



SYMPOSIUM

# Studying the Police in the Middle-East

Rethinking State Forms  
from the 8th Century  
to the Present Day

June, 23th 2025 | 9:30 AM - 5:00 PM  
CAREP Paris : 12 rue Raymond Aron Paris 13  
In French and in English

Photo : Nabil Ismail

Dossier 133

POLICE  
DE  
L'ETAT DU GRAND LIBAN  
بوليس لبنان الكبير

البيان الشخصي  
**Fiche Individuelle**

Nom et Prénom Hassil Soleiman Chehab (Enir)

Lieu de Naissance Bejrout

Date de Naissance 1877

Carte d'Identité:  
N° 18813/4769 A  
Date 12 Oct. 1921  
Localité Bejrout

Religion Chirien Rite Maronite الطائفة المذهب

Célibataire ou Marié Célibataire Nombre d'Enfants 4 اعزب او متزوج عدد الاولاد

Entré en Service le 1<sup>er</sup> Aout 1919 en qualité de C<sup>2</sup> de 1<sup>re</sup> classe دخل في الخدمة في الخدمة

GRADE	ARRÊTÉ قرار		الرتبة
	Date التاريخ	No. الرقم	
Agent de 2 <sup>ème</sup> Classe	<u>25/7/19</u>		بوليس صف ثاني
" " 1 <sup>ère</sup> "	"		.. .. اول
Brigadier	"		معاون
Commissaire de 3 <sup>ème</sup> Classe	"		مفوض صف ثالث
" 2 <sup>ème</sup> "	<u>25/7/19</u>		ثاني .. ..
" 1 <sup>ère</sup> "	<u>6/4/22</u>	<u>12841</u>	.. .. اول
" Principal 1 <sup>ère</sup> classe "	<u>1-1-26</u>	<u>3672</u>	

Sorti le 10-3-1930 Arrêté N° 6384 رقم القرار خرج في

Motifs Arraignment pour suspension d'emploi الاسباب

Observations Pour l'absence d'assurance de 1929 par loi n° 184 du 1<sup>er</sup> mai 1929 ملاحظات

Private Archives of Adonis Nehmé, ISF Headquarters, Beirut

Following pages: Archives from Fournié, Pierre, and Jean-Louis Riccioli.  
*France and the Near East, 1916–1946: A Photographic Chronicle of the  
 French Presence in Syria and Lebanon, Palestine, the Hejaz, and Cilicia.*  
 Tournai: Casterman

Symposium organised by **Leila Seurat** (CAREP)  
 and **Eugénie Rébillard** (Ifpo)

## Rationale

The Middle East has long been overlooked in social science research on policing. This neglect is not unique to the Arab world; even in France, interest in the field developed late, with studies focusing more on the victims of repression than on its architects and executors. This academic blind spot reflects a certain mistrust toward the police, often seen as a “dirty object” (Monjardet, 1996). In Arab contexts, this marginalization may also stem from the dominant political role of the military in post-independence state-building.

The popular uprisings of 2011 marked a turning point. The rise of mass protests—often closely tied to state repression—has led to renewed interest in the police among historians, sociologists, and anthropologists working on the region.

To better understand how public order is shaped and how state-society relations evolve in the Middle East, this symposium suggests a shift in perspective: focusing on the repressive apparatus and adopting a long-term, diachronic approach. Studying the police sheds new light on both premodern and modern state formation, including informal policing practices that reveal hidden aspects of state-building (Houte, 2024).

A long-term, diachronic approach to policing serves a threefold purpose:

### ***Comparing methodological approaches:***

Studying the history of policing raises diverse issues, employs varied methodologies, and mobilizes different types of sources depending on the period under study. In the medieval period, the main challenge lies in working with heterogeneous sources (chronicles, legal texts, papyrological records), which occasionally preserve traces of practical documents and inform us about the production of police archives—known to have been produced in large quantities in Iraq from the 9th century onward (Rébillard, 2024). In contemporary settings, one challenge is to combine institutional-level interviews with micro sociological approaches such as ethnography, in order to capture the gap between official policies and their on-the-ground implementation. These various methods can also yield distinct insights into policing

practices, their internal dynamics, and how they are received by the population. This symposium thus aims to open dialogue on how social science tools can inform historical research through the subject of “police”, and to foster interdisciplinary exchange.

### ***Revisiting dominant paradigms:***

The dominant authoritarian “exception” paradigm in political sociology in Arab states has largely neglected the analysis of coercive systems, focusing instead on liberalisation, co-optation, and consent. A focus on police institutions fills this gap and challenges—or nuances—certain long standing assumptions. For earlier periods, such as in Umayyad and Abbasid Syria and Iraq, studying recruitment policies sheds light on the evolution and role of the army from which the police emerged, and invites a reassessment of the “Mamluk paradigm”.

### ***Questioning continuities and ruptures:***

Although such a diachronic approach requires methodological caution, it enables coherent temporal frameworks for exploring transfers, legacies, and external influences over different time spans. For instance, the Ottoman and Mandate periods are crucial for understanding the reconfiguration of contemporary police forces. Administrative detention in Palestine is a practice inherited from the British Mandate. Examining continuities also supports a critical approach to “continuist” perspectives—that is, identifying false continuities. Attention will be paid to discourses that promote a direct line from colonial times, including Orientalist literature produced in the context of European imperial expansion. These works often present policing institutions as static and over-regulated, sometimes with a functionalist bias. More broadly, this session will consider the contemporary uses of police history.

Among the multiple lenses through which police practices can be analyzed, recruitment plays a central role, as it reveals much about public administration from the colonial period to the present. Who constitutes the police forces? What are the effects of militia demobilization and their integration into public security structures? What is the role of communal solidarities? Which bodies are responsible for delegation?



Another valuable long-term entry point is the study of informal policing practices, such as vigilantism. What do these practices reveal about the premodern and modern state? In 9th-century Iraq, short and long-term public order was often the result of compromises between state police and various social components of Abbasid society. The police did not hold a monopoly on legitimate force or internal security. In Iraq and more remote regions, non-state actors positioned themselves as guardians of public order and morality, amounting to early forms of vigilantism. In the contemporary period, the phenomenon of *baltajiyya* (thugs or unofficial enforcers) illustrates the complex relations between partisan groups and political power, beyond simplistic notions of state failure or manipulation.

Finally, a third heuristic approach across periods involves examining policing models and their circulation. For instance, medieval political literature (*adāb al-sultaniyya*) presents a theoretical model centered on the figure of the police chief, contributing to the construction of an “ideal policing” model. Over the past two decades, the concept of community policing has been widely promoted across Arab countries, often framed as a miracle solution to reform struggling police institutions (Seurat, 2022). This symposium explores a critical perspective on such models and their contemporary applications.



"Beirut, 1929: the French advisor and his class of Lebanese gendarmes", *Ibid.*

# Programme

09:30 Welcoming Participants  
09:45 Opening Remarks

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## 10:00 **Panel 1: Abbasid Policing**

*Chair: Pascal Buresi (CNRS)*

*Speakers:*

**Hassan Bouali**, CEFREPA

**Eugénie Rébillard**, IFPO:

*The Abbasid Police and Its Archives in Baghdad  
(3rd–4th/9th–10th Centuries)*

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## 11:30 **Panel 2: Ottoman Policing**

*Chair: Özgür Türesay (EHESS)*

*Speakers:*

**Yavuz Aykan**, Paris 1 - Panthéon-Sorbonne :

*The So-Called Nezir Contract: A Proto-Police Instrument  
for Maintaining Order in the Face of Urban Revolts  
in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*

**Noémi Lévy-Aksu**, EHESS (by zoom) :

*Policing Models and Local Dynamics: The Istanbul  
Police at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries*

13:00 Lunch Break

14:00

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### Panel 3: Colonial Policing

*Chair: Nadine Méouchy (IFPO)*

*Speakers:*

**Luca Nelson-Gabin**, IREMAM:

*A Dangerous Gendarmerie? Maintaining Order and Building the State in the Early Years of the French Mandate in Syria (1920–1925)*

**Mehdi Sakatni**, IREMAM:

*Policing the Desert: Governing Nomadic Populations in French Mandate Syria (1920–1946)*

**Alex Winder**, Brown University:

*Custom and Colonial Policing in Palestine*

**Clothilde Houot**, historian:

*Local, National, and Imperial Armed Forces in Iraq and Transjordan (1914–1941)*

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15:30

### Panel 4: Arab Policing

*Chair: Fabien Jobard (CNRS, Cesdip)*

*Speakers:*

**Leila Seurat**, CAREP:

*Violence and Sectarianism:*

*What Does the Police Do in Lebanon?*

**Ilana Feldman**, George Washington University:

*Police Encounters: Security and Surveillance in Gaza under Egyptian Rule*

17:00

Closing Remarks

By **Fabien Jobard** (CNRS, Cesdip)

## Biographies of the Speakers

### Yavuz Aykan

Yavuz Aykan is Associate Professor of Modern History at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. He holds a PhD from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) and specializes in Muslim law and Ottoman society in the modern era, with a particular interest in Islamic law and social practices.

### Hassan Bouali

Hassan Bouali holds a PhD in Medieval History from the University of Paris Nanterre. He is an associate researcher at CEFREPA and Mémo (Paris Nanterre), and specializes in the early period of Islam. His work focuses on the history of power and the Islamic empire in its formative stages.

### Pascal Buresi

Pascal Buresi is Director of Research at the CNRS (CIHAM, UMR 5648, Lyon) and Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). A former student of the École Normale Supérieure of Fontenay-Saint-Cloud and an agrégé in history, he is a specialist in the medieval Muslim West, with a particular interest in the borders between Christendom and Islam in the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages.

### Ilana Feldman

Ilana Feldman is Professor of Anthropology, History, and International Affairs at George Washington University. Her research focuses on the Palestinian experience in and beyond historic Palestine, exploring governance, humanitarianism, policing, displacement, and citizenship. She has conducted fieldwork in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt. Her publications include *Governing Gaza* (2008), *Police Encounters* (2015), *Life Lived in Relief* (2018), and the co-edited volume *In the Name of Humanity* (2010).



## Clothilde Houot

Clothilde Houot holds a PhD in History from Paris Panthéon-Sorbonne University. In 2024, she defended her doctoral dissertation entitled *"Defending the Empire in the Middle East: Local, National, and Imperial Armed Forces in Iraq and Transjordan (1914–1941)"*. Her research focuses on imperial and military history in the modern Middle East. She is also the co-author of *The Middle East and the West in the 20th Century* (Bréal, 2020).

## Fabien Jobard

Fabien Jobard holds a PhD in political science and is Director of Research at the CNRS. He is a researcher at the CESDIP (Centre for Sociological Research on Law and Penal Institutions) and works on policing and comparative justice systems.

## Noémi Lévy-Aksu

Noémi Lévy-Aksu is a historian with a PhD from the EHESS. A specialist in the late Ottoman Empire and contemporary Turkey, her research focuses on social history, states of exception, and state violence. She has taught at Boğaziçi University, Birkbeck College, and the London School of Economics. She is currently Director of the "Memory and Peace" program at Hafıza Merkezi in Istanbul.

## Nadine Méouchy

Nadine Méouchy is a historian specializing in Lebanon and Syria. She lived and worked for over twenty years between Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. In 1997, she founded in Damascus the first French academic program dedicated to the Mandate in Lebanon and Syria, and in 2008, she established the Ifpo Press on the dual sites of Beirut and Damascus, which she directed until 2019.

## Luca Nelson-Gabin

Luca Nelson-Gabin is a PhD candidate at IREMAM/CESDIP and an agrégé in history. After completing a master's degree (ENS/ENC) focused on the gendarmeries of the State of Damascus (1920–1925), his research examines the history of policing in rural Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate (1920–1941). He is particularly interested in policing intermediaries (guards, rural police) and their role in the implementation of agricultural, land, and fiscal policies.

## Eugénie Rébillard

Eugénie Rébillard holds the agrégation in Arabic and a PhD in History (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne). She is currently a researcher in the Department of Modern and Medieval Arabic Studies at the French Institute of the Near East (Ifpo) in Beirut, where she continues her work on the history of security institutions in the Middle East during the Abbasid and Buyid periods. Her recent publication includes *Imposing Order: The Police in the Cities and Countryside of Abbasid Iraq (132-334 / 750-945)*, Presses de l'Ifpo, 2024..

## Mehdi Sakatni

Mehdi Sakatni holds a PhD in History and is an associate researcher at IREMAM (2024–2028). His research focuses on the history of Syria and Lebanon, particularly during the French Mandate period.

## Leila Seurat

Leila Seurat is a researcher at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Paris (CAREP Paris), and an associate of the CESDIP and the OMAM (Observatory of Arab and Muslim Worlds). She has taught international relations sociology and the political sociology of Arab countries at Sciences Po, as well as the history of the contemporary Middle East at INALCO.

## Özgür Türesay

Özgür Türesay is Associate Professor at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Section of Historical and Philological Sciences). A specialist in the history of the Ottoman press, he has published numerous articles on the intellectual and political history of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th and 20th centuries, in French, English, Turkish, and Greek.

## Alex Winder

Alex Winder is Associate Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at Brown University. He is former editor-in-chief of *Jerusalem Quarterly* and edited the diaries of a Palestinian policeman during the British Mandate, *Between Jaffa and Mount Hebron: The Diaries of Muhammad 'Abd al-Hadi al-Shrouf, 1943–1962* (published in Arabic by the Institute for Palestine Studies). His work has appeared in journals such as *AlMuntaqa*, *Biography*, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, and *Radical History Review*.



"The Lebanese Gendarmerie School of Baabda in 1930", *Ibid.*



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