

John Boonstra, PhD Candidate, Department of History
IRIS Summer Fieldwork Award, 2016 – Research Summary

Through support from the Institute for Regional and International Studies, I was able to return to France in June and July 2016 to conduct additional research for my dissertation, “A Mandate to Protect: Imperial Encounters and Affective Ideologies between France and Lebanon, 1900-1930.” My project explores the formation of a unique imperial relationship between France and Lebanon by analyzing colonial ideologies of protection alongside the negotiation of everyday conflicts and exchanges. This summer’s research provided me with an opportunity to consult supplementary archival materials, address gaps in my narrative and argument, and gain a broader understanding of the types of contacts between French and Lebanese historical actors.

I focused during my summer work on consulting archival and library collections at the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and the Centre des archives diplomatiques in Nantes. In the rich records of the 1 CPCOM Série Guerre at the Foreign Affairs Ministry archives outside Paris, I deepened my analysis of Franco-Lebanese interactions during the Great War, while at the diplomatic archives in Nantes, I enriched and expanded my consultation of letters from everyday Lebanese men and women sent to the French General Consul in Beirut in the decades before the war. This research contributes particularly to my dissertation's third and fourth chapters, which consider how social and cultural encounters in the pre-war and wartime periods shaped notions of Franco-Lebanese affinity and allegiance, at once enabling individuals to stake claims to, contest, and articulate changing visions of idealized standards of imperial “protection.”

Over six weeks of research, I was able not only to consult material that I had anticipated working with, but also to uncover useful series of documents that I had not found in previous research trips. At the Foreign Ministry Archives, I also spent two weeks looking through Series 242 QO, on the French service at the League of Nations for the interwar period (1917-1940).

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These sources offered opportunities to evaluate how the League monitored the French Mandate over Lebanon and Syria, as well as how French officials conceived of and represented their colonial experiences in correspondence with colleagues in Paris and through official reports to Geneva. Within this series I also gained access to several dossiers of individual petitions, which have further bolstered my focus on the quotidian conflicts and disputes that comprised Franco-Lebanese interactions, especially those that occurred under the formal colonial structures of League of Nations Mandate authority.

In the remainder of my time in Paris, I pursued my research agenda of reviewing Great War and pre-Mandate materials, both to photograph documents that I needed to examine in greater detail (or to decipher inscrutable handwriting) and to sharpen my analysis of the ideological tensions and military exigencies that emerged during the First World War in the Eastern Mediterranean. As a beleaguered Lebanese population suffered and starved from Ottoman repression and Allied blockade, appeals for French protection failed to engineer a military intervention, engendering moral discourses and mortal consequences of Lebanese martyrdom. The debates and disillusionment of this period, I propose, marked a turning point in imperial relations between France and Lebanon. By assessing how officials, informants, and activists engaged with the moral and military pressures over French intervention and Lebanese famine, I obtained valuable information on the actors, agendas, and contexts that comprise my fourth chapter's narrative and argument.

During my research, I also deepened my consideration of the everyday events and exchanges in the pre-war period of Franco-Lebanese contact. I reviewed the “individual affairs” of 1897-1907 in Series 206 CPCOM 427, which provided me with a rich corpus of evidence to analyze how the French consular apparatus—and French imperial ideology—functioned as a site

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of negotiation, claims-making, and contestation for local appellants. I pursued this line of inquiry in my work at the consular archives in Nantes as well, where a systematic consultation of pre-1900 materials enriched my perspective into how complaints and accusations were filtered from local conflicts to the French General Consul. I encountered not only more individual cases of theft, insult, and abuse, but also a firmer sense of how tropes of Franco-Lebanese affinity and allegiance were reworked and redeployed through a range prosaic as well as unanticipated demands upon French prestige and protection.