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States of Rumors: Politics of Information Along the Turkish-Syrian Border, 1925–1945

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ABSTRACT



In this article, I focus on the production and circulation along the Turkish-Syrian border of rumors about the imminent annexation of Northern Syria by Turkey in the interwar years. Drawing on Joel S. Migdal and Sabine Dullin's works on the shared production of states and borders between the "center" and the "periphery", this article suggests that the study of the webs of rumors and information originating from the Turkish-Syrian border helps provide an alternative narrative about the bordering processes in the Middle East and beyond. To achieve this, I analyze dozens of reports produced by the border authorities and consulates as well as press articles in which such rumors were recorded and conveyed for more than two decades. I argue that rumors played a role not only in determining the way Turkish and French mandatory authorities intervened in borderlands' everyday life, but also in how the two governments interacted to each other.

KEYWORDS

Borderlands; rumors; border-making; (b)ordering; intelligence; subaltern

In September 1938, three Armenian landowners of Azaz in the northeast of Aleppo approached the French border authorities asking for official reassurance that their properties were not endangered by the alleged upcoming Turkish annexation of northern Syria. After advising the Armenian locals to ignore such allegations, the French mandatory authorities found out that these rumors were spread on purpose by Turkish citizens, who tried to trick the Armenian landowners into selling their fields and olive trees at low prices. In these encounters where the Armenian property holders rejected what were laughable offers, the Turkish potential buyers habitually responded that "given that northern Syria will be soon or later ceded to Turkey, Armenians should sell their lands and leave, for they don't want to be under Turkish rule."¹ Such encounters often led to the spread of further rounds of rumors and fear among those settled along the Turkish-Syrian border, forcing them to pay frequent visits to the French authorities to seek comfort and additional assurances.

Yet insistent rumors about the imminent Turkish annexation of northern Syria did not solely affect the borderlanders. Created and conveyed by a wide range of actors, including state officials, newspapers, soldiers, and smugglers, such rumors shaped collective

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perceptions and, importantly, brought about real consequences among both elites and locals. As Hahn suggested, if scholars treat the various currents of rumor in a given place together and, in certain regards, see them as mutually reinforcing, then those rumors “become something more than psychological projections, and the interpretive possibilities become more complex and intriguing” (Hahn 1997, 122–123). With a focus on the Turkish-Syrian border, this article seeks to untangle some of these complexities by combining the analysis of rumors as a field of historical enquiry with the “borders studies” perspective in order to advance our understanding of the making of the modern Middle East in three interrelated ways.

First is a methodological point: the study of rumors in borderlands first and foremost allows us to challenge conventional assumptions about the nature of this important historical source.² To date, scholars saw rumors as an alternative official narratives (Kapferer 1990) or subversive mode of communication (Guha 1983; Scott 1985). Yet, even if rumors could be used as a historical source to retrieve the voices of ordinary people, one should employ a greater caution to a *recorded* rumor, as rumors are originally oral affairs (Chandravarkar 1998, 234–65). In other words, because “subaltern voices” are at times filtered through elite sources, there is a real danger of repeating elite stereotypes about the “susceptibility” of the “ordinary people”. In this sense, the examination of “unverified reports” tapped by state officials along the Turkish-Syrian border are, more likely, those rumors deemed the most politically significant or compelling for the authorities or, at best, the local rumors that coincided with the concerns of the elites. The latter could even fabricate and spread rumors to influence public opinion either to “create” a “state of opinion” among borderlanders or as a means of combating the potential negative effects of others’ rumors.

This article pushes the argument further and argues that the interaction between popular and elite rumors is more complex than the scholarship has acknowledged. According to Perice, rumors are not imperfect copies of real events, as they are instead generative productions of language: “if rumors are explanations, then speakers are interpreters, not merely conduits of information” (1997, 2). More significantly, “because rumors are constructed in response to other rumors, they are not only narratives, but inter-textual in nature”. Consequently, “rumors are nothing but retellings, layers of story and meaning, fragments of fragments, in which context is best seen not only as performed, but also as *movement* through networks of people and society” (Perice 1997, 3). As such, despite the filtering of rumors by state officials, the analysis of rumors, their circulation and their effects provides a remarkable insight, albeit an imperfect one, into the “collective consciousness” – including that of the elites and non-elites – evident in the borderlands and beyond. I accordingly suggest seeing the rumors circulating across the Turkish-Syrian border as the result of a dynamic dialogue between elite and popular politics (Hahn 1997, 124).

Secondly, tracing the circulation of rumors in borderlands comes with the added benefit of challenging established narratives about the emergence of the modern nation-state in the interwar years. Historians and social scientists have traditionally chosen the political center as their unit of analysis to study the social, economic and political transformation of nation-states at the expense of the respective peripheries (Ghani and Lockhart 2008; Paris 2004). The extant literature on state-building and border-making processes in the Middle East has similarly reproduced the asymmetric perspective advanced by the elites of the new nation-states (Barr 2011; Dumont 1997; Lewis 2002).³ In short, the history

of borderlands would be of no interest in and of itself; it would in a sense constitute the shadow of imperial and national histories.⁴ The true picture, as suggested by diverse scholars in the last two decades, is somewhat more blurred (Hämäläinen and Truett 2011, 357–8).

Taking its cue from Joel S. Migdal's (2001) approaches to state-society relations⁵ as well as Sabine Dullin's decentered approach to the borders of the Socialist Bloc in Central Europe during the Cold War (2014), this article suggests that the study of the webs of rumors both originating from and concerning the Turkish-Syrian border helps provide an alternative narrative about the border-making and state formation processes in the interwar Middle East. While high-level diplomatic negotiations and intense debates on the fate of the post-Ottoman states and their borders took place in corridors, offices, and assembly rooms in distant cities such as Paris, Lausanne, Geneva, Cairo, London, and Ankara, cross-border dynamics also contributed to shaping not only the political perceptions of threats and opportunities by state officials, but also ultimately configured interstate relations. On the one hand, contraband and cross-border tribal raids became issues of permanent dispute between neighboring countries across the region. On the other, state authorities became highly concerned by the cross-border flows of information such as news, propaganda, and rumors. Consequently, the borderlanders in the Levant often found themselves at the center of influence, movements and tensions related to the regional and international levels, and it was in such moments of turmoil that governments came to perceive frontier zones as their Achilles heel.

Third and a final point: contrary to an important strand of scholarship that underscores the capacity of both the Turkish Republic and the European powers to impose their policies on their respective subjects and territories in the interwar years (Dumont 1997; Fieldhouse 2006; Lewis 2002), this article argues that fear and sentiments of fragility rather than strength inhabited Turkish Republican elites as well as French colonial officials. Feeding such perceptions, rumors provoked interstate tensions through mutual accusations of disloyalty and aggressive press campaigns and ultimately pushing Turkish and French authorities to better monitor their 500-miles common frontier. This took the form of not only transforming the physical and social landscape in their frontier zones by creating border posts, but also through the institution of passports, and border crossing cards or *passavants*.⁶ As a result, the international boundary drawn in the 1920s materialized during the following decade as a social institution with concrete "frontier effects" for local populations (Donnan and Wilson 2010) and around which power relations between state agents and borderlanders unfolded (Baud and Van Schendel 1997, 211–42; Newman 2003, 13–25; Novak 2011, 741–67).

While the conflicts between the French mandatory authorities and the Turkish government arising from the settlement of ex-Ottoman subjects in Syrian Jazira and the Alexandretta Question have abundantly been studied in the last two decades (Borlat 2016, 822–34; Mizrahi 2003; Tatchijan 2004; Shields 2011; Velud 1991), the impact of rumors on the border-making processes and the inter-state relations in the Levant in the aftermath of the First World War has attracted little attention.⁷ To be sure, many other rumors circulated across or originated from the Turkish-Syrian border, including, but not limited to, the reversal of political reforms in Turkey, military alliances within the context of World War II, supply shortages, and assassination plots.⁸ This article, however, has selected the rumor about the "imminent" Turkish annexation of Northern Syria for two

reasons. On the one hand, this rumor proved to be the most long-lived unverified report throughout the Mandate period. On the other hand, its pervasiveness allows us to analyze the past mental maps of the interwar years as well as its real consequences.

After providing a brief historical background about the emergence of the Turkish-Syrian frontier, the article will then propose a finer periodization in order to analyze the factors that made rumors concerning the amendment of the Turkish-Syrian border so ubiquitous between 1925 and 1945. I will then examine the extent to which they became constitutive by causing panic reactions among borderlanders, frequent diplomatic tensions between Turkish and French officials as well as their far-reaching impact on the consolidation of the Turkish-Syrian border as a social institution. The paper will finally describe how the word-of-mouth reports conveyed by both low-level state officials and borderlanders became increasingly entangled, thereby shaping shared “states of opinion” along the Turkish-Syrian border and, ultimately, contributing to a “lived experience of territoriality.”⁹

A War of Low Intensity along the Turkish-Syrian Frontier

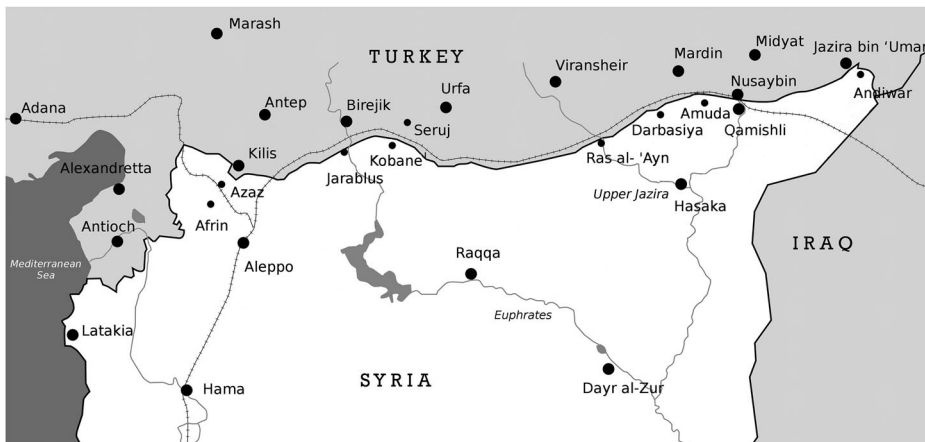
The collapse of the Ottoman Empire paved the way for diverse projects of modern statecraft in the Levant and Mesopotamia under French and British colonial oversight. Despite this dramatic turn, stability in the region failed to prevail. Thus, although the First World War formally ended in 1918, the Great War left behind several zones of post-war violence, as the dissolution of imperial borders – from Eastern Europe to the Caucasus and the Middle East – created spaces without order or a definite state authority (Gerwarth and Manela 2014, 1–16). Among these “shatter zones” (Bartov and Weitz 2013), the frontier between Turkey and Syria holds an important place in the interwar period, reflective of the important geopolitical shifts in the region.

By the time of the armistice, France occupied Southern Anatolia whilst Britain, Greece and Italy held diverse Ottoman territories, including Constantinople, the capital of the empire. Under such exceptional circumstances the Ottoman government accepted the conditions of the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), which abolished the Ottoman Empire and obliged Turkey to renounce all its claims over the Arab provinces of the empire. The pact also projected the creation of an independent Armenia and an autonomous Kurdistan. However, the resistance movement led by Mustafa Kemal – an Ottoman brigadier general – rejected the treaty altogether, and carried out a successful struggle that mixed means of paramilitary and conventional warfare. As Mustafa Kemal and his followers obtained a series of significant military victories, the resistance movement made its territorial ambitions clear through what was called the *Misâk-ı Milli* (the National Pact) which laid claim over Mosul province as well northern Syria, including the Alexandretta and Aleppo districts (Demir 2017, 15–21).

After the collapse of Faysal Kingdom in Syria (1918–1919), however, France officially received from the League of Nations its mandate over Syria and Lebanon. Likewise, the mandate for Iraq was awarded to Great Britain in 1920, while the political status of Mosul province was left open for negotiations between the Turkish and British governments. These arrangements failed to bring stability to the region. The ascendant Turkish leadership rallied several Arab and Kurdish tribal chiefs in South-eastern Anatolia to battle against the French “foreign-infidels,” using intense propaganda based on the idea

of “Ottoman-Muslim solidarity” (Zürcher 1999, 81–92). Exhausted from World War I, and willing to secure its presence in the Levant, France concluded a separate peace accord with the new Turkish leadership in October 1921, the Ankara Treaty. The agreement ended hostilities between the two sides, ceded Cilicia to Turkish forces, established a provisional boundary between the Turkey and French-ruled Syria, and forced France to secure the rights of the Turkish-speaking minority in Alexandretta by creating a separate administrative unit within an Arab-dominated independent Syria (Shields 2011, 20).

As the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) endorsed that of Ankara, gradually, Mustafa Kemal severed his links with Arab armed bands north of Aleppo (Mizrahi 2003, 165–82). Notwithstanding this, Turkey’s anti-French activities in the Upper Jazira proved to be extremely effective in hindering the advance of French troops up until 1925, as the negotiations between Turkey and Britain about the political status of Mosul province under the League of Nations’ oversight were still under way. Subsequently, both the Ankara government and the French in Syria continued to test the limits of their respective sovereignties for strategic reasons.



At its western edge, on the Mediterranean coast, the new boundary ran just north of the district of Alexandretta. This territory was located at the crossroads of Anatolia and the Levant, and more importantly, the city of Alexandretta had “the potential to be developed as a major modern port that could serve as a Mediterranean outlet for northern Syria, Iraq, and potentially Iran too” (Bein 2017, 42). Farther to the east, the middle part of the new border ran alongside completed sections of the Baghdad Railway, from northeast of Aleppo to Nusaybin/Qamishli. The two sides were required to manage the railway service jointly, which created frequent tensions between the two countries and nourished Turkish hopes to control all its sections in the long-term in order to avoid French interference in Turkish territory (Mameli-Ghaderi 2002, 126–7). At its eastern edge, that is the Upper Jazira – also known as the Duck’s Bill –, the border had also an important strategic value in that it allowed Syria access to the Tigris River before it crossed from Turkey to Iraq and control over the main road connecting Mosul to Syria and Anatolia. The fate of these two distant territories in northern Syria became tightly connected, for Ankara conditioned its recognition of the frontier in the Upper Jazira section to the establishment of a semi-autonomous entity in Alexandretta under Turkish patronage.¹⁰

Against this backdrop of contentious relations with Turkey, the domestic French opposition ranging from unions and political parties to anti-colonial committees started raising concerns about the financial viability and the benefits of a French mandate in Syria and Lebanon. It is within this context marked by both external and internal constraints that the French High Commissioner saw the launching of a profitable economic program in the Upper Jazira as a tool, which could serve to justify its “civilizing” mission in the Levant. Yet the local population, including both Kurdish and Arab nomads, was deemed numerically insufficient and “unprepared” to cultivate the arable lands. Consequently, the High Commissioner favored Christian migrants and refugees – namely, the Assyrians, Armenians, and Syriacs from Turkey – to colonize northern Syria (Tatchjian 2004, 301–28; Velud 1991, 412–548).

By April 1925, however, at a time when French troops and new settlers were still attacked by irregular forces, the High Commissioner expanded this policy to include Kurdish refugees fleeing repression from the Republic of Turkey after the collapse of the Sheikh Said revolt (Olson 1989, 115–26). Thereafter, French officers encouraged the local tribes, like the Turks did before them, to trespass the provisional frontier to attack Turkish posts in the area to force Ankara to accept a permanent settlement of the international boundary. In retaliation, the Turks also encouraged local tribes to frequently violate the border. As a result of the enduring insecurity, French and Turkish authorities came to the conclusion that cooperation rather than conflict was the best solution for both parties (Güçlü 2006, 644).

A permanent border commission was established in 1926 and three years later it began to work on the actual delineation of the Syrian-Turkish boundary. The work of this commission resulted in the dramatic increase of the number of border posts and guards deployed in the frontier zone. More importantly, the co-operation between French Mandatory and Turkish authorities favored the emergence of a “boundary regime.”¹¹ In doing so, Turkey and French-ruled Syria did not exclusively seek to prevent mobility, but they also promoted it by channeling it in different ways that suited their own agendas (Huber 2013, 3).

It is thus within this ambiguous context, marked simultaneously by increasing border cooperation between France and Turkey and by on-going tensions around political and economic cross-border issues, that rumors and “unverified” reports about the imminent annexation of northern Syria by Turkey found a fertile ground to circulate and achieve real effects. In tracing these rumors along the Turkish-Syrian border, the paper contextualizes them below into three distinct periods: the first starting with the final steps of the settlement of the Mosul affair by late 1925 lasting until 1933, which was marked by intense negotiations and frequent tensions over political and economic activities by exiled opponents and smugglers settled in Syria; a second period from 1934 to 1939 which witnessed the emergence of revisionist ambitions pursued by both Italy and Turkey; and the third one, identified with World War II and the unexpected opportunities that the conflict offered to Turkey to obtain at least a partial rectification of the Turkish-Syrian boundary.

“There’s no Smoke without Fire”?

Despite the increasing cooperation between French Syria and Turkey, the factors of tension did not disappear altogether. For Ankara, three main problems persisted

between 1925 and 1933. Firstly, the settlement of Armenian and Kurdish populations from Turkey along the border was seen as a potential threat to Turkish national security (Altuğ and White 2009, 91–104). Likewise, most of the exiled opponents to the Ankara government established themselves in the Levant where they continued lobbying against the Republic of Turkey (Bingöl 2010). Finally, Turkish criticism was also geared to smuggling activities on the border which, according to Turkish authorities, was at the hands of a coalition of Armenian and Kurdish cross-border networks, with the complicity of the French Mandate power.¹²

In turn, French *laissez-faire* was similarly connected to the Turkish-Syrian border dynamics. Since the establishment of the Turkish republic, France had requested Ankara to open its market to goods produced and/or circulating through Syrian territory. As Turkey sought to create its “national economy” by imposing high tariffs on imported goods, France turned a blind eye to smuggling as a measure of retaliation. Lastly, the French High Commissioner in the Levant was anxious about the insistent rumors and statements published in the Turkish press concerning the “natural right” of Turkey to “recover” its “lost” provinces in Northern Syria.¹³

In December 1925, as the League of Nations prepared itself to issue its awaited resolution of the Mosul Affair, the American Consulate in Aleppo informed that “the Turks are spreading reports in Urfa and Antep that the French are about to leave Syria, and that the time is now favorable for them to occupy the northern part [of Syria]”.¹⁴ Although Turkey was not in position to get involved in a new war, such rumors helped create a permanent state of uncertainty. Unsurprisingly thus, French, British and American officials and diplomats recurrently discussed the possibility of seeing the new Turkey challenge the post-WWI order in the region. In so doing, rumors alongside press campaigns became formidable tools of diplomatic pressure against French interests and, indirectly, contributed to shape Turkish-French relations in the interwar years.

For one, rumors gathered in the frontier region and media reports led the French Intelligence services to suspect that the Turkish high-ranking officials in Ankara had never abandoned the idea of regaining Syrian provinces despite the on-going diplomatic negotiations around the delimitation of the international boundary between Turkey and France.¹⁵ Frequent tensions thus emerged in different bilateral frameworks such as the meetings of the Frontier Commission.¹⁶ Admittedly, the presence of Armenian and Kurdish settlers along the border had become a bone of contention and a source of rumors since the early 1920s, readily exploited by Ankara in order to have a say on Syrian affairs. Yet in the early 1930s, the project of establishing a Sanjak in the Upper Jazira sparked wild rumors about the French endorsement to the establishment of an Armenian autonomous province in this area, which were reverberated by the Turkish press, fueling a new wave of campaigns against France and asking for an amendment of the common border for security reasons.¹⁷ Subsequently, Turkey asked the Mandate authorities to remove thousands of Armenians from the frontier zone, including the Alexandretta district and the Upper Jazira.¹⁸ While at first, the French authorities resisted to Turkish pressure, diverse Armenian families accused of being involved in smuggling activities were forcibly resettled in the interior. Although the removal of Armenians was sporadic and selective, French officials acknowledged that given the serious tenor of Turkish accusations advanced by the press, the Mandate authorities had to persuade

the Armenians to move away from contraband and, more importantly, France was to seal a commercial agreement with Turkey that would satisfy both sides.¹⁹

Rumors about the uncertain future of the Turkish-Syrian border not only had an impact on the French and foreign officials in the Levant, but they also affected borderlanders' perceptions and actions. Similar to Glenda Riley's findings on the scares of the so-called "Indian threat" among white settlers along the American frontier (Riley 1984, 427), imagination sometimes worked against the best interests of borderlanders in the Turkish-Syrian frontier zone. With the specter of the Turkish annexation of northern Syria always before them, borderlanders were victims of alarm reactions or simply made choices that were not fully justified.

In early 1925, for instance, the British consulate alerted that Aleppo suffered "from an unusually severe visitation of the periodical panic that the French are about to evacuate northern Syria immediately."²⁰ Likewise, in 1926, Turkish reports about the imminent departure of the French from Syria provoked a panic movement across the region: "a great terror is dominating at Arab Punar center (sic); the Kurds who have shops in the above-mentioned center have closed their shops and carried goods to the interior of Syria." Finally, "plenty of Armenian families escaped and arrived to Jarablus."²¹ A few years later, as France removed some Armenian smugglers from the border zone due to Turkish pressures, further rumors about a widespread – albeit inexistent – campaign against the Armenians in northern Syria led diverse families to leave the area voluntary and seek refuge to the south.²²

The changing international context both in Europe and in the Mediterranean from 1934 onwards paved the way for a new upsurge of rumors around the rectification of the Middle Eastern borders. Once more, such rumors were not completely groundless. While Italy and Turkey maintained a friendly relationship between 1928 and 1932, in 1933 Benito Mussolini started challenging the post-WWI order in the Mediterranean with a series of diplomatic moves (Barlas 2004, 231–52).²³ Similarly, the situation in the Balkans favored territorial revisionism. Between 1913 and 1919, Bulgaria had ceded the control of Western Thrace to Greece, Eastern Thrace to Turkey, southern Dobruja to Romania, and parts of Macedonia to Yugoslavia. By the late 1920s, however, Bulgaria denounced continuous maltreatment of Bulgarian minorities in these ceded territories. While at first such claims led Sofia to encourage revolutionary organizations to provoke constant border incidents, from the early 1930s onwards, Bulgaria sought to establish closer relations with Italy, Germany and Soviet Union (Znamierowska-Rakk 2012, 102–25). Against this backdrop, Turkey signed the Balkan Entente in February 1934 together with Greece, Romania and Yugoslavia, which aimed at establishing a unified front against a possible Italian and/or Bulgarian aggression in the Balkans. The Italian fortification of the Dodecanese Islands as well as the invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935 just confirmed Turkish fears about Italian revisionism in the Eastern Mediterranean.²⁴ In the Levant, that meant that Alexandretta and its port could become the main gateway for Italian expansion into northern Syria and the region as a whole.

Italian and Bulgarian revisionism was met with the awakening of Turkish irredentism over Syrian territories after the signing of the Franco-Syrian Treaty of 1936, which allowed for a complete independence of Syria. Although France did not ratify the treaty ultimately, Turkey voiced her opposition to its terms.²⁵ In addition, Turkey saw in the ambiguities left by the accord on the future status of Alexandretta an opportunity to kill two birds with one

stone: regain an ex-Ottoman province on the basis of its ethnic character and secure Turkish interests in the face of Italy's threat. In December 1937, Mustafa Kemal addressed the Grand National Assembly in Ankara underlying the importance of Alexandretta for the Turkish Republic (Atatürk 1997, 142). Both the press inside Turkey and the Sanjak's own Turkish-language press together with local committees launched a series of campaigns in favor of the annexation of this territory into Turkey.²⁶

Against this background, French officials warned that Turkey's claims to the Sanjak could encourage other countries such as Germany to put forward revisionist demands in Europe, thereby "challenging not only postwar treaties but also the institution of the mandates, and even the League of Nations itself" (Shields 2011, 75). French fears were confirmed in the following months. With the German annexation of Austria and Czechoslovakia, together with that of Alexandretta by Turkey between 1938 and 1939, irredentism had become now a real threat in the Levant. With this in mind, the French Advisor to the High Commissioner considered "that this country [Turkey] has never given up his ambitions over a region [the Upper Jazira] that is so close and whose oil potential cannot but awake its interest". Echoing the recent events in Europe and the final annexation of Alexandretta by Turkey, the French official predicted next Turkish steps:

Using the pan-German style, it will suffice that a number of Jazira villages suddenly deploy Turkish flags so that the Ankara government, arguing that it was a spontaneous move from local populations, put again the question of the Jazira on the table using all kinds of arguments, including the military ones [...], to consolidate its position.²⁷

The same concerns were shared by an increasing number of Syrian borderlanders who were ready to sell their lands to Turkish citizens since the former were convinced that Turkey was ready to occupy the northern provinces in Syria.²⁸ Once more, the Turkish press contributed to give credit to irredentist aspirations: "*Akşam* daily has published a picture of Aleppo city with the heading: The city of Aleppo whose annexation by Turkey is possible".²⁹ Fearing the impact of this kind of revisionist statements on the Syrian population, the French High Commissioner reacted immediately and required, with some success, the Ankara government to impress on the Turkish media the need of calming down the spirits in "such a difficult juncture".³⁰

British officials held different views with regard to the Turkish claims over the Upper Jazira in the late 1930s. While some of them took seriously the rumors of Turkish irredentism, others thought that such alleged reports were the result of a misunderstanding:

Sir P. Loraine rejects the supposition and suggests that it may owe its origin to a confusion between the district of Jezireh and the town of Jezirah ibn Omar [...], through which the Turks [...] are planning to link the Turkish and Iraqi railway systems, with the object [...] of assuring supplies of oil direct from Iraq.³¹

Be that as it may, in the face of the German and Italian advances in Central Europe and the Balkans as well as British alacrity to gain Turkish support (Barlas and Gülmez 2018, 827–40), Turkey gained leverage over France. Against this backdrop, France and Britain adopted a policy of "appeasement" towards the would-be Turkish ally, which included allowing Turkey to retake Alexandretta and tightening the border control in the shape of border posts and mobile units – to combat contraband along the Turkish-Syrian frontier thoroughly.³²

The outbreak of World War II precipitated dramatic changes in the Middle East, with profound consequences for French-ruled Syria and its relations with Turkey. As the talks with Moscow failed to achieve Soviet reassurances to Turkey's territorial integrity, Ankara opted to sign a defensive treaty with Britain and France in mid-October 1939. Nevertheless, the German invasion of France and the establishment of the Vichy regime in July 1940 led Turkey to re-evaluate both its position within the world conflict and its territorial claims over Syria (Vander Lippe 2001, 63–80). A reassessment policy that was indeed foreseen by the borderlanders themselves: “Much nervousness is apparent here regarding possible Turkish reaction to any change in position of north Syria resulting from eventual acceptance by Marshal Petain's Government of German demands on France”.³³ After a series of preliminary contacts between Britain and Turkey on both issues,³⁴ Britain eventually occupied Iraq in May 1941, and Syria and Lebanon in June. As a result, Britain established effective control of the Turkish-Syrian border and became Turkey's southern neighbor. Although the de Gaulle-Lyttelton agreement of 25 July 1941 provided for French territorial command in the Levant, control of the Turkish-Syrian border provoked conflicts of competence between the Allies for the duration of the Spears Mission; that is between 1941 and 1944 (Roshwald 1986, 897–919).

More importantly, despite the British “tour de force” in the region, suspicion of Turkish revisionism in northern Syria did not disappear altogether. In June 1941, the French Intelligence services in the Azaz area gathered a number of reports about Turkish soldiers and civil officials spreading rumors about the upcoming Turkish annexation of northern Syria. Turkish officials at Kilis, for instance, informed a Turkish woman who had a land dispute with a Syrian citizen that it was not worth going to Syria to solve that issue, for “in ten days the Turkish government is going to occupy Syria”.³⁵ Anxious about the effects that such rumors could have on the Syrian borderlanders, the French border authorities asked their Turkish counterpart for an immediate meeting to halt the circulation of similar and dangerous “false reports”.

By late 1941, the Turkish government had asked Great Britain for a rectification of the Syrian-Turkish border in exchange for its closer political and military cooperation with the British, including the construction of the road and railway linking Turkey with Iraq, which was deemed necessary to better protect Turkey in the event of a German invasion.³⁶ Although the British rejected Turkish claims in Syria,³⁷ every move in the frontier zone was interpreted as a signal of the final solution of the border issue. For instance, the temporary closure of the Turkish-Syrian border by the British during the summer of 1943 was rumored to be an attempt to force Turkey to break off diplomatic relations with Vichy France.³⁸ The same year, a Syrian citizen who had traveled to Viranshehir in Turkish territory informed the French Intelligence Services that “all villages located in a strip of land of 40–50 Km north of the railroad had been evacuated by the military authorities.” More significantly, talking to a Christian notable from the same town, the Syrian informant asked the former why, unlike his brother, he had not settled in Syria yet. The Christian notable gravely answered that it did not make any sense to move to Syria “since very soon the Turks were to enter into Syrian territory.”³⁹

Finally, rumors circulating across the border did not only reflect fears but also hopes. As of mid-1943, the persistent rumor that Turkey was going to declare war on Germany sparked an understandable wave of joy among merchants and shopkeepers. However baseless the news were, they pointed to the aspirations of the latter within a context

marked by the economic asphyxia of the region due to the closer monitoring of cross-border trade since the beginning of the conflict. Doubtlessly, the merchants and shopkeepers thought that the alliance between Turkey and the Franco-British axis would render the boundary more permeable, thereby opening a window of opportunity for the development of the regional economy.⁴⁰ This was the interstate background to the prospects of Turkish annexation of northern Syria, which had clear ramifications of its own among the borderlanders across the region.

State of Rumors

Scholarship on rumors has frequently highlighted their ephemeral nature and thus the difficulty to capture them. Some scholars have accordingly proposed to put aside the search for their origins, and focus instead our attention on *how* rumors travel, *who* convey them and what their *trajectory* reveal (Coast and Fox 2015, 222–34). Crucially, Kapferer argues that rumors are not simply a degeneration of news passed serially from person to person, but rather information that runs along “different webs of communication with many loops in the process” (1990, 138–41). Observing the Turkish-Syrian cross-border dynamics, we can trace how different webs of communication – e.g. intelligence gathering, espionage, and mass media – became enmeshed and interacted over time, thereby creating a “state of opinion” that was shared by both state officials and borderlanders.

As Martin Thomas suggests in his comprehensive study on intelligence gathering in the Levant, a key feature of modern nation-state is its capacity to integrate incoming information quickly into its decision-making processes. In that regard, extraction and exploitation of information about local conditions – physical as well as political – in the border areas were supposed to contribute to the state’s capacity to make “rational policy choices about how best to use the, very often, limited security forces at its disposal” (Thomas 2007, 22). Yet, as it often happened to borderlanders, rumors worked at times against the best interests of political centers as well. The growing tension between 1936 and 1945 along the frontier created a state of paranoia, particularly among the French. The mandate authorities considered that the boundary regime prevailing along the Turkish-Syrian boundary since 1929 had always worked in favor of Turkish interests for several reasons.

Firstly, the Turkish administration was more homogenous. In Syria, on the contrary, diverse services controlled and monitored the international border. The fact that those services depended on different authorities – the *Sûreté Générale* and Customs Offices from Beirut, the Syrian Gendarmerie from the local *Mohafaz* or governorate – made things worse, for the cooperation between these institutions was weak to say the least. The deployment of British soldiers in the Levant with the aim of protecting Syria’s borders between 1941 and 1944 aggravated the situation. More importantly, their Turkish counterparts were thought to be better informed about the developments occurring on both sides of the international boundary:

The Turkish authorities don’t miss out any activities occurring in the Syrian side of the border; they can count on the cooperation from Syrian sympathizers whose numbers increase as a result of every political mistake – and there are numerous – made by the [Syrian] nationalist government in Northern Syria.⁴¹

In contrast to the Turkish knowledge of the Syrian interior, the French failed to collect intelligence within Turkey. Weaknesses rather than strengths (Bayly 1996, 245) therefore led the French to distrust large sectors of the frontier zone populations, including Arabs and Kurds, who constituted the vast majority. In order to cope with the flaws of their intelligence gathering services, the French authorities were forced to draw information from all kinds of individuals and groups who crossed the border – migrants, refugees, commuters, merchants, travelers using the railroad, and even smugglers, thereby blurring the boundaries between state agents and local actors, and their respective webs of communication.⁴²

Ultimately, the French authorities reckoned that the presence of an important number of “Turkish citizens” could be exploited to advance Turkish territorial ambitions in northern Syria.⁴³ While the Kurds who sought refuge in Syria throughout the 1920s were depicted as loyal to French interests and thus good informants, Kurdish migrants arriving between 1936 and 1945 were perceived as potential trouble-makers and rumor-mongers at the hands of the Turks. In that sense, rumors became a driver for the acceleration of the “bordering, ordering and othering” policies (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002, 125–36) in the Upper Jazira. On the one hand, the mandatory power limited Kurdish migration into Syria by increasing border control as well as promoting immobility and ultimately favoring the “territorialization” of the borderlands communities. In that regard, and as a means to diminish Turkish influence in Jazira, the French even gauged the possibility of buying out the villages that were in Syrian territory but still belonged to Turkish owners to avoid transborder mobility.⁴⁴ On the other hand, they proceeded to the expulsion of potential disruptive groups and individuals, including local officials, from the frontier zone and the hardening of the already existing classification of its inhabitants between loyal and disloyal populations.⁴⁵

As the Second World War erupted, Turkish deserters became another important source of information. Understandably, Turkish deserters were thoroughly questioned by the French authorities to make sense of the Turkish military movements along the common boundary or more generally about Turkish politics. After being interrogated, deserters were delivered to the Turkish consulate in Aleppo. However, while at first French authorities seemed to be satisfied with this unexpected source of information, the former gradually realized that the news provided by deserters often were insignificant; rather than first hand intelligence information, those reports turned out to be rumors at best or were counter-intelligence effort borne out of the Turkish espionage strategies at worst.⁴⁶

Admittedly, border zones became nodal points for espionage, where rumors spread on purpose could play a crucial role in shaping views and political allegiances. In that regard, the former district of Alexandretta, later renamed Hatay by the Ankara government, was a case in point: “The social and administrative framework of the Hatay (...) provides a natural background for the interplay of rumors and propaganda which has been intensified by the circumstances of the war.” The reasons were twofold. Firstly, “foreign propaganda was able to play a considerable role among the dissatisfied minorities of the Hatay [e.g. Alawites]”. Secondly, the facility for the spread of rumors was especially “favored by the ill-maintained power stations of both Antakya and Iskenderun whose periodic breakdowns deprive the inhabitants of reliable radio news for weeks on end”.⁴⁷ As a result, “fantastic rumors” filled the gap either to compensate the lack of information in a permanent state of nervousness or, simply, with a clear political agenda.

The interplay between rumors and mass media (press and radio) was thus a complex one. As mentioned in the previous section, when rumors were repeated in the Syrian and Turkish press, their “circulation was given a second lease, as the written word gave rise to new verbal rumors” (Wagner 2010, 74). Actually, textual reproduction of rumors could strengthen their impact and authority. At the same time, as the British reported, the lack of “reliable information” could generate “fantastic rumors”. Censorship, too, could produce similar effects. Since the Armistice and being aware of the potential disrupting effect of rumors diffused by newspapers, French authorities imposed a severe censorship in Syria, including two days – long total suspension of telegraphic and telephonic communications as well as the virtual suspension of all press messages dealing either with the political or military situation. Yet, the cure proved to be worse than the disease. Within the context of worsening Franco-British relations in early 1940, food for rumor about the imminent arrival of German and Italian advisers in Syria was provided by the stringent local press control resulting in newspapers appearing with large blank spaces where articles and news had been removed.⁴⁸

Ironically, despite their advantageous position, Turkish officials and elites believed that they were losing “the battle” against the French and, consequently, pressured their government to consolidate the border through additional financial resources, military staff, and material means such as weapons, trucks, and telephone lines (Varlık 2010, 236–7).⁴⁹ In the same vein, the Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü considered in the early 1930s that the establishment of a national Intelligence Service was a priority in order to respond to security threats originating from the Levant. In addition, as the French co-opted some Kurdish tribal leaders for intelligence purposes, İnönü suggested that Turkey should ally herself with anti-French Syrians to gather secret information from the frontier zone and spread Turkish propaganda in the neighboring country (Öztürk 2007, 27).

Furthermore, rumors about assassination plots organized by diverse groups of political opponents, including Armenian and Circassian activists, based in Syria, Transjordan and Palestine also nourished the imagination of both Turkish elites and journalists for many years (Öztan 2020). It is within this context that the expression *cenup hududu* (the Southern border), frequently used in Turkish intelligence and administrative reports, came to epitomize the idea of a space where all dangers to the Turkish Republic came from.

Paradoxically thus, although state elites declared their political alacrity to integrate the Eastern provinces into the “Turkish” national fabric, repression together with national campaigns against smugglers helped deepen the symbolic boundaries between the “center” and the “periphery.”⁵⁰ Although the explicit target of Turkish official and media attacks were the towns built by the French on the Syrian side of the border – a sort of hub for contraband and crime,⁵¹ the violent statements were also geared towards “Turkish” borderlanders who facilitated and took part in illicit trade, with dramatic consequences for the national economy.⁵² As a result, smugglers and borderlanders, more generally, were under government scrutiny, for their patriotic sentiments were deemed to be weaker than among the rest of Turkish citizens living in other provinces.⁵³

Rumors had therefore an ambivalent effect. On the one hand, while they kept state authorities as well as borderlanders alert to possible danger and changes, including territorial annexations, displacement and loss of properties, rumors also tended to make state and non-state actors incapable of dealing effectively with alleged reports. On the other hand, whether true or false, rumors contributed to *bring* the state to the Turkish-Syrian

borderland and accelerate the bordering processes, including the increasing monitoring of the common border and the creation of order through the construction of difference (Newman 2003, 15).

Conclusion

In retrospect, the interwar years passed without major disturbance along the Turkish-Syrian border, with the exception of the French cession of Alexandretta to Turkey in 1939. Yet, by exploring the character, circulation and impact of rumors about the fate of northern Syria, this article has challenged the traditional Turkish historiography that tends to deemphasize both Turkey's engagement with its Middle Eastern neighbors in the 1930s and the potential amendment of the newly drawn boundaries in the region (Ahmad 2003; Deringil 1989). As Amit Bein points out, throughout the interwar years "it was far from certain that the new borders might not prove ephemeral and changeable" (Bein 2017, 7). In that regard, unverified reports and rumors about the fate of the international border contributed over the years to both generate and sustain a sentiment of uncertainty and anxiety among border populations and state authorities.

Whether created by journalists, local administrators or soldiers, rumors circulating along the Turkish-Syrian border found their niche in a wide range of webs among the Turkish, French, British, and American officials. Active participants in this process were also borderlanders themselves, particularly merchants, smugglers, travelers, and to a lesser extent migrants, refugees, deserters and simple trespassers. More importantly, because border authorities requested "news" about neighbor's intentions, those webs of communication became increasingly interconnected, thereby paving the way for the emergence of a shared collective "state of opinion." In that sense, rumors together with other pieces of information –propaganda pamphlets, newspapers and radiobroadcasts–, allowed both state and non-state actors to *make sense* of a context marked by heightened levels of interstate competition.

Finally, such a setting made Turkish and, more particularly, French authorities in Syria exceedingly sensitive to rumors and other flows of cross-border information. As a result, both governments committed themselves to a process of bordering along the Syrian-Turkish boundary, including the construction of border posts, the deployment of mounted patrols, telephone lines, and a tighter control by the respective intelligence services in the frontier zone. In parallel, states efforts to cope with rumors led the former to develop further (b)ordering policies, including the expulsion of Turkish migrants from border towns located in Syria and the forced displacement of local borderlanders in Turkish territory.

All things considered, rumors played a role not only in determining the way the Turkish and French authorities intervened in borderlands' everyday life, but also in how the two governments related to each other. In this respect, the rumors conveyed or produced by borderlanders also contributed to shape interstate relations and set the pace for the bordering processes throughout the interwar period.

Notes

1. Centre d'Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (hereafter CADN), Fonds Beyrouth (FB, hereafter), 1SL/1/V/2181. Information No. 278. Azaz, 6 November 1938.

2. There is not a clear-cut definition of rumors. However, the literature on rumors presents a certain consensus around some key ideas. Firstly, rumors are anonymously generated, transferred orally, ephemeral, and thus difficult to capture. Secondly, at its simplest, rumor is the passing of information between individuals or groups without confirmation or certainty of its veracity. However, rumor also expands to encompass much of the communication between different peoples and groups, including the passing of news and information. Finally, whether they are true or not, they may have real consequences (Wagner 2010, 23).
3. There are some exceptions though (Rogan 1998; Ateş 2013; Ellis 2018).
4. A *borderland* can be defined as the area that flanks a recognized international border, on both sides. It is also an area in the form of strip that is of “indefinite extent and thus cannot be measured in so many meters or miles” (Casey 2011, 389). One can add a political dimension to this concept as well. *Borderlands* are also “administrative regions abutting a border whose centers are physically and socially distant from that border” (Anderson and O’Dowd 1999, 595).
5. Joel S. Migdal (2001) argues that, contrary to what classic political scientists work suggest, the state is not a completely autonomous actor that stands vis-à-vis society. Instead, he sees government policies as being developed over time, in a non-linear way, and as a “re-action” to the action of various non-state and state actors, including those located in the “periphery”.
6. Documentation of status was not completely new in the region. In the late Ottoman period, it became increasingly widespread as more and more individuals had occasion to certify their identity in bureaucratic form. Yet bureaucratic records show that most individuals did not collect the identification documents available to them at that time (Hanley 2017, 70–74). Between 1929 and 1945, individuals “discovered” the advantages of those documents and used them widely along the Turkish-Syrian border.
7. For studies on the impact of rumors in border areas in other geographical areas, (see Riley 1984, 427–444; Dowd 1996, 527–560).
8. Borderlands were not of course the only locations that generated rumors. The amount of rumors circulating in both countries was so high that embassies and consulates devoted a separate section in their reports to collect the “rumors of the week”. See for instance, the weekly reports elaborated by the British Embassy in Damascus. The National Archives (hereafter TNA), FO 684/14. Damascus Diary. Political 1941–1943.
9. Matthew Ellis proposes the lived experience of territoriality as the conceptual lens that should enable scholars to “capture the dynamic interaction between state and local actors in the forging of modern bordered political identities” (Ellis 2018, 8).
10. TNA, FO 371/13075/E1467/249/89. Ankara to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Ankara, 20 March 1928.
11. George Gavrilis defines “boundary regimes” as locally cooperative methods of border control (Gavrilis 2008, 14–15).
12. Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi (hereafter BCA).30.10.180.244.6. Ankara, 5 December 1931.
13. TNA, FO 371/10853/E541/471/109. Paris to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Paris, 30 January 1925.
14. National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA), RG 84, Vol. 159. “Memorandum of current political news,” No. 11. American Consulate. Aleppo, 21 December 1925.
15. CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/395. Intelligence Services, No. 1713. Damascus, February 1929.
16. See, for example, the mutual accusations of exploiting the Kurdish tribes during the third (24 February 1931) and fifth (21 June 1935) sessions of the Frontier Commission. CADN, Fonds Ankara (hereafter FA), 36PO/1/120.
17. CADN, FA, 36PO/1/152. “Turkish and Armenian Refugees settled in Syria”. Adana, 25 November 1931; CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/2145. Summary of Turkish newspapers articles, 1932.
18. CADN, FA, 36PO/1/220. Inquiry from the Director of General Security. Beirut, 2 November 1935.
19. CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/2145. The Adjunct-Delegate to the High Commissioner. Aleppo, 6 February 1932.
20. TNA, FO 684/2. “Rumored imminence of French evacuation of Northern Syria and delimitation of Turco-Syrian Frontier”. Aleppo, 29 April 1925.

21. NARA, RG 84, Vol. 160. Maurice W. Altaffer, American Vice Consul in Charge (Aleppo), to the Secretary of State (Washington). Aleppo, 15 February 1926.
22. CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/2145. The Adjunct-Delegate to the High Commissioner. Aleppo, 6 February 1932.
23. In 1934, during a Fascist congress, Benito Mussolini put forward the Italy's historic rights in Asia and Africa.
24. For a comprehensive report on the Turkish assessment of the rapid changes in the Mediterranean, see BCA.30.10.219.476.5. "General Report on the Turkish Foreign Policy". Ankara, 18 November 1935.
25. "Antakya bizimdir", *Cumhuriyet*, 1 October 1936.
26. See, for instance, "Suriye Başvekili Büyük Şefe takdim edildi", *Ulus Sesi*, 24 December 1937.
27. CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/505. The Embassy Advisor to the High Commissioner to Mr. Puaux, French High Commissioner in Syria and Lebanon. Damascus, 13 June 1939.
28. CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/2181. Information No. 278. Azaz, 6 November 1938.
29. CADN, FA, 36PO/1/141. French Embassy in Ankara to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ankara, 21 January 1939.
30. CADN, FA, 36PO/1/141. French Embassy in Ankara to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ankara, 7 January 1939.
31. TNA, FO 371/23276/E149/149/89. "Alleged Turkish designs in Syria". Ankara, 5 January 1939.
32. CADN, FA, 36PO/1/153. "On Frontier relations". The Adjunct delegate at Aleppo to the High Commissioner. Aleppo, 16 November 1938.
33. TNA, FO 195/2466/252/4/40. Telegram from Aleppo to Ankara, 20 June 1940.
34. TNA, FO 25016/6574/316/44. "Comments on the recent conversation between his Majesty's Ambassador at Moscow and Mr. Stalin". Moscow, 9 July 1940.
35. CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/2144. Letter from Captain Terras to the Turkish Kaimakam of Killis. Azaz, 24 June 1941.
36. TNA, FO 371/33314/91/28/44. "Turkey: Arada-Diyarbakir Railway". Ankara, 5 January 1942.
37. The British feared that if they handed over Upper Jazira to the Turks, the latter would then claim Mosul, which would decrease the local security of an area that secured the channeling of oil to the Mediterranean. TNA, FO 371/33314/2713/2713/44. "Turkish Territorial claims in Syria". London, 12 May 1942.
38. TNA, FO 371/37527/R6878/5317/44. "Turkey and the war: closure of Turco-Syrian frontier". Ankara, 19 July 1943.
39. CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/2051. Special Services in the Levant, Ras al-Ayn. Weekly bulletin, No. 36, 16 October 1943.
40. CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/2051. Special Services in the Levant, Ras al-Ayn. Weekly bulletin, No. 44, 11 December 1943.
41. CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/2144. "Note on the Syrian-Turkish boundary regime". Beirut, 28 February 1938.
42. For the French assessment on "reliable" informants, see CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/1055. Colonel Callais, Adjunct delegate to the High Commissioner to the High Commissioner. Deir-ez-Zor, 8 March 1930; CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/2161. "Activities on the Turkish Border". Special Services. Aleppo, 23 January 1942.
43. CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/802. Note from the Head of the Special Services to Lieutenant-Colonel Antoine. Beirut, 3 June 1942; CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/2202. General Security. Qamishli, 1 April 1943.
44. CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/505. The Embassy Advisor to Mr. Puaux, French High Commissioner in Syria and Lebanon. Damascus, 6 March 1940.
45. French officers established lists of local officials and administrators that were to be replaced by "loyal" elements in the Upper Jazira in order to secure stability along the Turkish-Syrian border. See for instance, CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/505. Lieutenant Colonel R. Marchand (Hasaka) to the French High Commissioner (Beirut). Hasaka, 3 June 1939.

46. CADN, FB, 1SL/1/V/816. "Turkish deserters". General Caillault to Mr. Puaux, French High Commissioner in Syria and Lebanon. Damascus, 29 February 1940.
47. TNA, FO 195/2485/563/489/44. The British Consulate General at Iskenderun to the British Embassy in Ankara. Iskenderun, 6 December 1944.
48. NA, FO 195/2466. "From Reuters Special Correspondent, on the Syrian frontier". British Embassy in Ankara, 7 July 1940.
49. In 1931, the Turkish Minister of Interior Şükrü Kaya highlighted in a 28 pages-long report that the lack of resources together with the French complicity with smugglers accounted for the negative results of the "boundary regime" that prevailed along the Turkish-Syrian border as well as the Turkish failure in curtailing contraband activities. BCA.030.10.180.244.6. Ankara, 5 December 1931. This report is considered as the official justification of the diplomatic pressure on France and the inauguration of a comprehensive policy against contraband in the 1930s.
50. Celal Özbek, "Kaçak ve Kaçakçılık," *Yenilik*, 5 June 1936; Celal Özbek, "Kaçakçılara Öğüt: Kaçakçılar Vatana Duşmandır," *Yenilik*, 30 June 1936; Celal Özbek, "Kaçak İşİ Önemli bir Yurt ve Ulus İşidir!" *Yenilik*, 3 July 1936.
51. Mumtaz Faik, "Bir Dağın Yamacına Kenedlenen Mardin," *Tan*, 6 January 1937; Mumtaz Faik, "Cenup Hududunun Şikağosu Resulayn," *Tan*, 28 February 1937; Mumtaz Faik, "Cağcağ Suyu ve Pirinç Kaçakçılığı," *Tan*, 5 February 1937.
52. Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü estimated the loss caused to the state by smuggling at 20 million Turkish liras a year, apart from the prejudice caused to local industry by the illicit introduction of non-taxed foreign goods. TNA, FO 371/15381. British Embassy in Ankara to London. Ankara, 23 December 1931. Similar estimates were published the following years. Significantly, three fourths of this illicit trade took place across Turkey's southern borders.
53. Mumtaz Faik, "Fransızlar Türkiye'ye Karşı İktisadi bir Taarruza Geçmişlerdir," *Tan*, 9 January 1937.

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