Emile Eddé and the Territorial Integrity of Lebanon

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Emile Eddé was one of the most influential political figures in Lebanon during the 1920s and 1930s. He was a member of the first and third Lebanese deputations to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919–20 which demanded the independence of a Greater Lebanon within its ‘historic and natural boundaries’. He served as Prime Minister for a short period in 1929–30 and as President from 1936–41. Eddé was known for his devotion to the idea of Lebanon as a homeland for the Christians and for his opposition to the incorporation of Lebanon in the Arab–Moslem world.

Contrary to the general assumption that he failed ‘... to grasp the full significance of the changes which had resulted from the establishment of Greater Lebanon, when the Moslems became for the first time major partners in the Lebanese State’, Eddé was, in fact, fully aware of these changes, more so than most of his contemporaries. As early as 1926, he foresaw the difficulties which would arise in a Greater Lebanon with its large Moslem population. He was convinced that the only way to secure the Christian character of Lebanon would be by discarding territories with a Moslem population which were attached to Lebanon in 1920.

In a memorandum presented to the Under-Secretary of State in the Quai d’Orsay while visiting France in 1932, Eddé suggested that the Mandatory Power should detach Tripoli and South Lebanon from the Lebanese State. The memorandum itself was not signed or dated, but there is no doubt as to its authorship, as a note attached to it, dated 29 August 1932, identifies the writer as ‘M. Eddé, député libanais’, who introduced himself on the recommendation of Henry de Jouvenel. Following is the full text of Eddé’s memorandum:

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Note sur le Liban

La France a le plus grand intérêt économique et politique à consolider sa situation, au moins, sur la côte syrienne. Son intérêt économique réside principalement dans le fait que la côte syrienne constitue le port méditerranéen et la voie d’accès la plus courte de la Mésopotamie, de la Perse et des Indes. Son intérêt politique consiste notamment dans le fait que la côte syrienne lui offre un observatoire unique pour surveiller et contrôler le cerveau et le cœur de l’Islam, qui se trouvent dans les pays arabes.

Pour obtenir cette consolidation il convient de maintenir et développer l’administration française à Alexandrette et aux Allauttes et de procéder sans retard à la réduction territoriale du Liban pour permettre à cet état d’avoir une majorité Chrétienne plus consistante.

A cet effet il y aurait lieu de faire de Tripoli, qui possède un aéroport et qui va être l’aboutissement du Pipe-Line, une ville libre également placée sous une administration directe française. Les habitants de cette ville auraient la nationalité libanaise en ce qui concerne les Chrétiens, et la nationalité syrienne en ce qui concerne les Musulmans. De cette façon, le Liban compterait 55,000 Musulmans en moins, ce qui constituerait un premier résultat appréciable.

Il y aurait bien également lieu de faire de toute la région du Liban-Sud, qui est composé dans sa très grande majorité de Musulmans chiites, un état autonome
Edde and the Territorial Integrity of Lebanon

233

ayant à sa tête un administrateur français comme à Alexandrette aux Allaites et à Tripoli.

Grâce à cette deuxième amputation, le Liban serait débarrassé de près de 140,000 Musulmans chiites et sunites et resterait avec une majorité chrétienne égale aux 80% environ de l'ensemble de sa population.

A l'heure actuelle, le Liban compte 405,000 Mahométans (sunites, chiites et druzes) contre 425,000 Chrétiens seulement. Cette majorité chrétienne est beaucoup trop faible pour défendre contre l'attraction exercée sur lui par la Syrie en vue de son unification avec elle. Et si l'on n'y prend pas garde, il ne se passera pas longtemps encore avant que le Liban ne réclame lui-même sa fusion avec sa voisine.

D'ailleurs les événements qui se sont passés à l'occasion de l'élection du Président de la République offrent à ce sujet un sérieux avertissement. Un Musulman a posé sa candidature à cette haute charge et devant les chances de succès qu'il avait, l'autorité mandataire est allée jusqu'à suspendre la Constitution.

En adoptant la formule qui vient d'être préconisée, aucun danger semblable ne saurait être à craindre à l'avenir, et le Liban devenu ainsi homogène serait à même de prendre sa véritable évolution et d'apporter à la France, dans tous les domaines, un concours des plus intéressants. Au moment où la France semble devoir jeter du lest en Syrie, il convient qu'elle se fortifie de plus en plus au Liban et le long de la côte.

From the memorandum, it is clear that two events which took place in 1932, the census and the Presidential elections, convinced Edde of the precarious position of the Christians in Lebanon. The census, which was held in January, clearly proved for the first time how small the Christian majority really was. The Christians' fear of Moslem domination was intensified as, in contradiction to the understanding that the Presidency should be held by a Christian, a Sunni Moslem, Muhammad al-Jirs, President of the Chamber, announced his candidacy for the elections due to be held in May of that year. Only the intervention of the French High Commissioner, who suspended the Constitution, prevented his possible election.

However, Edde had previously expressed similar views supporting territorial reduction of Lebanon. As early as April 1926, he agreed with the idea of Henry de Jouvenel, then High Commissioner, to attach Tripoli and Akkar to Syria. Amin Sa'id, who gives these details in his book adds that de Jouvenel sent two hand-written letters to the then Prime Minister of Syria, Damad Ahmad Nami, in which he expressed recognition of Syria's rights to a sea-port. He promised to attach the port of Tripoli, as well as the Akkar and Baalbeck regions to Syria so that the railway line from Damascus to Tripoli would not have to pass through Lebanese territory.

According to Sa'id several of the Maronite leaders, including the Patriarch Huwayyik and Emile Edde, knew of this plan, and Edde supported it and promised to try and convince his own people to accept it. He even signed one of the letters as proof to the Syrian Prime Minister of his intentions. Sa'id ends by saying that the two letters were not published and that they were kept by Damad Ahmad Nami.

Furthermore, in April 1930, only three weeks after the downfall of his government, which was mainly due to the opposition of the Moslems, Edde met Henry Ponsot, the French High Commissioner in Syria and Lebanon and expressed to him his fear that the granting of greater independence to Syria and
Lebanon could result in stronger support by the Moslems in Lebanon for union with Syria. Eddé explained that it was for this reason that he:

a toujours été partisan d’un Liban ramené à de justes frontières et contenant une vraie majorité de Chrétiens, car le Liban, foyer chrétien, pourrait vivre alors sous la protection de la France. Mais ce sont des vues qu’il n’y a aucun intérêt à reprendre aujourd’hui.  

Eddé’s unwillingness to come to terms with Arab nationalism was further demonstrated at a meeting held on 12 April 1930 at the request of Riad Sulh, one of the influential leaders of the Lebanese Moslems, who was known for his strong ties with the nationalist leaders of Syria and for his support of a united independent Syria which would include Lebanon.

According to Eddé, Sulh proposed that he would recognise him as the leader of the nationalists in Lebanon, and would arrange an enthusiastic welcome for him in Damascus, in return for Eddé’s co-operation with the nationalists in the struggle for independence from France. Eddé rejected this proposal, explaining that while Riad Sulh and his ‘colleagues in Damascus’ strove to drive France out of the Levant as quickly as possible, he himself regarded the Mandate as a guarantee for the existence of Lebanon and would prefer to prolong the presence of France in the Levant. Following is Eddé’s version of their conversation as he related it to Ponsot:

Vous voyez bien, dit Riad Sulh, que la France vous ‘plaque’ et qu’elle vous abandonnera quelque jour sans plus de manières quand ce sera de son intérêt. Ce n’est pas une histoire nouvelle. Tenez-vous essentiellement à vous retrouver en face de nous dans la situation des Arméniens et des Grecs vis-à-vis de la Turquie?

— J’ai bien compris, repondit M. Eddé. Vous nous faites entrevoir, si nous ne vous suivons pas aujourd’hui, les joies du massacre lorsque vous serez les maîtres. Merci, je m’en tiens à mon opinion. Vous venez de me faire la démonstration même des raisons qui nous attachent au régime du Mandat.  

Eddé was fully aware that the majority of the Christians in Lebanon, in particular the Maronites and their influential Patriarch, would firmly oppose any attempt to harm the territorial integrity of Greater Lebanon and would regard any such attempt as an act of treason. Moreover, at that time, Eddé was involved in a bitter struggle for the presidency against Bishara al-Khoury and was trying to gain maximum support from the Christians, particularly the Maronites. He therefore refrained from publicly expressing such views, but he explained them in private to French officials, hoping that the Mandatory Power would act accordingly. But as the struggle for the Presidency intensified and he realised that France was not prepared to take such drastic action, Eddé dropped his suggestion for territorial reduction of Lebanon.

After his election as President and following the conclusion of the Lebanese and Syrian Treaties with France, Eddé began to think it would be possible to convince the Moslems in Lebanon to acknowledge the existence of Greater Lebanon in return for their full participation in the regime. Such participation was subsequently established at the beginning of 1937 with the appointment of
Khayr al-Din al-Ahdab as Prime Minister, when a precedent was formed, whereby the President is a Maronite and the Prime Minister a Sunni.

At that time, Eddé even defended the territorial integrity of Lebanon against Syrian demands for the inclusion of Tripoli in Syria as compensation for the Syrian territories in Alexandretta ceded to Turkey by France.

However, it is still open to debate whether Eddé in fact changed his previously expressed views and acted from personal conviction, or whether he dropped his suggestion for territorial reduction of Lebanon as the only means of retaining a homogeneous Christian state, realising that there would be no way of implementing his ideas.

NOTES

2. In June 1932, Herriot formed a new government in France. On the 20th of that month, Henry Ponsot left Beirut for Paris to participate in discussions being held in the Quai d'Orsay on the formation of a new policy in the Levant. Eddé probably presented his memorandum sometime in July or August, while these discussions were being held.
3. Henry de Jouvenel was High Commissioner in Syria and Lebanon in 1925–26. During the following years, while serving as Senator, he continued to maintain close ties with many Lebanese, some of whom he helped when they visited France.
5. All the underlinings appear in the original text.
8. Ibid.