Contemporary Levant

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ycol20

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To cite this article: César Jaquier (12 Jul 2024): Rethinking post-Ottoman space through the ordinary: garages, hotels and cafés between Syria and Iraq, 1920s–1930s, Contemporary Levant, DOI: 10.1080/20581831.2024.2373661

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/20581831.2024.2373661

Published online: 12 Jul 2024.

CONTEMPORARY LEVANT
https://doi.org/10.1080/20581831.2024.2373661

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Rethinking post-Ottoman space through the ordinary: garages, hotels and cafés between Syria and Iraq, 1920s–1930s

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the reconfiguration of post-Ottoman space in the Mashriq during the interwar period. It does so by delving into ordinary places, actors and practices, particularly garages, hotels, petrol stations and cafés along the trans-desert routes connecting Syria and Iraq. By investigating the interactions between stationary workers and mobile individuals in these settings, it presents a decentred and bottom-up perspective on how space was experienced, contested and reshaped in the region. Drawing from a diverse range of sources, the article explores how ordinary actors sought to reclaim and shape space for their own purposes, highlighting their potential and actual roles in the reconfiguration of post-Ottoman space. On the one hand, it reveals that their economic activities were marginalised by the dominant agenda to restructure space for capitalist and imperialist interests through automotive technology. On the other, it demonstrates that ordinary actors played a substantial role in the formation of lived spaces spanning Syria and Iraq, as well as in reshaping the fabric, economy and meaning of places within these regions.

KEYWORDS

Mobility; spatiality; spaces; places; ordinary; politics; Mashriq; automobility

When anthropologist Françoise Métral and sociologist Jean Métral explored the ancient caravan city of al-Sukhna and other oasis towns of the Syrian Desert in the 1980s, Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* had already been published in French (Lefebvre 1974). Although they did not explicitly reference this book, their research investigated how the Syrian steppe had been restructured in terms of space, networks and economies over the preceding decades, examining the role of people's practices in this transformation (Métral, J. 1993, Métral, F. 1996, 1998). During the interwar period, the Syrian Desert became divided among Syria, Iraq, Transjordan and Saudi Arabia as the former Ottoman space was fragmented into separate state territories. Concurrently, the development of motorised transport across the desert, particularly between Damascus and Baghdad, redirected and intensified trans-desert movements (Figure 1). As Françoise and Jean Métral noted, the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the reorientation of trade routes initially relegated the Syrian oasis towns to a marginal position during the interwar years. However, over the subsequent decades, their inhabitants successfully adjusted their economic activities in relation to the nomadic tribes and traders of Aleppo, thereby creating a commercial space in north-eastern Syria. Assuredly, these two scholars fitted into a wider intellectual movement that developed from the 1970s onwards and redefined space not as a static 'container for social processes', but as a product of social practices, power dynamics and negotiation (Cresswell 2013).

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Figure 1. Map of the Baghdad–Damascus route in the mid-1920s, drawn up by the author.

This article delves deeper into the role played by ordinary actors in shaping post-Ottoman space in the Mashriq.[1] This perspective aims to challenge and refine the prevailing narratives regarding spatial restructuring in the interwar period, which primarily focus on state territorialisation and regional (or global) integration. It allows us to perceive space as multiple, contested and continuously shaped by diverse individuals and groups. To begin with, it is worth charting the development of social science thinking on space over recent decades to outline how the concept of mobility and the perspective of ordinariness can enhance our comprehension of post-Ottoman spatial reconfigurations. Henri Lefebvre's seminal work (1974) paved the way for the *spatial turn* in the social sciences, introducing the notion of space as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than a fixed entity (Warf and Arias 2008). Lefebvre's approach led researchers to explore how everyday practices, spatial representations, as well as planning and other state strategies, all contribute to shaping spaces. Building on this, Doreen Massey (1994, 2005) initiated a relational analysis of space, viewing space as the outcome of interrelations in constant flux. As Wenzlhuemer puts it, '[s]paces emerge from a sum of relations that are shaped by the network of connections that facilitates them' (2013, p. 22). This perspective prompted scholars in the 1990s and 2000s to investigate movements, networks and flows in order to understand spatial restructuring processes. The underlying assumption that mobility practices 'animate and co-produce spaces, places and landscapes' (Cresswell and Merriman 2011, p. 7) fuelled the development of the *mobility turn* (Cresswell 2006, Urry 2007).

The increased focus on mobilities since the 2000s has expanded the study of spaces beyond political geographies, revealing the coexistence and intertwining of multiple spaces influenced by people's movements (Massey 2005, Sheller 2017). Recognition of the ongoing transformation of space has similarly led scholars to reject methodological nationalism and explore other spatial frameworks (Middell and Naumann 2010, Conrad 2016). The historiography of the post-Ottoman Middle East has been particularly fruitful in this regard (Mills and Hammond 2016). Some scholars have studied the short- and long-term evolution of geographies that pre-existed nation-state territories, especially socio-environmental spaces like deserts (Fletcher 2015a, Lefebvre 2015, Capdepuy 2021). Others have investigated spaces shaped by cross-border movements (Schayegh 2011, Bontemps *et al.* 2015, Kozma 2017), demonstrating that political territories can coexist with different spaces

experienced and perceived by individuals and groups. For instance, Toufoul Abou-Hodeib (2015, 2020) argued that cross-border mobility sustained conceptions and practices of space in contradiction to bounded national space. Drawing on this bottom-up approach to the production of space, I have previously examined the factors that influenced the integration of the Mashriq in the interwar period. Alongside environmental conditions, automotive technology and local and imperial elites, many individuals and groups contributed to the shaping of lived spaces that extended across state territories and imperial domains. These included, for instance, local and foreign entrepreneurs engaged in cross-border transportation, Iraqi families participating in regional tourism, pan-Arab intellectuals who organised tours to imbue a sense of 'regionality' to the Syrian-Iraqi space, and journalists who propagated novel spatial representations (Jaquier 2022).

However, this process of integration did not take place uniformly across the region, nor did it capture all the spatial reconfigurations of the post-Ottoman period. For example, the city of Mosul, which had been strongly oriented towards Aleppo in the late Ottoman period, found itself relatively isolated from Syria during the interwar years, unlike Baghdad (Shields 2000, Tejel 2023). Here, as elsewhere, time–space compression went hand in hand with differential integration, disconnection and enclosure (Barak 2013, Huber 2013, Koyagi 2021). Another point to note is that the emphasis on mobility and connections runs the risk of confining the in-between space to a mere backdrop against which mobility takes place (Lambert and Merriman 2020) or giving it 'a character of placelessness' (Dusinberre and Wenzlhuemer 2016). After all, the narrative that the Syrian-Iraqi region became more closely knit during the interwar period stems largely from a focus on connections between major cities (Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, Basra). If we redirect our focus to the steppes, villages and small towns on the edge of the Syrian Desert and the Euphrates, what reconfigurations of space do we observe? Did the transformation of the transport system between Baghdad and Damascus bring about shifts in practices, economies and places in between? How did ordinary people engage with trans-desert movements in the outlying regions of Syria and Iraq, and how space was conceived and experienced there?

To address these questions, this article focuses on the commercial establishments, local actors and economic activities scattered along the roads and tracks linking Syria and Iraq. By 'establishments', I mean both businesses and the places in which they operated, including garages, hotels, petrol stations, roadside shops and cafés. In other words, the article investigates *ordinary* places, actors and practices. Their ordinariness can be understood both in terms of their non-dominant social, economic and spatial features – as opposed to the dominant places, actors and practices (i.e., the major Syrian and Iraqi cities, the political and economic urban elites, the prevailing practices of production and consumption) – and in terms of their association with everyday life. The focus on sites characterised by their 'spatial ordinariness' enables us to consider the post-war reconfiguration of space without adopting territorially bounded spaces as natural units of analysis (Schlaepfer and Tejel, this issue). More broadly, the perspective of ordinariness can offer a decentred and bottom-up account of how space was reshaped, reclaimed and contested in the Mashriq during the 1920s and 1930s.

This viewpoint presents an opportunity to examine together mobility and the 'moorings' of the transport system (Hannam *et al.* 2006), namely the material and infrastructural environment that enables mobility (Cresswell and Merriman 2011). The article investigates whether garages, hotels and shops, as venues for daily and routine activity, played a role in the movement of people across the desert and, consequently, in the reconfiguration of the Syrian-Iraqi space. In other words, it explores the interdependence between movement and immobility (Adey 2006, Cresswell 2010) within the transport system. I suggest that a thorough comprehension of this interplay is essential for grasping the broader process of spatial transformation in the Mashriq.

Moreover, this perspective fosters an actor-centred approach to space while acknowledging the structures within which individuals operate. Drawing upon the history of everyday life, which considers the role of individuals and groups in shaping their surroundings (Steege *et al.* 2008), it provides one way of understanding how people's everyday actions create and facilitate interactions that contribute to shaping spaces. This article examines how garage owners, café workers, drivers

and others engaged with space and coped with its transformation while navigating institutional and socio-economic constraints. It illustrates their capacity for adaptation and initiative in dealing with the changes of the post-Ottoman era. To expand on the aforementioned point, I argue that these various establishments should not be viewed as mere 'intermediaries' in the transport system, but rather as 'mediators', in Bruno Latour's sense (2005). As will be seen, the individuals employed in these establishments not only made things work; they also transformed mobility, places and space in the process.

Finally, in connection with the above, the article illuminates the conflicts and frictions associated with the reshaping of post-Ottoman space during the interwar period. Space, as a socially produced phenomenon, is intricately woven in power dynamics. As noted by Scott Kirsch (1995, p. 548), a specific space 'can be *conceived* (or designed) and produced through labour, technology, and institutional factors. But the meaning of that space and indeed the space itself is adapted or transformed as it is *perceived* and *lived* by social actors and groups'. As will be demonstrated, the transformation of the mobility system across the Syrian Desert was driven by a 'dominant institutional project' (Pred 1984) in the interwar years, specifically the development of a primarily interurban network along the shortest, yet least populated, route. This system, which relied on autonomous transport services, failed to involve the ordinary people living between the major cities of Syria and Iraq. While illustrating this, I will demonstrate that these people nevertheless asserted spatial claims, requested alternative connections and, above all, reshaped space in the Mashriq through their everyday practices.

Ordinary experiences present a challenge for historians to capture, primarily because the available sources tend to focus on dominant people (Faroqhi 2022) and highlight moments of change or exceptional events (Bartholeyns 2010). In an effort to reconstruct the contours of these experiences, this article relies on a diverse range of sources. In addition to institutional archives, encompassing records from the French and British Mandate administrations, US consulates, the French army and the League of Nations, it draws upon the Arabic press, photographs and private collections. Furthermore, I incorporate travel accounts in Arabic, French and English that were published in both book format and periodicals. Taken together, these sources provide valuable insights into the experiences, perspectives, aspirations and initiatives of ordinary people, while also shedding light on the challenges and limitations they faced.

I begin by investigating the impact of existing commercial establishments on the new transport system to evaluate Ottoman legacies and post-Ottoman continuities. Then, I focus on some transport entrepreneurs and their efforts to establish a regular, direct and independent transport service between Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad. I will analyse the spatial representations underpinning this transport scheme aimed at fostering interurban connections and trans-regional movements, even at the expense of commercial ventures in the outlying areas between Syria and Iraq. The article reveals that, while the direct route between Damascus and Baghdad ultimately prevailed, there were grassroots calls for alternative spatial practices. After emphasising the disputed nature of space production, in the final sections, I take a closer look at the actions of ordinary people. Through an examination of interactions between commercial establishments, economic actors and travellers on both primary and secondary routes, I demonstrate the substantial role of ordinary people in reshaping places and space in the post-Ottoman Mashriq.

The Ottoman infrastructure of staging posts

The development of motorised transport between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf was a continuation of pre-existing practices of trans-desert mobility. In the aftermath of the First World War, the growing availability of motorised vehicles in the Mashriq enabled people to undertake the journey by car between Damascus and Aleppo, on the one hand, and Mosul and Baghdad, on the other. This was achieved by building on existing caravan routes and an Ottoman-era infrastructure of rest houses, khans and markets.

In the early 1920s, the preferred route between Iraq and Syria was the caravan path via Mosul and Deir ez-Zor, on which some people began to make the journey by car too.[2] In 1922, Ra'uf Hattab & Co.'s garage in Mosul offered motor transportation to Deir ez-Zor and Aleppo.[3] Shortly afterwards, the Euphrates routes also opened to traffic. In Aleppo, entrepreneur Georges 'Aziza provided occasional passenger transport to Baghdad ('Uthman 2004), a service later taken over by his relative, Salim 'Aziza. This service ensured a 3–4-day journey with rest stops (*maḥaṭṭāt*) for food and water at hourly intervals ('Aziza 1924, p. 2). Two brothers also offered transport along the Euphrates route, with three overnight stops in summer and four in winter.[4] Each village, once a day's caravan journey away but now just a few hours by car, provided travellers and drivers with provisions and accommodation in khans. Deir ez-Zor and Ramadi also featured a hotel and a market.[5] This network of Ottoman commercial establishments along the caravan routes laid the foundation for the car transport system of the early 1920s between Syria and Iraq.

In the south-west of the Euphrates, the Syrian-Iraqi space was structured by a network of oasis towns and villages, such as Dumayr, Palmyra, al-Suhna, al-Tayba and al-Kubaysa. These settlements had long served as the backbone of a well-organised caravan trade network between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, even though their significance as trading centres fluctuated in the nineteenth century due to economic trends and specific events (Phelps Grant 1937, Lewis 2000, Pétriat 2019). The rise of motorised transport in the 1920s posed a new challenge to their role in trans-desert mobility. From 1922, the Damascus caravan merchant Mohammad al-Bassam used cars to smuggle gold from Syria and Iraq across the desert. Initially, he followed the longer route, via Palmyra, which was used by fast caravans in the late nineteenth century (Carruthers 1918, p. 17). Later, he discovered a more direct route that cut across the desert in a straight line between Ramadi and Dumayr, near Damascus (McCallum 1925, p. 50).[6] Al-Bassam's success piqued the interest of local and foreign entrepreneurs hoping to establish a regular service between Damascus and Baghdad. The Nairn brothers from New Zealand and the Kettaneh brothers from Lebanon pursued distinct routes and strategies that would redefine the importance of Ottoman commercial establishments in facilitating movement across the region.

Francis and Alfred Kettaneh opted for the northern route: starting from Damascus, their cars headed northeast through several villages to arrive at Palmyra, before crossing the desert to reach the oasis of Kubaysa near the Euphrates. The purpose was to capitalise on the security and supply opportunities offered by these villages. Later, the company – now reorganised under the name of Beyrouth–Bagdad–Téhéran Automobiles (BBTA) – planned to enhance passenger comfort by constructing hotels along the route.[7] In 1925, the BBTA company built a luxury hotel near Palmyra's historic ruins. Initially boasting 12 rooms, the hotel expanded and changed ownership in the latter half of the 1920s. This shift took place after the 1926 merger of the BBTA with the company established by the Nairn brothers, which gradually phased out the Palmyra route, as detailed below. The hotel's management passed to the Frenchwoman Marga d'Andurain, who renamed it the Zenobia Hotel, offering 30 beds by 1932 (Monmarché 1932, p. 326, d'Andurain 1947, p. 28, 244).[8] Additionally, the BBTA company established a smaller hotel in Kubaysa about twenty kilometres from Hit. This hotel, managed by a Syrian, featured nine rooms and proved popular among passing travellers until heavy rains damaged it in 1926 (Cravath 1925, p. 145).[9] The company also organised its transport service by storing fuel in Palmyra, Kubaysa and Hit.[10]

The early development of automobile transport between Syria and Iraq reveals historical legacies, with al-Bassam showing continuity in the organisation of transport (Fletcher 2015a, Pétriat 2021). Additionally, the car transport system expanded from an existing network of commercial establishments. The Kettaneh brothers leveraged the existing mobility system while developing their own hotels and depots to achieve greater autonomy. Despite this pursuit of self-reliance, their transportation scheme generated benefits for the people living along the route, particularly in Palmyra and Kubaysa. This was to change with the development of a more direct route between Baghdad and Damascus.

The drive for non-stop transport services

Norman and Gerald Nairn, for their part, chose the shortest route across the desert. Their service targeted affluent clients and integrated into a trans-regional transport system, primarily serving travellers journeying between Great Britain and Iraq.[11] In line with French and British aspirations for a 'new land route to the East' (McCallum 1925), the Nairn Transport Company sought to improve interurban routes and facilitate connections between Europe, the Middle Eastern Mandates and the French and British colonies in South Asia. The direct route across the Syrian Desert best met this objective and was likely to generate the most revenue (Jaquier 2022). To operate a transport service over a 700-kilometer stretch of desert and steppe terrain, the company's vehicles were loaded with ample water, food and fuel reserves, which ensured self-sufficiency throughout the journey. Passengers were picked up from their hotels in Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad and relied entirely on the company for supplies and camping gear en route (Keeling 1924, p. 151).[12] In this way, the Nairns remained independent of external players and businesses along the way. Later, however, their commitment to passenger comfort, coupled with the security concerns of the British-Iraqi authorities, spurred a territorial development venture in the heart of the desert.

Until the early twentieth century, the site known as Rutbah Wells (*al-ruṭba*, 'the humid' in Arabic), consisted of a group of wells where nomads and their herds gathered seasonally.[13] Following the First World War, the Royal Air Force adopted Rutbah as an airfield and refuelling station for flights between Cairo and Baghdad (Phelps Grant 1937). The British entrusted Shaykh Fahd Ibn Hadhdhal to oversee nomadic tribes and secure the Baghdad–Damascus route from Rutbah Wells (Fletcher 2015b, Freeman 2022). The Iraqi government then shifted strategy and built a fortified post at Rutbah in 1926, which included a police station responsible for monitoring the borderlands and policing the nomadic tribes.[14] The fort of Rutbah quickly became a key stopover for transport companies on the Baghdad–Damascus route. The Nairns even proposed the idea of a hotel within the fort. The following year, the Iraqi government enlarged the building and fitted out part of it with a restaurant and a sixteen-room hotel. As designed by the British-Iraqi authorities, Rutbah Fort served the dual purpose of monitoring the Syrian-Iraqi border and facilitating cross-border traffic (Jackson 2016).

In April 1928, the Iraqi government leased a portion of the building to the Nairn Transport Company for three years to manage the desert hotel.[15] This decision allowed the Nairns to assume control of all operations between Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad, following an 'enclave' business model similar to Thomas Cook & Co.'s approach in nineteenth-century Egypt – that is, a model in which 'a dominant agent manages tourists' movement, their gaze at sights, and their consumption of services' (Hazbun 2007, p. 13). The Nairn Transport Company imposed high prices, rendering the hotel exclusively accessible to affluent travellers, leaving others to sleep in their cars or briefly rest in Rutbah (Al-Husayni 1932, p. 1).[16] Subsequently, the company introduced larger buses with reclining seats, completing its ambition to provide a non-stop transport service.[17] This strategy left little room for commercial relations between passengers and local people during the journey. The space between the departure and arrival points was merely a surface to be crossed. This approach reflected a way of viewing and organising space in which automotive technology, capitalism and imperialism combined to favour major interurban axes and trans-regional connections. Over time, the popularity of the route through Rutbah overshadowed the Palmyra route.[18] The main transport system linking Damascus and Baghdad thus favoured speed, even if it meant crossing near-desert areas.

Alternative spatial claims

The concentration of transport activities on the Baghdad–Rutbah–Damascus route did not enjoy unanimous agreement. As historical sources reveal, the rationale of 'least effort' (Cresswell 2013), which prioritised the most cost-effective route to link these cities, coexisted with different spatial imaginings and other ways of valuing movement. Firstly, it is worth noting that in the nineteenth

century, various caravan traders preferred the longer route along the Euphrates to the more direct routes already available to them between Baghdad and Damascus. This detour was not seen as a waste of time and money, but rather as an opportunity to benefit from 'intermediate markets' such as those of Deir ez-Zor (Pétriat 2021, p. 278). This logic did not disappear with the development of motorised transport. In 1929, for example, the British consul in Aleppo pointed to the booming demography and economy of Deir ez-Zor and estimated that the Deir ez-Zor–Mosul route would play a key role in the future, as it tapped into 'rich or potentially rich country'.[19] Indeed, the Syrian Jazira was undergoing significant development during that period (Abrahamyan 2024). In the same vein, the economic importance of the built-up areas bordering the Syrian Desert and the Euphrates was central to drivers' requests in the 1930s.

On 24 May 1935, the Syrian daily *al-Sha'b* reported that several drivers employed by companies operating between Damascus and Baghdad had called for traffic to be diverted from the Rutbah route to the longer route via Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor. They argued that transport companies would benefit from additional business opportunities thanks to the many villages lining this northern route, adding that this would also spare drivers and passengers from desert sandstorms (Anon 1935, p. 3). The issue was taken up a month later in another nationalist-leaning newspaper (Méouchy 2002) by Shukri Jabbur, a journalist who was particularly concerned with the idea of towns and villages maintaining close ties with each other (Jabbur 1935a, pp. 897–902). On 26 June 1935, Jabbur noted in *al-Qabas* that car owners and drivers had just informed the authorities of their requests for trans-desert traffic to be diverted northwards. As he explained, the route through Deir ez-Zor presented the advantage of passing through many villages and two densely populated towns. From Damascus, it ran through al-Qutayfa, Jayrud, al-Nasriyya and al-Qaryatayn to Palmyra; it then continued to al-Sukhna, al-Tayba and Deir ez-Zor; and from there followed the Euphrates route to al-Mayadin, Abu Kamal, Anah, Hit and Ramadi, where it joined the 'desert route' (*ṭarīq al-ṣaḥrā*). Given that the population of these towns and villages exceeded 4,000, he argued that rerouting traffic would enhance the local economies of inland Syria (Jabbur 1935b).

Government officials on both sides of the desert turned a deaf ear to these requests, being by this time even more determined to pursue the development of the direct route via Rutbah. In 1933, against a backdrop of political and economic crisis in the French Mandate states, High Commissioner De Martel initiated a development programme aimed at reducing unemployment (Schad 2005). The programme focused on upgrading of the Baghdad–Damascus motorway, expanding the port of Beirut, extending the railway line into northern Syria, and implementing irrigation projects. Work began in mid-1934 on the Syrian segments of the Baghdad–Damascus route and by May 1935, nearly a third of the project had been completed. In September 1935, the Iraqi government decided to construct a paved road westward from Ramadi, commissioning the Public Works Department and a private contractor for the task. Although entrepreneurs expressed interest in building new rest houses and petrol stations along that road,[20] the primary objective of the authorities was to speed up travel between the Syrian and Iraqi capitals. By the end of 1936, the journey could be completed in just sixteen hours by car.[21]

These government investments sparked resentment. During the 1930s, the population and local authorities of the small town of Anah increasingly felt that their district was being neglected by the government, as evidenced by the poor condition of the road leading from Ramadi to the Syrian border via Anah.[22] The Iraqi Ministry of Communications and Works responded to these complaints by stating that the Anah road was 'unessential' given its level of traffic. Consequently, the Department of Public Works was advised to prioritise its investments on 'essential roads'.[23] As for the French initiative, it faced criticism for primarily strengthening connections between Syrian cities and foreign markets.[24] In December 1934, a petition addressed to the French authorities acknowledged the need to pursue Syria's economic recovery but expressed regret that De Martel's programme had fallen short by focusing solely on Syria's connections with the outside world.[25]

As these episodes from the 1930s suggest, questions arose regarding how to pursue the infrastructural and socio-economic integration of the Mashriq. For the ordinary petitioners, whose

demands were echoed in nationalist discourse, the strengthening of cross-border interurban connections should not sideline the towns, villages and commercial establishments situated outside the Baghdad–Damascus axis. By advocating alternative spatial practices, these individuals claimed a stake in the restructuring of post-Ottoman space. They proposed different ways of connecting places, challenging the dominant paradigm that viewed automobiles as tools for shaping a space suited to the imperialist and capitalist interests of the urban elites. However, these grassroots claims went unheeded, highlighting the power dynamics in play. In the following two sections, I shift the focus from claims to practices to demonstrate how the day-to-day activities of ordinary actors nonetheless produced spaces and places through their engagements with people on the move.

Off the beaten track

On the back roads of Syria and Iraq, as well as on the secondary routes linking the two countries, there was sporadic yet not negligible motorised traffic. As a British consul observed in 1927, many Ford cars drove between Aleppo and Baghdad along the Euphrates, most of them 'in the hands of small owners'.[26] Travellers embarking on these routes typically relied on self-employed taxi drivers and arranged their journeys in different ways to those using the Rutbah route. An examination of these practices reveals a greater reliance on garages, rest houses and other commercial establishments along the way.

De Boucheman's study (1937) on al-Sukhna reveals that, by the early 1930s, three 'garages' had emerged in the village, replacing the former khans while preserving their architectural structure. These establishments offered accommodation, food and petrol and served as trading hubs between drivers and garage owners. De Boucheman highlights key figures associated with these garages, including Fodda bent Mezyed and Sagra bent Barakat (as per his spelling). He observes that most of the garages in the Syrian steppe were managed by women, possibility due to their customary roles in domestic affairs. It could also be argued that these women had managed to make a place for themselves in the public sphere (Sawalha 2014). The garage owners of al-Sukhna serve as witnesses to how ordinary actors, and perhaps exceptionally ordinary ones in this case,[27] adapted to ongoing socio-economic changes, at least in the interwar years. The transformation of khans into garages was a recurring trend in the region (Casey 1928, 'Azzam 1939, Weulersse 1946). Although these establishments often lacked mechanical workshops, they offered accommodation – as seen in Abu Kemal, where two garages offered 'rooms of dubious cleanliness' (Monmarché 1932, p. 2) – and occasionally transport services.

Travel accounts highlight the significance of these garages for motorists and travellers navigating the circuitous routes between Syria and Iraq. In December 1928, Tawfiq Jana, owner of *al-Sha'b*, embarked on a trip from Syria to Iraq via Deir ez-Zor. The account he published in his newspaper sheds light on the practical aspects of a journey that entailed numerous interactions. Departing from Deir ez-Zor, he completed his journey to Baghdad in three stages, with each leg involving a visit to a garage in search of a shared taxi to continue on his way. His route took him to Abu Kamal for the initial night, then onwards to Anah, where the sole lodging option was a garage offering a few beds. However, he was graciously invited by a local police officer to spend the night. Continuing his journey the next day, he reached Ramadi, where he found comfortable accommodation for the third night. As no cars were departing for Baghdad the following morning, he devoted another day to exploring the market of Ramadi. Success came on the subsequent day: after a two-hour wait at a garage, he found a car that carried him to Baghdad (Jana 1928, p. 2).

Another serial published in *al-Sha'b* in May 1931 offers additional insights into the workings of this shared passenger transport system. Penned under the pseudonym of Farzat, the author recounted his travels across Mesopotamia in various shared taxis. In Damascus, he visited a garage where a broker (*simsār*) showed him a car bound for Deir ez-Zor. After a considerable wait, the car departed once all the seats were occupied. Farzat journeyed to Deir ez-Zor in this

manner, pausing along the way to explore Palmyra with his travelling companions. Afterwards, he sought out another car to take him to the Syrian villages situated along the Euphrates, farther downstream. Upon returning to Deir ez-Zor, his initial plan was to continue his journey north to al-Hasakah using the same mode of transportation. However, he eventually decided to rent a car from a garage and search for fellow travellers who were willing to split the rental cost (Farzat 1931).

The broker's presence recurs in other stories, often evoking memories of uncomfortable rides in overcrowded collective taxis. In August 1932, the *al-Qabas* correspondent in al-Zabadani narrated his trip from Damascus to the Syrian summer resort. As he stood by a garage, a broker approached him, shouting that one last passenger was needed to fill a car about to leave for al-Zabadani. The broker quickly ushered him in, sold him a ticket and hurried off to 'hunt for other birds'. The journalist then discovered he would travel in a crowded car, wedged 'between two bags of wheat' (Anon 1931, p. 1). Owner-drivers were also at times depicted as greedy entrepreneurs, intent on maximising their car's capacity. In his memoirs, Syrian teacher and preacher 'Ali al-Tantawi recounted his journey from Damascus to Deir ez-Zor in 1939. He travelled in a car so cluttered with bags, baskets and luggage that there was almost no room left for the passengers (Al-Tantawi 1960, pp. 141–142, 1986, p. 153). In these conditions, those who could afford it sometimes opted to hire a car and look for passengers themselves, like Farzat mentioned above. This is how the French writer Maurice Honoré travelled through Syria and Iraq in the late 1920s, sharing the journey between Aleppo and Mosul with an Iraqi trader (Honoré 1929, p. 70).

Other ordinary places and actors proved invaluable to travellers using the back roads of Syria and Iraq. In Palmyra, travellers were advised to dine at Syrian restaurants near the customs checkpoint (Nisbet 1928, p. 43). Within the same town, drivers found accommodation at the Balkis Hotel, a modest establishment with only communal dormitories (Monmarché 1932, p. 326). In al-Qaryatayn, which eventually gained renown as 'a halting-place for desert travellers between Damascus and Palmyra',[28] some travellers recounted their experiences of obtaining water for their car radiators from local residents (Casey 1928, pp. 51–52). Over time, smaller settlements in Iraq began stocking petrol, which was readily available in places like Anah, Fallujah, Haditha, Hit and Ramadi by 1935.[29] Ramadi also witnessed the emergence of new hotels during the interwar period, affording travellers accommodation or a brief respite to savour a tea break before resuming their journey (Semach 1930, p. 9, Dangoor and Darwish 1936, p. 677).

These commercial establishments, dispersed across Syria and Iraq, provided alternatives to the direct Baghdad–Damascus route, nurturing relationships between travellers and a diverse range of economic actors who reaped the benefits of heightened regional movement. While the logistical challenges of venturing off the well-trodden path were undeniable, travel remained feasible, and the daily practices of ordinary actors contributed to this mobility. Through their dynamic interactions with people on the move, these individuals actively helped to shape lived spaces spanning Syria and Iraq.

Rutbah, the daily reshaping of a place

Even along the direct trans-desert route, ordinary actors partook in activities that exerted an influence on mobility, place and space. As discussed earlier, Rutbah Wells consisted of a blend of human and non-human elements before the twentieth century. In the 1920s, the merging of this historical legacy with new technological and political factors made Rutbah a suitable location for a fort and hotel, establishing it as a hub of 'air, motor and camel routes'.[30] Nevertheless, these elements alone do not fully explain the process of place-making that occurred at Rutbah Wells during the interwar period. Although Rutbah Fort originated from top-down initiatives to promote and control trans-desert mobility, these institutional efforts coexisted with grassroots, spontaneous initiatives (Bærenholdt and Granås 2008). Places are moulded by mobility and their interactions with other places. More precisely, they are shaped by 'the practices of people within and across them' (SLAPE *et al.* 2023, p. 571). This section delves into the emerging economic activities

of Rutbah's cafés and shops, revealing how diverse ordinary actors reshaped the 'physical landscape' and the meaning of Rutbah, two constitutive elements of place (Cresswell 2013, 2014). It demonstrates that their activities transformed Rutbah into a village with distinct materiality, economy and meaning, deviating from the initial state institutional project.

In his book about Baghdad during the 1920s, Iraqi historian 'Abbas Baghdadi (1998, p. 335) mentioned a small café in Rutbah where travellers could find bread, eggs, tea and a few beds. This is corroborated by numerous travel accounts. In 1931, Egyptian journalist and scholar ʿAbd al-Wahhab ʿAzzam journeyed through Rutbah with colleagues. As he recounted in his travelogue, *Rihlat*, the group paused in Rutbah to rest, and a young boy named 'Abd al-Karim came to offer them a cup of tea. They followed him outside the fort to a tent, where the boy made a living by serving tea to passing travellers. ʿAzzam and his colleagues enjoyed the teahouse before resuming their journey to Baghdad. 'Azzam encountered 'Abd al-Karim again at the same spot on subsequent trips. By then, a permanent building had replaced the original tent (ʿAzzam 1939, p. 37).

Some travellers mentioned the burgeoning business activity around Rutbah with disdain. For instance, the Egyptian teacher Muhammad Thabit (1934, pp. 288–289) depicted a luxury hotel surrounded by dingy shops and cafés, as well as the tents of nomadic groups nearby. On the other hand, others appreciated Rutbah's teahouses as social gathering places. During a journey from Lebanon to Iraq in December 1933, the Lebanese Shiite cleric Muhsin Al-Amin (2001, p. 82) halted in Rutbah. He observed that the cafés, which were now surrounded by newly planted trees, were attracting people from Palmyra, Ramadi and other towns bordering the Syrian-Iraqi desert. He himself enjoyed a tea prepared on open fire and performed his prayer in one of the teahouses. Upon his return trip in 1934, Muhsin al-Amin once again visited Rutbah and enjoyed a cup of tea.

Not only could travellers find drinks and snacks in the cafés, but they would also receive garage assistance in case of need.[31] These economic activities reveal a profound transformation of Rutbah during the interwar period, driven both by increased mobility and the activity of less mobile (or immobile) individuals. The growing number of motorists and passengers on the trans-desert route created an incentive for ordinary people to settle in Rutbah. In turn, these economic players encouraged trans-desert mobility by providing services to different socio-economic classes of travellers than those served by the Rutbah hotel, emphasising the co-constitution of mobility and place. What is more, their activities reshaped the infrastructural fabric and economy of Rutbah, as well as the meanings that people attached to this place.

The architecture also reflected this transformation. During the interwar years, Rutbah evolved from a mere water point into a small village. Early 1930s photographs already show scattered tents and structures around the fort, lining the track from Damascus to Baghdad (Figure 2). Around this time, Lebanese writer Amin al-Rihani travelled through Rutbah on his way to Iraq. In his travelogue *Qalb al-'Iraq*, published in 1935, he noted that: 'The desert has undergone urbanisation [*muddinat al-bādiya*]' (Al-Rihani 1935, p. 67). Several travellers passing through Rutbah in those years reported makeshift structures crafted from petrol cans filled with sand (Le Fèvre 1933, p. 11, Stark 1951, p. 308). Two other photographs provide compelling evidence of the gradual expansion of built-up areas during the 1930s. The first image (Figure 3), dating back to approximately 1932, depicts two rows of modest buildings flanking the road from Damascus. The second image (Figure 4), dated 1941, reveals the addition of a third row of constructions. Additional sources corroborate the existence of a village in Rutbah by the late 1930s (Byron 1937, p. 36, Stark 1945, p. 136).[32] In October 1938, *The Iraq Times* also reported the opening of a school for the children of nomadic tribes.[33]

Wartime events shed light on Rutbah's urban development. After the nationalist coup of 1 April 1941, which installed Rashid Ali al-Gaylani as Prime Minister of Iraq, tensions escalated between the British and Iraqis, as the former sought to secure a passage for their troops through Iraqi territory. This situation culminated in several days of conflict in May 1941 (Tripp 2007). On 2 May, Iraqi

Figure 2. Trackside tents and early structures, late 1920s/early 1930s. American Colony of Jerusalem Photo Department. G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division (LC-M33- 4505).

police attacked road workers at Rutbah and took up position in the fort. In response, British forces bombarded Rutbah on 9 May, and a detachment of the Transjordan Arab Legion captured the fort.[34] Subsequently, in April 1942, the British military conducted reconnaissance in Rutbah to assess the potential for building petrol and supply depots in anticipation of further hostilities. These surveys provide valuable insights into Rutbah's state of development in the early 1940s.

Figure 3. The first constructions around Rutbah Fort, circa 1932. Unattributed postcard. © Mary Evans / Pharcide (No. 11121223).

Figure 4. The fort at Rutbah and surrounding dwellings, 1941. Photograph by H. Hensser. © Crown Copyright, Imperial War Museum (CM 822).

Reports estimated Rutbah's population at a few hundred, not counting dozens of workers and engineers employed on the construction of a road between Haifa and Baghdad. They highlighted the presence of wells, an airfield and a petrol station operated by the Rafidain Oil Company. Moreover, the village now boasted a cemetery and a 'considerable bazaar' located to the west of the fort. Remarkably, this marketplace consisted of numerous shops housed within the blockhouses built in rows on either side of the road.[35] A French intelligence report offers insight into the commercial activities that took place in Rutbah. Syrian tribes frequented the village to buy Iraqi dates, which were transported there in large quantities by lorries.[36] Nomads and merchants also traded flour and likely truffles (*kam'a*) in Rutbah.[37] The village witnessed the development of its first commercial district along the motorway, spurred on by the interactions among numerous players, whether they were based in Rutbah, passing through, or affiliated with nomadic groups.

Originally conceived as a checkpoint and transportation hub to facilitate swift connections between Damascus and Baghdad, Rutbah underwent a substantial transformation during the interwar period. Its evolution was shaped not only by the environment, politics, mobile technologies and the movement of people and goods, but also by the initiatives of ordinary actors on-site. Although the backgrounds of these individuals remain somewhat elusive, historical sources shed light on their business activities and, in turn, reveal how Rutbah developed in terms of infrastructure, economy and significance. In less than two decades, Rutbah experienced distinct urbanisation, evolving into a village complete with cafés, shops and warehouses – a transformation that continued throughout the twentieth century. Travel accounts offer valuable glimpses into the new perceptions and memories associated with Rutbah.

Conclusion

In the early 1940s, the post-Ottoman space had been fragmented into several nation-state territories, yet it was also more interconnected than ever before. Over the span of two decades, technological advancements, infrastructural developments, entrepreneurial initiatives, mobility practices and evolving spatial perceptions had shaped a regional space spanning the Syrian Desert. This observation, derived from an analysis that prioritises cross-border and trans-imperial dynamics, offers a perspective on post-Ottoman spatial reconfigurations that moves away from state-centric views. Nevertheless, it underscores the connections between specific places and groups only. This article has aimed to redirect attention to peripheral places, ordinary actors and everyday practices along the pathways linking Syria and Iraq, thereby offering fresh insights into how the spatial configuration of the Mashriq evolved during the interwar period.

The reconfiguration of post-Ottoman space proved to be a contentious process. Through an examination of roadside establishments and their evolving significance for mobility between Syria and Iraq, this article has revealed the underlying dynamics of the main transport system, designed to link Damascus and Baghdad (and beyond) via the shortest, albeit least populated, route. This transport scheme, which marginalised the towns and villages situated in between, underpinned a dominant project aimed at shaping a space tailored to the imperialist and capitalist interests of urban elites, along with certain transport entrepreneurs. However, this development was far from spontaneous and encountered resistance from ordinary people, including drivers seeking alternative connections. Essentially, the transformation of post-Ottoman space was deeply entwined in power dynamics, resulting from planning, decisions and negotiations among unequal actors, rather than simply being a natural consequence of technological advances or globalisation.

Furthermore, the practices of ordinary people extended beyond mere reactions to top-down projects. Above all, these individuals arranged their daily lives and surroundings while navigating socio-economic constraints and changes. In other words, they strove to cope with the transformation of the spatial and mobility landscapes, often preserving former practices while adapting them to changing circumstances. An examination of commercial activities along secondary roads and tracks has revealed a variety of common actors who adjusted to and profited from the burgeoning mobility networks in the 1920s and 1930s. Their activities facilitated alternative modes of mobility between Syria and Iraq, wherein travellers often journeyed not under the best conditions but interacted with many people along the way.

The perspective of ordinariness challenges the dominant narratives about spatial reconfiguration by emphasising processes of grassroots spatial restructuring or regionalisation 'from below'. While ordinary actors displayed elements of both resistance and accommodation, they also played an active role. Over time, their daily practices helped to shape spaces of mobility, trade and representation across the outlying areas between Syria and Iraq. Their activities transformed the infrastructure of places such as Rutbah and imbued them with new layers of meaning. These people emerged as place-makers in their own right. The metamorphosis of Rutbah is indicative of the broader process of spatial reconfiguration that unfolded in the post-Ottoman Mashriq, characterised by multi-sited, bottom-up and everyday dynamics.

Notes

1. I use the term 'Mashriq' to refer to the post-Ottoman lands comprising Mandate Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan. Some authors designate this region as the 'Levant' (Issa and Wigen 2020). Although common today, the term historically referred to the eastern Mediterranean region without including Mesopotamia (or Iraq) (Schwara 2003).
2. British National Archives, Kew [hereinafter: TNA], FO 371/7851, Bourdillon, Secretary to the High Commissioner for Iraq, to Department of Overseas Trade, Baghdad, 26 October 1922.
3. 'Baghdad to London: Route via Aleppo and Beirut', *The Baghdad Times*, 11 November 1922, p. 4. https://gpa.eastview.com/crl/mena/

4. TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, Secretariat of the High Commissioner for Iraq to Department of Overseas Trade, Baghdad, 7 February 1923.
5. TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, Note on the route Baghdad to London via Aleppo and Beirut, Major Greenhouse, December 1922; TNA FO 371/9013, Report on a journey from Baghdad to Aleppo, Ellis Price, 10 July 1923; Thomas Cook Archives [hereinafter: TCA], *The Traveller's Handbook for Palestine and Syria*, 1924, p. 420–422.
6. TNA, FO 371/9013, 'Report on Reconnaissance by Motor Car from Beyrout via Damascus to Bagdad' by McCallum, Beirut, 1 May 1923.
7. FO 684/1/24/14, Acting British Consul Vaughan-Russel to the Department of Overseas Trade, Damascus, 15 December 1924.
8. FO 684/1/24/14, Decree No 230, Governor of the State of Damascus, 20 September 1924; Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de La Courneuve [hereinafter : CADC], 48CPCOM43, 'Rapport sur la question des transports vers l'Irak et la Perse par la route transcontinentale', 4 February 1926.
9. CADC, 48CPCOM43, Account of a journey between Tehran and Beirut by Mr Dayer, 27 March 1926.
10. The National Archives and Records Administration [hereinafter: NARA], Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Persia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 32, File 891.797, US Consul Fuller to the Department of State, Tehran, 25 January 1925.
11. NARA, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 16, File 890d.79790g, Nairn Transport Company circular letter, 1925.
12. TNA, FO 684/7, Nairn Transport Company to British consulate at Damascus, 20 June 1934.
13. TNA, FO 684/1/23/1, annex on 'Natural Features' to letter from Consul Palmer to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Damascus, 24 April 1925.
14. TNA, AIR 23/87, telegram from the High Commissioner for Iraq to the Commissioner for Palestine, Baghdad, 21 September 1925.
15. TNA, CO 732/39/11, agreement dated 2 April 1928 between Abd al-Muhsin al-Shalash, Iraqi Minister of Communications and Works, and the Nairn Transport Company; Middle East Centre Archive, Oxford [hereinafter: MECA], Nairn Transport Company Collection, Document No. 95: 'Nairn transport employees, as remembered by Norman and recounted to Muriel one day'.
16. To give just one of many examples.
17. TNA, CO 732/65/5, Memorandum by British Vice-Consul Todd, Damascus, 29 July 1934.
18. TNA, FO 424/632, British Consul Satow to Sir Austen Chamberlain, Beirut, 11 January 1928. See also: Government of Iraq, 1929. *Maps of Iraq with Notes for Visitors*. Baghdad: Government of Iraq, p. 11.
19. TNA, FO 371/14553, British consul to Foreign Affairs, Aleppo, 18 December 1929.
20. See the applications submitted by Lebanese engineer Richard Abd al-Nour to the French and British authorities: CADN, 1SL/1/V/1025, Notes by Richard Abd al-Nour (in French and Arabic), Baghdad, 9 July 1934; French High Commission's Department for the Control of Concessionary Companies, Note, 7 August 1934.
21. CADC, 50CPCOM580, French High Commissioner to the French Foreign Ministry, Beirut, 26 January 1934; TNA, FO 371/18923, Memo on 'The Baghdad Damascus Desert Route' by British consulate in Baghdad, 12 December 1935; CADN, 1SL/1/V/716, French memo on 'Réfection et aménagements des routes', 15 July 1938.
22. TNA, FO 624/29/639, Political Advisor to British Ambassador, Baghdad, 2 June 1942, along with 'tour notes'.
23. TNA, FO 624/29/639, Ministry of Communications and Works to British Embassy, Baghdad, 11 June 1942.
24. TNA, FO 684/7/34/1, Quarterly Report for January 1st to March 31, 1934, British Consulate, Damascus, 3 April 1934.
25. League of Nations Archives, R4099-6A-1469-11110, manifesto of the Economic Commission, 17 November 1934, in petition by R. Mélouhi and F. Baroudi to the French authorities, 9 December 1934.
26. TNA, CO 732/23/2, British Consul Hough to Department of Overseas Trade, Aleppo, 15 March 1927.
27. For, as Suraiya Faroqhi (2022, p. 14) and other historians have noted, 'information on women is scarce because the sources relegate people who are not adult males to the background of the historical scene'.
28. TCA, Thomas Cook & Son, 1929. *Cook's Traveller's Handbook for Palestine and Syria*. London: Simpkin Marshall, p. 348.
29. British Library, Indian Office Records, IOR/L/MIL/17/15/47, Military Report on Iraq – Volume II (Routes), British Air Ministry, November 1936, p. 15–17.
30. NARA, Confidential Files 1931, Consular Posts Beirut, Vol. 473, Memorandum on journey from Cairo to Teheran by Charles Hart, U.S. Legation, Teheran, February 1931.
31. TNA, FO 684/7/34/14, 'The Modern Caravan: Wheels Across The Desert', press clipping from *The Times* of 2 January 1934.
32. MECA, Mance Box D 2/2, 'Revised map of aerodrome – Rutbah', with a notice from Muhammad Ali Jawad, Royal Iraq Air Force, 1 August 1937.
33. NARA, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Asia, 1910–1929, microfilm roll 18, File 890G.00, press review, 1–15 October 1938.
34. TNA, AIR 23/5936 and FO 371/27078. See also British Pathé's propaganda film about the capture of Rutbah: British Pathé, 'The war in Iraq' (1941) https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/66324/ (accessed 29 June 2023).

35. TNA, WO 201/1292, Rutbah Recce Report by Lieut.-Col. Jones, 13 April 1942; Camouflage Recce Report by Brig. Gen. Staff, Tenth Army, 27 April 1942.
36. Service historique de la Défense, Vincennes [hereinafter: SHD], 4 H 455/4, Weekly Information Bulletin No. 46, 28 November to 4 December 1937, Desert Light Co., Palmyra, p. 12.
37. SHD, 4H455/8, Weekly Information Bulletin No. 46, Desert Light Co., Palmyra, 15 December 1940, p. 5.

Acknowledgments

I express my gratitude to Aline Schlaepfer and Jordi Tejel for initiating the conference and publication project on 'Ordinary Ottomans', and for providing valuable comments and feedback throughout the entire process. Additionally, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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César Jaquier completed his PhD in history at the Université Lumière Lyon 2 (France) and the University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland) in September 2022. He is currently involved in a new research project at the latter institution. His primary areas of research cover mobility, spatial processes and border formation in the Mashriq during the interwar period, with a keen interest in imperial, economic and environmental history. His doctoral thesis explored the development of the Baghdad–Damascus route in the 1920s and 1930s, investigating the interplay between mobility and space in the context of state territorialisation. Before obtaining his PhD, César Jaquier pursued studies in history, social sciences and Arabic in Switzerland and Lebanon.

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