

The Arabs

A History

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BASIC

BOOKS

A Member of the Perseus Books Group
New York

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Designed by Trish Wilkinson
Set in 10.5 point Adobe Garamond

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rogan, Eugene L.

The Arabs : a history / Eugene Rogan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-465-07100-5 (alk. paper)

1. Arab countries—History—1517–1918. 2. Arab countries—History—20th century.
3. Palestine—History—Partition, 1947. 4. Arab nationalism. 5. Petroleum industry and
trade—Arab countries. 6. Islam and politics—Arab countries. 7. Imperialism. I. Title.
DS37.7.R64 2009

909'.04927—dc22

2009028575

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*This book is dedicated to
Richard Huia Woods Rogan*

to village with the songs they composed recounting the tragedy of Dinshaway and the injustice of British rule.

Calm eventually returned to Egypt, though Dinshaway was not forgotten nor were the British forgiven. In 1906 the foundations for a nationalist movement were all in place. Yet nationalists in Egypt found themselves confronting a British Empire that was looking to expand its presence in the Arab world rather than retreat. Indeed, Britain's moment in Egypt and the rest of the Middle East was just beginning.

CHAPTER 6

Divide and Rule: World War I and the Postwar Settlement

Nationalism emerged in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire at the start of the twentieth century. It was at first difficult for the Arab peoples of the empire to imagine themselves in a separate state after nearly four centuries under Ottoman rule. The early nationalists grappled with conflicting notions of what an Arab state might look like. Some imagined a kingdom centered in the Arabian Peninsula whereas others aspired to statehood in discrete parts of the Arab world, like Greater Syria or Iraq. Nationalists before their time, they were marginal in their own society and faced such repression from the Ottoman authorities as to discourage others from following their lead. Those who wished to pursue their political dreams were forced into exile. Some went to Paris, where their ideas were nourished by European nationalists; others traveled to Cairo, where they were inspired by the Islamic reformers and the secular nationalists agitating against British rule.

Arab disenchantment with Ottoman rule grew more widespread after the 1908 Young Turk Revolution. The Young Turks were ardent nationalists who instigated the revolution to force the sultan to restore the 1876 Constitution and to reconvene the Parliament. These measures met with widespread support among the Arab subjects of the empire, who believed the Young Turks would liberalize Ottoman rule. They soon learned, however, that the new regime in Istanbul was determined to strengthen its hold over the Arab provinces through a more rigorous application of Ottoman rule.

The Young Turks introduced a series of measures they viewed as centralizing, but which many Arabs saw as repressive. In particular, they promoted the use of Turkish

as the official language of the empire over Arabic in the schools and public administration of the Arab provinces. This policy alienated Arab ideologues, for whom the Arabic language was an integral part of their national identity. The very measures the Young Turks imposed to reinforce the Arabs' attachment to the empire had the unintended consequence of encouraging a nascent nationalist movement. By the 1910s, groups of intellectuals and army officers had begun to organize secret nationalist societies to pursue Arab independence from Ottoman rule. Some of these nationalists entered into correspondence with the European powers through their local consulates, hoping to secure outside support for their aims.

The difficulties faced by the early Arab nationalists were nearly insurmountable. The Ottoman state was omnipresent, and it cracked down ruthlessly on illegal political activity. Those seeking independence for the Arab lands lacked the means to achieve their goals. Gone were the days when a strong man from the Arab provinces might rise up to defeat Ottoman armies, like Muhammad 'Ali had done. If the Ottoman reforms of the nineteenth century had achieved anything, it was to make the central government stronger and the Arab provinces more subordinate to Istanbul's rule. It would take a major cataclysm to shake the Ottoman grip on the Arab world.

The First World War was to prove that cataclysm.

The Ottoman Empire entered the First World War in alliance with Germany in November 1914. It was a war that the Ottomans would have preferred to avoid. The empire was battle weary after fighting the Italians in 1911 over Libya and the Aegean Islands, and after two devastating wars with the Balkan states in 1912 and 1913. As a major European war loomed in the summer of 1914, the Ottoman government hoped to stay out of the fight and secure a defensive alliance with Britain or France. However, neither Britain nor France was willing to enter into binding commitments against their Entente partner, Russia, whose territorial ambitions the Ottoman Empire feared most of all.

One of the leaders of the Young Turk government, Enver Pasha, was a great admirer of Germany. He believed Germany, as the only European power without territorial ambitions in the Middle East, could be trusted. Russia, France, and Britain had enlarged their own empires at the Ottomans' expense in the past and were likely to try to do so again. Enver was impressed by Germany's military prowess, and he argued forcefully that Germany alone could provide the protection the Ottomans needed against further European encroachment into Ottoman domains. Enver led the secret negotiations with the German government and secured a treaty of alliance shortly after the outbreak of war in Europe, on August 2, 1914. The treaty promised

German military advisors, war materiel, and financial assistance in return for an Ottoman declaration of war in support of the Central Powers.

The Germans had hoped to exploit the Ottoman sultan's titular role as caliph, or leader of the global Muslim community, to foment a jihad against Britain and France. Given the millions of Muslims in British and French colonies in South Asia and North Africa, German war planners believed that such a jihad would have devastating consequences on their enemies' war effort. When the Ottomans finally declared war on the Entente Powers, on November 11, 1914, the sultan called on Muslims around the world to join in jihad against Britain, Russia, and France. Though the sultan's call had little effect on the international community of believers, who were preoccupied with their own daily concerns far from the European theaters of war, it did raise serious concern in Paris and London. Long after the outbreak of war, British and French strategists actively courted the support of high Muslim officials for their war effort in a bid to counter the sultan-caliph's jihad.

At war once again, the Ottoman authorities clamped down ruthlessly on anyone suspected of separatist tendencies. Arab nationalists came under particular attack. One of the three leaders of the Young Turks government, Cemal Pasha, took control of Greater Syria and led the suppression of Arab nationalists there. Drawing on papers confiscated from the French consulate that implicated some of the most prominent Arabists in Beirut and Damascus, Cemal charged scores of Syrians and Lebanese with high treason. A military tribunal was established in Mount Lebanon in 1915 that, over the course of the year, sentenced dozens to be hanged in Beirut and Damascus and condemned hundreds more to long prison sentences, and thousands to exile. These draconian punishments earned Cemal Pasha the nickname *al-Saffah*, or "the blood-shedder," and convinced a growing number of Arabs to seek independence from the Ottoman Empire.

Yet the hardships of the war years affected everyone in the Arab provinces, not just those engaged in illicit political activities. The Ottoman army conscripted thousands of young men into active service, many of whom over time were wounded, succumbed to disease, or killed in action. Peasants lost their crops and livestock to the government's requisition officers, who paid for these goods in freshly printed paper money that had no real value. Poor rains, and a locust plague, compounded the farmers' problems and led to a terrible famine that claimed nearly half a million lives in Mount Lebanon and the Syrian coastal regions.

Nevertheless, and to the surprise of the European powers, the Ottomans proved a tenacious ally. Ottoman forces attacked British positions in the Suez Canal zone at the start of the war. They defeated the French, British, and Commonwealth forces at Gallipoli in 1915. They secured the surrender of the Indian Expeditionary Force in

Mesopotamia in 1916. They contained an Arab revolt along the Hijaz Railway line from 1916 to 1918. And they forced the British to fight for every inch of Palestine until the autumn of 1918.

After that, the Ottoman war effort collapsed. British forces completed their conquest of Mesopotamia, Palestine, and—with the help of their allies in the Arab Revolt—Syria. The Ottomans retreated to Anatolia, never to return to Arab lands. In October 1918, the last Turkish troops slipped over the border north of Aleppo, near the spot where Selim the Grim had begun his conquest of Arab lands 402 years earlier. Four centuries of Ottoman rule over the Arab lands came to an abrupt end.

When the defeated Ottomans withdrew from their Arab provinces, there were few who mourned their passing. With the end of Ottoman rule, people in the Arab world entered a period of intense political activity. They looked back on the Ottoman era as four centuries of oppression and underdevelopment. They were electrified by a vision of a renascent Arab world emerging into the community of nations as an independent, unified state. At the same time, they were aware of the danger posed by European imperialism. Having read in their newspapers about the hardships of French rule in North Africa and of British rule in Egypt, the other Arab peoples were determined to avoid foreign domination at all costs. And, for a brief, heady moment between October 1918 and July 1920, it seemed as though Arab independence might be achieved. The greatest obstacles they faced were the territorial ambitions of the victorious Entente Powers.

No sooner had the Ottomans entered the world war on Germany's side than the Entente Powers began to plan for the postwar partition of the empire. The Russians were first to stake a claim, informing their Entente allies in March 1915 that they intended to annex Istanbul and the straits linking the Russian Black Sea coast to the Mediterranean. France accepted Russia's claim and set out its own plans to annex Cilicia (the southeastern Turkish coast, including the cities of Alexandretta and Adana) and Greater Syria (roughly equivalent to modern Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Jordan), including the holy places in Palestine.

In considering their allies' demands, Britain was forced to weigh its own strategic interests in Ottoman territory. On April 8, 1915, Prime Minister Herbert Asquith convened a committee to consider postwar scenarios for a defeated Ottoman Empire. The interdepartmental committee, named after its chairman, Sir Maurice de Bunsen, aimed to balance "the prospective advantages to the British Empire by a readjustment of conditions in Asiatic Turkey, and the inevitable increase of Imperial responsibility." At the end of June 1915, the de Bunsen Committee presented its findings.

In the event of a partition of the Ottoman Empire, Britain sought to preserve its position in the Persian Gulf, from Kuwait to the Trucial States (the modern United Arab Emirates), as an exclusive sphere of influence. Furthermore, Britain sought to bring all of Mesopotamia—Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul—under its control. Britain also sought a land bridge linking Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean port of Haifa, with a railway line to ensure imperial communications.¹ What is striking is how closely the eventual postwar settlement corresponded to the recommendations of the de Bunsen Committee—particularly given the tangled web of promises that Britain subsequently concluded with its wartime allies.

The British concluded three separate agreements between 1915 and 1917 for the postwar partition of Ottoman Arab lands: an agreement with the sharif of Mecca for the creation of an independent Arab Kingdom; a European pact for the partition of Syria and Mesopotamia between Britain and France; and a pledge to the Zionist movement to create a Jewish national home in Palestine. One of the challenges of British postwar diplomacy was to find a way to square what were, in many ways, contradictory promises.

The first promise was the most extensive. Shortly after the de Bunsen Report was filed, Lord Kitchener, Britain's secretary of state for war, authorized British officials in Cairo to negotiate an alliance with the sharif of Mecca, the Ottoman-appointed chief religious authority of Islam's holiest city. It was early in the war, and the British were concerned that the Ottoman call to jihad might indeed have the impact the Germans had hoped for—a general uprising in the Muslim world that would destabilize Britain's colonies. The British hoped to turn the tables on the Ottomans with a counter-declaration of jihad by the highest Islamic official in the Arab world—in essence, turning the budding Arab nationalist movement against the Ottomans. Such an Arab revolt would also open an internal front against Germany's eastern ally.

By the summer of 1915, British and Commonwealth troops were in dire need of relief, pinned down by fierce Ottoman and German resistance in Gallipoli. In July 1915, Sharif Husayn ibn 'Ali of Mecca entered into correspondence with the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon. In the course of their eight-month correspondence, which ran until March 1916, McMahon promised British recognition of an independent Arab kingdom, to be ruled by Sharif Husayn and his Hashemite dynasty, in return for the Hashemites leading an Arab revolt against Ottoman rule. Britain promised to support the Arab revolt with funds, guns, and grain.

Most of the negotiations between Husayn and McMahon concerned the boundaries of the putative Arab kingdom. Sharif Husayn was very specific in his territorial demands: all of Syria, from the Egyptian border in the Sinai up to Cilicia and the Taurus Mountains in Turkey; all of Mesopotamia to the frontiers of Persia; and all of the Arabian peninsula, except for the British colony of Aden.

In his famous letter of October 24, 1915, Sir Henry McMahon confirmed the boundaries proposed by Sharif Husayn, with two exclusions. He ruled out Cilicia and those "portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo" in which France had declared its interests, and upheld British claims to the provinces of Baghdad and Basra, which could be satisfied by a joint Anglo-Arab administration. "Subject to [these] modifications," McMahon assured Husayn, "Great Britain is prepared to recognize and support the independence of the Arabs in all the regions within the limits demanded by the Sherif of Mecca." Husayn grudgingly accepted these exclusions, warning that "at the first opportunity after this war is finished, we shall ask you . . . for what we now leave to France in Beirut and its coasts."²

On the basis of this understanding with Great Britain, Sharif Husayn called for an Arab uprising against Ottoman rule on June 5, 1916. The Arab Revolt began with attacks on government positions in the Hijaz. Mecca fell to the Hashemite forces on June 12, and the Red Sea port of Jidda surrendered four days later. The large Ottoman garrison in Medina was able to withstand the Arab attack and was resupplied by the Hijaz Railway line. The Hashemites were determined to cut this vital line of communications with Damascus to force the surrender of Medina and complete their conquest of the Hijaz. They moved northward to sabotage the 1,300-kilometer-long (or 810-miles long) railway in more exposed parts of the Syrian Desert. This was where T. E. Lawrence came into his own, setting charges under culverts and trestles to disrupt the trains heading to Medina.

In July 1917, the Arab Army, commanded by Sharif Husayn's son, Amir Faysal, took the Ottoman fortress in the small port of al-'Aqaba (in modern Jordan). Faysal established his headquarters in Aqaba, from which point his forces harassed Ottoman strongholds in Ma'an and Tafila while keeping up a steady stream of attacks on the Hijaz Railway. However, the Arab Army never managed to overcome Ottoman defenses and take the town of Ma'an. Moreover, they encountered resistance from Arab tribes and townsmen allied with the Ottomans.

In the nearby town of Karak, the tribesmen and townspeople formed a 500-man militia and set off "fired with enthusiasm to fight Faysal and his band" on July 17, 1917. The Karak volunteers fought a three-hour battle against the Hashemite-led forces and declared victory after killing nine men from the Arab Army and capturing two of their horses. This minor engagement revealed the extent to which the Arab Revolt divided local loyalties between supporters of the Ottomans and of the Hashemites. In August 1917, British and French intelligence concurred that the tribes of Transjordan were firmly in the Ottoman camp.³ Sharif Husayn's counter-jihad had failed to win over the Arabs as a whole.

Faced with stubborn Ottoman resistance in Ma'an and fighting on what was sometimes hostile territory, the Hashemites raced northward to the oasis town of

al-Azrak in August 1918. From this new base, the Arab Army, which had expanded to a force of 8,000 men, set off in a pincer movement with General Edmund Allenby's army in Palestine, to take the city of Damascus. With the fall of Damascus on October 2, 1918, the Arab Revolt had secured its greatest ambition—and Sharif Husayn expected Britain to honor its commitments.

Britain's second wartime agreement for the disposition of Ottoman territory was the most complex. Britain was aware of France and Russia's territorial ambitions in Ottoman lands; though the three wartime allies had not yet struck a formal agreement. While McMahon was still in negotiations with Sharif Husayn, the British and French governments appointed delegates to conclude a formal agreement on the postwar division of Ottoman territory. The French were represented by Charles François Georges-Picot, the former consul general in Beirut, and the British by Lord Kitchener's Middle East advisor, Sir Mark Sykes. The two sides reached an agreement in early 1916, to which Russia subscribed on condition that its territorial claims be accepted by Britain and France.

The final accord, which came to be known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, was concluded in October 1916. It painted the map of the Middle East in shades of red and blue: the red zone corresponded to the provinces of Baghdad and Basra, in which the British would have the right "to establish such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire," and the blue zone covered Cilicia and the Syrian coastal region, where the French enjoyed the same prerogatives. Palestine was the exception, shaded in brown as an area under "an international administration," whose ultimate form remained to be determined. In addition, Britain claimed an area of informal control stretching across northern Arabia from Kirkuk in central Iraq to Gaza, and the French claimed informal control over a vast triangle running from Mosul to Aleppo and Damascus.⁴ The agreement also confirmed the boundaries of those territories claimed by Russia in eastern Anatolia.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement created more problems than it resolved. The British later regretted offering France trusteeship over Mosul and northern Mesopotamia, and they had second thoughts about internationalizing the whole of Palestine. Moreover, the Sykes-Picot Agreement respected neither the spirit nor the letter of the Husayn-McMahon correspondence. It was, in the words of one Palestinian observer, "a startling piece of double-dealing."⁵

Of all the wartime promises made by the British government, the third proved the most enduring. After centuries of anti-Semitism in Europe and Russia, a group of European Jewish thinkers had united around the dream of establishing a homeland in Palestine. Starting in 1882, waves of Jewish immigrants had fled persecution in Russia, and a small minority—some 20,000–30,000 in all—settled in Palestine. From

1882–1903 most of this first wave settled in the cities of Palestine, but some 3,000 lived in a series of agricultural colonies along the coastal plane and the northern highlands of Mount Carmel, supported by European Jewish philanthropists like Moses Montefiore and Baron Edmond de Rothschild.

This movement gained momentum in 1896 with the publication of Theodore Herzl's landmark book, *The Jewish State*. Herzl, a Viennese journalist, encouraged the spread of a new Jewish nationalist movement that came to be known as Zionism. Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in the summer of 1897, in which the World Zionist Organization was established and set out its aims, "to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law."⁶

The World Zionist Organization needed to gain international support for its project. With the outbreak of World War I, the organization moved its headquarters from Berlin to London. The leader of the organization was Chaim Weizmann, a chemistry professor whose contributions to the war effort (he made a discovery of direct application to the production of artillery shells) gave him access to the highest levels of British government. Weizmann took advantage of his connections to seek the government's formal support of Zionism.⁷ After more than two years' active lobbying with Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Foreign Minister Arthur Balfour, Weizmann secured the endorsement he sought. In a letter dated November 2, 1917, Balfour reported to Weizmann:

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.⁸

Such a sweeping pronouncement clearly had British interests at heart. By extending their support to Zionist aspirations in Palestine, Balfour told the war cabinet, "we should be able to carry on extremely useful propaganda both in Russia and America" where "the vast majority of Jews . . . appeared to be favourable to Zionism." Moreover, the Zionists returned the favor and, following the Balfour Declaration, lobbied for Palestine to be placed under British rule, resolving one of Britain's misgivings with the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which left Palestine under an ill-defined international administration.

The moment of truth, when Britain was forced to confront its conflicting promises, came in December 1917. The Balfour Declaration was a public statement, openly discussed by the British government. The Sykes-Picot Agreement, in contrast, was

concluded in secret between the three Entente partners. Following the Russian Revolution in October 1917, the Bolsheviks began to publish confidential documents from the foreign ministry to discredit the secret diplomacy of the tsarist government—among them the exchange of letters that constituted the Sykes-Picot Agreement. News of the secret agreement for the partition of the Ottoman Empire reached Istanbul before the Arab world. The Ottomans and Germans saw an opportunity to drive a wedge between the Hashemites and the British.

The Ottomans, besieged by the British army in Palestine, seized on British perfidy to approach the Hashemites with a peace offer. The Ottoman commander, Cemal Pasha, elaborated on the theme of the British duping the Arabs in a speech he gave in Beirut on December 4, 1917:

Were not the liberation promised to the Sharif Husain by the British a mirage and a delusion, had there been some prospect, however remote, of his dreams of independence being realised, I might have conceded some speck of reason to the revolt in the Hejaz. But, the real intentions of the British are now known: it has not taken them so very long to come to light. And thus will the Sharif Husain . . . be made to suffer the humiliation, which he has brought upon himself, of having bartered the dignity conferred upon him by the Caliph of Islam [i.e., the Ottoman sultan] for a state of enslavement to the British.⁹

Cemal Pasha offered generous terms to the Hashemites with the hope that they might abandon their alliance with Britain and return to the Ottoman fold. Sharif Husayn and his sons faced a difficult decision, but they opted to preserve their alliance with Britain in order to seek their independence from the Ottomans. Arab trust in British promises, however, had been shaken—and with good grounds. Between the Husayn-McMahon correspondence, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and the Balfour Declaration, the British government had promised most of Greater Syria and Mesopotamia to at least two parties, and in the case of Palestine, to no less than three.

To reassure their Arab allies of their good intentions, in November 1918, after the final Ottoman retreat from Arab territory, the British and French issued a palliative public statement. In their joint declaration, **the countries set out their war aims in Arab lands as "the complete and definite emancipation of the peoples so long oppressed by the Turks and the establishment of national governments and administrations deriving their authority from the initiative and free choice of the indigenous populations."**¹⁰ The British and French took pains to reassure the Arabs that they sought no gain from their actions. Such disingenuous statements calmed Arab public opinion in the short run but had little bearing on Anglo-French imperial interests that underlay their partition agreements.

As the Great War came to an end, the victorious Entente Powers set themselves the daunting task of restoring order—their vision of it, that is—to a world troubled by war. In the great queue of postwar issues to be resolved, the impatient leaders of the Arab world were told to take a number and have a seat. The peacemakers would address their concerns, and the conflicts of interest arising from British wartime promises, in due course.

In more than 100 meetings between January and June 1919, the leaders of the victorious Entente met in Paris to impose terms on their vanquished foes—Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. A serving American president left the United States for the very first time to play a role in world diplomacy. David Lloyd George and George Clemenceau, the prime ministers of Britain and France, took the lead in setting the agenda. Together with Italy, these states comprised the Council of Four that would make most of the decisions in Paris. After four years of “the war to end all wars,” France and Great Britain were determined to use the Paris Peace Conference to ensure Germany would never rise to pose a threat to the peace of Europe again. They would use the conference to redraw the maps of Europe, Asia, and Africa, including the Arab world. And they would reward their own war efforts with the territory and colonial possessions of the defeated powers.

Among the peacemakers at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, U.S. president Woodrow Wilson spoke with an idealism that electrified people under foreign domination around the world. In his address to a joint session of Congress delivered on January 8, 1918, Wilson set out a vision of America’s postwar policies in fourteen famous points. He declared an end to “the day of conquest and aggrandizement” and asserted the radical view that in colonial matters the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the claims of the imperial power. Wilson addressed Arab aspirations in his twelfth point, assuring Arabs “an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.” For many in the Arab world, this was their first encounter with the emerging American superpower that would come to dominate world affairs in the twentieth century. As the world assembled in Paris to work out the terms of peace, the Arabs looked to Woodrow Wilson as the standard-bearer of their aspirations.

Among the Arab delegations to present their case in Paris was the commander of the Arab Revolt, Amir Faysal. Born in the Arabian highlands of Taif, Faysal (1883–1933) was the third son of Sharif Husayn ibn ‘Ali of Mecca (served 1908–1917). Faysal spent much of his childhood in Istanbul, where he received an Ottoman education. He was elected in 1913 to the Ottoman Parliament to represent the Hijazi port of Jidda. Faysal visited Damascus in 1916 and was appalled by Cemal Pasha’s

repressive measures against Arab nationalists. While in Damascus, Faysal met with members of secret Arab nationalist societies and took the leading role in commanding operations during the Arab Revolt of 1916–1918.

Following the Ottoman retreat in 1918, Amir Faysal established an Arab government in Damascus with the aim of redeeming Britain’s pledge to support the creation of an Arab Kingdom. At the Versailles Peace Conference, Faysal sought to consolidate his position in Syria and to force the British to honor their commitments to his father, as set out in the Husayn-McMahon correspondence of 1915–1916, over Britain’s other wartime promises. He came to terms with the Balfour Declaration and even signed an agreement with Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann in January 1919 conceding Palestine to the Zionist movement on condition that the remainder of his demands for an Arab kingdom be fulfilled in full by the Allies. “But if the slightest modification or departure were to be made” to Hashemite demands for an Arab kingdom, Faysal penned at the bottom of his agreement with Weizmann, “I shall not then be bound by a single word of the present Agreement.”¹¹ Faysal had good reason to doubt that he would ever have to honor his agreement with Weizmann.

In January 1919, Faysal presented the Supreme Council of the Paris Peace Conference with a memorandum setting out Arab aspirations. He intended to be realistic, going so far as to tone down many of his father’s original demands set out in his correspondence with McMahon three years earlier. In his memo, Faysal wrote that “the aim of the Arab nationalist movements . . . is to unite the Arabs eventually into one nation.” He based his claim on Arab ethnic and linguistic unity, on the alleged aspirations of prewar Arab nationalist parties in Syria and Mesopotamia, and on Arab service to the Allies’ war effort. He acknowledged that the different Arab lands were “very different economically and socially” and that it would be impossible to integrate them into a single state at once. He sought immediate and full independence for Greater Syria (including Lebanon, Syria, and Transjordan) and the western Arabian province of Hijaz; accepted foreign intervention in Palestine to mediate between Jewish and Arab demands, and in Mesopotamia, where Britain had declared its interest in oil fields; and declared the Yemen and the central Arabian province of Najd (with whose Saudi rulers Britain had concluded a formal agreement) outside the scope of the Arab kingdom. Yet he maintained a commitment to “an eventual union of these areas under one sovereign government.” He concluded, “If our independence be conceded and our local competence established, the natural influences of race, language, and interest will soon draw us into one people.”¹²

This vision of a unified Arab state was the last thing that the Allies wanted. Faysal’s presence in Paris was an embarrassment to the British and French alike. He was holding the British to their word and getting in the way of French imperial ambitions. The Americans provided a way out for what was becoming an awkward situation for Britain, France, and the Hashemites. Wilson suggested the formation of

a multinational commission of enquiry to determine the wishes of the Syrian people firsthand. For Wilson, the commission would set a precedent for national self-determination, putting the principles of his Fourteen Points to work. For Britain and France, the fact-finding commission would defer consideration of Hashemite claims for months, during which time they would be free to dispose of Arab lands as they saw fit. Faysal took the suggestion at face value and thanked Wilson for giving the Arabs the opportunity to express "their own purposes and ideals for their national future."¹³

In hindsight, it is easy to see that the American-led King-Crane Commission was a fool's mission. The British and French declined to nominate officials to take part in the study, thereby undermining the validity of what had become an American, rather than a multinational, delegation. As they had no intention of being bound by the commission's findings, they did not wish to commit their own diplomats to the process. And yet the King-Crane Report is a unique document, providing in the words of its authors "a fairly accurate analysis of present political opinion in Syria"—a glimpse into the aspirations and fears of rural and urban communities in that brief moment between Ottoman and European rule.¹⁴

In March 1919, President Wilson named Oberlin College president Henry Churchill King and Chicago businessman Charles R. Crane to head the commission. Both men had extensive knowledge of the Middle East—King as a scholar of biblical history and Crane through his travels in Ottoman lands, dating back to 1878. The Americans set out for Syria in May 1919 with instructions to meet with local representatives and report back on the aspirations of the Arab peoples in Syria, Iraq, and Palestine. The King-Crane Commission proved to be much more than just a fact-finding mission. The two men's presence in Greater Syria set in motion intense nationalist activity involving a broader swath of the Syrian population than any political movement up to that point.

When Amir Faysal returned to Syria from Paris empty-handed, he presented the imminent arrival of the King-Crane Commission to his followers as a favorable development and a serious step toward achieving Syrian national aspirations. He gave a speech to an assembly of notables from across Greater Syria to brief them on his experiences. He could not tell them the whole truth, of how he had been kept waiting and was humiliated by the peacemakers in Paris, who seemed intent on rejecting his claims to uphold their own imperial interests in Greater Syria. Now that he was back on Arab territory, speaking his own language to his own supporters, he turned the condescension back on the Europeans. "I went . . . to claim our due at the Conference which was meeting in Paris," he explained. "I soon realized that the Westerners were profoundly ignorant about the Arabs and that their information was derived entirely from the tales of the *Arabian Nights*." In many regards, Faysal was right. Aside from

a handful of experts, the average politician in Britain and France would have known very little about the Arab world. "Naturally this ignorance of theirs made me spend a good deal of time in simply giving basic facts," Faysal explained.

Looking out over the faces of his supporters, who frequently interrupted his speech to pledge their devotion, he could not admit to failure. However, he stretched the truth beyond recognition when he asserted that the Allies had recognized the independence of the Arab people in principle. He tried to present the King-Crane Commission as an extension of great power recognition of Arab aspirations. "The international committee," he said, "will ask you to express yourselves in any way you please, for the nations today do not want to govern other peoples except with their consent."¹⁵

Buoyed by Faysal's words, Syrian nationalists set to work to unite the people of Syria behind a common agenda. The Arab government distributed sermons to be read in Friday prayers in Syrian mosques, political and cultural associations were enlisted to prepare petitions for the King-Crane Commission, and the headmen of villages and town quarters were mobilized to encourage an enthusiastic response to the commission. Thousands of leaflets were printed and distributed in towns and villages. For people new to nationalist politics, the leaflets provided straightforward ideas in the form of slogans. "We demand absolute independence," asserted one leaflet in bold Arabic and English. Another leaflet exhorted all Syrians to defend their freedom and used parentheses to set out nationalist slogans within the longer text.

Let no one mislead you into betraying the land of your grandfathers, or your children and grandchildren will curse you. Live free! Liberate yourself from the yoke of oppression. Seek your own benefit and make your demands the following:

First: Demand (Complete Political Independence) without restriction or condition or protection or trusteeship.

Second: Accept no partition of your people's land and your fatherland, in other words (Syria in its entirety is one and indivisible).

Third: Demand your country's borders, the Taurus Mountains in the north, the Sinai Desert in the south, the Mediterranean to the West.

Fourth: Seek for the other liberated Arab lands independence and union [with Syria].

Fifth: When necessary, show preference in financial or technical insistence to America on condition that it not compromise our complete political independence.

Sixth: Protest Article 22 of the League of Nations setting out the necessity of trusteeship over people seeking independence.

Seventh: Refuse absolutely any claim made by any state to historic or preponderant rights in our lands.

(signed) An informed Arab nationalist¹⁶

Even in the Arabic original the language is awkward, but the message was unambiguous. As local communities prepared to meet with the King-Crane Commission, these demands were frequently repeated in the petitions they submitted and in the slogans chanted and painted on signs and banners.

Having mobilized Syrian public opinion, Faysal and his advisors convened a makeshift parliament to present the Syrian people's views to the international commission. The Hashemites knew enough about European statecraft to recognize that according to their rules, a nation expressed its legitimate aspirations through an elected assembly. They relied on Ottoman electoral procedures to select delegates from the inland towns of Syria. They had to resort to other methods in Lebanon and Palestine, where the British and French occupation authorities obstructed all political action.¹⁷ Leading members of notable families and tribes in Palestine and Lebanon were invited to Damascus to join the Syrian General Congress. Nearly one hundred delegates had been selected to take part in the Congress, though only sixty-nine actually managed to reach Damascus in time to participate in its deliberations. They were working against the clock to produce a statement of national aspirations before the King-Crane Commission reached Damascus.

The King-Crane Commission arrived in Jaffa on June 10, 1919, and spent six weeks touring towns and villages in Palestine, Syria, Transjordan, and Lebanon. The commissioners kept statistics on all aspects of their trip. They held meetings in more than forty towns and rural centers and met with 442 delegations, representing people from all walks of life, such as municipal and administrative councils, village chiefs, and tribal shaykhs. They received farmers and tradesmen, and representatives of over a dozen Christian denominations, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Jews, Druze, and other minority groups. They met with eight different women's delegations and marveled at "the new role women are playing in the nationalistic movements in the Orient." In the course of their travels they collected 1,863 petitions, with a total of 91,079 signatures—representing nearly 3 percent of the total population of Greater Syria (which they estimated at 3.2 million). The commissioners could not have been more thorough in sounding out public opinion in Greater Syria.

King and Crane reached Damascus on June 25. Yusif al-Hakim, a minister in Amir Faysal's government, recalled:

They paid an official visit to the Royal Palace and to the head of the government. They then returned to their hotel, where the first people to greet them were the men of the press. In brief, they told the journalists that they had merely come to assess the will of the people in their political future, and to learn which state they would choose to serve as a mandatory over them for a period to provide technical and economic assistance, in accordance with previous statements of President Wilson.¹⁸

On July 2 the Syrian Congress presented the commission with a ten-point resolution that, they maintained, represented both the views of the Syrian people and the government of Amir Faysal.¹⁹ The resolution revealed a surprising degree of knowledge on the part of the drafters about international affairs; the text was replete with quotes from President Wilson and the Covenant of the League of Nations as well as references to the conflicting promises of Britain's wartime diplomacy and the aims of Zionism. King and Crane claimed the resolution was the most important document of their mission.

In their resolution, the delegates of the Syrian Congress demanded complete political independence for Syria within geographic boundaries separating it from Turkey, Iraq, Najd, Hijaz, and Egypt. They wanted their country to be ruled as a constitutional monarchy, with Amir Faysal as their king. They rejected the mandate principle set out in Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations outright, arguing that the Arabs were no less gifted than the Bulgarians, Serbians, Greeks, and Romanians, all of whom had secured full independence from the Ottomans without such European tutelage. The Syrian delegates expressed their full willingness to come under a mandate that was restricted to providing technical and economic assistance. They most trusted the Americans to fulfill this role, "believing that the American Nation is farthest from any thought of colonization and has no political ambition in our country." Should America refuse to serve, the Syrian people would accept a British mandate, but they rejected any role for France whatsoever. The resolution also called for the independence of Iraq, then under British occupation.

The Syrian Congress took a strong stand against the secret wartime diplomacy. In a swipe against both the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration, its members wrote: "The fundamental principles laid down by President Wilson in condemnation of secret treaties impel us to protest most emphatically against any treaty that stipulates the partition of our Syrian country and against any private engagement aiming at the establishment of Zionism in the southern part of Syria; therefore we ask the complete annulment of these conventions and agreements." They ruled out any separation of Lebanon or Palestine from the Syrian kingdom, and went on to reject the aims of Zionism as inimical to their national interests. "We oppose the pretensions of the Zionists to create a Jewish commonwealth in the southern part of Syria, known as Palestine, and oppose Zionist migration to any part of our country; for we do not acknowledge their title but consider them a grave peril to our people from the national, economical, and political points of view."

There was a tone of moral indignation to the Resolution of the Syrian Congress. Many in the provisional Syrian government had fought with Amir Faysal in the Arab Revolt. They believed they were wartime allies of Britain and France, and had contributed significantly to the victory on the Ottoman front. Faysal and his Arab Army had entered Damascus on October 2, 1918, and liberated the city from Ottoman

rule. The people of Syria, they believed, were now entitled to determine their own political future by rights earned on the battlefield. The Syrian General Congress expected basic justice from its wartime allies, "in order that our political rights may not be less after the war than they were before, since we have shed so much blood in the cause of our liberty and independence."

In August 1919, after six weeks in Syria, King and Crane withdrew to Istanbul to draft their report. The commissioners subjected all of the materials they had gathered to extensive analysis. In their recommendations to the Peace Conference, King and Crane largely endorsed the Syrian Congress's resolution. They called for a single Syrian state, undivided, with Amir Faysal as head of a constitutional monarchy. They recommended that Syria as a whole be placed under a single mandatory power, preferably American (though with Britain as second choice), for a limited period, to provide support. And they urged major modifications to the Zionist project, with limits on Jewish immigration. King and Crane argued that the Balfour Declaration's promises, both to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine *and* to respect "the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine," could not be reconciled. "The fact came out repeatedly in the Commission's conference with Jewish representatives," the King-Crane report noted, "that the Zionists looked forward to a practically complete dispossession of the present non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine, by various forms of purchase."²⁰ Not surprisingly, the commissioners found that nine-tenths of the non-Jewish population of Palestine were "emphatically against the entire Zionist program" and that 72 percent of the petitions they received in Greater Syria were directed against Zionism.

The commission submitted its report to the American delegation in Paris at the end of August 1919. Though Amir Faysal was not privy to the report, he could not have asked for more. For the Europeans, however, the King-Crane report was a very inconvenient document. The report was received by the Peace Conference secretariat and shelved without further consultation. It was only made public three years later, by which time Britain and France had concluded a division of the Arab world that they believed at the time better served their interests.

Britain declared its intention to withdraw its troops from Syria and Lebanon on November 1, 1919, with the transfer of authority to the French military to follow. The Syrian General Congress, faced with an imminent French occupation, decided to take matters into its own hands. Its members prepared a declaration of independence, based on the resolution delivered to the King-Crane Commission, which was read from the town hall of Damascus on March 8, 1920. Faysal was declared king of Syria, including Palestine and Lebanon.

The British and French governments refused to recognize the Syrian declaration of independence. The British looked the other way as the French prepared to occupy

Damascus and unseat their wartime ally, Amir—now King—Faysal. Increasingly isolated at home for his failure to deliver on his promises of independence, Faysal could only rally a small band of supporters to confront the French army as it advanced from Lebanon toward Syria. The Damascenes did not believe Faysal's cause worth dying for.

At dawn on July 24, 1920, a group of 2,000 Arab volunteers assembled at an isolated caravansary named Khan Maysalun, in a mountain pass on the road from Beirut to Damascus. They faced a bizarre column of colonial soldiers in French uniforms: Algerians, Moroccans, and Senegalese troops under French commanders sent to secure French rule in Syria. It was a reflection of the power of the French Empire that Arab Muslim soldiers from its North African colonies were willing to serve their colonial masters against Arab Muslim irregulars in Syria. One of the members of the provisional Syrian government, and a committed Arab Nationalist, Sati al-Husri, recorded his memories of the "day of Maysalun" as he followed events from Damascus:

Details of the battle began to trickle back. Although I couldn't entertain any hopes of victory in view of what I knew about our army and the equipment of the French, I kept wishing that the outcome would remain in doubt as long as possible for the sake of our military honour. By 10 o'clock, however, we received word that the army had been defeated and the front shattered. Yusuf al-Azmah [the Minister of War and commander of the armed forces] was reported to have been killed. I said no—he committed suicide at Maysalun, a true martyr!²¹

French forces swept past the defenders at Maysalun to enter Damascus, marking the start of an unhappy colonial occupation that would last twenty-six years. Yet the symbolic significance of Maysalun spread far beyond the frontiers of Syria. To the Arabs, this small battle represented the betrayal of Britain's wartime promises, the bankruptcy of U.S. president Woodrow Wilson's vision of national self-determination, and the triumph of British and French colonial self-interest over the hopes and aspirations of millions of Arabs. Maysalun was equated with original sin, when the Europeans imposed their state system on the Middle East, dividing a people who aspired to unity and placing them under foreign rule against their will. The new Arab states and boundaries of the postwar settlement proved remarkably enduring. So too did the problems they engendered.

Nationalist politicians in Egypt also believed they could achieve their independence from Britain at the Paris Peace Conference. Misled by Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, the Egyptian political establishment thought that Paris would inaugurate

