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*Urban notables and
Arab nationalism*
The politics of Damascus 1860–1920

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TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER

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NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION

ʿAyns and *hamzas* are the only diacriticals included in the transcription of Arabic technical terms, personal names and sources. Otherwise commonly accepted English forms are used, especially for Arabic place names. Turkish technical terms, personal names, place names and sources are generally kept simple in the text, notes and bibliography.

Preface

No idea has captured the imagination or expressed the hopes of the Arabs in the twentieth century as has Arab nationalism, and perhaps no subject has received so much attention from historians of the Middle East. But while many historians have explored its sources, few have considered the social and political environment in which Arab nationalism evolved as an ideological movement. This study attempts to correct the imbalance.

Its focus is on the social and political life in Ottoman Damascus and, in particular, on the great notable families of that city who were to play a disproportionate role in politically activating the Arab nationalist idea before World War I. Chapters 1 and 2 explore the ways such long-term factors as the Ottoman reformation, European economic expansion and agrarian commercialization in Syria encouraged rival and socially differentiated networks of locally influential families in Damascus to merge into a socially cohesive upper class. Under the umbrella of a reinvigorated Ottoman central authority, this class of landowners and bureaucrats produced a new urban leadership which dominated local politics after 1860.

Although this leadership faced no serious challenges from further down the social scale in Damascus, it was by no means free of internal conflicts. Economic and political competition between and within upper-class family networks was always rife. Chapter 3 focuses on the ways this factionalism comes to be expressed in ideological terms, after the Young Turk revolution of 1908 shook the established balance of power between the Arab provincial élites and the Turkish authorities. In Damascus a number of local leaders lost their offices and suffered material losses under the impact of Young Turk centralizing reforms and 'Turkification' policies. It was this disaffected group of urban notables who seized the recently available but still dormant idea of Arabism and molded it into an ideological instrument with which to re-establish its political position.

The final chapter offers a new interpretation of political life in Amir Faysal's short-lived Arab state in postwar Syria by emphasizing the continuity of factionalism between rival groups of urban notables

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expressed in ideological terms. But now the scale of the Arab nationalist movement has widened to include other major towns in the Syrian interior. Moreover, nationalist notables now have the upper hand in politics, that is until France occupies Syria in 1920, checking this trend for nearly a generation.

I should like to express my appreciation to a number of people and institutions whose assistance has helped to make this book possible.

I am most indebted to my teacher, Albert Hourani, who supervised my graduate studies at Harvard University from the beginning and who encouraged the making of this book.

I wrote much of the text for this book in Oxford where I spent two years as an Associate of St Antony's College. I wish to thank the Warden and Fellows of St Antony's for offering me this unique and wonderful opportunity. Roger Owen and Derek Hopwood of the College and its Middle East Centre were especially helpful. I completed the final draft of the book in the warm and familiar environment of Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies where I spent a postdoctoral year in 1980-81. Muhsin Mahdi, A. J. Meyer and Dennis Skiotis were my generous benefactors. Finishing touches were added after I moved to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1981-82, and I thank my colleagues in the History Section of the Department of Humanities for their steady encouragement as I attempted to smooth out the manuscript's rough edges. I conducted most of my research in Lebanon and Syria where I was hospitably received by the staffs of the Jafet Library of the American University of Beirut, and the Institut Français d'Études Arabes and the Center for Historical Documents in Damascus.

Many other friends, teachers, colleagues and family members assisted me at one stage or another in completing this book. I would like to mention Diana Grimwood-Jones and Aziz al-Azmeh in Oxford; Nadim Demichkie and Salma Mardam-Beg in London; Dominique Chevallier in Paris; Hanna Batatu, Wajih Fanous, Rashid Hamid, Yusuf Ibish, Salma Jurdak, Samir Khalaf, Zafir al-Qasimi, Khayriyya al-Qasimiyya, Edmond Rabbath, George and Rose Tomeh, and Qustantin Zurayq in Beirut; Thierry Bianquis, Dawn Chatty, Hasan al-Hakim, Samir Kahalah, Colette al-Khuri, Jean-Paul Pascual and Regina Heinecke, Abdul-Karim Rafeq, Fu'ad Sidawi, and the late Farid Zayn al-Din in Damascus.

I reserve for last a special debt of gratitude to two very special people – Ramez Tomeh and Mary Christina Wilson. Ramez personally introduced me to Damascus, its old social classes and families, led me through its ancient and modern quarters, and instructed me in the ways

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landownership conferred power and influence in Syria. This book has profited immensely from Mary's profound understanding of Arab nationalist politics, her keen editorial skills and steady and selfless support.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
September 1982

P. S. K.