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Broken Promises: The French Expulsion of Emir Feisal and the Failed Struggle for Syrian Independence

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The French Expulsion of Emir Feisal and the Failed Struggle for Syrian Independence

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Abstract

For well over a century, global powers have sought to exert their influence over the peoples and the resources of the Middle East. This paper analyzes how Emir Feisal, son of the Sherif of Mecca and leader of the Arab Rebellion during World War I, failed to navigate either the demands of the Syrians who proclaimed him king in March 1920 or the political realities imposed by the Paris Peace Conference. Using primary and secondary source material in English, French, and Arabic, this paper argues that Feisal's diplomatic, political, and military resistance to the French Mandate caused the French Government to evict him from the country in July 1920, terminating his brief rule as King of Syria. These sources detail the broken promises made by the Allies to supporters of Arab independence and the lost promise of an independent Syrian state after World War I.

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Lastly, I would like to thank Carnegie Mellon's Humanities Scholar Program and its Director, Professor Timothy Haggerty, for their recommendations and feedback regarding my project.

Note from the Author

Some of the primary and secondary sources quoted in this paper come from Arabic or French sources. I have translated them into English with the goal of preserving the original meaning of the authors. Since other scholars may translate these quotes differently, any quotes I have translated into English are identified in the footnotes. Finally, many of the Arab names that appear in this work can be transliterated [ie. changed from the Arabic alphabet to the Roman alphabet] using multiple spellings. Whenever I have quoted an author or a source that uses a different spelling for an Arab name than I have chosen, I have removed their choice of spelling and replaced it with my own in brackets in order to avoid confusion.

Introduction

The story of Arab nationalism mirrors that of the Zionist movement in several significant ways. First, both sought a revival of their cultures and their civilizations in the lands where they once flourished. Second, each movement gained traction and momentum in the early twentieth century. Third, the leaders of both movements received promises of support from the British Government during World War I for the realization of their nationalist goals. However, these movements differed in one important aspect; while the Zionist movement successfully used its British backing to continue its program for a national Jewish home in Palestine following the war, the promise made to the Arabs went unfulfilled.

Prior to World War I, Arab nationalist thought began to develop in Syria, where discontent with the Ottoman Empire's capitulations to European powers and French favoritism towards Maronite Christian and other minority groups inflamed nationalist feelings among the region's Arab Muslims. Sherif Hussein of Mecca, leader of the religious family dynasty charged with defending the holy Islamic city, tapped into the feelings of Arab nationalism by inspiring his followers with visions of an independent Arab kingdom in the wake of the British-sponsored Arab revolt against Ottoman Turk rule. Damascus welcomed Emir Feisal, one of Sherif Hussein's sons, and his Arab army when they entered the city on October 3, 1918, on the heels of a British assault against the Ottomans.

At the same time Feisal began to lay the groundwork for an independent Arab kingdom, British leaders grappled with the contradictory private agreements they had made with the Arabs and the French regarding who should govern the former Ottoman territory of Syria. When Feisal became aware of Britain's agreement with the French, which gave France control

over modern day Lebanon and Syria, he expressed Syrian opposition and prepared to argue the case for Syrian independence and self-determination at the upcoming Paris Peace Conference, scheduled to open in January 1919. After failing to resist French control under the Peace Conference's proposed mandate system, Feisal returned to Syria and became the sovereign leader of Syrian independence and the champion of Arab nationalism. France had initially agreed to recognize Feisal as a representative of Syria and Lebanon and sought to work through him to achieve French interests. However, the relationship between France and Feisal continued to deteriorate after the National Syrian Congress proclaimed Feisal King of Syria in March 1920. In July 1920, the French Government expelled Emir Feisal from Syria for consistently resisting French control of the Syrian mandate diplomatically, politically, and militarily.

History of the French in Syria

French designs in Syria stretch back nearly one-thousand years, to the time of the Crusades. Pope Urban II, a Frenchman, called upon European Christians to rescue the faltering Byzantine Empire by seizing the Holy Land during a speech in 1095. Many of the armies of the First Crusade set out from France the next year, and Franks formed the backbone of many subsequent crusader endeavors. Although Christian kingdoms governed parts of Syria and Palestine for long stretches of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Europeans ultimately lost the Holy Land to besieging Arab, Egyptian, and Turkish forces.

In the early 1500s, Sultan Salim I of the Ottoman Empire began to bring the Arab world under Turkish control by conquering Syria and Egypt. Syria remained under Ottoman control until the end of World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman state. Nevertheless,

Europeans, and particularly the French, once again successfully infiltrated the Middle East long before the fall of the Ottoman Empire. By 1535, the French had won their first capitulations from the Ottomans. Among the privileges King Francis I won from Ottoman leader Suleyman I were trading rights for French merchants, French jurisdiction over civil and criminal cases where both parties were French, and freedom of religion.¹

Over time, new capitulations reflected the growing French presence in Greater Syria, which included modern-day Syria, Lebanon, and Israel/Palestine. Louis XV signed a new agreement with the Ottomans in 1740 that placed all Christian visitors to the Ottoman Empire under the protection of France.² Later, the French extrapolated this agreement to take responsibility for all Catholic Christians in Syria, including the indigenous Maronites. French settlements appeared in Aleppo, Alexandretta, al-Ladhiqiyah, Tripoli, Sidon, Acre, and al-Ramlah, and French companies received contracts to construct railways in Syria and ports in Beirut, Tripoli, Jaffa, and Haifa during the nineteenth century.³ Historian Philip Hitti captured French priorities in Syria during the Ottoman period, writing, "France's interest rested on economic considerations, a policy of prestige, the time-honored capitulations and the traditional friendly relations with the Catholic and Maronite minorities."⁴

To gain influence and advance its interests in Greater Syria, France was happy to exploit its relations with the faltering Ottomans. In December 1912, French Premier Raymond

¹ James Harry Scott. *The Law Affecting Foreigners in Egypt: As the Result of the Capitulations, with an Account of Their Origin and Development* (Edinburgh: William Green and Sons, Law Publishers, 1908), 43-4.

² Philip K. Hitti. *History of Syria, Including Lebanon and Palestine* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), 672.

³ Jan Karl Tanenbaum. "France and the Arab Middle East, 1914-1920," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 68, no. 7 (1978): 5, accessed September 26, 2010, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1006273>.

⁴ Hitti, 697.

Poincaré announced French support for the “integrity of the Ottoman Empire.”⁵ Yet on several occasions prior to World War I, Georges Leygues, the chairman of the Chamber Foreign Affairs Committee in the French Senate, publicly stated that France expected its aspirations to take precedent in the region if the Ottoman Empire did indeed collapse.⁶

Although the interests of the French Government may not have changed much over the centuries, the situation in the Ottoman Empire did. The most relevant changes occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, with the rise of Germany. Kaiser Wilhelm found a ready partner in Sultan ‘Abd-al-Hamid II during his visit to Istanbul in 1898, where the Sultan granted a German company and German engineers concessions for a railway connecting Berlin to Baghdad and Constantinople to Medina.⁷ Further threatening to French interests was a 1908 coup d’état, when a group of Ottoman military officers called the Young Turks seized power and overthrew Sultan al-Hamid II the following year. The Young Turks held strong nationalist convictions and set out to revitalize the empire and centralize power in Istanbul. These developments undermined centuries of French dominance in Greater Syria and caused considerable anxiety in Paris on the eve of World War I.

Once the war broke out and the future of the Ottoman Empire came into question, French officials justified establishing French control in Syria on several levels. French companies had large financial and industrial investments in the Middle East, and the future of the French economy rested upon trade with the major cities of Beirut and Damascus. France had traditionally protected Middle Eastern Christians in the Levant, a point of honor.

⁵ Tanenbaum, 5.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hitti, 698-9.

Moreover, the possession of Damascus would increase France's prestige among its other Muslim subjects in North Africa.⁸ Vying among themselves for control of the region, France and other European powers neglected another important constituent – the native Arab population.

Hussein-McMahon, Sykes-Picot, and the Arab Revolt

Modern Arab nationalism began in Syria and Lebanon as an intellectual movement at the turn of the nineteenth century that sought the revival of the Arabic language, history and literature; Syrian and Lebanese Christians took a leading role in the movement.⁹ The movement soon grew to have political ramifications as well. Arab elites and intellectuals rejected the efforts made by the Young Turks to centralize authority, as reflected by a 1913 Arab congress in Paris that called for greater autonomy for the Arab regions.¹⁰ While historical, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious bonds tied Arabs together, the movement suffered from a lack of unity among its leadership.

The commencement of World War I and the precarious state of the Ottoman Empire overtook the dispute between the Young Turks and Arab nationalists. Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner to Egypt, contacted Sherif Hussein of Mecca in 1915 to encourage him to lead an Arab revolt against the Ottomans; Sherif Hussein responded by demanding in return an independent Arab state that would revive the old Islamic caliphate from the Sinai Peninsula in the west to Persia in the east, and from Syria in the north to the Indian Ocean in the south.¹¹ These initial contacts developed into the famous Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, wherein McMahon promised British support for an ambiguously defined Arab

⁸ Tanenbaum, 6.

⁹ Hitti, 701.

¹⁰ Ibid., 702.

¹¹ Tanenbaum, 8.

state under Sherif Hussein if Hussein spurred the Arabs to rebel against the Ottomans.

McMahon excluded present-day Lebanon from the Arab state, stating “as the interests of our ally, France, are involved in [the vilayets Aleppo and Beirut], the question will require careful consideration and a further communication on the subject will be addressed to you in due course.”¹² Hussein and McMahon never agreed on the exact boundaries of an independent Arab state.

During the final months of 1915, the British also began to negotiate with the French over the future of the Middle East. The French representative to the negotiations, François Georges Picot, went to London on November 23 in an effort to secure French dominance over Greater Syria following the end of the war and the expected collapse of the Ottoman Empire.¹³ British representative Sir Arthur Nicolson informed Picot of the arrangement between the British and Sherif Hussein at their first meeting. Picot immediately rejected the proposal to incorporate Syria into an Arab state under Hussein and returned to Paris for consultations.¹⁴ Paris had already suffered German and Italian influence in Greater Syria before World War I, and it now appeared as if the French would have to worry about the regional ambitions of Britain as well. French suspicions and at times hostility regarding British intentions lasted through the Paris Peace Conference.

Nonetheless, the French did not abandon their negotiations with the British. In Paris, Premier Aristide Briand did not see a terrible incompatibility with the British pledge to Hussein

¹² “Hussein-McMahon Correspondence No. 6: Translation of a letter from McMahon to Hussein, December 14, 1915,” Jewish Virtual Library, accessed October 22, 2010, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/hussmac1.html>.

¹³ David Fromkin. *A Peace to End All Peace: Creating the Modern Middle East, 1914-1922* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1989), 189.

¹⁴ Tanenbaum, 10-11.

and French aspirations. The British had already offered to recognize direct French control in Lebanon. As for Syria, Jan Tanenbaum wrote that “Briand reasoned that direct possession of Syria would entail enormous military and administrative expenses. A protectorate would be less expensive and would still allow France to control the area.”¹⁵ Briand expressed concern about how France could control an independent Arab state in Syria under Sherif Hussein, but came to the conclusion that the British promise to the Arabs would go unfulfilled. Picot agreed with the assessment, arguing that the British were “offering [the Arabs] a lot while admitting that the building they are constructing will probably not last beyond the war.”¹⁶

Picot returned to London to negotiate with Sir Mark Sykes, who had taken over for Nicolson. Sykes, along with many British officials, shared the French view of what “Arab independence” meant. According to David Fromkin, “Sykes characterized Arabs as wanting recognition of their essential unity, but only as an ideal.”¹⁷ In the words of Sykes himself, the Arabs simply wanted “[a] confederation of Arabic speaking states, under the aegis of an Arabian prince.”¹⁸ This marked a far cry from the revival of the Islamic caliphate envisioned by Sherif Hussein. With both the French and British believing a unified Arab state would not come to pass, and with France now accepting indirect control over Syria, both governments signed on to the Sykes-Picot Agreement in early 1916. The secret agreement bestowed direct control of Lebanon and exclusive indirect control of Syria to France.

Sherif Hussein instigated the Arab revolt against the Turks in June 1916, but the rebellion was largely limited to the Hejaz, or the Arabian Peninsula. Moreover, Hussein’s

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹⁷ Fromkin, 193.

¹⁸ Ibid.

soldiers consisted of only a few thousand tribesmen, mostly Bedouin. Even with British and French support, Hussein and his followers barely liberated Jeddah and Mecca from Ottoman control. In October 1916, British intelligence officer T.E. Lawrence arrived in the Hejaz with the purpose of ramping up the Arab rebellion, where he met Hussein's son Emir Feisal. Unimpressed with Hussein's son Abdullah, Lawrence immediately took a liking to Feisal. Soon thereafter, Lawrence met with incoming British High Commissioner of Egypt, Reginald Wingate, and advised him that Hussein's forces be used in a guerrilla campaign alongside a British military advance, and that Feisal command the Arab guerilla forces.¹⁹ Lawrence returned to a stalemate between Arab and Ottoman forces in the Hejaz; to the north, the Ottomans still controlled Medina. To be fair to the Arabs, British General Sir Archibald Murray of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force failed to break through into Palestine via Gaza in the first half of 1917.

General Sir Edmund Allenby took over the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in June 1917 and prepared for a new offensive against the Ottomans in Palestine. At the same time, the British transported Feisal and his Arab guerillas to Aqaba. Feisal and his forces captured the city and served as a right flank to Allenby's march on Jerusalem.²⁰ Jerusalem fell to Allenby on December 11, 1917, and the British and Arabs under Feisal set their sights on capturing Damascus. Although Feisal's band caused considerable harassment and sabotage to Ottoman forces on the road to Damascus, the British carried out the bulk of the fighting. Still, Allenby allowed Feisal's troops to enter Damascus first on October 1, 1918.²¹ Three months before the

¹⁹ Ibid., 226-7.

²⁰ Ibid., 312-3.

²¹ Tanenbaum, 21.

Paris Peace Conference and nearly two years after the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence and Sykes-Picot Agreement, the British had military control over Syria.

Resisting the French through Foreign Affairs

Emir Feisal's flurry of diplomatic activity before and during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 marked the beginning of tensions with the French authorities and their ultimate decision to expel him from Syria. The French directed much of their antipathy towards Britain during this time period because they distrusted British collaboration with Feisal during the war and the occupation of Syria. From the point of view of French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, the British wished to abrogate the Sykes-Picot arrangement by establishing Emir Feisal in Syria for the purpose of excluding the French from the Middle East. Beyond his British connections, French leaders also harbored a negative view of Feisal due to his diplomatic dealings with the Zionists and Americans. Evidence of Clemenceau's lack of confidence in Feisal's ability to administer Syria on France's behalf was manifest in an agreement reached with Feisal once it became clear the French would receive control over the area. The January 6 Agreement highlighted the distrust of Emir Feisal with its conditions that Feisal act in good faith with Britain and rally his followers behind the French Mandate, or risk the French use of force. Needless to say, the conditions attached to the January 6 Agreement set the stage for Feisal's expulsion six-months later.

British troops had largely conquered Syrian territory in 1918 and General Allenby had the prerogative to administer Syria as an occupied territory as Commander-in-Chief of the occupying forces. To maintain stability and a popular base of support in the conquered territories, Allenby allowed the Arabs under Emir Feisal to control the civil administration of

Syria.²² T.E. Lawrence entered Damascus days ahead of Feisal and began to assemble an Arab Government, with Allenby confirming Ali Rikabi as Feisal's Military Governor on October 3, 1919.²³ That same day the terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement clashed with Feisal's understanding of the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence when Allenby informed Feisal of his instructions to uphold the agreement between France and England, namely French tutelage for Feisal's civil administration in Syria and French control over Lebanon. Feisal objected to the separation of Lebanon from Syria and to any French assistance, to which Allenby responded that Feisal would have to accept this as fact until the end of the war.²⁴ Thus began Feisal's diplomatic initiative to obtain an independent Arab state and end French designs in Syria based on the promises made by Henry McMahon to his father, Sherif Hussein.

Feisal Seeks British Support

Feisal's diplomatic efforts focused on winning a British commitment to uphold their promise of an independent Arab state that reached north to include Syria. The facts that Britain occupied Syria militarily at the close of the war and that the British Empire was still the world's greatest power made British acquiescence to Arab independence all the more necessary. On November 21, 1918, Feisal set sail for Europe from Beirut at the invitation of the British Government to serve as the representative of his father and by extension all Arab interests at the Paris Peace Conference.²⁵

The impending visit of Feisal shocked the French, who did not wish to confer upon him any official status. M. Jean Gout, the Under-Secretary for Asia in the French Ministry of Foreign

²² Ibid., 21.

²³ T.E. Lawrence. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1935), 659.

²⁴ Fromkin, 339.

²⁵ Zeine N. Zeine. *The Struggle for Arab Independence: Western Diplomacy & the Rise and Fall of Feisal's Kingdom in Syria* (Beirut: KHAYAT'S, 1960), 52.

Affairs, wrote to Feisal's French handlers that they should "treat the Emir Feisal as if he were a General and a distinguished person but without any diplomatic standing."²⁶ Feisal arrived in France and toured the Western front between France and Germany. On December 9, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs held a reception for him, but he left for London without discussing any substantial issues that same day.

In London, Feisal's arrival followed a visit by Prime Minister Clemenceau to London for discussions with his British counterpart, Lloyd George. Throughout 1918, many high-level leaders in the British Government started to privately express their belief that the Sykes-Picot Agreement was out of date due to changing facts on the ground. Lord Curzon, the chairman of the Eastern Committee, T.E. Lawrence, Lloyd George, and Sir Mark Sykes himself all came to believe that Sykes-Picot must at least be modified, if not rescinded entirely.²⁷ A revision would preferably include a French renunciation to its claims in Syria, and the British saw supporting Arab independence under Emir Feisal as the best means to accomplish this goal. According to Tanenbaum, "Britain's interpretation of Arab self-determination was surprisingly restricted: basically it meant the absence of France from the Moslem Middle East."²⁸ Lloyd George's attempt to renegotiate Sykes-Picot with Clemenceau convinced the French that a British-Feisal conspiracy was afoot. Although they laid much of the blame at the feet of the British, the relationship between Britain and Feisal fueled French distrust and resentment towards the Arab prince.

²⁶ Gout in Zeine, 53.

²⁷ Fromkin, 342-5.

²⁸ Tanenbaum, 22.

During Clemenceau's visit to London in December 1918, two months before the opening of the Paris Peace Conference, Lloyd George began to pressure the French Prime Minister on his country's claims in the Middle East. The two leaders signed no written agreements, but Clemenceau gave Lloyd George a verbal commitment that France would relent on its claims in Palestine and Mosul.²⁹ Clemenceau believed that this modification would secure British backing for French control in Lebanon and Syria, but David Fromkin notes that "it transpired over the course of the next few months that Lloyd George had not presented all of his Middle Eastern claims when asked by Clemenceau to do so on 1 December; in addition to those he mentioned, he also wanted France to relinquish her claim to Syria."³⁰ This fact became apparent to Clemenceau soon enough at the opening of the peace conference.

As noted, London had pressed for Feisal to come to the Paris "to plead his case for an independent Syria" despite opposition from the French Government.³¹ Lloyd George further alarmed the French by refusing to back their claims over Syria in Paris. First, the British delegation claimed that Feisal's participation in the liberation of Damascus had earned him the right to rule an independent Syria. Second, Lloyd George stated that he could no longer actively support French claims in Syria because Britain was a friend to both parties.³² Third, in a meeting with Clemenceau and U.S. President Woodrow Wilson on March 20, 1919, Lloyd George argued that Sykes-Picot had only given France a mandate for Lebanon, not Syria, and stated that France should recognize an independent Syria under Feisal.³³

²⁹ Fromkin, 375.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Tanenbaum, 27.

³² Fromkin, 394-95.

³³ Tanenbaum, 28.

Feisal left Paris for Damascus in late April, upset with European plans to separate Lebanon from Syria. Upon his return to Damascus, he dropped his own diplomatic bombshell. After months of steadfastly demanding Arab independence and a unified Arab state, Feisal agreed to accept a British mandate over Syria, but not a French one. British General Clayton, to whom Feisal revealed this surprising decision, advised Feisal against such a stance since no one in the British Government wished to so blatantly challenge the French in Syria.³⁴

The Feisal-Weizmann Agreement of January 3, 1919

Emir Feisal did not deal solely with British officials in his attempts to achieve an independent Arab state. He entered into negotiations with Chaim Weizmann, President of the British Zionist Federation and, later, the World Zionist Organization, before the opening of the Paris Peace Conference. As a political movement rather than a global power, it may seem that Zionism had little to offer Feisal and the Arab nationalist movement. Yet Feisal reasoned that reaching an accommodation with the Zionists would help him to secure their support at the Paris Peace Conference and British and American support for an independent Arab state in Syria and Lebanon. Moreover, Feisal could minimize the Arab backlash to his actions because the terms of the ultimate agreement made it possible for Feisal to justify the legitimacy of Zionism based on its recognition and support for an Arab state.

General Allenby arranged for Weizmann and Feisal to first meet in June 1918, four months before the capture of Damascus. According to Weizmann, "Feisal was, in Allenby's opinion, as in that of most informed people, the only representative Arab whose influence was

³⁴ Zeine, 86-87.

of more than local importance.”³⁵ Weizmann captured his reason for visiting the Arab prince in his memoirs *Trial and Error*. “Sir Mark [Sykes],” Weizmann wrote, “then went on to speak of the Arab problem, and of the rising Arab nationalist movement...But he believed that the Arabs would come to terms with us [Zionists]—*particularly if they received Jewish support in other matters.*”³⁶ British officials and Zionist leaders both hoped to avoid conflict with the Arabs, who were now beginning to voice their own national aspirations, by reaching an accord with them on the Zionist program as enunciated in the 1917 Balfour Declaration.

Balfour’s declaration had given the support of the British Government to “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”³⁷ Zionists collaborated closely with Britain and their relationship explains why Weizmann and Feisal, who were both promised the fulfillment of their national aspirations by the British, saw room for cooperation. The June 1918 meeting between Feisal and Weizmann laid the groundwork for their agreement of January 3, 1919. At the meeting, Weizmann recounted that Feisal received him graciously and asked many questions about the Zionist program. Weizmann later wrote, “The Emir was in earnest when he said that he was eager to see the Jews and Arabs working in harmony during the Peace Conference which was to come, and that in his view the destiny of the two peoples was linked with the Middle East and must depend on the good will of the Great Powers.”³⁸

Weizmann was not the only one to come away with the impression that Feisal genuinely desired Zionist cooperation and would accept a Jewish Palestine if he could achieve an

³⁵ Chaim Weizmann. *Trial and Error: The Autobiography of Chaim Weizmann* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1949), 232.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁷ “The Balfour Declaration, 2 November, 1917,” accessed February 11, 2011, <http://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-4.html>.

³⁸ Weizmann, 235.

independent Arab Syria. Indeed, Fromkin claims that Feisal's senior British military advisor, Lieutenant-Colonel Joyce, "reported his personal opinion that Feisal welcomed the prospect of Jewish cooperation and in fact regarded it as essential to the realization of Arab ambitions."³⁹ According to these accounts, Feisal believed that working with the Zionists would help him assert his claim in Syria and pressure the British, the issuer of the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence and the Balfour Declaration, to back the claims of both parties.

Moreover, Feisal believed an agreement with the Zionists would earn him the support of the United States. According to Tanenbaum, a number of President Wilson's advisors for the Peace Conference were Zionists.⁴⁰ President Wilson had already announced that the U.S. supported self-determination in his famous Fourteen Points speech in 1918. "Wilson was naturally disposed to support the Syrians' right to choose their own government and destiny,"⁴¹ Fromkin wrote. Yet Feisal's efforts to work with the Zionists did impress the American President. When the Peace Conference opened, Feisal's willingness to deal with Zionist claims in Palestine stood in contrast to Clemenceau's refusal to budge on French claims in Syria.⁴²

Feisal and Weizmann signed their formal agreement on 3 January 1919, just before the opening of the Peace Conference. The accord opens with familiar language about the need for Arabs and Jews to work together for the fulfillment of their national aspirations before affirming a peaceful relationship between the Arab state and Palestine, the implementation of the Balfour Declaration, and other issues. Surely aggravating to the French were the words "Arab State," appearing together six times in the rather short document, and the fact that

³⁹ Fromkin, 324.

⁴⁰ Tanenbaum, 25.

⁴¹ Fromkin, 395.

⁴² Ibid.

Feisal acted as a sovereign in signing the treaty. Article IX, which refers any disputes to the British Government for arbitration, also excluded the French from handling the affairs of Syria, the “Arab State.” Lastly, Feisal included a hand-written addendum to the agreement, stating, “If the Arabs are established as I have asked in my manifesto of January 4th addressed to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, I will carry out what is written in this agreement. If changes are made, I cannot be answerable for failing to carry out this agreement.”⁴³ Thus, Feisal ensured that the Balfour Declaration and Arab independence were inextricably bound.

Feisal’s meetings with Weizmann and their January 3 agreement put pressure on Great Britain by tying up Arab acceptance for the Balfour Declaration with Arab independence and put pressure on the United States to live up to Wilson’s Fourteen Points. To the French, Balfour’s declaration, Hussein-McMahon, and the Weizmann-Feisal Agreement all served the same purpose; back-handed British attempts to exclude the French from the Middle East under the mask of self-determination, all the while Britain would offer tutelage to the Arabs and Zionists. Therefore, Feisal’s diplomatic relationship with the Zionists cultivated French anger and resentment by further connecting him to the British.

Feisal Appeals to the United States

In a joint-session of the U.S. Congress on January 8, 1918, President Wilson announced to the world his Fourteen Points, detailing his vision for the post-World War I global order. Notably, the first point denounced private dealings between the European powers and called upon the warring nations to reach a peace settlement within the public view, while over half of the other points touched on the ideals of self-determination, national sovereignty, and national

⁴³ “The Weizmann-Feisal Agreement, 3 January 1919,” accessed February 11, 2011, <http://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-5.html>.

independence. President Wilson attended the Paris Peace Conference in hopes of advancing these goals. Emir Feisal and his British allies appealed to Wilson's own idealism in order to convince the American President to support an independent Syrian state and allow the Syrians to choose which nation would provide them with assistance or handle a trusteeship. This policy would achieve the compatible Syrian and British objective of shutting France out of the region while advancing Feisal's interest in an independent Syria.

Feisal heavily depended on British support before of the Paris Peace Conference, but before long he came to see the United States as a potential ally. The Arabs, with Feisal as their representative, would not even have had a voice at the conference without British backing. In January 1919, T.E. Lawrence wrote in his diary, "Next day Balfour proposed the Hejaz [for representation in peace conference]. [French Foreign Minister] Pichon protested. Clemenceau accepted one delegate, and Pichon said they could have no more since they were an embryo nationality, not an independent state. Balfour and Lloyd George countered sharply with the statement that they & France had recognized its independence, and the point – two delegates – was carried."⁴⁴

Behind closed doors, Lloyd George continued to press Clemenceau to give up French claims in Greater Syria during the Peace Conference, but the British had already begun to distance themselves from Feisal. When Feisal visited London in January 1919, days before the opening of the Paris Peace Conference, the British Foreign Office informed him that it could not destroy their relationship with France by endorsing Syrian independence.⁴⁵ Therefore, Feisal

⁴⁴ T.E. Lawrence. *The Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, ed. David Garnett (New York: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, Inc., 1939), 273.

⁴⁵ Zeine, 62.

started to appeal to the United States to fulfill the demands of Syrian statehood, a policy embraced by Lloyd George, who was eager to deny the Levant to France without ruining the Anglo-French relationship.

On January 1, Emir Feisal submitted a memorandum to the Peace Conference, which had not yet officially opened. In the memorandum he wrote, “We believe that our ideal of Arab unity in Asia is justified beyond need of argument. If argument is required, we would point to the general principles accepted by the Allies when the United States joined them...”⁴⁶ The principles Feisal referred to were those of independence and self-determination. At the end of the same month, Feisal submitted another memorandum to the Peace Conference one week ahead of his appearance before the Council of Ten, or the heads of state and foreign ministers of France, Britain, Italy, Japan, and the United States. Again, he included an appeal to Wilson and the supposed guiding values of the Conference, writing, “I base my request on the principles enunciated by President Wilson (attached), and am confident that the Powers will attach more importance to the bodies and souls of the Arabic-speaking peoples than to their own material interests.”⁴⁷

Emir Feisal continued to speak to the values of self-determination and independence brought by the U.S. President to the Conference when he appeared before the Council of Ten on February 6. The meeting minutes from Feisal’s appearance show that he based his claim for an independent Arab state on eleven points, one being, “At the end of war the Allies promised [the Arabs] independence. The Allies had now won the war, and the Arabic speaking peoples thought themselves entitled to independence and worthy of it. It was in accord with the

⁴⁶ Feisal, “Memorandum to the Peace Conference” January 1, 1919 in Zeine, 248-51.

⁴⁷ Feisal, “Memorandum to the Peace Conference” January 29, 1919 in Zeine, 252.

principles laid down by President Wilson and accepted by all the Allies.”⁴⁸ Later in that meeting, the minutes note that Feisal “[h]oped the Conference would regard [the Arabs] as an oppressed nation which had risen against its masters” in response to a question posed by Wilson.⁴⁹ In both notes, Feisal’s reference to Wilson’s principle of self-government is clear.

Unbeknownst to the Emir, Lloyd George and the British delegation also delicately pushed President Wilson to sympathize with Feisal’s claims. According to Fromkin, Lloyd George saw Wilson’s Fourteen Points as “an expression of the political philosophy with which [President Wilson] approached public issues.”⁵⁰ The British preyed upon Wilson’s commitment to self-determination by arguing that Feisal and his revolutionaries played a key role in the drive to liberate Syria for the Arabs, and that their efforts should be rewarded by recognizing Feisal’s right to rule Syria.⁵¹

On January 30, all of the Allies, including Wilson, accepted the idea of assigning former Ottoman territories to mandatory powers, the day after Feisal submitted his second memorandum to the Peace Conference. The Allies sold the mandate system as a means for assisting with the process of political and economic development that would eventually lead to independence for all territories under mandatory administration. Nevertheless, Feisal’s memorandums and statements before the Council of Ten did impact the American President and his mediation of the conflict between Feisal, Britain, and France over the subject of Syria.

⁴⁸ United States Department of State. “The Council of Ten: Minutes of Meetings January 12 to February 14, 1919,” in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, The Paris Peace Conference 1919*, vol. 3. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), 1919.

<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1919Parisv03> (accessed October 23, 2010), 889.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 892.

⁵⁰ Fromkin, 394.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 394-95.

On February 13, France made its case before the Council of Ten for taking a mandate over Syria and Lebanon based on its historical connections to the region and the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement. Lloyd George did not object to the French in Lebanon but he did object to an exercise of any French authority in Syria on the principle that it would violate Britain's agreement with Sherif Hussein. French Foreign Minister Pichon countered that France had no such "convention" with Hussein, and thus began a month-long stalemate on the future of Syria.⁵²

On March 20, during a meeting between the heads of state of France, Britain, Italy, the U.S., and a few of their advisors, Wilson interrupted the Anglo-French dispute over Syria and presented his view. The meeting minutes record Wilson stating that "[t]he point of view of the United States of America was, however, indifferent to the claims both of Great Britain and France over peoples unless those peoples wanted them. One of the fundamental principles to which the United States of America adhered was the consent of the governed."⁵³ Wilson proposed that the Conference send an Inter-Allied Commission to the region to determine the wishes of the people. After further conversation, the other powers agreed to the proposal and charged Wilson with the task of drawing up the terms of the commission.⁵⁴ Thus, the controversy stirred up at the Peace Conference by Feisal's appeals for independence and the British refusal to back French claims in Syria motivated Wilson to develop a plan that gave the Syrians a voice.

⁵² Zeine, 69-77; Tanenbaum, 26-28.

⁵³ United States Department of State. "The Council of Four: Minutes of Meetings March 20 to May 24, 1919," in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, The Paris Peace Conference 1919*, vol. 5. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), 1919.

<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1919Parisv05> (accessed February 9, 2011), 9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12-14.

Emir Feisal embraced the Inter-Allied Commission to Syria and prepared to return to Damascus in order to establish a congress to give testimony to the Commission.⁵⁵ Before leaving, he met with Colonel House, one of Wilson's foreign policy advisors, with T.E. Lawrence on March 29. According to Lawrence's notes of the meeting, Feisal "wished to know whether the United States would undertake the idea of accepting a mandate of Syria, as he found there was friction between Great Britain and France on the subject...Emir Feisal said he could assure Colonel House that the Arabs would rather die than accept the French Mandate."⁵⁶ Colonel House replied that he doubted the U.S. would accept a mandate for Syria, although Lawrence told Feisal that the Commission "could be induced to report in favour of an American mandate for Syria, after satisfying himself as to the wishes of the inhabitants."⁵⁷ At the same time, Clemenceau attempted to reach an agreement with Feisal to head off the Inter-Allied Commission; he was rebuffed, and Feisal returned to Damascus. In an interview in Damascus between Emir Feisal and General Clayton of the British Army on May 12, Feisal demonstrated that he placed a great deal of faith in Wilson's idea to send a Commission to Syria. He told Clayton that he would ask for British assistance or American assistance, or assistance from Britain, America, and France, but not from France alone.⁵⁸

It turned out that Feisal's faith in the Commission was misplaced. When Clemenceau failed to reach an accommodation with Feisal, he again pressed for Britain to live up to Sykes-Picot. He especially insisted that Britain remove its troops from Syria and allow French troops to take over the garrisons. Lloyd George did not consent to Clemenceau's demands, and in late

⁵⁵ Fromkin, 435.

⁵⁶ "Journal entry of March 29," in *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 275.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Zeine, 86-87.

May Clemenceau declared France would not send Commissioners to Syria. Britain said they would not send Commissioners if France did not participate, and only American Commissioners ended up taking testimony in the Levant.⁵⁹

Had all of the Allies participated on the Commission, and had the Commission's findings been respected by the Peace Conference, then Feisal could have achieved his goal of an independent Syria by appealing to the United States and its ideals at the Conference. The King-Crane Commission, named after its two principal American Commissioners, Dr. Henry Churchill King and Mr. Charles R. Crane, arrived in Greater Syria in June 1919. They solicited interviews and petitions from the populace, including but not limited to local notables, ethnic groups, and political parties. Over the course of a month, the King-Crane Commission received 1,863 petitions.⁶⁰ 1,370 of these petitions, or 73.5%, specifically called for the immediate independence of Syria.⁶¹ More importantly, 1,129 petitions, or 60.5%, expressed anti-French sentiments, compared to 3 total anti-British petitions and no anti-American petitions.⁶² As for the mandate system, petitions from Lebanon showed strong support for a French Mandate, while the vast majority of other Syrian petitions did not ask for any power to assume a mandate. 1,064 petitions asked for American "assistance," and 1,032 petitions asked for British assistance if America declined assistance.⁶³

The data from the petitions largely conformed to the Damascus Program that the National Syrian Congress passed on July 2, 1919, which was directed at influencing the

⁵⁹ Zeine 88-93; Tanenbaum 31.

⁶⁰ The American Section Inter-allied Commission on Mandates in Turkey. *The King-Crane Commission Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government). The Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information. <http://www.ipcri.org/files/kingcrane.html> (accessed September 28, 2010).

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

Commission. The first point of the Damascus Program called for the independence of Syria. On the subject of mandates, the Damascus Program stated, "Believing that the American Nation is farthest from any thought of colonization and has no political ambition in our country, we will seek the technical and economic assistance from the United States of America, provided that such assistance does not exceed twenty years."⁶⁴ If America refused, then the Congress asked for British assistance in the resolution. Notably, the Damascus Program did "not acknowledge any right claimed by the French Government in any part whatever of our Syrian country."⁶⁵ The Damascus Program ended with praise for President Wilson and the United States, stating, "The noble principles enunciated by President Wilson strengthen our confidence...that President Wilson and the free American people will be supporters for the realization of our hopes."⁶⁶

During the winter and spring of 1919, Emir Feisal's diplomatic overtures to President Wilson and the United States seemed to pay off handsomely. His confidence in the American President greatly increased after Wilson proposed the idea of an Inter-Allied Commission. By the time the National Syrian Congress passed the Damascus Program in the summer of 1919, references to the British promises made to Sherif Hussein were minimal compared to those made to Wilsonian ideals. The Damascus Program was full of praise for Wilson and America. Emir Feisal must have felt as though his resistance to the French through diplomatic engagement with the U.S. had changed the course of the Peace Conference after the American Commission's visit. As it turned out, the King-Crane Commission affected nothing in the end and was not even published until several years after the Conference ended.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Feisal's Diplomatic Resistance Strategy Fails

Emir Feisal resisted French control of Lebanon and Syria through diplomatic means during the first half of 1919, culminating in Wilson's decision to send the King-Crane Commission of inquiry to the Levant to determine the wishes of the people. However, Feisal's ability to resist a French mandate over Syria in the diplomatic sphere grew increasingly limited over the second half of 1919. His position grew weaker after President Wilson failed to sell the Treaty of Versailles and American participation in the League of Nations to Congress, and Lloyd George was forced to seek rapprochement with the French to secure British aspirations in the Middle East. With America effectively sidelined and Britain urging Feisal to seek his own reconciliation with France, Feisal's strategy of appealing to other powers to achieve Syrian independence crumbled and failed.

Wilson's unsuccessful struggle with the Senate over the Versailles treaty, as well as several severe strokes that left him partially incapacitated, also delayed his push for an American mandate over Armenia, an objective sought by Lloyd George. According to Fromkin, Britain hoped that America would be an ally that helped to enforce the terms of the peace deal and that an American presence in Armenia would serve as a buffer between British holdings in the Middle East and Soviet Russia.⁶⁷ At the same time this was appearing increasingly unlikely, dispatches arrived to Europe from the King-Crane Commission. One from mid-July detailed

⁶⁷ Fromkin, 398.

Syrian opposition to the French, stating, "In our judgement proclamation of French mandate for all of Syria would precipitate warfare between Arabs and French..."⁶⁸

French officials and newspapers blasted the news coming from the commission in Syria. Although the commission was American in composition, the editorials attacked Britain, the occupying power, for stirring up anti-French sentiment in Syria.⁶⁹ The combination of uncertainty over America's role in the post-war world and rising anti-British feelings in France created anxiety among British leaders as the summer drew to an end. Many in the British Government, including Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour, began to sympathize with the French position.⁷⁰ Lloyd George was not yet ready to abandon Feisal and the principle of Syrian independence, but he too felt pressure to come to terms with Clemenceau.

On September 13, Lloyd George agreed to one of Clemenceau's key demands when he informed him that British soldiers would evacuate Syria and Lebanon beginning November 1. Britain planned to turn over British garrisons in Lebanon to France and those in Syria to Feisal and his Arab fighters.⁷¹ Clemenceau welcomed the news of the impending British departure, but he proceeded cautiously. On October 9, Clemenceau reminded Lloyd George that Sykes-Picot promised France Lebanon and Syria, not simply Lebanon. If the British occupied Iraq as stipulated in Sykes-Picot, why should France not occupy Syria?⁷² Lloyd George felt pressure to accept Clemenceau's argument and to make additional concessions in mid-October because

⁶⁸ United States Department of State. "Field missions of the American Commission to negotiate peace: Telegram from C.R. Crane and Mr. H.C. King to the Commission to Negotiate Peace, 10 July 1919," in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, The Paris Peace Conference 1919* vol. 12. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), 1919. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1919Parisv12> (accessed March 12, 2011), 749.

⁶⁹ Zeine, 101; Tanenbaum, 32.

⁷⁰ Zeine, 107; Tanenbaum, 33.

⁷¹ Zeine, 108-109; Tanenbaum, 33.

⁷² Tanenbaum, 34.

President Wilson had suffered from two serious strokes on September 25 and October 3. Yet he still considered the British Government obliged to support Emir Feisal.⁷³

In his response to Clemenceau, Lloyd George stated that he had asked Feisal to return to Europe and come to terms with the French. This satisfied Clemenceau because it implicitly endorsed a French mandate over Syria and the withdrawal of British troops from Syria drastically reduced Feisal's bargaining power because it eliminated the buffer between him and French forces.⁷⁴ Still, Lloyd George could say that he had forced Clemenceau to recognize and deal with Feisal and his nationalist government, which at least secured the principle of Syrian independence. He warned Clemenceau that "his Majesty's Government cannot conceal the anxiety they have felt at the apparent determination of the French press to deal with the Emir Feisal and the Arab problem with a high hand. If this were indeed the policy of the French Government, the British Government are afraid that it would inevitably lead to serious and long-continued disturbances throughout the Arab territories..."⁷⁵

Thus, Feisal returned to Europe having to enter into direct diplomatic negotiations with the French, something he had tried to avoid by appealing to Britain and the U.S. and signing an agreement with the World Zionist Organization. The prospect of America taking a mandate for Syria, or preventing France from doing so, had completely collapsed, and now Britain was encouraging Feisal to reach an accommodation with France. Feisal visited London first, where he asked Lloyd George to either maintain the status quo (ie. the British military occupation of Lebanon and Syria) or to turn over the garrisons in Lebanon to his control when he arrived at

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Zeine, 111; Tanenbaum, 34.

⁷⁵ Lloyd George to Clemenceau, October 18, 1919 in Tanenbaum, 34.

the end of September. He repeated this request twice over the next several weeks.⁷⁶ Lord Curzon and Lloyd George responded by reminding Feisal that the proposed arrangement was temporary and that the Peace Conference would determine all outstanding issues, but that the British withdrawal would go forward and Feisal should discuss the matter with France.⁷⁷

Feisal left London and arrived in Paris on October 20, where he began a two-month long dialogue with the French Government. France's first major proposal, dated December 6, called for France to have virtual dominance over all aspects of Syrian political and economic institutions. Feisal categorically rejected the proposal, and France issued a new proposal on December 16 that contained sweeping concessions. Syria would grant France a monopoly over any large loans or economic programs, accept French political and military advisers, and preempt any possible Peace Conference decision by recognizing France as its mandatory power. In return, France would recognize Feisal as a sovereign ruler and a Syrian Parliament empowered to make laws, and Arabic would be the official language of Syria.⁷⁸

Feisal and Clemenceau reached a conditional agreement based on the December 16 proposal on January 6, 1920. The major changes included articles proclaiming Lebanese independence under a French mandate and French control of Syrian foreign policy in addition to the fact that "[t]he High Commissioner representing France will have his usual residence at Aleppo, thus remaining near Cilicia [a southern Turkish province bordering Lebanon], a border zone, where [French] security forces will normally be concentrated. Their [French security forces] entry into Syria will be accomplished upon the request of the head of the Syrian state in

⁷⁶ Zeine, 112-114.

⁷⁷ Zeine, 115-116.

⁷⁸ Tanenbaum, 35.

agreement with the French High Commissioner.”⁷⁹ Therefore, French troops would not be stationed in Lebanon, and could not enter Syria without the consent of the Syrian Government.

Lebanese independence and the acceptance of a French mandate appeared to raise daunting problems for Feisal, who had to sell the January 6 Agreement to his Syrian nationalist supporters. He hoped to point to the articles promising no French military occupation and a huge measure of Syrian autonomy as major achievements. Indeed, many in the French Government expressed dismay over Clemenceau’s handling of the issue and the January 6 Agreement, believing it to give “too much power to the Syrian parliament” and no real power to the French advisers.⁸⁰ Quite a few of these opponents were located in the staff of General Henri Gouraud, the man Clemenceau appointed French High Commissioner to Syria and Lebanon.⁸¹

Clemenceau did attach two important conditions to his accord with Feisal that he communicated to Gouraud in a letter dated January 7, 1920. Due to the concessions made by the French Government, Clemenceau wrote that Feisal had to demonstrate “corresponding loyalty on his part, and that the absolute respect of his authority by his followers must satisfy me... [otherwise France] would impose order and respect of its rights through force.”⁸² In other words, Feisal had to fulfill his end of the bargain and rally his followers in Syria to do the same. Feisal left Paris for Syria on January 7 to garner support for the arrangement, which had “in his eyes, the saving grace of being a provisional arrangement which...could not fail to be modified

⁷⁹ “The Provisional Agreement of January 6, 1920” in Appendix 2, Tanenbaum, 45.

⁸⁰ Tanenbaum, 36.

⁸¹ Ibid., 34.

⁸² Clemenceau to Gouraud, January 7, 1920 in Tanenbaum, 36.

when the Arab question would come up for final settlement.”⁸³ In any case, his struggle to resist the French Mandate diplomatically had come to an end.

The Nationalist Political Resistance to the French

Feisal and his followers had determinedly resisted the French for much of the Peace Conference and France reluctantly dealt with Feisal only at the behest of the British. The conditions attached to the January 6 Agreement by Clemenceau reflected the lack of trust the French had in Feisal from his repeated remonstrations for Syrian independence. During the next several weeks, Feisal tried and failed to sell the January 6 Agreement to his nationalist supporters before acceding to the demands of Syrian nationalists and becoming the leader of the independence movement. These factors combined with the ascension of the imperialistic Alexandre Millerand to the office of French Prime Minister in January 1920 to renew hostilities between Feisal and the French over Feisal’s domestic political resistance to a French mandate.

The Situation in Syria

In Feisal’s nearly four-month absence from Syria, the nationalist voices advocating immediate independence and no French involvement had grown increasingly radicalized and hardened in their position. During those months, “[t]he politicians of Damascus, uneasy, emotional, and too little realistic, pressed for greater firmness, or aggression. A Committee of National Defence was formed in Damascus...”⁸⁴ The British plan of replacing its troops with French and Arab soldiers caused additional anxiety in the Syrian Congress, which had expressed its opposition to a French occupation only a few months earlier to the King-Crane Commission.

⁸³ George Antonius. *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1939), 302.

⁸⁴ Stephen Hemsley Longrigg. *Syria and Lebanon Under French Mandate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 92-93.

When news of the January 6 Agreement reached Damascus, Syrian leaders and the populace responded with disapproval and outright condemnation.⁸⁵ Feisal arrived in Syria on January 14 to “mass demonstrations which paraded the streets with cries of ‘Unity’ and ‘Independence.’”⁸⁶ Before he ever really had a chance to publicly promote his accord with Clemenceau, Feisal was distancing himself from it, saying that the agreement was in no way binding and that he had returned to Syria seeking the opinions and consent of the people, not to impose a solution.⁸⁷

Notwithstanding his backpedaling, Feisal still believed that the January 6 Agreement could serve as the basis of an accord that would avoid an armed clash between France and Syria while guaranteeing Syrian independence. He met with the nationalist societies in closed settings and tried to convey the perils of military conflict with France if they failed to arrive at an arrangement, but the futility of his efforts spurred him to pursue a new strategy.⁸⁸ On the home front, he quietly reached out to the traditional ruling elites of Damascus and other Syrian towns to form a new political party, called the National Party.⁸⁹ Conservative in orientation, these leaders had supported the Ottoman regime during the war and had little enthusiasm for the revolutionaries who dominated the Syrian Congress. The National Party would publicly advocate for Syrian independence but be willing to accept the provisions of the January 6 Agreement.⁹⁰ Moreover, Feisal asked the Millerand government for additional concessions, including a statement that “French advisers would only advise and not implement policy, that

⁸⁵ Antonius, 303; Zeine 130-31; Fromkin, 436-37.

⁸⁶ Antonius, 303.

⁸⁷ Zeine, 130.

⁸⁸ Fromkin, 436-37.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 437.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

the future Lebanon state would not include the Bekaa region, and that Syria would have some control over its foreign policy.”⁹¹ Millerand, already unenthusiastic over the January 6 Agreement, rejected Feisal’s alterations.

Disheartened, Feisal began surrendering to the nationalist emotions sweeping the country in order to regain his base of support in Syria. He understood that this stance would threaten his position in the eyes of the French Government, but he also knew that failing to move towards the more radical Arab leaders in Syria threatened his position with his own people.⁹² Feisal’s predicament did not go unnoticed; General Gouraud wrote to Millerand that although “Feisal is sincere, he is now absolutely incapable of being in control of the situation.”⁹³ Historian Philip Khoury argues that Millerand “was never really prepared to accept any nationalist government in Damascus...the Millerand government’s strategy was designed to force [Feisal] into the arms of his extremist supporters and resist the French. France would then have a suitable pretext for occupying Syria.”⁹⁴ Whether or not Millerand’s refusal to reconsider the January 6 Agreement was part of a grand strategy or simply reflected his belief that the accord had conceded too much already, the consequence was the same. His resistance to entertaining any further negotiations caused Feisal to feel increasingly desperate about his situation and identify more with those demanding immediate independence.

Feisal the Nationalist

Historical writer Stephen Longrigg called Feisal “shrewd and moderate,” echoing Lebanese diplomat and historian George Antonius, who in his analysis claimed that Feisal acted

⁹¹ Tanenbaum, 37.

⁹² Zeine, 132; Fromkin, 437; Longrigg, 96; Tanenbaum, 37.

⁹³ Gouraud to Millerand, February 18, 1920, in Tanenbaum, 37.

⁹⁴ Philip Khoury. *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 40.

with “sagacity.”⁹⁵ Millerand would not or could not revise the January 6 Agreement, and the nationalists in Syria never suggested they would accept anything less than full independence in any case. Trapped between these two uncompromising forces, Feisal chose to make clear that he had not sold out the Arab cause and intended to see it to fruition. A week after he had returned to Syria, Feisal gave a speech at the Arab Club in Damascus where he reaffirmed his goal of independence for “all the Arab lands” and support for his government in Syria.⁹⁶ He received a steady stream of nationalist leaders and agreed to recruit men aged from twenty to forty to serve in the military under a policy of compulsory conscription. Feisal filled open posts in his government with radical nationalists and supported restricting Syrian supplies from reaching the French in Lebanon and French use of the Rayyak-Aleppo railway.⁹⁷ Throughout the whole time, the nationalist leaders he received, as well as his closest advisers, urged him to formally declare Syria independence.⁹⁸

Thus, after a month of appointing uncompromising nationalists to his administration and backing their anti-French political decisions, Feisal felt intense pressure to go forward with declaring Syria a sovereign, independent state. Towards the end of February 1920, Feisal recalled the Syrian Congress, which had been dissolved by his administration in December of the previous year in order to reduce tensions during the British withdrawal and the French occupation of Lebanon. Most of the former representatives returned to their seats, and a number of political party leaders, lawyers, and sheikhs joined their ranks.⁹⁹ Quite a few of the Arabs involved in the nationalist movement were not Syrian. Indeed, Feisal, who was himself

⁹⁵ Longrigg, 96; Antonius, 302.

⁹⁶ Zeine, 132.

⁹⁷ Antonius, 96.

⁹⁸ Antonius, 96; Zeine, 132.

⁹⁹ Antonius, 95, 97.

from the Arabian Peninsula, included Iraqis, Palestinians, and Lebanese in his close circle of advisers.¹⁰⁰ Before the Syrian Congress was scheduled to return to session at Feisal's request in early March, its members held a preliminary session on February 27 to repudiate Zionism and announce that Palestine belonged to a united Syria.¹⁰¹

Feisal opened the Syrian Congress on March 6 by quoting the Hussein-McMahon Agreement and President Wilson, and offering a reminder that the Arabs had fought for the principles of liberty and national independence.¹⁰² The next day, the Syrian Congress considered the reasons for the Arab Revolt during World War I and the promises of self-determination made by the Allies. Its members then drew up a resolution that declared Syria's independence within its natural borders, which included Lebanon and Palestine, and proclaimed Emir Feisal as the constitutional monarch of the new nation. On March 8, 1920, the Syrian Declaration of Independence was read from the town hall in Damascus to much fanfare and celebration.¹⁰³

Similar to the American Declaration of Independence, the Syrian counterpart started out by stating its historical case for independence. It proclaimed, "[Syria] participated in the World War with the Allies based on what they openly promised in their official public and private gatherings...and what they especially promised to His Majesty King Hussein concerning the independence of the Arab countries."¹⁰⁴ This section described the promises of self-

¹⁰⁰ Zeine, 133.

¹⁰¹ Antonius, 97.

¹⁰² Antonius, 97-98; Zeine, 137.

¹⁰³ Antonius, 98; Fromkin, 437; Zeine, 138-39.

¹⁰⁴ "Text of the Decision of the Syrian Congress for the Declaration of Full Independence," in *al-Idahat al-siyasiyah wa-asrar al-intidab al-lfransi fi Suriya* (Beirut: Matabi Ashqar Ikhwan, 1955), 53. The source "Declaration of Full Independence" is in Arabic; the English is my translation of that text, with assistance provided by Professor Loubna El-Abbadi of Carnegie Mellon University.

determination initially made in the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence and repeated later by the Allied leaders. Next, the Declaration addressed what the Congress believed self-determination meant, stating that “[the Allies] sent the American Committee to see to the wishes of the people, so it became clear to [the Committee] that these wishes were about full Syrian independence and unity.”¹⁰⁵ Having justified the reasons for Syrian independence, the Congress proceeded to declare it:

So we unanimously declare the independence of our country Syria with its natural boundaries...and we have chosen his Highness Prince Feisal, the son of His Majesty the King Hussein, who has continuously struggled for the sake of liberating the country...a constitutional monarch of Syria with the title of His Majesty King Feisal I.¹⁰⁶

The document went on to assert that the occupying military government’s authority had been terminated and attempted to allay Lebanese concerns by promising Lebanon significant autonomy.¹⁰⁷

After the reading of the Syrian Declaration of Independence, the newly crowned King Feisal I addressed the crowd. Arab historian Ghalib Ayyashi wrote that “[Feisal] made God bear witness in front of them that he only fulfilled his duty to the Arab nation...he wished for God to help him to fulfill his mission in order to secure the country’s independence and liberty and take care of the interest and prosperity of the Syrian people.”¹⁰⁸ With his speech, Feisal accepted his position as the sovereign ruler of Syria and the duty to insure the nation’s independence. His acceptance of the Declaration of Independence constituted a tremendous

¹⁰⁵ “Syrian Declaration of Independence,” 55.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Zeine, 138.

¹⁰⁸ Ghalib Ayyashi, *al-Idahat al-siyasiyah wa-asrar al-intidab al-lfransi fi Suriya* (Beirut: Matabi Ashqar Ikhwan, 1955), 56. The quote reflects my translation, from Arabic to English, of Ghalib’s words.

act of political defiance, since it called for the end of Allied rule of not only Syria (as the French and British defined it), but also of Lebanon and Palestine. Moreover, the Syrian Declaration asked for the Allies to grant Iraq its independence as well. Later that day, a meeting of Iraqi leaders in Damascus drafted and read their own resolution proclaiming the independence of Iraq under the rule of Feisal's brother, Abdullah.¹⁰⁹ To the French, Feisal had become the leader of a rebellious movement that threatened French interests in Lebanon and Syria.

The political resistance directed against the French Mandate, established in the January 6 Agreement and being finalized at the Peace Conference, continued on March 9. 'Ali Ridha al-Rikabi became Prime Minister and formed the first cabinet of the new Syrian Government. Feisal and al-Rikabi penned letters to the Allied leaders, explaining the necessity of proclaiming Syrian independence, but assuring them of the Syrian state's continued friendship with them.¹¹⁰ The cabinet approved an agenda to draft a Syrian Constitution, bolster the defense of the nation, and revitalize the economy. Despite the letters of friendship sent to General Gouraud and the other Allies, the Syrian Government moved to resist the introduction of foreign currency, namely targeting the ongoing French efforts to impose currency in Lebanon issued by the Banque de Syrie.¹¹¹

Reactions

Lord Curzon, now British Foreign Secretary, responded immediately to the news of March 8, protesting on behalf of the Allies and telling Feisal that only the Peace Conference

¹⁰⁹ Antonius, 304; Fromkin, 437; Zeine, 138-39.

¹¹⁰ Longrigg, 98; Zeine, 140.

¹¹¹ Longrigg, 98.

could legally settle the fate of lands ruled by Turkey before the war.¹¹² Understandably, the French Government reacted harshly to the news of Syria's Declaration of Independence, "particularly at the inclusion of Lebanon" in the new Syrian state.¹¹³ Millerand wrote to Lloyd George to warn him against recognizing Feisal as King and echoed Curzon's earlier message that only the Allies could determine the future of the region.¹¹⁴ Curzon suggested they invite Feisal to return to the Peace Conference for consultations and Millerand agreed.¹¹⁵ They each sent a letter to Feisal, neither of which recognized him as King, encouraging him to return to Europe. In another act of defiance, Feisal replied that he would only return for talks if France guaranteed the recent Declaration of the Syrian Congress and removed French troops from Lebanon.¹¹⁶

The immediate French reaction to the Syrian Declaration of Independence in March 1920 reflected two important realities at the time. First, Gouraud faced a severe shortage of French soldiers in the region.¹¹⁷ On March 25, he wrote to Millerand that they should adopt "a wait-and-see policy, allowing us to avoid attempting a military solution to a problem which is insolvable at the present time."¹¹⁸ Second, France and Britain were distracted by a Turkish nationalist insurrection led by former Ottoman army officer Mustafa Kemal Ataturk that tied up the few French forces present in the region, particularly in Cilicia.¹¹⁹ These two factors explain the French policy of initially addressing the issue peacefully.

¹¹² Zeine, 141.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Tanenbaum, 38; Zeine, 141.

¹¹⁵ Tanenbaum, 38.

¹¹⁶ Antonius, 304-05; Longrigg, 99; Tanenbaum, 38.

¹¹⁷ Fromkin, 439; Longrigg, 97; Tanenbaum, 38.

¹¹⁸ Gouraud to Millerand, March 25, 1920, in Tanenbaum, 38.

¹¹⁹ Fromkin, 439; Longrigg, 97; Tanenbaum, 38.

In Europe, the Paris Peace Conference broke off into separate conferences, and the San Remo Conference quickly convened to finalize the mandates over former Ottoman territories. Britain contacted the French Government with a proposal on how to respond to Feisal's conditional refusal to return to Europe. Curzon wanted to inform Feisal that Britain and France would recognize him as King if he secured constitutional support from the Syrian Congress to go to the San Remo Conference as the representative of the Syrian people and strike a deal that could work for the Allies and the Arabs. Millerand did not want to legitimize any aspect of the Syrian Declaration of Independence because he feared direct French control in Lebanon would be jeopardized, and the proposal died.¹²⁰

Lebanon's reaction to the Syrian Declaration of Independence had the backing of the French Government. Although a number of Muslim leaders from Beirut traveled to Damascus to participate in the Congress, Lebanese Christians denounced the inclusion of Lebanon in a Syrian state after the passage of the Declaration of Independence. An Administrative Council of Lebanon, composed of Lebanese elites and representatives of the Christian communities, met and declared Lebanon's independence from Syria and submitted to the French Mandate on March 22 with the approval of the French Government.¹²¹

A little over a month later, on April 25, Britain, France, Italy, and Japan decided the Turkish question. Proclamation of the San Remo Resolution effectively repudiated the Declaration of Independence passed by the Syrian Congress.¹²² The document stated that the "High Contracting Parties agree that Syria and Mesopotamia shall...be provisionally recognized

¹²⁰ Tanenbaum, 38.

¹²¹ Longrigg, 99; Zeine, 143-49.

¹²² Antonius, 305.

as independent States, subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone.”¹²³ Allied recognition of Syria and Mesopotamia as independent deferred to the Allies’ particular meaning of independent; not sovereign, but separated from the Ottoman Empire.

The Resolution gave the Allies the power to both determine the boundaries of the territories and to decide the terms of the mandates, which would be submitted to the League of Nations for approval. To the distress of the Syrians, the San Remo Resolution separated Palestine and Lebanon from Syria, and Article C, written in French, began with “[t]he mandatories chosen by the principal Allied Powers are: France for Syria, and Great Britain for Mesopotamia, and Palestine.”¹²⁴ Britain, France, and the other Allies had not recognized Feisal or the Syrian Government in Damascus; ignored their claims to Lebanon and Palestine, and had bestowed the mandate over Syria to France.

Political Stalemate

The time period between Feisal’s return to Syria in mid-January 1920 and the San Remo Resolution at the end of April was characterized by Syrian political resistance to the French, eventually led by Feisal, and political stalemate between Gouraud’s military government and the nationalist government in Damascus. America’s abrupt exit from the peace negotiations and Britain’s own reconciliation with France had exhausted Feisal’s ability to resist the French mandate diplomatically. Syrian aversion to the January 6 Agreement and the intransigent nature of the Millerand Administration in France and nationalist politicians in Damascus forced

¹²³ “Essential Documents: San Remo Resolution,” Council on Foreign Relations, accessed March 16, 2011, <http://www.cfr.org/israel/san-remo-resolution/p15248>.

¹²⁴ Ibid. In the text of the San Remo Resolution, the sentence appears in French.

Feisal to harden his position on the side of the Syrian nationalist movement. Feisal never really abandoned quiet attempts to convince Syrian political leaders to help him negotiate a more favorable deal with France, but in public he spoke only of resisting French designs and securing Syrian independence.¹²⁵ Even though segments of the French Government understood Feisal's predicament, Millerand became annoyed with Feisal's inability to enforce the January 6 Agreement and his refusal to renegotiate.¹²⁶

This annoyance turned to anger after Feisal acquiesced to the intense domestic pressure he faced to move forward on the matter of Syrian independence and the integrity of Syrian territory (ie. Lebanon and Palestine). Historian Zeine N. Zeine wrote that the Declaration of Independence "confirmed the French...fears and suspicions of [Feisal's] real intention."¹²⁷ Feisal's acceptance of the Syrian throne, his refusal to return to Europe for consultations, and his other acts of political defiance violated Clemenceau's conditions of acting in good faith and controlling his followers from the January 6 Agreement. Clemenceau's threat of force, however, could not be immediately carried out by the Millerand Administration because of a lack of French troops and the Turkish rebellion. Furthermore, Britain urged restraint towards Feisal, as evidenced by Curzon's proposal to conditionally recognize him as King and bring him to the San Remo Conference.¹²⁸ Therefore, the spring of 1920 passed in political stalemate, with Feisal building his country and his government, and France seething until it could make a credible threat of force to implement its mandate granted by the San Remo Conference.

¹²⁵ Fromkin, 437.

¹²⁶ Tanenbaum, 37.

¹²⁷ Zeine, 149.

¹²⁸ Tanenbaum, 38-39.

The Military Resistance to the French Mandate

If America's exit from the Peace Conference and Britain's decision to withdraw its troops from Syrian territory marked the end of Feisal's resistance through foreign affairs, then the San Remo Resolution of April 25 marked the end of Feisal's hope to resist the French Mandate politically. By requiring former Ottoman territory to receive "administrative advice and assistance by a mandatory" and giving France the mandate over Syria, the San Remo Resolution ignored the Syrian Declaration of Independence from the previous month and guaranteed that Syria would either have to come to terms with a French Mandate or resist it militarily. Throughout the military preparations, Feisal maintained his willingness to accept an arrangement with France along the lines of the January 6 Feisal-Clemenceau Agreement, which would have allowed a Parliament that exercised complete control of internal affairs. But France, now buttressed by the San Remo Resolution, no longer felt that it was necessary to compromise with Feisal and his nationalist regime in Damascus. Since he could not obtain a deal better than or even equal to the January 6 Agreement from the French, and the nationalists had rejected the January 6 Agreement in first place, Feisal joined in calling for a military resistance to the French Mandate and French occupation of Syrian land. His military resistance proved to be the last straw for the French, who promptly expelled him from Syria after the fall of Damascus to French forces.

Military Preparations and Activities

Syrian military preparations began even before the Syrian Congress declared independence and chose Emir Feisal to be King. During the final months of 1919, when Feisal was negotiating with Clemenceau in Paris and the British were preparing to withdraw from

Syria and Lebanon, Syrian military activity was underway. Emir Zeid, whom Feisal appointed to govern in his absence, oversaw the formation of a Committee of National Defense, increased recruitment into Feisal's army, and instituted a restructuring plan that intended to turn Feisal's forces into a Syrian military with the strength of three divisions.¹²⁹ Each division later took the name of the Syrian city in which it was based; the division of Damascus, located in the Syrian capital; the division of Aleppo, located in the northwest of Syria, where guerillas launched attacks on French forces in the province of Cilicia in Turkey; and the division of Daraa, located to the south of Damascus on the road to Amman.¹³⁰

Guerilla attacks against French forces began in 1918, following General Allenby's decision to allow French detachments to join the British occupation of Cilicia and Lebanon (but not Syria). Most clashes between French troops and Feisal's followers were minor for much of 1918 and 1919 and occurred on the borders of Syria and Lebanon or Cilicia. The Alawites, a Shi'a Muslim sect that predominantly inhabits the mountains of north-western Syria, harassed the French regularly in Cilicia. France blamed Feisal in Damascus for supplying the Alawites with arms for their missions.¹³¹ Nevertheless, Feisal often reigned in the more extreme and risky military elements. Before his return in mid-January 1920, he had his Chief of Staff, Yassin Pasha, exiled to Cairo for planning a Syrian invasion of Lebanon during the British evacuation.¹³² However, the French cared more about the fact that Feisal tolerated guerilla attacks against French forces upon his return to Syria, when he was supposed to fulfill the conditions of the

¹²⁹ Longrigg, 93.

¹³⁰ Ayyashi, 97.

¹³¹ Longrigg, 80, 95.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 93.

January 6 Agreement by acting loyally towards France and forcing his followers to do the same.¹³³

After the San Remo Resolution in late April 1920, France still did not have the necessary military power in place to enforce its mandate over Syria and deal with the ongoing Turkish rebellion. One month earlier, General Gouraud had lamented that

[French] prestige suffers greatly...because of a shortage of military manpower which makes us incapable of guaranteeing order. The Sherifians (Feisal and his followers) are taking advantage of the situation and terrorizing our followers, occupying the country, [and] flying the flag of their new king there...Military preparations [in Syria] are openly being taken.¹³⁴

Syrian military preparations centered on rapidly training the three regular divisions while France did not have the resources to act. The divisions of Damascus, Aleppo, and Daraa had only a fraction of the numbers expected of a division, but they were well organized.¹³⁵ Ayyashi wrote that

each division was composed of three brigades, and each brigade was composed of three regiments, and with each regiment was a machine gun company, and with each division was an artillery brigade consisting of two regiments, and each regiment consisted of two batteries. The total power of the Syrian Army in mid-July was no more than 8000 troops.¹³⁶

Of course, this summary does not include the numerous Arab bands, gangs, and militias that regularly harassed the French from Syria. These irregulars received financial support from Damascus, and Longrigg stated that “[t]ribesmen and villagers formed bands for incursion and

¹³³ Fromkin, 438.

¹³⁴ Gouraud to Millerand, March 28, 1920, in Tanenbaum, 38.

¹³⁵ Longrigg, 96. Longrigg noted that conscription in rural areas went largely unenforced.

¹³⁶ Ayyashi, 97. The quote is a translation from Arabic.

pillage in the Western Zone [ie. Lebanon].”¹³⁷ As for military equipment, the three regular divisions owned

15,000 rifles of different types and for each rifle there were 250 cartridges. There were about fifty 57-mm cannons...In the active army, recruitment centers, and other military jobs there were no less than 500 officers of various ranks, including some who were trained in the Great War and fought in various arenas and battles, and some who are inexperienced and helpless...And this was the situation of the Syrian Arab Army during the reign of Prince Feisal.¹³⁸

While the regular Syrian military divisions engaged in preparation and training, skirmishes and sabotage attempts between Syrians and French forces grew more violent. Longrigg documented multiple attacks on French forces by Feisal’s followers, including against the towns of Hammam, Alexandretta, and Harim. Frequent raids targeting the French occurred on the roads between Acre and Sidon and Homs and Tripoli, and Syrian forces made failed attempts to blow up a bridge crossing the Litani River and one located near Tartus, a coastal city under French control.¹³⁹ On May 3, al-Rikabi’s government fell in Damascus, and Hashim al-Atasi, a more zealous opponent of the French Mandate, became Prime Minister.¹⁴⁰ The Syrian Congress responded to the San Remo Resolution with its own resolution on May 8 1920 that criticized the decision reached at San Remo and once again called for full Syrian independence and a rejection of the French Mandate.¹⁴¹ Feisal resisted calls that he should declare war on France, but he did nothing to stop the continuation of guerilla attacks on French forces.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Longrigg, 96.

¹³⁸ Ayyashi, 97-98. The quote is a translation from Arabic.

¹³⁹ Longrigg, 96.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 100.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 99-100.

¹⁴² Antonius, 306; Longrigg, 100.

The Stumble to War

Although the French held a deep mistrust of Emir Feisal by May 1920 for his resistance to the French Mandate, his eviction from Syria was not a sure thing but the result of personalities, factors, and developments between May and July 1920. On May 22, Millerand promised to General Gouraud the arrival of two additional divisions to the region, and France concluded a cease fire with the Turkish nationalists on June 1. French troops began massing in Lebanon now that Paris had the troops and stability in Turkey to enforce its mandate over Syria militarily.¹⁴³ The only restraint remaining, Britain's proposal to bring Feisal back to Europe for further negotiations, had likewise been neutralized by Feisal's statement that he would only return if the Allies recognized Syrian independence and sovereignty.

In June, the Syrian Congress created a delegation under Nuri Pasha al-Sa'id to travel to Europe, negotiate with the Allies, and secure the principles of Syrian independence and sovereignty. Yet increased French military activity in Lebanon caused Feisal to rethink his initial opposition to his returning to Europe. He dispatched al-Sa'id to Beirut in order to meet with Gouraud and secure Feisal passage to Paris on July 9, but Gouraud informed him that Feisal could not proceed to France and that he would receive a message from him within a few days.¹⁴⁴ Millerand had instructed Gouraud to issue Feisal an ultimatum, which Gouraud sent on July 14. The ultimatum cited the guerilla attacks against French soldiers and Clemenceau's reserved right to use force from the January 6 Agreement if Feisal did not fulfill the conditions

¹⁴³ Tanenbaum, 41.

¹⁴⁴ Zeine, 160-61.

of acting loyally towards France and requiring his followers to do the same as a reason for the ultimatum.¹⁴⁵

To back up his claim, Gouraud pointed to the following instances of Syrian resistance to the terms of the January 6 Agreement: refusal to allow France to use the Rayyak-Aleppo railway; Feisal's appointment of extremists to government positions; refusal to accept currency issued by the Banque de Syrie; the illegal nature of the Syrian Congress, since Feisal was to be a military governor of Ottoman territory [ie. Syria] until a legal decision was made by the Peace Conference; and support for Syrian guerillas.¹⁴⁶ For the last one, Gouraud quoted an alleged order from the commander of the division of Aleppo, stating, "Since we cannot officially declare war on the French, we must overrun the country with bands which will destroy them little by little. Our officers will command these bands and if any of them is killed, the Government will provide for his family."¹⁴⁷ These acts of defiance to the French Mandate legitimized the following demands made by Gouraud in the ultimatum:

The military occupation of Aleppo by French forces; the right of France to use the Rayyak-Aleppo railway, and to control the stations in Rayyak, Baalbek, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo; the end to the compulsory military service law; acceptance of the French Mandate; acceptance of French paper currency made for Syria; and punishment of the worst guerilla elements.¹⁴⁸ According to the ultimatum, Feisal had to agree to all of the demands by July 18.

¹⁴⁵ Tanenbaum, 41; Zeine, 169-170.

¹⁴⁶ Zeine, 170-72.

¹⁴⁷ General Gouraud to Emir Feisal, July 14, 1920 in Zeine, 171.

¹⁴⁸ Antonius, 101; Zeine, 173.

However, Feisal asked for two extra days, and Gouraud agreed to Feisal's request, despite Millerand's push for Gouraud to occupy Syria.¹⁴⁹

Yassin al-Hashimi, Chief-of-Staff of the Syrian Army, called upon Prime Minister Sa'id and told him that "he could not accept the job entrusted to him as he was not able to defend the country and stand in front of the French Army...because the Syrian Army arsenals were empty of weapons and ammunition, combat equipment was missing, and the necessary machinery of war had been hidden [from the French]."¹⁵⁰ Prime Minister Sa'id relayed the information to King Feisal, who convened the Supreme Council of War. During the council, Youssef al'Azma, Minister of War, vigorously argued for a military stand against the French, and stated that "[h]e in his capacity of Minister of War would be held responsible for all consequences and insisted on the resistance and defense."¹⁵¹ Al-Hashimi retorted that Syria had only enough ammunition to last two hours, and after further discussion a majority of the Cabinet supported Feisal accepting Gouraud's conditions.¹⁵² The Syrian Congress passed a resolution on July 19 condemning Feisal and his Government, and the Government responded by suspending the Congress.¹⁵³

Feisal's telegraph, sent late on July 20, accepted Gouraud's ultimatum of July 14, but it failed to arrive on time because the telegraph wire had been severed.¹⁵⁴ When word reached Feisal that French troops had started to march on Damascus on July 21, he sent his Minister of

¹⁴⁹ Tanenbaum, 41.

¹⁵⁰ Ayyashi, 98.

¹⁵¹ Youssef al'Azma in Ayyashi, 98.

¹⁵² Zeine, 175-76.

¹⁵³ Antonius, 101; Zeine, 176-77.

¹⁵⁴ Antonius, 102; Tanenbaum, 41; Zeine, 178.

Education, Sati al-Husri, to intercept General Gouraud.¹⁵⁵ Al-Husri carried a note from Feisal that reflected Feisal's desire to avoid bloodshed as well as a French military occupation of Syria.

Feisal wrote:

Having accepted all the conditions stated in your note of the 14th ...and finding in spite of that the French troops advancing towards Damascus, and desirous, on the other hand, to avoid till the last moment a useless effusion of blood, I ask for an arrest of operations of the troops which would enable us to discuss affairs...¹⁵⁶

Writing about the incident later, al-Husri reflected that General Gouraud was "visibly upset" when al-Husri asked him to stop the French advance in light of Feisal's acceptance of the ultimatum.¹⁵⁷ Al-Husri did not know that Millerand, already angry with Gouraud for granting Feisal a two-day extension, was pressuring Gouraud to occupy Damascus and Aleppo at the quickest opportunity.¹⁵⁸ Gouraud rebuked al-Husri and Feisal for failing to accept his ultimatum before the deadline and issued a new ultimatum that Feisal had to accept within twenty-four hours, although this ultimatum also received an extension, to forty-eight hours.¹⁵⁹ The new ultimatum would allow French troops to remain in the Syrian towns they now occupied on the road to Damascus, the withdrawal of Syrian troops near Damascus, and Feisal's acceptance of a French mission, which would effectively exercise control over Syria's military, political, and economic life through Feisal's government.¹⁶⁰

Attached to the second ultimatum sent to Feisal was a letter from Gouraud, in which he urged Feisal to distance himself from "extremists" and promised him that the French Mandate

¹⁵⁵ Antonius, 102; Zeine, 178

¹⁵⁶ Feisal to Gouraud, July 21, 1920 in Zeine, 178.

¹⁵⁷ Zeine, 180.

¹⁵⁸ Tanenbaum, 41.

¹⁵⁹ Tanenbaum, 41; Zeine, 180.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

did not threaten Syrian independence.¹⁶¹ Despite the stringent conditions of the new ultimatum, Millerand berated Gouraud for halting his march on Damascus. Millerand saw Feisal as an obstacle to realizing French ambitions in Syria, and felt the sooner France occupied Syria and removed Feisal, the better. Gouraud distrusted Feisal, but he also felt it would be dishonorable to use force when Feisal was carrying out the terms of the July 14 ultimatum. He thus held back his forces while waiting for Feisal's response to his second ultimatum, which would achieve Millerand's goals without using force.¹⁶²

On July 23, Feisal and his cabinet met early in the morning to discuss the second French ultimatum of July 21. They had until midnight to accept Gouraud's conditions, although this time Feisal and his government could not bring themselves to accept the more demanding terms.¹⁶³ Undoubtedly, they had been shaken by the resolution of the Syrian Congress condemning the Government and by massive violent demonstrations that rocked Damascus after Feisal agreed to the ultimatum of July 14.¹⁶⁴ In a hasty note sent to General Gouraud on the night of July 23, Feisal rejected the latest ultimatum, but also stated, "We do not want war. But accepting the conditions set forth in your last Communication exposes us, inevitably, to a civil war. We are ready to execute the conditions stated in your ultimatum of 14th July...on condition that the French forces withdraw from the areas occupied lately."¹⁶⁵ Unwilling or unable to weather the extremists in Damascus by making further concessions to the French, Feisal had put himself in a position to resist the French if they could not satisfy themselves with the terms of the July 14 ultimatum.

¹⁶¹ Zeine, 181.

¹⁶² Tanenbaum, 41.

¹⁶³ Antonius, 102; Zeine, 181.

¹⁶⁴ Antonius, 101; Zeine, 177-78

¹⁶⁵ Feisal to Gouraud, July 23, 1920 in Zeine, 182.

They could not. French troops resumed their march on Damascus early on the morning of July 24, and Syrian forces, which had demobilized in response to Gouraud's demands of July 14, rushed to defend the Maysalun Pass with irregular Syrian bands under the command of Minister of War Youssef al-Azma.¹⁶⁶ That same morning, in response to the French advance and the opening shots at Maysalun, Feisal issued an official declaration of war. Addressed to "the sons of the homeland," Feisal proclaimed:

We tried to preserve the peace so as not to open the nation's door to excuses and justifications [for French interference], and we maintained our honor in all of our positions with the French. The last thing we did in this respect was to accept the terms [of July 14] to keep away the enemies of the people of Syria and keep Syria a free and independent entity, but General Gouraud will not rest until he slights the honor of this nation, and he went back on his promise...and ordered his army to attack the Arab armies stationed on the border. So let us support those heroes who expose themselves to defend this holy land, and I call on every citizen to move forward in the direction of honor, glory, religion, and the homeland.¹⁶⁷

Feisal's forces, composing between two-thousand and four-thousand regular and irregular fighters, held the French at the Maysalun Pass for about eight hours, before being defeated by a combination of French armored infantry, artillery, and air power. French forces suffered casualties of fifty-two dead and 200 wounded; the Syrians counted Minister of War al-Azma among its dead.¹⁶⁸ After the Battle of Maysalun Pass, General Gouraud's army proceeded to Damascus unopposed. Feisal fled the capital the next day, and French troops streamed into the city. Outside of Damascus, Feisal formed a new Government, under 'Ala al-Din al-Drubi, that was moderate and could collaborate with the French.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Antonius, 308; Tanenbaum, 41; Zeine, 182-83.

¹⁶⁷ Feisal ibn Hussein, "Official Declaration of War," in *al-Idahat al-siyasiyah wa-asrar al-intidab al-lfransi fi Suriya* (Beirut: Matabi Ashqar Ikhwan, 1955), 116. The declaration reflects my translation from Arabic.

¹⁶⁸ Antonius, 308-09; Tanenbaum, 41 and Zeine, 182-83.

¹⁶⁹ Longrigg, 104; Zeine, 185.

Feisal and the al-Drubi Government returned to Damascus on July 26. Al-Drubi and his ministers met with General Goybet, the French officer under Gouraud who was in command at Maysalun upon arriving in Damascus. Goybet approved of the new Government, but required them to agree that “Emir Feisal had dragged the country to within ‘a distance of two fingers’ from destruction and ruin. His responsibility was great for all of the sanguine disturbances which had taken place on the Syrian stage during the last few months. It was evident that he could not be allowed to continue ruling the country.”¹⁷⁰ Upon learning that the Government he had hand-picked had disavowed him, Feisal protested to General Gouraud. Gouraud ordered Feisal to leave Damascus for Daraa and from Daraa to Haifa. When Feisal paused in Daraa, a French plane flew over the city, dropping leaflets that threatened the inhabitants to urge Feisal to leave the country or face bombardment.¹⁷¹ Feisal left for Haifa on July 30; his resistance to the French Mandate had come to an end.

Conclusion

The French did not evict Emir Feisal from Syria for any one act but for consistently resisting the French Mandate either diplomatically, politically, and militarily from the beginning of 1919 to July 1920. Feisal led the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire during World War I based on promises made by Great Britain for Arab unity and independence following the war. After helping the British liberate Damascus in October 1918, Feisal expressed his concern over French administration and troops assisting with the British occupation of Lebanon. It was at this time that he became aware of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which set aside Palestine as a Zionist “national home,” gave Iraq to Britain, and turned Syria and Palestine over to France.

¹⁷⁰ Zeine, 185.

¹⁷¹ Longrigg 103; Zeine, 186

Feisal trusted the British, with whom he had worked throughout World War I, but he shared the Syrian fear that a French role in Syria would spoil the promise of Arab independence. He resolved to represent the Arab, and more particularly the Syrian, case at the Paris Peace Conference when it opened in January 1919, with the goal of achieving Arab independence and preventing a French tutelage role (now called a "Mandate") in Lebanon and Syria. His efforts to lobby the British, Zionists, and Americans to support Arab unity and independence infuriated the French. When the Allies decided to split up the Arab lands and place them each under a mandatory power, Feisal focused on keeping the French from obtaining a mandate over Syria, trusting that Britain or America would fulfill the stated purpose of the mandates and lead to Syrian independence. However, Feisal lost any hope of excluding France through diplomatic means upon America's exit from the Peace Conference and Britain's decision to not accept a mandate over Syria and to withdraw its troops from Syria. Forced to negotiate directly with the French, Feisal and Clemenceau came to a conditional agreement on January 6, 1920. Due to Feisal's resistance throughout the Peace Conference, the conditions were that he had to act in good faith towards the French and make his followers support the January 6 Agreement.

Upon his return to Damascus, Feisal came to the realization that he could not rally the Syrian Congress around the January 6 Agreement. Thus, he repudiated his agreement with Clemenceau and decided to secure Syrian independence, and implicitly resist the French Mandate, by working with the Syrian Congress to issue a declaration of independence. The Syrian Declaration of Independence proclaimed that Syria was an independent and sovereign state, and named Feisal "King of Syria." France and Britain both considered the Syrian

Declaration illegal and void; Britain wanted to recall Feisal to Europe for further negotiations, and France did not have the resources to make a credible military threat. Feisal defied the request, stating that he would only return to Europe if France and Britain recognized Syrian independence. His political resistance ended with the San Remo Resolution of April 25, which gave France the mandate over Syria, which France intended to uphold with force if necessary.

Feisal's military resistance to the French Mandate has its roots in his refusal to curb guerilla attacks on French forces and Damascus assistance to many guerilla groups. He accepted General Gouraud's initial ultimatum but could not accept the second ultimatum that allowed French troops on Syrian soil and completely impinged on Syrian sovereignty. Although reluctant to face the French in armed conflict, Feisal called on the Syrian people to resist the French troops as they advanced on Damascus. To France, this was the final straw; Millerand wanted someone in Damascus who would act as an agent of the French Government, and Feisal had shown he could not fill this role.

Feisal's resistance through foreign affairs caused the French Government to mistrust him, even though Clemenceau struck a deal with Feisal. However, French mistrust led to Clemenceau's conditions that Feisal act loyally to the French and rally his supporters around the January 6 Agreement to prevent a French use of force. On his return to Syria, he broke Clemenceau's provisions by siding with the Syrian nationalists and resisting the French Mandate by supporting the Syrian Declaration of Independence and becoming King of Syria. Before enforcing the French Mandate militarily, General Gouraud issued Feisal two ultimatums in July 1920; Feisal could not accept the second ultimatum, which effectively eliminated every aspect of Syrian self-determination. His support for Syrian irregular action and the Battle of Maysalun

resulted in the final French decision to expel him from Syria. When Feisal departed from Syria in July 1920, he took the promise of Syrian independence with him. Syria would not receive its independence from France for another twenty-six years.

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