

# The Syrian-Ottoman Home Front in Buenos Aires and Rosario during the First World War

*Steven Hyland Jr.*  
Wingate University  
*s.hyland@wingate.edu*

## Abstract

The commencement of hostilities in Europe in late summer 1914 transformed the southern Atlantic cities of Buenos Aires and Rosario into diasporic home fronts for many belligerent nations. These cities became at once contested terrains between and among émigré colonies and a source of financial and material aid for warring nations. Buenos Aires' policy of neutrality further permitted activist immigrants to partner with like-minded individuals and their respective diplomatic representatives to organise civic associations, arrange public demonstrations, and host charity events. The Syrian-Ottoman colonies mirrored the efforts of other immigrant groups, but diverged in distinct ways as novel nationalist sentiments circulated among them. The increased social tension from penury and competing political agendas led to multiple violent confrontations among Syrian Ottomans. Thus, nations that did not directly fight in the European conflagration were indeed party to the First World War and warring states' home fronts extended beyond national boundaries.

## Keywords

First World War – Argentina – Ottoman Empire – diaspora – nationalism – immigration – home front

---

\* I wish to thank Isa Blumi for pushing me to pursue this subject and Halil Çetin for the opportunity to present a portion of this work before a public audience. I also thank the participants of the 'International Congress on War History Studies (ICOWHIS) – World War I and its Heritage in the 100th Anniversary', hosted by Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University in Çanakkale, Turkey, for their comments and conversation.

## Introduction

The commencement of hostilities in Europe in late July and early August 1914 transformed the southern Atlantic cities of Buenos Aires and Rosario into diasporic home fronts for many belligerent nations. Argentina's history of mass immigration, high literacy rates and civic liberties created an environment in which these cities became at once contested terrains between and among émigré colonies and a source of financial and material aid for warring nations. Buenos Aires' policy of neutrality further permitted activist immigrants to partner with like-minded individuals and their respective diplomatic representatives to organise civic associations, arrange public demonstrations, and host charity events. As the Argentine populace became increasingly restive with the doctrine of neutrality in 1917, activists and sympathisers joined forces attempting to sway the government's wartime position. In other words, although far from the front lines, the carnage meted out in the fields of Europe mobilised advocates and immigrants, politicians and intellectuals in Buenos Aires and Rosario to pursue a variety of responses, confront rival groups, and articulate competing demands.

The principal combatants of the First World War all had sizeable émigré colonies in Buenos Aires and Rosario, and each nation attempted to marshal resources from them. The main forms of diasporic participation were financial and material aid sent to the old country. A second important contribution came in the form of volunteers returning to fight on behalf of their birth country or that of their parents. The Ottoman colony, most of whom were Arabic speakers from Greater Syria, at once mirrored the efforts of the British, French and German colonies, but diverged in distinct ways. Like other immigrant groups, Ottomans raised money for wounded soldiers, orphans, and their families. Yet, as the war progressed, novel competing nationalist sentiments circulated among the colony. The few volunteers that did return to the old country did so by joining the French-organised *Legion d'Orient* with the idea to liberate Syria from Istanbul.

Thus, the Ottoman Empire's entry into the First World War in November 1914 initiated a complex series of events that challenged its émigré communities residing in Argentina. Two specific incidents, namely the dismissal of Ottoman Consul Emir Emin Arslan by his superiors in 1915 and the sinking of the Argentine merchant ship the *Monte Protegido* on 4 April 1917, tore at the fabric binding many of these immigrants with the government in Istanbul and served as the rock upon which the group split. The sinking of the *Monte Protegido* further permitted Lebanese independence campaigners the chance to connect themselves directly to France and the surging anti-German sentiment

palpable on the streets of the capital and Rosario. The war also had direct material effects on Syrians residing in Argentina as work disappeared and employers discriminated based upon nationality, while wealthier members pursued remedies for family members suffering deprivation in the old country. The increased social tension from penury and competing political agendas led to multiple violent confrontations among Syrian Ottomans. Put simply, Buenos Aires and Rosario served as another home front where Arabic-speaking Ottomans confronted issues directly stemming from the war.

Recent scholarship on the First World War has revealed that civil society, including émigré communities, responded to the outbreak and deepening of conflict in more diverse and complex ways than previously understood. This was as true in belligerent nations in Europe as it was in neutral countries in the Americas. Despite official rhetoric encouraging support for the war effort, public opinion was mixed and support varied. Indeed, there was no single response in any given national body. The horrors of the war front found their way to civilian populations, non-combatants challenged government prerogatives in war requisitioning, and various segments of civil society publicly expressed anti-war sentiments.<sup>1</sup> Reactions from civilian populations of neutral nations in the Americas, including the United States, Argentina and Brazil, were equally mixed and no less concerned about the prosecution of the war. Private groups organised large public acts of solidarity, raised significant sums of money for the war effort and humanitarian aid, attempted to influence governmental

1 For Germany, see Belinda Davis, *Home fires burning. Food, politics and everyday life in World War 1 Berlin* (Chapel Hill and London 2000); Jeffrey Verhey, *The spirit of 1914. Militarism, myth and mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge 2000); Roger Chickering, "War enthusiasm?" Public opinion and the outbreak of war in 1914', in: Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson (eds.), *An improbable war? The outbreak of World War 1 and European political culture before 1914* (New York and Oxford 2007) 200–212; Benjamin Ziemann, *War experiences in rural Germany, 1914–1923* (Oxford and New York 2007). For Britain and Ireland, see Adrian Gregory, 'British "war enthusiasm" in 1914. A reassessment', in: Gail Braybon (ed.), *Evidence, history and the Great War. Historians and the impact of 1914–18* (Oxford and New York, 2003) 67–85; Catriona Pennell, *A kingdom united. Popular responses to the outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford 2012). For France, see Joëlle Beurrier, 'Information, censorship, propaganda? The illustrated French press in the First World War', in: Heather Jones, Jennifer O'Brien and Christoph Schmidt-Supprian (eds.), *Untold war. New perspectives in First World War studies* (Boston and Leiden 2008) 293–324. For the Ottoman Empire, see Yigit Akin, 'War, women, and the state: the politics of sacrifice in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War', *Journal of Women's History* 26:3 (2014) 12–35; Eugene Rogan, *The fall of the Ottomans. The Great War in the Middle East* (New York 2015). For Austria-Hungary, see Maureen Healy, *Vien-na and the fall of the Habsburg Empire. Total war and everyday life in World War 1* (Cambridge 2004).

policy decisions, and engaged in new debates and introspection about national identity and cultural expression.<sup>2</sup> Immigrant communities from multi-ethnic empires organised political parties to pursue independence projects.<sup>3</sup> The key observation emerging from these new works is that the perceived clear division between war front and home front was in fact blurred.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, when studying the evolution of the war, studies can no longer exclude the role émigré communities performed during the conflict. Indeed, cities in the Americas, including Buenos Aires and Rosario, emerged as additional home fronts in which immigrants from belligerent nations experienced the course of the war, its hardships, its politics, and ultimately its resolution. As a result, nations that did not directly fight in the European conflagration were indeed party to the First World War and warring states' home fronts extended beyond national boundaries.

Scholarship on the impact of the First World War on Latin American societies is underdeveloped in comparison to studies of European nations. Comparatively little is also known about the consequences wrought by the Second World War on Latin America. With regard to Argentina and the Great War, classic studies have focused primarily on the country's diplomatic initiatives and the war's impact on the economy. The conflict challenged Argentina's steadfast policy of neutrality, a position that grew increasingly difficult after the sinking

- 
- 2 For issues, politics and long-term consequences of US-led humanitarian efforts, see Jennifer Keene, 'Americans respond: perspectives on the Global War, 1914–1917', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 40:2 (2014) 266–286; Keith David Watenpaugh, *Bread from stones. The Middle East and the making of modern humanitarianism* (Berkeley 2015). For Latin America, see Olivier Compagnon, *América latina y la Gran Guerra. El adieu a Europa. Argentina y Brasil (1914–1939)* (Buenos Aires 2014); Stefan Rinke, 'The reconstruction of national identity. German minorities in Latin America during the First World War', in: Nicola Foote and Michael Goebel (eds.), *Immigration and national identities in Latin America* (Gainesville 2014) 160–181; John Starosta Galante, 'The "Great War" in *Il Plata*: Italian immigrants in Buenos Aires and Montevideo during the First World War', *Journal of Migration History* 2:1 (2016) 57–92.
- 3 Hakan Kirişli, 'The activities of the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War', *Middle Eastern Studies* 34:4 (1998) 177–200; Steven Hyland Jr., "'Arisen from deep slumber": transnational politics and competing nationalisms among Syrian immigrants in Argentina, 1900–1922', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 43:3 (2011) 547–574; Stacy Fahrentold, 'Transnational modes and media: the Syrian press in the *mahjar* and emigrant activism during World War I', *Mashriq & Mahjar* 1 (2013) 30–54.
- 4 For colonial home fronts, see Tan Tai-Yong, 'An imperial home-front: Punjab and the First World War', *The Journal of Military History* 64:2 (2000) 371–410; Daniel Rouven Steinbach, 'Defending the *Heimat*. The Germans in south-west Africa and east Africa during the First World War', in: Heather Jones, Jennifer O'Brien and Christoph Schmidt-Supprian (eds.), *Untold war. New perspectives in First World War studies* (Boston and Leiden 2008) 179–208.

of Argentine merchant ships by German U-boats and the entry of the United States into the conflagration in 1917.<sup>5</sup> The war quickly revealed the dependent nature of the export-led development model, and the absence of credit and dearth of imports prevented attempts to industrialise.<sup>6</sup> Only recently have scholars revisited the conflict, examining more closely the role of Argentina's civil society and its public acts advocating for particular policy measures or belligerent nations and the consequences. Olivier Compagnon has explored the long-term effects the war had on nationalist and cultural debates in Argentina and Brazil in the 1920s and 1930s. María Inés Tato has called for further micro-histories demonstrating the diverse set of responses and consequences of the war, as well as studies comparing Argentina with other nation-states in the Americas and Europe.<sup>7</sup> Each of these works demonstrates clearly that Argentina was involved in the Great War from the earliest days. Moreover, given their massive presence in Buenos Aires and Rosario, immigrants played vital roles in war-related civic activism, shaping the debate within the broader Argentine public sphere while crafting home fronts abroad.

### The Syrian Colonies in Buenos Aires and Rosario

Arabic-speaking Ottomans, self-described as Syrians, began arriving in ever-increasing numbers during the two decades leading up to the start of the First World War. As migration evolved into a deeply ingrained cultural practice in Greater Syria, which included the provinces of Aleppo, Beirut and Syria and the governorates of Mt. Lebanon and Jerusalem, those abroad created informal interpersonal networks disseminating information about Argentina to friends and family back in the old country. The Syrian colonies, continuing to grow,

5 Consult Ricardo Weinmann, *Argentina, en la Primera Guerra Mundial. Neutralidad, transición política y continuismo económico* (Buenos Aires 1994); María Montserrat Llairó and Raimundo Siepe, *La democracia radical. Yrigoyen y la neutralidad, 1916–1918* (Buenos Aires 1997).

6 See Bill Albert, *South America and the First World War. The impact of the war on Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Chile* (Cambridge 1988).

7 Compagnon, *América latina y la Gran Guerra*; María Inés Tato, 'La Gran Guerra en la historia argentina. Balance y perspectivas de investigación', *Iberoamericana América Latina – España – Portugal* 14:53 (2014) 91–101. Other recent works include Hernán Otero, *La guerra en la sangre. Los franco-argentinos ante la Primera Guerra Mundial* (Buenos Aires 2009); Silvina Cormick, 'El continente americano durante la Gran Guerra: un elemento de disputa entre rupturistas y neutralistas. Las miradas de Manuel Ugarte, Ernesto Quesada, Alfredo Palacios y Leopoldo Lugones', *Cuadernos de Política Exterior* 111 (2013) 1–23; Galante, 'The "Great War" in *Il Plata*'.

became increasingly diverse religiously, including Druze, 'Alawites, Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, Maronite Catholics, Antiochian Orthodox Christians, Melkite Catholics and Sephardic Jews. The 1908 Young Turk Revolution, the 1910 consular agreement between Argentina and the Ottoman Empire, and the arrival of the first Ottoman Consul Emir Emin Arslan in 1910, further stoked this movement.<sup>8</sup>

While Syrians settled throughout Argentina, the largest community resided in the capital of Buenos Aires, registering as the sixth largest immigrant group by 1914 and numbering nearly 16,000 people. On the eve of the First World War, the two primary modes of economic activity for Syrians were commerce, either as haberdashers or pedlars, and working as labourers. The rapid growth of the colony in Buenos Aires led to patterns of settlement in particular zones of the city. A quarter of the Syrians lived in the southern and south-western districts of Santa Lucia, San Cristóbol Sud, Vélez Sarsfield and San Juan Evangelista, which included the La Boca neighbourhood where workshops, meat-packing plants and various other industries were located. A full one-third of Syrians resided in the districts of Las Heras (now the Palermo neighbourhood) and Socorro (currently the Retiro neighbourhood), the latter featuring a recognisable slum. Syrian Ottomans were the third largest foreign-born group in Rosario, Santa Fe province, an important port city on the Paraná River with numerous import-export houses and an incipient industrial sector.

Most Arabic speakers, roughly 3,300 souls, worked as labourers on the docks and settled in an area sandwiched between the Plaza San Martín, Parque Independencia and Plaza Sarmiento in central Rosario. Similar to other immigrant groups, Syrians established mutual aid societies, newspapers, and social and religious associations to help organise and defend the community. Many of the Sultan's subjects had also advocated for diplomatic relations between Buenos Aires and the Sublime Porte (achieved in 1910) and celebrated the success of the 1908 Young Turk Revolution's restoration of the Ottoman constitution. The First World War, however, undermined a broadly shared Ottoman political identity and created challenges that were dictated as much by local realities as by affairs in the old country.<sup>9</sup>

8 Kemal H. Karpat, 'The Ottoman emigration to America, 1860–1914', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 17:2 (1985) 175–209; Akram Khater, *Inventing home. Emigration, gender, and the middle class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley 2001); Steven Hyland Jr., *More Argentine than you. Syrians and Lebanese in northwestern Argentina, 1880–1946* (Albuquerque 2017).

9 *Tercer censo nacional: levantado el 1 de Junio de 1914*, volume 2 (Buenos Aires 1916) 148, 230. For the impact of immigration on the socioeconomic development of Buenos Aires, see José C. Moya, *Cousins and strangers. Spanish immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850–1930* (Berkeley 1998).

### Humanitarian Activism for the Old Country and Economic Precarity in Argentina

The foreign-born population in Argentina numbered more than two million people in 1914, accounting for nearly one-third of the national population, 50 per cent of Buenos Aires' residents and more than 40 per cent of Rosario's inhabitants. The activities of the various immigrant communities thus marked an important feature of the conflict's consequences for Argentina. British and French citizens organised early on. Italians became active after the country entered the war in May 1915. Others from neutral nations supported Argentina's positions and later the Entente beginning in 1917. Subjects from the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, which crumbled immediately following the war's end, seized the opportunity to push nationalist agendas in increasingly public ways from 1917 onwards. As the war progressed, all émigré colonies of belligerent nations continually raised funds for the casualties of war, both military and civilian. It was in every sense a set of active home fronts. Organising massive humanitarian aid efforts thus became the defining feature of immigrant activism in Argentina. Individuals and groups throughout the River Plate utilised several strategies to support their communities in the old country and accessed some of the most prestigious spaces in the process. In the case of Syrians, humanitarian efforts evolved from aid supporting troops and their families to efforts designed to address the suffering of their friends and families, civilians caught in the grip of famine wrought by war.<sup>10</sup>

---

For the Syrian-Lebanese in Argentina, consult, among others, Ignacio Klich, 'Criollos and Arabic speakers in Argentina. An uneasy *pas de deux*, 1880–1914', in: Albert Hourani and Nadim Shehadi (eds.), *The Lebanese in the world. A century of emigration* (London 1992) 243–284; Ignacio Klich, 'Argentine-Ottoman relations and their impact on immigrants from the Middle East: a history of unfulfilled expectations, 1910–1915', *The Americas* 50:2 (1993) 177–205; Solène Bérodot and María Isabel Pozzo, 'La inmigración sirio-libanesa en la ciudad de Rosario, Argentina: continuidades, desvanecencias e intercambios socioculturales', *Amerika: Mémoires, identités, territoires* 5. 2011, <https://amerika.revues.org/2746> (4 June 2016); Hyland, "Arisen from deep slumber"; Hyland, *More Argentine than you*.

- 10 Compagnon, *América Latina y la Gran Guerra*, 114–118. See also María Inés Tato, 'La contienda europea en las calles porteñas. Manifestaciones cívicas y pasiones nacionales en torno de la Primera Guerra Mundial', in: María Inés Tato and Martín O. Castro (eds.), *Del centenario al peronismo. Dimensiones de la vida política argentina* (Buenos Aires 2010) 33–63; María Inés Tato, 'El llamado de la patria. Británicos e italianos residentes en la Argentina frente a la Primera Guerra Mundial', *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos* 71 (2011) 273–292; Fahrentold, 'Transnational modes and media'; Galante, 'The "Great War" in *Il Plata*'.

Several merchants in Rosario and Buenos Aires created branch offices of the Ottoman Red Crescent Aid Committee to raise money and material aid for the orphans of Ottoman soldiers that perished during the defence of the Dardanelles. In addition to dropping off supplies or giving money to different merchant houses, the various organisations held fundraisers throughout the spring of 1915 and summer of 1916, including in Rosario's exclusive Colón Theatre and at the Empire Theatre in Buenos Aires.<sup>11</sup> The association in Rosario was able to raise and send 7,000 German Marks to the headquarters in Istanbul via the Transatlantic German Bank. The group in Buenos Aires enjoyed the participation of the renowned national deputy Dr Estanislao Zeballos. Participants purchased tickets at the offices of the pro-Ottoman periodical *al-'Alam al-'Uthmānī* (*The Ottoman Standard*) for an event that showed a motion picture. Organisers raised additional funds for the fallen and wounded of Gallipoli at the event by offering a variety of goods available for a donation.<sup>12</sup>

The following year, the Buenos Aires Ottoman Red Crescent chapter partnered with the local Central Powers Red Cross society to raise money jointly. The associations sponsored an event held at the Victoria Theatre, and it listed a number of Argentine military officers, legal scholars and intellectuals on its honorary organising committee, including General Francisco F. Urriburu, Carlos Mayer Pellegrini, Carlos and Eduardo Bunge, and Federico Martínez de Hoz. The event featured a play by an Argentine dramatist entitled *Viva la Patria*, which was set in Misiones province and included scenes with military troops. Alongside the heavy nationalist hue, the event also featured a *baile criollo* set in the countryside and a *pericón nacional*, performed by actors from the German Drama Society of Buenos Aires.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the efforts by the Ottoman Red Crescent Committees, other Syrians raised funds for the war efforts, including Antonio Suaya who donated generously to the Ottoman naval commission and received a Medal of Merit and the title of *Bey* from the Sublime Porte.<sup>14</sup>

11 'Media luna roja', *La Nación* 14 September 1915; 'Media luna roja otomana', *La Prensa* (29 October 1915); 'Media luna roja otomana', *La Prensa* 6 November 1915; 'Lajna i'āna al-hilāl al-aḥmar al-'uthmānī', *al-Mursal* (9 December 1915).

12 'Envío de fondos', *La Nación* 31 August 1915; 'Layla sīnimātūgrāfiyya', *al-Mursal* (2 September 1915); and 'Comisión otomana pro media luna roja', *La Prensa* 14 September 1915.

13 'La conflagración – función de beneficio', *La Nación* 21 October 1916. The *baile criollo* refers to a general folkloric dance from the Argentine countryside. The *pericón* is also a folkloric dance, however, it is danced by a set of couples, usually eight, that are interdependent on each other.

14 Alejandro Schamún, *La Siria nueva. Obra histórica, estadística y comercial de la colectividad sirio-otomana en las repúblicas Argentina y Uruguay* (Buenos Aires 1917) 134.



News of the emerging humanitarian tragedy wrought by famine in Syria and Lebanon arrived in Buenos Aires in the winter of 1915 and continued to be reported upon by the local Arabic press.<sup>15</sup> The plague of locusts and the subsequent crop failure in Beirut province, combined with a blockade by the Entente, would devastate local communities with an estimated 50,000–80,000 perishing in the initial months of 1916. The village of Batroun on Mount Lebanon reputedly dropped from a pre-war population of 50,000 to 2,000 by its end. The city of Beirut's population had dropped from 180,000 to 75,000 by the middle of 1916. In total, some 300,000 to 450,000 perished in Syria and Lebanon between 1915 and 1918. In addition, the Ottomans executed nearly three dozen local elites in 1915 and 1916 for treason.<sup>16</sup> These events compelled Syrians, like other immigrant communities, to pursue multiple strategies to alleviate the misery, in particular raising and remitting money.

A wide swathe of the Syrian Ottoman colonies in Argentina and elsewhere in the diaspora mobilised in the hope of finding some mechanism to provide succour to their friends and families suffering in the old country.<sup>17</sup> In August 1915, a group of Muslims and Christians in Rosario raised 2,336 pesos in relief aid. The following August, a group named Syrian Youth (*al-Nāsh'a al-Sūriyya*) put on a play entitled 'Revenge of the Arabs' (*Thārātu al-'Arab*) written by the Lebanese playwright Najīb al-Haddād in the Victoria Theatre and raised 409 pesos.<sup>18</sup> Syrian humanitarian activists also were able to tap their most esteemed members to raise greater awareness about the disaster created by the war. For example, Emir Emin Arslan offered a public talk in Rosario's Colón Theatre in June 1917 to benefit the efforts of the Committee for the Poor of Syria. In his speech, Arslan, the former Ottoman consul and a distinguished figure among Argentine intellectual and political circles, guided the audience through the diplomatic history of the war, outlined Turkey's role in the conflict, offered descriptions of Istanbul, the Dardanelles, and the Bosphorus, and commented on the 'poor Turks condemned to death'.<sup>19</sup>

Some leading members of the Syrian Ottoman colony in Buenos Aires organised a committee in the autumn of 1917 with the express purpose of aiding

15 '80 alf nasama tadhabu ḍahīyya al-jū' fi Sūriyya wa Lubnān', *al-Mursal* 31 May 1916.

16 Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial citizens. Republican rights, paternal privilege, and gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York 2000) 19–23; Eugene Rogan, *The fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914–1920* (London 2015) 290–293.

17 See Fahrentold, 'Transnational modes and media', 41–43.

18 'Maḥliyya', *al-Mursal* 19 August 1915; 'Maḥliyya', *al-Mursal* 2 August 1916; 'Maḥliyya', *al-Mursal* 26 August 1916.

19 'Noticias del interior', *La Vanguardia* 8 June 1917.

those afflicted by famine. The group attempted to move the debate away from nationalist politics and to focus the colony's energy on the 'inhabitants of Lebanon and Syria, regions of Turkey that live under the rigour of the hardest misery for more than two years as a consequence of the military events that have developed in the old world'.<sup>20</sup> The committee, comprised of Christians and Muslims, hosted an open forum in Fenix Hall and established a commission to approach the Spanish embassy to secure a means to transfer the funds. The meeting also decided to write a letter of thanks to the Spanish king, thanking his decisive and generous action benefiting those languishing in the Levant. To get the word out, the group crafted a manifesto, distributing it to their compatriots and the general public to advertise the humanitarian campaign and explain their motivation.<sup>21</sup>

The actions of this group, known as the Committee for Aid to the Victims in Syria and Lebanon (*Lajna I'āna Mankūbi Surīyya wa Lubnān*), proved vital for the transfer of the raised funds. The committee's leader and prominent merchant, Antonio Arida, finalised the arrangement with Madrid in June 1917, transferring remittances from the Spanish embassy in Buenos Aires to either its embassy in Istanbul or its consulate in Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup> This effort was not limited to Buenos Aires, but rather built upon the network of institutions and commercial relations constructed by the Syrian Ottoman colonies throughout Argentina.<sup>23</sup> It is unclear how political sentiments affected efforts to raise money and supplies over the course of the war. The larger initiatives were led by the merchant classes throughout Argentina and it may have been that the urgencies of the famine pushed aside political considerations. At the same time, direct support of the Ottoman war effort was organised by Syrian Muslims, as evidenced by the names on programming committees and the locations for receiving donations.<sup>24</sup>

While the deepening humanitarian crisis in the old country informed the actions of many Syrian Ottomans, it is likely that Argentina's severe economic contraction provoked greater consternation among a far larger number of their compatriots. Tightening credit markets and the recalling of short- and

20 'Comité de socorro pro Siria Líbano', *La Razón* 16 April 1917.

21 'Los habitantes del Siria y Líbano', *La Prensa* 16 April 1917; 'Comité de socorro pro Siria Líbano', *La Razón* 16 April 1917.

22 'Lajna i'āna mankūbi Sūrīyya wa Lubnān', *al-Mursal* 9 June 1917; 'Socorros para Siria y Líbano', *La Prensa* 10 June 1917.

23 'Lajna i'āna mankūbi Sūrīyya wa Lubnan', *al-Mursal* 9 June 1917; 'Mahliyya', *al-Mursal* 20 April 1916; 'Jam'iyya khairīyya jadīda', *al-Nasr* (San Miguel de Tucumán) 15 May 1917. For northwestern Argentina, see Chapter three in Hyland, *More Argentine than you*.

24 See, for example, 'La conflagración – función de beneficio', *La Nación* 21 October 1916.

long-term funds by British banks led to runs on banks in Argentina. Direct foreign investment evaporated at the same time European markets disappeared due to the disruption of international shipping. These facts combined with the lingering effects of a wheat harvest failure in 1913 and massive crop failure in 1917. The result was sustained unemployment in Buenos Aires and Rosario, peaking at 30 per cent in the capital and nineteen per cent nationally in 1917. Food prices spiked as inflation soared. Some 200,000 workers had quit Argentina by 1917, raising concerns in certain quarters about the long-term consequences of the European war. In addition, many small shop owners, struggling to keep pace with inflation, lost their businesses.<sup>25</sup>

The dire situation in Rosario gave rise to the phenomenon of the unemployed wandering through the streets with their 'monkey', a local term for a bag with the pauper's clothes, as real wages fell by half and prices for bread, sugar, and beef rose six-fold. The Rosario municipality attempted to manipulate prices by creating new markets and deregulating existing ones. These measures failed as wholesalers and commodities brokers played a brutal game of speculation, and labour unrest continued apace culminating in the enormous strike in 1917.<sup>26</sup> The result for workers in general, including many Arabic speakers, was an almost instant fall into penury and chronic social dislocation.

Syrian Ottoman labourers suffered like other workers operating in the import-export houses and at the ports of Buenos Aires and Rosario. Many of the most vulnerable were Muslim, recently arrived, and with weaker social networks. The gravity of deprivation among the Syrian working classes may have inspired the emergence of a benevolent aid society established by Arabic-speaking immigrant women.<sup>27</sup> In addition to the general malaise of the municipal and national economies, Ottomans also experienced overt prejudice from employers in many firms. It was in this context that Mahmud Ramadan Zibdani and nearly 1,300 other co-signers sent a letter to the Ottoman

25 'Emigración de trabajadores', *La Razón* 21 April 1917; Albert, *South America and the First World War*, 43, 247; David Rock, *Argentina, 1516–1987. From Spanish colonization to Alfonsín* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1988) 193–196; Compagnon, *América Latina y la Gran Guerra*, 138–139.

26 Albert, *South America and the First World War*, 38–44, 61–64, 73–745, 240–248; Diego Roldan, 'Crisis, experiencias y políticas públicas. Gobierno, administración y política en Rosario de Santa Fe (Argentina, 1886–1943)', *Procesos Históricos: Revista de Historia y Ciencias Sociales* 22 (2012) 2–18; Paulo Menotti, 'La Rosario obrera y la Primera Guerra', *Redacción Rosario*. 11 May 2014, <http://www.redaccionrosario.com/nuevo/2014/05/11/la-rosario-obrera-y-la-primera-guerra/> (4 June 2016).

27 Lily Balloffet, 'From the Pampas to the *Mashriq*: Arab-Argentine women, ethnic identity, and beneficence', *Mashriq & Mahjar* 4:2 (2016) 4–28.

consulate in August 1916 asking it to defend their right to work. The letter detailed how these men had worked in English and French export houses and other industries in Rosario for several consecutive years, but were recently fired without cause save for the fact that they hailed from one of the Central Powers.<sup>28</sup> German nationals also suffered from this practice.<sup>29</sup> German-owned firms, the Syrians pointed out, admirably, had not enacted a similar policy and were hopeful that they might offer work to the unemployed. Yet, these men confessed to reaching a breaking point at which they were unable to feed their families and were willing to do anything to support them.<sup>30</sup>

The consulate contacted the Argentine Foreign Ministry the following month, noting that the number of unemployed Ottomans in Rosario had risen to an estimated 2,500, or 75 per cent of its population according to the 1914 census. In the communication, the consulate admitted that an increasing number of Syrians in Buenos Aires were coming to its office requesting, 'almost demanding', that they receive help in procuring work. Given that these men faced the 'most hideous misery', the letter closed by begging the Argentine authorities for help. The foreign ministry thus tasked its legal counsel to offer an opinion regarding Argentina's labour laws in the event the allegations were true. The ministry's lawyers determined that it did not have jurisdiction over this issue and further Argentine law did not intervene into what it viewed as the private affairs of business, which had the explicit right to hire and fire as they deemed fit. Despite this report, the desperate nature of Bobrik's letter impelled the legal counsellor to forward a request to the Interior Ministry's National Department of Labour to see if it could help these unemployed men.<sup>31</sup>

The foreign ministry replied to the Ottoman consulate in late November 1916, informing the consul that the National Department of Labour had placed more than 1,300 Ottomans into jobs since January 1915. At the same time, the legal counsel admitted that if these numbers were not high enough it was due to firms asking for specific nationalities when communicating with the labour department, thus confirming the original allegations of the unemployed

28 Foreign Ministry Archives Buenos Aires (AMREC), Political Division (DP), Turquía, 1916, Box 1637, Folder 2, Ramadan Zibdani, et al. to Bobrik (August 1916).

29 Rinke, 'The reconstruction of national identity', 171.

30 AMREC, DP, Turquía, 1916, Box 1637, Folder 2, Ramadan Zibdani, et al to Bobrik (August 1916).

31 AMREC, DP, Turquía, 1916, Box 1637, Folder 2, Bobrik to Murature (22 September 1916); AMREC, DP, Turquía, 1916, Box 1637, Folder 2, Director General Aramburu to Legal Counsel Sarmiento Laspiur (26 September 1916); AMREC, DP, Turquía, 1916, Box 1637, Folder 2, Carlos M. Kreis to Murature (16 October 1916); and AMREC, DP, Turquía, 1916, Box 1637, Folder 2, Foreign Minister Becú to Interior Minister Ramón Gómez (24 October 1916).

Ottomans. The consulate responded with a letter of thanks to Argentine officials, ending it by expressing the hope that more work might be found to alleviate the misery currently experienced by Syrian Ottomans in Buenos Aires and elsewhere in the country.<sup>32</sup>

The hardship experienced by Syrian Ottoman workers demonstrates the unexpected consequences of conflicts for communities not directly involved in the fighting. The course of the war and the surge of nationalist sentiment running through the émigré communities in Argentina led private firms to hire and fire based upon nationality, regardless of the personal views of the affected workers. The ability to sustain this policy and the lack of desire on the part of the host state to intervene confirmed the absolute hold of liberal thought in Argentina. The Foreign Ministry's stance was clear: private firms had the prerogative to take on workers or let them go. This aspect of Argentine labour law thus forced many Syrians, bereft of other options, to seek the help of the German-run Ottoman consulate to help resolve personal emergencies, regardless of their views on the legitimacy of the acting consul's portfolio. Finally, this case reveals that, for many Syrians, the experience of the war was one of immediate and profound privation. The impoverished nature of these workers, and the dearth of social welfare institutions, both public and private, combined to mire them and their families in a state of intense precarity. Poverty, thus, was a reality for a large portion of this immigrant colony as it was for many workers throughout Argentina.

### Political Crises and the Collapse of the Ottoman Home Front in Buenos Aires and Rosario

The start of the war provoked much discussion and activism in the Argentine public sphere. While some newspapers and intellectuals may have followed respective governments' position of neutrality at the outset, it gave way to support for the Triple Entente within weeks. As the war progressed, two basic camps emerged: those supporting neutrality (called *germanófilos*) and those advocating for the Triple Entente (known as *aliadófilos*). These positions were debated heavily in the robust press throughout the country, especially in Buenos Aires. So-called *aliadófilos* included writers, artists, historians, journalists and literary critics who were 'more appreciable to the Parisian intellectual life and whose heart naturally would be inclined towards France'. Jurists, military

32 AMREC, DP, Turquía, 1916, Box 1637, Folder 2, Sarmiento Laspiur to Bobrik (25 November 1916); and AMREC, DP, Turquía, 1916, Box 1637, Folder 2, Bobrik to Becú (2 December 1916).

officers, philosophers, sociologists and physicians, many of whom were trained with German methods, made up the *germanófilos*. The mobilisation of intellectuals and journalists in the early days of the war marked the first foray into the European conflict by Latin American societies.<sup>33</sup>

For the Syrian Ottoman colonies in Buenos Aires and Rosario, the opening of the conflict created a space in which political activists attempted to push long-standing grievances regarding reform in the Empire. Yet there was little talk of secession. Rather, before and early in the war, the Syrian diaspora consistently advocated greater autonomy, but not independence.<sup>34</sup> For instance, a week after belligerents began hostilities in August and months before Istanbul's official declaration of war, a group of activists established the Lebanese National Party in Buenos Aires and invited like-minded immigrants to join their cause. The platform clearly indicated its desire to remain within the Ottoman imperial superstructure, but offered a series of reforms extending to the governorate even greater autonomy. In its five-point platform, the organisation called for the local Lebanese population to elect the governor, the creation of a truly autonomous administrative council, an executive branch independent from the administrative council, and free, regularly held elections. The final piece of the programme called for annual transfers of funds from the Ottoman treasury to Lebanon's. Later that month, *al-Salām* (*Peace*), the leading Arabic-language newspaper in Buenos Aires, published an open letter from the Lebanese Union in Egypt, which called upon immigrants in the diaspora to unify together in the interest of the old country. The letter appealed to the emotional connection of readers' place of origin, but stopped short of demanding outright independence. This appeal for unity would become a constant theme for the politically active throughout the Syrian Ottoman diaspora as many lamented the inability of formal parties to organise themselves, despite recognising the efforts of Ottoman leaders in exile, including Sherif Paşa in Egypt and Paris.<sup>35</sup>

In late September, the prominent intellectual and poet Jurjis 'Assaf, a Maronite Catholic from Mount Lebanon, gave a highly anticipated and widely

33 Compagnon, *América Latina y la Gran Guerra*, 67–111. See also Jane Rausch, *Colombia and World War 1. The experience of a neutral Latin American nation during the Great War and its aftermath, 1914–1921* (Lanham 2014) 23–42.

34 Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and white. Race and ethnicity in the early Syrian American diaspora* (Berkeley 2009) 81–112; Hyland, "Arise from deep slumber", 567–568; Fahrenstold, 'Transnational modes and media', 36–39.

35 'Shiqā' al-Lubnaniyyin', *al-Salām* 11 August 1914) 'Kitāb maftuḥ min Jam'iyya al-Itihād al-Lubnāni fi Misr', *al-Salām* (29 August 1914); 'al-Ahzāb al-'uthmaniyya', *al-Salām* 3 September 1914.

advertised speech in the elegant Casa Suiza Salon entitled 'Between Life and Death'. In his three-part speech, 'Assaf began by observing the important connections the audience had as Arabs with those communities in Iraq, the Hejaz, Egypt, and throughout Syria. He then focused more closely on the communities originating from Greater Syria, noting that the divisions based upon religion were artificially imposed by the Ottomans and that a Syrian Muslim had more in common with a Syrian Jew than an Indian Muslim. 'Assaf then appealed to the attendees, so-called men of progress, to collaborate in fulfilling the destiny of the old country by helping reform its politics. These activists should draw on their experience in Argentina, a truly free country in 'Assaf's eyes, and the models of the United States and some European countries, to secure the sort of development model for Syria to achieve that ill-defined idea of civilisation and progress.<sup>36</sup>

As the reality of the Ottoman Empire's participation in the First World War sunk in among the Syrian colony in Buenos Aires, the first significant crisis fell upon it. The Ottoman Consul Emir Emin Arslan had advocated publicly that the Ottoman Empire should remain neutral and decried the 'arrogance of German militarism', likely at events including his public talk entitled 'The European Conflict' at the Ateneo Hispano-Americano social hall shortly after the start of hostilities.<sup>37</sup> Later, he criticised privately and publicly the Ottoman alliance with the Germans and remained an inveterate supporter of France.<sup>38</sup> Obviously, these proclamations found disfavour with the Ottoman Foreign Ministry. In April 1915, word surfaced that Rodolfo Bobrik, the German Consul in Argentina, had demanded Arslan hand over the materials and cede control of the Ottoman consulate. Bobrik, according to press accounts, had acted upon orders received from his superiors in Berlin. Emir Arslan refused, saying he had not received such orders from Istanbul. The conflict over the consulate led the editors of *La Vanguardia*, the Socialist daily in Buenos Aires, to ask rhetorically how the German consul could order the handing over of the Ottoman diplomatic post and whether Istanbul lived under the complete dominion of Germany. They concluded that Bobrik's actions gave force to the popular notion in the Argentine capital that the Ottoman Empire had ceased being an

36 'Bayna al-ḥaya wa al-mawt', *al-Salām* 26 September 1914; 'Bayna al-ḥaya wa al-mawt', *al-Salām* 29 September 1914.

37 'Ateneo hispano-americano', *La Prensa* 30 August 1914.

38 For a recent treatment of Arslan, see Pablo Torielli, 'Hombre de tres mundos: para una biografía política e intelectual del Emir Emin Arslan', *Dirāsāt Hispānicas* 2 (2015) 157–181. See also Klich, 'Argentine-Ottoman relations', 177–205.

independent nation and had become 'nothing more and nothing less than a colonial commercial outpost of the German emperor'.<sup>39</sup>

The diplomatic crisis between Bobrik and Arslan anguished many Syrians in Buenos Aires. For instance, on 17 April a religiously diverse group of merchants delivered to the Argentine Foreign Minister José María Murature a copy of a letter sent to the Sublime Porte protesting the German consul's 'meddling in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire'. Murature was unavailable to meet with the group, however an undersecretary received the note. The Sultan's subjects, who were led by prominent merchant Antonio Arida, a Maronite Catholic from Mount Lebanon, pushed two key points. Firstly, the efforts to remove Arslan from his duties were unjustified because the consul had always defended the interests of the Ottoman state to the 'complete satisfaction of his compatriots, sacrificing his time and methods – his plume and his words – in support of his country and colony'. Secondly, the 'delegates' speaking for the Syrian colony declared unequivocally that if Istanbul gave a foreign country control over its consular duties, the 'Ottoman residents here' would protest in perpetuity, preferring the lack of diplomatic representation to the intervention of another state's envoy. The letter concluded by laying the blame of future consequences on Germany's employment of a 'condemnable and unscrupulous policy'. The undersecretary explained to the Ottoman subjects that the Foreign Ministry had yet to receive any communication from the Sublime Porte confirming Arslan had been fired or that the duties of the consulate should be transferred to Bobrik.<sup>40</sup>

The conflict lingered into the winter of 1915. Arslan continued to deny the legitimacy of Bobrik's claim, and informed the Ottoman ambassador in Washington DC of the matter. In fact, Arslan claimed in May that contrary to popular belief he had received several dispatches from the Prime Minister in Istanbul 'giving him instructions relating to the carrying out of his mission'. Although the Argentine Foreign Ministry also confirmed Arslan's status the same month, it received a telegram in June from the Ottoman government, via its diplomatic mission in Washington DC, stating unequivocally that Istanbul's consulate in Buenos Aires was under control of the German consul. Arslan remained defiant. He viewed the handing over of consular duties to a foreign national an affront to the Ottoman subjects in Argentina. Thus, Arslan refused

39 'La insolencia de un agente del káiser', *La Vanguardia* 14 April 1915.

40 AMREC, DP, Turquía, 1915, Box 1542, Folder 7, Arida, et al. Murature (17 April 1915); 'Consecuencias de la actitud del representante alemán', *La Vanguardia* 19 and 20 April 1915.



to comply, saying he was acting in accordance with the wishes and opinions of the Ottoman colony. The crisis deepened.<sup>41</sup>

As Arslan held out, the Syrian colony in Buenos Aires arranged a banquet of support at the fancy Savoy Hotel in early July. As noted by an observer, the large attendance and the great praise delivered by the various speakers evidenced the intense sympathy and respect Arslan held from his compatriots. Yet, the crisis certainly was a topic of conversation. Dr Miguel Hajjar, speaking in Spanish and on behalf of the 'truly loyal' Ottomans resident in Buenos Aires, walked a fine line as he expressed gratitude to the government in Istanbul while articulating a protest to it for letting the circumstances regarding the consulate fester. After great applause, others followed, including a Buenos Aires-based Syrian Armenian journalist Jamil Digdanian. Nevertheless, the consul's actions placed the Syrians who advocated for Arslan in a difficult position because to support his course of action was to support insubordination, if not treason. Emir Emin Arslan must have recognised this because during his remarks at the banquet, he explained the reasoning behind his actions to a rapt audience. He was wistful too, recalling the first grand celebration he had organised as consul in Buenos Aires in July 1911, which commemorated the restoration of the Ottoman constitution. He concluded by declaring that his comportment had always 'obeyed the idea of the dignity of his country and its own pride'. The Ottoman consulate affair also provoked curiosity in the region as a newspaper in Brazil even noted the crisis and the support for Arslan.<sup>42</sup>

The issue finally came to a head in the spring as Rodolfo Bobrik sued Arslan before Argentina's highest court. Presenting documentation from Istanbul, the German consul demanded the court compel Arslan to turn over the Ottoman consulate's seals, funds, and archive. He requested the assistance of law enforcement. The judges directed the Ministry of Justice to forward an opinion on the case, which the attorney general complied, siding with Bobrik. The Supreme Court thus ruled in favour of Bobrik and demanded Arslan finally relent and release the consulate's materials. In late October, Bobrik informed Foreign Minister Murature that he was now in possession of the Ottoman consulate.<sup>43</sup>

---

41 'El consulado de Turquía', *La Nación* 7 May 1915; AMREC, DP, Turquía, 1915, Box 1542, Folder 8, José María Cantilo to Judge Tomás Arias (20 May 1915); and 'Representación consular otomano', *La Nación* 5 June 1914.

42 'Banquete ao ex-consul de Turquía', *O Estado de São Paulo* 3 June 1915; 'El ex-cónsul de Turquía', *La Nación* 2 July 1915.

43 'El consulado de Turquía', *La Prensa* 5 September 1915; 'El consulado de Turquía', *La Nación* 10 October 1915; 'Consulado de Turquía', *La Prensa* 17 October 1915; AMREC, DP, Turquía, 1915, Box 1542, Folder 11, Bobrik to Murature (28 October 1915).

The letter delivered by Arida and his colleagues to the Argentine Foreign Ministry in April 1915 was an important and public rebuke of the German consul's actions, demonstrating that these immigrants believed themselves to be intimately connected to the politics of the old country. It also confirmed Arslan's popularity within and beyond the colony. His arrival in 1910, for instance, prompted a massive greeting at the harbour and a street parade featuring more than 70 automobiles and thousands of Ottoman subjects that escorted the diplomat to the luxurious Plaza Hotel.<sup>44</sup> Arslan also easily integrated into the diplomatic and elite social circles in Buenos Aires. He immediately began giving lectures on international law, the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, and aspects of Ottoman social and political life. He published in Argentine journals and newspapers on similar themes. Most importantly, Ottomans in Argentina viewed Arslan, a Druze Muslim from a very prominent Mount Lebanon family, as one of their own. His apparent summary dismissal, his subsequent conviction and death sentence *in absentia*, and the turning over of the consulate to his German counterpart provoked concern and deepened tensions within the colony about the destiny of the homeland.<sup>45</sup>

As the war continued, slaughtering men in the trenches of Europe, what had been largely intellectual debates among the most committed of the Syrian Ottoman colonies in Argentina began to transform into violent physical confrontations as divisions hardened and activists became more brazen. Certainly, the visceral debates in the Arabic press fit into the contentious atmosphere of Buenos Aires and Rosario, which suffered from increasing war-inspired social unrest and labour agitation. Syrian Ottomans now lived in an environment where interpersonal violence could manifest. For example, a mission organised by pro-French Lebanese in Buenos Aires travelled to Rosario in April 1916 looking for volunteers to join the *Legion d'Orient*, a French-led irregular force of young Syrians, Lebanese and Armenians from the diaspora. For Ottoman supporters, who were deeply suspicious of the French, this initiative was a provocation. The effort led hundreds to a midday riot outside a church. One Syrian Muslim died, more than a dozen were hospitalised and scores were arrested.<sup>46</sup> The following January, an argument of a 'religious character' between ten Syrians devolved into a street brawl in Buenos Aires' La Boca neighbourhood. This late night, mid-summer encounter intensified when Armenian Christian Nayilik Balikian slapped Salam Ahmed, a Muslim. The police arrived and took the two men into custody. After the men were released from jail, Balikian

44 'Arribo del cónsul otomano', *La Nación* 30 October 1910.

45 Klich, 'Argentine-Ottoman relations', 182–185; Tornielli, 'Hombre de tres mundos'.

46 Fahrentold, 'Transnational modes and media', 40–41.

walked off into the street. A Muslim named Taher Abdullah approached the unaware Armenian Syrian and stabbed him in the back and belly. The police immediately detained Abdullah and transferred the gravely wounded Balikian to the hospital.<sup>47</sup>

Imperial Germany's decision in early 1917 to return to unrestricted submarine warfare threatened to affect Argentina's economy by constricting transatlantic shipping. Within weeks of activating the policy, German U-boats torpedoed the Argentine merchant ship *Monte Protegido* in early April.<sup>48</sup> Public opinion was outraged, and Argentine activists and immigrant groups organised large-scale public demonstrations demanding the severing of diplomatic relations with Germany and proclamations of official support for the Entente. These sentiments and acts deeply challenged President Yrigoyen's neutrality policy. One of these events descended into violence, including the sacking of one pro-German paper (*Deutsche La Plata Zeitung*), one declared neutral paper (*La Unión*) and the cultural association Club Aleman.<sup>49</sup>

It was the sinking of the *Monte Protegido*, however, that gave Lebanese nationalists, whom the pro-Ottomans characterised as separatists, the chance to push their political agenda and attach themselves to the *aliadófilos* and the rising tide of support for the Entente. The sentiment of Argentine social elites, artists and intellectuals for French, especially Parisian, cultural forms coloured the strength of support for the Entente.<sup>50</sup> The tipping point between the various factions of the Syrian Ottoman colony in Buenos Aires resulted from the large celebration of Bastille Day in July 1917. Following a morning commemoration of the French national holiday at the Hospital Francés, a massive celebration followed that afternoon at the Rural Society, the social hall and exhibition centre of the association of large, wealthy Argentine landowners in the Palermo neighbourhood. Although this event was designed to showcase the French war effort and the contributions the French colonies had given to Argentina, the festival also offered a remarkable opportunity to Lebanese nationalists.<sup>51</sup>

The French Minister in Argentina, Henri Jullemier, and the French consul arrived at the principal grandstand, accompanied by the organising committee, several French soldiers on leave, a troop of boy scouts and students of the

47 'Shijar bayna Suriyyin', *al-Hawi* 27 January 1917.

48 Ronald C. Newton, *German Buenos Aires, 1900–1933. Social change and cultural crisis* (Austin 1977) 49.

49 'La manifestación de anoche', *La Prensa* 15 April 1917; 'Las manifestaciones de anoche', *La Vanguardia* 15 April 1917; 'En la cancillería', *La Vanguardia* 16 April 1917.

50 Compagnon, *América Latina y la Gran Guerra*, 90–92.

51 'Aniversario de la Toma de la Bastilla', *La Prensa* 15 July 1917.

French cultural organisation *Patrie*, students of the Syrian-Argentine School, and additional patriotic societies, including the Lebanese Union. Once settled, the municipal band performed the Argentine national anthem and the Marseillaise. Jullemier at this point addressed the crowd, praising the bravery and commitment of the soldiers seated behind him in the fight for the 'cause of civilisation'. He then read the names of the soldiers who had earned battle honours. This emotional event peaked when Jullemier placed the Military Medal, France's third highest combat award, on the chest of Julio Minvielle, an Argentine-born son of French immigrants who had lost an arm in combat 'in defence of his parents' homeland'. Jullemier then kissed the young soldier who was then emotionally embraced by his 'comrades of the glorious army'. Public events and private recognition of soldiers' heroism and sacrifice, in particular when a home-grown combatant was injured or killed, were particularly poignant and Argentine public opinion did not tolerate cynicism. The crowd was moved.<sup>52</sup>

The proceedings turned to Checri Abi Saab, a Maronite Catholic from Mount Lebanon who would serve as the dragoman of the French embassy in Buenos Aires during the 1920s and 1930s. Abi Saab, on behalf of the Lebanese Union, gave a speech introducing the benediction ceremony of the organisation's flag as that of the sovereign Lebanese nation. He was followed by Alejandro Cardahi, also of the Lebanese Union. Both speeches declared the love Lebanese have always felt for France, its desires for liberty, and evoked the hope that Lebanon would experience the protection of the great republic. Their words produced rapturous applause from the (just over) 10,000 attendees. Once Abi Saab and Cardahi had concluded their remarks, the municipal band performed the Marseillaise and Fr. Juan Gossn, a Maronite priest, blessed the flag immediately afterwards. The benediction complete, an honour guard of students from the *Patrie* society, a group of boy scouts, and members of the Lebanese Union escorted the standard to a flagstaff, hoisting it above the royal box seat area of the grounds. Minister Jullemier rose, saluted the banner and declared France would never forget the love professed by the Lebanese. The act finished with the boy scouts and the Lebanese Union, followed by *poilus* (French veterans), parading out of the grounds to much applause as a band from the Salesian Leon XIII School performed the Lebanese hymn, sending many in the crowd into ecstatic applause.<sup>53</sup>

52 'El Aniversario francés. Su celebración. Los actos de hoy', *La Nación* 15 July 1917; Compagnon, *América Latina y la Gran Guerra*, 187.

53 'La Fiesta de Francia', *La Razón* 14 July 1917; 'El Aniversario francés. Su celebración. Los actos de hoy', *La Nación* (15 July 1917); and 'Aniversario de la Toma de la Bastilla', *La Prensa* 15 July 1917.

The next day, members of the Lebanese Union publicly unveiled the society's blessed flag featuring the famous cedar of Lebanon, hanging it alongside the Argentine standard above the stoops of their residences and businesses in the downtown district of Socorro. In addition, the Lebanese Union and its supporters joined thousands of other pro-France supporters at the massive rally in the Plaza de los Congressos, occupying several blocks on their own. The event began with the Marseillaise and included families, men and women, Argentines and the foreign-born. French flags were as ubiquitous as Argentine ones. Immigrant groups flew the standards of 28 additional countries and nations, including Czech, Serb, Montenegrin, Catalan, and Italian, and featured both republican and liberal Spanish associations and the Young French Ladies organisation. As one observer noted, 'seldom has it celebrated the holiday of France with the intensity and sincerity as Buenos Aires did yesterday'.<sup>54</sup> The participants then marched to the French legation and then the French Club, from which Minister Jullemier addressed the crowd.

These brazen acts of public insubordination, if not treason, drew the ire of the Sublime Porte's supporters and heavy criticism and commentary in the pro-Ottoman Arabic-language press in Buenos Aires. Almost immediately, caustic disagreements that had largely remained at the rhetorical level devolved into two weeks of public manifestations and violent confrontations between competing groups. Rodolfo Bobrik, the acting Ottoman Consul, thus demanded the intervention by Argentine authorities, observing that the flying of this 'separatist' and 'fantastical' flag by 'a small group of lost compatriots' wounded the 'patriotic sentiments' of the Ottoman colony. Since Mount Lebanon remained an imperial jurisdiction, Bobrik further claimed neither Argentine law nor international precedent gave the right to raise this flag in place of the Ottoman crescent moon.<sup>55</sup>

This petition provoked internal deliberation among Argentine authorities. If the Lebanese Union used its flag to represent an independent Lebanese state, then the Argentine authorities could neither recognise nor permit its flying alongside their standard, 'whatever the patriotic aspirations may be'. At the same time, if the flag in question was that of the organisation, then the group had every legal right and protection to use it in its public acts and fly it from its headquarters. Thus, the Foreign Ministry suggested a compromise, recommending the Argentine government declare the Lebanese Union's flag could be used in official events, but could not be flown by individual members.

---

54 'La fiesta de la República Francesa', *La Razón* 16 July 1917.

55 AMREC, DP, Turquía, Box 1691, File 7, Bobrik to Pueyrredón, Interim Minister of Foreign Affairs (30 July 1917).

The Interior Ministry then informed the local police to be vigilant in preventing the 'abuse' of the union's flag as a national one.<sup>56</sup>

In November 1917, Dr Cesar Lakah and Jamil Mardam Bey, an Orthodox Christian and a Sunni Muslim respectively, arrived in Buenos Aires representing the Paris-based Syrian Central Committee, and seeking funds and volunteers for the French-led *Legion d'Orient*. The group's aim was to help secure Syrian independence under French protection, while the actual future of Lebanon was not entirely clear. Lakah and Mardam had been dispatched to engage the diaspora in the Americas in support of the initiative. While Lakah and Mardam experienced success in Brazil and Uruguay, they discovered a very different environment in the River Plate.<sup>57</sup> As Lakah explained in a report to the French Foreign Minister, Stephen Pichon, summarising their mission to South America, the colony in Buenos Aires was heterogeneous and divided. Not even the herculean efforts of Emir Emin Arslan could overcome this feature during his time as Consul. Lakah further complained that ever since their arrival in Brazil the Arabic- and Spanish-language Syrian press in Buenos Aires, under the pay of Germany, never missed a day to 'spread their venom among a certain class easy to seduce'.<sup>58</sup>

Lakah and Mardam then discovered that the only recognised Syrian political party in Buenos Aires was the Lebanese Union, understanding its stated goal was the complete independence of Lebanon in its ancient borders. And like the *germanófilo* Syrian press, the activities of the Lebanese Union created a climate of mistrust into which the two representatives walked. The two men met with the Lebanese Union's Executive Committee and explained that the goal of their mission was to aid in the independence of the old country. Lakah and Mardam believed the listeners to be satisfied with their answers, but two days later received a letter from the Executive Committee demanding written assurances from the French government guaranteeing Lebanese independence and stating that it would not be subsumed into a larger Syrian state. Lakah tried to massage his answer, responding that France 'promised to give Lebanon and Syria the most liberal regime possible' and that France's

56 AMREC, DP, Turquía, Box 1691, File 7, Sarmiento Laspiur, Legal Advisor, to Pueyrredón (20 August 1917); AMREC, DP, Turquía, Box 1691, File 7, Pueyrredón to Gomez, Minister of the Interior (20 August 1917); and AMREC, DP, Turquía, Box 1691, File 7, Pueyrredón to Bobrik (20 August 1917).

57 'Voluntarios Libaneses y Sirios', *La Prensa* 19 November 1917; Eliazar Tauber, *The Arab movements in World War I* (London 1993) 200–230; and Fahrentold, 'Transnational modes and media', 42–45.

58 French Foreign Ministry Archives, La Courneuve (ADLC), France, Guerre 1914–1918, Turquie, Box 893, Lakah to Pichon (14 April 1918).

word was sacred. Unimpressed, the Lebanese Union again asked for an official statement before it would support raising volunteers. Lakah then met with Alejandro Cardahi and Miguel Sellan, two members of the Executive Committee. The latter hurled invectives at Lakah and quit the meeting. Cardahi later apologised for Sellan's behaviour and announced his personal goal to find four volunteers.<sup>59</sup>

Lakah and Mardam then learned that the union never intended to help raise troops, but rather used their commercial contacts in the interior of Argentina to enact a propaganda campaign, arguing presciently that France would betray Lebanon. The physician lamented that most of the emerging Lebanese colony disapproved of the association's actions; however, lacking unity or wealth could offer no alternative. Alejandro Cardahi revealed what certainly was the final act in completely undermining the mission's goals. In an urgent letter to Dr Lakah, the activist explained that the Lebanese Union had voted in mid-November not to work with the Syrian Central Committee. Cardahi was incensed, declaring it an affront to the grandeur of France. He immediately resigned from his position as the union's vice president and quit the group altogether. To further impress upon the visitors the challenge they faced, Cardahi sent another letter to Lakah that included a copy of the Lebanese Union's newspaper front page featuring a letter from the Lebanese Committee in Cairo encouraging the local association not to help recruit volunteers. The actions of the Syrian *germanófilos* and the Lebanese nationalists sullied the efforts of Lakah and Mardam in the interior. The emissaries concluded their report by suggesting that the French assign someone specifically in their embassies to deal with Syrians and Lebanese, and give subventions to the *aliadófilo* Arabic press. Lakah also asked that the Lebanese Union newspaper be placed on the Entente blacklist.<sup>60</sup> The experience in Argentina sapped Lakah's energy and forced him to convalesce for a month once he arrived in Chile in January 1918.<sup>61</sup>

As evidenced in the confrontational acts and contentious debates in the Arabic press, the Syrian Ottoman colonies in Argentina continued to fragment as the war proceeded apace. As Lebanese nationalists advocated total independence, Ottoman loyalists continued to celebrate key national holidays. At the behest of loyalists, acting Ottoman consul Rodolfo Bobrik sought and received

59 French Foreign Ministry Archives, La Courneuve (ADLC), France, Guerre 1914–1918, Turquie, Box 893, Lakah to Pichon (14 April 1918).

60 French Foreign Ministry Archives, La Courneuve (ADLC), France, Guerre 1914–1918, Turquie, Box 893, Lakah to Pichon (14 April 1918).

61 French Foreign Ministry Archives, La Courneuve (ADLC), France, Guerre 1914–1918, Turquie, Box 893, Lakah to Pichon (14 April 1918).

permission from the Argentine state to hoist the Ottoman flag commemorating the eighth anniversary of Sultan Mehmet v's ascension to the throne.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, the confrontations in the newspapers and in the streets had created an environment in which any sense of common cause was untenable politically. The deteriorating relations within the Syrian colony would eventually lead to the pro-Ottoman community to quit the Socorro neighbourhood and relocate to the Balvanera *barrio*.<sup>63</sup> The Ottoman home front in Buenos Aires and Rosario had collapsed.

### Conclusion

On the eve of the Treaty of Mudros, an armistice signed on 30 October 1918 between the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain, the Lebanese Union organised an event at the Augusteo Salon celebrating the entrance of Entente forces into Syria and Lebanon. Consuls from the British, French and Russian embassies attended as numerous men and women from the Arabic-speaking colony filled the venue. The event opened with renditions of the Argentine national anthem and the Marseillaise. Leading members of the colony then gave speeches to much applause, including a talk in English by a representative of the Syrian Union. The Argentine politician and former governor, Carlos Gallardo, spoke glowingly of the 'righteous ideals' sustained by France and the other members of the Entente. As the evening drew to a close, the crowd chorused the Marseillaise as they left the building.<sup>64</sup>

The experiences of the Syrian Ottomans demonstrate clearly that Argentina was party to the First World War inasmuch as the belligerent nations had home fronts that extended beyond national boundaries as far away as the cities of Buenos Aires and Rosario. The unceremonious and protracted transfer of the Ottoman consulate to German control initiated a political crisis that challenged loyalty to Istanbul and sowed the seeds of division. The sinking of the *Monte Protegido* put supporters of the Ottoman Empire and Germany under a tremendous amount of pressure because there were material consequences for Argentina despite being neutral. This attack also gave an opportunity for actors to pursue nationalist impulses, leading to great internal conflict and

62 AMREC, DP, Turquía, Box 1691, File 3, Bobrik to Foreign Minister (30 March 1917).

63 Abdeluahed Akmir, 'La inmigración árabe en Argentina', in: Raymundo Kabchi (ed.) *El mundo árabe y américa latina* (Madrid 1997) 102–107.

64 'Demonstración libanense', *La Nación* 14 October 1918; 'Pro Líbano independiente', *La Nación* 15 October 1918.



interpersonal violence. It further allowed certain segments of the colony to seize on popular sentiment for France and lay out a vision for Lebanese independence, climaxing in an impressive public display on Bastille Day before a massive audience.

These events happened in a context of a severe economic contraction plunging Syrian Ottoman workers into unemployment and their families into poverty. Survival was far more important for many than discerning the political activism of their compatriots. And while many suffered from the whims of the labour market, others in the rapidly disintegrating Syrian Ottoman colonies, inspired either by the war effort or the famine afflicting the homeland, found creative ways to raise funds and supplies and remit them to suffering family and friends. Syrian Ottomans, thus, negotiated a difficult and changing set of demands and realities and enacted strategies to survive, to support loved ones, and to further political projects as the colony fragmented permanently.