent for his sisters to join him in the Mediterranean port city of Mersin and his charisma was so great that many other homeless residents of Suwayda joined them too. He was a heroic figure in his sister’s eyes, “a man among men.”<sup>19</sup> “He was loved by all,” she intoned to Hanna and his sisters as they stayed up in their deserted hut in a deserted field outside of Suwayda, “even death.”<sup>20</sup> When he passed away as a result of angina pectoris, he left Hanna’s mother in a precarious position.<sup>21</sup> In her words, she was “alone, a stranger in a country in which people were lost from war and migration.”<sup>22</sup> In those days of suffering, her bereavement was not unique; however, her isolation from family was. She remembered that she “was the only one for whom no relative remained and our town was far and seferberlik fearsome and the caravans of migrants filled the roads.”<sup>23</sup>

Not only did Mina’s mother’s memories inculcate a sense of the horrors of the end of the Ottoman Empire between Hanna and his sisters; his mother’s memories also bespoke the complex geography of this time period, when economic conditions and government coercion forced significant movements among the local population. The latter point – with respect to borders – is an important one since for the most part the history of Syria in the Mandate has been told as if this were an enclosed space, as if the European-imposed borders had an unassailable power not only in reality but also in the minds of the people who lived within these borders.<sup>24</sup> As Mina’s family’s peripatetic existence underscored, migration was a fact of life for many people during these years. Few scholars have grappled with the social impact of these population movements, and with good reason.<sup>25</sup> These migrants – particularly of the lower classes – left few records. Moreover, the nature of Arab nationalism and its demonization of the Ottoman past eschewed any impact – positive or negative – that the Ottoman years may have had on emerging or contradictory notions of polity in this time period. As Michael Provence suggests, the migration of tens of thousands of refugees and army deserters to Jabal Druze in the days of seferberlik surely aided the establishment of social networks that came into play in the Syrian Revolt of 1925.<sup>26</sup> Although Mina’s memoir provides few clear points in this respect, it does raise questions about how these late imperial geographies and circuits of migration influenced notions of collectivity and identity.<sup>27</sup>

If Mina’s autobiography provides few clues in terms of the seferberlik’s relation to notions of identity with respect to polity, Mina’s family’s experiences nevertheless underscore seferberlik’s status as a reference point and specter of suffering even during the Mandate years.<sup>28</sup> After the collapse of the silk market due to imported, manufactured silk from Asia, Mina’s family and others among the fields of then

useless mulberry trees recalled the “seferberlik” as “similar in their minds” since “the mouths finished off the few supplies, and starvation loomed like a sign of the plague. People sold some of what they owned, and some sold all that they owned; others borrowed, ate grass or begged, until there was no longer, in the fall, any grass or loans or alms.”<sup>29</sup> Several years later, after Mina’s family had left behind the mulberry trees, they again found themselves facing seferberlik-like horrors after a locust invasion devastated their crops. Mina’s father surveyed their village’s prospects for survival in light of their nonexistent food stores: “people will eat each other in the winter, justifiably, in seferberlik the mother ate her children ... she became a cat and ate her children.”<sup>30</sup> The repeated invocation of the experience of seferberlik in relation to trying circumstances may provide some insight into the earlier question about the development of certain identities and notions of polity among these people. While for middle- and upper-class urban residents, seferberlik represented the foil against which they defined their aspirations in the post-Ottoman world, for many rural residents, the horrors of the seferberlik were not confined to the Ottoman past; the tragedy was not repeated as farce but rather as tragedies upon tragedies.<sup>31</sup> In this light, perhaps the absence of clear allegiance to any polity makes sense; perhaps the absence has to do with the sheer challenge of existence. Mina’s family was struggling to find enough food; they did not have time or energy for thinking about politics. Moreover, the family faced preponderant public violence that enforced the existing social order, a phenomenon I will explore in the next section.

### **“He was hit like them and thus he became close to the peasants”: the Performative and Constitutive Violence of Rural Economic and Social Order**

Authority in Mina’s memoir rests with those who have powers of violence at their disposal, affording us some glimpses of state actors. During the family’s stay in Suwayda, for example, Hanna’s father’s departure from the town on a trip as an itinerant salesman prompted the village’s mukhtar to believe that the family planned to abscond and escape their debt to him. Threatening Hanna’s mother, who remained in the town, the mukhtar shouted, “Listen! Do you know who I am? I am al-Lushiyya!” referring to the downtown area of the village where government buildings were located. He continued, “I am able to imprison you in this house ... I am able to hang you on the mulberry tree like dogs without owners ... and if need be, I will sell your children.”<sup>32</sup> Clearly, the threat of public violence constituted an essential part of the social hierarchy and the maintenance of economic order. Since this violence flowed through the state to some extent, seeking recourse from the state was impractical. Later in Suwayda, when the family struggled with the mukhtar to be released from their debt following the collapse of the silk market, Hanna’s mother and father considered going to Antakya to lodge a claim with the government, but later reconsidered; it was just too far.<sup>33</sup> To escape their debt, the family eventually relied

on the very methods of the mukhtar: one of Hanna's mother's uncles aimed a rifle at the mukhtar's door and threatened to steal his cow if Hanna's family was not granted reprieve from their debt.<sup>34</sup> In this case, then, violence constituted the dominant force for both ensuring and resisting economic and social order.

Although Mina's family triumphed in this encounter, there should be no mistake about the hierarchical nature of the power arrangement in this society and the ways in which violence coerced the weak. At the suggestion that the peasants of Akbar might steal grain from the village storehouse, Hanna's father interjected, stating, "The peasants don't steal from the warehouse of the lord ... the peasant steals from a peasant ... he knows that he escapes if he does that."<sup>35</sup> But when peasants crossed these societal lines, Hanna's father clearly described the array of powers enforcing discipline. "As for stealing from the lord ... that happens sometimes and at that time, the police come and they have rifles and whips and the lord comes ... here, in this square, a peasant was killed. The lord accused him of stealing and killed him."<sup>36</sup> But the act of violence was not simply meant to punish; rather it was meant to enforce discipline by functioning as a public performance. Indeed, the lord and his men understood this relationship: "they covered his corpse with a sack so that the others would see him and be afraid."<sup>37</sup>

A later encounter between adversarial members of the economic elite also underscored the role of violence in underpinning power and, furthermore, symbolizing it as part of social identification. In Akbar, the owner of the village lands came, clad in a white suit astride a saddled horse, whip in hand. Hanna's father rushed to the man and took his horse. Tethering the mount, he intoned to his family simply, "The bey has arrived."<sup>38</sup> The "bey" proceeded to sit in the courtyard of the village storehouse and order the peasants to fill bags with grain. Attesting to the complex relationship between commodities, urban, and rural spaces, Mina writes, "It was said that cars would arrive in the evening to transport the bags to the city."<sup>39</sup> However, very soon another man arrived on horseback. He dismounted angrily shouting at the peasants to return the bags of grain to the storehouse. Then he proceeded to slap the bey, apparently his younger brother, across the face. The younger brother did not move his arms, which were wrapped behind his back, as he endured his old brother's continued slaps.<sup>40</sup> Then, without a word, the older brother departed and the younger brother remained, spending the rest of the night pacing in front of the storehouse. Mina particularly noted the man's comportment and its connection to his class: "he was young, he wore boots, and he had beautiful hair ... and according to the description of the father, he was inevitably white of skin, as he was one of the lords."<sup>41</sup> Rumors abounded among the peasants over the cause of the dustup. Some claimed a woman was at the root of the fight; others suggested that one of the brothers wished to go to school in France.<sup>42</sup> But Hanna's father saw the dispute in more prosaic terms: "the dispute of the two lords is over the harvest which is in the storehouse ... One of them, the younger, prefers to sell it while the other, the elder and true owner, is intent on holding on to it. He is a trader and hoarder, and in the pursuit of money he hit his brother."<sup>43</sup> Thus the dispute between these two brothers demonstrated the role of



Latakia in the 1920s. Source: [www.lattakiaonline.com](http://www.lattakiaonline.com).

public violence in the economic constitution of society.

But Mina's description of the encounter suggests an even broader societal connection between violence and class. As the younger lord paced in front of the storehouse, with the peasants still shocked at what had transpired, Mina writes, "It is certain that he had earned the admiration of those present and their sympathy, not because he did not respond to the slaps of his big brother, but rather because he was oppressed also. Indeed he was hit like them (the peasants) and thus he became close to the peasants who were beaten by the police and the land owners and the mukhtar."<sup>44</sup> So violence did not only underpin the social order; it also appeared to represent a part of the self-identification of certain social groups. The lord was beaten by his superior; therefore he was close to the peasants.

### **Seeing the City from the Countryside: Modernity, Consumption, and the Construction of Social Difference**

Mina's memoir demonstrates the hardships of rural life in this time period, evident in both the omnipresent specter of *seferberlik* and the hideous violence that underpinned the social order. In response to these difficulties in the countryside, Mina's family placed their hope in the modern trappings of the city. Although Mina's family spent considerable time in the countryside throughout *Baqaya Suwar*, they nevertheless (or perhaps as a result) strongly identified as city folk. In this section, I'd like to

explicate some of these notions of identification with the city with respect to notions of modernity and the ways in which social difference figured prominently in these articulations.

For Mina's mother, the city represented a space of hope for both security and education. In recalling the family's days in Suwayda, Mina remembers that his mother always looked forward to the next day, saying, "We will pay the debt to the mukhtar and leave. We will return to your uncles in Lattakia, and there we will live in a house of stone, and live among the people, and you will go to school."<sup>45</sup> When they did leave Suwayda, albeit not for the city, the fantasy of the city as the panacea of rural ills nevertheless remained fixed in the family's consciousness. Hanna's mother again promised, "We will live in the city, and you will go to school, and we will not go hungry or fear, because people in the city, they have enough to eat, and their houses are close to one another and there are no thieves or beasts, and we will not hear howls or the sounds of bullets."<sup>46</sup> Again, the mother conceived of the city as intricately tied to better material circumstances. She envisioned migration to the city to mean the end of the hunger that the family so often suffered during their sojourns in the countryside. Moreover, she saw the city as a place of safety, where the family would no longer be threatened by the whims of nature or the beastly qualities of men. But she also closely linked the city with novel state-directed forms of socialization, notably schooling. Thus, Hanna's mother's hopes for the city fused positive associations with the city to negative associations with the countryside, underscoring my point about the relational nature of assertions of self.

Notions of difference did not simply present themselves in Mina's mother's hopes and dreams; rather, they emerged in both the family's self-assertions as well as in the identity that their peasant neighbors ascribed to them. Doing the same work as the peasants during their time in Qarat Aghash, Mina's mother lamented the fact that the peasants around her did not seem to be as disappointed with their living conditions as she. They possessed, in the mother's eyes, a deeper sense of contentment with their difficult state of affairs simply because, according to Mina's mother, they did not harbor the same urbane aspirations; put simply, Mina writes, the peasants "did not think like our mother of schools, shoes, and clothes."<sup>47</sup> This statement is not evidence that peasants objectively harbored different aspirations than Mina's family; but it is evidence that Mina's family subjectively believed that a divergence of aspirations accounted for the difference between these respective social groups. Yet there is some suggestion that the peasants themselves also distinguished Mina's family from themselves. Again, this point comes mediated through Mina's memory, and thus it is obviously not without problems. But it nevertheless speaks to a mutually constitutive notion of social grouping taking place. In the village of Akbar, Mina recalls how a neighbor had come to their house, curious to see the "*bani adam*" family that had moved to the countryside. Clarifying this phrase, Mina writes, "This *adami* description is not to differentiate in living standard or work but rather to convey that we are from the city, from *bani adam* who live in the city, with houses of stone, and streets of asphalt, with cars and electricity and women with short hair and short clothes that

reveal their thighs.<sup>748</sup> Thus, social class did not simply consist of relationship to the means of production, as some crude versions of Marxism would have it. Rather, class also related to modes of representation. These processes of marking social boundaries are far more complicated than a simple analysis of economic means will convey.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Shoe Doesn't Fit: A Feet-Up History and Class Distinction in 1920s Syria**

One flashpoint for these negotiations of social distinction – and again, this negotiation is not simply imposed by outside observers but also claimed by the people themselves – is perhaps only visible from, quite literally, a history-from-below perspective that begins with the shoe.<sup>50</sup> Although Mina's family possessed a social status distinct from that of the peasants with whom they lived, they nevertheless did not possess the trappings of the promise of the city their mother envisioned. As noted above, schooling eluded them. So did shoes. When the family was in Qarat Aghash, near Iskenderun, for example, Hanna made a habit of walking to a sandy hill overlooking the harbor, where he would watch the boats pass by while his parents worked alongside the peasants. His mother warned him against making these journeys, for fear of the poisonous snakes and scorpions that inhabited the hill. She had promised to consent to Hanna's boyhood explorations as soon as he had shoes; indeed, Hanna remembers, "She had dreamed since our arrival [in Qarat Aghash] of going to the city to purchase shoes for me."<sup>51</sup> But their master, whom Hanna's father had contracted with for work, refused to grant them a sufficient sum of money. As a result, Hanna remained without shoes, still subject to the vicissitudes of the natural world. Indeed, one day Hanna defied his mother's entreaties to avoid the hill and ventured to the sand dunes in bare feet. He saw a snake and ran in fear. Imagining that he was bit, Hanna only got up when a peasant who heard his screaming picked him up and cared for him.

This relationship to the natural world figures prominently in many of Mina's comments about shoes, or their absence. For example, during the family's time in Suwayda, Mina has an idyllic memory of the dew wetting his and his sisters' "bare feet as [they] ran among the trees hunting butterflies."<sup>52</sup> Moreover, he recalls how a neighbor woman walked through the mud "barefoot" as she brought a cow to the family for much-needed sustenance.<sup>53</sup> When the family left Suwayda and moved to Qarat Aghash, Hanna and his youngest sister went out to the fields "barefoot like them [the peasants] and spread in the fields like they did."<sup>54</sup> Consequently, Mina and his sister contracted "conjunctivitis and disease" having been "immersed in all of this filth from dust to mud and dung."<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, in their final village, Akbar, Mina recalls how he and his family braved thorns and stones in the field as they searched for grains and olives which the harvesters had overlooked; as a sign of the family becoming accustomed to the ways of the peasants, Mina writes, "The scratches on the feet swelled and filled with pus, but they became familiar and expected."<sup>56</sup> Another instance of barefoot contact with the natural world occurred in the year of the locust

invasion when the entire village of Akbar convened at the behest of the security forces to kill locusts. Mina describes women and children running barefoot over hundreds of locusts with needle-sharp wings.<sup>57</sup> Each of Mina's descriptions of shoelessness bears a clear connection to some aspect of the natural world and, with the exception of the feeling of morning dew on his feet as he hunted for butterflies, the aspects of the natural world these people come into contact with are generally disgusting or painful, ranging from mud to dung to filth to thorns to pus to locust wings. Thus one might read the extensive attention to shoes as a reflection of anxieties about cleanliness, hygiene, and connection to the natural world.

The shoe, however, was not simply a signifier of social distinction, representing the promise of the city, nor was it just another hardship that Hanna's dire economic circumstances forced him to bear. The shoe dilemma also directly affected the family's economic circumstances. After all, Mina's father's trade was cobbling. Yet when he tried to ply his trade in the countryside, he failed miserably. He failed not because the peasants did not bring him their shoes for repair but rather because they did not have shoes to wear or repair.<sup>58</sup> But Hanna's father was undeterred. If the peasants lacked shoes to be repaired, perhaps there was a business opportunity for making shoes, he reasoned. So he borrowed some money from one of his servant-daughter's<sup>59</sup> wages and purchased some "red leather that he said was Sakhtiyan and half of a car tire to produce boots and Aleppo-style shoes."<sup>60</sup> Hanna narrates his father's decision with detachment and a sense of doom: "thus he decided, without considering the results, to progress from a cobbler to a shoemaker, without having any training in making shoes."<sup>61</sup> As Mina adumbrated, his father had problems with the new occupation. For starters, the "bent rubber of the tire" was to become "the bent sole for unwearable shoes."<sup>62</sup> And the peasants who "gambled on the father's recommendation ... were unhappy and altercations with them began."<sup>63</sup> But Hanna's father was usually able to talk his way out of difficult situations, convincing "the peasants that blame fell on their feet and not on their shoes."<sup>64</sup> As an example, Hanna's father would ask, "What does the hairdresser do with a bald bride? Look at your feet that were not molded because they did not know shoes. Wait a little. All new shoes cause discomfort to the feet and eat away at them." If these reassurances failed to secure a disgruntled peasant's acquiescence, Hanna's father resorted to aquatic solutions, putting the shoes in water in an effort to expand them. Mina writes, "So it was that his work was molding the feet of the peasants to the measurements of his shoes and not molding the shoes to the measurements of their feet."<sup>65</sup> Finally, the mukhtar of the village and the notables advised Hanna's father to discontinue his shoemaking and return to cobbling.

Yet apart from providing some dark comedy to Mina's narrative, his father's misadventures in shoemaking also underscored the role of the shoe as a social signifier, even apart from its common usage as protection from the natural world. Complaining after his failed shoemaking experience, Hanna's father lamented to his wife that the peasants were "dumb and it is better that they remain barefoot, because no one is able, even in the city, to produce shoes for these forms of feet."<sup>66</sup> However, Hanna's mother sharply disagreed, saying that "the feet of the people of the village

are like the feet of all people, and the fault is in the shoes ... so they carried them under their armpits in order to be able to show that they had shoes.”<sup>67</sup> At this remark, Hanna’s father laughed and joked: “To carry them is better than to wear them. This way they remain new.” Then he recounted seeing this phenomenon in actuality: “I saw in Suwayda people carrying their new shoes produced in Antakya itself, while walking barefoot. The important thing is that it was said that they have shoes!”<sup>68</sup> Thus at least from the perspective of Mina’s family, shoes possessed real value as a social signifier, even apart from their utilitarian purpose.

## **Conclusions: Mapping a Detour for the Historiography**

Throughout this article, I have attempted to illuminate some aspects of the subjective experiences of rural populations through an explication of Hanna Mina’s autobiography *Baqaya Suwar*. In the first section, I generally examined the impact of seferberlik on Mina’s family. I began by detailing the experiences of the Ottoman Empire endured by Hanna’s family, notably how his mother, deceased uncle, and many others, became enmeshed in a geography of suffering, moving from what would become Syria to what would become Turkey and back again. I believe these migrations are notable yet poorly attended to in the historical literature, as a result of both limited source material and the continued impact of nationalism on our historiographical imagination. As Tamari and Provenca have shown, these mobilizations crucially inflected later nationalist politics. The second point about the Ottoman past is that for Mina’s family, it was never really the past. As their repeated invocations of seferberlik suggested, they suffered hardships on the same scale over the decade following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In the second section, I discussed how publicly performed violence provided a foundation for the hierarchical social and economic structures of the countryside. Additionally, I suggested how the experience of violence at the hands of the powerful constituted one aspect of peasant identification. In the third section, I traced how the city emerged as a foil for Hanna’s family’s rural hardship. This identification was not simply a self-assertion but also ascribed to Hanna’s family by others: in the countryside, they were considered *bani adam*, hailing from a strange place of technology and fashion. Indeed, the most basic sartorial choice functioned as a key differentiating factor in these negotiations of difference. In the fourth section of the article, I discussed how shoes functioned as symbols of social status, signaling the economic means to afford a barrier between the natural world and the human body. Yet even when they did not serve this utilitarian purpose, shoes still carried a symbolic valence of status, as demonstrated by some peasants who carried their shoes under their arms. I began this article with Dr. Razi Shakhshir’s honeymoon, which was detoured from the city to the countryside; I hope my efforts in this article to sketch the contours of lived rural experience – which entailed a constant dialogue between the hardship of the countryside and the hope of the city – have demonstrated the usefulness of the rural-to-urban detour in writing the history of Mandate Syria as well. Moreover, I hope this discussion can shed light on events in Syria

today. While sectarian identification has become the dominant frame for understanding the ongoing turmoil, Mina's memoir reminds us of the importance of economic factors and urban-rural distinctions in forming conceptions of self as well.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 *Al-Qabas*, July 26, 1938, 1, 4.
- 2 Egypt has provided especially fruitful ground for such accounts that explore the urban elite's notions of the peasant and the types of power dynamics they underwrite. Michael Gasper, for example, shows how "the representations of peasants were essential in legitimating and lending authority to the social ambitions and political position of what became the nationalist elite." Gasper, *The Power of Representation: Publics, Peasants, and Islam in Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 5. In a similar approach, Omnia El-Shakry writes, "We may view the peasantry as the central contradiction of national identity within Egyptian colonial society – at the same time that they were localized by the nationalist elite as the repository of cultural authenticity, they were also demarcated as a locus of backwardness to be reformed and reconstituted as modern moral subjects of the nation-state." El-Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 91. Nathan Brown exposes the power dynamics behind the definition of peasants as ignorant, showing that peasant ignorance in the discourse of urban elites more readily meant "rejection of the new public morality that the state required." As Brown suggests, peasants had good reason to resist the intrusions of the state into their lives and what was for urban elites ignorance was in actuality a survival technique. Brown, "The Ignorance and Inscrutability of the Egyptian Peasantry," in *Peasants and Politics in the Modern Middle East*, eds. John Waterbury and Farhad Kazemi (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1991), 212.
- 3 Philip Khoury, "The Paradoxical in Arab Nationalism," in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, ed. Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 287.
- 4 I do not use objective means for identifying membership in class or social groupings (terms that I will use interchangeably) but rather the words of the actors and close observers themselves in an effort to understand how these identities were asserted and negotiated. I use peasant in correspondence with the Arabic term *fallah*. Although I acknowledge Hanna Batatu's point that "Syria's peasants do not constitute one but several types," I believe some attention to the construction of a common peasant identity is important. Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 97.
- 5 Mina's memoirs are such a rich source for the social history of this time period that there were numerous fascinating topics – notably, the raising of silk worms and locust invasions – that I treat in merely a cursory fashion here. Moreover, Mina wrote a second part to his memoir, called *Al-Mustanqa'*, which details the family's move to the city.
- 6 Salim Tamari, for example, finds an "interesting contrast" between Aref Shehadeh's diary of his time in a Siberian POW camp during World War I and the later "authorized" version of these same events in Aref's memoir. Whereas the diary presents Aref as deeply ingrained in Ottoman political culture, the memoir presents him as a staunch Arab nationalist, a stance much more in line with his subsequent activities. Tamari, *Year of the Locust: A Soldier's Diary and the Erasure of Palestine's Ottoman Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 68.
- 7 As Tetz Rooke states in his discussion of the ideological agenda of Mina's work, "The relation between doctrine and life in this text is organic. Both huck and grain belong to the same plant." Rooke, *In my Childhood: a Study of Arabic Autobiography* (Stockholm, Sweden:

- Stockholm University, 1997), 220.
- 8 Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: the Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).
  - 9 James Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 11.
  - 10 Thompson writes, "The rural context for urban politics is important ... however, peasants did not mount organized movements of their own during the period of French rule, and so did not participate as distinct players in the construction of citizenship." Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 5.
  - 11 Nevertheless, Provence makes a number of compelling points about the significance of this shift away from a notion of nationalism as solely an urban phenomenon, among them the fact that the three biggest cities in Syria were never composed of more than 20 percent of the total population of Syria during the Mandate. Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas, 2005), 19. Moreover, as Hanna Batatu demonstrates, rural experiences also deserve attention because of the overwhelmingly "rustic complexion of the Ba'ath party" in their early decades of rule. Batatu, 161. One final point in favor of taking rural history seriously: in addition to taking over the government, people from the countryside ruralized cities in the course of extensive rural-to-urban migration in the post-independence period. As Kevin Martin has suggested, these transformations of urban space instigated elite efforts to civilize the newcomers to the city through didactic cartoons in the popular press. Martin, "Quick Studies: Peasants into Syrians," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (1): 4-6.
  - 12 This work seeks to build on Linda Schilcher's examination of the connections between state violence, the world market, and the Syrian peasantry in the late Ottoman period. Schilcher, "Violence in Rural Syria in the 1880s and 1890s: State Centralization, Rural Integration, and the World Market," in *Peasants and Politics in the Modern Middle East*, eds. John Waterbury and Farhad Kazemi (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1991), 50-84.
  - 13 This point is not to say that notions of pluralistic, multi-ethnic politics did exist up until the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Michelle Campos's recent work underscores this point: "by illustrating the deep resonance and widespread nature of a professed Ottoman imperial nation, this book challenges entrenched historical narratives about the role of ethnic nationalisms in the breakup of the Ottoman Empire." Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 5. Indeed, much of the reason these Ottoman pasts have been erased has been the power of seferberlik on people's memory.
  - 14 Hanna Mina, *Baqaya Suwar* (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1978), 58. This and all subsequent translations are the author's.
  - 15 Mina, 59.
  - 16 Mina, 59. Later in the book, Mina details his experience with malaria. Far away from any doctor or the quinine leaves, Hanna tried the remedy that a peasant suggested to him – drinking one's own urine, preferably stored overnight in a hollowed-out watermelon shell – to no avail. Mina, 238.
  - 17 Not to be confused with the Suwayda in southern Syria.
  - 18 Mina, 61.
  - 19 Mina, 60.
  - 20 Mina, 60.
  - 21 Elizabeth Thompson attends to Mina's memoir in her work briefly and even discusses Mina's uncle Rizqallah. Thompson, 33.
  - 22 Mina, 60.
  - 23 Mina, 60.
  - 24 Some exceptions to the anachronistic acceptance of borders include Keith Watenpugh, who criticizes the "exclusionary" nature of Turkish and Arab studies in his account of modernity in Aleppo in the early twentieth-century, as well as Ussama Makdisi, who criticizes the gap between Ottomanist and Syrian and Lebanese nationalist interpretations of history in his article on the emergence of sectarianism in the wake of the 1860 violence in Mount Lebanon and Damascus. Watenpugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 11. Makdisi, "After 1860: Debating Religion, Reform, and Nationalism in the Ottoman

- Empire,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34 (2): 601-602.
- 25 Tamari broaches this topic, suggesting that the “mobility of war” brought together urban and rural in new ways. Tamari, 88.
- 26 Provence, 44.
- 27 Another aspect of Provence’s argument that takes seriously the social circuits of the late Ottoman Empire is his contention that socialization in Ottoman military academies greatly abetted bonds between rural notables who eventually spearheaded the 1925 Revolt. Provence, 41-42.
- 28 This dynamic is very different from that experienced by Ihsan Turcaman. In response to the suffering of Arabs under seferberlik and Cemal Pasha, Turcaman becomes more supportive of Sherif Hussein’s revolt in the Hijaz. Tamari, 155.
- 29 Mina, 182.
- 30 Mina, 346-347.
- 31 Marx’s famed rejoinder to Hegel in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great events and characters of world history occur, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.” Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire and Louis Bonaparte,” in *Political Writings, Volume II: Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 146.
- 32 Mina, 115.
- 33 Mina, 88-89. The collapse of the silk market was an especially crushing blow for Mina’s family. They had labored all season with the hope that they would be able to pay their debts with the silk they produced. The connection between silk output and the family’s material well-being was so great that Hanna even described the silk in terms of the foods it would enable them to eat, including peaches and honey. Mina, 151.
- 34 Mina, 218.
- 35 Mina, 276.
- 36 Mina, 276.
- 37 Mina, 276. As Tim Mitchell writes, “A violence that erased every sign of itself would be remarkably inefficient. The death, the disappearance, the physical abuse or the act of torture must remain present in people’s memory. To acquire its usefulness in the play of domination, violence must be whispered about, recalled by its victims, and hinted at in future threats.” Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 153.
- 38 Mina, 264.
- 39 Mina, 264.
- 40 Mina, 265.
- 41 Mina, 265.
- 42 Mina, 273. This is one of the few times Mina mentions France in the entire memoir, despite the fact that the book spans the early years of the French Mandate of Syria. His reluctance to mention the French is quite interesting, particularly given the fact that the large landowners as well as the collapse of the silk market extensively described in the memoir were both deeply connected to French colonial policies. But perhaps this is a testament to his attempt to capture his lived experience without explicit political rhetoric.
- 43 Mina, 275.
- 44 Mina, 265.
- 45 Mina, 120.
- 46 Mina, 201.
- 47 Mina, 226.
- 48 Mina, 278.
- 49 As Zachary Lockman writes, “Working-class formation (in fact, all class formation) is as much a discursive as a material process.” He continues, “Within a specific structural context, class and class consciousness are historically constructed in and through political, ideological, and cultural – that is, discursive – contestation.” Lockman, “Imagining the Working Class: Culture, Nationalism, and Class Formation in Egypt, 1899-1914,” *Poetics Today* 15 (2): 158, 160. Michael Gilson brings up a similar point about class and performance in his ethnography of a Lebanese village in the 1970s, when he describes how structural changes in the Lebanese economy rendered fellah and aghas, previously hierarchically arranged, “in material terms on the same level.” This measure of equality, then, “made it all the more important for the aghas to insist on difference” in the realm of public performance of power. Gilson, *Lords of the Lebanese Marches: Violence and Narrative in an Arab Village* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 164.
- 50 The symbol of the shoe possessed symbolic purchase in the eyes of government officials, too. A 1938 government report discussing the social impact of rural education vowed that the village children would not emerge from new agricultural schools as effendis. They would leave the schools, the report claimed, wearing

- neither shoes nor tarbushes. *Al-Qabas*, April 21, 1938, 1,4.
- 51 Mina, 226.
- 52 Mina, 139.
- 53 Mina, 201.
- 54 Mina, 224.
- 55 Mina, 224.
- 56 Mina, 277.
- 57 Mina, 317.
- 58 Mina, 240.
- 59 The family's dire economic circumstances
- forced them to impress two of their daughters into domestic service.
- 60 Mina, 258.
- 61 Mina, 258.
- 62 Mina, 259.
- 63 Mina, 259.
- 64 Mina, 259.
- 65 Mina, 259.
- 66 Mina, 288.
- 67 Mina, 288.
- 68 Mina, 289.