



# Fezzes in the River: Identity Politics and European Diplomacy in the Middle East on the Eve of World War II

*By Sarah D. Shields*

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A fascinating case study of a province of Alexandretta caught in mandate system of the League of Nations and Great Power Politics in the interwar period.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Shields has written a well-researched book that...demonstrates the price often paid by local populations for colonial power politics or imported and imposed Western notions." --*Journal of World History*

"What is so striking, and so alarming, about the story told in *Fezzes in the River* is the evident speed with which mutual tolerance could be supplanted by internecine violence. Unwavering focus on the human consequences of flawed schemes to protect 'minority rights' in an era of ethnically defined nationalist allegiance lends great resonance to Shields' book for anyone interested in the roots of political violence. Thoroughly researched and historically astute, it is an exceptionally fine piece of work." --*Journal of Interdisciplinary History*

"Sarah Shields has written a fine and important study that contributes to our understanding of great power politics and identity politics in the making of the contemporary world. Her historiographic methodology is largely archival and she has been able to weave together an extraordinary tale of intrigue and power politics." --*International Journal of Turkish Studies*

"*Fezzes in the River* is a very engaging book, not only shedding light on the process that ended with Turkey's incorporation of the Sanjak of Alexandretta, but also opening a window into the interwar years in the context of the Middle East. An essential work for students and scholars dealing with issues of identity in the Middle East in the interwar era, French imperialism in the Middle East, Turkish diplomatic history, and modern Syrian history." --*Syrian Studies Association Newsletter*

"In addition to offering a valuable reexamination of international relations in the troubled years leading up to the Second World War... Shields also attends to the impact of those relations on the delicate balance of post-Ottoman identity politics among the Arab, Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, and Circassian residents of the Sanjak itself. What emerges is a painstaking reconstruction of the violent 'dismemberment' of a deeply intercommunal and 'cosmopolitan society' in the Sanjak through its reinscription as ethnically Turkish in the name of regional stability, international peace, and, ironically, the principle of national self-determination." -*H-Net*

"Written with wonderful skill and understanding, *Fezzes in the River* is a dispassionate account of a complex, troubling, and little-known subject." -Roger Owen, Harvard University

"What can a café quarrel in 1938 over headgear-the sporting of a brimless hat-in the disputed province of Alexandretta tell us about grand historical processes in Europe, the Middle East, and indeed world-wide? In this compelling and vividly written study, Shields traces the momentous shift away from older European obsessions with 'protecting' religious minorities in Muslim lands to another kind of imperial intervention in the region after the Great War. The League of Nation's attempts to impose an immutable ethno-linguistic identity upon the polyglot, multi-religious peoples inhabiting the borderlands between the new Republic of Turkey and the French mandate of Syria illustrates how fierce international struggles, nationalisms, and local realities clashed and intermingled to produce startling outcomes, some of which remain with us today."-Julia Clancy-Smith, author of *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration*

"Shields has done a masterful job in recounting the all-but-forgotten story of the 1936-39 Hatay/Alexandretta imbroglio-an imbroglio which bears an uncanny resemblance to contemporary crises in the Balkans, Iraq, and the Caucasus. With an eye for the telling anecdote, Shields spins a narrative of shifting identities, political opportunism, colonial bungling, and international intrigue during the lead-up to World War II. An important contribution to the fields of both history and nationalist studies."-James L. Gelvin, University of California, Los Angeles

"In her carefully researched and convincingly argued study of 'identity politics' in the Middle East, Sarah Shields offers readers a fascinating account of how the Sanjak of Alexandretta was incorporated into the Turkish Republic in the late 1930s. Anyone interested in our contemporary world with news headlines frequently addressing multiple conflicts in the Middle East will discover in *Fezzes in the River* a thoughtful and compelling introduction to the complexities of that region."-John F. Sweets, author of *Choices in Vichy France*

"This is a tale of many paradoxes, thoroughly emblematic of the flimsiness of the 'new international order' of the period between the World Wars. This absorbing account, based on a wide variety of archival sources, keeps the reader constantly attuned to the wider ramifications of such issues as national sovereignty, national identity, and minority rights. The ubiquity of the hat as a symbol of modernity (versus its antithesis, the fez) is a particularly evocative image in this elegantly written and compelling story."-Peter Sluglett, University of Utah

"A unique narrative... It is a valuable study both in terms of its narrative and its extensive use of different archival sources."-- Hazal Papuccular, *New Perspectives on Turkey*

#### About the Author

**Sarah D. Shields** is Bowman and Gordon Gray Distinguished Term Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is the author of *Mosul before Iraq: Like Bees Making Five-Sided Cells*.

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