“What is Syria Worth?”

The Huvelin Mission, Economic Expertise and the French Project in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1918-1922

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Résumé

« Que vaut la Syrie ? » La mission Huvelin, expertise économique et présence française au Levant, 1918-1922

Cet article analyse une mission universitaire envoyée en Syrie en 1919 pour préparer l’installation du mandat français dans cette région. Il montre comment le discours sur le développement économique produit par cette mission permet de surmonter les multiples oppositions à la présence française.


Abstract

This article analyzes a French academic mission in 1919 aimed at justifying the subsequent French occupation of Syria as a League of Nations Mandate. It shows how this mission created a discourse of economic development to overcome resistance to the occupation.

Keywords: Colonialism – Syria-Lebanon – Mandate – Political Economy – World War One.
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"And France, arriving in Syria, found there the same task she encountered three quarters of a century previously in Algeria, or more recently in Morocco. The country needed to be equipped so as to take an honorable role in the economic 'struggle for life', or to make the most of her resources".  

"Ideas circulate attached to boxes of merchandise".

At the close of World War One the future of the Ottoman Empire and of its Syrian provinces became a major political and diplomatic question, both internationally and within the French imperial system. The war destroyed the Ottoman state, encouraged the demands of nationalists and spurred the imaginations of French imperial agents, who hoped to "build a guaranteed future from past realities". By late 1918 the British had occupied Ottoman Bilad al-Sham, with the help of Hashemite armies and a small French force. A variety of client groups of the Entente, fostered during the war, began to make their claims at the peace negotiations, even as nationalist movements agitated across the region and the European powers planned for post-war security. Four years of industrial warfare had transformed the French political-economic system, creating a "warfare state" and provoking a sense of civilizational  

1 Archives de la Chambre de commerce et d'industrie de Marseille-Provence, Marseille, France, (CCIMP), Carton M.Q.5.4, Dossier 35, Commerce international : relations avec les pays étrangers et en particulier rapports avec les pays asiatiques : Syrie et Liban 1845-1926, Bulletin officiel de la Fédération nationale agricole, commerciale, financière et industrielle : Organe de vulgarisation scientifique et de défense des intérêts économiques et corporatifs, novembre 1925, « La valeur économique de Syrie ». All translations are the author's own.


3 I thank Hélène Blais, Claire Fredj and Emmanuelle Sibeud for organizing the conference at Université Paris 8 in March 2012 titled "Visiteurs d'empires" Enquêtes exceptionnelles et missions d'expertises en situation coloniale », at which this paper was first presented, and especially Claire Fredj and the conference participants for their insights. I thank my colleagues in the Max Weber Programme and History Department at the EUI in Florence, in particular Dirk Moses. Finally I thank Nida Alahmad for her comments on this article, and Isabelle Lyon-Jackson and Clement Jackson for their indispensable support during its production.


crisis that stretched from Paris to Damascus. The changes brought by the war fostered the re-articulation of existing political agendas and the re-working of existing modes of political engagement. For example, in 1919 Lebanese Christians enjoyed a privileged connection to French diplomacy that dated to 1860, while French colonialists drew on pre-1914 commercial and educational networks in the Ottoman Empire. A process of reinvention therefore characterized the war’s close, as the protagonists deployed new evidence and arguments in support of established claims, and tried to adapt to the new postwar circumstances. This article analyzes and places into context one particular example of this process—the Huvelin Mission to Syria.

The Huvelin mission

In the spring of 1919 Paul Huvelin, a French law professor holding posts in Lyon and Beirut, led an economic mission to Syria. The mission emerged from a major congress about Syria coordinated by the Marseille and Lyon Chambers of Commerce in early 1919. These organizations had played a major role in French policy in the Eastern Mediterranean before the war. The mission numbered eight experts, in subjects including agronomy, geology, architecture and archaeology, business, law and botany. They were drawn from the nexus of French business, religious and university interests that had developed a close relationship with Ottoman Syria in the late nineteenth century. The mission the


before included Lyonnais silk buyers, pre-war consular officials, colonial cotton experts who would go on to work for the Mandate authority, and Lyonnais university professors. It also included three members of the Parisian Ottoman diaspora – from the Comité de l’Orient de Paris including Paul Ghanim, the son of a leading diaspora publicist. The Quai d’Orsay imposed these extra members, supplementing the mission’s Lyonnais-Marseillais core.

Under Huvelin, the experts gathered data in the region in the spring of 1919, fanning out from southern Anatolia to Mosul to Sinai. They relied on the strong pre-war network of Jesuit educational institutions and French business interests for hospitality and guidance. The experience of the mission was uneven – three of its members spent much of their time recovering from illness, hampering their ability to contribute. Unlike other simultaneous visits including the King-Crane investigation, Huvelin’s mission deliberately avoided the contentious question of nationalist and sectarian politics. Instead, it focused on assessing the agricultural, industrial, geological, demographic and commercial potential of the country, as well as surveying its fiscal system and its riparian and energy resources. On their return to France, accompanied by the French orientalist Louis Massignon, Huvelin and his colleagues produced a report – bluntly titled ‘Que vaut la Syrie ?’ It was published repeatedly in the colonial and mainstream press, and notably as a special supplement in L’Asie française – a leading colonialist journal with a readership of businesspeople, administrators and politicians. Jacques Keryell has observed the “report contributed powerfully to guaranteeing the French Mandate in Syria”.11

Huvelin’s mission and report fueled with other voices in the debate over the future of Syria in 1919. Seeking to furnish the Paris peace conference with evidence, numerous experts and politicians circulated between Paris and the Eastern Mediterranean, gathering data and seeking to legitimize a range of different political positions. Salient groups included the Maronite Patriarchate, the Hashemite leadership, the Syro-Lebanese diaspora, which worked closely with the Maronite Patriarch and the Hashemite project alike, the Zionist lobby, the diplomats of the great powers, including the American originators of the King-Crane commission, and the various delegates of French party politics. These voices proposed diverging agendas for

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the Eastern Mediterranean. Part of the French parliament, for example, was hostile to occupying Syria, which it saw as a waste of resources at a time of acute postwar scarcity. As the introduction to the published Huvelin report noted:

“In its session of 28 July 1920 the French Senate heard M. d’Estournelles de Constant explain that ‘while Tunisia is a granary of abundance, Syria is something else entirely’, M. Bompard proclaim that Syria ‘has a very slight economic value’ [...] and finally M. Victor Bérard demonstrate that Syria ‘will give nothing’ to France”.

Within this wider debate, the Huvelin mission intended to influence French policy by performing a highly visible scientific mission of inquiry and by producing an “objective” account of Syria’s postwar economic value. By vesting their endeavor with economic objectivity they hoped to mitigate accusations that their agenda was merely a political or imperial one, fed by the pre-war concerns of Jesuit educators and Lyonnais business. In his history of colonial development in Mandate Palestine, Jacob Norris makes a parallel point about the language of expertise by citing Bruno Latour: “if one looks at the difference between a politician and a scientist [...] the first is said to be greedy, full of self-interest [...] the second is said to be disinterested, farsighted, honest”. It was in the language of economy that Huvelin and his colleagues found their disinterested science. This is not to say that such rigor automatically favored the cause of the French occupation of Syria: its opponents, such as Victor Bérard, also drew on the data collected to oppose the mission’s conclusions.

Historians have anatomized the negotiations that shaped postwar outcomes in the Eastern Mediterranean, from the Sykes-Picot-Sazonov agreement in 1916 to the formal creation of the French and British Mandates in 1922. They have emphasized the role of economic interests in influencing political strategy. But they have not inquired into the idioms through which economic interests were articulated, nor inserted those concepts into the wider postwar political-economic debate. Kais Firro notes that:

“After the establishment of the Mandate, the French began to draw up plans for “economic reforms” in Syria and Lebanon and asked French economic “experts” to measure ce que vaut la Syrie (“what Syria is worth”) and to suggest ways

14 Priya Satia, Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain’s Covert Empire in the Middle East (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
of increasing its industrial and agricultural production [...] In other words [...] Mandatory rule was not to be at the expense of the home economy".18

Firro correctly notes the influence of the Marseille Chamber of Commerce in pushing for a Syria “from Taurus to al-Arish”. But he does not ask just how the argument for economic development was made: economic “experts”, though framed by quotation marks, appear here as transparent—and transparently an instrument of domination—in a way that other forms of cultural production do not.19 Latterly historians have paid more attention to the role of expertise in producing the concepts through which colonial rule was maintained and have emphasized that such concepts were not the preserve of colonialists. Regarding the Syrian Mandate, Elizabeth F. Thompson has written of French colonial science:

“This body of knowledge was far from complete, and far from a perfect reflection of reality [...]. But it nonetheless became a privileged, hegemonic construction of community and nation that not only competed with, but also influenced, opposition perspectives like those of the nationalists”.20

In line with Thompson’s observation that knowledge flowed across standard lines of division, Leyla Dakhli has studied the role of orientalist expertise in the French project.21 Neither historian treats economic expertise individually, although World War One prompted the formation of newly national economic spaces and a widespread concern with the distinctively economic nature of the postwar international order.22 Indeed, though often forgotten, the years 1916-1922 marked the high tide of the colonial economic development movement, led in France by Henri Simon in 1918 and Albert Sarraut in 1921, which saw the French empire as the salvation of an exhausted metropole:

“Weighed down by the albatross of the war’s financial result, vassal to foreign powers in the supply of its economic life, our Fatherland, if it knows how, can find in its own lands, in its colonial granary... in its warehouses overseas, that immense reservoir of commodities and raw materials that will largely free it of the tribute currently paid abroad.”23

This quest for the permanent postwar mobilization of imperial resources was matched

18 Kais Firro, Inventing Lebanon, op. cit., p. 79 (cf. note 16).
19 Ibid., p. 213.
22 Claude Didry, Peter Wagner, « La nation comme cadre de l’action économique », op. cit. (cf. note 6).
23 Archives nationales, section outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence (ANOM), 100 APM, 152-154, Exponial Marseille 1922, Propaganda, Sarraut’s Inaugural Speech; Albert Sarraut, La mise en valeur des colonies françaises, Paris, Payot, 1923.
by the development of new international languages and metrics within which to capture such potential. Scholars of the League of Nations have recently shown that “international experts in Geneva” built the concept of the spatially delimited and statistically objectified economy in these years after 1918.\textsuperscript{24} The period from 1916-1922 in Franco-Lebanese/Syrian relations, which defined the political geography of the Eastern Mediterranean, should therefore be grasped not simply as a diplomacy of competing “interests”, but in terms of the redefinition of those “interests” through a specific subset of intellectual expertise: the language of post-war economic development.\textsuperscript{25} This approach also challenges the residual historiographical binary between a distinctively cultural and assimilationist French imperial system and an inherently commercial and “indirect” British rival, thus breaking down the analytical isolation of different imperial units. As the Huvelin report stated: “we will prepare moral reconciliation by facilitating economic cooperation. One calms the spirit by nourishing the body.”\textsuperscript{26}

Below I describe the Huvelin Mission’s forerunners, as well as the evolutions of wartime. The article then describes the Huvelin report, closing by comparing it with some of the competing and overlapping agendas that circulated at the close of the war: advocates of \textit{Grand Liban} and diaspora voices calling for a federal Syria.

### Pre-war precedents

The Huvelin Mission emerged from a tradition of economic missions run by the French chambers of commerce before World War One. One contemporary review of the Huvelin Mission report made this point, noting that “the mission’s investigation had been conceived more or less on the model furnished by Henri Brenier at the time of the Lyon Chamber of Commerce Mission to China in 1895-1897”.\textsuperscript{27} Meanwhile, throughout the nineteenth century Ottoman Syria became the target for the compilation of a canon of expertise in which “science and religion, cold observation and sentimental attachment, were easily blurred”.\textsuperscript{28} Finally, in terms of imperial economic thought the period from

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\textsuperscript{26} Paul Huvelin, “Que vaut la Syrie ?”, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 50 (cf. note 2).

\textsuperscript{27} Maurice Zimmerman, “La Mission Paul Huvelin en Syrie », \textit{Annales de géographie}, n° 157, 1920, p. 70.

the 1890s to the outbreak of war proved critical to shaping the repertoire of economic expertise available to French colonialists. For instance, by the late 1890s a key French colonial lobby group, the *Union coloniale française* (UCF) advocated a developmental rather than an expansionist colonial agenda. The UCF prefigured Huvelin’s conclusions of 1919, arguing that economic growth would provide the wealth that in turn would allow the resolution of merely political imperial problems.\(^\text{29}\) By about 1900, French colonialist ideologues such as Joseph Chailley-Bert and Paul Leroy-Beaulieu had established the idea of *mise en valeur*—economic development—as hegemonic, based on the widely esteemed British or Dutch “model” of public capital investment to facilitate private initiative.\(^\text{30}\) In Ottoman Syria, reflecting this ideological turn, French capital entered heavily into the new port company in Beirut in 1887 and into the “Beyrouth-Damas-Hauran” railway in 1891.\(^\text{31}\)

Paul Huvelin’s own biography instantiates this wider history just prior to the war:\(^\text{32}\) Huvelin was a jurist who wrote a thesis on medieval commercial fairs. Attracted to the ideas of Marcel Mauss, Huvelin deployed the concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity in his study of ancient legal systems. These interests can be found in his comment after World War One:

> “Let us rely also on the influence of trade fairs attended by Syrians from all regions. Much like the great fairs of the past, modern trade fairs constitute centers of moral attraction, and powerfully contribute to the sense of solidarity among those clients who attend.”\(^\text{33}\)

From 1899 Huvelin held a teaching post at the University of Lyon. Lyon’s religious missions, its involvement in education, the close connections between its university and the medical and law schools of the Université St. Joseph in Beirut, and especially the role of its businesses and banks in the silk trade with the Lebanese mountain—all made the city a key force in wider French imperial policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. Michel Seurat described the reach of the business and political district of central Lyon: “the influence of this neighborhood extended well beyond the city limits, and the Palais de la bourse, the headquarters of the captains of industry, was a center of decision-making at a regional and even a global scale”.\(^\text{34}\)

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From 1909 to 1914, a period when French commercial hegemony in Ottoman Syria came under pressure from British and German competition, Huvelin undertook a series of missions to the Eastern Mediterranean, where he encouraged the role of French educational establishments. In 1912 he visited Syria to plan a law school in Damascus—a sign of Lyonnais interest in the region beyond the Lebanese mountains—and a technical college in Beirut. In 1913 he inaugurated the French law school at the Université St. Joseph. He also raised funds to support this and other schools: the Lyon Chamber of Commerce subsequently voted subsidies for an engineering school in Beirut, scheduled to open in November 1914. Moreover, the St. Joseph law school was Jesuit-administered and there Huvelin encountered the school of historiography led by Father Henri Lammens, a neo-Phoenician historian of the region who became a major influence on Christian Lebanese nationalism after 1918, educating the sons of the Christian bourgeoisie that had become rich exporting silk to Lyon, and steering them towards the idea of Greater Lebanon.

**The impact of wartime**

Wartime brought new imperatives, and French colonial business rapidly conflated national war aims with its own agenda. On 19 August 1914 the Office national du commerce extérieur organized a poll of French Chambers of Commerce globally: the responses placed emphasis on replacing German imports with French ones.

As Georges-Henri Soutou has noted, there was “an intimate, organic connection between economic war aims in terms of the enemy and projects of internal development”. The case for the war-winning wealth of the colonies functioned partly because it resonated with the presentation of economic development as productive of postwar political success in Europe too. One example is General Joseph Joffre’s August 1916 report on the Rhineland, which presented a postwar customs union with that region as the seed of a wider “moral union” with France. Another influence was the British example. André Maginot cited the 1916 creation in London of an “Imperial Institute” and the involvement of British industry in the project. Commissioning a 1917 imperial economic conference, Maginot turned his thoughts to the postwar economy:

“Our English Allies are already busily at work with their colonial resources: let us imitate their example and outline at once the required pro-

gramme of initiatives. We should reflect too on the postwar moment. After her heroic military effort we have the duty to assure France a powerful economic renaissance. This renaissance will depend on the efforts of every one of us in every domain of commercial, industrial and agricultural activity, both in the mother country and in the overseas possessions.40

Colonial publicists such as Edmond du Vivier de Streel then took up these ideas, vulgarizing the notion that the political economy of wartime would inevitably extend into the peace and would require colonial resources:

“Among all these problems there is one that seems the most serious and on solving which depends the resumption of economic life and success in the conflict of tomorrow: this is the problem of the supplies required for our industry [...] and the solution, in my opinion, can come only from our colonial empire. The empire can and must become our purveyor of raw material, a move that will allow it to become simultaneously the most important consumer of our finished products”.41

Such writings vulgarized economic theory for political use and shaped the narrower project to occupy Syria. Thus, in the colonialist journal L'Asie française, edited by the French Syria specialist Robert de Caix, articles in this vein appear from 1915 onward. They warned against the abandonment of existing French interests to the British or discussed the damage to silk-producing mulberry trees wreaked by “Turkish” action.42 Prior to Sykes-Picot such coverage maintained the profile of French investments in Syria, at a time when the European war claimed most attention. But from mid-1916, as the breakdown of Ottoman rule grew ever more apparent, the future of the “well-protected domains” became critical. Pressure on French colonial business increased, as Hashemite aspirations for an Arab state grew on the one hand—encouraged by British policy, by the dawning of the Wilsonian moment, by the Arab Revolt and by Georges Clemenceau’s sympathy. Pressure also grew from other directions, as a variety of Franco-Lebanese Christian groups pushed for an expanded Lebanon, while radical imperialists such as the Comité Dupleix demanded a French Syria reaching the Persian frontier.43 An emphasis on economic development allowed its advocates to steer a prudent middle course, defending existing investments while presenting future development as both beneficial to postwar reconstruction and scientifically justified. How though, did this presentation operate?

40 ANOM, 100 APOM, 679-681, Conférence coloniale, ordre de mission de l’Union coloniale française, 21 June 1917.
The Brenier-Artaud Memorandum

Henri Brenier and Adrien Artaud of the Marseille Chamber of Commerce contributed a formative intervention to this debate in early 1916. They described “integral Syria” as “the France of the Levant” and emphasized the importance of the economic rationale for both Marseillais and French interests. In their account French science mediated between history and economics, caricaturing the former and moralizing the latter:

“What this memorandum hopes to show above all are the undoubted possibilities for the development of Syria, given the undoubted wealth of certain of the lands there and the role that our foresters and agronomists could play on them; likewise our doctors... and our methods of hygiene could guarantee the necessary growth of the population, while our administrators, familiar, as a result of our Tunisian and Algerian experience, with Arab business and the social and political problems posed by Muslim countries could—without neglecting our traditional relationship with the Christian populations—ensure a harmonious general cooperation for the good and the well-being of the country”.

A key part of the political economic narrative here is the binary of potential and degradation: a political ecology asserting the enormous potential wealth of greater Syria in the future, evidenced especially by references to the empires of antiquity. This narrative was sharpened by the accusation that long-term environmental mismanagement had prevented the new flowering of the region’s “stunning fertility”. Brenier and Artaud attributed the irregular rains and relative aridity of the Lebanese and Jerusalem muta-sarrifiyyâts to the “criminal deforestation that man has permitted himself, with its disastrous effect on harvests”. This undisciplined Ottoman stewardship meant that a viable French Syria would have to be “integral” Syria, including the richer northern and cotton growing areas of Cilicia. A declensionist view of the environment thus facilitated the designation of specific imperial economic spaces. In support Brenier invoked a key symbol rooted in orientalist tradition: “one still finds there ... [in Cilicia] ... those cedar trees that have, in contrast, disappeared from Lebanon, with whose name they were once so associated”. As Diana Davis has shown in the context of the Moroccan protectorate:

“The idea that Morocco had been the granary of Rome, and also the location of the mythical garden of the Hesperides, was used to formulate and to justify extensive agricultural policies during the colonial period in Morocco [...] descriptions of North African forests during antiquity attracted as much attention [...] since they were interpre-

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44 CCIMP, Carton M.Q.5.4, Dossier 35, Commerce international : relations avec les pays étrangers et en particulier rapports avec les pays Asiatiques : Syrie et Liban 1845-1926, « Note sur la valeur économique de la Syrie Intégrale ».
45 Id.
46 Ibid., M. Terrail, President of the Silk Merchants Association of Lyon, to Marseille Chamber of Commerce, 11 May 1915.
47 Ibid., « Note sur la valeur économique de la Syrie intégrale ». 
ted as indicators of the region’s innate natural fertility and environmental salubrity”.\footnote{48} Within this logic, Syrian commerce would resume—and restore imperial and regional prosperity alike—through stabilization of the harvest and “progressive reforesting which would be a tempting work of civilization (and alone would justify our intervention), and which is not beyond the science and methods of our admirable [Forestry] School at Nancy”.\footnote{49} Such arguments drew force from the context of widespread starvation on the Lebanese mountain in the last years of the war. Brenier also borrowed copious statistics from “Turkish” and German sources, but noted the need for fresher data—a subsequent motive for the Huvelin Mission. These numbers estimated the Syrian population at 4 million and the estimated annual value of its commerce at 275 million francs. As one contemporary noted, “[...] lists and figures are more demonstrative than long memoranda”.\footnote{50} In several ways then, the argument for postwar economic development entwined itself with historical narratives and with the vaunting of French technical and scientific capacity. Artaud and Brenier wanted an “integral Syria [...] in other words the classical land that carries that name and whose natural geographic limits reach from the Taurus to Egypt and the Mediterranean”.\footnote{51} As the map below shows, the resulting claim defined a Syria including the pre-war heartlands of the Lyonnais silk industry, while opening up Anatolian cotton for use in the uniforms of the next war. The report thereby re-articulated pre-war interests and arguments for \textit{mise en valeur}, but drew on the imperatives of wartime. While the territorial unit claimed by Brenier exceeded the Sykes-Picot boundaries, notably in the south, it also fell short of the maximalist French claims made at the war’s end, which included Mosul and Eastern Anatolia.

Brenier’s conclusion reprised his arguments. He blended in another pre-war Lyonnais concern—the loss of silk-producing labor to emigration—with an anti-Turkish standpoint undoubtedly amplified, as we have seen in the coverage in \textit{Laïsie française}, by the war. Brenier thereby presented the contrast between Ottoman misrule and French science as redemptive:

“The substitution, for the disorder, ignorance and corruption of the Turks, of a regular, competent and honest administration, admirably prepared for its task (and this appears very important) by its experience in the Arab countries of Algeria and Tunisia, will certainly put a stop to the emigration to the United States, intense now for several years;

meanwhile French medical science, already active and made famous by our University at Beirut, will enjoy the freedom to give, to the great benefit of the health and growth of the country’s population, those services that our foresters and agronomists will give her lands, to the legitimate profit of our businessmen, industrialists and the railways that our entrepreneurs and capitalists have built there.\textsuperscript{52}

It was this type of economic argument that provided the basis for Huvelin’s own presentation of the value of Syria in 1919 and we turn now to the war’s end.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Id.} See also Albert Hourani and Nadim Shehadi, eds., \textit{The Lebanese in the World: a Century of Emigration} (London: IB Tauris, 1991).
The end of the war and the Huvelin Report

In October 1918 Paul Huvelin was a founding member of the Comité lyonnais des intérêts français en Syrie. The committee, alarmed by British military preeminence, worked towards the Congrès français de la Syrie of January 1919. The congress united 154 attendees in four different sections: economy, archaeology-history-geography, teaching and education, medicine and public health. In addition to the expected members of the chambers of commerce, Henri Franklin-Bouillon, head of the parliamentary foreign affairs committee attended. Also in Marseille were Anatole de Monzie, president of the Franco-Syrian committee in Paris, and Shukri Ghanim. The commissioning of the Huvelin mission emerged from a demand for improved data with which to make the case for the defense of French interests. As the Paris director of the Banque impériale ottomane noted in his presentation: “to understand these economic possibilities unfortunately all the data we have at the moment refers to the pre-war era”.

On its return, the Huvelin mission brought with it this evidence, and deployed it as follows. The report began by citing the classical wealth of Syria in the style of Brenier:

“The past guarantees the future. We can foresee that an independent Syria will, with the support of France, recover the benefits of the pax Romana.

We can foresee that she will be able to develop the resources with which nature has abundantly blessed her.”

But the report also immediately positioned itself in the wider political debate. It criticized Syrian writers for their “excessive optimism” about their country’s future potential but also French policy makers for their jaded and pessimistic attitude. Further, the report’s opening dismissed the credibility of other existing accounts and statistics–French or Ottoman–of Syria and hoped that a “French Syrian institute” would soon fill the gap. In the interim the report presented itself as the state of the art in assessments of Syria’s value. It soberly restricted its purview to production, consumption, transit and trade. But even this intellectual delimitation critiqued yet-narrower definitions of post-war influence–notably those of Beirut and Lebanese nationalists who sought an independent Lebanon–asserting: “it is essential that Syria has a national political economy, self-conscious and defined, inspired by the greater interest of the whole country”.

Prosperity, on this account, could not develop without a single economic zone larger than just the Lebanese mountain, the Biqa’ and the coastal ports, and Huvelin dedicated much of his conclusion to a defense of the soothing powers of commerce in a land he

55 Id.
56 Ibid., p. 50.
characterized as riven by ethnic and religious enmity:

“Separated one from another by opposing religious and ethnic traditions, the Syrians agree that they need order to re-establish their businesses. Let us use this unique point of consensus. We will prepare moral reconciliation by facilitating economic cooperation. One calms the spirit by nourishing the body”.

Warning of rising foreign efforts to exploit post-Ottoman Syria, the report argued for an “economic delegation” at Beirut, bringing together “businessmen, farmers, manufacturers, drawn from all the regions of Syria, and...[for France to]...study a general plan of action with them”. Huvelin painted economic development as a means of “pacification, for which markets render better service than [military] columns, and cost less too” and insisted that an economic approach was necessarily “non-imperialist”:

“I envisage the value of Syria for Syria. I do not envisage the value of Syria for France. France is not practicing imperialism, even in economic matters. France preoccupies herself with helping the populations that must be given into her tutelage. She seeks not clients, but friends. So much the better if, on top of that, these friends become clients.”

This was a fine line to walk: Huvelin and his co-authors emerged from the Lyonnais nexus of Jesuit and university investments in Ottoman Syria and could not completely neglect them, even as they preferred to emphasize the economic question. So the report acknowledged that Syria’s value as a site of morality, civilization and intellectual culture was greater than as a mere venue for economic activity. Nonetheless, it concluded: “Ideas circulate attached to boxes of merchandise”.

In the body of the report Huvelin focused first on agriculture. He estimated its pre-war value at 638.6 million francs, but added that wartime inflation had raised this figure to 2 billion francs. Blaming Ottoman taxes for a lack of growth, he remarked that only 4.5% of 17 million cultivable hectares was ploughed. The report called for land reform to break up large estates and free individual farmers to invest in Syria’s “generous soil”. He invoked the Qur’an to suggest that the state should seize land uncultivated for three consecutive years, and called for improved rural credit and primary education for farmers. Ottoman rule had included an agricultural credit bank, the report added, but by 1913 it had made only 45,000 loans totalling just 12 million francs.

In addition to a survey of cereal, olive, grape, vegetable, sesame, tobacco and mulberry production, Huvelin focused heavily on cotton, a critical commodity of industrial warfare. The cotton crop of Cilicia, he stated, with reference

57 Id.
58 Id.

59 Id.
60 Ibid., p. 15.
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to British policy in Egypt, could bring back the wealth of the

“Middle Ages, when Syria was the world’s largest producer. Syria is becoming emancipated and organized, the large producers are reserving their production for the national market and the industrial nations that lack cotton plantations will seek out new providers. The hour has come for Hama and Aleppo to revive their tradition and profit by it”.

The 200,000 annual tons of cotton available could fulfill two-thirds of French needs, especially with the benefit of a cadastral survey and land registry, which would allow for more agricultural investment and end a quasi-feudal system of landholding. The report was clear that these were long term projects—“it would be puerile to count on our generation reaping a profit”—since building transport infrastructure, reforesting and reforming the fiscal system, fostering political liberty and changing social mores would all take a long time. But it placed faith in fiscal and administrative reforms—including investment in the Biqa’ valley—and on technical fixes, rather than on a rapid rise in the rural population.61

On geology and industry, the report’s perspective was more sombre. Huvelin listed the judicial and fiscal regimes, the lack of energy sources and the defects of a workforce more given to commerce than to manufacture as major obstacles. He noted that in 1919 there were not more than 100 businesses with more than 50 employees in Syria, all of which suffered from inadequate plant and credit.62 Contrary to other French sources Huvelin suggested an absence of real mineral wealth and a concomitant dependence on oil or coal imports from the USA or Britain.63 Oil from Mosul seemed to Huvelin an unreliable prospect, while hydroelectricity was inadequately framed by legislation. Additionally the “open door” fiscal regime imposed by the League of Nations was a concern to the authors since it seemed likely to prohibit import substitution.

Finally Huvelin and his co-authors dwelt on the “temperament of the race”, which made the Syrians a collection of “agile individualists, lacking discipline, solidarity or specialization”.64 It elaborated the history of the trade axes that in antiquity connected Syria to Asia and Africa and concluded: “Phoenicia owes her fortune first of all to her good and various relations with the different economic zones with which she is in contact. She owes it secondly to the entrepreneurial genius of her inhabitants”.65

In line with his overall emphasis on a greater Syria as a viable economic unit, Huvelin

61 Ibid. p. 11. See also Tarif Khalidi, ed., Land Tenure and Social Transformation in the Middle East (Beirut: AUB Press, 1984).


64 Paul Huvelin, « Que vaut la Syrie ? », op. cit., p. 20 (cf. note 2).

65 Ibid., p. 27.
expressed special hope for the Alexandretta-Aleppo axis, which he imagined “reliving its ancient Hittite glory” thanks to wartime rail-building, and which he hoped would attract a commercial periphery reaching to the Caspian. Indeed, unlike some Lebanese advocates, he saw the success of the Phoenician coast as secondary to this Aleppine commercial revival.\textsuperscript{66}

The international commercial context worried Huvelin and his co-authors. On the one hand he argued for a liberalizing strategy, concerned that tax arbitrage and superior infrastructure would draw trade south to British-dominated Egypt. But on the other hand he feared an unsustainable commercial deficit, supported in 1919 only by Entente military spending and external remittances. Huvelin concluded that textile production alone should enjoy tariff protection—a point of view that overlapped well with existing Lyonnais silk interests—and he argued that French metallurgy, which had increased its capacity radically during the war years, should become the primary supplier for the Syrian market.

Overall the Huvelin report built on the pre-war interests of French business, emphasizing agricultural investment, textile production and the condition of the rural workforce over industry and mineral resources. Highly critical of the Ottoman fiscal and legal legacy, it drew on ancient historical precedents to positio

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., p. 47.

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to dethrone Faysal in part because some elite Lebanese Christian groups had, in early 1920, begun to draw close to the regime in Damascus “on the grounds that the region’s division into two separate zones would be the economic and commercial ruin of both”.68 For our purposes the critical dimension of the Maronite claim in October 1919 was to the Biqa’ in order to render a future Lebanese entity self-sufficient in agricultural production after the starvation of the war years. As Bulus Nujaym articulated this position in the *Revue phénicienne* in August 1919:

“[Every year 10,000 Lebanese go to Egypt or to the United States to feed themselves]...while at their very gates spread fertile, little populated lands that their intelligent activity would transform into granaries of abundance [...] Rather than colonizing Egypt and America, the Lebanese should colonize their own country and would thereby contribute to its grandeur and prosperity”.69

This concern with agricultural autonomy represents an important overlap with the Huvelin position’s focus on improved farm production. But whereas the Patriarch and his supporters characterized the Biqa’ as adequate to Lebanon’s needs, Huvelin and his colleagues preferred a far larger Syrian economy, unobstructed by subsidiary borders and focused on the commercial axis of Aleppo and Alexandretta. Similarly, the Patriarch echoed Huvelin’s demand for collaboration with Syrian business by working hard to secure infrastructure concessions for Lebanese businessmen. Thus Huwayyik wrote to the Lebanese hydroelectricity entrepreneur Jean Hani in early 1920 about a concession to develop the river Ibrahim, which the latter had obtained from the Conseil Administratif du Liban:

“You know how important it is to me that you succeed, and [...] even before receiving your latest telegram I never missed an opportunity to recommend your business to the goodwill of the government. Recently I discussed it with His Excellency General Gouraud and I expressed to him my desire to see a successful future for this business that is both Maronite and French”.70

Hani’s claim, and the Patriarch’s lobbying on behalf of Franco-Lebanese collaboration on infrastructure would subsequently receive a setback from the annulment of all Ottoman-era concessions by Robert de Caix in 1920, even


70 Archives of the Maronite Patriarch, Bkerke, Lebanon (AMPBL), Huwayyik Collection, Patriarch Ilyas Huwayyik to Jean Michel Hani, un-dated letter (1920), Document 45. My thanks to Guita Hourani, Director of the Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC) at Notre Dame University, Louaize, Lebanon and Mr. Sami Salameh, archivist at Bkerke.
if the *Quai d’Orsay* continued to suggest that concessions include some “Syrian” participation as minority partners.\(^{71}\) In this respect Huvelin’s focus on French commercial hegemony proved more enduring, while his emphasis on economic liberalization and on Syrian collaboration proved more evanescent.

The same bifurcation characterizes the relationship of the Huvelin report to a second alternative position: the economic vision of advocates for a federal Syria, such as Nadra Mutran in 1916 and Georges Samna in 1919-1920. Mutran was a Greek Catholic and a graduate of the Université St. Joseph. But despite his exposure to “Lammensite” historiography at St. Joseph, he embraced Syrian federalism and concentrated his enmity on the Young Turks after 1908, notably during his participation at the Syrian Arab Congress of Paris in 1913.\(^{72}\) Mutran’s economic perspective, delivered in a 1916 text, prefigured Huvelin’s ideas. He believed the Syrian future rested on “honest French administration” and the ascendance of economic interests over sentimental religious politics. He called for the massive involvement of French capital in transport and irrigation projects and like Huvelin he prescribed the abolition of the Ottoman tax system, which favored foreign imports over local ones. Also like Huvelin, he drew heavily on a range of historical examples and contemporary analogies, quoted St. Jerome on the commercial aptitude of Syrians and referred to the status of Syria as a Roman breadbasket. A *rentier* himself, he also castigated the stagnation induced by Ottoman cadastral and tax policies and the resultant domination by landholding elites: like Huvelin he advocated land reform and support for small farmers. Finally, presenting Syria as more similar to Switzerland than to Morocco, he discouraged the French from pursuing their policies of the Maghreb, and warned the Lebanese Christians against following the Jews of Algeria into privileged, French-sponsored social isolation.\(^{73}\)

Georges Samna, meanwhile, writing in 1919 and 1920, drew directly on the Huvelin report’s findings in his text. Likewise a Greek Catholic, Samna was born in the Egyptian diaspora and had family roots in Damascus. He had lived in France since the turn of the century and worked closely with the Quai d’Orsay during the war. In a decisive phrase from his 1920 book he stated that the:

> “Only policy possible for a country dependent on the neighboring provinces for its essential needs...[is]... the organization of a large Syria. Even with Beirut and the Biqa’ the Lebanese Mountain, isolated from the larger Syrian body, away from the great currents of the world, is

\(^{71}\) Archives of the French Foreign Ministry, Paris, France (MAE), Série E–Levant 1918-1940, Carton 60, Situation économique, April 1920-May 1922, 19 October 1920, MAE to De Caix.


Samna drew an analogy between a vigorous Lebanon, supported by France within a large and economically reborn Syria, and the historical role of Piedmont as the leader of the Italian Risorgimento—again backed by French power. Drawing directly on Huvelin, Samna argued further for a French-directed programme of agricultural improvement and land registration, an exploitation of Cilician cotton on a scale to rival British production in the Nile Delta, and a massive programme of French investment in Syrian infrastructure, whose antique quality had been destroyed in the war by the Turks. Like Huvelin and Mutran, Samna warned against a colonial administration in Syria, and used the legacy of war to note that: “France is being represented to the Syrians as indebted, impoverished, and incapable of creating the conditions necessary for business and for the development of the country”.75 He concluded, echoing Huvelin’s notion that economic and technical development was immune to the politics of imperialism, that the “rational association of the weak and the strong” was possible:

“The interests of France in Syria are different from our own, but parallel, with no possibility of encroachment: the pursuit of one set of interests favors the other set [...]. The maintenance of territory, defense against foreign incursion, control of the Islamic movement, creation of a naval base, the establishment of markets and railways, reorganization of the administrative system, rational and scientific development of natural resources, such are French interests and such, we could quite as easily say, are Syrian interests”76

The primacy of the economic?

This analysis has concentrated on the conceptual repertoire and political-economic narratives through which the Huvelin mission experts influenced the negotiations of 1919-1922, thus contributing to the establishment of the French Mandate. Setting the mission into context, I have argued that its focus on economic development emerged from the imperatives of wartime and from the pre-war ideology and interests of French colonialists in Lyon and Marseille especially. This political-economic brief was built by reference to the capabilities of French science and through a specific account of the history and sociology of Bilad al-Sham. More broadly, the Huvelin report should be seen as part of a distinctive moment, from 1916-1922, when wartime economic mobilization fostered a new demand for colonial economic development and sponsored a new “primacy of the economic” in the minds of writers on the future of Syria, both French and Syro-Lebanese. That moment passed, and the grand programmes of economic development proposed by Huvelin and his peers

in greater Syria crumbled. Instead, the political strategies of Robert de Caix, the influence of Turkish and British power to the north and south, and the contraction of budgets in the Mandate combined to produce more segmented collection of states. Aspects of Huvelin’s ideas did endure however—for example its common customs system, long-term French efforts at cadastral reform and sporadic efforts to provide rural credit or improve agriculture—even if they were enacted through collaboration with elites far more than through broad-based reforms.