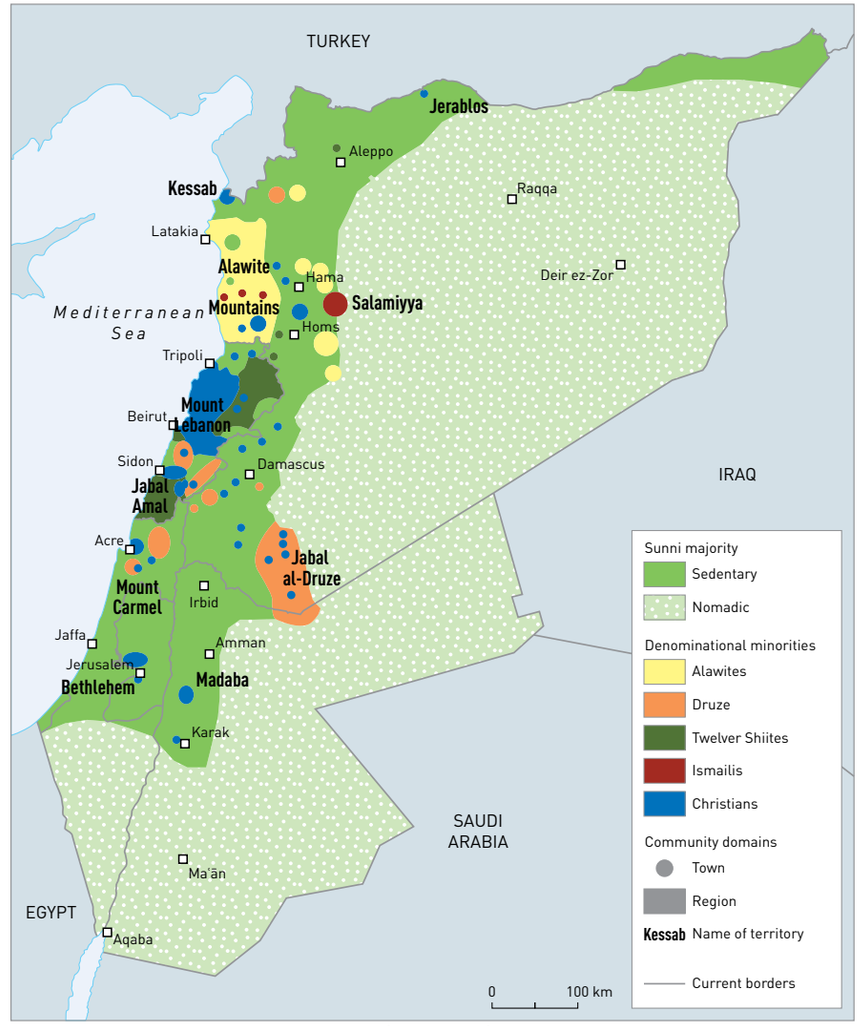
Communitarianism[1]

The Ottoman Empire was made up of multiple communities and was multi-ethnic. Politically, Sunni Islam was the dominant religion because the sultan was also the caliph, that is, the successor of the Prophet. Under the Ottoman system, subjects were defined by their religious communities (*millets*); the Jews and the different Christian churches had their own organisations under the authority of their leaders, whereas Muslims of all persuasions (Sunni and Shia) belonged to the same *umma* (community of Muslim believers). Reality, however, was much more complex: the Alawites, and notably the Druze, were not recognised as Muslims and were socially marginalised. Maronite believers—considered schismatic by the Melkites (Greek Orthodox and Catholics)—were similarly rejected. Ethnically, no distinction was made between subjects. In the Near East, the population was more than 90 per cent Arab; there were Turkish, Kurdish, and Armenian populations in the Taurus foothills and in the larger cities. After the conquest of the Caucasus by the Russians, several tens of thousands of Circassians (Adyghes) were exiled to this region. The spread of these communities throughout the space of the Near East shows perfectly the relationships that exist between space, power, and communities. The dominant communities (Sunni Arabs) and their protégés, the Jews and Melkite Christians, lived in the cities, the seats of power and wealth; they possessed the best lands. On the other hand, the heterodox communities (Alawites, Druzes, Twelver Shiis, Maronites, etc.), often persecuted, were marginalised in the outskirts (mountain refuges and marginal steppes). In the cities, each community occupied its own residential quarter; the Muslims lived near the main seats of power and the Friday Mosque; and the Christians and Jews lived close to their churches, synagogues, and denominational schools. With non-Muslims representing less than one third of the urban population, the Sunni Muslims were always the majority.

There was an opposition between the sedentary and the nomadic Sunni Muslims, between the *hadara* (city or civilisation) and the *rif* (countryside or savagery). After two centuries of political weakening, the Ottoman Empire had lost control over large parts of the countryside. The nomadic tribes took advantage of this situation and occupied those lands, progressively forcing small farmers without protection to flee. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the domain of the nomads stretched up to the walls of Damascus and Aleppo.

DISTRIBUTION OF COMMUNITIES AT THE END OF THE OTTOMAN PERIOD

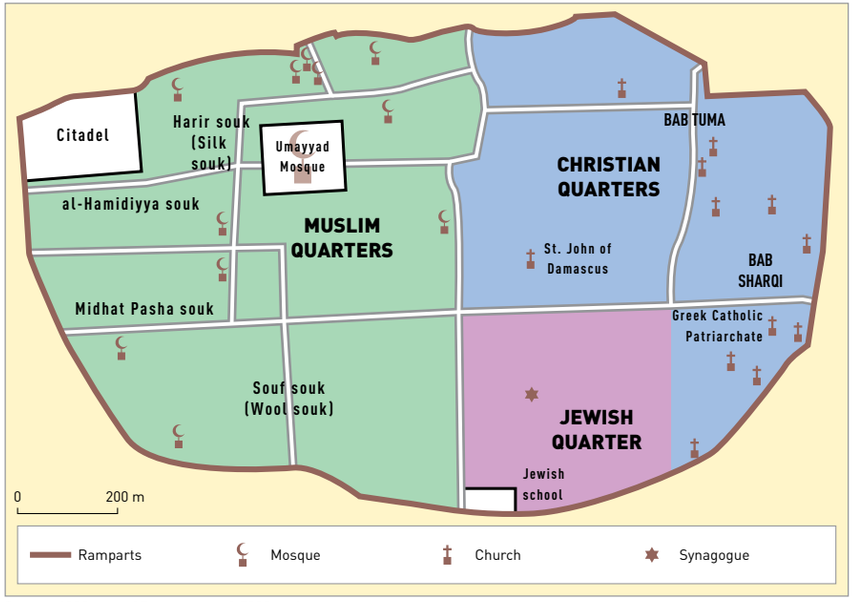


Fabrice Balanche, based on Vital Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie* (Paris, 1890–95).

1 A theory or system of social organisation based on small self-governing communities.

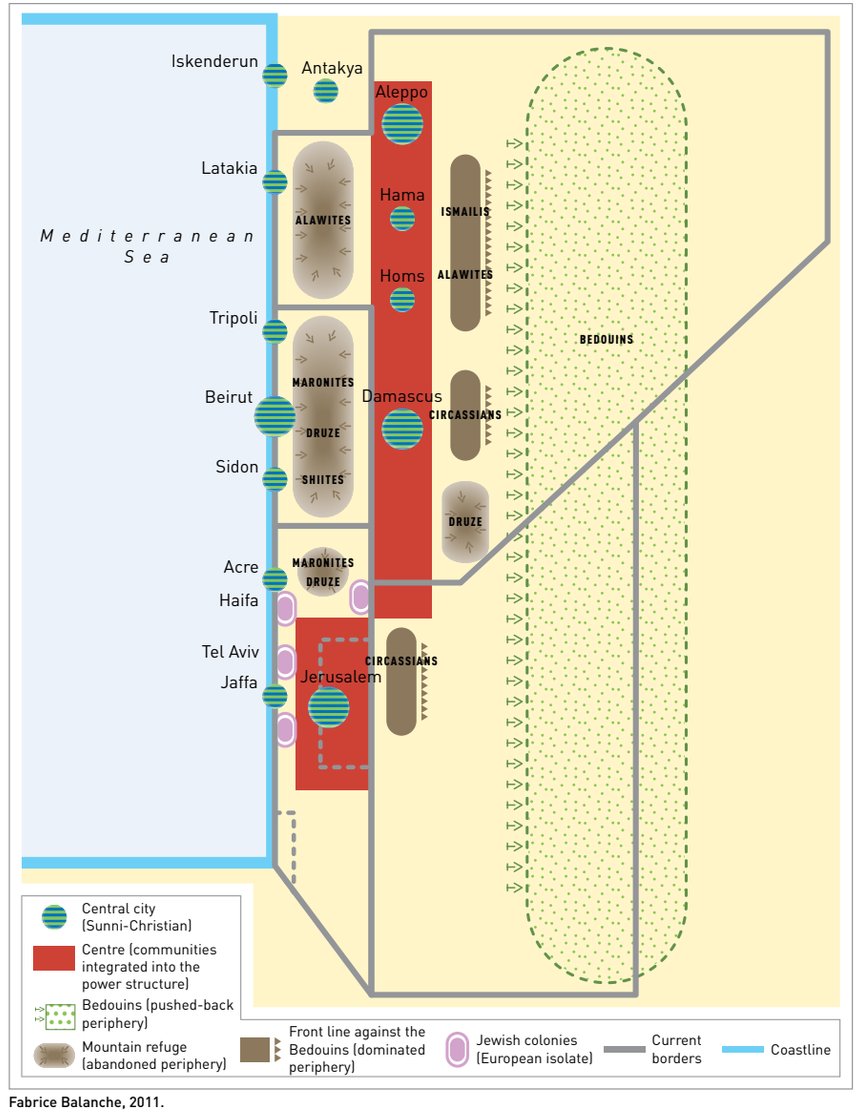
In order to push the Bedouins back and protect the economic hubs, the Ottoman authorities installed buffer populations on the margins of the steppes; Ismailis, Druze, and Alawites were driven from their mountains by internal conflicts or impoverishment as resources became insufficient to feed them. The Circassians who had come from the Caucasus were placed in the front line, especially in present-day Jordan, where they reshaped Amman. On the other side of the Jordan River, Palestine saw the first Jewish settlers arrive in the year 1880. The Zionists established settlements along the coastline and in the northern part of the Jordan Valley; these were the only lands available at that time as the Palestinian population had abandoned them because they were swampy and insalubrious. The development of these lands required techniques and capital that the Palestinians lacked; the Zionists, however, obtained support from European and American capitalist companies.

THE OLD CITY OF DAMASCUS AT THE END OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE



Source: 1932 map of Damascus at 1:5000 scale.

CENTRES AND PERIPHERIES AT THE END OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE



Fabrice Balanche, 2011.