

A Vision in Pictures (3)

Opposition to the Sykes-Picot Partition Plan

By Safia Saadeh

The people of Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria), never imagined that they would one day be divided, nor that the advancing Western powers would set brother against brother in the name of religion, sect, denomination, creed, and race. They could not conceive that their beautiful homeland—coloured by its diverse population, faiths, and traditions—would be torn apart, or that this dismemberment would be imposed upon them by force, despite their repeated appeals against partition. This rejection was clearly expressed in the report of the King–Crane Commission, the American mission that came to the region in 1919 to survey local opinion.

That mission also warned of the peril of Zionist settlement, foreseeing that it would one day ignite the entire region.

Antun Saadeh opposed the partition project with all his strength and determination. He saw in it not only a means for Western domination of the region but also a way to facilitate the Zionist enterprise, which could then advance unopposed in the absence of a unified front linking the states of the Fertile Crescent area capable of confronting the immense Western military power.

Saadeh was the first to draw a clear distinction between Judaism as a religion and Zionism as a settler-nationalist movement that exploits religion for its own ends. He explained that “Israel” is a state built upon two racist foundations—a dual caste system. The first is the ethnic principle, expressed through the idea of belonging to the homeland by racial descent, whereby Jewish identity is defined through the mother. This reflects ancient tribal roots and the social structures of primitive matriarchal societies that traced lineage through the maternal line. The second is the sectarian principle, rooted in religious identity, through which Zionism categorically rejects integration with others who differ either in faith or in ethnicity.

Saadeh was also the first to call for the re-unification of Geographic Syria affirming that liberation from occupation, displacement, and destruction could be achieved only through this unity. He foresaw, moreover, the complicity of Great Britain, which had opened wide the gates of Palestine to Jewish immigration and would later work to dismantle Geographic Syria as it had existed before 1920.

For Saadeh, the unity of the Syrian land was the natural order of things—not the Sykes–Picot colonial partition imposed upon the people of the region by force of arms, as the Syrian Battle of Maysaloun so clearly demonstrated. The partition was never born of local popular will; on the contrary, Saadeh’s steadfastness stemmed from that popular will itself—from the people’s deep desire to reclaim their land and their unity.